

THE HARVEST IS PLENTIFUL AND THE POTENTIAL WORKERS ARE MANY:
A STUDY OF MINISTRY RECRUITMENT IN WELS AREA LUTHERAN HIGH SCHOOLS
AND ITS EFFECTIVENESS AMONG STUDENTS

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|----------------|-------------------------------------|
| ALHS | Area Lutheran High School |
| CLHS | California Lutheran High School |
| CLS | WELS Commission on Lutheran Schools |
| DMLC | Dr. Martin Luther College |
| ELHS | Evergreen Lutheran High School |
| ELS | Evangelical Lutheran Synod |
| ILHS | Illinois Lutheran High School |
| KML | Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School |
| Lakeside | Lakeside Lutheran High School |
| LCMS | Lutheran Church Missouri Synod |

LPS..... Luther Preparatory School
MiLHSMichigan Lutheran High School
MLCMartin Luther College
MLHSManitowoc Lutheran High School
MLS Michigan Lutheran Seminary
MVL..... Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School
NELHS.....Nebraska Evangelical Lutheran High School
NLHSNorthland Lutheran High School
NWC Northwestern College
RML..... Rocky Mountain Lutheran High School
SCLA St. Croix Lutheran Academy
WELS..... Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
WLA Winnebago Lutheran Academy
WLC..... Wisconsin Lutheran College
WLS Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary

ABSTRACT

The Area Lutheran High Schools of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod are ripe fields for ministry recruitment. According to surveys in three ALHSs, 31.28% of the WELS member students have at least considered a career in ministry. Yet, over the past 10 years, only 10.4% of ALHS WELS member students have gone on to Martin Luther College, including only 8.1% in the surveyed schools. There is tremendous opportunity at a time of great need. This thesis is a research study of 20 high schools which uses a “convergent mixed methods” research design. It employs statistics, multiple in-depth surveys at MLC, WLS, and 3 ALHSs, 10 interviews, some ethnography, and more to examine what successfully recruits students from these schools. This study reveals several factors ALHS faculty and other gospel ministers can consider and apply to impact recruitment in meaningful ways. Overall, the study discovers successful ALHS ministry recruitment to be a group effort centered around passionate, personal, and transparent gospel ministry.

INTRODUCTION

As of December 2023, the WELS has 180 teaching and 162 pastoral vacancies, revealing a significant need for called workers. At the same time, enrollment numbers at our area Lutheran

high schools (ALHS) are at their highest ever, with over 7000 students nationwide.¹ We have more need and opportunity to serve more students than ever! ALHSs must increase ministry recruitment at a correlative rate with growth. If not, the pool of called workers will be unable to keep up with the ALHSs' faculty needs, not to mention other needs across the synod. Therefore, ALHSs should see ministry recruitment as a self-sustaining effort. It is imperative that each high school give a faithful effort in ministry recruitment for their own future. While it may be tempting for ALHS leaders to lament the lack of quality of candidates for their faculty, they can strive to be an answer to that very issue by championing ministry recruitment right at their school. Discussions about the called worker shortages frequent call and board meetings, but our schools must consider if they share the importance of that with parents, students, and faculty in an impactful way.

We are not without opportunity. Survey statistics show great potential for increasing ministry recruitment numbers in the ALHSs. Of the 2023 graduating class of my 3 surveyed high schools,² 8.11% of WELS graduates went on to MLC. Yet, the survey revealed that 31.28% of WELS member juniors and seniors have at least considered ministry as a career. In fact, 5.42% of those upperclassmen selected 10 out of 10 on a scale of how interested they are in ministry, revealing the ALHSs are only recruiting 2.69% more than the all but guaranteed students. I mention this not to lament our current state of recruiting but to point out that we can have optimism as we seek to improve our recruitment. If we were to recruit all the students who rated their interest as 7 or above, the percentage would jump to 12.56%, a considerable improvement

1. WELS CLS statistics.

2. The high schools surveyed were KML, MLHS, and WLA. See Appendix D.

over the 2023 rate of 8.11%. Indeed, there is potential to recruit more of the remaining 23.17% of WELS students thinking about a career in the public ministry.

This thesis employs a “convergent mixed methods” research design which “is a form of mixed methods design in which the researcher converges or merges quantitative and qualitative data in order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem.”³ As such, it combines ALHS student surveys and one faculty survey, MLC and WLS student surveys, faculty interviews, statistics, and more to explore what is effective and what hinders recruitment of ALHS students and, by association, any potential gospel minister. The student surveys, which include both quantitative and qualitative design, add perspective directly from a large quantity of ALHS students, a unique perspective compared to previous research and studies on this topic within the synod. This thesis, then, seeks to answer the question, “Why do some ministry-interested students pursue ministry and others not?” Overall, this study discovers that successful ALHS ministry recruitment is a group effort centered around passionate, personal, and transparent gospel ministry. I pray that these data and observations shed light on how we can most effectively recruit the next generation of public ministers.

3. John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 5th edition (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2018), 15.

LITERARY REVIEW

A significant paper by Dr. Daniel Schmeling, presented to the Association of Lutheran High Schools in 1992, still sets a valuable foundation for recruitment in the ALHSs. He echoed the challenge Mordecai spoke to Esther as a similar call to ALHS leadership, “Perhaps you have come to a royal position for such a time as this” (Esth 4:14). He gives the pertinent reminder that this is God’s work. We in the WELS education system are his tools. God must be the one to grant success to anything discussed in this thesis.

In his study, Schmeling found that 17 ALHS boards “expressed a complete support of the training of called workers at their schools.”⁴ I pray that this is still the case today! Schmeling also points out that, in 1992, “synodical preparatory schools have provided 60% of the pastoral candidates and 30% of the teacher candidates. The [ALHSs] have provided 25% of the pastoral candidates and 50% of the teacher candidates.”⁵ My survey at MLC revealed the numbers are still strikingly similar. 56.1% of the 57 pastor track students who responded were from a prep school, and 30% were from an ALHS. 27.4% of all teacher track respondents (157) were from a prep school compared to 65% from an ALHS. As Schmeling hoped, the ALHSs’ share of synod-wide recruitment has improved, but there is still potential, especially for bringing up pastors from ALHSs. Another observation still proven true today is that “most pastors and teachers are able to identify one significant individual—a parent, a pastor, a teacher—who encouraged them to enter

4. Daniel M. Schmeling, “The Role of Area Lutheran High Schools in Worker Training” (February 1992), 4.

5. Schmeling, “The Role of ALHS in Worker Training,” 5.

the public ministry. That one-on-one encouragement is perhaps the most effective recruitment ‘program’ available to us.”⁶ He also encouraged ample opportunities for students to see ministry in action through programs at the ALHSs.

Jason Williams wrote his senior thesis on recruiting specifically pastoral candidates in the ALHSs. He found, along with Schmeling, that “overwhelmingly, the importance of building personal relationships is evident.”⁷ He also encouraged ALHSs to have a designated person who takes the initiative and leadership in ministry recruitment. He included valuable ministry recruitment plans from FVL, Lakeside, and other ALHSs. These plans displayed the benefits of having that leader in recruitment and that ministry recruitment must start with a pro-ministry culture throughout the faculty and high school.

Hans Thomford’s senior thesis, entitled “God’s Word is Our Great Heritage: Defining WELS Pastoral Recruitment Philosophy For Continued Excellence In Raising Up Future Public Ministers,” does an excellent job discussing the “why” of gospel ministry, having the undeserved blessing of saving souls (the ministerial cause); the “means,” the privilege of ministry as one’s life’s work and means of income; and the “manner,” the comfort that God is the one who calls his ministerial workers and works through them. His thesis covers what a more thorough literature review would cover here. Combined with Williams’ thesis, the reader can study existing recruitment strategies and philosophies.

6. Schmeling, “The Role of ALHS in Worker Training,” 7.

7. Jason Williams, “Bolstering Ministerial Influence and Recruitment at Area Lutheran High Schools for Full-Time Pastoral Ministry in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod” (February 2015), 46.

Caleb Kurbis' 2010 church history paper outlines the history of ministerial recruitment from 1980 to 2010. Most applicable to this thesis is the impact the lack of assignments had in the 2000s. He wrote,

The greatest harm Pastor [Earle] Treptow, [former MLC recruiter], saw in confronting the issue of lack of assignments was the effect it had on the very instrumental and foundational level of recruitment, i.e. the pastors and teachers. If called workers pulled back from encouraging individuals on account of the uncertainty of 'job-placement,' this would have an adverse effect on certain quality candidates. The same effect was caused by some of the negative talk that surrounded the lack of placements.⁸

We are certainly in a very different context today, considering the number of vacancies across the synod and the rapid growth of schools, particularly the ALHSs. This paper considers whether we can use this to our advantage.

Luther's Thoughts

Students often want to be closer to home now, especially since "eighty-eight percent of those in Generation Z feel they are extremely close with their parents, whom they see as playing roles more like friends and advisers."⁹ Recognizing this, much of what Luther wrote for parents of potential ministry candidates is more relevant than ever. In his "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School," he helps parents recognize the sanctity of ministry. "[Christ] paid dearly that men might everywhere have this office. ... For this office not only helps to further and sustain this temporal life and all the worldly estates, but it also gives eternal life and delivers from sin and

8. Caleb Kurbis, "Always Changing Yet Ever the Same: First-Hand Historical Perspectives of Recruitment for Our Ministerial Education System Spanning the Last 30 Years" (December 2010), 13.

9. Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace, *Generation Z Goes to College*, 1st edition, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2016, 89.

death, which is its proper and chief work.”¹⁰ He encourages parents to see ministry as a noble career choice for their children.

How much more should you rejoice if you have raised a son for this office of preaching in which you are sure that he serves God so gloriously, helps men so generously, and smites the devil in such knightly fashion? You have made your son such a true and excellent sacrifice to God that the very angels must look upon it as a splendid miracle.¹¹

Luther also discussed the perseverance required in ministry and, as we would put it, recruitment for ministry. He cites how “our Lord God had to ask Moses as many as six times. He also led me into the office in the same way. Had I known about it [and its troubles] beforehand, he would have had to take more pains to get me in. Be that as it may, now that I have begun, I intend to perform the duties of the office with his help.”¹² We, too, can show students the joy in ministry found in the Lord and pray he brings them to ministry despite the troubles. Yet, sanitizing our presentation of ministry from all troubles would be a dishonest portrayal.

10. Martin Luther, “A Sermon on Keeping Children in School,” *Luther’s Works* 46 (1967), 220.

11. Luther 46, 229.

12. Martin Luther, “Table Talk Recorded By Veit Dietrich,” *Luther’s Works* 54 (1967), 13.

METHODOLOGY AND FIELD RESEARCH

I began investigating the topic of ministry recruitment using the convergent mixed methods research design under the research question, “Why do certain ALHSs recruit for ministry better than others?” Early research revealed this would be a difficult question to quantify. There are nuanced and almost innumerable contextual differences between each ALHS, such as demographics, size, and intangibles like joy for ministry among faculty. This made comparing ALHSs difficult. Therefore, my question evolved to, “Why do certain ministry-interested ALHS students pursue ministry and others not?” The convergent mixed methods approach suited this new question well. Additionally, since my study included perspectives from over 600 current college and high school students, I felt this research question better fit the unique angle on recruitment this paper could have.

I compiled statistics from MLC and the WELS CLS. I interviewed various faculty and guidance counselors from four ALHSs, having selected these specific schools to provide balanced data and insights from schools with varied percentages of WELS students who pursue ministry. The schools selected were KML, WLA, MLHS, and SCLA. Along with the interviews, I also conducted surveys of high school juniors and seniors at KML, WLA, and MLHS. These surveys asked the students’ perception of MLC, ministry, and other factors related to ministry recruitment. I surveyed MLC students to find out what successfully recruited them to pursue ministry.¹³ I especially considered responses from students who went to an ALHS.

13. See Appendix C for more information about this survey and the included questions.

This convergent mixed methods approach to research fit this study because there are not many college recruitment philosophies congruent with the WELS's unique situation, having their own and exclusive college of ministry. Even materials from LCMS authors proved difficult to analyze with differences in the doctrine of the ministry. It quickly became clear I would need to do my own research. The convergent mixed methods approach stood out as a method since it naturally offers checks and balances to my personal research (i.e., student survey results vs. faculty interviews). John and David Creswell write of this method, "The investigator ... integrates the information [from varied methods] in the interpretation of the overall results. Contradictions or incongruent findings are explained or further probed in this design."¹⁴ Many varied opinions and hypotheses exist concerning ministry recruitment. This research design offers a chance to analyze them from multiple angles. I will consider the information from the interviews, data from the surveys, and the statistics together to observe patterns and strategies that are successful or unsuccessful for ministry recruitment.

Current Outlook of WELS ALHSs

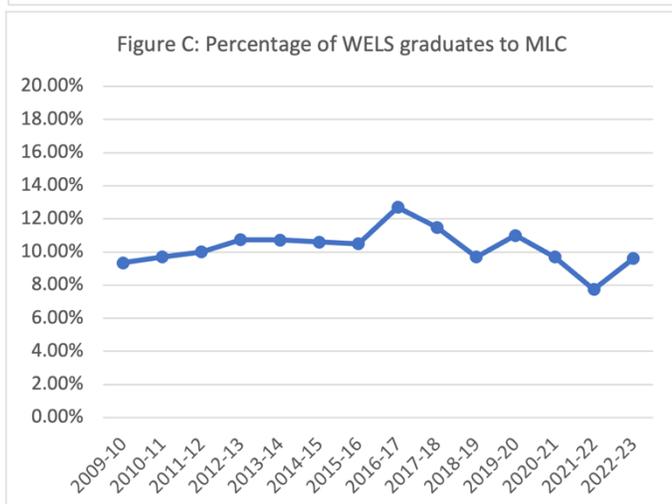
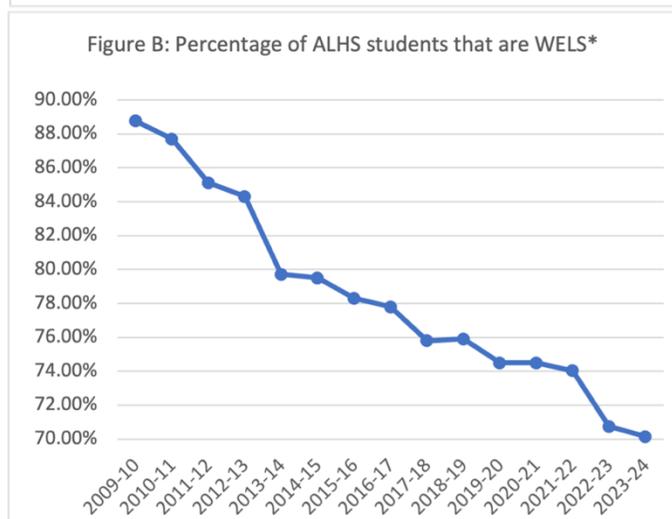
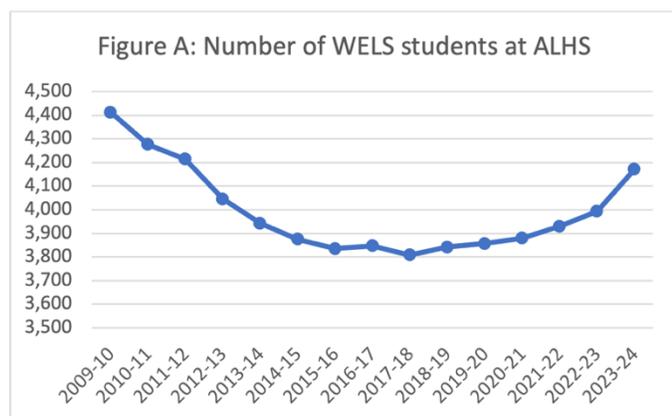
The WELS ALHSs are in an extended season of growth. Since 2015-16, the total enrollment of the 20 studied ALHSs grew by an average of 119 students per year, including over 300 students in each of the last two years. While non-WELS students, whom MLC does not recruit, are a significant factor in this growth, the ALHSs¹⁵ are not without recent growth among WELS

14. Creswell and Creswell, *Research Design*, 15.

15. For the rest of this paper, ALHS/s will represent the 20 schools which were included in this study unless otherwise noted. See Appendix B.

students. Factors such as school choice have likely enabled growth for both WELS and non-WELS students. Overall, as of this school year (2023-24), WELS has its largest ALHS enrollment on record at these 20 high schools with 5946 students (over 7200 at all ALHSs).

Furthermore, the number of WELS member students at the 20 ALHSs is the highest since 2011-



12, with 4171 students in 2023-24. However, the growth of non-WELS students has outpaced the number of WELS students in 11 of the last 14 years. In 2023-24, the percentage of WELS ALHS students dropped to just north of 70%, likely dropping below 70% next year. This likely affects the ALHS culture in general, so one must wonder if this affects ministry recruitment, too. Since the increase in nonmember students, the percentage of all ALHS graduates who pursue ministry has dropped, as expected. Yet, the rate of WELS graduates who pursue ministry remained relatively steady with, perhaps, a slightly discernable downward trend (see Figure C on the next page). However, the 7.74% of the 2022 ALHS graduates pursuing ministry is the lowest percentage over the 15 years studied.

Therefore, statistically, it is inconclusive that a higher presence of non-WELS students negatively affects ministry recruitment. However, this increase does reveal a need for increased recruitment across the board. The increased growth of the ALHSs will require more than ministry recruitment remaining stationary. ALHSs should view ministry recruitment as self-sustainment. The gap between the number of WELS students and total enrollment has never been higher, meaning there is a smaller pool of candidates to serve a greater number of students. Now is the time to be intentional and proactive in recruiting tomorrow's ministers of the gospel.

Figure D: Statistics from the 20 Studied ALHS

| Statistics from 20 Studied ALHS | 2009-10 | 2010-11 | 2011-12 | 2012-13 | 2013-14 | 2014-15 | 2015-16 | 2016-17 | 2017-18 | 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 | 2021-22 | 2022-23 | 2023-24 |
|---|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Percentage students that are WELS* | 88.77% | 87.70% | 85.13% | 84.31% | 79.71% | 79.50% | 78.30% | 77.80% | 75.80% | 75.90% | 74.50% | 74.50% | 74.03% | 70.75% | 70.15% |
| Percentage of WELS graduates to MLC | 9.35% | 9.70% | 10.01% | 10.75% | 10.72% | 10.60% | 10.50% | 12.70% | 11.50% | 9.70% | 11.00% | 9.70% | 7.74% | 9.61% | N/A |
| Percentage of total graduates to MLC | 8.30% | 8.50% | 8.53% | 9.06% | 8.54% | 8.40% | 8.20% | 9.90% | 8.70% | 7.40% | 8.20% | 7.30% | 5.80% | 6.80% | N/A |
| Number of WELS students at ALHS | 4,413 | 4,276 | 4,214 | 4,045 | 3,942 | 3,875 | 3,835 | 3,847 | 3,809 | 3,842 | 3,857 | 3,879 | 3,930 | 3,993 | 4,171 |
| Increase in # of WELS from prior year | N/A | -137 | -62 | -169 | -103 | -67 | -40 | 12 | -38 | 33 | 15 | 22 | 51 | 63 | 178 |
| Total enrollment of ALHS | 4,971 | 4,878 | 4,950 | 4,798 | 4,945 | 4,874 | 4,899 | 4,946 | 5,024 | 5,065 | 5,176 | 5,206 | 5,309 | 5,644 | 5,946 |
| Number of Non-WELS at ALHS | 558 | 602 | 736 | 753 | 1,003 | 999 | 1,064 | 1,099 | 1,215 | 1,223 | 1,319 | 1,327 | 1,379 | 1,651 | 1,775 |
| Increase in # of Non-WELS from prior year | N/A | 44 | 134 | 17 | 250 | -4 | 65 | 35 | 116 | 8 | 96 | 8 | 52 | 272 | 124 |

**In this study, WELS students include ELS students. This will be the case for the remainder of the paper.*

Ministry Recruitment and the Statistics

The statistics I received from MLC and CLS included the number of graduates from each high school that attended MLC. However, considering that the ALHSs have the highest percentage of non-WELS students in history, it became evident the presence of non-WELS students could skew the data, especially considering that MLC generally does not recruit non-members. Therefore, I narrowed the statistics down to the percentage of WELS or ELS high school graduates who went on to MLC (see Appendix A). A considerable difference was noticeable. SCLA, for example, recruits 5.2% of its total 420 students to MLC but 9.5% of its 217 WELS students. In the table on the next page, I ranked the ALHSs by this percentage.

Figure E: ALHS Statistics (2014–2023)

| High School | % of All Students that Pursue Ministry | % of WELS Students that Pursue Ministry | Total Enrollment (23-24) | Total WELS Enrollment | % of enrollment WELS | % of faculty went to MLC* |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|--------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|
| California Lutheran High School | 18.10% | 35.80% | 92 | 36 | 39.13% | 100% |
| Evergreen Lutheran High School | 12.70% | 21.00% | 97 | 56 | 57.73% | 90% |
| Michigan Lutheran High School | 11.70% | 20.80% | 126 | 57 | 45.24% | 81.80% |
| Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School | 17.00% | 18.40% | 269 | 241 | 89.59% | 89.50% |
| Nebraska Lutheran High School | 12.30% | 16.10% | 60 | 46 | 76.67% | 100% |
| Manitowoc Lutheran High School | 12.80% | 13.80% | 248 | 210 | 84.68% | 84.60% |
| Rocky Mountain Lutheran High School | 9.30% | 13.80% | 57 | 21 | 36.84% | 75% |
| Luther High School, Onalaska | 12.90% | 13.50% | 252 | 227 | 90.08% | 75% |
| Great Plains Lutheran High School | 10.30% | 12.70% | 137 | 110 | 80.29% | 87.50% |
| Lakeside Lutheran High School | 9.50% | 9.90% | 536 | 478 | 89.18% | 77.80% |
| ALL 20 Studied ALHS | 7.90% | 10.40% | 5946 | 4174 | 70.15% | 79.03% |
| Saint Croix Lutheran High School | 5.20% | 9.50% | 420 | 217 | 51.67% | 76.30% |
| Northland Lutheran High School | 7.20% | 9.40% | 110 | 58 | 52.73% | 77.80% |
| Arizona Lutheran Academy | 6.00% | 9.10% | 235 | 131 | 55.74% | 85.70% |
| Fox Valley Lutheran High School | 7.50% | 9.00% | 745 | 593 | 79.60% | 81.70% |
| Shoreland Lutheran High School | 6.00% | 8.90% | 425 | 225 | 52.94% | 76.90% |
| Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School | 6.90% | 7.80% | 568 | 457 | 80.46% | 75.60% |
| Illinois Lutheran High School | 4.20% | 7.40% | 92 | 53 | 57.61% | 100% |
| West Lutheran High School | 4.10% | 6.70% | 216 | 121 | 56.02% | 88.20% |
| Winnebago Lutheran Academy | 6.00% | 6.50% | 337 | 308 | 91.39% | 75.90% |
| Wisconsin Lutheran High School | 4.00% | 6.40% | 924 | 526 | 56.93% | 64% |

*The % of faculty that went to MLC includes faculty who attended NWC and DMLC.

The observation that jumps off the page is the size of the high school. The top 10 high schools above have a combined enrollment of 1874 students compared to 4072 students for the bottom 10 high schools. Furthermore, the 7 largest high schools are below average in ministry recruitment rate. The one close exception is Lakeside, which is at 10th for recruitment but has recruited only 3.39% and 7.62% of WELS students for ministry in the last two years, respectively. MVL is the eighth-largest school and recruits well, but those statistics are difficult to analyze with MVL's proximity to MLC. One former MVL student wrote in a survey, "[The] location of MLC being close to home was a factor into my attendance, but not the main reason."

The Increasing Number of Non-WELS Students

One hypothetical factor for differing numbers in high schools is a higher presence of non-WELS students. Presumably, non-WELS students could affect the school's culture and how MLC is perceived. For the bottom 10 schools, 66.04% of the students are WELS. For the top 10 schools, 79.08% of the students are WELS. The difference of over 13% may indicate that a more prominent presence of non-WELS students negatively affects ministry recruitment, especially since the bottom 10 schools are generally larger, meaning these percentages represent a significantly greater number of non-WELS students. The average number of non-WELS students in the bottom 10 schools is 138.3, as opposed to 39.2 students per school in the top 10. However, the hypothesis of this adverse effect breaks down when considering a school like WLA. WLA has the highest percentage of WELS students yet has the second lowest rate of ministry recruitment over the past 10 years. Also, KML has the second-highest percentage of WELS students among the bottom 10 schools. Yet, its ministry recruitment rate is firmly in the bottom quarter of the 20 schools (KML is over a full percentage behind the next highest school, SLHS). Multiple schools, such as CLHS and ELHS, are recruiting at high rates despite having some of the lowest percentages of WELS students among the 20 schools.

The surveys of ALHS students at KML, MLHS, and WLA do not suggest a negative effect of non-member students on ministry recruitment. Fifty-six non-WELS students took the survey. Twenty-nine of them were at least somewhat familiar with Martin Luther College.¹⁶ The students' impressions were generally neutral and more often positive than negative. Of 54

16. Students who chose a number 5 or less out of 10 were considered "less familiar" with MLC. Students who chose a number 6 or more were considered at least "somewhat familiar" with MLC. See Appendix D.

responses, 32 students were indifferent or did not know much about MLC. Nineteen had something positive to say about the school, such as, “Good, if I was going to be a teacher I could go there! Seems to be run very well.” Only 3 had something negative to say. Impressions of students who go to MLC were also generally positive. They described these students as “hard workers,” “very involved and determined,” “usually nice,” or “they usually have a family member in the public ministry.” Many also said a variation of “I’m happy for them.” Negative characterizations were rare outside of “quirky” and “nerdier” among a few responses. In fact, impressions of MLC were generally more positive among non-WELS students than WELS students.

The Increasing Number of Non-Traditional Faculty

The faculty makeup of the ALHS is also worth considering. With the growing need for teachers, the number of called workers from a non-traditional path who have joined the staff of our Lutheran schools has increased. This corresponds with the continued increase in ALHS enrollment but the slight decrease in MLC enrollment. Theodore (Ted) Klug, Vice President for Enrollment Management at MLC, considers this a hidden blessing of the MLC enrollment downturn. Additionally, now it is more challenging than ever for WELS public school teachers to live out their faith in their vocation, leading them to seek employment at a WELS school. Therefore, “in the last [few] years, we’ve pulled in over two to three hundred teachers from public schools or from other [occupations] into the ministry. That was never possible before the

last [few] years.”¹⁷ However, Klug added that this trend could affect ministry recruitment. He said,

Something that [the increase of other options to public ministry] has done, however: It has watered down cheerleaders for the pure version that we think of public ministry. ... It’s a lot like when the Brewers and Cubs are playing. The Brewers won’t allow tickets to be sold out of state for a great amount of time because they know that all the Cubs fans are going to come by. It’s going to change the whole feel of [American Family Field] because now you’ve got somebody that’s cheering for a different team. No, I don’t want to say that people who went through WLC or somewhere else who love Jesus don’t have every right to be in ministry as much as you and I do. But I’m saying they came in through a different path. So, if someone went to UW Whitewater and then got synod certified, you think the first thing out of [their] mouth is going to be, “Hey, go to MLC! This is a great place to go?” No, it’s going to be, “I went through a different path.”¹⁸

So, there are two sides to this issue. On the one hand, we rejoice that God is using another path to provide the needed called workers to serve even more students. Conversely, we must consider how to sustain our main cog for the public ministry lest we undermine it by something akin to a hiring process.

At first, the statistics seem to support Ted Klug’s hypothesis, though not conclusively. The top 10 recruiting schools have a ratio of 13.3 students per faculty member who attended MLC¹⁹ as opposed to 15.3 students per MLC faculty member in the bottom 10 schools. Furthermore, 83.93% of the faculty of the top 10 schools attended MLC as opposed to 76.66% of the faculty of the bottom 10, subtly indicating that more traditional faculty creates a more effective ministry recruitment environment. However, when we consider the ratio of specifically WELS students to MLC graduates on the faculty, the bottom 10 schools have the lower ratio, at

17. Theodore Klug. Interview by author. Zoom. September 20, 2023.

18. Ted Klug interview.

19. This figure includes teachers and pastors that graduated from DMLC or NWC pre-amalgamation. “MLC graduate/s,” throughout this section, includes these individuals as well.

10.1 WELS students per MLC graduate faculty, as opposed to the top 10's 10.5. Therefore, the statistics are inconclusive. One ALHS faculty member was also unsure of the impact. He said, "[My high school] does have a number of graduates [of this high school] on the staff here, and not all of them took the traditional route to get here. Some went through public school, became a teacher that way, and then went through [certification] afterward. So, I don't know if that's a negative or a positive, just that it's a reality."²⁰ It cannot be assumed that non-traditional teachers, just by their presence, affect recruitment to MLC. However, suppose these faculty members actively discuss or encourage their route to students. In that case, that is a different story (as Ted Klug pointed out) that is difficult to observe in the statistics. Certainly, ALHSs should be aware of non-traditional route teachers' impressions of ministry training and seek to find a unified approach to ministry recruitment.

Examining this issue from another angle, the size of the ALHS plays a role. At many smaller high schools, students have increased contact with individual teachers. Teachers at CLHS, for example, are teaching upwards of 5–6 different classes, including their pastor on staff, who teaches all four levels of Word of God. That is ample quality time with MLC graduates, including four teachers who graduated from MLC within the last 4 years. Students at most of the other top 10 ministry recruiting schools cross paths with MLC graduates more than many larger schools. However, with the larger high schools' enrollment and faculty size, the question becomes whether students can build meaningful relationships with those graduates, which are invaluable to recruiting. Larger high schools would do well to mimic what happens naturally at

20. Anonymous ALHS faculty interview 1.

smaller high schools through avenues like mentoring programs to create more opportunities for connections and relationships between MLC graduates and ministry-interested students.

A Lack of Pastoral Influence Toward Ministry

When one considers explicitly pastoral influence, a more noticeable difference is observable between the top 10 recruiting schools and the bottom 10. There are 132 students per pastor in the top 10 schools with a pastor on the faculty compared to 166 students per pastor in the bottom 10 schools.²¹ These numbers especially stand out when compared to the prep schools. LPS has a student-to-pastor ratio of 37. MLS has 32 students per pastor. This noteworthy difference from the ALHS's ratio of 155 students per pastor has a discernable effect on ministry recruitment. In the MLC student survey, a significantly lower percentage of former ALHS students were chiefly influenced to ministry by pastors. 30% (15 of 50) of male ALHS graduates were chiefly influenced by a pastor (besides family) as opposed to 62.2% (28 of 45) of male prep school graduates. This could also be a factor in the prep schools recruiting more young men than the ALHSs. 57% (45 of 79) of surveyed prep students were male compared to 40% (50 of 125) from the ALHSs.

These statistics may indicate why ALHSs produce far fewer pastors than the prep schools. In a survey of WLS juniors and middlers, 13 of 41 respondents went to an ALHS compared to 23 from the prep schools. In the MLC student survey, 73.3% (33) of male prep

21. ELHS, MVL, RML, and ILHS do not have a pastor on their faculty and were not included in the ratios' calculation.

school graduates are in the pre-seminary track compared to 34% (17) of male ALHS graduates. Of course, we need teachers and staff ministers, but this significant discrepancy in students pursuing pastoral ministry is worth noting.

ALHS students often are “spiritual nomads” between their high school and home congregation. They may even see their ALHS as their “home church” more than their local congregation. Randy Hughes, campus pastor at KML, noticed this. He said,

A lot of our kids that come here view KML as their church for four years. You can tell them, which I do quite frequently, “Remember, after four years, you’re out of here. Who’s your spiritual guide going to be? Who’s your pastor? Who’s the church that will continue to move you forward?” ... When they’re here, because they have chapel every day and Word of God [class] every day, many often say, “I’m getting the Word of God here.” And they discount their pastors or their churches.²²

Without much interaction with their home pastors, a critical relationship for ministry recruitment remains stagnant at best or diminishes at worst. The importance of pastors as personal ministry recruiters is seen at the prep schools and even among former public high school students at MLC. Ten of 11 former public school men chose a pastor as their biggest influence in the MLC survey. Even 3 of the 11 former public school women chose a pastor or vicar. Rik Krahn, campus pastor at MLHS, pointed out the impact the lack of pastoral influence has on ministry recruitment.

Many of our ALHS students, to their shame and our shame, use the fact that they go to an ALHS to justify not going to church on Sunday, or at least not often, not regularly, which means that they don’t have a whole lot of interaction with their home pastor. They’ve got very little relationship with their home pastor. So, it would make sense to me that the ... teachers, in general, would have a stronger impact because there are just more of them.²³

22. Randy Hughes, Interview by author, In-person, November 8, 2023.

23. Rik Krahn, Interview by author, Zoom, November 15, 2023.

Even co-curriculars at the ALHSs can interfere with Sunday worship at students' home congregations. Seminary senior Jacob Klug, a Lakeside alum, said, "When I was a junior and senior at Lakeside, I was in A Capella Choir, which is like 40 to 50 kids. Having a relationship with my home pastor was hard because I was gone roughly 15 Sundays of the school year."²⁴ I also had a similar experience at KML, singing at local congregations on many Sundays during the school year. This is incredibly impactful since many prospective ministry candidates are involved in fine arts.

Beyond co-curriculars, Dustin Sievert, campus pastor at SLHS, shared his fear about student church attendance in general. "I fear a lower percentage of 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th graders actually going to church in the first place. So, there's a gap in young people building relationships with the right people."²⁵ Less time in church negates opportunities for relationship building, and the impact is not just relationships with pastors. Low church attendance means less chance for encouragement from laypeople or even recognizing the pastoral ministry's importance in the first place.

I discovered two proposed solutions for increasing interaction and building relationships between ministry-interested ALHS students and pastors. Krahn encouraged the idea of more pastors in the ALHSs.

We [should] get more pastors in our ALHSs. There is this perception that a pastor-trained man shouldn't be wasted at an ALHS. ... You've got an ALHS where the [student] is coming into contact with 20 or 25 teacher-trained people and one pastor. Of course, the teachers will have a bigger influence just because there's more interaction and contact. I'm certainly not saying anything negative about teachers, but ... I think somebody who's

24. Jacob Klug, Interview by author, In-person, December 12, 2023.

25. Dustin Sievert, Interview by author, In-person, November 12, 2023.

got some parish experience brings something that somebody who's been in a school their whole life doesn't bring.²⁶

Students at LPS have 11 pastors on staff they can see daily. Students at MLS have 6 pastors. That is an average ratio of 34.6 students per pastor. The most at an ALHS is 4 pastors (WLHS and KML) with an average ALHS student-to-pastor ratio of 148.6, not including the enrollments of the 4 ALHSs with no pastor on staff. There are far fewer opportunities for effective ministry mentoring relationships, especially considering how busy ALHS students are. "Every day in high school, those kids get here at 7, 7:30 in the morning, and some don't leave until 9 at night or later. This is their life. How do you involve somebody in a congregation when they are here for 50 or more hours a week?" Krahn's observation reveals that churches have a challenge since ALHS students operate with minimal time and energy for additional involvement. "In a lot of cases, the ALHS essentially functions as the congregation's youth ministry. ... Congregations are just kind of willing to say, 'Well, yeah, they don't [come to youth ministry] because they're over at [the local ALHS].'"²⁷ Therefore, more pastors on staff involved in students' lives during and after school hours could meet students where they are and not hope to meet them where they are not.

Another solution is for parents and pastors to make a concerted effort still to involve their students in meaningful ways at their congregations. Busyness at the ALHS means it may not be during the week but on Sundays. Are these high schoolers' gifts and talents being utilized? Or are they forgotten members at the "ALHS church" down the street? Involvement in the church's

26. Krahn interview.

27. Krahn interview.

ministry can only heighten natural opportunities for ministry recruitment. These opportunities would also further encourage teens and their families to attend church. Considering the current ratio of students to pastors in the ALHSs, it is not plausible for ALHS-staffed pastors to create the same relationships as local pastors. Parish pastors should still see students as their flock first. They can be aware of schedules for activities such as Sunday sing-outs and athletics and plan accordingly.

More pastoral interaction on both sides, the congregation and the ALHS, would be beneficial. Pastoral presence is a decided advantage for the prep schools since they have more around-the-clock interaction with students. With many students on campus and far from home, LPS and MLS become, in effect, the home congregation for these students. So now, these pastors, many of them young tutors fresh out of the seminary, have relationship-building opportunities with students in the classroom, the dorm, the field, and personal lives. While this is not wholly replicable at an ALHS, a combined approach between the local congregation and ALHS could create a similar effect. While some ALHSs do have days when local pastors gather with their member students or a weekly chapel by a local pastor, the close relationships that affect recruitment most require more than a handful of visits per year.

Influencing ALHS Students to Pursue Ministry

MLC Student Survey

Since a natural way to see what is effective in recruiting young people to ministry would be to ask those who were successfully recruited, I developed a survey for MLC students asking

questions about what influenced them to pursue ministry.²⁸ I received 222 responses, 123 of which came from former ALHS students.

Some overarching findings are as follows: Exactly 50% of respondents have at least one parent who is/was a called worker, and former prep school students do not skew that. 48.8% (60 of 123) of former ALHS students also had one or both parents serve as a called worker. Called workers' families are a substantial source of future called workers. As explored above, ALHSs are not recruiting future pastors at nearly the same rate as the prep schools. 32% of ALHS men pursue pastor track compared to 73.3% of prep school men. Also, 8 of the 11 (72.7%) non-Lutheran high school men are studying in pastor track. The most common "biggest factor" that led the respondents to pursue ministry was "the encouragement/example of a called worker" at 35.6% of respondents. The rest of the choices are listed below.

Figure F: The Biggest Factor that Led MLC Students to Pursue Ministry

| Factor | Percent of All Students | Percent of ALHS students | Percent of students w/out a called worker parent. |
|---|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| The encouragement/example of a called worker (not family). | 35.6% | 40.2% | 52.3% |
| The encouragement/example of parents or a family member. | 27.9% | 27.9% | 13.5% |
| The importance of sharing the gospel. | 19.4% | 20.5% | 18% |
| The desire to study Scripture/grow in faith. | 9% | 4.9% | 7.2% |
| An impactful ministry experience (a mission trip, VBS teaching, a chapel devotion, etc.). | 6.8% | 5.7% | 9% |
| The culture at Martin Luther College. | 1.4% | 0.8% | 0% |

28. The questions included in this survey are found in Appendix C.

Clearly, a called worker's influence on prospective called workers is critical, especially among students who do not have parents in the ministry, as that group had over 50% who chose that option. Overall, 63.5% of current MLC students, regardless of whether there is a called worker in their family or not, chose another person as their chief influence toward ministry (the top two factors above).

These statistics support Sievert's hypothesis: "I firmly believe that relationships are the sweet spot to recruitment. That could be with any number of people. A mentor, a coach, a pastor, a friend."²⁹ On the surface, the MLC survey, including written responses, supports this. Many respondents described strong examples of teachers who invested in them and created a connection with them.

The few choices for "the culture at Martin Luther College" or "an impactful ministry experience" should not be overanalyzed. Respondents had to choose only one from the list above, so those factors could have played a complementary role. Ministry experiences, in particular, appeared more in written responses. However, the draw of MLC as a college or college experience did not show up commonly. At the same time, responses were generally positive when survey questions specifically asked about MLC. So, MLC's college experience is not a main draw for students, but it is also not as much of a hindrance as some may suggest.

29. Sievert interview.

How MLC Students Characterized Their Ministry Influencers

I performed content analysis on the MLC survey's responses to the question, "In what way did [your biggest ministry influencer] influence you to pursue ministry?" The results were fascinating. I categorized each response into one of three categories: a description of someone who was an example of ministry, someone who actively encouraged ministry, or someone who was both an example and an encouragement.³⁰ Responses I categorized as examples described the called worker's passion, skill, action, and, in most cases, literally an "example." Here is one response I characterized that way:

[This teacher] was always such a warm and bubbly personality. She would always go out of her way to make people feel welcome. Between her personality and her very evident passion for teaching, she had a very large impact on my life. Because of her incredible example, I knew that I wanted to be a teacher and share even a small amount of that passion with other people.

Responses I categorized as describing an active encourager for the ministry said as much or told how a called worker suggested ministry as a path for this student. Here is an example of a response in the active encourager category:

[This teacher] convinced me that MLC would be a good fit for me when I was considering pursuing a teaching degree at a public college. He knows me the best of all my high school teachers and his confidence in my ability to teach and share the gospel was an important factor in my decision to go to MLC.

I categorized responses that included characteristics of both categories above as "both." Here is an example:

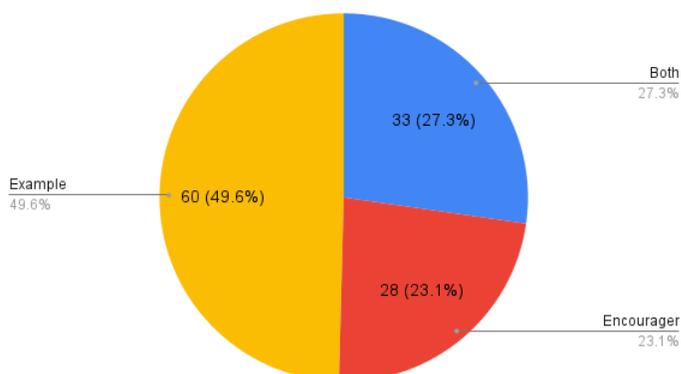
He was constantly a great example of a teacher and pastor who shared God's Word with everyone. During his chapel sermons, he would focus on ministry and the work MLC did

³⁰ This is an example of what Margaret Roller and Paul Lavrakas call "secondary content analysis" of "latent content." This method calls for thorough transparency, which is why I describe my rationale above. These concepts are covered on pages 230–286 in *Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework*.

to share the Gospel with the world. He also was a wonderful active encourager who invited many people to consider called worker ministry.

These categorizations revealed that 60 of 123 respondents who went to an ALHS

Figure G
Was an ALHS student's top ministry influencer more of an encourager or an example?



described someone who was simply an example of ministry, whether by their joy, passion, or talent in the church or classroom. Responses categorized as “both” were the next most common, with 33 responses. Then came “encourager” with 28 respondents.

A passive example of ministry is the most effective for ministry recruitment. Almost 50% of ALHS respondents described a called worker who was an example of ministry and did not mention them actively encouraging them to MLC or ministry. Add in those called workers who were an example but also encouraged, and over 75% of ALHS respondents described ministry influencers’ examples of ministry. Anecdotally, the responses that described a called worker’s example (or both example and encouragement) were generally longer and had a passionate tone. Typically, leading by example with passion and joy for ministry is more impactful than simply encouraging students toward MLC.

Over-Recruiting is Detrimental

That 49.6% of students now at MLC described only a passive recruitment style fits with how many current and former ALHS students describe ministry recruitment in their high school: far

too constant encouragement about MLC and reminders of called worker shortages. A current KML student wrote,

[MLC is] an opportunity that is forced upon me by just about everyone from my parents to my study hall supervisor. I love the idea of ministry but not the approach of promoting ministry. I think presentations and “meetings” should be something that students ask to have. Instead of someone coming into a high school classroom and doing a presentation, where half the kids in the room would never consider it. ... But I think ministry shouldn’t feel as if it is forced upon me or pressured by my teachers to go into the field. If anything, that’s made me consider ministry less.

Another KML student, who wrote positively of MLC, also cited recruitment pressure as a negative factor that led her to pursue other vocations.

It seems like a good school and I know that they are struggling to find enough pastors and teachers to serve. But I also feel like they can be overly pushy for students like myself to attend. I might have a bigger interest in attending if I felt like I had more freedom to make a decision. Being someone who has always attended a Lutheran school, people have always been hounding me to consider the ministry, and I have, but frankly, it’s a bit annoying and that has kind of driven me away.

Ted Klug had a similar observation:

Schools that have people who are gung-ho about Martin Luther College do not do well in recruitment. The schools that are gung-ho about ministry and Jesus are the ones that do best for us. It’s so different ... here’s a prime example that someone told me one time: They said, “What if you don’t like the teacher who loves MLC? ... Well, that’s what you’re going to hate... that’s what it is.”³¹

Perhaps situations like the one Klug described led to the KML students’ responses above.

Yet, KML is not the only school where students have this impression. A WLA student wrote on their survey, “I’m sure the school is a fine school; however, the obtrusiveness of the teachers at WLA telling everyone to go there makes a lot of students more opposed to attending.” Unaware of the previous comment, Pastor David Haag from WLA said, “MLC is really encouraged at

31. Ted Klug interview.

WLA and we have the MLC recruiters come. Every once in a while, I'll ask my kids in class, 'Do you feel like you are encouraged a lot to think about ministry and go to MLC, or [do] you never get to hear about it?' Generally speaking, I would say they feel like it kind of gets crammed down their throat." Haag added that he thinks many other options are offered and discussed, too, though he admitted, "I definitely don't think [MLC recruitment] is under-emphasized."³² An MLHS student also wrote, "It's been shoved down my throat since I was in kindergarten and I haven't ever wanted to be a teacher and I'm just not interested." Krahn pointed out that recruitment at grade schools has an effect, too. "To me, there's always a pretty fine line that we have to walk because, by the time we get them, most of these kids have been through several years of WELS grade school. Some of them have already been to MLC. I'm hearing freshmen now say they feel that MLC is being shoved down their throats."³³

The above quotations reveal that overly done ministry recruitment is an apparent issue affecting two distinct audiences. To students who have already decided they are not interested in ministry, especially those with gifts elsewhere, it may turn them against ministry and MLC even more. To students who have gifts for ministry and may be thinking about it, it can become annoyingly redundant. For example, the WLA student quoted above admitted that MLC is a good school but referred to the faculty's ministry encouragement as "obtrusiveness." About this latter audience, Dustin Sievert said, "I could tell [an interested student] till he's blue in the face that he should be a pastor, but deep down, he probably already knows that. So, it's just walk

32. David Haag. Interview by author. Phone call. November 21, 2023.

33. Rik Krahn interview.

alongside and encourage and let it sort of play out without trying to get to a certain number.”³⁴

After due effort is made, it seems best to allow some space while offering more nonchalant encouragement.

[For one student at MLC], having someone in their past who mentored them was a huge benefit. Not necessarily an intentional mentorship like, “Hey, every Saturday we’re going out for breakfast,” but just somebody who constantly and continually just encouraged and reminded the individual of the gifts that they had in a very intentional, but nonchalant, personal way. That made all the difference in the world.³⁵

A little pushback and transparency can go a long way in counteracting this perception among ALHS students. Pastor Krahn described his practice at MLHS:

As soon as I give just a little bit of push back to [the overrecruiting complaint] and say, “Well, let’s understand why because you could probably make the same statement, when you were in grade school, about MLHS, that we were shoved down your throats. Well, because that was your high school, and we definitely want you to consider that. Well, MLC is your college. Whether you ever go there or not, it’s your college. So, we want you to be aware of it, and we want all of you to consider public ministry. If you, after considering it, decide you have gifts and interest to do something else, that is fantastic.”³⁶

This honest rebuttal addresses the students as Christians, allowing them to see why this is something they should want to support whether they pursue ministry or not. This also presents a key chance for clarification: other vocations are a fantastic way to serve God! Let high schoolers see that we simply encourage this vocation so we can continue serving them and their future family with God’s Word as they serve in other ones. “I push vocation hard here; you can serve God by being a cobbler just as well as being a pastor or a teacher. So, because we talk about those things and try to be pretty open and honest about it, there aren’t any [negative stereotypes

34. Sievert interview.

35. Sievert interview.

36. Krahn interview.

about MLC].”³⁷ MLHS guidance counselor Ryan Hulse’s approach is an example of balanced, nonchalant recruitment that fits well in Sievert’s description of “just walking along and encouraging.” He described his practice:

Usually, when I meet with the students [who have gifts for ministry] individually, I get what they’re interested in. Then I just bring up, “Have you ever considered teaching or being a pastor ... or staff minister?” And if they say, “I’ve thought about it,” then I just say, “Well, let’s just keep it as an option as you’re looking at schools. By no means do you have to go there, but let’s just keep it as an option.” We put that in front of them. Then, I don’t necessarily pressure them one way or the other. It’s more of just, “Where are you at with this?” [If they’re interested in something else], “Great! Alright, let’s pursue that.” But I always bring it as a viable option to everybody by asking them, “Have you ever thought?”³⁸

Recognizing the sanctity of other options while explaining why the ministry is encouraged is a balance ALHSs should strive for. Even with this “walking-along” approach, 3 of the 27 ministry-interested students at MLHS listed Hulse as the person who impacted their interest in ministry most. Pastor Krahn also appeared twice as well as once by a current MLC student. This attitude at MLHS could contribute to their recent success in ministry recruitment, ranking 6th among ALHSs and 2nd among high schools larger than 200 students.

Recruiting Positively and Passively

While there are undoubtedly thoughtful ways to encourage ministry verbally, as discussed above, the MLC survey indicates that a passive example of ministry is the most effective form of recruitment. Ted Klug describes it this way,

37. Krahn interview.

38. Ryan Hulse. Interview by author. Phone call. November 21, 2023.

When somebody just loves ministry, then kids start asking questions. “Why do you love ministry? Why do you love talking to people about Jesus? Why?” And now there’s an open door to say, “Here’s why. And by the way, if you want to think about it, here’s a place that will prepare you just as well as it prepared me.” ... We’re not in this to jam MLC down their throat. We want them to have such a wonderful feeling for [called workers], that they have a wonderful feeling toward MLC. We want them to come in because of ministry and because of the excitement to serve Jesus.³⁹

Since this interview happened early in my school year, I did my best to adopt Ted Klug’s suggestions at KML as a Word of God 10 teacher. I came with as much passion as I could every day. The natural opportunities to talk about ministry and MLC came along with it. In an online anonymous form where students could ask any questions about God and Christianity, questions submitted have included “What led you to pursue ministry?”, “Why did you want to go to MLC?”, “What is life at the seminary like?”, “What is your favorite Bible story?” Questions like these, occurring organically, allow for far more natural encouragement toward ministry. Instead of “shoving MLC down their throats,” this simply shares the joys of ministry and ministry training. Ted Klug added, “You’ll find with those groups of schools that do very strong [at recruiting for ministry], it’s very visible, the ministry. It’s not MLC. It’s that they love Jesus so much that you can see it in everything that they do. And students want nothing more than to become that.”⁴⁰

Considering the statistics presented in Figure E, many top ministry recruiting schools naturally fit the mold Ted Klug describes. CLHS and NEHLS, in the top 5, have dorms and a faculty that all attended MLC, including many recent MLC graduates, with 4 from 2020 or later at CLHS. Also, most faculty teach 4 or more different classes. Combine young, energetic MLC

39. Ted Klug interview.

40. Ted Klug interview.

grads, dorms, and lots of student interaction, and you have a strikingly comparable situation to the prep schools. MVL's location has ministry and ministry training right before their students. ELHS and MiLHS have smaller student bodies and are ranked 5th and 6th in WELS student-to-MLC/WLS graduate ratio at 6.2 and 6.3, respectively, below the ALHS average of 9.0. These schools provide natural opportunities for relationship building and close contact with ministry.

These schools demonstrate Ted Klug's hypothesis that young ministry "cheerleaders" are most effective. He used tutors as an example.

The cream of the crop ministry candidates often end up as dorm supervisors for a couple of years. So, our best people go out and become our best cheerleaders. Why is that? Because those students see themselves in those tutors. That's the key. A good tutor is huge for ministry encouragement because they see them living their life from morning to night, and they can't hide it.⁴¹

Young gospel ministers have significant opportunities to influence young teens, which is common and natural at many top ministry recruiting ALHSs. In a survey, Jonathan Marquardt, a junior at WLS, wrote, "Many teachers, especially younger guys, like the tutors, were very easy to look up to and want to be like." MLHS serves as an excellent example of this. Nathan Meitner, a 2018 MLC graduate, appeared as 2 students' biggest ministry influencer on the MLC survey and was cited by 7 of 27 ministry-interested students at MLHS. One student wrote of Meitner, "He showed me that teaching can be whatever you want it to be. You can have a musical instrument in your classroom to play for fun, and you can make close connections with your students."

Another student wrote,

[Mr. Meitner] convinced me that MLC would be a good fit for me when I was considering pursuing a teaching degree at a public college. He knows me the best of all

41. Ted Klug interview.

my high school teachers and his confidence in my ability to teach and share the gospel was an important factor in my decision to go to MLC.

Even with just these two descriptions, this young teacher demonstrates how effective “close connections” can be at creating ministry conversations. Yet, he established these connections passively and organically by investing in his students. Another 2018 MLC graduate who taught at MiLHS was mentioned by 2 students (of 5 from MiLHS) in the MLC survey as a ministry influence, as well as multiple other students in interviews with MLC president Rich Gurgel.⁴² One of those MiLHS students wrote, “She always encouraged me and was an example!![sic]”

Joyful ministers of the gospel who build relationships are crucial to recruitment, and not just called workers who graduated MLC in the past 5–10 years. Ted Klug pointed to Pastor Clark Schultz as the “Pied Piper” of ministry recruitment. He said,

I call it the Clark Schultz effect because anytime Clark is anywhere, the enrollment for MLC and ministry goes sky high. Lakeside was close to 30 students one year coming out of an ALHS, and the normal average is 10; not to say that it’s all Clark ... but it’s one key factor. The students could see that he loved ministry, and everything he did just looked fun. They wanted and strived to be that in ministry. They found it so amazing that they could share Jesus in such a positive way. It was so much fun that they wanted nothing more than to do that, too.⁴³

Klug also mentioned that the bubble of increased recruitment at ELHS (2nd in ministry recruitment) began when Joe Schmudlach arrived. Schmudlach was mentioned as ministry influencer by 1 of the 6 ELHS respondents in the MLC survey. Additionally, 4 of ELHS’s 10 faculty graduated MLC within the last 10 years, including Schmudlach. “Students looked at [Schmudlach] and the rest of the staff, and they loved so much what that staff brought to the

42. Rich Gurgel, phone correspondence, November 25, 2023.

43. Ted Klug interview.

table. They love ministry. They love Jesus. They want nothing more than to go out and excitedly serve. And all of a sudden, we get close to 40 percent of their student body this year that graduated from their school.”⁴⁴ As Dustin Sievert closed his interview, “Again, relationships are the sweet spot for ministry recruitment. That’s where I put my focus.”⁴⁵

How do relationships and passive ministry encouragements begin to develop? It is difficult to pin down specific programs or philosophies. Klug said attitudes about ministry and ministry training are “the interesting balance between the high schools. Often, it’s not a program they’re doing. You won’t go into high school and go, ‘Whoa! You are doing something exactly different than the other ones are.’”⁴⁶ Rik Krahn pointed to joy:

Our faculty just seems to enjoy what they do. ... There’s no grumpy person who looks like they’re only here because they don’t have any other options in life or coasting until they retire. ... If they’re surrounded by 25 people who really seem to like what they do ... interacting with [them] seven, eight, or more hours a day, how can that not rub off? It’s just that we have a faculty that genuinely loves what they do.⁴⁷

At the same time, perhaps proof that this can never be perfect or perfectly perceived, one former MLHS student wrote, “Honestly, there were some really good examples of what I don’t want to be in a called worker at my high school and how lack of empathy can affect students which made me want to be better.” Yet, a positive relationship and passive example of ministry can cover over bad impressions. That same MLHS student, describing the teacher who was their biggest ministry influencer, said, “He was an inspiration to young adults who didn’t come from a

44. Ted Klug interview.

45. Sievert interview.

46. Ted Klug interview.

47. Krahn interview.

traditional WELS background in showing they also have a place in the ministry.” There will be some called workers at an ALHS who did not have a great experience at MLC or in ministry and, therefore, are hesitant to encourage MLC or ministry. There will also be others who leave a less-than-desirable impression of ministry among interested or gifted students. Yet, relationships by teachers with that connection or something that resonates with the students (in this student’s case, a non-WELS background) can overcome the negative impressions. “You have one side who goes, ‘I’ve got a bone to pick with something that happened, and so I don’t necessarily love MLC because they wronged me at some point in time.’ They will never come out and say that, but you can see that. Then you have the other side where the students go, ‘This ministry thing is fantastic. I want nothing more than to do exactly what you’re doing.’”⁴⁸ While being careful not to downplay their experience, ALHSs can encourage those faculty on the former side to avoid generalizing MLC and ministry training based on their personal experience for the sake of the public ministry’s future. Yet, even when these situations exist, there are examples of strong relationships and positive examples of ministry overcoming them.

High School Students’ Understanding of Ministry

While many emphasize the importance of encouraging the public ministry for ministry’s sake, others are concerned that it does not communicate to all ALHS students. This could especially be the case at larger schools where it is more difficult to foster meaningful relationships between teachers/pastors and students, relationships that provide students a window into ministry. As a

48. Ted Klug interview.

result, many ALHS students, especially those without called workers in their families, may not understand ministry. Therefore, ministry-related reasons for attending MLC may not draw these students as effectively as prep school students or students with a called worker in their family.

Jason Walz, guidance counselor at KML, put it this way:

Who does ministry appeal to? Who understands the sanctification of ministry at 15 years old when you're recruiting that student? And the parents say, "I have to send my kids six hours for what? I got two Lutheran colleges right here." "Well, ministry." ... That works at LPS. It works at my house. Why? Because we understand ministry. It works with our pastors' and teachers' kids. But [they] are the ones who we're going to get.⁴⁹

The call process is one aspect that can be equally compelling for some as it is a deterrent for others. Distance was already cited as an increasingly common deterrent from colleges, so the prospect of parents' children being sent far away after college may also deter. Jason Walz described KML's student and parental perception of call day:

[The assignment process] is a negative. For years I've been saying to MLC, "Don't specifically send stuff to us that shows people's reaction to call day." ... That will deter more than anything. "Well, it's so exciting." Well, it's also "you're taking my child somewhere where I don't know, and I have no say in it, and they have no say in it." ... And MLC's website, come call day and assignment day, it's not about that a hundred percent of graduates are getting jobs. It's, "Wow, look at the reaction to this person going to Alaska" or something. And now our parents are like, "Yeah, nope." ... Our recruits do not have the maturity to understand that.⁵⁰

Student surveys at KML support Walz's sense of reluctance about the call. Of the 52 respondents who said they were at least "somewhat interested" in ministry, 24 selected "If I go into ministry, I don't know where I'll end up" as a reservation about pursuing ministry. At 46.15% of ministry-interested respondents, that was the highest rate of the three surveyed ALHSs. This concern

49. Jason Walz, Interview by author, In-person, November 2, 2023.

50. Walz interview.

ranked even above salary concerns, which was the clear frontrunner at MLHS and WLA. Yet, over 30% of ministry-interested respondents at WLA and MLHS cited concern about “where I’ll end up” as well. MLC, aware of this, does include an explanation about the call in its recruitment materials. Yet, perhaps there are other areas of emphasis that are more effective in recruiting students who do not come from ministry families.⁵¹

Recruiting Non-Ministry Families

What, then, does draw ALHS students without a called worker in the family? Do MLC and ministry have something to offer them? Jason Walz suggests job placement, salary, and quantitative evidence of a top-notch education program. Whether we like it or not, these areas are concerns parents and students have about their futures. MLC is in a great position to influence in all three areas successfully.

Job placement is one angle of the assignment process that may positively influence ALHS students and parents. With a high number of vacancies, consistent growth of high schools, and increasing opportunities for WELS schools in general, job placement out of MLC may be a selling point we can rely on for the foreseeable future. While the exact figure is not 100%, Jason Walz said, “Quantify [what makes MLC a great choice] for me because I have to sell this to parents. 100 percent job placement? Great. I can sell that to parents. I can sell that to kids.”⁵² Job placement does show up in MLC recruitment materials, in an MLC “*knightspages*” tract entitled

51. More on a response to the concern about the call is found in the section “Addressing Common Reservations about Ministry and MLC.”

52. Walz interview.

“Just for Parents.” Discussing concerns about Call Day, the last paragraph states, “Speaking in practical terms, please note that in the last several years, 98-100% of our eligible graduates received calls. Considering the high unemployment and underemployment rates for American college graduates in general, our ‘placement’ rate is very high.”⁵³ This is well-worded, especially considering that many students interested in ministry also cited a strong interest in another vocation. MLC is competing for students and should recognize this.

Again, whether we like it or not, salary is a concern, especially for students and families unfamiliar with the synod’s support system for called workers. Walz suggests transparency about salary in the recruitment process could also be beneficial.

There’s a perception [that called workers aren’t paid well]. I don’t think that’s a reality. That’s a bit of a wives’ tale, a myth. How can we bust that myth? [Advertise] starting salary. What’s your average starting salary? Everyone publishes that. “Well, it’s not about that.” I know it’s not about that. It’s about recruiting families.⁵⁴

I could not find a mention of salary in MLC’s recruitment materials. There are mentions of other financial concerns, such as the MLC graduate’s debt being over \$9000 lower than the national average and MLC’s commitment to teaching students financial literacy.⁵⁵ However, those issues were not as common a concern for current ALHS students and parents. College is expensive just about anywhere you go, and students seem aware of this.

Called worker salary was the biggest concern for current ALHS juniors and seniors. Of students who were at least somewhat interested in ministry, 42.31% at KML selected “People in

53. Martin Luther College, “Just for Parents,” 2020, 2. In Pastor Haag’s interview, he wondered if there is still a ripple effect from when, about 10 years ago, not everyone received assignments. We can rely on the (almost) guaranteed job placement for now but should still recruit well in other area should it change in another 10 years.

54. Walz interview.

55. Martin Luther College, “Financial Literacy,” 2020, 1.

ministry don't get paid enough money" as a concern. That number jumped to 48.15% (13 of 27 respondents) at MLHS. At WLA, this was the highest percentage among reservations about ministry. There, 58.33% (28 of 48 respondents) chose "people in ministry don't get paid enough money." That is 49.61% of ministry-interested respondents from these three ALHSs. Among uninterested students, some said that their fellow ALHS students who attend MLC are choosing a career where "they will make no money" and "will be in debt."

Since half of the interested students are concerned about salary, even a small amount of transparency about salary would be beneficial. While a common objection may be that the ministry is not about salary, perhaps there is not a strong enough appreciation of ministry among non-called worker families to counteract that. Also, most students considering a career in teaching are likely already aware this is not "where the money is." So, why not show them God's people and the synod will take great care of them in this career, especially as MLC and WELS compete with other options for a career in teaching, whether in public or other private schools.⁵⁶

Finally, what makes MLC's program top-notch, especially for education majors? If the ministry side of teaching is not as valued by families and students unfamiliar with a career in ministry, then what else is drawing them? Many people I talked to, including Jason Walz, stated that MLC has a strong education program. However, unless these statements are quantified, they will not be as effective as they could be. Walz said,

Now quantify [MLC's good education program] for me ... Does MLC have twice the amount of student contact with pupils than elsewhere? I don't think they do, but I need something like that. ... 'Every year, they're going to get teaching experience.' How many hours? I know [another competing college] doesn't [have that same experience]. ... MLC needs to compete. ... You got to show me that you're better than [another college] in

56. See "Addressing Common Reservations About Ministry and MLC" for a few facts and strategies in response to the salary concern.

education. Otherwise, my kids aren't going to go there. Right now, I have nothing to say that it's better other than anecdotally.⁵⁷

MLC's recruitment materials make many general references to its education program. These include points such as

Our faculty members are not only spiritually mature Christians and experts in their fields, but they have also had real parish and school experience. That makes a difference. They understand why you're here, because they made a similar choice earlier in their lives.⁵⁸

This could be a compelling point for those who want to be in a WELS school someday.

However, quantitative facts about why MLC's program will best prepare someone for teaching were not as present. One example I found was in the "Just for Parents" sheet from the "knightspages." Under "What if my student is not sure they want to be a teacher, pastor, or staff minister?", MLC states,

Our early field experiences, beginning already in the first year, will help them clarify their vocation decisions, and our professors will offer guidance as well. (Our 11:1 student-professor ratio enables this kind of personal attention.)⁵⁹

While these are helpful facts about the program, perhaps a comparison to other similar programs would help parents and students see MLC as a preferred choice.

Overall, Jason Walz offers these thoughts and hypotheses because of his high level of trust in the environment and programs at MLC. However, none of that affects these students if they never attend in the first place. By having more transparency about issues on students' and parents' minds, perhaps more students will give MLC a chance. Then, its Christian environment and talented faculty will have the opportunity to have an impact. As one MLC student wrote,

57. Walz interview.

58. Martin Luther College, "The WELS College of Ministry," 2020, 1.

59. Martin Luther College, "Just For Parents," 2.

“Gave [MLC] a shot, told myself I would try it out for a semester. Grew to love it and can’t see myself anywhere else. So excited to be a part of the ministry and have the opportunity to share God’s love to his children in my future call!”

Ministry’s Impact as An Effective Influence

As many students described how different people in ministry inspired them, they often included the impact teachers, pastors, and staff ministers made on others. These impacts help ALHS students grasp, in a more concrete way, why ministry brings people such joy. Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace’s Generation Z study revealed “that more than 70 percent of Gen Z students are motivated by not wanting to let others down, advocating for something they believe in, making a difference for someone else.”⁶⁰ Ministry uniquely delivers on all three of those motivations. A current MLC student who does not have a parent in ministry wrote, “After I graduated high school, I did not know where I wanted to go. But I knew that I wanted to help people directly in my job. Therefore, I thought the best way to help people was to teach them about Jesus. So, I came to MLC to become a pastor or teacher.” Our ministry recruitment should seek to help more students reach this conclusion!

Two current MLC students’ mention of a called worker’s funeral stood out regarding the powerful impact of the ministry. “[This teacher] was the model of what a Christian teacher should be. He taught high level math classes and his students loved him. At his funeral, some

60. Seemiller and Grace, *Generation Z Goes to College*, 15.

former and current students came from [out of state] to share their stories about him. He is the kind of teacher I strive to be!” Another student, describing the same teacher’s funeral, wrote,

When he died from cancer, we had a funeral service at his school’s church and so many of his students and their families showed up at his funeral and that is why I want to pursue a teaching career. The impact [he and another teacher] left on their students obviously meant something to them and that is what I want to do in my life.

MLC recognizes this draw to ministry. In one recruitment brochure, former student Lexi Heiman (née Dabe) said, “Sometimes I imagine sitting in heaven and seeing all the parents and students in whom God worked faith through the Word I spoke. To know I had even a small part in spreading the gospel message to them is the most incredible feeling!”⁶¹ These are tangible things ALHS faculty and pastors can help teens see. These are impacts that set MLC’s preparation apart from other schools. The “2023 Admissions Viewbook” at MLC includes testimonials to help students envision their future as called workers. One section entitled “Where Do You See Yourself?” contains statements such as “On the sidelines with a whistle in your mouth and a team huddled up?” or “helping struggling students, one by one, find the tools to succeed?”⁶² How much more effective would these pictures be if students had personally seen or experienced great examples of this impact already? Perhaps we can lead more students to speak similarly to this MLC student: “I want to help as many people as I can in my life. I don’t see any better opportunity to do that than to be a teacher. There will be hundreds if not thousands of students that I will get to teach over the course of my life and I want to have a positive, helpful, and Christ-filled impact on all of them.”

61. *MLC Recruitment Viewbook*, 2023, 9.

62. *MLC Recruitment Viewbook*, 2023, 8.

Faculty at ALHSs and other ministers in the students' lives should build relationships with the students to show them why ministry is a joy. We can help them look with eyes of faith at the spiritual impact while not wholly disregarding the temporal. The WELS is uniquely blessed to still provide great opportunities to enjoy earthly college life with multiple clubs, athletics, activities, and more at MLC. But so can other schools. These ministry-gifted teens need to see the difference ministry as a future career gives and the impact God allows jars of clay to have.

This unique calling sets MLC apart as a college as well. The first page of the admissions viewbook says,

What makes Martin Luther College different? Jesus! Jesus is the heart of our campus, our curriculum, our culture. Here you will: Worship twice a day in the beautiful Chapel of the Christ. Learn from expert professors who become your mentors on the path to gospel ministry. Meet like-minded Christians who become your friends for life. Discuss your journey of faith in campus Bible studies. Develop all your God-given gifts—in classroom and club, field and court, theater and concert hall. Discover the best way for you to say, “Here am I!”⁶³

These are all excellent reasons to consider MLC *if* the student is already interested in ministry.

That is why a passive and passionate ministry example and communicating the impacts of ministry as a career must come first. These things come through nurtured relationships with called workers. Yet, it is also important to remember Jason Walz's warning that, while these spiritual differences set MLC apart as a college, temporal things have a role in recruitment, as that is what most teenagers are interested in at their stage of life. Walz gave an example of this:

I talked to a junior [student] today. I said, “Hey, I want you to think about being a teacher, and I want you to go to New Ulm.” I said, “You know, I can see you on the soccer field playing for them for four years.” Well, why? Because I think he'd be a good teacher. He's great with kids. I've seen him, and I told him that. Okay, so great with kids.

63. *MLC Recruitment Viewbook*, 2023, 3.

Well, that's kind of spiritual maturity, a little bit. But soccer is what he cares about right now. And since he cares about it right now, that's attractive.⁶⁴

There is no need to separate the impact students can make in ministry from the college experience they seek too. Jason Walz also puts a lot of faith in MLC's ability to train young men and women to understand ministry. But until then, it takes a layered approach. He said of the same student, "Well, he's got to get into ministry. MLC does a great job of, once the kids are there, training them. And they got them for four years and they do a great job. [Overemphasis on only ministry] is where we failed in sending them kids."⁶⁵ Overall, the ministry's impact is caught more than taught, and verbal encouragement may be better focused on defending and supporting MLC in the areas teens are concerned about.

The Value of Ministry Experience

One way students can catch the joy and impact of ministry is through ministry experience, especially in the early high school years. Shadowing a pastor during my junior year at KML profoundly impacted my consideration for being a pastor. Growing up with a father in the ministry but out of the parish, my shadowing experience opened my eyes to the impact pastors have in so many areas. I witnessed a shut-in visit, a hospital visit, a Bible study with a ladies' group, and had lunch with the pastor. Others had similar experiences on their paths to MLC, too. One student wrote of their biggest ministry influencer, "[He influenced me by] giving me opportunities to assist in teaching positions and gain experience, meeting me up with a

64. Walz interview.

65. Walz interview.

recruitment ambassador here at MLC, and leading by example as I wanted to be a teacher like he was to me.” Ministry experience is effective when connected with encouragement and example within a mentoring relationship.

Many ALHSs, including KML, have opportunities for seniors to lead a chapel service. However, many seniors have already finalized or begun finalizing their college choice. Additionally, schools like WLA give the opportunity to lead chapel to those who have already expressed interest in ministry.⁶⁶ This is certainly a good way to bolster that interest, but it misses the chance to be a catalyst of that interest in others. Plus, earlier ministry experience could even help inspire that consideration far sooner in their college deliberations. This may mean suggesting to students they should have or go on a ministry experience even before they express interest themselves. KML, for example, sends students an interest form if they would like to shadow a pastor.⁶⁷ Yet, approaching students directly and individually with the experience first would bring a natural opportunity for ministry encouragement without being pushy. Even if the student says no, they will still remember that a teacher or pastor thought they would be a good fit for ministry, rather than quickly disregarding something like an email invitation, which lacks the personal aspect.

Unfortunately, not all ALHSs have opportunities for ministry experience. One high school I studied does not currently have a shadowing experience for ministry-interested students. They used to have a guidance counselor who set up shadowing experiences for many vocations.⁶⁸

66. Haag interview.

67. Ben Reichel, email correspondence.

68. Haag interview.

Perhaps this is a position through which more ALHSs could incorporate ministry shadowing. Shadowing has proven to be a big part of developing ministry interest among prep school students. WLS junior Zach Neumann described his experience through LPS's taste of ministry program, "[The pastor I shadowed] showed me ministry is more than Latin, Greek, Hebrew or just plain memorization. He showed a heart for his people, visiting the sick and the elderly, planning outreach opportunities in the community as well as how to plan for a Thanksgiving worship service ... how to simplify things for the newcomer."⁶⁹

Since teachers overly pushing MLC is a relatively common complaint among ALHS students, ministry experiences are another more subtle yet memorable way to recruit. Plus, the fact that they can even miss a school day could appeal to the "less sanctified" side of the teenage mind. Furthermore, in-school experiences such as giving chapel are real opportunities for students to see the ministry's impact and get over a common objection to ministry. Haag said, "I would say the most common negative response I get from a boy is, 'No way do I want to do public speaking.'"⁷⁰ "Again, I think [ministry recruiting] is more modeling and then just putting kids in positions like we've given our [SCLA] senior leaders a chance to do chapel, and that's been good for those guys."⁷¹ After chapel, many teachers and possibly fellow students will likely encourage the student leader and thank them for their leadership and sharing of the Word. This gives even more tangible evidence of the ministry's impact and is a first step in bolstering public speaking confidence. Instead of more meetings and broad announcements that add to the

69. WLS survey.

70. Haag interview.

71. Sievert interview.

stereotype of overrecruiting for MLC, we should let them *see* ministry to catch its joy and impact.

Creating Positive Ministry Peer Pressure

Speaking of positive encouragement from peers, positive ministry peer pressure can be a powerful encouragement for students to try MLC. This positive peer pressure is especially prevalent in the prep schools, particularly LPS. Jonathan Marquardt, WLS junior and former LPS student, wrote, “Having so many friends (and even non-friends) in my class that wanted to keep going down the same road was very encouraging (not that that’s only a thing at prep schools obviously).” His last parenthetical statement is accurate, as attested to by faculty at ALHSs. Pastor Haag said, “I think in the early 2000s, we had 20, 30, 50 kids from WLA at MLC. Then it was, ‘Five of my friends are going to MLC, and I’m not really sure what I want to do, so maybe I’ll go to MLC too because so many of my friends are.’” Haag cited a few examples of students he knew went to MLC for this reason. “At that stage in your life, sometimes just ‘What are your friends doing?’ is such a big influence and ... I think that’s why so many kids from prep, of course, and MLS, go to MLC because, ‘Hey, that’s what everybody else is doing.’ ... that’s not the only reason why people do it, but that’s a factor.”⁷²

An attempt to recreate a similar influence among ALHS students would be effective. However, when a school has few students at MLC, rebuilding lost momentum toward ministry can be difficult. One ALHS faculty member said, “I don’t know how you [build the influence of

72. Haag interview.

others going to MLC] on an ALHS basis. Are there ways that we can get kids who are thinking about ministry together more often so that they know others who are going into ministry without being the only one from their high school?”⁷³ ALHSs and MLC working together to find ways to build more of that positive peer pressure to ministry can only benefit recruitment. It not only shows interested students they are not alone but could fight the stereotype that MLC is just a “backup option” or a lesser option than other colleges.⁷⁴

There are a variety of ways this positive peer pressure can be nurtured. The same faculty member suggested, “Is there some way we can do something maybe [at] one of the upcoming youth rallies?”⁷⁵ While MLC is often present at youth rallies with presentations, booths, and the like, perhaps there could be more events for ministry-interested teens at the rallies. Pastors or teachers could identify students who may be interested or have gifts for ministry ahead of the rallies. Or, MLC recruiters could identify, among the youth rally roster, students who have met with them before. Then, perhaps a get-together of those teens could happen at the rallies. Something like “Thank you for meeting with MLC recruiters and thinking about us in the past. We want to show our appreciation! Join us for this party with cookies and ice cream with others also thinking about MLC!” Could there be other gatherings that ministry-interested/gifted students are invited to throughout the year?

73. Anonymous ALHS faculty interview 1.

74. One WLA student wrote in a survey, “Man, they could have done something better (last year’s valedictorian) who could have gone almost anywhere on academic scholarships, but other than that the people that go to MLC from WLA seem like they would be good teachers.”

75. Anonymous interview 1.

“Focus Trips”⁷⁶ at MLC could be a natural opportunity to bring interested kids together. In 2022-23, the Focus Trip for each ALHS was on a different date. This seems like a missed opportunity to accomplish what the interviewee mentioned above. If Focus Trips brought a few high schools to campus at a time, then even more ministry-interested high schoolers get to interact. They get to see that there is a whole cohort of ministry-interested students out there. My Focus Trip was memorable for this very reason. I remember catching up with multiple students from FVL and NEHLS in the MLC cafeteria, many of whom I met at WELS Choral Fests. Picturing life at MLC came up in conversation more than once.

Recent MLC Focus Trips have also proven successful among students; ALHS faculty praise them. Pastor Krahn said, “MLC has made some adjustments to their Focus on Ministry schedule and how they do that. And it’s really well done. So, they leave a positive impression, and I think it’s pretty universal, even kids who have no intention of going there leave there saying, ‘Yeah, this is a good school.’”⁷⁷ Another former FVL student at MLC wrote, “Coming on the Focus Trips or just a visit here [at MLC] helped a lot.” Seminary students and Dustin Sievert speak of a similar impact through ALHS trips to WLS. One student wrote, “My seminary tour when I was at Prep made me want to be a seminarian.” If most students come away with a positive impression of MLC and WLS through trips, this would only broaden a positive impression and peer pressure toward ministry.

76. “Focus Trips” are MLC’s recruitment trips where ALHSs bring students on campus for a variety of classes, activities, and tours of the campus.

77. Krahn interview. The positive impact Focus Trips can have on recruitment through non-interested students is covered further in “ALHS Students’ Perception of MLC and WLS.”

Creating Positive Parental Encouragement

Often, parents can be tougher to sell on MLC and ministry than the students themselves. Parents are not on Focus Trips and are often concerned about factors such as the divine call and called worker salary.⁷⁸ Another factor, MLC's distance from many ALHSs, is a chiefly parental concern, though it does appear among student's reservations. Pastor Hughes said, "I've heard it from quite a few, and usually it comes from the students which is from the parents. It's the parents that are afraid to let their kids go more than I think the kids, but there's a fair number I'm sure that would rather stay closer to home."⁷⁹ A faculty survey carried out by a teacher at KML supports Hughes's observation. In the answers to "Aside from not wanting to be a pastor or teacher, what are reasons a parent would not want their child to attend Martin Luther College?", 23 of 32 responses (72%) mentioned some form of "MLC's distance from home."⁸⁰ Other common factors faculty listed under that question and "What are major obstacles that keep parents from wanting to send their child to MLC?" included MLC's education ("sense that academic program isn't as strong as other teacher training programs"), concerns about the divine call, and not enough flexibility for their children's life choices ("feeling 'pigeon-holed' into one (or two) specific field(s)/major"). However, most of these concerns are related to the college rather than the ministry itself.

78. See the "Recruiting Non-Ministry Students" section above.

79. Hughes interview.

80. KML faculty survey. While this survey is asking the faculty to speculate for these reasons, the teacher who ran the survey said a large portion of the KML faculty do have children, including many who are high school aged.

As parents begin to see the value of ministry, they will start to see it as a blessing for their children. Martin Luther's remarks on this topic are intense but humbling reminders for parents everywhere still today. He wrote, "[God] has not given you your children and the means to support them simply so that you may do with them as you please, or train them just to get ahead in the world."⁸¹ So many of the above reasons are worldly-focused. Yet, parents are forgetting what really matters. Deep down, Christians know this, so ALHSs and especially churches can remind parents of these truths so they and their children can have a "things above" mindset (Col 3:23). This is an increasing challenge in our setting today. "[There is] the influence of money on kids today because everybody is used to the immediate satisfaction. ... They're looking for that. And we got to change a mindset. And it's not just a high school that changes the mindset. It's got to start already at the grade school, and it's got to start with parents."⁸²

Ministry and ministry training have a positive impact on the called worker's own faith. Christian parents would be hard-pressed to find other goals they would want for their children more. Their children's studies and careers will daily include the Word of God. This should be especially effective considering that the college years can be a dangerous time of testing for young people's faith. A 2017 study from Lifeway Research says, "While 69 percent say they were attending [church] at age 17, that fell to 58 percent at age 18 and 40 percent at age 19. Once they reach their 20s, around 1 in 3 say they were attending church regularly."⁸³ What a blessing

81. Luther, "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School," 222.

82. Hughes interview.

83. Aaron Earls. "Most Teenagers Drop Out of Church When They Become Young Adults." *Lifeway Research*. January 15, 2019. <https://research.lifeway.com/2019/01/15/most-teenagers-drop-out-of-church-as-young-adults/>.

MLC and a career in ministry are to counteract this trend! It is a prerequisite to remain in the faith for enrollment and career. Klug put it strikingly, “Let’s get right to the heart of what we’re doing. You get to get paid to talk about Jesus. That’s what you get to do. ... You can get fired for not talking about Jesus.” Perhaps stating it like that, in the negative, will drive that point home even further with students and parents. About spiritual life and MLC, Klug said,

You get an opportunity to hear from the very people that you’re reading devotion books from. Those are the people that you get to sit before and you get to grow in your faith, your understanding. You get to hear the pure Word regularly. And you get to be surrounded. You’re surrounded in the dorms. You’re surrounded in your classroom. Why wouldn’t you want to try it? ⁸⁴

MLC’s “*knightspages*” entitled “Just for Parents” helps parents see blessings like these. The first paragraph includes,

The campus family is united by a shared mission, a sense of community, and a campus culture marked by spiritual growth, service, and mission-mindedness. Chapel, religion classes, Bible studies, and service projects provide opportunities to worship, learn, and serve. Our classes are taught ... by professors who have formerly served in the public ministry, who are committed to education excellence, and who care deeply about their students.⁸⁵

Parents are often concerned about lost time with their children because they are a few hours further away for school. Yet, would they not much prefer that to their child lost for eternity because of a loss of faith at a university an hour away? While an appalling way to put it, this could help parents truly consider this point. Of course, we hope and have reason to believe WELS students are well prepared to face the world in this way and keep the faith. However, in my experience and speaking to multiple classmates at WLS, we all could think of numerous

84. Klug interview.

85. Martin Luther College, Just for Parents, 1.

classmates who lost their faith while at public universities, and some of them even considered ministry while in high school. And all these reasons do not even begin to touch the eternal impact parents' children will be blessed to have! As David Peter wrote in the *Concordia Journal*,

Today many young people are seeking to invest their lives in meaningful causes. There is no more significant cause than that of the gospel mission. As pastors and parents affirm to the young men [and in our case, young women] entrusted to them the high value and inestimable impact of the office of the ministry, no doubt numbers ... for ministry will swell.⁸⁶

How can we help parents have these views? Again, thoughts like Luther's can certainly help them grasp what a blessing it is to have a child consider this path.

A man ought to be willing to crawl on his hands and knees to the ends of the earth to be able to invest his money so gloriously well. Yet right there in your own house and on your own lap you have that in which you can make such an investment. Shame, shame, and shame again upon our blind and despicable ingratitude that we should fail to see what extraordinary service we could render to God, indeed, how distinguished we could be in his sight with just a little application of effort and our own money and property.⁸⁷

This is something to be proud of, not ashamed or afraid of. The first step, then, is simply conversations with the parents. So often, it seems, ministry recruitment is focused only on the child. What good will that do if that student goes home only to hear discouragement, be it ever so mild, from the people in the closest relationship with them? Instead, ALHS faculty can use orientation nights, events, and parent-teacher consultations to communicate with parents about their child's ministry gifts. These opportunities allow called workers to immediately dispel misconceptions and encourage all the blessings and impacts discussed above. A bit of humility never hurts, either, to admit to families unfamiliar with ministry that the prospect of this career

86. David J Peter, "A Timely Word from Luther on Recruiting Young Men for Pastoral Ministry," *Concordia Journal* 40, no. 1 (2014): 16.

87. Luther, "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School," 228.

may seem daunting, only to slowly cover over those reservations with the joys. Perhaps parish pastors can get fantastic devotionals written by MLC faculty in the hands of parents with ministry-gifted children. Encourage the new man in these Christian parents, who will see what a blessed path this is to pursue. This is what leads us to pray in “The Service: Setting Three,”

Instill in the hearts of our children a desire to follow you as they prepare for future days. Help them to distinguish between what is passing and what is eternal, between instant thrills and lasting joy. Encourage more young people to prepare for service in the public ministry of the gospel.

And the congregation and these very young people’s parents pray in response, “Mold us and move us to be good examples for our youth.”⁸⁸ May God use us, as we instruct parents, to be an answer to that prayer.

Creating Opportunity For Lay Member Encouragement

Much of the discussion thus far has centered on recruiting tactics for ALHS faculty, pastors, and parents. However, encouragement from our congregations’ laypeople could be an incredibly persuasive recruitment to ministry. It is easy to imagine a student thinking, “Of course, my pastor and teachers are going to recruit me to MLC. They’re all in ministry and went there themselves! It’s their job.” How surprisingly swaying and new would it be for them to hear laypeople’s encouragement! One example is what laypeople did at St. Joseph’s Roman Catholic Church in Red Lake Falls, MN. They placed the names of people they thought could serve well as priests

88. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *Christian Worship: Hymnal*, Milwaukee: NPH (2021): 198.

into the offering plate.⁸⁹ Could something like a Ministry Sunday be used to do something similar? Perhaps ushers pass out small cards as the pastor asks, “Write the name of two people in this congregation you believe God has blessed with the gifts for gospel ministry and a sentence or two of why they would be a good fit.” The pastor can also encourage the members to speak to those people personally. It is difficult to imagine a ministry-gifted young person, receiving a stack of sheets pointing out their God-given gifts and seeing the quantity of support, not being impacted profoundly.

I did not see many examples of laypeople’s encouragement in the surveys, but I believe that is because it is relatively uncommon. It was clear that the few who did mention a layperson’s encouragement were sincerely impacted by it. One example was a WELS member who dropped out after one year of seminary training. A WLS middler wrote this about him: “He is a WELS member who had a ministry mind who met people day after day who needed to hear about their Savior. He made it his mission to show me the need for more pastors; pastors who need to be out in the world being a friend to all with the cross of Christ on their heart.” A current MLC student from a public high school wrote about her lay recruiter: “Growing up she always made it a priority to let me know the importance of being a called worker in the ministry.” There are ways we can foster more interactions like these. Pastors can identify the members of the congregation who have the spiritual gift of encouragement (Rom 12:8), speak with them, point out the young people in the congregations, and ask them to encourage them continually. Encourage the encouragers! The blessings would be two-fold: it is a chance to teach the blessings of public

89. Melinda R. Hepe, “Calling People to Ministry: The Churches Learn to Summon Tomorrow’s Pastors,” *In Trust* 4, no. 3 (1993): 13–16.

ministry to another member and give a gifted young person a new and unique encouragement to remember, one that inherently shows the impact a career like the public ministry has.

ALHS Students' Perception of MLC and WLS

The perception of MLC among ALHS students was more positive than many may expect. In the high school surveys, “I have reservations about Martin Luther College” was rarely picked. 12.6% of ministry-interested students chose that as a reservation, and 6.45% of not-interested WELS students (even with the ability to choose up to three of these reservations).⁹⁰ Written statements by students interested in ministry, not-interested, and especially non-WELS students were also generally positive. This further minimizes the perception that a higher percentage of non-WELS students affects ministry recruitment negatively. The survey responses from MLHS were noticeably positive, displaying the positive momentum toward ministry training currently present at MLHS.

Negative comments about MLC were rarely directly related to campus life. Most described the campus as a “Christian environment” with a “good atmosphere.” A few students said it seems like a bigger version of their high school, “with the same cliques and small feel.” One mentioned the new field house as a nice addition and that the dorms could be improved but “aren’t bad.” A few also noted that programs closer to home “do the same [thing]” and some are better. Most negative comments related to the distance away or that it is primarily for “smart”

90. See Appendix D. Students could pick 1–3 of the listed reservations for pursuing ministry and also had the option to write in their own.

and “sanctified” students.⁹¹ 13 students at WLA mentioned that WLA students who go to MLC are “smart,” and 2 called them “nerds.” At MLHS, 7 students mentioned that students who go to MLC are “smart” and added comments such as “and devoted, to both their education and to God.” Two students also called them nerds. A ministry-interested KML senior wrote, “[MLC] seems pretty high stakes, and I don’t know if I’m exactly smart enough for this school.” Six other KML students also described MLC students as smart. While, in many ways, this helps create a positive impression of MLC as a school, the previous student quote shows how this may give the wrong impression and hinder recruitment. We should find ways to show that students with all levels of gifts and intelligence can be great ministers of the gospel. After all, critics of the faith even had this impression of the apostles: “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13).

ALHSs may be playing into the perception that “only very sanctified students go” for a few reasons. One, if teachers are only going after highly talented students, other students are noticing. Two, if students, especially outside of called worker families, constantly hear only the ministry-sided or sanctified reasons for pursuing this career, perhaps that will not appeal to the common ALHS 16- or 17-year-old. One ALHS teacher described that impression:

How are you going to send more? You are not going to do it by saying, “Hey, become a called worker, be in the Word every day, and, you know, you will grow spiritually. It’ll be fun reading the Bible.” How many times have they had fun reading the Bible? Not many. So, it’s going to be terrible. And then, who wants to do that? Nerd kids. You know who goes to MLC? Nerd kids who don’t like to have fun. Why? Because MLC is in New

91. What is interesting about this impression is that when it comes to highly talented students, you see almost the opposite attitude (i.e. the footnote quote on page 49). Ministers would do well to point out the opposite side’s opinion to dispel either stereotype. Though, the stereotype of MLC students being especially smart or sanctified was significantly more common.

Ulm, Minnesota. Out in the middle of nowhere. ... There's nothing to do except read the Bible. All things I disagree with, but that's a perception.⁹²

While, of course, we hope students who pursue ministry are interested in reading the Bible, this teacher may be right that it is a bit of a stretch to assume their motivation for ministry is perfectly sanctified at this point in life. If our ALHS ministry recruitment always sounds similar to what is described above, it follows that students have this impression. Instead, ministers of the gospel should humbly be open about their faults and shortcomings, reminding students that God uses jars of clay to show “that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Cor 4:7). A WLS junior wrote, “One of the main reasons I went [to MLC] was when I learned that pastors don't have some special ‘divine sense’ that they need to be a pastor. They don't need some miraculous experience to feel like they are called to ministry.” If we can remove subtleties that give an impression that something akin to an “inner call” is necessary, then perhaps more students will drop the impression that, as one KML student wrote, “you should be certain that you want to be a teacher or pastor before you go there.”

Another way to squash the “only smart or sanctified students” impression is through more exposure to MLC. Focus Trips are a natural option. Krahn noted that Focus Trips are effective for interested and non-interested students, especially since the trips have recently improved. Therefore, he is a proponent of letting students go, no matter their reason.

If you want to be a pastor or a teacher, [MLC] is exactly the place you should go. I think that's basically the perception that the students have. We do the Focus on Ministry trips twice a year. So we end up taking a lot of kids there. And I don't vet that at all. ... Even if you're just looking for an excuse to get out of school for a couple of days, that's fine.⁹³

92. Anonymous ALHS faculty interview 2.

93. Krahn interview.

This year, at one ALHS I studied, students were held back from going on the Focus Trip because the bus was full. This was conducted by “weeding out” students who were not interested in MLC and wanted to miss a few days of school. In all, 55 students signed up for the trip, but only 33 students went. This seems like a missed opportunity for MLC to make a good impression on students who do not go to MLC, which only helps the overall impression of ministry training in the high school.

The importance of trips on the perception of ministry training does not end with MLC. Dustin Sievert described the profound impact a trip to WLS had on young men at SCLA, both interested and non-interested.

To get kids projecting out a little further, having high school students on the seminary campus is really transformative. It’s really eye-opening and a positive way just to see guys who are like them, that they could be like that someday. And just to see the campus, go to chapel, and feel the sem culture. Getting them here is even more powerful than going back home. ... And that’s [what] our philosophy at St. Croix has been: if there are kids who are gifted with the servant leadership idea and have gifts for ministry, we just want to plant the seed and see what happens. We’re probably more into modeling ministry than we are into specific programs.⁹⁴

Sievert also emphasized how the WLS trip helps students who worry about the eight-year program. It was a concern that 17 ministry-interested students from the surveyed high schools included in their 1–3 reservations. Sievert said,

I think a lot of it for early high school kids might be the longevity of the degree from start to finish. The freshman year to the ending point there at the seminary being eight years, I think that’s hard to fathom for a kid who isn’t ingrained in the system. ... So that’s why we bring kids here. I think this is really valuable so they can see that we try to help them, in their minds, shorten up the window.⁹⁵

94. Sievert interview.

95. Sievert interview.

Plus, trips like these help with the overall impression of only “smart” and “dedicated” students going into ministry training. The WLS trip includes activities like dodgeball with the seminarians, class visits, and conversations over pizza, all things that help bring seminarians “down to earth” for these students. MLC and WLS trips show prospective students that the WELS ministerial education system is not akin to a monastery or a terribly dull schooling experience.

MLC as First Option – A Dying Method?

A recruitment strategy I often heard throughout this study was trying MLC first and recognizing it is okay if someone does not like it and wants to try something else. This idea came up a few times in the MLC survey. One student wrote, “My biggest push to join the ministry was a single thought by someone else. They said I have a passion for Jesus, and I’ve thought about serving, so I thought why not at least try the MLC thing out? So, if you feel like you might like it, I would highly encourage you to try it out because it is easier to transfer out than in.” Perhaps this option is not suggested or advertised as well in some settings. A KML student wrote, “I feel as though you need to be set on becoming a pastor or teacher, which I am not set on. I enjoy something else.” Two other KML students also expressed similar sentiments. The idea of trying MLC first does, practically speaking, seem like the better option than trying other colleges first. There was a general frustration across a few surveys that when transferring into MLC, students did not have many credits that came over. However, the MLC recruitment materials highlight the ease of transferring out, citing that most credits will transfer with the student. They also include a quote from a student who did transfer out: “MLC was a great experience! I met many new friends who are extraordinary people. I played on the basketball team. I learned things I can take on to my

future career, and of course the spiritual advances I made at school are awesome. It was so much fun at MLC. I'm going to miss it."⁹⁶

However, Ted Klug wonders if this mentality of trying MLC first has changed. He said,

[It used to be] you went to MLC, and you went for one year and you tried it out and then you decided whether or not you were going to do it. And that is a huge mentality shift that we've been through now. But now people don't do that anymore. They're like, "I'm not sure. So, I'm just going to go somewhere else," and we hear it quite often. I can show it to you in hundreds of different comments from counselors that students will often say, "I'm going to try this first, and if I don't like it, then I'll come to MLC." So, you see that mentality shift.⁹⁷

This strategy is still alive in certain contexts. MLHS guidance counselor Ryan Hulse said,

I usually go with the MLC option first if they're 50/50 [on pursuing ministry]. Mainly because at least it gets you there to try it, just because the other stuff you kind of know what to expect. But this one, you might not. So, at least try it to see if you like it. Get involved and see if you like the campus. ... [If] they're a sports person, ... "Hey, why don't you go try it, play your football? If you don't like it, then you're going to go try a school where you're not necessarily going to play football, right?" So, I kind of look at it that way.⁹⁸

Hulse's strategy also does a good job of recognizing the draw of non-ministry-related interests that MLC offers, such as athletics.

However, others see letting students try other options first as effective for certain students. Dustin Sievert points out that kids, especially those with opportunities in areas such as athletics at a larger school, may go to MLC and continually wonder what the other path could have been like. Yet, if they have strong gifts for ministry, they will remember to consider MLC again down the road.

96. Martin Luther College, "General Education," 2020, 1.

97. Ted Klug interview.

98. Hulse interview.

Go to [the bigger university] and see what happens. If it's a fit, great. God's going to use you, and you're going to be a solid light on the campus and wherever he takes you. ... Or you just have that experience of that setting which will make you a better pastor and student down at MLC if it doesn't work out.⁹⁹

Three current seminary juniors are examples of a path like this that eventually led them to ministry training.

At the same time, Sievert emphasized that this is not an overarching strategy but depends on each student.

It's situational for each kid, but [for some], go scratch that itch first and see what happens. See how the Lord's going to bless you in that setting. Or go to New Ulm and see how the Lord's going to bless you in that setting. We try not to put pressure [on them]. ... So, it's not necessarily a strategy. It's more just giving kids permission to think about all options.¹⁰⁰

This could be an effective option for called workers' kids who already understand and are familiar with the ministry and ministerial education. They often know ministry seems like the right path for them, but they may not be able to get another idea out of their head. Often, they can end up back at MLC. Perhaps showing students like this that there is not one "right" decision can take some pressure off. Yet, for students with little to no familiarity with MLC's culture and WELS ministerial education, especially students who are not from ministry families, it makes sense to encourage MLC first. They are likely more familiar with the typical college path, and MLC may be the "itch" they should scratch first. One MLC publication said, "What if my student is not sure they want to be a teacher, pastor, or staff minister?' Then your student is like many of our students!"¹⁰¹

99. Sievert interview.

100. Sievert interview.

101. MLC, "Just for Parents," 2.

ADDRESSING COMMON RESERVATIONS ABOUT MINISTRY AND MLC

“Teachers and Pastors Don’t Make Enough Money”

Outlined above, we see that the most common concern current ALHS students have about pursuing ministry is the salary. A related issue is also the cost of tuition at MLC. These concerns also are common among parents, according to KML faculty.

First, called workers need to kill a fallacy that “pay for WELS teachers is well below public school.” Some form of this came up multiple times in the surveys. However, this is frankly untrue. In a 2023 article in *InFocus* magazine, MLC president Rich Gurgel pointed out two key things to know about money and ministry. First, the average debt of MLC students continues to drop: “In May 2019, the average debt for all MLC graduates was \$21,077. In May 2022, that average had fallen to \$16,937. That means MLC graduates carry about the same average debt as public university graduates. And they carry significantly less debt than private college graduates.”¹⁰² Second,

Sometimes we’ve almost given the impression that those entering the public ministry have taken a vow of poverty. They haven’t! ... Picture a May 2023 MLC graduate assigned to southeastern Wisconsin. For that graduate, the WELS salary matrix suggests a base salary of \$30,987 to \$35,635. If the calling body does not provide a house, they would provide a housing allowance of \$16,488. That makes the actual salary range for that new WELS teacher \$47,475 to \$52,123. ... In 2022, the starting salary for a new Wisconsin public school teacher was \$34,687 to \$50,650, with the average teacher earning \$41,535. In addition, when compared to other businesses, WELS congregations and schools usually cover much more of the cost of health insurance. ... Here’s the takeaway: Our MLC graduates are not compensated as second-class educators.¹⁰³

102. Gurgel, “A Doubly Positive Narrative,” In *InFocus*, Spring 2023, 2.

103. Gurgel, “A Doubly Positive Narrative,” 2.

When housing allowance is considered, even the MLC graduate at the bottom of the WELS salary matrix in southeast Wisconsin makes \$5,940 more than the average first-year public school teacher. This is significant quantitative data that guidance counselors, like Jason Walz, are looking for. MLC would do well to include figures like these in recruitment materials and not let this info die in a now outdated magazine volume. As quoted above, Walz recognizes this is not what ministry is about. Usually called workers' families are the ones that understand the relative unimportance of salary, but "who does care about salary? Everyone else."¹⁰⁴

Faculty members can make a profound impact on this impression in the ALHSs. For example, I recently encouraged 3 students in my high school classroom to consider ministry. Two of them immediately brought up the objection of salary and cited multiple faculty members who gave them that impression. High schoolers are listening! Shame on us if we give an impression that does not even find a basis in truth. Instead, faculty can individually counteract this misconception with transparency about their personal lives in the ministry and how they are well-provided for while at the same time recognizing that "we don't want to lure people to public ministry by waving high salaries before them. The apostle Paul had good reasons for warning us that a spiritual leader should not be a 'lover of money' (1 Timothy 3:3)."¹⁰⁵ This is a good reminder for us all about what priorities we are communicating to students.

Transparency about salary and personal life is key. Randy Hughes said, "I think it's a fallacy, that pastors or teachers are underpaid. Are we going to be in the highest pay scale that's

104. Walz interview. This, of course, must be balanced with the idea Paul brings up in 1 Tim 3:3. But this does not exclude transparency about salary since Paul instructs in the same book that "the worker deserves his wages" (1 Tim 5:18).

105. Gurgel, "A Doubly Positive Narrative," 2.

out there? Absolutely not. Are you going to starve to death? Absolutely not. And so we have to change that perception of poverty-stricken called workers.”¹⁰⁶ As an example of this transparency, Dustin Sievert said, “I’ve tried to debunk [the salary objection] in my class a lot. I said, ‘You can come drive by my house. I’m not hurting. I mean, I might have two really crummy minivans, but the Lord takes care of us, and there are lots of unique blessings even being where we are in our tax bracket.’”¹⁰⁷ ALHS teachers must consider the following: What impression are they giving? They should be aware that this research reveals that the misconception is still out there and impactful on potential public ministers.

“MLC is Too Far Away”

As shown in the KML faculty survey, distance from MLC is a common reservation that parents, especially, have about MLC. Randy Hughes used his personal experience to sum up well how this may be a bit of a fallacy.

The closer you stay to home means the less you are going to have the ability to make switches and changes in life and grow from them. I would also say that I believe it’s a fallacy because I have two daughters, one that went to Marquette, one that went to UW Milwaukee. Then, my third one went to be a called worker and went up to MLC. And I saw [the daughter who attends MLC] as much as I did my other two daughters that were maybe 30 to 45 minutes from here. Because college takes over their life, they get a job, sometimes it’s their boyfriends, but I saw [the MLC student] as much as my other daughters, and so I think it’s kind of a fallacy to think that you’re going to be seeing your kids during college for big chunks of time or every weekend. It shouldn’t happen if you’re committed to your studies, so I think it is a fallacy that a lot of people believe in.¹⁰⁸

106. Hughes interview.

107. Sievert interview.

108. Hughes interview.

Responding to this objection may also be an effective time to talk about the positives parents can see in MLC's environment. Their children may be far from them, but they are kept close to God through constant exposure to the Word. The safety of the campus and even the recognized stereotype that many students meet their spouses at MLC should be positives for parents.¹⁰⁹ What parent would not like the high probability of a Christian spouse for their child? Plus, it may not hurt to mention the completion of the Highway 14 project between Nicollet and New Ulm. Google Maps now lists the drive time from WLS, for example, as less than 6 hours, and students will drive on four-lane highways for almost the whole trip.

Worries/Concerns About the Divine Call

This concern was discussed at length in the "Recruiting Non-Ministry Families" section. MLC materials include a transparent tract about it among their "*knightspages*," which includes a detailed description of the assignment process. MLC president Rich Gurgel points out the blessing of the call in the tract, saying, "On difficult days, it's an incredible comfort to look at the call on my office wall (where it's always been since my first call) and remember: 'I didn't put myself here. Jesus through his church called me to serve here. And where God calls, he always equips.'"¹¹⁰ In an age where Evangelical ideas of God's will run rampant, tempting even our own young people to try to "find God's will" for their life, what a wonderful breath of fresh

109. This was a commonly mentioned stereotype by KML students, where 9 respondents mentioned that students seem to get married or find a spouse. This was not mentioned in the MLHS or WLA surveys.

110. Martin Luther College, "The Divine Call," 2020, 1.

air God’s doctrine of the call is, to have the blessed assurance that you are right where God himself has placed you.

Yet, these are still hard truths to grasp for students who are not familiar with ministry or the call at all. One WLA student wrote, “I feel that Martin Luther College is a very unknown environment ... when you graduate you could go anywhere in the US without warning of where you’ll be.” While discussing the divine blessings may help, perhaps an attitude of “just wait and see” would be helpful, too. Jason Walz goes so far as to say that MLC should emphasize that you do not need to take an assignment. He bases this assertion on his trust that MLC does a great job of teaching people about the call. “If they start emphasizing that you do not have to be assigned, I would guess you’re still going to get the same percentage that takes the assignment.”¹¹¹ An MLC “*knightspages*” does mention students who defer calls, but the two examples are “to pursue further education or to serve overseas.”¹¹² While Walz’s suggestion is certainly unique, it is hard to imagine a typical situation where a student, after 4 years at MLC, would still be against taking an assignment along with their friends and classmates. MLC’s “Just for Parents” brings this out, “It’s important to note that what your students will feel as college seniors is very different from what they feel now as high school students. Over the college years, they’ll grow in their trust that God will place them where they’re needed. And parents will grow in this trust too!”¹¹³

111. Walz interview.

112. MLC, “Just for Parents,” 2.

113. MLC, “Just for Parents,” 2.

CONCLUSION

Praise be to God! There is great potential and reason for optimism for recruitment at our ALHSs. Over 30% of WELS students at KML, WLA, and MLHS indicated that they have at least considered ministry, yet we are recruiting only 8.11% of WELS students at those same schools. There is potential for growth, especially as surveys show that the impression of MLC is relatively positive, even among non-WELS students, whose growing presence has no discernable hindrance to ministry recruitment.

Surveys among students at MLC and ALHSs indicated that a more passive and personal example of ministry is more effective than constant and active recruiting. Over 75% of current MLC students from the ALHSs described a ministry influencer who inspired them through faithful and personal work in the ministry. ALHSs should foster more relationships between joyful ministers of the gospel and ministry-gifted students through things like ministry experiences and a positive ministry environment among the faculty, especially around students. Then ministry as a career will be more intriguing for students. Schools should also make sure faculty members who did not graduate from MLC are on the same page about ministry recruitment in the school, as statistics revealed this could have an impact.

Schools should seek to create more positive ministry peer pressure by allowing more students to experience MLC and WLS (regardless of interest), bringing ministry-interested students together from multiple schools, and giving students opportunities to serve in ministry at their schools and churches. The ALHSs and local pastors must also actively dispel the notion that the high school serves as the teens' church for 4 years, as this minimizes pastoral influence, which is noticeably lacking in the ALHSs. ALHSs should emulate, as is feasible, what naturally gives prep schools an advantage: having excited young people on the faculty with ample time for

relationship building. ALHSs should look for ways for passionate and often young faculty to build relationships with ministry-gifted and interested students. Bigger schools, especially, must be more proactive about making this happen.

ALHSs need to recognize that students who do not have called worker parents are almost an entirely different audience from students who do. Surveys revealed that students are most concerned about salary and the divine call. MLC and ALHS faculty can also smooth over these and other reservations about the ministry through transparency about called worker salary, personal life, and stories of the ministry's impact. We should be careful to communicate in ways that families outside the ministry are not turned off by, perhaps by relaxing a bit of the emphasis on the divine call and instead showing that we are currently blessed with close to 100% job placement. Faculty should also be transparent about how called workers are well taken care of and be aware that students quickly pick up on statements that suggest otherwise.

Overall, ministry recruitment is a balanced and multi-faceted approach. It is the responsibility of both the churches and the schools to recruit these students. Recruitment suffers without one or the other's investment. We should also be careful to avoid two ditches of recruitment extremes. On the one side: trying to sell students 100% by the sanctity of ministry and joy for the Word. While this is undoubtedly the more important side, recruiting without any temporal or earthly appeals only feeds an existing stereotype that MLC is only for highly dedicated, intelligent, and sanctified students. On the other side, our recruitment should avoid exclusively using worldly appeals to appeal to and be understood by more students.

Ultimately, we can never fully cleanse the ministry of all doubts, difficulties, and worries, or it would no longer be ministry in a sinful world. Martin Luther, reflecting on his own call to ministry, put it thoughtfully, "On account of the exceedingly great and heavy cares and worries

connected with [ministry], I would not take the whole world to enter upon this work now. On the other hand, when I regard him who called me, I would not take the whole world not to have begun it.”¹¹⁴ We can try to perfectly portray ministry, making every effort to dispel every possible reservation or misconception. But ultimately, we leave it to the Lord and praise him for every young person who pursues the holy ministry despite the “great and heavy cares and worries connected with it.” To remove them all would be to lie. Instead, we remember that Jesus instructed his disciples to “ask the Lord of the harvest” (Matt 9:38). May we continue to do so, whether in personal prayer or as congregations across the WELS pray, “Help [our children] distinguish between what is passing and what is eternal, between instant thrills and lasting joy.”¹¹⁵ Then, let God use us as an answer. Let us live out this noble task displaying the light of that “lasting joy” so that this ripe harvest of candidates “may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16).

114. Luther, “Table Talk Recorded By Veit Dietrich,” 13.

115. WELS, *Christian Worship: Hymnal*, 198.

APPENDIX A – CLARIFYING THE STATISTICS

The WELS CLS statistics, collected annually from each high school, include the number of non-member students at each school. However, these numbers are not separated by class year (i.e., the number of non-members in the freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior class). Therefore, I estimated the percentage of high school graduates that went to MLC with the following formulas:

First, the number of WELS graduates was estimated with the following formula:

$$(\# \text{ of WELS Students} / \text{Total student body of that graduation day's school year}) * \text{Total \# of graduates} = \text{Estimated \# of WELS graduates}$$

Then, using that estimation, the number of WELS graduates who pursued MLC was calculated with the following formula:

$$\# \text{ of graduates that pursued MLC}^{116} / \text{Estimated \# of WELS graduates} = \text{Percentage of WELS graduates that pursued MLC}$$

This calculation means there is a slight amount of fluctuation possible for the WELS graduate numbers each year. However, this fluctuation is mitigated over longer periods of consideration. Most of this paper considers the past 10 years for its observations and conclusions.

Especially considering the large variation between the sizes of each school, average percentages for the 20 studied ALHSs were not calculated simply by averaging the yearly or

116. This number was provided by both MLC and WELS CLS. When there were (rare) discrepancies, the author went with the number provided by MLC admissions.

historical percentages together. Rather, the total number of MLC graduates at all 20 ALHSs were divided by the number of WELS graduates (estimated using the same formula above). This same calculation procedure was followed whenever percentages or ratios were calculated for all the studied schools together. In short, ratios or percentages, as values, were never averaged together. Rather, the sum of numbers in the considered categories was what was used to calculate total-look ratios or percentages.

APPENDIX B – THE INCLUDED HIGH SCHOOLS

Twenty ALHSs were included in this study. There are listed below along with basic statistics for reference. Light green indicates a top 10 ALHS for ministry recruitment of WELS students. Light orange indicates a bottom 10 ALHS for ministry recruitment.

| High School | Total Enrollment (23-24) | Total WELS Enrollment | Percent of WELS Students that Pursue Ministry | Percent of All Students that Pursue Ministry |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|---|--|
| Arizona Lutheran Academy | 235 | 131 | 9.10% | 6.00% |
| California Lutheran High School | 92 | 36 | 35.80% | 18.10% |
| Evergreen Lutheran High School | 97 | 56 | 21.00% | 12.70% |
| Fox Valley Lutheran High School | 745 | 593 | 9.00% | 7.50% |
| Great Plains Lutheran High School | 137 | 110 | 12.70% | 10.30% |
| Illinois Lutheran High School | 92 | 53 | 7.40% | 4.20% |
| Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School | 568 | 457 | 7.80% | 6.90% |
| Lakeside Lutheran High School | 536 | 478 | 9.90% | 9.50% |
| Luther High School, Onalaska | 252 | 227 | 13.50% | 12.90% |
| Manitowoc Lutheran High School | 248 | 210 | 13.80% | 12.80% |
| Michigan Lutheran High School | 126 | 57 | 20.80% | 11.70% |
| Minnesota Valley Lutheran High School | 269 | 241 | 18.40% | 17.00% |
| Nebraska Lutheran High School | 60 | 46 | 16.10% | 12.30% |
| Northland Lutheran High School | 110 | 58 | 9.40% | 7.20% |
| Rocky Mountain Lutheran High School | 57 | 21 | 13.80% | 9.30% |
| Saint Croix Lutheran High School | 420 | 217 | 9.50% | 5.20% |
| Shoreland Lutheran High School | 425 | 225 | 8.90% | 6.00% |
| West Lutheran High School | 216 | 121 | 6.70% | 4.10% |
| Winnebago Lutheran Academy | 337 | 308 | 6.50% | 6.00% |
| Wisconsin Lutheran High School | 924 | 526 | 6.40% | 4.00% |
| ALL 20 Studied ALHS | 5946 | 4174 | 10.40% | 7.90% |

Divine Savior Academy, Kingdom Prep Lutheran, and Apostles Lutheran were not considered in this statistical study because the percentage of their student body that are WELS/ELS members is 7.21%, 2.46%, and 20.97% respectively (2022-23 school year). While we still hope to recruit for ministry from these schools, I felt the numbers would too far skew the

overall percentages/numbers in this study. This study is also focused on recruiting students who are currently WELS members. **Hope Lutheran Academy** was also not included in this statistical study, not because they would have had the smallest enrollment of the studied schools (50 students in 2022-23), but simply because I did not realize that Hope is formerly Huron Valley Lutheran High School. As a result, there were not enough historical statistics for comparison with the other high schools. This mistake was realized far too late in the statistical analysis process to be easily fixed.

Luther Preparatory School and **Michigan Lutheran Seminary** were not included in this statistical study because this thesis' focus is on recruiting for ministry in the Area Lutheran High Schools. LPS's (50.92%) and MLS's (39.23%) percentages of graduates who go on to pursue ministry are far higher than the percentage of ALHS graduates who pursue ministry (7.9%). Including MLS's and LPS's numbers would further skew results and would not serve the purpose of this study. However, statistics and MLC survey results related to the prep schools (LPS and MLS) are used as points of comparison throughout this study.

APPENDIX C – MLC STUDENT SURVEY

This survey was conducted through Google Forms. Submissions were limited to one response.

This survey especially targeted undergrads living on campus to ensure respondents would have graduated high school within the last 1–4 years. Therefore, the survey was distributed to students in the dorms. Overall, I received responses from 222 of the roughly 575 students living on campus.

The Survey Questions:

- Gender
- MLC Track
 - Teacher
 - Pastor
 - Staff Minister
 - Other
- What high school did you go to?
- Are/were either or both of your parents called workers?
- Which of the following was the *biggest* factor that led you to pursue ministry?
 - The encouragement/example of parents or a family member.
 - The encouragement/example of a called worker (not family).
 - The culture at Martin Luther College.
 - An impactful ministry experience (a mission trip, VBS teaching, chapel devotion, etc.)
 - The desire to study Scripture / grow in faith.
 - The importance of sharing the gospel.
- Besides parents, what individual had the greatest impact on your pursuing ministry?
- This individual was a...
 - Included instruction:* Choose the role this person had when they influenced you toward ministry.
 - Pastor
 - Teacher
 - Tutor (includes pastor tutors)
 - Staff Minister
 - None of the Above (explain below)
- In what way did this person influence you to pursue ministry?
 - Included instruction:* Were they more of an example or an active encourager?
- Are there any other factors you wish to share about what led you to pursue ministry?
(*Question not required*).

Quantitative Results

| Gender | Former ALHS Students | Former Prep School Students | Former Public/Other | All Students |
|--------|----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Male | 49 (40.2%) | 45 (57.0%) | 11 (52.4%) | 105 (47.3%) |
| Female | 73 (59.8%) | 34 (43.0%) | 10 (47.6%) | 117 (52.7%) |

| MLC Track | Former ALHS Students | Former Prep School Students | Former Public/Other | All Students |
|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Teacher | 103 (84.4%) | 44 (55.7%) | 11 (52.4%) | 158 (71.1%) |
| Pastor | 16 (13.1%) | 33 (41.8%) | 8 (38.1%) | 57 (25.7%) |
| Staff Ministry/Other | 3 (2.5%) | 2 (2.5%) | 2 (9.5%) | 7 (3.2%) |

| Are/were either of your parents called workers? | Former ALHS Students | Former Prep School Students | Former Public/Other | All Students |
|---|----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Yes | 60 (49.2%) | 46 (58.2%) | 5 (23.8%) | 111 (50%) |
| No | 62 (50.8%) | 33 (41.8%) | 16 (76.2%) | 111 (50%) |

| Which of the following was the biggest factor that led you to ministry? | Former ALHS Students | Former Prep School Students | Former Public/Other | All Students |
|--|----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| The encouragement/example of parents or family. | 34 (27.9%) | 24 (30.4%) | 4 (19.0%) | 62 (27.9%) |
| The encouragement/example of a pastor or teacher (not family). | 49 (40.2%) | 28 (35.4%) | 2 (9.5%) | 79 (35.6%) |
| The culture at Martin Luther College | 1 (0.8%) | 1 (1.3%) | 1 (4.8%) | 3 (1.4%) |
| An impactful ministry experience (a mission trip, VBS teaching, chapel devotion, etc.) | 7 (5.7%) | 6 (7.3%) | 2 (9.5%) | 15 (6.8%) |
| The desire to study Scripture / grow in faith. | 6 (4.9%) | 9 (11.4%) | 5 (23.8%) | 20 (9.0%) |
| The importance of sharing the gospel. | 25 (20.5%) | 11 (13.9%) | 7 (33.3%) | 43 (19.4%) |

| [The student's biggest influencer] was a... | Former ALHS Students | Former Prep School Students | Former Public/Other | All Students |
|---|----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Pastor | 23 (18.9%) | 25 (36.7%) | 12 (57.1%) | 60 (27.0%) |
| Teacher | 86 (70.5%) | 32 (40.5%) | 3 (14.3%) | 121 (54.5%) |
| Tutor (includes pastor tutors) | 1 (0.8%) | 13 (16.5%) | 0 (0.0%) | 14 (6.3%) |
| Staff Minister | 1 (0.8%) | 1 (1.3%) | 1 (4.8%) | 3 (1.4%) |
| None of the Above | 11 (9.0%) | 8 (10.1%) | 5 (23.8%) | 24 (10.8%) |

APPENDIX D – HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT SURVEY

Student surveys were carried out among the juniors and seniors at three ALHSs: KML, MLHS, and WLA. Transparency was encouraged, and the surveys were anonymous to get as accurate a picture as possible from real students about their impressions of ministry and MLC. At KML, 83.9% of eligible students (juniors and seniors) took the survey, at MLHS, 87.62% of eligible students, and at WLA, 89.57% of eligible students. Below is the complete survey.

- Gender
- Class
 - o Junior
 - o Senior
- Are you a member of a WELS/ELS church?
 - o Yes
 - o No

Students that answered “No” (non-members) went to this section:

- How familiar are you with Martin Luther College?
 - o Respondents chose a number from 1 (never heard of it) to 10 (very familiar).
- What are your impressions of Martin Luther College?
- What are your impressions of [the surveyed ALHS] students that go/plan to go to Martin Luther College?
- If given the opportunity, would you be interested in being a teacher, pastor, or staff minister in a WELS church or school?
 - o Yes
 - o No
 - o Maybe

Students that answered “Yes” to being a WELS/ELS member went to this section:

- What church do you go to?
- On a scale of 1-10, how interested are you in becoming a WELS pastor, teacher, or staff minister?
 - o Respondents chose a number from 1 (not interested at all) to 10 (very interested).
 - Option “5” was also labeled “I’ve thought about it.”

Students that answered 5 or more to interest in ministry went to this section:

- Which of the following is the biggest impact on your interest toward ministry?
 - o The encouragement/example of parents or family.
 - o The encouragement/example of a pastor or teacher (not family)
 - o The culture at Martin Luther College.
 - o An impactful ministry experience (a mission trip, VBS teaching, etc.)

- To grow my faith/study God's Word deeply.
- The importance of sharing the gospel.
- What one person has impacted your interest in ministry most? (Besides parents)
- What reservations do you have about pursuing ministry? (Choose 1–3)
 - I have a strong interest in something else.
 - People in ministry don't get paid enough.
 - The job is too stressful/difficult.
 - I don't think I could be a teacher, pastor, or staff minister.
 - If I go into ministry, I don't know where I'll end up.
 - The school portion is too long.
 - I have reservations about Martin Luther College.
 - *Other*
- What are your impressions of Martin Luther College?
- What are your impressions of [your high school's] students that go/plan to go to Martin Luther College?

Students that answer 4 or less to interest in ministry went to this section:

- What are the largest factors for your reservations about ministry? (Choose 1–3)
 - I have a strong interest in something else.
 - People in ministry don't get paid enough.
 - The job is too stressful/difficult.
 - I don't think I could be a teacher, pastor, or staff ministry.
 - If I go into ministry, I don't know where I'll end up.
 - The school portion is too long.
 - I have reservations about Martin Luther College.
 - *Other*
- What are your impressions of Martin Luther College?
- What are your impressions of [this high school's] students that go/plan to go to Martin Luther College?

See results on the next page.

Quantitative Results

Students Who Have Considered Ministry (answered 5 or more in ministry interest):

| Which of the following is the biggest impact on your interest toward ministry? | KML | MLHS | WLA | TOTAL |
|--|------------|-----------|------------|------------|
| The encouragement/example of parents or family. | 16 (30.8%) | 8 (29.6%) | 12 (25%) | 36 (28.4%) |
| The encouragement/example of a pastor or teacher (not family). | 14 (26.9%) | 7 (25.9%) | 8 (16.7%) | 29 (22.8%) |
| The culture at Martin Luther College | 2 (3.9%) | 1 (3.7%) | 5 (10.4%) | 8 (6.3%) |
| An impactful ministry experience (a mission trip, VBS teaching, etc.) | 8 (15.4%) | 3 (11.1%) | 8 (16.7%) | 19 (14%) |
| To grow my faith/study God's Word deeply. | 2 (3.9%) | 1 (3.7%) | 4 (8.3%) | 7 (5.5%) |
| The importance of sharing the gospel. | 10 (19.2%) | 7 (25.9%) | 11 (22.9%) | 28 (22.1%) |
| Total ministry-interested respondents | 52 | 27 | 48 | 127 |

| What reservations do you have about pursuing ministry? (Choose 1-3) | KML | MLHS | WLA | TOTAL |
|---|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| I have a strong interest in something else. | 26 (50.0%) | 10 (37.0%) | 16 (33.3%) | 52 (40.9%) |
| People in ministry don't get paid enough. | 22 (42.3%) | 13 (48.2%) | 28 (58.3%) | 63 (49.6%) |
| The job is too stressful/difficult. | 10 (19.2%) | 4 (14.8%) | 7 (14.6%) | 21 (16.5%) |
| I don't think I could be a teacher, pastor, or staff minister. | 3 (5.8%) | 3 (11.1%) | 8 (16.7%) | 14 (11.0%) |
| If I go into ministry, I don't know where I'll end up. | 24 (46.2%) | 10 (37.0%) | 15 (31.3%) | 49 (38.6%) |
| The school portion is too long. | 7 (28.0%) | 2 (7.4%) | 5 (10.4%) | 14 (11.0%) |
| I have reservations about Martin Luther College. | 6 (11.54%) | 5 (18.5%) | 5 (10.4%) | 16 (12.6%) |
| Total Ministry-Interested Respondents | 52 | 27 | 48 | 127 |

Students Who Are Interested in Other Vocations (answered 4 or less in ministry interest):

| What are the largest factors for your reservations about ministry? (Choose 1-3) | KML | MLHS | WLA | TOTAL |
|---|-------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| I have a strong interest in something else. | 112 (84.9%) | 43 (78.2%) | 73 (79.4%) | 228 (81.7%) |
| People in ministry don't get paid enough. | 47 (35.6%) | 18 (32.7%) | 38 (41.3%) | 103 (36.9%) |
| The job is too stressful/difficult. | 17 (12.9%) | 7 (12.7%) | 16 (17.4%) | 40 (14.3%) |
| I don't think I could be a teacher, pastor, or staff minister. | 70 (53.0%) | 27 (49.1%) | 41 (44.6%) | 138 (41.5%) |
| If I go into ministry, I don't know where I'll end up. | 22 (16.7%) | 7 (12.7%) | 15 (16.3%) | 44 (15.8%) |
| The school portion is too long. | 22 (16.7%) | 10 (18.2%) | 16 (17.4%) | 48 (17.2%) |
| I have reservations about Martin Luther College. | 8 (6.1%) | 7 (12.7%) | 3 (3.3%) | 18 (6.5%) |
| Total Other-Vocation-Interested Respondents | 132 | 55 | 92 | 279 |

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