

WELS'S SWISS ARMY KNIFE: THE HISTORY AND PURPOSE OF THE PASTORAL  
STUDIES INSTITUTE AND ITS COMMITMENT TO TRAIN SPIRITUAL LEADERS  
WORLDWIDE

BY  
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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|                       |                                                                                |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ACTS .....            | Apache Christian Training School                                               |
| ALS .....             | Asia Lutheran Seminary                                                         |
| BDiv .....            | Bachelor of Divinity                                                           |
| BHM .....             | Board for Home Missions                                                        |
| BTh .....             | Bachelor of Theology                                                           |
| CBE .....             | Competency-Based Education                                                     |
| CBTE .....            | Competency-Based Theological Education                                         |
| CELC .....            | Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference                                   |
| COP .....             | Conference of Presidents                                                       |
| CRM .....             | Candidate of the Pastoral Ministry ( <i>Candidatus Reverendi Ministerium</i> ) |
| EFT .....             | Early Field Training                                                           |
| HELC .....            | Hmong Evangelical Lutheran Church                                              |
| HFC .....             | Hmong Fellowship Church                                                        |
| ICETE .....           | International Council for Evangelical Theological Education                    |
| IDI .....             | Intercultural Development Inventory                                            |
| ISP .....             | Individual Study Plan                                                          |
| JMC .....             | Joint Mission Council                                                          |
| LCMS .....            | Lutheran Church Missouri Synod                                                 |
| LATTE .....           | Latin America Theological Traveling Educators                                  |
| MC <sup>2</sup> ..... | Multi-Cultural Mission Committee                                               |
| MDiv .....            | Master of Divinity                                                             |
| MEPP .....            | Multi-Ethnic Preseminary Program                                               |
| MLC .....             | Martin Luther College                                                          |
| PSI .....             | Pastoral Studies Institute                                                     |
| SON .....             | Seeking Our Neighbor Committee                                                 |
| TEE .....             | Theological Education by Extension                                             |
| WELS .....            | Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod                                           |
| WLS .....             | Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary                                                    |

## ABSTRACT

The Pastoral Studies Institute (PSI) exists because the Lord has opened doors for mission work that the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) cannot walk through alone. Born out of logistical challenges, cross-cultural opportunities, and a shifting mission landscape, PSI has become a flexible yet confessionally firm process for training pastors from diverse backgrounds to serve their own people groups. In this study, I examine the problems and opportunities that prompted PSI's formation in 2003, trace its development alongside the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod's (WELS) changing mission strategy, and highlight PSI's continued relevance as WELS seeks to carry out gospel ministry in an increasingly global and diverse world.

I explore the theological assumptions that guided PSI's creation, recount the historical circumstances—including second-career ministerial education, immigrant ministry needs, and evolving world mission practices—that shaped its identity, and evaluate PSI's role as both a training process and an institutional safeguard for doctrinal unity. I describe PSI's work in North America and abroad, its reliance on supervising pastors, the sacrifices its students make, and the messy success of its partnerships around the world. Finally, I compare PSI's culturally sensitive model of theological education to WLS's residential approach, which share the theological education principles of time and presence. These principles demonstrate that while PSI differs in method, it remains united in purpose with WLS: pastors forming self-sufficient pastors who proclaim the gospel faithfully in their unique ministry contexts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

I conducted research for this thesis through two primary methods—first, through personal interviews with PSI students, PSI graduates, and key administrative leaders of PSI; second, by reading material on PSI’s history and resources concerning different approaches to theological education. To uncover PSI’s model of theological education and compare it with WLS’s model, I consulted journal articles, books on pedagogy and theological education, and internal documents from PSI, WELS, and WLS. This paper attempts to synthesize the information from the cited interviews and authors.

The two unpublished documents that describe PSI’s history, organization, and present operation include *PSI Supervising Pastor Handbook*, written by Jonathan Bare, and *The PSI Way: The Pastoral Studies Institute of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary*, edited by Bradley Wordell, a PSI document written with the help of Bradley Wordell. Pastors who serve as mentors and instructors in the PSI program receive the *PSI Supervising Pastor Handbook* as an introduction and guide. *The PSI Way* was integral for uncovering PSI’s history, goals, and values.

Besides the personal interviews and conversations, two sources helped me define PSI’s current missiology and model of theological education—Bare’s dissertation, “The Student-Faculty Relationship Among Male M.Div. Students,” and Paul Wendland’s essay, “Church and Ministry in World Mission Settings.” Bare, Bivens, Sorum, Wendland, Wordell have all served on the PSI team at WLS. From their practical experience as world missionaries and administrators, I have gained a deep appreciation for PSI’s mission and purpose to walk with

spiritual leaders worldwide. “Church and Ministry” has been particularly formative, since Wendland emphasizes the necessities of time and presence principles in ministerial education.

To understand the history of the WELS ministerial education system, I consulted *Centennial Story: Northwestern College 1865–1965* and “Establishing Educational Subculture: The nineteenth Century German Gymnasium Arrangement Of Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin to 1915. Since these sources primarily did not address ministerial education at the seminary level, I also engaged with the available WLS self-studies from 1978, 2003, and 2024. The initial proposal for PSI, contained in *2003 Self-Study*, whose primary author is Paul Wendland, was integral to my research since it lays out the challenges and impetuses that prompted the formation of the PSI. John Brenner’s histories—*Jars of Clay: A History of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (1863–2013)* and his update to *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans* helped me gauge WELS’s pulse on mission work and ministerial education amid synod-wide challenges in the 2000s.

Peter Kruschel’s essay “A Cry from the City: WELS’ Need to Address Multicultural Issues,” Paul Wendland’s “Cross Cultural Ministry – Don’t Lose The Message,” and E. Allen Sorum’s “Reaching Ethnic Minorities in North America,” and *Change: Mission & Ministry across Cultures* laid the scriptural foundation for cross-cultural ministry and argued that this was a significant area in which WELS needed improvement. “A Cry from the City” and *Change*, in particular, not only describe the significant challenges and complexities of cross-cultural mission work, but they also reflect a significant paradigm shift in the spirit of WELS mission strategy during PSI’s founding period. For that reason, these resources are not just rational for cross-cultural outreach, but they are a window into the missiology of PSI.

Jane Vella is recognized worldwide for her work in education. She is the pioneer and primary spokesperson for dialogue education. Two of her books, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults* and *Training Through Dialogue: Promoting Effective Learning and Change with Adults*, proved relevant in describing PSI's model of theological education. Since PSI leans heavily on the mentor-mentee relationship, the *PSI Supervising Pastor Handbook* notes how PSI aspires to Vella's dialogue education approach as an effective means for education across cultures.

To describe the uniqueness of PSI's model of theological education, I highlighted other popular models and philosophies. These include WLS's residential model, Theological Education by Extension (TEE), Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE), and hybrid and distance learning models. In "Theological Education by Extension," E.H. Wendland traces the history of TEE and explains why it did not replace the residential model. *The History of Theological Education* by Justo L. González provided the background necessary to describe WLS's traditional, residential model of theological education. However, the most useful source for describing WLS's residential model was "The Student-Faculty Relationship Among Male M.Div. Students" since the study of the learning impacts of relationships was conducted on WLS's campus. Steve Delamarter's "A Typology of the Use of Technology in Theological Education" and Delamarter's and Daniel L. Brunner's "Theological Education and Hybrid Models of Distance Learning" define the difference between the residential model of theological education and distance models. They argue that distance models have distinct advantages over the traditional residential model, but I disagree with this conclusion within the context of ministerial education in WELS. Online learning lends itself well to the PSI context by necessity,

but the residential model theological education at WLS has been proven to produce capable and qualified pastors. Finally, the sources that were most useful in describing CBTE include Kenton C. Anderson and Gregory J. Henson's *Theological Education: Principles and Practices of Competency-Based Approach*, "Meet Competency-Based Theological Education," by Daniel Witte, "CBTE – What Does That Mean? – Nontraditional Education," by Nicole LaGrow, and *Transforming Theological Education: A Practical Handbook for Integrative Learning*, by Perry Shaw. Shaw's work in designing theological education based on modern learning principles helped me contextualize PSI's model in the world of theological education.

## INTRODUCTION

Professor David Bivens calls the Pastoral Studies Institute (PSI) of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary the “Swiss army knife of the Joint Mission Council (JMC).”<sup>1</sup> How can a distance program for training pastors be so valuable? PSI is not just a curriculum or distance program. It’s not just WELS’s answer for non-traditional pastors or an exception to our normal way of doing things. PSI is a powerful multitool in the hands of WELS mission administrators as they train spiritual leaders worldwide.

PSI is a pastoral training program in collaboration with WLS, but PSI is also an integral part of WELS’s vision to increase its global footprint as a confessional Lutheran church body. The WELS 2025 ten-year strategic plan indicates how WELS’s strategy must shift in order to carry out its purpose to glorify God by proclaiming Scripture through supporting congregations, training called workers for ministry, and coordinating mission efforts:<sup>2</sup>

Since 1850, Christ has mightily worked through us, his ambassadors, to share the message of reconciliation with countless souls, drawing them to his cross. Across those seven generations, we see that mankind’s greatest affliction—sin—remains unchanged, as does its only remedy: the righteousness of Christ, freely bestowed through faith.

However, we also acknowledge that the world in which we carry out this sacred mission has transformed dramatically. In North America, the cultural landscape has shifted. Secularism and skepticism have surged. Increasingly, Americans dismiss faith as being irrelevant and view the church with suspicion, associating it with judgmentalism or hypocrisy. The vast majority of Christian denominations in America are declining at a

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1. David Bivens, personal interview, 16 October, 2025. The JMC is the board that facilitates mission work for both the WELS Home Missions and World Missions.

2. “Christ Through Us: Long-Range Strategic Plan 2025-2035” (WELS, September 2025), 3.

pace that strains their ability to sustain ministry. WELS, too, has felt the weight of these challenges.

Yet at the same time, across the world, the Lord is opening doors wide. In regions where Christianity was once unknown or unwelcome, the gospel is taking root and flourishing. Through Word and sacrament, the Holy Spirit is drawing new believers to Christ—often in the face of opposition or persecution—building his church in ways that defy human expectation. These global opportunities remind us that the ministry of reconciliation entrusted to us is not bound by borders or eras, but is a living, Spirit-driven mission that transcends all perceived obstacles.<sup>3</sup>

What would be your preferred survival tool in a “cultural landscape of secularism and skepticism?” We have “the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people,” (Rev 14:6 NIV).<sup>4</sup> We have the promise that “the word of our God endures forever,” (Isa 40:8). That seems like a pretty good multi-tool to bust down the walls of any *ism*. But how exactly will we as stewards of the eternal gospel react to the doors that the Lord opens for us? WELS is investing in the PSI to achieve these goals.

PSI is crucial to WELS’s mission. In 2007, Pastor Bounkeo Lor, a Hmong graduate of PSI was serving his scattered Hmong people group, when leaders in Vietnam discovered his sermons online. Lor was formally invited by spiritual leaders in Vietnam to provide pastoral training there in partnership with the PSI Team.<sup>5</sup> In the years since this training, the Hmong Evangelical Lutheran Church (HELCH)<sup>6</sup> has grown from 55,000 to over 146,000 members.<sup>7</sup> This

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3. “Christ Through US,” 3.

4. All Scripture references are from the New International Version.

5. Pastoral Studies Institute, *The PSI Way*. (Mequon: n.p., 2019), 5.

6. Initially, the church body was named the Hmong Fellowship Church (HFC).

7. “Vietnam - Hmong Outreach,” *WELS*, 17 March 2025. The 146,000 figure comes from a presentation by Bounkeo Lor, “Hmong Ministry,” presented at WLS Mission and Ministry, 5 February, 2026.

ministry has made such an impact that in 2018, the communist Vietnamese government invited WELS to build a center for theological education in Hanoi. But after the Theological Education Center (TEC) was built, the Vietnamese government regulators insisted upon practices contrary to Scripture—withholding baptism to infants and allowing non-Lutheran teachers. Since then, the HELC has not been granted access to the educational facility. Though the HELC continues to face these obstacles, fifty-five pastors have been trained, and 120 more seminary students are enrolled and expected to graduate by 2028. Pastor Lor, who has served as the HELC President since 2025, remains hopeful that the TEC will be fully functional again in 2027. Lor has high hopes for the HELC as they continue leadership training, Sunday school, youth catechism classes, and women’s ministry. Currently, the HELC works closely as a mission partner with WELS and with Asia Lutheran Seminary (ALS) to produce new Hmong outreach materials and publications. Lor dreams that HELC will one day be a fully self-supportive church body in the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC) fellowship.<sup>8</sup> WELS would have far fewer international partnerships such as the HELC in Vietnam if it were not for the careful training, counsel, and expertise of the PSI Team.<sup>9</sup>

Pastor Paul Chung graduated from PSI in 2013. His path was different than most PSI students. After serving as a pastor within a Korean Methodist context, he later became connected with Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Thousand Oaks, California. There, he was welcomed in

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8. Bounkeo Lor, “Hmong Ministry,” presented at WLS Mission and Ministry, 5 February, 2026.

9. “God’s Plan Flourishes in Vietnam,” *WELS*, 17 March 2025. This partnership between WELS and HELC is an exciting example of a ministry effort started by PSI graduate Lor. However, it is important to note that the HELC is not an overseas branch of WELS, they are an independent Lutheran church body who has sought counsel through WELS world missions and the PSI Team. Currently, they are not members of the CELC.

worship and wanted to learn more about confessional Lutheranism. Since he already had extensive theological training (the equivalent of 140 credits in multiple graduate programs), PSI treated him as a colloquy rather than starting from square one. Professor Sorum of the PSI Team flew to California to get to know him personally and conduct intensive training. Chung said that he had never heard of this kind of training from other church bodies, “I’m just one of many, possibly, right? But for the WELS and for the PSI and for the Seminary, I am not just one of many.”<sup>10</sup> After completing the colloquy process and graduating from PSI, Chung was called to the Korean ministry in Thousand Oaks. But one year later, something unusual happened. A primarily Anglo congregation—Apostles Lutheran Church in San Jose—called him as an associate pastor. Today, Pastor Chung is serving as the sole full-time pastor at Apostles. Though PSI graduates are usually called to their own people group, the Lord has used Pastor Chung’s unique gifts and background to administer to an Anglo WELS church and to simultaneously reach out to the Asian community of San Jose through the connections that he has made at a preschool leased by Apostles. Without the PSI Team, there would be no viable path for men like Pastor Chung to enter public ministry in WELS.

Bounkeo Lor and Pastor Chung’s stories show how WELS’s aim to increase its global footprint depends on PSI. The WELS 2025 strategic plan tells how it intends to best carry out Christ’s Great Commission:

God has entrusted us, as his ambassadors, with the message of reconciliation, commissioning us to proclaim the gospel to every nation, tribe, people, and language—a charge that echoes with urgency in our time. While Christianity wanes in much of the Western world, its light blazes anew in regions where the gospel is still a fresh whisper, revealing the Spirit’s boundless power to gather souls. Yet over 6.5 billion people—more

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10. Paul Chung, personal interview, 28 October 2025.

than two-thirds of humanity—dwell in places where Christ’s name is barely known, their hearts unreached by the hope we bear.

In 2025, as WELS reflects on 175 years of grace, we stand at a crossroads: The decline of faith in North America contrasts with unprecedented global opportunities, calling us to extend our confessional Lutheran witness beyond familiar borders. This commission is not a mere task but a sacred privilege, strengthening our synod’s resolve to bring the nations to the foot of the cross.

Imagine a future where, through us, the unchanging truth of God’s Word resounds across continents, uniting over a million souls in faith and sparking a global movement anchored in our confessional Lutheran heritage. Picture not just WELS dispatching missionaries worldwide, but new Lutheran church bodies—birthed by our mission efforts—rising as partners in this divine calling. Envision a day when these vibrant churches, from distant hemispheres, send well-trained missionaries to a spiritually dimming North America, rekindling the message of reconciliation with confessional clarity. Imagine a symphony of nations, bound by the gospel, proclaiming Christ together in joyful unity.

Here is what we pray Christ might accomplish through us.<sup>11</sup>

Without PSI, these ambitious plans would never be considered by WELS. In light of ever-shrinking active church membership in the U.S., PSI stands as the primary way WELS intends to embrace the ocean of opportunity for immigrant ministry right at our doorstep. The scope of this need is great. WELS’s baptized membership is currently 98% white and 2% ethnic minorities, while the U.S. is about 42.2% non-white.<sup>12</sup> The JMC’s budget is constantly stretched to meet the need for WELS’s cross-cultural ministries.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, the religious center of Christianity has moved from Western nations to the Global South, and PSI has become a major tool for partnering with Lutheran church bodies

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11. “Christ Through Us: Long-Range Strategic Plan 2025-2035,” 9.

12. Eric Jenson, Nicholas Jones, Megan Rabe, Beverly Pratt, Lauren Medina, Kimberly Orozco, and Lindsay Spell, “The Chance That Two People Chosen at Random Are of Different Race or Ethnicity Groups Has Increased Since 2010,” *United States Census Bureau*, n.d..

13. Harland Goetzinger, personal interview, 20 October 2025.

worldwide. The Pew Research Center indicates, “Sub-Saharan Africa is now home to the largest number of Christians, surpassing Europe. As of 2020, 30.7% of the world’s Christians live in sub-Saharan Africa, compared with 22.3% in Europe.”<sup>14</sup> Since PSI is so critical to WELS’s strategy, the average WELS parish pastor ought not think of PSI as simply a non-traditional theological education program, but every WELS congregation must actively consider how they may seek immigrant ministry opportunities and partner with PSI’s purpose, “to walk with kingdom-committed spiritual leaders worldwide.”<sup>15</sup> For these reasons, the PSI ought not be just the Swiss army knife of the JMC, but a tool in every WELS parish pastor’s toolbelt as we work together to advance God’s kingdom to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

### **Thesis Goal**

How does PSI train spiritual leaders worldwide? I seek to answer this question by examining the initial need for the PSI, tracing its evolution over time, and proving its increasing relevance today. In this thesis, I summarize the history of the PSI and describe the roles that PSI currently carries out through WELS congregations in North America and in theological education programs overseas. Finally, I uncover PSI’s model of theological education by identifying other prevailing models of theological education, by comparing PSI’s model to WLS’s approach to

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14. Conrad Hackett Fahmy Marcin Stonawski, Yunping Tong, Stephanie Kramer, Anne Shi and Dalia, “How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020,” *Pew Research Center*, 9 June 2025.

15. Jonathan Bare, *PSI Supervising Pastor Handbook* (Mequon: n.p., 2021), 3.

theological education, and by highlighting two key presuppositions that WLS and PSI share about theological education—time and presence.

## THEOLOGY OF PSI

### **The Holy Ministry**

The world needs Jesus, now more than ever. Sinners need saving. At the heart of the Church's ministry of reconciliation is God's fervent desire that all people be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4)—the initial cause of salvation. Our God's boundless grace is the reason that he deigned to send his Son to redeem the whole world from sin. "When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy," (Titus 3:4–5)—the meritorious cause of salvation. Yet the salvation of souls also depends on the ministerial cause of salvation—the Holy Spirit working through the public proclamation of the gospel to effect and strengthen faith. The apostle Paul writes, "And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Rom 10:14b). Therefore, God has committed to his Church the divine duty of proclaiming the gospel to bring sinners to faith in Christ (2 Cor 5:17–6:1).

The apostle Paul shares the motivation for sharing the message, "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again," (2 Cor 5:14-15). As heralds of the eternal gospel, Christian love compels believers to share this message with the world. This gospel proclamation is the only goal of the Christian Church and the focus of the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2:9).

## **Cross-Cultural Ministry**

Since God desires all people to be saved, his love for sinners necessarily includes people from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Saint John describes the true diversity of the Church Triumphant in heaven (Rev 7:9). Scripture demonstrates God's unconditional love for all sinners of every culture, background, and walk of life. Consider God's command to the Israelites, "The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt," (Lev 19:34), or Isaiah's second servant song, "I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth," (Isa 49:6b), or God's climactic conclusion to the story of Jonah, "And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:11).

The Gospels also show our Savior's heart to welcome people of diverse walks of life into his kingdom. A few examples include the Samaritan woman (John 4), Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8), or Paul's message concerning the power of the unconditional gospel, which brings unity in Christ (Gal 3:26–28).

According to Scripture, cross-cultural ministry is not optional but essential. Ministering across cultures often involves stepping outside comfort zone just as the apostle Paul "became all things for all people" (1 Cor 9:22). Since God desires to gather believers to himself from every nation, tribe, people, and language, missionaries ought not seize the most convenient evangelism opportunities or even the most cost-effective ministries but be intentional about going to all nations as Christ's witnesses. E. Allen Sorum says, "Even as we look forward to a heaven that hosts every nation, tribe, people, and language (Rev 7:9), so also we are eager to host many

nations and tribes in our congregations and in our church body.”<sup>16</sup> Paul Wendland identifies a believer’s proper motivation for reaching out across cultures:

We might paraphrase Paul's thinking on cross cultural ministry something like this: “Jesus did not shrink back from entering a world made alien to him by sin. Nor did he shun a slave's death on the cross to serve me in my need. His love drove him on for me. Since this is so, the one consideration above all that will guide me is the thought: I am not here to be served, but to offer my life in service to others. Whatever my neighbors' need, that I will do.” As Paul urged Christians in another place, “Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Ga 6:2). There is no greater wholeness, no greater integrity, to be found on earth than that....That's why if we are aiming to engage in cross cultural outreach as a congregation, it is simply essential to make sure that the congregation as a whole sees it as their gospel mission. It cannot be the hobby of a few – even if only a few at first may be engaged in it. It needs to be perceived as what we together are doing – some directly, others in supporting roles – because the Lord loved us and gave himself for us.<sup>17</sup>

What Wendland shares at a congregational level also translates easily to the ministry of the WELS. Christ’s love compels us, the WELS, to love our neighbors by actively engaging in cross-cultural outreach.

### **Theological Education**

The Scriptures show that Christian education is necessary. The apostle Paul writes to Timothy, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work,” (2

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16. E. Allen Sorum, “Reaching Ethnic Minorities in North America,” in *Heritage and Hope: Essays in Honor of the 150th Anniversary of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary*, ed. Kenneth A. Cherney Jr. (WLS Press, 2013), 515.

17. Paul Wendland, “Cross Cultural Ministry – Don’t Lose The Message,” paper presented to the Nebraska District, June 2006, 2–3, WLS Essay File.

Tim 3:16–17). To the Romans, he writes, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ” (Rom 10:17). The Holy Spirit works mediately through the gospel in word and sacrament to produce and strengthen faith. This was Martin Luther’s *sola scriptura* epiphany during the Reformation. Historically, the Lutheran Church has emphasized spiritual formation through Christian education because of Scripture’s own emphasis on the power of the means of grace.

There are no Bible passages that state that for a church body to be legitimate, it must provide theological education through a three-year Master of Divinity (MDiv) program. There are no passages that state that real ministry is carried out only by ordained public ministers who have mastered Greek and Hebrew. President of ALS, Jonathan Bare, states:

Theological education as it is known today with its certificates; diplomas; Master of Divinity, Master of Sacred Theology, Master of Theology, and Doctor of Ministry degrees; and a plethora of other distinctions is a product of our modern era... The Scriptures do not present a comprehensive plan for a systematic, degree-granting seminary program. The Bible, however, does provide descriptive examples of leadership training in action, commands that such training should take place, and certain expectations concerning what is to be taught.”<sup>18</sup>

The Old and New Testaments are filled with such examples of the value of theological education. Moses reminded the Israelites that he had been instructed by God and encouraged them to educate the next generation (Deut 11:18–20). Anointed leaders were instructed in their roles. Elisha learned how to be a prophet through Elijah’s mentorship and presence. Priests had to undergo some kind of systematic training to master the daily rhythms of the sacrificial system

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18. Jonathan Bare, “The Student-Faculty Relationship Among Male M.Div. Students” (PhD diss., Regent, 2021), 9–10.

and ceremonial law.<sup>19</sup> The Psalms indicate how knowledge and instruction passed down from generation to generation were highly valued in Israelite culture (Ps 78:4).

In the New Testament, Jesus embraced the common rabbinic model for education. The four gospels are filled with accounts of the lessons that Jesus taught his disciples through personal presence, conversation, and imitation.<sup>20</sup> Paul's epistles to congregations highlight his concern that his hearers embrace learning and formation through spiritual leaders. Paul tells dear Timothy to "Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction, (2 Tim 4:2). The Berean Jews were praised for their noble character in how they eagerly examined the Scriptures (Acts 17:11). Clearly throughout the Old Testament and New Testament, the handing down of divine truth through theological education by spiritual leaders is emphasized as a necessity in God's design for his Church.

### **Missiology of PSI**

The nuanced missiology of the PSI is built upon the necessities of the Holy Ministry, cross-cultural ministry, and theological education. If a church body fails to embrace the Great Commission, then it becomes a self-serving asceticism, unconcerned about bringing the gospel to the nations. If a church body fails to embrace theological education, then there will be no one left

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19. Bare, "The Student-Faculty Relationship," 13.

20. Bare, "The Student-Faculty Relationship," 17.

to tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord. Cross-cultural ministry, though necessary according to Scripture, is often easiest for a church body to overlook and neglect.

One of the main reasons that PSI was established was to help address WELS's struggle with cross-cultural mission work. There is still significant room for improvement in WELS's diversity. In WLS's 2024 self-study, it acknowledges the present need for growth in terms of diversity:

Since the seminary enrolls only those who are members of WELS congregations and express a desire to serve as pastors in WELS or affiliated churches, the seminary's on-campus enrollment naturally reflects the make-up of its church body, which is predominantly Caucasian. This area has considerable room for growth, and the seminary is eager to see more ethnic diversity among its students and faculty. It is hoped that PSI's work of making pastoral training available to ethnic minorities will bear fruit in this way.<sup>21</sup>

The reasons that initially compelled WLS to establish a PSI compel us to continue to utilize and improve the program. Since PSI plays a huge role in WELS's desire to diversify, as PSI continues to train leaders worldwide, it remains vital to WELS's mission in the twenty-first century.

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21. Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, *Self-Study Report*, Prepared for the Initial Accreditation Comprehensive Evaluation Visit of the Association of Theological Schools (Mequon: n.p., 2024), 4.

## HISTORY OF PSI

### Historical Circumstances that Prompted PSI

Existing challenges and new opportunities necessitated the formation of PSI in 2003 when WLS published a self-study. These challenges included logistical issues for implementing seminary education for “non-traditional”<sup>22</sup> pastoral students. But simultaneously, new cross-cultural mission opportunities were opening up, and there were mixed opinions regarding cross-cultural mission strategy.

### Educational Challenges

It had not been long since the 1995 amalgamation at Martin Luther College (MLC), and WELS was still evaluating the change to ministerial education<sup>23</sup> and its effects in pastoral

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22. In short, the original definition for “non-traditional student” included both men from diverse cultural settings and any second-career men pursuing pastoral ministry. The initial proposal in the 2003 Self-Study included six categories: “a) men older than the traditional college-age students and who possess bachelors’ degrees already; b) men older than the traditional college-age students and who do not possess a bachelors’ degree (second-career men); c) men from diverse cultural settings who would attend Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and be trained in its standard seminary curriculum, culminating in a degree; d) men from diverse cultural settings who would attend Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and be trained for certification in the pastoral ministry of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod; e) men from diverse cultural settings who would be trained in association with Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary at off-campus sites for service in pastoral ministry among specific ethnic groups.” In 2020, the process for second-career enrollment has been removed from the umbrella of PSI, (“WLS Catalog 2025-2026,” 3). Today, WLS “has special procedures for recruiting and admitting non-traditional, second career men who have not graduated from MLC through its Admissions Committee and Pre-Seminary Program,” (WLS, *Self-Study Report*, 34).

23. The terms “ministerial education” and “theological education” are used interchangeably in this thesis. Most differentiate the terms in this way: just because someone is a theology student in a master’s program at a seminary does not mean that they are studying to be a pastor. Whereas at WLS, all theology students are studying

training. WLS asked, “Could there be better ways for us to train students who do not fall within the scope of our traditional approach?”<sup>24</sup> Additionally, WLS wanted to know if there were some “non-traditional” second-career students who were not pursuing pastoral ministry because of the inconvenience of moving to New Ulm. Such a move could involve “consequent hardships for families,”<sup>25</sup> including the practical challenge of temporarily uprooting and facing extra financial burdens if the second-career candidate’s wife needed to find another job and his children needed to be placed in another school. Were second-career students being lost to the ministry because of these considerations?

Additionally, WELS had neglected to pursue cross-cultural ministry to immigrant groups in the United States. Already at the 1993 synod convention, WELS had called for evaluating the changing domestic and global realities affecting mission work. The Seeking Our Neighbor Committee (SON) was appointed to articulate new goals, principles, and approaches to guide twenty-first-century mission work at synodical and congregational levels.<sup>26</sup> In 2003, 11% of the US population was foreign-born,<sup>27</sup> yet WELS had not made strong efforts to tap into immigrant ministry opportunities.

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for the pastoral ministry. Therefore, in this context, the theological education they receive can be called ministerial education.

24. WLS, *2003 Self-Study Report* (Mequon: n.p., 2003), 105.

25. WLS, *2003 Self-Study*, 105.

26. John M. Brenner, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 2nd ed. (Milwaukee: NPH, 1992), 282.

27. WLS, *2003 Self-Study*, 105.

The proposed changes in the 2003 Self-Study illustrate this problem. WLS wondered whether it could be more hospitable toward students of minority cultures. The Multi-ethnic Preseminary Program (MEPP)<sup>28</sup> began in 1994 “to assist men from minority cultures to achieve their goal of serving the Lord as pastors in the WELS.”<sup>29</sup> When PSI was established in 2003, it absorbed MEPP.<sup>30</sup> The MEPP director, Dr. Glen L. Thompson at MLC, expressed a desire for more flexibility in meeting the needs of minority students.<sup>31</sup> What might more flexibility for minority students consist of? Peter Kruschel, then Associate Administrator for Home Missions, raised some of the questions that Home Missions and WLS were wrestling with concerning seminary education of multicultural students:

When the Lord leads us to gospel ministry partners from other cultures, how will we train them for full-time gospel ministry? How will we train them for full-time ministry if they're not conversant enough in English to understand or keep up with the classes offered at Martin Luther College? How will men be prepared if neither they nor we are sure at what academic level they should be placed? Is it even wise to take a man—well respected by the Christians gathered from his culture/group—out of familiar surroundings and away from the place where he can best serve as a gospel partner, and place him into a culture that is very “foreign” to him and expect him to thrive for three, four, or five years?<sup>32</sup>

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28. The term “ethnic” is not commonly used today to refer to diverse people groups, but in 1994 it was used without causing offense.

29. Peter H. Kruschel, “A Cry from the City: WELS’ Need to Address Multicultural Issues,” paper presented at Issues In Multi-Cultural Worship, July 1998, 12, WLS Essay File.

30. John M. Brenner, *Jars of Clay: A History of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (1863-2013)* (Mequon, Wisconsin: WLS Press, 2013), 289. Leonard Freeman was the first to complete the MEPP program. He graduated from WLS in 2003 after MEPP was absorbed by PSI. Since the effort had already begun in the early nineties to train more culturally diverse seminary students through MEPP, the PSI inherited its basic curriculum and materials from MEPP which served as a precursor to PSI.

31. WLS, *2003 Self-Study*, 105.

32. Kruschel, “A Cry from the City,” 11.

Kruschel recognized that it is not wise to remove a man from his host culture and drop him into WLS's system of residential education. It is unreasonable to expect a non-native English speaker to take seminary-level courses solely in English. It is unreasonable to expect a student of another culture to assimilate into WLS's Anglo, Midwestern culture and later resume ministering to his own culture.

Wendland calls WLS "the gold standard" system for ministerial education in WELS.<sup>33</sup> Yet, Wendland also acknowledges that WLS "is very culturally embedded. It speaks the language of Western culture with academics and credits and self-studies and all the rest. That's the language of Western academe. And yet, I think, we are Westerners, and I think that this is our gift that I don't think we have to apologize for."<sup>34</sup> WLS's admittedly monocultural, Western approach to training pastors can be viewed positively. It has been a tremendous blessing to WELS since it produces capable pastors who are "thoroughly evangelical and confessionally-Lutheran."<sup>35</sup> Even so, if the end goal in training pastors of different cultures was to assist them in serving their own culture, they required another path tailored to meet their need with culturally sensitive theological education.

Besides a lack of culturally sensitive training and the practical issues involved with the training of ethnically diverse students in Mequon, WLS needed to consider how a newly trained

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33. Paul Wendland, personal interview, 6 November 2025. Former WLS president, Paul Wendland, was instrumental in helping WLS work through the questions surrounding the formation of the PSI. Because of his extensive world missions experience in Africa, Wendland was chosen for the task because of his ability to speak both Home Mission and World Missions as a careful administrator. Wendland became the first acting PSI administrator in 2003 before Professor Sorum was called to be the first full-time administrator.

34. Wendland, 6 November 2025.

35. WLS, *2003 Self-Study*, 106.

ethnic pastor reintegrates into his host culture. WELS missionaries to the Apache reservation in Arizona once attempted this method. Instead of training Apache pastors on the Reservation, the prevailing idea was that they would receive better training at WLS. However, when the Apache leader was removed from his own cultural environment and “made a clone of the white man,”<sup>36</sup> through his training in Mequon, “he was viewed with suspicion from his own people,”<sup>37</sup> upon his return as a graduated pastor. Before any pastoral training, already an Apache leader would be disadvantaged. Simply by leaving the culture, he would inevitably need to re-earn the trust of his own people. The need for a flexible, cross-cultural pastoral training process was evident.

### Mission Opportunities

Simultaneously, new cross-cultural ministry opportunities were constantly opening up in North America. Brenner says, “the synod recognized that the United States had become as much of a foreign mission field as those areas around the world.”<sup>38</sup> WELS congregations, which once served those of German heritage in towns and farming communities, now found at their doorstep an immigrant diaspora from Latin America, Africa, and Asia.<sup>39</sup> WELS congregations, especially

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36. Wendland, 6 November 2025. Wendland admits that he is speaking with outdated terminology.

37. Wendland, 6 November 2025.

38. Brenner, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 283.

39. Bare, *PSI Supervising Pastor Handbook*, 3. The term “diaspora” refers to immigrants who have been dispersed from their country of origin and established community, but they are often still tied to and identify with the culture of their home country. Later, this dispersion would lead to more cross-cultural opportunities when PSI graduate pastors would return to their home country and people groups as connect WELS to church bodies around the world.

in cities with immigrant ministries, needed a way to train up spiritual leaders within the people groups. One example was pastor Loren Steele, who “helped pioneer and popularize mission work” to the Hmong community in cities throughout the US and later to East Asia.<sup>40</sup> Steele’s success proved that the PSI method for training pastors cross-culturally was not only possible but fruitful.

Another instigating factor that shaped PSI was that WELS’s approach to mission work was changing. The historical approach that WELS had used was that the Anglo pastor, trained through the traditional European residential system of theological education, was sent out into the harvest field. Ideally, he would learn the host culture’s language and study their unique system of beliefs and way of thinking. He would be the professional whom the host culture respected as the conveyor of divine truth, the one who trained leaders, and the one who made most of the decisions. But this mission mindset presented some challenges.

Professor E. Allen Sorum’s<sup>41</sup> book *Change* reflected the changing views about harvest strategy in WELS’s mission fields:

Therefore, who is generally the best person to introduce change into a culture? This is a key question in our discussion of the missionary as an agent of change. The answer is that the cross-cultural missionary/pastor will usually be more effective in introducing biblical change if he does not try to introduce that change himself. Those who are already the recognized leaders in the host culture or society will be the most effective agents of

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40. John M. Brenner, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 282.

41. Professor E. Allen Sorum was called to WLS in 2004 after his extensive cross-cultural experience as a pastor at Garden Homes Lutheran Church in inner-city Milwaukee. He was called to teach New Testament and became the first full-time director of PSI in 2004, (Brenner, *Jars of Clay*, 289). His book, *Change*, not only brought problems with cross-cultural ministry in WELS to light but also provided a great resource for beginning cross-cultural evangelism in congregations. Sorum presently serves at WLS as a professor of New Testament and serves on the PSI Team.

change. Therefore, one of the top priorities of every cross-cultural missionary/pastor will be the evangelizing and training of the natural leaders in the host culture.<sup>42</sup>

Those best equipped to administer to the host culture are the very ones who are already recognized in that culture as leaders. They are already masters of the culture's language, beliefs system, worldview, values, and presuppositions because they have had the unique experience of growing up in that culture. Sorum says, "The leaders in the host culture or society are going to be more familiar with their culture and the functions that customs serve in their culture than a cross-cultural witness ever could be."<sup>43</sup> The problem with the old paradigm was not just the missionary's lack of cross-cultural proficiency or understanding. No matter how gifted the missionary, as an outsider, he would simply never be able to reach a culture in the same way as someone who grew up in it.<sup>44</sup>

One final impetus for PSI came from ethnic training programs beginning on their own. Satellite programs like the Apache, Caribbean, Hmong, Latin America, and central-city Milwaukee programs<sup>45</sup> already existed, yet they had few shared standards or any formal structure

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42. E. Allen Sorum, *Change: Mission & Ministry across Cultures* (Milwaukee, Wis.: WELS Outreach Resources, 1997), 95.

43. Sorum, *Change*, 95.

44. This is not to say that the expat missionary has no role in the world field. The Apostle Paul says, "Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ," (1 Cor 12:12). There is beauty in the diversity of leaders with a diversity of gifts with which God has blessed his church, working together toward a common goal. The point here, rather, is that as stewards of time and resources, we ought to pursue excellence in everything (Cf. Col 3:23-24). We ought to seek and implement the most effective methods as possible of ministerial education in our mission fields. At the moment, training up native leaders seems to be not only the most culturally effective but also vastly more cost and resource effective.

45. Paul Wendland, *PSI Update to the WLS Faculty*, August 2003. These programs included the Apache Christian Training School (ACTS), Latin America Theological Traveling Educators (LATTE), the Caribbean Christian Training Institute, and the Multi-Ethnic Preseminary Program (MEPP), which oversaw the central-city

of accountability. Committees like the Multi-Cultural Mission Committee (MC<sup>2</sup>) and the Mission Opportunity Task Force sought new ways to train pastors for cross-cultural ministry.<sup>46</sup> They wanted to put standards in place so that these ministerial education programs did not become a “proliferation of seminaries,” as this would be a “negative outcome.”<sup>47</sup> Quoting the MEPP director, Dr. Glen Thompson, the 2003 Self-study sets forth “a concern that we not, through inaction, encourage the establishment of ‘numerous, independent ethnic training programs’ here in the United States.”<sup>48</sup> Wendland notes, “Our synod fathers had wisely decided that there should be one seminary.”<sup>49</sup> The common maxim certainly applies: “As the seminary goes, so goes the synod.” The training students received at WLS would, in turn, shape the doctrine and culture of the synod. WLS wanted to continue offering pastoral training in these cross-cultural programs, but if cross-cultural programs became institutional seminaries themselves, there was a risk of drifting into doctrinal disunity. PSI became the process as an institution to hold other programs doctrinally accountable. There needed to be a standard way to give these programs authenticity with the synod’s stamp of approval, so that there would be no suspicion of leaders who completed them.<sup>50</sup> WLS proposed that PSI would address the needs of “non-traditional”

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Milwaukee program. In the *2003 Self-Study*, the Hmong seminary (later called Asian satellite seminary training) is also mentioned.

46. WLS, *2003 Self-Study*, 105.

47. PSI, *Report to the WLS Board of Control* (Mequon: n.p., January 2003), 1. One specific area of concern for these committees included providing accountability in pastoral training for the fast-growing Hmong ministry whose need for pastoral training was apparent.

48. WLS, *2003 Self-Study*, 105.

49. Wendland, personal interview, 6 November 2025.

50. Wendland, personal interview, 6 November 2025.

seminary students by offering pastoral training for second-career candidates who could not relocate to New Ulm or who already held degrees from other universities, and by providing a standardized system of accountability for satellite and cross-cultural pastoral training programs.<sup>51</sup>

### **Other Considerations**

The need for training up pastors from diverse backgrounds and cultures was obvious. Then why not just transform the WLS system to better accommodate non-Anglo pastoral candidates? Better minority representation on campus would enhance education and cultural competency for the rest of the student body. Wendland captures the scope of the issue:

Unlike many raw mission settings, the training of pastors in North America can still assume that a large portion of our students will have been born into Lutheran homes, gone to Lutheran primary schools and high schools, and to have attended Martin Luther college. Our seminary training, in other words, is not just a matter of four years at WLS. For many, it is a cradle-to-call training. Assignment day is 25 years in the making.<sup>52</sup>

WLS eagerly desired to equip its graduates for cross-cultural ministry and to gain a more diverse student population. Yet it would have been impossible to transform a system so reliant on traditional Lutheran education and recruitment for ministry without significantly compromising the system. The initial proposal for PSI puts it this way:

We firmly believe that God has blessed the WELS with a pastoral training system that supplies our synod with capable, well-trained Lutheran theologian-pastors whose

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51. The second career part has since been taken out of PSI. Paul Wendland explains, “Originally, the PSI also had responsibility for the vetting of second-career students to determine whether they’d be best served either by a specialized program of study under the oversight of the PSI, or by seeking admission to the second career program of study at MLC. This function has now been assumed by a special admissions committee at WLS,” Wendland, “Church and Ministry in World Mission Settings,” presented to the JMC 9 October 2023. Professor Wendland wrote this as a “white paper” for the JMC and has not been published. I have quoted Wendland with permission.

52. Wendland, “Church and Ministry,” 17.

approach to gospel ministry is thoroughly evangelical and confessionally Lutheran. Schooled in the liberal arts, grounded in the biblical languages, and rooted in a thorough exegetical study of the Scriptures, the graduates of Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary are well equipped to receive calls into the pastoral ministry of our Synod and church bodies within our fellowship.<sup>53</sup>

Instead of reforming the whole system, WLS sought to preserve what was done well—the training of pastors through the traditional residential system handed down to us—while also developing new and appropriate ways to train culturally-diverse students.<sup>54</sup> Anticipating pushback to this new proposal, the 2003 Self-Study authors wrote, “We do not wish to compromise in the least what it means to be a Lutheran pastor. At the same time, we are seeking to be as flexible as Scripture permits in the methods we use to deliver that training to pastoral students.”<sup>55</sup> Compelled by love for the lost, PSI aimed to make it possible for more non-traditional students to pursue pastoral ministry and, strategically, to pursue cross-cultural ministry starting with pastors from diverse people groups.<sup>56</sup>

### What is a Pastor?

One key goal in establishing the PSI was to avoid any compromise and preserve a clear understanding of the pastoral office. But if PSI intended to raise up non-traditional pastors of other cultures, the planning process needed to remain focused on the outcome—pastors. What

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53. WLS, *2003 Self-Study*, 106.

54. WLS, *2003 Self-Study*, 106.

55. WLS, *2003 Self-Study*, 106.

56. WLS, *2003 Self-Study*, 106.

does it mean to be a “traditional” WELS pastor? Does the outcome change when working with culturally diverse students? Does the host culture’s conception of what a pastor is change the process of theological education?

God has commanded that the public ministry be carried out through the Church (cf. Matt 16:19, 28:19–20; Eph 4:11–12), yet God has not ordered that this one ministry be carried out through specific forms. Brug elaborates on the public ministry and the priesthood of all believers in general:

Christ has given only one assignment to the church, to preach the gospel. Everything else the church does, even the preaching of the law, has value only as it supports the church’s one mission: to preach the gospel.

This one ministry of the gospel may be exercised privately by all believers as well as by publicly called ministers of the Word. The same gospel is used in both private and public ministry. The same divine authority stands behind the gospel when it is used privately and when it is used publicly. This establishment of the public ministry, however, is not an adiaphoron, left to the freedom of the church. It is a command of God.<sup>57</sup>

One does not need to be divinely called in order to preach the gospel, yet traditionally, the Church has viewed “the pastoral office as the most comprehensive form of the public ministry of the Word.”<sup>58</sup> Wendland comments on our high view of the pastoral office, “The pastoral ministry occupies a definable space in our culture. Preaching, presiding, and administering the sacraments are all closely associated with this calling in our minds, as is the overall spiritual leadership in the congregation.”<sup>59</sup> In Western culture, pastors are easily recognized by what they do—they study in college and at seminary before their ordination and installation. They plan worship,

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57. John Brug, “Doctrinal Brief: ‘Forms Of Ministry,’” *WLQ* 97.2 (2000), 122.

58. Richard L. Gurgel, *This We Believe: Questions and Answers* (Milwaukee: NPH, 2006), 30.

59. Wendland, “Church and Ministry,” 17.

counsel people, write sermons and Bible studies, teach, baptize, and administer the Lord's Supper.

But there is no divine mandate that a pastor should look exactly like the traditional Western application of the biblical principle. Many non-Anglo cultures perceive the pastoral office differently. In other cultures, Wendland suggests, the pastor would not necessarily "need to have the same academic chops"<sup>60</sup> as in North America. Thorough exegetical study of Hebrew and Greek may not be expected, nor theological training through an accredited system with credits, grades, and course hours.

But regardless of expectations and understanding of the pastoral office, there are certain qualifications for the pastoral ministry that transcend cultures. As Paul lays out the qualifications for the noble task of overseers in the New Testament church, all of them except for διδακτικός (able to teach) deal with Christian character rather than intellectual abilities:

Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect (1 Tim 3:1-4).<sup>61</sup>

Wendland concludes, "The subtext seems to be that we ought to put a little less emphasis than we do on doctrinal study and just make sure we have a decent soul as a candidate."<sup>62</sup> Pastors are to be men of upstanding character in a community in order to shepherd their flock. No matter the

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60. Wendland, personal interview, 6 November 2025.

61. The term "overseers" is not a one-to-one comparison to our modern concept of "pastors," yet since the qualifications for public ministry are concern character, they apply to anyone called into the public ministry including pastors.

62. Wendland, "Church and Ministry," 9. Wendland is not asking us to bend on Lutheran confession.

culture, Wendland says a pastor is someone who is “able rightly to divide the Word of truth, is a man of true and tried and tested character, evangelical heart and an evangelical spirit.”<sup>63</sup> Able to teach means communicating God’s Word clearly and defending it against Satan’s lies, but able to teach also includes the ability to correctly divide and apply law and gospel. Being a “decent soul” means having a heart for the salvation of sinners and care for proclaiming the truth according to God’s Word.

The goal of raising up pastors within any culture remains the same—that he can “stand on his own two theological feet.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, Wendland says, he is someone who can carry out an independent ministry without constantly relying on help from a mentor.<sup>65</sup> Yet the way a pastor carries out the noble task of the ministry may change over time, even within a single culture. For example, a pastor of first-generation immigrants may look different than a pastor of the same people group as the culture becomes more integrated, moving to second- or third-generation immigrants who speak primarily English.

### **Risks in establishing PSI**

One of the biggest challenges in establishing PSI was not curriculum design or organizational structure, but getting synod buy-in. From the start, some were wary of PSI because they saw it as

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63. Wendland, personal interview, 6 November 2025.

64. Wendland, “Church and Ministry,” 20. “An E. H. Wendland dictum.” Wendland credits his father as the source.

65. Wendland, personal interview, 6 November 2025.

an easier path toward ministry and that it would undermine the traditional track (four years of pre-seminary training at MLC, three years of seminary training at WLS, and one year of internship) by cutting corners in the education process. Wendland expressed how, in the early 2000s, he had to assure people that PSI was meant to be a process, not a separate, novel track for entering pastoral ministry:

The PSI is not so much an institute as it is a procedure. It's an institutional procedure for going to a particular culture, through negotiation, determining what their needs are, and then coming up with a culturally sensitive answer to those needs, that it would also satisfy academic requirements of the Seminary, so that we could rightly and in a valid way put our stamp of approval on it and graduate them as graduates from the Seminary. So, it was intended from the very outset to be flexible, not a single answer.<sup>66</sup>

PSI sought to be culturally sensitive ministerial education tailored to the host culture's goals for the trained shepherds while remaining uncompromising on WLS's high standards for theological education. Wendland continues, "We did not want to dilute or have threatened the MDiv program, because it's integral to the doctrinal integrity of our church."<sup>67</sup> The Master of Divinity program, integral to residential theological education at WLS, was embraced by PSI too, not because of the degree itself nor the *candidatus reverendi ministerii* (CRM) status conferred on graduates by the Conference of Presidents (COP), but because students' character and ability are naturally vetted and evaluated throughout the education process.<sup>68</sup> This process for vetting future ministers of the gospel includes determining their confession—that they must be authentically

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66. Wendland, personal interview, 6 November 2025.

67. Wendland, personal interview, 6 November 2025.

68. Wendland, "Church and Ministry," 17.

Lutheran—and evaluating their character—that they are just as qualified for ministry as leaders of their culture as “traditional pastors.”

Finally, instituting PSI proved to be a tremendous challenge while WELS was experiencing financial hardship. Between the years 2000 and 2003, world missionaries were removed from the mission field, and over 36 positions were eliminated at the synodical schools, including staff positions and faculty calls.<sup>69</sup> Since synod boards and WLS committees were preoccupied with the more pressing financial crisis, there was limited bandwidth to address PSI’s growing mission opportunities.<sup>70</sup> But through the steady work of key leaders such as President Wendland and Professor Sorum, PSI became a success and continued to grow throughout the 2000s.

### **PSI is Born**

From its inception, PSI was designed to be not only a path for “non-traditional” students toward pastoral ministry, but “would also serve as an umbrella organization, providing curricular resources and oversight for other ethnic pastoral training programs.”<sup>71</sup> PSI was not only the process itself, but it also was the accountability that early ethnic programs needed since it would be operated in association with WLS.

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69. Brenner, *Jars of Clay*, 282.

70. Wendland, personal interview, 6 November 2025.

71. WLS, *2003 Self-Study*, 107.

PSI was served by an administrative committee which included a BME member, a member of MC<sup>2</sup>, two WLS faculty members, and advisory members from the BWM, from the COP, and the MLC Academic Dean. The number of different boards that originally made up the PSI committee shows how integral PSI is to WELS's commitment to improving on cross-cultural mission work as a whole. PSI was also served by a full-time director who evaluated student applications, proposed individual study plans (ISP) for each student, and coordinated staffing, since much of the training would happen remotely.<sup>72</sup>

The Lord has blessed the work of the PSI. Within the first year of its existence, the PSI advised over thirty pastoral candidates, established a relationship and approved a curriculum for the satellite training for Hmong ministry, explored opportunities for satellite seminary training in other parts of the world,<sup>73</sup> developed and implemented ISPs for four PSI students, and produced materials to assist men who considered pastoral ministry through PSI.<sup>74</sup>

### Biggest Changes since the Inception of PSI

In 2004, around the same time that PSI was founded, WELS established the JMC because it recognized that the BHM and the BWM's ministries were constantly overlapping in an age of globalization. The JMC permitted Home Missions and World Missions to intentionally

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72. WLS, *2003 Self-Study*, 107.

73. Wendland, *PSI Update to the WLS Faculty*, 18 August 2003, 1. These included the Caribbean Christian Training Institute, ACTS, Hispanic training, and a new satellite seminary in Hong Kong.

74. Wendland, *PSI Update to the WLS Faculty*, 18 August 2003, 1.

communicate and cooperate. One of their initial purposes included coordinating “the future expansion of multicultural ministries to enhance the reaching of more lost souls both in North America and the homeland of the people to whom we minister.”<sup>75</sup> The establishment of the JMC marked a deliberate institutional shift toward coordinated mission planning within WELS.

In 2015, the BMW streamlined its administration by introducing One Teams in Africa, East, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. Instead of scattered missionaries carrying out individual ministries around the world, these One Teams would meet regularly online to share their national church experience and communicate and collaborate across borders. This change allowed the missionaries themselves to participate in the administrative process and provided them with more resources in evangelizing nearby mission fields. The development of the WELS One Teams in world fields provided an intentional and unified framework for carrying out mission work across regions.<sup>76</sup>

But the restructuring of World Missions into One Teams raised the question—How will theological education be carried out? In 2016, in partnership with the board for World Missions (BHM) and the JMC, PSI reorganized and introduced the PSI Team to cooperate with the One Teams and the CELC to advise in theological education abroad and to seize mission opportunities opening up around the world.<sup>77</sup> Two major developments prompted the introduction of the PSI Team. First, circular migration had become a welcome challenge in

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75. Brenner, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 283. This is one of four purposes listed in the *Report to the Twelve Districts* from WELS.

76. WELS, *Book of Reports and Memorials* (Waukesha: n.p., May 2019), 118.

77. WLS, “Catalog Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary 2025–2026” (Mequon: n.p., 2025), 3.

WELS missions. *The PSI Way* defines circular migration as “those cases where an immigrant has become a WELS pastor (sic) and wants to take the Gospel and WELS training back to his country of origin.”<sup>78</sup> Second, globalization through the internet played a major role in mission expansion. Confessionally minded church bodies around the world sought confessional Lutheran partners. The PSI naturally became an institutional means for supporting global church bodies’ requests in mission partnership. Under the authority of the JMC and in cooperation with sister churches in the CELC, the PSI Team would offer guidance and counsel to church bodies as they moved toward partnership with WELS.

Finally, in 2020, the enrollment of second-career students was removed from the umbrella of PSI to the WLS Admissions Committee.<sup>79</sup> PSI’s purpose had shifted from broadly the handling of all “non-traditional” students to becoming the culturally sensitive process that provides theological education and partners with confessional church bodies around the world. Though the curricular materials that were developed for PSI could be applied to the training of second-career students, those cases would fall to the WLS Admissions Committee.

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78. WLS, *The PSI Way*, 4. *The PSI Way* errs in saying that the PSI student becomes a WELS pastor since they are typically referred to as PSI pastors or graduates of PSI.

79. WLS, “Catalog,” 3.

## PURPOSE AND PROCESS OF PSI

PSI's broad purpose is to "walk with kingdom-committed spiritual leaders worldwide."<sup>80</sup> PSI achieves this purpose as a collaborative ministry between WLS and the JMC. Though its initial purpose in 2003 was primarily to train "non-traditional" pastors, today PSI's purpose has become much broader. Church bodies around the world seek confessional Lutheranism, and PSI graduates continue to connect WELS to missions overseas.<sup>81</sup> PSI collaborates with the JMC in three main ways: to train pastors of diverse cultures, to provide curriculum resources and set the standard for theological education in WELS missions, and to provide consultation for different pastoral training programs and church bodies seeking WELS fellowship around the world.<sup>82</sup>

Broadly speaking, PSI hopes to expand its mission by reaching more people groups, graduating more leaders through the program, and by expanding its network of mentoring partners who provide consultation and teach courses.<sup>83</sup> The JMC considers PSI integral in its

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80. Bare, *PSI Supervising Pastor Handbook*, 3.

81. Bare, *PSI Supervising Pastor Handbook*, 3.

82. PSI's core values stated in *The PSI Way* reflect its purpose as an umbrella organization which collaborates with the JMC: "1. We strive to train and encourage stand-alone, confessional, evangelical pastors; 2. We teach a distinctively Lutheran curriculum that equips and inspires workers to pass it on; 3. We strive to deliver this curriculum contextually in a culturally appropriate way; 4. We rely on a mentoring approach because that approach allows a broad assessment of knowledge, skill, and character; 5. We look to the national leaders as soon as possible to lead in the planning, teaching, and evaluating because the national leaders are able to offer culturally appropriate perspectives and; 6. We seek an authentic collaboration with all stakeholders including the students, the administrative committees, sister seminaries, and all sister church bodies." WLS, *The PSI Way*, 6.

83. Back in 2017, a ten-year target for PSI included partnership with "100 identified ministries" working toward membership in the CELC led by "at least 250 Kingdom-committed spiritual leaders" (including confessionally Lutheran leaders in North America and abroad) who are "served by 50 PSI mentoring partners," *The PSI Way*, 6–7. Since 2017, this very ambitious goal for 2027 has been abandoned. The number of students enrolled

mission to expand WELS cross-cultural reach and to partner with confessional Lutheran church bodies.<sup>84</sup>

### North America

Current PSI Director Harland Goetzinger describes PSI's mission as nuanced, because PSI exists to train men "to be pastors to their own people group."<sup>85</sup> Often, the goal is that graduates would make contacts in their country of origin to connect WELS mission teams with that group. While the traditional WLS program produces "generalist" pastors, PSI produces "specialists" in the sense that they are not eligible for a call anywhere.<sup>86</sup> In fact, in the onboarding process, the PSI program does not accept just anyone "who wants to be a theologian,"<sup>87</sup> but they must be recognized leaders of a people group or a vision from the beginning on how they might shepherd a flock.

PSI graduates are no less qualified for ministry than traditional WLS graduates. Upon graduation, *CRM* is conferred on them. Goetzinger stresses that WELS does not support a "two-

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in PSI does not reflect its ministry success. However, I pray that PSI continues to expand and improve as it has proven itself relevant and important for WELS's global partnerships in the twenty-first century.

84. Goetzinger, personal interview, 20 October 2025.

85. Goetzinger, personal interview, 20 October 2025.

86. There are always exceptions in PSI. For example, pastor Paul Chung, a Korean PSI graduate currently serves as pastor at Peace Lutheran Church in Santa Clara, California. Though he does not serve his own people group per se, he is situated in a community where he conducts largely Asian evangelism.

87. Goetzinger, personal interview, 20 October 2025.

tiered pastorate”<sup>88</sup> through PSI, but it exists for an entirely different purpose than our traditional system of ministerial education.

### Supervising Pastors

In North America, local WELS pastors typically serve as supervisors for enrolled PSI students. Supervising pastors fulfill the role of ministry mentor and academic advisor for the PSI student.<sup>89</sup> As an academic advisor, he may teach a number of courses depending on his interest and ability. As a mentor, he works closely with the PSI student in multiple facets of ministry, promotes mutual respect as he encourages, seeks to listen to the PSI student’s needs, and gets to know his ethnic community. Since the theological education principles of time and presence are carried out primarily through the supervising pastor, PSI relies heavily on supervising pastors to foster a relationship with the PSI student, teach classes, assess their character and pastoral heart, and regularly report to the PSI committee.<sup>90</sup>

Relying on supervising pastors to carry out much of the relationship-building and assessment presents some challenges for the PSI program. First, in North America, PSI can only

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88. Goetzinger, personal interview, 20 October 2025. According to Goetzinger, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) at one time offered at least 7 different ways to become ministers of the gospel in their system. This resulted in a multi-tiered pastorate— “traditional” MDiv graduates and then exceptions to the traditional route, which had to be made due to pastoral shortages. Since this practice resulted from their flawed position on the doctrine of the Church and Ministry, WELS wanted to carefully guard against giving the impression of a “two-tiered pastorate.” Today in the LCMS, they do have a similar distance training program like PSI for nontraditional students called the Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) Program.

89. WLS, *The PSI Way*, 10.

90. Bare, *PSI Supervising Pastor Handbook*, 9–10.

truly operate where there is a WELS pastor. Not every parish pastor will necessarily be a good match for a PSI student. When it comes to being διδακτικός and participating in PSI's ministry, Goetzinger admits that while PSI relies on WLS professors to instruct courses, PSI cannot always assess the quality of the average parish pastor in WELS.<sup>91</sup> The supervising pastor makes or breaks the success of the PSI method. Bivens highlights some of the challenges of relying on supervising pastors,

The program passes or fails based on the ability of the supervising pastor. It is just a huge ask of a supervising pastor. Does he have a willingness to throw himself into this? Does he have the time to be able to do it? Does he have the ability to be able to do it?...So many of the courses need to be delivered by a third party, whether it's a supervising pastor or another pastor that he finds in the area, and that can just really bog down the program or cause other issues.

Perhaps a pastor is willing, but then after years of investment of time and resources in the PSI program, he takes a call or his situation changes. With the never-ending schedule that comes with the full-time ministry, not every pastor has the needed time to invest in PSI mentoring. Due to these limitations, one of the biggest challenges that PSI currently faces is finding committed supervising pastors. Pastors always need to weigh how they can best use their time, but how better can they partner in Christ's Great Commission than by training spiritual leaders through PSI? Instead of just shepherding a flock, why not partner in this unique way to train up more under-shepherds all to the glory of the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:1–4)?

Since the PSI Team provides the curriculum, materials, and necessary training for the supervising pastor, much more important than the supervising pastor's knowledge of systematics or mastery of biblical Greek or Hebrew is his multicultural sensitivity. This sensitivity involves

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91. Goetzinger, personal interview, 20 October 2025.

intentionality, genuine curiosity, and the ability to listen. Not every WELS pastor has the gifts or the cultural sensitivity to become a PSI mentor.

Recognizing this reality, one current goal at WLS is to instill a high cultural IQ in its students.<sup>92</sup> It carries out this goal through its curriculum, by exposing students to cross-cultural learning opportunities, and through cultural assessment tools like the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI).<sup>93</sup> Sorum offers several reasons why more WELS pastors should seek to grow in their cultural sensitivity:

We do not know this yet, not like we should. But our immigrant neighbors and our ethnic minority friends have so much to share with us. They are teaching us evangelistic passion, fraternal affection and fellowship, neighborhood involvement, the energy of storytelling, a broader definition of family, and so much more. Out of their abundance, they meet our need. Out of our abundance, we meet their need. And there is a richer equality for us all (2 Cor 8:14).<sup>94</sup>

Christian love compels gospel ministers to embrace mentorship opportunities with those who wish to pursue partnering in ministry, especially cross-cultural opportunities. All WELS pastors ought to consider how they can support this unique ministry of PSI through mentorship or recruitment.

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92. WLS, “Diversity Statement: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary,” n.d.. WLS’s Diversity Statement lists the following objectives to help instill cultural sensitivity in its students: “1. To foster cultural sensitivity among our faculty and students. 2. To encourage active listening “with the heart” so as to better understand those with whom we speak. 3. To provide safe opportunities for those from diverse (non-ethnic/racial majority) backgrounds to share their experience with the rest of the body. 4. To allow no obstacle in the path of ethnic and racial diversity on our campus, both in the student body and faculty. 5. To strive for a seminary family which reflects the kind of diversity promised in Revelation 7: “from every nation, tribe, people and language.”6. To recognize the difference between truth and error when evaluating current conversations regarding matters of diversity in our society. 7. To maintain a grace-filled appreciation for the “one Lord, one faith” truths that unite us.”

93. WLS, *Self-Study Report*, 4.

94. Sorum, “Reaching Ethnic Minorities in North America,” 532.

## PSI Students

Currently, about forty students are enrolled in the PSI from over seventeen people groups.<sup>95</sup> These men are recognized leaders who have a passion for gospel ministry. They make countless sacrifices to participate in the PSI program.

Time and financial issues are constant challenges for PSI students, especially for immigrants. Imagine arriving in North America from a poor country. You are unfamiliar with all the bureaucracy required to gain permanent residency, citizenship, and the necessary work qualifications. Though you are a skilled professional in your country of origin, you have to settle for a third-shift factory job to support your wife and family. You happen to meet a WELS pastor, and since you have a fiery zeal for gospel ministry, you want to train as a PSI pastor so that you can minister to your own people group. Unlike a student at WLS, you work 60 hours per week, but you decide to dedicate your precious spare time to voluntary instruction in the PSI program. It may take you up to seven or eight years to complete the program, and by that time, you are not sure if you will have the energy to start a ministry from scratch. PSI students sacrifice so much for the sake of the gospel.

It takes an extra measure of dedication and self-accountability to devote the necessary time and energy to complete PSI on your own. This is why the mentor-student relationship is emphasized. The PSI program is not a self-guided program. It is an institutional system for training and vetting pastors. Courses are not asynchronous online self-studies offered to anyone

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95. Goetzinger, personal interview, 20 October 2025. While there are forty men enrolled, Goetzinger says that there are about twenty-two men who are active in PSI right now for various reasons.

who wants a degree. PSI students are highly dedicated and motivated men who possess the character and gifts needed to carry out gospel ministry.

Finally, PSI students go through the whole process without any guarantee that their ministry will be funded by WELS. With a 12% vacancy rate,<sup>96</sup> WLS graduates have job security when they are assigned as pastors. The PSI graduates on, the other hand, carry the burden of figuring out how to leverage their PSI training into successful, self-supporting ministries. Goetzinger says that currently, PSI strives to be intentional about telling its students from early levels of enrollment that they need to envision and plan for their ministry before they graduate. Do they have a strategic ministry plan? Does it involve tent ministry? Will they be supported through another WELS congregation? There is no guarantee of pay. So, as the JMC stretches itself to fund new mission starts and to cooperate with church bodies overseas, finances will continue to be an issue for PSI graduates.<sup>97</sup>

### **PSI as a Global Mission Partner**

Today, PSI works very closely with the JMC and WELS World Mission One Teams. *The PSI Supervising Pastor Handbook* lists six objectives in collaboration with PSI and the One Teams:

- 1) Identification of future spiritual leaders in and for individual groups. 2) Introduction and assistance in the development of appropriate models for local training. 3) Encouraging mission zeal. 4) Developing evangelical and evangelistic ministry. 5)

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96. WELS, “WELS Conference of Presidents Meets,” 21 October 2025.

97. Goetzinger, personal interview, 20 October 2025.

Assessing the training we are providing and the pastors it has produced. 6) Encouraging and participating in One Team networking.<sup>98</sup>

PSI remains a natural fit for collaboration with the One Teams since it has the expertise needed to develop curricular programs for other cultures and address educational questions abroad. One of the main roles of PSI globally, according to Goetzinger, is ensuring “the consistent and solid confessional Lutheran theological education.”<sup>99</sup> When church bodies around the world seek guidance in theological education, the PSI Team regularly offers recommendations to seminaries and Bible institutes.

Often, PSI’s graduates connect WELS with new people groups and open new mission opportunities, yet the success of WELS world mission partnerships cannot necessarily be traced to this vision. World mission work is messy. Sometimes God opens up unexpected doors for missionaries. Sometimes the world missions plane takes off without a landing destination in mind—growth opportunities outpace the planning for education, discipleship, and publications.<sup>100</sup>

The story of PSI graduate Dr. David Shang illustrates the messy success of PSI’s vision. David was a professor at a Chinese university who specialized in Chinese history, philosophy, and literature. When David’s wife, Nancy, took a position at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, to teach Mandarin, David visited often. Eventually, after attending English as a second language classes at Wisconsin Lutheran Chapel, David agreed to attend a Bible study there since

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98. Bare, *PSI Supervising Pastor Handbook*, 4.

99. Goetzinger, personal interview 20 October 2025.

100. A perfect example of mission opportunities outpacing planning is certainly the HELC in Vietnam. Though the ministerial education programs for Hmong pastors and evangelists and multiplication strategy had not yet been drawn up, the HELC seized on the opportunity to build the TEC while the Vietnamese government cooperated with their mission efforts.

he was interested in learning more about Western history and civilization. David soon discovered that what he had been taught in China about Christianity was false. He found himself hungering to learn more, and he and Nancy were baptized at Wisconsin Lutheran Chapel in 2018.<sup>101</sup>

David immigrated to Toronto to study and write more about Western culture. It was there that David became a member at Hope Lutheran Church. After expressing interest in pastoral ministry, in 2021, David was accepted into PSI. While studying as a PSI student, David produced monthly online lectures on Chinese history. He gained a following of over 3,000 viewers. Though it remains illegal to evangelize through Chinese media, through these videos, David dropped subtle hints about Christianity, and some of his viewers reached out to him privately to learn more. He formed online Bible studies through these connections with people scattered across Asia who wanted to learn more about Christianity. Though David's English was still at a beginner's level, he completed the two stages of the program in about three years, graduating in May of 2025. David's online ministry has led to over 100 baptisms around the world. The Asian diaspora group, which he serves from Toronto, has adopted the name Goshen Lutheran Church, a fitting identity for a group living in foreign lands for whom God continues to abundantly provide (Gen 47).<sup>102</sup>

Yet David's ministry and future as a PSI pastor remain messy. Though PSI remains committed to this partnership and David was ordained as a pastor in 2026, there is no guarantee that David's ministry will receive funding indefinitely from the JMC. He presses on, not

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101. Julie Wietzke, "A Delightful Trouble," *Forward in Christ* 110.8 (August 2023), 7–11.

102. Dr. David Shang, personal interview, 29 July 2025.

knowing exactly how God will provide for this unique ministry. He had considered launching a Chinese outreach ministry to over 500,000 East Asians in the Toronto area in partnership with Hope Lutheran Church.<sup>103</sup> But when David's online ministry accelerated, he recognized that he could not pursue both. Now, Guili Chi, another Chinese member of Hope, has entered the PSI program in hopes of beginning a local Chinese ministry in Toronto. Assuming Guili is graduated from the PSI program, David and Guili wonder how this ministry will function especially with no promise of funding. David's ongoing blessings and challenges highlight the messy success of PSI.

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103. Shang, personal interview, 29 July 2025.

## COMPARING PSI TO WLS'S MODEL OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

There is no ideal model for theological education, but context, limitations, and goals shape the methodology of all education. New models for theological education with different presuppositions and learning outcomes challenge the traditional residential model. For example, according to the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE), the COVID-19 Pandemic “challenged and changed theological education as we knew it, especially as evidenced in the accelerated shift from residential to virtual modes of delivery.”<sup>104</sup> It is important to understand common models for theological education worldwide, in order to see how WLS and PSI share assumptions about theological education and how PSI's process of theological education differs from the MDiv program at WLS.

### **The Residential Model of Theological Education**

The history of the residential model of theological education is difficult to trace. In the second century, church fathers such as Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria organized theological schools to pass down Christian theology, but students did not necessarily train to enter public ministry as pastors.<sup>105</sup> The second through fifth centuries saw the rise of monastic asceticism and soon became the backbone of the hierarchy of the Christian Church. But

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7. 104. ICETE, “ICETE Manifesto II: Call and Commitment to the Renewal of Theological Education” n.d.,

105. Bare, “The Student-Faculty Relationship,” 23.

González argues that seminary, as we know it, is a recent innovation dating to the sixteenth century and the Council of Trent.<sup>106</sup> He says,

When at the time of the Reformation the Council of Trent decreed the founding of “seminaries” for the training of clergy, this was understood in terms of communities of study and character formation that would be very similar to the earlier monastic communities. Soon Protestantism began to follow a similar pattern, particularly in the United States and Great Britain, and Protestant seminaries came to be study centers in which community life was part of clerical formation. This is the reason why to this day many Protestant seminaries both in Europe and in the United States—and in churches resulting from North Atlantic missions—stress life in community.<sup>107</sup>

Residential theological education emphasizes community learning at a physical institution. Steve

Delamarter defines the “traditional model” with six basic distinguishing characteristics:

This assumed model – which I will call the “classic paradigm of theological education” – believes that the best setting for ministry preparation is (1) full immersion for at least three years in a (2) residential program in which senior members of the community instruct, inspire and form junior members primarily through (3) lecture-based pedagogies and where students learn the art of theological reflection through (4) face-to-face community discourse, (5) library research and (6) writing.<sup>108</sup>

Traditionally, information is passed on from professor to learner through lecture or sage-on-the-stage techniques. But today, residential theological education seminaries have begun to embrace modern teaching techniques that appeal to the psychology and sociology of human learning.

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106. Justo L. González, *The History of Theological Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 81. The first use of the term seminary, literally meaning “seedbed,” comes from Reginald Pole of Canterbury, who was a Papal Legate and important advisor at the Council of Trent. According to González, “what was intended was, as in a seedbed, to plant a large number of candidates, care for them in their growth process, and finally transplant them to the places where their ministry was to take place,” 81. For further reading on the history of residential theological education see González pp.79–130 and Bare pp. 23–40.

107. González, *The History of Theological Education*, 117.

108. Steve Delamarter, “A Typology of the Use of Technology in Theological Education,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 7.2 (2004): 135.

## Other Models of Theological Education

### Theological Education by Extension (TEE)

In opposition to the residential model at the Bible Institute are distance models of theological education. In the mid-1960s, TEE was popularized by the Presbyterian Church in Latin America for the Bible institute level. Instead of placing students in a central institution to prepare spiritual leaders for seminary training, an institution provided classes via correspondence, usually through programmed lesson materials with added seminars and practical experiences so that students could learn at their own pace.<sup>109</sup> Soon, the TEE concept was generally accepted as a more efficient means to train up spiritual leaders in mission fields around the world. But like all other models, TEE carried advantages and disadvantages. TEE experienced a 40% drop out rate, much higher than traditional programs. But TEE also provided more opportunities for those in mission fields who could not otherwise afford or access theological instruction. Overall, it proved useful in training lay spiritual leaders, but it failed to gain lasting momentum because it was not meant to be a one-to-one replacement for residential education that prepares professional pastors.<sup>110</sup>

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109. E. H. Wendland, "Theological Education by Extension," *WLQ* 77.4 (1980): 277.

110. Wendland, "Theological Education by Extension," 277–278. In 1972, WELS world missions were weighing the implementation of TEE abroad. At that time, Wendland estimated that TEE did not solve the existing problems of pastoral training in the mission field (immature graduates and practical limitations) though it could be a valuable aid to the education process.

### Distance and Hybrid Models

Other non-residential models of theological education have emerged with the rise of the internet and online forms of communication. The hybrid model—part in-person and part online instruction, and the distance model—online instruction only, allow for more flexibility and challenge the traditional model of seminary education. Delamarter and Brunner note, “The advocates of hybrid education contend that when pedagogy alone is allowed to dictate the issue, the answer will almost always be hybrid.”<sup>111</sup> They say that a hybrid model is superior to the residential model because learning objectives are better fulfilled through online communication than face-to-face communication. According to Delamarter and Brunner, the advantages of hybrid learning include flexibility for educators and students, contextualized learning, and deeper connections between faculty and students, and between students.<sup>112</sup>

However, the context in which Delamarter and Brunner advocate for hybrid education differs from WLS’s context. Hybrid models may foster deeper relationships at institutions where students pursue theology degrees for a variety of applications and where the faculty are not united in doctrine and purpose. But in a residential context like WLS, where students possess a distinct culture and identity, where the faculty all work toward the same goal—pastors forming pastors to proclaim God’s praise—and where culture is preserved through genuine interpersonal relationships, a hybrid model is not the most proficient approach for learning outcomes. The residential model, which embraces the theological education principles of time and presence,

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111. Steve Delamarter and Daniel L. Brunner, “Theological Education and Hybrid Models of Distance Learning,” *Theological Education* 40.2 (2005): 149. Though Delamarter and Brunner’s conclusions about technology use are outdated, they represent an important voice of leaders in theological education.

112. Delamarter and Brunner, “Theological Education and Hybrid Models,” 150-151.

encourages contextualized learning and strong student-faculty relationships unmatched by the hybrid model.

Where the hybrid model functions well in cross-cultural environments, especially in shame-honor based cultures characterized by pronounced hierarchical expectations. Through online platforms like Zoom, students who would otherwise never have spoken to one another are invited to reflect, collaborate, and apply new learning as peers. PSI has embraced online methods due to the need for better cross-cultural education and to overcome the staffing challenge of distance learning.

### Competency-Based Theological Education (CBTE)

Daniel Witte, member of the WELS One Africa Teams, notes six focuses where Competency-based education (CBE) differs from the traditional model:

1. *Culture*: CBE's approach is more individualized and less classroom-based.
2. *Instruction*: Teachers are not the sole deliverer. Practice partners are key.
3. *Progression*: CBE focuses more on what the student can do.
4. *Assessment*: Multiple formative assessments help move students toward success.
5. *Grading*: The approach is less norm-based than traditional models. It may be pass-fail. Coaching helps students get ready to move to the next stage of learning.
6. *Pace*: This is the most controversial aspect. Even in a semester-based system, CBE helps students move at their own pace.<sup>113</sup>

Instead of a rigid program that centers on the teacher as the sphere of learning, CBE focuses on the student as the sphere of learning and seeks to provide an environment best suited for them to succeed.

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113. Daniel Witte, "Meet Competency-Based Theological Education," n.d., 2–3.

CBTE applies these same principles to ministerial education. Anderson and Henson define CBTE as follows:

Competency-based theological education is an approach to education in which a learner's formation is rooted in contextualized standards of excellence, shaped by the recognition that the act of knowing requires the integration of content, character, and craft, and evaluated in the context of team-based mentoring. Therefore, learner progression is marked by the observable demonstration of integrated knowledge rather than by time, input, or curricular stages. Furthermore, quality is measured by learner outcomes rather than assumed based on path, resources, or people engaged in formational journey.<sup>114</sup>

CBTE prioritizes application and outcomes over a rigid curriculum. Advocates of CBTE recognize the ongoing problem that higher education institutions and the church are drifting apart.<sup>115</sup> In response, CBTE offers contextualized theological education that remains oriented toward a purpose—the mission of the church. Anderson and Henson say, “Education is not an end in itself. Education is a means to some greater missional objective.”<sup>116</sup> If CBTE is primarily focused on mission-mindedness and appealing to best practice in the way learners learn, then it is certainly something from which PSI can learn. Today, MLC education students can minor in CBTE.<sup>117</sup>

Since CBTE is goal-oriented toward the Church's mission, CBTE's emphasis remains a weakness of PSI's model. The PSI program is a culturally sensitive process and training that PSI

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114. Kenton C. Anderson and Gregory J. Henson, *Theological Education: Principles and Practices of Competency-Based Approach* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2024), 15.

115. Anderson and Henson, *Theological Education*, 22.

116. Anderson and Henson, *Theological Education*, 24.

117. Nichole LaGrow, “CBTE – What Does That Mean? – Nontraditional Education,” 8 October 2024, The CBTE program at MLC “meets MLC's institutional mission,” and uses seven emphases: contextual learning, partnered investment, team-based mentoring, integrated outcomes, timely instruction, recognition of prior learning, rigorous and adaptive assessment.

students receive remains thorough and robust, but the PSI Team has little interaction with the people groups whom PSI-trained men serve. This reality underscores the importance of the mentorship component of PSI's model.

### **WLS's Approach to Ministerial Education**

"Pastors forming pastors to proclaim God's Praise" is WLS's tagline.<sup>118</sup> WLS's faculty is intentionally comprised of pastor-professors with wide experience in the parish and in the missionary fields. Students are reminded of WLS's focus and mission every time they walk through the chapel doors and see emblazoned above the entryway, "Κηρυξατε Το Ευαγγελιον." Baked into the fabric of every course syllabus, every homework assignment, and every field experience is WLS's gospel purpose—to equip men for the pastoral ministry.<sup>119</sup> It achieves its purpose through two emphases:

Primarily, WLS prepares men to begin pastoral ministry by providing the spiritual, theological, and professional training needed to enter that ministry. WLS also partners with pastors in their ministry-long pursuit of spiritual, theological, and professional growth in their various God-given vocations.<sup>120</sup>

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118. WLS, "Strategic Plan | Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary," n.d., This tagline is drawn from the theme and title of WLS's strategic plan for 2020–2026. It is based on Isaiah 43:21, "The people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise." The strategic plan page on the WLS website has been updated since I accessed it in November 2025.

119. WLS, "Catalog," 1. Specifically stated, "The purpose of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) is to equip pastors for the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod or for churches and cultural groups within its confessional fellowship," 1.

120. WLS, "Catalog," 1.

WLS is not merely a theological seminary that awards MDiv degrees to students who want to study theology for their own sake. WLS is a professional seminary that prepares men for serving as pastors in WELS congregations and “for cultural groups within its confessional fellowship.”<sup>121</sup>

The current WLS catalog indicates:

To carry out its purpose, WLS has established the following objectives

- to lead theological students and pastors in a reverent study of the inspired and inerrant Word of God so that they are able to understand and apply its Christ-centered message of law and gospel;
- to encourage theological students and pastors to grow in their personal faith through daily contact with the means of grace;
- to teach all the areas of the theological curriculum in a thorough and scholarly fashion, in full harmony with the Holy Scriptures and in conscious agreement with the Lutheran Confessions;
- to train theological students and pastors in the skills required for ministry in an ever-changing world;
- to instill in theological students and pastors the kinds of attitudes that will assist them as they carry out their ministry in the contemporary world, e.g., confessional in stance, evangelical in approach, mission-minded in spirit, culturally sensitive, appropriately flexible, zealous both to nurture and to equip the saints.<sup>122</sup>

All of these objectives aim to shape students’ character and grow their faith. Theological education at WLS is a means to an end— “pastors forming pastors.” Students are shaped not only through their professors’ instruction and pastoral experience but also implicitly by the seminary’s culture, which cultivates an evangelical heart for the gospel and a zeal to share the Word with others. All of this is facilitated and enhanced through WLS’s proven residential model for theological education.

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121. WLS, “Catalog,” 1.

122. WLS, “Catalog,” 1.

### WLS's Residential Model of Theological Education

Because of its respect for the pastoral ministry and its proven success in training pastors for WELS, WLS remains a traditional residential seminary. There are expectations for students which accompany the residential model. All WLS students attend classes from real professors in a physical classroom. All students enroll full-time, most professors live on campus, and all single students live on the Mequon campus while married students live near enough to commute.<sup>123</sup> All students are required to take the same classes for the same number of credits over three years of on-campus instruction. They go through the same rigid program. While students are expected to be employed, no students are considered tent-ministers while they are enrolled. Course assignments and expectations are prioritized over student jobs as they fulfill their vocational duty as full-time students.<sup>124</sup>

WLS's residential model stems from WELS' German roots. When the early Wisconsin Synod first desired to found a worker-training school, they designed a combination high school-

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123. Further evidence on WLS's historical emphasis of residential theological training is found in its past policies on marriage and dorm life. WLS's 1978 Self-study reads, "4) It is understood that unmarried students are expected to live in the Seminary dormitory, unless their homes happen to be in the immediate vicinity....6) Those who have followed the regular course of pre-seminary training provided by the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod are not permitted to enter marriage prior to their entrance at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Exceptional cases are left to the judgment and final disposition of the Northwestern College faculty and board. 7) The synodical marriage regulations, which the seminary has been asked to follow, are the result, first, of the Synod's unwillingness to put an undue financial burden on its Worker Training Division and, second, of its conviction that Seminary dormitory life offers the student advantages which are an important part of his training. Enrolled students in attendance, vicaring, or on leave of absence, who contemplate marriage must seek the approval of the Seminary and must take note of the synodically adopted regulations." The prevailing view at that time was that full-time pastoral ministry was a sacrifice that must be prioritized above all else, so the policy was generally not considered extraordinary. Today, the policy has changed and enrolled students are allowed to marry. WLS, *A Self-Study of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary*, (Mequon: n.p., 1978), 95.

124. Case in point, WLS students used to be encouraged to work no more than twenty hours per week, but recently this number has been reduced to between fifteen and eighteen hours per week.

college after the German *Gymnasium*.<sup>125</sup> Since 1870, the system at Northwestern College in Watertown was meant “to serve the church exclusively as a training school for the seminary.”<sup>126</sup>

Thomas I. Ziebell captures the spirit in the beginning years of the *Gymnasium*:

By the middle of that decade [1870s] though [sic] a European-style curriculum was in place which remained virtually unchanged until well after World War One, shaping the school’s life for well over half a century.

This imported approach rested on the firm conviction that Old World education arrangements were far superior to those in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. Introducing the *Gymnasium* system then meant not just minor scheduling readjustments but a true cultural transformation of the institution. As statements by its leading proponents (A. F. Ernst, who had arrived on campus in 1869, and F. W. Notz who came in 1872) reveal, they believed traditional German classical instruction provided the best possible training anyone could receive. To these men it was not simply a means for preserving faith or providing a correct foundation for seminary studies—the essential *raisons d’être* [core rationale] of similar arrangements in the Missouri Synod—but the only proper way to prepare for any career, and their particular academic *Weltanschauung* [worldview] would endure at Watertown for the next two generations.<sup>127</sup>

This *Gymnasium* emphasized Classical education and required instruction in German in order to distinguish itself intentionally from American institutions.<sup>128</sup> Though exclusive instruction in the *Muttersprache* did not survive with the switch to English in the 1920s–1930s,<sup>129</sup> the basic

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125. Erwin Ernst Kowalke, *Centennial Story: Northwestern College 1865–1965* (Milwaukee: NPH, 1965), 132.

126. Kowalke, *Centennial Story*, 62. Beginning with President Lewis Thompson’s tenure at Northwestern College in 1869, German-American school had an English department aimed at traditional American preparatory academy, whereas the German department (*Gymnasium*) was put in place in 1870 and was meant to also fulfill the synod’s worker training needs.

127. Thomas I. Ziebell, “Establishing an Educational Subculture: The 19th Century German Gymnasium Arrangement Of Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin to 1915” (PhD diss., Madison: UW, 1994), 171.

128. Ziebell, “Establishing an Educational Subculture,” 173.

129. Edward C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, 144–145. On the Wisconsin Synod’s switch from German to English, Fredrich remarks, “The reader might want to know the precise year when English moved from a minority to a majority status for the church body. This is impossible. Those making the transition never were conscious of the fact that they were making history in the process...Efforts at dating the turn from German to

program and philosophy behind this style of residential education survived until the 1960s and shaped Wisconsin Synod synodical schools' culture and curriculum for decades.<sup>130</sup>

### WLS's Curriculum

WLS's MDiv curriculum consists of four key disciplines: biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology, and practical theology.<sup>131</sup> Together, they provide the necessary training and molding students need to carry out their vocation one day as pastors.

WLS's approach, consisting of four theological concentrations, follows a traditional residential model of theological education. Shaw argues that this model, which fragments

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English might scrutinize *Gemeinde-Blatt* and *Northwestern Lutheran* subscriber totals and spot 1939 as the year when the latter first outnumbered the former. Such a reading of the record overlooks the fact that the *Gemeinde-Blatt* had over the years gained a very loyal following out of all proportion to German's numerical strength in the church body...If pressed for a specific date for the transition, the writer would suggest the years 1929–1930. It was then, he estimates that the Wisconsin Synod ceased being a German and became an English synod.”

130. Ziebell, “Establishing an Educational Subculture,” 441–442.

131. WLS, “Catalog,” 15. The catalog also indicates that new students receive an introduction to biblical studies including learning basic Lutheran principles of hermeneutics, principles of textual criticism, and an overview of New Testament Greek. Biblical theology provides the foundational exegetical skills and Bible knowledge necessary to gain a thorough understanding of the message of the divine Word. The WLS catalog says, “No one can be a God-pleasing public witness unless with a believing heart he understands the message which our God and Savior has called us to proclaim to a world of sinners,” WLS, “Catalog,” 15. Students dive deeply into Scripture itself so that they can apply it as proclaimers of the gospel in every ministry context (2 Tim 3:14–17). Through careful study in historical theology, students learn how errors and false doctrines have perverted the message of truth as long as the Church has existed. They discover how God has kept his promise that his Word will stand forever (Isa 40:8). Students also gain a thorough knowledge of the doctrine of the Lutheran confessions and the historical background for these writings since they reflect the doctrine of Scripture. Deep study and reflection in systematic theology equip students with the knowledge of the doctrine of Scripture so that they can proclaim the truth in the pulpit, classroom, office, and mission field. Finally, teaching and learning experiences in practical theology allow the students to constantly apply their knowledge to the practical office of pastor. Students receive courses in Christian education, pastoral theology, and Christian worship, and they undergo other practical experiences such as catechism instruction, preaching, leading worship, and a vicar year as they learn, observe, and serve under their bishop's mentorship.

theology into different disciplines, arose from the emergence of the scientific method during the enlightenment:

European structures of higher education were admired across the Atlantic, and when seminaries began to be established in North America from the beginning of the nineteenth century, the model of distinct biblical, historical and systematic theological studies was retained, with the addition of a fourth area of ministerial or liturgical studies. Ironically, within these disciplines, ministerial studies or ‘practical theology’ has generally been seen as the lowest in rank, with biblical or systematic theological studies occupying the pre-eminent position. While the seminary curriculum purports to exist for the preparation of men and women for Christian ministry, through the hidden curriculum, the training component of ministerial studies is communicated as being of secondary importance (Madueme and Cannell 2007). The lack of any integrating paradigm has served to reinforce this sense of hierarchy.<sup>132</sup>

Shaw prefers a holistic approach to theological education, which emphasizes practical learning experiences over systematics. Shaw perceives one weakness of the traditional model is that a sense of hierarchy is unintentionally enforced in students through the structure of the curriculum itself, and that the traditional model is diametrically opposed to integrative learning.<sup>133</sup> However, at WLS even though the traditional model is retained in the curriculum, the overall culture of the institution and gospel-centered instruction and methodology instill an evangelical spirit in its graduates. Pastor-professors regularly speak to their experience of applying Scripture and tackling problems in parish and mission settings, which adds an integrative element in the classroom. Practical experiences through vicar programs, Early Field Training (EFT), and catechism instruction also allow students to personally apply and reinforce classroom knowledge.

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132. Perry Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education: A Practical Handbook for Integrative Learning* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2014), 93–94. For a definition of “hidden curriculum” see the section in this thesis entitled “implicit and explicit learning.”

133. Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education*, 94–99.

### PSI's Curriculum

To enroll in the PSI program, students must be members of good standing of WELS or a CELC church body and must have a letter of recommendation from a pastor in his home congregation.<sup>134</sup> To graduate as a PSI pastor, the student must complete four levels of education: Level—Evangelist, Level 2—Congregation Assistant, Level 3—Vicar, and Level 4—Pastor. Levels one and two comprise the Bible Institute level, while students must apply again for entry into the Seminary level, levels 3 and 4. The levels exist so that the student follows a natural progression of courses, receiving foundational training before advancing to intensive seminary-level material. Even if a student decides to discontinue the program after level one or two, his spiritual leadership training will still be valuable to him as he applies law and gospel, evangelizes, and continues to actively partner in ministry. Levels three and four emphasize biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology, and pastoral theology.

Goetzinger says simply, “PSI's curriculum mirrors WLS's curriculum, just not to the depth and breadth.”<sup>135</sup> PSI students enroll in virtually the same courses as WLS students. Upon graduation, graduates will either receive a Bachelor of Divinity (BDiv) or a Bachelor of Theology (BTh). In the BDiv program students receive extensive training in biblical Hebrew and Greek, while in the BTh program, “Greek and Hebrew objectives and courses are removed and replaced by Bible study in the student’s vernacular and other applicable courses.”<sup>136</sup> The fact that students may opt out of training in the biblical languages does not mean that PSI graduates are

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134. Bare, *PSI Supervising Pastor Handbook*, 6.

135. Goetzinger, personal interview, 20 October 2025.

136. Bare, *PSI Supervising Pastor Handbook*, 6.

second-tier or any less-qualified than BDiv students. Nor is it an indication that PSI is “cutting-corners” for the sake of the need for pastors. PSI simply recognizes that it is not always realistic to expect a PSI pastor to have the same language requirements as a WLS graduate pastor. Often, PSI graduates are much older and do not have the time, gifts, or the cognitive malleability to be able to master Greek or Hebrew. Instead, they are given thorough training to equip them to “stand on their own two theological feet”<sup>137</sup> as they interpret Scripture and apply law and gospel in their own culture.

WLS and PSI’s educational models are built upon the same principles of theological education—time and presence. The key difference, then, between training at WLS and through PSI is the modality, not the curriculum. PSI training often happens one-on-one or in small groups regularly over Zoom meetings. Keeping these limiting factors in mind, the PSI courses are designed to be culturally sensitive as they encourage dialogue and participation.

### **Dialogue Education**

PSI suggests that new supervising pastors adopt dialogue education as a teaching technique or at least learn a little bit about it as they teach PSI courses. The interesting challenge of cross-cultural education is that not all cultures learn the same way. *The PSI Supervising Pastor Handbook* offers dialogue education as a viable approach for instruction.<sup>138</sup>

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137. Wendland, “Church and Ministry” 20.

138. Bare, *PSI Supervising Pastor Handbook*, 24–26

Jane Vella is the main pioneer and visionary of dialogue education. She finds the traditional model of education offensive and even harmful to students' learning because instructors carry their own worldviews and perceptions in their teaching methods.<sup>139</sup> Instead of the popular education approach, Vella suggests making the students the subjects rather than the educators.<sup>140</sup> Dialogue education, which is Vella's proposed solution to the problems of the traditional model, is guided by twelve principles:

- *Needs assessment*: participation of the learners in naming what is to be learned.
- *Safety* in the environment and the process. We create a context for learning. That context can be made safe.
- *Sound relationships* between teacher and learner and among learners.
- *Sequence* of content and *reinforcement*.
- *Praxis*: action with reflection or learning by doing.
- *Respect for learners as decision makers*.
- *Ideas, feelings, and actions*: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor aspects of learning. *Immediacy* of the learning.
- *Clear roles and role development*.
- *Teamwork* and use of small groups.
- *Engagement* of the learners in what they are learning.
- *Accountability*: how do they know they know?<sup>141</sup>

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139. Jane Kathryn Vella, *Training Through Dialogue: Promoting Effective Learning and Change with Adults*, 1st ed., Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 3. Vella says, "The problem often faced in education comes from the obverse of these assumptions, which holds that individuals are neither free nor capable of being subjects; that they need direction; that the world is a given--nothing can be done about it; that society designs itself by virtue of an invisible hand; and the knowing is a matter of moving in controllable facts from the professors page to the learner's. Under these assumptions, educators attempt to cover as much as they can in a given time, so they can transmit as much information as possible to the learners. From this point of view of popular education, these assumptions are a dangerous basis for human learning," (9).

140. Vella, *Training Through Dialogue*, 6.

141. Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults*, Rev. ed., (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 4.

When educators apply these basic principles, learning becomes a guided dialogue rather than a rigid checking of boxes from the course syllabus. Instructors become facilitators of conversation. Similar to CBE, dialogue education is focused on the individual's learning needs and personal goals. Students input new information by relating it to past experience. Unless learners are given a chance to demonstrate how new material is immediately relevant, the teaching will make no impact on their lives.

One reason that the *PSI Supervising Pastor Handbook* proposes dialogue education is that it lends itself well to cross-cultural education. When different cultures bring different presuppositions, experiences, and ways of interpreting the world into the classroom, the best way to learn is through dialogue—listening, clarifying, and sharing. Communication must move two ways in order for teacher and student to progress.

However, dialogue education itself is not the whole of PSI's model of theological education for several reasons. PSI does not expect supervising pastors to learn and adopt dialogue education as their primary method. It is much more crucial for a supervising pastor to be culturally sensitive than it is for him to teach via dialogue education. According to Goetzinger, sometimes the course content requires the instructor to diverge from dialogue education techniques and just say it how it is—when talking about deep concepts in systematic theology for example. Teaching about the *genus maiestaticum*<sup>142</sup> requires some lecture. Finally, much of Vella's work is directed at enhancing student motivation by emphasizing the relationship between learner and instructor. Dialogue education was designed, in part, as a means

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142. The *Genus maiestaticum* (The Majestic Genus) is a term that Lutheran dogmaticians have used in Christology to teach that all the divine attributes are communicated to Jesus' human nature.

to level a power imbalance in the classroom between a group of students and the teacher.<sup>143</sup>

However, PSI's education context differs from Vella's since it deals with highly motivated and skilled individuals with a real passion for gospel working closely with their mentor toward the common goal of the pastoral ministry.<sup>144</sup> PSI instructors can certainly learn much from Vella, but dialogue education itself is not the model of theological education for PSI.

### **WLS and PSI's Shared Principles of Theological Education**

The principles, time and presence, inform WLS and PSI's models of theological education. WLS follows the residential model of theological education, but PSI cannot be purely residential due to the distance aspect of the program. WLS and PSI's models for theological education differ because they serve different purposes. WLS's purpose is "pastors forming pastors" primarily for service in WELS, while PSI is committed to pastors forming pastors cross-culturally and partnering with kingdom-committed spiritual leaders worldwide.

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143. Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, 11.

144. Goetzinger, personal interview, 20 October 2025.

## Time

“Making a Lutheran pastor is like steeping tea. You don’t just dip the tea bag in and all of the sudden, bingo the guy’s a Lutheran pastor.”<sup>145</sup> As an experienced missionary in Africa and former president of WLS, President Wendland understands that a pastor should not be rushed through his seminary education.

The time principle is not just a pedagogical concept but a biblical one—an overseer “must not be a recent convert” (1 Tim 3:6). It takes time to digest the meaty concepts of systematic theology and historical theology. Practical experiences such as vicaring, preaching, presiding, and making evangelism calls require time and energy. It takes time for theology students to learn how to properly divide and apply law and gospel. It takes experience to apply the truth in pastoral counseling. It takes time for true gospel motivation to become the heart and soul of the theology student.

Time is not just the friend of students but also educators. The careful evaluation of the student’s character and ability to shepherd happens through hundreds of interactions over years of study. Wendland demonstrates the time principle of theological education through a story of personal experience when he was tasked with establishing a seminary and evaluating the local ministry in Cameroon affiliated with WELS:

Yes, men could be trained in the classroom. But with only two missionaries allocated—and often only one on the field at any given moment—it was difficult, if not impossible, to find sufficient time to discover what was happening in real life in the congregations. The problem was only exacerbated by the remoteness of the congregations and the extreme difficulty of travel. When visits were made, the results were often disheartening. “Pastors” and church leaders would act in less than evangelical ways—like the big Boss—issuing peremptory commands to inferiors. When pastors did deign to preach to

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145. Wendland, personal interview, 6 November 2025.

their congregations (not always a given). Sometimes preaching was delegated to others; the content was often a mishmash of moralizing...the key problem, it seemed to me, was that we didn't have enough time nor the resources of money and manpower to oversee the work of seminarians in the field while they were being trained in the classroom.<sup>146</sup>

Without gospel motivation, the theology student's spiritual default remains the *opinio legis*.<sup>147</sup> So when the principle of time in theological education is minimized, students do not have as much opportunity to take gospel motivation to heart, which inevitably leads to un-Lutheran practice—moralizing in the pulpit, ruling by the law instead of love, improperly administering the sacraments. Especially in world missions settings, where spiritual leaders are often trained first through non-Lutheran programs, seminary students need sufficient time to unlearn prior doctrinal imprints and develop a distinctly Lutheran hermeneutic—reading and applying Scripture through the lens of law and gospel. Teachers need time to evaluate the character and capability of the ministerial candidate. Sharing this distinctly Lutheran identity is not “an act of cultural imperialism,” Wendland maintains, since we have “the everlasting gospel to proclaim to every nation, tribe, language, and people” (Rev 14:6).<sup>148</sup>

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146. Wendland, “Church and Ministry,” 23–24.

147. Latin for “(human) thinking about the law.” The *opinio legis* is the innate human conviction that we can contribute something to our salvation by keeping the law rather than seeking justification through Christ alone. Even Christians with the strongest of faith remain sinner-saints for whom the *opinio legis* remains a constant companion and struggle.

148. Wendland, “Church and Ministry,” 18.

## Presence

Time and presence are closely associated theological education principles. Though they were unschooled, ordinary men (Acts 4:13), the Apostles spent three years learning at the feet of their Savior before being sent as witnesses to the ends of the earth through the power of the Spirit (Acts 1:8). The Apostle Paul, too, trained leaders of the New Testament church through constant personal interaction. Wendland supposes, “We could even say that Luke, Silas, Timothy, Titus, Sosthenes, and Epaphroditus—among others—comprised the first graduating class of New Testament seminarians.” How, then, does one keep the presence principle today? Does it include conversation between professor and theology student? Does it necessarily involve face-to-face engagement like the Apostles, or can the presence principle be fulfilled through a Zoom call?

### ***Implicit and Explicit Learning***

Modern theories of students’ learning show the importance of presence in theological education. Learning is not like plugging into a database and simply downloading course content and teachers’ lectures into the students’ brains. Humans are social creatures who learn by relating new information to information they already understand.<sup>149</sup> Shaw says:

The human mind even from birth is not a *tabula rasa* upon which instructors write, and new knowledge cannot simply be transmitted from one person to another. When students are confronted with new information, they must process that information, building upon

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149. Jane Vella, *Training through Dialogue: Promoting Effective Learning and Change with Adults* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 2–5.

previous knowledge and experiences, before they can make sense of it, value and apply it.<sup>150</sup>

Students do not just learn in the classroom, but learning also happens implicitly whenever the student relates new concepts to previous knowledge. If gospel ministry is not just about speaking a message but personal contact with people, then professional training for full-time ministry ought to require personal contact through interaction.

In theological education, both the implicit and explicit curricula are vital for learning and must be designed intentionally to facilitate appropriate learning outcomes. Shaw defines the implicit (hidden) curriculum as “the potent sociological and psychological dimension of education, which are usually caught rather than intentionally taught.”<sup>151</sup> Implicit learning might include the overall culture of the institution, the teaching methodology itself, or personal conversations between mentors and students. The explicit curriculum, on the other hand, includes “those publicly known, stated and planned educational events which are commonly understood by all those who are participating.”<sup>152</sup> Explicit learning includes lesson content, objectives listed in course syllabi, and planned activities such as preaching in homiletics class.

Implicit instruction is significant for training spiritual leaders. Wendland demonstrates how Scripture highlights implicit instruction:

Implicit instruction is equally if not more significant [than explicit instruction]. In the classic rabbi/student relationship, it was simply expected that a disciple would spend time in daily life with his instructor to learn from his everyday speech and behavior. We need

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150. Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education*, 83.

151. Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education*, 79.

152. Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education*, 79.

only recall here the words of Mark 3:14, “He appointed twelve apostles...that they might be with him (ὄσιν μετ’ αὐτοῦ).” It is that last phrase that is so pregnant with meaning.<sup>153</sup>

Presence through implicit instruction is arguably more important to facilitate theological education than checking the boxes and obtaining the necessary credits to earn a degree. This means face-to-face engagement between instructor and student, personal involvement, and relationship development is not just preferred but mandatory.

Robert Ferris goes so far as to say, “the faculty are the curriculum.”<sup>154</sup> Theology students perhaps learn even more through the shaping of faculty members through relationships than through the course material itself. Jonathan Bare conducted a study at WLS to determine what role student-faculty relationships play in theological education. Through his research, he identified the following evidence for the importance of relationship building in theological education:

When faculty demonstrated pastoral, relational qualities, relationships were enhanced. As pastors, the faculty naturally look at their students as souls who had been entrusted to their care. Pastoral qualities identified in this research included being evangelical, kind, caring, warm friendly, personable, relatable, approachable, real, light-hearted, open and honest, trustworthy, and respectful. Students who could see those qualities in their professors as they interacted together were naturally drawn into a relationship.<sup>155</sup>

One great advantage of the residential model of theological education is that the faculty can lean into the presence principle. These faculty-student, mentor-mentee, pastor-soul relationships are not just fostered in the classroom but in social gatherings, extracurricular activities, and other natural interactions by design. Through implicit learning, students who have a positive

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153. Wendland, “Church and Ministry,” 9.

154. Shaw, *Transforming Theological Education*, viii.

155. Bare, “The Student-Faculty Relationship,” 118.

relationship with their professors naturally seek to emulate their evangelical heart and want to carry their pastoral approach into ministry.<sup>156</sup>

Presence is also integral to PSI's process of theological education. How is presence accounted for when learners are scattered across cultures and time zones? Presence must be balanced with what is practically possible. Wendland says, "You can't create a Mequon in the Twin Cities...You can't create Mequons in every single Hispanic community."<sup>157</sup> Online presence through Zoom meetings is great for explicit learning, espousing the course content through question-and-answer format, but real, in-person, personal interaction is preferred whenever possible.<sup>158</sup> In order to maintain presence in theological education, Goetzinger and other members of the PSI Team frequently travel to interact on a personal level with students—sitting down to meals together, going on ministry calls together, sharing experiences together in their specific culture and context.<sup>159</sup> PSI students are also encouraged to visit the WLS campus for leadership seminars so that they receive as much time and presence as possible with fellow students of other cultures and pastor-professors. The shaping that happens through these interactions is invaluable.

PSI also relies on WELS supervising pastors to deliver time and presence through personal mentorship. Goetzinger says, "The PSI system is built on the premise that it doesn't

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156. Bare, "The Student-Faculty Relationship," 104.

157. Wendland, personal interview, 6 November 2025.

158. Like all other education in America, PSI was impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic. One positive consequence was that online instruction became smoother and more easily implemented when face-to-face interaction was limited.

159. Bivens, personal interview, 16 October 2025.

work unless you have a supervising pastor.”<sup>160</sup> Compared to the residential system at WLS, whose students typically have at least three years of intense study, growth in knowledge and character, and culture shaping by classmates and the faculty, PSI relies on the supervising pastor to influence and shape the PSI student as a personal mentor. This mentor role is critical because he is also the eyes and ears of the PSI Team, constantly evaluating and encouraging the PSI student as he prepares to assume leadership in gospel ministry. *PSI Supervising Pastor Handbook* says, “The PSI Team is committed to mutual mentoring because this process holds out a strong hope that the community of believers who hold to Reformation commitments and values will grow; The evangelical and evangelistic partnership will flourish.”<sup>161</sup> The blessings of mentorship are mutual. Mentor and mentee learn together through many conversations and interactions over time as they influence each other.

### ***Institutions***

Though subtler than time and presence, the institution is a necessary part of theological education which is central to PSI and WLS. The institutional aspect of WLS is obvious—the Seminary is a physical institution with classrooms, faculty, staff, and students. But PSI, too, was designed intentionally to be an institutional process. Wendland calls institutions “living repositories of memory; libraries of culture.”<sup>162</sup> Institutions have their own culture, traditions, and

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160. Goetzing, personal interview, 20 October 2025.

161. Bare, *PSI Supervising Pastor Handbook*, 9.

162. Wendland, personal interview, 6 November 2025.

ways of doing things. So, institutions naturally provide necessary structure for theological education to take place in an orderly way and give guidance when application questions arise in diverse ministry contexts. Institutions also ensure that a system of vetting and accountability is in place. This remains different from TEE or other self-guided processes for obtaining theology degrees. PSI is the gospel-centered institutional process that provides theological education, authentically Lutheran in doctrine, yet suitably adapted for cultural contexts.

The institutional aspect of PSI is important because when church bodies around the world want to begin their own ministerial education programs, they may be tempted to forfeit the structure and accountability that institutions provide. After all, institutional residential seminaries are tremendously expensive to operate on the mission field, and the yield does not always justify the expense. PSI provides necessary accountability as a program operated through WLS and the JMC, but also institutional credibility, momentum, experience, wisdom, and knowledge. It has high standards and a strict vetting process for its students. PSI exists to provide excellent pastoral education and to maintain the integrity of the pastoral ministry in the most culturally sensitive way possible.<sup>163</sup>

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163. Wendland, personal interview, 6 November 2025.

## CONCLUSION

Scripture proclaims that the Holy Ministry, including cross-cultural ministry, and theological education are necessary. PSI lies crucially at the intersection of these three scriptural commands as it carries out its purpose—training spiritual leaders worldwide.

The historical circumstances that prompted the formation of PSI include ministerial education challenges, mission opportunities, a love to reach across cultures, and a shift in WELS missions philosophy. Though the purpose of PSI has evolved over time, these same considerations which necessitated PSI continue to prove PSI's relevance today. Never before has WELS been poised to prioritize cross-cultural evangelism in North America and overseas as kingdom-committed leaders and national church bodies seek to partner with confessional Lutherans. If WELS wants to expand its global footprint, it needs to expand its efforts to train recognized leaders in diverse cultures through PSI.

PSI is the most important way that WELS seeks to carry out cross-cultural mission work. PSI, therefore, is not just a method for carrying out culturally sensitive theological education or an alternative path to pastoral ministry in WLS, but it is integral to WELS's mission strategy. PSI's method through the mentor-mentee relationship provides a unique, proven method for cross-cultural multiplication. Therefore, Christian love compels ministers of the gospels to be seeking more opportunities to enhance, expand, and partner with PSI's ministry.

When I consider the future of theological education in our synod, I pray that we always embrace the principles of time and presence and the institutional aspect of theological education. These principles are not only supported by examples in Scripture, but when they are upheld, they

give pastoral candidates best opportunity to learn at the feet of their pastor-mentors as they divide law and gospel. Time and presence encourage a natural process of vetting, accountability, and maintaining doctrinal integrity. WLS's residential model of theological education and PSI's own model are built upon these presuppositions about theological education. As new programs for training spiritual leaders arise even within WELS to embrace open doors for world mission work, as enrollment at our synodical schools declines, and as technology influences how we carry out theological education, I pray that we do not forget the intentional design of our ministerial education system nor compromise on time and presence in theological education.

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