



Κηρυξάτε PREACH THE GOSPEL

A MAGAZINE OF WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY



THE NEW NORMAL



2023-24 EVENTS

AUGUST 23	Opening Service
SEPTEMBER 18	WLS Alumni Society Annual Meeting
SEPTEMBER 18-19	Symposium
OCTOBER 7	Friends of the Seminary Day
DECEMBER 10	Christmas Concert
JANUARY 8-19	Winterim
FEBRUARY 6-8	Mission and Ministry
MAY 23	Call Day and Graduation Concert
MAY 24	Graduation



EDITOR'S NOTE

“The new normal” is a phrase often used to describe recent societal shifts that seem to have staying power. This issue will offer perspectives on some of the things that have changed on our campus and in our programs—as well as some that have not—and the ways God has blessed us through both.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

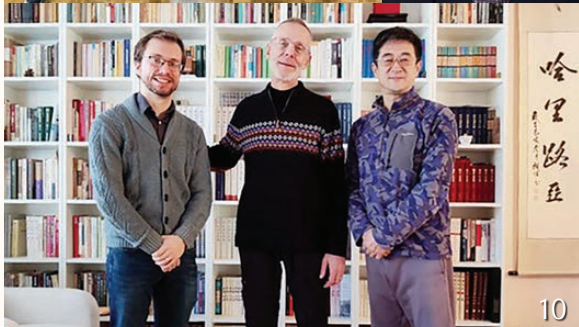
- † Thank you to the authors who contributed to this issue.
- † Special thanks to Lori Guse, who serves as mission advancement coordinator and provided all seminary photographs, and to Barbara Rickaby, the seminary’s communications coordinator.

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Free to be Flexible



Allow me to state the obvious. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod does not operate a seminary for the sake of operating a seminary. Our forebears didn't establish a seminary in 1863 to provide the fledgling church body with some legitimacy as a "player" on the Lutheran scene in North America. The goal was much simpler. God's people desired faithful Lutheran pastors. Those who went before us prayed that the Lord, through the seminary, would provide pastors who would be ready, eager, and able to preach the gospel of Christ in the synod's congregations and mission fields.

In some respects, the work of the seminary remains the same 160 years later: the formation of gospel-centered pastors who will consistently point people to the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. The seminary faculty recognizes that those who will serve as pastors need to know the

Scriptures inside and out. The professors, all of whom have served in parish ministry, realize the importance of providing practical tools for ministry, so that the men they recommend for service in the church are ready to handle the tasks commonly asked of a pastor. However, the faculty aims to do more than transmit important information about the Bible and share helpful techniques for day-to-day ministry.

Pastoral ministry requires more than knowledge of the Scriptures and proficiency in ministerial duties like teaching, preaching, and outreach. At the heart of faithful service as a pastor is a sincere and living faith in Christ, which is entirely a gift of God's Spirit. Knowing that the Lord has chosen to work through the gospel in word and sacrament to effect faith, the gospel is at the heart of life on the seminary campus. Each day, the members of the campus family gather in the chapel to

hear the Lord speak to them through one of his servants. Every class has the living and active Word of God at its center. In addition, students and faculty seek to spend time alone with the Scriptures in private meditation. All of that is done with confidence in the Lord's promise, that his word will not return to him empty (Isaiah 55:11).

While it's true that the essential task of the seminary remains unchanged, the environment in which the graduates of the seminary will serve has changed significantly since the seminary's founding. In fact, change will remain a ministry constant for as long as the Lord continues to sustain this present world. The recent pandemic has certainly altered the context in which pastors will serve. To be faithful to its mission, the seminary needs to prepare pastors who can serve in "the new normal," whatever form that may take.

The Apostle Paul serves as an excellent model for any who want to be faithful gospel proclaimers in a changed and changing ministry context. Let's start with this: he was zealous to preach Christ crucified to all. The Savior's love so overwhelmed him that he simply couldn't stop sharing the good news of forgiveness in Christ. Because the Lord had addressed his greatest need, freeing him from the punishment he deserved, Paul could center his life on reaching people with the gospel. He was free to serve without fear. The Apostle speaks of that freedom as he summarizes his approach to ministry in these familiar words: "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Corinthians 9:22b–23).

This is not to say that Paul acted like a chameleon. He didn't "change his colors" to blend in with the people he met. He didn't alter his teaching to find acceptance in different contexts. Changing doctrine wasn't a viable option,

because it was the Lord's teaching, not his. It's rather that the Apostle wasn't much concerned about his personal preferences or his individual comfort. How else does one explain his willing endurance of the significant persecution he received for proclaiming Christ? When he might have waved the white flag and resigned from gospel ministry because of the abuse he experienced, he kept fighting the good fight. With energy the Lord provided, he gave himself fully to the work of the Lord in many different contexts, confident that his labor in the Lord would never be in vain.

In the freedom of the gospel, the Apostle felt no need to demand his rights. The Lord taught him to think less about himself and more about others, to view himself as "less than the least of all the Lord's people" (Ephesians 3:8). Because he looked up at everyone, valuing others above himself, he centered his attention on how best to serve them in Christ. God's love in Christ had transformed Paul's heart and altered the trajectory of

his life. His focus changed from protecting himself and pursuing personal desires to trusting the Lord to work through him and seeking to reach people with the gospel. He longed to be the Lord's instrument to save some from everlasting punishment.

The Lord who raised up the Apostle Paul for ministry set him free to be selfless. Or, to say it another way, using an expression often mentioned on the seminary campus, the Lord made him "appropriately flexible." Through the gospel the Lord not only led Paul to trust Christ as his Savior, but also enabled him to serve others selflessly. That God-worked selflessness prepared him for changing ministry contexts. He could alter his approach, because his changed heart was set on reaching people in changing circumstances with the heart-changing word of Christ.

As the Lord works through his Word proclaimed each day on the seminary campus, he prepares men for the new normal. He assures them of his unending delight in them, based not on their performance but on his declaration of them in Christ. In so doing, he sets them free to think of others more than themselves and to be consumed with the salvation of sinners, rather than their rights or preferences. He fills them with confidence in his power to work in them and through them, regardless of their ministry setting.

As the Lord sets men free by his promise of unconditional love and continual forgiveness, he empowers them to be appropriately flexible, ready to serve selflessly. The Lord equips them to adapt so that they are ready to be his instruments to bless and save people, wherever he calls to them to serve. †

Earle Treptow serves as president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and teaches courses in systematic theology.



A New Home

“You’re moving from Florida to Wisconsin in January? That’s crazy!” My family and I heard these words many times after announcing that my husband had accepted a call to serve as a professor at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. At times it did seem crazy. We would be leaving behind so much: a beloved congregation, many dear friends, the only home our four kids had ever known, and all this in beautiful, sunny, warm Florida. Of course, the reason we were moving had nothing to do with the weather; it was about serving in God’s kingdom in a new way and in a new place. While we were unsure what the “new normal” would look like in our new home, we trusted in God’s promises as we moved from Florida to Wisconsin (in January!).

One and a half years have passed since our move. As I reflect on all the unexpected blessings of the past year and a half, I am most thankful for the home, neighbors, and fellowship we experience here on campus with the other professors and their families. Our cross-country move was made easier by not having to search for a house; a spacious move-in ready home was waiting for us when we arrived.



In addition, a knowledgeable and skilled maintenance staff is available to help with home repairs. What a blessing to have our physical needs cared for so we can spend more time focusing on ministry tasks!

Our new neighborhood is a unique place where professors, their families, students, and others from the outside community connect daily. I needn’t have worried about my kids making friends after moving. On day one, a gaggle of seminary kids assembled at the end of our driveway to introduce themselves and meet the new kids. Endlessly creative, this friendly group takes full advantage of the beautiful eighty-acre campus that is their playground. In winter, they sled down the hill or play basketball in the gym. In summer, they build forts in the woods, draw chalk creations all over the road, and fish for crayfish in the creek.

The kids aren’t the only ones enjoying the fellowship opportunities readily available in our new neighborhood. When my husband and I walk our dogs on campus, we can stop to chat with other professors and their wives. On summer evenings, many of us find ourselves having an impromptu gathering in a backyard around a fire pit. As we celebrate birthdays together or share our favorite books at the faculty wives’ book club, we build relationships and encourage one another. When I told friends in Florida that we would be living on the campus where my husband would work, more than one person commented that it sounded like we’d be living on a compound. Yes, this is a unique living situation, but so are the blessings that come from living here.

There’s another group of neighbors living on campus: many of the seminary’s students. We wave to each other as we pass on the road driving in and out of campus. In nice weather, we gather for a cookout in the seminary courtyard. Many professors invite students to their homes for a meal. We see students outside kicking a soccer ball, going for a run, or working on the grounds crew. As a pastor’s wife, I enjoyed getting to know the people my husband served in the parish. Now, as a professor’s wife, I am blessed to meet and get to know many of our synod’s future pastors.

Upon moving to Wisconsin, our family stepped into a new house, a new neighborhood, and a new ministry. But God’s graces follow wherever we go, and the blessings have been great here in our new home at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. †

Jill Russow teaches at Christ Alone Lutheran School in Thiensville, Wisconsin. Her husband Joel is professor of systematic theology and counseling.

Preacher Podcast

Podcasts—sets of audio recordings that people can play on demand on their smartphones or computers—are proliferating, as they have been for many years. How many podcasts are there now? Estimates vary widely. In all, there may be five to seven million. If you count only podcasts that are currently releasing new episodes, that number goes down to about 500,000. Whatever the exact number, this much is certain: podcasts are now one of the most common ways people access and consume media.

A few years ago, WELS Congregational Services and Grow in Grace, the seminary's continuing education department, both had an idea: "What if we produced a podcast that could help WELS preachers?" A podcast featuring a discussion of a sermon text could help pastors as they organized thoughts for their sermon each week. Grow in Grace and Congregational Services merged their plans, and in January 2021, the *Preacher Podcast* began recording episodes.

Now working under Congregational Services, the *Preacher Podcast* releases episodes that coordinate with The Foundation, the free resource on welscongregational-services.net that offers professionally designed resources for worship, outreach, and devotions for home and classroom. Working over one year in advance, a team at Congregational Services designs a worship series and recruits two pastors to offer their insights on podcast episodes for that series. Then the seminary gets involved. As *Preacher Podcast* moderator, I schedule recording dates and recruit other seminary professors to participate. Often a professor who teaches New Testament will volunteer for a New Testament sermon text—maybe even a section of the Bible he teaches in the seminary classroom—and likewise with Old Testament texts. When the time for recording arrives, the podcast participants meet on Zoom, record their discussion, and upload the recording to the cloud. From there,



The small Rochester and La Crescent circuits meet every month for worship, study, and fellowship.

One of the study components of our meetings is an exegesis of an upcoming sermon text. I encourage the brothers to listen to *Preacher Podcast* as part of their preparation for the meeting. We have really enjoyed and benefited from the podcasts.

Pastor Brian Kom, Ascension Lutheran Church, Rochester, Minnesota

Congregational Services edits and posts each episode.

The goal of the *Preacher Podcast* is not to replace the pastoral work of carefully studying a text or of writing and preaching a sermon. The goal is to get preachers thinking after they've used the tools they've acquired at Martin Luther College and the seminary. Once they've studied a text in its original language, they can listen to the *Preacher Podcast* for ideas and suggestions on how to craft their sermon. The podcast is meant to feel like a circuit meeting, where a small group of pastors gets together and informally discusses a sermon text. Sometimes the podcast may give a preacher an idea to implement in his sermon. At other times, the conversation will spark an idea of his own that no one else has mentioned. The goal is to get thinking and talking about the text, to "grease the wheels" for the preacher.

Through the *Preacher Podcast*, pastors can get ideas for their sermons as they drive to a hospital visit or walk their dog. Or groups of pastors can still gather to discuss a text, and the podcast can offer additional voices and points of view. Since the *Preacher Podcast* is available on several popular podcast platforms, it's easily accessible with any smartphone. It's one more technological tool to assist pastors as they proclaim God's praise. †

In addition to hosting the Preacher Podcast, Jonathan Micheel teaches church history and preaching courses.

Not Just Academics

“What do seminarians do for fun?” That’s a question I hear a lot. I think sometimes people hear “seminary” and picture something like a 15th-century monastery. They assume that all our days are spent in a classroom, a library, or a dorm room with our heads buried in a book. On some days, that is our “fun.” However, most of our fun does not involve classrooms or textbooks. Yes, we seminarians may be more “normal” than you realize!

Don’t get me wrong, the seminary and its students are “abnormal” in many ways. We spend hours translating Greek and Hebrew, and we like it! But there are also ways the seminary is just like a regular school. For example, we have an athletic department. We have a budget and even an athletic director. Like other schools, sports play a significant role in the campus culture and provide opportunities for students and professors to have fun. Sports bring the seminary family together in a unique way. Not only professors and students but also wives, friends, and

other staff get a chance to enjoy fellowship through sports.

Because of the pandemic, previous school years were not ideal for socializing, so a great emphasis was placed on getting together for the 2022–23 school year. Sports provided many of those opportunities. In the fall, a co-ed volleyball league allowed wives, friends, students, faculty, and staff to compete with and against each other. For the championship game, the bleachers were packed, and we even had a concession stand providing snacks and refreshments.

After Christmas break, the basketball season began. Sixty students and professors signed up to play, and six captains drafted them to their teams. The teams battled to be crowned SBL (Seminary Basketball League) champions! As the brutal Wisconsin winter dragged on, intramural games during the week provided much-needed entertainment and laughter.

As the basketball season ended, sporting events moved outside to take

advantage of the spring weather. One weekend, the students traveled to Martin Luther College for a softball tournament. On another, a golf outing was held at a nearby course. Students set up a nine-hole frisbee golf course on the seminary’s beautiful campus. Professors and students often took breaks from studies between classes to play in the annual cornhole tournament. New to the seminary this year was the co-ed pickleball tournament.

In addition to the organized sporting events on campus, pick-up basketball and soccer games take place many mornings before class.

It’s normal for a school to have sports and an athletic department, but at the seminary, it’s about more than wins and losses. These sporting events are opportunities for future brothers in the ministry to learn how to work and compete together. These games allow wives to interact with one another and build lifelong friendships. These tournaments give professors and students the time to build meaningful relationships. These interactions outside of the classroom make the classroom interactions more impactful.

So, what do seminarians do for fun? Just like you, we enjoy spending time with our friends and family. We like to grow and strengthen bonds between new and old colleagues. We look to find moments of release from the daily stressors of life. We seek to glorify God with our abilities. For many of us, sports provide all those things. We thank God for allowing us to return to normal seminary sports! †

Nathanael Goelzer was assigned in May 2023 to Gethsemane, Davenport, Iowa. He served as the seminary’s athletic director his senior year.

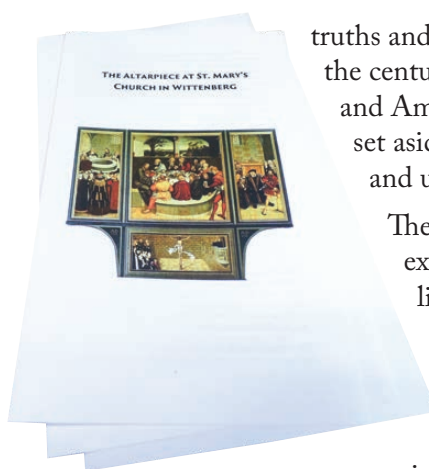


Renewing Appreciation for Lutheran Art

In 2021, the seminary received as a gift a reproduction of the altarpiece at St. Mary's Church in Wittenberg, Germany. St. Mary's was the church at which the Luther family worshipped and where Luther often preached. The original work was designed and installed by Lucas Cranach the Elder, the well-known painter, engraver, and printer, and dedicated in 1547, a year after Luther's death. Cranach's shops were located in Wittenberg, and he and Luther became close friends; he was a witness at Luther's wedding and sponsor for Luther's first child.

The St. Mary's reredos* consists of four paintings that depict the use of the means of grace by leaders of the Wittenberg Reformation: Philip Melanchthon baptizing an infant; Luther receiving Holy Communion; Johannes Bugenhagen, the congregation's pastor, using the binding and loosing keys; and Luther preaching. Because of the altarpiece's subject matter and its wide familiarity in confessional Lutheran circles, the gift is a significant addition to the works of art displayed on the seminary campus.

A representation of the Cranach altarpiece became a hoped-for project after the renovation of the seminary chapel in 2006 enlarged the library foyer. Two graduating classes (2009 and 2013) presented the seminary with single paintings in the hope they would eventually be included in a completed project. Unfortunately, the two gifts were not proportionately matched, and the project stalled. In 2019 the work began again. Three new pictures were purchased to match the proportion of the gifted central panel (the 2009 gift hangs at the entrance of the library). The pictures were framed by a local professional, and the entire frame was designed, crafted, and painted by Matthew Staude. The work is a 35% reproduction of the Cranach original and hangs on a west wall of the seminary library.



Lutheranism's contribution to religious art lies primarily in music. Luther's love of music and his musical abilities led him to extol music as an effective vehicle for gospel proclamation. His interest in the visual arts is less familiar.

Early on he criticized the Roman Church's massive artistic expenditures but was just as critical of the iconoclasm he saw in Reformed circles.

Luther came to value painting, engraving, statuary, and architecture for their ability to communicate gospel truths and encourage Christian devotion. Over the centuries, Lutheran congregations in Europe and America followed Luther's example and set aside significant resources for the purchase and use of both musical and visual arts.

The seminary was slow to offer artistic experiences to its students despite their liberal arts background and their future leadership roles in WELS congregations. Finances were the usual limiting factor. The chapel in the 1929 seminary in Mequon was not

equipped with liturgical art or even an organ until the 1940s. The artistic influence Professor Johannes Koehler would have brought to the faculty and student body was minimized by his departure from the seminary soon after the new campus' dedication. As time passed, class pictures covered walls that might have displayed religious art. Occasional paintings and pictures gifted to the seminary usually reflected the personal interest and experience of the donors and were not noteworthy works of religious art; many were secular and not religious at all.

The donors of the altarpiece have expressed the hope that their gift might encourage the display of additional works of significant religious art in seminary spaces and hallways. There is no need to place art and mission into an adversarial relationship since Lutherans have long understood that sight and symbol serve the good news as surely as speech does. †

Retired professor James Tiefel serves as pastor of St. John's and Trinity, both in Mequon, Wisconsin.

* An ornamental screen or partition covering the wall at the back of an altar but not attached directly to the altar

Beginnings

It began with a phone call from my grandmother. She had learned about my school assignment to write a paper about a “famous” family member. She went on for the next ninety minutes telling me stories about her father, the first missionary to China sent from the Augustana Swedish Synod. She told me stories about growing up in China. Stories about her father’s work, and how proficient he had become in speaking Mandarin. Stories about the challenges of mission work, but also the incredible blessings. When that phone call concluded, my passion for mission work had been fanned into a blaze.

It began with a phone call from Reath (Jacob) Luk. He informed me that he was the spiritual leader of a group of people and they were looking for a church home. “May I come and see you and speak with you about this?” The following Saturday Reath came to my office with his wife Elizabeth and they explained that they were a group of South Sudanese Nuer-speaking Lutherans. They had been worshipping at another Lutheran church, but the pastor was not supportive of their monthly Nuer language service. They very much wanted to find a church home where they could worship God in truth and purity, raise their children in the Lutheran faith, and offer their people a Nuer language service once per month.

Within the month we started Bible Information Classes with this group of South Sudanese. Fifteen weeks later, 45 souls were received into membership at St. Paul Ev. Lutheran Church in downtown Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. A Nuer language Christmas service was planned, complete with a Christmas dinner following worship. The invitation went throughout Ottawa. The service was attended by 250 people that first year. South Sudanese families drove up to seven hours to attend. It was a glorious Christmas celebration that lasted two and a half hours. At the meal that followed, we enjoyed fellowship until 8 o’clock in the evening!

The addition of these South Sudanese brothers and sisters is just another chapter in the long history of St. Paul being the spiritual home of a diverse group of Confessional Lutherans. Since the beginning, St. Paul’s membership has been composed of souls from China, the Philippines, Korea, Jordan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and South Africa. St. Paul is a multicultural gospel embassy in the heart of Canada’s capital city.

It wasn’t long before Reath expressed an interest to be trained as a pastor to his flock. With full encouragement from his community, Reath entered into the Pastoral



Studies Institute (PSI) of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. With six children at home, his progress has been slow and steady, but his faithfulness to his studies has been admirable. Reath is currently leading monthly Nuer language worship. He writes his own sermons, reviewed by one of the St. Paul pastors, and is a fine example of a shepherd to his flock.

I would never have been able to anticipate the next chapter of my ministry.

It began with a phone call from Missionary Mike Duncan, following up on his request that I join him in teaching PSI courses to two groups of men in two Asian countries. What an amazing privilege to share God’s Word with over 65 men studying to be evangelists or pastors in their home countries! Little did I know at the time that it would be a foretaste of the ministry that I would be called to.

It began with a phone call from President Treptow informing me that the Lord had just called me to serve as the director of the Pastoral Studies Institute. I was speechless. As much as I love the diverse and multicultural ministry at St. Paul, this call sounded like the dream vocation. I would be carrying out the same kind of work I was doing in Ottawa, but now on a global scale. Imagine—the opportunity to train the next generation of non-Anglo pastors to serve their people groups in North America while also helping them carry that gospel back to their home countries! This was a very exciting call from our Lord of the Church.

The Pastoral Studies Institute is a partnership of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and WELS Joint Missions. Our mandate is the theological training of non-Anglos who wish to study for the pastoral ministry and ultimately serve

...and Endings

in the ministerium of WELS. While our focus is on training North American students to serve their own people groups, we are called upon to lend counsel, teaching, and resources to WELS mission fields and sister church bodies around the world. One of the key aspects of our work is bridging connections back to a PSI pastor's home country, and establishing an embassy for the gospel in that country. Our prayer is always that the gospel may flourish in a part of the world where it has been marginalized.

My addition to the PSI Team was the result of Professor Jon Bare accepting the call to serve as president of Asia Lutheran Seminary. This was just one of many changes that have occurred in the PSI office over the last two years. Professor Brad Wordell served for many years as a member of the PSI Team. When he was called to lead Grow in Grace, this left a vacancy on the PSI Team. Professor Dave Bivens joined the seminary faculty in July 2020. With Professor Wordell's departure, Professor



Bivens was called to serve the PSI. Professor Bivens serves as our PSI advisor to the One Africa Team.

When Professor Sorum stepped down from his director position after 17 years, he

continued to serve as a PSI Team member. He is currently an advisor to our South American and European mission fields.

The PSI utilizes many pastoral instructors to assist us in carrying out our work. Annually, pastors have the opportunity to fill out or update the PSI Interest and Ability Assessment when updating their self-assessment form on the WELS cloud.

The PSI Team is grateful to our church body for the privilege of carrying out this important ministry. We keep all our pastors in our prayers as they continue to reach out with the gospel to every nation, tribe, language, and people in their communities. You never know when someone is going to give you a phone call! †

Harland "Skip" Goetzinger serves as the seminary's new PSI director.

As a high school sophomore, I went to Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin, for a recruitment visit. After the campus tour, we sat in on a class, and at the front of the classroom was Professor Paul Wendland.

When I started college two years later, it was not in Watertown but in New Ulm, Minnesota, at Martin Luther College. Yet Professor Wendland was there, teaching the Minority Cultures class I took.

When my class came to the seminary, Professor Wendland came with us, having accepted the call to teach here.

When we graduated from the seminary, he was the one who handed us our diplomas, having been called to serve as president the year prior.

Twelve years later, when I was left speechless by a phone call informing me that I had been called to the seminary, it was President Wendland's voice on the other end of the line, helpfully filling the silence. When I arrived in Mequon, his support was invaluable as I began this new task.

So, it's hard for me to imagine him not being around now that he has retired.

I know I'm not the only one who feels that way. A whole generation of pastors has been blessed by his service in the seminary classroom and leadership in the president's office. Our church body has benefited from his writing and presenting. His colleagues have enjoyed his wisdom, wit, and zeal for the gospel.

Yes, it's hard to imagine him not being around. Yet we trust that the Good Shepherd will continue to provide the teachers, mentors, and leaders needed by his under-shepherds present and future, even as we thank him for providing those things through Paul Wendland during his 22 years of seminary service. †



Professor Paul Wendland



Samuel Degner teaches evangelism and New Testament courses.



Students honor Professor Aaron Christie's 25th anniversary in the ministry by imitating his favorite look.



Tour guides welcome grade school groups to campus.



WLS alumni enjoy lunch after their annual meeting.



Professor Steve Geiger led a tour to New Testament sites in Turkey during Winterim.



WLS supporters tour the campus on Friends of the Seminary Day.



Professor Paul Wendland addresses the annual Symposium.



The class of 2023 shows their excitement on Graduation Day.



This year's senior class featured seven members from Trinity, Waukesha, WI.



Students and presenters mingle at Mission and Ministry.

Bucking the Trend?

For the 2022–23 school year, the Association of Theological Schools reported that enrollment in Master of Divinity programs in American seminaries had declined. This has continued a downward trend that has been ongoing since 2006.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary has been experiencing a similar trend. Since the 2004–2005 school year, when there were 188 students enrolled at WLS, a decline set in that bottomed out at 110 students in the 2017–18 school year. The following year was not much better with 114 students. From 2014 to 2022, an average of only twenty-seven students graduated from WLS (compared to nearly forty graduates a year for the previous ten years). This lower number of graduates partially explains the high vacancy rate currently being experienced in WELS, although the vacancies were increasing even before the 2014 class graduated. Probably the most prominent reason is that the large graduating classes of the 1970s and early 1980s (averaging over fifty per class) have been entering their retirement years.

The trend, however, began to reverse in the 2019–20 school year. That is when the class of 2023 arrived on campus with forty-three students (the class graduated this year with thirty-seven). A significant increase occurred with the 2022–23 school year. The incoming junior class enrolled at WLS with forty-nine students, the most since 2006. The total enrollment was the most since 2009. Could it be that WLS is “bucking the trend”? Is this the “new normal” for WLS enrollment?

It is difficult to answer those questions. Current enrollments in the pastor track at Martin Luther College (MLC) indicate that WLS probably will not



see classes approaching fifty in the near future. However, it appears that classes ranging from thirty-five to forty are certainly reasonable. That means that WLS enrollment should remain fairly stable for the next few years.

The increased enrollment brings with it some challenges. Some faculty members have teaching overloads; for example, the large incoming class had to have an extra preaching section. It is necessary for some faculty members to serve as advisor to a couple of additional students. The chapel and cafeteria are a little more crowded. The dorm has more occupants, which results in fewer available rooms when larger groups of MLC or high school students are on campus for recruitment purposes. But most of those are good “problems” that the WLS faculty and staff are eager to take on.

The blessings far outweigh the challenges. Every student who studies on this campus is a gift of God’s grace. Every student is an answer to the prayers of God’s people for more workers in the harvest field. Every student brings to the seminary his own set of God-given gifts for the benefit of his fellow students. Every graduate fills another vacancy or is sent to start a mission. Even if a student withdraws,



his time on campus is a blessing for him as he grows in God’s Word and his appreciation for the proclamation of the Word.

Is WLS “bucking the trend”? That remains to be seen as far as enrollment projections are concerned. But this much is certain. “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few” (Matthew 9:37). That will always be the case. Who knows what the needs of WELS will be in the future? The grade-school boy you encourage today won’t be a pastor for at least fifteen years. The high schooler you recruit for MLC won’t serve in a classroom for at least five years or shepherd a congregation for at least ten years. So, pray for more workers. Encourage young people to consider the noble task of shepherding a portion of God’s flock. Pray for and support the students at WLS, no matter how many, or few, there may be. †

Joel Otto is dean of students and teaches courses in church history and education.

Vicar in a Mission Setting: The New Normal

My wife, Livia, and I sat in stiff metal chairs, filled with excitement—and our fair share of nerves. It was May, and the countdown to Vicar Call Day was finally at zero. My first two years at the seminary had flown by, and I felt so honored to be sitting in the auditorium, waiting anxiously to hear where I was going to be assigned. From the day I set foot on the seminary campus, I had been dreaming of this moment. We wouldn't have to wait much longer because my name was the first one read. To be honest, I didn't hear another one of my classmates' names during the entire service. My mind was sprinting, thinking about everything that this coming year was going to have in store for Livia and me.

“Duane Backhaus. Participating in the Vicar in a Mission Setting program. Zion Lutheran Church. Denver, Colorado.” To a boy who had grown up in small-town Wisconsin, Denver seemed so exotic. What would it be like ministering in one of the fastest-growing cities in the United States? What kind of challenges would I face? How would my wife and I adjust to living in a big city? These were just a few questions circling my brain. And the questions didn't stop during the summer leading up to our move. What kind of work did God have in store for me? Was I qualified for work like this?

When we finally arrived at our new home in August, settling in took no time. We quickly realized that, while Denver is a big city that offers a wide variety of opportunities to reach the lost, Zion's ministry still centers on the simple truth that the gospel needs to be shared with lost souls. Ministry is all about sharing the gospel in as many ways as we can.

Zion isn't a brand-new mission. It's a well-established congregation that has



been around for almost sixty years. Church membership is almost 400 souls, and their school has over seventy children enrolled in Pre-K to 8th grade. Yet a mission spirit remains. Every day, students from the community, many of whom are unchurched, walk through the school doors to receive a Christ-centered education. Their families are invited to participate in Bible Information Class and encouraged to attend worship. Zion members eagerly look for opportunities to invite friends. Zion also hosts several community events a year, hoping to touch those who attend with the Savior's compassion and love. We also strive to get out into the community to let our neighbors know we care for them, letting the light of Christ shine in our lives.

As I discuss my experiences with my classmates, I'm finding that many of them have similar stories. More churches are participating in the Vicar in a Mission Setting program, which started more than 20 years ago, many of them much younger than Zion. Some of these missions are just beginning. Lord willing, many of us will serve in missions just like this in the future. Regardless of the location, regardless of method, and regardless of the people we serve, God has given all of us the same commission to diligently and faithfully preach his Word. And isn't it amazing that God has given us the opportunity to carry out that same mission in diverse ways? There is no silver bullet in ministry; otherwise, everyone would be doing the same thing. God simply says, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15). †

Duane Backhaus served as a vicar at Zion, Denver, Colorado, during the 2022–23 school year.

Supporting One Another in Christ

When I was in elementary school, my grandfather volunteered to drive a truck of donations from Saginaw, Michigan, to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary every November to help fill a pantry for married seminary students. These donations would include all kinds of nonperishables and canned goods, paper and cleaning products, and even diapers. My schoolmates would help load up the truck. The amount of goods was astonishing, especially knowing that even more donations would be added on stops along the route to Mequon. At the time, I didn't fully understand what we were doing or how these small donations could make such a big impact.

Fast forward to August 2022. As newlyweds, my husband Mark and I were able to use this same food pantry. We often still use this resource to supplement our grocery trips or pick up a few extra things we forgot during the week. These donations may seem like a small drop in the bucket to those giving them, but they are immense blessings in keeping grocery costs low. In addition to physical donations, gift cards and monetary donations are graciously accepted from congregations around the country. Because of this, seminary students do not experience a financial burden that would be a hindrance to their studies.

Students at WLS attend classes for five hours in the morning, but the day does not end there. Many students work a part-time job for four to five more hours in the afternoon, evening, or on weekends. As you can imagine, these hours might not add up to a livable salary to pay rent, groceries, gas, and other bare necessities. Seminary wives play an important role in making ends meet during their husbands' time in school. Many wives serve as teachers at nearby schools, but other

common jobs include nurses, nannies, and servers.

The three school years spent on campus are such a fun and influential time for growth—not only for the students but wives as well. We love to get involved in events on campus such as Bible studies, evening chapel services, intramural sports (both playing and watching), mommy-and-me playdates, fellowship get-togethers, and traveling to nearby churches when the choir sings. The importance of brotherhood is often stressed to these future pastors, but the sisterhood holds a special significance as well. Creating bonds with women who will be “in the same boat” as you in coming years can be so beneficial when ministry may show its challenges.

Seminary families see so much support from congregation members near and far. First-year seminarians are assigned to attend and participate in an Early Field Training (EFT) church. This local congregation provides the student with opportunities to practice ministry.



Mark and I were assigned to Crown of Life in Hubertus, Wisconsin, and felt at home there quickly. We've enjoyed getting to know the members both in and outside of worship. These EFT churches are just as delighted to make relationships with students.

I would ask that you keep both seminary students and their families in your prayers. Pray that students find strength and endurance to prepare faithfully for the important task ahead of them in shepherding Christians in the church on earth. Pray that their families and wives support and understand the demands and find flexibility and joy in their lives of ministry. We, in turn, pray for you as Paul did for the Philippians: “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel.”†

Aislynn Burger is married to Mark, who was assigned as a vicar to Abiding Grace, Covington, Georgia, for the 2023–24 school year.

Hear another perspective on the food drive in the next article.



More than Just Food

When asked to write an article about the Michigan food drive, I was at a loss because I only drove the truck for a few years. The Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Food Drive started as a mini-van full of food from Pastor Greg Gibbons and his circuit in Michigan. By word of mouth, it quickly turned into the 24-foot van that I drove. We made stops at Saginaw, Detroit, and Benton Harbor, where thankful members and congregations from all over Michigan had food and money waiting.



Started in 2000, the WLS food pantry has been graciously supplied by generous WELS donors from across the United States. To the right is a report sent to several Michigan congregations who help provide an annual shipment of goods to the pantry.



Perhaps the best way to tell you about this project is to share with you what I reported back to our Michigan congregations in November of 2004:

Dear Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Food Drive Participants,

I wish you could have come with me to deliver the food to our Seminary!

I wish you could have heard the restaurant manager at our evening meal marvel (after he asked about the purpose of our big van), "You care so much about people so far away!"

I wish you could have seen our shock as that manager gave us a hefty discount on our meal.

I wish you could have seen the excited WLS food pantry director show me the 12-by-12-foot room ready to receive our food donation.

I wish you could have heard my snicker, knowing that the room would not hold your generous gifts.

I wish you could have heard the delighted gasps of the seminarians when I lifted the back door of the van to show them literally tons of food and supplies.

I wish you could have seen the food pantry director's mouth hit the ground when I presented him with about \$5,000.00 in checks to accompany your other gifts of love.

I wish you could have heard his smiling explanation of how this \$5,000.00 would be used for grocery store certificates to be given at Christmas time to the approximately 50 married seminarians.

I wish you could have enjoyed the thankful conversation of those ministry students as we unloaded your gifts of love at 6:00 a.m.

I wish you could have seen the bubbly wife (yes, at 6:00 a.m.), who said, "Pastor, remember me? I was eight months pregnant when I helped unload last year."

I wish you could have seen the cute, blond baby girl she held as she helped unload this year.

I wish you could have seen the neatly and clearly marked shelves and bins of the food pantry, almost empty.

I wish you could have seen the ecstatic wives putting all your donations in their proper place, smiling like kids in a candy store.

I wish you could have seen all the roaming toddlers undoing their moms' work.

I wish you could have heard the pantry director yell to all the workers, "Take as much food home as you want! There's no rationing today!"

I wish you could have seen the thankful families take only a bag or two, because they wanted to share with those who weren't there.

I wish you could have watched the husbands, now dressed in their suits and ties, wave a final time as they headed out to study to be pastors some day . . . maybe even your pastors.

I wish you could have helped me count the times the wives they left behind to load the pantry shelves said, "Thank God for Michigan! Tell them all THANK YOU!"

I wish you could have felt the light truck on the way home—and our light and happy hearts.

In our Jesus,

William Brassow, pastor and part-time food pantry truck driver

P.S.: I know you didn't have to be there to rejoice with me. After all, you have the same Judgment Day words of your Savior to look forward to as I do: "Whatever you did . . . you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). †

William Brassow is pastor at Zion, Osceola, Wisconsin.

WLS Pastor Partners

For many years synodical leaders expressed concern about the number of pastors and teachers who were resigning from the ministry. Beginning in the summer of 1992 the Board for Parish Services responded by sponsoring a Parish Ministry Enhancement (PME) at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary for pastors finishing their first year in the ministry. PME allowed these recent graduates to discuss matters of common concern, offer mutual encouragement, and review some of the practical courses they had at the seminary with the new eyes that a year's experience in the pastoral ministry gave them. This program had some value, but more was needed.

Current Martin Luther College President Richard Gurgel spearheaded a study which found that during the 40-year period between 1970 and 2010 our synod experienced a significant loss of pastors due to resignations. Between 1970 and 2010, 1,856 pastor candidates graduated from the seminary and during the same period 499 resigned, a 27% resignation rate! A graduate's first years in the pastoral ministry are challenging. Many of these new pastors are also relatively new husbands and fathers with the

attendant challenges of these new vocations. Recognizing that the continuing professional growth and mentoring of new teachers had been cultivated for several years through the New Teacher Induction initiative, Professor Gurgel proposed a mentoring program for seminary graduates.

Professor Gurgel and Pastor Daron Lindemann, who currently serves in Pflugerville, Texas, then developed a pilot mentoring program with three 2010 seminary graduates as the first mentees and Lindemann as the first mentor. This pilot initiative was funded by a foundation (Antioch II) and received positive appraisals from those being trained as mentors, those being mentored, and those who had been observing the program as a possible long-term effort. The program was opened to all graduates in 2011 and 2012. As the program expanded and Pastor Lindemann found it necessary to step away, he and Professor Gurgel decided that it was time to establish a Mentoring Leadership Team in early 2013. Each lead mentor is assigned several mentors with whom he keeps in contact to assist them in carrying out their responsibilities.

In 2014, our synod's Conference of Presidents unanimously endorsed the

mentoring work that was being carried out in the pilot program. The program was approved by the synod in convention in 2015. As the program expanded following the pilot period, Professor Emeritus Forrest Bivens was called to be part-time administrator in 2015. He was succeeded in 2022 by the undersigned. The part-time administrator serves under the seminary's Grow in Grace director, currently Professor Bradley Wordell. Besides other responsibilities, the part-time administrator writes a monthly devotion which he shares with the lead mentors, who in turn send it to the mentors under them to be shared with each mentee. This process allows a regular, informal monthly contact for all involved.

As the program is structured, each graduate is mentored for three years with an annual cost of \$1,000 to the congregation he is serving. The \$1,000 covers the costs of the program and most of the costs of a retreat that is held in the third year of the recent graduate's ministry, as the formal mentor-mentee relationship is nearing its conclusion. The retreat is called *Celebration of Ministry I: Begun in Grace*. (There are parallel retreats or celebrations for pastors who have



Mentoring Program

completed 10, 25, and 35 years in the ministry, respectively, and these are funded by the congregations the pastors are serving at that time.) These retreats are intended to serve as continuing education events with the added benefit of the support that classmates can give each other. Congregations are still responsible to cover related costs so that the recent graduate (and his wife if he is married) can attend the retreat and receive encouragements and resources that will serve him in the ministry after the mentoring phase is concluded. The mentoring program, however, will cover much of these costs rather than the congregation, since about half of the annual fee is set aside each year for this purpose. It is hoped that the congregation will continue to set aside a similar amount each year for the continuing education of their pastor after the three years of mentoring are over.

Mentors are nominated by the lead mentor team and approved by the Conference of Presidents. The first year of mentoring involves walking alongside the new pastor as he gets to know his people and what it's like to be in the pastoral ministry. The mentor is there to answer questions and to provide accountability as the recent graduate starts to develop habits pertaining to his devotional life, physical health, and dealing with pastoral functions he faces for the first time. In years two and three, after the typical congregational "honeymoon period," the mentor is there to provide a listening ear for his mentee's questions and concerns. The mentor is not intended to replace the circuit pastor. In fact, he is there to help his mentee identify a situation which might require the young pastor to speak with his circuit pastor or district president and he will encourage his mentee to do so.



By year three, the mentor's goals include working with the mentee to plan or even work through a basic personal evaluation process to help the young pastor continue to plan for personal and professional growth into the future. The mentor also works to see that the recent graduate is developing a broader network of support in his circuit, conference, district, and synod. Cultivating working relationships with lay leaders, circuit pastors, pastoral peers, and district or synod leadership will serve the new pastor well. At the end of year three, the formal mentoring relationship concludes—although the friendship based on mutual trust may continue for many years. In fact, many long-term friendships have already developed as a result of this program.

For those graduates who are called to serve for two years as tutors at synodical schools and then transition to serve as parish pastors, the mentoring timetable is a little different. The schools where they serve will see that their mentoring needs for the tutoring years are met, and then they enter the seminary program for three years as they begin pastoral work in the parish. Graduates who are assigned to world or

home missions receive their mentoring through the respective mission boards apart from the seminary program.

The program has paid dividends. Since 2010, 190 WLS graduates have completed the mentoring program; 28 others have participated in the program but did not finish. From 2010 to 2023, only four of the 190 graduates who completed the program resigned from ministry. The other 186 are still serving, by God's grace. Of the 28 who participated but did not finish the full three years of the program, four have resigned, one retired (a second-career student), and one went to eternal rest with Christ. We currently have 57 mentees in the seminary program from the classes of 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022, being served by 55 pastoral mentors and seven lead mentors.

Participation in the program is optional for our graduates, but the program has proven so valuable that in recent years nearly every graduate has chosen to have a mentor. The mentoring program has become the new normal. †

Retired professor John Brenner is part-time administrator of Pastor Partners and lives in West Bend, Wisconsin.

On the Road Again

In February 2020, we received the news. It really wasn't a surprise: the Seminary Chorus tour out to California and the West Coast had been canceled.

For the previous month, we had been stuck in limbo. As we gathered for choir practices in the chapel, we were aware of the news reports that COVID-19 had moved from Asia to Europe and finally to the United States. As the tour dates drew closer, the case counts grew higher; the decision became more and more difficult. Would we—could we—still go on tour?

Soon the decision was out of our hands. The world came screeching to a halt. Life was shut down, school was canceled, and the students went home, which spelled the end of any hope that the Seminary Chorus would go on its California tour.

In February 2021, the Seminary Chorus season also was coming to an end. It wasn't a surprise: we knew from the beginning that there would be no 2021 choir tour.

Maybe the greater surprise was that there was even a choir season at all. In a year that required social distancing, quarantining, and masks, the Seminary Chorus still performed its annual Christmas and graduation concerts while singing at a handful of local churches on Sundays.

It was a challenging year in many ways. For rehearsals, we spread out in the gym, singing while sitting and standing six feet apart. We were certainly a strange sight at concerts, wearing large duck-like masks made of wire and canvas. We endured the illness and quarantining and made it to the end of the year, and at the graduation concert, we were finally able to sing free and unmasked, albeit to a limited audience.

As I look back, those two seasons of choir shortened by COVID-19 feel like memories from long ago. Many of my recollections of those times are hazy, even though these stories are only from two or three years ago. But the memories we do have are tinged with sadness.

There is a certain wistfulness and regret as we look back at what could have been and what we lost: The California tour and everything that comes with such a trip. The memories that could have been made, the brotherhood and bonds that



could have been built, the mutual encouragement and fellowship we never got to share with congregations, a proper and timely sendoff for the final year of longtime chorus director Professor James Tiefel.

And yet, as we look back, those two years were filled with joy. Amid a difficult year when we were isolated and distant, the chorus gave us a place to be together and to

sing together, even though we were six feet apart. If anything, these two years have been a precious reminder of what joy there is in making music together, in joining our voices with each other and for each other.

After all, there is something beautiful in music. It comforts us; it speaks to us; it links us together.

A mother gently strokes her son's head while singing, "Yes, Jesus loves me." A flock of small children stand before church and belt out "I Am Jesus' Little Lamb" straight into our hearts. A symphony of voices blends together on a Sunday morning to sing the old, old story of Jesus and his love.

This past spring, the Seminary Chorus once again traveled across the country to sing for God's people—its second trip since the California tour was canceled three years ago. It was the first tour for most, and for many of us, the only tour we'll experience. But that's what makes it special. After three years of waiting, we were grateful for this return to normal, for the chance to sing for you again. †

Matthew Zeng was president of the Seminary Chorus as a senior. He was assigned in May 2023 to Trinity, Neenah, Wisconsin.

Always Adapting

The new normal” can be a frustrating term. From my time in the Marines, I know that there is no such thing as “normal.” The phrase “overcome and adapt” was engrained in our brains. In combat situations, you’re always adjusting and anticipating the next move—where an attack may come from or where a unit must move to remain safe. The “new normal” just becomes the next day.

Things aren’t too different in the Information Technology (IT) world. Technology has rapidly evolved over the last few decades and continues to evolve constantly. Software programs are constantly being rewritten; hardware is always being improved. This means congregations, schools, and businesses must do their best to keep up and keep



making changes. It’s no different for Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, where we have found that some things are easier to change than others.

For example, we were a bit ahead of the game when our email server decided to take an untimely dirt nap (which is Marine for “stopped functioning”) in September of 2019. Although no data was lost, it was the perfect time to make the move to Microsoft 365 as our email and file server. The move was a long process as there were over 200 email accounts and tens of thousands of files that needed to be migrated. Having our data moved over to the cloud almost

four months before the world moved to remote learning made our shift significantly smoother.

Another example is the use of the digital learning management system, Moodle. Our Moodle site, originally called Seminary Online, was implemented in 2010 by Sue Holtz, our previous director of technology and integration. Now called SemNet, this application allows professors to have courses in a central online location on which students can participate in online forum discussions. Professors can also use the application to send announcements,

give assignments, and record grades. Much has changed since the seminary’s first initial efforts to integrate technology into classroom learning.

Just a decade ago, options for online meetings weren’t needed at the seminary. However, once the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we had to find a way to adapt quickly. At

the time, our classrooms contained twelve to fifteen students, but Microsoft Teams was limited to only six users, so we had to look for meeting software that could handle a full classroom. The features that Zoom offered were almost perfect for what we needed. Only a few of the professors on campus even knew what Zoom was before “the new normal” took over, but we provided them with the program and taught them how to use it. With Zoom, recorded sessions could easily be added to the professors’ virtual classroom pages on SemNet for students to view later if they missed the class.



Since then, we have incorporated microphones and cameras in every classroom in case a student is out for illness, injury, or even visa issues. One new piece of technology we have introduced for this purpose is the OWL, which looks exactly like its name suggests: it is a camera that has a 360-degree view with adaptive sound that allows the camera to track where the voice is coming from and bring that person into focus on the screen. Students who are learning remotely have a better audiovisual experience. The OWL technology also benefits faculty who need to attend meetings remotely.

Recently, we have also equipped our classrooms with interactive display technology that further expands professors’ teaching options. These displays from New Line combine a projector and dry erase board into one device, which is especially valuable for displaying and marking up biblical text.

In the IT world, “normal” means constant change. We see these changes as a blessing as we continue to improve the education we provide. At the seminary, we are adapting to technological changes for the sake of training our future pastors. †

Jeff Mitchell is the seminary’s technology services coordinator.

Learning by Experience

I'm convinced the more you do something, the better you get at it. The more a five-year-old plays soccer, the better he plays. The more an actress practices a monologue, the better she speaks it. The more a college student stays up late to write papers, the better he gets at . . . well, staying up late, at least.

As students at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS), my brothers and I look forward to the day we, Lord willing, will be full-time pastors. We all want to serve the Lord to the best of our abilities, but we also understand that some of our abilities won't be the best. Not everyone can write sermons like Luther or evangelize like Paul. Fortunately, our training helps us with a lot of those shortcomings. Our rigorous education, both at Martin Luther College and WLS, does an excellent job of preparing young men to be strong, capable pastors.

Nonetheless, as invaluable as it is, this education has limitations. As much as I love my seminary brothers, they aren't a congregation. As much as we can talk about witnessing and evangelizing in a classroom, it's not someone's doorstep. There is no substitute for the real thing.

For this reason, our training includes a whole year of hands-on experience in the form of the vicar year. First- and second-year students also gain experience in local congregations through the Early Field Training (EFT) program.

It can happen, though, that during a young man's eight-year journey, he desires even more practical experience. Maybe his love for Jesus and his desire to share Jesus with others becomes so heightened by his intense study of God's Word that he desires more "real-



world" opportunities to evangelize. Or maybe, in recognizing the tremendous responsibility that comes with being a minister of the gospel, he wants experience in certain areas to be even better equipped to serve God's people. Thankfully, our seminary recognizes this desire, and provides seminarians with voluntary opportunities to get long-term, practical experience through the Summer Assistant Program. This program connects seminary students with congregations to give them additional ministry experiences outside of the traditional curriculum. Students spend ten to twelve weeks during the summer assisting a congregation in their efforts to fulfill the Great Commission. They may help plan worship, assist in leading a Vacation Bible School or a soccer camp, preach the sermons they prepared during their time at the seminary, lead a Bible class, help a church start planning for a mission, shadow a pastor's shut-in visits, attend board of elders' meetings, or lead youth ministry events, all under the supervision of veteran pastors.

I was blessed to do all the above

during the summer of 2022 with a group of congregations in Florida, Alabama, and Louisiana. In each place, I was able to preach and teach, serve and lead, succeed and fail, and ultimately grow in my abilities and my confidence under the guidance of some amazing men. God certainly blessed me during my time there.

You don't always recognize when God is preparing you. Sometimes he allows us to experience some success or failure, grief or joy, comfort, and sadness. What purpose could he have in mind? At other times, the blessings seem clear; the time I spent as summer assistant was a perfect example.

Few things rival the opportunity to shepherd the flock of God. The men I am surrounded by, both professors and students, know that well, and it is a pleasure to learn from them day in and day out. But to get to know and love God's people, to get new and real experiences in the field, to see God at work through me as his instrument—there is no better teacher. †

Jacob Bitter was assigned as a vicar to Santísima Trinidad, Medellín, Colombia, for the 2023-24 school year.

“Best Seminary Ever!” Accreditation at WLS

I can truthfully say, “Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) is the finest theological seminary I ever attended.” What does that really mean when WLS is the only seminary I ever attended—and the vast majority of WELS pastors would say the same?

The truth is, there are hundreds of seminaries and graduate schools in the US that offer a Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree, the degree conferred on most WLS graduates. Two hundred seventy of these institutions have come together to form the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), the accreditation agency with which WLS is currently working.

Among ATS schools, WLS is unique in many ways—but not every way. For example, the mission of each school in ATS is slightly different. But every school has to have one—and it has to make sure that, as time passes, it stays faithful to its reason for existing in the first place. Every school has a curriculum—and it needs a way of checking on it regularly, to make sure that the school is still teaching timeless truths and preparing graduates for ministry to a changing world.

There are many reasons why WLS is pursuing accreditation with ATS. For one, being an accredited school will make it easier for WLS to enroll international students, bringing benefits both to sister churches in the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC) and our own campus. For another, accreditation will make it easier for our graduates to pursue further studies beyond the MDiv degree at other institutions.

But the most important reason is this: accreditation makes us a better school.

While WLS’s confessional commitments, culture, and story make us unique, that doesn’t mean we are the only school in history ever to face the tasks and challenges we face. And it would be a little prideful to conclude that the



solutions we’ve come up with over the years must be the best ones possible—for no other reason than that we came up with them (see 2 Corinthians 10:12). Pursuing accreditation with ATS lets us tap a huge reservoir of experience that applies to challenges we have now and helps us anticipate others we don’t have yet, but easily could. While accreditation costs time and effort in the short term, down the road the savings—in terms of time not spent reinventing the wheel—could be immense.

Right now, WLS is involved in a self-study, a top-to-bottom look at the entire school in the light of the ATS Standards of Accreditation. (The last time we undertook a self-study was in 2003.) Here’s an example of how this has already helped us. We see it as vital that our graduates learn skills to share the gospel across cultures. How are we doing at this? It turns out that 1) cross-cultural competence is a value for ATS, and 2) there are tools you can use to measure it. One of these is in wide use among ATS schools, and we’ll start using it soon. As we’ve worked through the Standards, time and again we’ve found ourselves saying, “Good idea! Are we already doing that? If not, what would it take?”

Will accreditation come at the price of our uniqueness or confessional integrity? We at WLS are unanimously agreed: that price would not be worth paying. There is no reason to think that’s the situation—in fact, quite the contrary. “We don’t dictate the school’s mission. We don’t tell you who you are,” one ATS representative told us. “Our job is only to help you be the best ‘you’ you can be.” Through this process, we are a better “we” already—and we’re only getting started. †

Kenneth Cherney, Jr. teaches Old Testament courses and has led the accreditation process at WLS.





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