

# five words

In the Initial Days of Your New Ministry

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## **Five “L” Words in the Initial Days of Your New Ministry**

### **Introduction**

So, you’ve arrived at your new (first or latest) station of duty. You are a pastor or commissioned worker in the church, and you are excited to know and find out what is involved with this “Call.” We believe and teach that God’s Holy Spirit works through God’s people, the Church, to extend “invitations” to professional workers to serve with and among them. After thought, conversation, maybe visitation, and definitely prayer, you have been led to say, “Yes” – affirming that you understand this to be a Call not only from this ministry but a Call from God!

Whether this is your first Call or one of many, you are, in most cases, new to this setting. Your work may be within a congregation, school or special ministry. You may be a “sole” worker or part of a team; you may be the administrator or in-charge person --- or one who reports to someone else. No matter the details of this Call, you are about to begin a new experience, and you pray to the Lord to help, guide and keep you in His care and equip you for this work.

Especially if you are the administrator (*e.g.*, Pastor, Principal, Director), there will be a host of expectations, assumptions, hopes or resolves that you will: “do it as we have always done it”; “bring new life into this place”; “return us to where we once were”; or “take us into new avenues of service and adventures in ministry.” As some have mused, “We want a young pastor with twenty years of experience, with excellent preaching, teaching and counseling skills, who will relate to children and youth, and have an excellent rapport with our seniors.” (Enter, Jesus!)

With over forty years in parish ministry, and with a recent “vacancy” assignment, I felt led to share what I feel to be a measured, honest and appropriate response to the “first 100 days,” as we hear of politicians. In fact, I am more concerned here with the first 40 days (a good, Biblical number!). While I applied this to my vacancy service, I would suggest this applies to any worker’s first forty days (give or take a few) in a new Call and setting.

If you have found effective and successful approaches, please share them with me and with others. This is not the “be all to end all”; simply, sharing from someone who feels strongly about a healthy relationship between “called, professional workers” and the ministries we serve. I pray these five “L” words will be helpful to you. To God be the glory!

### “L” is for “Lord”

St. Paul wrote to the Philippians, “... that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (2.10-11). As baptized children of God, we believe and worship Him as “Lord” each day of our lives. Jesus is Lord over all of life, as we consider ourselves, relationships, structures, organizations, governments --- and the Church!

We understand and view the Church as the Body of Christ, and this Body needs a head! Neither you, I, nor any other member of the Church is in a position to be Head. Yes, God gifts us by His Holy Spirit and equips us for ministry; however, that makes me a toe or an eyelid (not a tonsil, I hope) ... but definitely not the head.

There is only One who can be and who is the Head of the Church: Jesus Christ. Our Lord and Savior called His early apostles, gathered other men and women around Him, modeled ministry, trained them, and then sent them out. You and I are twenty-first century versions of those early believers, as we seek to know and do His will.

Beyond expressing “Jesus is Lord,” you and I must remember that truth: He ... not I! As I begin a new assignment, a new area of ministry, Jesus is there already. This ministry usually has been functioning before my arrival, and I am in the position of a servant among servants. In a leadership position, I may have duties and responsibilities that place me in authority; however, I am no less the servant there.

Think of it this way: I am so thankful that Jesus is Lord, because I might be tempted to (and sometimes do) “lord” it over others --- and that is not good. I’m thankful that we know, honor, worship and serve Him together, even as He has called me to this ministry, this place, at this time. I pray to always remember it is not “my way or the highway,” but His way, His path, His leading. I believe He is “the Way and the Truth and the Life” (John 14.6). Jesus is Lord!

### “L” is for “Listen”

You have likely heard the comment, “God gave us one mouth and two ears for a reason!” I have quipped with people that I have a great job, “because they pay me to talk!” Yes, God’s human creatures are blessed with the skills, brains and organs to develop thoughts, to form words and sentences, and not simply to hear, but listen and understand what others are saying. We call this communication!

In my early days and weeks in a new ministry, I pledge (along with my duties of teaching, preaching, counseling, visiting, etc.) to listen. I feel this is an absolute and important first response among people and ministries that are new to you. At first, this may feel awkward, but soon, it’s almost fun ... and fun to watch others observe you listening! Sometimes, it’s like they can’t believe this new worker is listening.

I have found this pays dividends. Promise to listen actively for the first month, do it, and you have accomplished at least three things: kept your word; modeled good listening behavior; and, likely, heard and understood much more than you would have if you jumped into the conversation. Naturally, you may ask questions; but these would be for simple clarification --- not to get the topic to a place where you can share your “pearls of wisdom.”

Listening also involves One other person: God! Assuming you, your people and your ministries are “bathed” in prayer, you need to listen to God’s answers. As the prophet Elijah found out, this may come in a “low whisper” (I Kings 19.12), but God is present, active and answers prayer! Listen for it; look for it; and have complete confidence that God will make Himself known to you --- through Spirit-filled comments of other people, and, especially, through words you are reading in His Word! It pays to listen!

### “L” is for “Learn”

Having been a faithful listener, I pledge to learn from my brothers and sisters in Christ. I may (or may not) have more “book knowledge” than they, and I may have a better understanding of the Lutheran church; however, they have knowledge, insight, experience and wisdom that I need to hear and to learn. When is a great time to begin to learn? During those first weeks of ministry in their midst.

Sometimes, there is a “rub,” because a pastor or administrator will act – or appear to act – as if he alone has the good answers or she alone knows how to do something “right.” Other times, the “rub” comes from members or other staff who think the organization does not really need a person in charge – or another person – or this new person. The Devil delights in attempting to cause confusion, jealousy or outright division. We must be alert to such temptations!

A woman in one church I served spoke to me at one of my first meetings, “You know, pastor, we were here before you came, and we’ll be here after you leave.” Know what? She was! That was a great moment of humility and learning on my part ... and I listened and learned!

What do we learn? We learn about the “culture” of this group, the “ways” they perceive things, their history and traditions. We learn how they interact with one another, how they communicate, and how they approach ministry tasks. We learn about elected leaders and acknowledged leaders – because of age, status or wisdom. We learn about their spiritual lives and expressions of faith. And, we learn how best to interact, work, witness and serve with them!

It’s been said: “If I don’t learn something today, it wasn’t worth getting up.” For a church worker in a new setting: If I don’t learn something of the people in your early days “on the job,” my ministry will be hindered. By God’s grace, each day will have blessings; however, God will do even greater things if we learn from each other . . . even as we learn from Him as we stay in His Word!

### “L” is for “Lead”

You have been faithful and consistent (mostly!) to listen and to learn. As you reflect on the days and weeks, and communicate with others, you are prepared to take greater leadership in your setting. If you are a pastor, principal or other administrator/head/leader, you have had to do some leading already --- this is expected and understood. However, if you have followed the L-L-L of Listen, Learn, Lead, you have limited your leadership activities to a minimum.

You might ask yourself, “What type of leader shall I be? What leadership style should I adopt? What type of leader have I been?” These are good questions to consider, because their answers may help you to avoid repeating mistakes. In your time of listening and conversation, and in your time of learning and observation, you have been given helpful information and insights that will assist you as you “step out” in faith and “step up” in your leadership role.

It is said, “A good leader is a good follower,” and this is something to “tuck away,” since there are times when you would do well to follow other leaders ... maybe even some you have instructed or trained. It has also been said, “You are a leader only if someone is following you.” While this sounds or feels “cute,” there is wisdom behind it. As with a child-parent walk, I do well to ask myself: “Am I too far ahead, and they don’t see or can’t follow?” “Am I too far behind, and they don’t know where to go?” “Am I within reach – sight and/or sound – so they feel confident we are together and they are going where I lead?”

Millions of words have been written on leadership types, styles, approaches and results. Within the Lord’s Church, we take our best cue from Him, as we lead with humility and grace, and as we identify with those we lead. Remember that, ultimately, we are following the Leader of all, Jesus Christ, who called to those around Him to “Follow Me.” If we are faithful to Him and His leading, He will bless our humble efforts to provide leadership among His people. Jesus said that he came, “... not to be served, but to serve” (Mark 10.45). Good words to follow!

### “L” is for “Love”

When St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he said, “The greatest of these is love” (I Corinthians 13.13). Although many have used this well-known “love chapter” as a reading at their weddings, we understand that this love – *agape* – is referring to God’s Love. St. John wrote, “We love because He first loved us” (I John 4.19). God’s Love is not only a characteristic or attribute, this is who and what He is!

What about your love for others? Do I live “by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself life for me”? (Galatians 2.20) How do I show, speak, model love for some who are at least as unlovable as I am? What difference does it make that I live and work in an atmosphere of love? Will other workers, others in this ministry, or those around us notice a difference if we love one another for Christ’s sake?

When a ministry area, a project, plan or person seems to go “sideways” with you, this is the time to step back, breathe, and pray! As some have said, “It is difficult to hate (or even dislike) someone for whom you pray.” Pray about and for them, the ministry, and you. Pray the Lord’s Prayer – with emphasis on the fifth petition. Pray for Godly wisdom, insight, direction, peace . . . and love! Yes, “Love covers a multitude of sins” (I Peter 4.8).

After stepping down from a wonderful ministry of over seventeen years and then, stepping up to a vacancy position, I heard the question regularly, “I thought you retired; what are you doing working, again?” There were a variety of reasons, but the more I served, the more God led me to love this ministry and to love His people in that place. And --- they were gracious in their love, encouragement and support for me.

Live in love, promote, speak, show and share it, and then when things get “dicey,” love from God will be a strong factor in reaching consensus, understanding, maybe agreement, or, if necessary, confession and absolution. It is not always “right to be ‘right,’” and applying Listen-Learn-Lead in Love will underscore that we live for, serve and glorify the Triune God, and Him alone!

## Conclusion

Jesus is Lord of the Church, of our lives, and of the ministry we carry out in His Name. We honor our Lord and His people as we Listen – Learn – Lead ... doing all in Love! Now what? Continue to stay in His Word, honor your Call, love His people --- and *Laugh*! Yes, enjoy what you do – after all, a good laugh is healthy for body, mind and spirit! Enjoy the humor in parts of Scripture, laugh at yourself, and be ready to laugh with your people.

This is not about being silly or trite; it is about experiencing and sharing the Joy we have in the Lord. Ministry is work; being in an administrative position is often thankless; and trying to get others to assist may be tough. However, if we remember the “L” words, we will go forward in thankfulness to the Lord for all He does and will continue to do in us, for us and through us. Our God is an awesome God!

I pray these few (about 2,500) words have given you insight, encouragement and anticipation for what God will accomplish in your ministry. Trust Him, rely on Him, take Him at His word, and you will be rewarded with many wonderful times, places, people, and events of ministry. May the Triune God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit – bless, preserve and guide you!

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