

Ministry as a Trade

A Proposed Training Model for the WELS

I. Introduction: Why a New Pathway to Ministry?

Our goal is to make ministry training more accessible to more people, so that more people - from fresh out of high school to second career to retired - might consider serving in the public ministry. The purpose of this brief paper is to shine a light on some of the challenges that might stand in the way of people choosing ministry, and propose a new method to overcome those challenges. This proposal is not in place of the pathways already available through our worker training system; it is another pathway that might open the door for more part time and full time ministry careers.

The Blessing of the Ministry

Serving in the Public Ministry is a great honor and blessing. There is so much joy in being called by God, through his people, to serve with our whole lives in the building of the Kingdom of God. And willing servants are a blessing to the Church, as they carry out the work our Savior has entrusted to us.

The Challenge We Face

Fewer people are choosing to enter the ministry. This is not just a WELS problem, it is a problem for the Christian Church in America. According to Ministry Watch, seminaries and Bible colleges across various denominations are experiencing persistent enrollment declines in ministry training programs (Rabey, 2022). According to a study of M.Div. programs, between 2018 and 2022, M.Div. enrollment nationwide dropped 9%, and in 2021 alone it decreased by 4% (Post, 2022).

We are feeling it. Declining enrollment in our Synod schools. A growing shortage of Called Workers for our churches and schools. There is no one factor behind all of this, but some of the reasons young people are giving for their hesitance are: cost of the education, lack of options for ministry roles (especially for women), the location of Martin Luther College, the uncertainty of the call system, and the amount of time spent in the classroom rather than actively doing ministry in the Church, especially in courses that do not seem directly relevant to the ministry they hope to do.

There is also an “expertise gap” in the church, where trained Called Workers are the experts in ministry and handling God’s Word. Lay people with gifts and maturity are underutilized because ministry feels reserved for those with formal academic training. Young people reflect on feeling called to ministry, but feeling that the path is long, narrow, and doesn’t offer the kind of roles and responsibilities they feel best suited to. Meanwhile, second-career candidates struggle with the sacrifices involved for their families.

A Proposed Solution

Nationwide, young adults are increasingly opting not to attend four-year college, and are instead choosing trades, where the education is hands-on, mentored, and includes only coursework directly relevant to the work (Pew Research, 2023). This proposal mirrors that approach: Ministry as a Trade. Those who sense a calling to ministry can begin serving and learning in context immediately, guided by seasoned mentors, while growing in knowledge and competency directly from the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions.

In this model, roles and responsibilities in ministry would increase as knowledge, skills, and experience increase. Ministry Apprentices would be mentored to develop their gifts and work in areas that best fit them,

while exploring more ways to serve as they grow. As they become more competent, they are regularly evaluated and are given more responsibility as they demonstrate capacity.

In broad strokes, the process would be a flexible, localized program, carried out at the congregational level, resources by the Synod, taught by subject matter experts, and mentored by local ministry leaders. Ministry Apprentices would spend a few hours each week in classroom learning (in person or online), meeting with their mentor, interning at their congregation, engaging in Bible reading and theological reflection, and practicing skills. They would go on regular retreats with other apprentices to grow in community, and the culmination would involve robust assessments, including a portfolio, written doctrinal statement, and oral review.

An important consideration: How do we maintain doctrinal fidelity and church supervision? How do we make sure we do not open the door for immature, poorly trained individuals becoming a spiritual danger to themselves and others? More work will be done to safeguard against this potential, but the combination of mentoring, community, and robust assessment will be a good starting point.

This is not about lowering standards or lessening training, but creating an accessible path that integrates learning, mentoring, and practice together as Ministry Apprentices work to meet the standards and gain the training needed. The first stage of this model would result in Staff Ministry certification, but the journey does not end there. This model invites further specialization, and for some, a viable path into preaching and congregational oversight as a recognized Pastor in the Synod.

The remainder of this paper will provide brief arguments for this model, describe the model “at-a-glance,” and suggest some steps forward. This proposal is a suggestion - a potential way forward for consideration on the part of Synod leaders, administrators of our Synod schools, and anyone who sees the same challenge and is looking for an idea to move us forward. It is intended to open the conversation and begin laying new paths for entrance into ministry.

II. A Biblical Vision: Ephesians 4 and the Call to Equip

"So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature." —Ephesians 4:11–13

This is not just a programmatic shift; it is a biblical return. Leaders exist not to do all the ministry, but to **equip God's people** for it. The purpose of training is not to create a professional class, but to grow the whole church toward maturity, unity, and fruitful service.

This proposal reflects that vision: pastors, teachers, and staff ministers become **mass equippers**, guiding God's people into deeper discipleship and active service. It invites more people to begin the journey toward public ministry, and invites some to experiment with whether or not public ministry is right for them.

III. Prerequisites & Starting Assumptions

This program is not for brand-new believers. We assume:

- Participants have completed confirmation instruction.
- They are actively engaged in worship and Bible study.
- They have demonstrated spiritual maturity and a desire to serve.
- If needed, have a letter of recommendation from a trusted ministry leader

This foundation ensures that participants already possess a working understanding of Scripture and doctrine. The apprenticeship then builds upon this through deeper theological study, practical training, and character formation.

IV. Ministry as a Trade: A Mentored Model

Throughout church history, and in Scripture, candidates for ministry learned by apprenticing to someone with experience and maturity. Jesus mentored the Twelve. Barnabus mentored Paul in the early stage of their partnership, and later Paul mentored Timothy, Titus, Silas and others. The Early Church operated similarly as it trained those who came after the apostles. Ministry was:

- Learned by doing
- Passed on through relationship
- Honed through practice

This program reclaims that model.

- **Mentorship** is central
- **Theological depth** is expected
- **Practical skills** are developed through real ministry work
- **Assessment** is based on demonstrated competency, not just course completion

Rather than lowering standards, this model **lowers barriers** and raises expectations for growth.

V. The Opportunity: Real People, Real Ministry

Taylor's Story: The Blocked Path

Taylor left the church as a teen, but came back as a young adult. He and his wife joined a small group, and soon they started leading a small group together. He became passionate about theology and ministry, and asked about training to serve in the public ministry at his church. The only option presented was the full MLC path, which his young family could not afford. By God's grace, we were able to create a workaround, making use of mentorship and MLC courses, but it took a while for Taylor to get started; the cost and length of the program felt daunting, especially because there was no assurance that at the end of the path he would have a call. A Ministry Apprenticeship would have made a clearer and more accessible path.

Cil's Story: The Narrow Vision

Cil is a high school senior who feels called to ministry. But as a woman, the only vision offered to her was classroom teaching—something she doesn't feel called to. She sees women like the Women's Ministry leader at her church, or a community organizer like her mom, and envisions a ministry that expands on those roles. When presented with a mentored internship model built around her gifts, her response was immediate: "Yes! Yes! Yes!" How many other young women see the narrow path and closed doors and long for a new - and still biblical - way to enter service in God's Church?

Brandon's Story: The Long Way Around

Brandon had family and friends encouraging him to pursue pastoral ministry, but he chose Staff Ministry because it aligned more closely with his gifts at the time. As the years went on, he discovered new strengths—including pastoral counseling, preaching and biblical languages—and pursued them through additional study, eventually earning two Master's degrees and a Doctorate. But within the WELS, the current structure of Staff Ministry offers no defined pathway to pastoral ministry. Despite his theological training and ministry experience, fully using those gifts would require stepping backward to re-enter a traditional academic pipeline. Today, there is no formal track for a Staff Minister to grow into expanded responsibility or a pastoral role, even with advanced education. What if that changed? What if Staff Ministry wasn't the ceiling, but the starting point—a platform that could grow with the person, leading wherever God has gifted and called them to serve?

A common thread in these stories is not formal restriction, but lived perception. Someone could say that these obstacles are not intended, and they might be right. But they are a lived reality. No one may intend to close doors—but for many, the existing pathways feel narrow, unclear, or unreachable. These are just three examples of individuals who have experienced that tension between calling and opportunity. This proposal doesn't aim to dismantle what already exists; rather, it seeks to expand the vision—to open more doors for more people, and to help the Church make fuller use of the gifts God has already placed among us.

VI. The Program Structure at a Glance

Staff Ministry Certification Path

- **Length:** 2 years (Four 6-month phases)
- **Weekly Time Commitment:**
 - 3 hours of classroom instruction
 - 1–2 hours with a mentor
 - 6–7 hours of supervised ministry
- **Ongoing Components:**
 - Whole-Bible reading plan with Lutheran Bible Companion
 - Weekly journaling and theological reflection
 - Progressive portfolio building

Phases:

1. **Soaked in the Scriptures** – Biblical literacy, law/gospel, hermeneutics
2. **Rooted in the Confession** – Lutheran identity, creeds, confessions
3. **Formed for Ministry** – Vocation, spiritual care, leadership, teaching
4. **Ready to Serve** – Doctrinal synthesis, ministry philosophy, final assessment

VII. Assessment and Certification

At the conclusion of the program, participants complete:

- **A ministry portfolio** (lesson plans, reflections, event reports, devotions)
- **A written doctrinal statement** (8–12 key theological questions)
- **An oral doctrinal and ministry interview** (conducted by mentor, pastor(s), and optional representatives from MLC/WLS)

Outcome: Certification as a Staff Minister, with clear documentation of skills, theological readiness, and practical competence.

VIII. What Comes Next? A Path That Grows With the Person

This program is designed to be a beginning, not an end.

- Graduates can pursue **certificate-level specializations** in areas like women's ministry, discipleship, worship leadership, small groups, campus ministry, technology in ministry, or outreach.
- Long term, we envision a path toward **pastoral ministry** that builds on this program—allowing those with the gifts, training, and experience to continue their theological education without starting over.

This is about more than staffing churches. It's about unleashing the body of Christ.

IX. Steps Forward

How does this proposal turn into reality? There are two possible ways:

1. Synod leaders see the viability, and together we refine and build out a program.
2. A congregation experiments and creates a "proof of concept."

Option 1: A Congregation Builds a Proof of Concept

A congregation would recruit a handful of interested individuals and secure a moderate amount of financial support. It would bring those candidates on as interns, and begin the training process. Subject matter experts would need to be recruited from local pastors and staff ministers, or willing professors at Synod schools. Over the next two years, that handful of Ministry Apprentices would demonstrate the feasibility of the process. Some might complete the process, prompting an important conversation about how certification could be extended to someone who completes this process. Some might step out of the process partway, and they would be lay people with more training and ministry experience than they had before.

Option 2: Martin Luther College Embraces the Vision

While the process at the congregation level may look similar, the key difference would be the resources and support structure made available. MLC professors could be called on to create video lectures, or offer them

through live video conferencing. Some would serve on evaluation panels, reviewing Ministry Apprentice portfolios, written statements, and oral exams. Administrators at MLC would assist with coordinating and tracking, making it possible for more congregations to be involved and more local pastors to identify candidates and mentor them.

Both paths are viable. What's needed now is leadership—whether from Synod or from a single congregation—to take the next faithful step, so that more workers might be equipped for the harvest field.

X. Anticipating Objections

Without a doubt, there will be concerns, objections, and questions. Many of those will have to be answered as they come. However, a few that we anticipate:

How is this different from the Congregational Assistance Program?

While there are certainly similarities, this is more ambitious. Those who complete the Congregational Assistance Program have an undefined role in our Synod. While their service is valuable, they are not considered certified Called Workers, nor are they tracked by the Synod. CAP standards remain unclear, and though MLC has indicated plans for a revision, those revisions have not yet materialized. This proposal goes beyond the CAP, aiming at full Staff Ministry certification and beyond.

Would this impact enrollment at MLC?

This proposal is not designed to draw from MLC's existing enrollment pool. Instead, it aims to reach a different group entirely—those who feel called to ministry but for personal, financial, or situational reasons have not pursued the traditional path. Rather than compete, this model could expand the pipeline by inviting in those who otherwise would not have entered ministry at all.

Would Ministry Apprentices be seen as inferior to those who attend MLC?

Currently we have some who complete a four-year degree program at MLC, and some who complete the Staff Ministry Certification program through MLC. These are two different paths, but active Staff Ministers don't seem to rate each other based on which program they completed. We envision that the same would be true when adding another path.

Why not just encourage people to complete the Staff Ministry Certification program that already exists?

The Staff Ministry Certification program is still a good option, but there are some distinctions between that program and what is being proposed here.

The Staff Ministry Certification program is entirely online, but runs according to the academic calendar at MLC, and courses are taken as they are offered. Those courses are treated as college courses, with standard college assessments such as quizzes, exams, presentations, and written assignments. This proposal is more flexible, where Ministry Apprentices can be mentored through the coursework when it works for them and their mentor. Assessments in this proposal happen in the context of ministry practice - a student might give a devotion, complete a Bible study, or write a blog, or be observed and evaluated in a ministry activity. Reflection journals and conversations with the mentor will also contribute to the overall assessment.

Students entering the Staff Ministry Certification program are required to have a college degree of some kind prior to enrolling in that program. This proposal makes the program available to candidates right out of high school and beyond, regardless of prior educational experience.

The Staff Ministry Certification program does not require a local mentor or the community building through retreats. This proposal would leverage the benefits of those elements.

Finally, the Staff Ministry Certification program is an academic program, with accredited hours associated with each course. As of right now, this proposal is not aiming at academic credentials associated with this training.

How do we ensure doctrinal fidelity without formal coursework?

This model relies heavily on mentorship by synodically certified pastors, teachers, and staff ministers. All coursework is drawn from confessional Lutheran sources and aligned with WELS doctrine. Assessments include not just ministry performance, but a written doctrinal statement and an oral examination before a panel—including WELS-trained leaders. This allows for high standards of confessional integrity, even in a flexible training model.

Is this a fast track to becoming a Pastor? Does it circumvent a tried and tested system?

This model does not offer a shortcut to the pastoral ministry. Those who pursue that path would still need to complete rigorous study in biblical languages, systematic theology, historical theology, and homiletics—likely over several additional years.

XI. Conclusion: Equipping the Church to Be the Church

The harvest is plentiful. The workers are out there. They're sitting in our pews, leading small groups, raising families, discipling teens, and asking, *"Is there a place for me to serve more deeply?"*

This program says: Yes.

Yes to the Taylor who needs a local path. Yes to the Cil who needs a broader vision. Yes to the Brandon who needs a ministry that grows with him.

It would be folly of us to believe that the model we have in place today is the only way, the best way, or even the most biblical way to train the next generation of called workers. The gifts the Lord of the Church gives to his Church are many, and the more ways we can draw them out, the stronger our work for the Church will be.

Let's stop guarding the gates and start building bridges. Let's equip God's people for works of service. Let's reclaim ministry as a trade.

Because the Church is ready. And Christ has already given the gifts.

References:

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