

Rev. Paul Wilde:
A Pastor Who Keeps Learning

1999 Senior Church History Project
Professor Brenner

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A Summary of Rev. Paul Wilde's pastoral ministry –

1952 – Graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, assigned to our mission in Tiffin, OH

1954 – Accepted call to our mission in Saginaw, MI, later organized as Bethany

1960 – Accepted call to St. John's, Hancock, MN

1965 – Accepted call to St. Paul's, Lake Mills, WI

1970 – Accepted call to Northwestern Lutheran Academy, Mobridge, SD as professor and Dean of Students

1979 – Accepted call to Salem, Escanaba, MI

1994 – Retired from full-time pastoral ministry

Pastor Paul Wilde has faced many challenges in his ministry, yet he has maintained a positive attitude and has kept learning. He has a true pastor's heart for the Lord's work and for the Lord's people. Two things that Pastor Wilde has learned are interconnected. First of all, recognizing when something needs to be done and following through with a plan of action. Secondly, the ability to know when someone else's gifts and abilities might be what's needed. One such case was his decision to accept the call to serve St. John's in Hancock, Minnesota. Pastor Wilde states, "Fall came (in 1960 in Saginaw) and I didn't have an adult information class. No one was ready to come even though I had worked just as hard as other years. So it seemed it was time for someone else." While he thought someone else might be needed in Saginaw, he felt even more strongly that he was needed in Hancock, Minnesota. The congregation had suffered the loss of their pastor and about ten percent of the congregation to the Church of the Lutheran Confessions. A long vacancy ensued. So as Pastor Wilde states, "It was time for somebody to answer that call. That's one of a couple times when I said, 'Somebody ought to do something.' Right now they're asking you to do it. You just said, 'Somebody ought to do something.' How about being that somebody?"

Pastor Paul Wilde has some words of advice that every Christian and every human being can follow. These words are not new, but they are tested and true. He said, "You prove you're

not old if you're still learning something every day. Then you're not old. So I think I'm not old yet." He gives this advice to young candidates for the ministry like myself. "You don't stop learning when you graduate from the seminary. You don't stop learning about people. You keep on learning and you keep on growing."

In my interview with Pastor Wilde, I perceived his love for his people. I also noticed his desire to learn about his people and learn to adapt to their way of thinking. Here are a few brief examples. In Hancock, Minnesota he learned to drink his coffee black. It was sort of a practical matter as well as a local custom. He didn't want to make the hostess run back to get cream or sugar for his coffee, so he learned to drink it black. He also spoke of the possibilities of Christians working together in spite of their differences of opinion. There were two farmers who lived across the road from each other. One was the county chairman of the Young Republicans and the other was the county chairman of the Young Democrats. Yet they were unified in serving their congregation and in their willingness to serve their country.

One more illustration of learning from the challenges of differences of opinion in Hancock was a vote to change the width of the aisle and the pews. There was gridlock with the vote at something like 22-22. Instead of splitting the congregation, the motion was simply tabled. Then, it was brought up again after a few months, at which time it was decisive one way or the other.

Through the split with Missouri, Pastor Wilde learned personally of the heartache of which Professor Meyer lamented concerning the Protes'tant controversy. The situation in Hancock, (in which the previous pastor left to join the CLC), split families. But Pastor Wilde learned many valuable lessons from that ordeal. He noted,

Satan is winning victories at times like that. We really have to work hard to make sure he doesn't win too many more by putting hatred into our hearts and angry words in our mouths. It's not particularly fun to talk about the 50's and their impact on the situation in Hancock. It split families there. We can't yield to sadness. But God can make use of that to be careful not to cause unnecessary sadness.

Through all the challenges he faced, Pastor Wilde learned, but he also grew ever stronger in his faith. "You become more and more convinced that the Gospel is relevant and has something to say to people."

Though much is expected of pastors, Pastor Wilde learned his limits as to how much he could do. But it's amazing to learn just how much one man can do. Pastor Wilde had tremendous responsibilities as pastor of St. Paul's in Lake Mills, WI. In fact, there was so much work that shortly after he left, two men were needed to continue the work. One year he had 46 private communions during Holy Week. That's a busy man! But he had his limits. So after five years he accepted a call to serve as Dean of Students at Northwestern Lutheran Academy in Mobridge, South Dakota.

At least Pastor Wilde knew who was to be the focus of his attention at Mobridge—the students. And boy did he focus on the students. His voice beamed with joy as he spoke of the family atmosphere of the school, including the cooperation of the faculty, the experience of worshipping together as one big family, and the spiritual maturation of the young members of the family. Every September the faculty noted how immature the ninth graders seemed. But by the time they graduated four years later, the students had matured so much that the faculty was left wondering, "How will we get along without them? They are so reliable. We count on them for so much. Next year is going to be terrible without them!"

But Pastor Wilde faced challenges as well, including how to push the right buttons to motivate the students. Sometimes the students also needed discipline from their dean. When they did, Pastor Wilde disciplined them in a firm, fair manner. Instead of acting on impulse on the spur of the moment, he met with the student the following day to discuss their inappropriate conduct. Pastor Wilde “let them stew and let their friends commiserate with them about how much trouble they were in, and some of those friends would say how foolish they were. By one o’clock in the afternoon I didn’t have any belligerent kids. Silence makes its point too.” This also gave Pastor Wilde time to cool down. He very succinctly stated, “When you have anger it’s not the time to impose what discipline ought to be. You can be a judge when you’re angry, but you can’t be disciplined.”

Pastor Wilde taught the students at NLA to learn not only from their own mistakes, but also from the sins of other students. When accused of being unfair by a student, Pastor Wilde responded, “You weren’t being fair. You didn’t learn that this behavior is not acceptable, so you’re getting four weeks (of being confined to campus) instead of two. I want you to learn and your friends to learn that this conduct is not acceptable. And if someone doesn’t learn from you, they’ll get six weeks.”

Pastor Wilde has learned so much from working with youth throughout his ministry. For leaders working with today’s youth, Pastor Wilde has some timeless advice, “Remember, these are children of God. Remember what you expect children of God to be—subject to temptation, and capable of great things with God’s help!”

Pastor Wilde realizes that today’s youth are the future workers in the Lord’s church. As a pastor, and especially as dean, he felt that recruiting was part of his work. This zeal for recruiting is tempered by his realism that not everyone is suited for the public ministry. He asserts, “It takes

something more than our thinking that this would be an ideal candidate. I don't want to send anybody out to a congregation who's had his arm twisted behind his back so bad that the congregation is served by a one-armed pastor or a one-armed teacher. It's up to the Holy Spirit to move hearts so that we have workers."

Finally, the Lord shapes and molds his workers by what they have learned – not only from success, but also from failure. I'd say Pastor Wilde has learned quite a bit. He reflects,

My first congregation didn't grow. I did the best I can. Somebody else will have to make it grow after that. My second congregation grew. I'd better not get too proud. It grew with somebody else too. Either way, it was the Lord. You will embarrass once in a while. Pick yourself up and keep going. After all, what did you think you were? Perfect? Never make a mistake? That isn't going to happen. Don't give up and don't quit. Don't quit learning!