

The Training of a Lutheran Pastor

**An Interview with Pastor Marvin Putz
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Pastor Marvin Putz officially retired from the pastoral ministry in 1993. This retirement soon turned into a semi-retirement as he served a congregation for another twelve years until he retired a second time in 2005 after more than fifty years in the public ministry. On December 2, 2006 Pastor Putz sat down for an interview to discuss his education as he grew up and prepared for his life as a minister of God's word.

"I'm very, very sure that there's not another pastor in the synod who is still living who has gone through what I did in elementary school." With these words Pastor Marvin Putz began our interview and introduced a rather unique grade school career. True to his words his very first day of school began in a very memorable way. It was the day after Easter, 1933. On Easter Sunday there had been a terrific snow storm, and his parents decided that Marvin and his older brother Leonard would not be going to school the next day. But Marvin had his heart set on attending his first day of kindergarten and after some pleading and a few tears his parents decided that they would attempt the 3.3 mile trip from home to the little country school in Eagle Valley, WI. They hitched up a team of horses to the manure sled, covered the bottom with straw, wrapped up little Marvin and his brother and set out down the road. Marvin still remembers the snow rolling up over the front of the sled into the box where he and his brother were bundled up as they glided over the road to school.

Over the next two years each day Marvin and his brother would hitch up a pony to a cart and travel along that same dirt road. Pastor Putz can still recall the sound of the pony's hoofs plopping through the mud on a rainy day. There was an old barn at school where the pony would stay during the class day, content to nibble on the hay that the boys brought over about once a month. The pony died after two years of service and for the next few years the brothers had to find alternate means of transportation. By seventh grade Marvin's older brother had graduated and Marvin had a new traveling companion, his younger brother Merlin. He also had acquired a new ride to school, a bicycle. It took some imagination to turn the bicycle into a two passenger vehicle, but the two brothers were up to the task. They nailed a pad from a horse collar on the back of the bike. Merlin would ride on the back as Marvin peddled to school. A person may often hear the story, "We had to go two miles to school every

day and it was uphill both ways.” Pastor Putz comments that this wasn’t the case with him, rather he remembers neighbors commenting on the strength of his legs as he carted his brother up and yes, even down the hills on the way to and from school each day.

Eagle Valley School was located in Eagle Valley, WI about 9 miles north of Fountain City. About 18-24 students attended the school and were instructed by four teachers. One teacher was from the local Catholic church and the other three were from Marvin’s home church, St. Michael’s Lutheran Church in Fountain City. These teachers did not have any influence on Marvin toward the pastoral ministry as the concentration in the elementary years was simply on learning the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic. However Pastor Putz recalls that all four of these teachers were very good and two of them in particular were highly respected by him and the community.

Catechism instruction began in 8th grade. Classes were held in a small room scattered with a few desks in the upper level of the parsonage. Pastor Herbert Nommensen had a fairly interactive teaching style requiring the students to answer many questions and to analyze passages. Their textbooks included a red Missouri Synod catechism, which Pastor Putz also used for the first two years of his own ministry, as well as a Bible history textbook. Catechism classes continued during the year following his graduation from elementary school. It was during this year that Marvin took a year off from school to help out his father and brother on the farm. In those days it was not at all unusual for a farmer’s kids to stay home rather than continue on to high school. That fall Marvin did much of the field work as his father and older brother worked on putting in a basement under part of the house.

During his year off from school catechism instruction continued and on March 29th, 1942 Marvin was confirmed. Pastor Putz recalls a rather humorous incident from the service that day. Pastor Nommensen had instructed the confirmands to follow him out of the church at the end of the service. About midway through the service Pastor Nommensen got up and walked down the middle aisle on his way to the balcony to sing in the choir. Normally the pastor would walk around the outside of the church, but it was particularly rainy that day and he changed his route in order to stay dry. When Marvin’s classmates saw the pastor walking down the middle aisle six of the nine confirmands got up and followed

him out. Only Marvin and the two classmates he could hold down with his arms remained in the pew. The other six, realizing their mistake, asked the usher, Marvin's father, what they should do. He simply told them, "Well go back in and sit down where you belong."

After confirmation Marvin's educational career took another turn. Those were the days of World War II, and a family with two healthy farm boys at home could fully expect at least one of them would be drafted. As the boys grew older it became more and more likely that one of them would be off to war. Marvin's father decided to allow him to return to school in fall of 1942. He thought that perhaps by the time he was finished with school the war would be over and neither of them would have to be drafted. His freshman year he attended Fountain City High School, boarding with a lady from St. Michael's congregation who had a son in the navy. Fountain City, however, did not offer FFA, the farmer's course, so the following year Marvin transferred to the high school in the neighboring town of Cochrane. After his sophomore year at Cochrane Marvin decided that the farmer's course was an easy "A", but he was not getting anything out of it. So with his father's permission he dropped the course.

It was during his junior year that the Holy Spirit led Marvin to make the decision to pursue the pastoral ministry. Pastor Nommensen, whom Marvin highly respected, greatly influenced him in making this decision. He shared with him the many joys of the pastoral ministry and encouraged him to think about continuing on in his education. Marvin recalls thinking over pastor Nommensen's words one day as he walked through the woods to a neighboring valley to catch the bus to school and deciding that the public ministry was the way the Lord would have him serve. The summer after his junior year in Cochrane Pastor Nommensen began talking with Marvin's parents about the ministry as well, and it was decided that he would continue on in his education the next year at Northwestern Preparatory School.

Marvin came to Watertown in the fall of 1945. From the very beginning it became apparent that the course of study at Northwestern would be much more intense than the classes he was used to in public school. Even though he already had three years of high school he was scheduled to graduate in two years after his quintaner and quartaner years in order to catch up with the other students in the areas of German and Latin. This proved to be quite an arduous task. Marvin worked very hard and even stayed in the

dorms both years during Thanksgiving break in order to study. Through it all Pastor Putz recalls that Dean Waldamar Pless was a great help to him. He understood that Marvin did not have the same Bible training as many of the students who had gone through parochial grade school and a number of years at Northwestern Prep. Marvin was very impressed by Dean Pless and appreciated his patience and understanding.

There is very little difference between the curriculum of the Wisconsin Synod's preparatory schools today and that of Northwestern Preparatory School in the 1940's. The main difference noted by Pastor Putz was the lack of electives at that time. When a student came to Northwestern they told him, "Here are your classes," and that was it. There were no choices to be made. Although a number of electives are offered at the preparatory schools today the stress remains getting deep into the word of God. This stress on the word of God is the obvious difference noted by Pastor Putz between his public and parochial educations. As he looks back on his years at Northwestern Preparatory School he realizes that at times he felt "woefully inadequate" concerning biblical knowledge. At times during in his ministry he felt that the years of Christian education he missed out on in grade school and early high school prevented him from having the location of certain passages at his fingertips. He strongly encourages anyone thinking about entering the pastoral ministry to attend one of the preparatory schools or an area Lutheran high school.

Pastor Putz also sees some advantages to his early public school education. He comments that in public school you are living in the world in the sense that you see a different philosophy that you don't see at the preparatory schools. The "how am I going to succeed in this life" attitude dominates while the spiritual is completely ignored. This fact helped him realize the importance of the word of God. His appreciation for his parents grew as well as he saw how hard they worked in order to get him and his siblings to church. His parents made sacrifices that Pastor Putz admits he isn't sure that he would have been able to make for his own children. Throughout his life his parents instilled in him, "There's one thing important in your life, and that's your spiritual life."

After a year off and five full years of high school Marvin was more than ready to move on to college. Although he moved up to an institution of higher learning he didn't move far, but remained on campus in Watertown at Northwestern College. His freshman year began in the fall of 1947 not long after Northwestern had recently returned from a year round schedule to a fall through spring schedule. This year round schedule had been implemented at Northwestern and the Seminary because of the war. During those days pastoral candidates had a special draft designation that prevented them from being drafted, but this designation could easily be lost if a person left school and returned home for summer break. Classes were much the same then as they are now for pastor track students who attend Martin Luther College. The biggest difference noted once again is the electives, most notably the choice that students have today to study a living language rather than having an emphasis in either Latin or German. Pastor Putz comments that he can see the advantage in having the option to take a living language. Early in his ministry in Arizona he did a lot of canvassing in Spanish-speaking neighborhoods. Often times he would knock on a door and it would be answered by a person who did not know English. Because Pastor Putz did not know Spanish they would smile awkwardly at each other for a few moments and the conversation would be over before it started. He believes it would have been helpful for him to have the option to take some Spanish and some German at Northwestern rather than German throughout. He stresses, however, that he doesn't believe that the confessional languages should be passed over lightly, but should be replaced with something truly valuable to the ministry.

In 1951 Marvin came to Mequon and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. The curriculum at WLS in the 1950's is almost exactly the same as it is today, with a few exceptions that will be noted later. The way classes were taught was very similar as well. Some teachers lectured and others used discussion questions and encouraged participation. In exegesis classes students were asked to read their translations out loud and to analyze forms. German and Latin were still used a little bit in Dogmatics and Symbolics classes to translate portions from the church fathers, the same portions students today have translated for them already. Perhaps surprisingly, the classroom atmosphere was much the same as it is today as well. According to Pastor Putz the image of a 1950's classroom that many in the current generation may have is

not quite accurate. We often envision students sitting up completely strait, never daring to whisper, and getting slapped on the knuckles with a ruler if they at all misbehaved. However Pastor Putz comments that they were just your typical students, “We weren’t anymore angels in the classroom than out of the classroom.” Some professors were more organized and commanded the students’ attention and others were less organized and as a result they were taken advantage of a bit by the students. However they respected each of their professors who were faithfully using their God-given talents.

The camaraderie between classmates is another aspect of Seminary life that has not changed in the past 60 years. Pastor Putz appreciated this camaraderie then just as students do now. “You were so close. You could talk over your troubles. You could talk over your successes with each other. You could horse around with each other. You were totally at home with one another.” Pastor’s Putz’s classmates at the Seminary were the closest friends he ever made.

There were also several notable differences between the Seminary of the 1950’s and today. The biggest difference is that there was no vicar program at that time. “We went to the Seminary three years and then we graduated and we were out there to make our mistakes and there was no one to correct them except us.” Although there was no formal vicar program not every student would graduate without any practical experience. Many men would take advantage of opportunities to help out in local congregations. During his middler year Marvin was given the opportunity to preach and assist with communion at Trinity in Freistadt and then again during his senior year at Zion in South Milwaukee.

Another difference was in the area of liturgics. At that time Prof. Hilton Oswald would come down from Northwestern in Watertown once a week to teach the students the basics of presiding in worship. Liturgics did not receive the same emphasis that it does today and the students only took the class for one year. Pastor Putz comments that he is not sure the different liturgical nuances explored today really add anything to the work of the church. Early in his ministry he enjoyed the fact that you could walk into any Wisconsin Synod church and you would know from the service that you were in a WELS church, something which he believes is not true today. He was always a “black gown guy”. He

simply tried to proclaim the word faithfully and doesn't feel like he really missed out on anything by not getting deeper into liturgics.

A few other differences were noted in the interview as well. Note taking has definitely changed as technology has changed over the years. A vast majority of the student body today has laptops and takes notes on computer programs like Libronix or Microsoft Word. In the 1950's students took notes for dogmatic and exegetical classes in loose-leaf Bibles. The use of German at school is also something that has changed over the years. Today the students' use of German is limited mainly to terminology and the occasional quote. In the 1950's German was in the process of being phased out of regular use. Seniors had a *Bibelstunde* in which they would read from the German Bible. Students who felt capable would write a sermon in German; however this was not a requirement. As mentioned above German was used in Dogmatics and Symbolics and some students wrote German shut-in devotions. Pastor Putz formally used German in a service only once during his ministry when he presided at a burial service.

Pastor Putz recalls one of his professors saying, "The work [at the Seminary] is such that it requires a student's full time attention, but the students aren't such." Life outside the classroom required the student's time and attention as well. Junior year Marvin picked up odd jobs wherever they could be found. During his middler and senior years he worked at Bergen heating, a company located at the bottom of the hill in Thiensville. He worked four hours a day, three days a week. His job generally didn't interfere with his studies. There were always a few students who overdid it and worked too many hours and this fact would be reflected in their work in the classroom. There was no tuition at that time. Students were given a bed and a desk and charged \$200 dollars a year for room and board. Pastor Putz comments that anyone who applied himself at all would be able to graduate from the Seminary debt free.

In the early 1950's students at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary did not get married and remain students. If a man wanted to get married while enrolled at WLS he was generally asked to transfer to the Missouri Synod Seminary in Springfield, Ill. During his junior year, Marvin and his soon-to-be wife Edna Miller decided that if they did not receive permission to marry that summer after school he would ask for a transfer to Springfield. After several meetings with President Edmund Reim, who in turn met

with the Seminary board, Marvin was granted the distinction of being the first student at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to get married and remain a student. With the precedent set, others students soon followed suit.

Throughout his educational career, several people have made a lasting impression on Marvin. As mentioned above Pastor Nommensen is at the top of this list. Another is Prof. Jackson Petrie, who was a tutor at Northwestern Prep during Marvin's time there. He helped him immensely in his Latin studies as he worked on getting caught up with the other students his age. Prof. Fredrick Blume made a lasting impression on Marvin as well during his years at Northwestern College. Above all he remembers that Prof. Blume taught his students to stand up under pressure. While teaching two different classes he would often give two rather large assignments at the same time. When the students complained he would tell them, "My right hand in Greek doesn't know what my left hand in Church History is doing." Marvin always appreciated Prof. Blume's tough love later on in his life when faced with the many pressures of the ministry. While at the Seminary Marvin was always impressed with President Edmund Reim. He describes him as "sound as could be." President Reim's stress on the word of God influenced Pastor Putz throughout his ministry. He recalls President Reim's words one day in class, "Our work at the Seminary is to prepare you in the word of God so that when you are out in the ministry you are able to stand on your own two feet on the basis of God's word."

During his more than fifty years in public ministry Pastor Putz has noticed several trends in the Wisconsin Synod that have caused him some concern about what is or is not being stressed in more recent years at the Seminary. He wonders if the Seminary's teaching concerning church fellowship has weakened since the time he attended school. He also wonders if pastors today are too concerned with "pushing the envelope" when it comes to the role of women in the church. Finally he questions the current attitude in the synod concerning raising funds for the Lord's work. He comments that years ago a person would not have dreamed of holding a fundraiser, but today it seems that people are looking all over for money. He does not mean to sound judgmental but is concerned that an emphasis on gospel motivated giving is being lost. Positive improvements in our pastoral training system have been noticed

as well. Pastor Putz cites the vicar program and various outside-the-classroom experiences such as “Project Timothy” as excellent additional opportunities to learn and grow that were not available during his time in school. He also notes the introduction of *Christian Worship* as a wonderful blessing for our congregations.

To close our interview, Pastor Putz had some encouragement for students training for the pastoral ministry today. He encourages students to use God’s word and their calling as their guide, and to not be lead astray by society in the way they dress or in the way they preach or in anything else. He also urges us to put aside preconceived ideas about what methods are “effective” and open our hearts completely to the word. God’s word is something very special and we are to stand on it and use it. “Our church is interested primarily in leading souls to eternal life and anything that might interfere with that message or take away from that message we better leave outside the church. We make sure that we approach God’s word with an open heart, ‘Lord you speak and I’ll bear your message.’”