

“Pastoral Ministry: Observations from an Augustana Perspective”

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Arland Hultgren and I graduated from Augustana Seminary in 1965. Augustana Seminary had merged into the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago and would operate on two campuses until it consolidated in Hyde Park in 1967.

If I were to describe my state of mind as I graduated from seminary, one phrase echoes and re-echoes through my consciousness: “BURN BABY BURN!” President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated while we were on internship. Racial strife was rampant in cities across America. Classmates and parish pastors were marching on behalf of justice. Martin Luther King, Jr., was seeking to build bridges of reconciliation in a nation full of rage. Augustana Church in Omaha, Nebraska gained national recognition with the documentary “A Time for Burning.”

As I graduated from seminary it was very clear to me that my primary focus was not to be on pension plans, days off, sabbaticals, and personal comforts. The church was not there to serve me and my classmates, but we were to serve the church whatever the cost in terms of personal sacrifice, expenditure of energy and faithfulness to the Gospel.

The nation was soon enmeshed in the quagmire known as the “Vietnam Conflict,” and I was called to serve congregations whose pews were filled by members of “The Greatest Generation” who had served valiantly during World War II. There was little tolerance for a flag burning generation who sought my counsel as conscientious objectors and/or threatened flight to Canada to avoid the draft. On more than one occasion I presided over the funeral of young men, boys really, who were casualties of the Vietnam conflict.

In this context I thanked God again and again for the grounding, the training, the conviction that had been instilled in me during my years at Augustana Seminary. The seminary grounded pastors in well rounded theological and biblical training which enabled many of my colleagues like Ted and Arland on this platform to go on to become seminary professors. Yet I always perceived that the primary emphasis of the seminary was to TRAIN PASTORS FOR PARISH MINISTRY AND TO TRAIN THEM WELL.

As a point of reference it might be interesting to know who some of the seminary administration and faculty were during my seminary years. Karl Mattson was the seminary president and Theodore Conrad was the dean. Serving on the faculty were Arthur Arnold, Hjalmer Johnson, G. Everett Arden, Arnold Carlson, Theodore Swanson, A.D. Mattson, Paul Swanson, Arne Bentz, Leroy Norquist, and Bob Tobias.

What then are some of my observations of Pastoral Ministry from an Augustana perspective? Arland and I posed this question last fall to a number of our seminary classmates gathered in reunion and there was remarkable unanimity in our recollections about our training at Augustana:

\* Pastors were not trained to be lone rangers serving in isolation from one another. We were part of a ministerium and the support, fellowship and cooperation with colleagues in ministry was assumed. Strong bonds were formed between ministerial colleagues and their families that were invaluable in facing the joys and challenges of parish ministry.

\* Within Augustana, pastors were not afraid to express strong convictions on scriptural, theological, and social issues. “Knock down, drag out” conflicts arose concerning such issues as retention of divorced pastors on the church roster, smoking and consumption of alcohol, dancing at our church colleges, labor unions, just wars and, in later years, the ordination of women. These issues were dealt with in heated debate permeated with a spirit of Christian charity.

\* When the church in assembly spoke, pastors and parishioners upheld and supported the democratic process of decision making. When a decision was made by the church body pastors abided by the decision and didn’t encourage their congregations and parishioners to leave the church body.

\* Among Augustana pastors there was a vision of the church beyond the local congregation. World Mission, ecumenism, and wider participation within the whole body of Christ in the world was encouraged and pursued. World missionaries were frequent guests within the parsonages and congregations of Augustana giving a personal dimension to global outreach. Among my seminary classmates it was as though we were all personal friends of missionary Minnie Tack as we would have saved our pennies, nickels, and dimes during our Sunday School years to advance the cause of world mission in Augustana.

\* There was a respect for leadership. The synod and conference presidents held positions of honor and were welcome visitors within congregations.

\* Pastors were encouraged to be “theologians in residence” within the local congregation and community. As better educated members of the communities in which we served, we were admonished to bring an educated biblical and theological perspective to bear on the issues of the day.

\* Good order was emphasized in worship with common liturgy and hymnody shared throughout the synod.

\* A strong social consciousness was ingrained in our pastors. Parish pastors were called to minister not only to the spiritual needs of their flock and community but to a vast variety of social ministries as well.

\* Biblical literalism was not taught in the seminary. Pastors were provided with the skills to analyze, probe, and dissect scriptural texts to determine their context, intent, and meanings.

\* Preaching within Augustana was to be rooted in the scriptures, discerning the original meaning of the text and applying it to contemporary society with conviction including words of challenge and comfort. Introduction, three points, summary, and conclusion was the standard format embraced by many Augustana pastors in their preaching.

In conclusion it is my personal assessment that Augustana Seminary saw as its primary mission the training of pastors to serve the whole church locally, synodically, nationally, and worldwide. In addition to strong theological and biblical grounding, pastors were given a deep rooting in the practical issues of ministry. Augustana was a forerunner in initiating an internship program where pastors received “hands on” experience for parish ministry under the mentoring of a supervisor. This model, having proved its merit, was embraced by many other church bodies.

In a nutshell, Augustana pastors were equipped and sent forth to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ effectively with conviction and fervor and to save the souls of those whom they encountered in all times and places. These pastors went forth in times of peace and war, prosperity and depression, among congregations experiencing boom and bust, but the message of God’s enduring love remained the same through the years. Forty seven years after leaving seminary the mandate laid upon me and my classmates is still clear: “burn, baby burn,” or in the words of St. Paul: “Whatever gain I had I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.”