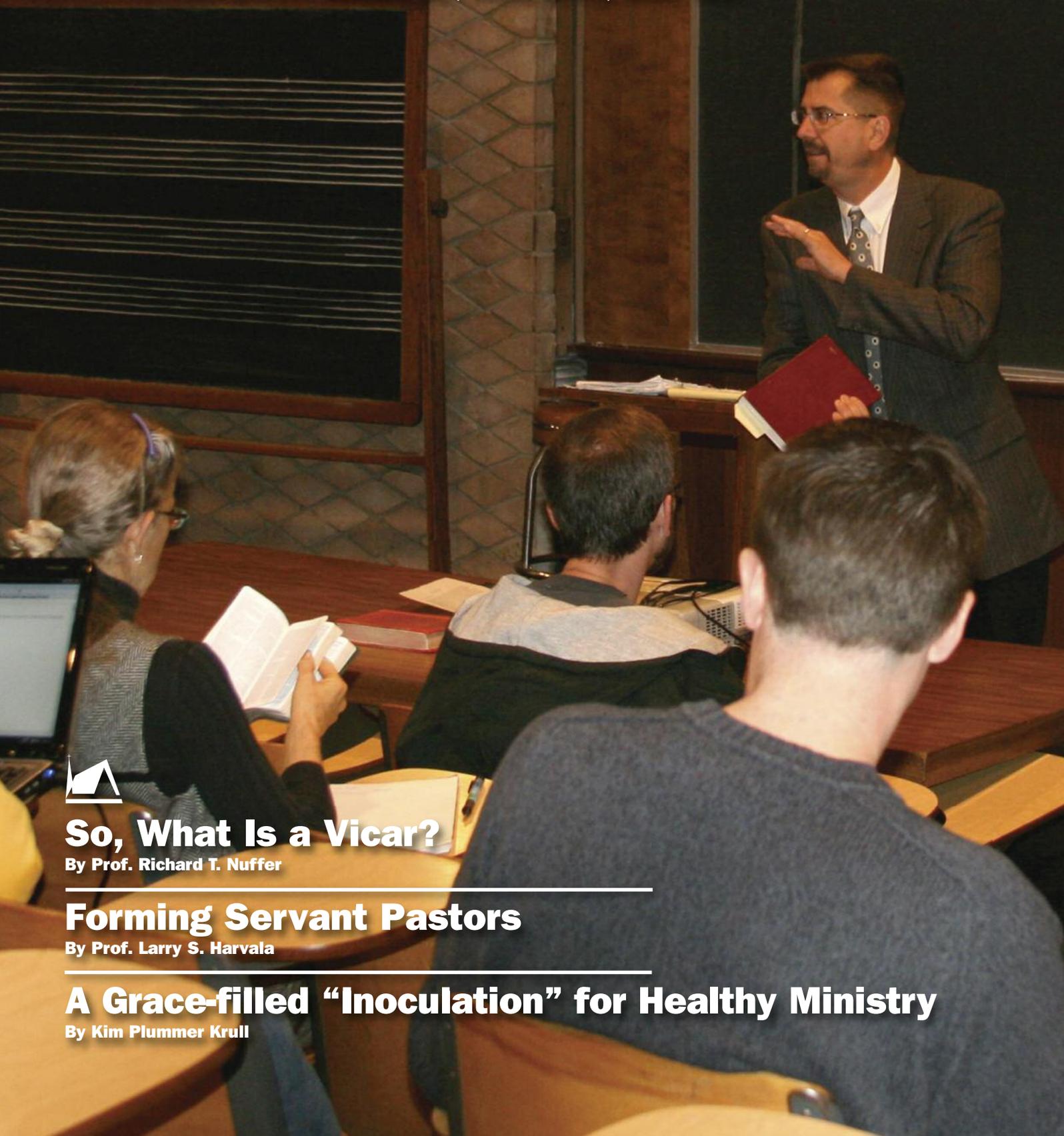


For the Life of the World

Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne

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By Kim Plummer Krull

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Vicarage is a year of practical, hands-on training in which seminary students serve as interns under experienced pastors. They do so to “put legs on” all of their academic classroom training. And they begin to learn how to bring Christ to people who are hurting in a great variety of ways and to those who do not believe.

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The important things are that the faithful are faithfully taught, the lost are vigorously reached and all are cared for by the Word and Sacraments with which Christ has marked His beloved Bride.

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In 1999, Dr. John Eckrich, a physician and lifelong Lutheran, founded Grace Place Lutheran Retreats. After years of treating church workers and seeing how their vocational challenges led to health problems and a pulpit exodus, he started Grace Place to help clergy who “were burning themselves out while they cared for others but did not take care of themselves.”



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A Grace-filled “Inoculation” for Healthy Ministry

By Kim Plummer Krull

As Jay and Patti Mazikas prepared to take part in a retreat for fourth year Concordia Theological Seminary students and spouses last spring, Patti looked forward to a rare opportunity to get away with her husband while grandparents babysat their children and she enjoyed “no concerns for four whole days.”

While the retreat did prove a respite from the demands of studies and parenting, Patti says it also presented one concern that still bothers her months later: the statistic that, on average, Protestant pastors stay in the ministry only about eight years.

“I looked around (at the retreat) and saw men who had been going through four rigorous years of training and were looking forward to serving the church. That was an eye-opening statistic,” Patti said. “It made me see the importance of resources that help pastors keep their own house in order so they can have a strong foundation for ministry.”

In 1999, Dr. John Eckrich, a physician and lifelong Lutheran, founded such a resource: Grace Place Lutheran Retreats. After years of treating church workers and seeing how their vocational challenges led to health problems and a pulpit exodus, he started Grace Place to help clergy who “were burning themselves out while they cared for others but did not take care of themselves.”

Over the years, this unique continuing education ministry, which is also a Recognized Service Organization (RSO) of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, has led more than one hundred “mini-sabbaticals” for some 2,500 pastors, teachers and their spouses. For the past seven years, Grace Place also has customized an annual retreat for seminary students: “An inoculation of sorts,” Dr. Eckrich says, “against unhealthy challenges that can limit ministries as new pastors enter their first calls.”

In April, the Mazikas were among the 17 couples who gathered at Pokagon State Park and Retreat Center near Fort Wayne, Indiana, for the Grace Place seminary retreat. This pause point included education sessions with biblically-based strategies to strengthen personal life and ministry and also to avoid that troubling eight-year retention statistic, quoted by Eckrich and based upon studies.

The Grace Place focus is to provide tools to build and maintain what Dr. David Ludwig, Grace Place Associate Director of Retreat Programs, calls the “Power of WE.” “The healthier they are as a couple, the better able (pastors and spouses) are to bring that health to their congregation,” said Dr. Ludwig, a licensed therapist and associate pastor at Christ Lutheran Church, Hickory, North Carolina.

Like many retreat participants, Rev. Jay Mazikas has now been placed in his first call. Looking back, he says he appreciates the Grace Place emphasis on balancing ministry and family demands. The retreat helped him and Patti “recognize potential conflicts and have some strategies that will help us work through them,” said Rev. Mazikas, who is serving both

Trinity Lutheran Church, Ashaway, Rhode Island, and Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, New London, Connecticut.

Others have benefited from this experience as well. While the seminary gave him a strong theological foundation, Rev. Martin Measel says Grace Place offered solid practical advice. “It was good encouragement for learning how to adopt a healthier lifestyle and deal with stress,” said Rev. Measel, associate pastor at Christ Lutheran Church, Stevensville, Michigan, who attended the spring retreat with his wife, Jill.

Three years have passed since his seminary retreat, but Rev. Daniel Lepley says he continues to use Grace Place tools and

insights when teaching confirmation and Sunday School classes and in pastoral counseling. His Grace Place experience is one reason his congregation, Redeemer Lutheran Church, Seymour, Indiana, is planning a January marriage retreat.

Lepley says he valued the time he and his wife, Wendi, spent at Grace Place before he received his first call. As a pastor, he wanted to offer a similar opportunity for couples in his congregation to get away together and gather around God’s Word with friends who are in the same place in life as they. “It can be a tremendous blessing,” Rev. Lepley said.

Rev. Timothy R. Puls, CTS Assistant Vice President for Church Relations, says Grace Place helps form servants by allowing students and spouses to reflect upon areas critical to their personal lives, including their relationship, physical health, finances and time management.

“Retention of church workers and pastors is often lost when that worker lacks regular support and encouragement from his spouse, family or from within the parish or institution,” said Rev. Puls, a Grace Place board member. “Grace Place assists church workers by valuing them through appreciation and acknowledgement and also by encouraging

congregations to recognize their critical role in supporting the overall well-being of their servant.”

Rev. Vincent Shaw, Mount Olive Lutheran Church, Sebastopol, California, called last spring’s seminary retreat a good “stepping stone” into his first congregation as he learns to serve in the world as one called by Christ. He and his wife, Erica, learned valuable communication tools, including to look to one another, united in the cross. And if, on down the road, the couple feels the need to sharpen those tools, Rev. Shaw says they know where to turn: another grace-filled retreat! 

Kim Plummer Krull is a St. Louis-based writer and a member of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, Des Peres, Missouri.



Grace Place helps form servants by allowing students and spouses to reflect upon areas critical to their personal lives, including their relationship, physical health, finances and time management.



Jay and Patti Mazikas share thoughts concerning life in the parish. Jay received his first call in May 2009.
