

The Lord Prepares His Servant, Robert J. Voss

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The Lord Prepares His Faithful Servant, Robert J. Voss

It has been said that his heart pumped black and red blood through his veins. As I moseyed up to the door of his Watertown residence lugging my video-equipment, I couldn't help but to notice the "NWC" license plate on the minivan parked in the garage. Having been greeted at the door, I nearly stumbled over some strange object. Upon further examination, I noticed that it was a "NWC" yarn covered doorstep. I then followed the President Emeritus into his office, where a small shrine of NWC memorabilia was proudly displayed above his desk. East of his desk rested a chair with the NWC seal inscribed across the back. It was from this chair that President Emeritus Robert J. Voss answered my questions on Wednesday afternoon April 14, 1999.

President Voss loved Northwestern. He grew up on the campus. He attended the Prep school and the College. He began his ministry there as a tutor, and his full-time ministry concluded there as President. But far more noticeable than the black and red blood that supposedly runs through his veins is the love for his Savior, who bought him with holy precious blood. President Voss's deep appreciation for the message of the gospel is what moved him to be totally committed to the task of training workers for the church. He always kept the big picture in mind, while thoroughly organizing and planning the hosts of minute details that had to be accomplished to complete the task at hand.

The task at hand was a difficult one at Northwestern. Voss came in as an outsider. He came into a school that had the long history of being a faculty run school, and he intended to make it a President run school. This is the type of administration that he knew from his experience and his education as being the best for the educational

system of the WELS. He gave it everything he had. He was a demanding leader of the school and asked that they do the same. This was not difficult for them to do though. One of his former colleagues stated, “his willingness to work and his dedication was contagious.”

President Voss spent the majority of his ministry as Administrator Voss. Spending 17 years as Executive Secretary for the Board of Higher Education thoroughly familiarized Voss with the worker training system of the WELS. He was well known as being an administrator who was “outstandingly well organized and admirably prompt in attending to the host of details that fall to the BME office,” as Prof. Panning stated. He had the habit of answering letters the same day he received them. He put out an extraordinary amount of work. Those who worked with him in meetings said that he was always exceptionally prepared. He knew where he was going and how he hoped to get there.

These were difficult years in the realm of synod administration. Budget considerations made Coordinating Council meetings tug-o-war sessions between the three major areas of the Synod, worker-training, home missions and world missions. Voss was a strong fighter for his division. He did not easily give up on reaching his goals. Of course, this is how goals are reached. Even though Voss was a strong fighter for his division, he always kept the big picture of kingdom balance in mind. He even wrote a paper on the subject. Keeping kingdom balance in mind, the synod as a whole grew by leaps and bounds in all three of these branches during these years.

But even before Voss was Administrator, he was President of Milwaukee Lutheran Teachers College. Being placed in this position did much to prepare him for his

future work as Administrator. While he was at “the old WLC,” he went back to school to work toward a master’s degree in administration. These years supplied him with invaluable knowledge and experience for his future positions. Not only did he become thoroughly equipped to lead this school, but he had the opportunity and responsibility to thoroughly study the big picture of the Synod’s worker training program as he defended the school in its final days as a worker-training school.

Pastor Voss received training for his future positions as he served the large congregation of Siloah. Having learned much in the area of administration from his predecessor, he was thrust into that position when the head administrative pastor suddenly passed away.

At his first parish, Pastor Voss was thrust into the position of being on the chairman of the building committee of Winnebago Lutheran Academy.

His first assignment out of the Seminary was a call back to the Watertown campus to be a tutor. He had an early opportunity to touch the lives of future workers for the church as they were in school. He had the opportunity to touch their lives just as his had been guided and directed by former Professors and students when he was hearing a call to a different type of service.

Finally, and firstly, there was his father, Pastor Luther Voss. Robert Voss was groomed from early on to be a fighter, backer of what you believe in and an encourager to future workers in the church.

This short paper does not include everything that I learned in this study. It does not include everyone that has been a major influence in Voss’s life, not the least of which

is his wife Carol. This paper is simply a short summary of what I have learned and I hope that gives an appropriate introduction to the video.

You may wonder why this paper is written in this order. Some would call it backwards. It is not because I wrote as the tape was being rewound in the V.C.R. It was in this opposite of chronological order that I researched the subject of my interview. Throughout the research, the interview and the study afterwards, I became convinced that I am not the only one who looked at President Voss in this same opposite of chronological order. It seems to me that our omniscient Lord was thinking ahead for the needs of our synod. He saw exactly what kind of man was needed in those positions at that time. He and only He knew precisely how to train a man to be fit for the task. May he do that with each and everyone of us. To God be all praise and glory!

The "Former Colleague of President Robert J. Voss" Survey

I sent out the following survey and received it back from:

Prof. Richard Balge
Rev. Norman Berg
Rev. Phil Kieselhorst
Prof. James Korthals
Rev. Daniel W. Malchow
Pres. Emeritus Carl Mischke
Prof. Armin Panning
Rev. William Zell

The "Former Colleague of President Robert J. Voss" Survey

What years did you work with President Voss? In what capacity?

What aspects of working with him were the most enjoyable? Least enjoyable?

What do you remember as being Pastor Voss's strengths as Exec. Sec. Or Pres. of NWC?

What would you consider some of his weaknesses?

What would you describe Pres. Voss's working relationship with his colleagues, students, and others?

What would you consider a "good" question(s) that one might ask Pres. Voss regarding his years as Executive Secretary or President of NWC?

What else (advice, more questions, stories) might help me in conducting my interview?

The Video

The original interview lasted 2 hours and 17 minutes. Some editing was necessary to fit the interview onto one tape for practical reasons. If anyone is ever interested in seeing a copy of the original full-length video, that will be in my hands. As you will notice as you watch the video, I am not a technological genius. Some of the questions were partly cut off in the editing process. I included a copy of the original questions for the interview so that you can follow along if you wish.

Original Interview Questions

Interview agenda:

- I. Introduction
- II. Biographical Information
- III. The ministry prior to 1970
- IV. Years as Administrator for the Board for worker training/Executive Secretary of the board for Higher Education
- V. NWC years (1987-1993)
- VI. The ministry after
- VII. Concluding remarks

Biographical Information

- 1) When and where were you born?
- 2) Please tell us a little about the Voss family – how would you describe your childhood/early years?
- 3) Your father, Pastor Luther Voss, was a “disciplinarian, pro-military, WELS chaplain to Vietnam, fitness advocate, backer of NWC sports programs, etc.” Do you see some of his influence in you? Care to share any anecdotes about encouraging letters written to you by your father?
- 4) You moved to the NW campus. What was it like growing up and living on that campus? How did that affect your future years?
- 5) How were you influenced to study towards the pastoral ministry? When did you know you wanted to become a pastor?
- 6) Can you see anything in your early years that may have prepared you for the work in education that became the biggest part of your life?

The ministry prior to 1963

- 1) What was your first call day like in 1950, as you were assigned as tutor at NWC? 2nd one?
- 2) 11 months after you became the first full-time assistant at Siloah, your father, Luther M. Voss, became your assistant in 1956. What was it like working with your father in the ministry?
- 3) How did the years at Faith in Fond du Lac and Siloah, Milwaukee prepare you for being involved in higher education for the rest of your full-time ministry?

WLC years:

- 1) From Pastor to President: This was a huge change in daily duties. Of your everyday assignments, which were the toughest, the most joyful, and/or the activities of a parish pastor that you most missed?
- 2) During these years in Milwaukee, you went back to school for a Master’s degree in Administration. How did this help you out in the future years?
- 3) Your heart was obviously very dear to WLC and its purpose in the future of the WELS. At the 1969 Synod Convention, you submitted “The Case for Wisconsin Lutheran College,” which was a final effort and study to save WLC. “Let us lengthen the chords; let us at the same time strengthen the stakes,” was the final line of that article. The Synod voted to close the school that year. How did this decision affect you at that time? What did you think about the decision 10 years later? Today?
- 4) A Church History paper that I read stated that you “planted the seed for the modern WLC,” by a comment in the 1969 Synod proceedings. What did you envision that school would be like today? What are your thoughts on how/where WLC now fits into the current pattern of WELS’ synodical life?

Years as Administrator for the Board for worker training/Executive Secretary of the board for Higher Education

- 1) You were the first full-time man in this position. Where did you begin?
- 2) What did you see as being the biggest challenge of that position?
- 3) These years brought about huge changes in the physical schools, administration, and curriculum. What do you see as being the biggest changes? What took up the majority of your time on a day to day basis?
- 4) Being in this position for about 17 years gave you the opportunity to work with a great number of people. Who were some of the people that you worked very closely with? How did they help your work?
- 5) What was most difficult about going from being a pastor to administrator?
- 6) The WELS was blessed with a great number of students preparing for the ministry during most of your years as administrator. And yet, those numbers did not keep rising, and now have fallen. The shortage that I heard so much of when I was in grade school is now here. What do you think are the main reasons for this?

NWC years

- 1) Is it true that being Northwestern's president was something you dreamed of?
- 2) Looking back, which of the positions did you enjoy more, Administrator or President?
- 3) Many of my classmates want to know the answer to this question: Of all the many speeches that you heard over the many years, which one sticks out in your mind as being the most memorable?
- 4) How was this office different than as President of WLC, many years earlier?
- 5) Once again, you were put in a position to defend your school. On April 25, 1978, the Commission on Higher Education put out this alternative:

Alternative #4a

A. The joint prep school at Watertown

B. The joint college at New Ulm

Comments:

1. This is unacceptable because it in effect destroys MLA.
2. It does not solve the basic necessity for continuing a viable preparatory system.
3. It combines a terminal and a non-terminal college, which could have deleterious effects.
4. It destroys a tradition which the Synod at large is not likely to accept.

What happened to these concerns over the next 15 years?

- 6) Amalgamation: NWC & MLPS were very close to you. MLC & LPS have been in existence for 4 years now. What were your feelings at the time that the decision was made? Has your perspective or feelings about the amalgamation changed in that time or only become more solidified?
- 7) A former colleague said, "These were not the easiest of times." Any comments?
- 8) What are some regrets, if any, you have when you look back at your years as Executive Secretary or President of NWC? What was your biggest accomplishment?

The ministry after

- 1) From President of NWC to planting a mission and teaching English in Russia was quite a switch. How did you adapt? What new things did you have to learn?
- 2) What have you enjoyed most about your opportunities to serve abroad?
- 3) Now you are the vacancy Pastor at Trinity, Watertown. What differences do you see in the ministry now, from your years at Faith and Siloah?
- 4) One of your former colleagues said, "there was a time when he almost seemed to be on a campaign trying to "civilize" WELS pastors and students into being more considerate and respectful with their wives and women in general." Where do you think WELS clergy stand today in its attitude toward wives and women in general? Has there been any progress in the last decade or two?
- 5) Your wife, Carol, has served for many years as a teacher for children who are retarded. Could you give us a brief description of her work and tell us how she has been an asset to your ministry?
- 6) It's been said that, next to marrying Carol, hiring Ruth Rogahn was one of the best moves you ever made. Would you care to comment on either of those good choices?

Concluding remarks

- 1) In ten years, when someone interviews you again and asks you, "What do you remember and cherish most about your ministry," what will you answer?
- 2) God has bestowed many blessings upon the ministerial program of our Wisconsin Synod. Which rank at the top of your list?
- 3) What would be your prime suggestions for addressing the current shortage of workers in the preaching ministry?
- 4) If you had the attention of the entire WELS right now, what encouragement would you give as we enter the 21st Century?

(Thanks, closing remarks)

*The following is a brief biography. Most of which is from the service folder of his 40th Anniversary in the Ministry. I added the final paragraph.

President Robert J. Voss

Robert John Voss is the son of Rev. Luther and Mrs. Magdalene Voss (Berndt). His father was the first person called to be a civilian chaplain for the Wisconsin Synod. He ministered as a chaplain in Vietnam. Both parents have joined the Lord in glory.

President Voss received his elementary education at Good shepherd Lutheran School in West Allis, WI. In 1939 he moved to NW campus. After graduating from NPS in 1943, he enrolled at NWC, graduating in 1947. He became a candidate of theology in 1950 when he graduated from the Seminary.

Upon graduation from WLS, he spent a year, 50-51, as tutor at NWC. He also served as prep football coach. After that year, he was assigned to be pastor at Faith Lutheran Church in Fond du Lac, WI, ministering there from 51-55. In 55 Siloah Lutheran Church of Milwaukee, WI called him to be pastor. He remained at Siloah until 63. From 63-70 he served as president of WLC. In the 60's he completed the course of work for a doctor's degree. At the closing of WLC in 1970, the synod called him to be Administrator for the Board for Worker Training. He served in that capacity for seventeen years (1970-1987). In the fall of 1986, he accepted the call to become the sixth president of NWC. He began his work on this campus in July 1987.

On June 24, 1951, President Voss married Carol L. nee Holz of Milwaukee. She has served as a teacher of children who are retarded. The Lord has blessed the Voss's with five children and 18 grandchildren. Richard (Susan) resides in Glendale, AR. David (Lorry) is a teacher at Fox Valley Lutheran High School in Appleton, WI. Mark (Marie) serves as pastor in Aurora, CO. Carla (Gregory Dallmann) lives in Winchester, VA and Carolyn (Pastor Ross Henzi) makes her home in Brillion, WI.

President Voss retired on June 30, 1993. He spent 1 year in Russia planting a mission and teaching English. Since then he has assisted our Synods civilian chaplaincy program in Europe three times. In 1997 he received an honorary doctorate from WLC.