Holding Up The Prophet’s Hand
Supporting Church Workers

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Why write a book specifically on supporting church workers? Do church workers as a group need special attention? In a word, yes. I am convinced of the need for special attention because I see church workers at increased risk of sadness, despair, stress, frustration, cynicism, anger, and disappointment. For a number of reasons, church workers living out this vocation are at much more risk than many other folks. The risk comes from several sources.

First, people-oriented professions carry specific, inherent vocational risks. Like counselors, social workers, nurses, teachers, and other caregivers, church workers face stressors common to the helping professions. Day by day, these workers deal with the crises of others—unemployment, financial distress, personal illnesses, and the death of loved ones. Professionals called to help others during stressful circumstances find these circumstances upping the stress ante in their own lives too.

Second, stress often increases when one’s vocation asks the worker to connect challenging human experiences with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I will have much more to say about this throughout the book.

Third, church workers most often have personal relationships with those they serve. Unlike counselors, whose clients come and go, or firefighters, who meet emergency needs and then leave the scene, church workers walk closely with those they serve in day-by-day, ongoing relationships. In short, church workers meet more than the average number of life-stressors because of their people-oriented vocation. They minister to those they care about on a personal as well as professional level, often during times of crises.

Finally, they are called by God to apply the Gospel to the most daunting of human experiences. Is it any wonder that church workers sometimes succumb to dramatic risks of body, spirit, and self?

In the chapters of this section, I will focus on four crucial arenas: (1) satanic attack and spiritual warfare, (2) psychological stressors and stress, (3) burnout, and (4) secondary traumatic stress. Each is key as congregations seek to support their workers. However, readers will not find solutions to these challenges in Section 1. That is the task of the remaining sections of the book. Section 1 seeks simply to define and communicate the challenges in detail.
Chapter One

Satan’s Strategy

Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8)

I begin with a fable. I begin in this way not to be dramatic but because I want to make and underscore an important point. I wholeheartedly believe that the devil does indeed prowl on earth like a roaring lion, just as Scripture says (1 Peter 5:8). I do believe the devil and his demons seek to undermine the work of the Christian Church.

“This may be the day the Lord has made,” thought Satan as he sped from the garden and back toward Hades, “but it was a great day for me anyway.”

An easy smile came to Satan’s face. He had just completed his successful temptation of Adam and Eve, destroying the bliss of the garden, and unleashing sin and death into God’s good creation. “What a great day!” he repeated to himself.

A hellish crowd awaited Evil’s triumphant return. But no sooner had the applause died down than Satan called together his lieutenants. “We must make further plans,” Satan announced. “There will be many more opportunities. We must use our resources effectively. Any ideas?”
One of Satan’s lieutenants cleared his throat. Those around the table leaned forward in anticipation. “We assume,” he began, “that there will be followers of God—people of the light. He has promised a Savior. And He will keep that promise. These people will seek one another out. They will gather and form groups, clusters, organizations made up of people whom our Enemy will rescue. In these groups, leaders will arise. If we can get to the leaders, we can undercut and destroy the efforts of the groups.”

“Interesting,” said Satan after thoughtful silence, “Tell me more.”

“We weaken and take down the God-followers by attacking their leaders, and this is how we do it. We begin by creating stress and trouble in their lives. We beat them down. We find ways to cause them to lose heart. We work to isolate the leaders from one another and from the people they serve. We tempt them to feel that they are carrying their burdens alone. Then we instigate undercurrents of jealousy and discontent, shame and denial, criticism and gossip throughout each group.”

Murmurs of approval spread through the assembled demonic army.

Another lieutenant continued, “And we can work on the God-followers too. We will keep them distracted from thinking about their leaders’ needs. We will distract them with their own stress and worries. And when they make the effort to demonstrate any kind of care for their leaders, we will stir up conflict around every little thing and distract them some more.”

Satan thought about the plan. “If we get to the leaders,” he said, “we can undercut their effectiveness and the influence of all the God-followers. We’ll isolate the leaders, criticize them, isolate them, overwork them, and demoralize them. Yes! That will be the plan!”

Someone cheered. Then, two more. Someone began to clap and the applause became a crescendo. When it finally died down, Satan continued, “Keep the married ones from spending time with their spouses! Keep them from taking care of their bodies! Convince them they have so much work to do they have no time for exercise, adequate sleep, a healthful diet, or personal time in fellowship with their God.”

The applause began anew, soon becoming a roar. Satan shouted over it:

“Encourage conflict as it simmers underground. Cause hard feelings and break up relationships. Isolate them! Attack them! Isolate them! Discourage them! Isolate them! Keep them away from anything that will comfort or nourish them—physically, emotionally, intellectually, or spiritually! Isolate them! That is the plan.”

All hell roared at these words. Satan’s followers hoisted him onto their shoulders in celebration of their anticipated victory. Soon they would deploy to carry out his plan. But for now, they celebrated.

And that is Satan’s plan. If I were to create a game plan focused on undermining the work of the Church begun by our Lord Jesus Christ, I would unleash that attack in the following order:

First, I would seek to destroy the significant relation-
ships of church workers, their relationships with their spouses, children, friends, co-workers, parish leaders, congregation members and even other church workers.

Second, I would work to destroy the relationships of congregation members with one another, isolating them and fracturing community.

Third, I would cause the faithful to question their beliefs.

As I’ve ministered to church leaders over the years, I have seen Satan use these three steps again and again. And sadly, his strategy often works! Armies that hope to fight successfully must be able to identify the enemy. In the same way, it is vital that Christians recognize our enemy and discern his strategy.

St. Paul was certainly on target:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. (Ephesians 6:10–13)

Because a church worker’s vocation is to connect people to the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ, they are exceptionally vulnerable to Satan’s attack. Were a parochial school math teacher, for instance, to confine herself solely to her academic subject without any concern for the spiritual lives of her students, she would likely be less vulnerable to satanic attack. Her activities would be simply less threatening to the kingdom of darkness.

However, a math teacher who connects with her students on a spiritual level does threaten the satanic game plan. If she connects on a spiritual level with the families of her students, she poses even more of a threat. Likewise, a pastor who offers only theological abstractions in his teaching and preaching may not find himself in Satan’s crosshairs. But if that teaching, preaching, and counseling links the Gospel of Christ to his hearers’ lives, then his work poses more of a threat to the satanic game plan. If that pastor grows relationally close to his people, caring for them on a personal as well as a professional level, that threat increases more.

In short, when church workers do what a congregation calls them to do, that is, integrate their daily leadership tasks with the Gospel of Jesus Christ they proclaim, they put themselves in a much more dangerous position. Congregations need to understand that we ask our workers to assume a higher risk, spiritually speaking. Understanding it, we must faithfully take up the task of supporting our workers.

Church workers, along with all those who seek to connect the Gospel daily, are by virtue of their vocation, in positions of special vulnerability for satanic attack.
It is unsettling to think of our parishes as places of spiritual warfare. We would rather consider the church as a place of respite, of safety. There, we hear God's Word. There, we receive the Sacraments and support one another as members of the Body of Christ. However, the power of the Word and Sacraments make the congregation and its leaders targets for special attack.

John Kleinig notes the dangers seminarians and seminary faculties face:

If we heed what Luther has to say about the role of the devil in the spiritual formation of theologian, we will realize our seminaries are spiritual battlegrounds, contested places, rather than spiritual oases, places of refuge from temptation. We will also be able to help our students understand why they and their families come under such concerted attack at certain points during their course of study.\(^1\)

Read that quote again, substituting “congregations” for “seminaries.” It fits! When a congregation does the work of the Gospel—proclaiming the Gospel in the human condition—it also places itself in greater danger. Congregations content to focus only on themselves pose less danger to the kingdom of darkness than those who intentionally become more robust in their outreach.

The general principle, then, holds true for both individuals and congregations: the more we work to connect the Gospel to the lives of individuals, organizations, and our community, the more risk we assume. Attention to this reality will motivate congregations to do all they can to shield and support their workers. Martin Luther helps us understand this:

> It is impossible to keep the devil from shooting evil thoughts and lusts into your heart. But see to it that you do not let such arrows (Eph. 6:16) stick there and take root, but tear them out and throw them away. Do what one of the ancient fathers counseled long ago: “I cannot,” he said, “keep a bird from flying over my head. But I can certainly keep it from nesting in my hair or from biting my nose off.”\(^2\)

**Speaking Personally**

Is all this talk about Satan and his minions anachronistic? Hopelessly out of date? It may seem so, given the fact that Western culture today denies not only the power but also the existence of Satan and his demons. Yet true danger lies in the offhand dismissal of evil. We need not deny Satan’s existence. We need only ignore it. We need only to disregard it. We need only to shrug off Satan’s strategic opposition to the plan of salvation flowing from the goodness of God and from His Christ.

When I was a full-time pastoral counselor, I often saw the results of evil in the lives of those I counseled. But frankly, if pressed, I might have waffled on the question of whether or not Satan was, even in part, responsible. Then I was called to serve at the national headquarters of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. I was on staff for only a few months before I saw the evidence of Satan actively attacking the very foundations of countless local
congregations as well as the Synod itself. I began to realize that Satan’s primary tactic involves influencing the ways people in those congregations, and in the church as a whole, behave toward one another.

To paraphrase Luther, the devil is not silly enough to tempt us to think or act in ways that even unbelievers understand as wrong and sinful. Rather, in the Church, Satan disguises himself, using religious language on the lips of some to destroy others, to exert power and control over them, to abuse them. This is a version of the adage that righteous ends justify any means.

Satan is real, and his aim is to destroy the witness of every church worker and every congregation. Dismissing this reality as fanciful, far-fetched, or delusional plays into his plans. Church workers and lay leaders alike make themselves vulnerable to his attacks by forgetting or ignoring this scriptural truth. Having seen again and again the corrosive behaviors of the baptized toward one another, I have no other explanation. Satan is at work.