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David Peter

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, peterd@csl.edu

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A Timely Word from Luther on Recruiting Young Men for Pastoral Ministry

A recent edition of the *Reporter*, the official newspaper of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), arrived in the mail with this front-page headline: “CUS Enrollment Hits New High: 33,399 Students.”¹ The article lauded the fact that enrollment in the synod’s Concordia University System’s ten campuses has increased every year for twenty-one years, but there was one aspect of the report that was not so cheery. It states:

Although total CUS enrollments continue to climb, the number of students in church-work programs continues to fall—from a total of 1,654 in 2012 to 1,531 this year, a drop of 123 students, or 7.4 percent. Except for an increase of 54 students in fall 2010, that total has been dropping for at least the past 13 years, according to CUS staff.²

This announcement brought to my mind one of Martin Luther’s writings, a work composed in 1530 “A Sermon on Keeping Children in School.” This sermon addresses a similar situation in Luther’s day in which the number of young people going into church work was diminishing. I encourage the reader to access this composition in volume 46 of *Luther’s Works* in order to encounter directly this timely exhortation.³

Luther’s composition is timely because it focuses on the matter of recruiting young men (actually boys) for preparation for pastoral ministry. Today the need for this is acute, as apparently it was in Luther’s day. Currently the total enrollment of pre-seminary students in all Concordia University System schools is down to 156.⁴ The number of residential students in the programs leading to pastoral ministry at Concordia Seminary (i.e., the MDiv degree program and the alternate route option) is significantly down from what it was ten years ago. In 2004–2005, the total number of residential pastoral formation students was 725. Today it is 285.⁵

Luther’s sermon (actually more of a treatise) addresses a similar situation, even a crisis. Despite the advance of the gospel due to the Reformation, an insufficient number of boys and young men were in the process of preparing for pastoral ministry. Although Luther’s estimate of the number of vacancies in Saxony in his day is disputed and the reformer may have exaggerated the crisis, there is no doubt that he had valid reasons for the impassioned concern he expresses in these pages. Similarly, today some question the extent and severity of a “pastoral shortage” in the LCMS. Yet there is good reason to believe that the current low numbers of students in pastoral preparatory studies (both at the seminaries and in the Concordia University schools) does not bode well for the future advancement of God’s kingdom within existing congregations of the synod, let alone new mission efforts.

Before highlighting some similarities between the conditions that Luther addresses and the current situation in our church body, one must acknowledge differences. For example, Luther insists upon instruction in Latin, which was the *lingua franca* of theological study of the day and no longer is a necessity for pastoral preparation. More

significantly, the Reformation affected the decline of monasteries in Germany. Since these had been the contexts in which boys, especially from poor households, could gain an education in preparation for the priesthood, the demise of such institutions led to a concurrent decline in students preparing for pastoral ministry. It is assumed that the reader will be able to make the appropriate distinctions between “then and now” as well as the needed translation of Luther’s counsel into contemporary circumstances.

Nevertheless, I will comment on three emphases in Luther’s sermon that need to be recaptured today. These emphases deserve renewed attention in our current context regarding efforts to recruit talented young men to prepare for pastoral ministry. Although Luther directed his exhortation to parents, I believe a contemporary application should also be directed to pastors and congregations (which is why I am writing this opinion piece in a journal sent to pastors). These are the emphases:

Luther affirms the high value and inestimable impact of the office of the ministry. As one reads this sermon, one cannot help but be struck by the author’s esteem for the office of the ministry (rendered as “the spiritual estate” in this translation) as well as for those who fill it. He upholds the estate’s dignity and honor, stating, “There is no dearer treasure, no nobler thing on earth or in this life than a good and faithful pastor and preacher.”⁶ For the pastors who read this, please take encouragement from these words and be affirmed in your calling!⁷ Many in our society regard pastors as irrelevant at best and deluders at worst. A post-Christian and even anti-Christian culture seeks to denigrate the office of pastor. Even some congregational members demonstrate ambivalence toward the office of pastor and even dismiss the value of their shepherd, but Luther’s estimation of the office is of the highest level.

Luther identifies the reasons for which the office of pastor is so valuable.

He [Christ] paid dearly that men might everywhere have this office of preaching, baptizing, loosing, binding, giving the sacrament, comforting, warning, and exhorting with God’s word, and whatever else belongs to the pastoral office. For this office not only helps to further and sustain this temporal life and all the worldly estates, but it also gives eternal life and delivers from sin and death, which is its proper and chief work.⁸

Luther emphasizes the eternal impact that those in the office have. The work of pastors, he affirms, brings rich blessings for the present age but also makes a difference for the eternal destiny of many. Through the pastor, Luther asserts, many souls “come to everlasting righteousness, to everlasting life and heaven.”⁹

Today many young people are seeking to invest their lives in meaningful causes. There is no more significant cause than that of the gospel mission. As pastors and parents affirm to the young men entrusted to them the high value and inestimable impact of the office of the ministry, no doubt the numbers of those preparing for ministry will swell. This brings me to the second emphasis from Luther’s sermon.

Luther emphasizes the need to encourage young men to pursue the office of the ministry. This is a primary purpose of this homily. It is remarkable that Luther would devote a sermon to this goal, which some today might dismiss as a crass recruitment

ploy. However, Luther's concern is not just for some institutional advancement; his passion is for the kingdom of God!¹⁰ He regards the mission of the church as hinging on the pastoral office and of those who fill it. This is why Luther's goal is not just filling the office with warm bodies, but with raising up pastors of the highest character and talent.¹¹

Luther identifies one of the major reasons young men were not encouraged to enter into preparation for pastoral ministry as economic. Parents did not regard this vocation as one in which their sons would become wealthy and prosperous. The preacher accordingly rebukes such parents—and the community that holds similar values. “He [God] has not given you your children and the means to support them simply so that you may do with them as you please, or train them just to get ahead in the world.”¹² Doesn't that sound like the values of our contemporary society? In my own experience, I have encouraged teenage boys and girls to pursue full time church work, receiving an initial positive response from them. Shortly thereafter however, when I take up the subject again, these young people inform me that they have been discouraged from that path by their parents. Commonly, the reason is that church workers do not make enough money. As Luther observes, the parents' primary concern is that their children “get ahead in the world.”

Luther's admonition is one that is appropriate for parents and parishes today: “...your children are not so wholly yours that you need give nothing of them to God. He too will have what is rightfully his—and they are more his than yours!”¹³ Granted, not all young people should go into professional church work—Luther himself affirmed this.¹⁴ But I am convinced that the current decline in students preparing for the pastoral office—and for other auxiliary offices of the church—reflects to some extent the mindset of our age in which we see ourselves as the masters of our own destinies (and of that of our children) rather than as stewards of God's gifts. In this spirit, the primary destiny to which we aspire—and to which we direct our children—is to “look only to the belly and to temporal livelihood.”¹⁵

More than rebuking Christians for neglecting their responsibility to encourage the brightest and the best young people to prepare for ministry, Luther holds forth the joy and the glory experienced in directing our youth toward service in professional church work. He asks: “How much more should you rejoice if you have raised a son for this office of preaching in which you are sure that he serves God so gloriously, helps men so generously, and smites the devil in such knightly fashion? You have made of your son such a true and excellent sacrifice to God that the very angels must look upon it as a splendid miracle.”¹⁶ There is joy and fulfillment in ministry, both for the ones sent and for those who send. The latter category includes parents and congregations. Perhaps the most compelling case for recruitment into the pastoral office is that joy which pastors demonstrate while carrying out their ministry. Such a winsome witness—exemplified by Luther himself—will attract young souls to investigate the public ministry and contemplate their place within it.

Luther advocates the financial support of young people who pursue the office of public ministry. In the previous quotation, the reformer stated that those who direct

their children to professional church work offer them as “a true and excellent sacrifice to God.” To send one’s child to be formed as a pastor was a sacrifice in Luther’s day, and it is so today. It is not cheap to train pastors, and it is not inexpensive by any means for those who prepare to be pastors. A recent edition of Concordia Seminary magazine reports that a year at Concordia Seminary costs \$41,000 to \$54,000 and that students pay 50 to 60 percent of that. As a result, when combined with the undergrad debt many students incurred before they ever set foot at seminary, half of Concordia Seminary graduates in 2013 left the seminary with a debt of \$39,000 or more and one-fourth had a debt of \$80,000 or more.¹⁷ This places a significant financial stress upon seminarians and their families—including their parents—to prepare for pastoral ministry both at the undergraduate and seminary levels. Indeed, this can be a “true and excellent sacrifice to God.”

However, the financial burden should not be borne primarily by them. The broader ecclesial community is also called to make the sacrifice and financially support seminarians and other church workers. By ecclesial community, I am referring to congregations and trans-congregational entities such as districts and the Synod, but I especially refer to individual Christians who have been enriched by the ministry of pastors and other professional church workers and who seek to invest in the spiritual wellbeing of future generations. To this matter, Luther insists that there is no better investment than in the training of pastors.

Now ever if you were a king, you should not think you are too good to give your son and to train him for this office and work, even at the cost of all that you have. Is not the money and the labor you expend on such a son so highly honored, so gloriously blessed, so profitably invested that it counts in God’s sight as better than any kingdom or empire? A man ought to be willing to crawl on his hands and knees to the ends of the earth to be able to invest his money so gloriously well. Yet right there in your own house and on your own lap you have that in which you can make such an investment. Shame, shame, and shame again upon our blind and despicable ingratitude that we should fail to see what extraordinary service we could render to God, indeed, how distinguished we could be in his sight with just a little application of effort and our own money and property.¹⁸

This admonition and encouragement was originally directed to parents of sons, but I would expand the application to congregations and members. This is especially true of churches that have members who are preparing for pastoral ministry. Many congregations are highly supportive of these “sons of the congregation” and offer ample financial assistance for both undergraduate and seminary education. Yet many are not; the significant educational indebtedness that so many seminarians incur is a testimony to that. I have spoken to many seminary students who reveal that the support for their studies offered by their home congregations is a pittance. Add to this the diminishing support from districts and Synod and it becomes clear that Luther’s admonition hits home for us in the LCMS today.

That which has affected me most in the reading of Luther's sermon is his conviction that the best investment of money for advancing the kingdom of God is in the training of professional church workers, especially of pastors. This has caused me personally to adjust my financial contributions so that I direct a higher proportion to the support of seminary education. As one who is employed by Concordia Seminary, this may appear self-serving. However, I sincerely take to heart Luther's perspective on this: "A man ought to be willing to crawl on his hands and knees to the ends of the earth to be able to invest his money so gloriously well."¹⁹

What a timely word of exhortation and encouragement we receive from this 1530 composition by Martin Luther! The reformer concludes his sermon with these words: "You have heard your prophet."²⁰ May this prophet's message find renewed hearing in our church body today!

David Peter

Endnotes

¹ Paula Schleuter Ross, "CUS Enrollment Hits New High: 33,399 Students," *Reporter*, November 2013, 1.

² Ross, 1.

³ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 46, ed. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 219–258.

⁴ Ross, 1.

⁵ This data was provided by Dr. Paul Philp, Director of Academic Programming and Curriculum assessment, Concordia Seminary. The number of non-residential pastoral formation students has increased somewhat, from 148 in 2004–05 to 173 in 2012–13 (the largest number occurring in 2011–12 with 195 students).

⁶ Luther, 223.

⁷ Yet Luther keeps this affirmation in proper perspective by acknowledging: "It is not the man, though, that does it. It is his office, ordained by God for this purpose. That is what does it—that and the word of God which he teaches. He is only the instrument through which it is accomplished." Luther, 224.

⁸ Luther, 220.

⁹ Luther, 224.

¹⁰ Luther identifies what is at risk. Speaking to parents who discourage their sons from pursuing a career in the public ministry, he writes: "So far as you are concerned, the serving of God can just die out altogether . . . But because you allow the office instituted and established by your God and so dearly won to go to ruin, because you are so horribly ungrateful as to let it be destroyed, you yourself will be accursed." Luther, 223.

¹¹ Luther, 231.

¹² Luther, 222.

¹³ Luther, 223.

¹⁴ "In saying this I do not mean to insist that every man must train his child for this office, for it is not necessary that all boys become pastors, preachers, and schoolmasters . . . for the world also needs . . . people without whom the temporal authority would go to pieces." Luther, 231.

¹⁵ The full quote is "If God has given you a child who has the ability and the talent for this office, and you do not train him for it but look only to the belly and to temporal livelihood, then take the list of things mentioned above and run over the good works and miracles noted there, and see what a pious hypocrite and unproductive weed you are. For so far as it is up to you, you are depriving God of an angel, a servant, a king and a prince in his kingdom; a savior and comforter of men in matters that pertain to body and soul, property and honor; a captain and knight to fight against the devil." Luther, 229.

¹⁶ Luther, 229.

¹⁷ "Debt Follows Seminarians into Congregations," *Concordia Seminary*, Winter 2013, 5.

¹⁸ Luther, 228.

¹⁹ Luther, 228.

²⁰ Luther, 258.