

# **Armin Panning: A Man of the Word**

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In my conversations with various colleagues of his, in talking to students of his, and in my own interaction with Professor Panning inside and outside the classroom, several characteristics came to light: soft-spoken, well-prepared, firm, fair, friendly, caring for those entrusted to him, studious, wealthy in knowledge, having a subtle sense of humor, diligent, and patient. But one characteristic seemed to outshine the others. Armin Panning is a man of the Word. Over the years he has been a student, servant, and teacher of the Word of Christ that our gracious Lord has given us for our salvation. So, although he is soft-spoken, he was never timid when it came to letting God's Word speak in his life. Although he prefers not to be in the limelight, he was always prepared to let the Light of the world shine in its brightness and brilliance in his ministry.

More than anything else, I learned from this project the value, even the necessity, of being a man of the Word. During the interview with Professor Panning, it became clear that he is just a man, like any of us preparing for or serving in the public ministry. But he is also a man who lived because of and for the Word of God. Like any student, he enjoyed some subjects more than others. But the classes in the Word which he received in our WELS worker training system prepared him well to proclaim that Word in his ministry. He felt more comfortable in the classroom than in the pulpit. But he was determined to teach others the Word in whatever calling the Lord had placed him. He mentioned that at times he may have been too patient with students. But he recognized the importance of not overwhelming them, and maintaining a positive learning atmosphere in the classroom so the Word could take root and grow in them. He dealt with many difficult issues in his ministry, from call shortages for Mequon graduates to the Kokomo justification controversy. But in all of those struggles, he found the strength and guidance he needed in the Word. He noted that there have been and will be changes in the

ministerial education curriculum. But he said our purpose and goal at these schools is to grow in the Word and in the knowledge of Christ. Professor Panning wrote and edited several literary works for the synod over the course of his ministry. How satisfying must that be for him to have deepened his own understanding of the Word and to have helped others do the same! He said that he didn't always budget his time with his family as he would have liked. Yet he struggled with it, as all full-time ministers of the Gospel do, and he did lead and enjoy, train and care for his family. The Word remained at the center of his home life as well, as is evident in the lives of his children, some of whom, just like their father, serve in the public ministry, and all of whom serve their Savior each day. Professor Panning is a good example of a man who did take time for his family, and hobbies such as fishing and woodworking, even though he had a lot on his plate as a minister of the Word. The Word tells us that these pastimes are blessings of our Creator and Sustainer as well. Professor Panning worked in different parts of the globe and on different committees during his ministry. But in all those places, the same Word which called him, also called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified those Christians by the power of the Spirit. The Word is what brings us to Christ or Savior, and by God's grace keeps us in him all our days so that we poor sinners can enjoy the riches of the heavenly mansions prepared for us by the Way, the Truth, and the Life. God grant that we all remain people of the Word.

The same Lord who redeemed Professor Panning and gave him his gifts has certainly used him for the building up of the Church. We thank the Lord for Professor Panning's service in Jesus' name throughout his ministry and even now in this interview as he leaves for future generations an account of what God has worked in him and through him by his Son.

# Interview Questions

## Pre-ministry years: The Word prepares him

Please introduce yourself briefly (name, place and date of birth, where you grew up, what grade school you attended, and a recollection of what life was like growing up in your household— family size, parent's occupation, etc).

Who were some of the people (family, friends, other Christians, teachers, pastors, etc) most influential in your decision to train for and present yourself for a call into the public ministry? How did they or other factors guide you into this path of service?

How did the curriculum in the worker training system prepare you well for the ministry?

How did your year of emergency service at MLS help prepare you for your future ministry? What were some of the things you particularly enjoyed about working with the high school kids? Any fond memories of dorm life?

As you were going through NWC and WLS, the WELS, LC-MS, and CLC were going through fellowship struggles and splits. How, if at all, did this affect you personally and your classmates?

What professors did you appreciate and enjoy most as you went through NWC and WLS? What was it about them that made you look up to them and /or desire to emulate them?

## Parish years: He proclaims the Word

What were some of the defining characteristics of ministry in Escanaba (congregation size, any unique focuses, struggles or strengths of the congregation)?

What were some of your favorite aspects of parish ministry?

How did serving in Escanaba help prepare you for your service at NWC and WLS?

## Northwestern years: He prepares men in their study of the Word

You were assigned right out of WLS to tutor at NWC. When you graduated, did you see yourself serving in our institutions of ministerial education rather than in a parish? What kinds of thoughts went through your mind on that call day?

What were your NWC tutoring years like? What did you teach? Were there any particular joys or memorable stories?

Administration: clearly, the Lord saw fit to give you gifts in this area and use them in service to him and his saints. Yet I have heard from administrators that they really miss being in the classroom more or in the parish. I have also heard from professors that they miss being in the parish. Was this a struggle for you throughout your years in administration, or did you have an ever-growing love for this kind of service from the start?

Teaching Greek: did you always have a great love for this particular language, or did you grow to love it as you taught it?

Professor Spaude and other colleagues and students have characterized your interaction with students in the classroom as “firm, fair, and friendly.” He noted your “patience in dealing with students who were slow in learning as well as students who were acting up in class,” and your ability to let the students know you meant business. Some noted that you would patiently wait for a student’s answer, even if he was unprepared. Some noted your unique ability to find something good in any answer. How did you find this teaching style effective? How did this manner of interaction contribute to learning, and the preparing of life-long students of the Word?

Professor Spaude mentioned that you were always available to counsel the students—and faculty. How did you perceive your service in this important capacity? How did God’s Word guide you in this?

Professor Spaude said that you were a staunch defender of the “old Gymnasium” style of curriculum, one heavy in languages (especially a foundation in Greek), history, literature, and religion. Why do you feel that is the best form of ministerial education at the undergraduate level?

#### Seminary years: He prepares men to proclaim the Word

My grandfather Roland told me that you were always eager to learn more even back when you were growing up on the farm. Others got the same impression, that you were very studious and always well-prepared for class. What kind of schedule did you fall into for your personal study, whether devotional or for your own curiosity, at NWC and WLS? What were your favorite subjects to dig into more deeply?

How was teaching different at WLS than it was at NWC? Did you approach it differently as you gained more experience and taught a different level of student? What were your favorite aspects of teaching or favorite subjects to teach?

Based upon what I’ve read and your colleagues I’ve spoken with, the following were some of the issues you dealt with during your years at WLS. What did you see as the main struggles on which these situations centered, and the solutions to them? How did God’s Word help you deal with them?

- Call shortages for ministerial candidates
- Roles of man and woman in the church and society

- Christian Stewardship
- The Kokomo controversy over objective justification
- Curriculum issues (around 1990 you wrote a series of articles on the Seminary Curriculum)
- Holiness Church Bodies (a couple colleagues mentioned your conference paper on this as a very valuable summary. Did you write the paper in response to a particular problem? Or was it primarily meant to inform and help defend the saints against these dangerous and prevalent false teachings in our American society?)

You contributed much in the way of literary work to the synod at large (e.g. the *Romans* People's Bible and over 20 years worth of articles and editorials in the *Northwestern Lutheran* and *Forward in Christ*). What were your favorite aspects of that service? Which of your works in this capacity do you perceive as more significant? (And why?) Did you observe any notable changes in Synodical publications over the years? What Synodical literary projects do you think would be of particular benefit to the Church in the future?

You spent nearly 30 years of your ministry at WLS. What were the most notable changes on the campus? In the classroom? Among the student body? On the faculty?

Being the president of WLS seems a huge office and responsibility to carry out. How reassuring that the Head of the Church was always guarding and guiding you! But were there also certain other men to whom you looked as a pattern to follow, or for advice in perplexing situations?

Your colleagues noted that you led as president in a patient and encouraging collegial style, working to build consensus rather than dictate decisions. They also mentioned that you would firmly express your opinions in public, and privately call people on the carpet when necessary. How did this leadership style work well for you and for the Seminary?

Since this interview will be for future generations, do you have any advice or words of wisdom for us training and those yet to train for the pastoral ministry?

#### International years: He lets the Word encourage and unite Christians around the world

What foreign countries have you had the privilege of serving in, whether as a WLS professor or president, as a member of the CELC, or with the Lutheran Church in Bulgaria?

Please describe the circumstances of your work in each of those countries. Did you learn any other languages in order to serve among those people? What were the living conditions like? How were the cultures different from Midwest USA? What were some of the struggles facing God's people there? What kind of progress did the Lord grant during your time of service? Any memorable stories?

What were some of the joys of working with Christians around the world?

Family and personal time: he lives by the Word outside of the public ministry

In what extracurricular activities did you participate as you went through school (music, sports, drama, etc)? Looking back, how did those experiences help you relate to and enjoy time with your students and children?

What were some of your favorite things (activities, pastimes) to do with friends and classmates as you grew up and went through school?

How did you meet and come to court Virginia back in Escanaba? What things have you especially appreciated about her over the years?

What advantages or disadvantages did you notice in raising a family on a school campus?

What are some hobbies you have enjoyed and what are some things you have done in them? E.g.: you have told me a little bit about your woodworking.

What were some of your favorite things to do with your children and family? Did you observe any special family days or traditions through the years? How did you budget time for family with the demands of the public ministry? For what things are you most thankful to the Lord concerning your children?

Students and colleagues alike appreciated your subtle sense of humor. One professor mentioned a "For Sale" sign placed on another's property. As you look back on your years at NWC and WLS, what are some of your favorite things to laugh about?