

The Relationship Of The School Visitor To The Principal

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Introduction

Supervisor? Inspector? Counselor? Helper? Fellow teacher? Listener? How do you perceive your relationship to the principals of the schools you visit? Would any of those terms define that relationship? Through this paper an attempt will be made to clarify the relationship between visitor and principal. This will be done by examining the scriptural principles which apply to the relationship, namely, the public ministry, Christian love, Christian service; the historical perspective of the relationship; the relationship from the perspective of the WELS Constitution; and, finally, practical applications of the relationship.

Scriptural Principles

The Public Ministry

In a paper entitled "The Lutheran Teacher's Position in the Ministry of the Congregation" a LCMS theologian, A. C. Stellhorn states:

Any position or office of the church which participates in "the gathering, building, governing, providing for, and preserving God's Church on earth in His name," is a part or branch of the one office of the public ministry established by Christ.

Stellhorn stated the above because he believed that a teacher shares in the work and calling of the public ministry. The quote not only makes a case for teachers, but emphasizes equally well that a school visitor as he performs his work of visitation qualifies as a member of the public ministry. Basing such a conclusion on the opinion of mortal man would make the argument a bit weak to say the least. Let us turn to a source of proof that will give 100% credence to that idea.

No, as all of us know, the Lord does not speak of school visitors in the Scriptures. That's a man-made position. But if we examine certain positions of Scripture, it is evident that visitors are part of the church's ministry because they are part of that greatest work of "taking care of God's Church" (1 Tim. 3:5).

Matthew in his inspired Gospel writes: "Go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19,20). Is there any reason to doubt that the visitor as he counsels with teachers encouraging and advising them in their ministry is assisting the congregation in "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you?" As a visitor meets with pastor and principal to discuss the school's education program and make suggestions regarding it, that visitor is functioning as a minister of the Word for he gives advice regarding the religion curriculum, suggests changes in methods of discipline, and encourages a more active school promotion program. The Word is an integral part of each of those areas, in fact the very foundation of each.

In Ephesians 4:11-13 the Apostle Paul spells out the function of the ministers of His Word. These are "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining the full measure of perfection found in Christ."

I suspect there are few if any of us here or among those pastors, teachers, children, parents, and congregations we serve who would doubt that we school visitors as we go about our appointed tasks are doing as the Apostle Paul urges: “Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

Another requirement of members in the public ministry is the selection or a call by a congregation or group of believers to preach or teach or to be active in some phase of those two. Luther states it thus: “Though all of us are priests, we may and should not on that account all preach or teach and govern. However, from the whole congregation some must be selected and chosen to whom this office is to be committed; and whoever holds this office is now, because of it, not a priest (like all the rest), but a servant or minister, of all the others. And if he can or will no more preach or serve, he steps back into the common crowd, commits his office to someone else, and is now again no more than every common Christian. Behold, thus must the office of preaching, or the ministry, be distinguished from the universal priesthood of all baptized Christians. For this office is nothing more than a public service, which is delegated to one by the whole congregation, though all of them are priests together” (F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol..III, p. 442).

The Scriptures speak of this special call or selection. In 1 Timothy 5:22 the Apostle Paul states: “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands.” In Acts 14:23 we read: “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in every church and, fasting, committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust.” Numerous other Scripture passages refer to the selection of elders. Cf. Titus 1:5 and Acts 20:17.

For the visitor this special call, this selection, was done by the district board for parish education, in the stead of and by the resolution of the Synod, and with the consent of the congregations of the Synod. In effect we visitors are indeed serving the Christians who have, even if only indirectly, called us into our positions.

To this point no mention has been made of the principal and his call into the public ministry because I assume that all of us and all the people we serve are aware of that fact. On the other hand my reason for spending the first section of this paper on the school visitor as a public minister is to show that he, as well as, the principal is a servant of the Word, serving in the public ministry. That establishes an important base as we discuss the relationship of these two servants.

Both visitor and principal have calls to their respective roles. Both are in the public ministry by virtue of those calls. Those calls outline the specific responsibilities of each.

The visitor is to help and encourage teachers, principals, and congregations in their Christian day school programs. Annually he examines and evaluates instruction, curriculum, discipline, instructional materials, and facilities. He suggests and recommends.

The principal has direct responsibility over the daily activities of the Christian day school, its pupils, teachers, curriculum, and instruction. He is administrator of the school and a leader within the congregation.

Later in the paper some practical applications to these responsibilities will be discussed.

Even though similarities exist in the calls of the visitor and principal, the differences are also apparent. The visitor’s-call is temporary, but the principal’s is permanent. The visitor functions only about two or three weeks annually, while the principal is principal all year round. The visitor is responsible to several congregations, the principal to one. The visitor receives no remuneration for his labors. More differences could be mentioned but this will give us some indication how their calls differ.

Love

A second scriptural principle which influences the relationship of the visitor and principal is Christian love. This Christian love has two prongs, love God and love neighbor. Numerous times the Lord reminded His hearers and us of this love. Deut. 6:5, Ps. 31:23, 2 Thess. 3:5, and Jude 21 all enjoin us to love our God. Neighborly love also receives due emphasis. Cf. Deut. 10:19, Matt. 22:39, and John 15:12.

The love of the Savior that wells up in the hearts of the visitor and principal pervades and controls their relationship. They work together in harmony knowing that both labor for the same goal. Both share a deep love and commitment to children, parents, teachers, pastors, and congregation members whom they serve, for both know that the Savior offered His life for each of them. Both forgive as easily and quickly as Christ forgives them. Both know that the only true God-pleasing motivator is the love of the Savior. Both recognize their weakness, their need for encouragement, understanding, empathy, and admonition.

This two pronged love sets this relationship apart, making it special.

Service

Service is the third scriptural principle which applies to the relationship of visitor to principal. You undoubtedly recall the quote from Luther stating that the office of the public ministry “is nothing more than a public service.” The Lord minced no words when He discussed this point. James and John desired special favor from the Lord when they entered heaven. The Lord answered: “Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45). The Lord wasn’t a “do as I say and not as I do” individual, but He practiced what He preached. John 13:14 tells us He washed His disciples’ feet. Also examining Jesus’ public ministry, it was totally dedicated to serving, both spiritually and physically, the people who so desperately needed His Word. And let us not forget the supreme service He performed, giving His life for us. Oh, that we as visitors and principals could match that love which displayed itself in that service! Even if matching it is impossible let each of us resolve to be more Christ-like in this aspect of our ministry, using Jesus as our example as we serve those who have called us. Pray. Ask Him for total dedication to our calling. Read and study His Word, the only source of strength and commitment.

One aspect of service needs emphasis here. In the relationship of visitor to principal one is not superior to the other, and, therefore, neither is one inferior to the other. Both are called, both serve, both are striving for the same goals. Therefore, both work together encouraging, advising, consoling, and, when necessary, admonishing one another.

Historical View Of The Relationship

Taking a trek through the history of the school visitation program should assist us as we examine the relationship of the visitor to the principal.

The roots of our school visitation program go back to the Synod convention of 1890 which elected a school committee whose assignment included working out daily programs and compiling statistical reports on our schools. This committee recommended that a school secretary be appointed to gather school statistics. Dr. F. W. A. Notz was appointed to this position. He performed these duties in addition to his regular responsibilities.

Between 1891 and 1919 synodical records indicate that the school committee ceased functioning. Again the Synod in convention in 1919 resolved to elect a school committee which was to call a full-time school visitor. Mr. Claus Geischen received and accepted the call. In

addition to evaluating the schools to determine if they were regular schools, the visitor was to work for the improvement of our schools by giving advice and help to the schools that were not up to standard. Needless to say Mr. Geischen had to work closely with the principals of the schools if there was to be improvement. Certainly we can assume that a Christian spirit of love and willingness to service pervaded the relationship of visitor and principal. This assumption is made because we are told the Lord blessed Mr. Geischen's efforts for he did much in assisting our schools to retain an evangelical character.

Shortage of funds prompted the Synod in convention to temporarily vacate the office of school visitor.

In 1930 our Wisconsin State Teachers' Conference memorialized the Synod asking that another school visitor be appointed. A financial crunch made the Synod say no, but it recommended that a school visitation program be established similar to the one in the Minnesota District which had a pastor-teacher visitation team. The pastor helped congregations begin new schools and the teacher visited the schools offering advice and giving assistance.

Prior to the 1933 Synod convention a committee of teachers appointed by the Wisconsin State Teachers' Conference developed a school visitation program. The Synod adopted the plan, but deferred the calling of an Executive Secretary (part of the plan) until 1935. Finally in 1936 Mr. F. W. Meyer accepted the call. He was called by a School Committee which had again been elected by the Synod. This School Committee prior to Mr. Meyer's acceptance implemented the school visitation program. Mr. Meyer assumed the responsibility for administering the program after he accepted the call. In effect the administration of the program has not changed to this day. The name of the School Committee is now the Board for Parish Education and assisting them and working with them are the district boards. The administrator of the program now is the Secretary of Schools.

The general purpose of the school visitation program essentially is no different than Mr. Geischen's purpose in visiting. Improved Christian education is and was the goal and no matter if we had one visitor or if district boards appoint 25 the objective is still the same. That means the visitor had to and has to work with the principal. A healthy relationship based on scriptural principles was as vital to goal accomplishment then as it is now.

The WELS Constitution And The Relationship

Although our Synod's Constitution states nothing directly concerning the relationship, it does so indirectly when it says: "the Department of Christian Day Schools and High Schools shall encourage, advise, and aid local congregations in establishing and maintaining elementary and high schools; it shall supervise the work of school visitation" (*The Constitution and Bylaws of the WELS*, p. 27). *The Statement of Purpose, Objectives, and Policies* of the Board for Parish Education is a document which was recently adopted by the BPE. It expands on the above statement of the Constitution. The first four objectives in the statement are

1. To assist congregations in providing Christian education for all their members;
2. To assist congregations in promoting Christian education;
3. To assist congregations in establishing for their educational agencies curricula which are in harmony with the principles and purpose of Christian education;
4. To advise congregations in the continuing development of their programs of Christian education.

Two policy statements also refer to the school visitor-principal relationship.

- 3a: To conduct programs of school visitation for Christian day and Lutheran high schools;
- 3d: To encourage, assist, and advise Christian day school and Lutheran high school faculties in the study of educational matters: administration, curriculum, in-service training.

The BPE by adopting those policy statements is assuming that the visitor and principal will discuss every phase of the principal's work. The assumption is also made that the visitor has the obligation to make recommendations to the congregation regarding the principal's work.

In addition to outlining broadly the school visitation program the Constitution places some restrictions on it. By giving to the district president and the circuit pastors the right and obligation to supervise doctrine and practice within their district the school visitor's scope of responsibility is limited to the school elementary education program. More will be said about this in the practical application section.

Practical Applications Of The Relationship

By calling a principal the congregation places on him the responsibility of running the school. It is his responsibility to supervise instruction, curriculum, students, staff, and facilities. He is the administrator. He is the leader within the congregation. The visitor, on the other hand, is to assist a congregation in maintaining its elementary school program. By examining each area of the principal's responsibilities and then examining how the visitor is involved in each area, we will have that relationship rather clearly defined.

Supervision of Instruction

The principal is to be knowledgeable of the teaching methods being used by the teachers in his school. Are the methods suitable for the grade level and for the subject being taught? Is there a variety of methods being used? Which methodology is best suited for which teacher? Answering these questions necessitates giving time and effort to regular classroom visitation, formal conferences, and informal conversations with each teacher. Ideally the principal should have visited and counseled with each teacher before the visitor makes his observations and evaluations.

In order to carry out his responsibilities the visitor observes and evaluates lesson procedures and holds pre and post observation conferences with each teacher he visits. Following the observations of and conferences with teachers, the visitor discusses with the principal the instruction in the classrooms. The visitor might discuss and make recommendations to the principal about-any-of the following:

1. Visiting the classrooms more often
2. The content of pre and post observation conferences
3. Methods of conducting conferences
4. Lesson evaluation techniques
5. Various types of lesson procedures

Supervision of Curriculum

As the visitor observes and evaluates the school's education program, he notes strengths and weaknesses in the curriculum. He may find any of these conditions. Test scores may be low in a certain subject. Outdated textbooks still being used in science. The phy ed program is almost nonexistent. The art curriculum needs to be studied and revised. The visitor is obligated to discuss with the principal both weak and strong aspects of the curriculum. Encouragement should be given to continue the good work in strong areas, and suggestions and ideas

should be offered to help the principal strengthen the weaknesses. The visitor should be straight forward, honest, evangelical, and understanding in his observations, evaluations, and recommendations. The visitor should always be ready to listen to the problems the principal faces as he attempts to improve the curriculum. Shooting from the hip was customary in the wild west and that's where that type of action should stay. We can ill afford visitors who make hasty, ill conceived suggestions and thoughtless recommendations based on a whim or a fancy. Thoroughly discussing a problem with the principal in an atmosphere of Christian concern will be the first step toward a God-pleasing solution to any difficulty. The principles of love and service should be uppermost in the visitor's mind. These are obligations of the visitor.

The principal has responsibilities too. He should willingly submit to an evaluation by the visitor realizing that evaluation and the suggestions which follow are made to improve the Christian day school program in his congregation. Being thin skinned and over reacting to constructive criticism will usually result in the continuation of a questionable program and might well cause ill feelings and poor relations between visitor and principal. At this point a word of caution to visitors. Any suggestion for major curricular change should be discussed with the principal. The original idea may originate in a visitor-teacher conversation, but the topic should not be left there without being discussed with the principal.

Supervision of Staff

Faculty meetings, helping beginning teachers, dealing with a teacher's school and personal problems are possible agenda items for visitor-principal discussions. The visitor here can discuss with the principal the scriptural principles of human relations, emphasizing that these principles form the basis for all person to person relations involving one or more persons who are in the public ministry. Should a staff problem exist which deals with doctrine and practice the visitor is obligated to stay within his sphere of responsibility and ask the circuit pastor or district president to deal with the difficulty.

Supervision of Students

Define good acceptable discipline. Answers will be as varied as the number of respondents. Just because this is an area in which a visitor must apply sound Christian common sense and because it is difficult to give a definitive answer regarding what is good student behavior, a visitor should not hesitate to call attention to good discipline and to offer a tactful rebuke if poor discipline is evident. Providing for the needs of LD children or other children with handicaps, class size, dress codes, and reporting pupil progress are possible discussion topics.

Supervision of Facilities

Discussion topics here might include adequate building needs for the number of pupils, maintenance of facilities, purchase and maintenance of equipment.

Administration

Does the principal have his office routine organized to most wisely use his time? Is he delegating to the other faculty members tasks which they are capable of handling or at least learning? For example, one faculty member who is interested in and has special gifts in music could lead the faculty in a curriculum study and evaluation of that subject area. Is the principal doing all sorts of tasks which could be done faster and better by a part-time secretary, e.g., record keeping, filing, library work, typing, keeping financial records, book store, duplicating, making bulletin boards. Is the school being promoted within and outside the congregation as it should be?. Any of these questions could be the basis of a beneficial discussion between principal and visitor.

Leadership

This area is somewhat difficult to evaluate in a short visit of one to three days, therefore, no comments will be made on this topic.

I hope this paper has made it abundantly clear that the visitor has the right, yes, the responsibility to evaluate and if necessary discuss with the principal every phase of his work which deals with the Christian day school. The visitor need not be reluctant about including in his letter to the congregation recommendations regarding the principal's duties and responsibilities be they encouraging the congregation to establish a job description for their principal so that they and he have clear guidelines what is expected of the principal, be it making a suggestion that the congregation pay a substitute teacher so that the principal can visit the classrooms of the other teachers, be it suggesting providing several half days each year for faculty curriculum study. I think the message is clear. The visitor must be perceptive and straight forward. He must call a spade a spade, but this must be done within the framework of the principles outlined earlier in the paper.

One other phase of the school visitation program deserves mention here. The visitor after completing his visit is to encourage the principal to complete the form, "Evaluation of the School Visit." The visitor will encourage the principal with his faculty to complete this form, for in so doing help and advice will be given to the visitor. He too needs to have his work evaluated. Strengths should be noted and weaknesses should be frankly but evangelically pointed out.

If a visitor has built a proper relationship with the principal, a relationship based on God's commands, and if the visitor has carefully studied the various phases of the school's program he is observing, he will be able to provide counsel, advice, encouragement, and admonition in such a way that the name of God will be glorified and His Kingdom will benefit. May our Lord bless the relationship of our visitors and principals making that relationship serve the welfare of His people that have been entrusted to the care of our visitors and principals.