

**An Ordained LCMS Pastor for Every Synod Congregation:
Nine Recommendations for Forming and Providing Pastors in the LCMS**

“God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another”
(ESV, 1 Corinthians 12:24-25).

“Our churches teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church, or administer the Sacraments, without a rightly ordered call” (AC XIV).

In the Fall of 2023, Dr. David Peter of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis (CSL) invited us three West Coast District Presidents (Michael Lange, CNH; Paul Linnemann, NOW; Michael Gibson, PSD) to provide a White Paper for consideration in advance of the meeting between the Pastoral Formation Committee (PFC) and representatives of the seminary faculties in May of 2024. We count it a substantial honor to have received this request to contribute to the conversation regarding the future of routes of pastoral formation in our Synod. While the Synod bylaws place the responsibility for recommending changes and additions to routes for pastoral formation to the PFC, your concern for our insights regarding this matter reflect not only your consideration for us but also for the many congregations on the West Coast. While the venue for the consideration of this paper has more recently shifted to the April meetings of the Council of Presidents (COP) together with the seminary faculties and the PFC, the gesture is no less significant. This kind of fraternal dialogue and attentive listening allows us to live out the unity we have in Christ despite our unique perspectives. We are bound together as one body in Christ and by our shared confession in Christ’s name.

With this unity of the Body of Christ in mind, we subsequently invited input from a selection of other district leaders from around the Synod. We sought their informal written feedback on the strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities regarding the present state of pastoral formation in the LCMS. We also hosted an in-person facilitated meeting in February of 2024 to dialogue about the informal input gathered. The Atlantic District, Ohio District, Michigan District, Minnesota South District, Nebraska District, North Wisconsin District, Rocky Mountain District, SELC District, Southeastern District and Texas District all participated in some fashion along with our three West Coast Districts: the California Nevada Hawaii District, Northwest District, and Pacific Southwest District. The following reflects the outcome of that fruitful discussion.

The Reasons for Forming Synod and Forming Pastors through Multiple Routes

The preamble of the Synod’s constitution contains two simple reasons for forming the Synod: (1) “the example of the apostolic church” (LCMS, 2023b, p. 11) namely that they met and made decisions together citing Acts 15:1-31, and (2) “our Lord’s will that the diversities of gifts should be for the common profit” (LCMS, 2023b, p. 11) citing the very passages of the Body of Christ dialogue from which the opening of this paper came, 1 Corinthians 12:4-31. Inherent in these two foundational aims in our life as Synod is the recognition that the decision to walk together in ministry, mission, and service for Christ does not eliminate variety in the methods that such ministry, mission and service are carried out; rather, they commend such variety for the common good. This blessed tension, reminiscent of the many paradoxical tensions inherent to a strong

biblical theology so eloquently expressed in our Lutheran Confessions, is therefore a core value that undergirds the Synod's objectives found in Article III of the Synod constitution. The third of those objectives calls for the Synod to "recruit and train pastors, teachers, and other professional church workers and to provide opportunity for their continual growth." Objective seven is likewise significant: the Synod shall "encourage congregations to strive for uniformity in church practice, but also to develop an appreciation of a variety of responsible practices and customs which are in harmony with our common profession of faith." Again, our efforts at unity of practice are not to undermine appreciation for the variety of responsible practices that can benefit the common good. While encouraging this healthy tension, our foundational documents convey that the reasons for forming Synod are also the reasons for seeking alternative routes for forming pastors.

With this in mind, we are grateful that the PFC and our seminaries have made such a strong commitment to multiple routes to ordination, continuing an almost two century tradition of pastoral formation that has embraced and furthered our Synod's mission. Since our Synod's beginning, a rich variety of practice has developed to meet the pressing need of supplying pastors fit for service to the varied congregations of God's people spread in diverse contexts across the regions of our Synod. In its report to the 2023 Synod convention, the PFC outlined the features of the current agreed upon Synod pathways for pastoral formation: the residential pathways of MDiv and Alternate Route, as well as the non-residential pathways of Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP), the Cross-Cultural Ministry Center (CMC), the Center for Hispanic Studies (CHS), and the Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology (EIIT). We want to affirm all these routes.

The theological training our seminarians receive from our Synod's seminary faculties could rightfully be called the "gold standard" among all other seminaries due to the faithful and diligent instruction in accord with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. We can assure the PFC and seminary faculty members that in no way do we want to lessen the faithful instruction of our seminaries. It is our hope and prayer that the analysis of our Synod's current models and methods of pastoral formation, the challenges we face with them, and our ideas for new approaches will not in any way be seen as an attempt to undermine or compete against this treasure that our seminaries offer to our Synod. Rather, it is our earnest desire to bring this strong theological foundation to as many men as possible with the ultimate goal that there would be an ordained LCMS pastor for every Synod congregation. This goal becomes particularly poignant in light of the beginning and pressing pastoral shortage that districts across the Synod are starting to feel. (The Feb. 2024 COP meeting noted 10.7% of LCMS congregations are vacant, with another 10% being served only part time.)

An Analysis of the Current System of Forming and Providing Pastors for LCMS Congregations

We believe the desire for an ordained LCMS pastor in every Synod congregation is a shared value across our Synod for it reflects our shared confession of the Office of the Ministry as a gift of Christ to his church. There are, however, significant challenges that make the attainment of such a worthy, yet lofty, goal to be very difficult. To better understand those challenges, we first offer our grassroots, ground level, analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats impacting current pastoral formation efforts. Following this analysis, we offer nine

recommendations to the PFC and seminary faculties. While this is not an academic paper, per se, we do make reference to current research and to the history of the church as appropriate for rationale and grounds for consideration as you dialogue over these recommendations.

Strengths of the Current System (Positives based on internal realities):

- **Rich History of Pastoral Formation:** Our Synod boasts over 177 years of robust and faithful biblical and confessional seminary training preparing pastors for our Synod.
- **Multiple Institutions of Higher Education:** Our Synod appreciates its multiple higher education institutions equipped with pastors and theologians adept at preparing men for the Office of the Ministry. These include the faculties of the seminary programs of CTSFW, CSL and the CMC at CUI in partnership with CSL, as well as the faculties of undergraduate pre-seminary programs at our Concordia University campuses.
- **Variety of Pastoral Formation Pathways:** Our Synod provides multiple pathways to ordination through pastoral formation tailored to students from different ethnic backgrounds and in different stages of life without assuming that one pathway will fit all situations.
- **The Finest Residential Theological Training:** Our seminaries provide the finest residential theological training available. Beyond the academics offered, other significant elements of residential seminary training include: (1) lifelong relationships among students attending concurrently, (2) world-class library facilities, (3) time and space for in-depth study, and (4) the creation of the Lutheran ethos.
- **Decades of Experience in Non-Residential Pastoral Formation:** Our Synod benefits from decades of experience in designing and implementing non-residential modes of pastoral formation. This rich experience comes not only from our current SMP, CMC, CHS, and EIIT routes, but also from previous efforts such as DELTO and theological training by extension in the mission field. Beyond the academics offered, other significant elements of non-residential seminary training include: (1) lifelong relationships among concurrent students in SMP, CMC, EIIT, and CHS programs and (2) practical ministry training in varied expressions of the Body of Christ with a variety and styles of ministry among our congregations, which affords the cohorts to learn from one another under the guidance of instructors.

Weaknesses of the Current System (Concerns based on internal realities):

- **Unmet Need for Seminary Graduates:** The current number of candidates prepared by the residential programs is not meeting the need. An increasing gap exists between the number of vacant congregations and the number of pastors available to fill them. This is accelerating due to retirements and other factors without adequate numbers of seminary candidates to make up that gap. Our districts are active in new leader development and potential church-worker recruitment, diligently identifying and involving new leaders in

processes of vocational discernment in support of the *Set Apart to Serve* initiative. Still, the gap remains and is widening.

- **Rising Costs of Residential Education and Relocation:** The rising cost of traditional residential forms of higher education necessitates a significant commitment of Synod resources to provide full tuition grants to residential students, while limited financial aid is provided for non-residential routes. Currently, only partial aid is given for EIIT, CHS, and CMC, and none for SMP until the student reaches GPC stage. On the one hand, the high cost of relocation to many parts of the country causes undue burden on residential students upon their graduation as well as on calling congregations. On the other hand, non-residential students, who avoid the relocation costs, are hampered by a lack of funds to meet tuition costs. This is especially onerous for those serving in ethnic ministries where anticipated future compensation will not cover educational expenses.
- **The Length of Time Prior to Service in Ministry:** The time required prior to ordination can be a deterrent for a man considering ministry especially for those who are older with less time to serve. While the Scriptures caution against new converts becoming pastors, they do not prescribe an amount of time for long-time faithful members of LCMS congregations to study and prepare for the pastoral office.
- **Limited Contextual Understanding:** While residential MDiv students receive practical training through residential field education and vicarage, it is not equivalent to the knowledge of the local context and long-standing relationships that local leaders have. Such leaders are the kind whom Paul describes as respectable, having a good reputation with outsiders, and above reproach. The appointment of elders in Crete relied on keeping leaders in their context, not removing them from it. Foreign missions have relied on such a practice and such leaders to fill the Office of the Ministry.
- **A Tiered Pastorate:** Currently, the unequal outcomes of alternate routes in terms of academic degree, roster certification, and ministry limitation contribute to the concept of a class system among our pastors. This is further perpetuated by the emphasis on residential formation as the “Gold Standard,” which contributed to the mindset among pastors that those not completing a residential MDiv are inferior, due to a perceived lack of education, and are therefore in need of continuing formation and training. Meanwhile, many who have completed the residential route MDiv presume their pastoral formation is complete with no further need of training or continuing education.
- **Certification by Educational Institution Alone:** Currently, certification for ordination is granted exclusively by the educating institution. Many, if not most, professions (doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc.) are certified by processes outside of the educational institutions. Greater involvement in the certification of pastors, not just their placement, by those who are responsible for their ecclesiastical supervision would build a greater cooperation in tuning pastoral formation to meet the needs of congregations. This would provide balance between our Synod ecclesiastical and educational entities and help guard against the tendencies of institutionalism within them, where the focus can unwittingly become more upon the institution than the Kingdom of God. Additionally, in other vocations

certification is ongoing. While Synod bylaws call for continuing education among pastors, there are no normative criteria for pastors' continual formation and certification.

Opportunities for Forming and Providing Pastors for Synod Congregations (Positives based on external realities)

- **Greater Mission Awareness:** The changing spiritual landscape of society from predominately Christian to post-Christian, where more people prefer not to identify with any given faith tradition, gives pastors a tremendous opportunity to be on the front line of mission. It also provides the Synod the opportunity to bring a greater mission awareness and preparation in pastoral formation.
- **Ethnic and Cultural Diversity:** The increasing ethnic and cultural diversity of not only our urban centers but of many rural and agricultural settings in North America is likewise an opportunity. We appreciate that the 2023 Synod Convention Resolution 1-05A recognized this and encouraged *Set Apart to Serve* to “give attention to recruiting professional church workers among present Lutherans who grew up in these immigrant, ethnic, and non-Christian religious groups” (LCMS, 2023a, p. 119).
- **Advancements in Technology:** The use of technology can allow us to provide a full MDiv experience to a greater number of men. Such a program would utilize the theologians and practitioners in local congregations to assist in the formation process. The possibility of the LCMS leading the way in a new era of theological education, while showing continued fidelity to doctrine, is exciting. We have an opportunity to share our Lutheran ethos in new broader fields of theological education through technology.

Threats to Forming and Providing Pastors for Synod Congregations (Concerns based on external realities)

- **The Fear of Loss:** When identifying threats to our pastoral formation program, the fear of loss predominates. Among the prospective losses if programs are expanded or altered are: (1) loss of theological orthodoxy, (2) loss of academic rigor, and (3) loss of Lutheran ethos. Other potential losses could be attributed to not expanding or altering our methods of pastoral formation: (1) loss of ability to fill existing congregations with qualified pastors, and (2) loss of the ability to reach people with the gospel.
- **Rising Real Estate Costs and Cost of Living:** Real estate costs and the general cost-of-living in many regions of the U.S. make it increasingly difficult for congregations in those areas to adequately compensate a full-time, highly-educated, pastor or to provide compensation packages that make accepting a call to that part of the country feasible for pastors from outside the region.
- **Increasing Numbers of Synod Congregations Cannot Afford Pastors:** An increasing number of vacant congregations are unable to call a full-time pastor due to declines in membership coupled with the increasing age of their congregational members. In some districts, the number of congregations facing this reality is approaching one quarter to one

third of the congregations. Christ's Church needs pastors in these calls who are not simply hospice pastors for dying ministries but who will also actively take a role in renewed mission to the community. While part-time retired pastors, multi-parish formations, and mergers are all avenues currently utilized to prevent closure, they are not the complete solution to the problem. Our districts lack inexpensive expedient ways to provide ordained pastors for these saints. Lack of attention toward the growing need for bi-vocational or co-vocational pastors also leaves many pulpits vacant. Candidates completing the residential MDiv are not being placed in parishes where they will receive only part-time compensation, nor are candidates generally open to going there.

- **A Cycle of Decline:** The lack of pastoral leadership leads to fewer believers and fewer pastoral mentors to young men, which leads to fewer pastors.
- **A More Parochial View of Ministry:** If non-residential programs are expanded, it may lead to a more parochial, rather than synod-wide, view of church and ministry.
- **People Not Experiencing Eternal Life:** People need to hear the gospel.

Recommendations

In addressing issues of the SWOT analysis above, while holding to the reasons for existence as Synod and continuing the legacy of living out those reasons, we offer the following nine recommendations to achieve the goal of having an ordained LCMS pastor for every congregation in Synod.

1. **Continue to Provide High-Quality Theological Education:** High-quality theological education is a hallmark of the pastoral formation process of the LCMS; let's continue it.
2. **Maintain and Expand Flexibility:** Maintain and expand the flexibility of and access to all pathways for pastoral formation.
3. **Develop Contextual Formation:** Encourage, expand, and develop the contextual (non-residential) pathways of pastoral formation (like EIIT, CHS, SMP, and CMC).
4. **Emphasize Lifelong Pastoral Formation:** Create and implement specific criteria to establish a process of lifelong pastoral formation in the Synod with benchmarks for recertification for all pastors.
5. **Encourage Local Identification, Formation, and Service:** Encourage pathways where local identification leads to local formation and service.
6. **Provide Equal Outcomes:** Remove the limitations and restrictions so that all ordained pastors are general rostered pastors once they have completed their course of study and that those completing a degree route, residential or non-residential, all receive the same degree, an MDiv.

7. **Design Bi- and Co-Vocational Friendly Pathways:** Design the curriculum and travel expectations of local contextual pathways to pastoral formation with the bi-vocational and co-vocational pastoral candidate in mind.
8. **Enhance Affordability:** Enhance the affordability of alternate, contextual, pathways to pastoral formation.
9. **Utilize Collaborative Certification:** Utilize a collaborative certification process for the contextual (non-residential) routes by involving the local pastoral mentor/supervisor, the District President, and a seminary faculty mentor rather than certification by the seminary faculty alone.

Recommendations Explained

1. Continue to Provide High-Quality Theological Education

We treasure our strong theological education emphasis and do not want any of our subsequent recommendations and requests to undermine or lessen it. Since we believe this to be a shared value in our Synod, we offer it without further explanation. Our earnest desire is simply for such education to be more accessible, more contextual, and more on-going for all who are called to the pastoral office.

2. Maintain and Expand Flexibility

The LCMS has a long history with flexible forms of pastoral formation to meet the needs of its congregations and its mission. John Wohlrabe Jr., in the *Concordia Theological Quarterly* in 2021, surveyed the long history of LCMS pastoral formation pathways. His article vividly described the tensions in our Synod throughout its history over the use of a practical versus a theoretical approach to pastoral formation reassuring us that our tensions over this issue today are not unique. Yet, despite repeated discussion and even resolutions in past Synod conventions aiming to close the practical seminary or to limit the number of students going through the practical seminary, the Synod maintained the school, recognizing the necessity of both tracks.

Wohlrabe (2021) notes that as recently as 1920, men were admitted to the practical seminary without even an eighth-grade education. The practical pastoral formation track was “designed to equip students for the practical work of preaching and pastoral care in a congregation as quickly as possible” (p. 216) and was complementary to the deeply theological pathway at the St. Louis seminary. Both were deemed necessary. Wohlrabe (2021) further describes the differences and similarities in curriculum saying, “While the emphasis of the theological seminary was on scholarly theological education, and the practical seminary stressed sermonizing and catechesis, both schools held up systematic theology as of primary importance” (p. 220). At many stages of LCMS history, the practical seminary served more students and produced more pastors than the theoretical seminary. Even into the 1950’s, the practical seminary of the LCMS was “one of the largest Lutheran seminaries in the country” (p. 230) and it remained a feature of Synod pastoral formation until the late 1970’s.

There are many other examples of our Synod's historically flexible approach to pastoral formation. Walther would at times pluck a student from the seminary and assign him to a parish if he felt the student was ready, even though he had not finished the full seminary curriculum (Wohlrabe, 2021). The 1866 Synod Convention charged Synod's leadership and seminary faculty to "assume the responsibility that as soon as possible capable men are commissioned as *Reiseprediger*" (Meyer, 1964, p. 206), which were typically less educated traveling preachers. Referring to the years prior to the Synod's formation, Suelflow (1964) writes of Wilhelm Loehe's "Nothhelfer ('emergency helpers') or Sendlinge ('missioners')" (p. 97) describing them as "untrained theologians sent to alleviate the dire spiritual needs of German immigrants in America" (p. 97). This practice, he suggests, "was a radical departure from the usual practice of utilizing only university-trained men in the spiritual ministrations of the parish or mission field" (p. 97). Our methods of preparing men for ministry are quite different today, yet the principle that there would be a variety of pathways to pastoral formation to meet differing needs of both the pastoral candidates and of the people to be served is a principle we recognize inherent in the long history of our Synod.

We believe the Synod today would benefit greatly from maintaining, and even expanding access to, the non-residential alternate routes. Not only do we view them as the way to place an ordained LCMS pastor in every Synod congregation, but they can also aid us in our mission. For example, expanding the use of the CMC, opening it up to all candidates interested in seeking a ministry education that is more attuned to cross-cultural mission, would be a tangible way to act upon LCMS 2023 Resolution 1-05A to "recognize and actively promote the fact that the United States and Canada form a mission field with many unreached immigrants, ethnic groups, and non-Christian religious groups" (LCMS, 2023a, p. 118).

We sense significant fear within our Synod that less academically comprehensive avenues of pastoral formation, like SMP, will begin to shape the pastorate in a negative way. This fear is not new, nor does it necessarily reflect reality. Wohlrabe (2021) cites Walther, in the mid-nineteenth century, expressing this same fear in a private letter to Pastor Carl M. Zorn: "Just between us, the greater share of the so-called 'practical' preachers in our synod are always our weak side (since more and more become such)" (p. 220). However, operating by faith in Christ and driven by the overarching passion to provide pastors, the Synod continued to promote these alternate forms of instruction such that, "for the next thirty years, the ministers who graduated from the practical seminary had a majority voice in the affairs of the synod. Yet, the confessional theology of the two schools was the same" (Wohlrabe, 2021, p. 220). Ironically, Wohlrabe (2021) notes that when issues of biblical and confessional fidelity did arise in our Synod, in the mid-twentieth century, it did not arise from those with lesser theological education; it arose from the theoretical seminary.

3. Develop Contextual Formation

We appreciate what our Synod has learned about forming pastors contextually in their local geographic area without necessitating the move to a residential seminary. At the same time, we have clearly heard the voice of the PFC in its report to the 2023 Synod Convention saying:

The PFC and seminaries maintain that there is great value in residential formation and continue to encourage all prospective students considering preparation for the pastoral office to enroll in full-time theological study and pastoral formation in community at our seminaries. The benefits of residential formation include being formed by a daily liturgical life of the Word, living and learning within an incarnational face-to-face relational culture, immediate access to professors and peers, and personal investment in the continued fostering of a Synod culture that extends far beyond limited years in direct seminary studies. (Pastoral Formation Committee, 2023, p. 128-129)

Again, we have heard the voice of the PFC:

The PFC recommends that the Synod direct it to prepare a report to the 2026 Synod convention that evaluates and makes recommendations pertaining to non-LCMS seminary, district, and local congregational programs of ministerial formation that have surfaced within the LCMS in recent years. This evaluation should also include a thorough assessment of the benefits of residential (in-person) pastoral formation over against nonresidential (distance learning) methods of training those who carry out the distinctive functions of the Office of the Holy Ministry. (Pastoral Formation Committee, 2023, p. 129)

This “evaluation” mentions only the “benefits of residential (in person) pastoral formation,” without any consideration of the benefits of non-residential, or what we would prefer to call local/contextual pastoral formation. It needlessly sets these two models “over against” one another. We view this dichotomy of residential pastoral formation pitted against contextual pastoral formation as unhealthy for our Synod in a way which encourages us to look for the negative and minimize the positives and benefits. We believe that the two pathways are complementary avenues existing side-by-side in our Synod, enhancing the flexibility of pastoral formation and the development of new pastoral leaders for our church. We also believe they are both absolutely essential to place an ordained LCMS pastor in every Synod congregation. Considering again the topic of lifelong formation, we believe that if non-residential forms are beneficial for continuing pastoral formation, post-seminary, they can be robust enough for initial formation as well.

Contributing to the adversarial dichotomy between those who support a residential model over against a more contextual (non-residential) pathway are voices claiming the distinction is self-evident. CSL President Tom Egger shared in his essay to the 2023 Synod Convention on Pastoral Formation:

We thank God for our online programs and for the dedicated men and women who are preparing to serve the church through them. Real bonds are also forged among these online cohorts, and personal faith and identity in Christ is nurtured. We must recognize, however, that these crucial bonds are established more profoundly through in-person formation. (Egger, 2023, p. 110)

We find, however, when actual research studies in theological education and pastoral formation are brought into the mix, it becomes clear from the research that one pathway is not superior to the other. It may indeed be true that face-to-face bonds are deeper and stronger than online

bonds, but that is why contextual, non-residential, pathways to pastoral formation do not rely solely on online formation. Online aspects of the education enhance and extend the program across geographic distances, but each of the routes within our Synod includes intensives and cohorts that bring students together. The CMC advertises as much as thirty percent of its courses are taught in these intensives, which provide the opportunity for students to pray together, worship together, eat together, and to learn from one another. These bonds grow deep very quickly when preceded by months of online interaction through discussion boards and live video conversation.

J.J. Roberts (2019) surveyed the extant literature to find that as recently as 2019:

There have only been a handful of empirical studies undertaken on formational issues in distance or online theological education (Graham 2002; Heinemann 2006; Hockridge 2013; Lynch & Pattison 2005; Naidoo 2012; Nichols 2011, 2015, 2016; Palka 2004; Reissner 1999). Some of these articles show evidence from empirical studies that indicate that DE is a suitable mode of delivery for theology studies and, in particular, formation. (p. 6)

Among the research she points to is that of Hockridge, who in 2013 found evidence that it is “overly simplistic to conclude that formational learning cannot occur in distance and online modes. Formational learning is complex and is not easy to achieve regardless of the mode of study” (p. 158). Hockridge (2013) argues what is more important is that, regardless of the mode of learning, formation must be intentionally fostered. Based on her study of sixteen different theological institutions in Australia, each of which offered distance education, she found “that the great majority of the identified practices of formation can be undertaken in both distance/online and on campus learning contexts” (p. 152). Nichols (2015, 2016) conducted both quantitative and qualitative studies on pastoral formation among bachelor's level theology students preparing for ministry in evangelical churches in New Zealand and found:

Many objections to theological distance education on the basis of formation are not sustained by primary evidence. A strong case can be made that optimal formation through theological education actually takes place when part-time students, already active in their local congregations, are empowered by theological ideas and dialogue. (Nichols, 2016, p. 30)

CTSFW President Larry Rast, in his essay to the 2023 Synod Convention on the history of pastoral formation in our Synod, quoted research from Carroll et al. published by Oxford University Press in 1997, who studied cultural formation at two seminaries in the United States. Rast summarized their findings by saying:

For students to be formed by the culture of an institution—specifically if they were to internalize and synthesize the institution’s theological commitments and practices—it is necessary for that student to ‘Be-there,’ to spend time on campus learning and living in the midst of the community. (Rast, 2023, p. 108)

We do not disagree with this statement. Yet, we also recognize the culture of an institution can be a double-sided coin. Is the goal for men to be formed by the culture of the institution (putting the institution ahead of the *missio dei*) or for men to be formed to encounter the culture and be salt and light in the culture in which they will be serving for the sake of the *missio dei*?

More recent research described above adds nuance to Carroll et al.'s notion. Some of that more recent research was conducted at one of our own seminaries, CSL. John Palka, who was instrumental in designing the EIIT program, published research in 2004 which found that even residential MDiv students identified their primary influence for formation to be the congregations they were involved with (either their home congregation or their field work congregation). He further added:

The data indicate that students use their work and interactions within congregations as their primary platform for testing and validating the information that they receive in the classroom. This testing and validation process is a crucial step in transforming raw classroom data and information into knowledge, and in transferring the knowledge to other settings. (Palka, 2004, p. 5)

Another set of researchers who have studied this topic and found non-residential forms of pastoral education significantly formative, Lowe & Lowe (2010), suggest we ought not be surprised because the New Testament authors speak this way repeatedly. Paul talks of being absent in body but present in Spirit as he instructs the people and church leaders of Corinth (1 Corinthians 5:4). Paul interacts with the Galatians in writing so that Christ may be formed in them (Galatians 4:19). Likewise, Paul's letters to Timothy are all about Timothy's continual formation as a pastor. Lowe & Lowe (2010) encourage us to recognize "the totality of contexts and settings in which students study, learn, and grow. . . . rather than delimiting Christian development to physical face-to-face community" (p. 97).

In view of this research, we posit that pastoral formation in a local context can indeed produce well-prepared pastors founded in strong biblical and confessional theology. Formation takes place through relationships both at a distance and face-to-face with a local pastoral mentor and a cohort. These pastors are further shaped by the community of believers with whom they are worshipping and serving in a local LCMS congregation. We believe our current non-residential routes to ministry do a good job of fostering this contextual formation, and we also believe there are ways these can be enhanced. One of those ways is by gathering local cohorts of men going through these contextual avenues of pastoral formation. As more students enter these programs, districts and circuits can facilitate their gathering on a more regular basis to develop deep bonds and allowing men to be shaped by one another. Field work and vicarage provide limited local formation to the residential student, but this aspect of formation is amplified for the contextual student. This suggests that even though SMP students receive less academic training than their residential MDiv counterparts, they are more experienced in the day-to-day life of pastoral ministry. We suggest this is of immense value. If we embrace a lifelong formation mentality, the SMP rostered pastor's theological education will continue to grow just as the MDiv pastor's experiential ministry formation will continue to grow.

4. Emphasize Lifelong Pastoral Formation

Recent resolutions of the Synod encouraging continuing education, circuit meeting engagement, and pastoral conference participation are welcome voices to remind our pastors that a residential MDiv education does not produce a fully formed pastor. Yet the perception persists among pastors in the field that alternate route pastors require continuing supervision and education, whereas pastors with a residential MDiv do not. We believe the entire COP and those on the PFC would share our values regarding lifelong pastoral formation. Post-seminary formation through Post Seminary Applied Learning and Support (PALS), or our West Coast track Ministry Applied Practice (MAP), provides part of this continuing formation. Additionally, we recommend formalizing expectations for continued formation through touch points of recertification throughout a pastor's active ministry which rely upon patterns of participation in circuit meetings, conferences, and yearly engagement in some form of continuing education or formation. These types of recertification are standard not only in secular professions like engineering, medicine, and accounting but even in trade careers like electrical work and plumbing. It would seem no less important that this be the case for those proclaiming the Word of God and caring for his people. Formal tracking of this would most appropriately take place through districts, but setting a Synod-wide standard would benefit our collective proclamation of the Gospel in word and deed.

5. Encourage Local Identification, Formation, and Service

The current primary model of pastoral formation is that men identified in one location as apt for pastoral formation are sent to another part of the country to study, then elsewhere for vicarage, and are finally called to yet another place. This model provides the candidate with a variety of experiences in different contexts within our Synod. As such, it can be a blessing befitting the trans-parochial nature of our pastors, since all general rostered pastors are certified for calls anywhere in our Synod. At the same time, when men are locally identified, locally formed, and locally serving, they are those whom people in the local context already know and trust to serve in their midst. This is the model evidenced often in the New Testament (Acts 6:3; Titus 1:5; Colossians 1:7 & 4:12), and it facilitates the identification of those known to be "full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (ESV, Acts 6:3).

When a man can be identified locally, formed locally, and remain in his current region, it allows for a less expensive avenue for pastoral formation and provides a pastor who is more sensitive to the context in which he serves. It also provides the opportunity for men already established in the community (personally, professionally, and relationally) to be trained for ministry while they continue in their current positions. Each of our current non-residential routes allows for this kind of local identification, formation, and service, which is why we are recommending greater access to these pathways. We believe this to be critical as unique features of cultural context in different regions of the United States coupled with the economic challenges of congregations and communities often necessitate that a more locally selected and formed model for raising up pastors be readily accessible.

We further recommend removing the restriction that the calling congregation must commit to a candidate's call prior to his entering the SMP program. This limitation restricts districts from

utilizing men identified by congregations and circuits for pastoral ministry if there is not yet a congregation prepared to commit to their call. If districts could sponsor men to enter the SMP for training, creating a cohort of such men who are locally identified by the congregations and recommended by fellow pastors in the circuit, then even if there is not a church already identified for their call, they could still be a blessing to the local circuit while they are in formation. As long as there is a supervising pastor and a ministry in which they could serve during their years of training, by the time certification comes following year two, or at completion of the SMP program at year four, they would be ready and equipped to be a blessing through a call to a congregation in that local area.

6. Provide Equal Outcomes

Currently, there is no avenue to earn an MDiv in the LCMS except through the residential seminary program. Those who complete the academic degree paths in the alternate routes, engaging in the full course of master's level study, receive an MA. This often leads to bias and disparity within our pastorate. Other ATS accredited schools offer distance or online MDiv tracks. We recommend that the PFC and seminaries work toward making this a reality in the LCMS. Each district participating in the preparation for this conversation has stories of men in our congregations who were considering pastoral formation in the LCMS but attended another program outside of the LCMS in order to earn an MDiv. We lament this needless loss of LCMS-theologically trained men and the impact that has on our congregations, our seminaries, and our Synod.

Moreover, we are recommending that the distinction between SMP roster status and general roster status be removed so that we once again recognize that an ordained pastor is an ordained pastor. We believe this to be more consistent with our shared confession in the *Treatise of the Power and Primacy of the Pope* that there is no substantive difference between ordained pastors (Melancthon, 1537/2000, p. 340). It makes little sense why EIIT and CHS students, who pursue the certificate route rather than the degree route, are considered fully rostered pastors while SMP pastors are not even considered such at the completion of their course of study. Reflecting on the days of the practical seminary, we as a Synod made no formal roster distinction between practical seminary graduates and theoretical seminary graduates even though practical seminary graduates both entered and completed seminary with significantly less education (Wohlrabe, 2021).

The limits preventing SMP rostered pastors from serving as delegates to Synod Convention and as elected officers, such as Circuit Visitors, often hampers districts' ability to carry out ministry. Additionally, requiring SMP rostered pastors to have a named supervisor suggests that general rostered pastors do not need one. However, all pastors serve under ecclesiastical supervision. Our system of Circuit Visitors and District Presidents already provides this oversight. Further, the limitation on where SMP pastors can be called but not on general rostered pastors suggests that every general rostered pastor is suitable in any ministry. We believe all district presidents would recognize this is not the case. If the roster distinction on SMP were to be removed, the GPC program would still have value, not as a path to a different roster status, but as a pathway to earn the remaining credits necessary for a degree (an MDiv, rather than MA).

7. Design Bi- and Co-Vocational Friendly Pathways

The economic challenges of small congregations, the need for part-time associate pastors in large congregations, and the opportunity to fund new mission efforts through secular vocations demand that we give more consideration to pathways of pastoral formation that lead to bi-vocational or co-vocational pastors. We are all aware of the Apostle Paul's tent making with Aquila and Pricilla, Acts 18:2-3, which Paul used to fund his mission. We also know this was a specific mission strategy for Paul: "*You remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God*" (ESV, 1 Thessalonians 2:9). The contextual, non-residential, routes to pastoral formation are more specifically suited to men expecting to earn all, or a portion, of their living from a vocation other than their own ministry. We use the term bi-vocational to speak of the traditional worker priest who engages in another vocation because the ministry he is called to is not able to fully support him. The bi-vocational pastor would serve the ministry full-time if the ministry allowed for it. We use the term co-vocational to speak of those who intentionally choose to remain in another vocation alongside their ministry, as Paul did, for the sake of the outreach potential, service to the community, or freedom from financial constraints that it provides.

While it is possible that a man graduating from MDiv residential seminary might be willing to seek a supplementing vocation in the place to which he is called, the low number of graduates to calling congregations in our Synod presently means that congregations who cannot afford a full-time pastor are losing out on the opportunity to receive a pastor. We recommend the design and implementation of contextual, non-residential, education that is friendly to bi-vocational and co-vocational pastoral candidates to significantly alleviate this issue.

8. Enhance Affordability

We have already noted that financial challenges plague many of the congregations in our districts. We are tremendously grateful for the generous support of God's people across the Synod and for the diligent efforts of the Joint Seminary Fund along with the development staff of both seminaries in providing full tuition scholarships to our residential students. Yet, it concerns us that EIIT and CHS, which serve our minority communities, do not currently receive this benefit. We applaud the efforts of 2023 Synod Resolution 1-05A which encouraged seminaries:

...to ensure that students enrolled in ethnic immigrant or multicultural programs leading to ordination, for example the Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology or Center for Hispanic Studies, or any other similar program, receive financial aid that covers a percentage of tuition equal to that received by M.Div. students. (LCMS, 2023a, p. 119)

We are eager to see this realized and recommend immediate implementation. Yet, CMC and SMP students receive no tuition assistance at the Synod level. The CMC is also a critical pastoral pathway serving the mission of our Synod to other ethnicities in North America. Among the express purposes in the inception of the SMP was a concern for the "many instances" where:

...It is not practically feasible for a congregation to call, install (with ordination in the case of candidates recently graduated from seminary), and adequately provide support

(compensation, benefits, housing, etc.) for a general ministry pastor to carry out the duties of the Office of the Holy Ministry. (Pastoral Formation Committee, 2023, p. 129)

Another purpose was for the “Synod’s desire to be responsive to dynamically emerging congregational mission opportunities” (Pastoral Formation Committee, 2023, p. 129). Can our financial aid priorities go beyond assisting men who will be called from the residential seminaries to healthy well-funded congregations to also include those serving new missions and struggling congregations which now receive no financial aid? We advocate for more affordable pastoral formation for all pathways, without preference for one over the other.

9. Utilize Collaborative Certification

Historically speaking, certification was the purview of the local bishops, not the faculty of an educational institution (Walther, 1852/1987, p. 240). Because the faculty is more familiar with a residential student’s qualifications, it makes sense for the faculty of the institution to have the lead in certification in that pathway. Yet, with the local, contextual pathways for pastoral formation for which we are advocating, we suggest that the certification of candidates would be a collaborative effort of the local District President, the candidate’s mentor pastor, and a faculty mentor/advisor from the seminary.

Conclusion

If there is any wisdom beyond seafaring to the phrase “a rising tide raises all ships,” opening broad access to all routes toward ordination would benefit the residential routes as well. As more men become immersed in the treasures of our Lutheran doctrine, it would only be natural for many of them to seek even more of what the seminaries offer. Making such opportunities for study less accessible initially only makes opportunities for further study even less accessible in the future. By continuing to position residential MDiv theological education as the “Gold Standard” and the “strongly preferred route” with each of the others considered to be an “exception” (LCMS, 2023a, p. 162), we are not only undermining our recruitment and *Set Apart to Serve* initiatives but minimizing the very arena in which men are most influenced in their formation as pastors ready to serve God’s people.

We are asking our Synod to not only open wide all avenues to pastoral formation but also to change the language regarding those avenues. By changing the language, we believe we can change the narrative of declining numbers of pastors and declining numbers of congregations with pastors. We can start a new, vibrant narrative in which our Synod is a model of maintaining confessional fidelity through the use of multiple routes of pastoral formation. The culture of our Synod can be one in which more and more men committed to our Lutheran Confessions fill more and more pulpits rather than slowly watching our confessional presence disappear in our communities as congregations dwindle due to the absence of theologically trained men to lead them.

We believe these recommendations are reasonable. More than that, they are supportive of a primary reason for our being Synod, namely, preserving the “diversities of gifts” that God has given us with the variety of pastoral formation programs we currently possess for the common

good. The programs, platforms, and experiences our seminaries currently offer, which provide contextual (non-residential) pastoral formation, make these steps readily achievable without significant re-design or drastic changes in curriculum. We trust that this can be accomplished faithfully in a way that fosters the confessional integrity and unity of our Synod. We pray so. We also pray that the result of this effort will mean that someday soon, in the not-too-distant future, we will have an ordained LCMS pastor in every Synod congregation.

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