

Report of the Ministry Recruitment Task Force

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The 2023 WELS synod convention adopted two resolutions encouraging the formation of a Ministry Recruitment Task Force. President Schroeder appointed this task force in October 2023. It is our privilege to serve and to bring you the following explanations and recommendations.

There is a teacher shortage

A Teacher Shortage Task Force met from April to October 2022. It clearly identified a growing teacher shortage. Each year after all the available graduates from Martin Luther College (MLC) are assigned to classrooms, the number of positions still to be filled has been 50 in 2020, 90 in 2021, 140 in 2022, and 158 in 2023. Total new teachers in the fall of 2023 included around 100 MLC graduates, around 100 WELS teachers returning to the classroom, and around 100 WELS members who were public school teachers but were provisionally called to teach in Lutheran schools. All three of those pipelines have a ceiling. The fact that there are 100 former WELS teachers available to return to the classroom every year demonstrates that retention is an issue, especially at places where teaching is more difficult for various reasons. At the same time, WELS schools report that they anticipate growing 3 percent year-over-year for the next three years.

The main reason for increasing teaching vacancies is the increasing enrollment. Out of a global pandemic and societal changes across our country, God opened the doors of our WELS schools to more and more families seeking a different educational path for their children. Funding models that include state vouchers and admissions models that include non-member students have been the chief contributors to the rapid increase in enrollments.

The teacher shortage will continue and may worsen

We know that the future of the Church and her needs is in the hands of our living Lord, and we know that our predictions have proven inaccurate in the past. Nevertheless, we believe that it is a matter of good stewardship to make plans based on our best predictions.

Predicting the number of teachers WELS will need in the future requires first forecasting expected enrollment. The challenge is the student makeup in WELS schools is rapidly evolving. Consider these three categories of families for our schools: 1) WELS students, 2) unchurched and non-Christian students (student and parent prospects to evangelize), and 3) other-Christian students (may belong to a Christian church not within our fellowship).

We can make informed estimates about how many WELS students will enroll in our Lutheran schools in the future. WELS tracks annual births. In years evenly divisible by five, congregations submit age-group demographics. This data enables us to clearly see that our historic member group of students is declining. For example, WELS congregations reported 59,000 members ages 0 to 14 in 2015. In 2020, they reported 53,500 members in that demographic, representing a 2.4 percent year-over-year decline, paralleling the decline in birth rate in years prior.

Forecasting the potential number of interested families from those other groups—unchurched and other-Christian households—is more challenging. We know interest in parochial education is rising rapidly. We do not know if there is a ceiling on that interest. We do not know how many states will embrace or walk away from school choice programs, which provide the financial means for more parents to seek parochial education. Therefore, future interest by those two groups is impossible to predict. It seems likely in the short term the interest is only going to rise.

From school year 2018–19 to school year 2023–24, total enrollment in our Lutheran elementary schools (LES) grew 4.2 percent year-over-year. Enrollment by unchurched/non-Christian students increased 13.9 percent year-over-year. Enrollment of other-Christian students increased 11.7 percent year-over-year. But WELS/ELS (Evangelical Lutheran Synod) enrollment declined 0.7 percent year-over-year. In the past two decades, enrollment at all levels of WELS schools (early childhood ministry, LES, area Lutheran high schools, prep schools) rose 17 percent. Enrollment by WELS students declined 30 percent during that time.

The continued growth in enrollment suggests that WELS should expand every possible pipeline of future teachers. It is necessary to acknowledge that even with all those pipelines wide open, it seems unfeasible for a church body our size to supply enough teachers to keep up with the current rate of enrollment growth. This has already proven true in early childhood ministries (ECMs).

It would appear to be helpful to develop a shared philosophy of ministry to help us prioritize our efforts to serve WELS students, unchurched students, and other-Christian students. Failure to develop a shared philosophy of ministry and a

corresponding controlled growth plan poses multiple risks. Unmanaged growth could steer WELS schools onto a path where the need for teachers could result in pressure to hire non-Lutheran/Christian teachers. Since the identity of our WELS schools has always included God's Word being integrated throughout the day and throughout the curriculum, unmanaged growth has the potential to impact our identity and our mission.

All of our Lutheran educators should be able to articulate and demonstrate the reasons for the nature of genuinely Lutheran education. MLC has done an excellent job teaching and inculcating those values and traits. The Conference of Presidents (COP) relies on MLC to provide ministerial certification for all teachers in all our schools. MLC should be commended for stepping up and providing programs to meet the exact needs of WELS at this time, including online ministry certification courses, competency-based education courses for elementary school teachers, and a broad range of courses for those serving in ECMs at all levels.

Specific remedies for the teacher shortage

RECOMMENDATION #1

That all WELS schools enroll all existing teachers who are not ministry certified in the appropriate level of MLC courses to achieve ministry certification.

Such courses include

- ministry certification courses, all online, for teachers at all levels who have a bachelor's degree in education from institutions other than MLC;
- competency-based education courses, all online, for WELS members who have an associate degree or a bachelor's degree in areas other than education and are teaching or intending to teach at the elementary level; and
- early childhood support for teachers in the field.

Tier one: 25 free training modules to be used by directors to on-board and locally train new hires.

Tier two: Three one-credit online courses to provide the required training to earn the Child Development Association (CDA) Credential in one semester.

Tier three: An 18-credit online program, Teaching Ministry Certification for Early Childhood Teachers, providing the theological and professional training for ministry in a Lutheran context. Together with the CDA Credential, it can qualify a teacher to be "locally called" by a congregation.

Tier four: An online Associate Degree in Early Childhood Education (preschool only) for currently serving WELS early childhood teachers. The ideal candidate has some college background already.

RECOMMENDATION #2

That the Conference of Presidents (COP) commission a white paper to develop a shared philosophy of ministry to guide our efforts, considering some questions such as these:

1. Is it theologically accurate to say that we should not be teaching kids in our schools who are members of another church body and therefore under a different shepherd? Should we avoid enrolling such students on theological grounds?
2. Is it theologically accurate to say that if parents who are members at other churches want to place their children under our theological care, it is our responsibility to teach them the unconditional gospel as long as they listen and conform to the beliefs and standards of our schools? Should we enroll such students on theological grounds?
3. Can and should our district presidents prioritize the provision of teaching candidates to schools that have demonstrated effective programs to help unchurched students and their parents become children of God and members of their congregations?
4. What would it look like for all our schools to have a shared philosophy of ministry and a corresponding controlled growth plan?

We are aware that there are implications in the management of growth at all educational levels for the COP to consider based on the answers to these questions.

There is a pastor shortage

WELS presently has more than 160 pastoral vacancies (just under 12 percent). At least one out of ten congregations in WELS is experiencing a pastoral vacancy. There are congregations being served by a vacancy pastor rather than their own pastor for over a year. Such lengthy arrangements can be detrimental to the ministry plans of both the vacant congregation and the home congregation of the vacancy pastor.

One reason for our current shortage is a decade (2012–2022) of smaller than usual seminary classes due to our synod's earlier fiscal crisis (2003–2009). Morale was hurt during the crisis by bringing missionaries home. Enrollment in our ministerial education schools dropped sharply when we raised tuition by over 10 percent a year in 2003–2005 without corresponding increases in financial assistance. In the subsequent years when we talked about closing our prep schools, our most reliable source of preseminary students, both the prep school enrollment and their production for the MLC preseminary program were suppressed. Seminary graduating classes from 2003–2011 averaged 41. Seminary graduating classes 2012–2022 suddenly averaged 28. We thank God that beginning in 2023, seminary graduating classes are trending toward the 30s.

The current graduating numbers from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) could have been even higher. Unfortunately, some WLS classes have shrunk between matriculation and commencement. Some attrition has always occurred in seminary classes. In the recent past, a higher percentage of men have discontinued their preparation for pastoral ministry. This trend is a matter of serious concern for WLS. The WLS president has an exit interview with every student who decides to withdraw. Central to the conversation is the man's reason for discontinuing preparation for ministry. The primary reason given is that the man has decided that he does not wish to be a pastor. To a man, the students who withdraw from the seminary express great appreciation for their time in the program. They thank God for the blessings he granted through it, increasing their faith and opening their eyes to new insights. When asked to identify other factors that led to their decision, some withdrawing students note that it is difficult to complete all the work assigned, because they do not have the same motivation as those who were eager to serve as pastors. Others speak of being tired of school in general, especially when many people their age have left the academic setting behind. In the end, though, all say that the primary reason for withdrawing is their conviction that pastoral ministry is not for them.

The most recent school year demonstrates that the higher attrition rate may have been temporary. There has been an increased emphasis on the advising system. Each student has a faculty member serving as his advisor. The advisor meets regularly with his advisee and talks with the student about his desire to serve in pastoral ministry and offers encouragement. In addition, professors frequently speak in class about the joys of serving people with the gospel, even amid challenges, to help students keep the end goal of their studies in mind. The faculty has also taken steps to ensure that student workload expectations are reasonable. Early field experiences are on the increase.

We also investigated whether the current shortage is caused by pastorally trained men serving outside the parish. The current report lists 1,363 pastoral positions. One thousand two hundred four pastors (88.7 percent) have as their primary responsibility serving laity with Word and sacrament. One hundred fifty-four pastors (11.3 percent) are in a ministry where serving laity with Word and sacrament is not their primary responsibility. That 11.3 percent is below historic averages (13.6 percent in 1956; 13.0 percent in 1990). We find value in pastorally trained men serving in high schools and other areas where their influence can help young men see the virtues of pastoral ministry.

We recognize and appreciate that, across the board, consideration is given about which non-parish responsibilities can be given to laymen that would reduce the need for pastorally trained positions outside the parish. This is evidenced by a 1 percent drop in pastorally trained men serving outside the parish over the past three years.

The pastor shortage may improve

We know that the future of the Church and her needs is in the hands of our living Lord, and we know that our predictions have proven inaccurate in the past. Nevertheless, we believe that it is a matter of good stewardship to make plans based on our best predictions.

Currently, 1.4 percent of WELS' active full-time pastors are age 70 or older. Using an average retirement age of 70, we would expect to average about 23 retirements a year over the next 5 years (2024–2028). Retirements of pastors would then rise, averaging closer to 29 annually over the next decade as all Baby Boomers (currently aged 60 to 69) and the older GenXers reach retirement age. Around 2040, we would expect to see retirements trend down some, closer to 24 to 25 annually. They would rise again slightly in the late 2040s, due to some larger classes from the turn of the century reaching retirement age.

Over the last 20 years, WELS has typically had between five and seven pastors leave the ministry annually for something other than retirement. This includes things like resignations and deaths. This number has improved significantly over the last decade. Adding retirements with other types of attrition would suggest that to maintain current pastoral ministry efforts synodwide, we need WLS graduating classes to be about 28 now, rising to about 34 around the end of this decade and holding there for at least ten years.

However, these predictions assume that WELS maintains approximately 1,240 congregations. In the past six years, church closures and consolidations have increased. Over that period, for the first time in 60 years, WELS has fewer churches each year than the year previous. Even with WELS Board for Home Missions' 100 in 10 initiative, total closures and consolidations have led to an annual net decline in the number of churches. We expect this to accelerate over the next decade.

What is impossible to predict is whether the demand for pastorally trained men in non-parish roles will increase. For example, we expect the desire of other-churched and unchurched parents to provide parochial education for their children to increase. It is hard to predict how the expansion of area Lutheran high schools will affect demand for pastors. The same holds true for other WELS-affiliated ministries.

If we assume the demand for pastorally trained men in those non-parish roles does not increase, and we assume the rate of closures/consolidations will trend slightly upward, it suggests that if WLS senior graduating classes averaged in the low 30s over the next decade, the vacancy rate would trend down slowly, returning to approximately 5 percent by 2035. If the graduating classes average less than that, the vacancy rate would remain higher. We will always need workers.

Beyond that, the ongoing pastoral demand will be tied to whether WELS' statistical decline maintains its current rate of around 2 percent annually or levels out. This leads to another way of thinking about the synodwide need for parish pastors: looking at the ratio of parish pastors to total membership. In 1990, that ratio was approximately 1:360. Currently, it is closer to 1:280. If WELS had the 1990 ratio today, it would call for 240 fewer in-parish pastoral positions. Obviously, that is not feasible for a variety of reasons, including the geographic deployment of congregations and the increased demands for pastoral counseling. This is simply meant to illustrate that it would be a mistake to forecast pastoral needs assuming that current pastoral service opportunities will remain steady.

Remedies for the existing shortages

General remedies

When we search the Scriptures for insight on shortages of ministers of the gospel, we find a direct word of Jesus on the subject. "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. So ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field" (Luke 10:2).

RECOMMENDATION #3

That we each pray for workers.

Loving God and Lord, instill in the hearts of our children a desire to follow you as they prepare for future days. Help them distinguish between what is passing and what is eternal, between instant thrills and lasting joy. Encourage more young people to prepare for service in the public ministry of the gospel. Mold us and move us to be good examples for our youth. Amen.

Understanding what it means to recruit

We want to be clear about what we are encouraging the Church to recruit to: candidacy for the public ministry of the gospel in the name of the Lord and of his Church. Only the outward call from Christ through his Church actually puts someone into the public ministry, yet the inner desire to serve in the ministry of the gospel (1 Timothy 3:1) is precisely what we seek to nurture in the hearts of many in the next generation.

We also want to be clear about the Church's need for qualified (1 Timothy 3; 2 Timothy 2:2 and 3:15) candidates. Hence, no matter the preparation process for the potential candidate, qualifying a candidate or ascertaining if a candidate already has those qualities is essential in the faithful Church. There is no such thing as allowing people to serve in the public ministry just because they want to serve.

The faithful Church has remarkable liberty to choose exactly what is required in our time and in our place to be qualified for candidacy for the public ministry of the gospel. Clearly, to serve in the public ministry as a Lutheran teacher of first graders requires different theological and educational depth compared to the scope of ministry into which the pastor will be called. WELS has historically chosen to give as much of a liberal arts education as is possible to each candidate on the undergraduate level in addition to as much theological depth as is possible in a normal four-year course of studies. WELS has historically chosen to require, if possible, the candidate for the teaching ministry and the preseminary level candidate for the pastoral ministry to attend our own synodically-owned and subsidized campus. We are unique in Christendom in this view of the Lutheran teaching ministry as public gospel ministry in its own right and in this approach to pastoral

preparation. Our students entering Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary have already been doing exegesis of the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament.

We recognize that where, by the grace of God, there is a high regard for the Word of God, a high regard for the public ministry of the gospel will also exist.

The Lord of the Church has promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church, and so we trust that there will always be qualified public servants of the Word of God to serve our Lord's Church and to liberate humans from their self-chosen deities or from their slavish attempts to live under the law of God and to free them to live freely and faithfully in Christ. May the Lord keep that promise through us rather than without us.

Personally addressing the need to recruit

Most called workers can tell the story of why they began to consider ministry in the first place. Perhaps a young man grew up watching his father be an excellent pastor like his father before him. Maybe a young woman fell in love with early childhood ministry because of her high school job and the mentorship she found from her veteran coworkers there. It seems clear that the Holy Spirit uses human connections to do his work here on earth.

It makes perfect sense that our ministerial education schools would concentrate on sharing their message far and wide. "We take great care in creating a great environment to equip you to do ministry!" Let official school recruiters give tuition assistance details, show slideshows of their schools, and talk about their programs. But ministerial education school recruiters are limited in the impact they can have.

Individuals in every corner of WELS need to be told clearly and often that they are the best recruiters for public ministry. Grandparents, parents, youth group leaders, and Lenten dinner soup cooks all have unique relationships with young people in their families and congregations. A word from them about how great a teen is with kids is as good as gold. An encouragement from a pastor to consider pastoral ministry after a boy gives a confirmation class presentation is a huge deal. Recruitment of public school students is nearly completely dependent on such interactions.

A veteran pastor says, "I always recruit for ministry, not for particular ministerial education schools. Students will surely end up going to those places, but I recruit for ministry, and the schools become necessary challenges and blessings to help God's children get to do ministry for and with Jesus."

RECOMMENDATION #4

That we each recruit people for the ministry of the gospel.

Individual recruitment for the ministry of the gospel includes praying for individuals; facilitating their continued faithful involvement with Word and sacrament in their congregations; speaking positively about local pastors, teachers, staff ministers, and missionaries; arranging service opportunities with those ministers of the gospel; encouraging use of ministerial education school programs at appropriate levels; and many other acts of affirmation.

Corporately addressing the opportunity to recruit

As we each individually search for opportunities to recruit, we can get creative with how we remind one another that this is a way we can bless our church body for generations.

The issue of faithful recruitment to candidacy for the public ministry of the gospel needs to be owned in our synod by every congregation, school, and entity. A promotional program has to target individual influencers of the young people. We need to help prospective influencers see themselves as influencers of young people to consider ministry.

Let us also recognize the blessing that we have in entities that can lead us in the recruitment effort. We have a dedicated ministerial education office at the synodical level. We have our WELS-owned and supported seminary, a ministerial education terminal school for Lutheran teachers and staff ministers, a pre-seminary program of liberal arts education on the undergraduate level at that same school, and two preparatory schools whose purpose is to encourage and prepare for the next stage of candidacy preparation.

RECOMMENDATION #5

That the Ministerial Education Office craft an aggressive ongoing promotional program for synodwide recruitment.

The program may include one additional recruiter per district, frequent reminders for individual and congregational recruitment, Bible studies, worship planning resources, devotions for students at all levels, ideas for age-appropriate tastes of ministry, ideas for student assistance, links to resources from the ministerial education schools, age-appropriate print materials, social media posts, and many other encouragements for recruitment activity.

Remedies at the high school level

Understanding the young people whom we are recruiting

Most of the high school class of 2024 was born in 2005 and 2006. They were learning their first words when the iPhone was introduced. Generation Z is the classification of those born between 1997 and 2012, and since about 2020, they are represented by every traditional student who graduates from Martin Luther College. Beginning next year, every classroom at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary will also be full of Gen Z men. Sociologists observe ruefully that in the worst cases, Gen Z is tech-addicted, chronically depressed, lazy, entitled, and irreligious.

It's no secret that young people today are more prone to mental health issues than possibly any generation that has come before them. They are constant witnesses to the relentless positivity presented by users of the Internet and social media, which creates a growing void between what life seemingly could be and what it truly is. Some have questioned whether people are talking more about mental health because more people are struggling or if more people are struggling because people are talking about mental health. The number of young people who are apparently struggling could be influenced in part by an increased cultural willingness to seek help. Regardless, depression has skyrocketed in just a few years, a trend that appears among Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics, in all regions of the United States, across socioeconomic classes, and in both large and small towns.

In many ways, Gen Z's relationship with the Internet and social media could be directly related to their uptick in mental health issues. But the digital world is not all bad. If the perception of social media, e-mail, and lightning-quick search engines were overwhelmingly negative, the average person wouldn't spend three-plus hours on their phone every day (seven-plus for teenagers). The root of the issue lies not in the fact that our young people have been exposed to the Internet, but that they haven't experienced life without it. Once we've accepted the reality of the Internet, once we've acknowledged what it represents in the lives of our young people, we need to decide what we're going to do with that information. The situation calls for a very intentional moderation. We must be sure to assist young people in finding appropriate uses for the Internet like a father guides his child's first strokes with a hammer. That which could be used to harm people and damage property is also valuable in supporting new ways to reach out with the gospel.

Gen Z is more likely than any generation before them to be raised by religiously unaffiliated parents. Without parental direction, individualism and a rejection of moral absolutes predominate, leaving young people especially vulnerable during their high school and college years. There is nothing in this world better able to pierce the dense fog of ideologies than Scripture itself. This is why the retention of young church members in their most vulnerable years is so important. If young people see no reason to be involved with church, they will not even begin to consider serving in one vocationally. This generational trend highlights a potential blind spot in the current model of WELS parish ministry. Traditional confirmation class concludes for 14-year-olds in the spring of their eighth-grade year. In many cases, this also marks the end of the church's ministry efforts targeted toward them. While some churches set the bar high when it comes to youth ministry, the majority have no specialized effort. An increased emphasis on mentoring young people through their years of maturing faith could produce just the type we're looking for at our ministerial education schools. Our often-absent young people could turn into active members of our congregations, beneficiaries of rich intergenerational relationships, and eager mentors of those who look like they did just a few years prior.

RECOMMENDATION #6

That WELS Congregational Services develop resources to assist congregations in their ministry with high school and college students through age 25.

Encouraging area Lutheran high schools

Veterans of our area Lutheran high school system are well aware of how the schools maintain their historical average of 8 percent of the WELS students matriculating to MLC. Key positive factors are usually popular students and popular faculty members encouraging ministry, particularly boys and girls as teachers. The percentage of non-WELS students in attendance at a given school and the promotion of popular non-ministerial programs of study are factors to consider. MLC already offers online courses for college credit to high school students.

RECOMMENDATION #7

That the Martin Luther College courses offered for online study to high school students be packaged as a pre-ministerial program and combined at the local level with age-appropriate tastes of ministry.

Encouraging preparatory schools

Veterans of our prep schools, Michigan Lutheran Seminary (MLS) and Luther Preparatory School (LPS), are well aware of how the schools maintain their historical average of 48 percent of the students matriculating to MLC. Key factors are

usually students identifying with the single purpose of the school and picturing themselves in later service, particularly boys as pastors.

The preparatory schools want elementary-aged students and their parents to know that the average student comes only willing to be encouraged for a life of service in ministry, not already committed to it. MLS and LPS have enough financial assistance dollars available that no family situation should prevent anyone from trying the schools.

RECOMMENDATION #8

That our synodwide promotional program encourage enrollment of students at our preparatory schools.

Remedies at the college level

Maintaining undergraduate enrollment at Martin Luther College (MLC)

MLC plays a central role in the WELS ministry recruitment effort. Because we value the gospel and the people who bring it to us, we want them to have the best possible college education. MLC carries out that role for WELS.

MLC is affected by the same trends as other American colleges. For approximately the past 20 years, the birth rate in the United States has been in sharp decline. Those in secondary education talk about the “enrollment cliff” that will begin around 2025, as that birth rate decline begins to result in an increasingly smaller college-aged population.

A birth rate decline has occurred in WELS as well. In 2005, just over 7,000 children were born to WELS couples. Since then, the birth rate within WELS has been trending down and currently is closer to 3,000 births annually. That decline will increasingly impact enrollment at all WELS schools. In Lutheran elementary schools and area Lutheran high schools, enrollments may remain stable as more unchurched and other-churched students enroll. But at Martin Luther College, which has the singular purpose of training WELS members for gospel ministry, the decline in birth rate will be more challenging to mitigate. Long term, we believe the decline in WELS' birth rate will present a major challenge to MLC's residential undergraduate enrollment. Unless the Lord would grant WELS with growth, each year a smaller pool of college-aged WELS members exists. Without that growth, to maintain enrollment levels at MLC, we will need all WELS-affiliated high schools to achieve a higher percentage of seniors going on to MLC. We acknowledge there is a natural ceiling on how many seniors that could be.

In the short term, we believe it is possible Martin Luther College will actually see enrollment rise somewhat. In recent years, the percentages of seniors at our preparatory schools and area Lutheran high schools that went on to MLC hit historic lows for a variety of reasons, including the impact of COVID-19. However, we believe that in the next couple years both the preparatory schools and area Lutheran high schools will revert to having a percent of seniors attend MLC that is closer to the historic averages (approximately 48 percent from the preparatory schools and 8 percent from area Lutheran high schools). This would result in MLC's opening undergraduate enrollment rising in the 600s for the next few years, before trending down again below 600 around the beginning of the next decade.

Long term, to maintain residential undergraduate enrollment levels at MLC, we will need all WELS-affiliated high schools to achieve a higher percentage of seniors going on to MLC along with an increasing number of WELS students matriculating at MLC from public high schools.

Lowering undergraduate costs at MLC

Most American colleges are facing the same demographic challenges. There are teacher shortages across the U.S. Many institutions are reacting by lowering costs for undergraduates in order to recruit more of them, especially in the area of education. MLC developed its own financial assistance task force to develop the following goals.

RECOMMENDATION #9

That donors continue to validate MLC's formal goal of reducing the average educational debt of all MLC graduates so that it is at or below 50 percent of the base starting salary of a WELS first-year teacher.

MLC met this goal in the summer of 2023 and is on track to continue meeting it because of the generosity of WELS donors. MLC's Congregational Partner Grant Program, where the congregations of MLC students contribute financial assistance and MLC matches their contribution up to a certain amount, has been very helpful in meeting this goal. Preseminary students accumulate no additional educational debt at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary because of the generosity of WELS donors.

RECOMMENDATION #10

That donors continue to validate MLC's formal goal of increasing financial assistance for the average student by 10 percent per year.

MLC has been meeting this goal every year since 2022 because of the generosity of WELS donors. Average student assistance at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary exceeds the cost of tuition because of the generosity of WELS donors.

RECOMMENDATION #11

That donors validate MLC's formal goal to prioritize the allocation of MLC financial aid so that first-year students will not normally be compelled by financial necessity to take on any educational debt.

MLC is on track to meet this goal by 2027 in partnership with incoming students and their parents or guardians because of the generosity of WELS donors. Students at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary are presently not compelled by financial necessity to take on any educational debt because of the generosity of WELS donors.

RECOMMENDATION #12

That donors validate MLC's informal goal that no first-year student would have to pay more than \$9,999 in total cost (tuition, room, board, fees).

Because of the generosity of WELS donors, MLC has the resources to meet this goal right now but not yet for the long term. Donors who wish to make this possible for the long term should contact the MLC Mission Advancement office. Such a goal has already been reached at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary because of the generosity of WELS donors. Conventional wisdom is that students should pay something rather than nothing in order to have some personal investment in their college training.

Pointing out the benefits of campus life at Martin Luther College

Martin Luther College is blessed to be centered in an excellent location for an amazing small college experience. The 50-acre campus sits on a beautiful wooded hill overlooking the city of New Ulm, Minn. About 25 miles from Mankato and 90 miles from Minneapolis/St. Paul, MLC students have easy access to big-city venues while enjoying the small-town charm of this Minnesota Star City of 14,000. The campus includes four residence halls; an academic center; a library and media center; a student union with cafeteria, gym, and fitness center; a 900-seat auditorium; two music halls with practice rooms; and outdoor athletic facilities including a disc golf course and a low ropes course. The campus cornerstone is the Chapel of the Christ, a 1,200-seat chapel where services are held almost every day during the school year with one of the largest organs in the Midwest. Just a few blocks from the main campus is an early childhood learning center as well as expansive off-campus athletic fields and the new Betty Kohn Fieldhouse, an indoor turf facility. MLC professors are veteran pastors and teachers who bring a wealth of experience to their distinctively Lutheran classrooms. While it is a sacrifice for some to relocate to Minnesota, our task force believes that the sacrifice is worthwhile.

The majority of currently-serving WELS pastors did their preseminary training on the MLC campus. The vast majority of WELS teachers received their first calls after their schooling on the MLC campus. Both of those groups recruit naturally to a campus they know. But a growing number of WELS teachers who know MLC only from its online ministerial certification courses need to find out more about our campus in New Ulm, Minn., in order to become better recruiters of the young people in their care.

RECOMMENDATION #13

That the MLC Alumni Relations office be tasked with developing a program that introduces WELS teachers who did not graduate from MLC to the undergraduate campus experience for which they will be recruiting.

The MLC Alumni Relations office can also consider connecting with pastors who graduated from the WELS preseminary program before 1996 and have not had children go to college on the MLC campus.

Expanding opportunities to be trained by MLC offsite

The mission of Martin Luther College is to train men and women to meet the public ministry needs of WELS. At this moment in history our WELS needs are expanding, especially in the area of teachers. MLC is to be commended for recently developing four tiers of assistance to meet WELS needs in professional and ministerial certification of teachers at the early childhood level. By survey MLC has identified that these programs should meet the needs of over 1,000 people already serving. Our recommendation #1 above is that schools take the initiative to enroll those students. We also see the need for MLC to devote special attention to these programs.

RECOMMENDATION #14

That WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools assign someone to take the initiative to work with each WELS early childhood ministry on how to enroll each of their workers in the appropriate tier of professional and/or ministerial certification.

In the past, ministry certification and professional licensure were difficult for students who were unable or unlikely to have their residential college experience at MLC because of life circumstances, ethnicity, or geography. But now competency-based educational models are under development. MLC has made it possible for any existing WELS school to serve as a satellite location for MLC ministry certification, professional licensure, or continuing education. Local pastors, MLC professors, and adjunct instructors are all in a good position to aid in such efforts.

RECOMMENDATION #15

That anyone desiring to serve as a WELS teacher but unable to participate in residential college life at MLC should contact Dr. John Meyer (meyerjd@mlc-wels.edu) to determine the best course of study.

RECOMMENDATION #16

That any WELS school desiring to serve as a satellite location for a cohort of students in educational studies should contact Dr. John Meyer (meyerjd@mlc-wels.edu) to determine how to begin such a program.

Providing such opportunities for nontraditional students is not a threat to replace the valuable residential undergraduate college experience for traditional students.

The MLC Staff Ministry program has proven valuable to WELS. As congregations make their ministry plans in view of our current called worker shortages, they might consider calling local WELS people who already have degrees to serve provisionally as staff ministers. These people might not be able to take residential classes at MLC. MLC might consider creating a graduate-level theology certificate for such staff ministers.

RECOMMENDATION #17

That the MLC Office of Graduate Studies and Continuing Education work with the MLC Staff Ministry program and the Conference of Presidents to develop a certificate of theology for WELS people called as staff ministers in their home congregations.

Remedies at the seminary level

MLC and WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools (CLS) partner in keeping track of those who have withdrawn from MLC or who have graduated from MLC with education degrees but are not presently in WELS classrooms. Contact with those people has proven valuable for CLS as it provides call lists for many unique circumstances.

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary has taken responsibility for keeping in contact with men who have withdrawn from training for pastoral ministry but not necessarily in a systematic way. Someone should also take responsibility for keeping in contact with men who have resigned from pastoral ministry for reasons other than cause.

RECOMMENDATION #18

That the WLS faculty discuss how it might keep in contact with men who have withdrawn from training for pastoral ministry or from the pastoral ministry itself in order to have the opportunity to encourage them as appropriate.

Support for those already in the ministry

One regularly hears that those who serve in public ministry must make many sacrifices. Near the top of that list is the idea that those who serve as pastors, teachers, staff ministers, and missionaries must give up any hope of a comfortable life financially. Called workers must work long hours, the story goes, without receiving compensation in any way commensurate with their responsibilities.

It is true that WELS called workers do not receive a salary that will lead to inclusion on a list of the highest-paying professions. That is not to say, however, that they are being asked to live in poverty. Thirty-five years ago, before WELS took a hard look at the compensation package being provided for called workers, someone could have made an argument that those receiving compensation according to synod code were being asked to make a financial sacrifice. Since then, the synod made a significant adjustment to the compensation schedule to ensure that public ministers of the gospel are receiving compensation that shows honor to those laboring in the gospel and allows them to devote themselves fully to the Lord's work.

In 2016, the synod's Compensation Review Committee made additional revisions to the compensation guidelines. Just as importantly, the synod provided a helpful called worker compensation calculator to make it far easier for calling bodies to determine appropriate support for their workers. The Compensation Review Committee used that opportunity to emphasize to calling bodies the importance of carefully and prayerfully considering how to take care of the servants the Lord had given them. The compensation package includes a salary that takes into consideration the worker's responsibilities, educational attainment, and where the individual serves. The package also includes one half of the self-

employed social security tax for ministers of the gospel, as well as providing health insurance and housing. Those last two items may not always be appreciated as they ought to be.

The Compensation Review Committee continues to improve the guidelines. Calling bodies who request a candidate from MLC or WLS are required to show they are providing compensation that meets or exceeds the guidelines.

Telling the full story of called worker compensation requires mention of special tax treatment for pastors, teachers, staff ministers, and missionaries as ministers of the gospel, which allows declaration of a portion of their salary as a parsonage allowance, thus reducing the amount of income subject to taxes. Whatever is spent on housing, utilities, and furnishings can be excluded from taxable compensation. That is a significant benefit that makes the salary they receive go much further.

In addition, the Lord's people love those who proclaim the gospel to them and their children, and they show it. They regularly provide gifts directly to called workers and support them in other ways. They often treat the Lord's servants like members of their family. That needs to be shared regularly with young people who are considering the different ways in which they might serve the Lord with their lives.

Part of encouraging morale for men and women entering the teaching and staff ministries is to support realistic expectations for service. Asking people to perform duties for which they are not trained can be disheartening. Unrealistic calling bodies can inadvertently or callously cause toxic work atmospheres.

Part of encouraging morale for men entering the pastoral ministry is supporting the men currently serving. In a time of pastoral vacancies, it seems important to watch for the possibility of burnout. Increasing the number of men entering pastoral ministry only to have a growing number of resignations would hinder our efforts to address the shortage of pastors in our synod.

There are some good things in place to support our called workers. Over the last five years, nearly all the graduates of WLS have opted to have a mentor during their first three years of ministry through the Pastor Partners mentoring initiative. Nearly all the graduates of MLC have participated in the New Teacher Induction program. Statistics demonstrate that these mentoring efforts have, humanly speaking, reduced the number of resignations in the early years of ministry. Grow in Grace, the seminary's continuing education institute, sponsors ministry anniversary retreats aimed at helping pastors find renewed joy in their privileged work. Circuit pastors seek to encourage and support the men and women in their circuits in their challenges. Districts have funds available to assist with the costs of counseling for pastors, teachers, and staff ministers who are hurting mentally and spiritually. Many congregations have a Care Committee for Called Workers, which provides called workers an opportunity to be open about their challenges and for congregations to offer support in various ways.

Perhaps more could be done to hold up the prophet's hands. Pastors themselves could make it a priority to find a brother in ministry to whom they could confess and from whom they could hear the Savior's word of forgiveness. That absolution equips a pastor to return to the work with a clear conscience and a settled peace, grateful for the privilege of being the Lord's instrument to bless others. A donor could consider funding retreats for pastors aimed at providing spiritual refreshment and encouragement in ministry beyond the special ministry anniversaries presently offered by Grow in Grace.

Supporting pastors, teachers, staff ministers, and missionaries in their ongoing labors will help with the recruitment of another generation of called workers. Gospel ministers who feel supported in ministry carry out their work with joy and zeal. Young people notice the joy they have in ministering to the saints and reaching out to the lost, and they begin to think about becoming called workers themselves. In addition, called workers who feel supported in ministry speak more positively of the honor of serving in the public ministry and are much more likely to encourage young people to prepare for service to the Lord and his Church.

In the end, serving in the public ministry is, as the apostle Paul says, a grace. No greater privilege could be given to a person who is by nature sinful and therefore unworthy to serve as the Lord's messenger. To be the Lord's instrument to speak the good news of forgiveness in Christ and to prepare people for eternal life is an honor and a joy. Getting to spend life fully engaged in sharing the life-giving Word with others and not having to work a side job to pay the bills is an extraordinary gift. Many called gospel servants have thought along the way, "I should have to pay to do this! Instead, God's people support me so that I am free to do what I love."

RECOMMENDATION #19

That each congregation, school, and mission agency seeks to meet or exceed the synod's guidelines for compensation of called workers.

Our task force heard the suggestion that the former tuition rebate program be reinstated. This was a program where the synod kept a certain percentage of the tuition money that students paid at the ministerial education schools and then reimbursed it to graduates after a certain number of years of service. We decided not to recommend reinstating the program. The accounting for the original program was difficult, and it would be difficult to restart under the same terms. If we must choose between funding a program like this or funding financial assistance while a student is enrolled, the task force recommends funding financial assistance.

But if a program could be devised whereby a graduate of MLC or WLS receives a certain grant after a certain number of years of service as an expression of gratitude from a grateful church body, it might be helpful. Certain donors might be interested in funding such a program. It might be part of our overall efforts to encourage persistence in the ministry.

At WLS, the Grow in Grace program works to encourage retention in the ministry by Pastor Partners and other initiatives. At MLC, the New Teacher Induction program works to encourage retention in the ministry in a growing number of ways.

RECOMMENDATION #20

That the WLS Grow in Grace and the MLC New Teacher Induction leaders discuss a graduate gratitude grant program, recommending the timing, amounts, and funding sources of such a program to the synod president.

Remedies we discussed but are not recommending

We heard the suggestion that the two preparatory schools be defunded, that the money be given instead as subsidy to MLC every year, and that MLC use it either to lower costs for students or to recruit students to make up for what the prep schools would have produced. We also heard the suggestion that the prep schools be closed and that their faculties be distributed one-by-one to each of the area Lutheran high schools to encourage recruitment there. Similar suggestions were discussed by the Prep School Study Committees of 1990 and 2005. We decided that the proposals would risk the reliable annual production of students from the prep schools at a time when we are working hard to increase both enrollment at and production from them as a helpful remedy for our current shortages.

Since half of all WELS members live in Wisconsin, it is logical that we heard the question of whether the WELS college of ministry should be located in Wisconsin. Students who are driving to MLC from Wisconsin must ask themselves this question all the time! In the 1960s, WELS discussed that issue and decided that the college for teacher training should be in New Ulm, Minn., even with an existing WELS junior college for teacher training at the time in Milwaukee, Wis. Thirty years later, in the 1990s, WELS discussed the issue once more and ended up moving the preseminary college-level program from Watertown, Wis., to Minnesota. Thirty years later, our committee looked at the issue again.

We know that Martin Luther College professors are willing to serve anywhere that the Church asks them to serve. It is the same attitude that they seek to instill in their students. That is not an issue.

MLC admissions officers routinely ask personnel at WELS high schools in Wisconsin and Michigan about students who prefer to stay closer to home. Estimating the number of additional traditional students who might prepare for ministry at a hypothetical college in Wisconsin is difficult, since the students themselves usually have many other factors they are considering as well. Sometimes it is their parents who would prefer them closer to home even when they would be fine studying farther away. At present, Wisconsin students who go to school in Minnesota indicate their willingness to serve anywhere upon graduation, and our task force discussed whether having more students studying at the college level closer to home in Wisconsin might change that dynamic.

Our task force asked WELS campus ministries in Wisconsin to identify students who were attending those Wisconsin colleges but indicated interest in serving in WELS ministry. We asked permission to interview them to gain more nuanced data. Our interviews turned up no students who chose to attend public colleges in Wisconsin rather than MLC simply because of location. Rather the reasons cited centered mostly on available programs and related costs. A broader study of WELS students attending public colleges and universities found that a majority of them see geographic isolation as a weakness.

We were especially interested in whether the location of the WELS college of ministry in Wisconsin might make it more likely for Black and Hispanic students from our congregations in Milwaukee to enroll there. We surveyed groups of Black and Hispanic WELS students from Milwaukee and discovered that there are multiple factors in play, none of them

simple, and none of them solvable by a simple relocation of the WELS college of ministry. We also surveyed Hispanic WELS members from Doral, Fla., and discovered that it might be best for a school in Florida to form a cohort and serve as a satellite location for the appropriate MLC courses (see Recommendation #16).

We consulted with Dr. Eric Fulcomer of the Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. He informed us that any college or university established or re-established in Wisconsin after 1992 is under the jurisdiction of the Department of Safety and Professional Services (DSPS) Educational Approval Program (EAP). The statutory reference is 440.52 (1)(e)(1), and the EAP comes with its own set of political and regulatory challenges.

We made an attempt to calculate costs. We looked at the difference between Wisconsin state support for Wisconsin students attending Wisconsin colleges vs. Minnesota state support for Minnesota students attending Minnesota colleges, and it was nearly a wash. Relocation costs for the college were estimated at \$5,600,000. We presumed that a brand-new fully-appointed campus would cost approximately \$270,000,000. We assumed that a sale of the New Ulm campus would net \$25,000,000. We are unaware of existing campuses in Wisconsin that would meet our needs and are available. We finally determined that the numbers did not yield a good cost-benefit ratio for moving the campus of our college of ministry to Wisconsin.

We heard the suggestion of combining Martin Luther College and Wisconsin Lutheran College (WLC). We were unwilling to suggest the necessary changes to WLC's governance, which works well now outside the corporate synod structure. We strongly validate the broader mission of WLC, which is providing quality teaching, scholarship, and service that are rooted in Holy Scripture. We observed that whenever the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) combined its ministerial education high schools and colleges with its more broadly purposed LCMS high schools and colleges, the ministerial education programs were mostly lost.

We heard the suggestion of offering a special theological course online for men who might be interested in studying the Bible, and then using that course to identify men who are interested in becoming WELS and entering pastoral training. We see that this method is being used to recruit men and women for ELCA seminaries at this time. We also heard the suggestion of considering models like *Academia Cristo* and TELL, currently used by WELS World Missions to identify potential congregational leaders in places where we presently have no congregations of our fellowship.

Our task force commends our WELS World Missions planners for devising methods that work well to identify potential leaders in places where we have no current presence. The Pastoral Studies Institute of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary is pleased to partner with its World Missions partners to provide the best possible seminary training for such candidates.

For English speakers in North America, however, we highly value the time and presence that we are able to devote to training ministers of the gospel. When those candidates come from our existing congregations and schools rather than from online courses, we know them much better and have many more opportunities to demonstrate Lutheran ministry to them. Such an opportunity in a time of peace and prosperity is a great blessing from the Lord, which we do not take for granted.

Rev. Paul Prange, reporter

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