

Overcoming Obstacles

Rev. Thomas Zimmerman

Entering the seminary to study for the pastoral ministry can seem daunting at times. Each man's story and path is different. Logistically, there is so much to address: relocation, housing, employment, finances, and the like. Those who make the commitment to attend the seminary prayerfully address each of these concerns. If you have a spouse or family, sometimes the concerns are enhanced because of the number of people involved.

Many times, the logistics of relocating are the first concerns expressed. This is especially true if you have an established home, community, schools, doctors, friends, and so on. The mere thought of leaving all that is familiar can be overwhelming. We do enjoy being in our earthly comfort zones. But often we must leave those zones to grow and see new opportunities to serve our Lord. But after leaving what is comfortable, students and families often look at their time at the seminary and on vicarage as an adventure, an opportunity to meet new people and to experience different cultures, and it is likely that you will as well. You will change during your four years at the seminary. It is through these changes that the Lord is molding you into His servant.

How will I pay for seminary? Financial concerns are real, and as a faithful steward of what the Lord provides, you will need to seriously address this matter. Coming to the seminary in the best financial condition possible is the ideal. Some students work at entering the seminary with no outstanding credit card debt, selling certain possessions as they downsize or living the year prior to coming at a reduced rate to make the adjustment easier. Financial assistance is available. Most of our students have received the majority of their tuition as gift aid with other grants being available.

How will I be able to live? Housing is reasonable and affordable in the Fort Wayne area. The Food and Clothing Co-op will be of tremendous assistance with some of your basic needs. Most student families meet seventy to eighty percent of their family food needs at the Food Co-op.

What about my children's education? Fort Wayne is blessed with many Lutheran elementary schools and a Lutheran high school in addition to the public school system. There is also an active homeschooling association in the Fort Wayne area.

What about my wife's job? Employment is a concern for many of the wives, especially if they have been out of the job market for several years. God has and will provide for your needs. It may not always be in the area in which your wife was trained, but it is only temporary, and in some cases, the wives have learned a new skill and increased their marketability for future employment.

Can I handle seminary level studies? If you have not been in a classroom setting for some time, there may be some apprehension about doing the course work. Seminary is indeed a challenge. It is a rigorous course of study. Those who haven't been doing college work for some time might consider enrolling in some adult studies at your community college to refresh your study skills before you come to the seminary. Diligence makes a big difference. Yes, there is much to read, much to study, and much to learn. The student who dedicates himself thoroughly to his studies will accomplish his purpose.

The previous obstacles focused on the logistical challenges of coming to the seminary. There are also personal challenges to be addressed. As with all things, there are two sides to every position. The very reason some men cite for why they entered the ministry is the same reason others cite for why they did not enter full-time ministry.

Entering full-time ministry to fulfill a dream sounds noble if that dream was in fact the Lord calling you into ministry. If serving as a pastor fulfills the dream your grandmother, your parents, your pastor, and your spouse had for you, have you truly been called? Following God's plan for us may not be in concert with the dreams of our loved ones.

Many pastors are drawn into the ministry because they desire to make a difference—sharing the Gospel and God's forgiveness does make a difference in people's lives. But it is God who is making the difference not you. If you are convinced that your insights, your ideas, your messages, and your visions are going to be the driving force of your successful ministry, you have missed the reason for serving in His name.

Others are drawn into the ministry because they see it as a godly vocation. While it is true that it is a godly vocation, it is not the only vocation that is godly. We can serve the Lord as firefighters, nurses, auto mechanics, UPS drivers, and librarians. We serve God as we serve our fellow man. God desires us to be industrious and to use our talents for the good of His kingdom.

Helping people is often cited as a reason for entering the ministry. Being a pastor does indeed offer many opportunities to help others. One has to be honest and ask, "Do I love people?" As a pastor, you are asked to serve and aid others in many

different settings and circumstances. To really minister to them, you must have a real heart for people. Person-to-person ministry is carried out in face-to-face relationships whether that person is a premature infant or an elderly adult. You will encounter people from cradle to grave in the best of times and the lowest of times. You will be asked to respond pastorally to crises and sometimes at the most inopportune moments. Failure to respond to a person's need because it is your day off or because it is after hours is inexcusable.

Many pastors want to share the truth with others. As a pastor, you have the opportunity to share the wonderful news of salvation and God's grace. As a shepherd of a congregation, you also will need to lead your parishioners as they approach doctrinal issues, evangelism, stewardship, education, and outreach ministry. Will you be able to share the truth in love while showing patience, forbearance, and perseverance? As a pastor, you will need to gently and humbly lead your congregation. You were called to be their pastor, not their drill instructor.

Others want to become pastors because they desire to lead. How one leads and the demeanor with which one leads is crucial to ministry. True pastoral leadership requires multiple skills and insights. You must provide your congregation with support and guidance, especially in periods of crises. Your members will look to you to provide vision and direction. Discipline will be needed, but it must be done in love and with patience. Your members will look to you for motivation. You will serve as a role model for your members. They will look to you to see a disciplined life of prayer and personal devotion. The congregation will look to you to set the tone for harmony, handling of troublemakers, and averting and resolving problems.

Others may see the ministry as offering job security and stability as well as flexibility. Outside of scheduled worship times, pastors often experience an unstructured schedule. Each day has twenty-four hours. It takes a very disciplined and organized personality to utilize one's time wisely. Unexpected emergencies arise, and others in the congregation look to you to see and plan the bigger picture. Impromptu, last-minute ideas, and procrastination can cause your secretary, elders, organist, and other church staff much frustration. You may seem to survive and even thrive on such an approach to life, but others will find it stressful to say the least. It is easy to lose track of time, and suddenly find that you have failed to serve your members or properly prepare for your sermon because of the Internet or family activities or inattentiveness. Time management and accountability are also part of the ministry.

Still others say, "I've been told that I have the personality to be a pastor." There is no single personality that makes an ideal minister. Some of the qualities of a pastor are listed by St. Paul in Timothy, "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity

keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil" (1 Timothy 3:1–7).

"Is the pastoral office for me?" Only you and God can answer that question. Seek His will. Seek His guidance. Go with God.

Rev. Thomas Zimmerman, (CSL 1984) has years of experience as a Lutheran teacher, parish pastor, and campus pastor. He serves as Director of Admission at Concordia Theological Seminary.