

Providing the Next Generation of Pastors in the WELS: An Essay on the Role of Pastors in Recruiting More Pastors

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When I came to Northwestern College in 1976 and began to get involved with the school's recruitment program, a sense of urgency, if not of crisis, was filtering through our system. The Wisconsin Synod was on the move, awake to its mission responsibilities, growing. "Every State by 78" had become a slogan standing on the threshold of reality. Coincidentally, however, Northwestern's pre-seminary enrollment had suddenly dipped from a high of 290 in 1973 to 242 in 1976 (238 in 1977), even while the CHE was predicting it ought to be growing—as high as 395 by 1989-90 (cf. CHE's "Supplementary Report on Worker Training Facilities" to the WELS, August 1977). On June 10, 1976 Northwestern's Recruitment Committee issued a report on "The Coming Manpower Emergency" calling the outlook "bleak" for pastoral candidates in the mid 1980's. In a January 1977 report, Prof. Jerome Birkholz (then of Michigan Lutheran Seminary) predicted "a low supply of candidates possibly beginning as early as 1982 and continuing through 1988." And he concluded that during those years we "could accumulate a backlog of from 125-175 pastoral vacancies."

A decade later and nearing the end of the critical period targeted by Birkholz, look at what actually has transpired: The enrollment at Northwestern College has dipped to its lowest in 24 years (202 in 1986, 192 in 1963). And yet, instead of the anticipated backlog of pastoral vacancies, we face the danger of a backlog of unassigned candidates graduating from the Seminary.

What happened—aside from demonstrating that we mere mortals make miserable prognosticators? In brief, a number of things happened: At first we as a Synod appeared to respond positively to the call to action. NWC's enrollment grew again, to 275 by 1981. We added a fulltime recruiter. We graduated our largest class in history by the spring of 1985. Larger numbers of public school graduates (17 in 1981) bolstered our enrollment while a thriving Bethany program increased the numbers entering Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (16 Bethany graduates entered WLS in 1980). But, then, we experienced the "low supply of candidates" projected by Birkholz. Acting like a hose with a crimp in it the flow of students to Northwestern slowed drastically. Coincidentally, the rapid mission growth by our Synod also slowed, decreasing the needs for candidates, creating the unexpected threat of an imminent (temporary?) oversupply of workers. So we have today's situation.

Some will see this as a classic case of *deja vu*. The numbers are down. Future shortages are predictable. The push is on. And I'm delivering a paper on pastors as recruiters—as I did ten years ago. Maybe we are coming around the same corner we passed before. If we are, it only means we didn't learn enough the first time around. By the same token, maybe this is a completely different bend in the road with different problems calling for new insights and solutions.

Judge for yourself. But in either case be prepared to do your part in negotiating a new course and a smoother ride. Be prepared to help provide the next generation of pastors in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. We have a responsibility under Christ. He leads the way for us, entrusts potential workers to us, gives us the means to influence them and expects us to give them proper training.

Christ Leads the Way

Ever since the Lord Jesus recruited the Twelve Disciples and told some of them, "I will make you fishers of men," (Matt. 4:19) he has been providing the pastors for his church. "It was he who gave some to be

apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers..." (Eph. 4:11). He, by his Holy Spirit, has led each of you pastors here to your position as an overseer in the Church.

Jesus produces the pastors for his church. That truth can prove comforting whenever we get to wondering where all the prospects have gone. We can leave it in the Lord's hands whenever we think a young man ought to pursue the ministry but doesn't. We can thank Christ when we have our Seminary filled with sufficient candidates to satisfy our needs, as we do today. We can also gain insights for when things don't go smoothly by remembering that Jesus doesn't get his workers by sprinkling magic moon dust on them to draw them irresistibly to the task. Some come kicking and complaining all the way, something like Jonah of old. Contrariwise some who appear to be obvious candidates turn other directions, something like Judas. Nevertheless, the Lord is in control.

Maybe we need to say no more. Jesus provides the workers. Jesus has provided an apparent surplus of pastoral candidates among us for perhaps the next four years. He will provide again when the need presents itself. I suppose that sounds good, that is, if it isn't merely fatalistic thinking. Beware, because it can become a formula for complacency and slothfulness.

Take the matter of need. When Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few" (Matt. 9:37) was he speaking only for the first century or was he stating a general truth for all time? Look around you. The needs are constant. Only our resolve to meet them sometimes wavers. We have never known a time when we couldn't look about us and see fields white for the harvest. We have never and will never lack nations where we can reach more souls to teach and baptize. We do not now lack places to put ministers to work for the Lord, even if we don't look to foreign fields.

I shudder when I think of the implications of us likely having pastoral candidates standing idle in today's world. But we have to believe—and I'm thinking of a living faith that produces works—we have to believe that our mission outreach will be renewed with vigor, that we will grow, and that we will be looking for more and more candidates to do the work. That, however, is not the problem for this paper. Providing the supply of workers we will need is.

That leads us to a paradox which needs our attention. I have hinted at an oversupply of pastoral candidates. I have suggested we have an ample number of students at the Seminary right now. Still I have some grave concerns. The potential shortage of candidates is at Northwestern, not at the Seminary. We appear to be at least five years away from feeling it in the field, but it is coming. Even so, it may not have a major adverse effect on us if—this is the important condition—if we can quickly reverse the trend at Northwestern.

Given the present enrollment at Northwestern and in the special course at Bethany, we can expect four consecutive classes of 40-50 candidates graduating from the Seminary in the years 1991-1994. You have to go back to 1972-75 to find a comparably low sequence of Seminary graduating classes. Meanwhile, year after year we have been calling significantly larger numbers (in the 50's and 60's) to begin their fulltime work in the Lord's service. If the smaller numbers at Northwestern continue much longer, in the last half decade of this century we will either experience a severe shortage of pastoral candidates or a nearly complete stagnation of our mission outreach or a collapse in our educational system. Not one of the alternatives is acceptable.

We have a need all right. In the simplest terms, we need at least 20 more new students entering NWC each year than we've gotten the past three years when we have averaged only 56. Furthermore, Jesus, who must give the increase, wants us to have a part in what he does to get it. He speaks to us about the matter. After telling us the harvest is plentiful but the workers few, he exhorts us, "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." (Matt. 9:38) You begin to help by asking God to help.

Listen to Jesus. The same Savior who says, "Go... Make disciples... Be witnesses... Proclaim the gospel!"—now says, "Pray!" "Ask the Lord of the harvest ...to send out workers..." Here is something you can do often and at any moment to aid in recruiting pastoral prospects. You can, in response to the Savior, look to God and pray for workers. Let your faith in Jesus move you. Let an awareness of the lost souls in this world make you the more fervent. Pray for workers.

Christ Entrusts Potential Workers to Us

Next comes an important step. What should you do after you pray? Let me ask you first: Do you pray for more members in your church and then fail to visit the prospects brought to your attention? Do you pray for missions and then refuse to give any offerings for mission work? Do you pray that the Gospel will work in the hearts of your members and then neglect to preach it? If you agree it is unconscionable to imagine any such praying and consequent neglect, then ponder this: Can you pray for workers and then not say anything about the possibility to the potential workers Christ has entrusted to your care?

The Lord can use you personally to help guide a young (or not so young) man to study for the ministry. He's done so with others. In fact didn't God himself send Ananias to Saul as part of the recruitment process that led the great persecutor to become the great proclaimer? Andrew helped influence Peter. Philip encouraged Bartholomew. Paul influenced Titus and Timothy. In fact, Timothy's case is classic when considering the human element in recruiting pastoral candidates also in our day. When Paul met Timothy, he was a young man who had earned the respect of others in his local congregation. "The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him." (Acts 16:2) Paul, the preacher, therefore, invited Timothy to become a preacher also. The rest is well known history among us.

How can we not, similarly, be on the lookout for prospects? As Paul later instructed Timothy, we too need to entrust the Gospel message "to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others." (2 Tim. 2:2) We too need to be involved in finding and preparing preachers to send into the world even as Paul reminds us, "And how can they preach unless they are sent?" (Rom. 1:15) You, the parish pastors in particular, with all the congregation's young people in your spiritual care, have unparalleled opportunities to promote worker training.

So you agree. You are on the lookout for future pastors. Now comes the hard part. How can you tell who truly has the potential and should be encouraged to become a pastor? The truth is that you can't tell for sure. Think again of Jonah. Would you waste your time on someone with his attitude? How about Judas? With someone of his gifts and willingness you might think you had passed along a veritable gem into the system. And how would you have characterized a person like John Mark who at one point so bitterly disappointed Paul? (cf. Acts 15:37, 38)

The uncertainties continue. One student enrolls at Northwestern who surely won't make it, probably can't make it, maybe shouldn't make it. Yet he does and functions well as a pastor. The next student comes along loaded with abilities—someone who can't miss. He misses, and we look for reasons why.

Nevertheless, don't let the difficulties daunt you in your efforts. The Lord himself gives us some guidelines so that the process isn't as unstable as it may appear. To begin with, remember that he can use men from a variety of backgrounds to become his pastors, e.g., farmers, fishermen, tax collectors, physicians. In the most recent survey taken at Northwestern, in fact, we discovered that fully 40% of the student body had no previous family contact with NWC or the ministry. In recent years, an average of only 25% of pastor training students has been pastors' sons (a percentage that seems to be increasing, however, as the number of prospects with public school background has decreased). In other words, we need to view virtually every young man in the congregation at some point as a potential prospect.

Then we can narrow down the field by applying such guidelines as the Lord gives. Based, for example, on the qualifications Paul by inspiration recorded for "the overseer" in the church (cf. 1 Tim. 3:2-7) you might look for the following important characteristics in a potential recruit:

- Does the individual show signs of being *able to teach*? This qualification presupposes an ability to learn. Keep in mind, however, that a person does not have to be an "A" student in order to be able to teach; nor does every "A" student make a good teacher. While you should look for gifted students, remember that average students also may make good ministers.
- Does this person *get along well with other people*? A minister must work with people. Look for signs of an even temperament, friendliness, loving concern and gentleness. Does the prospect enjoy a good reputation with authorities and with peers?

- Does the student demonstrate *faithfulness* to God's Word and faithfulness in carrying out assigned tasks? Faithfulness suggests commitment and motivation. Such persons feel good about serving God and people. They are dependable.
- Does the young person reflect *a sense of propriety and of priority*? How does the individual respond to the temptations of drink sex and related "youthful lusts?" How much do money and other material things matter in this person's life?

We have some guidelines and we know from our own experience that God uses us even with our many failings, so we should have no trouble spotting prospects.

Christ Gives Us the Means to Influence the Prospects

When you feel you have a bona fide prospect you'd like to influence, be sure to tell him your feelings. Tell him that "here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task" (1 Tim. 3:1). Emphasize the "noble task." Tell him what makes it noble, because not many young people think it necessarily is. For example, among today's young people preparing for college the career of "clergyman" ranks among the least popular choices (cf. "Chronicle of Higher Education," September 4, 1985). You tell him because next to his parents your influence means the most. (A number of independent surveys support the importance of the pastor's influence in getting young men to study for the ministry.)

Don't let the emphasis on your influence surprise you, even if you've doubted seriously whether you have any meaningful effect on the teenagers in your congregation. Yours is the most obvious influence; for Christ has established you as the role model, as the living example of what a pastor is. Some young persons have no other perception of the ministry than what they see in you. For you, the pastor, then, recruitment literally needs to be a way of life because your whole way of life communicates to potential prospects what you really think about public service to God.

You have likely heard the expression, "What you are doing speaks so loudly I can't hear what you are saying." Don't let that happen when it comes to encouraging prospects for the ministry. What impression do you leave with others of your own experience as a pastor? Do you complain often and otherwise reflect the "pressures" of your work? Do you sigh frequently, frown more than you smile, and appear generally spiritless? Do you have horror stories to tell about the ministry and the people you have to serve? If so, you are communicating a loud negative message about the ministry. If you appear unhappy, you'll have trouble convincing others they'll be happy doing what you do. If you don't appear to have a high regard for the "noble task," why should anyone else set his heart on doing it?

You significantly enhance your own status as a recruiter when you practice what you preach and enjoy doing it. "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus..." (Col. 3:17). Live your faith. Let your light shine to the glory of God. Set your own heart on being an "overseer" and show that your heart is in the work. Talk about your own good experiences in the ministry. Tell what they mean to you. Tell of others' experiences too as you have opportunity. Keep close to the young people in your congregation and be enthusiastic about teaching and working with them. Let them know you like them and your work. Be upbeat about your calling.

In case you're beginning to wonder, I am not suggesting that you play act, put on false fronts or otherwise pretend just to impress potential prospects with how wonderful the ministry is. I am suggesting, rather, that the ministry is special enough to generate such enthusiasm naturally. But be honest. Let prospects know that, as with all of life, the ministry presents challenges and stresses with which you have to cope. Then underscore for them how God gives you the strength and enthusiasm to carry on.

Of course, God has made you much more than a role model to your flock. Christ has entrusted you to take the lead in their spiritual training, "teaching them to obey everything [he has] commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). You have it inherent in your call to emphasize repentance and faith, faith and works, the Great Commission and service to Christ. You are out there by God's grace leading in worship, preaching and

teaching. Use your opportunities well. Let your prayer for workers become also the congregation's repeated, fervent prayer. Let the Lord's call for workers resound also from your pulpit—with special emphasis as on Recruitment Sunday—with renewed emphasis as we review the work we have to do “while it is day” (Jn. 9:4). Let your teaching, in Catechism class and Bible classes, reinforce the motivation (Gospel), the need (sinners) and the particular opportunities (witness) each person has to get involved in the work.

The Catechism class, in particular, introduces you to the young people. There you can talk with the emerging teens and future leaders in the church. You can get down to cases. Impress upon them, for example, the burgeoning field about to break open in Brazil, the cry for more help in Taiwan, the need to replace departed workers in Japan, the potential to begin 25 new churches every year in our own country. Then tell them where we need to get the pastors and missionaries to do the work. Talk about the roles of pastors and teachers, the divine call and the necessary preparation, showing them what God's Word means to you in your call by the way you treat your class. Be patient, helpful and friendly.

I cannot overstress, however, the importance of personal contact once you have identified specific prospects you would especially like to see in the ministry. In recruiting, too, the old truth applies: “Everybody's business is nobody's business.” The young man listening to your inspirational thoughts in church or in class may never become aware that you consider him in particular a serious candidate to actually pursue the ministry. What you say personally and privately to a prospect or to his parents can make a more lasting and meaningful impression than what you say to every student.

Just recently, for example, I spoke with Mark, one of the active laymen in our Wisconsin Synod, as he lamented that his pastor never gave him a single word of encouragement regarding the ministry when Mark was younger. If the pastor had said something, Mark believes he would have followed the suggestion. Whether or not Mark's hypothesis is true, it is true he looked for guidance from his pastor and did not get it.

Are you giving such guidance to the “Marks” in your congregation?

You have the opportunities. You see the young people in class, around the school, at church, in their homes. You can show some genuine personal concern for the individual and for the kingdom of God. Get to know him more personally and you will be able to talk with him more freely. Watch for your openings. When you see him exhibit a talent or a trait useful in the ministry, for instance, such as a good grasp of Scriptural truths in Catechism class, leadership qualities in the YPS, a willingness to work hard on volunteer projects at church—commend him in private and tell him how he can employ such a trait in the Lord's work.

By all means, then, persevere. Just understand that persevering is quite different from pressuring or pushing. A young student has to arrive at his own decision under God without feeling coerced. You don't coerce, however, when you repeat your words of encouragement. Repetition is the mother of learning and the handmaid of recruitment. The idea may take hold only gradually, but the youthful prospect will know you mean it when you repeat it.

While you're planting the idea, make sure he's not the only one to hear it. Get to his parents too. I emphasized a bit ago that you have considerable influence over a young person thinking of the ministry. Nevertheless, you can waste a lot of energy if you don't get support from the parents at home. In fact, a friend shared a newsclipping with me last fall that supported this contention (“Why Young Men Do Not Become Ministers,” Adapted from Harpeth Hills Herald, n.d.). It stressed that parents shape the value system and parents provide the definition of success for their children. It lamented, furthermore, that parents do not always practice at home what they say at church. It asserted that “parents produce pastors.” We need to reach the parents.

I was abruptly reminded of that article a couple of weeks ago when I attempted to call, Jon, a prospect for Northwestern College. Jon is already a sophomore in another college, but he has been talking about switching his direction and studying for the ministry instead. A cousin put me in touch with him, but so far I had only written. When I called, I ended up talking with Jon's mother since Jon had already returned to school. In answer to my queries, Jon's mother revealed that she and her husband had talked with him about the ministry. Then with an iciness that chilled the rest of the conversation, she announced, “We advised him to stay where he is and finish. He can study for the ministry later if he wants to.”

She's right, of course. He can try it later. But I'm still wondering, "What if they had advised Jon to try the ministerial studies now while he's searching and debating?" As things stand, my best guess is that we'll never see Jon as a brother in the ministry.

So work with the entire family. Help parents get enthused over the prospect of their sons serving the Lord as pastors. Arrange for family visits, perhaps, to our worker training schools as one way of building the enthusiasm. Try to convince the family of a prospect in high school to have him attend the Focus on Ministry retreat at Northwestern College. Finally, the advice you received out of the seminary about how to help keep your congregation active and interested applies here also, namely, get into the homes and use your opportunities there.

Christ Expects Us to Give Proper Training to the Prospects

Now, before we say more about how you can help, let's briefly look once again at the basic reason we have the educational system we do. Once again we get our cue from the Lord. When he said to Timothy through Paul, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth," he gave us a good idea of what our training program for the ministry should accomplish. Thank God, whatever else we may care to say about our pastor training curriculum, we have an entire synod of pastors prepared to correctly handle the word of truth.

Admittedly, to accomplish that, we have made sometimes unpopular academic demands on the men preparing to become pastors. Some have turned away or been turned away. Some have faulted the system and specific schools in the system for the setbacks. Some pastors have shared in the criticisms. Some of the criticisms have undoubtedly been well-founded, some groundless or uninformed. Nevertheless, the system has worked better than most to produce shepherds who are continuing in Jesus' word.

Although this line of thought may seem like a digression, I assure you it is not. Nor is it an invitation to discuss specific elements of the pastor training curriculum. I entered upon it because of a conversation I had with the mother of a Northwestern College prospect last November in Michigan. She spoke of her daughter and her husband (a newly ordained Missouri Synod pastor) and a vicar from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. And she spoke critically of how we educate our pastors. It seems the vicar and her son-in-law had met and compared notes about their educational background. The young pastor boasted of endless courses and clinical training in counseling in his synod's program. Supposedly our vicar in turn merely lamented the void in that area in his background. He envied the other.

Without belaboring the issue, I suggest to you that the wrong man was doing the lamenting. The Lord Jesus called us to preach and teach his word and to administer the sacraments. While counseling enters the picture, and might sometimes seem dominant in the picture, it too must happen in connection with the word. Our emphasis on the word is the proper focus.

Having said that, let me get back to our point of focus and how you can help us, by suggesting to you: "Value your education." And be prepared to teach your prospect to value it equally. We have something distinctively Christian, distinctively Lutheran, distinctively WORD-centered. And when you help a young man struggling with the Greek participle to see the positive value of that study, you help him stay on course toward the ministry.

In that spirit, you will have no trouble encouraging a high school freshman to tackle the pastor's course. You can say with conviction to a high school senior who didn't take the course that an extra year of undergraduate work is not only common for students in many colleges but an asset in his case at Northwestern. You can enjoy following his progress, keeping in touch, and encouraging him along the way. You might even want to find out from him if there is anyone quite like "Smilely" teaching at NWC any longer.

Yes, keep in touch with the students from your church and with the school. You may be surprised to learn of the ways in which we have changed over the years without losing sight of our primary purpose.

As you work to encourage the prospects in your congregation, you will experience some setbacks and some successes. It's much the same as your efforts at outreach with the Gospel. You keep on working and you

keep on rejoicing when things work well because you see the hand of the Lord in the process. On the other hand, when things don't go as you hoped, you also have to battle against discouragement because you in the weakness of your flesh are involved. So don't let setbacks discourage you from trying again and again.

This thought about setbacks, however, can help us bridge to one final area of concern. I'm referring to the feeling apparent in some that once you have recruited a prospect for Northwestern College you have recruited him for the ministry. He's one of your successes. There is no turning back. Your job is finished.

Believe me, we at Northwestern wish it could work that way. We don't like "setbacks" any more than you do. Nevertheless, we see students with doubts, students who are struggling, yes, many students who still don't know for sure about becoming pastors. We, in turn, work hard to keep your prospects in the program. We therefore also enlist your continued help while they are at Northwestern. We need to encourage prospects until they are in the ministry, not just until they are in the program of study.

There you have it. You and I have shared the privilege of serving as pastors in God's Church. With the privilege comes the responsibility to help produce the next generation of pastors. Jesus has led the way for us to see the need. He has entrusted the next generation to us now. He has given us the means to influence them. And he has shown us what he expects from those who will try it. In Jesus' name, let's get to work.