

# Interview with James J. Westendorf

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## Purpose

The dynamic between teacher and student in any place of higher education is often quite interesting. Healthy dialogue between the two roles is often indicative of mutual respect—both for the subject matter and those involved in the learning process. However, occasionally students see their professors as learned but somewhat unapproachable men. Students learn quietly at their professors' feet without a full grasp of their professors' hearts. Yet, there was a time when all our current professors were in the same classrooms as their students— often with some of the same joys and fears. The goal of this interview was to investigate the personal experiences, emotions, and anecdotes of Professor Westendorf's tenure at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, while including a brief background on his education and parish experience.

## Classroom Experience

Professor Westendorf attended Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary from 1963-1967. In his junior year he had the privilege of having Professor Meyer in New Testament Isagogics. He described the experience of having Professor Meyer—already in his early 90's at this point—as quite interesting. For the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians portion of the class, the students were expected to read Professor Meyer's book, and Professor Meyer would ask questions to determine comprehension. Often times this exercise found the students with less than

complete answers in Professor Meyer's mind. This was as nerve-wracking for students then as it is today.

During the following year, Professor Westendorf tutored at Northwestern Preparatory School. He primarily taught Latin, but also served when and where he was needed during his year on campus. What made this year especially important in his training was its purpose. Because he taught for a year at Northwestern Preparatory School, Professor Westendorf was not required to go out on a formal vicar year. (The vicaring process was relatively new at this point.) In discussions with Professor Westendorf, he made it clear that while he had the option of requesting a formal vicar year, this would have been outside the normal way of things. It would not be many years before he recognized how much he missed during that year of practical instruction.

As he reflected on his education at the Seminary, Professor Westendorf noted the academic nature of his classroom experience. Thorough exegesis was the standard—as it is today—but there was less of an emphasis on the practical training. Confirmation class was only taught to a student's peers; they had no real-world classroom experience. Throughout the educational process, sermons were preached in the classroom. This students sharing class periods a necessity in order for everyone to have an opportunity to preach in class. Today, it seems odd to have a one student preach the first half of a sermon, with another preaching the second half. Yet this was the process in those days. Professor Westendorf expressed some regret about this part of his training, noting how sterile a preaching environment this was.

## Parish Experience

Upon graduation from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, James Westendorf was assigned to St. Charles, Michigan to serve at Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church. This congregation was a mission started by area congregations—spearheaded by the WELS congregation in Hemlock. Because many of the core-group were from this congregation in Hemlock, they brought over the bloated constitution and organizational structure from their previous congregation. This is what they knew, but the past successes of this system didn't translate into future success. There were struggles to fill the offices and even difficulties in the fulfilling the duties of basic offices such as council and board of elders. After a few years the constitution was reworked to fit the ministry being done.

After serving at Hope for 8 years, Westendorf received and accepted a call to Christ the Lord, Brookfield, Wisconsin. This congregation had undergone some divisiveness over political issues and had been vacant for a year and a half. Most of these issues were solved, and a significant section had been released from membership, but there were still hurt feelings and significant clean up which needed to be done in the aftermath. Westendorf expressed that these challenges were part of what appealed to him as he deliberated his call to Brookfield.

## Seminary Professor Experience

In 1981 Westendorf received the call to Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to be a professor of homiletics and Old Testament. As he reflected on his receiving this call, he mentioned that he knew immediately that he would take the call. He deliberated for about a month and accepted the call. As he arrived on campus he quickly noticed that Homiletics took a secondary role. Old Testament class preparation was extensive—he noticed quickly how much more he had prepare for the Isagogics' courses.

Professor Westendorf mentioned how some of the wisdom literature was especially difficult to prepare for. He didn't feel like he had a lot of that material already in his wheelhouse, so class preparation became more necessary. It is also notable that during this time period he was serving a vacancy at St. John's Newburg, a large congregation. His time management skills were certainly pressed, but did very admirable work under the circumstances.

He also noted that the homiletics department might have been slow to adopt newer preaching techniques and alternative styles, such as narratives and inductive methods. He didn't think this was a conscious effort to ignore these styles or a reaction based on fear. WLS was satisfied by the preaching product of the deductive method. But things change. Slowly, more of these elements of inductive style made its way into the homiletics instruction. During Professor Westendorf's tenure, the homiletics department has made more strides than the Old Testament department, something Westendorf was glad to see and be a part of. (There had been an attitude that any professor could teach homiletics because he had served as a professional preacher for a time.)

## Review of the Interview

Professor Westendorf was a real pleasure to sit down with and interview. He was lucid and anecdotal, sharing insights from his experience as a student, parish pastor, and a professor. He was also interesting and willing to offer his opinions on a number of topics. One aspect of the interview that I really appreciated was the human element of sitting down and talking with a professor with this much experience on campus. You could see that he genuinely enjoyed his time here on campus and spoke of the joys of watching students mature in their faith and in the ministry. He even commented on what it was like to have his sons in the classroom and the joys of reviewing text studies together. It was truly a blessing to sit down with Professor Westendorf for a short while, just as it was to have him in class. Even his sense of humor was evident as he commented near the end of our interview, "Well, I guess I'm history." Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary's student body and faculty have been blessed to have him serve as a professor since 1982.