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Engaging the World with the Gospel of Hope



A Special Focus: Pastoral Education

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Have you ever considered spending your vacation at a monastery? Christian monasteries throughout the world offer opportunities for visitors to escape from their everyday routines. Advertising for these monastic experiences contains pictures of peaceful surroundings and encourages prospective guests to retreat from the pressures and worries of the world in order to engage in worship, study, and quiet reflection. It sounds wonderful, and there is certainly much to be gained from such an experience.

Our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod seminaries in Fort Wayne and St. Louis are not monasteries, and those being prepared for pastoral ministry there are not engaging in a monastic retreat. To be sure, worship, study, and quiet reflection take place on the seminary campuses, and they are essential components of pastoral formation. Yet, these students are not interested in retreating from the world. They are interested in fervently engaging the world with the Gospel of hope.

The pages that follow vividly describe the efforts of our future pastors and our seminaries to communicate to the world the only true source of eternal hope, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Seminarian David Ficken provides examples of his passionate Gospel engagement of the people he meets while working at Starbucks. Vicar Andrew Yeager, from Baltimore, details how he learned to relate the hope of the Gospel to people in the very different surroundings of Oklahoma. Two students in the new Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) program, a program that allows students to stay in their mission contexts while being formed for pastoral ministry, describe their experiences in Gospel engagement.

Apart from their students, our seminaries vigorously engage the world through the online theological resources they offer in electronic format. Audio files, video files, and manuscripts are downloaded tens of thousands of times each week by people around the world. Only the Lord of the Church knows how many people have been reached by the Gospel conveyed through these amazing means.

All are blessings from God—the people featured in the following pages and the means they employ to engage the world. Yet, it would be a mistake to emphasize the people and the means while ignoring the message itself—the Gospel of hope. This hope is sure and certain, for Jesus Christ is its source. It is unchangeable, for it is grounded in the words and promises of God. It is a living hope, for He who once died for the sins of the world now lives and reigns to all eternity, and we with Him!

As Peter was inspired to write: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:3–4 ESV).

Dr. Glen Thomas is the executive director of the LCMS Board for Pastoral Education.



From Seminary to Starbucks—and Beyond

Living with the Gospel in church is often comfortable. Living with the Gospel beyond the church doors is often less so.



Have you ever been asked a tough question that you didn't know the answer to? Have you ever been put on the spot with a question about your faith, where you found yourself fumbling for a response? You know, something like, "If God is all powerful, and all loving, how can He let people go to hell?"

Chances are you have been in a situation where, whether it is about your faith or not, you have been asked a question that made your confidence sink and your comfort level wane because you couldn't reply with a swift, certain answer.

I am a student at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. I also work at a local Starbucks. While the seminary has been teaching me many, many things in the classroom and on campus, I have a unique opportunity to keep learning while serving lattes and cappuccinos, often to people who have never been on a seminary campus or, in some cases, inside a church building. It is through my conversations with these people that God is teaching me how to reach the lost with His Good News.

So, yes, you guessed it. There is no shortage of faith-filled questions that come my way, or opportunities to find myself bereft of a swift answer. But these occasions have also taught me a few guidelines as important as instantly having the right answer—guidelines that might speak louder than my words.

Opposite: Dave Ficken enjoys a coffee with Margaret Walsh at Crave, the coffeehouse of Christ in the City Lutheran Church. Ficken initially met Walsh, a City of St. Louis judge, through his work at Starbucks. Eventually, they connected again after a worship service offered by Ficken's field-education congregation, St. John, Ellisville, Mo.

Below: Walsh and Ficken with Donna Green, manager of Crave.

Lean on the Promises of God

There is a reason God tells us to lean on His Spirit. This is where we are given the strength, the words, and the guidance for sharing His Good News. This is essential for you and me as we share our faith. God equips you and gives you situations to share His love, even when you don't think you can handle it.

For example, over the past several months I have become acquainted with one of my regular "drive thru" customers. An inactive Christian (perhaps my best way to describe him), he knows that I am a seminary student. Recently, after I had not seen him for a while, I asked how he was doing. He told me his father had been diagnosed with bone cancer. He asked me to pray for him. Several days later he came through the drive-thru again. "Dave! It worked," he said. Not quite sure what he was referring to, I asked, "What worked?"

Without hesitation, he replied, "Your prayers! They worked! My dad's cancer isn't nearly as severe as they said it would be!" God promises to hear our prayers and tells us that our prayers are powerful and effective. Lean on those promises and trust that He is leading you.

Live Life Authentically with Others

Do things with others, non-Christians included, outside of the normal context in which you meet them. Hang out after work. Talk about things other than school if you are a student.

I saw this unfold during a Tuesday-night service organized by my field-education church at a popular local microbrewery and pub. One of my regular customers attended. We spotted each other. She said, "Hey, you're the barista!" I said, "Hey, you're the Triple Grande Nonfat No-Foam Latte!" Multiple conversations later she came to hear me preach at my field-education church and now regularly asks about my progress in school. Our relation-

ship has grown so that we can regularly encourage each other in our faith.

Leave the Door Open for Further Opportunity

Many times we think that sharing Christ is a one-shot deal. Truth is, when someone is part of your "sphere of influence," you are going to continue interacting with him or her, and you will probably have more than one opportunity to share Christ.

A Starbucks colleague started asking questions about my Christian faith a few months ago. She firmly stated her disbelief in the same God I believe in. Her strong opinion could have been taken to be offensive. However, because I knew it wasn't going to be the last time we talked, we agreed to disagree. Since then, we have had more conversations about what she believes, what I believe, what the Bible teaches, and how all of that intersects in our lives. If I had taken offense during our first serious conversation and fired back, attacking her beliefs, we would not be having those conversations. In fact, because there is now a level of trust

built between us, I can ask her a question as deep as, "If you were to be approached by a Christian who wanted to share his or her faith with you, what kind of person would you want that to be?"

Without hesitation, she said, "Someone like you, someone I could trust. Someone who I know won't shove a Bible down my throat without any consideration for who I am as a person. I'm not a target."

Remember Our Calling

Many times we shy away from opportunities to share our faith because there seems so much uncertainty and discomfort involved—a question we cannot answer, a belief we do not know how to respond to, a consequence we do not want to face. But God doesn't call us to live within our comfort zone. Instead, the Holy Spirit guides us in all situations, whether they are comfortable or not. "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord" (2 Tim. 1:7–8).

Dave Ficken is completing his second year of studies at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. His home congregation is Trinity Lutheran Church, Lisle, Ill.

