

Kansas District Theological Convocation
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“A Commissioned Worker’s View of Pastor/Laity in Ministry”

I’m grateful for this opportunity to address you as a Commissioned Worker on the view of Pastor and Laity in Ministry. I’m Pam Nummela and I’m Director of Child Ministry at Bethany Lutheran Church and Principal of the Day School. I love to tell the story of Jesus. I love to see Jesus – His love, His grace, His power – lived out in the lives of children and their families. I’m a Commissioned Worker with a Lutheran Teacher’s Diploma and a Director of Christian Education Certificate. I love my church, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and have never wavered in my desire to share Jesus as a worker in it. More importantly, it’s my life’s goal that people who come into contact with me meet my Savior Jesus through my words, actions, and attitudes. It’s what I was born and, more important, re-born to do. If I can be of service to my church by sharing my view on how that happens, I’m glad to do that. I’m honored to do that.

I frequently speak to groups including Children’s Messages in front of hundreds of people in a worship service. This didn’t seem to be such a big deal – until I got into the middle of writing and realized that I had a problem. I never have spoken to a room full of men! I speak fluent “kid” and I naturally speak “woman,” but “man” isn’t one of my fluent languages. Language is so important in good communication and as I was writing I felt something was missing. But I decided to do my best and leave it at that. However, then as I was driving down I 35 I passed an RV with this bumper sticker: “My wife says I don’t listen to her...or something like that.” My unease was back! Ministry is all about relationships – our relationship with our Father and His Son Jesus Christ through the power of His Spirit and our relationship with each other because of Christ. I needed to be able to make a connection with you.

Then the press conference announcing Herman Edwards as the head coach of the Kansas City Chiefs began on my car radio. As I’m listened to Herman Edwards speak, I was captivated by his words. Then, I realize that he was illustrating my points! I was getting it and he was speaking “man!” So, throwing caution to the winds, I wrote down key thoughts and used them to rewrite this talk last night. It’s my prayer that this will make those important connections. We need to do whatever it takes to make connections in ministry.

The first impression was the Chiefs were described as a family...relationships are important. Herman Edwards talked about his close relationship with Carl Peterson, with Dick and Carol Vermeil and their influence his character and on the man he has become. He spoke of the close connections that he had made still had and with the Chief organization. Building and preserving relationships is an essential part of ministry for pastors and lay people. After all, to restore his relationship with us – to have us live forever with him in heaven – God sacrificed His one and only Son.

We need to figure out how to maintain relationships. Herman Edwards will be calling the staff. He'll be meeting with the players. He'll be working on connections. We need to do that too.

Good relationships also are about living out the fruits of the Spirit and acting in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self control. This is not the only setting where "Rules of Engagement" or a Code of Christian Conduct is important. Whenever we gather kids together, we make sure that they know the rules and abide by them. If you don't have clear behavior guidelines in Confirmation, do it! You will accomplish the objectives and preserve relationships. Kindness is an essential fruit. Well intentioned humor is appropriate. Put downs are not. Sarcasm is not...if your intent is to build and preserve relationships in the family of God. Since I've made the commitment to follow 1 Thessalonians 5:15 and "Be kind" no matter, I've created less stress, less conflict and more ministry happening.

Herman Edwards is clear about his focus. It's his job to lead the Chiefs to win ballgames. He said, "Winning is everything." If you aren't concentrating on winning, as a player, coach, staff or head coach, you aren't doing your job.

Herman Edwards wants players that play for the name on the helmet and not the name on the back of the jersey.

The essential point about ministry in the New Testament is about sacrificially "doing it." That's what Jesus did through His life, death, and resurrection and that's what he calls us to do. Our focus is sharing the good news of the salvation we have in Jesus. We don't need helmets. We've received his cross on our forehead and on our heart. We are baptized in Him. It's not about me. It's about Jesus. When I'm living for myself I've lost focus and I'm playing for the wrong thing.

That's where the spiritual disciplines of Bible study and prayer come into play. "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus." Herman Edwards would call them the fundamentals. Whether you are pastor or lay people if you aren't engaged together in God's Word and prayer, you're dropping the ball. Focus on the fundamentals. I don't know about you, but I have an awfully hard time staying in conflict with someone when we're sitting together over God's Word and joining together in prayer.

Herman Edwards is known as a player's coach. He spoke about playing with the players he has. He'll build his team with them. He plans to win. He intends to put players in the positions to be successful.

In Ephesians chapter 2 Paul says "In Him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord in whom you are also built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." We are built together to glorify God. It's the role of the pastor to play with the players God has given – that's called the congregation. It's his job to put them in positions to be successful with their God-given gifts. That's a daunting task. How do you create in practice the dynamic in a congregation that bridges between the spoken

Word of God and how that's played out in the hearts and lives of people. That's the challenge of ministry.

Edwards also talked about roles. Everybody has a role. The key responsibilities of the game are broken down, the roles are defined – all with the goal to win football games.

In Ephesians 4:11 it speaks about the gifts for the offices of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, but subsequently it's clear that the reason for those roles is to “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” What's the goal? “Until all of us come to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” That's why as Christians we're on the field. The roles are necessary to build that bridge. Ministry doesn't happen with one set of gift or through one role God has put them all in place to accomplish His will.

Herman Edwards talked about “trust.” He talked about the 35 seconds a head coach has to make the call. The players, the coaches, and he, the head coach, have to have a level of trust. They can't second guess him. They have to trust him and do it even when he's wrong. It's his job to know the goal, to set the plan enacted by his coaches, and to know the abilities and aptitudes of his players – and it all comes together on the grass.

As a Commissioned Worker, the Synod recognizes me as a minister of the Word and as Walther explains in Church and Ministry, I serve in an auxiliary Office that supports that pastoral office. (Walther, pages 289-290) In the world of football I'd be part of the coaching staff. I take the role to support very seriously. I'm not the one who has the church's equivalent of 35 seconds to make the call. I don't wear that yoke of office and ultimately, I'm not going to be the one at the podium answering questions about the results of the congregation's ministry at eternity's equivalent of the “post-game press conference.” So, as a commissioned worker, I listen very carefully to the pastors and what they say about vision and directions for ministry at Bethany. I seek to clearly understand the goals that the pastor and the congregation have established to fulfill our mission of “making more and better disciples.” In the analogy, I need to be someone my “head coach” can trust.

Herman Edwards is known as a defensive coach. He said that a good defensive squad “gets dirty.” He doesn't want to see clean jerseys. He wants them putting all their efforts into their goal and objective. It's my role to help God's people make the transition from the plays in the playbook discussed in the locker room and get them executed on the field. In our structure, that means leading the Boards I serve and the teachers, program directors, and other staff I supervise to activities where God's people “get dirty” as they share God's love on the field of play happening in their homes, at their work, with their friends, especially that they find the people who are hurting and in need of Jesus and serve them.

Luther in Church and Ministry (page 294) draws the analogy of a pastor as the driver of the horse and wagon. His charge is to pastors not to be “lax and careless” because if they

are “no other offices will succeed.” In this analogy, Luther limits focus just on the duties of the driver, but it’s clear that if the horse isn’t putting his weight into the harness the driver has a real task on his hands. Whether we draw the analogy of a driver or a head coach, pastors hold the office to effectively communicate direction for God’s people. A head coach calls plays in the moment based on weather, the strengths or weaknesses of both teams, a multitude of specific conditions in that call. The specific direction for ministry in Haven, Linn, or Wichita will be different than the direction in Overland Park. In my view, pastors are responsible to develop that vision and direction for ministry for that place. It glorifies God and extends His kingdom when all who serve God’s people at Bethany are clear about what that direction in this place is. It means a lot to Preschool teachers and Nursery caregivers and the teachers in the Day School when our pastors take the time to check in with them about how God is working in them, with them and through them for the “building up of the Body of Christ.” It means a lot to me when Pastors look for, notice, and place value on the connections between what’s happening in the lives of the children and family at Bethany and what they’ve been proclaiming from the pulpit. Leading God’s people to make those connections and to “get dirty” is my role. From my perspective, I know the angels in heaven celebrate when God’s will is done, but in ministry, we could use more end zone celebrations when we score.

Herman Edwards sees trust as vital to achieving his goal of winning. He didn’t speak about respect, but you can hear that attitude in his words.

In chapter two, Paul talks to Titus about the importance of teaching respect. Respect pairs with trust in the church’s ministry. It’s a temptation for me as a commissioned worker to “know better” than my pastor and the congregation. It’s easy to be at odds. It’s easy to be disrespectful in thought if not in deed because pastors and congregational leaders are all too human. Those temptations exist for all of us. But, those temptations are to be resisted and are sins to be confessed. God is not glorified by conflict and disrespect. As a commissioned minister I need to love, trust, and respect the pastors and God’s people. Herman Edwards would tell me not to second guess the calls of the coach and the abilities of the players. And trust and respect should be returned to me.

And, over the last three decades, I’ve seen pastors ignore or distrust the blessings and resources of commissioned workers and the congregational leadership. Then they aren’t a “players coach” but a “Lone Ranger.” The result was often not clearly to the glory of God.

I’ve also watched as congregations and pastors have been at odds. In the atmosphere of conflict, the work of God through His church is severely hindered. Everyone gets consumed with the conflict. Eyes, hearts, minds, and energy turn inward. Proclaiming Jesus Christ isn’t the witness proclaimed by pastor or lay people – or commissioned worker - to the community. “See how they love one another” is not the witness the community receives. God is not glorified. If congregations were assessed like football teams, I don’t think anyone would predict that those congregations were headed to the playoffs.

Herman Edward presented himself as a man of integrity and commitment. Commitment means sacrifice. It means saying “no” to what you’d like to do, want to do and saying “yes” to what gets the work done. It’s hard to hear “no.” I’ve heard “no” and served congregations as a “super-volunteer” with my DCE husband because the congregation said “no” to extend a call to me but willingly took free advantage of the gifts and abilities of my training and vocation. I’m a woman...so you know I’ve heard “no” from my God and my church regarding roles in ministry. I’ve had to deal with my very human reactions to these limitations. But God has lead me to stop looking at the “no” and start looking all the ways He and the church shout “YES!” God has blessed me abundantly with ways to serve Him in ways I could not and would not have imagined. However, for me that includes my submission and obedience to His and His church’s “no.”

Herman Edwards spoke about a play that defined his playing career. He said, “I was in the right place at the right time.” It’s my goal to be at God’s place at God’s time to do his will. Submission and obedience to Christ, submission and obedience to his church as opposed to calling our own plays put us in “the right place at the right time.” Herman Edwards said that while that play was the focus, he defined his career by his commitment. He never missed practice, he never missed a game. He put himself in the right place at the right time. I do that as I put myself in corporate worship, at the Lord’s table, in fellowship with God’s people, in service in the name of Jesus. That’s where I want to be when my “career defining moment” happens.

A lot of what Herman Edwards said made connections for me with the ministry of God’s church. But there’s one final thought I’d like to share. He said, “The game is won on the grass.” There’s work done in the locker room, on the practice fields, in the offices, but ultimately, the players and coaches have to take the field, get on the grass and play the game. In ministry I think it’s easy to get involved in the stuff of life, staff meetings, daily routines, even daily conflicts and never get on the grass doing what we’re supposed to be doing. At Bethany, part of our church legacy is the story of our cross. At Bethany there isn’t a cross inside the chancel. Instead a big cross stands outside the chancel windows. It’s there by the design of Pastor Sabo who wanted the cross outside the church because while we come together inside to worship, learn, and fellowship the real work is outside where we take the good news of Jesus out in service to our world.

I know Kansas City is hoping that the Chiefs win ball games under head coach Herman Edwards. Well, that remains to be seen. But I’m certainly grateful to him for his insights.

But I do know that God’s will will be done in this world. May God bless us all with His Spirit and His power to proclaim His Word and in whatever role God has placed us that through our ministry together He is glorified!