

Dear people of St. Paul Weston Lutheran Church and Pre-School,

It has come to my attention during this period that some questions have arisen regarding the process. I apologize for my absence due to some significant back pain and subsequent surgery. Perhaps I may offer a brief summary of the process and its elements including addressing the rationale and how the people of St. Paul will be involved and give voice and influence to the outcome.

When a pastor retires or accepts a call to another ministry or congregation there is naturally a period between the time the one pastor leaves and the time when another pastor arrives. Congregations are naturally interested in seeking the best pastor to replace the one who left.

As an aside, any pastor in the LCMS is someone who is trained in not only theology but also pastoral care, visitation, preaching and teaching. Most of our pastors from training and experience are well rounded and are in many ways similar. Yet through personal interest, giftedness and training each may be best suited for a particular variety of parish (local church) ministry. Some of those varieties are around community and congregational demographics, ethnicity, language ability, needs, ages and stages in life and congregational life cycle etc.

Requirements for a typical vacancy between pastors

So, in a typical (perhaps 3-6 years of tenure serving a church) vacancy (where a pastor leaves and the pastoral office is “vacant”) certain required steps are initiated. It has been standard practice for a congregation within our Missouri Synod (“synod” literally meaning “walking together”) to agree to a “self-study” process to pause to take the time to clarify its ministry and needs and ultimately the pastor who would best serve them. This self study precedes any call.

This standard self study for a short or medium length tenure of a prior pastor’s presence requests answers, questions and data which include things like: statistical information about the church, general information about the pastor and staff & compensation, congregational growth or decline statistics, local community information/ demographics, congregational program evaluation regarding doorways to the community, Christian education, Bible study and worship practices, outreach, stewardship, youth ministry, governance, congregational goals, a rating of pastoral functions/traits and abilities desired, and so on.

Additional Steps after a longer tenured pastor

For churches where the outgoing pastor has a longer tenure it is well advised that an “interim minister” be put in place where the interim pastor serves not only as the pastor in that place for a time but also guides the church through a more extended self-study process. Typically this would involve a contract for six months or a year or even longer with the interim pastor. This extended time serves as a “buffer” or transition opportunity between a long term, often much loved pastor and anyone who would follow them. Without this “intentional interim” the next pastor will inevitably serve in the shadow of the previous pastor which may prove challenging. Often in that case the next pastor becomes the “unintentional interim” and inevitably will be there only a short time. So this extended time also allows for the congregation to take the time for the extended self study which when done carefully and prayerfully will help the congregation to shift from looking longingly to the past to seek the Lord’s will for the future and embrace it. In love, people should be allowed time to grieve what has changed and seek what will come by God’s grace. An intentional interim ministry allows this important work to happen.

For St. Paul, the ministry of Pastor Hartner was of a very long tenure. He was an exceptional pastor and was deeply loved and appreciated. He was very concerned for the next chapter of St. Paul and was concerned that St Paul go through this intentional interim. As the number of available trained interim pastors is limited, a variation of the interim pastor arrangement was organized and approved by the District President. First a local retired pastor, Pastor Abram, was available to be the steady hand of

preaching and teaching and supporting the pastoral care by St. Paul’s capable staff. This then left two other roles to fill: first, who would guide the interim work or extended self study with the church and secondly who would serve as circuit visitor (District representative of the District President)? Since Pastor Hartner is still the Broward Circuit Visitor, he is unable to serve this role for his previous congregation. In both roles, I was asked if I was available. This is because of my additional training and education as a congregational consultant and executive coach for pastors and service as a circuit visitor for eleven years previously in the Palm Beach Circuit. Thus, while not one person, we two pastors were willing to serve and fulfill the role of the “intentional interim.”

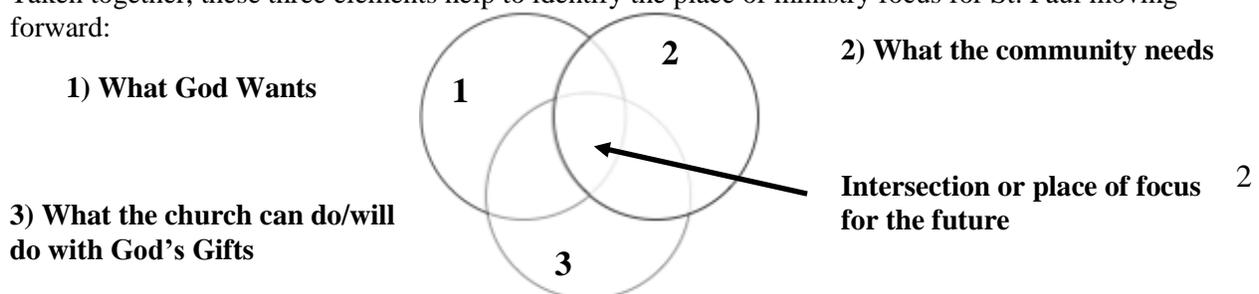
The Extended Self Study:

The “extended self study” referenced for congregations of pastors who have served with longer tenures is not a static or one size fits all process. The circumstances of each vacancy require varied interventions and approaches to prepare the congregation to call a pastor. Some churches may have been in decline, some may experience conflict, some may have a specific history of ministry tied to the gifts of the previous pastor which need to be discontinued or altered, some may have experienced subtle or significant changes in their surrounding communities since the prior pastor arrived. There may be a myriad of other circumstances or situations both within the congregation and within the immediate community which need to be identified, evaluated and clarified. All of which is necessary prior to identifying the particular traits, gifts and specialties desired in a new pastor and therefore who a church may wish to call. Much like a wise doctor will not prescribe treatment without a proper examination, testing and diagnosis, a wise congregation would do well to call a pastor only after doing the “homework” of the extended self study. The benefit of this time of study is not only that the congregation pauses to pray and examine their situation and opportunities but also through it they begin to experience a shift in their perspective from the past to more of an anticipation or excitement about the possibilities that God is showing them for the future. This can happen precisely because they took the time for this season of extended self study.

So for St. Paul, in addition to the standard, prescribed FLGA District self study process, a three part extended self study process has been designed and initiated which includes but is not limited to:

- 1) A time of prayer and Bible Study regarding God’s will for congregations and pastors. This was begun in part on a Sunday early in May. Another Bible study will occur at the Workshop scheduled in October. Prayer is requested throughout.
- 2) A time of discerning what the community needs. God places churches in particular times and places for specific ministry as His “salt and light.” It is wise therefore to periodically study the community and learn where there may be the best places to impact the community for the sake of the Christ. Demographics, interviews of those who have other perspectives, surveys of friends and neighbors are prescribed. This is perhaps what most have heard about in the first months of the interim period.
- 3) An inventory of St. Paul’s gifts and resources. Who are the people of St. Paul? What gifts, talents, traits, resources, financial, material and relationally do they have? How may those be leveraged for the kingdom of God? A my forte survey, plus an appreciative inquiry workshop are scheduled to examine, listen and gather this information.

Taken together, these three elements help to identify the place of ministry focus for St. Paul moving forward:



Question:

In what way will the congregation be involved in the process?

Answer:

First, through broad participation in conducting the interviews and surveys, gathering the demographic data (part 2 above illustration) and completing the standard FLGA self study document they will a) be not only gathering important information to identify that place of intersection but b) their perspectives on priorities and needs may be shaped as well.

Secondly, through the my forte survey and their participation in the Appreciative Inquiry workshop (part 3 see above illustration) they will discuss at tables and report to the larger group the gifts, talents, resources of St. Paul and their people. Through their participation and input, sharing and reporting out many will come to a new, renewed or deeper appreciation of their and their fellow members gifts, but will no doubt also begin to see new possibilities for how God can use St. Paul's people and resources.

Question:

But what about asking St, Paul about what it wants in a pastor and what kind of ministry it wants to pursue?

Answer:

Certainly St Paul's members will be asked about the functions, traits, and abilities desired in their next pastor as required by the standard self study process outlined above. Yet, just like a doctor will not give a diagnosis and treatment plan until they have completed their diagnostic testing, it would be best to allow for the homework and participation of as many members as possible in the regular and extended self study "diagnostic testing" to be completed first. So, after the information and data have come in, most of it through the first hand work of members themselves, then they will be asked to be "doctors" and give their advice for what is required for a new pastor.

Secondly, as for the focus of ministry, that intersection will become more apparent and will receive greater clarity during and following the second workshop when what God wants is reviewed (1) and the "homework" will be reported (2 & 3 from the above illustration).

Summary.

It is tempting to jump to the final step to simply form a call committee and complete the standard self study and get this process finished. Yet, wisdom and experience teaches us that a healthy positive lengthy tenure of a new pastor where a majority of members participate and support this new stranger as their pastor takes time. furthermore, the time invested in going through the diagnostic steps will ensure a much better fit for St. Paul, its future ministry and the furthering of God's kingdom in this challenging culture and time. May God bless us through this time of transition. Serving Christ with you, Pastor Gress