Proactively Fostering an “I’m My Brother’s Keeper” Attitude in the Congregation!

Before we begin, a few disclaimers are in order. I do not see myself as an authority on the subject before us. Nor do I hold up the congregation I serve as the ideal model of a group of Christians who have mastered the art of being “their brother’s keeper.” David’s Star Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jackson, WI is a work in progress. Despite my gray hair, I am still a work in progress. This essay has been drawn from a study of the Holy Scriptures and gleaned from the Christ-centered thoughts of those who have gone before me or worked beside me for the sake of the gospel. This essay will be valuable only to the extent that it proclaims God’s eternal truth and affords each of us the opportunity to reflect on how these truths shape the way we interact with our brothers and sisters in Christ. My prayer is that our Lord Jesus blesses the time we spend together in his Word!

Some basic questions need to be answered before we can speak about proactively fostering an “I am my brother’s keeper” attitude in the congregation. Simply stated these questions are: “Who am I?”, “Who is my brother?”, and finally, “What does it mean to be my brother’s ‘keeper’?”

“Who am I?”

If we are going to work at fostering an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude in our congregations, we need to understand our target audience. How can we collectively describe the individuals whose names appear on our congregational membership rosters? What unites the people sitting in the pews of our churches on Sunday morning (and those standing in the pulpits for that matter)?

We have our differences to be sure! Our heavenly Father did not create us to be cookie-cutter copies of each other. Each of us possesses a unique set of personality traits, physical attributes and cognitive abilities. Some of us are introverts. Some of us are extraverts. We come in all shapes and sizes. In our worship services we join our voices with successful Ph. D’s and with those whose cognitive function is impaired. We come from variety of cultural backgrounds. Environment and experience shape our personal preferences and influence the choices we make.

Despite our differences, we WELS Christians have this in common: we are united in the one, true faith. We accept the public profession each individual makes at the time they are accepted into our communicant membership. We do not possess the ability to peer into hearts and identify those who might be using God’s name to cover up unbelief. God reserves that right for himself.1 Let’s operate, then, with the hypothesis that all the people on our church membership rosters are Christians.

“I am a sinner.”

The members of our congregations are believers. Now let’s peek under the hood and take a closer look at our identity. Who am I? With shame we all confess, “I am a sinner.” We have been a sinful since our mothers conceived us.2 As children of Adam, we all share the same unflattering history. I used to be spiritually dead. So were you.3 I used to be an avowed enemy of God. So were you. I wanted nothing at all to do with God. Neither did you. “The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor

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1 1 Samuel 16:7b “The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”
2 Psalm 51:5 “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
3 Ephesians 2:1 “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.”
can it do so.” 4 I have broken every single commandment of the Lord. So have you. 5 “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” 6 I deserve to spend every moment of eternity apart from God in unending torment for my ungodly thoughts, words and actions. So do you. 7 I couldn’t lift a finger to change my future. Neither could you. We unite our voices and join with St. Paul in his plaintiff cry: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” 8

“I am a saint.”

Now for the good news! In Christ I have a new identity. So do you. My old identity died on the day of my baptism. It was buried with Christ. My sinful nature no longer defines who I am. My sinful nature no longer calls the shots in my life. We cherish St. Paul’s inspired words concerning what our Lord did for each of us through the Holy Sacrament of Baptism. 9

Your current district president painted a memorable picture of the simultaneously mortal and life-giving encounter (“tomb and womb”) that occurs at the font. Please note that I am not quoting Pastor Treptow’s work to enhance my “street cred” with the Nebraska District. His words were memorable when I first heard them, and they have stayed with me to this day.

“The Lord draws near that precious little baby, the joy of her parents, dressed in that beautiful white heirloom gown, in midst of a lovely ceremony, and does something shocking. That cute little baby he kills. Just as the water of the flood put the unbelieving world to death, so the water of Baptism puts the old Adam to death. Just as the water of the Red Sea drowned Pharaoh’s army, so the water of Baptism drowns the sinful flesh. We witness a death every time we witness a Baptism. Call it a mercy killing, but it remains a killing … He also draws near to give life … the Lord raises from the watery grave of Baptism a new creature that trusts God’s love and desires to demonstrate that love.” 10

Luther agrees with Pastor Treptow! 11 “The sinner does not so much need to be washed as he needs to die, in order to be wholly renewed and made another creature, and to be conformed to the death and resurrection of Christ, with whom he dies and rises again through baptism.” 12

4 Romans 8:7,8. “The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God
5 Romans 3:23 “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”
6 James 2:10
7 Romans 6:23a “The wages of sin is death”
8 Romans 7:24
9 “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:3-11).
10 Earle Treptow “Sanctification: Set apart by God’s grace to Serve” 2007 WELS Convention Proceedings p. 82,83
11 More importantly, both Pastor Treptow and Martin Luther faithfully proclaim what the Scriptures teach!
Who am I? I am a baptized child of God! God no longer sees me as a sinner. I am a saint who has been clothed in the righteousness of Christ. “You are all the sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who have been baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ.”

We need to return to our baptism often and remember who we are in Christ. Mark Zarling’s gospel-centered encouragement is in place:

“Go back to the font. There we find comfort for our past haunts and for our present horrors. The apostle says to you and to me, “But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11). Rejoice in those passive verbs. God has come through baptism and cleansed you, set you apart, and declared you innocent. Rejoice in those past tense verbs. It is an accomplished fact. Let Satan rage all he will, he cannot change what God has declared. “You are my child. For Jesus’ sake, I am well-pleased in you.”

My precious Savior took on flesh and lived a perfect life for me (Galatians 4:4,5). My holy Jesus became “sin” for me (2 Corinthians 5:21) and willingly bore for me the full brunt of God’s wrath -- the punishment that should have been mine (Galatians 3:13). The blood of Jesus Christ has cleansed me from all sin (1 John 1:7). I can be sure Jesus did all this for me, because he did it for every sinner in the whole world. You know the passages well: John 1:29; John 3:16; Romans 3:23, 24; 2 Corinthians 5:19. God chose me to be his very own and brought me to saving faith. God’s Word tells me. “From the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth” (2 Thessalonians 2:13). All this was God’s doing, not mine (Ephesians 2:9). The same God who formed me in my mother’s womb caused me to be born again of water and the Spirit (John 3:5). By God’s grace I am one of his saints.

“I am a saint/sinner.”

God sees me as a saint. I am robed in Jesus’ righteousness. God has “declared” me righteous for the sake of Jesus. Yet I have not been “made” righteous. The Formula of Concord expounds on this important distinction in Article III:

“When we teach that through the Holy Spirit’s work we are reborn and justified, we do not mean that after regeneration no unrighteousness in essence and life adheres to those who have been justified and regenerated, but we hold that Christ with his perfect obedience covers all our sins which throughout this life still inhere in our nature. Nevertheless, they are regarded as holy and righteous through faith and for the sake of Christ’s obedience, which Christ rendered to his Father from his birth until his ignominious death on the cross for us, even though, on account of their corrupted nature, they are still sinners and remain sinners until they die.”

I will need to do battle with my sinful nature until the day the Lord calls me to heaven. To the world I look like a sinner. I act like a sinner. If you carefully examine the record of my life you will find nothing but

13 Galatians 3:26,27  
14 Mark Zarling “Where is the Font?” 2001 www.wlsessays.net  
16 Romans 7:15-20 “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I
imperfection and failure. You name the role and I have messed it up: son, brother, student, employee, husband, father, teacher, pastor, citizen. The devil points his finger at me and levels his accusation, “You are nothing but a poor miserable sinner.”

My guilty conscience concurs ... until I remember again how God sees me for the sake of Jesus. I have a new identity. I am baptized. I am clothed in Christ’s righteousness. “With these I need not hide me.”

Though the world may not see it or know it, I died, and my life is now hidden with Christ in God. I am a saint and a sinner at the same time.

In answering the basic question, “Who am I?” we have been reviewing the law/gospel truths proclaimed in our churches every Sunday and in our Lutheran classrooms every school day. We are unworthy sinners redeemed by the blood of Jesus, brought to saving faith by the sanctifying work of the Spirit. These truths about our identity have a powerful impact on our lives. Christ’s love frees us from selfish living and compels us live in a way that honors the name of our Savior and helps our brother!

“I am a priest.”

If our goal is to proactively foster an “I am my brother’s keeper” attitude in our congregations, we need to help each individual “sinner/saint” in our congregations embrace another biblical truth about their identity in Christ. Who am I? “I am a priest of God.”

Our dear Lord says to his Church, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

Luther wrote about this priesthood of all believers in his commentary on Psalm 110:4:

“But you may ask: “Wherein does this priesthood of Christians consist, and what are their priestly works?” The answer is as follows: The very same that were mentioned before: teaching, sacrificing, and praying. But you must know this, as I have also stated before, that Christ is the only High Priest. Before we attempt to do such priestly works, we must have the benefit of His priestly office; yes, we must possess it. The doctrine and preaching by which we are saved comes from Him; He brought it from heaven. He alone has made the complete sacrifice for us all by which we are reconciled to God. Therefore He is also the only one who stands in the immediate presence of God to make intercession for us all, and without this Mediator no prayer is acceptable to God.

But after we have become Christians through this Priest and His priestly office, incorporated in Him by Baptism through faith, then each one, according to his calling and position, obtains the right and power of teaching and confessing before others this Word which we have

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17 Line from CW 219 “Lord, When Your Glory I Shall See”
18 Colossians 3:3
19 2 Corinthians 15: 14,15 “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”
20 1 Peter 2:9
21 “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”
obtained from Him. Even though not everybody has the public office and calling, every Christian has the right and the duty to teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, and rebuke his neighbor with the Word of God at every opportunity and whenever necessary. For example, father and mother should do this for their children and household; a brother, neighbor, citizen, or peasant for the other. Certainly one Christian may instruct and admonish another ignorant or weak Christian concerning the Ten Commandments, the Creed, or the Lord’s Prayer. And he who receives such instruction is also under obligation to accept it as God’s Word and publicly confess it.”

Do all the believers in our congregations see themselves as God’s priests? Jesus does. The mom carrying two drooling kids on her hips is a priest. The usher looking uncomfortable in the sport coat and tie he only wears on Sunday morning is a priest. The white-haired grandma who never misses a service is a priest. The single guy with no one at home to tell him that his orange and blue “Tebow” jersey clashes with his red “Husker” pants is a priest. Every believer is a priest of God.

Most of us don’t have a problem embracing the identity of “poor, miserable sinner.” We know and feel that identity. We confess with David, “I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.” But the psalm does continue. A forgiven David proclaims, “Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.” “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.” In other words, David acknowledged that he would carry out his role as a “priest of God.”

I am a priest?? Really?? We want to object. We’re tempted to conclude that our perfect and all-knowing God must have made an uncharacteristic mistake. “I’m not qualified to be one of his priests.” “Who am I to represent God?” “Who am I to proclaim the gospel when I fail to fully appreciate God’s grace in my own life?” “Who am I to proclaim the gospel when I fail to fully appreciate God’s grace in my own life?” We race to take our stand next to reluctant Moses and say: “O Lord, please send someone else to do it.”

God’s Word provides answers for the questions we ask and the objections we raise. We are not priests because we are the best and brightest in the eyes of the world. We are priests because God chose us to be priests … and he chose us knowing full well who we were. “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are so that no one can boast before him” (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

We are not priests because we have earned that honorable office. Our priestly status is a gift of God’s grace. God made us to be priests when we were born of water and the Spirit. Luther: “All of us that have been
baptized are equally priests.” 27 We also have this comfort: the same God who called us to be his priests will himself equip us with everything we need to carry out his work.28

So what does a priest do? In his lectures at a pastors’ institute on the campus of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1980, Armin Schuetze pointed his listeners to the words of Luther:

“Luther lists no less than seven rights and privileges of the Christian or priest. He writes: “There is no other Word of God than that which is given all Christians to proclaim. There is no other baptism than the one which any Christian can bestow. There is no other remembrance of the Lord’s Supper than that which any Christian can observe and which Christ has instituted. There is no other kind of sin than that which any Christian can bind or loose. There is no other sacrifice than of the body of every Christian. No one but a Christian can pray. No one but a Christian may judge of doctrine. These make the priestly and royal office.” There is really nothing that any pastor may do that Luther does not ascribe equally and completely to every Christian priest.” 29

The comments of John Brug are also instructive:

“The priesthood of all believers is both a status and an activity. We become priests when we are reborn through the gospel. We enjoy forgiveness of sins and access to the Father at all times. Everything we do as Christians is an exercise of our priesthood, whether it is "spiritual" or "secular." We are priests who show forth the praises of God both when we share the gospel with others and when we let our good works shine to the glory of God. Worship, conducting home devotions, teaching our children, sharing the gospel with our neighbors, admonishing and forgiving fellow Christians, calling pastors and teachers, and making judgments concerning doctrine and adiaphora are just some of the many privileges of the priesthood of believers. Christians may fully exercise their priesthood without ever holding an office or a formal position in the church.30

“I am an individual joined with other believers of the body of Christ”

When I was baptized, God put his name on me as an individual. In eternity God had already predestined that I, Michael Alan Woldt, would be adopted as a child of God.31 My Good Shepherd sought me out and found me. The Lord said to me, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.32 Wow! The eternal Lord of the universe used his incomparable power to bring me into his family! All of you can make that same claim. Hallelujah!

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27 Luther “Three Treatises” p 244
28 2 Corinthians 2:3-6 “Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”
29 Armin Schuetze “The Significance of the Lutheran Reformation for our Ministry Today.” www.wlsessays.net.
31 Ephesians 1:3-5 “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will.”
32 Isaiah 43:1b
The Lord didn’t stop there. When he brought me, a unique, one-of-a-kind individual into his family, he united me not only with Jesus, but also with every other believer in Christ. I became one with all the saints in the Holy Christian Church, or as Scripture also refers to it, the body of Christ.33

St. Paul calls the Church “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”34 Here’s a real theological head-scratcher! My Lord Jesus Christ, in whom “all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,”35 tells me that I am vital to the proper functioning of his body. So is each one of you!

In an insightful exegetical brief on Ephesians 1:23, Daniel Leyrer writes:

“How can this be? Our Lord Jesus is not incomplete in any way. The church does not make him more of a Lord or more of a Savior by anything she does ... It is in apposition to the church as Christ's body that Paul refers to the church as Christ's [fullness]. Just as the body completes the head, so also the church completes Christ. Of course, this completing is all part of Christ’s perfect and gracious plan for his church in the world. He doesn’t need us to complete him. He allows us to be his body, his effective instruments on earth. He could have chosen angels to spread his gospel after he ascended into heaven. Instead, he chose us! What a gracious privilege it is to complement him in this way. To fill Jesus up is to carry out his work in this world.36

Who am I? Each believing member in our congregations can answer: “I am a baptized child of God.” “I am a saint/sinner.” “I am a priest of God.” “I am an individual joined with other saints in the body of Christ.”

Our answers to the question “Who am I?” could take up the remainder of the time allotted for this convention essay. However, I believe the foundation we have laid allows us to move on to the second question that needs to be answered before we can proactively foster an “I am my brother’s keeper” attitude in our congregations. “Who is my brother?”

**Who is my brother?**

The term “brother” is used in various ways. When murderous Cain feebly attempted to dismiss the Lord by asking, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”37 he knew exactly who his brother was. Biology defined his relationship with Abel. They shared the same DNA. Politicians who advocate for retention or expansion of social welfare programs remind their audiences that they have a responsibility to be “their brother’s keeper.” In the political arena, the phrase “my brother” is usually synonymous with “fellow citizen.” I noticed in promotional materials for a WELS affiliated men’s conference38 that the keynote speaker’s presentation was entitled “Being My Brother’s Keeper.” I assume that the speaker talked to Christian men about their interaction with other Christian men.

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33 Scripture references to the Holy Christian Church as the body of Christ are found in: Romans 12:4,5; 1 Corinthians 10:17; 12:12,13,27; Ephesians 1:22,23; 2:16; 4:12,16; 5:23; Colossians 1:18,24; 2:19.
34 Ephesians 1:23
35 Colossians 2:9
37 Genesis 4:9
38 The Third Annual “Men of His Word” Conference, held on February 11, 2012 in Oshkosh, WI
For our purposes, let’s agree that we are using the term “brother” in a sense that transcends biology, nationality and gender. We are using the term “brother” to refer to fellow baptized members of the body of Christ. If I were drawing a Venn diagram there would be a circle within a circle. The larger circle would represent the entire population of the planet. The smaller circle would include those whom the Spirit has called to faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”

We could narrow our definition of the term “brother” even more. When seeking to proactively foster an “I am my brother’s keeper” attitude in our congregations, we might imagine a third, even smaller circle in our Venn diagram. This circle represents the members of the body of Christ with whom we have (or should have) some sort of personal connection or relationship. These are the brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we regularly worship and publicly fellowship. We share a common confession. We meet together at the Lord’s Table to commune with Jesus and with each other. We walk together as members of the same synod and perhaps the same local congregation. These are the believers who live within our personal sphere of influence and activity. These are the “brothers” (and sisters) in Christ we have the opportunity to encourage and support on a regular basis as the “Day” approaches.

Please note! By narrowing the definition of “brother”, I am not suggesting that we have no obligation or concern for those “outside” the circle of our fellowship. God wants all people to be saved. Jesus said, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” However, the focus of this presentation is not outreach or evangelism, but our interaction with and concern for our closest fellow Christians.

What Does it Mean to be My Brother’s ‘Keeper’?

The concept of being a “keeper” is related to guardianship, protection and keeping watch over someone with their best interests in mind. A quick Internet search reveals that people in our world typically equate the concept of being a brother’s “keeper” with providing assistance to the poor and homeless. No one can deny that Jesus himself is pleased when his people remember those in physical need as they manage their God-given financial resources. In the account of the Sheep and Goats, the Divine King commends those on his right saying: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." The apostle John also chimes in: “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”

However, for the purposes of this presentation, we our focus is primarily on being our brother’s “keeper” in a spiritual sense. We are speaking specifically of the “care of souls.” Perhaps the most useful picture of a spiritual “keeper” is that of a shepherd. Any shepherd worth his salt "keeps watch" over his sheep, guarding and protecting them from harm. The Good Shepherd went so far as to lay down his life for the sheep!

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39 Following the lead of the editors of NIV 2011, maybe we should rephrase the title of this essay to include the reality that I am both my "brother’s and sister’s" keeper.
40 Mark 3:35
41 Hebrews 10:25
42 Matthew 28:18,19
43 Matthew 25:35,36
44 1 John 3:17,18
45 In 1 Samuel 17:20, the author uses the same Hebrew word for "keeper" that Moses records coming from the mouth of Cain as he attempted to dodge the Lord’s question concerning the whereabouts of his brother.
46 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then
To be our brother’s “keeper” then, means to be concerned about his (or her) spiritual welfare. We want to do everything in our power to help our brothers stay close to Jesus in Word and Sacrament. As “keepers” we remain vigilant, knowing that the Lord has called us to help our brothers fight off the attacks of Satan, do battle against the godless attitudes of the unbelieving world, and resist the sinful inclinations of the Old Adam who still resides in their hearts and ours.

**Jesus wants me to be my brother’s keeper.**

It has taken us a while to lay the foundation for our discussion on proactively fostering an “I am my brother’s keeper” attitude in our congregations, but I pray that the time we have taken will prove beneficial as we now move forward and remind ourselves that Jesus wants each of us to be our brother’s keeper.

The eighteenth chapter of Matthew’s gospel is familiar to every pastor and most congregational members in our circles. We use “Matthew 18” as a code phrase for the application of the loving principles found in verses 15 – 20 of that chapter. “Have you dealt with [insert name here] according to Matthew 18?” Let’s do a brief bible study and note the context in which these verses are set.

**BREAK TO COMPLETE ACTIVITY ONE**

Now that we have re-familiarized ourselves with the opening verses of Matthew 18, let’s take a closer look at verse 15. With the picture of the Good Shepherd seeking lost sheep fresh in our minds, Matthew now records Jesus’ words: “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.”

The stated goal of “going and showing” is to win your brother over, or more literally “avoid the loss” of a brother. The Good Shepherd loves every single one of his precious sheep. Jesus wants us to love them too. The Good Shepherd watches over and protects his sheep. He is their “keeper”! Jesus wants us to watch over his sheep (our spiritual brothers and sisters) too. The Good Shepherd is not willing to lose any of his sheep. None of our brothers and sisters in Christ is expendable. Irwin Habeck put it this way:

“Ours is to be the mind of the seeking Shepherd. Here is a sheep going astray. He wants us to seek it and to shun no hardship or effort in the process. Only when that is our purpose shall we be heeding the spirit of our Lord’s command. In our congregational life we often have to contend against zealots who want to clean house, strike the delinquent members from the membership list or excommunicate them, as a punitive measure; sometimes, it

the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:11-15).

47 It should be noted that the words “against you” are not found in some manuscripts. It would be a misapplication to limit what Jesus says here only in the cases where a brother or sister in Christ actually sins against us personally. In the spirit of the Good Shepherd, we will be concerned any time we see our brothers and sisters in Christ falling into Satan’s trap, and with the heart of the Good Shepherd, we will seek to call them to repentance.

48 Matthew 18:15
seems, to take revenge on them for the grief and heartache which they cause. But our purpose must be to gain the sinning brother, if at all possible.”

The quote above comes from an article on the topic of “church discipline.” As I was working on this presentation, I privately wondered if we have pigeonholed the words of Matthew 18:15 to the point that we think of them almost exclusively in the context of a formal process of “church discipline.” This private “brother to brother” conversation was designed to take place outside of the framework of any organizational structure. By the time our brother’s “sin” becomes known to the pastor or the board of elders, we have already moved on to the “steps” outlined in the next verses. If my goal is to win my brother over, then I need to listen to my all-knowing and all-loving Savior who reminds me to carry out my role as my brother’s keeper by first going to speak to him privately. I am one of God’s priests. You are one of God’s priests. God has given to me (and to each of you) the right and privilege of proclaiming the life-changing and life-giving Word of God. If the Spirit works repentance as we use his tools, the matter need go no further. Chances are that no one else in the congregation will even know that any “brother keeping” occurred ... but the Good Shepherd watches and smiles.

Being our brother’s keeper doesn’t mean that we are going to watch him like a hawk to see if we can catch him doing something wrong -- then pounce on him at the first sign of imperfection. Do we really want to use the same tactics the teachers of the law and the chief priests employed against Jesus? Brotherly admonition is called for when we personally come to know that our brother in Christ has committed a sin and there is no repentance, no “change of mind” about his sin. We need to be our brother’s keeper when there is no apparent contrition (sorrow over sin), no desire to stop sinning, or no faith in the forgiveness of sins won for us by the perfect life and substitutionary death of Jesus. The particular nature of the sin doesn’t really matter. Those who live happily in the darkness of sin have no fellowship with God. Impenitence results in eternal death. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” I am my brother’s keeper because I love my brother. I love my brother because Jesus loves him. I love my brother because Jesus loves me.

49 Irwin Habeck “Church Discipline” delivered in Thiensville, WI to a Conference of Theologians in 1960. www.wlsessays.net.
50 It is not my intention to address the many facets of church discipline (policies, procedures, terminology, etc) in this presentation. There are twenty essays on the topic at www.wlsessays.net, and a symposium on “Brotherly Admonition” at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in September of this year.
51 Matthew 18:18 “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.
52 Luke 20:20: “Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be honest. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor.”
53 The words Habeck writes about church discipline are certainly applicable to private brotherly admonition: “Evidently church discipline is called for in the case of those sins concerning which it is written that those who live in them shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. There are the catalogs in I Corinthians 6:9, 10 and Galatians 5:19–21. Furthermore, since the Lord teaches that those who do not believe in Jesus as the Son of God who became man in order to save them from sin and guilt and damnation by dying as their substitute will be damned, church discipline is called for when a brother becomes involved in an error which denies one or more of the essential truths of the saving faith. That does not mean that no admonition is called for when there is no gross sin or gross error. Nowhere does the Word of God indicate such a limitation.”
54 1 John 1:6 “If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.”
55 1 John 1:8,9
56 Peter’s question in Matthew 18:21 (“How many times shall I forgive my brother ...?”) leads Jesus to tell the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. The forgiving love of Jesus compels us to love and forgive others.
While the scope of this paper does not call for a thorough examination of the topic of church discipline, Jesus teaches me that genuine love for my brother and concern for his spiritual welfare calls for broader action if there is no repentance when I speak to my brother about sin. I cannot let the matter drop with a shrug of my shoulders. I cannot console myself with the thought, "At least I tried to do something!" Brotherly love demands more. "But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."\(^{57}\)

**Do We Need an Attitude Adjustment?**

Now that I am multiple pages (and many minutes) into this presentation, maybe it’s time to ask a basic question. Do we in the WELS have a real problem being our brother’s keeper, or is the topic of this essay nothing more than convention filler doomed to offer meaningless remedies where no malady exists? Is there a genuine need to spend time thinking about how to foster an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude in our congregations? Or are we doing just fine, thank you very much?

We who walk together in the WELS often focus our collective attention on specific aspects of gospel ministry in response to statistics that seem to suggest we could be doing better or could be doing more to honor our Lord Jesus. We rush to emphasize “stewardship” when offerings trend down and no longer support the gospel work we want to do locally and as a national church body. We wave the “evangelism” banner with greater fervor when statistical reports reveal that our numerical growth is stagnant. We sense there is a problem to be addressed when new home mission starts are down and world missionaries are called home. We redouble our efforts to recruit young men and women to prepare themselves for public ministry when enrollments at Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary reach critically low levels. So I ask again, "Is there a compelling reason for the current emphasis on 'keeping our brother'?"

I have not attempted to measure the current “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude in my own congregation, much less the Nebraska District or the WELS at large. I would guess that so-called “back-door” losses might be one of the driving concerns that push this topic to the front burner. The 2011 WELS Statistical Report indicates that 3299 baptized WELS members joined other Christian congregations during the last calendar year, and another 4598 were removed from membership for one reason or another.

I’m not a big numbers guy. When it comes to the Spirit’s work, it’s impossible to form valid judgments based on raw statistics alone. "Back-door" losses do not necessarily indicate a critical need to improve the "I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude in our circles. After all, Jesus was the perfect “brother’s keeper.” Despite his flawless efforts, Judas was still lost. Yet when we observe that a significant number of people are leaving our confessional fellowship each year, I believe it is “meet and right” to hold up the holy mirror and at least raise the question, “Were we faithful in our personal and corporate ministry to those who at one time publicly confessed they were one with us in faith?”

Personal experience also suggests (at least to me) that there is room for growth in showing spiritual concern for our brothers and sisters in Christ. See if you recognize either of these stories. You probably have some of your own...

Early in my pastoral ministry, a young couple made an appointment to speak with me. They wanted to get married at our church. The young lady was a member of our congregation. The young man was not. Through the course of the initial conversation I learned that this unmarried couple was already living together and sharing a bed. Unfortunately, that’s not the saddest part of this tale. Here’s what blew me

\(^{57}\) Matthew 18:16,17
away. They were sharing a bed in the home of the young lady’s parents, who were also members of the congregation I served. Even though these parents attended church regularly, they didn’t seem very concerned about being the spiritual “keepers” of daughter, much less the young man who still had so much to learn about Jesus. Instead of confronting sin, these parents had convinced themselves that they were doing a good thing by providing a safe place for this unmarried couple to cohabitate.

Or how about this? One of our elders reached out to encourage an adult child of a church council member to attend public worship more frequently. Instead of welcoming this show of spiritual concern for his child, the council member reacted with anger and told our elder that his adult child’s church attendance was none of his business.

The need to foster an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude in our congregations may be most clearly demonstrated by the tragic way so many people seem to slip away from the church family unnoticed. No one seems to care that they are gone. No one bothers to speak to them in frank and loving terms about matters pertaining to eternal life and eternal death.

Before I go on demonstrating how “others” have missed the mark in showing spiritual concern for their brothers and sisters, I need to reflect on my own personal failures. Jesus reminds me to take the plank out of my own eye. How many times did I show true spiritual concern for my foundering classmates in high school, in college and even at the seminary? How many times have I misused Luther’s Eighth Commandment injunction to take people’s “words and actions in the kindest possible way” as cover to pretend there is not a problem in my brother’s life, when all the evidence clearly points to spiritual suicide?

There is a portion of Holy Scripture I would prefer to avoid. It makes me squirm every time I hear it. It gives me no place to hide. It doesn’t let me pretend that I am a faithful pastor. It cuts my legs out from under me. It kills me. It leaves me with no hope apart from the forgiving love of Christ. God says to me:

“Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked man, ‘You will surely die,’ and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood.”

God forgive my selfish neglect of a brother in need of “keeping.”

We all benefit from pointed reminders that we are our brothers’ keepers. But let’s not be driven by guilt! Thank God that what the law tears down, the gospel builds up! In Christ we are forgiven. In Christ we are now free to love and serve God!

Wherever faith in present, an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude will be present also. We have the mind of Christ. We want what our Savior wants. Our Lutheran Confessions quote from Luther’s preface to the book of Romans:

“Oh, faith is a living, busy, active, mighty, thing, so that it is impossible for it not to be constantly doing what is good. Likewise, faith does not ask if good works are to be done, but before one can ask, faith has already done them and is constantly active. Whoever does not perform such good works is a faithless man, blindly tapping around in search of faith and good works without knowing what either faith or good works are, and in the meantime he charters and jabbers a great deal about faith and good works. Faith is a vital, deliberate

58 Ezekiel 3:17,18
trust in God’s grace, so certain that it would die a thousand times for it. And such confidence and knowledge of divine grace makes us joyous, mettlesome, and merry toward God and all creatures. This the Holy Spirit works by faith, and therefore without any coercion a man is willing and desirous to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything for the love of God and to his glory, who has been so gracious to him. It is therefore impossible to separate works from faith as it is to separate heat and light from fire”

In Christ I discover that being my brother’s keeper is not a heavy burden I must bear, but a high calling Jesus gives me as a member of his body. “Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

Let’s take a look at some other passages related to brotherly admonition

**BREAK TO COMPLETE ACTIVITY TWO**

**What Now?**

I’ve been sitting where you are sitting hundreds of times in my life. I often find myself thumbing through a paper looking for the bottom line. Right now you might be saying to yourself, “OK! I get it. I am my brother’s keeper! I’ve known that all along. What I really want to know is “How can we foster an “I am my brother’s keeper” attitude in our congregations? After all, isn’t that supposed to be the focus of the paper?”

As we work to foster an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude in our congregations, it is vital that we …

“Clearly Proclaim God’s Law!”

Because the Old Adam still resides in us this side of heaven (remember who we are?), we need God’s holy law to condemn the self-centered thinking that permits us to walk “in pleasant ways, unmindful of a broken brother’s needs.” We need to stop thinking like Esau. You remember Esau, don’t you? He’s the guy who traded his inheritance rights for a bowl of “red stuff.” The holy writer calls Esau “godless.” This desert roughrider attached no value to the Messianic promises given to Abraham and Isaac. What really mattered to Esau? He was famished. The desire for short-term satisfaction was the driving force behind his actions. He wanted pleasure here and he wanted it now.

Isn’t that the same satanic motive driving us to inaction when our brother needs spiritual “keeping”? We don’t want the temporary inconvenience of having to speak frankly with our brother. It’s more comfortable to stay in our recliner or to keep ourselves occupied with chores that need doing around the house. Besides, we don’t want to put our friendship on the line, do we? We hunt and fish together. He gives me tickets to the game. What if he gets upset with me? I don’t want to lose a friend!

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59 Formula of Concord: SD IV, 10-12.
60 Ephesians 4:15,16
61 In fact, being the natural introvert that I am, I generally prefer sitting and listening to standing and speaking! Quite a confession for someone who is called to prepare and deliver sermons on a regular basis.
62 Christian Worship #482 (v3)
63 Hebrews 12:13
So, for the sake of our own temporary comfort, we stand by silently even as our brother's eternity hangs in the balance. "Oh, what a wretched man I am!" 

It is equally vital that we ... 

"Preach the Gospel"

Only the Holy Spirit can foster a truly God-pleasing "I'm my brother's keeper" attitude in our congregations. Consider Galatians 6:1 again: “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.” Paul addressed those who are "spiritual." The apostle was writing to believers who were recipients of the Spirit's work. The believers in Galatia were “sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.” They were called to be free! Free, not to indulge their sinful nature, but free to serve one another in love. The Spirit who works to bring us to faith in Jesus through the gospel in Word and Sacrament employs the same means to renew the mind of Christ in us, so we want what God wants. There can be no genuine “attitude adjustment” apart from the work of the Spirit. "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

I'm preaching to the Lutheran choir here, but we need to keep on doing what biblical, confessional Lutherans have always done best! There aren't any shortcuts. There is no better way. Wield the Sword of the Spirit. Remember your Baptism. Be nourished at the Lord's Table. Where faith thrives, so does godly living.

We also need to recognize the important role that we as leaders play in shaping congregational attitudes ...

“Attitude Reflects Leadership, Captain.”

You might recognize the quote from the 2001 movie “Remember the Titans.” Without rehearsing the movie’s storyline, I would suggest that the attitudes openly exhibited and expressed by the leaders of a congregation (convention delegates, council members, pastors, teachers, staff ministers) are second only to the work of the Holy Spirit himself in fostering an "I am my brother's keeper" attitude in any group of Christians.

John Brug wrote:

“Lutherans emphasize the means of grace in their efforts to help Christians grow in sanctification since only the means of grace produce the proper motivation for sanctification. Nevertheless, in our preaching and teaching we should also refer to other means which God may use in a secondary way to strengthen and encourage us in our sanctification.”

One of the “other means” God uses in a “secondary” way is the godly example of Christian leaders. The apostle Paul understood that people were “reading” him all the time. He didn't shy away from using himself as an example to encourage others in their lives of sanctification. He issued this bold invitation in

64 Romans 7:24a
65 Galatians 5:13
66 Philippians 2:13
67 OK. Maybe I should put prayer second on the list. I'm getting to that. Leadership is still important.
his letter to the Philippians: “Join with others in following my example, brothers and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.”

Most in the audience remember well the encouragement St. Paul gave to young Pastor Timothy:

> Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

So I invite you, fellow servants of the Lord Jesus … pastors, teachers, staff ministers and lay delegates … to examine your own attitudes toward our straying brothers in Christ. How do you publicly speak about those who haven’t been at a worship service for a while? What do others hear you saying about spiritually weak members who have been drawn into sinful living by the myriad of temptations our self-centered world offers? Do you give lip service to the concept of “being my brother’s keeper,” only to turn around and vent frustration about all the headaches the “delinquents” are causing you and your congregation?

We Lutherans are not known for being overly emotional in our worship lives. Sometimes that’s good. God forbid that our theology would ever be established by our feelings! Yet Jesus did not bury his emotions when it came to the lost and straying. Jesus’ disciples heard and saw how Jesus agonized over those who were in spiritual jeopardy. Jesus openly wept over Jerusalem and prayed earnestly for the very people who were nailing him to the cross.

The German language has an excellent word for genuine, heartfelt care and concern for souls: “Seelsorge.” Blessed are the people of God who have true “Seelsorgers” serving as called workers in their churches and Lutheran schools. Blessed are the called workers whose hands are held up by faithful congregational members … people of God who support them and work by their side because they share a similar concern for the care of all the souls in their congregation.

In the pages of Holy Scripture, we watch Jesus and learn what it means to have concern for souls. God’s people are watching us today, and still learning. As called and lay leaders in the congregation, we set the tone. We help shape the attitudes of those who follow us. We have direct and indirect influence on the priorities our congregations establish. Each of us has a role to play in helping to foster an “I am my brother’s keeper” attitude in our congregations. “Attitude reflects leadership, captain!”

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69 Philippians 3:17
70 1 Timothy 4:12-16
71 While not directly related to our topic, I love the Luther quote included in Senkbeil’s “Sanctification: Christ in Action.” “If you are not ready to believe that the Word is worth more than all you see or feel, then reason has blinded faith. So the resurrection of the dead is something that must be believed. I do not feel the resurrection of Christ, but the Word affirms it. I feel sin but the Word says that it is forgiven to those who believe. I see that Christians die like other men, but the Word tells me that they shall rise again. So we must not be guided by our own feelings but by the Word.” (p. 116, 117)
72 Luke 19:41,42
73 Luke 23:34
“Spend Time With Your People”

I recently pulled “The Shepherd Under Christ” (Schuetze/Habeck) off my bookshelf and began scanning through the chapters. I should do that more often. It’s been almost four decades since its publication. As you might expect, some specific pastoral ministry applications are dated. Still, there is much food for thought. Chapter 6 (“The Shepherd Visits the Sheep”) contains some practical wisdom for the subject at hand. The authors urge pastors to regularly visit their people:

There can be a sense of distance and strangeness over against the pastor if his people know him only from seeing him in the pulpit. If, however, he has contacted them in their homes and they have learned to know him as a friend who takes personal interest in them, it will be much easier for them to accept his ministrations in a time of trial, or to go to him for help when a problem arises in their personal life, or when they are looking for an answer to questions which they have concerning matters of doctrine and practice. 74

Even back in 1974, the authors acknowledged that it was getting more and more difficult for pastors to do general home visits. Most people aren’t used to having friends drop in on them unannounced … much less the pastor. It remains important, however, that we pastors, teachers and leaders of our congregations find ways to spend time with our fellow members. (Most of our teachers make annual home visits and know how these visits can pay huge dividends throughout the school year.) Hang around church before and after services and meetings a little longer. Talk to your fellow members. Ask them what’s happening in their lives. Go to some of those basketball games at your school, even if you don’t have any children playing. Work side by side with your members at congregational weekdays. Stop and talk if you see your brothers and sisters in town or at the store. Find ways to spend time with your brothers and sisters. You will get to know them better. They will begin to sense your genuine concern for them and for all God’s people. Your casual conversations, especially those “seasoned with salt”75 will go a long way to help foster an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude in the congregation.

“Programs Have a Place!”

In case you missed it earlier, I will say it again: “Only the Holy Spirit can foster a truly God-pleasing “I am my brother’s keeper” attitude in our congregations.” Having repeated that foundational truth, I also acknowledge the value of organized programs in equipping and mobilizing God’s people for gospel service. (Assuming, of course, that the gospel remains at the heart of any program that we design or use.)

You should know that part of me despises special programs. A few in this assembly might share my inbred suspicion of programs. In certain circles I know I could get a loud and rowdy “Amen” if I stood on my high horse and proclaimed, “I am against special programs because they tend to be short on gospel proclamation and motivation. Programs foster a spirit of legalism and a misplaced trust in the power of the program itself.” Or, “I am against special programs because that’s what non-Lutherans do, you know, the guys who write all the “how-to” books that point to Jesus as an example, and all but ignore the saving work of our crucified and risen Lord.” Or “I am against programs because they tend to divide congregations into two groups, those who participate (the “truly spiritual”) and those who do not (the “less spiritual” - can we even call them Christians if they don’t buy into the special program the congregation has following?)

74 Schuetze/Habeck  “The Shepherd Under Christ” NPH , 1974. p. 139
75 Colossians 4:6  “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”
Organized programs are neither good nor evil in and of themselves. Programs are tools. Like any other tool, programs can be abused. They also have the potential to provide wonderful opportunities for Christian growth and service, as long as the focus remains on Jesus and his saving work for us.

My default position to lean away from organized programs may be more personal than theological. I am not gifted in organizing programs. I’m even worse at monitoring on-going programs, and holding myself and others accountable within the parameters of a program. The congregational programs I have organized often begin with great fanfare and flourish, only to die a quiet death at some point in the future.

I’m going to provide you an opportunity for a little “Schadenfreude.” I serve a congregation that is relatively large by WELS standards. We have just over eleven hundred baptized members on our books. David’s Star has its fair share of “brothers” who need “keeping,” especially in the area of attendance at public worship and reception of the Sacrament. Shortly after I accepted the call to serve at David’s Star, I attended a WELS networking workshop for large congregations. I heard one of the presenters promote the value of organizing a large congregation into smaller “shepherding” groups. I decided to give it a shot. I worked at developing a local plan that would encourage our members to “be their brothers’ keepers” in an organized way. We called it our “Shining Lights” program. The board of elders and I recruited and trained “contact people” who were asked to maintain regular communication with a small group of their fellow members. Our contact people had direct input in selecting the people in their group. Expectations were outlined. The elders pledged help and assistance if problems arose. The program looked pretty on paper.

Fast forward a decade, and we no longer have a “Shining Lights” program at David’s Star. Why? We lost our enthusiasm for the program. I lost my enthusiasm for the program. The “Shining Lights” program did not miraculously transform David’s Star into an outwardly thriving congregation, resplendently shining with good works and exhibiting an unblemished spirit of fraternal love for all to see. Despite our efforts, sin kept happening. Average church attendance remained about the same. Some contact people grew weary of their seemingly fruitless labors. Some members grew weary of being contacted.

The “Shining Lights” program died a quiet death, and few mourned its passing. Still, I do not consider this program a wasted effort. There were blessings. The gospel was shared, and its proclamation is never without impact. God’s Word achieves its purpose. As flawed as “Shining Lights” was in its implementation, the program allowed us to talk on a congregational level about the importance of “caring for souls” in a way that is often reserved for organized evangelism or stewardship efforts.

My fondest memory of the “Shining Lights” program is that more than eighty people, who could have been doing other things with their time and energy, volunteered to serve as contact people. To me, their willingness to serve testified that they already knew being their “brother’s keeper” was important kingdom work.

A few years ago my pastoral associate stepped up to the plate and took another swing at organizing a special program directed at the care of souls within our congregation. We had completed a building program that provided us with a remodeled school and an attractive gathering space outside our worship area. The brick and mortar work was complete. Now, according to the new program, we were going to “Build our Spiritual House.” A series of special sermons and bible classes were prepared and delivered during the Epiphany season. The elders recruited spiritually grounded members to work with one other member or member couple who had not been in worship at our church for an extended period of time. In this program no one was responsible for a whole group of people. Personal contact was encouraged. "Try

76 Finding enjoyment in the disasters of others.
77 An outline of the initial “training” meeting is included at the end of this essay.
to forge a relationship if you don't already have one” was the charge. "Listen as a friend.” “Show persistent love until they come back to worship or make it clear that they are no longer part of our congregation or fellowship of believers.”

Again, a remarkable number of members volunteered to participate in the program. Jesus’ love was compelling them to "be their brother’s keeper.” These members of the body of Christ, these priests of God, were looking for a way to serve. The “Building our Spiritual House” program provided an avenue for that service.

Each volunteer handpicked one member or member couple from a list compiled by the pastors and elders. Off they went to be “their brother’s keeper.” Predictably, the results were mixed, at least from our human perspective. Only God sees the heart. Most volunteers made their initial contacts, but had difficulty forging authentic relationships unless one already existed. One heartbroken member called to tell me that the efforts she had made to encourage her friend spiritually had not been received well. A previously existing friendship came to a crashing end. (It should be noted that even this apparent “failure” gave the pastors an opportunity to have important spiritual conversations with both individuals regarding the giving and receiving of brotherly encouragement within the body of Christ.)

One of the “success” stories of the program involved a father who realized that two of his adult children were on our list of people who could use some “keeping.” The “program” gave him an occasion to do the fatherly work he should have been doing all along. This burly farmer, who is more comfortable in the cab of his tractor than in his Sunday best, began having regular conversations with his own children about the importance of worship. The Spirit blessed his efforts. His children now have more regular contact with the means of grace.

Is a special program for the care of souls right for your congregation? The called and elected leaders of God’s people will have to answer that question on a local level. One size does not fit all. It doesn’t make much sense to divide an already small congregation into smaller ministry groups. Do you really need a special program to give you a reason to speak to that member whose worship attendance suddenly declines? Consider your unique circumstances. Then find some way to let your members know that the “care of souls” needs to be a high priority. Find some way to encourage the priests of God to carry out their high calling. Provide your people with opportunities to serve. Do something that gets your membership talking to each other and to their families about Jesus. God promises to bless every proclamation of his Word.

If you are interested in a more systematized congregational approach to dealing with brothers/sisters who are absent from worship, you might want to contact Pastor Joel Heckendorf (Immanuel - Greenville, WI) or Pastor Mark Henke (Bethany, - Appleton, WI) and talk to them about the “Peter Plan.” The program involves focused sermons to develop congregational awareness, a trained team of callers who follow up in a timely way on letters sent out by the elders and pastors, and a plan to personally visit those who do not respond positively to the initial efforts to show spiritual love and concern.

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78 More than eighty as I recall.
79 I’ve included the program outline at the end of this essay.
80 Three years after the program was implemented at Immanuel, Pastor Heckendorf was candid in an evaluation he sent to me via email: “As far as the impact on our congregation, it has whittled the list down from 200 to about 100 people after three years. I do think we need a shot in the arm again though. It’s also been a blessing to have about 20 “callers” from the congregation, both men and women. We use a few women to call on our single women that are on the “peter plan” and they have been so good in simply building bridges through relationships. The administration of the program is a pain... I do have a gentleman who monitors the stats for us and I have our
“Formal Lutheran Education Can Serve as an Ally!”

Not all congregations are blessed with Lutheran elementary schools. However, where these gospel-centered schools are present, they can play an important role in developing an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude within the congregation. In an essay presented at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary’s Symposium on Lutheran Schools, Martin Luther College President Mark Zarling wrote:

The Lutheran school is the Spirit’s boot camp as He uses the word to prepare future soldiers of the cross. I’m not just speaking about future called servants of the Gospel, though it is no secret that the LES is fertile soil for nurturing and raising up the next generation of full time Gospel heralds. Rather, I’m talking about the valuable training a Lutheran school provides in training all of God’s people to learn how to “talk Jesus” and share the “one thing needful.” Appropriate and well-designed collaborative learning techniques can allow children to practice using Scripture with each other. The Spirit through this Word work can develop important skills so essential for the body of Christ, skills to clearly proclaim law and Gospel. But for a person to rebuke sin and call to repentance presupposes an understanding of the Lord’s immutable will as revealed in his law. For a person to witness to the unconditional Gospel of grace in Christ Jesus presupposes a knowledge of this truth that can only be revealed. In the Lutheran school, students are trained to understand that rebuking a person is first and foremost an effort to reach a soul. If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. Students learn to witness to the love of Christ, not simply to win a debate or to argue a person into the faith. But rather, in humility and gentleness, that child realizes the joy and privilege to be a mouthpiece for the message of new life in Christ. Peter tells us, Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. Therefore, the Lutheran school not only allows children to practice serving volleyball. It not only provides opportunities to sing in a musical. The school first and foremost is a safe and directed environment for children to practice their greatest calling – to be witnesses in word and deed of Christ’s love for them, in them, and through them.81

Have we used our precious Lutheran elementary schools (or our Sunday schools for that matter) to foster an “I am my brother’s keeper” attitude in the lives of our children? If you have a leadership role in a Lutheran school or on your congregation’s board of Christian education, it’s a question worth asking.

“Don’t Forget to Pray!”

In 2007 Northwestern Publishing House (NPH) produced a bible study by Pastor Tim Gumm entitled: “My Brother’s Keeper: Regaining the Straying Brother or Sister for Christ.” This five-lesson study was published as the part of the NPH Bible Insights series and is available on CD-ROM for $42.50. (I found a copy of this

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study in the WLS library.) I have not used this particular study in my congregation, but Pastor Gumm did some good work. I particularly appreciated his encouragement to pray for our brothers and sisters who might be straying from the Savior. I have prayed privately and often (though probably not often enough) for the people I serve, including my weak and straying brothers and sisters in Christ. However, I plan to incorporate more personal and focused prayers like the one below in our elders’ meetings and as I counsel individuals who are concerned about a friend or family member.

O Almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor miserable sinner, confess unto you all of my sins. I especially acknowledge my own neglect of prayer and your Word. But I beg you, of your boundless mercy and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me. Yes, cleanse me through the blood of Christ. Forgive all of my sins. Give me a pure heart and empower me, by your Spirit, to live a holy life, because you have called me to be holy.

I thank you, Father, that, through the Spirit’s work, you have called me to saving faith and into a family of believers. Bless my congregation and continue to strengthen its members through your holy Word and sacrament. Where some have wandered from you, bring them back into your fold.

Father in heaven, among those who are wandering is ____________, my brother (sister) in Christ. My heart is filled with concern, because I know the spiritual danger that comes through neglecting worship and the use of Word and sacrament.

Oh, Lord, please do not let him (her) be lost, but with the sword of your convicting Word, bring about repentance. Let him (her) see his (her) damning sin. Move him (her) to confess it. Assure him (her) that in Christ Jesus there is full and free forgiveness and the power to put away sin. And then, Lord, bring my brother (sister) back into this fellowship once again.

Finally, Lord, use me to reach out to my brother (sister) in love.

Lord, for Jesus’ sake, hear and answer my prayer on behalf of my brother (sister). Amen.\textsuperscript{82}

While it may not be wise to “name the names” of straying members in the public prayers we use during worship services, it would be good practice to incorporate regular intercessions on behalf our brothers and sisters in Christ who need our spiritual help. The “Mission of the Church” prayer in Christian Worship\textsuperscript{83} invites worshippers to pray silently “for a family member, an acquaintance, a neighbor, or a friend who does not believe in you, or whose faith is weak or troubled [emphasis added].

May we be bold enough to regularly and sincerely pray: “Lord, use me to reach out to my brother (sister) in love.”

"Bible Study"

Any time spent in listening to God speak will ultimately foster an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude within our congregations. (I may have mentioned this before: it’s the Spirit’s work!) I’ve already referenced the focused study prepared by Pastor Gumm, available through NPH. It seems to me that the members of most

\textsuperscript{82} This prayer is found in Lesson Five of the "My Brother’s Keeper" NPH Bible Study by Pastor Tim Gumm.

\textsuperscript{83} Page 129
congregations would also benefit from focused bible studies on the topic of gospel ministry, both the priesthood of all believers and the holy office of the ministry. If you like to use prepared lessons, NPH has a study titled, “Church -- Mission – Ministry” by Pastor James Janke. The study is part of the “His Word – My Life” series.

You might use one of your bible classes to work through Daniel Deutschlander’s new book, "The Narrow Lutheran Middle: Following the Scriptural Road." Chapter eight walks the reader through an overview of how the universal priesthood of all believers and the holy office of the ministry both “exist for the glory of the Shepherd who gave his life for the sheep.”

Any Bible study that has an “evangelism” focus will also bear fruit in fostering an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude in the congregation. As your members receive training in how to clearly present the truths of God’s “great exchange” to the “unchurched”, they will also be equipping themselves to share the same saving message with their “churched” friends and family members who are beginning to stray.

In 1981 WELS Commission on Evangelism published a brief spiral-bound manual called “Regaining the Straying.” The stated hope was that this manual would “help those men entrusted with the spiritual care of members (i.e., the elders) in the faithful discharge of their duties.” This manual was designed as a companion piece to “Talk About the Savior” an evangelism approach built around two key questions. “Regaining the Straying” could provide you with a starting point for crafting your own bible study on the care of souls. If you are attempting to foster an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude in the congregation, the bible study should be offered to a broader audience and not limited to the board of elders.

How about reading through the five articles on “Seeking the Straying” by Wayne Mueller? They were published in “Forward in Christ” volume 87 (April through August of 2000). You can find them doing an online search in the WELS “Forward in Christ” archives. When these articles first came out, I used them with our board of elders. Again, if we want to foster an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude in the congregation, why limit this study to the board of elders? Here is a sampling of paragraphs from the first article in Pastor Mueller’s series:

“Some congregation leaders are looking for a silver bullet, a quick fix for the back door losses of straying members. They send out mass mailings to delinquent members that invite, threaten, or both. They pass resolutions that simply "terminate" members from whom they receive no response.

Other quick fixes involve changing external aspects of worship to make it more inviting. Parking space is added, more music and youth participation is woven into the worship services, and greeters offer the personal touch of a smile and handshake as members come to church.

But there is no silver bullet. Some quick fixes have value and in some places are long overdue. Perhaps the greatest value of external changes is that it keeps more of those who are already coming from lapsing.

84 “The Narrow Lutheran Middle” Daniel M. Deutschlander, NPH 2011 (My Kindle app tells me the quote is found 81% of the way through the book!)
85 The quote taken from the foreword of the “Regaining the Straying” manual
86 1. “If you died today, do you know for sure where you’d be?” 2. “If you died today and God asked you, “Why should I let you into My heaven?” What would you say?
But the real problem for hard-core church-skippers is not parking or lack of friendliness. It is sin in the individual heart. Most delinquent members wouldn't come to church if you passed out $20 bills. A variety of fears, deep-seated guilt, anger, and personality conflicts needs to be personally and individually addressed.

The bad news is that our sinful flesh gravitates to what is safe, comfortable, and traditional. Not to confront our neighbor with his sin is politically correct but spiritually incorrect. This inertia leads our congregations to hold many meetings and gatherings for the safe sheep, but keeps us from reaching out to the majority who are no longer safe in the arms of the Good Shepherd."87

Topical/doctrinal studies have an important place in the spiritual growth opportunities we offer to our members. My personal preferences lean toward bible studies on whole chapters or books of the bible. These studies also present opportunities to foster an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude in our congregations.

At David’s Star, we recently read through the Gospel of Matthew. We spent time wrestling with Matthew 18. We heard the Savior pour his heart out over Jerusalem.88 We listened to Jesus lovingly warn three sleepy disciples89 in the garden, and reach out one last time to his betrayer.90 We heard the Great Commission with Jesus’ gracious accompanying promise, “Surely I will be with you always!” It’s all right there ... everything needed to foster an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude.

Our Sunday morning bible class has been reading through the books of Judges and Ruth. In Judges we saw the tragic results of spiritual lethargy unfold before our eyes. We noted that there wasn’t much “brother keeping” going on as everyone was busy doing “as he saw fit.” 91 What an important warning for our self-centered generation to hear! In the book of Ruth we saw how our gracious Lord remained faithful to his word during a time of general faithlessness. The Lord used famine, poverty, and even death to keep his Messianic promise alive. We witnessed how faith in the God of Israel moved Ruth to selflessly serve as a “keeper” for her “bitter” mother-in-law. We marveled as faith moved Boaz to serve as a “keeper” for Ruth, taking up the role as her “kinsman-redeemer.” Again, it was all there in Judges and Ruth ... everything needed to foster an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude. Keep your eyes open, and the applications will jump off the pages of Holy Scripture!

"Using the Pulpit"

Two of the “care for souls” programs I referenced earlier (“Building our Spiritual House” and “The Peter Plan”) began with a short series of sermons designed to raise congregational awareness about the importance of showing spiritual concern for our brothers and sisters in Christ. This approach follows a pattern frequently employed to shine the spotlight on a particular aspect of Christian living or joint mission work. From mid-August 2011 through May 2012, the congregation I serve held a mission festival, four “Christ’s Love, Our Calling” Sundays, a Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School Sunday, a WELS

87 Wayne Mueller  “Real Church Renewal”  Forward in Christ - Volume 87, Number 5 Issue: May 2000
88 Matthew 23:37  “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.”
89 Matthew 26:41  “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.”
90 Matthew 26:50  “Friend, do what you came for.”
91 Judges 21:25
“Walking Together” Sunday and a special Sunday set aside to thank God for the rich gospel heritage of our congregation. In the past we have also conducted “Friendship” Sundays, “Jesus Cares” Sundays, “Recruitment for Public Ministry” Sundays, and “Celebration” Sundays in conjunction with capital fundraising drives. Every ministry group interested in advancing its mission seems to offer a special worship packet, which includes sermon suggestions. Sometimes they even provide a guest preacher to trumpet the cause.

Like topical bible studies and congregational programs, special services and sermons on the “care of souls” have their place in the life of the church. But how do you fan the flames of mission passion once the “special” Sunday has come and gone?

As a rule I prefer “lectionary” preaching to “free text” preaching for special Sundays. Preaching the lectionary presents pastors more than enough opportunities to proactively foster an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude in their congregations. If the “care of souls” is a front burner issue with the pastor, his eyes will be open for the possibilities his lectionary sermon text provides for speaking God’s truth concerning the important work of “brother keeping.”

The appointed readings for the next few Sundays illustrate my point. This coming Sunday is “Father’s Day” on Hallmark’s calendar, but on the church calendar it is “Pentecost 3.” The appointed Old Testament lesson is Genesis 3:8-15. While the heart of this Genesis text is the first gospel promise given to a fallen world, the Lord God’s question to Adam (“Where are you?”) opens the door to speak about the failure of Adam to be the spiritual “keeper” of his wife when the ancient serpent came tempting. In the appointed Gospel lesson (Mark 3:20-35) we hear Jesus saying: “Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.” What a great reminder that we are truly family through faith in Jesus, and that our brothers and sisters in Christ are precious to Jesus.

Moving to the next Sunday, the “supplemental” Old Testament lesson for Pentecost 4 is Jonah 3. While the reluctant prophet was sent to a foreign land, the text provides an opportunity to speak about the amazing power of God’s Word to change sinful hearts. Jonah gives us the additional opportunity to examine our own reluctance to get involved in the priestly work to which God has called us. The Gospel Lesson for Pentecost 4 (Mark 4:26-34) includes the Parable of the Growing Seed. This parable teaches that God’s Word possesses the power to cause spiritual growth all by itself. It serves as an encouragement to plant the Seed by sharing Jesus’ love. Our thoughts can be drawn not only to those who don’t yet know Jesus, but also to those who need to have their faith strengthened. It doesn’t matter whether our faithful labor seems to produce results or not. Plant the Seed!

The Gospel lesson for Pentecost 5 brings us the account of Jesus calming the storm in Mark 4:35-41. Would it be stretching the text too far to ask the question Jesus asked of his disciples: “Why are you so afraid?” and apply it to the fears we feel at the thought of speaking God’s truth to our brother or sister who is caught in a sin? Isn’t it a comforting reminder to hear that “Jesus is in the boat with us” as we live our daily lives and speak his Word to those we love?

The opportunities to foster an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude abound in the sermon texts we use regularly. Use those opportunities to shine the spotlight this important aspect of Christian living and ministry.

92 I’m reminded of a recent kickball game I played with my children and their spouses. The playground ball we were using had a slow leak. The ball was round and firm after we added air, but before long it needed to be pumped up again.

93 If time permits, I could share some past experiences with special services that helped to shape my preference.
"Research Findings Worth Some Attention"

The WELS Board for Evangelism conducted a two-year research project on “back-door” losses in the late 1980’s. The data gathered through this project was published in a spiral-bound volume entitled: “My Brother’s Keeper: A Study of Back-Door Losses with Recommendations for Ministry to the Inactives.” I don’t know how many copies of this study are still floating around. I found one at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary library. Most of the findings in this study make sense to me. In other words, they correspond to my personal ministry experiences. My sense is that the study’s findings remain valid, even as the decades have passed.

I found it noteworthy that 40 percent of former members surveyed indicated “church teachings” as a reason for leaving.94 We can’t change God’s Word to suit the “itching ears. The faithful proclamation of the Word will always cause division. However, more than half of the people leaving our fellowship gave non-doctrinal reasons. Personal issues and relationships were mentioned most frequently as the “non-doctrinal” reasons for leaving the WELS congregations surveyed.

John Isch, one of my former colleagues from Martin Luther College, analyzed the data collected from questionnaires sent to 211 sample WELS congregations. He observed:

“Many of the families who leave our congregations by the backdoor are “hurting” families. They are families with drug and alcohol problems, incarceration, unwanted pregnancies, child abuse, extra-marital affairs, health problems. They are families that are suffering spiritually, emotionally, physically and socially. Many of the back-door losses are walking away from the one thing they need the most – and they are not aware of it.”

“A second observation is the dismal picture we see when we lose life-long WELS members. Better than one-third of those we lose have never known any other church. And we lost them in a miserable manner for the most part. They lie inactive for years until they or the congregation belatedly moves to do something. These are the Laodiceans who seem to be excited neither by the prospect of staying nor by the prospect of leaving.”

“Third, the greatest share of our back-door losses are persons who entered our congregations from outside our fellowship. There seems to be an initial enthusiasm followed by disinterest or disappointment leading to inactivity and withdrawal.”95

In a personal interviews with “inactives” who were still on the membership roles, 72 percent of the respondents said that “personal issues” were keeping them from worship. Jobs, family problems, leisure-time interests and apathy were high on the list of reasons. Most of the former and inactive members felt that little could have been done by the pastor or congregation members to help them remain active and engaged in the congregational worship life.

Would it surprise you to learn that this study showed no substantial difference in member-loss ratios between congregations with or without structured member retention programs? What does make a difference? According to the study, “the degree of personal contact by pastors and lay leaders was revealed

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94 Most cited teachings like the role of women, church fellowship, close communion and life-style issues (aka – Scriptural teaching regarding the Sixth Commandment.)
95 “My Brother’s Keeper: A Study of Back Door Losses in the Church” p 17,18
as a greater retentive factor than a structured program.”96 This finding led to the conclusion that "personal and individual efforts are the key elements [to member retention] whether they are formally or informally generated or administered.”97 In other words, we all need to be personally involved in “brother keeping.”

“Strengthen the Family Altar”

While I haven’t conducted my own study to support this observation, it seems to me that most of my brothers and sisters in Christ who already demonstrate an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude had their mind-sets forged in a Christian home. Mom and dad led by example. Jesus was at the center of family life. The family members prayed together daily. The bible was more than a coffee table decoration. The question, “Are we going to church this Sunday?” was never asked. Public worship and frequent reception of the Sacrament was a way of life.

If we are going to foster an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude in our congregations, we can’t afford to ignore the Christian family. We need to encourage and strengthen our parents. They need to recognize the importance of their God-given roles in the lives of their children. Martin Luther’s explanation of the 4th Commandment in the Large Catechism is worthy of frequent study! I’ve copied the concluding paragraphs from his explanation below:

But here again the sad plight arises that no one perceives or heeds this, and all live on as though God gave us children for our pleasure or amusement, and servants that we should employ them like a cow or ass, only for work, or as though we were only to gratify our wantonness with our subjects, ignoring them, as though it were no concern of ours what they learn or how they live; and no one is willing to see that this is the command of the Supreme Majesty, who will most strictly call us to account and punish us for it; nor that there is so great need to be so seriously concerned about the young. For if we wish to have excellent and apt persons both for civil and ecclesiastical government we must spare no diligence, time, or cost in teaching and educating our children, that they may serve God and the world, and we must not think only how we may amass money and possessions for them. For God can indeed without us support and make them rich, as He daily does. But for this purpose He has given us children, and issued this command that we should train and govern them according to His will, else He would have no need of father and mother. Let every one know therefore, that it is his duty, on peril of losing the divine favor, to bring up his children above all things in the fear and knowledge of God, and if they are talented, have them learn and study something, that they may be employed for whatever need there is [to have them instructed and trained in a liberal education, that men may be able to have their aid in government and in whatever is necessary].

If that were done, God would also richly bless us and give us grace to train men by whom land and people might be improved and likewise well educated citizens, chaste and domestic wives, who afterwards would rear godly children and servants. Here consider now what deadly injury you are doing if you be negligent and fail on your part to bring up your child to usefulness and piety, and how you bring upon yourself all sin and wrath, thus earning hell by your own children, even though you be otherwise pious and holy. And because this is disregarded, God so fearfully punishes the world that there is no discipline, government, or peace, of which we all complain, but do not see that it is our fault; for as we train them, we

96 Ibid. p.28
97 Ibid. p. 28
have spoiled and disobedient children and subjects. Let this be sufficient exhortation; for to draw this out at length belongs to another time. 98

In a paper on “The Church and its Ministers” delivered at the 2008 Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary symposium, Pastor Charles Degner asked and then gave his answer to an important question:

So why are the people of God in our parishes so afraid to use the ministry of the keys and carry out their function as kings and priests? It has much to do with ignorance on their part. They cannot rebuke because they cannot point to Scripture and say, “The Lord says ...” They do not have the spirit of Christ in their ministry to the lost because they do not sit at the master’s feet and listen. The people of God who are studying his Word have no trouble teaching their children the truths of God’s Word every day. Later in life when their children wander from the faith, Christian parents are quick to come to them and remind them what God’s Word says. They do it with conviction and with love, because they have Jesus. Our calling is to lead our people into the word and to train and teach them from it.99

“There’s Not Always Smoke Where There’s Fire!”

Most of the material I’ve read on the subject of “being my brother’s keeper” tends to concentrate on inactivity in an individual’s corporate worship life. We become concerned when our brothers and sisters in Christ begin to neglect the public use of Word and Sacrament. Rightly so! But the ancient foe works in many other ways to draw our brothers and sisters away from Christ. Sometimes there are spiritual problems, even when church attendance is good.

I remember cheerfully visiting with a couple serving as “greeters” for a Sunday service, only to have the wife call me later that same week to inform me that she was divorcing her husband. Conflicts in their relationship had been building quietly over the years. Some of their friends knew about their strained relationship. I wonder how many of their brothers and sisters in Christ tried to help them draw strength from Jesus’ love before the divorce.

A woman came to the pastors looking for help because her husband was abusing alcohol. He told a different story: “I’m just having a few beers to unwind after work.” The pastors sensed that this church-going man was putting his love for beer ahead of love for his wife (and ultimately, his love for God). They counseled him to stop drinking and seek additional counseling. Some of his church member friends and relatives had other thoughts. “His wife is going overboard,” they said. “What’s wrong with having a few beers?” I wonder what blessings might have come if, instead of making excuses, his close circle of Christian friends and family members had confronted his sin, directed him to the love of Jesus for forgiveness and strength, and supported his efforts to stop abusing alcohol.

No pastor, teacher, staff minister or congregational leader is familiar with all the intimate details in the lives of the people they serve (even if they do regular home visits). The attribute of omniscience belongs to God alone. However, everyone in the congregation has their own personal circle of friends and family members. What a blessing it would be if each individual member of our congregations took their role as “brother’s keeper” seriously and lovingly admonished those walking headlong into sin’s deadly grasp ... even those who are attending church regularly.

98 Triglot Concordia St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921 pp. 629, 630.
99 Pastor Degner’s complete essay which has many applications to our topic can be found at www.wlsessays.net
Give Thanks for the Spirit’s Work When You See It in Action!

Sometimes we spend so much time ruminating over our sin and failures that we miss opportunities to celebrate evidence of the Spirit’s work in our lives and in the lives of the people we serve. The miracle of the Spirit begins at the baptismal font where hearts are changed and lives are connected to the crucified and risen Jesus. We see fruits of the Spirit as God’s people “no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”

The Spirit’s work often shows itself in simple acts of kindness and charity. We love our brothers and sisters in Christ. We hurt when they hurt. We have a desire to help and comfort. I think of a woman from our congregation who was overwhelmed with gratitude for her brothers and sisters in Christ. She couldn’t believe the number of encouraging cards and phone calls she received after her cancer diagnosis became widely known through a requested prayer at church. I think of the thousands of dollars given anonymously to help struggling parents pay their school fees. I think of the fundraiser our members organized to purchase a specially equipped van for a fellow member struggling with mobility issues.

The Spirit’s work is demonstrated when “soul care” finds its way into the daily lives of our fellow members. I think of the dairy farmer who, as a young man, considered studying for the pastoral ministry. His life went in a different direction. While he never enjoyed the privilege of preaching from a pulpit, he shares his love for Jesus and for his Christian brothers in remarkable ways. As a Christian father, his kitchen table serves as a true family altar. He often hears heartfelt confessions from Christian brothers while sitting on his combine or standing beside his manure spreader. He has directed countless people to the gospel in word and sacrament, and to their pastors for further guidance and encouragement. The Spirit, working through the means of grace, gave this man the mind and heart of Christ.

I think of the man who pulled me aside in the narthex after a recent Saturday night service. He knew that I had been working with his friend whose church attendance had suddenly dropped off. He wanted to speak to me privately … not to share gossip or dig for dirt … but to ask if there was anything he could do to help his struggling friend. This concerned individual has never served on our board of elders or volunteered to be part of a formal “care of souls” program at our church, but he had a desire to be “his brother’s keeper.”

I thank God for all of the men who have allowed their names to be used on the election ballot for a position on our board of elders, knowing that they would have to shatter the barriers of their comfort zone to speak to fellow members about spiritual matters. By the power of the Spirit, these men recognized the eternal importance of “keeping their brothers”.

The visible church will never look pure to human eyes. The church militant will always be striving for growth in faith and sanctified living. But the Spirit is working as gospel is proclaimed. Take some time to give thanks for evidence of the Spirit’s work in your own congregation.

One Last Encouragement - “Block and Tackle”

We have a professional football team in Wisconsin. Some of you might already know that! The coach is obsessed with fundamentals. In post game interviews, while the fans and reporters rehash all the big plays that led to victory or the blown opportunities that cost them the game; the coach keeps talking about “cleaning up” the footwork of the linemen and “squaring up” to make a solid hits on the ball carrier. The

100 2 Corinthians 5:15
coach knows that games are won blocking and tackling. He crafts practices with the goal of turning his players into better blockers and tacklers.

The “blocking and tackling” of God’s church is the faithful proclamation of the gospel and the proper administration of the Sacraments. Called workers (and I speak to myself even as I encourage you): “Clean up” your presentation of law and gospel. Make sure your personal life “squares up” with the saving message you proclaim. Block and tackle!

Lay leaders; support your called workers in their faithful gospel labors. Don’t be seduced by the glamour of the “big play” and measure your congregational health by the special programs you conduct or the number of committed volunteers you can amass. Our gracious God does some of his best work in quiet whispers and hides his glory in the most strange and ordinary places. Thank God if your called workers are “blocking and tackling” well. Join them on the field. You are part of the team too!

Brothers in Christ: “Preach the gospel!”

God bless your labors for the Lord and his people.

Pastor Michael Woldt  
Nebraska District Convention  
Nebraska Evangelical Lutheran High School  
Waco, Nebraska  
June 11, 12, 13, 2012
Random Comments:

I scanned through many other essays on www.wlsessays.net. What a great resource!

You will note that my quotes do not reflect reading widely outside of our fellowship. I started down that road, but did not quickly find resources that spoke a better word than brothers within our fellowship. I did run across some material that breathed an entirely different spirit. I scribbled some notes a few months ago as I listened to John MacArthur's “Grace to You” ministry audio sermon series: “My Brother's Keeper.”

“One of the most compelling issues in implementing church discipline is the importance of “Enforcing the standard of holiness” within the church. “The purity of the visible church is threatened.” “God has called us to deal with sin in his assembly.” “The church purges itself through the ministry of God.” “Children have to be made to conform” “This is what has to happen within the family of God.” “God disciplines us to force us into the track of obedience.” Preaching alone won't work. We are like children. We need to be pressured. There must be enforcement.” “Deal with sin in order that we might see the church follow the pattern of holiness.”

Listening to this audio sermon caused me to give thanks once again for the gospel-centered messages we hear in our churches!
Appendix A

SHINING LIGHTS PROGRAM

OUTLINE OF PROGRAM PURPOSE

Through the Shining Lights Program, we want to show that we CARE for our fellow members at David’s Star.

Concern Regular contact from a caring friend communicates concern.

Awareness As a communication vehicle, this program can be used to keep members aware of issues in the congregation.

Retention Without shown concern or connection, many people tend to drift away from their church and regular use of Word and Sacrament. This becomes particularly important with changing circumstances in life. (Last child confirmed, empty nest, divorce, etc.)

Ear Many people have issues bothering them, but don’t feel comfortable talking about them or asking questions. You become the “ear” that listens and then directs concerns to the proper individuals. (Pastor, principal, elder, council, etc.)

YOUR COMMITMENT

We are asking you to make a “Shining Light” contact with 10 individuals or families from David’s Star’s membership list four times a year.

It would be good to make the first contact by phone if possible. Subsequent contacts can be made in a variety of ways. Use your creativity.

We are asking you to meet twice a year with an elder to report on the how the program is working for you and the people in your group.

Your elder will have your name and will meet with you at a mutually convenient time. If issues arise, you are encouraged to contact your elder or the pastor at any time.

Your participation in the program is open-ended, but we would like you to commit to at least a two-year period of time. (8 total contacts per family/person.)

Suggested Shining Light communication topics will be provided quarterly. (Reminders about service times, worship opportunities, etc.) You may modify the communication depending on the make-up of your group.
Do ...

... consider your service an important ministry.
... pray for God's help and guidance as you make your contacts.
... keep close to Word and Sacrament yourself.
... communicate your private concerns to the pastor or an elder.
... pray for the people in your group.
... keep your contacts “gospel-centered.”
... suggest changes that will improve the program

Don't ...

... feel you have to answer every question yourself.
... lose heart if every contact is not positive.
... take negative comments personally.
... give up on this important ministry
... pass along “confidential” information without the permission of the person who shared it. (Example – hospital stays, sickness, family problems, etc.)

What if's ...?

What if someone on my list doesn’t want me to call or is otherwise rude or hostile?

*Inform the pastor or your elder. The individual will be removed from your group and the pastor or elders will do the follow-up work.*

What if someone on my list says that they are no longer a member of David’s Star?

*Inform the pastor or your elder. The individual will be removed from your group and the pastor or elders will do the follow-up work.*

What if I can no longer serve as a contact person?

*Inform your elder and he will try to find a substitute.*

What if someone on my list changes status? (Example – no longer has children at school)

*You may either retain that contact or change it. Changes in “Shining Light” contact lists will be made by the elders with your input.*
Appendix B  

The Peter Plan - “Restore Gently”

Note:  This plan was implemented at Bethany, Appleton, WI, under the leadership of Pastor Mark Henke. Pastor Joel Heckendorf also used this plan at Immanuel, Greenville, WI. Pastor Heckendorf introduced this plan to his congregation with a series of three sermons on the subject. Use it to stimulate your own thought about how you might improve the “care of souls” in your own congregation.

Introduction - Background

Prior to 2004 Bethany had a significant number of members whose use of Word and Sacrament had diminished or discontinued entirely. In response the Board of Elders and pastors made calls, offered invitations to Bible Class, and sent periodic reminders. Nevertheless, by 2004 there was little progress. By then the number of communicants that had not communed in three months increased to 150, approximately 20% - 25% of the communicant membership. Of this number 70-80 had not communed in more than 12 months.

These were friends, relatives, and neighbors who at one point were confirmed and promised “to be faithful unto death”. While these souls would answer individually to their Lord, we as a congregation felt we would be increasingly remiss if we did not do all we could to help them regain their footing in their walk with Jesus, or warn them of the consequences should they abandon that walk entirely.

The Peter Plan is simple, organized approach to church discipline. As such, it fell on the Board of Elders to implement. In addition, the approach calls upon all members of Bethany to support the effort.

Goal

To restore inactive, non-communing members to a living relationship with the Lord Jesus and an active church membership; or, to take the appropriate action that reflects their current spiritual status.

Biblical Basis

There are two key passages to this plan.

John 21:15-18 provides the post-resurrection account of Jesus’ restoration of Peter. In the hours before the crucifixion Peter had boldly declared his intent to stand by his Lord regardless what others did. And then within hours Peter denied Jesus not once, not twice but three times, ran like a cut cat and hid with the rest of his cowardly brethren.

It appears that following the resurrection Peter was not at all sure about his role. He returns to his old job, fishing in the Sea of Galilee. Note how Jesus now meets privately with Peter, confirms his love, and then provides direction for his new job – “Feed my lambs...feed my sheep...feed my lambs...follow me.”

Galatians 6:1-2 says, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”
As Christians those of us who are active, practicing, worshipping, communing church members have the responsibility to restore those who are caught in sins – neglect of Word and Sacrament, unbelief, or the host of other sins listed detailed in the 10 Commandments. But we are to “restore gently”.

Other passages also apply. Matthew 18:15-18, Romans 15:14, I Corinthians 4:14 allow for progressive, specific steps with clear outcomes. There is no “one way” to practice church discipline. It is the congregation that fills in the details.

**Key Dates – Key Sequences**

Bad habits and a weakening faith just don’t just develop overnight. But there are first steps down the slippery slope. Missing one Sunday or one opportunity to receive Lord’s Supper may not result in the fires of hell. But when one Sunday becomes a month of Sundays, this may be indicative of serious spiritual problems or a complete loss of saving faith. The member is distancing himself or herself from Jesus or may not be walking with Him at all.

The Bethany Board of Elders earlier tried mailings and contacts at different festivals (Lent, Easter, Christmas) but adopted the quarterly calendar key dates (Jan 1, Apr 1, Jul 1, Oct 1) for the sake of order and ease of administration.

The key sequences with interventions at 3 months, 6 months, 9 months with specific actions (release, removal, excommunication) at or about 12 months give callers and pastors sufficient time for contacts and the member with ample time to respond.

**Key People**

**Visiting Elders** make the calls for Letter #1, which bears signatures of the elder and one of the pastors. Early in the program with a significant backlog we had eight (8) elders making 12 – 15 contacts every three months. Currently we have four (4) elders making 7 – 8 contacts.

**Pastors** make the calls for Letter #2 which bears their signature. Should additional time or attention be needed this is often the point in the process where a member is put on **Hold**.

A **Visiting Elder** makes the calls for Letter #3 which bears signatures of the elder and one of the pastors. This step is probably best handled by an elder with some experience.

A **Coordinator** tracks communion attendance, identifies candidates for Letters #1, #2 or #3, communicates favorable responses (communion attendance) between meetings, and prepares agendas. This is done by an elder but could be easily done by administrative staff.

**Meetings**

The Pastors and Visiting Elders meet with the Chairman of the Board of Elders four times a year in January, April, July and October prior to the monthly Church Council meeting.

Each Visiting Elder and Pastor goes through their folders/files, indicates a favorable response (communion attendance) and makes a recommendation (next letter, hold, referral, membership action).

Meetings are also devoted to the discussion of common issues. They usually run between an hour and an hour and a half.
Activity One

A Brief Study of Matthew 18:1-14

1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” 2 He called a little child and had him stand among them. 3 And he said: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

The disciples were concerned about who would be the greatest. What does that reveal about their personal focus and priorities?

What change needs to take place before a person can enter the kingdom of heaven?

What “means” does God use to bring needed change to hearts and minds?

5 “And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. 6 But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

How does Jesus make it clear that each child is precious to him? (Verse 5)

What does Jesus say of the person who “causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin”?101

7 “Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! 8 If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

Why is causing someone else to sin such a serious matter?

Why is it vital that we root out everything that causes us to stumble in our own walk with Jesus?

101 The word used in this passage literally means “cause to be caught” or “cause to stumble.” A “skandalon” was a trap. Some have described it as a “trigger trap” which, when touched leads to destruction. The King James Version translated the word as “offend.” Our concept of "giving offense" has its root in this word.
10 “See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.  

*Who is watching over God’s little ones?*

12 “What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? 13 And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. 14 In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.  

*How does a shepherd show his concern for individual sheep that wander off?*

102 NIV includes verse 11 in a footnote, not the body of the text. It reads: “The Son of Man came to save what was lost.”
Activity Two

Passages Related to Brotherly Admonition

Matthew 7: 3-5: “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

According to Jesus, what needs to happen before I am prepared to serve as my brother’s keeper?

Galatians 5:19-21: The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

What is the clear and present danger for my Christian brother who is caught in sin?

Galatians 5:22-26: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

Who provides the gifts that allow me to approach my role as “my brother’s keeper” with a God-pleasing attitude? 

By what means are those gifts provided? (Not specifically mentioned in the passage, but here’s a hint: Think like a Lutheran!)
Galatians 6:1,2: Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

Are you among the “spiritual” people to whom Paul addresses these words? Explain.

As we attempt to “restore” a brother caught in a sin, Paul says we should approach him “gently.”

Explain what Paul means.

What trap does the devil set for those who try to serve as the “keeper of their brother”?

What is the law of Christ? (See John 15:12)

James 5:20: Remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

What is the ultimate goal for serving as our brother’s keeper?

103 Literally “in a spirit of humility.”

104 While Jesus was in the upper room with his disciples on Maundy Thursday he said, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.”
Activity Three

Time for Personal Reflection

What room for growth do you see in the way you personally model an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude to the members of your congregation?

Do you hear or include “I’m my brother’s keeper” themes in your sermons and Bible classes? Give examples.

Would your congregation benefit from special programs or a focused emphasis on “being my brother’s keeper?” Explain.

What is the biggest stumbling block to fostering an “I’m my brother’s keeper” attitude in your own congregation? Suggest ways that stumbling block might be removed.

When I return to my home congregation, I will work at fostering an improved “I’m my brother’s keeper attitude” by ...