

# PATHS TO PASTORAL MINISTRY

## A PRE-CONVENTION PRIMER



By Kristine Bruss

**A**t this summer’s national convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), delegates will almost certainly hear discussion and debate about a topic that has sparked substantial discussion online and at various gatherings in the past triennium: pastoral formation.

In light of the need for pastors in the LCMS, what should pastoral formation look like? Are existing routes to ordination meeting the needs of our congregations? Should new options be considered to help fill available calls in our congregations and plant new churches?

In approaching these questions, it’s important to know how the LCMS forms pastors. The LCMS has entrusted that task to its two seminaries, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne (CTSFW), and Concordia Seminary, St. Louis (CSL). Both seminaries offer several programs that prepare future pastors to carry out their pastoral duties—including and foremost preaching, teaching, and administering the Sacraments—faithfully.

The following overview provides basic details about the paths to pastoral ministry offered at CTSFW.

### RESIDENTIAL PATHS

**Master of Divinity:** Men preparing for pastoral ministry are strongly encouraged to enroll in the four-year residential MDiv program if possible, in keeping with 2023 LCMS Convention Resolution 6-02A, which affirms this path as the “most robust route in terms of academics and additional means of pastoral formation” and “the most complete means of preparing a man for the general responsibilities of the pastoral office.”

“Most of our pastoral ministry students opt for the MDiv program, regardless of other programs they may qualify for, because they understand that pastoral formation is about more than just completing requirements and checking boxes,” says Rev. Matthew Wietfeldt, Assistant Vice President of Admission. “It involves being shaped through rigorous theological study, liturgical worship, a vibrant community, and practical contextual experiences that prepare them well for the responsibilities of the pastoral office.”

The 139-credit program requires two years of coursework on campus (including field education in a local congregation), a one-year vicarage in a congregation, and a final year of classes back on campus. Greek and Hebrew are required; students who have not studied these languages prior to seminary often begin their seminary studies in Summer Greek.

Students take courses in four departments: Exegetical Theology (e.g., language courses, Gospels, Pentateuch; 40 credits), Systematic Theology (e.g., dogmatics, Lutheran Confessions; 29 credits), Historical Theology (18 credits), and Pastoral Ministry and Missions (e.g., liturgics, homiletics; 40 credits).

In their final year, students must pass a theological interview and be certified by the faculty for their first call.

**Alternate Route Certification:** The Alternate Route (AR) option is open to prospective pastoral ministry students who are at least 35 years old and have significant experience in church work. Graduates of Concordia University System schools are required to have eight years of experience as commissioned and rostered LCMS church workers. Other

applicants must have ten years of ministry experience (as elders, lectors, Bible study leaders, etc.) in an LCMS congregation and have completed at least sixty hours of college coursework.

The program requires 93 credits and can be completed in three years. Greek is required; Hebrew is not. Students complete a vicarage in the final year of the program.

An AR student who has a bachelor’s degree is eligible to pursue a **Master of Arts in Pastoral Studies** simultaneously, which results in a degree, rather than a certificate, on completion of the program.

“The AR program is shorter than the MDiv program, but it’s still a robust and comprehensive formation,” says Dr. Todd Peperkorn, Vice President for Spiritual Life and Director of Vicarage and Internship. “Commissioned ministers, congregational elders, or long-time teachers are all great candidates for this program.”

## NONRESIDENTIAL PATHS

**Specific Ministry Pastor and Specific Ministry Pastor Español/English:** The Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) program, approved by the Synod in convention in 2007, is a distance education program designed to provide pastors to meet needs in specific situations (e.g., in a congregation that can’t support a full-time pastor). Students take courses online and work with a supervising pastor in their context. While most coursework is completed virtually,

SMP students and their supervising pastors spend one week in residence each year of their four-year program.

Dr. Don Wiley, Director of the Specific Ministry Pastor Program, notes that SMP students come from all walks of life. “Many are retired from another career and desire to serve the Lord and meet their congregation’s need to receive pastoral care. Others are younger and have been approached by their congregation to prepare and serve as a bi-vocational pastor in a congregation that would otherwise be without regular Word-and-Sacrament ministry. Still others are sought by their congregations to begin new outreach in a nearby community.

“What these men hold in common is a commitment to Christ and to being well-prepared in their particular circumstances to serve as faithful proclaimers of the Gospel to God’s people (and to those God will yet make His people).”

Students for the SMP program are identified for pastoral ministry by their district or ministry site. No languages are required, and students can enroll without a bachelor’s degree.

For the first two years of the program, students take one course each quarter and serve as vicars in their ministry context, after which they are ordained. They take eight more courses, one each quarter, after their ordination to complete the program. After graduating, they continue to serve under a supervising pastor.


	Master of Divinity (MDiv)	Alternate Route (AR)
Residential?	Residential only	Residential only
Bachelor’s required?	Yes (non-bachelor’s option possible in exceptional circumstances)	No (60 hours of college coursework ≈ AA)*
Minimum age requirement	—	35
Trimester credit hours required	139	93
Greek required?	Yes	Yes
Hebrew required?	Yes	No*
Degree granted?	Yes (MDiv)	No
Time to ordination	4 years	3 years
Admission to general pastorate?	Yes	Yes

\*AR students with a bachelor’s degree can complete the Master of Arts in Pastoral Studies to earn a degree.

CTSFW also offers a Specific Ministry Pastor–Español/English program, a Spanish-language program much like the SMP that prepares pastors for service in a bilingual Español/English context.

## EITHER/OR

**Specific Ministry Pastor to General Pastor Certification:** SMP pastors are not LCMS general pastors and are thus limited in their service. They aren't eligible, for example, to supervise vicars, serve as circuit visitors, or serve as voting delegates to a national convention. SMP pastors do have the option of **General Pastor Certification**, which involves taking additional coursework that, added to their SMP studies, is the equivalent of the MDiv or AR (residential or distance) program. With General Pastor Certification, the pastor is eligible to be rostered as an LCMS general pastor. The chart below captures some of the main differences between the paths.

For more information, contact the CTSFW Admission Office at [admission@ctsfw.edu](mailto:admission@ctsfw.edu) or visit our academic program pages at [ctsfw.edu/pastoral-ministry](http://ctsfw.edu/pastoral-ministry). 



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SEMINARY LIFE WITH THE PRESIDENTS

## HOW ARE LUTHERAN PASTORS FORMED?

**NEW PODCAST**

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has launched a new podcast, *Seminary Life with the Presidents*, featuring LCMS seminary presidents Dr. Jon Bruss (Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne) and Dr. Thomas Egger (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis). The podcast, moderated by Rev. Roy Askins, addresses frequently asked questions about seminary life and pastoral formation in the LCMS. You can find the podcast on the LCMS YouTube channel.

SMP	SMP Español/English (SMP-EsE)	SMP to General Pastor Certification
Nonresidential / hybrid	Nonresidential	Residential / hybrid / nonresidential
No (high school diploma minimum)	No	No
40**	40**	—
51 (48 class hours + 3-credit vicarage)	51 (48 class hours + 3-credit vicarage)	88 for residential MDiv; 42 for residential and nonresidential AR
No	No	Yes
No	No	MDiv: Yes; AR: No
No	No	MDiv: Yes; AR: No
2 years	2 years	N/A
No	No	Yes

\*\*May be waived by vote of LCMS Council of Presidents.