

Post-Convention SMP: Quo Vadis?

Before beginning to speak to you today, I want to engage in a little self-disclosure. It is only fair that you know my involvement with the Specific Ministry Pastor Program (SMP). First, I was a member of the old, permanent “Commission on Structure” in 2007 when SMP came before our commission. Proponents of the program were trying to figure out where SMP might fit into the Handbook of the Synod and wanted the Commission’s opinion on that matter. Second, I am currently a member of the Synod’s Commission on Handbook. As such I was assigned the task of attending the meetings of Floor Committee 5 of the 2013 convention, the floor committee to which the SMP matter was assigned. (I had a voice but no vote, and was there only to advise on Handbook matters that came up within the committee, including SMP.) Third, President Harrison has appointed me to the 2013 Convention Resolution 5-14A Task Force that will study all “alternative routes” to ordination. Fourth, for the last four years I have taught the first SMP class in Concordia Theological Seminary’s SMP curriculum. It is called Confessing Christ in Today’s World and involves a week-long introduction on campus and then an additional nine weeks of distance education classes. Fifth, I taught in the Distance Education Leading to Ordination Program (DELTO), predecessor to SMP. Finally, I served as the Director of Vicarage for fourteen years at CTS, ending in 2011. Each SMP student is a vicar until ordination, so I got to interact with many SMP students while in that position.

2013 Convention Action

At the 65th Regular Convention of the LCMS, held July 20-25, 2013 in St. Louis, Missouri, three resolutions were adopted concerning the SMP Program. The first two of these are rather brief and straightforward: Resolution 5-03E¹ established an SMP Oversight Committee comprised of the Chief Mission Officer (representing the President of the Synod) and one representative from each seminary. This resolution makes it clear that the Chief Mission Officer has the responsibility, on behalf of the President of the Synod, for leadership, coordination, and oversight of all of the Synod’s pre-seminary, seminary, and post-seminary continuing education. This includes SMP. The President of the Synod will have a strong hand in SMP matters because the Chief Mission Officer reports directly to him. The President’s great interest in SMP is also indicated by his appointment of an SMP Task Force that produced a 49 page report, found in the *2013 Convention Workbook*.² The Executive Director for Pastoral Education of the Synod, who reports to the Chief Mission Officer, is not a member of this committee, although he will certainly be involved as the staff person serving the needs of the committee. As of January 1, 2014, this committee had not yet met. My understanding is that President Larry Rast of CTS and Dr. Andrew Bartelt of Concordia Seminary St. Louis will represent their institutions on this committee. There is no termination date for this committee. It appears that it will be in existence as long as SMP is in existence.

The second short resolution adopted this summer concerning SMP, Resolution 5-14A³, mentioned above, is entitled “To Conduct a Study of Alternate Routes to Pastoral Ministry”. It creates a new task force to conduct a study of all non-Master of Divinity routes to ordination and then report back to the President of the Synod by the end of 2015. Its task is to determine the “appropriateness” and optimal number of such routes. At present there are seven non-M.Div. alternate routes. There is also the historic, residential M.Div. route, making a total of eight routes to ordination in The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. The non-residential alternate routes are as follows:

- 1) Residential Alternate Route
- 2) SMP

¹ *2013 Convention Proceedings, 138-139*

² 403-452

³ *2013 Convention Proceedings, 155*

- 3) EIIT (Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology)
- 4) Center for Hispanic Studies
- 5) DIT (Deaf Institute of Theology)
- 6) EPCP/MPCP (Ethnic/Multi-Cultural Pastor Certification Program)
- 7) Licensed lay ministers who have ten or more years of experience and are approved by the Synod's Colloquy Committee.

Three of these routes (#'s 1, 2, and 7) are expressly authorized by the Synod in Convention. It will be interesting to learn through the work of the 5-14A Task Force how and when the Synod has authorized the other four (#'s 3, 4, 5, and 6), all of which are programs of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. What these programs all have in common is that they provide non-residential pastoral and theological education that is much shorter than the MDiv residential programs of the seminaries. They are all "certificate programs", in which a certificate of completion is given rather than a degree. The Executive Director for Pastoral Education will chair this 5.14A Committee.

The third and most important SMP resolution passed at this past summer's convention is Resolution 5-04B⁴, "To Continue and Strengthen Specific Ministry Pastor Program". The *Resolves* of this resolution may be summarized as follows:

1. The SMP Program is retained.
2. The Synod affirms that SMP Pastors are properly called under Augsburg Confession XIV.
3. The new 5-03E SMP Oversight Committee should consider all concerns about the SMP Program, including those set forth in the 2013 Task Force Report and in the overtures set forth in the 2013 Convention Workbook.
4. Admission to and the administration of the SMP program is assigned to the seminaries, while district presidents remain responsible for the appropriateness of the specific ministries involved.
5. District Presidents should not approve a man for a specific ministry that could be provided by a minister of religion-commissioned, or approve an SMP man for a congregation that could afford its own general ministry pastor.
6. Congregations, districts, and seminaries should encourage the SMP pastors to study beyond completion of the SMP program to attain general ministry pastor status.
7. Residential theological education shall remain the primary means for training pastors.
8. Christ is given thanks for the men who have completed the SMP program and for the two seminaries that have developed the curriculum for it.

This resolution passed by a vote of 803 yes (84%) and 151 no . By way of comparison, Resolution 5-01B⁵ adopted by the 2007 convention to establish SMP, passed by 76% in favor. This represents only a small increase, but the obvious conclusion is that the members of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (individual and congregational) overwhelmingly favor SMP.

Resolution 5-04B was a compromise resolution from Floor Committee 5. Fifteen overtures on SMP were submitted to the 2013 convention by congregations or other entities. These ranged in scope from commending and seeking continuance of the SMP Program to discontinuing SMP and repealing the 1989 Wichita Convention resolution that authorized laymen to undertake pastoral acts under certain circumstances.

The Shape of SMP in 2014

⁴ Ibid., 139-140

⁵ Appendix IV, *Report of The SMP Task Force (2013)*, 418-422

The Bylaw governing SMP, 2.13.1⁶ has changed somewhat over its brief life. No longer is an SMP pastor prohibited from taking a call to a different location. As long as the context and type of service is the same, a district president may approve such a move. Likewise, an SMP vicar (first two, pre-ordination years of the program) can be given a new supervisor at his existing site, or can be moved to a new site with the permission of the district president.

The seminaries now have much more similar curricula, class schedules, and administrative procedures than when the SMP program began. The district presidents and seminaries are now much more unified in terms of appropriate SMP sites and standards for the admission of SMP applicants to the seminaries.

The basic outline of the SMP program in 2014 is this:

- A) Two years of education (eight courses) before ordination; eight courses after. Program four years in all (a little less than half that required for residential M.Div. students); students take one course at a time, ten weeks in length; total required courses are 16 in number, as opposed to almost forty in the residential program.
- B) Called vicars before ordination and pastors after, and must have a supervising pastor who is a general ministry pastor.
- C) Can't serve as a pastoral delegate to national conventions.
- D) Not permitted to supervise vicars.
- E) Not permitted to serve as a circuit visitor, but can serve as a pastoral delegate to a district convention.
- F) Are rostered as Specific Ministry Pastors. All other pastors are "General Ministry Pastors."
- G) Must serve in a specific ministry only. No ability to accept a new call out of that context.
- H) No Greek or Hebrew courses required.

There are many issues that must be examined that arise out of this program structure. These pertain mainly to the fitness of a man for the pastoral ministry. The SMP Oversight Committee will hopefully address these:

Admission. Should an SMP applicant be no younger than a given age, so that younger men are expected to enter residential programs? Is there an age beyond which a man should not enter the SMP program? Should there be an educational requirement, such as a high school diploma or college degree? Should a Graduate Record Exam or some other examination of basic aptitude be administered, as in the case of residential students?

Specific Ministry. What qualifies as a specific ministry? Should a man be allowed to enter the program if his specific ministry is his work on a multi staff pastoral team?

Quality Mentors/Supervisors. What can be done to assure that there is consistent, competent, confessional supervision measuring up to acknowledged standards?

Administration of the Lord's Supper. How can it be arranged that SMP vicars not serve as celebrants until after ordination?

Removal after ordination. If the SMP pastor does not complete the two years of study required after ordination, what happens? Can the district president remove him from his congregation and the Synod?

⁶ 2013 Handbook of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, 65

SMP Interface with District Licensed Deacons/Lay Ministers. SMP has replaced DELTO (Distance Education Leading to Ordination), but the number of licensed deacons/lay ministers has increased from 540 in 2009 to 602 in 2012.⁷ Clearly, SMP did not replace the district lay ministry programs. SMP and the district lay ministry programs might be duplicating each other to some degree.

Formation Issues. How can SMP students regularly come together for worship, for theological discussion, and for building friendships in the ministry? Many subjects can be taught via the internet, but it is difficult to see how pastors can be formed in Christ that way. There are no purely internet congregations in the LCMS. Congregations involve people meeting face to face. Pastors need to be trained for that reality.

Precedent for SMP

It is often said that the existence of *Nothilfern* (emergency helpers) in the Loehe areas of the early Synod somehow justifies the SMP Program now. The rationale section of the 2013 Convention 5-04 B includes these words: “However, the practice is not without precedent in the LCMS, since *nothilfern* (“emergency helpers”) were utilized in the early years of the Synod.”⁸ Yet, the President’s SMP task force also cites C.F.W. Walther in distinguishing between what are truly emergencies, and an ongoing need for regular preaching, teaching, and prayer in a vacant congregation. Walther writes these words in a letter to Jacob Aall Ottesen concerning the use of laity as emergency helpers in carrying out pastoral work:

This is so diametrically opposed to the doctrine of the Office in Scripture (I Cor. 12:28; Acts 6:4; Titus 1:5), to article – of the Augsburg Confession, to all witnesses of pure doctrine, and to the constant practice in our church, that one cannot fathom how one who is otherwise fairly conversant with God’s Word and the orthodox church can be in uncertainty for a moment. To base such a matter on the spiritual priesthood of Christians is nonsense, for it that were the case, no one has reason to wait for the calling of a pastor. Even less can the matter depend on a special call, for the church cannot make a call according to its whim, but can give only that which God has established and which He alone recognizes (by this alone is a servant of God made, not through a human contract for a few hours or days). That the matter also cannot be based upon the emergency situation is quite clear.⁹

The call of the SMP pastor today is not an emergency call. It is of unlimited duration and involves doing pastoral work on a long term basis. “Emergency” has not factored into convention discussion and action of the SMP Program.

Things began to radically change with the Synod’s adoption at the 1989 Wichita Convention of Res. 3-05B, “To Adopt Recommendations of Lay Worker Study Report as Amended.”¹⁰ This resolution “regularized” the work of about 135 lay ministers already serving in Word and Sacrament ministry. It also allowed other laymen to serve in Word and Sacrament ministry when a pastor was not available. Wichita opened the door to laymen serving in ways only open to pastors in the past. The sainted Rev. Kurt Marquart called Res. 3-05B the “Wichita Amendment to Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession.”

In the ensuing years the DELTO program began and provided theological education to lay ministers whose congregation/mission would fail if they had to leave to go to the seminary. District lay ministry training programs also grew in number and were affirmed by Res. 5-09B of the 2004 Convention, “To

⁷ Appendix IV, *Report of The Specific Ministry Task Force* (2013), 409

⁸ Resolution 4-04B, *2013 Convention Proceedings*, 139

⁹ *Concordia Journal* 18, 167 in 2013 SMP Task Force Report, page 412-413, *2013 Convention Workbook*

¹⁰ *1989 Convention Proceedings*, 86

Affirm District Programs that Equip Laity for Ministry”¹¹ As many as nineteen of the LCM’s districts had licensed lay minister/deacon training in the period leading up to the establishment of SMP.

All of this history paved the way for the 2007 Convention Res. 5-01B, which established the SMP Program. It is interesting to note that this resolution made SMP a Synod bylaw matter (Bylaw 2.13), requiring a majority vote for passage, rather than a constitutional matter (Article V), which requires a two-thirds majority plus congregational ratification. It more logically was a constitutional matter, because Article V identifies the individual and congregational members of the Synod and describes the conditions for their membership, whereas Bylaw 2.13 dealt only with the discipline of existing members through imposition of restricted or suspended status.

SMP’s Unaddressed Theological Issue – Aptness to Teach

The 2013 Convention Res. 5-04B has eight “*Resolved*” paragraphs after a lengthy “*Rationale*” section. Seven of these address SMP’s future. One addresses its past: “*Resolved*, That the Synod affirm that SMP pastors are properly called in accord with Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession.” At first glance this appears to present no problem. The congregations issued calls for the particular SMP men serving them, who had been trained through seminary instruction, examined by seminary faculty, and who had been placed in their SMP calls through the LCMS Council of Presidents. When the SMP students accepted their placement calls, it is assumed that the *rite vocatus* requirement of Augsburg XIV was met.

However the entire matter of the validity of SMP calls is not just a matter of jumping through the right hoops. No, Scripture is much more particular and definite than that. The Pastoral Epistles, especially 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1, set forth a list of qualifications for the pastoral office. “Husband of one wife”, “above reproach”, etc. are examples. But the one qualification in the list perhaps most important to is “apt to teach”, when considering SMP. (The Greek *didaktikos* is translated “able to teach” in some English translations, “apt to teach” in others. It only occurs in 1 Tim 3:2 and 2 Tim 2:24, and in each instance requires that a pastor have the ability to teach the faith.)

One might ask, “Teach what?” Certainly, this is referring to the Scriptures and the Confessions, Christ crucified for the world, and the whole counsel of God. In other words, teaching the faith is the meaning of “apt to teach”. It cannot refer to the latest learning theory or pedagogical methods, or educational psychology. It cannot refer to simply the “basics” of the faith, for many children can tell of Jesus’ love for them and they could not serve as pastors. Pastors are called to a Word and Sacrament ministry centered around justification by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, not to an excellence in subjects outside Scripture. A man desiring to be a pastor must know Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions and be able to teach them to others.

The Confessions are filled with language regarding teaching the pure doctrine: Augsburg V Introduction – “Our churches teach. . .”; Augsburg V – “the ministry of teaching the Gospel. . .”; Formula of Concord – “We believe, teach, and confess.” Throughout the Book of Concord the substance of teaching and preaching are identical: pure doctrine, for the sake of the gospel. In addition, the Scriptures themselves also show the importance of aptness to teach. II Timothy 2:15 requires that a pastor be an “approved workman”, who can “rightly handle the Word of Truth”. II Timothy 2:2 speaks of the importance of entrusting the Gospel to “faithful men who will be able to teach others also”. Most importantly, Matthew 28:18-20 requires not only that the apostles make disciples through baptism, but Jesus commands that they must include in their work “*teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you*”. “All” does

¹¹ 2004 Convention Proceedings, 143

not mean the basics of the faith, certain key doctrines, or any other sort of boiled down Law and Gospel. “All” means all and nothing else. Every doctrine has its life in the chief doctrine of justification.

by grace through faith in Christ. Men who are about to be ordained who cannot teach the whole faith, especially the doctrine of justification, are not ready for ordination.

This ability to teach is not just a legalistic requirement for pastors and the church. No, it is the heartbeat of salvation itself. Teaching proclaims the gospel, which the Holy Spirit uses to create faith. And without faith in Jesus Christ, mankind is doomed. So, people’s souls are at stake in the matter of the pastor’s ability to teach. A lot is at stake with regard to aptness to teach.

The Scriptures and the Confessions are clear that there is one Office of the Holy Ministry. There is no discussion of SMP Pastors, Pastoral Assistants, Assistant Pastors, Senior Pastors, Associate Pastors, Administrative Pastors, Youth Pastors, Family Ministry Pastors, Seasonal Ministry Pastors, Visitation Pastors, etc. There is one divine office that requires one set of qualifications. There is no such thing as a “half-pastor”, “pastor-practitioner” (cf. nurse practitioner), or a “para-pastor” (cf. para-legal).

All pastors require the same amount of instruction in the faith, because all people are equally sinners and equally redeemed in Christ. It is wrong to send a less well trained pastor (less apt to teach) to a congregation just because that congregation is deemed less well educated or catechized. In fact, an argument can be made that is sinful discrimination.

SMP men who have taken fewer than half the courses residential men take simply are not as apt to teach the faith as those who have had more theological education. If two years of theological education were sufficient for aptitude to teach, why shouldn’t the residential program be changed to two years of study followed by ordination? Or why shouldn’t men in a four year residential program be ordained at the end of the second year. Ordination after two years, and ordination after four years prevent an inherent contradiction

Each seminary requires that a man pass a theological interview before its faculty certifies him for placement in a congregation. (Placement involves a call by a congregation for a seminary graduate.) At CTS, these interviews involve the student and two professors. They usually last about one hour. The subject is the Christian faith as the men have learned it in the seminary. All aspects of the faith are fair game for questions. SMP men must pass such theological interviews. The interviews of men in the SMP Program occur in the second half of their second year – not long before ordination.

After the interviews of the first class of SMP students, the questions had to be revised and simplified, “dumbed down” if you will. This was because SMP students did not know the answers to the more difficult questions, and on average did not do as well in their Theological Interviews as the residential students. This was really not the fault of the SMP men or the seminary, but was the fault of the SMP Program. The SMP men simply were not “apt to teach” at that point before ordination, given their two years of education as opposed to the four years of the residential men prior to ordination. There of course have been exceptions – SMP men who did exceptionally well in their theological interview, but on average their performance was below the average performance of the residential men, who do their theological interview during the second half of their fourth year.

It is true that after ordination and upon completion of their whole SMP program, the SMP are given a second, full theological interview. They do better in that interview. However, there appear to be large gaps in their knowledge, especially in the areas of Bible knowledge and hermeneutics, church history, church polity, and the Lutheran Confessions. They just do not have the full complement of courses taken by a residential student before his theological interview.

Perhaps SMP just has things out of order. 1 Timothy 5:22 warns against being hasty in the laying on of hands: “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor participate in another man’s sins; keep yourself pure.” This assumes that a man desiring to be a pastor will be educated first, found apt to teach through examination, receive a call, and only then be ordained. SMP, however, creates a new order: educate a man so he is somewhat apt to teach, ordain him, and then give him some additional teaching, hoping that he will become fully apt to teach. This is not good for the man, his flock, the pastoral office, or the church at large. Plus, why should any congregation or calling entity be given anything less than a fully prepared man who is apt to teach?

There are those who would say that we should not look behind call and ordination to examine whether a man is apt to teach. Their argument is that the congregation knows that their SMP man has a limited education, but wants him anyway and therefore is going to call him. The difficulty here is this: should a congregation have the right to call a man who has minimal aptness for teaching – who doesn’t himself understand the faith and therefore cannot teach it? Certainly not, but that could happen. The church must have the ability to set the standard for aptness to teach, and to exclude congregations who want an untrained pastor from membership in The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. Never should the Constitution and Bylaws trump the Scriptures on the subject of aptitude to teach.

What degree of aptness to teach, then, is required of a pastor? Historically, the standard has been very high and included the Biblical languages and all the subjects included in a seminary’s academic catalog: exegesis of the Biblical text; doctrinal and systematic statement of the faith; historical examination of the church as it confessed the faith throughout history; and pastoral theology – the way in which the Scriptures and Confessions impact the lives of Christians.

During the Reformation the standard regarding aptness to teach was particularly high:

“With the coming of Luther’s reforms, new attention was paid to the teaching of the candidate, with the result that some ecclesiastical constitutions prescribed lengthy examinations for those who were about to be called to the pastoral office. The examination certified the competence of candidates according to the apostolic admonitions. Together with a trial sermon the examination stressed the importance of the proclamation of the Gospel that stood at the heart of the pastoral ministry. . . Generally the theological faculty carried it out. At other times the superintendent had the responsibility for examination.¹²

In the sixteenth century in the heartland of Luther, examination to determine aptness to teach involved the congregation at an early point. A candidate preached in a congregation two or three times in a congregation and a written report was made by the parishioners. This report had to include an evaluation of the candidate’s teaching. The candidate then submitted to a theological examination before the court preachers of the dukes and his chaplains, which included a trial sermon. This whole process indicated that aptness to teach was a primary concern.¹³

There is little exegesis of passages in the Pastoral Epistles concerning “apt to teach”, including 1 Timothy 3:2. This is most likely because it has been assumed that this phrase comprehended teaching the whole counsel of God, to-wit, the Christian faith, and there never was any contention that it meant otherwise. However, Franz Pieper does offer these comments about aptness to teach in his *Christian Dogmatics*:

¹² Commission on Theology and Church Relations, “Theology and Practice of the ‘Divine Call’ (2003)”, –

¹³ Ibid.,

“As far as knowledge of the Christian doctrine and aptitude to teach are concerned, they (pastors) must be thoroughly familiar with the ‘sound’, that is pure doctrine and be able to handle both thesis and antithesis, that is be able to teach the congregation the truth and to refute heretics.”¹⁴

In conclusion of this discussion of “apt to teach”, we can say that *rite vocatus* must include aptitude to teach – in fact that it must include all the qualifications for the pastoral office set forth in the pastoral epistles. The 2013 convention erred when it declared in Resolution 5-03A that all SMP pastors were rightly called without reference to the pastoral qualifications of 1 Timothy, especially “apt to teach”.

Where Do We Go from Here?

It will be difficult, if not impossible to repeal SMP and all the 2007 through 2013 convention resolutions affecting it. The margins by which the resolutions passed are simply too great. However, the pastors, laity, and congregations of the ACELC and other confessional bodies, should memorialize the Synod to do exactly that. Those memorials will most likely never succeed. However, we are all called to be faithful to our Lord by standing for the truth, even if we never see success. Our brothers in the pastoral ministry and the congregations of the Synod need to see the standard to which the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions hold us. How will the people of the LCMS understand the problem and issues unless there are bold resolutions identifying them?

Beyond such efforts, I would also recommend the following action with regard to SMP:

1. Be patient. When confessional Lutherans see error, they want to correct it immediately. That’s good! However sometimes it takes time for things to change, perhaps a number of years. An example is the DELTO program, which after about ten years of existence began to run out of steam, and then after another five, just as SMP was being introduced, closed down and accepted no new students.

Also be patient in this regard: the number of students entering the SMP program is declining quite quickly. SMP matriculated its first class in 2008. The total number of students from both seminaries entering the program was 55. The entering class in 2011 was 26, less than half of the original class.¹⁵ Classes continue to be small in number. The Fort Wayne seminary’s SMP new enrollment has been only 6-9 students per year over the past four years. The St. Louis entering SMP classes are about a little more than double that. With these low enrollments the seminaries might very well find that an SMP program is not financially viable. Six to nine students is far smaller than the average on-campus class size. Six to nine students do not generate much tuition revenue. SMP courses each require a faculty instructor and count for three credits of his course load. SMP will die a natural death if the student enrollment continues to fall.

2. Write, indeed petition, the SMP Oversight Committee and the Res. 5-14A Task Force with your thoughts and suggestions. The best contact would be the President’s staff member who works with the seminaries and those two committees. Dr. Glen Thomas. He is a very gracious man who will receive your letters and petitions and make sure that they come before the committee and task force. It does no good to complain without taking some affirmative action to attempt to make things better.
3. Speak in favor of residential theological education as often as you can. If you learn of men who are interested in the SMP program, search them out and try to get them to enter residential education. If you know current SMP students, urge them to come to the seminary to finish their

¹⁴ F. Pieper *Christian Dogmatics* III, 443

¹⁵ “Specific Ministry Pastor White Paper” in 2013 *Task Force on SMP*, appendix, 429

M.Div. degree. When they are five to ten years in the parish, they will wish they had taken this route.

4. Encourage SMP students to complete the entire four-year SMP program before being ordained. Students can take all four years of SMP courses without being ordained after the second year. Encourage SMP supervisors to suggest this path to their SMP students. Two of the seven SMP students that I had in class last fall were doing exactly that. They will not end up with an M.Div. degree, but they will know a lot more when they are ordained than their classmates. This approach does not trespass on the doctrines of the Office of the Holy Ministry, call and ordination.
5. Encourage the seminaries and their professors to make the SMP curriculum more difficult and demanding than the residential curriculum. The shorter duration of SMP requires that. Especially require that theological interviews be strengthened. Perhaps PHD pastors in congregations or professors from the other LCMS seminary could participate in these interviews. Write the seminaries, Dr. Bartelt, President Rast, and Dr. Thomas about this.
6. Lobby to increase the amount of time SMP students spend on campus. Right now, it is one week per year. The students regularly comment on how wonderful that week is. Why not make it two weeks, or two separated weeks? If a program can't be residential, the next best thing is a hybrid, with a significant amount of residential time blended with distance education. Campus time tends to bind students to each other, to the instructor, and to the seminary.
7. Become an SMP mentor pastor. I know that this sounds contradictory to objecting to SMP on doctrinal grounds, but I believe that you can do both. You could provide your SMP student with Scriptural, Confessional teaching, even though the program is confessionally wrong. You would be making the best of a bad situation. Right now a number of solidly confessional pastors who object to SMP are supervising SMP vicars.

If confessional pastors don't step up to the plate on this, it will be other pastors who fill the void. It is best for the SMP students that they have truly Lutheran supervisors. You can tell an SMP student that you don't think the SMP Program is theologically justifiable. He might feel the same way. Given the constraints of the SMP Program, you can still give him solid, orthodox teaching that he will need for the pastoral office.

8. Develop scholarships for residential theological education. Make the case to your laymen of how important residential education is for the formation of pastors. When you hear of a man about to enter the SMP program, offer him a scholarship for the residential program.
9. Encourage the seminaries to include some distance education in their residential M.Div. programs. Certain courses lend themselves to this approach, such as the languages, Bible overview courses, etc. Students might be able to complete some of these courses while keeping their secular jobs and remaining in their home city. The Association for Theological Schools is allowing member schools to offer more online courses as part of the M.Div. curriculum. For example, Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN has an M.Div. degree that is mostly online.
10. Consider forming an SMP institute, run by and taught by pastors in the ACELC. Offer in such an institute courses on subjects that the SMP pastors missed due to deficiencies in their seminary SMP program. Award a certificate to those who successfully complete the courses.
11. Propose to the right parties alternate ways of addressing problems in the Synod (perceived or real) that SMP is supposed to solve. These include congregations that can't afford a pastor, ethnic and immigrant ministries in the same situation, and larger congregations needing pastors with a

specialty and expertise in certain areas. SMP cannot simply be eliminated. There must be a plan to address perceived and actual underlying problems, or at least to show that the reasons for SMP's existence no longer exist. There must also be a way for strong proponents of SMP to save face as SMP is phased out in favor of other ways of doing things.

12. Pray for our pastors, congregations, seminary students, supervising pastors and leaders in the Synod who are involved in SMP in some capacity.

Conclusion

The SMP program is inferior to the residential M.Div. program. It does not offer as many courses. It has little face-to-face interaction involving professor and students. It ordains men before they have been found to be apt to teach. In this regard it contradicts sound doctrine and practice by placing ordination before program completion, rather than after it. It will create, in the long run, two classes of pastors, "Class A", who are well-prepared, and "Class B", who are not as well prepared. There is only one Office of the Holy Ministry, but the SMP Program would have there be two.

In all of this, not only is the Office of the Holy Ministry at stake, but more importantly people's souls. God works through the Means of Grace. God's means of grace are administered by faithful pastors who are able to preach and teach God's mercy in Jesus Christ for a hurting world. Only the Lord knows whether the SMP program will ever be overturned by a convention of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. We should all faithfully make known our objections to the program, making every effort possible to end it. However, at the same time we should be willing to do what we can to make SMP stronger and more confessional in nature. Hopefully we will not see resolutions beyond SMP that would further degrade theological education and the Office of the Holy Ministry in our Synod. We continually pray that the Lord will raise up faithful men who desire to study for the pastoral ministry while residing at one of our seminaries. That way has served us well for the past 167 years. May it be so for us in the future as well.

Rev. Prof. Richard T. Nuffer

St. Matthias, Apostle, *anno domini* 2014