

Issues in Our Synod
The Growing Shortage of Pastors and Teachers

by
Dr. A. L. Barry
President, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

*Introduction*¹

We have been reading and hearing reports in various publications in our synod about the challenge we are facing in our Synod when it comes to the number of pastors and other church workers serving the congregations of our church.

Yes, it is a true challenge, but also a joyful opportunity. We have the opportunity to encourage young men to devote their lives to serving their Lord and His church as pastors. There is no higher calling than that of being a pastor. We need to work to inculcate this attitude in the minds of the young men of our congregations. What greater calling can there be in this life than being a called and ordained servant of the Word? There is none. This is not to say that other callings in life are of less worth, but it is surely true that to preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments is the greatest privilege God gives to His people and to those certain qualified men of God He calls into His ministry.

And how joyful it is to be called into a life of teaching the Lord's young ones and of providing leadership to the church in the many other church vocations that men and women have in our Synod! What joy it is to be a part of the Lord's ministry in a local congregation, to serve on a mission field, or in an elementary school, in a high school or in some other setting. May God bless all who labor in His harvest fields .

The Growing Concern with the Shortage of Pastors

During a recent Council of President's Meeting, John O'Hara, the director of our Synod's Department of Planning and Research, presented some very sobering facts. The problem, simply put, is that we have a decreasing number of pastors to serve the congregations of our Synod. Of the number of active pastors that we do have, the majority of them are older and are fast approaching retirement age.

You can see from the chart illustrating the number of aging clergy that we have nearly 2,000 active clergy who are 55 years of age or older. In ten years most of these men will be retired. We have another 1,850 pastors who are between the age of 45-55. This would not be of concern were we to have a sizeable number of men who are 45 years of age or younger, but the fact is that we have only around 2,000 men who are 44 years old or younger, and only 427 men younger than 35 years of age.

Over the next five years, if attrition rates hold steady, we will probably be losing 1,600 pastors to death, retirement or resignation. The greatest number of these losses will

¹ Note: This story originally appeared in the December 1998 issue of *The President's Newsletter*. A follow-up story was printed in the March 1999 issue.

The Growing Shortage of Pastors and Teachers

come from retirement. Pastors who graduated in the relatively large seminary classes during the late 1950s and early 1960s will be reaching retirement age during the next five years. In addition, the second-career men who graduated from the seminary at the age of 40 or older since the Seminex walkout will also be reaching retirement age.

The Need for First-Career Pastors

And this points to another important concern. Related to the growing shortage of pastors is that the number of men who are entering the ministry as a first career continues to decrease. We praise and thank God that there are men who make the sacrifice of giving up careers and other vocations to enter the seminary. We have come to refer to these men as “second career” students.

However, the simple reality is that men who start seminary at a later age have fewer years to serve the church. Men who follow the traditional route of going from college to seminary have a potential career in the church of nearly 40 years. There is a chart here showing that as of 1993, 24 per cent of our seminary students were over the age of 40, up from 6.7 percent in 1981, and the most recent statistics would show this figure to be even higher.

Again, I want to be very clear here. We are not in any way trying to suggest that the service of older men is not appreciated. By no means! In many ways a second-career man brings more maturity and life-experience than a younger man, but the fact that an older man has fewer years to devote to full-time service to the is a growing concern contributing to the overall shortage of pastors in our Synod.

We have around 900 vacant congregations in the Synod. It might well be that as many as half of these congregations cannot receive a full-time pastor, for a variety of reasons, for instance, they are simply too small to support a full-time pastor. But even given that fact, there are around 450 vacancies in the Synod. You can well imagine that even to keep up with our vacancies, we need more men as pastors than both of our seminaries are producing.

This need becomes even greater when we take a look at projected mission starts over the next five years. Our Board for Mission Services has indicated that it wants very much to send out 15 full-time pastors as missionaries during each of the next five years, for a total of 75 full-time pastors stationed overseas within five years.

When we look at the need for pastors to serve new congregations here in the United States, we are looking at a need to start 48 new congregations each year, just to replace congregations going out of existence. So this means that we really need 48 new pastors every year just to make it possible to fill 48 new pulpits. Ideally, we would like to have at least 60 new congregations per year over the next five years, for a total of 300 pastors also needed for new congregations.

A Growing-Church Attitude

The Growing Shortage of Pastors and Teachers

When we discuss the shortage of pastors that we are facing, it is important for all of us to look upon this challenge with the attitude of a growing church. We do not need more pastors merely to fill the pulpits that we presently have. We need men to fill the pulpits of churches we will be starting. We genuinely want to be a growing church and expanding church, not just a church maintaining its present numbers. As this happens we will need even more pastors than ever before. The need is only going to become greater, if we are to be the kind of church that the Lord would have us to be, namely, a church that is reaching out more and more boldly with the Gospel and working actively to bring more and more people into the church.

We need our colleges and universities not only to devote their energies to training laymen and women for secular careers, but to very much refocus their attention on their most important task: the preparation of church workers for our Synod. This focus must remain priority one in our Concordia University System.

We need two strong seminaries that have increasing enrollments, and thank God that this is happening. We need as a Synod to more intentionally devote our resources to our seminaries. This has been sliding for many years, and we must stop this trend and reverse it. Whenever someone suggests that we do not need two seminaries, I can't help but chuckle a bit to myself, and then shake my head in disagreement. A church body that wants to be boldly reaching out with the Gospel, within this country, and around the world, needs two strong seminaries. A church body that is committed to a highly trained and highly-qualified ministerium must have two healthy seminaries.

Teacher Shortage

The number of available teachers is also of great concern, particularly when it comes to the number of men serving in the full-time teaching ministry. If there is a concern with the decreasing numbers of pastors, and an aging clergy population in our Synod, the word "crisis" may not be too strong to describe the growing problem in the number of synodically certified teachers who are available for the schools of our Synod.

As you can see from the chart illustrating trends in our schools, we have a growing school population. Thank God for this! However, from the chart showing how many certified teachers we have serving in the Synod you can see that the percentage of synodically certified teachers serving in our Synod's schools is continuing to decrease. And, for that matter, you can see that historically, our teacher population experiences a significant number of resignations annually. Now we do need to keep in mind that a good number of these resignations are due to women having children, but there is also a significant number of resignations of teachers who, for a variety of factors, feel it necessary to leave the service of our Lutheran day schools.

Again, as with pastors, so also with teachers. We need more men and women willing to serve in our congregations' schools, not just to keep up with the demand, but to facilitate growth in our elementary and secondary school system. The schools of our Synod will continue to remain one of our great strengths. That is why we need to keep the

The Growing Shortage of Pastors and Teachers

priority of having them staffed with synodically-educated and certified teachers a very high one.

Responding to the Challenge of Church-Worker Shortages

First of all, we need to recognize that we do indeed face a problem here. Then, we need to respond to the challenge. Where to begin? There will be, and needs to be, a multi-faceted approach to the challenge, but I believe we can pick up the best cue from the Word. I have in mind here specifically our Lord's word: "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Luke 10:2).

I am convinced that a big of the reason why we are experiencing a shortage of church workers is simply the fact that we are not doing what our Lord told us to do—to ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into the harvest fields. Therefore, I would like to strongly encourage the congregations of our Synod regularly to include in the prayers of the worship service, a very specific prayer for the need for church workers. The members of the congregation need to be encouraged to pray regularly to the Lord of the Harvest for more men and women to enter his harvest fields.

I am also convinced that as we take the Lord at His Word and pray for workers, two things will happen: 1) We will ourselves be more aware of this need and will find ourselves taking those concrete steps necessary for addressing the need, and 2) our congregations also will become more aware of the need and will join us in addressing it.

Secondly, there is yet another step that needs to be taken. When there is a young man in the congregation who seems to have an aptitude for the pastoral office, we need to speak to him about it. Our pastors need to recruit future pastors. Surveys consistently reveal that the number one reason a young man decides to enter the office of the ministry is because of the influence of another pastor. Let's look for future workers, identify them, and then actually approach them and ask them to serve.

A younger pastor in our Synod recently told me that he can vividly recall that on the day of his confirmation he received a card from an older, retired pastor. When he opened the card, it contained a very simple note, "May the Lord continue to be with and bless you. Would you please consider becoming a pastor?" That very simple card, with that very simple message, had a powerful impact.

There was a time when I was not doing as good a job as I should have been when it came to recruiting men for the pastoral office. That fact was brought home to me when I was visited by Dr. Karl Barth, who was then serving as the president of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Dr. Barth looked me in the eye and said, "Al, when was the last time you asked a young man to become a pastor?" I had to admit that it had been quite some time! And from that day on, I began going out of my way to ask young men to consider preparing for the ministry. The Lord has blessed this effort in ways I could not have anticipated. I believe that if each of our pastors made it a personal goal to ask this

The Growing Shortage of Pastors and Teachers

question a few times even every year, we would be very much impressed with how much of a blessing this would be for the church.

The same holds true for our teachers. I believe that here again one of the most effective ways we can generate interest among our young people in serving as teachers is for our teachers not only to model a joyful life of service, but also to speak very specifically about being a teacher to their students, particularly as young men and women are in the middle-school grades.

And there are certainly any number of things we can do. One pastor I know makes it a point to send a letter every year to all the young people he has confirmed, once a year, on the anniversary of their confirmation, offering words of encouragement and also asking them to give prayerful consideration to becoming a pastor or a teacher or other church worker. I have heard of at least one case where a pastor has organized a sort of club for young men who are considering the ministry. That too is a very fine idea. Sunday School teachers need to make it a point to speak to their students about being pastors and teachers, and the same is surely true for the classroom teachers in our elementary and high schools.

Conclusion

As our Synod looks to the future, and at the fields white ready for harvest, surely we will recognize how important it is for us to make a high priority the recruiting of young men and women to serve our congregations as pastors and teachers and other church workers. We will give higher priority to financial support for our colleges, universities and seminaries. Our Lord once said, “You have not, because you ask not.”

Let us then ask, and then ask again and then ask some more. Then, together, let us take action to put our prayer into action and follow up our requests with the tangible steps that we can take to address this growing concerns. And as we do, God will surely bless.

The Growing Shortage of Church Workers: Reactions

I was pleased by the large number of responses I received to the previous issue of *The President's Newsletter* with its article on the growing concern about a shortage of church workers in our Synod. I thought it would be helpful for me to offer you a sampling of responses. It is precisely this sort of fraternal discussion that needs to go on across our Synod as together we seek ways to address the growing shortage of pastors, teachers and other church workers. The following quotations from some of the letters I received on this issue are set off by titles, so that you will be able to distinguish one from another.

Retention is the Real Issue— People, not Programs

“You speak to an issue that is of grave concern to us all. One thing that strikes me as odd is that in all this conversation little, if anything, is said about retention. In my

The Growing Shortage of Pastors and Teachers

opinion, we cannot address the real problems involved in this shortage without addressing retention. Why are pastors leaving? Why are pastors' sons no longer going into the ministry in the first place. Why is it that fewer and fewer people want to serve as pastors and teachers in our congregations? I think these questions, and more importantly their answers, speak volumes to this issue, but no one seems willing to listen. Instead, I see us discussing the results rather than the causes, treating symptoms without addressing the underlying problems. I also see program-orientation rather than people-orientation. Funding for recruiting programs keeps coming up without any talk of support for present students and workers.

“To many students and workers I have talked with over the past years, it seems that money and effort goes to recruit while little of either goes to support and retain them when they are in their first calls. I have experienced the same as a worker in the field, and have heard the same from far too many pastors and teachers in our church body. Therefore, I ask you and the Council of Presidents, the Boards and Commissions, the educational institutions, the pastors and teachers, and the congregations of our Synod, to consider prayerfully and earnestly taking this up as your motto for dealing with the growing shortage of pastors and teachers: Retention is the best recruitment. Since we realize that our church workers are becoming precious few, we should indeed treat the few we have as precious. Then, and only then, will others see our good treatment of our workers and consequently want to present themselves as candidates for service.”

Do We Know Why People Leave Church Work?

“Is there no exit interview that would help us focus in on why so many leave? What are some of the more common experiences or dissatisfactions? Perhaps these could be addressed by a special committee and a report presented to the Synod in convention. Are such interviews conducted? What are the results? Are the results too embarrassing to publish? Who would be embarrassed? Why? I am not a mean-spirited person and I ask these questions because they might get at the answer to why more pastors are not actively recruiting. I have seen first hand how many teachers are treated in the parish. Perhaps the next study should filter out teachers who leave in order to raise a family and those who leave to seek other employment. I have met more in the latter category.

“Serving in the ministry has great rewards and it is a high calling. It is also filled with an abundance of challenges. I know the Synod has attempted to meet some of the needs through providing counseling for church workers. A number of years ago, I read a book that had some good points, but it also seemed to point the finger at the church worker, suggesting that there was something wrong with them. I have experienced some difficult times in ministry and I am glad to say that I have grown through such experiences. I do not consider myself to be a “great,” polished pastor. But I struggle with my brethren to preach the Good News in season and out of season. I believe in most instances we deserve more credit from support personnel in the Synod and district. Thank you for listening.”

The Growing Shortage of Pastors and Teachers

Does the Synod Realize How Much It Costs?

“Over my 38 years as a pastor, I have had a number of young men and women enter a synodical school to prepare for full-time ministry. But the reality today is that no matter how much encouragement we give, unless these people have the finances to meet their educational costs, they will most likely drop out of a synodical school and go to a secular institution to complete their education in a field that will give them an adequate income to repay their student loans. A young man I confirmed six years ago is currently enrolled in his first year at one of our Concordias. He has the desire and the ability to become a pastor, but the cost for just one year is \$17,000. This young man does not have this kind of money and neither do his parents. This may be his last semester there. Even if this young man were able to obtain a student loan for \$9,000 a year, where would he be financially by the time he received his first call— over \$60,000 in debt?

“With the salaries most of our congregations are able to offer seminary graduates, does anyone in synodical headquarters or colleges have a clue as to why only 427 pastors in the Synod are younger than 35 years of age? When I graduated from the seminary in 1960, I was called to a mission congregation. With a wife and two children, we needed financial help from my parents to enable us to stay. Had I had a student loan to repay, I would have had to leave the ministry before I turned 29. Somehow, the Synod is going to have to address our present system of preparing young men for the pastoral office. My recent conversation with the accountant at the college, left me with the impression that only students with lots of money need apply. Many years ago, the Synod came up with the idea of a “practical” seminary to train the necessary men to meet the demands of a growing Synod. Surely, there has to be another, more efficient way of providing a quality education for our future pastors, one that is affordable for them, their supporting congregations and the Synod.”

Are Older Pastors Being Neglected on Call Lists?

“There is one piece of the picture that seems to be ignored over and over again. That piece of the picture is the rather evident age discrimination currently taking place in the Missouri Synod. I have asked two district presidents why so few calls have come my way. Both of them clearly indicated, ‘It’s because of your age.’ There are many, older, faithful pastors in the field, who are praying for and desiring one more change in location before retirement. Many of those pastors will not wait until the age of 65 to retire if a change does not come. I just want to serve my Lord as a faithful pastor as long as I am able. It often feels, however, that the Synod doesn’t care if I do or not. I know that’s not true, but that’s how it feels sometimes.”

Pray and Work for More Workers

“I believe in praying but as Paul said, we have to be bold sometimes. With pastors, one of the problems is that when they are done with the long time of schooling they are so

The Growing Shortage of Pastors and Teachers

far in debt that, with the salary they make, they can't see their way out of debt. It has to be discouraging. It is said sometimes that after his first year, a new pastor is already beginning to look for another call with a salary that will allow him actually to support his family. Maybe we could assess each LCMS congregation so much per year, per communicant, to help the seminaries to decrease this cost to new pastors.”

Without a Shepherd the Sheep Will Wander Away

“People are not going to continue staying with a congregation if there is no hope for a full-time pastor. I was on our church's call committee and we looked for almost two years before we found a pastor. In the meantime, we lost a lot of people because they wanted a pastor! Right, wrong or indifferent, these are the facts and it is happening right now! The longer these shortages go on, the more chance there is that we will lose parishioners.”

We Need to Do More to Encourage Our Young People

“We dare not rest simply on the hope and anticipation that pastors and teachers will encourage the youth to consider church ministries as their life's work. We have reached the point where the Synod itself must develop resources aimed directly and specifically to both our youth and their parents, encouraging full-time service in the Lord's kingdom. The church has the inside track to these young people through our church-centered youth organizations, i.e., youth groups, choral activities, Bible classes, service opportunities and so on. Yet there seems to be no organized tools or procedures available for youth leaders, or, for that matter, for parents of our youth, to inform, encourage and direct the cream of our youth towards the various ministries of our church. This is unfortunate, almost tragic, and is even more distressing when one considers that we have the personnel, resources and skills to develop and initiate such a program. Considering that the audience for this program is primarily the youth, it seems expedient that media tools be developed with which youth are familiar, specifically, videos with follow-up discussion guides, written and developed by counselors and directors presently working with our youth and thoroughly conversant with their mind-set. Such videos, designed to encourage our young people to seriously consider the ministries in the Lord's kingdom, must be spiritually focussed, youth-directed, informative and positive. The joy of serving the Lord in soul-saving and faith-building needs to be presented to them.”

Conclusion

By reading through these various responses, it was quite obvious to me that one important issue of concern is the whole question of finances, both in terms of the cost of attending a synodical school in preparation for a church-work career, and then also in terms of the level of financial support one receives from the congregations where one is called. Still another issue that repeatedly surfaced was concern with how our church

The Growing Shortage of Pastors and Teachers

workers are treated by their congregations in terms of the respect they receive. Needless to say, these will continue to be significant issues as we move into the days ahead. Increasingly, our Synod is growing more aware of the shortage in church workers and is looking for helpful ways to counteract this trend.

Those of us in full-time church work need to make every effort to speak about serving the Lord and His people in this special way. The one letter writer said it very well when he mentioned that we need to be active in sharing the joy of serving the Lord. And, again, we need to heed our Lord's very clear word to us, "Pray, therefore, that the Lord of the harvest would send out workers into His fields."

Once again, therefore, I am asking every congregation in the Synod, at least once a month, to include in the prayers of the church specific petitions to the Lord that He would touch the hearts of young men so that they would be moved to enter the pastoral office; and that the Lord would touch the hearts of other young men and women to be moved to serve as teachers, DCEs, deaconesses, and in other offices of full-time service in our Synod. We pray knowing that the Lord who invites us to pray will both hear and answer our prayer.

President A. L. Barry
Jude 24–25