

How, then, Can They Call on the One they have Not Believed In?

By, Forrest L. Bivens

[August 3, 1993]

Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved.
How, then, can they call on the one they have no believed in?
And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?
Romans 10:13-14

Hearing and believing in the Lord lead to *calling* on his name and being saved.
So our attention is drawn to the message of the Lord, that is, the *gospel*.
At this time we give attention to:

1. The Eternal Gospel: Established for Everyone
2. A Different Gospel: Insufficient for Everyone
3. The Saving Gospel: Used and Enjoyed by Us
4. The Glorious Gospel: Also Entrusted to Us

1. The Eternal Gospel: Established for Everyone

*“I pray you all give your audience,
And hear this matter with reverence.”*

These are the opening words of a play written 500 years ago, at the end of the fifteenth century. The play is called *Everyman* (more fully, *The Summoning of Everyman*) and shows Everyman summoned by death while immersed in worldly pleasures and pursuits. As the play unfolds, Everyman comes to realize that none who had professed undying loyalty to him, whether valued friends or prized possessions, will accompany him to the grave or stand with him before the judgment throne of God. None will ensure his entrance into Paradise. His lament is predictable and pitiable:

*O, to whom shall I make my moan
For to go with me in that heavy journey?
First Fellowship said he would with me gone;
His words were very pleasant and gay,
But afterward he left me alone.
Then spake I to my kinsman, all in despair,
And also they gave me words fair;
They lacked no fair speaking,
But all forsook me in the ending.
Then went I to my Goods, that I loved best,
In hope to have comfort, but there had I least;
For my Goods sharply did me tell
That he bringeth many into hell.
Then of myself I was ashamed,
And so I am worthy to be blamed;
Thus may I well myself hate.*

*Of whom shall I now counsel take?
I think that I shall never speed
Till that I go to my Good Deed.
But, alas, size is so weak
That she can neither go nor speak*

By dramatizing the universal struggle between mankind's temptation to sin, fear of death, acknowledgement of divine reckoning and desire for salvation, *Everyman* issues an appeal to every conscience. In truth, the character Everyman is everyone—from every nation, tribe, language and people on the earth. Everyman is you and me and everyone else. And for everyone of us God has this message:

“Everyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.” For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”* (Ro 10:11-13)

Trusting in the Lord and calling on his name results in salvation. It is doing just what the chosen writer of Psalm 116 did, as he himself says:

The cords of death entangled me,
the anguish of the grave came upon me;
I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.
Then I called on the name of the Lord:
“O Lord, save me!”
The Lord is gracious and righteous;
our God is full of compassion.
The Lord protects the simplehearted;
when I was in great need, he saved me.

Seeking salvation by calling on the Lord's name is a pleading for mercy based on all that the Lord has made known about himself. He reveals himself as the God who is gracious, full of compassion and righteous at the same time. In fact, in his grace and compassion he gives a righteousness to those who have none of their own. Anyone and everyone is invited to trust and call on this revealed Lord to gain Christ's righteousness that comes from God. *“This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe”* (Ro 3:22). Everyman in the medieval play was neither seeking nor finding comfort in Christ's goodness provided for him. Rather, he petitioned his own good works for assistance in the final reckoning—and received swift answer:

*Good Deeds, I pray you help me in this need,
Or else I am for ever damned indeed . . .
Everyman, I am sorry for your fall,
And fain would I help you, if I were able.*

The disappointment Everyman experienced should come as no surprise to us. We know very well what the Bible says to *everyone* of us about seeking to establish a righteousness of our own. *“All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law’”* (Gal 3:10). But *“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us”* (Gal 3:13). The truth remains: *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”* This is not a question or statement of mere possibility. It is a declaration of fact.

There is a question, however, that the Apostle Paul wants us to consider in this connection. In fact there are a number of them. *“How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they*

believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?” (Ro 10:14-15). Paul’s obvious point is that people do not simply happen to call on the name of the Lord to be saved. Doing this requires and presupposes confidence in the Lord, which in turn assumes knowledge of the Lord and his work. To know the Lord requires the testifying of messengers who must be equipped, authorized and provided to proclaim the good news of Christ’s righteousness. Any idea of “spontaneous regeneration” in Christ deserves the same degree of acceptance that the theory of spontaneous generation enjoys in the scientific community, namely, none. Knowing, trusting and calling on the Lord for salvation are creations of God through the proclamation of the gospel. “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . Since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe” (1Co 1:18, 21).

This is the message that medieval Everyman needed to hear and heed. This remains the essential proclamation for everyone today, “because it is the power of God for the salvation of *everyone* who believes” (Ro 1:16). Here is the answer to the question, “How can people (anyone or everyone, us or others) hear, believe, call on the name of the Lord and be saved?” “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Ro 10:17).

Since this is so, we as Christians and as members of a Christian church body have our primary purpose and mission defined. The theme chosen for this convention, drawn from the words of Revelation 14:6, reflects this. There we read of “the eternal gospel” that is to be proclaimed “to those who live on the earth--to every nation, tribe, language and people.” It is likewise expressed in our WELS mission statement, which says that we exist “to make disciples throughout the world for time and for eternity, *using the Gospel* to win the lost for Christ and to nurture believers for lives of Christian service” (See the 1993 *BORAM*, p. 209). We observe the repeated emphasis on getting the gospel to *everyone*, whether reaching the lost or nurturing those who already believe. Everyone of “them” and everyone of “us” is targeted for the preaching of the gospel of Christ.

The specific focus of this essay is the gospel work carried out in and for “us” and our congregations. In assigning this essay our synod’s praesidium stated:

We see this paper as a basic emphasis on Parish Service issues. The spade work is done at the parish level. Here souls are brought into the kingdom. Here they are nourished and built up in their faith. Evangelism, youth ministry, adult spiritual growth, Bible study, elementary and secondary education, worship—everything in the Parish Services domain is emphasized here. This is also where the basic equipping occurs for lives of Christian service.

The other essays prepared for this convention carry the emphases of training fulltime gospel ministers and mission outreach. At this time we remind ourselves that God’s establishment of the eternal gospel for everyone and our Parish Services work are intimately linked. Maintaining and expressing this connection in all aspects of our work is of utmost importance. Cherishing the biblical “gospel for everyone” shapes and influences what we do, why we do it and the way we go about it. So we repeat the truth: The eternal gospel is established by God for everyone, and our mission is to use it to bring everyone to know, trust and call on the name of the Lord.

2. A Different Gospel: Insufficient for Everyone

In his letter to the Galatian believers, St. Paul expressed astonishment that they were turning from the gospel of Christ and “to a different gospel -- which is really no gospel at all” (Gal 1:6). Then, with some of the strongest language in the Bible, the apostle declared, “Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned” (Gal 1:8). There is reason for such indignation. Any “different gospel” aside from the good news of Christ and his righteousness for us is “no

gospel at all.” It is neither God’s news nor good news for the salvation of sinners. Whatever it may promise or give to people, its benefits are insufficient for immortal souls.

Unfortunately, Everyman in the fifteenth century play, received the same kind of “different gospel” that the Galatians were exposed to. The morality play presented a blend of Christian truth and Catholic dogma with the ultimate emphasis on human deeds. This is exactly what Paul lamented concerning his fellow Israelites: “They are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness” (Ro 10:2-3). Everyman, whose own good deeds were at first admitted to be inadequate and unacceptable to God, was eventually pointed to the path of penance, the Roman priesthood and self-scourging to expand and enhance goodness from his deeds. So shortly before he must sink into his grave he announces his source of strength and comfort in this way:

*Methink alas, that I must be gone
To make my reckoning and my debts pay,
For I see my time is nigh spent away.
Take example, all ye that this do hear or see,
How they that I loved best do forsake me,
Except my Good Deeds that bideth truly.*

Pity Everyman! And pity everyone who settles for a “different gospel.” “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (Isa 64:6). This offers us all a good lesson as we appraise what we do and why we do it in our ministries. The various aspects of ministry that each congregation must give attention to are many. Since the Parish Services division is to help our congregations and their called workers carry out their ministries, its work is also quite diverse. The names of the six commissions in this division bring this out: Adult Discipleship, Evangelism, Parish Schools, Special Ministries, Worship and Youth Discipleship. Working closely with our Northwestern Publishing House, these units give attention to a wide variety of tasks. The scope of responsibility was summarized by Rev. Wayne Mueller in the August, 1992, issue of the *Northwestern Lutheran*:

The Parish Services division of our synod does just what its name says: it helps churches. While our mission boards plant new congregations at home and around the world, Parish Services provides those parishes with support for their daily gospel ministry: hymnals, choir music, catechisms, Bible histories, Lutheran elementary and high school curriculum material, stewardship and evangelism training, vacation Bible school studies, youth Bible courses, Sunday school material, liturgical helps, and adult Bible studies. While the Worker Training division prepares young men and women for work in the church, Parish Services assists them after graduation with motivation and instruction for their ministry.

Yet all these functions are to have one thing in common: the centrality of the gospel. The gospel must remain our constant theme and thrust. (To avoid unnecessary misunderstanding, let it also be said that we are also to preach Law, God’s holy will, to expose and convict guilty mankind. The gospel of gracious pardon and free salvation will not appeal to a sinner unless he realizes he is lost in sin and guilt. Fully stated, all the support and assistance offered to congregations and their called workers has to do with the proclamation of God’s word, Law and Gospel, with the primacy of the gospel maintained.) To do otherwise is to slip into serving ourselves and others with a “different” and insufficient gospel. To illustrate this point, we mention three examples of “other gospels” that we are wise to avoid.

First, we are not here to “improve people,” that is, to upgrade their morality, ethical standards or external behavior patterns in general. This sounds good and is a desirable thing to people, but is not God’s primary desire or what people really need most. Human nature observes and admires good behavior, but “because it sees only works and does not understand or consider faith, it dreams accordingly that these works merit remission of

sins and justify. This opinion of the Law inheres by nature in men's minds" (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, *Triglotta*, page 197, 144). This inborn "opinion of the Law" moves people to want moral lifestyles that they might gain God's favor by outward obedience to divine Law or reap blessings that often accompany good behavior on earth. Without faith and its accompanying love for the Lord, however, good works remain sinful in God's eyes and fail to supply what everyone really needs: the forgiveness of sins and the new life that flows from a new heart given through the gospel. In Parish Services work this distinction is to be recognized and maintained. Materials and resources to foster growth in Christian stewardship, for example, are not simply to improve financial giving. Nor are we to serve our youth, provide elementary and secondary school curriculum items or publish materials primarily to foster external obedience and respect for God's Law. Our chief goal is to communicate the gospel and only then to anticipate improved lifestyles because of the Spirit's work.

Secondly, we are not here simply to *improve society*, that is, to make life more pleasurable, the environment more enjoyable or people happier than they would be otherwise. Again, this is precisely what many crave. Peggy Noonan, former speech writer for Ronald Reagan, George Bush and Dan Rather, must be acknowledged as a keen observer of our society and its desires. She has written about a "huge revolution in human expectation" that has shaped lives within the last generation. She calls this "the expectation of happiness" and writes:

Somewhere in the '60's or '70's we started expecting to be happy, and changed our lives—left town, left families, switched jobs—if we were not. And society strained and cracked in the storm.

Why? We have lost the old knowledge that happiness is overrated—that, in a way, life is overrated. We have lost, somehow, a sense of mystery about us, our purpose, our meaning, our role. Our ancestors believed in two worlds, and understood this to be the "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" one. We are among the first generations of man that actually expected to find happiness here on earth, and our search for it has caused such—unhappiness. The reason: if you do not believe in another, higher world, if you believe that this is your only chance at happiness, then if the world does not give you a good measure of its riches, you despair. ("Why Are We So Unhappy When We Have It So Good?" *Forties*, September, 1992)

Those aspects of ministry that are directed toward the hearing and visually impaired, those who are single or aged, those who serve in the military or who seek to evangelize or counsel others must resist the temptation to seek only improved bodies, minds, emotions or social life. These are not unworthy goals in themselves, but take a back seat to the primacy of the gospel for everyone. The gospel must remain our dearest treasure and the central content of resources and materials prepared for and used by our parishes.

A third "different gospel" we want to avoid is that of *improving churches*, that is, seeking the statistical health or external growth of congregations as ends in themselves. So much has been written and said on this subject in our circles in the past several years, yet the point is well given and wisely received. As we use and share the gospel we normally anticipate outward growth in our churches, but we do not make this our primary objective. Nor dare we seek growth or visible vitality by relying on something other than God's gospel. If we fail to focus on Christ's righteousness offered and given through the gospel, and instead rivet our attention on measurable results and frequent byproducts of the message, we do no one a service. So in our planning and preparation for evangelism and mass media outreach, in giving attention to physical settings, liturgy and music for worship, or in strengthening the educational agencies in our congregations, we are to maintain the primacy of the gospel and leave the results in God's hands.

In saying all this about avoiding substitute gospels, we must still humbly confess that we find it hard to steer clear of them. Improved behavior patterns, social comfort and statistically stable if not growing churches are what most people seek and what fully satisfies our own sinful nature. Our frequently "felt needs" are not always the same as our "real needs" in the eyes of God. The gospel for everyone is what he gives to meet the

real and eternal needs of us all. In Parish Services work as in all other aspects of our ministry we are to do God's work in God's way—the gospel way.

It is also worth saying this: improved morals, social conditions and visible churches are important to us. They all have their place, and it is a rather prominent place at that. We will say more than that: we genuinely anticipate improved ethics, a happier society and strong churches as results of gospel preaching. The gospel renews hearts and attitudes. It makes a salutary impact on societies and churches to the degree that it is heard and heeded. The point to be made is simply this: we dare not make probable or possible results of gospel preaching our main concern, but rather the use and proclamation of the gospel itself. Sowing the seed of God's Word and leaving the harvest in the Lord's hands is the biblical pattern set before us. Sowing less than the gospel will guarantee a harvest of less than the fruit of the gospel. However welcome and pleasant the lesser harvest might be, it will remain less than what everyone really needs.

It is therefore unthinkable to want to develop a new message. It is fully another thing, however, to consider new ways of communicating the unchanging gospel in a rapidly changing society. Those who work in Parish Services do try hard to devise attractive and contemporary resources to convey the gospel. They also study trends and prevailing currents of thought in society where we and our fellow believers live. Being aware of how people, including those in our congregations, are thinking enhances our ability to find and use points of contact. The purpose is to be all the more "prepared to give an answer to *everyone*" who asks the reason for the hope we have (1Pe 3:15). We are not trying to "make the gospel attractive" to people. Only the Holy Spirit can do that and he does so by granting spiritual sight and insight to those who were born theologically blind and hostile to the message of the cross. We are talking about trying to catch and keep everyone's attention so we can communicate the message they need as much as we do. Methods and materials need to be compatible with and subservient to the gospel, but beyond that may be flexible and fluid. So again we say it: We have the eternal gospel for everyone. We need and seek none other.

3. The Saving Gospel: Used and Enjoyed by Us

When the Bible says that the gospel is for everyone everywhere, it impresses on us that this is for us Christians as well as others. Central to our calling is the recognition of our own need to use the gospel for spiritual growth and continued equipping for Christian ministry. What did Paul want for those already saved? He tells us: "Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved" (1Co 15:1-2). Paul and his coworkers kept this as a primary objective in their work, as expressed in Colossians 1:28: "We proclaim him [Christ], admonishing and teaching *everyone* with all wisdom, so that we may present *everyone* perfect in Christ." To be "perfect in Christ" is to be "complete" or "mature," reaching the goal God seeks for us as growing Christians. Commenting on this verse, Pastor Harlyn Kuschel writes:

Paul preached Christ with the great aim of bringing immortal souls to know and believe in Jesus and be saved. Nor did he neglect the spiritual growth of those who had already been brought to faith. He wanted to "present everyone perfect in Christ." Christians are still sinners. They will not reach perfection in their faith and lives here on earth, so they need to press on and strive constantly to grow toward full maturity in Christ. They need to work to maintain their faith and to grow in their Christian living. To help them achieve this growing and maturing, believers need constant, thorough instruction in God's word. (*The People's Bible*, "Philippians, Colossians, Philemon," page 140)

Our synod's Mission-Objectives-Vision (MOV) Statement brings this out well (See the 1993 *BORAM*, pp. 209-211). Fifteen of the twenty vision statements deal with hopes and desires that pertain to us within the synod, aside from mission outreach. Similarly the great majority, about two-thirds, of them deal with issues that the Parish Services division is charged to work with. Likewise, the first of the four "key emphases" being

recommended to this convention is the “emphasis on getting more people into God’s Word more often through worship and Bible study” (1993 *BORAM*, p. 211). This is clearly an evidence that we who have received the saving gospel enjoy it and understand our continuing need for it. Part of our high calling is to “teach and admonish one another with all wisdom” (Col 3:16) and “speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph 5:19).

This kind of gospel activity, of course, takes place in each parish continuously. Planning and work on the synod or Parish Services level support and assist what is done there. The high priority and profile given to this work in the synod MOV Statement and key emphases bears witness to its importance among us: The fact that Parish Services personnel (a chairman and six coordinators plus commission members) are also established in each district of synod also indicates how we value giving and receiving assistance for our local gospel ministry. To appraise local needs and desires, to identify problems and seek solutions, and to develop and offer useful materials and services for our parishes are tasks we take seriously. To facilitate improved efficiency and the ability to react to changing parish needs with flexibility, major organizational restructurings of the Parish Services division were studied and authorized by the 1985 and 1991 synod conventions. The dollars allotted to Parish Services work on the synod and district levels have increased substantially over the past several years as well. All this seems to indicate that we who have graciously received the gospel enjoy it and desire to serve ourselves more and more with that same saving message.

Trying to determine how much help is needed or wanted by our congregations and their called workers is often difficult. Most indications are that Parish Services functions are being carried out at a highly satisfactory level. One such indicator is included in the report of the Committee on Program Review (CPR) to this convention (1993 *BORAM*, pages 364-412). The CPR provides major findings from a 1992 survey of WELS congregations, pastors and principals. When asked to evaluate the need of their respective congregations for specific services provided through synod agencies (including but not limited to Parish Services), a “majority (55 percent) said they needed about the same level of service they were currently receiving, with the remainder split evenly between those who wanted more service and those who wanted less” (p. 384). When asked to evaluate the need of “synod as a whole” for a variety of services, fifty-two percent were of the opinion we need about the same level of service we are receiving through the synod structure, while 35 percent felt more service is needed and 13 percent felt less service was needed (p. 384). It is also reported that “in no instance did a majority of the survey group ever say that congregations or our synod as a whole needed less of a particular service” (p. 385). In short, there is reason to believe that there is widespread appreciation and contentment with our attempts to serve congregations and called workers in their ongoing ministries of nurture, outreach and worship.

More might be said in this matter, however. Since, as said before, the Division of Parish Services has grown in profile and budgetary allocations over the past decade, it is inevitable that some may feel uneasy about it or question the necessity of doing what we are doing. The CPR report also tells us this:

Approximately seventy letters were sent to CPR as addenda to CPR’s congregational survey. These letters, with few exceptions, overwhelmingly supported the notion that in tight financial times, parish services programs should be cut in favor of benefiting missions and worker training. The reasoning in the letters varied. Some felt it was simply a question of prioritization, and some felt the materials provided for evangelism or stewardship or for mass media (advertising) was simply not needed or an adequate amount is available. (page 386)

Admittedly, the seventy respondents who voiced such an opinion were less than four percent of the 1,834 who participated in the survey. Yet the number and percent of those among us who are asking similar questions is probably higher, especially because we see ourselves in one of those “tight financial times” referred to. At any rate, this issue deserves our ongoing attention and examination. The question will never be, “Shall we continue to strengthen and encourage one another with the gospel?” or “Do we want to provide materials and help for our congregations and called workers?” The mutual help and encouragement we offer to each other is

not optional, but a facet of God's good will for us. But it is appropriate to ask, "How much help (and at what cost) do we want provided for our parishes through the synod structure?"

If we decide to cut Parish Services programs dramatically, we want to be sure our congregations and their called workers can do the same or similar things well on their own. In reality each parish *can* and *does* do gospel work for mutual strengthening and equipping for ministry. The same word of God and Holy Spirit who gave birth to them remain active to enable our congregations to proclaim and apply the saving gospel. To despise the help of fellow believers beyond our local fellowship, however, is not for that reason a particularly prudent idea. To walk together as a synod is a choice made not only to carry out tasks that prove burdensome or impossible for individual congregations, but also to carry out responsibilities more fully than we can individually. Wisdom seeks to use the spiritual gifts, talents and expertise the Lord has given to some for the benefit of all.

An examination of the tasks undertaken by the Parish Services division on behalf of our congregations will show that over half of the allotted time, energy and funding is granted to what we may call "specialized" work that cannot easily be accomplished by the vast majority of our parishes. The development of fully integrated curricular materials for Christian education, the preparation and production of mass media tools, the work of civilian chaplains beyond the borders of our nation, the development of resources for the physically or mentally disadvantaged, the creation of suitable, worthy worship resources, and other similar tasks call for the energy and expertise, not to mention the time, that local leaders would be hard pressed to come up with on their own.

To what degree local congregations and their leaders may desire to use materials and resources made available for them will remain in their hands. There are no hard and fast rules governing this. In fact there are no rules at all. Professor John P. Meyer, in a 1964 essay read to the Arizona-California District Convention, stated the truth well: What are our needs? We repeat: We need to hear the Word of God, we need to receive the Lord's Supper, we need the support, the instruction, the counsel, the exhortation, the warning, the encouragement of our brethren. What are our assignments? We are to preach the Gospel, we are to practice brotherly love, particularly to those who are weak, in danger from temptation and error. How are we to supply our needs? What method are we to employ in carrying out our assignments? We scan the New Testament in vain for a word of institution prescribing some form, nor do we find any record that such an institution ever took place. In answer to our question for mode or manner or form we are told: "All things are yours." Use any means at your disposal. Do so as an expression of your faith and love. Do it decently and in order. Do it as effectively as you know how with the ability and the special gifts which the Lord provides.

The New Testament has not commanded that we have congregations, circuits, conferences, districts and synod in the forms we enjoy at present. The same obviously applies to administrative divisions of synod. These organizational forms developed because loving and zealous believers, seeking the welfare of God's kingdom, organized themselves to meet spiritual needs and carry out spiritual assignments. Our present structures exist for the same reason that most of the New Testament Epistles were written: to help congregations cope with special difficulties or opportunities.

With this New Testament freedom in mind, then, let us return to the question of how much help we want provided through the synod structure. If we contemplate cutting Parish Services functions primarily for financial reasons, with the intention of channeling limited dollars into missions and worker training, let us be very cautious. It is not prudent to skimp on gospel work among ourselves so that we might be more lavish in sending it to others. Rather, we will actually prepare and send workers and carry out mission work only to the degree we are nourishing ourselves with the word of God. The link between proclaiming the gospel to ourselves and to those beyond our synod boundaries was clearly stated by President Mischke in his letter assigning this essay:

I have often said that the decision on how far and how fast we move in our mission outreach is not really made at synod conventions and certainly not at 2929 [the Synod Administration Building]. It is made in each of our more than 1,200 congregations. So Parish Services has an

extremely vital role in enabling us to carry the everlasting gospel “to every nation, tribe, language and people.”

The importance of growing, maturing congregations and local leaders can hardly be overemphasized. Parish Services administrator Wayne Mueller puts into words what all the divisional personnel believe and call to mind continuously:

In the end, our synod’s ability under God to carry the gospel to all the world will depend upon the strength of each parish here at home. That thought underlies every effort of the Parish Services division these days. Our ministerial schools, our home and expatriate missionaries, and the money and the prayers that support them—all that comes from our local churches. As Parish Services seeks to help the local church, it serves in turn to strengthen the spiritual base from which we reach all the world with the love of Christ. (*Northwestern Lutheran*, August, 1992, p. 267)

The importance of gospel ministry resources and materials earmarked for parish use is not likely to diminish. As a synod we seem to understand this. Our commitment to the use and enjoyment of the gospel is a great gift from God. Let us gratefully acknowledge this and rededicate ourselves to seeking more of the same.

4. The Glorious Gospel: Also Entrusted to Us

In 1 Timothy 1:11, the Apostle Paul referred to “the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.” Paul knew the gospel wasn’t entrusted to him to be kept from others or preserved intact out of the reach of souls. God wanted him to use and share it liberally. And what about us? We who already have and enjoy the gospel know it is also committed to us for continued use and sharing. With this in mind let us look at what is currently being planned or developed in Parish Services work. Like the other divisions of synod, Parish Services strives to spend quality time doing long and short range planning. This involves identifying strengths and weaknesses in our parishes and assessing the contemporary social environment to gain insights into how we may best equip one another with the gospel to share the gospel.

How do researchers and thoughtful observers of our society describe it? What do our own experiences and observations tell us of our culture? The picture is not a pretty one. The secularization of society has spread like an epidemic through our public educational institutions, the media industry and a significant percentage of churches. The changing nature of family life has made the traditional family a vanishing one, given rise to open anti-child attitudes, thrust women into the workplace whether or not they prefer it, and shaped a generation of children and youths who less and less possess worthy values. A moral vacuum has brought with it rampant drug and alcohol abuse, child abuse, suicide and sexual immorality. The tidal wave of godlessness has left countless hurting people in its wake. Those who speak of trends, even “megatrends,” also cite an emerging spirituality—but one largely characterized by a preoccupation with self and a loveless individualism rather than a service-oriented mentality. In this kind of society we live. Into this kind of world we are sent with the message of Christ’s cross. With a few variations on the theme, of course, Christians of every generation lived and served in the same environment. We are entrusted with the same glorious gospel they had, and for the same purpose: to preach it.

To discharge the trust committed to us, several new Parish Service efforts are being prepared and offered to our called workers and congregations. *Parish Leadership* is a new periodical, published three times a year, giving biblical and practical information gathered and prepared by the six commissions in the division. Articles on worship and liturgy, youth education, adult spiritual growth, family ministry, evangelism, financial stewardship, Sunday school, church management and special ministries are included in each issue. People may subscribe to this journal and share its contents with coworkers in every parish. Five six-week Bible study courses have been prepared as part of the new *Lutheran Leadership Series*. These are designed to help

congregational officers, board and committee members as well as called workers review elements of spiritual planning and enjoy growth in leadership skills under God. The Commission on Parish Schools is seeking to strengthen and assist our Lutheran elementary school faculties through its *Team Ministry* emphasis. The Commission on Special Ministries is giving encouragement and materials for the establishment of *Care Committees for Called Workers* in all our congregations. These committees will encourage our called workers to continue their professional education and help them deal with practical problems of daily gospel ministry as well as attend to the workers' material needs. Starting one year ago, pastors with one year of parish experience are invited back to the campus of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary for a week of study and encouragement. This emphasis is labeled *Parish Ministry Enhancement*.

What do these five recently developed Parish Service efforts have in common? They are all aimed at helping, strengthening, encouraging and further equipping called workers who labor on behalf of the gospel in our parishes. The 1989 synod convention endorsed "the revitalization of congregations through their called workers" as a top priority in our fellowship. This is precisely what we desire to do, knowing that called workers have a tough time of it in our contemporary church scene. In his final "President's Newsletter" (June, 1993), President Mischke commented on the current ministerial situation among us. The majority of us, I believe, would concur with his observations and appraisal:

I hope I'm wrong, but I seem to sense that the unrest, the tension, the frustration, the mistrust among our called workers is higher today than at any time during my 46 years in the ministry. The specific reasons for it will vary a bit from person to person. But there's a common thread in all of them: Little or no growth, lack of respect for the Word, perennial budget shortages! I'm not making a difference. I have nothing to show for my efforts. No one even knows what I'm doing, much less cares.

Those actively involved in Parish Services work are acutely aware of the unrest, tension, frustration and mistrust that plague many of our called workers. Our charter and desire is to help alleviate the problem. The resources and services just mentioned, plus others, are contributions to this cause. It's not that the solution to the problem is obscure or beyond our reach. It starts with the gospel, the eternal, saving and glorious gospel given and entrusted to us. This message of Christ's righteousness not only informs us of our holy standing before God, but imparts a new ministerial mentality. Pastor Mischke, in the same "President's Newsletter," expressed this well:

He [Satan] can't touch us as long as we understand that our title *minister* means to *serve*, as long as we understand that we're not in charge of the harvest. God is! Our only assignment is to serve faithfully.

So if I approach my ministry with the assumption that I'm making a big sacrifice, if I'm constantly comparing myself with others and dreaming how much better I would have it if I were in another vocation, or even at another spot in the ministry, then my ministry will be filled with negatives, most of them of my own making.

But if I view my ministry as a privilege, a privilege that God has given to very few, if I count it an honor that he considers me worthy to serve with all my shortcomings when he has legions of angels at his call, if my primary question is, "How can I serve? How can I best serve my Lord? How can I serve the precious souls he has entrusted to my care?" then the ministry will have its own rewards, its own unique compensation, its own fringe benefits. And there isn't another vocation that rates a close second.

It is the prayer and the resolve of those who serve in Parish Services work to see all our called workers growing in the gospel and content in the gospel ministry. We also want to see them all the more competent and confident to encourage and equip fellow believers to enjoy and express new life in Christ. Our task is to help

them help others. *Adult spiritual growth* among all our members is a key priority within our fellowship and always will be. To further this cause, *Training Christians for Ministry* (TCM) is being prepared and already partially available. TCM is a curriculum for the study of Scripture, Lutheran doctrine and ministry presented in attractive student texts, leaders' manuals and companion videotapes. All indications tell us that the issue of adult Bible study and spiritual growth will remain a prominent part of our endeavors.

Recognizing the turmoil in our society, and knowing the difficulties our congregations are confronting in our culture, Parish Services personnel are working on additional resources and services. The *Task Force on Family Ministry* is devising and offering ways to introduce home devotions and workable models for family ministry in each parish. The *Singles Study Committee* has written articles and invited pastor and teacher conferences to examine how we are serving and may serve the growing number of single persons in our parishes. The *Committee on Ministry To and Through Seniors* has four pilot projects which invite mature members to increased Bible study and gospel service to their congregations. In the area of Special Ministries, in addition to maintaining ministry helps for those who are hearing and visually impaired or who have learning disabilities, committees are at work to discover ways we can better serve the message of Christ with other groups with special needs. Recognizing the large number of "backdoor" losses in congregations, largely due to the secularization of society, the Evangelism Commission now provides materials and training for congregations in membership retention and assimilation. With the arrival of *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* comes the reminder of tremendous opportunities and challenges that lie before us to improve the worship life of our members. Our Worship Commission is eager to assist congregations in this key aspect of parish life.

Some congregations seek individualized help with their specific needs and circumstances. On invitation from pastors and congregational leaders, Parish Services offers such help through *Parish Assistance*. Through an objective assessment of current ministry, Bible study and pointed encouragement, local leaders are enabled to recommit themselves to the church's mission, grow in their ability to set priorities, and make conscious choices concerning the use of the gospel for the salvation of souls. Currently the funding of this emphasis is drawn from outside the synod budget and the program, in its present form, may cease to exist in a couple of years. Nevertheless the hope remains that this kind of help, at least to some degree, will continue to be available to interested congregations for a much longer time.

The preceding overview of selected Parish Services efforts hopefully serves to point out that our commitment to help local parishes is real. At the heart and core of all these and many other efforts within the division is the God-given commitment to the glorious gospel and its use among us. The primary impetus for all our study, resource development and offering of services must remain the same: to maximize the use and application of the gospel by and for more and more of our members.

Concerning the proclamation of the gospel to ourselves and others in the future, we have the best basis for confidence. Jesus has told us, "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Mt 24:14). Concerning the effectiveness of this preaching we also have utmost reason for optimism. The glimpse of heaven granted to the Apostle John reveals "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb" (Rev 7:9). And how did this great multitude come to embrace the gospel and ultimately enter glory? One at a time. Every one was brought to call on the name of the Lord to be saved. In substance, each one echoed the words uttered by medieval Everyman as he sank into his grave:

*Into thy hands, Lord, my soul I commend;
Receive it, Lord, that it be not lost.
As thou me boughtest, so me defend,
And save me from the fiend's boast,
That I may appear with that blessed host
That I may be saved at the day of doom.
In manus tuas, of mights most*

For ever, commendo spiritum meum.
[Into your hands, most mighty one
Forever, I commend my spirit.]

As we noted earlier, despite that fine confession Everyman in the play was not offered the pure gospel of Christ's righteousness. The message he received and testified to was a gospel different from the real one. It is pure fiction to say that he entered Paradise embracing his own rather than his Savior's goodness. We, on the other hand, have and enjoy the real gospel and are privileged to use it for the benefit of ourselves and many others. So that we and they won't ever have to settle for the "gospel according to *Everyman*," let us resolve again to proclaim the gospel of God for *everyone*. The anticipated result of doing this is happily predictable: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."