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# Shepherding Souls and the Life of Faith

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The original meaning of the word “pastor” is *shepherd*. A called and ordained pastor serves as a Christian leader in the role of shepherd. It is a concept that has been lost on many pastors in an age that promotes a rich variety of leadership roles for pastors to choose from: proclaimer, worship leader, visionary, mission leader, evangelist, executive administrator, community leader, and more. However, what if not only pastors but all Christians understood that it is foundational for them to shepherd others in faith, hope, and love as a way of life?

The Life of Faith Initiative of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) articulates a vision that relates directly to what it means to shepherd souls, specifically the following points:

- We will learn to speak of “the expressions of the church” first as the people themselves . . .
- We will be able to speak as easily and concretely about the ministry by all the baptized in daily life as we currently do about the ministry that happens in and through congregations.
- The center of gravity for our living out “missional church” will shift from what we do as the church gathered to what we do as the church scattered.
- The understanding of “ministry” will grow from “what pastors do” and “what we do as the congregations” to include the love and service that is lived out in our everyday roles and relationships.
- We will become practiced at counting and reporting ministry in terms of the impact we are making in our homes, workplaces, schools, local communities, and around the world—not exclusively in terms of money received and numbers of participants.
- All of us—from children to adults—will be able comfortably and confidently to speak and live the faith in our daily lives.<sup>1</sup>

Worthy of clear articulation in all six of these vision statements is that all people in the body of Christ serve one another and the world as shepherds of the soul. This represents a valued way of naming and living out the central Reformation theme, the priest-

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hood of all believers. All who are part of the church are called to attend to one another’s life of faith for the sake of the world that God so loves. As an “expression of the church,” people serve others with the love of God as shepherds. We listen, we bless, we pray, we teach, we sing, we comfort, and, yes, we even correct. Everything done “in word and deed” we do “in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:12–17).

Alongside all the labors of our hands in serving our neighbors, we also speak the faith out loud to others as the humble, attentive, and faithful life of the baptized. This, too, is part of the life of faith lived daily in the world. This listening, speaking, and attentiveness, this shepherding of one another, is central to the “missional church.” It is what we do in our everyday relationships in ways that pastors and congregational programs cannot fully address, because the pastors and programs are not present in the roles and relationships of daily life—but we, the priesthood of all believers are. It is what we do in our “homes, workplaces, schools, local communities, and around the world.” The stories that come out of these experiences are worthy of receiving, documenting, counting, and affirming as much as we keep track of annual giving and participation in congregational activities. Speaking the faith out loud as shepherds to one another is as critical as the other ways we “live the faith in our daily lives.”

## Expanding our community of shepherds

The term pastor means “shepherd,” but not as a term that excludes the shepherding of others. For three years our Good Shepherd, Jesus of Nazareth, shepherded his inner circle of followers. Can we imagine how the church would have begun its ministry without

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1. <http://lifeoffaith.info/about/our-vision>.

that kind of personal care, teaching, healing, attention, correction, exhortation, and encouragement? Just as Jesus is the “chief of shepherds” (1 Pet 5:4), so are we all to shepherd one another as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9). Indeed, 1 Peter addresses “elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge” (5:2). Pastors and elders as those who “tend the flock of God,” do so that all may care for one another, equip the body of Christ, and “proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (see Gal 5:6 and Eph 4:11–16).

Leaders in the New Testament church were designated as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, bishops, and elders. These are people who were gifted by the Spirit for these roles, roles that did not simply emerge out of thin air. These are gifts that were birthed in communities of faith. These communities were the faith formation centers that served, taught, and equipped people—all people—in the body of Christ to care for one another with the love of Christ. While all in the community received such equipping, some emerged as those who were recognized for their giftedness to serve the body of Christ in specific leadership roles.

The Bible gives numerous examples and expectations on how to care for one another in faith and love as the body of Christ. This is the wisdom, guidance, encouragement, and even exhortation that the biblical witness gives to the church of all generations. As we emphasize faith in daily life, it is important to encourage the idea that every Christian, as part of the priesthood of all believers serves others at some level as a shepherd of souls.

In *Shepherd of Souls: Faith Formation through Trusted Relationships*, shepherding is described as “the personal care of others through caring conversations, faith-filled reflections, and prayerful engagement”<sup>2</sup> There is perhaps no better job description of Christian shepherding than Col 3:12–17, but it is by no means the only description. One can see throughout the New Testament the wisdom, guidelines, and encouragement to care for one another as the church, the body of Christ. In Gal 6:5 Paul exhorts those who observe a transgression to “restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.” The only prerequisite for such intervention is that the one who offers the care is to “have received the Spirit,” that same gift of God that all have received in baptism (see Gal 3:27–4:7). Ephesians 4 speaks of specific gifts given to various people “for building up the body of Christ” (v. 12). However, the building up of the body is something for which all are to aspire. Every part of the body is to work together to promote “the body’s growth in building itself up in love” (v. 16b). Heb 10:24–25 describes how believers care for one another: “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

2. David W. Anderson, *Shepherd of Souls: Faith Formation through Trusted Relationships* (Ridgeley, West Virginia: Milestones Ministry, LLC), 25.

## To serve as a shepherd of souls is a critical role for the priesthood of all believers and a valued contribution to faith in daily life.

### From the New Testament to Luther to today

In addition to Jesus the Good Shepherd, the chief of shepherds, and the New Testament call for disciples to tend the sheep (Matt 9:36–38; Mark 6:34; John 21:15–17; 1 Pet 5:4), the history of the church has also lifted up “soul care” as central to the life of the church. The early church understanding of *cura animarum* (care or cure of souls) and later the German term *Seelsorge* (concern or care of souls), emphasizes a ministry of the church that has lost attention in our contemporary age.<sup>3</sup> Today’s church is understandably focused on visionary and strategic leadership to reach the once-churched and the unchurched in our midst. What has been minimized or even neglected in today’s focus is the faith formation and outreach possibilities of those who are ambassadors for Christ as shepherds.

Theodore Tappert, translator and editor of the 1959 edition of the *Book of Concord*, also translated and edited the important volume, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, published in 1960. Through this book Tappert made available a large number of Luther’s pastoral letters. In the introduction Tappert states:

Martin Luther (1483–1546) is usually thought of as a world-shaking figure who defied papacy and empire to introduce a reformation in the teaching, worship, organization, and life of the Church and to leave a lasting impression on Western civilization. It is sometimes forgotten that he was also—and above all else—a pastor and shepherd of souls.<sup>4</sup>

The language of “shepherd of souls” has stayed with me through three decades of working with congregations as a pastor, speaker, trainer, author, consultant, and coach. Not only have I concluded that pastors need to reclaim the role of shepherd, but *so do the members and friends of local congregations*. To serve as a shepherd of souls is a critical role for the priesthood of all believers and a valued contribution to faith in daily life.

Luther wrote his Small Catechism not only for clergy but for the “head of the household,” the faith formation leaders in the home. Luther’s Large Catechism started out as sermons also to provide faith formation. Luther’s identity as shepherd is visible in his Preface to the Large Catechism, where he writes: “This much

3. Herbert Anderson. “Whatever Happened to *Seelsorge*?” *Word & World* 21 (Winter 2001): 32–41.

4. Theodore G. Tappert, ed. and trans., *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1960), 13.

is certain: those who know the Ten Commandments perfectly know the entire Scriptures and in all affairs and circumstances are able to counsel, help, comfort, judge, and make decisions in both spiritual and temporal matters.<sup>5</sup> He goes on to write: “Let all Christians drill themselves in the catechism daily, and constantly put it into practice, guarding themselves with the greatest care and diligence against the poisonous infection of . . . security or arrogance.”<sup>6</sup> In this same text Luther puts himself in the role of a child who needs to learn and recite the catechism daily. He notes that he “must remain a child and pupil of the catechism—and I also do so gladly.”<sup>7</sup>

The idea of the universal priesthood and its implications for shepherding souls in daily life gets no clearer presentation from Luther than in his “Estate of Marriage.” There he states:

Most certainly, father and mother are apostles, bishops, and priests to their children, for it is they who make them acquainted with the gospel. In short, there is no greater or nobler authority on earth than that of parents over their children, for this authority is both spiritual and temporal. Whoever teaches the gospel to another is truly his apostle and bishop.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, Luther elevates the role of parent as the highest spiritual office, one that affects not only one’s relationship to God but also to one’s neighbor. Note how Luther generalizes his point that anyone who “teaches the gospel to another” is doing the essential work of the church and is to be recognized as “apostle and bishop.” This is even more striking since the vast majority of the population in Luther’s day was illiterate. That did not stop him, however, from honoring the role of parent, another family member, mentor, guide, or friend in pursuing ways to equip them for this highest of all callings. As apostle, bishop, and priest, a father or mother provides the spiritual care—the shepherding—needed by the youngest generation. Luther gives praise to the office of parent and the entire community of saints, and equips them all with sermons, catechisms, and prayer books.

Luther not only promotes the role of head of the household, he also lived it. In the table talks in his Wittenberg home he speaks about his own need to study and pray the catechism with his own Hans and Lena. When away from home in 1530 and secluded at the Coburg Castle (when Melancthon and other were presenting the Augsburg Confession), he took time to write an endearing letter to his 4-year-old son, Hans, congratulating him on a report from Hans’ tutor, Jerome Weller, that Hans was doing well in his studies. Martin takes the opportunity to exhort his son (and his son’s friends) to continue to “study, pray, and be

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good.”<sup>9</sup> In another instance when his wife, Katie, expressed her worries for Martin’s health as he traveled to Eisleben to resolve a dispute, Martin chides his wife for her worries and wonders if this is how she has learned the catechism.<sup>10</sup> In word and deed, Luther exemplifies the life of a shepherd of souls, not only in his public ministry but to his family and all those with whom he had opportunity to address the gospel with voice or pen.

It is urgent for us to recover not only the language but also the practice of faith in daily life that cares for the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of people: the ministry of the shepherd of souls. In *A History of the Cure of Souls*, John T. McNeill observes that perhaps the greatest contribution of Lutheran personal ministry—as promoted by figures like Luther, Martin Bucer (d. 1551), and Philipp Jakob Spener (d. 1705)—was the “mutual cure of souls” by the laity. McNeill writes:

This is the implementation of the doctrine of the spiritual priesthood of all Christians—a doctrine often erroneously interpreted in an individualistic sense. There are still undisclosed possibilities in the application of this principle in the Church, both in the direction of brotherly [sic] correction and of mutual enrichment.<sup>11</sup>

The Life of Faith Initiative reclaims the importance of the priesthood of all believers as central to the daily life of all Christians. A valuable piece of that effort includes an emphasis on the care of souls, the shepherding ministry of all disciples of Christ. It empowers the church in its faith formation and its outreach. The initiative encourages congregations to create vision and mission statements, to evangelize surrounding neighborhoods, to accompany Christian brothers and sisters in other lands, and to connect with others through social media. Each of these activities will be enhanced and enriched when pursued through the practice of shepherding reflected in the life of Jesus, the New Testament community, church history, and Reformation theology and practice.

### Speaking the faith out loud

For a shepherd to offer “the personal care of others through caring conversations, faith-filled reflections, and prayerful engagement,” one needs to be able to speak the faith out loud. That is one of the reasons to know the catechism, read the Bible, and recite the

5. Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism,” in the *Book of Concord*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 382.

6. *Ibid.*, 382–383.

7. *Ibid.*, 380.

8. “The Estate of Marriage,” 1522, ed. Walter I. Brandt, in *Luther’s Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 45:46.

9. Luther: *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 144–145.

10. *Ibid.*, 107–108.

11. John T. McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 190.

liturgy in worship: to be able to use the language of faith and not just the language of the marketplace, sports, global travel, political views, avocational interests, and the weather. But how successful have we been at nurturing followers of Jesus who can speak the faith with loved ones and acquaintances?

One of the saddest developments in the church today is the often-recited prayer of older adults who pray in some form: “Dear God, get my children and grandchildren to church.” When one takes the time to explore the family experiences behind that prayer with these parents and grandparents, one also hears them confess they do not know how to share their faith with their children. They do not know how to speak the faith or practice the faith in the presence of their loved ones. They confess they do not have a clue how to be a shepherd of souls to those most dear to them. Yet, extensive research points out that parents are the number one influence in a child’s faith.

Today’s emphasis on faith in daily life and outreach to the larger world needs to include a focus on the historical ministry of care for the life of faith of others. This focus serves as an essential part of building up the body of Christ.

The New Testament witness is filled with examples of this equipping to build up the church. Brothers and sisters in Christ are to live a life that speaks the truth in love (Eph 4:15). They are to be strengthened by the word of God to face the challenges of sin and discouragement that daily life can bring (Eph 6:10–20), to use one’s freedom in the gospel for love and not for the desires of the flesh (Gal 5:1, 16–26), and to rejoice with those who experience joy and weep with those who grieve (Rom 12:15). The *Shema*, the classic text that Jesus references regarding the greatest commandment (Matt 22:37) describes a way of life that directs people to speak the words of the Scriptures out loud, to “[r]ecite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise” (Deut 6:7). Truly, the biblical witness is given not just for theological clarity but as guidance for how to live and speak the faith with other Luther understood the catechisms as the encapsulation of the message of the Bible for the sake of daily edification. In the Large Catechism, Luther chastises clergy and all the saints for not daily reciting and learning the catechism. In the Preface he observes, “each morning, and whenever else I have time, I do as a child who is being taught the catechism and I read and recite word for word the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc.”<sup>12</sup> A fundamental reason for this discipline of meditating on the word of God is to be equipped to do battle with evil and for conversation with others. Luther goes on, “Nothing is so powerfully effective against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts as to occupy oneself with God’s Word, to speak about it and meditate upon it.”<sup>13</sup>

It is indeed time to wed the important shepherding themes of the priesthood of all believers and faith in daily life together with

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a faith upon which we meditate and which we speak out loud. Is this not an important consequence from the familiar words of Jesus: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt 18:20)? Luther thought so.<sup>14</sup>

### The Small Catechism: A shepherd of souls resource

Luther’s Small Catechism was not written to harass teenagers in a classroom. Luther wrote it to give people the gems of the biblical witness so that they may meditate on it, pray it, and speak it in households and in other settings morning, noon, and night. The Small Catechism gives a model for shepherding souls. It gives us material for conversations regarding the Christian faith. It gives us words to pray and meditate day and night, including in public worship. It gives us a multitude of ways to live our lives as servants of God’s love. For example, Luther takes the Ten Commandments and turns them from being primarily about what you are not supposed to do and incorporates what you shall do to love your neighbor. He adds “The Household Chart of Some Bible Passages” to encourage us in our “holy orders and walks of life” to reflect on how to be a servant of God’s love, how to live out the universal priesthood, whether as bishop or wife, whether young or old.<sup>15</sup> Luther includes Christian rituals and daily traditions to use from the beginning of the day to its end.

The Small Catechism contains four foundational and irreducible faith practices that I call the Four Key Faith Practices: caring conversations, devotions (for example, meditating on God’s word), service, and rituals and traditions.<sup>16</sup> Luther identifies the importance of practicing the faith, especially in the Large Catechism when reflecting on Holy Baptism. He states that baptism is so full of grace and mercy that no one can fully grasp it. Therefore, we are to “study and practice” our baptism for a lifetime.<sup>17</sup> In the Small Catechism Luther gives the church a resource to do just that. The Small Catechism is a valuable tool to help the priesthood of

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14. Ibid.

15. “The Small Catechism,” in the *Book of Concord*, 365–367.

16. *Shepherd of Souls*, 16–18. These essential faith practices are found not only in Scripture and church history but are verified in research about what helps pass on the faith from generation to generation. See David W. Anderson, *From the Great Omission to Vibrant Faith: The Role of the Home in Renewing the Church* (Ridgeley, West Virginia: Milestones Ministry, LLC, 2009), 49–52.

17. “The Large Catechism,” 461.

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12. “The Large Catechism,” 380.

13. Ibid., 381.

all believers serve as shepherds of the soul.

A multitude of Christian resources need to be made available to equip the saints as shepherds, so that the critical Reformation theme of the priesthood of all believers can be lived out today. Resources such as *Taking Faith Home* and *Sharing God's Word* serve as bulletin inserts that can be used electronically, so that worshippers can take God's word home with them and practice and speak the faith every day.<sup>18</sup> Both of these resources give examples of the Four Key Faith Practices for people to use in daily life. Whether it be the Bible, Small Catechism, Christian liturgy, or some other resource for nurturing, practicing, and speaking the faith, this kind of attention to equipping the saints to care for one another will strengthen our faith in daily life. It will also strengthen the larger ministry of the body of Christ to extend God's reconciling work through Christ the Good Shepherd to all the world.

### Reclaiming the priesthood of all believers and shepherding souls

One may wonder why the Reformation theme of the priesthood of all believers has not gained more traction over the centuries. Why is it still part of the unfinished reformation? One possible cause involves a definition of church that places almost singular attention on Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. Yes, this is a helpful—even critical—definition that speaks of the church as that “assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.”<sup>19</sup> However, that definition has lent credence to an understanding that limits church to a community of people gathered for worship in a congregational setting. By itself, this definition has promoted a sacerdotalism regarding the role of pastors, even though such a claim would be rejected by most clergy. However, it is a definition that has put undue pressure on and led to the isolation of clergy, thus compromising the importance of the universal priesthood. It has also put unrealistic pressure on congregations to fulfill all that the good news of Jesus Christ calls us to do and be in the world.<sup>20</sup>

The Lutheran confessional writings also include the “Smalcald Articles” written by Luther, in which he describes “the gospel, which gives guidance and help against sin in more than one way.” Here Luther lifts up themes central to the care of souls. Luther holds that the means of grace includes the spoken word, baptism,

the Sacrament of the Altar, and the power of the keys. He adds to this list “the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters.”<sup>21</sup> Luther thereby lifts up one of his signature themes for the care of souls: faith-filled conversations of the saints with one another.

Interpreting Article VII of the Augsburg Confession in light of this text from the Smalcald Articles, we can perceive the church as a community that not only gathers together publicly, but a community that also scatters into daily life, where people gather in smaller groups of two, three, or more, to hear the voices of everyday Christians living out the universal priesthood as shepherds of the soul. This is what Luther promoted wherever the means of grace is extended to others with one's “living voice.”<sup>22</sup>

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18. *Taking Faith Home* is based on the Revised Common Lectionary and is available at [www.milestonesministry.org](http://www.milestonesministry.org). *Sharing God's Word* is based on the Narrative Lectionary and is available at [spiritandtruthpublishing.com](http://spiritandtruthpublishing.com).

19. *Book of Concord*, “The Augsburg Confession—German Text,” 42.

20. In this regard, it is helpful to recall that the Augsburg Confession was written as a conciliatory document of concord to point out that the German church was faithful to the catholic and apostolic witness in Rome. In other words, it was a document that was not trying to say everything about the Christian faith and the church, just essential things that showed peace and harmony with the Roman Catholic Church.

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21. *Ibid.*, “Smalcald Articles,” 319.

22. Luther: *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 101.