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Dean J. H. C. Fritz and the (Lifelong) Formation of Pastors

Bruce M. Hartung

The citation in the *Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church* is clear, precise, and relatively short:

John Henry Charles (J. H. C.) Fritz (July 30, 1874–April 12, 1953)
American Lutheran professor, editor, author. Born at Martin Ferry,
Ohio. Graduated from Concordia College, Ft. Wayne, Indiana, 1894;
from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, 1897. Served as pastor in
Missouri and New York (1897–1920). Vice-president, Western District,
Missouri Synod, 1915–1919; president, 1919–1920. Professor of church
history and pastoral theology, Concordia Seminary, 1920–53; dean of
Concordia Seminary, 1920–40. Initiated noonday Lenten services in St.
Louis. Co-founder of Missouri Synod’s radio and television mission.
Frequent contributor to religious periodicals. Editor of *Der Lutheraner*,
1949–53. Author of *The Practical Missionary*, *Pastoral Theology*, and other
books. A staunch advocate of the inspired, infallible Word.¹

Fritz’s biographer Ruth Fritz Meyer, on the other hand, titles her 155 single-spaced typewritten pages *Big John*.² Meyer’s work provides personal and professional details of the man who was the dean at Concordia Seminary for twenty years (1920–1940). Fritz’s influence on thousands of Concordia Seminary students and on the church at large likely more approximated “Big John” than a small notation; however, his influence seems to have survived more in the lives of the people he touched, rather than in the use of his writings (apart from his *Pastoral Theology*).

The focus of this article is on three areas concerning pastoral formation gleaned from Fritz’s extensive writings: 1) practice and experience are key in pastoral formation, not just add-ons to intellectual and academic learning; 2) knowledge about scripture, people, and oneself is central to the life and work of a pastor; 3) the pastor’s personal characteristics and ways-of-being are crucial because the work of the Holy Spirit can be hindered. In developing these foci, only Fritz’s actual writings and Meyer’s biography were used.

Through Fritz’s often-prescient thinking, we are able to see the challenges in the twenty-first century to the formation of pastors and in their ongoing vocational formation through continual learning.

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Becoming the First Dean

Fritz summarized his duties as dean for the special voter's meeting at Bethlehem Lutheran Church where he was the pastor and from which he sought a peaceful dismissal, given not without controversy, in September of 1920:

1. Supervision of the spiritual interest of the individual student.
2. Giving a number of lectures weekly, especially along practical lines: mission work, parochial school, Sunday school, establishing congregations, etc.
3. Supervision of student activities: boarding club, students' chorus, etc.
4. Routine work: records of attendance, supply work, correspondence with secretarial assistance.³

The position of "dean" came about from the recommendation of the Educational Survey Committee (established in 1917 by resolution of the synodical convention). Besides recommendations "that practical matters be given more attention in the 'Pastorale' and in a special lecture course,"⁴ "that the students be given practical manuals to avoid time-wasting dictation,"⁵ "that the students be led to do independent work,"⁶ there was a specific recommendation that a dean be added to the faculty.⁷

On December 2, 1920, J. H. C. Fritz, Martin Summer, and John T. Mueller were installed as members of the Concordia Seminary faculty. The twenty years of Fritz's deanship began. He soon initiated and led "Lectures on Practical Problems," held on the first and third Mondays of the month. "Chapel talks," held every Monday evening and led by a member of the faculty, followed. Dean Fritz also interviewed all incoming students at the beginning of their matriculation and all concluding students prior to their graduation.

Following his deanship, which ended in 1940, Fritz continued as a member of the faculty until his death in 1953, the last years on modified service.

Learning to Put Into Practice by Doing

The challenge of pastors and pastors-to-be gaining practical experience was evident to Fritz even before he became a faculty member at Concordia. Striking and direct is his apologia for *The Practical Missionary: A Handbook of Practical Hints for the Lutheran Home Missionary, Containing Thirty-eight Talks on Related Missionary Subjects*.

The average seminary graduate has had no practical missionary experience, and he often fails to see and to use the very opportunities which present themselves unto him to learn by practical experience what he later so much needs.

The graduate from the high school and from the commercial college may be brimful of theories, but, in spite of it, he may not make good in the business world; most young men, in fact, never get beyond the common routine of business life. Even so, the graduate from the theological seminary may have ranked high in Exegesis, Isagogics and Hermeneutics; and may be able to recite all the rules of Homiletics and of Pastoral Theology;

but in spite of it all, he may be a miserably poor missionary. The reason is not that all the knowledge which he has acquired makes him such and that he would be better off without it, but the reason is that he *has not learned to put into practice what he knows*. Only the practical man is the successful man in life, in the church as well as in the business world. The mere theorist does not get very far; he is a failure.⁸

This is not written by a man who discounts academic learning nor, obviously, the foundation of Lutheran confessional theology. Rather, it is characteristic of a man who desires a bringing together of theoretical learning and practical application. The book also seems to arise from a certain amount of frustration:

Mission Boards, which must supervise and direct mission work and to this end must keep in close touch with the missionaries through personal interviews, by means of quarterly reports, and through correspondence, bitterly complain, as was done at a representative gathering of many Mission Boards of our Synod, of the *practical inefficiency of the missionary*. As a result, the work in the mission field is suffering; the missionary, who ought to lead in the work is, himself, often an obstacle in the way of its progress. Sad, but true!⁹

The Practical Missionary brings practical suggestions, assuming a biblical and theological foundation. There is an assumption that the pastor/missionary will have some kind of supervision by a mission board; it is not clear how far this extends to practices in our times, such as coaching, continuing education, and clinical reflection. Fritz speaks directly to actual pastoral practices. For instance, how is a conversation with an unchurched person to be structured?

Let the call be made along these lines: “Mr. Smith, I am pleased to make your acquaintance. I am Pastor Jones of the Lutheran Church. May I step in? I understand that you are not church member; is my information correct? I have come to extend unto you a hearty invitation to attend our Lutheran services. Here is our church card, giving you all the necessary information as to the location of our church, time of services, etc. The Lord has given us the Gospel because we are all sinners who need the Savior. Have you ever been a church member, Mr. Smith? Have you any children? Do they attend Sunday school? Is your wife a church member?” When making a missionary call, the missionary should at once state why he has come. He should not speak about the weather or about some matter which has been filling the columns of the newspapers, much less engage in any neighborhood gossip, nor talk about one hundred and one other things, and then, finally, when he has his hat in hand, “tack on” an invitation, very timidly given to the stranger, to come to church. The first missionary call should, as a rule be made in five to ten minutes.¹⁰

Further research might reveal if these suggestions for practice made it into teaching opportunities, through role-playing in the classroom, or actual calls in their practical experience, and then, in true clinical pedagogy, discussed through verbatims or direct supervision. But already in 1919, the pedagogical sense was present: learning includes doing in addition to thinking about doing. The imperative for all learning was also present: that all people come to know of Christ.

There is some evidence, though, that Fritz taught homiletics using this kind of pedagogical insight. After recognizing his debt to his homiletical instructors in his own seminary experience, after twenty years of being on the Concordia faculty, and after twenty years of preaching, Fritz writes:

My method of teaching homiletics to beginners is the inductive method. I use no textbook. My students in the beginners' class are given a text which in the classroom is developed into a sermon through the various stages of sermonizing, the final writing of the sermon being done by the student in his study. Thus the student learns the homiletical rules by actually doing what he is to learn. In other words, the writing of the rules, principles, and definitions is not the first step but the last step in the process. This makes for a much better understanding of the rules and for their reader application in the preparation of sermons. Later in the course—at times but not always—I place a book on homiletics into the hands of a student.¹¹

In discussing sermon preparation, Fritz expands his argument and the rationale for his method:

“First think yourself empty, then read yourself full.” We can learn to do only by doing. A person will never learn to make a suit of clothes if he lets someone else take the measurements, cut the cloth, and sew the parts together, while he only makes the buttonholes and sews on the buttons. Likewise, the preacher who always at once resorts to helps and uses the sermon outlines of others and their ideas will never become a really good preacher. Using ready-made material, he also will likely not give due attention to applying that text to the particular needs of his hearers.¹²

Time and prayer are needed in this inductive method. In the big picture of pastoral formation and the ongoing formation of pastors in their congregations, learning is done by doing and, at least in seminary and missionary settings, by consultation and feedback. If this principle were applied robustly toward pastoral formation in our time, a significant amount of time would be given to learning by doing in the context of coaching, consultation, and supervision.

Reading Holistically: Books of Scripture, Flock, and Self

A central theme that runs throughout the Fritz corpus is attention to the scriptures, the congregation and its members, and to the pastor himself.

The minister must read in order to *gain a more profound and a better working knowledge of the Scriptures*; and he must read to keep abreast of the times in which he is living, in order that he may be apt to *apply the Word of God to the needs of his people*.¹³

Attention to the scriptures is both fundamental and assumed, in some cases, as known by Lutheran pastors. In reviewing a classic book of pastoral care of the time, *The Art of Ministering to the Sick*, Fritz observes: “The book unfortunately reflects the modernistic viewpoint time and time again, which makes it necessary that the Lutheran, Scriptural, background be supplied by our readers.”¹⁴

Attention to the congregation and its members is vital, requiring an assertiveness on the part of the pastor to get to know his people.

In order to apply the Word of God to the special needs of his congregation, the preacher must know what those needs are. To know these he must know his people, their occupation, their environment, their education and culture, the particular temptations to which they are exposed; also what they talk about, what is agitating their mind, what is troubling their soul. The preacher must know the world in which he lives and in which his people live, must know the particular tendencies of his time, the happenings of his day.¹⁵

Without this intimate connection to his people; without the closeness that provides an understanding of the spiritual needs of members of his congregation, there will be “little directness in his sermons, and they will be comparatively profitless to his people.”¹⁶ For Fritz, pastoral calling is one major way to accomplish this. However, it is not the means that is most critical, but rather the product: knowledge of the congregation and its people so that pastoral care and preaching can be targeted and directed. Getting out of the office and into the lives of the congregation and the community is a basic task.

Attention to the person of the pastor, i.e., of the pastor to himself, also emerges as a crucial and important point. For instance, Fritz quotes approvingly from Earle V. Pierce concerning seminary education:

Its graduates should be qualified for spiritual ministry. They should above all things bring warmth and love to the churches. Scholarship is valuable if it has a soul, but it is an arid desert if it does not have flowing through it the river of great love for God and for the souls of men. Diamonds are sparkling to look at, but you cannot eat them. Pastors are to be spiritual and not carnal. They are to be men of God. Someone has truly said that the greatest single force for good in a community is a godly minister.¹⁷

These three areas comes into full play in a brief line near the beginning of *Pastoral Theology*: “The words of an old writer still hold true, that ‘a holy pastor has but three books to study—the Scriptures, himself, and his flock.’”¹⁸

Attention should be given to spiritual, intellectual, and physical fitness.¹⁹ Spiritual

fitness includes the development of “Christian character and the Christian virtues,”²⁰ at a higher level of development than the average follower of Christ. Intellectual fitness includes having “the necessary intellectual equipment and fitness for his work”²¹ acquired by his theological training and life-long learning (“keep abreast of the times . . . study the history of the past . . . read the works of contemporaries but also the principal works of the literature of all ages . . . take time for systematic and thorough study”²²). Physical fitness focuses on a sound mind in a sound body and is helped by giving “attention to regular habits of life, to diet, sleep, exercise, and recreation.”²³

Attention to these three books—Scripture, flock, and self—becomes the focus of the nature of life in Christ as a pastor. Theological education and pastoral formation need to take into account the development of the capacity of the seminarian to read all of the books. It does not profit the church, to borrow from Fritz’s concern about the development of missionaries, if a pastor is rightly schooled in the book of the scripture, but not schooled in the book of the flock or the book of the self. There are eternal implications for the inability or ability of a pastor to read all three books. This brings us to the third and, in some ways, most stunning development in Fritz’s thinking.

Hindering the Work of the Holy Spirit

Can a pastor hinder the work of the Holy Spirit? For Fritz, the answer was a resounding yes. Mostly, he references this in relationship to preaching, but it does surface in other ways as well.

The question to be discussed is not, “Is the Word of God effective?” The Word of God has divine power in itself, which we can neither take away nor to which we can add. However, the sorry thing that we can do is to hinder the Holy Spirit from exerting His divine power through the Word.²⁴

There is confidence in the power of the word of God as well as concern about the responsibility of the pastor for doing his part, which is to remove the barriers or hindrances to the Holy Spirit over which he has some control.

The sorry thing which the preacher can do—which preacher is not at times guilty of doing it?—is to *hinder the work of the Holy Spirit*. By anything the preacher does or fails to do whereby he prevents the Word of God from striking the inner ear of the hearer, he is hindering the work of the Spirit.²⁵

These include: “not studying and not supplying the spiritual needs of his people,” “not giving due time and attention to the preparation,” “failing clearly to present the subject-matter of his text,” “a poor delivery,” and “not practicing what he preaches.”²⁶

We are called upon to pray and labor with the confident expectation of its (i.e., the saving of souls) being realized, and where it is not, to examine ourselves with all diligence lest the cause of the failure be found in ourselves: in our want of faith, our want of love, our want of prayer, our want of zeal and warmth, our want of spirituality and holiness of life; for it is by these things that the Holy Spirit is grieved away.²⁷

Fritz approvingly quotes Oecolampadius: “How much more would a few good and fervent men effect in the ministry than a multitude of lukewarm ones?”²⁸ This quotation also appears in *Pastoral Theology*:

The greatest problem in the Church is the pastor. People are no better than their leaders . . . Much depends on the pastor’s spiritual leadership . . . Said Oecolampadius: “How much more would a few good and fervent men effect in the ministry than a multitude of lukewarm ones?” Said William Reid: “The mere multiplying of men calling themselves ministers of Christ will avail little. They may be ‘cumberers of the ground’ . . . Even when sound in faith, yet through unbelief, lukewarmness and slothful formality they may do irreparable injury to the cause of Christ, freezing and withering up all spiritual life around them. The lukewarm ministry of one who is theoretically orthodox is often more extensively and fatally ruinous to souls than that of one grossly inconsistent or flagrantly heretical.” . . . All detailed instruction and good advice given to a pastor will avail little or nothing if the pastor himself is not the right kind of man—a *sincere Christian* and a *faithful* and an *able* worker . . . A minister of Jesus Christ should seek to become great by way of service.²⁹

So the task of the faithful pastor is to be the kind of person who does not, in word or deed, hinder the Spirit of God. Speaking in this way, he moves the formation of the pastor from simple horizontal implications to more significant spiritual ones. It is not just that seminaries are to form trustworthy and faithful men for ministry because these are good qualities, even though they be so; the seminaries are to help form pastors who can clear away hindrances, in themselves and perhaps in others, of the free working of the Holy Spirit.

It is in the person of the pastor and his pastoral tasks, especially preaching and living consistently with that preaching, that Fritz concentrates his discussions concerning hindrances to the working of the Holy Spirit.

Some Pastoral Formation Implications for the Twenty-first Century

While it is possible to draw many more implications about pastoral formation from the corpus of J. H. C. Fritz’s work, this research concerns three areas: 1) learning by doing still is a primary way to learn, despite the reality that academic work is at least partially learning by thinking/reading/conversation; 2) holistic thinking and being requires that a pastor is conversant in at least the three books of Scripture, flock and self, or, in a broader sense, the three books of academic theology, congregational life and the lives of individual people, relationships and families, and the inner life of the seminarian/pastor; 3) personal pastoral formation demands attention to all facets of the self including intellectual, spiritual, physical, interpersonal, vocational, and personality.

Were Fritz’s emphases followed in the twenty-first century, seminaries could:

1. Place holistic growth at the forefront of all activities, using the question of that growth to assist in what should actually happen in the experience of a

seminarian. For instance, what are we proactively doing that attends to the spiritual growth of the student (as well as spouse and family)? Every student should have a spiritual advisor (or even a regular spiritual director) as well as an academic one. More mutual support and accountability groups gathered around the word and community should be available or even mandated. Private confession could be offered as part of spiritual direction or in a separate pastoral relationship.

2. Growth in intellectual, spiritual, and physical well-being is embraced within the community and becomes one of the touch-points for certification for call. Thus, the question of whether certification should remain a seminary activity is not confined to doctrinal assessment but includes all aspects of this more holistic approach.
3. Increase “learning by doing” activities as a viable and connected-to-the-classroom experience. This could involve credentialing learning communities as well as specific field experiences that would offer opportunities beyond the occasional preaching, teaching, and leading liturgy available in our current resident field education (RFE). Learning by doing activities require doing and not just observing. So student exposure to various forms of ministry would be used to help the student actually do ministry in that setting. RFE experiences would become more robust and active congregational work. Evangelism education would offer, for instance, going to various coffee houses, bars, rock concerts, and the like in order to strike up witnessing conversations. Modules to do ministry would increase, building on existing hospital, prison, and assisted living center modules. In all these cases, debriefing experiences would be held to analyze and develop skills, and reflect on “gospel-in-life” matters through conversation and prayer.
4. Classroom work could center somewhat less on lecture pedagogy and more on experiential pedagogy. Role-playing, simulation, field trips, and personal challenges plus a host of other pedagogies would become more of a classroom staple. The class itself, then, takes on the flavor of a learning and prayerful group where personal reflection on the meaning of what is being studied becomes a natural part of the class conversation.

Additionally, active pastors, providers of continuing education, and circuit and pastoral conferences could take note:

1. Ongoing attention to the “book of the self” is very important. Every pastor could (or should) have a spiritual director or spiritual counselor as well as a confessor. The pastoral self, professionalized, will likely lack vibrancy and perhaps even authenticity.
2. Learning comes by doing not just by talking about doing. Active experiences that push the comfort zone are not only important but necessary. But it is not just having the experience that is necessary; it is also reflection on that experience, most effectively within a community or peer context. This debriefing or reflective process, bathed in prayer and transparency, is the central pedagogical core of active learning.

3. Mandated pastoral conferences need time for reflection, engagement, and conversation.
4. Circuits work toward a spirit of safety and openness so that pastors can risk their work and be supported in a context of care and, dare the word be used, love.
5. Use of the behavior sciences—at the foot of the cross and with the power of Christ’s empty tomb and Spirit—is a legitimate activity of learning about the “book of the flock.” Pastors need to be able to target the gospel to human need.

We owe J. H. C. Fritz a great debt, not only for his influence on pastors in the LCMS and elsewhere, but also for his courage to write about his work and share his vision of ministry, preaching, and pastoral theology. We would do well to study him more. Those who do will receive wonderful gifts of mind and spirit, and may very well extend and deepen the implications of his vital work. I suspect that he would very much enjoy this kind of a conversation.

Endnotes

- ¹ Gerhard E. Lenski, “Fritz, John Henry Charles,” *The Lutheran Cyclopedia*, 891.
- ² Ruth Fritz Meyer, *Big John* (self-published manuscript, 1991).
- ³ *Ibid.*, 39.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ John H. C. Fritz, *The Practical Missionary* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1919), 1.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 39–40.
- ¹¹ John H. C. Fritz, *The Preacher’s Manual* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), viii.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 22.
- ¹³ *The Practical Missionary*, 19.
- ¹⁴ John H. C. Fritz, “Review of the ‘The Art of Ministering to the Sick’ by Richard C. Cabot and Russell L. Dicks,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* VII, no. 12 (December 1936): 957.
- ¹⁵ John H. C. Fritz, *The Essentials of Preaching* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1948), 56.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58
- ¹⁷ John H. C. Fritz, “The Theological Seminary,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* X, no. 2 (February 1939): 133.
- ¹⁸ John H. C. Fritz, *Pastoral Theology* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1932), 8.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 18
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 20
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 21
- ²⁴ John H. C. Fritz, “What Makes for Effective Preaching,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* XIII, no. 9 (September 1942): 684.
- ²⁵ *The Preacher’s Manual*, 82.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 82–84.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ *Pastoral Theology*, 14–15.