

Seminary Stories

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The doctrinal disputes within the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod have been seen in various ways throughout the last two generations. It is the purpose of this study to see how these theological divisions have manifested themselves in recent years at the seminary level. At the present time Pastor Mark Story from the Lutheran Church Canada is attending Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary as a colloquy student. He has allowed himself to go on video record discussing his seminary experience in the Missouri Synod. This video interview, conducted December 4th, 2008 at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, serves as the main focus of this study.

Two other surveys have been filled out by former LCMS pastors Daniel Iwinski (now serving as a WELS pastor in Moline, IL) and Michael Smith (now serving as an ELS professor at Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary in Mankato, MN). These surveys lend perspectives from different times and circumstances in order to flesh out the experience of the average LCMS seminarian in the past 25 years. None of these men seemed especially eager to cast stones at their former synod. They all remember fondly their days studying God's Word at Concordia Fort Wayne or Concordia St. Catherine's. However, it was their love of the Word that led them to eventually leave Missouri and share some of the theological conflicts they observed there.

Pastor Mark Story attended Concordia St. Catherine's in Ontario, Canada, from 1992 to 1994. St. Catherine's is a seminary of Lutheran Church Canada, which is in altar and pulpit fellowship with LCMS. There were only six professors and thirty students at Concordia St. Catherine's when Pastor Story attended. This small seminary is located on the campus of Brock University, a school of 8-10,000 students.

Before his Lutheran seminary days, Story had been a Methodist pastor and had worked as a salesman for 7 years. It was during his time as a salesman that he came into contact with the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod "by way of a conversation with a gentleman that I worked

with.”¹ Pastor Story had had some familiarity with Lutheranism from his studies as an undergraduate, earning a B.A. in history.

One of the first questions asked of Pastor Story was: “Did the average seminarian at your school perceive the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod as divided?” “Generally no,” he responded. But then he was quick to add that many students were “idealistic” in their view of the LCMS. “I was very naïve as to what exactly was going on in the Missouri Synod Canada.” Pastor Story said that out of all the Concordia seminaries, “St. Catherine’s is probably most conservative... It was started as a result of Seminex and the problems at St. Louis in the seventies.” Nevertheless, even at such a seminary, Story maintained that “there were certainly camps.”² These will be discussed later.

Professor Michael Smith, who from the fall of 1983 through the spring of 1985 attended Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, IN, had this to say regarding divisions at the seminary: “I do not know if ‘divided’ would be the proper descriptor, but most of the student body was aware that there were divergent opinions and views held in the synod.”³

In contrast with Pastor Story and Professor Smith, Pastor Daniel Iwinski considered his student body very much divided. While attending Concordia Fort Wayne from 1996 until 2000 he noticed that people were “divided into theological ‘cliques.’”⁴ Division was also apparent in the occasional debates among professors. Pastor Iwinski described an open debate on campus between Dr. David Scaer and Dr. Walter A. Maier II regarding John 6 and whether Jesus was

¹ Mark Story, video interview by author, Mequon, WI, 4 December, 2008.

² *Ibid*

³ Michael Smith, email interview by author, 30 November, 2008.

⁴ Dan Iwinski, email interview by author, 6 December, 2008.

speaking of the Lord's Supper or not.⁵ Smith and Story do not recall any open debates between professors when they attended seminary.

All three men appreciated the very high view of Scripture that was taught at their respective seminaries. Pastor Story did not remember any of the students openly disagreeing with this view of Scripture, while Professor Smith recalls that "there were a few students (very few) who were a bit more 'open' to other views of Scripture. But they generally did not cause problems in class." Pastor Iwinski said that all his professors held Scripture to be infallible and inerrant. Even when disagreements were raised by the students, "there was a lot of trust in the approach to Scripture and the professor's commitment to the Biblical texts."⁶

With such a high view of Scripture, one wonders how any theological difficulties could arise in the LCMS seminaries. Nevertheless, in the Missouri Synod all three men had their struggles with church and ministry, fellowship, and church discipline. Story, Smith and Iwinski were all willing to share their seminary observations regarding these topics.

Pastor Story described the worship life at St. Catherine's as "very rigid" and "quite high church." Everything was very liturgical with chant playing a big role. While there are similarities between the worship Pastor Story has experienced at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and the worship of St. Catherine's, "most of the services at St. Catherine's were not preaching services. We had a number of local LCMS or LCC churches surrounding the seminary and for a preaching service a local pastor would come in and do that. Sometimes seminarians would preach but that

⁵ Daniel Iwinski, *WELS-LCMS Relations 1993-2007*, p. 3.

⁶ Dan Iwinski, email interview by author

would be rare.”⁷ Pastor Story described the average worship service as lasting 25-30 minutes and being highly interactive, filled with call and response.

Story, Smith, and Iwinski all came away from seminary with a very high view of the pastoral office. “The office of the public ministry equals pastor.”⁸ As a result of this view, there were few student preachers and no lay distribution of communion. “Even in an emergency situation that would be frowned on.”⁹ In Pastor Iwinski’s experience at Fort Wayne, “when communion was held on Tuesdays a local congregation ‘sponsored’ the communion and the students were all ‘guests’ of that hosting pastor.”¹⁰

“High church” seemed to be the majority view of worship. However, “there was a tremendous breadth of views on the ministry” according to Pastor Iwinski. Some students had such a high view of the ministry that they would not even allow church voters meetings. Others took a very low view of the ministry “where in essence everyone, as part of their Christian faith, has a public call into gospel ministry.” In fact, Pastor Iwinski “personally knew men that wanted to eliminate any ‘office’ of the pastor as a recognized gift from God and replace it with a more generalized ‘priesthood of all believers’ with a general and personal call into public ministry.”

When asked what his view of worship was after leaving the seminary, Story said that “there was a degree of flexibility. I realized that worship doesn’t have to be like at St. Catherine’s everywhere. I was able to differentiate between the seminary and the church at large.” Iwinski and Smith also left their seminaries with a deep appreciation for liturgical

⁷ Mark Story, video interview by author

⁸ Micahel Smith, email interview by author

⁹ Mark Story, video interview by author

¹⁰ Dan Iwinski, email interview by author

worship and an understanding that variety was possible. Story said that in LCMS “Worship is not the problem. The problem is more deep seeded. Missouri has never fully recovered from what took place in the 1960’s and 1970’s.”

It is not easy to understand the divisions that exist within the LCMS. Pastor Iwinski has observed five theological camps in his former synod. They are High Church, “Waltherian,” “Gospel Only,” Charismatic, and Liberal.¹¹ In his written interview, Iwinski pointed out that these names are not the official Missouri Synod labels, but solely represent his opinions. “However, brief commentaries outlining the above named ‘camps’ have been written about by Iwinski in Christian News and other places (Luther Quest.org) and were received favorably as identifying the main competing camps within the MO. Synod.”

These groups perhaps require some explanation. The Waltherian group holds a conservative view of fellowship and most resembles the historical beliefs and practices of the Synodical Conference. The “Gospel Only” group does not practice closed communion and has little time for church discipline. The Liberals are generally “weaker on the roles of women.”¹² The High Church party has already been discussed and the Charismatics will be mentioned later in regards to Professor Smith and his decision to leave Missouri.

Each of the men interviewed were asked if they observed these groups at seminary. In his small, conservative seminary, Pastor Story did not run in to many Liberals, Charismatics, or those who belonged to the “Gospel Only” camp, but he certainly came into contact with those promoting High Church. He said that the students and professors who leaned toward High

¹¹ Daniel Iwinski, *WELS-LCMS Relations 1993-2007*, p. 4.

¹² Michael Smith, email interview by author

Church were described as being “high as a kite” or referred to as “spikes.”¹³ Although these terms were thrown around jokingly at seminary, Pastor Story said it was “somewhat disconcerting” when as a pastor he heard that one of his High Church professors left Missouri to become an Eastern Orthodox priest.

While all three men described their student body as mostly Waltherian with a strong High Church influence, these other groups were not unknown. At Concordia Fort Wayne in the early 80’s, a few of the faculty were perceived by the students as being Liberals or holding “Gospel Only” views. Professor Smith mentioned a fourth year student in his dorm who was “amenable to the charismatics.” As has already been mentioned, Pastor Iwinski perceived the 1996-2000 student body of Fort Wayne as being divided into theological “cliques.”

Today the issue of woman pastors is often seen as the dividing line between “confessional” and “non-confessional” Lutherans in the Missouri Synod.¹⁴ None of the three men interviewed recalled the role of women in the church being discussed much at the seminary. “It was said that there were some of the professors that held to ‘weak’ views about the role of women in the church. But since in the LCMS it was allowable for a congregation to have women’s suffrage, this should not be a surprise. I really don’t recall it being a topic discussed much among the students.”¹⁵

After discussing the role of women in the church, Pastor Story answered some questions about church fellowship. I asked Pastor Story: “What did you perceive as the role and responsibilities of your synod in exercising doctrinal discipline?” He did not recall whether or

¹³ Mark Story, video interview by author

¹⁴ John Brug, *News and Comments: It’s not Your Grandfather’s Missouri Synod*. Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Vol 105, #4, 2008, p. 297.

¹⁵ Michael Smith, email interview by author

not the synod's role of doctrinal discipline was ever vocalized to him at seminary. As a seminarian, Smith understood the synod, primarily at the district level, to be responsible for doctrinal discipline in the congregations. However, during his vicarage he saw that "this responsibility did not always translate into action."¹⁶

Because the LCMS distinguishes between "church" and "synod," Pastor Iwinski explained that there is not much interest in exercising doctrinal discipline at the synodical level. However, he observed that there certainly was need for doctrinal discipline at the seminary level. "I do remember having a classmate who believed in evolution and who rejected Genesis one and two as history. To my knowledge absolutely no discipline ever took place."¹⁷

Another source of fellowship conflict for these men was the practice of closed communion. At seminary they were taught to exclude from the Lord's Table anyone not in fellowship with Missouri. However, they all saw this practice violated as pastors. "Several pastors would have no problem communing someone who professed faith in Jesus as their Savior."¹⁸ As will be discussed later, Smith and Iwinski saw communion practices that gave them pause already during their vicarage.

Concerning fellowship, the men were asked how they viewed other Lutheran Church bodies as seminary students. Pastor Story said that "WELS was pretty much unknown in Canada." He had heard that the people in WELS were "supposed to be somewhat restrictive and oppressive." Smith and Iwinski expressed similar views. Smith said that WELS pastors were viewed as "those guys in black robes that are against everything." All three men agreed that as

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Dan Iwinski, email interview by author

¹⁸ Mark Story, video interview by author

seminary students they viewed ELCA, and the church bodies that would eventually make up ELCA “as those who had strayed from true Lutheranism.”¹⁹ None of the men interviewed recalled hearing much about ELS or CLC at the seminary.

The purpose of this study has been to observe how the theological divisions in LCMS have manifested themselves in recent years at the seminary level. On the basis of these three interviews, it seems that division has gradually become more pronounced over the past twenty-five years. In the early 80’s and early 90’s, both Pastor Story and Professor Smith viewed their student bodies as theologically united. “The only ‘cliques’ I can recall would be that of on-campus single students and the off-campus married students...but I do not recall there being theological divisions as such.”²⁰ However, from 1996 to 2000 Pastor Iwinski had a different experience.

While attending seminary I was saddened and distressed that there was so much difference of belief in issues such as the office of ministry, the nature of fellowship and even the approaches to missions and evangelism. While attending seminary I questioned if that was the right place for me. However, in my life that was all that I knew directly, and there were always just enough truly good and godly people for me to have hope for the future.²¹

For all three of these men, the decision to leave the LCMS came while they were serving in the ministry. For professor Smith, the doctrinal “wake-up call” came early. “My first vicarage assignment put me squarely on the path to looking elsewhere.” Professor Smith was part of a campus ministry that “was quite liberal/ecumenical.” Open communion was practiced, and his supervising pastor was a practicing charismatic with some higher-critical views of Scripture. After witnessing this man pray over four different women for healing and the gift of tongues,

¹⁹ Michael Smith, email interview by author

²⁰ *Ibid*

²¹ Dan Iwinski, email interview by author

Smith decided that he could take no more. He successfully requested a transfer and was sent to a very conservative congregation in Waterbury, Connecticut. However, after a thorough study of the Synodical Conference and its demise, Smith began looking elsewhere. "I had come to the conclusion that I could not see myself serving as a pastor in a heterodox synod."²²

Pastor Iwinski also left Missouri on account of his observations in the ministry. He was particularly dismayed by the lack of discipline regarding closed communion. After serving as an LCMS pastor for eight years, he felt that he "truly understood the concept of Biblical fellowship in both theory and practice. I changed in my theology from the MO Synod position on fellowship to that of the WELS."²³

Pastor Story's leap from Missouri to Wisconsin was a bit different. A personal conflict with the Missouri Synod's vice president put Story on the path to looking elsewhere. When asked to describe "the events and observations that lead him to leave the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod," Story chose instead to focus on the positive things that led him to the Wisconsin Synod. "Three things brought me to Wisconsin...Strong biblical emphasis, mission emphasis and the emphasis on caring for souls with the gospel of Christ."²⁴

For these strengths, we in the Wisconsin Synod need to thank our gracious Lord. It is only on account of his mercy that this can be said about our synod. The three pastors interviewed each had unique seminary struggles. Learning about their experience has led me to appreciate the doctrinal unity that exists among the faculty and students of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. May we never take this tremendous blessing for granted.

²² Michael Smith, email interview by author

²³ Dan Iwinski, email interview by author

²⁴ Mark Story, video interview by author

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