

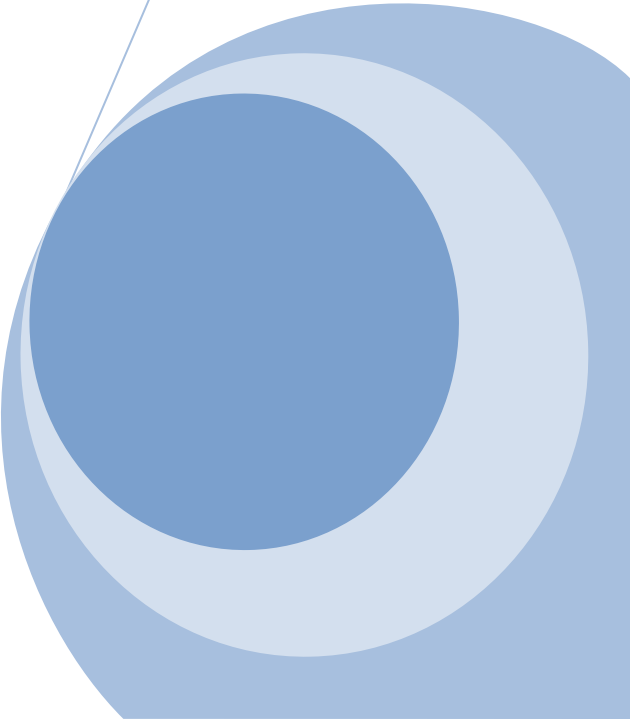
*"An effective pastoral evaluation is a truthful, grace-filled, transparent conversation about things that matter so that the pastor-church relationship is enhanced and the pastor and elders are encouraged to continue further transparent conversations after the formal pastoral evaluation process has run its course. . . . Speaking the truth in love through relational transparency requires that we speak with one another thoughtfully, tactfully and prayerfully, even when we feel we must convey an admonition or even a rebuke."*

Walt Brouwer  
Commenting on the pilot project for *Pastoral Evaluations: Mutual Accountability through Transparency*

# Report to Classis

**Walt Brouwer**  
Pastor-Church Relations Consultant for Classis

Classis Alberta North, October 20-21, 2010  
First Christian Reformed Church, Red Deer, AB



# Classis Report from Walt Brouwer

Classis Consultant, Pastor-Church Relations, Classis Alberta North

I am pleased to report to you as your “half-time” consultant in pastor-church relations. As I am writing this report, I note that I have been classis consultant for approximately a year. I spent much of the first half year building bridges and getting acquainted with our pastors and the churches of classis. This groundwork has helped my ministry gain significant traction in the latter half of my first year.

At the meeting of classis last March, you adopted and approved for field testing a new pastoral evaluation proposal, *Pastoral Evaluations: Mutual Accountability through Transparency* (PE:MATT). Early this year I sent this proposal first to the Pastor-Church Relations Committee of classis (PCRC) which sent it on to you (this document remains available on the classis website at <http://www.classisalbertanorth.org/Documents>). Since March I have been running a pilot project with this pastoral evaluation and want to report on it first, before commenting about my other work.

## I. The Pilot Project

I want to acknowledge my indebtedness to the PCRC. Their support and guidance during this pilot project have been terrific. Without diminishing my indebtedness to the members of the PCRC, I am also thankful to the pastors and churches who have been part of the pilot project. I was pleasantly surprised by the ready reception I received – from councils, pastoral evaluation teams (PET) and pastors alike. However, I want to acknowledge my gratitude to the pastors in particular, for they have welcomed me to join their very personal conversations with their congregations. Without exception, these pastors have allowed me to sit in and be privy to what their own office bearers, staff and members think about their ministries – the heartfelt, grace-filled, truthful, generous love and appreciation, and sometimes critical comments about what evaluators think is important about their pastor and his/her ministry. My inclusion into these conversations has given me unique insight in pastor-church relationships of these churches. While the final version of PE:MATT has yet to be written, I want to share with you some encouraging observations and tentative conclusions.

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**A. The Critical Question**

The critical question for any pastoral evaluation is: How do you gauge its effectiveness? Some pastoral evaluations offer numerical scales with which evaluators are asked to use in order rate various aspects of the pastor's ministry. The benefit of such an evaluation is that a pastor's performance can be expressed in unambiguous numbers. Other evaluations are more descriptive, but anonymous. However, these evaluations have several difficulties.

First, in the case of anonymous pastoral evaluations, no follow-up conversation can take place between pastor and evaluator which can lead to all sorts of difficulties, not the least of which is a degree of tactlessness by the evaluators due to the lack of transparency and therefore accountability.

Second, graded evaluations not uncommonly ask evaluators to rate aspects of the pastor's ministry about which the evaluators have no real knowledge or little insight. For example, two pastors on separate occasions have expressed to me with frustration how church members were asked to rate on a scale of one to five how they think the pastor manages his/her

time. Since a pastor is on call 24/7, does not punch a clock, usually works partly from home, and often is gone on visits or to meetings during the day or night, even elders don't have a good grasp of a pastor's time management. Hence the struggle many consistories face in devising a meaningful monthly pastoral reporting process that provides effective accountability.

Third, graded evaluations also often don't give a clear picture of how the pastor performs the ministry entrusted to him/her, or encourage on-going and meaningful conversations that enhance pastor-church relationships. These pastoral evaluations tend to isolate the pastor by placing too great a burden for his/her ministry, rather than structure a conversation in which the pastor and the elders together take responsibility for the ministry.

So how do we gauge the effectiveness of a pastoral evaluation? My answer is this: *An effective pastoral evaluation is a truthful, grace-filled, transparent conversation about things that matter so that the pastor-church relationship is enhanced and the pastor and elders are encouraged to continue further transparent conversations after the formal pastoral evaluation process has run its course.*

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**B. Tentative, Encouraging Observations**

If an effective pastoral evaluation is a truthful, grace-filled, transparent conversation about things that matter so that the pastor-church relationship is enhanced and the pastor and elders are encouraged to continue further transparent conversations after the formal pastoral evaluation process has run its

course, then PE:MATT is indeed effective. With the pilot project still running, I tentatively offer the following encouraging observations about things learned thus far.

First, PE:MATT has proved itself to be effective beyond my expectations. I will admit that when I came to the first meeting where the individual feedback of the pastor's ministry was reviewed by the Pastoral Evaluation Team (PET) in the absence, but with the approval of the pastor, I did so with some trepidation. After all, PE:MATT is unique and untested. It could fail, backfire and cause more problems than solve them. Instead, as the PET and I systematically reviewed the feedback during that first meeting, I became increasingly encouraged; even excited. Evaluators – both office bearers and church members – were able to speak the truth in love. As I continued to meet with the PETs of other churches to review the feedback received, this became a pattern. Difficult things were conveyed, even critical things and real concerns, but with love and grace. Themes emerged in each church about their pastor's strengths and need for growth. In one instance at least, a concern was raised that led me to urge both the key lay leader and the pastor to address while it is still manageable, lest this concern eventually become unmanageable and lead to unhappy relations down the road. Thus PE:MATT appears to be preventative of potential pastor-church breakdowns. In fact, in all the feedback I have read – and there have been many dozens – there has not been a single instance whereby a confessing member was not able to speak the truth in love.

Second, PE:MATT appears to be an effective tool in those pastor-church relationships which I characterize as tenuous, less than ideal. This is highly significant, for this means that PE:MATT works not just where pastor-church relationships are thriving and healthy. When I met with a team which was unsure whether to participate in the PE:MATT pilot project because of the perceived pastoral difficulties, I countered what other format or process they were intending to use in order to address the concerns and perform the long-overdue pastoral evaluation. Opting for an anonymous process is likely to do more harm than good. In the end, this team, with the approval of the pastor and council, decided to use PE:MATT. When I later joined the PET to review the feedback, and as I debriefed with the pastor at a later date about his experience with the PE:MATT process, first I was relieved and then heartened that even here the pastoral evaluation proved to be constructive in dealing with matters that truly count. While accountability is always done under tension, even here in this tenuous pastor-church relationship the pastoral evaluation was edifying and conducive to further transparent conversations after the formal process has ended.

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Third, PE:MATT needs an outside party who is intimately acquainted with the process to coach the pastor, consistory and PET. In the initial proposal, I only tentatively offered to come along side of pastors and churches. I am now convinced that this outside party involvement is essential. I was impressed by some PETs which consisted of members who in their own vocations were highly professional and competent. Yet even here, my presence as coach through the process was

welcomed, appreciated and needed. In all fairness, this is partly due to some unanswered questions in the proposal. For example, the PE:MATT proposal does not answer the question about what kind of people should be asked to participate in the pastoral evaluation (answer: those of whom the PET judges to have a reasonable degree of maturity). However, my coaching PETs went far beyond simply filling in the blanks. I was able to clarify the steps, give insights into what evaluators were saying of their pastor, guide them on how to report to the elders, and so forth. My presence gave confidence to the PET to do its work of facilitating the conversation between the congregation and its pastor, and passing on the findings to the elders to continue the conversation. As the final version of PE:MATT is written and more churches use it, it will become critical to train others in the use of PE:MATT. Retired- and regional pastors, for example, might be prime candidates to receive this training.

Transparency in social relationships has come to imply open communication, lucid accountability; the antonym of transparency is anonymity, ambiguity, even secrecy.

Fourth, of particular value and appreciation is PE:MATT's way of offering the pastor opportunity to continue the conversation with those individuals who have participated in the evaluation. Thus, pastors have been able to thank evaluators for the generosity of their comments; asked for clarification about a remark or a concern; explained a perceived misunderstanding that the process seems to have uncovered. More than that: it has happened that evaluators gladly participated for PE:MATT provided them with the opportunity to personally convey their feelings to their pastors – in these cases usually of love and appreciation, though sometimes of concern.

Of interest I want to note that since PE:MATT was posted on-line last March, other denominations – Reformed, as well as evangelical and mainline – have expressed unsolicited interest in the pastoral evaluation and have requested permission to use it.

I encourage other pastors and churches who have not joined the pilot project to consider using PE:MATT yet. I will be happy to come along side and coach the pastor, PET and council through the evaluation process.

### **C. Challenges**

Among the feedback the PCRC and I have received about PE:MATT, two matters deserve further attention: the principle of transparency, and the nature of a pastor's authority in his/her relationship with parishioners which might impact the transparent feedback which parishioners provide.

#### **1. Transparency**

The original PE:MATT proposal attempts to establish the uniqueness of the pastoral calling among other vocations. This is actually a moot point and the case needed not to have been made. The key

question is not whether a pastor's calling is different from other vocations. Instead, the question is how pastors and churches shall relate to one another in terms of accountability, which includes how pastors need to be evaluated for the performance of the ministries entrusted to their care. The answer to this question is that the rules that guide pastors-church relationships must come not from the corporate world, but the Scriptures, for the church is not a business; it is the body of Christ.

The Scriptures are clear about the way relationships ought to be conducted within the family of God. While the word "*transparency*" is not found in the Bible, the values associated with transparency are. The term transparency comes from the field of photography. Before the advent of digital photography, a transparency was used as a see-through picture which was achieved when a positive photographic image was created on a transparent material such as film or a slide so that the image could be viewed when light shone through it. Transparency in social relationships has come to imply open communication, lucid accountability; the antonym of transparency is anonymity, ambiguity, even secrecy. Thus, transparency means that communicators identify themselves to the recipients of their communication.

Speaking the truth in love through relational transparency requires that we speak with one another thoughtfully, tactfully and prayerfully, even when we feel we must convey an admonition or even a rebuke.

We have the urgent biblical injunction that "*we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of His body, the church*" (EPHESIANS 4:15, NLT). Paul's imperative for speaking the truth in love is that believers can grow together in "*every way*" more mature and Christ-like. Speaking the truth in love argues for relational transparency rather than anonymity, for transparent communication, unlike anonymity, cultivates authenticity which is essential for maturing relationships. Speaking the truth in love through relational transparency requires that we speak with one another thoughtfully, tactfully and prayerfully, even when we feel we must convey an admonition or even a rebuke. Indeed, healthy communication through transparency is antecedent to healthy community. In 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-3, the value of speaking the truth in love is considered so important that the Scriptures imply that unless we speak the truth in love, our words are "*nothing*" and therefore not worth speaking at all (verses 1-3, NLT). Admittedly, this is a high and at times a difficult calling, yet one which especially church leaders must heed and which we cannot honourably dismiss in their relationships within the body of Christ.

Moreover, parishioners are commanded to treat their pastors with respect:

*Dear brothers and sisters, honour those who are your leaders in the Lord's work. They work hard among you and warn you against all that is wrong. Think highly of them and give them your wholehearted love because of their work. And remember to live peaceably with each other.* 1 THESSALONIANS 5:12-23 (NLT)

Transparency seeks to speak the truth in love and honours pastors for the position they are entrusted with. Should concerns arise with how pastors fulfill their ministries, or if pastors as persons are no longer perceived to be able to fulfill their pastoral roles, even then pastors must be treated with honour, and the truth must be spoken in love which can only happen through transparent communication rather than anonymity.

As a matter of interest, the EDMONTON JOURNAL recently published a “*Note to Online Readers*” (May 19, 2010, p. A2) which announced the new requirement of transparency for on-line comments to newspaper articles for reasons stated:

*As many news sites have discovered, anonymous commenting tends to amplify a lack of civility, which degrades the conversation. Anonymous commenting also makes it difficult for readers to respond to each other in coherent ways. . . . Having a name associated with your comment also makes it easier for us to publish selected comments in the newspaper. . . . [W]e’ve learned from experience that anonymity encourages the worst in a few of our commenters, which is turning many other readers away.*

Even the JOURNAL has come to recognize the negative impact of anonymous feedback, and the value – even the necessity – of transparency.

## 2. Pastoral Authority

The second matter deals with the vocational authority (or power) which attends the pastor’s role. Authority in this context comes from the pastor’s position as church leader and primary interpreter of the Bible for those under his/her spiritual care. This authority usually induces parishioners to respect their pastor.

Pastors therefore are not only expected to handle transparent feedback judiciously, but must necessarily do so lest they undermine the very road upon which they must travel.

The concern, however, is that pastoral authority can also have an intimidating effect whereby a parishioner cannot or will not be transparently honest and authentic with their pastor for fear that the pastor may use his/her authority to negatively affect the parishioner or his/her relationship with the pastor. Indeed, pastors might even abuse the authority inherent in their position. Moreover, a pastor’s authority not uncommonly places him/her in a conflict of interest. At face value, this conflict of interest exists, and it certainly does in a formal way. However, while a pastor is sometimes placed in a conflict of interest, it is expected that the pastor will handle this conflict with discretion, wisdom, integrity and maturity. For example, pastors preach and teach generous financial giving,

knowing full well they are a primary recipient of the generosity of those they so instruct. Pastors also counsel, encourage, edify, admonish, rebuke and even discipline those who support them not just financially, but who are encouraged follow their leadership. Also, the personal depth and trust which pastors cultivate with many parishioners add a unique complexity to the pastor-parishioner relationship that pastors must be able to handle with great care and maturity. The congregation not only needs the confidence and expects that their pastor will handle such conflicts of interest with wisdom and integrity; such confidence and expectation are intentionally cultivated through the unique ordination vows pastors make both to God and His people before assuming their ministry of the Word and the sacraments. This trust also applies to pastors when they receive transparent feedback of their ministries. Indeed, should pastors violate this trust and thus abuse their authority, they undermine their own credibility and thus harm their ministry. Pastors therefore are not only expected to handle transparent feedback judiciously, but must necessarily do so lest they undermine the very road upon which they must travel.

Since PE:MATT was posted online, other denominations – Reformed, as well as evangelical and mainline – have expressed unsolicited interest in the pastoral evaluation and have requested permission to use it.

Pastoral authority has another potential impact on pastoral evaluations and has to do with pastoral idealization that may distort transparent feedback. Idealization happens when parishioners perceive pastors to be better or have more desirable attributes than is actually the case. Idealization is inevitable and can even be a tool for ministry, provided pastors do not believe these idealized perceptions of themselves. Idealization does not mitigate the need for transparency, even though it may distort the feedback by reflecting a more positive image of pastors and their ministries. However, this distortion can be compensated for by seeking out those who are reasonably mature so that their idealization of pastors is minimized and they are able to speak the truth in love when they provide their transparent feedback to their pastors about the ministries entrusted to their care.

## II. Other Consultancy Work

As for my other work as classis consultant in pastor-church relations, allow me to mention the following.

First, pastors have contacted me about a wide variety of matters, from conflict management to pain in ministry and marriage; from pastoral questions and tough judgment calls, to sabbatical policies and books; from funeral protocols and counseling referrals. Office bearers and members have contacted me about matters including church order issues, pastoral issues and -concerns.

Second, I commend to you the overture from the PCRC regarding asking synod to amend Article 17 of the Church Order which deals with pastor-church separations. This overture is in this agenda and deserves careful thought.

Third, with the PCRC I am happy to report that the third annual Pastors and Spouses Conference was the most successful yet. In fact, the evaluations rated the Jasper-event so highly, it will be difficult to improve on it. Dr. Ron Nydam of Calvin Theological Seminary was our keynote speaker. His authenticity, theological reflection on pain, and depth of pastoral insights were singularly outstanding. (And so, by the way, was the weather which also contributed to the success of the weekend.)

I encourage especially those churches that only have one pastor to invite others to fill your pulpits every four the six weeks. This does not only allow pastors to invest their time in other pressing ministry matters; an occasional fresh voice in the pulpit is wholesome for congregations.

Fourth, after conversations with pastors and lay leaders, allow me to encourage churches to open their pulpits to fresh voices. Few churches today have a morning and evening service. With this change, pulpit exchanges have virtually disappeared. This change is regrettable. I encourage especially those churches that only have one pastor to invite others to fill your pulpits every four the six weeks. This does not only allow pastors to invest their time in other pressing ministry matters; an occasional fresh voice in the pulpit is wholesome for congregations that are used to listening to the same pastor week-after-week. One way to find a fresh voice is to reinstitute pulpit exchanges. However, it would also not be unwise to invite another preacher while the church's pastor worships with his/her own congregation seated beside his/her spouse if they are married to experience worship not as a leader, but a member.

Fifth, even after some 25 years in pastoral ministry, I have learned much about pastor-church relations. This growth has come in part due to opportunities to come along side of pastors and churches. I also have received valuable training. In March, I received excellent instruction in conflict transformation and mediation with Rickhard Blackburn through the Mediation Skills Training Institute of the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center. And in May, I joined Gil Rendle, Senior Consultant with the Alban Institute, to take *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as Spiritual Practice for Congregations*. These opportunities for development have not only given me greater insights, but confidence to tackle some of the important opportunities for ministry that have come my way.

Sixth, I have made a commitment with a church in classis to work with them for a year at congregational renewal.

Again, I offer myself to the churches of classis for preaching. I am able preach on matters more directly related to my position with classis, such as managing conflict biblically; forgiving when you cannot forget; a fresh look at what the Bible says about vision; habits of healthy churches; etc.

Finally, I offer two recommendations for your edification. Check out our denomination's toolbox for ministry. Whether you are a pastor, elder, deacon, ministry leader, or even just a curious

member looking for ministry insights, you're bound to find nuggets of wisdom. Check it out at <http://network.crcna.org/>. And second, among the many books I could recommend to you, allow me just one thoughtful, fresh, important read on leadership: Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (Seabury Books, New York, 2007).

Finally, as I pray for our pastors and churches, I do so with gratitude to Christ for you, and pray that together you might bear abundant fruit with great joy,



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