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The Effect of Professor Emeritus David Valleskey's Leadership Model: An Insight to the
Pastor's Heart

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As students prepare for the pastoral ministry, they find themselves confronted with the questions of their future ministry: What will it be like? Do I have the right gifts? Am I ready? How will I know what to do? How to lead a congregation is another question, and it is difficult to answer because it is a concept. In other words, it is not like learning algebra or how to ride a bike; there are no specific rules that apply in every situation. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, to the glory of God, prepares leaders as best as they can through teaching theory and giving practical instruction. Professors also teach leadership by taking advantage of their inherent position as leadership models. By seeing leadership modeled, the student is able to take the theoretical instruction and make applications to his own ministry. This is one area where Professor Emeritus David Valleskey had a powerful influence.

This paper will attempt to measure the influence of Professor Emeritus David Valleskey's leadership model on the students who went through the Seminary during his time there. It will first present a brief biography of his life looking at how his leadership developed through his own ministry. It will then look more closely at his years at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary as a professor and president and what kind of an effect his leadership model had on his students.

“What others can do why with effort cannot you?” This can-do spirit filled the childhood home of Professor Valleskey.¹ As he watched his father handle the ministry needs of his congregation as its pastor, he noticed that ministry was always positive, and those upbeat words were never far from his father's lips. Later, involved in his own ministry, Professor Valleskey would learn about some of the difficulties his father faced at that church and noted that those things never made it home, and never dampened his father's gospel joy. Instead, his father modeled the positive spirit of the gospel ministry and encouraged his children to do the same.

¹ Professor Emeritus David Valleskey of San Diego, interview by author, 19 September 2006, Mequon, written notes, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, WI.

“What others can do why with effort cannot you” might be a way to characterize the spirit of Professor Valleskey and the spirit in which he carried out his own ministry.

Professor Valleskey always knew that he wanted to be a pastor. The reason is hard to nail down.² No doubt, the joy in which his father carried out his ministry played a major role, and of course, we cannot discount the call of the gospel that motivates Christians to select vocations of the public ministry. So Professor Valleskey grew up always knowing that he wanted to be a pastor, it was something that was just there.

He graduated Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in 1962 and was assigned to St Paul’s congregation in Livingston, MT where he served until 1965. He then accepted a call to San Jose, CA to start a new mission and served there for 19 years at Apostles congregation. The church was blessed with significant growth and facility expansion during that time. In addition, while at Apostles, he worked with neighboring pastor Forrest Bivens and developed a Bible information course titled *New Life in Christ*. In 1984, then, he received a call to serve as a professor of New Testament and Pastoral Theology at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary where he served for 20 years until his retirement in 2004. He was also the first professor called specifically to teach evangelism, which he had become known for from his work in San Jose.³ He was president of the Seminary from 1996 until 2004.

His years as president of the Seminary saw some significant changes. In his October 2002 report to the Governing Board of the Seminary, he speaks of the progress of the Seminary’s self-study, something that had not been done for about ten years. The self-study was completed by spring of 2003 with high praise from both Valleskey and the rest of the faculty who were heavily

² Ibid.

³ Tiefel, James, “The Celebration of the 40th Anniversary of David Valleskey’s Ministry.” Worship folder (photocopy). On file, Office of the President, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wi.

involved in committee work and plenary faculty meetings to discuss everything the Seminary was doing. The final report that was adopted included 109 action items, 30 of which remained to be addressed one year later at the January 2004 Governing Board meeting.⁴

The remodeling of the Seminary culminating in the remodeling of the chapel in 2005 occurred while Valleskey was president of the Seminary.⁵ The introduction of technology onto the campus⁶ and the requirement of laptop computers for students⁷ are other important changes. Other important organizational items were a revised faculty handbook written with the new professor in mind, policy manuals and the establishing of the Seminary as a separate, non-profit corporation as part of the Synod restructuring in 1997.⁸

In a letter to the Governing Board dated January 22, 2003, President Valleskey announced his decision to retire. In the letter he says, “If the Lord so permits, I would dearly love to serve in the parish once again for brief periods of time...I’ve never truly wanted to be anything else than a pastor, though it has been a rare privilege to serve our Lord at the Seminary.”⁹ Through his years of ministry, Professor Valleskey exemplified leadership, though his desire was to only be a pastor—just a pastor. For a man who had accomplished so much

⁴ David Valleskey, “Report of the President to the Governing Board Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary” (Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, January 2004, photocopied), 5.

⁵ David Valleskey, “Report of the President to the Board of Control of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary” (Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, January 1998, photocopied), Addendum. These are the proposals for remodeling projects that continued until 2005.

⁶ David Valleskey, “Report of the President to the Board of Control of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary” (Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, October 1997, photocopied), 3.

⁷ David Valleskey, “Report of the President to the Governing Board Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary” (Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, September/October 2003, photocopied), Appendix A.

⁸ David Valleskey, “Report of the President to the Board of Control of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary” (Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, October 1997, photocopied), 6.

⁹ David Valleskey, “Report of the President to the Governing Board Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary” (Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, January 2003, photocopied), 9.

while at the Seminary, you might have thought he had been training years to become an exemplary administrator. But Valleskey just wanted to be a pastor and it was with that joyful pastor's heart that he modeled leadership.

The heart of a pastor is alive with feeling for its members. It swells with joy when a young confirmand defends his faith and encourages others to do the same. It burns hotly when it finds out what inappropriate and soul-damaging things a member has done. It flutters in the pulpit as it proclaims God's unbending law and God's merciful gospel first to itself then to its members. The heart of the pastor is a heart that ultimately loves its people, and that is how Valleskey modeled leadership.

As a pastor and as a professor and president, Valleskey loved the people he led, which helped motivate him to be a decisive and organized leader.¹⁰ You can see his organization in some of the things that were accomplished when he was president. The introduction of the revised policy manual mentioned above might seem insignificant on the surface, but it was something necessary in order to more thoroughly and easily acclimate a new professor to the Seminary. The addition of a purpose statement to the Seminary gave direction to the professors as they taught and it helped the students know what to expect while at the Seminary. His decisiveness was crucial when it came to presenting new ideas. The entire faculty recognized that when he presented an idea or a suggestion it came because of thorough study of the options and a clear and definite reason for picking one particular option.¹¹ While he was thoughtfully decisive, Valleskey was careful to build consensus by presenting ideas so that they did not come

¹⁰ Reverend Dan Koelpin of Milwaukee, interview by author, 1 November 2006, Milwaukee, written notes, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wi.

¹¹ Secretary Leah Leyrer of Mequon, interview by author, 8 November 2006, Mequon, written notes, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wi.

across as his own, but as simply ideas or suggestions to consider.¹² This way, if people liked the idea, they could support it without the unfortunate consequence of just doing it because that is what the Seminary president wanted to do. He cared enough about the people with whom he worked to make every effort to be a thoughtful administrator.

One example of Professor Valleskey's ability to provide thoughtful suggestions without forcing them on other people is from his work with the WELS Board for World Missions. In the late 1990s, East Fork Lutheran High School in Arizona faced a grim financial situation that threatened to close the school down. When the board was discussing how to provide funding for the school from the synod's budget, they could never provide enough money since the Synod was facing funding issues of its own. The options seemed pretty grim: either the Synod gives East Fork the funding it needs, or close the school down. The solution seemed to be escaping them, when Professor Valleskey suggested that the synod supply partial funding for the school to allow the school to pursue private funding on their own. This thoughtful suggestion was what they needed so they implemented a plan and the school remained open.¹³

The students who went through the Seminary during Valleskey's years also noticed his example of loving leadership. Students found him to be passionate about the work of a pastor, remarkably knowledgeable of Scripture, personal and something to emulate.¹⁴ Above all, they noticed how his love for the gospel motivated everything that he did or about which he talked. The message of the gospel was not something to mention briefly, but it was something to build

¹² Professor Emeritus David Valleskey of San Diego, interview by author, 19 September 2006, Mequon, written notes, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wi.

¹³ Reverend Dan Koelpin of Milwaukee, interview by author, 1 November 2006, written notes, Milwaukee, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wi.

¹⁴ Generalized results from a survey conducted by the author of students who had Valleskey in class. Thirty surveys were sent out to men from every class that had Valleskey and 11 responded. Even with a relatively small sample, the respondents all answered very positively regarding Valleskey's style of leadership.

an entire ministry on. They saw a man who was excited about ministry not because of success or because it was fun, but because he got to tell other people their sins were forgiven. One survey remarked, “It wasn’t just book knowledge to him, he truly lived the love of Christ as he taught it.” That basic feature, which permeated his entire ministry including his professorship and presidency at the Seminary, would be the one thing impressed on students during their formative years at the Seminary and this model would carry on into their separate ministries.

One other feature that his students tended to notice above others was his example of a balanced ministry.¹⁵ This would show itself in a kindness and patience with people, even in difficult situations where it would be easy to become frustrated and short-tempered. He also showed his balanced ministry by being accommodating without giving up doctrine. Being both administrator and a pastor of sorts to the students, he balanced the two functions well so that even the students who did not have him in class recognized that he was a loving leader. This modeled for the students how in the pastoral ministry a pastor functions in different ways both as administrator and as a doctor of souls. He showed what it meant to be firm in the law and equally as firm in the gospel and to do it with gospel-motivated joy.¹⁶

Another feature of Valleskey’s leadership was his unshakable devotion to studying God’s Word. Pastoral leadership is about leading people who are joined together in the gospel. Without a firm grasp on God’s Word and a firm conviction of it, leadership becomes a chore or the pursuit of your own ideas for your own gain. What Valleskey’s students appreciated was not just that Valleskey knew his Bible well; it was that Valleskey demonstrated that he immersed himself in the Word of God and shared that experience with his students. It taught them that to be

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Reverend Jeff Bovee of New Ulm, interview by author, 7 November 2006, written notes, New Ulm, Minn., Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wi.

effective pastors and loving leaders they had to immerse themselves in Scripture. Without that, they would have no foundation.

What students came away with from Professor Valleskey would be something that would stick with them. It was not just the knowledge of what they ought to be doing as leaders in God's church; rather, it was a living example of a humble, loving leader who devoted himself first to God and then to his people. Professor Valleskey just wanted to be a pastor. He did not grow up wanting to be a professor or a president. He grew up wanting to share the gospel, because he knew what it meant for him. It was that bright light coming from the pages of Scripture, the bright light that chases away the shadows of sin and guilt and replaces it with the light of God's own Son. Professor Valleskey wanted to be a pastor, he wanted to share the light with other people and God molded him into a great leader so he could do just that.

As young men (author included) set their minds on full time service in the Church as pastors, we ask all those tough questions and the answers are often fleeting. Studying the effect of Professor Valleskey's leadership model shows us that being well balanced, caring, Scriptural, organized and decisive leaders is not about studying those skills per se. Being a good pastor-leader is not found in mirroring another man's unique gifts (though we can often learn); rather, it is found in the gospel truth that God loves us. Who knew the answer would be so simple? Perhaps we did know all along, yet in the quiet of our minds we wanted something more complex than that, something we could write down. If there were something to write down, something we could learn from Professor Valleskey, perhaps it would be this: in our quest to become great leaders, we remember first of all that we are God's beloved children.

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