



THE SPRINGFIELDER

October 1974
Volume 38, Number 4

Where Have All the Young Men Gone?

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FRESHMEN MINISTERIAL STUDENTS: 1965—465; 1966—391; 1967—367; 1968—317; 1969—329; 1970—267; 1971—262; 1972—251; 1973—199.

"Dr. Klotz (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri) had reported that the number of students in preparation for the pastoral ministry in Synodical schools is less than half of those enrolled in 1965. 'If we are to supply pulpits in the years ahead, the number of ministerial students recruited must be increased' " (Lutheran Witness, October 6, 1974).

Where *have* all the young men gone? There are no ministerial students because of turmoil in the church—right? Wrong! There are no ministerial students because there are fewer students of any kind these days—right? Wrong! There are fewer ministerial students today because those who influence potential ministerial students personally are not "recruiting" for the ministry—right? Right!

There is no way to refute the fact that our church is enrolling fewer ministerial students every year—statistics speak for themselves. But this phenomenon is not peculiar to the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, for though the statements indicated above as incorrect answers to the problem *do* have some bearing on the problem, they certainly do not provide all of the necessary answers.

There is small comfort in the fact that other Christian bodies are suffering the same problem, that of a dearth of ministerial students. The national community of the Jesuit Society of the United States decreased in novice applications almost 300% during the past decade. Major advertising campaigns are presently being carried out among many religious orders, even utilizing full-page newspaper advertisements to recruit for the ministry as well as colorful advertisements in such publications as *Playboy*.

Research studies recently completed identify other reasons why young men are disappearing from the rolls of ministerial student bodies. These studies and the accompanying literature seem to point toward a declining image of the church in the world today, thus adding to the pressing shortage of ministerial candidates. Slocum and Bowles (1968) discovered that out of approximately 3100 high school juniors and seniors sampled concerning career aspirations, 67.1% of the boys and 62.8% of the girls indicated they would dislike a church-service occupation. In a comparison of attractiveness and prestige in this same study, church-service occupations tied with that of motel and hotel clerk at a rank of 45.5. Wells (1973) indicated his belief, from an impressionistic study, that the status and role of the church and society has changed so much as to reflect adversely on the professional ministry. He commented that ". . . once the minister was among the few educated people in town.

Now he is hardly distinctive at all and very little revered." Yet Johnson and Cornell (1972) in a questionnaire sampling of over 26 million Protestants, members of 15 different major denominations in the United States and Canada, discovered that more than half of the pastors and laity survey in these two countries expressed a belief that the church's role in society in the next ten years would become more important. Thus the question arises, not so much "where *have* all the young men *gone*?" but "where *will* all the young men *come from*?"

Perhaps Rasmussen (1967) put a solid beginning toward a solution to the problem when he wrote that ". . . more and more Protestant denominations are coming to acknowledge that the starting point for responsible recruitment must be to foster a minister-producing environment within the church." He went on to identify persons who could influence young men toward the study of the ministry by both their words and their lives, chief of which, of course, was the "convictional model" of the effective and satisfied minister presently active.

In order to determine a sound statistical basis for improved recruitment for ministerial students in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the author of this article conducted extensive research concerning the relative importance of recruitment practices and personal influences on student choice of pre-ministerial studies in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod as a doctoral dissertation. The study's research sought to elicit responses from every freshman ministerial student enrolled in a Missouri Synod college. The study's major purpose was to determine and compare the degree of importance of specific recruitment practices carried out within our colleges as well as the degree of importance of personal influences on the students' choice of a pre-ministerial curriculum. The relationship between the importance of the students' perceptions and their background, education, geography, and religious orientation was also considered. 203 students and 20 professional recruitment persons in Synodical colleges were surveyed and almost 92% of the total ministerial freshman population within LC-MS colleges responded to a rather comprehensive questionnaire. Computerized statistical analysis was then completed, comparing the students' perceptions regarding ministerial recruitment as well as the perceptions of Synodical college "recruiters." Although a study of this type can only be classified a beginning, certain conclusions of interest clearly manifested themselves. In capsule form, they are these:

1. Students are recruited for the ministry more through influences which work on a person from *within* (such as intangible influences upon a person's life by other persons) rather than by any influence on such a person from *without* (such as brochures, advertising, "persuasion" via telephone and the like). This theory has long been expounded by behavioral scientists such as Ginzberg and Holland, both of whom propounded this theory with regard to a choice of any occupation as early as the beginning 1950's.

2. In keeping with the conclusion cited above, the research

showed that motivation for a young man to study for the ministry is highly spiritual and begins in his early years. Students constantly identified a) people, b) specific spiritual happenings (i.e. a "religious experience"), and c) perceptions of the work of the ministry as strong influences in their choice of the ministerial curriculum. This conclusion substantiated another theory of Holland's, one which was suggested in 1959 proposing that a person choosing a vocation did so as a result of the influence on him of both his heredity and his environment.

3. Conclusions 1 and 2 cited above were not influenced to any significant degree by the ministerial students' education or geography.

Some specific findings which were apparent from the research included the following:

1. The most important single influence in a young man's decision to study for the ministry is his own parish pastor. Where the parish pastor constantly projects an image of self-satisfaction with his calling, the young student finds reason to consider that same calling. Due to this finding, the study recommended that the church-at-large seek to impress upon the parish pastor his important role as an influence upon prospective ministerial students and therefore the need for him to be outwardly positive about his personal image of the professional ministry. The statistics pointed out that active professional ministers are in by far the best position of anyone to be of importance in a student's selection of the ministerial curriculum.

2. Other persons were found to play a great part in the selection process of the ministerial curriculum. Thus, people such as parents, relatives, friends, peers, and parish pastors other than the student's own were cited with varying degrees of regularity and importance. Oddly enough, since in most cases the ministerial student indicated he had been influenced in his early teenage years, parochial school teachers and Sunday school teachers were almost non-existent as factors in student selection of the ministry. Since these persons are active at a time when a ministerial student is being influenced toward vocational selection, it was apparent in the study that the teachers themselves are not conscious of the important role they can and should play in ministerial recruitment. Thus, the study's further recommendation was to concentrate further effort upon informing such persons of the very important role which they can play in the recruitment of students for the ministry.

3. Spiritual experience at an early age was a highly motivating factor, and students cited opportunities to lead worship, to participate in worship services as acolytes and the like, and to participate in various opportunities to serve their fellow-men as quite important to their decisions. The students surveyed paid staggering tribute to their "desire to serve God" and their "desire to serve their fellow-men" as influences toward choice of the ministerial curriculum. Out of 186 responses, 157 students identified their wish to serve God as one of the three most important influences in his choice of the curriculum, and 100 of these students indicated the wish to serve his fellow-man as another of the three most important influences.

Overall, if the question "where will all the young men come from" is to be answered satisfactorily, the conclusions of this study pointed to some very direct and possible steps to be taken. Those with responsibility for ministerial recruitment must concern themselves with providing information and inspiration about meaningful ministry to that matrix which makes up the prospective student's environment—pastors, parents, teachers, and congregational members in general. These people, in turn, must be made to realize that *they* are the influences God uses to enlist young men for His service; people who speak, teach, and live the word of God in the presence of impressionable young men are utilized by the Holy Spirit as significant influences toward ministry.

There were many more meaningful conclusions in the research, but this article has attempted to put in capsule form only some of the most important of them. Young men have not "gone" any where—they are still out there, waiting to be recruited for God's ministry. The "recruiters"—pastors, parents, peers, and people in general—need only be conscious of the use God will put them to in the cause of ministerial recruitment. When is the last time *you* suggested to a young man of your acquaintance that he consider the ministry as a valuable way to spend his life?

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