

The Seminary's Ministry to Parish Pastors

By Wayne D. Mueller

[This is the second in an anniversary series of articles describing the seminary's purpose and role in the life of the church.]

The primary calling of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary is simply stated in its *Catalog*: "... to offer theological training for men who desire to enter the public ministry ..."ⁱ By far most of the time and energy of the board of control, administration and faculty is spent on carrying out this main task. We all know why the seminary is here. It is here to train men to be parish pastors.

Yet there is another direction in which Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary directs its energies wholeheartedly. That is its ministry to those who have been graduated from the seminary and who presently serve as parish pastors. Parish ministry is not exactly what it was ten years ago. Ten years ago it was not exactly what it had been twenty years before that. Thus the reality of serving in the public ministry today is the struggle to apply a powerful and changeless Word to a challenging and changing world. Everything Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary teaches its undergraduates about the Word of God it teaches in the context of the public ministry. Because that context is always shifting and changing, the seminary has always felt a need to minister to its graduates.

The service which Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary has given to parish pastors is not a supplemental program or effort. No formal policy statement exists which categorizes the seminary's labors outside the classroom as a "secondary calling." Rather, all of the seminary's ministry to its graduates is seen as an integral part of its primary purpose. The reality of the changing forms and challenges of parish ministry demonstrates why Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary considers its ministry to the parish pastor essential to maintaining its integrity over against its primary calling. If the faculty is not constantly involved in current parish life, the seminary classrooms immediately lose the flavor and context of the real ministry the students will soon enter.

The faculty's involvement in today's parish life is important also for maintaining the integrity of the instruction which the synod's pastors and missionaries received during their seminary years. In the face of new troubles and unexpected difficulties, pastors and missionaries need to know that the timeless, changeless message of the Word they were taught at the seminary is still applicable to the many new masks the devil is wearing.

Some of the seminary's service to the parish pastor is very carefully planned and programmed. This is true especially of the opportunities for professional growth that are offered on a regular basis. The seminary *Catalog* establishes the relationship between these opportunities for professional growth and its primary goal of training men who desire to enter the ministry:

In line with this single purpose of training men for the public ministry the Seminary also endeavors in various ways to offer opportunity for theological and professional growth to those who already are active in the public ministry of its confessional fellowship.ⁱⁱ

One of the more formal and certainly the longest running program of the seminary involving itself in the growth of parish pastors is the Fall Pastors Institute. The 1978 *Self-Study* briefly presents the history of the institute:

The first Pastors Institute was held in the summer of 1952. With a few exceptions an institute has been held on the Mequon campus each year since that time. In later years the institutes were arranged for the autumn.ⁱⁱⁱ

Under the present format for the Fall Pastors Institute two faculty members each prepare a series of lectures on an exegetical, historical, doctrinal or practical topic. These lectures are presented on five consecutive

Monday afternoons in September and October. About an hour and a half is allowed for each lecture and discussion. A small fee is charged those who attend the lectures. The Mequon lectures are usually attended by several dozen pastors from Wisconsin and Illinois.

Satellite Pastors Institutes are held every year in various locations throughout the synod. By faculty resolution these satellite lectures involve only one professor at a time. Satellite institutes are usually presented in one to three days. In 1987 the Mequon and three satellite lectures were heard by 175 participants, most of whom were parish pastors.

Another formal, though more recent, program for the continuing education of parish pastors is the seminary summer quarter. Following the first summer quarter sessions in 1972, then President Carl Lawrenz stated the purpose of the graduate study program in his report to the seminary board of control:

The objective of the summer quarter in all the theoretical and practical courses offered, and to be offered in the future, should be that of helping those enrolled to become even more proficient in their work of preaching and teaching in the public ministry of Christ's church.^{iv}

What is significant about this statement buried deep within reams of old board reports is that it typifies the behind-the-scenes commitment and attitude of the seminary board, administration and faculty toward its former graduates who are out in the parish ministry. The seminary purposes also to serve its graduates, to minister to our church's public ministers.

Summer quarter sessions have been held every year since 1972. The total enrollment during those years has been 773, involving 357 men. This does not include the Summer Quarter in Israel or the Reformation Lands Study Tour participants. The summer quarter condenses a full quarter's work into three weeks of intensive study. The three-week sessions run from late June through early July.

The summer quarter brochure indicates that the purpose for these special sessions is the same as it was when first reported to the board of control in 1972: "Through these courses the Seminary wishes to provide an opportunity for theological study and professional growth to men already active in the public ministry."^v

Those who have attended summer sessions know that this growth is not limited to the classroom. Many of the summer quarter participants stay in the dormitory for most of the three-week sessions. The interchange of ideas among participating pastors and the informal discussions among summer students and professors lead many to feel that they have participated in a three-week pastoral conference.

The vicarship program is another point of contact which the seminary maintains with the parish ministry. After their first two years of seminary study, all students are required to spend one year serving in a parish. This requirement has been obligatory for every new class entering the seminary since 1963.^{vi} The exchange of information which occurs in this program benefits the seminary student, the congregation he serves, his supervising pastor and the faculty of the seminary. The vicarship program was originally designed to help the various congregations and institutions to which undergraduate seminary students were assigned.^{vii} In 1963, however, when a year of vicarship service became mandatory for all seminary students, the main focus of the program's benefit shifted to the student.

The value of the vicar program for the student and the congregation since that time has been obvious. The congregation receives the student's ministry as service to the church. The student receives invaluable experience in a practical setting. But there is another great value in the vicar program which must be recognized as a part of the seminary's ongoing contact with parish life. That is the benefit that the supervising pastors and the seminary faculty receive from each other through the vicar and by means of written and oral communication.

Supervising pastors are made keenly aware of their integral part in the seminary's training program when they receive their first vicar. "When the Synod made the vicar year an integral part of the Seminary curriculum, the pastor who received a vicar now became involved in the Seminary's program."^{viii} Supervising pastors are regularly reminded of the close connection they have with the seminary's work in the newsletters they receive at the end of the calendar year from the faculty:

It is particularly in the matter of training the next generation of pastors that our roles overlap. The faculty here at Mequon is very much aware that while we can help students gain a measure of knowledge and learn some theory, all of what they acquire here in the classroom is intended for use in the practical work of the parish ministry.^{ix}

It is probably not an overstatement to assert that the vicarship program more than any other formal or informal effort by the seminary keeps the seminary involved in the practicalities of parish life and at the same time keeps parish pastors in touch with what is being taught at the seminary. The seminary faculty and the parish pastor get to know a lot about each other's work. From each new vicar the supervising pastor gets a reading on the work professors are doing in the classroom. The seminary in turn keeps close contact with the practical life of the ministry. The supervising pastor's written report to the faculty, the noticeable improvement in the returning vicars, and the returning vicars' stories about parish experiences help to keep the reality of parish life before the whole faculty and student body.

In order that these lines of communication between the parish pastor and the seminary faculty remain open, the seminary has regularly sponsored seminars for the supervising pastors. The first of these seminars was conducted in 1975 and a second in 1980. Materials and presentations from these first two seminars were condensed in a *Supervising Pastor's Manual* in 1982. The last of these seminars was held in 1985. The seminars with supervising pastors allow both sides to be reminded of the other's continuing goals. Pastors review the level of knowledge and competency second year students can be expected to exhibit at the beginning of their vicarship year. Seminary faculty members are updated on the kind of work vicars are expected to do in the parish and what applied skills the seminary needs to cultivate in them in order to prepare them for that important year in their training.

Another way in which the seminary serves the parishes of the synod and at the same time learns from them is through the seminary library. The seminary library offers many services to the constituents of the synod, but these services are most often requested by and supplied to parish pastors. The most frequent request made to the library staff is for the development of bibliographies for research and conference papers. These requests come through the mail from pastors and missionaries all over the world. Pastors learn from the seminary in this way because the most recent work, published or unpublished, by faculty members is brought to the attention of pastors by the library staff. The seminary learns from parish pastors, since through their requests the faculty gets a reading on current topics of interest, what conferences are scheduling on their agendas and what kinds of study papers are of interest to the church's pastors.

The Fall Pastors Institute, the seminary summer quarter, the vicarship program and the services of the seminary library comprise most of the formal, regular contact of the seminary with parish pastors. Into this category belongs also the occasional lecture to which Milwaukee area pastors are invited. Formal programs such as these have kept the seminary and parish pastors in regular communication with each other. Yet the greatest involvement by the seminary in parish work most likely occurs in the contact individual faculty members have with parish life. The most noticeable of these are the writing assignments which professors accept.

Seminary professors all regularly contribute to the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*. This theological periodical serves the theologically trained workers of our synod with religious news, homiletical helps, recommendations for the pastor's reading and library and, especially, with exegetically based theological studies. Some professors are regular contributors to other synodical periodicals, such as *The Northwestern Lutheran* and *The Lutheran Educator*.

Seminary professors have been involved in the revisions of three of the most practical teaching tools of our parishes. Professors Blume and Jeske worked with the editors of the *New International Version* of the Bible. Under the direction of the Board for Parish Education Prof. David Kuske worked with many parish pastors and teachers to produce *Luther's Catechism*, a thorough revision of the question and answer section of Luther's *Small Catechism*. Prof. James Tiefel is presently serving on the Joint Hymnal Committee, which is working on

the revision of *The Lutheran Hymnal*. The many contacts of the seminary faculty with our parishes as a result of participation in these projects have inestimable practical value.

Service to the parish pastor and his parishioners has been the intention and the result of almost all of the published writing by seminary faculty members. Service is certainly the theme of Prof. Joh. P. Meyer's commentary on Second Corinthians entitled *Ministers of Christ*.^x Prof. Irwin Habeck's many years of parish experience shine through the pages of *Amazing Grace*, his study of Ephesians.^{xi} Dr. Siegbert Becker's thorough knowledge of the Bible and decades of teaching are evident in *The Distant Triumph Song*, a study of the Book of Revelation.^{xii}

Many of the books written by seminary faculty members are directed specifically to the needs of the modern parish pastor. *Preach the Gospel* was written by two experienced homiletics instructors, Professors Richard Balge and Joel Gerlach.^{xiii} True, it serves as a textbook in the seminary's classrooms. But the authors note a broader purpose for the book in the Introduction. They want this book to serve as "a helpful review of homiletical theory for one who has been practicing the art and science of preaching for some time. It offers tools for self-criticism and practical hints for improvement."^{xiv}

The desire to reach beyond the classroom and into the parish pastor's work life is the primary aim of *Sermon Texts*, edited by Prof. Ernst Wendland.^{xv} *Sermon Texts* is intended to replace other outdated pericope books in the pastor's library. *The Shepherd under Christ* was the joint effort of Professors Armin Schuetze and Irwin Habeck.^{xvi} The subtitle of this book says that it is a textbook for pastoral theology, but many students study and reread this book more after their graduation than before. Another practical book, co-authored by Prof. Schuetze, is expected to be published soon.^{xvii} It applies a wealth of biblical insight to the complexities and pressures of modern pastoral counseling. No doubt this book will also, at least initially, have more readers among our pastors who are in the midst of counseling than among our students who are studying in anticipation of it.

Many other published titles could be mentioned. They would include various volumes of *The People's Bible*, Bible study books, conference essays and special studies, such as *Luther Lives*, a volume of essays written by members of the faculty in commemoration of the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth.^{xviii} A number of faculty members have used their writing skills to serve various boards and committees of the synod and agencies and institutions within our fellowship. Again, the service which the seminary faculty renders to others brings blessings to the faculty in return. A constant stream of reporting on trends and developments, on the problems and needs pastors and teachers are facing in the parish reaches the seminary.

A large amount of the contact which Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary has with parish life comes in the form of the individual assignments faculty members accept apart from any formal program or schedule of the seminary. Each year every faculty member is asked to give an accounting of such assignments he has accepted during the past year. This report to the seminary board of control is the best indication that the seminary, not only as a whole, but right down to each individual faculty member is regularly serving the parish pastor and keeping in close touch with parish life. These reports to the board typically contain several hundred of such assignments accepted by faculty members annually.

Nothing typifies parish life more than the Sunday sermon. Faculty members annually accept scores of regular Sunday preaching assignments. A quarter of the faculty preaches regularly on a monthly basis at area churches. Others are regular contributors to television and radio ministries. Candidates entering the ministry often ask former professors to speak for their ordination and installation services. Professors record dozens of special sermon assignments on their annual accounting to the board, such as joint area Reformation services, church anniversaries, mission Sundays and recruitment Sundays. These special assignments are in addition to the weekly preaching duties that accompany the occasional service as an interim pastor during a vacancy.

The bulk of parish service from the seminary faculty, however, comes not from association with synodical boards and agencies or from occasional preaching. Most of the personal service from faculty members to our parishes derives from individual writing and speaking invitations. The kind of service each faculty member provides in this manner depends mostly upon his area of interest, experience and expertise. Throughout the seminary academic year and during summer recess, on weekends and week days, faculty

members address pastors and teachers conferences, circuit meetings, congregational Bible classes, special study groups and seminars, Sunday school institutes and teachers meetings, young people's groups, missionary societies, altar guilds, parent-teacher societies and stewardship and evangelism committees. In 1987 there was this kind of faculty service in all twelve districts of our synod. Personal contact, learning the context of local problems, give and take in presentation, and the experience of dealing with similar concerns in other places characterize this service of the seminary to local parishes.

During the years 1984–1986 the seminary pastoral theology department conducted 17 counseling workshops for pastors in the 12 districts of the synod. These were planned and conducted with the help of Mr. Fred Matzke of the Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Service. These workshops were a project of the seminary, which made all the arrangements. Either Prof. Paul Nitz or Prof. Armin Schuetze was involved in each workshop. Total attendance was 653, over half the total number of pastors in the synod.

There are two reasons why the service Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary renders to the parish pastor and his people is so important. First, it demonstrates that the message of Scripture is an unbroken bond which binds together all those who preach the gospel. In a confessional church this bond must be demonstrated and reinforced not only by ideological proposition but also by practical involvement. Our parish pastors benefit from having seminary faculty members working with them and among them from time to time. It gives pastors the ability both to learn from them and to hold them personally to account for what they teach. This kind of contact assures both parties that what was taught at the seminary when the parish pastor attended there, what is taught at the seminary today, and what is being put into practice in today's parish are all one and the same application of the same Word of God. This bond has been a part of the seminary's heritage since the last century when Prof. A. Hoenecke was forced to give up his full-time pastorate at St. Matthew's in Milwaukee in order to devote full time to his seminary teaching duties.^{xix}

The second reason why the seminary's continuing service to the parish is so important is that this contact is a demonstration of its teaching objectives. Scripture is the bond which holds all gospel workers together. But the application of the truths of Scripture to the human heart is the sole objective of all teaching and learning at the seminary. The seminary's *Catalog* states this in these words:

Reverent, thorough, and scholarly study of the Holy Scriptures and a clear apprehension and faithful application of its contents, especially of its basic messages of Law and Gospel, are considered fundamental in realizing the Seminary's practical purpose of training and equipping men for the practical tasks of the public ministry.^{xx}

So at the seminary principle is never taught apart from practice. The Bible is never studied without reference to the real people for whom it was written.

As we give thanks to God for 125 years of grace toward Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, the faculty is humbly grateful for the privilege of serving the Lord and his church not only in the classroom but also in many other areas. The seminary aims to carry out its specific purpose of preparing shepherds for God's flock without sacrificing its attention to the changing and challenging needs of its graduates. Through the service which the seminary offers to others, God continues to return blessings to the seminary. The input of our synod's parish pastors, their expressed concerns, their feedback, their constructive criticism, their identification of new problems, their perception of solutions provide the context of a living parish in classrooms filled with students who have not yet had the experience of serving as a shepherd of God's flock.

It is an axiom that the best way for a pastor to know his people is for him to be among them in a role of service. The board, administration and the faculty of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary have also been led by God to understand that the best way for the seminary to know its work here is to be out there in a role of service to the synod's parish pastors. May God continue to bless this phase of the seminary's work!

ⁱ *Catalog*, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1987–88, p 3.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*.

ⁱⁱⁱ *A Self-Study of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary* (Mequon: WLS, May 1978), p 40.

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- ^{iv} “The President’s Report (to the Honorable Board of Control),” from the official minutes of the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Board of Control, October 2, 1972, p 1.
- ^v “1988 Summer Quarter of Graduate and Supplemental Study,” brochure (Mequon: WLS, 1987).
- ^{vi} *A Self-Study of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary* (Mequon: WLS, May 1978), p 28.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*.
- ^{viii} Irwin J. Habeck, “The Vicarship—The Third Year in the Student’s Training Program,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Supervising Pastor’s Manual* (Mequon: WLS, 1982), p 3.
- ^{ix} Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Faculty “Newsletter” (to supervising pastors), December 1986, p 1.
- ^x Joh. P. Meyer, *Ministers of Christ, A Commentary on the Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1963).
- ^{xi} Irwin J. Habeck, *Ephesians: Amazing Grace* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1985).
- ^{xii} Siegbert W. Becker, *Revelation: The Distant Triumph Song* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1985).
- ^{xiii} Joel Gerlach and Richard Balge, *Preach the Gospel: A Textbook for Homiletics* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1978).
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p XI.
- ^{xv} Ernst H. Wendland, editor, *Sermon Texts* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1984).
- ^{xvi} Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd under Christ: A Textbook for Pastoral Theology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1974).
- ^{xvii} Armin W. Schuetze and Fred Matzke, tentatively titled, *The Counseling Shepherd*; publication is expected within a year.
- ^{xviii} Edward C. Fredrich, Siegbert W. Becker, David P. Kuske, editors, *Luther Lives* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1983).
- ^{xix} *The History of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary from 1863 to 1903*; unsigned German original, probably by Dr. Adolf Hoenecke, translation by Prof. Wilbert Gawrisch in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Volume 85, Number 1, p 10f.
- ^{xx} *Catalog*, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1987–88, p 3.