



**PREACHING IN PARADISE:
A LOOK AT THE PUERTO RICAN VICAR**

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For the last thirty-three years, thirty-one young men from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary were called for their vicar year of service to *La Isla Del Encanto*, the Island of Enchantment – Puerto Rico. Many of these men were pulled from classes on the day before call day and were presented with a challenging and unique vicar experience. The feeling is unanimous that their year of service in the Caribbean was life changing. These men were blessed with the opportunity to learn a different language and a different culture, changing their own worldview. They were able to share the gospel message while wearing shorts all year round, also spending time on beaches and doing some sightseeing on the small island measuring 40 miles by 100 miles in between the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea. What a blessing and privilege to be able to say to others that one spent a year – PREACHING IN PARADISE!

Brief History of Puerto Rico and WELS Mission Work in Puerto Rico

Puerto Rico was discovered by Christopher Columbus on his second voyage to the New World. As many of the tourist attractions in Puerto Rico are quick to point out, Columbus made a note in his diary, proclaiming Puerto Rico to be the most beautiful of the islands (maybe a claim all the islands adopt). Columbus landed on the island, which the Indians called Boriquén or Borinquén, in 1493 and claimed the land for Spain. He named it after San Juan Bautista (St. John the Baptist). In 1508 Juan Ponce de León founded the first settlement, Caparra, and in 1521 moved it 4 miles away to a small peninsula along a beautiful bay. He called it Puerto Rico (Rich Port). The whole island eventually became known as Puerto Rico and the capital city as San Juan.

Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony from 1493 until 1898, when it became a part of the United States as a result of the Treaty of Paris, which ended the Spanish-American War. During those 405 years, the foundation of Puerto Rican culture was laid: the Spanish language, the Roman Catholic religion, architecture, and art.

The Indian population (mainly Taíno) dwindled and disappeared soon after the arrival of the Spaniards, leaving behind countless place names and other influences on the language and culture of the island.

To replace the Indians the Spanish imported slaves from West Africa to work the land. Slavery was abolished in 1873, but by then many elements of African culture had been absorbed into the island's heritage. In the 19th century there was also significant immigration from Europe, South America, and other Caribbean islands.

Puerto Rico became a possession of the United States in 1898 as a result of the Spanish-American War, US citizenship was granted to its inhabitants in 1917, and the island became a self-governing U.S. commonwealth on July 25, 1952. Elections are held every four years. The vast majority of Puerto Ricans have supported either commonwealth status or efforts to become the 51st state, however a small, but vocal, minority supports independence. For those who were able to see them, the campaigning for these elections is just one of the many fascinating aspects of the Puerto Rican culture.¹

The synod made plans in 1964 to enter Puerto Rico. Articles in the Northwestern Lutheran made sure that the plan of the WELS in Puerto Rico was no secret.

“We propose to select able men, missionaries, as did the congregation at Antioch when it shows Paul and Barnabas. We propose to arm them with God's Word. We propose to support them in the field with enough to take care of their needs so that they may be free to preach the gospel. We propose to support them with the prayers of those who love the gospel. But beyond that we expect those who hear

¹ www.gotopuertorico.com

the gospel and accept it will bear from the very beginning the burden of local support. Out of that way of going at things we hope not only to spread available mission dollars over the earth, but we also hope to be able to build strong, indigenous churches which will themselves carry forth the banner of Jesus.”²

The following is a timeline to outline the men and the events that God used to carry out this purpose.³

- 1964 Missionaries Rupert Eggert and Roger Sprain arrived on the Island of Puerto Rico and worked in San Juan and Humacao.
- 1966 Missionary Sprain began work in Guayama. Missionary Eggert began a radio outreach effort in Humacao.
- 1967 The first member is confirmed
- 1972 Missionaries Martens and Flunker arrived to replace Missionaries Eggert and Sprain.
- 1972 The first chapel was built in Barrancas near Guayama. Worship services had been held for various periods of time in Yaurel, Las Mareas, and Grand Stand Branch.
- 1977 Missionary P. Hartman arrived and began to serve in Humacao.
- 1981 A congregation was organized in Guayama.
- 1983 Mission work began once again in San Juan by Missionary Flunker.
- 1984 The first Latin American Delegate conference was held in Mexico. Delegates from each congregation attended. Congregations began to contribute monies to a central fund controlled by the missionaries. The funds are to be there to help pay for future Puerto Rican pastor’s salaries.
- 1986 Missionary Horner replaced Missionary Hartman.
- 1987 Missionary J. Strackbein replaced Missionary Flunker and Missionary R. Baerbock replaced Missionary Horner.
- 1988 A chapel was dedicated in Guayama.

² Pastor R. Zimmermann, *The Northwestern Lutheran*, 1964, p. 318.

³ Adapted from Pastor John Strackbein’s essay, “Focus on Puerto Rico: 35 years of God’s Grace – 1964-1999.

1990 A national church was organized. The constitution was signed on Reformation Day at the Pabellon de Paz in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The national church was named the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church of Puerto Rico. Miguel Cortijo was elected president. An education committee began working on a catalog for the Bible Institute.

1991 Missionary T. Satorius arrived and replaced Missionary R. Martens.

1992 Sergio Cortijo graduates from the Bible Institute. The first national assembly after initial organization asks each individual congregation to study the pros and cons of considering goals that would lead to self-supporting churches in fellowship with the WELS.

1993 Missionary T. Zimdars arrives and replaces Missionary R. Baerbock. The seminary is organized and Sergio Cortijo is the first student. A Puerto Rican evangelist helps WELS in the exploration of Cuba.

1994 The Nation Assembly of the IELC (Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Church) accepts a plan of action that would lead it to become a completely self-supporting church in fellowship with WELS. One missionary would be freed up to go elsewhere shortly after one Puerto Rican graduates from the seminary and is called into full time service in Puerto Rico. The goals for graduation of three full time Puerto Rican pastors and one part time pastor are 2002, 2004, 2008, and 2010. Based on these projections, dates that missionaries can plan to enter other countries are 2004, 2008, and 2012.

1995 The IELC of Puerto Rico is accepted as a member of the CELC.

1996 Manuel Monroig is second Puerto Rican to enter the Seminary. WELS missionaries turn book keeping of national funds to the national treasurer.

1997 Lutheran church in Antigua asks the Puerto Rican church to send evangelists to reach out to immigrants from the Dominican Republic to Antigua. The national church begins funding visits every two weeks of Puerto Rican expatriate missionaries and five Puerto Rican evangelists. A Caribbean Pastoral conference and a Caribbean lay delegate conference are formed.

1998 Missionary Satorius is sent to Antigua on loan for one year because of the respond to the mission work there. Vicar N. Wagenknecht is asked to stay an extra year to cover Missionary Satorius' responsibilities in Humacao.

1999 Missionary Satorius is called to remain in Antigua. Vicar N. Wagenknecht returned to the Seminary, so Manuel Monroig was called to serve as an emergency part-time pastor in San Juan to allow Missionary Strackbein to serve the church in Humacao. This was also the year that the WELS transferred the titles of the chapels in San Juan and Guayama to the national church.

2000 Missionaries S. Wagenknecht and P. Rydecki are called to Puerto Rico. Missionary Wagenknecht replaced Missionary Zimdars in Guayama/Barrancas. Missionary Rydecki is called to serve Humacao and do exploratory work in Caguas.

2002 Sergio Cortijo completes his nine years of seminary training and becomes an associate pastor in Guayama/Barrancas.

2003 Pastor Sergio Cortijo becomes lone pastor at Guayama/Barrancas when Missionary S. Wagenknecht accepts call. Manuel Monroig completes seminary training and becomes pastor in San Juan. The Latin American Traveling Theological Educators is formed, serving Puerto Rico as one of it's posts to handle all seminary level training.

2004 Missionary Rydecki accepts call to Mexico. Tito Madera is called to serve as student/pastor in Humacao. No plans are made to send any missionaries to Puerto Rico for the time being.

The Vicar Program in Puerto Rico

In 2004, when Missionary Rydecki accepted the call to Mexico, no WELS expatriate missionaries were left on the island, meaning there were no supervising pastors at the moment ready to take on a vicar. After thirty-three years of fun in the sun, the vicar program would be put on hold for the time being. The future of vicars in Puerto Rico will be discussed later.

The very first vicar to Puerto Rico was Carl Leyrer, back in 1971. Pastor Roger Sprain, who with Rupert Eggert was one of the first two WELS missionaries to Puerto Rico, lays out two primary reasons for the vicar program to get started on the island, "The work in Guayama area began to expand very rapidly, especially among the poorer classes (at first). So there was more work for us to do than we could. Also we felt that in the future, synod was going to need more Spanish speaking personnel." So Carl Leyrer was assigned to serve his vicar year in Puerto Rico, has been known as Carlos since, and

officially became “the great WELS experiment” in sending a vicar to a World Mission field.

Pastor Leyrer explains the feeling of being the “guinea pig”, “I felt some pressure. The grand experiment was: can a vicar learn the language in six months? The biggest pressure was that, since this was the first time, there was no one to give me any guidance. I had to figure out everything on my own. I made a lot of mistakes in the process but I also gained a lot of self-confidence.” The grand experiment proved to show that it was feasible to have a vicar learn and live a different culture and language while still picking up the much-needed experiences of pastoral work. To accomplish these two aspects, the Puerto Rican vicar year was basically broken down into two parts: language training and then vicar service (which can also strongly be considered continuation of that language training).

Language Training

The pressure of learning the Spanish language wasn't only felt by Pastor Leyrer as the first vicar to Puerto Rico. It would not be too bold of a statement to say that the pressure of learning Spanish is the biggest concern to all as they left their homes and headed South. The manner in which these men learned the language was similar: an intense schooling combined with living with a host family to create a true immersion in the language and the culture. Although this was the basic philosophy to learn Spanish, the location of where our men studied has changed throughout the years.

The first four vicars were sent to La Universidad Interamericana in Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico, a school which “collapsed” during the tenure of the fourth vicar, Lynn Wiedmann. As for the curriculum, Leyrer explains, “The school specialized in offering

advanced degrees to those who taught Spanish in the U.S. Most of the students were already fairly fluent in Spanish. It was not designed to be a school for beginners, which is what it was. To say the least, the first months were intense.” Pastor Philipp Lehmann described the program, “[There were] classes from 8 AM through 1 PM, class at 3 and private tutor from 4 to 7 PM, five days per week – a full language curriculum, with literature, philosophy, cultural studies, and half hour daily of “dance” class or related to learn of the native arts.” It sounds as if it were almost impossible NOT to learn the language with such an intense schedule.

With the language school in Saltillo dissolving, a new location to send these young men ready to jump into the immersion pool needed to be found. Thus, the WELS began sending those who needed to learn Spanish to El Instituto Cultural Mexicano Norteamericano in Guadalajara, Mexico and ultimately used this school for about the next twenty years. The days at this institution were not as quite as full as in Saltillo, described simply as “classroom training in the morning, immersion training in the afternoon” by Pastor Herb Huhnerkock. Many of the vicars who studied here recalled the long and boring tapes they listened to sent from the US to supplement their studies. The school had one weakness - the inconsistency of enrollment, as Pastor James Connell comments, “The Spanish program at this school received a lot of attention during the summer months when there were plenty of students who came from the States and Europe to study Spanish. However, September through November it was touch and go. Personally, I learned the most during those smaller classes, but there was always the possibility those smaller classes might be cancelled.” There was one special teacher that has a special place in many former Puerto Rican vicars’ hearts, Sra. Palomera. She took

our WELS missionaries/vicars under her wing and offered private, intensive one on one tutoring to them in their free time at her home. “My head just hurt after that tutoring, but it was really good and enjoyable,” remarked Pastor Richard Pamperin. Pastor Connell added, “”What a lively lady and what a gift for teaching! There was never a dull day nor a dull moment in her classes.” Just another case of God providing the neatest people when we need them most.

In 1994, Missionary Larry W. Schlomer and his wife, Marlene, moved to Monterrey, Nuevo Laredo, Mexico and found the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, a school well known for its international language training program. Pastor Nathan Wagenknecht gave a solid summary of the program each vicar went through from 1994 until 1999:

The summer session started with a placement test to gauge proficiency in Spanish. Students were placed in Beginner I, Beginner II, Intermediate I, Intermediate II, Advanced I or Advanced II level courses. (I tested into Intermediate I for the summer.)

In the summer intensive program, there were two classes a day; one was for reading and writing, the other for listening and speaking. Classes were supposed to be conducted purely in Spanish, but often the students would get frustrated and the teacher would give in to explain something in English.

In the fall semester, the reading/writing and listening/speaking classes continued, but not as intensively. We were also encouraged to take two or three other classes in Latin American culture, history, literature, communication, etc.

The international program of ITESM occasionally arranged trips to various locations throughout Mexico, usually on extended weekends. I was able to go to Zacatecas/San Miguel de Allende/Guanajuato on one trip and Puerto Vallarta on another.

To help the total language immersion process, students were encouraged to live with a Mexican family. I lived with the Trevino family where former vicars had also stayed. The father and sons spoke some English, but they usually spoke only in Spanish to force us to communicate in Spanish faster.

The move to Monterrey allowed for another benefit to learning Spanish. Our sister synod in Mexico has a congregation there, which proved to be of great value to the vicars. Here they were able to worship in Spanish, practice with the members, learn all the theological jargon one doesn't pick up at school, and even participate in leading worship once a level of comfort in the language was reached.

The new millenium brought about another change in venue for those headed to Puerto Rico. There had always been an adjustment period, three weeks or so, to get accustomed to the various nuances of Puerto Rican Spanish – the speed, vocabulary, “spanglishisms”⁴ - as Pastor Lynn Wiedmann recalled, “I remember hearing (on my first night in Puerto Rico) a mother yelling at her child. I could not understand one word of the ‘machine gun’ Spanish I heard.” Pastor Thomas Behnke felt the same way, “I was pretty fluent...until I got off the plane in Puerto Rico and realized they spoke an entirely different dialect than Mexico. I took a couple of weeks for my ears to ‘catch up.’”

For this reason and also to learn the Puerto Rican culture better, it was decided to have the Puerto Rican vicar learn his Spanish in Puerto Rico, beginning with Pastor Ryan Heiman in 2000. He studied in Guayama. The schooling there consisted mainly of one-on-one tutoring for four hours every morning, with afternoon conversation in the community whenever possible. There was one drawback as Pastor Heiman recounted, “Because of learning Spanish and being involved in the congregation before we knew Spanish caused many members to have poor first impressions because, when we didn't

⁴ With Puerto Rico's close ties to the United States and many Puerto Ricans knowing at least some English, some of the vocabulary of the English language has been adopted as regular Spanish conversation vocab in Puerto Rico. For example, the words “parking,” “sandwich,” and “freezer” are all used instead of the normal Spanish words one would use in other Spanish speaking countries.

know Spanish, we didn't communicate much, until we knew it better." This program also lacked the immersion aspect of living with a host family.

The following year, New England School of Languages in San Juan became the organ for equipping the vicars with Spanish. This program too proved to have its weaknesses as Tutor Martin Vallesky reflects, "[The program] was designed for 2-4 week stays, not necessarily to make progress over four months – strong on speaking practice, but not all teachers could explain grammar well." Paul Biedenbender also found some difficulties studying in San Juan, "So many Puerto Ricans know English that the struggle one needs to work in a language in order to learn it is too easily avoided. You can go to a McDonald's, obviously looking like a white guy, and they go and get the manager who knows English to come take your order. I really had to be blunt about wanting to practice Spanish because so many around me in my supposed immersion wanted to speak in English."

The big test for every vicar came when that last day of Spanish class was over. Now it was time to get to work. That raises a huge question in one's mind, *Can I really do this? Am I fluent in the Spanish language?* Fluency has a wide range of definitions. Studying at a language institute can get you to one level of fluidity, but the rest must come through practice and experience as Pastor Michael Roth explains:

I definitely felt I was ready to go to Puerto Rico. I knew there was still a lot that I needed to learn. Fluency is not an exact science either. There are many levels of fluency. I was definitely at a low level of fluency. I also knew, though, that what I needed to learn wasn't going to come any more from the classroom. What I needed beyond that I would have to get from using the language "on the street." In that sense, I was definitely prepared and ready to go. My Spanish now is definitely better than when I arrived in Puerto Rico, but that doesn't mean I wasn't ready.

No one considered himself one hundred percent fluid in the language. Most shared the same sentiments as Pastor Philip Strackbein, “I was not fluent, but I could get along.” It was a scary thing to now think that the comforts of the classroom were gone, the safety nets had been pulled away, a time to question one’s own abilities. But looking back, many would agree with Pastor Phil Hirsch, “I was apparently more ready than I thought I was at the time.” After four to six months of studying, it was time to put that language to work in vicar service.

Vicar Service in Puerto Rico

In comparing a vicar’s experience in Puerto Rico with the experience of one who served stateside, there are many similarities. In Puerto Rico, the vicars were a regular part of the preaching rotation, taught Bible Information Classes, Confirmation class, and Sunday morning Bible classes, and worked with the youth. Both vicar programs gave the seminary student the chance to look at himself, thanking God for the gifts he was given and praying for the tools he still lacked.

In looking at the differences, the language training process explained above stands out. Not too many other vicars came back to campus with another language under their belts. Those vicaring in Puerto Rico preached sermons where a language struggle was the biggest concern and delivery work somewhat secondary. Pastor Hirsch shared his feelings on preaching when returning to Seminary:

I graduated from the Seminary in ‘86 with a grand total of eleven English sermons in my files. I didn’t think of myself as a preacher and I felt quite inadequate and quite inexperienced. In retrospect, vicar year was the best thing that could have happened to me – as far as preaching was concerned. Sitting in the living room in San Juan for worship on Sunday night was invaluable. Preaching to a ‘real’ congregation in Guayama was almost normal. In short, I thought I missed out on learning how to preach well. But, even then, I was quite aware of the many, many other benefits that I had acquired, so I wasn’t sad about the experience, in

comparison to classmates. Far from it. I felt many times that I wished I could have shared such experiences with someone who actually had the same experience. Right or wrong, I felt unique.

Also, the vicar from Puerto Rico came back, as Pastor Connell explains, missing out on some of “the administration of a larger church, i.e., the council meetings, organization of the different committees (evangelism, education, youth, stewardship, worship, etc.) In the world mission setting, we pretty much served as the leaders in these aspects of the ministry while trying to teach and build up leaders for the future.” But this wasn’t necessarily a bad thing as Pastor Leyrer commented, “In retrospect, I did lose out on the traditional vicar experience (traditional Bible studies, hospital visits, conducting meetings, etc...). However, the experience was beneficial in other, less concrete ways. I learned how to think on my feet – to expect the unexpected – to be flexible, in short, to survive. That training has always served me well.”

Many of the vicars found themselves “running the show,” so to speak, because of the furloughs missionaries were allowed during the summer months. Getting the news that your bishop was taking off for two months was eye-popping news to a vicar fresh from language training, still feeling a bit overwhelmed by the idea of doing just a few little ministry items initially. No major damage was reported on any accounts. Another situation unique to Puerto Rico, but of great benefit to those blessed to part of it.

The worker training system in World Missions is also quite different and something a few of these young men got to see develop as the Puerto Rican church grew. It really put things in perspective on the blessings the vicars had in being able to prepare for the ministry as a full-time, typically single, student. Admiration and respect for the Puerto Ricans studying for the ministry is easily gained in a short while. Pastor Wagenknecht (a current faculty member of LATTE), like many former vicars, hold the

highest respect for these men, “The dedication of these men stands out in my mind. They all worked full time and had families, yet were willing to study in preparation for the public ministry and serve both their congregation and the national church. All participated in a preaching rotation which included all four congregations of the national church. They all wanted to serve the Lord and his people.”

The majority of the vicars lived and served primarily in Guayama, also ministering to the church in Barrancas (which the first vicars were able to help to build physically digging, laying bricks, painting, etc...). A few lived and worked in Humacao. But being on such a small island, the vicar found himself being available for service all over the island. For this reason, many vicars had more than one bishop. One missionary was designated as the official evaluator, but all the missionaries were there to offer support and guidance whenever needed.

There were a few exceptions of those assigned to vicar in Puerto Rico. Two men, Pastor Herb Huhneskock ('75-'76) and Pastor Mark Jeske ('76-'77), ended up serving in Medellin, Colombia. As Pastor Roger Sprain explained the circumstances that lead to this unique opportunity, “We had rapid growth in Colombia in the first years. Because of the need we asked that the switch could be made. However, it did not last because of the visa problems that arose. The first one and maybe the second one got in quickly, but after that it took too long to get them into the country with a work visa.”

Living in Puerto Rico

The living situation varied among the vicars. Most were single, some were married. Some lived in a hotel room that was built to house sugar cane workers during the harvest season sharing a bathroom with most of them. Some lived adjacent to their

bishop or rented a room from a local family. Many of the vicars in Guayama found themselves living in a carport/turned apartment owned by a couple from the church, Rafael⁵ and Candy. This “vicar pad” collected many utensils, household items, and jars of salsa that were passed down through the years.

There are many fond memories of the relationships between the vicar and the missionaries and their families. They became family during the year. Many meals were shared. The holidays were usually spent together. The missionaries and their wives understood firsthand what the vicar was having to adjust to and were right there to offer support, guidance, and love when needed. Sometimes being lonely was a part of the vicar life in Puerto Rico, but God blessed these men with “family” in their new home.

The relationship with the members of the church in Puerto Rico still have place in the heart of those who served there. These brothers and sisters in the faith made the tough transition easier, as Pastor Connell put it, “I felt very comfortable with the members from the very beginning. In one sense they were accustomed to vicars coming in and then leaving after a year. As in all relationships, there is a period of getting to know each other. Yet the initial warmth grew to strong friendships and mutual trust.” As Pastor Timothy Otto recalls, “Member visits were so enjoyable as the people received me as if I was their own blood.” It was not a rare occurrence for a member to invite a vicar over for an authentic Puerto Rican meal and a game of dominoes.

Living in Puerto Rico also meant adjusting to the culture. Adjustment number one - taking your watch and pretty much throwing it out the window. It is a laid back situation. Pastor Thomas Bernthal expresses that “worship started twenty minutes late as

⁵ Incidentally, it turns out that Rafael had been a professional wrestler in Chicago some time back which made for some interesting stories.

a norm, and meetings starting one to one and a half hours late as a norm.” This easy-going attitude wasn’t only seen in the church by the vicars as Prof. Brian Dose remembers, “I would get frustrated waiting in a twenty-minute traffic jam because two friends in vehicles heading in opposite directions stopped in the street to visit. One time the post office line was backed up for fifteen minutes or so as the clerk talked to an older lady about her grandchildren.” But learning this patience was important as Pastor Otto learned the lesson of “the importance put on spending time with people i.e. a quick wave just doesn’t cut it.” It is also proved to be quite remarkable to many former vicars that Puerto Rico celebrates every United State’s holiday as well as their own national holidays, making for a lot of days off of work and closed stores when least expected.

Many of the vicars had the availability of a vicar mobile during their stay. This afforded them the chance to learn all about the somewhat “ugly” side of the culture – driving. Pastor Wagenknecht remembers driving in Puerto Rico:

Driving styles took some getting used to. Guayama was not a large city, so it was not too bad for driving in. But during busy times in the day you could still find yourself in stop and go traffic. On the freeways during rush hour, the shoulder and even the grass in the margin became traffic lanes for people in a hurry. Driving was often “fend for yourself”, but it was greatly contrasted in Guayama when someone would be turning onto the main street from a parking lot or side street. Traffic from both directions would come to a complete stop in order to let the other person in. Day or night. Heavy traffic or almost none at all. They would stop to let the other person in—even if there was no other traffic and the street would have been completely open if the car on the main street had simply gone past.

The stories of the men who lived in Puerto Rico are enough to make this history hundreds of pages long. The situation of a naïve boy in a new culture with a new language is a breeding ground for humor. But in all the fun, yet humbling times, a young man was given a foundation that would mold his future ministry.

What vicaring in Puerto Rico means to me...

This portion is simply a listing of summaries/reflections on how the vicar year in Puerto Rico has affected both the man and the ministry.

Puerto Rico set the direction for my ministry (Carl Leyrer)

Fully transformed my view of the ministry. I might have not continued on, were it not for the vicar year in the Hispanic missions. So much insight into what the Gospel reach into the world was all about...The whole experience taught me the value of evangelical/evangelistic outreach into the far corners of the world, among all who may not speak as we do nor live life as we do. That gave me a depth of inspiration and insight which have ever fueled my labors in the stateside parish. (Philipp Lehmann)

My vicaring experiences in Puerto Rico were valuable to me in allowing me to meet many different kinds of people and in preparing me for a life of work among non-Americans. It has been a blessed privilege to be associated with Spanish speaking, Chinese speaking, Thai speaking, and other peoples around the world (Robert Meister)

It gave me a desire to be a “mission supporting” pastor no matter where I would be. I had an opportunity to experience a “global” view of wealth and poverty which continues to allow me to look at myself and my own country with different eyes. I learned that no one comes to faith by my fine, persuasive words, but that the power of the gospel is sufficient to overcome the stumbling, bumbling of the preacher, and the cultural biases of both speaker and hearer. It gave me a better understanding of the time and patience (along with careful instruction) that are necessary to develop a mission field, and an awareness of just how much everything we do depends on the God who gives the increase. (Lynn Weidmann)

When I began studying for the ministry, my dream was to be a pastor of one of those white churches on bulletin covers that are surrounded by trees in summer or snow-covered in winter. God never fulfilled my dream but he has given me something much better – the ability to be able to share his gospel truths with people of another culture and language in places that are far from those mid-western scenes that I once dreamed about. There is no greater thrill than preaching God’s Word, I know. Yet there is an extra charge from doing it in another language with his help and for his glory. (James Connell)

I learned not to complain about not having “things” for ministry, and that the gospel can be preached and taught anywhere, even under trees and next to sugar cane fields. (Thomas Behnke)

Many times I've wished that many more of my pastoral colleagues could have had such an experience. (Phil Hirsch)

It opened my eyes to the world "out there" that I never experience growing up in "isolated" Montana. I found there is a lot of diversity in culture that is not wrong, just different. That has helped me understand different personalities in people I deal with daily in my ministry. (Thomas Bernthal)

My vicar year changed my life completely. I've often said that it was the second most significant event in my life (after my baptism). I was a typical white American WELS pastor's kid. I had lived a relatively sheltered and in many ways (although I did not understand this at the time) a very privileged life. I was pretty arrogant – again, without realizing it. So, first, my vicar year opened me up and showed me a world that was much bigger than what I knew. Second, it humbled me. It became very clear to me that although I excelled in academics, there was a lot more that I didn't know. Third, it gave me a whole new perspective on life, school, ministry, the church, politics – everything. Fourth, it taught me that understanding a culture or a group of people does not happen by looking from the outside, but rather by living on the inside of it. Fifth, it taught me what Christian love was all about as I gained some of the best and greatest Christian friends I have ever had. They were patient, loving and willing to teach me about their lives and their world. I can never repay the debt I owe them. Sixth, I learned that education comes in many ways and from many different sources – not just the classroom and not always taught by the "highly educated." (Michael Roth)

It was the best vicaring experience I could have had. It taught me that although I was an educated seminary student, I would only be able to communicate like a kindergartner. It taught me there is more than one way to do anything, except go to heaven. I think that I owe a great deal to my supervising pastors for their love and examples of faithful service. (Richard Pamperin)

The Future of the Puerto Rican Vicar

As far as the future of the vicar program in Puerto Rico, it is on hold for now, but Pastor Jon Buchholz, a member of the Administrative Committee for Latin America and a former Puerto Rican vicar, states the possibility of resurrecting the program isn't dead.

For fiscal year (FY) 2004 the Administrative Committee for Latin America (ACLA) was compelled by budget constraints to reduce the number of Latin American vicars to one. It was determined that, with the presence of expatriate missionaries in Mexico, that country would offer a better vicar experience and better achieve the goal of enhancing the ministerial training of men who are preparing in the seminary to become pastors. The FY 2005

budgets present additional challenges, as the ACLA was unable to provide budgeted funding for even one Latin American vicar, hoping that such funding would become available from extra-budgetary sources and special gifts.

For the future the ACLA will likely evaluate the possibility of having a vicar serve in Puerto Rico under the supervision of national pastors, but a number of factors would have to be considered very thoroughly before such a program could be implemented. Would the vicar have a sufficiently broad-based vicar experience under a national pastor? Would such a program meet the high standards of our Mequon seminary for a pastor in training? What issues would have to be addressed if oversight and reporting were carried out by national pastors, without expatriate supervision of the vicar? These questions--and others--highlight challenges that might not make implementation of such a program likely in the near future. Time will tell.

Through the past thirty-three years, God has blessed young men with a life-changing ministry opportunity – vicaring in Puerto Rico. Looking back at what he did for these men during that year (or two, in some cases) and how he equipped them for their future ministries, we thank him for his grace. Ministry is something no one is capable of doing on his own. It is only through the help of the Holy Spirit that we are able to serve others with the Word. What an added blessing to see that Word work in another language and culture! Such an experience is truly a blessing from God for those who were able to spend a year preaching in paradise.

THE VICARS OF PUERTO RICO

1971-72	Carl Leyrer
1972-73	Philipp Lehmann
1973-74	Robert Meister
1974-75	Lynn Weidmann
1975-76	Herbert Huhneskoch (Colombia)
1976-77	Mark Jeske (Colombia)
1977-78	Philip Strackbein
1978-79	Edward Spreeman
1979-80	James Connell
1980-81	Thomas Behnke
1981-82	No vicar assigned
1982-83	David Sweet
1983-84	Brian Dose
1984-85	Phil Hirsch
1985-86	Richard Pamperin
1986-87	Richard Pamperin (stayed on for extra year as Senior Student Assistant)
1987-88	Timothy Satorius
1988-89	Jon Buchholz
1989-90	Thomas Bernthal
1990-91	Daniel Voigt
1991-92	Thomas Zimdars
1992-93	Steven Dorn

1993-94	Larry Schlomer
1994-95	Michael Roth
1995-96	Timothy Otto
1996-97	Stephen Mueller
1997-98	Nathan Wagenknecht(stayed on for one more year as Senior Assistant)
1998-99	Timothy Westendorf
1999-2000	Arthur Faught
2000-01	Ryan Heiman
2001-02	Martin Vallesky
2002-03	Seth Haackenson
2003-04	Paul Biedenbender

Missionaries/Bishops in Puerto Rico

Roger Sprain
Rupert Eggert
Ralph Martens
Charles Flunker
Paul Hartman
Thomas Horner
John Strackbein
Ron Baerbock
Tim Satorius
Tom Zimdars
Steven Wagenknecht
Paul Rydecki

Puerto Rico Vicar Interview

Name:

Year of Service in Puerto Rico:

Language Training

- Where did you go for language training? For how long?
- Describe the program.
- Did you consider yourself fluid in Spanish when you were done? (In other words, were you ready?)

Vicar Service

- Where did you serve? Who was your bishop?
- When did you start?
- What kind of duties did you have?
- Did you feel capable of handling the duties?
- How was your year of service beneficial to you as you came back to the Seminary?
- In comparing your year with the year of your classmates, did you find that there were some valuable aspects of church work that you missed out on because you were in a World Mission setting? If so, explain.

Living in Puerto Rico

- Were you married or single at the time?
- What were your living arrangements?
- How was your relationship with the members? The people of Puerto Rico in general?
- What were the most notable differences in culture?
- What were the hardest adjustments you had to make?

Memorable Moments

- What events, people, etc... stand out in your mind as you think back to your year in Puerto Rico?
- Could you share any memorable stories that may make this paper more interesting?

Where are they now?

- Where has the Lord taken you since your time in Puerto Rico?
- Has Spanish been a part of your ministry since your vicar year?
- Have you been involved with World Missions in any aspect since then?
- Please summarize how vicaring in Puerto Rico has proven to be a valuable asset in your ministry today.