

Church History Interview

Bob Gerke – Lay and Public ministry

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Church History
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This interview was conducted in Tomah Wisconsin on December 9th. The interview really had three different focuses. I wanted to get Mr. Gerke's perspective on resigning from the ministry. I also wanted him to relate what it was like for him to come back into a strong lay ministry as well. Lastly, I wanted him to look at one of the programs the WELS now has to help men resigning from the ministry and for him to give a reaction to that.

Mr. Gerke's early experiences were very likely not that different from many young men going into the ministry at the time. Growing up on a farm, Bob wasn't firmly decided on entering the ministry until his time in the Seminary. After vicaring in a large congregation in Columbus Wisconsin Bob received a permanent call into the ministry to serve a dual mission congregation in Washington State. He served the towns of Ellensburg and South Cle Elum for 6 and a half years. There he went through many of the growing pains that all young pastors experience in their first years, but he and the congregation grew close. This was an established congregation of nearly sixty years and Bob's ministry was primarily what some call a "maintenance" ministry.

In his sixth year there Bob received a call from a small mission congregation in Medford, Oregon. Feeling they needed a pastor at that crucial time in their development accepted the call and his family moved there. Again Bob and the congregation grew together, keeping busy with outreach activity, Bible classes, and even the congregation's first building project. Despite being several hours away from each other, the pastors in the Oregon circuit managed to come together most months for devotions and fellowship. The men supported each other very well.

After six and a half years at this congregation though, Bob resigned from the ministry. His father-in-law was quite ill with cancer in Indiana and his own father and brother were laid up with injuries as well. Bob's primary reason for leaving the ministry appears to be to keep the

family farm afloat. Allowing his children to attend the Lutheran Elementary School also played into the decision. The decision was a difficult one, but a quick one. Bob said in the interview that he probably had not thought about it for more than a month before he announced his resignation to the congregation during Sunday morning services. The congregation was saddened by the news but understood his reasons for leaving. Bob and his family moved back to the family farm in Tomah in October of 1990.

As far as difficulties go in leaving the ministry, Bob's situation is somewhat unique. Bob had a job and housing lined up on the farm before he left the ministry. Bob's difficulties in leaving the ministry were primarily emotional and spiritual. He described the trauma of changing vocations and moving his family as a great stress on his relationships both with his wife and with his Lord. But his children fit in well at the school and Bob was soon busy with farm life once again.

Because Bob resigned for personal reasons, and not for cause or from burnout, he returned to ministry almost immediately as a lay member. One of the pastors in Tomah at the time, John Kuske, asked him to serve as an elder. Bob has served in this ministry to delinquents ever since. In the year or two before his divorce Bob, in fact, helped out one area pastor with some heart problems by filling the pulpit a few times during the summer.

Bob's divorce was very difficult for him. His wife became involved with another man and she ended up pregnant as a result of the affair. Looking back, Bob sees any number of small stresses that led to this, rather than one big one. He thinks the stress of changing their lives completely from ministry to farming was part of it. His wife was unused to farming and small town life and that was difficult for her. Another contributing factor was very likely the fact that their devotions, both family and private, fell off with the busyness of farming. Without getting

too personal, the divorce process lasted for a year and a half and left Bob a much sadder person. At the time, he went through counseling with Wisconsin Child and Family Services and today he holds them in high regard for their Gospel-based approach toward counseling.

Today in Tomah, Bob is seen by the pastors as a very reliable layperson that can be counted on in case of any emergency. If help is needed for communion distribution or for teaching a Bible class, Bob is the first one they approach. Bob is happy to help in any way that he can, although he is always aware that he no longer holds a full-time call into public ministry. He seems to live with the attitude that God has plenty of work for all of us, whether our title is pastor or farmer or factory worker. In this respect God has blessed the congregation in Tomah with a very strong lay leader who serves as an excellent example to the other members. God's ways are mysterious and it seems that Bob's work for the Kingdom is being blessed as much now as it was in his ministry. Having seen him on encouragement calls myself, he has a Gospel approach that delinquent members respond well to. This is an advantage he has from his ministry that is now being put to use for the saints in Tomah.

Bob's reaction to the help team manual was very positive. He very much appreciated the detail and care that obviously has gone into the planning of the group. He praised the group for focusing on getting information to families without necessarily trying to be their pastor. He particularly liked the speed with which they visit people (within 72 hours) and the fact that they visit with the wives and families, even in cases of resignation for cause. He felt their focus on the emotional and spiritual needs of the resigning pastor was especially on target.

This interview was valuable for me as an insight into life as a pastor and life as a layperson. I was somewhat surprised to discover how much Bob enjoyed the ministry. One almost gets the feeling that he regrets his decision somewhat and would return to the ministry

now if it were not for family responsibilities. He knows that there is a great amount of work to do in Tomah though, and that God has given him the gifts and experiences to serve there very well. God has certainly blessed his ministries, both public and lay, and God will certainly continue to do so in the future. May he bless all of us as richly.

Church History Interview Transcript
(Interview Length: 1 hour, 17 minutes)

Ryan Wolfe: My name is Ryan Wolfe. I am a senior at the Seminary this year. I'll be in the class of 2005 and I'm here in Tomah, Wisconsin with Bob Gerke, who was a member of the WELS ministry several years ago and he resigned from the ministry. The purpose of this interview is to get a perspective of the kinds of things a minister goes through as he resigns from the ministry, and then also what it's like to come back into a lay ministry, as Bob does here in Tomah. I've also given Bob the manual from the Michigan District "Help Team" so that we can look at that and get his reaction to that as well. And so with that, we'll go into the first part of the interview, the part about your ministry and your resignation from the ministry.

PART 1: MR. GERKE'S MINISTRY AND RESIGNATION EXPERIENCE

Ryan Wolfe: So why don't you just describe your background for me.

Bob Gerke: I grew up here, just south of Tomah on a dairy farm, my folks were on the farm all their lives. I've got a couple brothers and a sister on the farm too. I went to the grade school here in Tomah and Onalaska Luther high school and of course from there to Northwestern and the Seminary. Graduated in 1977 from the Seminary.

RW: And your parents were both farmers, you said?

BG: Well, on the same farm.

RW: At that time, and I might be wrong on this, but was the vicar year optional at that point?

BG: I don't recall that it was. I know that we had a smaller class, 53 or something like that. All the vicars, I believe were placed. I was in Columbus, Wisconsin under pastor Gerhardt Cares for that year. I was married already for that year.

RW: And how did you enjoy your vicar year?

BG: I enjoyed the congregation. It was an old, established congregation of course. I got close to a lot of the teachers. I ran the youth group there so I got close to quite a few of the kids. Very good year.

RW: Was this a large congregation, small?

BG: It was a very large congregation. Not quite as big as Tomah here, but probably 1500 members.

RW: That's a large congregation.

RW: You said that you were married your vicar year. Did you get married the summer before that or...?

BG: Just a few weeks before vicar year started. August 9th of '75. My wife was from the Indianapolis area. I met her during my first summer in the seminary when I went down to that area for what they called the "summer vicar" program at the time. I did canvassing in Ft. Wayne and Indianapolis and Kokomo. Just helped the congregations in the area that summer. My wife's parents had originally started the congregation in Indianapolis in their own home, so they were a strong WELS family.

RW: And what was her name again?

BG: Diana Wooten. Fred and Carol Wooten were the folks.

RW: You said all the vicars were assigned then. What about your senior year? Were all the members of your class assigned on call day at that time?

BG: Yes, I believe they were. Some were tutors, a couple, but I believe all of us received calls.

RW: I'm going to jump back a little, just because I'm interested in this. At that time were there a lot of married guys coming out of the Seminary?

BG: I believe at that time it was kind of a transition time; there were becoming more married fellows coming out of the Seminary. I'd like to say about fifty percent of us were married.

RW: But mostly guys getting married before their vicar year or senior year?

BG: Oh probably half and half. Half before their vicar year and half before their senior year. I'm not sure on that percentage.

RW: That's okay; I'm just interested in your opinion. Juniors and middlers probably not a lot of married guys or...

BG: Not too many. We did have some from the ELS, Mankato, Seminary and some of those were married.

RW: Probably off the topic, but it's interesting... Where did you get assigned?

BG: I was assigned out to the state of Washington, to Ellensburg Washington and South Cle Elum Washington, which are between Spokane and Seattle. They were older, established congregations, but mission congregations. I think the one in Ellensburg was probably about 70 years old and, well I'm not even sure anymore, it was probably more like 60 years old. They were older little congregations in the Pacific Northwest. You've got to realize the Pacific Northwest is known for so many different types of religion; Lutheranism isn't really that strong out there. A lot of cults in the Northwest.

RW: And you said they were little congregations.

BG: Yeah, I think the one in Ellensburg had about 60 communicants and the one in South Cle Elum had about 20 or 23. A log cabin church.

RW: So you had a dual parish coming right out of the Seminary?

BG: Yes, I did. About 30 miles apart.

RW: Can you describe your feelings on call day?

BG: I was just happy to serve the Lord and do my best wherever the Lord put me. The size of the congregation didn't really make any difference or the place. I was just happy, that... wherever they wanted me, I'd go.

RW: Had you wanted to be a pastor for a long time?

BG: Through college I really hadn't decided for sure. I wanted to wait at least one year through the seminary and that summer that I summer vicared, I guess I kind of made my mind up then that I would go on to be a pastor.

RW: Your wife you said came from a good WELS family. I assume that – Was your wife and her family also supportive of your going into the ministry?

BG: Oh yes, my father-in-law encouraged me all the time.

RW: We had just talked about the call day and how you felt when you were assigned the dual parish in Washington. Just describe your ministry there. The congregation, what you did...

BG: It was a learning experience for both me and my wife. Our first child was born just before we went out West and so we went out there, never been out West before. You have to realize the lifestyle is a little bit different out West than in the Midwest. People are more cowboy-type out there and casual dress. So there were a few things we had to get used to, but as far as the size of the town it was pretty much the same as Tomah here. The people were common people. We had country people and city people in the congregation. All of our children were born in Ellensburg. We had four children total. The congregation really warmed up to us, I felt. They were always willing to help baby-sit or whatever we needed for our children. Just enjoyed our service there. We had workdays two or three times a year and we always had a good turnout for those. We even had a softball team in the league in the town there. Even though we were one of the smallest churches in the town we came in second in the tournament. And we could have won that! No, we had some pretty good people. There was a college in the town there, Central Washington University, so we did have a few college students. So I did some work on the campus there too. As I say, the congregations I served were about thirty miles apart so every Sunday we did a little driving back and forth. And of course, Mt. St. Helens erupted while I was out there. That happened to be on a Sunday morning. When we were in the little log cabin

church I heard this explosion. I couldn't figure out what it was; all of a sudden it became as dark as night right during our church service. And we came outside and it was darker than night because of the ash.

RW: How far away were you from that?

BG: About fifty miles, somewhere in that area.

RW: That's not far at all. You stopped the church service?

BG: No, we finished the church service and we were on our way back to Ellensburg and they already had the interstate closed because of the ash. It was such a fine dust that if a car went by, you couldn't see anything for a couple minutes. So I ended up having to take a back road back home. We did make it home that day. It was dark most of the day. Yakima Washington, which was about twenty-five miles south of us, had four inches of ash. So it was an unbelievable day. I'll never forget that.

RW: You knew what happened right away, that it was an eruption?

BG: Well, I think as we left church some of the people said Mt. St. Helens must have erupted. There was a little forewarning, the mountain had been burping a few times before that and we thought that must be what happened.

RW: How ironic that it was just going off again this year.

BG: And it was a perfectly clear morning. I'll never forget that day. Perfectly clear, sunny day and all of a sudden it was darker than night. The birds started, or stopped singing I should say.

RW: Getting back to your ministry a little bit there, you said earlier this was a pretty well established congregation, 60 or 70 years old. What kind of ministry did you do out there?

BG: In Ellensburg Washington it was more of a maintenance ministry. That congregation had over the years had a few divisions. Back in the forties, I understand, they had a separation over lodge membership and I think in the late fifties they had a breakup with the CLC, Church of the Lutheran Confession, so they lost some families with that. It just had gone through some turbulent times and I think our ministry there was more of a healing process for the congregation. I also had a motorcycle that I used while making calls because I was putting so many miles on it. I had people that lived twenty miles from each congregation so I was covering a large area. And of course one day I was going up to Cle Elum on the back road following the Yakima River and I had an accident and ran off the road and ran into the boulders. It wasn't my fault; they were resurfacing the road and there was, like, three inches of gravel on the road and I ended up losing it. I was only going about thirty miles per hour. I ended up cracking my kidney and I was in intensive care in Yakima for about three days. Well, I did end up missing a Sunday there, and with the next Sunday I came back I think we had the largest attendance ever in my ministry there. So the congregation loved us. We enjoyed our service there. You know, what was to me the main part of the ministry there was just preaching the Word and teaching the Word and helping the people move forward. Helping them grow further in their understanding.

RW: You said there was a college there. Did you do much outreach with the college at all or was it WELS people coming to you?

BG: It was mostly referrals from other congregations, but they would bring friends from college to the services and we had a lot of potlucks in the congregation. Many times college kids would come up for those. They liked the home cooking. We also had wild-game feeds in the fall and you never knew exactly what you were eating, but they went over well and the congregation enjoyed it. Like I say, we tried to involve the college people in work days and we handed out brochures for Bible school and things like that. And our Bible schools at that time were very successful. We had a lot of children coming to vacation bible schools.

RW: Sounds like the people really supported your ministry there.

BG: I was there 6 and a half years and I received a call in the same district to Medford, Oregon, which was the southern-most congregation in the district and that was just a newly establish mission. They had about 30 communicant members. Pastor Ed Zell had served there and started the congregation. He had taken a call back to the Midwest for health reasons. One of the children. So I received that call down to Medford and I felt at that time they needed a pastor. It was a crucial time for that fledgling congregation so I did accept that call down to Medford in January of 1984. And I also served there 6 and a half years. During that time they also built a little WEF unit, 2300 square feet (Worship, Education, and Fellowship). That was an experience too, a building project. We did a lot of canvassing. It was just an outreach mission church basically.

RW: Sounds like you had an interesting contrast there...

BG: Older, established congregation to a new one. Yes it was quite a difference. And because it was such a new congregation they were kind of learning like I was to reach out to others. At that time we had these Travel Canvass Witness teams too and they also came to our congregation in Medford and served a week there. So we did a lot of work as far as public outreach. One other thing I should say is that one of the members was from Grant's Pass Oregon, which was about thirty miles away and ended up building a church in Grant's Pass, which today is ELS. So some of the time I ended up going up there too helping that congregation. You end up wearing a lot of hats when you're in the mission field. We were three hours from the nearest WELS congregation out there. Eugene, Oregon or Bend. Or Redding, California.

RW: Redding I know, my geography of Oregon or Washington is not so great.

BG: We were kind of all by ourselves, which didn't bother me in the least. We were happy to be there and our kids were getting a little older at the time. I helped with Tee-Ball for example, trying to get to know people that way. With my kids, I think I was a Tee-Ball coach for four years. Again, it was just a good experience we had there, serving the people in Medford.

RW: With the congregation so spread out there were you able to have regular circuit meetings or get to meet other pastors?

BG: We still met once a month. I probably had the farthest distance to go. I was in the Oregon circuit for the last six and a half years. Most of the pastors were either in Portland, Tigard, Eugene or Salem. Being three hours from Eugene, most of the time I probably had to drive four, maybe five hours to a circuit meeting. Now I probably didn't make every one, but I probably missed very few. We became quite close. There were probably about eleven, twelve of us at the time in Oregon. I hate to make the equation with the twelve disciples, but that was just about the way we felt. We talked about our experiences with one another and a lot of them were my age. Pastor Vanslow, our circuit pastor, was in the same class, I believe, as I was or one year behind, I can't recall.

RW: Were there any, for lack of a better word, "seasoned" pastors that were in the circuit as well.

BG: Pastor Warren Widmann, who at this time serves our Synod from Milwaukee I believe. He was president of our district. He was important. Ted Lambert, who I think is Vice President of the Pacific Northwest District right now, his dad Lloyd Lambert was in Eugene when I first came there. So we had some older men also out there. There's just a few retired pastors out there; a lot of them are younger.

RW: Is there anything else you'd like to share about the congregations you served out there or special things you enjoyed about the ministry or anything like that?

BG: I guess again, being in a mission area in both those congregations out there, vacation Bible school was probably a pretty emphasized thing back then. We really put a lot of effort into vacation bible school in those days. Bible classes, we tried to have as many bible classes as we could. Trying to have as many potlucks as we could too. We just were like little families.

RW: I know that today at least the Pacific Northwest almost prides itself in being the least Christian in the nation. Was it that way back then too?

BG: It's pretty much been that way I think. You have so many different ethnic groups too out there too, from overseas. When I use the word "cult," there's a lot of cults out there. The Mormons are quite strong in the Pacific Northwest, Jehovah's Witness seem to be quite strong. Just a lot of different cults. Non-denominational churches too.

RW: I can understand the emphasis on Bible classes. Now you were a pastor for six and a half years at the dual parish and six and a half years at Medford. So then you were in the ministry for how long?

BG: Thirteen years.

RW: And rather than having me ask questions at this point if you would care to just share the things that kind of led up to your resignation.

BG: When I talk about my resignation I don't want to make it sound like it was pre-planned. I don't think it was at all preplanned. In my ministry I never even gave it a thought that it would

come to an end. Some of the events that led up to the time I resigned... In 1990 my father-in-law was very severely ill with cancer back in Indiana. My dad's health was deteriorating. My one brother had hurt his back on the farm and I had a little farming background in my heart. I grew up on a farm and was in 4-H and all that as a kid. Being the four children we had at the time were getting up to grade school age, the thought had crossed our mind of having the children in a Christian day school every day and I know my wife wanted to be a little closer to her dad, and I felt that to try to keep the farm going at the time was a good thing. Those factors all kind of played in together when we came back in October of 1990.

RW: How long before that had the thought of resigning come to you?

BG: I wouldn't say much more than a month. A very short time. We felt we had worked very, very hard at the ministry. We had had papers out there on pastoral burnout and I don't believe I was burned out on the ministry. My wife had many talents. She could play the organ, she could sing, she taught Sunday school, she typed a lot better than I could type and of course you have to realize that in those congregations you didn't have a secretary. You were your own secretary and I probably took a little advantage of my wife. I know she typed the bulletin for me and most of my sermons. I think maybe after thirteen years, and I'm trying to speak for her and I don't know if this is fact or not, but maybe she was a little bit burned out helping me as a secretary basically. She had gone to the college in Southern Oregon, in Ashland Oregon, to be a nurse, an RN, and had just graduated earlier that year, in the spring and was working in the hospital there in Medford before I resigned. That was another thing. Tomah had a hospital here and so she thought that she could work here too. So as far as transition to coming back here, I would have a place to live on the farm and she would have a place to work too. We felt economically it wouldn't be that difficult a thing. I don't know if that has answered that question or not. She always left it up to me whether or not I wanted to continue in the ministry. Down in the bottom of my heart I always thought I could help the Lord in many ways just as a layman too. Some people have the thinking that if you resign from the ministry that's a black eye against you but I guess I never had that thought. It never crossed my mind. So the Sunday I resigned from the pulpit that was a very difficult thing. It was an emotional service. I had all I could do to control my own emotions. And the congregation was very sad too. They all wished us the best.

RW: Did you talk to the Council of Elders before this or...?

BG: Yes I had talked to them at our monthly meeting that I possibly would resign and that I would make the announcement one way or another in the service following.

RW: What was their reaction to that?

BG: It's kind of like losing a loved one. You're very sad. This is your shepherd. This is your spiritual guide, who is now going to be leaving you. After I explained the situation to them, they had a better understanding of why. They were sad, I don't know what else to tell you.

RW: Did you give any thought to maybe asking for time off or something?

BG: You mean leave of absence or something like that? I guess I never did. I never thought of that.

RW: Or even maybe a call back or something...

BG: Of course, over the years the pastors here have always mentioned that they'd like to see me back in the ministry. I've always sort of set it aside, is the word I'll use. Being on the farm, I was very, very busy as far as work. I'd forgotten how much work there is to a farm. The physical demands wore me out, I guess I'll say and I just never gave it too much thought again.

RW: How long did you farm?

BG: We farmed the dairy farm until 1998, summer of '98, so I guess about 8 years.

RW: That's got to be about the time my Dad got out.

BG: I've been at a factory here in Tomah, the Cardinal IG plant, since then. I don't know if you want to get into the family situation after I got back on the farm or...

RW: Sure, this is as good a time as any to talk about it.

BG: After I was back on the farm about a year, year and a half I was working hard in the daytime and my wife was a night nurse at the local hospital. She became involved with another person... Again, I'm not going to blame her. I'm partly to blame myself. Of course, the time demands of the work on the farm I'm sure kept us from having quality time as a family and she became emotionally involved with another individual so that in '02 we were divorced. She became pregnant. So that's what happened there. And I think part of that too is because of the emotional transition from one vocation to another. When you stop and think about moving from two different areas of the country and, you know, my wife was from the big city and I think the farm life was a surprise for her. She wasn't that well prepared for it. So there's a lot of factors there that may have caused this break up in our family.

RW: I imagine she had a fairly good social network in Oregon before you moved.

BG: Yes, she was quite close to most of the members there too. Well, with being on the farm, being involved with 4-H and so on. That was about the only outlet we had. Either the church here or something like our 4-H group. And being in a large congregation of course, the congregation is a lot different than a little mission congregation. My wife wasn't used to that either because she had never been in a large congregation.

RW: When you left the ministry and came back to farming did you find it difficult to still save time for the Word?

BG: Yes I did. I found it very difficult because my day started at about five in the morning and a lot of days I was still outside at nine o'clock at night. By the time I came in the home, you'd eat and then just about pass out it was so tiring. And so, my Bible reading did slip. I tried to read the *Meditations* as much as I could. I know that that was one thing that was neglected in my

time on the farm, was my personal bible study. I know that you had asked one other question about how my fellow pastors out in Oregon... Of course, after I did resign too, many of them called me and asked if there was anything they could do to help me. And so I have utmost respect for my pastors, and as long I've been in Tomah I've always had utmost respect for my pastors. There's a lot of mental strain in the ministry. Even though I served smaller congregations we still had some counseling problems and so on. There's just a lot of pressure being a pastor and I respect a man that can continue on with all the difficulties they face in the ministry.

RW: Were there any men in particular that gave you any advice? Or even if you don't remember any of the men do you remember any of the advice they gave you?

BG: I remember Pastor Widmann spoke with us, with my wife and I. Besides people that called me by phone, he was the only one I had personally visit. We had a long discussion on why I had left. He didn't try to influence me one way or another. He just left it up to me as to what I thought was best at that time. Looking back at it, maybe I did make the wrong decision. I'm not going to say. Who knows? Things happen and things change and life goes on.

RW: I know God certainly uses you here in Tomah too.

BG: Wherever we're at the Lord makes us of us.

RW: Was Pastor Widmann the circuit pastor or District President?

BG: I believe he was still circuit pastor at the time, but later on then he became DP.

RW: I think I heard you say you talked to him after you had resigned?

BG: We stopped in Portland and I believe stayed the night there and talked with him.

RW: And that was the first you had talked to him about it?

BG: Well, he had called me on the phone too I think. He wanted us to come up and talk to him. We talked about a lot of things. I can't recall everything.

RW: What was the most difficult part? You've mentioned a couple of times the emotional. Was that the most difficult part?

BG: I think as far as myself, the emotional change was difficult. You're going from a leadership role in a congregation. You've always got the feeling that you're letting these people down. You've always got that feeling in the back of your mind that you've let them down. Again I always felt that they were well instructed. They knew their Word. We stressed Bible classes out there. These people were well grounded in their faith and I had confidence that they could continue on and they did. My children didn't seem to have any difficulty adjusting.

RW: There was not a school at that mission church. Part of the decision was to come back to the Lutheran school here. So the logistical difficulties like housing or anything like that?

BG: Of course where we farm we have three homes out there. When we first moved back we did live up on the ridge S. of Tomah off of the farm a ways, but that was just for six months. We had renters in the one home or something and they could stay there until spring. So I think it was April 1st when we moved back on the farm itself. So as far as that, we really had no difficulties with logistics. We became actively involved right away with the congregation. At that time of course, we didn't have any organization for people that had left the ministry, so any counseling I did receive was pretty much the pastors here. I will say this. In '92 when I went through my divorce we did have counseling with WLCFS, which was very beneficial as far as I was concerned. I felt I received as much help as I could at the time.

RW: I have a bunch of questions that I want to save for the second part of the interview. That part really is about coming back to Tomah and things.

BG: You asked me one time about returning to the ministry and I guess I wanted to say, I just saw something here too. There are other factors that have come into the picture now too. Of course being remarried now, my wife and I have seven kids between us. There is a little bit of parental responsibility there yet, and so, at this time it's a tough time to even consider changing vocation again. So I just have to be happy with my place and station in life.

RW: How old is your youngest?

BG: 21

RW: Is that Alicia?

BG: No that's Rachel. So we're still trying to blend these families and point these kids in the right direction.

RW: Is there anything else you'd like to add about your ministry in either of the congregation or about the resignation process?

BG: I guess I can't think of anything more. I enjoyed the ministry, that's all I can say there. You do things you feel you have to do sometimes and I guess I felt I needed to do that at the time.

PART TWO – MR. GERKE'S EXPERIENCE BECOMING A LAY LEADER IN TOMAH, WISCONSIN

Ryan Wolfe: We're back. We talked about your ministry in Washington and Oregon, and the process you went through to resign there. I'm just summarizing. You came back to Tomah. I know there's Gerkes all over.

Bob Gerke: A lot of Gerkes. They're like the Johnsons.

RW: You came back to the farm and worked there. That was in 1990. I don't even know if I need to ask the first question I had there, why you came back to Tomah.

BG: Again, just basically so the kids could be in school here, and I wanted to keep the farm going, and my wife wanted to be closer to her dad, and just a lot of combination of things.

RW: You pretty much had work lined up when you resigned from the ministry right away and I think in that respect you were a little unusual. But I know when you stopped farming you had to find another job. Was that a case where you had something lined up before you stopped milking?

BG: Pretty much, I did do a little work at a cranberry place here. Ocean Spray cranberries. That was a part-time job there. Being still on the farm, I had all I could do keeping awake watching cranberries go by. I wasn't really overjoyed about that job and I put my name in at the glass factory here. The benefits seemed to be pretty good and compared to dairy farming it's not quite the physical labor. I started working there in the summer of '98 and then hired on in December.

RW: Was there extra training required then?

BG: Not really. After a day or two you really know what's going on. A lot of the people working there aren't that educated and have difficulty spelling very simple words. You'll see a note and just have to laugh.

RW: That happens at the Seminary sometimes too. If you would have had to find work right after resigning from the ministry what do you think would have been some difficulties?

BG: Like I said, with our training and our schooling, we're not qualified in many areas. Maybe a possibility of counseling. Or a high school teacher or something like that. I never really gave that a thought either. Otherwise factory work in this area is about all I got left.

RW: What month did you come back again?

BG: October

RW: Did you come right to the church?

BG: Yes I did.

RW: Now, this was the church you grew up in...

BG: This was the church I was confirmed in.

RW: Did you go to the grade school too then?

BG: Yes I did, six years.

RW: What was that like, coming back to the congregation?

BG: I thought I was very well received. The congregation didn't seem to hold any stigma against me. Of course, they've asked me for years, over and over why I left the ministry...I guess it's many different people have asked me over the years. They've always made me feel right at home here. Our kids, too, fit right in at the school and were well liked. They didn't treat us with any favoritism or anything. We were just treated like everyone else. I didn't notice anything as far as bad treatment toward us.

RW: And who were the pastors at the time?

BG: John Kuske and Pastor Buch [Don Buch]

RW: What was it like talking with them or dealing with them?

BG: I remember one day coming in and Pastor Kuske right away asked me, "Which committee would you like to be on?" I said, "Where do you need the most help?" At that time we called it the board of elders and he mentioned that right away. I said, "Well I suppose that would keep me busy." Of course over the years we've changed the name to the board of encouragement, but I've been pretty much a stalwart on the board of encouragement since I've been here. And I've enjoyed it. You get to meet a lot of people you don't see very often in church. So I've gotten to meet more people that way in the congregation. I think most congregation change over every five years in people and, of course this being such a large congregation, it's pretty tough to keep a handle on who's who in the congregation. I do remember that right away they felt they'd be able to use me in that way.

RW: When you first came back to Tomah I imagine a lot of people were surprised to see you, or you know, weren't expecting to see you back.

BG: I suppose there were some that hadn't gotten the word. I suppose it's not something you want to broadcast, that someone left the ministry. I'm sure within three or four months a lot of people here knew already.

RW: You said that pretty much the reaction pretty much in general was a positive one.

BG: I thought it was positive, yes.

RW: What were some of the encouraging things that people did for you?

BG: They would always double check to know if there was anything wrong. I'd say no, that I was very happy with the Wisconsin Synod and do all I could for the pastors that were here and give them the encouragement that they need. I said that I just came back because of family circumstances. Of course, then after a year and a half or two years when I did go through a

divorce I suppose there were other questions that came up. Over time, then I think some of the people in the congregation felt sorry for me. But again, the Lord's ways are always higher than our ways. The Lord's plan was different than what we had planned. I just kept on farming at the time and everything worked out.

RW: Did you have any negative experience coming back or even discouraging things?

BG: I guess it's no different than any congregation. You have your financial strains in this congregation just like in most congregations and I know that puts a lot of stress on our pastors. And you know serving on the boards and month after month you talk about money in the meetings. I feel that large congregations get bogged down on the subject of money at the meetings. I guess my emphasis is always on trying to get more Gospel motivation in the minds of the people. Being an old congregation, many people think the same way they thought forty or fifty years back and it's just something you slowly work at and try to change attitudes.

RW: I think in part because of all the family you have here, was it pretty well known why you were coming back?

BG: I think it was. My mom was always active in the mission circle activities and my dad was from years back a councilman and my brothers have helped out too in the church. The people in the congregation pretty much knew that I was trying to help keep things going out on the farm. I gave it my best shot, that's all I can say. For eight years there. There's a lot of difference between farming and the ministry. You know, one's mental and one's physical. Pretty much.

RW: For sure you're not the only farmer that didn't make it through the nineties. Now you said your brother had back problems.

BG: Yes, my one brother at the time had hurt a disk in his back. He was laid up pretty much for quite some time. My other brother at the time was hauling mail. Basically I just wanted to keep the farm going.

RW: Was your brother a member of the church at the time?

BG: Mm-hmm.

RW: Which brother was that?

BG: Well both brothers haul mail now. My oldest brother is Jim and my youngest brother is Eldon. Eldon hurt his back.

RW: And you said your father had health problems too?

BG: He was unable to walk for quite a long time. He passed away and it's been a while.

RW: SO the congregation really understood then why you came back.

BG: Like I say, with the children being in the school...they all understood as far as I know. They treated us with respect.

RW: You've talked about how people felt about you. What was it like, or how did you feel about coming back and watching other men continue in the ministry?

BG: I've always had full support for pastors. To this day I still receive Christmas cards and phone calls from pastors. I've even spoken at 25th ministerial anniversaries. Pastor Nitz down there in Lake Geneva area. I was down there a year or two back and spoke for his 25th ministerial anniversary. I still have a lot of contacts with pastors yet. Pastor Panning up on the ridge. His dad was one of my professors. One of the pastors in Sparta who now has just retired, I buried his dad out in Ellensburg Washington. Can't think of the name right now, just retired last year.

RW: You buried him, you said?

BG: His dad.

RW: You led the service?

BG: His dad was a member of our congregation out in Ellensburg Washington.

RW: You've been doing some preaching things and other ministry.

BG: When I first came back in 1990 I did preach in Kendall and South Ridge. The pastor was having some heart difficulties and I preached four or five times for him that one summer. Basically since my divorce I haven't preached. I even went up to Onalaska Luther High School and gave a little devotion up there one morning.

RW: What else have you done for the church? I know when I was here...

BG: Well, I've led some Bible classes, like for Vacation Bible School we have some adult Bible classes. I led one class there for the week this summer. I've helped with communion and sometimes it happens during the summer months that two or three people are gone on vacation at the same time and I've been asked a few times to help out there. In any way I can I try to help out. I am singing in the choir now. When I was on the farm that was an impossibility. So I just try to help in any way I can.

RW: Maybe I should explain a little bit too. There's a little bit of a strange perception here in this congregation (I think I'm safe in saying this.) that they like to have the people distributing communion be called workers. And with two pastors and a vicar and a principle and another male teacher [actually there are two other male teachers] that's pretty easy to do, but I know whenever a called worker couldn't do it, or a number of them, you were always the first one on the list and that came up in teaching Bible class too. I think that shows a little bit that the pastors kind of think of you as somewhere between everyone else and a pastor. Do you get that sense? How do you feel about that?

BG: That's normal I think for the pastors to look at me that way. I am a layman now; I don't have a public call into the ministry. Of course, you and I both know that distributing the means of grace, any Christian can baptize. It's just a matter of instructing our people, you know, so that they just understand that these things we've designated our called workers to do, but in the case of an emergency or something we make exceptions.

RW: Now I'm going to draw on your unique position as a pastor formerly, and as a layman now. We've talked about your favorite parts of ministry. What are your favorite parts of being a lay member?

BG: Potlucks. I like social activities. We have the Christmas parade every year; I'm on that float. I try to be where there's some sort of activity involving our people. If it's a carwash, I try to bring the car in if I can. Or with the youth group. Different committees serve for our Lenten services and Advent services. I sure try to support all of them. Just do what I can to keep as many people involved. It's the love for the Lord then you'll do anything.

RW: I don't have that much experience, but even in my vicar year there were times that I felt that if I didn't have this label as vicar or pastor...times I felt that if I didn't have this label people would take me more seriously. People expect me to come to them. Have you found that not having that label "pastor" has helped you in any way?

BG: I think it has a little bit. Most people today now, it's been fourteen years since I left the ministry and a lot of people don't know that in the congregation. When I make my delinquent calls now I don't even tell them right off the bat that I've been a minister. I just want to hear the same excuses that I always hear and give them the Gospel motivation. I think I have a little bit of an advantage over the regular lay worker making a visit on a delinquent because I just have more experience dealing with it. In the size congregation we have, we could have a congregation of delinquents. It's not that the Lord has left me sitting around doing nothing; I'm trying to help even in an area where we have a large congregation.

RW: Have you guys crossed that magic 200 barrier?

BG: I think we're just under it a little bit, not much but we're under, but we've come down to just ten months now instead of eleven.

RW: That pretty good. In a congregation this size I was always pretty impressed by the fact that as many of them got visited...

BG: I think we're catching up a little bit in the last ten years. I know there for a while we were quite a ways behind in delinquents, but I think we've made progress.

RW: There's a number of good men that go out in this congregation.

BG: And they all enjoy going out. I look forward to going out. That's one of my favorite nights of the month is making delinquent calls.

RW: I got to go out with pretty much everyone on the committees and I have to admit, that was something I wouldn't have expected coming into vicar year enjoying going out on encouragement calls. Coming out of the Seminary you say, boy the thing I least want to do is visit people who don't want to see me.

BG: And even where I work, there are delinquents where I work from our church. And I give them a gentle prod every now and then.

RW: In a city the size of Tomah with a church the size of St. Paul it's hard not to work with someone or see someone.

BG: My relationship with all these members is the same. I love all the people. I don't play any favorites. It's just the same as in the ministry; you don't play any favorites there either.

RW: Any other benefits that you see? We talked about having used the Word so often and being familiar with it. Any other benefits from your ministry that you see for the lay worker here today?

BG: Teaching things. My experience teaching things has helped me there with Bible classes. That's always been a joy to teach a Bible class really. The blessings of the work that we do are satisfying. If a delinquent does come back... We never want to take our pastors for granted. Our pastors have these different committees in the congregation knowing that lay involvement is going to strengthen the congregation so being a part of a lay committee is going to strengthen the congregation. We want appreciate the time and the effort that our pastors are putting into all these committees. When you stop and think about all the committees we have in a large congregation, that does take some time on a pastor's part. I think we're striving in the right direction though, that some of these committees don't need the pastor at every meeting. So that's a good thing.

RW: Have you felt at all that because you kind of understand what the pastors, and I know this is a different congregation, but because you know what a pastor's work is like that you are better able to empathize or relate to them?

BG: Pastor Enderle here today...we're what you would say is an old, established congregation and we're living in a day and age where contemporary music is becoming a bigger and bigger thing and I think back when I was in the ministry and the NIV was the big new thing. I think there's a lot of parallels between the transition to the NIV and the transition to the contemporary. There's a lot of stress on the pastors. The style of worship, of course, doesn't matter to me. It's just that a lot of the people are still used to that traditional style of worship. I think that over a period of time it just takes training and instruction. It means pastors have to be patient. I tell them, "Don't get down on yourself and just remember we're doing this all for the glory of God." And things are going to work out here. It's just going to take some time.

RW: I know talking to both pastors, Buch and Enderle, that they said they do appreciate your kind of unique perspective on the encouragement you give and I guess I would say that that's a blessing maybe we wouldn't have guessed.

BG: No matter what we do in the ministry there's always going to be a little laity backlash, no matter what you do. But we go on to try to do it to the glory of God. I guess negativism is just part of sinful nature.

RW: I think that's all the questions I had prepared here for you. Are there any comments you'd like to make about coming back into a lay ministry?

BG: Just that the Lord keeps us busy, whether we're in the lay ministry or in the public ministry. The Lord has something for us to do.

RW: Much work for us to do and not enough workers.

MR. GERKE'S REACTION TO THE MANUAL FOR THE MICHIGAN DISTRICT HELP TEAM

Ryan Wolfe: This is just a quick look at what the Michigan District calls their "help team." I found the information off their website and talked to their chairman. He gave me permission to print this off and I gave Bob a copy of it ahead of time so that he could look at it just to kind of get his reaction to it as a person who has gone through it and as a person with a background in pastoral ministry and counseling therefore, just to see what your reactions were.

Bob Gerke: As I read through this today, Ryan, I was very impressed with this. They have a part in here called transition counseling and what kinds of issues that deal with as far as their emotional state, their marriage and family situation, your vocational aptitudes. From what I can see reading through this, they do a fine job as far as seeing where you are at emotionally, helping you understand your family situation, and as far as your vocation, helping to get you started in another vocation and writing resumes and interviewing skills and so on. They've come a long way since 1990 as far as I can see. In 1990 about all we had then was just the advice of your fellow pastors.

RW: My understanding is that Michigan was the first district to put something like this together. At this point I can't even say what year they started theirs. I do know that in convention last summer the Western Wisconsin voted to approve the formation of one of their own, so they're just starting it right now. I imagine in good form the different districts will just copy what Michigan has done.

BG: These help teams are just there to get the information out to the families that need this. They're not trying to be the pastors of these people; they're just trying to see where they might have some needs and then they refer them to the counselors that they need. And that's where

Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service comes into the picture. And for years, they've been very good with divorce counseling already and I have a high regard for our counselors.

RW: I should maybe say this is a manual that they would give to people joining the help team themselves and one of the things it stresses over and over again is that they should get there right away...

BG: Within seventy-two hours...

RW: Which is remarkable, and I think part of that is, as you say, because their function is to get information out...

BG: not to solve any problems.

RW: In your experience what was the most difficult thing to deal with in leaving the ministry?

BG: I guess not publicly leading the congregation bothers me a little bit. It is a joy to be a public servant of God's Word. It is a joy every time you step in the pulpit to preach to God's people and a privilege. I think, like I said before, we take for granted our pastors and we need to pray for them because they need our support and every time they go into the pulpit the verse they read contain the jewels of God's Word and we want them to be brought forth to the people in as clear a way as possible. I guess that's the one thing I miss the most, is sharing God's Word publicly.

There is an emotional strain when you change vocations. It's a totally different lifestyle from being a farmer to being a minister. I guess in farming you can't spend every minute dealing with God's Word and applying it to situations. In the ministry you get to do that. In that respect you miss something I suppose. To me the greatest calling is a pastor. That's not to put down other callings, but you can't spend as much time in God's Word in any other vocation.

RW: You said earlier, I don't remember if it was on camera or off camera, that there really wasn't a group like this to help you back then.

BG: I would be interested to know how they're doing over there in Michigan. If you ever find me out, let me know.

RW: I've heard great things, and I think the fact that they're being imitated all over I think probably speaks well for what they do.

BG: From what they drew up here, I'm amazed. It's very detailed and gives the help teams a lot of directions. For questions even to ask the people, it's all here.

RW: One thing I wanted to ask. Would you have been comfortable in your situation going through the kinds of procedures that they describe in the manual?

BG: Sure, I would've been. Like I said, we had no really negative reason we came back, so my door would've been always open. It would've been a joy to talk to my fellow Christians.

RW: I know one thing that some of the comments I've read talked about the spiritual difficulties they've faced and I think particularly when a pastor resigns for cause. You left for family reasons and you still talked about feeling like you let the congregation down. I think that judging by what I've read, in a situation for cause, that feeling's even magnified. And so I think that when the help team manual really specifies the spiritual aspect. Would you agree that that is the most important thing?

BG: I would agree that it is the most important thing. Putting myself a year later with my divorce and everything the spiritual part of it, the counseling, was the main thing. And for me, going through my divorce was probably as difficult as leaving the ministry. They say a lingering divorce is kind of like a slow death. My divorce lasted, like, a year and a half. There's a lot of truth in that statement.

RW: In our counseling classes we talked about as wonderful thing it must be to be a secular counselor and help people that way, ministers have such a special extra tool.

BG: That extra tool is the one thing that got me through.

RW: I guess going into this, looking at the help team manual. The things I had thought of were primarily economic. You know, how does a pastor deal with suddenly not having a job, or if you had a parsonage, a home. A lot of these things. I think one thing that the help team does very well is focus the resigning minister himself back on what's really important.

BG: And even the wife and children if a pastor left for cause. They help them too and that's really great to see that. I was very impressed with what they do for the families.

RW: In looking at it were there any specific recommendation you might make?

BG: Nothing that I can improve on. I like everything that they do: They do it quickly; the transition counseling to me is critical, that they get to the right counselors. The emphasis on the emotional and the vocational is very good. I think they've got the nail on the head, is what I would say.

RW: I'm sure they'll be glad to hear that. That's pretty much all I had for the interview unless there was something you wanted to add.