

Observations of a District President Emeritus

“Thank God! At last we have a pastor! He will perform the marriage of our daughter, baptize our grandchildren, and be on our doorstep whenever we need him!” Such words are commonly heard when a pastor or seminary graduate accepts the call to one of our congregations. They also are sentiments that seem to me to be reinforced by the wording and spirit of the rites of Ordination and Installation that we tend to use in our churches, almost without exception. “Tending the flock,” through preaching, instruction of young and old, ministering to the sick and dying, and forgiving the sins of the penitent, are held up as the primary functions of anyone who assumes the pastoral office.

I address this issue, rightly raised by President Newton, as one who served as district president within the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod from 2003 to 2012. The Southeastern District came into being in 1939 in order to “exploit the mission opportunity” in the five-state region from Delaware to South Carolina, and since then our leadership, in a variety of ways, has continued to pursue this same objective. Soon after I took office, therefore, I saw the Ablaze movement in the Synod as yet another opportunity to take our congregations and church workers in this same direction. In convention, our district congregations, in light of the impending Reformation anniversary in 2017, adopted a set of ambitious mission goals; and we successfully partnered with the Synod in the raising of over six million dollars, primarily for new ministry starts. For this reason, when I presided at the ordinations and installations within our district during this same period, the absence of any reference in the promises a pastor makes, and presumably to which he is to be held accountable, to the work of “mission,” or “seeking the lost,” or reaching the “community” with the Gospel, never ceased to get my attention. My questions were: “What are we saying not just to the candidate, but to God and to each other as the church? Is tending the world beyond the church just an option? And is what we are seeking to do together right now as congregations of this District only to be ranked as secondary in importance?”

Early in my tenure, I discovered that there were other district presidents who felt much the same way I did. In one of our meetings of the Council of Presidents, I was encouraged when those who were involved in crafting an agenda to accompany a new hymnal for the Synod sought input from the 35 of us who conduct hundreds of ordinations and installations. The need for making more explicit connections between mission and the pastoral office in particular, as I recall the discussion, was clearly emphasized. It was much to my disappointment, therefore, that, when the new agenda came out, none of this appeared to have “made the cut.”

While people in our pews these days may indeed be grateful that they have a pastor to tend their flock, they also, in my view, know what the “score” is for the

church in our land. The daughter for whom they hope the new pastor will perform a marriage may not be a churchgoer, and the baptism they want the pastor to provide for their grandchildren may be the last time they are in a church, or its Sunday School, for many years to come. In their more emotional moments, these realities can bring them to tears. On Sunday mornings, they often stand in sanctuaries that are at best half-filled with worshipers; and, hence, in the self-study documents the leaders of their congregations prepare for the district president, as he seeks to assist them in their call process, they often strongly indicate that their greatest need is for a pastor will help them find new ways to reach their community. In part, their motivation may be to “get more members,” especially young families, and to improve the sagging offerings. In addition, some of them may be reluctant to accept any real changes that most assuredly will need to be made in the weekly schedule of any pastor for the sake of the flock he is seeking to tend beyond the congregation’s current membership. But in their heart of hearts, they often know that times have changed. The culture in which we are now living in all of North America is mission territory.

Some may want to say that just a few words here or there cannot make much of a difference. However, I believe that they do. The words a district president speaks in the rite of Ordination or Installation, because they have become so familiar to him, can smoothly roll from his tongue. The other pastors who are there for the laying on of hands may find themselves nodding off because they have heard them almost as many times. But the people in the pews are more likely to be paying close attention because many of them are hearing them for the first time. I also think that district presidents, in consultation with other members of their leadership teams, or congregations for that matter, might consider amending what “the book” calls upon a pastor to promise at his Ordination and Installation. There may in fact be some who have done this already. In any case, what I would eventually hope to hear more often at such precious moments in the life of any congregation is this: “Thank God! At last we have a pastor who will care enough about us to put us to work as he leads us into the mission field that lies right outside the doorstep of this church!”

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