

From the Field: Forming Mission Leaders through Contextual Education in the Specific Ministry Pastor Program

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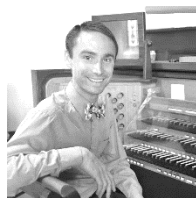
Abstract

As one well acquainted with students in the SMP program, the author provides background and verbatim interviews with four students who represent those who participate in this seminary program of pastoral formation while engaged in their local mission contexts. Their personal reflections on both their contexts and this certification program provide insight into how one way of delivering seminary formation can intersect with actual mission experience.

The Specific *Ministry Pastor* (SMP) Program of the LCMS has from its inception intersected the pursuits of *missional leadership* and ministerial formation in a variety of unique ways. In this article, you'll hear from the director of the SMP program at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, as well as from four recent participants in that program, each of whom is engaged in a unique missional context. These four represent a wider collegium of pastors formed in this program who serve in specific and unique contexts, faithfully engaging in ministry and bearing fruit in the Kingdom. They all offer personal reflections on their ministry contexts and how this pastoral formation program has supported and shaped their missional leadership.

I have had the privilege of teaching in the SMP Program for the better part of a decade and have taught the four students featured here. I have also served with SMP pastors in three of my own ministry contexts. I am proud to be able to collect

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and organize these stories for you, the reader, that you too may celebrate the work of our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, who by the Holy Spirit calls His Church to the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

The pastors featured in this article volunteered to write, responding to a general invitation sent out by the SMP Program director to students in the program. I prompted the volunteers with two simple questions, asking them to describe their ministry contexts (especially their missional scopes) and to describe how their seminary education prepared them for service in their ministry contexts. I also asked the current SMP Program director at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Rev. Dr. W. Mart Thompson, to provide a brief explanation of the program, which is offered at both LCMS Seminaries.

Mart Thompson, Director of the SMP Program, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

The Specific Ministry Pastor Program was established by the LCMS at the 2007 Synodical Convention when it created the SMP Certification and directed its seminaries to provide pastoral formation that would prepare men to serve in specific pastoral ministry contexts through a unique distance education program. Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and Concordia Theological Seminary in Ft. Wayne began offering the SMP Program in 2008 and have continued to do so since that time.

This program forms pastors for supervised service in specific ministry contexts where they live. They include revitalizing small churches (at times, on the verge of closing), part-time specialized ministries at larger churches, church planting, prison ministry, and various places for service by local men with unique gifts for pastoral ministry in specific contexts. Many SMP pastors are retired or bivocational. In some places they serve full time, but the majority serve part time. Some serve alone in small churches. Others serve on staff in larger churches. The average entrance age of students entering the SMP Program is forty-seven years. Some students complete the program in their late seventies. However, other students are younger and enter with the intention of seeking additional education after SMP to achieve a General Ministry Certification, which allows for rostering as those from traditional programs.

So, what is the SMP Program like? It consists of a four-year curriculum taught year-round at a master's degree level. (It is a certificate program; however, eligible students can earn an MA through this program.) Students receive this rigorous academic formation from full-time seminary professors and part-time guest instructors who are pastors with advanced degrees and serve full-time in the church. This gives a balance of academic excellence and skill in the practice of ministry. The curriculum is delivered through weeklong, on-campus intensive classes as well as ten-week online courses taught in a synchronous, interactive format by professors. This enables students to learn where they live and serve. While taking classes in this contextual educational curriculum, students work with local pastor-mentors who support them in the program, help them apply their new course knowledge, and offer them day-to-day guidance, encouragement, and prayer. These mentors are trained for this work and paid by the seminary. Students are also formed in a learning community, a cohort of men (capped at 12) with whom they also exchange encouragement and support for

service to the Lord’s Church. We sometimes refer to their cohorts as “bands of brothers” because of the close bonds formed through their online and on-campus connections.

For more information on the SMP Program and the unique SMP Certification go to <https://www.csl.edu/smp> and <https://www.ctsfw.edu/future-students/pastoral/smp/>. You may also visit <https://www.lcms.org/how-we-serve/education/pastoral/seminary-education> for a more comprehensive explanation of pastoral formation in the LCMS.

Chad Bresson, The Table of Los Fresnos, Los Fresnos, TX

Since the summer of 2018, I have been the (full-time and sole) lead church planter at The Table of Los Fresnos in Los Fresnos, Texas—a Word and Sacrament church plant of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Harlingen, Texas. The Table of Los Fresnos was launched in September of 2019 (we often say we launched knowing we only had six months before COVID-19 hit). The Table is approximately twenty-five minutes north of the border and twenty-five minutes to the southeast of St. Paul. Los Fresnos is the second fastest growing community in the entire Rio Grande Valley (RGV). It is 92 percent Hispanic and in one of the poorest economic regions in the entire US. The Table of Los Fresnos was chartered as a congregation of the LCMS in the Texas District in June of 2021, and I was ordained and installed as The Table's first pastor in September of 2021. The “target market” for The Table is unchurched and de-churched parents, ages thirty-five to fifty, with children in elementary and middle school. (“De-churched” refers to those who used to go to church, left the church, and were not in church until coming to The Table.) Most of those who are de-churched in the RGV come from Catholic or Pentecostal backgrounds, and more than half of those who are now at The Table are formerly de-churched. Many who are at The Table are there because of our community service projects, our sponsorship of Little League baseball teams, participation in community events such as the Los Fresnos Rodeo, and engagement in a Rotary club made up of a majority of the community leaders. We have a few “cradle-to-grave” Lutherans who came over from St. Paul, the mother church, but our focus has been on those who are not currently participating in a faith community.

I recently completed my Specific Ministry Pastor studies at Concordia, St. Louis. Prior to being the lead church planter at The Table, I spent twelve years as a pastor in non-denominational churches in Ohio and Brownsville, Texas, serving as an academic administrator and Bible exposition instructor in the Antioch School of Church Planting and Leadership Development (Ames, IA), the Center for Pioneer Church Planting (Los Fresnos, TX), and the Simeon Trust Bible Expository Workshops (Chicago, IL). Currently, I participate in an Exponential cohort of Texas District pastors and church planters. As the lead church planter, it has been my responsibility to build relationships within the community of Los Fresnos (where my family and I have resided for the past nine and a half years), form the core team for the church plant from St. Paul, lead the vision and planning for the church plant, and oversee the organization and communications of the

plant. I also implement social media, community service projects and outreach events, and facilitate anything else related to effective church planting.

The SMP program has made a significant impact on our church planting efforts at The Table in multiple ways. Because SMP is non-residential, it has allowed us to plant a church in our home city among those we are most familiar, reaching those we have come to know in the school district and business community. And, as it was for Paul and Barnabas at Antioch, the non-residential program allows the local church to be a significant contributor and incubator to pastoral formation and training. The mentoring component of SMP was critical, as it allowed me to continue being discipled and shaped by the pastor primarily responsible for bringing me into the Lutheran fold. As a “newbie” in the Lutheran tradition, the early classes in the SMP Program provided significant context to both the church plant and my call. In fact, as I look back over the four years, Introduction to Pastoral Ministry (and Walther as a primary text) and Introduction to Worship may have been the most impactful classes I had. Being immersed in the Altenburg Debate story gave me context not only for the LCMS in history, but also for the church plant in the RGV. It was here that Walther's Confessional definition of church became central to all things church plant: where the Gospel is faithfully preached and the Sacraments rightly administered. Introduction to Worship gave me a framework for worship service design. While The Table utilizes a contextualized worship approach, the movement of the service from creation to new creation and from sinner to saint through confession, forgiveness, and Word and Sacrament is still evident in the service. It was here, too, that I was introduced to Luther's seminal essay, “On the German Mass,” in which the idea of contextualized worship is broached by Luther himself. Luther's contextualized thoughts were then reinforced through study of Leopoldo Sanchez's own work on the contextualization of Word and Sacrament.

One other significant contribution of SMP was the fine-tuning of my preaching through the homiletics courses. Preaching is a learning experience over a lifetime, but taking time to specifically think and work through the entire preaching enterprise was quite helpful in supporting how my own sermon preparation takes place throughout the week. And if I didn't love the Book of Concord already, being immersed in the Book of Concord for an entire course (Lutheran Confessions) gave me not only a love for the Confessions, but a passion for making it accessible in the 2023 culture of the RGV. And, of course, SMP benefits from some of the best faculty in the Christian world. Having a week with Dale Meyer all to ourselves (Preaching 2) was the highlight of the four years. Much, much wisdom was gleaned during that intensive week (summer of 2022). Okamoto (Means of Grace), Furgeson (Pastor as Leader), Marriott (Introduction to Worship), and Fisher (Church and its Life) were all highlights.

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Okamoto deepened my appreciation of the Sacraments, Furgeson personified Pastor as Theologian, being able to glean wisdom from a pastor who is in the parish trenches every week. The same was true of Fisher's class, where a pastor provides a parish context to what is being taught. And Marriott pushed me out of my comfort zone in the study of rites and rituals and their impact on congregational life. All of this had a significant impact on what Word and Sacrament ministry looks like at The Table, even in a highly contextualized setting. This is the beauty of SMP: seminal thought working itself out in real time and space of pastoral ministry in the church plant. What is taught and studied in SMP has immediate impact and application, or as I frequently stated throughout the program, what is taught and learned on Mondays (the day of the online SMP Zoom class) is applied on Tuesday.

One other thought about SMP, from one who has been a pastor in another tradition and has been involved in church planting outside of the LCMS: a critical component generally lacking from SMP is mission and multiplication. In four years, only one professor broached the subject. I'm not speaking of evangelism. The idea that both pastors and churches should be multiplying themselves seems to me to be a (mostly) foreign idea in pastoral ministry. While this critique could be aimed at the seminary in general, SMP is where there is great opportunity for our denomination and seminaries to not just be filling pulpits but to be developing the missional enterprise of multiplying pastors and churches. There will always be a need for the residential program. But in 2023, now more than ever, technology has made pastoral formation, training, and development possible beyond the residential programs. That possibility is an opportunity to grow our denomination during a time when many churches are closing, vacant pulpits outnumber pastors available, and membership is in decline.

Art Stevens, Grace Lutheran Church, Los Angeles, CA

My mission and ministry is to the incarcerated, something I have been doing as a volunteer at R. J. Donovan Correctional Facility near Otay Mesa in San Diego, California and other institutions for the last eight years. This is a second career for me after working as a general contractor in Southern California for over forty years. If we define missional leadership as paying attention to what God is doing in your life, and how He opens opportunities for you and others, then my story fits the description.

My dear friend the Reverend Mike Bonner (now called home to Jesus) from San Diego is responsible for pushing me into prison ministry. I say “pushing” because he kept asking me to join him on a Sunday at Donovan to “just meet the guys.” I’ve spent forty years trying to stay out of prison—not going into one. But, just to humor my friend, I finally agreed and drove down to San Diego. I remember thinking, as we entered the employee gate with the concertina wire and electric fencing, *this is serious business*.

Pastor Mike and I would spend a short time together inside Donovan in Yard D, ministering to the men, not knowing that soon everything would change. Years earlier, I had entered the deacon program and had completed my ten classes, and

Mike had ideas that I would be his deacon inside the prison. I was waiting for him at a pastors' conference in Phoenix when word came that my friend had unexpectedly passed away on his way to the conference. I wondered if this was the way God was telling me I wasn't going to be a prison deacon. Well, at Mike's funeral, the prison chaplain came up to me and asked if I was a Lutheran. I acknowledged that I was, and he wanted to know if I could do a catechism class that needed to be finished. The challenge was, could I do this? With "no" not being in my vocabulary, I thought, *These are adults; these guys could surely get done in one year.* I committed to a year in my mind and said "yes." Three years later, we completed the class of twelve men, and I realized then and there that I had learned more during that time about who Jesus was than they did, but that I needed much more training to teach the narrative of the Bible confidently.

My background in the Church has included being involved with many of the functions of my congregation as a lay leader. I was head trustee, an elder for many years, and a congregational president. Each time, God was grooming me for something very different in my life; I just didn't know it. I now know that God was calling me in ways I wasn't ready to understand; He was calling me to step out of my safe zone. I would enter the SMP Program at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and get what God knew I needed.

Just like using the right tools brought me to a successful construction career, the training at Concordia provided the right tools to prepare me for a confident ministry. I remember that first day, nervously sitting beside my mentor awaiting our introduction, when Pastor Mart Thompson came in and introduced Dale Meyer, then President of Concordia Seminary. Dale told us we were going to be pastors in every sense of the word. Eventually we had a great class with Dale on preaching, one of my most memorable courses. Our first class was with Rev. Dr. Paul Biber, an introduction on pastoral ministry that set the stage for how God sent His Son to rescue and restore His beloved creation. Dr. James Marriott, a gifted organist, was our instructor for the worship course. He taught us about confessional Lutheran style and defined worship for us. With Rev. Dr. Timothy Roser, we learned what a narrative is and how to live it. Professor David Maxwell taught us how to look deeper into the central chapters of the Christian story, how to think in terms of doctrines as ways of talking about the meaning of various narrative elements that together comprise the Christian story. Professor Maxwell's class was our first intensive class held on campus for a week. We got a chance to experience what it means to just be there in person. Everyone I met was gracious, understanding, and willing to help me as I walked in a world I wasn't yet used to. Rev. Dr. Richard Serina would teach about Lutheran distinctions and how they are not only doctrinal, but in proclamation and pastoral care the right distinctions to guide theology, keeping the Christian story centered on the Gospel. And this was just our first year—three more to go!

I can attest that the training we received was thorough. The seminary sets up a program of study online, which is intent on providing those tools I talked about. Our professors Abjar Bakou, Joel Okamoto, Brian Gauthier, Kevin Armbrust (our instructor for OT and Creedal Themes), Victor Raj, Alex Fisher, Kale Hanson, Timothy Dost, and Jon Furgeson, as well as those previously mentioned, all played a part in graciously making sure we stayed on track. Thank you all!

I will be forever grateful for the steady support of my mentor Pastor, Chuck Brady, throughout this whole life-changing study experience. Pastor Brady met with me every week for four years, guiding me and offering his wisdom on the subjects at hand. Without his pastoral wisdom, I wouldn't have had such a great experience. Pastor Brady and the professors who are willingly teaching God's Word, encouraging us all, are the very definition of the Greek word *charis*, translated, *of grace and loving-kindness*. God certainly knows how to get His message out to a needy world.

Now I am called to Grace Lutheran as their representative in prison ministry. My ordination was conducted on September 19, 2021 at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in the inner city of Los Angeles. I am also the PSD Prison Ministry Coordinator as an SMP pastor, having just graduated in January 2023 at the age of seventy-seven, after four years of study at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis.

Martin Cornes, Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN

In January 2020, I arrived at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Northeast Minneapolis, a church which was expecting to close its doors. My position as a multiethnic outreach missionary was jointly funded by the church and the Minnesota South District for three years. I serve as the sole pastor at Gloria Dei, and my mentor attends a nearby church; it has been a great encouragement and motivation to me to have someone viewing my service from the outside.

Shortly after I arrived, COVID-19 happened, and then the riots in Minneapolis, just a few miles south of the church. These events brought numerous issues to our attempts to revitalize a church and outreach to the local area. This started with a focus on renewing the congregation's confidence in God's Word, (using The Story curriculum for sermons and arranging a new time for Bible studies) and enabling and exciting the congregation for missional possibilities. There was emphasis on sharing their faith on a one-to-one basis as they go about living their lives, as well as reaching out in innovative ways to the community, such as handing out roses and candy to the community, carol singing, and generally letting the community know that if the church wasn't there it would be missed. In sum, opening the congregation's eyes to the possibilities of how the Lord might use them and Gloria Dei, even outside their comfort zones, has led to 40 percent growth, including new converts.

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Our SMP courses were largely held during COVID-19. This reduced the number of intensives, which might explain why, when we did meet, they were most impactful. The professors, several of whom were also serving in a

congregation, made an immense impact, as they shared their knowledge, giving space for relevant discussion and teaching. The opportunity to find relevant fieldwork experience offered the possibility to attend an impactful Israel trip. I also attended the Exponential church planting conference in Florida. Dr. Thompson's leadership and availability at certain times was also invaluable in helping with issues in the program, especially as I grappled with some misunderstandings of what SMP was.

The last class, led by Prof. Jon Furgeson on Pastoral Leadership, was immense, as much for the reading content, which provided tools to use in future ministry, as the structure of the class, which allowed sharing and discussion with my colleagues along with input from a gifted practitioner. It was also a blessing to be led by the exceptional Prof. Bob Sundquist in Preaching II, again leaving us with invaluable tools for future use and transforming our preaching style to be flexible and impactful.

There were, sadly, limited courses on mission, and perhaps in the ongoing review, more attention should be given to apologetics and mission outreach that applies to new pastors coming into a rapidly changing church and culture. (I also attended seminary in my native England, where the course structure has been adjusted to take into account this changing environment.) But, classes with a focus on building up confidence in Lutheran belief (in my case, as someone from a non-Lutheran background), and in the Scriptures were the greatest help. The third year is tough, as we studied both Old and New Testament, but the teaching was invaluable. As is the cohort we were assigned to. We still meet online to discuss, pray, fellowship, and chat together.

Andy Greer, Messiah Lutheran Church and School, Lincoln, NE

Messiah Lutheran is a church and school in Lincoln, NE. We have a large congregation that gathers for three worship services on Sunday mornings. On Wednesday nights, our Sunday School, confirmation, middle school, high school, and adult Bible studies take place. We focus on faith, family, friends (witness/outreach) and finances (stewardship) for our adult offerings. We just opened a new Early Childhood Development Center that has our highly respected preschool program embedded into it. We also have a thriving/growing kindergarten through fifth grade program.

Our mission statement is simple: Love God. Love Others. Share Christ. We believe in gathering around God's Word so that, transformed by it, we may scatter to witness in our communities and to the ends of the earth. We reference Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18 as we focus on being a training ground for transformational discipleship and Acts 2:42-47 in being a launching pad for community engagement/outreach.

Our ministry leaders and congregation members work diligently to meet the needs of the community and partner in mission throughout the United States and the world. Messiah feels so strongly about this that in 2017 they voted as a congregation to extend a call to an Associate Pastor for Community Outreach. This pastor would provide leadership and oversight to intentionally encourage the Body of Christ to engage in mission, witness, and outreach. This encouragement would go beyond the church congregation and extend to the school families as well.

We are passionate about generously giving our time, skills, material goods, and finances to meet the needs of people and as means of sharing Jesus in our own community and around the world. The following is a list of our ministries and partnerships:

- We support missionaries in nine different countries.
- We partner with a Christian Heritage program called Families Together, where we train families to look after children so parents can get the help and support they need to keep children from entering the social support system.
- Our Common Threads ministry partners with the international missions Days for Girls, Orphan Grain Train and the local mission People's City Mission to provide highly demanded human care needs through sewing, assembling, and distributing items through the work of over 370 volunteers.
- We helped bring in, house, and equip a ten-person Afghan family during the refugee efforts, partnering with Lutheran Family Services.
- We partner with Royal Family Kids camp to care for children affected by neglect, abuse, and abandonment in Lincoln.
- We began our own ministry called Home in a Box that partners with the community to furnish homes for single mothers and others that need a restart or help overcoming homelessness.
- We partner closely with Mercy Meals to send thousands of meals all over the world to people in need.
- Our disaster relief team continues to rebuild houses in Nebraska from past flooding and goes all over the country for various tornado and hurricane relief efforts.
- We partner with area schools to provide coats, hats, and scarves before the winter months in Nebraska.
- We engage in witness and outreach to the Winnebago tribe in our state.
- We actively support the University of Nebraska Lutheran Chapel.

The SMP program has provided a way not only to form/prepare a future pastor but has also provided a vicar immediately to learn and serve with our ACTS (Acclaiming Christ Through Service) and other missions teams that currently carry out these efforts. While I am here as boots on the ground, I am also able to learn God's Word and practical theology to care for not only those we serve but also for those that are serving. It aids in pastoral care and teaching as we gather to hear God's Word, so that we can scatter and be witnesses while we serve. The courses Teaching the Faith and the Master Narrative have specifically helped me to better understand the fruit of the Spirit (sanctification) that flows out of God's grace. Not only can I better understand it, but I can help others understand it as we pray and serve together. Though we have several great missions and service efforts underway, the SMP Program has added pastoral support to our team ministry. Personally, it has allowed me to understand the systems it takes to be the hands and feet of Christ, reaching and including as many people as possible.

The on-the-job training will pay dividends for years to come, and the SMP Program makes that uniquely possible.

Conclusion

In keeping with the theme of this issue, this contribution has explored some ways that this contextual program of pastoral formation provides theological education at a seminary level alongside the work and ministry of students engaged in mission. These stories represent the wider work being accomplished by the many pastors serving in the LCMS in a variety of contexts. Through each of the pastoral formation programs offered in our church body, the intersection of mission and ministry is always in the forefront. As a church, we continue to pray that the Lord of the harvest would send out workers into the harvest fields. We give thanks that Chad, Art, Martin, and Andy have heeded the call, and we celebrate those who follow in their steps.