

The Vicar's Preparation in Pastoral Theology from the Supervisor's Viewpoint

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Introductory Remarks

Earlier this year I was asked if St. Thomas would request a vicar for the next year. My answer was that we would pass for a year, in hopes of by-passing the "dud" which the law of averages most certainly entitles us to after three very excellent vicars. In fact, our experience with vicars has been so positive that I hesitate to proceed any further with this assignment, for fear that the good thing we have going might somehow become derailed. St. Thomas is looking forward to the arrival of our fourth vicar, who also, I might add, makes an excellent impression, based upon the limited contact we have had with him.

The title above suggests at least two different approaches. One might be: "What kind of job did the Seminary do in pastoral theology training before sending out the vicars." The other might be: "What can the supervisor do during the vicar year to deepen and further that foundation in pastoral theology." What I propose to do here is make some general observations regarding the first, and then become somewhat more detailed in order to demonstrate what we try to do during the vicar's year of service to build upon the Seminary's foundation in pastoral theology. In this latter section, I shall attempt to follow the same basic categories utilized by Prof. David Valleskey in his presentation.

How Is the Sem Doing?

It is amazing to me each year how much more our Seminary students know today, than we knew as Sem students almost two decades ago. The only qualifier I will offer is that we have had only three vicars to date, but each of them has been a real blessing to our congregation and to me as supervisor. Each in his own way, and in keeping with his special gifts from God, has made a lasting impression upon the ministry and service of our congregation. To a man they have understood very thoroughly their role as assistant to the pastor, and for those who have not had the same experience, it is not because the vicars have not been taught and told what their assignment is. It's really neat to sit and discuss with them the Scriptural principles which apply to everyday situations in congregational life. Their knowledge of the Bible is deep and they look to that Word as the only Source of doctrine and direction in life generally, and especially in the life of the ministry. I could go on at quite some length of just this subject, but in recognition of that fact that we of the WELS are not very proficient at the giving and receiving of accolades, I will cease and desist. But not before thanking you, our brothers in ministry here at the Sem, for a job well done.

I have heard a very limited number of horror stories regarding vicars down through the years. But then, as one who has been on the other side of the desk for quite some time now, there are also those stories which unfold on our side of the ministry as well. Even papers such as "Misfits In The Ministry" have not solved the problem. Frankly, there will be no total solution this side of heaven, and the best that we can hope to do as a result of seminars of this type is to bind even more tightly on the basis of the Word the chains which that Houdini called Satan is so adept at breaking out of. How sad each of these instances is in an age in the Lord's Church when the ministry does not seem to be held in the high esteem that it once was.

If you will permit me, I would like to make several more observations of a general nature. These are the result of watching the "finished product" of the Seminary in the early stages of full-time ministry. Our part of the country gets its fair share of candidates, and several trends are of concern to me. If we think that our recent students know more than we did as rookies, apparently some of them think so also. In spite of repeated pleas and invitations to get together for consultation and discussion, there are some who insist on forging ahead with their own programs. Very often it comes across as grinding their own axes, and often into the teeth and eyes of

those whom they are called to serve. It's almost as if the mentality is gaining momentum that if you don't get things changed right now, it will never happen later. How glaring the contrast between this approach and that of the Master over against the Twelve during His ministry. His patience, without compromising the truth, astounds me more and more as life goes on.

I can't ever be grateful enough for being surrounded by an I. G. Frey and an R.H. Zimmermann every single week of my ministry. When I think back to some of the stupid questions which they so willingly fielded during those early years, and in recent times also, I hurt all the more for those who isolate themselves from the brethren while trying to do the work of the ministry in the vacuum of a walled in fortress. If I can convince each vicar of the urgency of this one thing, I am convinced that they will have captured the essence of post-graduate instruction. Whether it be in a recreational setting or a study setting the Church of our Lord could be advanced mightily by the cultivation of cross-consultation meetings among the co-laborers in any given area of the Synod. What do you do in your area to promote this concept? Am I alone in sensing that our various conferences are no longer as effective as they once were for promoting this kind of "germinating" and brother to brother exchange? If this is the case, what other forum could be developed to revive it? (Not ANOTHER meeting!)

A seasoned old veteran of our Synodical ranks once observed: "As long as you can get along with people, you can even preach false doctrine and get away with it!" We can excuse the facetious nature of his conclusion by citing the cynicism of experience, but we dare not forget those first words: "As long as you can get along with people." Seminary professors may have forgotten this dimension to the ministry, since they've been away from people for so long! Seriously, to the same degree that certain students literally drive you up the walls, to that same degree are there still people out in the congregations who do the same! Here again, I could not have made it without the aid and comfort of brothers in the ministry. So often the very people I simply could not stand any longer turned out to be very normal after I dumped my poison on a long-suffering brother. Not to have done so would have kept the poison inside until it finally came pouring out with all the destructive force of its venomous bile. As we grow older, we begin to appreciate even more the Savior's approach to people pressures. There is still a need to do what the Word records that Jesus did: "He departed again into a mountain Himself alone," (John 6:15b) Meditation and prayer are principal ingredients in "getting along with people," as God would have us do that in the ministry.

Having made some rather sweeping and general remarks about the "finished product" of our Sem in the early stages of ministry, I have not forgotten that we are talking about the vicars of just over a year ago! I can only hope and pray that what we are doing reflects what we are saying and teaching, because, otherwise, I am not a little uncomfortable with the indictment against supervising pastors. It all comes back to a comment from President Mischke in the last president's Newsletter. He welcomed the newly-trained workers to our side of the desk, with the reminder to all of us that we do everything possible to facilitate this time of tremendous transition in their lives.

What Can the Supervisor Do?

Under this portion of the paper I shall attempt to spell out what I do with each vicar in order to further his foundation and training in pastoral theology. It might be helpful to know that St. Thomas is a small congregation (just over 400 communicants) and a very young congregation (18 years as of July 30th). These two factors, plus geography, mobility, and time away from the congregations because of involvement with the Board for World Missions, might all contribute to make this approach somewhat different from that of others. At any rate, what do I do?

Arriving in Phoenix in the dog days of August tends to be somewhat of a shock to the system, unless the brain has previously been fried in the heat! August hits the Monsoon Season dead in the middle, and we can't even hide behind the "dry heat" explanation or excuse. As a result I have tended to start rather slowly with the vicars, giving them as much encouragement as they need those first days and weeks to hide behind the refrigerated comfort of the apartment. Then, for about the first four to six weeks, we try to follow the "shadow

plan.” I simply ask that they be available to accompany me on a daily basis as I go about the routine work of the church. By routine I mean visitation of guests at worship, visitation of patients in the hospitals and nursing homes, preparation of bulletins and newsletters, youth Confirmation and Adult Information. Phoenix is a sprawling community, so there is ample time to talk and get to know the vicar between stops along the way. It also helps them to familiarize themselves with the street patterns and landmarks of our Valley.

We also spend time those first weeks planning the preaching schedule. We aim for the last Sunday in September to begin with, and then approximately once a month thereafter, adjusted to my times out of town as needed. Even though this will probably be covered elsewhere in this seminar, I also assign lesson preparation for Sunday School teachers to the vicar as an on-going assignment. Not only do they prepare the teachers, but they also cut their teeth in consultation with me on the recruitment and training of new candidates for teaching. Mobility in Phoenix can alter the composition of a congregation our size by 10 to 15 percent per year on the average. That fact, plus the increasing number of working wives, makes this a sizeable task, and an on-going one, in our area.

As one who entered the ministry never having attended a Church Council meeting or a congregational Voters’ Assembly, (the experience of our past vicars has not been all that different) I encourage the vicar’s presence at every such meeting, and also at the meetings of the various boards and committees as well. We are attempting to implement a program which consolidates monthly meetings into one evening. The various boards and committees meet from 6:30 to 7:30 or 8:00 P.M., and then the Church Council representative from each board carries the report to the full Church Council beginning at 7:30 or 8:00 P.M. With a number of meetings in progress simultaneously, the vicar and I move from one to another as time allows. I wish I could say that it works better than it sounds, but we are still in the process of working out the bugs. At any rate, I hope that attendance at these various meetings of the congregation will give our vicars a jump over my floundering and fumbling beginnings way back when.

As time goes on, I begin to work the vicar into the various phases of the work, beginning with the conducting of devotions in hospitals and nursing homes. For a while we continue to work together, but eventually we begin to split the route and alternate visits from week to week. As we become better acquainted with time and experience, it becomes much easier to speak about the pluses and minuses of what takes place. In time other duties are added to the work schedule as consultation, experience and willingness indicate. I can’t speak for the vicars, but from my perspective, before I know it, the year is over, and the process begins all over again. So far, it has been an exciting experience each step of the way with each vicar, and I am grateful to God for the privilege, and grateful to you for your teaching, training, and preparation of the vicars before they arrive.

What Can the Supervisor Do - *Specifically*?

How does one measure the scope of pastoral theology? Even though preaching and teaching are not involved directly, how can they take place except from a perspective of pastoral theology? Raw sounds, in the absence of personality, involvement, and yes, emotion, rightly understood, are not the way of God. What we do in contact after contact with God’s people, how we act in the context of their problems and their progresses spiritually, definitely affects not only what we say, but how we say it as well. From that perspective we will now touch upon some of the specifics which were mentioned in Prof. Valleskey’s presentation, with the hope that they contribute something, and not merely repeat.

Counseling

Nothing overwhelmed me more in the early days of my ministry than the tangled snarls of people’s lives. Life was much simpler on the Indian Reservation than it ever was in the big city! Case histories and test examples from pastoral theology classes all but eluded me, it seemed, those first days and years in the saddle. As a beginning mission, with a mere handful of members, St. Thomas was plagued by a constant stream of petty personality squabbles, which in retrospect, were as much a component of size as anything. The missionary can

very easily become the designated referee in such squabbles, and you know what people think about referees, don't you? If the call goes your way, the guy is a pro. If, however, the call should go against you, even the organist chimes in with her rendition of "Three blind mice." With no structure in place, with no established and experienced Board of Elders, these can be trying times for the pastor as counselor! On the positive side, there are seldom very many serious counseling needs at this stage of a congregation's development, partly because of the closeness that exists among members and pastors, and partly because of the type of people who are attracted initially to beginning church work.

But then, God, in keeping with His promises, sends growth. And with growth comes a tremendous increase in the need for counseling. It is not merely a factor of numbers either. That initial closeness is lost, and lost with it is the cement that holds things together. By this time new members are becoming active in the administration of congregational life. They need guidance, and the "old guard" needs scratching and the constant reassurance that the whole operation is not going down the tubes, just because things are being done anymore the way they were in the "good old days." And then comes more growth. From where I sit, I wonder constantly how you men with larger congregations are able to survive it!

Thinking back on counseling through the years, I guess I would have to plead guilty to many and sundry mistakes. At first it seemed that every problem was so different from every other one that no common ground could be found. With time the common ground seemed to expand, until recently I told a trusted brother that there are only two problems in marriage: lack of commitment (quitting) and unfaithfulness. While looking over the balcony of the Holiday Hotel in Taipei, Taiwan he said, "There is only one problem in marriage, sex." Maybe so. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, and without taking the time to look up Luther's comments on the subject, I would again encourage that seeking the counsel of trusted brother in these matters is an essential of the ministry.

When it comes to counseling, we could spend the rest of this seminar belaboring the details of specific cases, and with 20/20 hindsight probably formulate some pretty terrific solutions. However, it wouldn't do us much good. We'd spend the rest of our ministry lying in wait, just to be able to have all the answers for once. But the identical situation would not likely come up. Much better is the approach of the Seminary, which mirrors the Scriptures, and teaches principles grounded in the Word rather than technique and quicky solutions. Maricopa County, Arizona leads the nation in divorce statistics; so maybe this is why I tend to think of marriage in connection with counseling. The publication of *The Shepherd Under Christ* was a tremendous help to me in this area of my ministry. What a blessing that our vicars have access to it before, during, and long after their year of service. What a tremendous tool to share between supervisor and vicar as the continual stream of problems in this area cuts its path through the vicar's year of experience. If nothing else, the vicar should learn that much more time than he would like during his ministry will be devoted to this and other kinds of counseling.

Pre-Marital Training

A number of years ago at our Arizona Pastoral Conference I delivered a paper on pre-marital counseling. Rumor has it that the two vicars who were in our area that year carried it back for their final year at the Sem, and "borrowed" heavily from the contents for a paper in PT! Further rumor has it that they both aced the paper! You probably know why I haven't ever tried to verify the rumors, right? With my luck, either the first rumor would prove false, or the second. Seriously, no one questions the desirability of as much training as possible from God's Word in preparation for marriage. When you stop to think that there are precious few applicants still around where both spouses to be have had the same father and mother since birth. If this sounds like an exaggeration, just think back over the past few years of your ministry. What a disadvantage these young couples face as they begin their life together. Maybe my optimism is unfounded, but of late I sense a change in the making. Recent applicants for marriage have been much more receptive to training than couples were five and ten years ago. I pray that this is a trend, but I guess only time will tell.

The approach I take in this area is to arrange a series of meetings with the couple, and I try to include the vicar a number of times along the way. Unfortunately, the desired number is often short-circuited and reduced by time constraints and scheduling difficulties. Ideally, there are a minimum of three meetings; one to finalize details and arrangements for the Wedding Service itself, one to work through the Scriptural principles regarding marriage, and the final a kind of practical nuts and bolts discussion of money matters, communications and a host of other considerations. I am sure that practice will vary as much in this area as in any other, and possibly much of the difference is related to time and sheer numbers. The only other observation I share with the vicars is that there always seems to be goodly number of people who seem to be so much in “love” during the proceedings, that it is doubtful that very much sinks in during the pre-marital training. I have often wondered if some sort of post-marital program might be more beneficial. Rather than develop a special section on the wedding service itself, I will just say that I try to involve the vicar in a number of weddings throughout the year, from the first counseling through the service itself.

Stewardship

A candidate who happens to be assigned to an exploratory mission is not the one to address this subject. When only a handful of families comprise the nucleus, it is easy not to have a formal stewardship program. Then, as God grants growth, especially if it is substantial, it is relatively easy to come out at the end of the year. In those early years there were often twice as many shooting for the goal as there were setting the program in January. This tends to cultivate a false security, and an attitude that it will all work out anyway by the end of the year. Ending 1981 almost \$40,000.00 “in the soup” proved to be tremendous reality therapy for St. Thomas. The vicars started coming in 1982, so all three to date have been involved in one program or another. There will also be more this Fall for the new vicar, the way things look, and even if we were ahead at this point, which we are not, he would be involved anyway. My mistake was to coast along with “home spun” programs during the boom years, only to see now, at least partially, what we lost to inflation and deflation along the way. But we’re working on it, and the vicars are learning with us. We have used them for group meetings, cottage meetings, and home visitations, by having them make the presentation to a group of people of their own age and circumstances. It has been a blessing for us as a congregation, and hopefully, also for the vicar and his wife.

How unfortunate that stewardship has such an uncomfortable sound to the ears of so many in the WELS. Is it because we only hear it when we’re behind the eight ball? Or is it because too many of us as pastors wallow in the old refrain: “My people can’t do anymore?” Perhaps if we substituted the word “God’s” for the word “my”, we’d choke on the remainder of that old song title. I wonder what “my people” would think if I decided for them, without telling them anything, what they could or could not do! Granted, it was much easier to “up” the Synod offering during the boom years than it has been of late. But on a percentage basis it went up anyway, just with normal program growth for home purposes. Where push really comes to shove is when there is not enough at year’s end to square up. For us at St. Thomas this came to \$18,500.00 for Synod in 1981. There was pressure to “write it off.” It took until this year, 1985, but this year the first installment of that 1981 deficit is budgeted for pay back. Have patience with us, and we will pay thee all.!” I can only hope that as our vicars become aware of this, they will not think that their future congregations are at the upper limits of their capability, at least not so long as we are attempting to fund the WELS program for an average of 80 per communicant per week!

Administration

I alluded to this phase of pastoral theology before, so let me simply capsule by saying that we have the vicars sit in on as many meetings as possible. Nothing beats involvement. Even back at my Sem days, men like Pastor Karl Krauss and Raymond Zimmermann included me in their post meeting discussions. The entire Saginaw Faculty included me as one of their own during the entire tutor year there. Both years as counselor at the now defunct Milwaukee Lutheran Teachers College, affectionately known as “chicken little college”

provided many opportunities to just sit and talk with the likes of President Robert Voss and many others. In every case administration came to life. Far from being just numbers and necessary paper work, it became the means whereby we serve God and reach people with His message of salvation. I might also add that our world missionaries can't thank us enough, after sitting in on one of our meetings during their furlough, for the privilege of seeing the kingdom in action. And I hate meetings! But hopefully, in our little corner of the kingdom, our vicars can get a taste of the tremendous privileges and opportunities which our God showers upon us for service in His Church. What an army of eager volunteers stands ready, waiting to be trained and equipped to shoulder these opportunities with us! "Use your people," I tell the vicars. They will always be God's greatest resource!

Evangelism

Now that we have Professor David Valleskey here at the Sem, it will be nice to have the vicars come out to the congregations and train us in this area! Seriously, I look forward to the arrival of our new vicar, because I am convinced that God will further His Church through the redoubled efforts on the part of all of us to promote this skill. This is not to say that there was no emphasis before this. All three of our vicars have slotted right in with our standing committee on Evangelism, making visitations in our neighborhood on a weekly basis. Each has been an inspiration to our people as they engage themselves in this outreach activity. Phoenix participated in a Mass Media Outreach program earlier this year. As of the last consultation with the area pastors, there is still no tangible evidence of the success of that program, but the awareness of our people was enhanced greatly as a result. Historically, St. Thomas has not had an organized Evangelism program on an ongoing basis. Our growth through the years came primarily as the result of members who brought friends with them. Significantly, it was often newly-confirmed members who brought friends. We are working more and more into this area, and I'm sure I'll leave this seminar with even more inspiration and ability to equip in this area also.

Church Discipline

Just this evening our vicar joined me for a one hour session with a twelve year old girl and her ten year old brother. The television program "Eight Is Enough" makes for good entertainment, some people think, but it can be devastating in real life. He brings his kids, she adds hers, they throw in one or more as "ours" and the war starts. This is occurring more and more, and even after extended discussions in pre-marital counseling about the mountains to be climbed in this area, no one seems to remember the discussions when the bottom falls out two years later. Here it is, Tuesday, July 30th, and I have to go meet with the parents of these kids when Dad gets home at 10:00 P.M. What will I tell them? It's headed for divorce. The mother is an adult confirmand of ten years ago. Her husband left her with three children. She remarried a man with three children, and consequently he was instructed and confirmed. Only God will be able to mend the torn and tattered edges in the lives of these eight blood-bought souls. We pray constantly that He do so.

In this area I move very slowly with the vicars each year. Either I'm doing something wrong, or I ought to write the book on unusual discipline cases. In the discussion which follows I will no doubt look to you for direction and advice in some of these matters. It will be "old hat" to my neighbor, Pastor David Gray, who is here, because we have spent hours already trying to sort through some of them. Two more areas in the matter of discipline are of growing concern to me.

First, has any one else been threatened with law suits lately? In the past two years attorneys have been consulted as a result of meetings which have taken place between our Elders and members under discipline. Fortunately, at least as of yesterday when I left, nothing has come of these. But, more and more, this is becoming the order of the day. What are you doing to combat the trend? Is it showing up in other parts of the country also? To my knowledge, every court action in the country to date has been resolved in favor of the churches involved, or else they remain under appeal. But, where will it all lead? Church Mutual now offers

“mal-practice” insurance, and we have it, but how good would it be under a test? Your thoughts will be appreciated.

The second concern is with the subject of abuse, be it wife, or child, or sexual, or otherwise. Arizona now has a statute which makes it mandatory for clergy and teachers to report any evidences of abuse to the local authorities. The legislation abrogates any concept of confidentiality, not only to pastors and teachers, but to the personnel of emergency rooms, day care centers, and psychiatric practices. One of our area churches is currently torn apart, a house divided, over this very issue at present. It appears to me that this is going to be the cause of the 1980's, and when I return to Phoenix I will be counseling a young father in our congregation who is out on bail, after being reported for child abuse as a result of spanking his son in the front yard of the house for watering the lawn with his biological sprinkler. A number of parents have been grilled almost mercilessly in the emergency room of hospitals after an accident involving one of the children. What are the trends in this area in other parts of the country?

Afterthoughts

Have you ever had the feeling that you didn't do your job? That you missed the point? That you should have persisted even more vehemently in your contention when this paper was assigned that some one with more experience should undertake it? Well, I have, and after looking back over the above almost interminable verbiage, I have resolved to enjoy the last vicar you will ever assign to me to the fullest!