

Manual for the Recovery of a Parish Practice of Individual Confession and Absolution



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**Manual for the
Recovery of a Parish Practice of
Individual Confession of Sins and Absolution**

The Rule of the Society of the Holy Trinity states:

***Chapter V
Confession and Absolution***

Individual or personal confession of sins is to be kept and used by us for the sake of the absolution, which is the word of forgiveness spoken by a fellow pastor as from God himself. Therefore, members will:

- 1. Learn and adopt the understanding and practice of Confession and Absolution as described in the Augsburg Confession (Article XI, XII, XXV), and the Small Catechism.*
- 2. Seek out a trustworthy pastor who will be willing to serve as a confessor and who will be able to be available for one's individual confession regularly and frequently.*
- 3. Prepare to make individual confession by examining one's personal life and relationship with God and others in the light of the Ten Commandments. Also helpful are the penitential Psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) and the Prayer of Manasseh in the Apocrypha.*
- 4. In preparation for hearing the confession of others, make regular and frequent use of Confession and Absolution, keep confidences, so as to be worthy of the trust of others, read and reflect on the Holy Scriptures so as to provide a reservoir of passages with which to comfort consciences and strengthen the faith of penitents (see FC, SD XI.28-32).*
- 5. Both as penitent and confessor, refrain from extraneous conversation so that attention is centered on the penitent's confession of sins, the Absolution or forgiveness of sins, and the confessor's use of Scripture passages which comfort the conscience and encourage faith in the Word of God which absolves; refrain from challenging or evaluating the confession; use the order of Confession and Absolution of the Small Catechism or that of the service books of the Church.*
- 6. As absolved penitents, expect to be held accountable by the confessor for reconciliation with those whom we have offended and restoration of what we have taken or broken.*
- 7. Confession and Absolution is a sacramental rite of the Church (AP XII.4) and therefore is normally conducted in church buildings where provision can be made for privacy and confidentiality.*

Since Confession and Absolution has fallen into disuse among many of us, its restoration demands utmost care and concern for both penitent and confessor. Introduction to and initial use of Confession and Absolution may call for simply following the order of Confession and Absolution lest the penitent worry about a full enumeration of sins or the confessor about comforting and encouraging with passages of Scripture.

Preface

As members of the Society of the Holy Trinity, Lutheran pastors commit themselves to a recovery of individual/personal confession and absolution. This recovery is to be two-fold: pastors are to seek out and regularly make use of a pastor/confessor, and pastors are to offer regular and frequent opportunities within the parish for lay penitents to make confession and receive the comfort of holy absolution.

It is an unfortunate reality that individual confession and absolution within Lutheranism today has fallen into disuse. Rare is the pastor or parish which makes available regular and frequent opportunities for personal confession and absolution. Just as rare is the pastor who seeks out a confessor. For these reasons, the recovery and re-introduction of such practices require a strategy and understanding that is missing from the training and experience of most Lutheran clergy. Not only have pastors not participated in individual confession and absolution as part of seminary pastoral formation, they have often not been part of congregations where such practices are offered, discussed, appreciated or understood. When faced with the challenge of introducing this long-neglected Lutheran practice, pastors may encounter surprise at best and outright opposition at worst. Lack of knowledge of the Lutheran Confessions, poor instruction within parishes, and ignorance among clergy and laity have left Lutheranism with the mistaken Protestant assumption: “We don’t have private confession, as the Roman Catholics do. We don’t need to confess to a pastor—we can confess our sins directly to God.”

To respond to such a gross misunderstanding requires time spent in the Book of Concord, and there are many places within our confessions which instruct and explain individual confession and absolution within the Lutheran tradition. A pastor and/or parish desiring to introduce this practice anew should first become familiar with our confessional teachings, to provide a solid foundation for preaching, instruction and practice. Having become knowledgeable with regard to our confessional understanding of individual confession and absolution, the pastor and parish will next have practical questions about how to introduce regular and frequent confession and absolution, how to educate and inform, how to arrange space for individual confession, how to ensure privacy and confidentiality, and finally, how does one make or hear individual confession. This brief guideline is intended to assist the pastor or parish who wishes practical counsel with regard to recovery/re-introduction of personal confession and absolution within Lutheran congregations.

Introduction

As newly subscribed members of the Society of the Holy Trinity, Lutheran clergy quickly realize the challenges presented by commitment to the Rule of the Society. One of the greatest challenges is that presented by Chapter V, regarding Confession and Absolution. There is a temptation to delay addressing this commitment, given the difficulty inherent in introducing such a practice to a congregation unfamiliar with our Lutheran teaching or understanding of confession and absolution. Most pastors assume recovery of such a practice will be met with congregational resistance, and an unwillingness to participate on the part of those who may think/feel the general confession on Sunday morning is sufficient. For this reason, Lutheran clergy who subscribe to the Rule of the Society may seek out a confessor for themselves, and regularly avail themselves of the opportunity for Individual Confession and Absolution, but hesitate to introduce the practice within the parish.

As a newly subscribed member of the Society, I returned to the parish determined to address all of the commitments of the Rule. However, with regard to confession and absolution within the congregation, I found myself delaying action, considering the time wasn't right, there wasn't sufficient time, until I finally admitted I had no idea how to proceed. My solution was to contact some of those first subscribers to the Rule, several of whom had helped to shape the Rule from the beginning. I asked quite simply, how did they introduce individual confession and absolution, how did they arrange a confessional space, how did it "work", and what might they have done differently. These persons shared from their personal experience, providing me with wise counsel to get started, and assuring me that the Holy Spirit would guide and direct the effort. This guideline is offered to pass on that wise counsel, help other members of the Society to get started, and perhaps, foster a recovery of individual confession and absolution within Lutheran congregations.

To Begin: Set a Date

It may seem needless to say, but once the pastor has spent sufficient time reading and digesting our Lutheran Confessions with regard to personal confession and absolution, set a date for the first opportunity that will be offered. This may be any time during the church year, but most would schedule the first opportunity prior to the great festivals of Christmas and Easter. These are times of preparation and reflection, and the idea of making individual confession and absolution a regular part of that preparation is easily taught and understood. Perhaps schedule personal confession and absolution for the Sunday before Christmas, or Palm Sunday afternoon. It could also be offered prior to Advent or Lenten midweek services; although care must be taken to ensure the confessional space is not disturbed by worshipers arriving for service.

It is prudent to schedule a two hour period, conveniently arranged so that nothing will impinge on the time either before or after. Each pastor will find the time and day which will work best for his or her congregation. Some may find evenings work best for penitents, while Saturday or Sunday afternoons may work better for other congregations. It is also important to schedule times for confession and absolution when the pastor is rested, at ease, and not distracted. Times just before services or activities or times when the pastor is exhausted will not allow the pastor/confessor to be focused and attentive as necessary.

Educate, Inform, Prepare

Schedule the date and time well in advance, to provide adequate time for education, sharing of information, and preparation of the parish. If the opportunity will be offered before Easter, for example, plan Lent as a time for teaching and preaching to focus on repentance, confession and forgiveness. Lenten midweek services may focus on relevant biblical texts so that preaching may focus on the Lenten call to repentance in general and the upcoming opportunity for individual confession in particular.

At the same time, plan a congregational mailing which will include a cover letter from the pastor explaining, briefly, the Lutheran understanding, the value of individual confession and absolution, the possibility of both a general individual confession, as well as confession of specific sins. This cover letter ought also to include clear, easily understood instructions about when to arrive, when to enter the confessional space, what will happen, how long it will take, etc. First time penitents will be nervous and worried about the process. Explaining individual confession in detail will relieve much of this anxiety, and allow penitents to concentrate on their confession. Also include in this mailing a copy of Luther's Small Catechism on the Office of the Keys/Confession and Absolution, and perhaps a copy of the brochure published by the Lutheran Publicity Bureau on Lutheran Confession and Absolution. It is also wise to include a copy of the rite for Individual Confession and Absolution that will be used.

Make use of monthly newsletters and weekly bulletins to include brief summaries of the above information to reinforce the mailing, and to catch the attention of those who may not have received or read the parish mailing. Experience suggests that most Lutherans are not, will not be comfortable with Individual Confession and Absolution at first. For this reason, repeated, complete, and understandable information should be provided in a variety of formats and materials. Copies of materials distributed should also be available in the narthex or gathering space at the church so that interested persons may pick them up, if their copies have been misplaced.

It would be useful to dedicate a Sunday, or several Sundays of Adult Class to introducing and discussing the Lutheran Confessions on Confession and Absolution. This is a fine opportunity to re-teach Luther on the Office of the Keys, and to review the Small Catechism, and perhaps the Large Catechism. Such teaching could also be profitably done with High School class, Middle School, Catechism classes, and/or First Communion classes. Perhaps opportunity for individual confession could be included in a retreat with adults, with confession following education/instruction.

Confirmation classes should include instruction of confirmands with regard to individual confession and absolution. An appropriate number of sessions should be devoted to Luther's Small Catechism on individual confession and absolution. The pastor/catechist could actually lead the class through the process of making a confession--a dry run, as it were--without requiring a confession. This will enable the confirmands to experience what will happen when using this order. If there is a confirmation retreat, individual confession might be offered. Youth being confirmed should be encouraged to avail themselves of individual confession, making a general confession if they are not prepared

to name specific sins. One aspect of preparation would be to review the explanations of the Ten Commandments and encourage confirmands to examine their own lives in light of this review. A "first confession" could be a regular part of either "First Communion" or "Confirmation" preparation. And wouldn't it be profitable to include parents or confirmation sponsors in such an experience, to encourage shared reflection and discussion?

What may be the most meaningful information shared with average lay-Lutherans would be your own "testimonial" shared appropriately in sermon, mailing, or class-setting. It is helpful for our members to understand that we, too, have begun to avail ourselves of the opportunity for individual confession and absolution. Without divulging our personal confession, it may be helpful for folks to hear how we approached personal confession the first time, why we chose to avail ourselves of the opportunity, and how we received absolution. The freedom, relief, grace and transformation of life we receive from individual confession and absolution will go far to encourage parishioners to open themselves to this great gift of God's forgiveness and mercy. This is one time when it is useful for pastors to lead by example, being the first in the parish, if you will, to enter the confessional. Of course, the pastor must be careful not to share too much, or too personally about the nature of his or her confession, but only of the trepidation before (perhaps), and the relief and release after. This is not a time for "baring one's soul", but for relating the value of "baring one's soul" in the confessional.

Arranging the Confessional Space

Once a date has been set and an educational/informational strategy developed, the pastor will want to spend time considering an appropriate space for individual confession and absolution. Experienced, respected and seasoned members of the Society recommended that the best space, by far, is in the church nave, before the altar. This is the primary place of one's encounter with the Living God, and simply being in this space reminds us that we are in God's holy and life-giving presence. The pastor may place a chair within the chancel, perhaps by the communion rail, with a chair for the penitent outside the communion rail, facing the altar. The confessor's chair should be "sideways" alongside the communion rail, so that one is not facing the penitent, or the altar, but is to the side, so that as the penitent kneels and faces the altar, the confessor is to the side—near enough to hear the penitent speaking softly, but not immediately in front of the penitent. This allows the penitent to kneel at the rail, allows proximity to the altar, and allows for privacy and intimacy near the chancel, within sacred space. Of course, the same arrangement could be attained with a prie dieu (prayer desk/kneeler) placed conveniently in or around the chancel, with confessor's chair to the side. It is important to have a chair for the penitent behind the place for kneeling, as not all who come may be able to kneel throughout.

If, for some reason, the chancel or nave are not available, or conducive for individual confession and absolution, the pastor must search for secondary alternatives. Some experienced members of the Society have arranged confessional space within the sacristy, within a smaller chapel in the church building, or if need be, within a classroom space or office. The primary concerns, of course, are silence, privacy, convenience (not hard for penitents to find), and a suitable waiting space nearby. Another primary concern must be that this is a public enough space for persons to feel "safe". It is necessary for clergy to be aware of the fact that some persons may feel "trapped", closed in, or vulnerable in a space that is completely "private", i.e., with no windows or openings. Like it or not, a penitent confessing extremely personal sins may feel uncomfortably "close" to the confessor if closed into a small space. God forbid this needs to be mentioned, but the confessional space must be chosen in such a way that the penitent not feel trapped or closed in, and the confessor may never be accused of inappropriate actions, touching, closeness, etc. It is for this reason that the nave or chancel is preferable, as this is public space, yet sacred and private in nature. Let the pastor/confessor be informed and aware of such issues, and be careful in manner, approach and arrangement to be above reproach.

Having chosen and arranged the confessional space, it is appropriate to light candles on and/or around the altar, although lighting in the chancel and nave may be more subdued than usual. Lighting must be sufficient for reading, but not so bright as to be harsh. Practically speaking, lighting can also encourage a sense of privacy and confidentiality—as if this is private and individual, not public and "on display".

As important as is the confessional space, it is also important to arrange a space for penitents to wait for their time with the confessor. Ideally, if the confessional space is near the chancel of the church, the waiting space should be in narthex, entrance or gathering space. Arrange several chairs for those waiting and provide devotional

materials while they wait (Holy Scripture, Small Catechism, Copy of the Ten Commandments, etc.), so that they will not feel compelled to chat while waiting. You may want to spread chairs a bit further apart to discourage idle conversation, and have sacred/classical music playing softly in the background to discourage any sense of hearing or listening to those who are presently making their confession. This will reassure penitents that no one will be listening to or hearing them when they make their confession.

It is often helpful to have a trusted person “hosting” the waiting area—especially the first few times that individual confession and absolution is offered in a parish. This person (perhaps staff person, deacon or deaconess, council person) must be schooled so that they understand they are to welcome penitents, answer questions, discourage conversation, and help penitents know when to enter the confessional space. The “host” should also have reading material present to occupy their time, so as to model the silence and activity that is to be preferred in this waiting space. Of course, such a “host” in the waiting area must understand that they, too, must maintain confidentiality—neither noticing or paying attention to those who come for confession—certainly never mentioning or discussing or gossiping about those who come for confession. Again, this host must be a trusted person who can welcome warmly, sit quietly, and mind their own business.

Hearing Confessions

The first thing a confessor must learn, and remember is: this is not about you! Your wisdom, insight, counseling skills, ability to memorize and recite Scripture verses are beside the point of individual confession and absolution. In fact, the less said by the confessor the better!

Each confessor seems to have his or her own method of preparation for hearing confessions. The preparation of the confessional space and donning of vestments help to prepare one inwardly, as well as outwardly. Certainly prayer, silence, and putting oneself in a proper frame of mind are essential. There must be a “barrier” between the day’s activities, and the hearing of confessions, and each confessor will learn how best to erect that barrier for themselves.

At the appointed time, the confessor, wearing cassock, surplice (or alb, depending on local custom) and stole should enter the confessional space and be seated. You may wish to have at your side a glass of water and reading material, as no one may show up the first time or two—or there may be significant time between confessions. It is important to be prepared to sit and wait for penitents. This is not a time to be completing tasks in the sanctuary or nave, doing office work, or keeping oneself busy. Be prepared to sit quietly engaged in reading of Scripture, or some other appropriate book or devotional material. When (and if) penitents arrive, they should see the confessor seated, prepared and ready. By the way, have a box of tissues available for penitents. When a penitent arrives:

First, welcome the penitent and invite them to be seated, or to kneel as they are able. Hand them the printed material containing the rite to be used and if necessary, explain the “process” to them so that they are comfortable and understand what will happen. You may want to explain that they may make a “general” individual confession, or they may confess specific sins. Many Lutheran materials make both options available in the printed rite.

Second, as the penitent makes their confession, listen silently, responding only for clarification, not to discuss or explore their confession more deeply.

Third, after their confession, the confessor may offer words of Scripture to uplift, challenge or guide, and at times, it may be necessary to discuss with the penitent their intention for amendment of life. How will the penitent “make this right”? How will the penitent “go and sin no more”? This conversation should be brief, focused, pastoral, and aimed not at counseling, but at spiritual guidance. The confessor will want to be mindful of the time of the church year, and scripture references related to that time which may be useful to the penitent. For example, when a penitent is making confession during Holy Week, prior to the Triduum, biblical images such as burying one’s sins in the tomb with Christ Jesus, receiving freedom from sin and new life on Easter morn draw the penitent into the Paschal mystery, while communicating the power of Christ’s sacrifice, death and resurrection to the penitent. There are historic resources available within the Roman Catholic tradition which help the confessor to draw on the particular time of the church year for biblical resources appropriate for sharing within the confessional. One example

is the book, *What to Say to the Penitent*, by Fr. Charles Hugo Doyle, available from Roman Catholic Books, P.O. Box 2286, Ft. Collins, CO, 80522-2286, www.booksforcatholics.com. While first published in 1953 and not wholly applicable to Lutherans offering individual confession, this book broadens the confessor's thinking about "what to say to the penitent". Also available is a book by Kurt Stasiak, OSB, *A Confessor's Handbook* (Paulist Press, 1999). Obviously written from a Roman Catholic context, but most of it is sound pastoral advice easily applicable to a Lutheran situation. Some sample chapter titles: "Do not accuse; do not insult"; "Do not make the penitent's confession *your* confession"; "Do not minimize or trivialize the penitent's confession"; "The penitent in need of counseling or psychotherapy"; "The penitent who is a brother priest" etc. Of course, when using Roman Catholic materials, they must be used judiciously and wisely, not mechanically, as Lutherans do have a distinctly different approach to private confession that focuses not on "satisfaction", but on absolution.

Fourth, the confessor should stand before the penitent, lay hands on the penitent, and offer words of absolution. These should be the words appointed for absolution within the rite, but may also include specific prayer for the penitent. It is a custom in some places to cover the penitent's head with the confessor's stole for the laying on of hands, emphasizing the pastor as confessor, and God's grace which covers a multitude of sins. It is also appropriate to anoint the penitent's forehead with oil, making the sign of the cross at the words, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." After the absolution, the confessor and penitent share the peace of the Lord, and the penitent leaves the confessional space. The confessor is seated to await the next penitent. Again, this is not time for chit-chat, or idle conversation. The penitent leaves in silence.

After Hearing Confessions

It is the experience of many confessors that a time of hearing confessions is draining, can be emotionally intense, and requires time for personal prayer and reflection before leaving the confessional space and returning “to the world”. It is important to leave the confessions with God, not taking them home, not allowing one’s life to be impacted by the sins which have been confessed. To mentally leave the confessed sins within the sanctuary, with God, aids the confessor’s transition to the remainder of the day, while also aiding the confessional seal. Do not take the confessed sins with you. They are not yours, nor have they been given to you as a burden for you to carry in your own life and ministry. They have been given to God, and you have pronounced God’s absolution. You must go in peace, as do the penitents.

A word of caution must be firmly spoken here to reinforce the seal of the confessional. While all clergy do (or should) understand and respect that everything shared within the confessional is private and may not be shared with anyone, anywhere-- there may be a temptation to adapt certain stories one might hear in the confessional thinking to use such as sermon examples. Yes, pastors will be aghast at such a suggestion, and yet, pastors who are also preachers are often desperately in need of real-life examples, experiences and stories to highlight and make relevant sermons. Pastors who are preachers commonly take real-life experiences and stories, change the names and any details which might give away the identities of the actual persons involved, and include them in a sermon. Regardless the ethics of such a practice, it is completely inappropriate, unethical and pastorally wrong to use or otherwise adapt or share what is revealed in the confessional. As we have been taught, the seal of the confessional is inviolable-- completely--and nothing confessed may ever go beyond the confessional--no matter how useful or relevant the confession may be to other Christians.

Other Items

- + Do not become frustrated by the fact that few (or none) may come for Individual Confession and Absolution the first times it is offered. Lutherans have had centuries of neglectful behavior with regard to this practice—it takes time to re-introduce it to the average Lutheran congregation. If you sit in the confessional space for the entire time alone, see this as time for prayer for your flock, prayer that they may be open to confession and absolution, and prayer that you may do God’s will in this regard.

- + Do not judge the effectiveness of Individual Confession and Absolution by the numbers of penitents who come. If only one person comes for private confession, that one person has received holy absolution and your time has been well spent.

- + Use many opportunities throughout the church year to teach, invite and encourage persons to come for Individual Confession and Absolution. The liturgical year provides many opportunities to speak about confession and forgiveness, and this ongoing preaching and teaching will help persons to be prepared to come when the time is right.

- + When Individual Confession and Absolution are scheduled prior to festivals, use this as an opportunity to announce that persons may arrange times for confession throughout the year. In this way, persons will come to see Confession and Absolution as a life-long process, not something that is only offered or appropriate during certain times.

Appendix I

Major References to Confession and Absolution in the Book of Concord

While there are numerous citations in the Book of Concord relating to confession and absolution, the following are major sections within the Lutheran Confessions which address the practice of individual confession and absolution. Citations are from The Book of Concord, Tappert edition, Fortress Press: Philadelphia 1959.

Augsburg Confession: Article XI, *Confession*, p. 34.

Augsburg Confession: Article XXV, *Confession*, p. 61.

Apology of the Augsburg Confession: Article XI, *Confession*, p. 180.

Apology of the Augsburg Confession: *Confession and Satisfaction*, p. 197

Small Catechism: (*Confession and Absolution*); *How Plain People Are to Be Taught to Confess*, p. 349.

Large Catechism: "*A Brief Exhortation to Confession*", p. 457

Appendix II

Bibliography of Writings on Confession and Absolution

Provided by Frank C. Senn, STS

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Appendix III

Sample Letter for Congregational Distribution

Dear friends,

This letter is to share with you some of the details of Private Confession and Forgiveness, and hopefully, to answer your questions with regard to this important pastoral ministry of the Church.

Although this practice was encouraged by Fr. Martin Luther, and by all of our Lutheran confessional writings, it has fallen into disuse in most of our parishes. I had the opportunity to make a private confession at my first General Retreat of the Society of the Holy Trinity. At first, it seemed odd and frightening to me. I really didn't want to do it, but there were sins that were troubling to me, in spite of my regular Sunday public confessions, and so my feeling was--"If Luther encourages private confession, I ought to at least find out what it's all about." So, I made my first confession--and it surprised me. Burdens I had been carrying for some time and was unable to let go of, were relieved through private confession and absolution. The feeling of release and forgiveness brought me to tears, totally unexpectedly. It was easier for me to address these issues after confessing them verbally, honestly, in front of a called, ordained Servant of the Word. I can't explain it--it seems to have something to do with being able to verbalize our sins and broken-ness, out-loud, before another. After my first confession, I was so moved that I realized I had not been ministering fully to my parishioners, by not offering opportunity for private confession and forgiveness. I returned to Saint Luke's and scheduled our first opportunity. Since then, **I have never ceased to be amazed and blessed by the experience, by my own experience of private confession, and the experiences of those who come for confession.**

Not everyone is in need of private confession. Luther encourages us to come to confess in private only those sins which trouble and burden us. I ask only that you consider your life and whether you are carrying around a heavy burden of guilt that you've never been able to let go of. These are the sins and troubles that may be brought to private confession, to receive forgiveness and freedom from them.

Remember, the point of all confession is not to make you feel bad, or to shame you. All confession is aimed at relieving you of shame and guilt, so that you may be forgiven and freed from this burden, to go and make amends, and go and sin no more. The experience of private confession and forgiveness is truly a gift from God that will surprise you in ways you never expect. I'm not making grandiose promises--I'm simply speaking from my own personal experience. I offer private confession and forgiveness because I have seen how free and relieved parishioners have felt afterwards, how positive have been the changes in lives, and how wonderful it is that God has given us this "sacramental" gift. **As your pastor, I offer this opportunity FOR YOUR SAKE--OUT OF MY LOVE FOR YOU, AND MY DESIRE THAT YOU NOT CONTINUE TO DRAG AROUND ANY BURDEN OF GUILT.**

As always, you need to be assured of two things. **First, the "seal" of the confessional is inviolable.** The pastor/confessor may not divulge information shared in the confessional under any circumstance, ever.

Second, private confession and absolution is not pastoral counseling. If you desire time to discuss concerns and issues with me, in terms of pastoral care and counseling, please call me to schedule an appointment. The pastor/confessor in the confessional situation may ask brief questions for clarification and offer suggestions as to amendment of life and making amends to those who may have been harmed. "The pastor is there only to hear what you confess and to speak the Absolution, not to examine you."

Let me now turn to some very practical questions.

Do I need an appointment? No. Due to the nature of private confession, a great deal of time is not normally required. Simply come to the church during the appointed time. You may have a brief wait, which will serve to provide extra time for prayer and inward preparation.

How do I know if I should come for Private Confession and Absolution? In Luther's Small Catechism, he writes, "Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the

Lord's Prayer; but before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts." Consider whether there are sins which burden you, and you feel in your heart. Consider the Ten Commandments and other passages from Scripture, as mentioned in the brochure and the Small Catechism. Consider whether there are secret thoughts and desires which continue to haunt you, even after hearing General Absolution at Sunday worship. These may bring to mind sin which may be confessed in private confession, to receive the assurance of God's forgiveness.

Must I list specific sins during Private Confession and Absolution? Normally, private confession is for those specific sins which burden and trouble you. However, in Luther's Small Catechism, he writes, "We should not torture ourselves with imaginary sins. If we cannot think of any sins to confess, we need not name any in particular, but may receive absolution because we have already made a general confession to God." At one's first private confession, it may be more comfortable to simply confess all your sins and disobedience, without listing particular sin. As one becomes comfortable with private confession, one becomes more comfortable with recognizing and being aware of specific sins which you may need to confess privately.

What will happen when I come to the church? As pastor/confessor, I will have a place prepared for private confession. A member of the Church Council will serve as host, and will greet those who come, answering any questions about the procedure. If there is more than one person waiting, you will be directed to be seated, and to engage in silent prayer and preparation. This is not a time for conversation or chit-chat. When it is your time for private confession, the council host will let you know, and show you where to go. You will be asked to kneel or sit (as you are able), and we will follow the Order for Individual Confession and Forgiveness from the Lutheran Book of Worship (p. 196-197). A copy of the order is included in this mailing. After making your confession and receiving absolution, we will exchange the sign of peace, and you may depart in silence.

What if other people see me coming for confession? Be assured, in the Church of Jesus Christ, we are all simultaneously saints and sinners. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. I have a pastor/confessor, and will make my own confession before hearing those of my parishioners. No one in our congregation is under the impression that they are sinless, nor will anyone be shocked or surprised that you come for private confession. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We are all in need of confession and forgiveness. Coming for private confession does not imply you are a "worse" sinner, or that you have committed more grievous sins. If anything, it implies that you acknowledge your own sin before God, and seek forgiveness and amendment of life. The confessional will be arranged so that no one will be able to hear your confession, save God, and your pastor/confessor.

If I don't come for private confession and absolution this time, will there be another opportunity? My hope is that we may offer Private Confession and Absolution two or three times a year, at publicly scheduled and announced times such as this. However, if you desire to make a private confession at another time, simply call me and I will be glad to schedule a time.

What if I feel the desire to come, but I'm hesitant or afraid? Please call me, or talk with me when there is opportunity. It is only natural to experience some anxiety and uncertainty. At my first private confession, I felt uncomfortable and ill at-ease. However, after all the years of participating in the corporate confession and forgiveness at the beginning of each week's worship, I was surprised by the impact of private confession and forgiveness. I truly experienced a freedom and release that was different from what I experience on Sunday morning. Call me, 598-4397 (church) or 593-2462 (home) if you are hesitant or afraid. Perhaps I can reassure you.

In Christ,

Pastor David M. Wendel

Appendix IV

Sample Bulletin Flier

With regard to Private Confession and Absolution at Saint Luke's:

As always, you need to be assured of two things. **First, the “seal” of the confessional is inviolable.** The pastor/confessor may not divulge information shared in the confessional under any circumstance, ever.

Second, private confession and absolution is not pastoral counseling. If you desire time to discuss concerns and issues with the pastor, in terms of pastoral care and counseling, please call to schedule an appointment, 598-4397. The pastor/confessor in the confessional situation may ask brief questions for clarification and offer suggestions as to amendment of life and making amends to those who may have been harmed. “The pastor is there only to hear what you confess and to speak the Absolution, not to examine you.”

Some practical questions.

Do I need an appointment? No. Due to the nature of private confession, a great deal of time is not normally required. Simply come to the church during the appointed time. You may have a brief wait, which will serve to provide extra time for prayer and inward preparation.

How do I know if I should come for Private Confession and Absolution? In Luther’s Small Catechism, he writes, “Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord’s Prayer; but before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts.” Consider whether there are sins which burden you, and you feel in your heart. Consider the Ten Commandments and other passages from Scripture, as mentioned in the Small Catechism. Consider whether there are secret thoughts and desires which continue to haunt you, even after hearing General Absolution at Sunday worship. These may bring to mind sin which may be confessed in private confession, to receive the assurance of God’s forgiveness.

Must I list specific sins during Private Confession and Absolution? Normally, private confession is for those specific sins which burden and trouble you. However, in Luther’s Small Catechism, he writes, “We should not torture ourselves with imaginary sins. If we cannot think of any sins to confess, we need not name any in particular, but may receive absolution because we have already made a general confession to God.” At one’s first private confession, it may be more comfortable to simply confess all your sins and disobedience, without listing particular sin. As one becomes comfortable with private confession, one becomes more comfortable with recognizing and being aware of specific sins which you may need to confess privately.

What will happen when I come to the church? The pastor/confessor will have a place prepared for private confession. A member of the staff or Church Council will serve as host, and will greet those who come, answering any questions about the procedure. If there is more than one person waiting, you will be directed to be seated, and to engage in silent prayer and preparation. This is not a time for conversation or chit-chat. When it is your time for private confession, the host will let you know, and show you where to go. You will be asked to kneel or sit (as you are able), and we will follow the Order for Individual Confession and Forgiveness from the Lutheran Book of Worship (p. 196-197). A copy of the order is included in this mailing. After making your confession and receiving absolution, pastor and penitent exchange the sign of peace, and you may depart in silence.

What if other people see me coming for confession? Be assured, in the Church of Jesus Christ, we are all simultaneously saints and sinners. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The pastor has his own confessor, and makes his own confession before hearing those of parishioners. No one in our congregation is under the impression that they are sinless, nor will anyone be shocked or surprised that you come for private confession. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We are all in need of confession and forgiveness. Coming for private confession does not imply you are a “worse” sinner, or that

you have committed more grievous sins. If anything, it implies that you acknowledge your own sin before God, and seek forgiveness and amendment of life. The confessional will be arranged so that no one will be able to hear your confession, save God, and your pastor/confessor.

If I don't come for private confession and absolution this time, will there be another opportunity?

Private Confession and Absolution will be offered two or three times a year, at publicly scheduled and announced times. However, if you desire to make a private confession at another time, simply call the pastor to schedule a time.

What if I feel the desire to come, but I'm hesitant or afraid? Please call the pastor, or talk with him when there is opportunity. It is only natural to experience some anxiety and uncertainty. At one's first private confession, one often feels uncomfortable and ill at-ease. However, this passes quickly, and most are surprised by the impact of private confession and forgiveness. Call the pastor if you are hesitant or afraid.

Appendix V

**Sample Rite for Individual Confession and Absolution
with Opportunity for both General and Specific Confessions**

You may kneel or sit.

Pastor: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Penitent: Amen.

Pastor: Are you prepared to make your confession?

Penitent: I am.

The pastor and penitent say the following verses together:

**O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare your praise.
Had you desired it, I would have offered sacrifice, but you take no delight in burnt offerings. The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
Have mercy on me, O God, according to your lovingkindness;
in your great compassion, blot out my offenses.
Wash me through and through from my wickedness,
and cleanse me from my sin. (Ps. 51:16-18, 1-2)**

Pastor: You have come to make confession before God. You are free to confess before me, a pastor in His Church, your sins, that you may also receive God's forgiveness.

You May Use the General Confession:

Penitent: O almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto you all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended you and justly deserved your temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them, and I pray 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, a poor, sinful being.

OR to confess specific sins:

Penitent: I confess before God that I am guilty of many sins. Especially I confess before you that...

*The penitent confesses those sins which are known and those which trouble or grieve him/her.
Concluding...*

For all this I am sorry and I pray for forgiveness. I firmly intend to amend my life, and ask for help to turn from sin, and to serve God in newness of life.

Pastor: The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness. He will not always accuse us, nor will he keep his anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to

our sins, nor rewarded us according to our wickedness. As a Father cares for his children, so does the Lord care for those who fear him. (*Ps. 103:8-13*)

Pastor Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;

Pastor and Penitent: as it was in the beginning is now, and will be forever. Amen.

The pastor may further engage the penitent in pastoral conversation, offering admonition, counsel and comfort.

The pastor stands and faces the penitent.

Pastor: Do you believe that the word of forgiveness I speak to you comes from God Himself?

Penitent: Yes, I believe.

The pastor lays both hands on the head of the penitent.

Pastor: God be gracious to you and strengthen your faith. By the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I, a called and ordained servant of the Word, forgive you your sins in the name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Penitent: Amen.

Pastor: Blessed are those whose sins have been forgiven, whose evil deeds have been forgotten. Rejoice in the Lord, and go in peace.

The pastor and penitent may exchange the peace of the Lord.

Appendix VI

***The Small Catechism
By Martin Luther***

V. Confession

How Christians should be taught to confess.

What is Confession?

Confession embraces two parts: the one is, that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution, or forgiveness, from the confessor, as from God Himself, and not doubting but firmly believing that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven.

What sins should we confess?

Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even of those which we do not know, as we do in the Lord's Prayer. But before the confessor we should confess those sins alone which we know and feel in our hearts.

Which are these?

Here consider your station according to the Ten Commandments, whether you are a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker. Have you have been disobedient, unfaithful, slothful (lazy)? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you grieved anyone by words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, or wasted anything, or done any harm?

How might we confess our sins privately?

We may say that we wish to confess our sins and to receive absolution in God's name. We may begin by saying, "I, a poor sinner, confess before God that I am guilty of many sins." Then we should name the sins that trouble us. We may close the confession with the words, "I repent of all these sins and pray for mercy. I promise to do better with God's help."

What if we are not troubled by any special sins?

We should not torture ourselves with imaginary sins. If we cannot think of any sins to confess (which would hardly ever happen), we need not name any in particular, but may receive absolution because we have already made a general confession to God.

How may we be assured of forgiveness?

The pastor may pronounce the absolution by saying, "By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." Those who are heavily burdened in conscience the pastor may comfort and encourage with further assurances from God's Word.