

### “Ten Things Pastors Look for in Partnership with Laity”

The nice thing about the title assigned to this presentation is that the title itself provides the answer to the question we’re gathered here to address. What is the nature of the relationship between pastor and laity as they work together in Christ’s kingdom? Is it a friendship? Is it a courtship? Is it a sponsorship? Maybe it’s all about ownership? Or salesmanship? Or showmanship? Or, is it a hardship? A dictatorship? Maybe, in some cases, it’s a battleship.

The answer is in the title. The relationship between pastor and laity is a partnership. Pastors and laity are to work together as equal partners in the ministry of Christ’s kingdom. We are partners with a common Savior, a common goal, common means of reaching that goal, and common enemies working against us.

So, what do pastors look for in partnership with laity? Let’s look first at perspective, then at actions.

**1. Pastors look for faithfulness to Christ.** That’s so obvious that maybe it doesn’t even need mentioning. But in this world where so many things clamor for our faithfulness, both pastors and laity must constantly guard against losing sight of the main thing. And the main thing is Jesus—what He has done for us and continues to do for us. It’s His Church. It’s His plan. We all are His instruments. Whatever else we do, we want His name, His Word, and His salvation to be proclaimed.

**2. Pastors look for faithfulness to Christ’s mission for His Church.** Christ’s mission for His Church is two-fold. He wants to make disciples and He wants to strengthen disciples.

That two-fold mission requires us to keep a balance in our kingdom work. A balance between looking inward and looking outward. On the one hand, we want to provide spiritual care for our own members (strengthening disciples). On the other hand, with just as much effort and enthusiasm, we want to reach out to the community around us (making disciples). If all our attention and focus is directed only inward, to ourselves, or only outward, to the community around us, we’re only accomplishing half the task.

Pastors, therefore, want to work with you in knowing and taking care of both the congregation and the community to which we’re called. It can’t be one or the other, but both.

**3. Pastors look for faithfulness to Christ’s method for His Church.** Christ’s method for making and strengthening disciples is the Gospel. Jesus said “Go into all the world and preach the good news, the Gospel, to all creation” (Mark 16:15) That Gospel is also two-fold, being given to us through the Word and the Sacraments. Our Lutheran confessions put this Gospel proclamation at the very center of what it means to be a church, saying “the Church is a congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered.”

So, on Monday morning, as we evaluate the activities of our church, we want to look at many things. We want to know how many people came, whether the visitors felt welcome, whether the music was effective, whether the bulletin contained any spelling errors. These are all good and necessary questions to ask. But the main thing we want to know is whether the Gospel was taught purely and the Sacraments correctly administered. If we got everything else right, but not that, then we've not been faithful to the method Jesus gave us for His Church and whatever we accomplished may not have been for His glory.

The most important thing a pastor does is preach the Gospel. We need the laity to support us in this. Allow us time to prepare. Even caution us when we begin to pay too much attention to other things at the expense of attention to the Word. Join us in spending time in that Word in Bible reading and Bible study.

**4. Pastors look for the same attitude as Christ.** The Apostle Paul says that our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus (Philippians 2). And what attitude is that? It's an attitude of humility. An attitude of sacrifice. An attitude of service. We can get so much more accomplished in the kingdom when both pastors and laity set aside the question, "What's in this for me?" and instead ask, "How can I serve as I have been served?"

**5. Pastors look for a spirit of cooperation, not competition.** Partnership means we work with each other, not against each other. This is not a power play. As Jesus explained to the mother of James and John regarding who gets to be first in His Kingdom, it isn't about being first. It isn't about lording over each other. In His Kingdom, it's all about taking your place at the end of the line, not the beginning. It's all about serving, "...just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28).

In other words, we're all equal in this kingdom. Equally sinful. Equally covered by the blood of Christ. Equally marked by baptism. Equally called to serve God by working together in the various vocations He gives us.

**6. Pastors look for a balanced division of labor between pastor and laity.** That is, both the pastor and the laity have important roles to play in the ministry of the congregation. It shouldn't be just the pastor doing the work of the ministry. Nor should it be just the laity. The pastor's job is to oversee the work, while preparing (equipping, training) God's people for works of service (Ephesians 4:12).

In other words, the pastor shouldn't be the only one visiting the sick. He should be showing members of the congregation how to visit the sick also. Nor should the pastor be the only one making evangelism calls, or handling conflict, or leading Bible studies. These things (and many others) are things that all of us can do according to the gifts God has given us, under the oversight of the pastor.

**7. Pastors look for laity to keep us grounded in reality.** Yes, it's true. Pastors sometimes lose sight of the real world we live in. It's possible for a pastor to spend an entire day in the company of nothing but other Lutherans. His phone calls will be with Lutherans. His emails will be with Lutherans. He'll read books written by Lutherans. All of his attention will be

directed toward things within the boundaries of the congregation to which he's been called.

Of course, that's his job. That's what he's supposed to do. But it also means that in some ways the pastor may no longer be aware of what's really going on out where you live. How can I preach in a way that makes sense if I have no idea where you're coming from?

What's the solution? I can think of three possibilities:

First, invite us out of the church building and into your world. Invite us to your children's birthday parties. Invite us to your Super Bowl parties. Yes, even the ones where your embarrassing brother-in-law who never comes to church will be in attendance. We pastors need to know what's going on in the real world.

Second, tell us honestly what you think. Not in a mean way but in a constructive way. For example, I know it's customary to tell the pastor after church that it was a good sermon. I appreciate that. But I also appreciate that person who comes up to me and says, "Pastor Wehling, I didn't understand something you said in the sermon on Sunday." Or maybe even, "Pastor Wehling, I didn't understand *anything* you said in the sermon on Sunday." I need to know that! Thank you for telling me! Let's talk about what you heard.

Third, join us in listening to your community. Pastors are not the only ones who can lose sight of reality. Entire congregations can become unaware of what's really going on around them. We can't assume that the manner in which we reached out ten years ago—or even six months ago—will still be effective today. We need to ask our community leaders, "What do you need?" "How can we help?" You'll be surprised at the answers you receive. You'll also be surprised at the opportunities for proclaiming the Gospel that those answers provide.

Keep in mind, though, even as you work to keep me grounded in reality, that it's also my job to keep you grounded in reality. You need to remind me that we currently live *in* the world. I need to remind you that we are not *of* the world. We all need God's Word to remind us that we are citizens of a different kingdom.

**8. Pastors look for the support of the laity.** I know that pastors are to give support. But we also need your support. Which may sound strange to many laity—sort of like your physician coming to you and saying "I need your help staying healthy." But it's true. Remember, we're in this together. Pastors need your physical, emotional, and spiritual support.

So, pray for us. Regularly. It stands to reason that if the Devil wants to slow down or stop the ministry of a congregation, he'll strike first and hardest at the shepherd of the congregation. Pray for us. Pray for protection, and strength, and zeal. And tell us that you're praying for us. We take great strength from knowing that.

Secondly, pay us. Give us a fair wage. Not because we're in it for the money, because we're not. Pay us enough so that we can do the work you've called us to do without having to spend too much time figuring out finances.

Third, help us grow in ministry. Support us as we pursue continuing education. Provide regular opportunities for evaluation. Encourage us to take our day off and our vacation time.

**9. Pastors look for a mutually agreed upon method of dealing with conflict.** Which might come as a surprise to many, since so often we think church is supposed to be a conflict-free community.

Well, maybe it should be. But in a sinful world, it won't always be. Thankfully, God's Word gives us very healthy and God-pleasing methods of dealing with conflict. Methods that work, even.

Which means that with any conflict there are always two issues to address: The first, most visible issue and the one that generally gets the most attention is the offense itself—who said or did what to whom. But the second, less visible, but just as important issue is whether or not the offense is being handled in a God-pleasing, scriptural manner. When it comes to conflict, the question “What happened?” is no more or less important than the question, “How will we deal with what happened in a way that glorifies God?” And that last question can and should be asked before the fact, not after.

**10. Pastors look for mutual accountability regarding our calling.** Pastors and laity each need to appreciate and respect the roles God has given us in the Church. We pastors have been called to oversee. Which means we're striving with God's help to keep the congregation accountable to Christ, to His Word, to His mission, and to His method. We need your respect for that calling.

But that accountability goes both ways. It would be a grave error for laity to sit back and say “Well, the pastor's in charge of the church. Let him do whatever he wants.” No, you also are members of the royal priesthood. When we pastors stray from the Word of God, we need you to tell us about it. Not as competitors, not as enemies, but as partners, as those who are working together toward a common goal, under a common Savior, with a common faith.

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There they are. Ten things. Let's be thankful today that, by God's grace, many of these things are already in place in our congregations. At the same time, both pastors and laity constantly pray that the Lord of the Church would forgive us where we have failed and direct us to even better service to Him. To God alone be the glory!