

The Ministry of Rev. James G. Kiecker, Ph. D.

“For what is history without the Word of God?”

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Matthew J. Kiecker

Rev. Dr. James George Kiecker was invited to present a series of three lectures under the general topic “Luther as a Historian” near the end of his years as an active participant in the public ministry. In the third lecture he commented:

If I were to give a title to these three lectures which sums up Luther’s attitude to history, and my own, I could think of nothing better than the words italicized in the following statement: ‘But what are the histories of the heathen written by Vergil, Homer, Livy, or others, no matter how much they are decked out with words? They are histories of the Greeks, of Alexander, and of Hannibal. But they lack the magnificence, the glory, and the crown of the Word and promise of God. This diadem they do not have. Therefore they are records of things that have no value rather than actual histories. *For what is history without the Word of God?*’ For what is history, if God is not active in it? It is, as Shakespeare said, ‘A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’¹

“What is history without the Word of God?” Kiecker echoes Luther in regards to an attitude toward the study of the past.² This sentiment, of course, was not original with Luther. It reflects the same attitude as that of the Prophet Isaiah. “To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this Word, they have no light of dawn” (Isaiah 8:20).³ Through the prophet the Holy Spirit set the true standard of wisdom. Without the Word of God, without the completion of our salvation in the work of Christ, without the recognition of the hand of God alive and intimately active in the course of this world’s events, from beginning to end, one truly ambles about in darkness. He has no true light. “What is history without the Word of God?” In a word: nothing.

“What is history without the Word of God?” For Rev. Dr. Kiecker this question sufficiently described his attitude toward his life’s work. This statement does much more

¹ James G. Kiecker, “Luther at Work (Continued), and an Appraisal of Him in the Context of Later Historians”, *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 1 (March 2002), p. 81. One of three lectures presented at the 34th Annual Reformation Lectures, *Luther as a Historian*, Bethany Lutheran College and Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary, Mankato, Minnesota, October 25-26, 2001.

² *Luther’s Works*, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-1986), 5: 353.

³ All Scripture is taken from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973.

for us. More than just a personal attitude, this statement ultimately serves well as a slogan describing the entire work and ministry of James G. Kiecker. It is clear as day. For, as a student and parish pastor, where there was the one the other was always there. And as a professor and leader of students, the attitude endured. Over the years the focus of his ministry shifted. So too did the accent and stress given each part. Yet the whole remained: History with the Word of God. Rev. Dr. Kiecker knew and exemplified it well.

“Call Day” in 1964 marked the entrance of James into the public ministry of the gospel. The story, of course, does not begin here. A whole lot of learning and growth takes place before a man is recommended as a candidate for the ministry. This period of time in James’ life was marked by one overwhelming characteristic. “[As a pre-ministerial student] I would never describe myself as a great scholar,” he said. Although he never thought of himself as this, though, James was always interested in improving and growing intellectually. As a student James loved to exercise his mind. But this was really no surprise.

Yes, long before his years of formal education, God provided the fertile ground to promote intellectual and spiritual growth. This fertile setting was the family that James was born into. His father, George, was a Wisconsin Synod elementary school teacher from the Fairfax, Minnesota area. He was born in 1904 as a first generation American and grew up learning and speaking German.⁴ His family consisted mainly of farmers, yet when it became time for high school, he decided to head off to Dr. Martin Luther High School in New Ulm, Minnesota. He was on track to become a Lutheran schoolteacher.

⁴ The Kiecker family arrived in the early 1870’s from the Pomerania region of Germany. The group consisted of five Kiecker brothers and their families. A four-year-old (at the time of immigration) son of one of the “original 5 brothers” was the father of George. Thus the status “first generation American.”

At that time there were only two years of college for those on this course, so in 1927 he graduated from Doctor Martin Luther College. His first call was to Woodlake, Minnesota. Then in 1929 he was called to St. Paul's in Appleton, Wisconsin, as an organist and sixth and seventh grade teacher; he spent the rest of his career there. In 1930 George met his future wife, Leona *nee* Tetzlaff, also from a farming family⁵, living just south of De Pere, Wisconsin. The two of them began their family with the birth of their first son, James George, on June 11, 1938.

George and Leona set an example in their household that young James never forgot. They both valued education. They held a focus toward continued refinement and sharpening of skills and growth, especially intellectually. James remembers,

Mother never had much education at all. She only completed the equivalent of 8th grade...But I must say this about both of them, [they] were very intelligent, natively intelligent. [They were intelligent] to the point where father, by himself at his own expense...in the 1930's already, when he was first in Appleton, started taking courses at what was then Oshkosh State University⁶...and later on he also took music and organ playing lessons from a well-known organ instructor at Lawrence College⁷ in Appleton...He always wanted to improve himself, to improve his skills to the glory of God...it was in his nature; he also took extension courses from the University of Wisconsin-Madison to the point where finally he had accumulated *more* credits than were necessary for a master's degree.

He goes on then to describe his mother as having very strong native intelligence as well.

She was extremely business-wise despite her relatively short education. James commented, "My brother David and I often said that if she had been born into a wealthy family and in a time when it was more common for women to have careers, if she had the

⁵ The Tetzlaff family came to America from Prussia one generation earlier than the Kieckers. The earliest tombstones at the family cemetery list ca. 1830. The family settled just south of De Pere, Wisconsin along the east side of the Fox River. George met Leona at a church service in Wrightstown, Wisconsin, where Leona was a member. George's uncle was the pastor there at the time.

⁶ Now the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh.

⁷ Now Lawrence University in Appleton.

backing of money and education, she might very well have gone a long way...She too was always improving herself.” This atmosphere that encouraged intellectual improvement proved to be quite influential in the years to come.

Young James was not only blessed with a rich intellectual background, however; he also was born into a family with a strong Lutheran foundation. This already makes itself evident in the immigrating generation of Kieckers. It is never clear whether there were specific religious reasons for emigration from Pomerania, or not.⁸ Yet, as far as James is concerned, religion was a key concern in the lives of his ancestors. This is clear from the fact that one of the very first activities of the immigrants was to build a church.⁹ James comments, “Of course there were no records kept. ...Yet we do know that very shortly after they arrived they built churches and looked for ministers.” As the Kieckers settled into south-central Minnesota, they built a church in Wellington Township, just north of Fairfax. They also passed their religion to their children and grandchildren.

The Lord, as noted earlier, led George, James’ father, into a life of service in his kingdom as a schoolteacher. It was also a young Lutheran lady whom George met and married. And these two set up a Christian home in which to raise their children. When James was born he was made a child of God through Holy Baptism at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church in Appleton. This is where he also went to grade school and was confirmed. He can still recall the confirmation classes taught by his childhood pastor (Pastor F.M. Brandt), and he comments on the influence that Pastor Brandt had on him, even evident

⁸ Like most immigrants of the period, there may have been many factors leading to the Kiecker family’s move to the new world, such as a desire for more freedoms or more land, besides religious reasons.

⁹ According to James the church they founded was decidedly Lutheran as well, as opposed to a church with unionistic tendencies as may have come out of the Prussian Union.

years later in his own ministry. Already at a young age the building blocks were laid that later would serve him in the ministry.

James then came to a pivotal moment in the course of his life. “My mother insisted that I go to Northwestern for high school...and become a minister.” She firmly decided that the greatest improvement she could offer her son would be found at Northwestern Prep and College in Watertown, Wisconsin. So James headed off for Watertown in 1952. Here he would be set on the path toward becoming a pastor.

The next eight years of his life, then, he spent on the campus of Northwestern Prep and College in Watertown, Wisconsin. He described Northwestern in general as providing a “very rigorous and demanding” education. As far as his time there, his memories and feelings are mixed. On the one hand, especially during his high school years, he felt that life there was much more restrictive than perhaps necessary for a high school-aged young man. He also felt that some of the professors whom he had were sort-of standoffish in character and attitude toward students. Yet life was not all bad. He enjoyed his years playing football.¹⁰ Especially in high school he found a place at Watertown fit for intellectual stimulation. He also made many friends there, some of whom he’s been able to stay in touch with even today despite different life-paths.

He commented of himself that he was drawn to others as friends and role-models who were intelligent people, living a Christ-like life, who went out, especially on their own, in order to improve themselves. He commented that he looked up to the professors and upperclassmen in high school and college whom he considered good “thinkers”.

¹⁰ Incidentally, this mixture of mental and physical stimulation has always been a part of James’ regular routine. In childhood already he tells tales of playing “Sergeant Preston of the Yukon,” imitating a current radio program, in the woods at his maternal grandparent’s farm. During his Northwestern years, his exercise (besides football) shifted to taking regular walks, a habit that remains today. He has always enjoyed being in nature.

While at Northwestern many professors, such as Dr. Richard Jungkuntz, professor of Latin and Theology, and Dr. Ralph Gehrke, professor of Ancient History and Greek, and Dr. Kiessling, had quite an influence on young James. They exemplified a scholarly approach and a drive for intellectual and spiritual growth, and in their own ways they encouraged him to pursue the same. He considered Pres. E.E. Kowalke a Christian philosopher.

Although James thoroughly enjoyed improving intellectually, he was not at first convinced that he would become a Wisconsin Synod pastor. His high school and college years fell in the span of time immediately preceding the Wisconsin Synod-Missouri Synod split. As previously alluded to, many of James' friends, over time, headed in other directions outside the Synod to continue their respective educations. Even as he considered his own future, the questions arose whether or not he wanted to maintain his course, or head elsewhere, or even pursue another vocation. In the end, though, James decided to continue on the same path he had been traveling. "I just didn't feel like I wanted to do anything else," he said.

Guided by the Lord, then, James enrolled at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS) in the fall of 1960. He charted his course heading toward the parish ministry. At the Seminary he once again found himself relating to others who encouraged exercising the mind and spirit. He found this especially, he noted, in Professor Dr. Paul Peters, who taught Hebrew. He was also greatly influenced by the relationship that Professor Frederic Blume had with his students. James appreciated the "personal" quality about the man. These are but two examples of the great impact that the professors of his youth had

on him. These men exhibited qualities and left legacies that would re-emerge years later when James was in his own classrooms.

James enjoyed his preparation for the ministry at WLS. At the same time, he felt that perhaps, if he could reach out, he could experience more, leading to a fuller education. So his course to becoming a pastor took several of side routes.

The desire that he had to always learn more and know more led to a desire in James to reach out and be exposed to more. This first manifested itself in a desire to venture beyond the halls of WLS. James did this during the school year 1961-62. That fall, instead of stopping at Mequon, he instead continued south down US Highway 41 to Chicago. There he enrolled as a student at the University of Chicago. He commented that in those days it was much easier to make enough money in the summer that one could afford to do this sort of thing as a student. The money that he had saved was able to afford James two (of three) quarters at the University. In his first quarter, he decided to focus on theology. Not that he was in the market for anything new. He always had the focus of a confessional Lutheran, even when confronted with “foreign” concepts such as modern liberal criticism. Yet he wanted to experience more in order to be better able to understand where others were coming from. This was key and would be a recurring theme throughout James’ education. The second quarter, then, allowed James to focus on his other love, that being English/British Literature. (History? Not quite yet – it’s still on the horizon but coming quickly.) The goal of the exercise was to experience more. As he experienced more the foundation for the future was being set. However, when the money ran out, James headed home. Well, not quite!

The summer following his year at the University of Chicago brought the second great opportunity for James to experience and learn more. This time the focus would be on practical-ministerial experiences as he continued preparing to be a pastor. At that time there was no official, obligatory vicar year as part of the curriculum of the Seminary. Yet for practical experiences there were opportunities to serve. James chose to take an opportunity to help out with a mission congregation in the summer of 1962. So he headed down Highway 41 again, this time even further south, all the way down to Florida in fact. There he helped out in two mission areas doing evangelism work. First he spent six weeks in the Pompano Beach area; then he spent six more north of there in the Cocoa/Cocoa Beach/Merritt Island areas. This experience, too, would prove useful in the years to come.

The basis of a seminary education and these two experiences, along with an adventure to Europe during the summer of 1963, brought to a close the pre-ministerial education of James G. Kiecker. He was now about to head out, to serve his Lord as a minister of the gospel. His love and care for souls would be at the forefront now, yet his education had brought out several other deep loves that he would pursue in the years to come.

James received his first call into the fulltime public ministry in 1964, and this sent him on a new sort of adventure. Previously the road he followed headed south. The Lord approved this road, but now pointed James in another direction. Highway 41 runs north, too, you see, and this is where James was now headed. With affection he recounts the day:

I remember when [then Seminary President Carl J.] Lawrenz read off the assignments and he got around to the 'K's'. He read me off and said, 'Mr.

Kiecker...Daggett, Michigan...and by the way, that's in the *upper* peninsula of Michigan.' [And I thought] well, O.K., I didn't know much about the Upper Peninsula, but I had heard it was there...somewhere north of Wisconsin...so I went afterwards to get a map of Michigan and I couldn't find Daggett, [it seemed that] it didn't exist!

Despite his first doubts, Holy Cross, Daggett with its dual parish, St. Mark, Wallace, Michigan, really did exist. And this was where James began his parish ministry. Later the Lord would call James to two different fields. In 1970 he took a call to serve Paul the Apostle congregation on Springwells Ave. in Detroit. He would serve there until 1974. In 1976, then, he took a call to his third and final parish, St. John in Zilwaukee, Michigan, which is near Saginaw. In total he spent eighteen of his first twenty years out of the seminary as a parish pastor, and each area he served was unique in regards to lifestyle, he found. He commented, "It was a very varied ministry." From the farming culture in Daggett and Wallace to the blue-collar atmosphere in Detroit and on to the suburban lifestyle in Zilwaukee, each area was distinct. Yet James found great joy in experiencing each new area. "In the parish you can really get to know the people," he commented, "I really enjoyed that."

James looks back now and appreciates all the years he spent in the parish ministry. He sees the Lord's hand of blessing abundantly present as he was at work serving God's people with the gospel. Despite his personal growth as a pastor and the trials that would inevitably come up, James comments, "As far as [major] difficulties and tragedies...the Lord spared me lot of things other ministers go through." There were no major crises with which he had to contend, but there were many opportunities to minister to people going through difficult times.

James truly had a deep personal care for the spiritual welfare of his people. He counts among the greatest of the many joys he experienced in his ministry the more simple aspects of being a pastor. “The most joy for me was the Sunday service. I [also] enjoyed, very much, going around to hospitals, and visiting shut-ins...[I would] go to strengthen but [often found myself] come away being strengthened.” His weekly work as a parish pastor satisfied him during those years. “I wanted everything prepared to the best of my ability for the Lord on Sunday morning,” he commented, “and I enjoyed that wonderful feeling conducting the service.”

James enjoyed serving the Lord’s people as their shepherd. He also relishes the opportunities he had to reach out in new areas with the gospel. One such opportunity came as he was serving in Detroit. Pastor Edgar Herman of Flat Rock, Michigan, the next church to the south of James, recognized the opportunity for mission work in another suburb of Detroit (Taylor, Michigan) and asked James to help. So, the two of them engaged in mission work in this area for a couple of years “with the permission and support of the District Mission Board.” They started holding services in rented space; they did canvassing and finally built a nucleus. “I would always preach,” he commented, “while Edgar would play the organ, an old, fold-up army field organ.” As to the long-term results of this endeavor, James was not able to see them out. He recalls that after he left Detroit eventually a full-fledged mission started in the Taylor area; over time it also passed away, however.

James spent many good years in the parish ministry. He loved serving the people with the Word of God. As long as he was active in the parish, though, he never got too

far away from his other love, that being a continuing drive to improve himself intellectually.

Certainly the focus and the emphasis rested squarely on the Word of God during James' years in the parish ministry. As he dealt with the Word, however, and as time went along, a budding interest in church history emerged. Although in the past James' intellectual love for English literature and theology flourished without much attention to historical pursuits, now a love for church history would blossom. He comments: "I was more and more interested in church history...interested in the history of the church through the ages. Yes, Luther, of course, but besides Luther, church history in general."

With this love for church history emerging, it was natural for James to seek new ways to nourish his interest. He started by heading back to school. "Now this was before the Seminary started its summer sessions," he said, "and I'll be very frank, even if the Seminary had started summer sessions, I still had this urge to sample what else was there." As was generally true, along with this desire to continue his education, James also desired to reach out and consider more. The Lutheran Church in America had a summer program at its Seminary in Melrose Park, Illinois (west of Chicago) that seemed to offer what James was looking for. Therefore, already beginning the next summer after receiving his first call, that is, the summer of 1965, and continuing through the summer of 1968, James spent his summer vacations hitting the books. Among the greatest fruits that these four summers produced was a renewed zeal for fresh learning. He was back into books, reading, writing, and of it all he said, "I really, honestly enjoyed it." But this was neither the time nor the place for James to settle down into a terminal curriculum. He commented that he was encouraged by the counselors during those years to consider

finishing a course of study. But that would have meant having to leave the ministry, something that he was not yet willing to do.

There also were, he discovered in the next couple of years, other things that one could do with a summer vacation. In the summer of 1969 he took another adventure. This time he ventured west for the first time, visiting relatives in the Los Angeles area. Then in the spring of 1970 he was in the process of taking a call to Detroit. These things, along with the fact that in the summer of 1969 James met the lovely daughter of a local mortician, romance blossomed, and on June 28, 1970 they were married, were enough for any one man in two short summer vacations.

So there they were, James and his beautiful bride Susan Lynn *nee* Diehm, heading off to Detroit together in the summer of 1970. After he got there, even with that two-year break from summer school and with a new flock to tend, James still entertained thoughts that he might continue his education. However, this was never a reason for going to Detroit in the first place. Of course he realized that being in a large metropolitan area would mean that there would be many more avenues to pursue for educational purposes. He commented though, "I did not go to Detroit because of easy access to universities....I just went and was following the Lord's call." It was only after he got there and settled that he turned his attention back to pursuing more education. "[After I got there] I started sniffing around," he said. "The University of Detroit...had a master's program in religious studies. You could pretty much pick your own courses." And he did, choosing mainly church history. Therefore, starting already in 1971 and continuing until 1973 James headed to the University of Detroit one or two nights a week for one or two

courses each time. By 1973 he had enough credits to complete a post-seminary education for the first time. He was awarded a Master's Degree in Religious Studies.

Unfortunately, as James soon realized, the Master's Degree was not so much a *terminus ad quem* for him as it was a *terminus a quo*. He commented, "Once you get the Master's [you realize more and more] there's that tantalizing Doctorate out there." When James got to this point, he just couldn't resist. "So I started thinking more and more that I'd like to go to school somewhere for a doctoral program." The next move was beginning to take form. Just a simple desire to do something like this does not take into account all the factors of reality, however. James and Susan had to do some serious thinking first.

The financial concern was the first and greatest one for the Kiecker family as they considered the possibility of James' doctoral program. Among the many factors in this concern was the question as to where to go. The University of Detroit had no doctoral program to offer James. There were plenty of other options, however. In the immediate area, of course, was the University of Michigan. There were also programs offered by the Universities of Chicago (where he had been ten years prior) and Iowa; these were worth looking into. But none of them offered any financial support to James, Susan and their new baby daughter, Laura. This leads, then, to the second concern. No matter how interested James was to pursue a doctorate, there were some nagging doubts about his capability to do so. "What if it didn't work out?" he thought to himself. Or in other words, if he would leave for school and not cut it would he also have an "exit strategy?" Finally, the inevitable concerns of the practical implications of such a move existed as well. If he were to pursue this course, then he would leave the ministry. But what would

happen after he completed the course? With so many factors, one might wonder whether or not James' doctoral program could ever get off the ground, let alone be completed. No matter where James was, however, no matter the obstacles and concerns that were in his way, the Lord always provided.

The Lord provided for James and Susan and Laura financially as well. Because of the fact that both James and Susan enjoyed several years of professional work prior to marriage, they already had a head start financially. "We had a little nest egg," James recounts, "so we figured we could afford one year some place." So they felt that they had the means at least to embark on the adventure. Yet, where to?

While still at the University of Detroit James was looking at a bulletin board one day. He noticed an advertisement for Marquette University, Milwaukee. Here was another possibility to add to the list. So, along with Chicago and Iowa, James applied to Marquette and was accepted there as well. The same problem that marked each of those other schools (that being the lack of an offer of financial aid) applied to Marquette as well, however.

Even so, Marquette did have some pretty appealing features. The first of these was location. Marquette was in the right place. In the Milwaukee area, it was close to the parental homes of both James and Susan. If all actually did go wrong and James would fail miserably (a genuine concern, if only introspectively, from time to time), then there wouldn't be far to retreat, James figured. Also, the Marquette library contained the material he was interested in. And as far as compatibility, Marquette was the best place as well. Already in 1973 James made a trip over to Marquette. Here he met Professor Dr. Kenneth Hagen, his future doctoral advisor, an ALC, now ELCA layman, but

conservative Lutheran in his theology. He also met several other department members, and he got along with them quite well. Overall, Marquette was the best choice and when it came right down to it, it was the place for James to be.¹¹ So he decided to go.

He didn't just carelessly toss aside his position as a called minister of the gospel for this, however. Before deciding to leave the parish, James went and talked to both the District President (Waldemar Zarling, at the time) and the District Vice-President (Robert Mueller, at the time) to inform them of his intentions. Both men were very encouraging, James remembers, but they had their own questions. As he remembers it, their major concern was the issue of what would really happen after he left his call. At this time there were still relatively few doctorates among the Synod's clergy. James recounts, "Thirty years ago this was really uncommon. Other people had used the excuse that they were going back to school, which they probably would do, but then leave the Synod." James was clear in his response: "I assured both...I was not interested in that. I was simply interested in Church History, and I wanted to learn more about it and then return to the parish." And even when asked directly whether or not he hoped to get a call afterwards at a college, James still assured them, "of course I would certainly consider that, but if that's not the Lord's will, if his will is that I stay in a parish, then I'll stay in a parish."

That would be a concern of the future, however. For the time being he needed to focus on the task at hand. James, Susan and Laura left for Wisconsin in 1974. During the academic year 1974-1975, the summer of 1975, and the first semester of academic

¹¹ One side-note: After James had already decided to head to Marquette, a representative of the University called wondering what it would take to make sure he came. James indicated that a scholarship would be appreciated. The man later called back with news from the University that they were offering a full tuition scholarship. This meant that of the 10 courses James would eventually take there, he would only have to pay tuition for one, non-academic year credit.

year 1975-1976, James did his classroom work at Marquette University studying late medieval theology.¹²

The focus of his study was on the 200-year span directly prior to Martin Luther. James intended to find out if there was a significant impact from the thought of this time on Martin Luther. Not discounting God's special calling of Luther, he wanted to answer questions such as: "What had made Luther think the way he did," "What was exegesis in this time like," and "How did these things affect Luther?" In the end, James inevitably found that these things did in fact influence Luther a great deal. In May of 1978, at just about the same time that his son was being born, James completed his dissertation work and received his Ph. D. The title of the work is: "The Hermeneutical Principles and Exegetical Methods of Nicholas of Lyra, O.F.M. (ca.1270-1349)".

Already by the time of the completion of his doctoral work, James had been back in the parish ministry (St. John, Zilwaukee, MI) for about two years. The Lord blessed James once again with the privilege of being a servant of the Word. He also blessed James and the Kiecker family as a whole with tremendous success in their endeavor in Wisconsin. For six more years the Lord in his wisdom would see that the best place for his servant James was in the parish ministry. The Lord had blessed James' intellectual work abundantly during his years proclaiming the Word in the parish ministry. In the future, the same Lord of blessing would have new plans in store for him.

The years of James' youth had set a foundation both intellectually and spiritually that would serve him well for the rest of his life. Later, during the nearly twenty years of time in which he served in the parish ministry, the emphasis of James' work was

¹² The Kiecker family lived in Cedarburg, Wisconsin, during this time. James held a part-time job working at Paulus' Meat Market.

decidedly on the Word of God. He dealt with the Word daily both privately and publicly, yet he never got too far away from improving intellectually. He had a drive to gain more education and pursue intellectual goals, which he did, and the Lord blessed his efforts. In the latter years of his ministry, now, the accent will change: Whereas the heavy accent previously fell on proclaiming God's Word, along with learning history at the same time, now the accent would fall on daily teaching history, always in the light of God's Word, however.

It was the spring of 1984. James had been in Zilwaukee, Michigan for going on eight years. During this time his family had grown to its entirety with the addition of the two youngest daughters, Marcia and Amanda. With really only one phone call that spring, however, the Kiecker family would be heading in an entirely new direction. With a laugh James recounts, "Susan and I were painting our parsonage living room, so [we] were up on ladders and splattered up and the telephone rang..." On the other end was Dr. John Lawrenz, who was at the time serving on the board of Wisconsin Lutheran College (WLC) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The conversation that ensued was to the point: "Dr. Lawrenz asked, 'Have you ever thought about teaching on a college level?' And I said, 'Well, to be perfectly honest, yes.'" Dr. Lawrenz then commented that there was a new college in Milwaukee, that being WLC, and that they were looking for someone who could teach history. James would be that someone. Before too long the official call was in his hand. "But," he says, "I wasn't trying to escape the parish ministry by going into teaching. I had always loved the parish and still do. I simply felt that teaching was what God wanted me to do."

Encouraged by many friends, he accepted the call and officially went on the payroll at WLC in August of 1984. By the time that the family was moved into their new house in Milwaukee, James only had three weeks to prepare for that first semester's course load – and that was a bundle. The official call that he had was for “history”, but keep in mind that WLC was just entering its second decade at the time, and only had five or so fulltime faculty members in all. Being the only history professor would mean teaching a lot of history, even history, such as American, that he never specialized in. “For the first year for sure I was the only person doing a complete European corpus, and a complete American History corpus,” James comments. Over the years there James did teach a wide variety of courses.¹³ Although he confesses that he sees himself as a generalist as far as history (i.e., he never specialized in any one particular era as many other professors at other universities did) he considered himself as having the presence of a “family doctor”; he knew a little about a whole lot of history.

James enjoyed his new focus at WLC very much. He was now in a position to use the intellect that God had blessed him with to help and serve others, specifically the future lay-members and lay-leaders of our Synod's congregations. He would now be the one who would encourage the next generations to use their minds to learn more; he would now be the one who could have a meaningful impact on their lives. “I enjoyed the teaching,” he said, “[and I enjoyed] being with young people of college age.”

In the classroom, his goal was two-fold. On the one hand he would encourage the students to pursue academic excellence. At the same time, he desired that their faith be strengthened in the process. He commented, “I would give the kids whatever I could;

¹³ Including Western Civilization, European, American and even Far Eastern History as well as Church History and Religion. It was only after the development of the college and its departments that James was able to focus more on Church History.

and at the same time I would try to instill in them the “Lutheran” perspective on history...[I would] challenge them to see history through the eyes of a conservative Lutheran.” In this James was quite in line with the general mission of WLC. He firmly believed in the concept of having an alternate post-high school education available to the youth of the Wisconsin Synod. He saw, and still sees, many benefits in having Christian training available for young people, even if they are blessed in other ways or pursue other goals besides the preaching or teaching ministry. He sees a tremendous value in the laity of the Wisconsin Synod, male and female alike, and feels that in many cases our congregations could use them more wisely. The training of WLC serves to equip these young Christians, then, to be leaders in the world, but also leaders in their own congregations.

James, just as he worked hard to provide intellectual and spiritual training for the students as a goal, also worked hard to provide the best setting for learning to take place. He said, “I wanted to make history friendly.” This sort of attitude is evident in many ways as he deals with history. In 1992 the first book written by James was published. Even as he deals with the concept of *ecclesia semper reformanda*, i.e., that “the church is always in the process of being reformed,”¹⁴ he still strives to do so in a way that first the layman or laywoman will understand, and second in a way that is engaging and enjoyable to discover. He writes in his preface, “So sit back, relax – or get excited – and watch the challenges and responses develop in the church, as you relive in imagination the Reformation, the whole reformation – The Long Reformation.”¹⁵ James’ doctoral advisor, Prof. Kenneth Hagen agrees that he accomplishes this as he writes in his

¹⁴ James G. Kiecker. *Martin Luther and the Long Reformation* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992) xiv.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

foreword to this publication, “In short, *Martin Luther and the Long Reformation* is both edifying and enjoyable.”¹⁶

The time that James spent at WLC also allowed him to use the knowledge and understanding of Church History that he had with more than just students. Throughout this time, James engaged in many works of scholarship. Perhaps the crowning achievement of this time was the aforementioned book he wrote. Yet James also presented much more of his knowledge in other formats. Several times works of his were published in the theological journal of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (*see attached bibliography for titles and dates*) and the Northwestern Lutheran (now Forward in Christ). Over the years he produced many articles for various other publications of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. He was also invited to present a series of lectures on the theology of Martin Luther at Asian Lutheran Seminary in Hong Kong in the summer of 1994, as well as a lecture at the History-Social Science Division Symposium at Martin Luther College in the spring of 1999, and a series of lectures on Martin Luther as a historian at the Annual Reformation Lectures at Bethany Lutheran College and Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary in the fall of 2001. In all of his works and writings James never failed to show when applicable God’s hand at work in history. These works have truly been a blessing to Christ’s Church in the understanding of Reformation and Church History.

It is true that God’s hand is always at work in history. Even though God is always there, however, does not mean that humans are always able to discern it. This is in accord with what Luther had to say regarding his *deus absconditus* and *deus revelatus*

¹⁶ *Ibid*, xi.

dichotomy.¹⁷ Simply put, in all of history, the hidden hand of God is at work. This recurring theme, brought out especially in *Martin Luther and the Long Reformation* and the Bethany Lectures, applies to the life of Rev. Dr. James G. Kiecker as well.

The hand of God, albeit hidden at times, is always at work. The realization of this has given James a lot of comfort over the years and still comforts today. Of course, it is easier to see this truth in the positives in life. Times like the concerns and resolutions of James' doctoral days lend themselves to seeing God alive and active in history. Yet there are times in everyone's life that it is not so easy to see the comforting truth. James was no different.

He recalls one summer while still in college when he applied for a factory position for a summer job. In order to be hired he needed to submit to a complete physical, including a hearing test. The results that came back indicated that he might be experiencing some hearing difficulties or loss. He remembers that he felt "devastated" at the news. What was already detected some twenty years earlier really started to make an impact by the time he came to WLC. Over the next nineteen years, James' hearing problem became worse to the point that he needed hearing aids and that he had difficulty engaging with the students in the classroom – something he dearly loved to do. This would be a truly difficult situation in which to see the hand of God at work for anyone.

Another such instance was the erosion of his relationship with especially the administration of WLC during that same period of time. What began as quite a camaraderie eventually became a cool relationship at best. Despite the support of the faculty as a teacher, James was eventually asked to resign from his position, never understanding why. Because there was no evidence to say that James was unfit or unable

¹⁷ Kiecker, *Luther at Work (Continued)*, 56.

to carry out his divine call, he refused to resign. Yet only five or so years later, when he became eligible for Social Security, James decided to retire. He cites these two factors as the primary reasons why he is not still in front of the classroom today. Despite this, though, he does not doubt the Lord's hand at work.

On June 30, 2003 Rev. Dr. James G. Kiecker retired from active participation in the public ministry. His children were now full-grown. The oldest one was married and already had two children. His son was proud to be following in his father's footsteps as a student at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in preparation for full-time service to the gospel. The other two daughters had both graduated from the college that James was so proud to serve for nearly two decades. And James and his (still beautiful) bride packed up and headed up that familiar Highway 41 for the north woods (from whence they came thirty-three years earlier).

These days James is still his fun-loving, scholarly self, sitting hand-in-hand with Susan by the shore of Green Bay in a town called Cedar River. Here he is once again able to strike out on yet another of his many adventures in the woods. He won't say whether he's still Sgt. Preston of the Yukon any more or not. Either way, he's been blessed with a wonderful place. In this place, he is also able to concentrate on what he loves to do most. Here he watches the Packers on Sunday afternoons (perhaps a love-hate relationship?). He's happy when pastors ask him to fill in for Sunday services. Here he is able to read and study and think – and *write*. He has taken upon himself the task of writing a complete Church history, from his own conservative Christian viewpoint, for the benefit of the layperson who wants to know more. How truly James G. Kiecker!

For what is history without the Word of God? It's a question that needs no answer, for there is no such thing. The two always go hand in hand. The life and ministry of Rev. Dr. James G. Kiecker shows this well. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

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Much of the information presented in this paper came from extensive personal interviewing with Rev. Dr. Kiecker on December 4 and 12, 2004 at Cedar River, MI, and Grafton, WI.