

## Why Do We Call Workers Like This?

In America today, companies spend enormous amounts of time and money trying to find good people for the positions they need to fill. They aren't even looking for a perfect candidate. They just want someone who will work out. It's hard. Out of the hundreds of millions of people in this country, they need to find one that's qualified and that will fit in at their workplace. When my wife got her current job, she had a recommendation from someone in the company that she had worked with at another place. She still had to go through multiple interviews, not just with their HR person, but with team leaders and co-workers. She had to supply a resume and transcripts. It took a couple of weeks to go through it all.

You know what? I didn't have to do any of that stuff to get my job here. I didn't send you a resume. I didn't get interviewed when you were looking for a pastor – in fact, I never met or even spoke with a single member of this congregation except Pastor Schaeve and then only when we were in school together almost twenty years before that. You didn't know me either. You never heard me preach or do a Bible class. You never got the chance to ask me about my philosophy of ministry or my previous experience or where I thought I would be in five years. Nobody ever asked me the meaningful questions some people ask in interviews, like: "If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be?" Yet, you hired me. Better, you called me to be your pastor. Your experience is not unique. That's the way the system we have in the WELS works, and all our congregations have to follow it. **Why do we call the workers for our churches like this?**

How do we do it? Even though we've had some experience with the process recently, I wonder how many of us understood how it works. It begins with the congregation deciding that it needs to call a new pastor or teacher. Once we decide that, we contact our district president and ask for a call list. Before we get it, he needs to know some things about our congregation. For a pastor, that usually means a pre-call meeting. The district president comes here and asks the whole congregation a series of questions. With a teacher, it's done through an online form that the board of education fills out. But once he has the information, he makes us a call list usually with three to six names on it. He develops that list by sifting through the synod's database on called workers and by talking to other district presidents and pastors and teachers. We have the right to add names to the list, if we want to. But then our voters assembly meets, pours over the list, and votes. Once we have a majority, we make the call unanimous and we contact the man or woman we've called.

What do you notice about that system? Most people are struck by the fact that it's kind of a blind system. We don't collect any information here. We don't do a national search for a pastor. We don't publish what we're looking for and interview candidates. Finding qualified candidates is in the hands of the district president. So all the vetting is done by him and the other district presidents. And it's blind on the other side, too. I don't know when my name is put on a call list. It could've been used a hundred times in the last couple years or not at all. I just don't know. I don't get to put in my name for a call that I think I'd like to have. I don't send in resumes for other positions. I can tell the district president if I feel that it's time for a change. But I don't know if he'll ever act on that or not.

To be honest, that process can be frustrating. We can feel powerless as we try to find a minister to serve our congregation, but someone else is vetting the candidates and giving us a list. The information on the call list is really limited. We've had a lot of experience calling teachers in recent years and we've seen how limited that information is. Guess what? With pastors it's even worse. As the circuit pastor, I go to call meetings where some voters share their frustration on this score. They don't know how they're supposed to make a decision based on the small amount of information they have. My only response is to tell them that the district president believes that every name on the list is someone who is qualified to serve in their specific situation.

That doesn't always make people feel better, especially when they've been calling for a long time. There is shortage of pastors and principals in the WELS right now. Today, there are 125 pastoral vacancies in the WELS. The graduating class from the seminary is only 26 men. By the time they graduate next spring, many pastors will retire, so the vacancy rate will grow. The situation with principals is even worse. So the process can take a long time. It took us two years and eleven calls to get our new principal. With such a high vacancy rate, our pastor and principal might get calls in the future.

The process can be especially frustrating when there are problems with the worker who comes. When that pastor or teacher doesn't work out – especially if they prove to be unfaithful, the congregation has a serious cross to bear. And it's easy to get mad at synod for sending us that guy! We may even feel betrayed because we think they should've known that this person was not fit or not faithful for ministry.

So why do we do it this way? Very few other churches have a call system like ours, so obviously, the Bible doesn't command it. There is not one word about district presidents or call lists in the Scripture. The Bible does not command this "double blind" system that we've instituted. We would be free to change it. But our Lutheran forefathers put this system in place because they believed it applies what we do believe about the divine call to real life.

What do we believe? You've heard me talk about it before. We believe that the Holy Spirit calls through the church. We believe that God sends pastors and teachers exactly where he wants them to go. Now, sometimes, that has been misunderstood. We imagine that somehow God communicates directly to us ministers and tells us to go to this or that place. We just get a feeling and we know what God wants us to do. That's not what we believe. We believe that when a pastor or teacher gets a call like I did earlier this year, he actually has two calls from God. Both are equally valid. Both are the will of God. And God gives the worker the freedom to choose how best to serve in his kingdom. Now, that puts a big responsibility on him or her to make the decision be about what's best for God's kingdom, not what's best for me. But when God gives us freedom, it always comes with responsibility. And at the same time, we do believe that God works through those choices and he gets those men and women to the places he wants them to be.

So our forefathers wanted a system that is orderly. God says that he is not a God of disorder but a God of peace. Now, other systems could be just as orderly, but this one is, too. Our forefathers also wanted a system that underlined God's control of the process. So they took it out of the hands of the churches and of the workers themselves. They wanted you to remember that God sent all the workers who've ever served this church. They wanted me to remember that I'm serving where God wants me to be. Why does that matter? Because we're sinners living in a sinful world. It's easy for pastors and teachers to be hard on their congregation and to be discontent in their calls. Other pastors or teachers make more money. Other pastors and teachers have this or that advantage. Sometimes, we get weary or frustrated. And over hundred years ago, a leader in the American Lutheran church reminded pastors and teachers that the place that God calls you to serve is, for you, the most precious place on earth. Not because it's perfect. But because this is where God called you to serve. He loves you and he loves the people he sent you to. And he calls us workers to trust him and be content.

The flip side is true, too. It's easy for members to be frustrated with their pastors and teachers. That pastor always picks impossible hymns. I can't hear him when he preaches. He's boring and he always talks about the same things. That teacher isn't very good at her job. She's not very likeable, engaging, whatever. Sometimes, those things are true. Pastors and teachers are sinners and there will always be room to criticize the work we do. I'm not saying we should make excuses for those weaknesses, but that's when God's people have to remember that God sent those pastors and teachers. Our Lutheran forefathers believed that this call system underlined that truth. That's why they made some unwritten rules about it: a pastor should never put himself forward for a specific call. He should let the Holy Spirit come to him. A congregation should never ask a pastor or teacher if they're interested in their call before the call meeting. If a congregation does that, no minister should answer that question.

Does it have to be this way? No. We could have bishops who just moved our pastors and teachers around. I wouldn't like that, but it wouldn't be sinful. We could have interviews and sometimes, I wonder if we should. We could ask for resumes. That wouldn't be sinful but I think we'd have quite a debate about whether it was good for our churches. But we can make changes to the system we have. However, until we do, we should abide by the system as it exists because God is not a God of disorder but of peace.

We need to remember it's not the system that guarantees we get the man or woman we need. Any call process is a human application of a divine truth: God calls through the church. If Jesus came and tapped us on the shoulders and told us where to go, there really wouldn't be much to debate. But Jonah shows us that even when God does that, our sinful nature still interferes with God's plans. When the sin of pastors or teachers ruins our ministries, that doesn't make God unfaithful. Sometimes, we pastors and teachers are a cross that our congregation has to bear. But God calls his people to bear the cross. God sends trouble and hardship to teach

his people to trust him. Sometimes, the human side of the process is clunky and even offensive. Sometimes pastors do try to get a specific call. Sometimes congregations manipulate the process. Sometimes, voters walk out of a meeting frustrated by the way it was run. All that is real and it's caused by sin.

But God hides himself behind all the human clunkiness of our process. God hides himself behind all our weakness and even sin. God hides himself behind the holy ministry itself. And he works. He knows our congregation. He knows exactly what we need. He knows us ministers and where we can serve best. He knows what's going to happen tomorrow and what gifts your church's workers will need when those things come. He knows when you and your church need a challenge, even a cross. And he works in whatever call process we have to send exactly what you need.

Trust him as he works through the process. Now that doesn't mean we can't try to improve our process. But no matter what process we have, trust that the Lord of the Church calls through you. How can you trust him? Because this is the Father who sent his Son to die and rise for you. This is the Son who took on flesh because he knew that we pastors and teachers and members are all weak sinners who are more likely to hurt our churches than help them. And he came to be perfect in our place. He came to lay down his life and pay for our weakness and sin. This is the Holy Spirit who loves you so much that he never stops working in the church through the word and sacrament to give you peace. Trust God's love. And trust also his power. God who made the world and controls the world and sees all that is in the world works in all things for the good of his church. That applies to all call processes, too. God the Son who died for us also rose. He defeated death. He defeated sin. He wiped all our guilt away and made us holy in God's sight. He is working for you. God the Holy Spirit took dead sinners and made us alive by faith. He is working to renew his church. He is working to call men and women where they need to be. He is working in the gospel for you. Is the system imperfect? Without a doubt. Are we free to change it? Yes. But is God working through it? Absolutely. That is what he promises. Trust him. Amen.