

Why Do We Run Our Churches Like This?

Have you ever wondered why people do things the way they do? My wife and I have often wondered about road construction. You're flying down the highway and suddenly traffic slows to a crawl while one or even two lanes disappear. You go 45 miles an hour for three or four miles and you never see a single worker. Not one truck or piece of heavy equipment. And then, you pass the "End construction" sign. Why did they put all those cones up? Why do they do it that way? I assume they have a reason. But when you're crawling along in stop and go traffic and you don't see any actual work going on, it seems like one of the great mysteries of life. Well, today, we want to talk about another one of the great mysteries of life: why do we Lutherans run our churches the way we do? Have you wondered about that? Have you walked out of church shaking your head over what we're going to do now? **Why do we run our churches like this?**

Maybe we should ask first: how do we run our churches? Like most WELS congregations, here at Peace we have a constitution and by-laws that define our structure. That constitution states that the highest authority is the Word of God. Beyond that, our constitution and by-laws spell out a pretty typical WELS structure. At the top is the voters assembly. It's made up of adult men who are communicant members. The voters are the final authority on all non-doctrinal questions. They issue calls. They approve the budget. They can revise the constitution and the by-laws. They elect officers and the members of the boards. The chairmen of each board and the officers of the congregation form the church council, which takes care of business between voters meetings. Each board focuses on specific areas of ministry, like the school, and they report to the voters through the council. So the voters represent the entire congregation. Their job is to manage our ministry. They delegate day to day authority to the council and the boards.

Why do we do it that way? What passage of Scripture commands it? The truth is, no Bible passage says we have to do it this way. So why do we? It's designed to give a voice to our membership at large, within the limitations that scripture requires. It allows for us to change leaders when that's necessary. It allows us to amend our constitution if the situation calls for it. It separates administration from preaching the gospel. So while your principal and I both sit on the council and on boards, we are not the president of the congregation. We do not make rules or dictate to the congregation. We have to follow the decisions of the voters unless they go against what the Bible says.

Is this the best way to run our church? The purpose of Peace Lutheran Church is to preach the gospel. There are an infinite number of ways that we could do that, and we get to make choices about it. But our purpose is to proclaim the good news that Jesus Christ died and rose so that sinners like us know we're forgiven. We want to find peace and comfort here and to get to heaven when we die. Our forefathers were convinced that the congregational structure – voters electing officers – was the best way to proclaim that gospel.

Again, there is no Bible passage that says that. It was their Christian judgment that they passed on to us. Their thinking was colored by their historical experience. The Roman Catholic Church has bishops and they are absolute in their authority. And they lost the gospel in part because no one could call them to account. The Lutheran church in Germany was run as a department of the government. That state run church also lost the gospel in part because there was no way to call them to account. So our forefathers studied the scriptures and realized that you, the members, are responsible for what is preached and taught and practiced in your church. If you have no voice, you can't correct false doctrine or insist on the truth. So they tried to come up with a model that made you responsible. Being Americans they came up with something that looks a lot like a town meeting.

So now that we've escaped from the darkness of Roman bishops and the German state church, we have the perfect system to guarantee that we will always be faithful to the truth, right? No. If this were the perfect system and God wanted all churches run this way, it would be in the Bible. It's not because no structure can guarantee faithfulness. No constitution can change our hearts. Only the gospel can do that. Any structure – even bishops – can be used to preach the good news, if the men and women who work under it are faithful. But even the best structure will fail if we don't cling to God's Word and teach that Word and live by that Word – which is why our constitution makes the Word of God the highest authority.

Now I do believe that structure matters. Within the WELS, there are voices that argue for a different model. Some want to see something more like a corporation with the pastor as the CEO. Some want to see something closer to a bishop. Some want to see more of a consensus model where no votes are ever taken. If

you want to, we can talk about those things. Even within the structure we have, there are times when the work would go better if we streamlined this or added that. Structure matters, even though faithfulness to God's Word matters more.

So what are the weaknesses of the structure we have? The greatest weakness may be participation. We have over 300 communicant members here at Peace. Leaving out those who aren't old enough to be voters and those who can't serve because of what God's Word says about the roles of men and women, that leaves 130 or 140 men who could be voters. On paper we have 55. But how many actually come to voters meetings? Usually not more than twenty. But it's worse than that. Only voters can serve on the council or the boards. We have almost 20 positions on the council and boards. We struggle year after year to find men who are willing to serve in those positions. Many congregations have decided to shrink the number of elected positions so that they don't have to find as many people to serve. But that does also increase the authority and the workload of those men who do serve.

Another problem is communication. Since God's Word forbids women to have authority over men, all our voters are male. They make decisions that we all have to follow. Now, when God set that up, he made men responsible for representing the needs and concerns of the women in their congregation. But not every woman in our congregation has a male family member who is a voter. Who speaks for them? All the men are supposed to. The men of this congregation should be constantly engaging the women to find out how our decisions impact them. But it takes a lot of effort to do that. And our sinful flesh is just lazy.

The communication problems go beyond that. How often do you know what's really going on? How often do you know what decisions are being made or how good or how bad our finances are? We have not been able to maintain a functioning newsletter and we have not made good use of social media. Much of that falls on my shoulders. I haven't made those things function the way they should. The other leaders of our congregation also have struggled to make communication work in this church. What's the problem? On one level, we just spend so much time with it that we forget that other people don't live and breathe this stuff. And it takes thought and effort to be a good communicator. We all have other stuff to do. Too often, we let it slide.

That points to a third issue that I've seen in more than one WELS congregation: trust. The congregational model assumes that we're all sinners and checks and balances help to keep sinners honest. But the devil has done a remarkable job of eroding almost every structure in American life by eroding trust between leaders and members. It's true in government and in work and it's true in the church. Some of it is the fault of us leaders. We're sinners and when we don't listen to our members or don't pay attention to how our decisions affect other people, we sin. When we're too lazy or egotistical to do the work of communicating we sin.

But some of it also is the fault of the members. Some members would rather gripe than help find constructive solutions. Some members are quick to condemn what their leaders do without talking to them or trying to find out why a decision was made. Some members refuse to accept that a decision that's different from what they wanted can still reflect an effort to be faithful in doing God's work. Some members assume that their leaders have no interest in hearing what they have to say. They condemn their leaders without even trying.

And some members just won't help out. Now, not everyone belongs on a board or the council. Raising your children to know the Lord, loving and honoring your spouse, being faithful in your job and being a productive member of society – these are all God pleasing things. They are specifically Lutheran values. You can serve the Lord without being elected to position in your church. But at the same time, being a part of your congregation is a gift of God. God does expect all members to contribute to our joint work in a way that fits your gifts and your station in life. Do we all do that faithfully? Or do we just want someone else to take care of it? Or do we just not know what opportunities there are to serve?

Now, I'm sure we could come with other weaknesses to our way of running our church. I'm interested in hearing from you how it could work better. But in the end, would a bishop or a CEO communicate better than a church council? Would you respect and support and participate more in a church run by a bishop or by a consensus model than you do now? Or do we have to admit that on both sides of the equation, the biggest problem is that we sinners are the ones doing this and we sin even when we try to serve the Lord? We could do better with the structure we have. We might do even better with different one. But doing better won't erase our sin. God calls us to be faithful and it's just too easy for us to give in to our sinful pride or laziness and do something else.

But that's why Jesus came. He was the only perfect church member and the only perfect church leader who ever lived. God sees him when he looks at us leaders and at us members. Then Jesus died and paid for all the times we leaders were too lazy or too prideful to do our jobs right – for all our failures to communicate or to care about how our actions affected our people. He died and he paid for all the times we members failed to trust and love and support our leaders – for all the times we took their words and actions in the worst possible way. His blood washed all that sin away. It made us clean in God's sight. Jesus rose to tell us that. He rose to give us the gift of heaven.

Then, in love, God gave us faith and gathered us into his Church. He sent pastors and teachers to baptize us and teach us and commune us. In his infinite wisdom, he chose to make that happen primarily within congregations. But he didn't give us a code about how to run these congregations. He loved us and he trusted us to wrestle with it. He gave us the freedom to make choices. And he sent the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts through the gospel. That Spirit gives us wisdom. That Spirit gives us all gifts. Some of us have gifts to administer the work. Some of us have gifts to proclaim. Some of us have gifts to show love. They're all here. They're all part of our work.

Above all else, he gave us the gospel in word and sacrament. That gospel works in our hearts and in the hearts of everyone we share it with. No matter how much our sin gets in the way – no matter how many problems our sin causes in our congregation, the Holy Spirit works every time we announce that Christ has forgiven us. My friends, Christ has forgiven us for all the ways we get in the way instead of helping with the work. So now, as forgiven children of God, help with the work. In just a few minutes, we're going to install the officers that our voters elected. Pray for them. Talk to them. Listen to them. Help them. And trust them. Find your place in the preaching of the gospel here. Do all that you can, with gifts God as given you and in the circumstances he has called to you live in, to help the gospel be preached here. Then trust in God to do amazing things here. Amen.