

TOGETHER



February 20, 2024

Update on the Ministry Recruitment Task Force

The Ministry Recruitment Task Force (MRTF) was formed as a result of a resolution passed by the 2023 synod convention, due to the significant shortage of pastors, teachers, and staff ministers. Its assignment is to look at all factors that impact the recruitment of called workers and to bring recommendations to the 2025 convention for an ongoing synodwide effort to recruit and train more called workers. Rev. Paul Prange, administrator of Ministerial Education, chairs the group.

The MRTF began its work by building on the good work done by the Teacher Shortage Task Force in identifying the reasons for the current teacher shortage. The MRTF then identified the reasons for the current pastor shortage.

The MRTF worked on estimating the expected supply of pastors and teachers in the near future and more than a decade from now. It did that with the knowledge that the future of the church and her needs is in the hands of our living Lord and that our predictions have proven inaccurate in the past. Nevertheless, the MRTF believes that it is a matter of good stewardship to make plans based on our best predictions.


The task force received about 30 suggestions for addressing the shortage. The suggestions related to the high school supply of candidates were easy to consider, since the prep schools and area Lutheran high schools are constantly working on supplying candidates to Martin Luther College (MLC) and MLC has already begun to improve its recruitment of public high school students.

Alternative pathways for nontraditional seminary students were also easy to consider, since Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and its Pastoral Studies Institute have worked out courses and delivery models for nearly every life situation.

It is more complicated to consider all the suggestions for the college level. MLC has recently added a number of programs for early childhood workers at all stages of professional and ministerial certification, and those programs are just being promoted for the first time. MLC is also developing a Competency Based Education program, which provides an alternative pathway to the teaching ministry for WELS second-career adults who are unable to move to New Ulm for a traditional on-campus program.

In addition, U.S. colleges are changing rapidly because of changing demographics and funding sources. How will those changes affect the ability of MLC to meet the public ministry needs of WELS? The MRTF is discussing those issues.

The task force plans to issue the first draft of its report in April. It will include preliminary recommendations that can be discussed synodwide prior to the presentation of the final report at the 2025 synod convention.

Serving with you in Christ,
WELS President Mark Schroeder 

Meeting the spiritual needs of WELS members in the military

In early February, WELS Military Services National Civilian Chaplain Rev. Paul Horn completed a trip to the southeastern United States to visit military bases and WELS congregations to learn more about life in the military and present information about WELS Military Services and how it serves WELS members in the military. As the national civilian chaplain, Horn's role is to serve as the liaison to the military as well as orient, train, and mentor WELS military contact pastors around the country.

Horn's first stop was Abiding Grace, Mobile, Ala., which is close to a Coast Guard pilot training center. Abiding Grace is home to many veterans and actively serving military members. Abiding Grace's pastor, Rev. Tom Spiegelberg, serves as a military contact pastor to WELS members on base.

After a stop at Zion, Gainesville, Fla., to present at a circuit meeting that included two military contact pastors, Horn made his way to Savannah, Ga., where he toured the US Army Ranger training facilities. While in Georgia, Horn was able to shadow WELS member LTC Michael Hefti, battalion commander at Fort Stewart, for a day, opening his eyes to the stressors a military family faces.

Horn's final stop was Hope, Irmo, S.C. While at Hope, Horn met with an Air Force veteran for Distinctive Religious Group Leader (DRGL) training, a program that allows lay members or civilian clergy the opportunity to represent their faith group and serve their people through Word and sacrament. With this training, this

veteran will be able to lead Lutheran worship and Bible studies for the Army recruits at Fort Jackson, S.C.

"One of the ways the military allows WELS to provide Word and sacrament to members on bases is to train WELS pastors and laypeople to be religious lay leaders," says Horn. "While they don't always have full access to WELS military members—it depends on the installation, the chaplain, or commanding officer—it is a foot in the door in meeting the spiritual needs of WELS members in the military."

Because WELS does not endorse chaplains, technically WELS is not a Distinctive Religious Group as recognized by the Department of Defense, but when WELS members enlist or commission as officers, they can indicate their religious preference. If WELS is the designated religious preference and religious accommodation is requested, it's possible to access WELS worship.

Horn emphasizes that it is also important for military members to sign up with WELS Military Services at wels.net/refer. Once a service member signs up, they'll be put in contact with the nearest WELS church and pastor.


Religious accommodation in action

Our Savior in San Antonio, Texas, is an example of a congregation that makes use of the religious accommodations on base. The congregation is near the Air Force base that conducts all the Air Force basic training. Rev. Micah Koelpin, pastor of Our Savior's west campus, and Mr. David Kasischke, Our Savior's staff minister, share the duties of once-per-month WELS worship services on base.

Kasischke shares what worship on base is like:

"The worship services we conduct are currently held on JBSA-Lackland here in San Antonio, in the Gateway Chapel's conference room. We are billed as 'Evangelical Lutheran (Wisconsin Synod),' and we meet on the third Sunday of every month at 3:30 p.m. I use an order of service from our hymnal to ensure the worshipers, Air Force basic trainees, get the evangelical Lutheran experience. Usually, the ratio of non-WELS versus WELS is high . . . there are many more non-WELS people who attend. Some are curious about what an 'evangelical Lutheran' service looks like, and some are attending because they are 'wingmen'—the escort that is required because basic trainees do not go anywhere unaccompanied. Attendance is always unpredictable. My largest group was 19; then there have been times where it has only been a small handful. I always have the Lord's Supper ready for any WELS member who attends. We practice close communion, but I explain why we do it this way and invite people to stay and participate in the other parts of the short communion service that I lead afterward. These services bring in people from all walks of faith life—unbelievers, doubters, curiosity-seekers, people who identify as 'Christian' but really know very little about their faith as well as Lutherans of other synods and members of other Christian denominations. I always take time to walk through the worship service and explain what each

part is and why we do it when we do it in the worship service. I also leave time for questions after the service, about the worship itself or faith in general. I have found the questions are thoughtful and heartfelt."

Opportunities to worship together and receive the sacrament are vitally important, says Kasischke. "What I have gathered from my conversations with these young people is that despite how well prepared you are, there is an adjustment to being away from home, loved ones, and the entire support network you are used to." 

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