

Frequently asked Questions for Congregations and Schools Calling New Pastors through the Synod's Assignment Committee

Introduction:

"*Mentoring initiative for new pastors*" was the subject of a resolution that was discussed and then adopted at the WELS convention in July 2015. Our synod adopted two things through this resolution:

1. As a synod, we formally approved a three-year mentoring initiative for new pastors as part of pastoral continuing education administered and developed through Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.
2. As a synod, we agreed that congregations and schools that are calling pastors through the synod's Assignment Committee would cover the cost for this initiative, and the annual cost for the mentoring program was set at \$1,000 per year for the three-year period.

You may view the entire resolution with its more detailed rationale and two-part resolve on pages 202-203 of the *2015 Book of Reports and Memorials*. The formal notice of the adoption of the memorial is on pages 24-25 of the *2015 Proceedings* of the synod convention. Much of that information will also surface in the following Questions and Answers.

In 2024 the Conference of Presidents increased the fee for the program to \$1,500 per year beginning with the 2025 pastoral assignees.

Question: Why did we as a synod consider and adopt the pastoral mentoring program?

Answer: Here is a list of key reasons that led to the *Pastor Partners* mentoring initiative:

1. *We have long been aware of perceived benefits of professional growth in general and mentoring specifically.* Secular as well as religious professions consistently make use of professional development using trained mentors. In our own circles the continuing growth and mentoring of new teachers has been cultivated for several years through the New Teacher Induction initiative, a program that has been designed to help new teachers grow in all 12 districts of the synod.
2. *We learned that during the 40-year period between 1970 and 2010 our synod experienced a significant loss of pastors due to resignations.* Between 1970 and 2010, 1,856 pastor candidates graduated from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and during the same period 499 resigned. That's a 27% resignation rate. We began to think more seriously about helping young pastors survive and thrive in a life-long calling.
3. *Most of our newly graduated pastors are also relatively new husbands and fathers.* These vocations are blessings that come with challenges. Learning what it means to manage wisely multiple God-given callings is often a pressure point that young pastors are learning to navigate.
4. *The early years of pastoral ministry following graduation are critical times for any pastor.* Critical patterns of thinking, living, and working as pastors are being established. They will prove either a benefit or a detriment for future decades of ministry. Well-trained, experienced pastors can have a strong impact on young pastors and help them set up patterns in life and ministry, especially since they are asked to mentor only one or two new graduates. Helping the less experienced pastor to adopt a strong personal devotional life and a strong support system with his circuit pastor, other ministry peers, and lay leaders yields rich dividends during subsequent years of ministry.
5. *In 2010, as part of its continuing education program, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary began a pilot program to train and provide pastoral mentors for new graduates for the first three years of ministry.* In 2014, our synod's Conference of Presidents unanimously endorsed the mentoring work that was being carried out in the pilot program. The Pastor Partners Mentoring Program became a permanent or ongoing part of our ministry.

6. *We can thankfully report that we are currently retaining more young pastors in the ministry than we have seen since the 1980's.* In this world there will always be problems that threaten to end ministries prematurely, but these efforts to strengthen young pastors and guide them during crucial early years in office is making a difference.

Question: Why was a three-year mentoring period chosen rather than a one- or two-year period?

Answer: While the relationship between a mentor and mentee is expected to endure informally for many years, we thought that a three-year formal mentoring duration should accomplish the goals we had in mind – and our experience so far has confirmed this. Here is a basic summary of how three years of mentoring commonly accomplish our goals:

1. **Year One** of mentoring is usually a year of walking alongside the new graduate through a year of firsts as he gets to know his people and what it's like to be in the pastoral ministry. Habits and patterns start to develop during this time. It often takes about a year to develop trust and confidence in the mentor-mentee relationship. The experienced pastor is there not only to answer basic questions for the colleague, but to provide accountability as the recent graduate starts to develop habits pertaining to his devotional life, physical health, and dealing with pastoral functions he faces for the first time.
2. It's especially in **Years Two and Three** when a graduate develops stronger habits and patterns that will impact the rest of his ministry. After a kind of "honeymoon period" in a congregation, years 2 and 3 are often when a graduate is clearly reminded that he is still in the church militant both personally and professionally. The graduate is starting to recognize more questions that he needs to be asking about his challenges and concerns. And the mentor is there to provide a listening ear when that young pastor has questions or concerns. The mentor is also there to identify if a situation comes up where the young pastor should speak to his circuit pastor or district president, and encourage his mentee to do so.
3. In **Year Three**, if not before, the mentor goal includes working with the mentee to plan or even work through a basic personal evaluation process to help the young pastor continue to plan for personal and professional growth into the future. The mentor also works to see that the recent graduate is developing a broader network of support in his circuit, conference, district, and synod. Cultivating working relationships with lay leaders, circuit pastors, pastoral peers, and district or synod leadership will serve the new pastor well. At the end of Year 3, the formal mentoring relationship concludes – although the friendship and mutual trust may continue strong for many years.
4. For graduates who are called to serve for two years as tutors at synodical schools and then transition to serve as parish pastors, the mentoring timetable is a little different. The schools where they serve will see that their mentoring needs for the tutoring years are met, and then we will mentor them for three years as they begin pastoral work in the parish. We are monitoring and appraising this approach to these situations, and will adjust the approach or timetable if we learn we can accomplish this task in a better way.

Question: How was the \$1,500 per year fee determined?

Answer: The \$1,500 – as the round number suggests – is our current “best guess” estimate for what the three-year mentoring process costs, on average, per year. And there are factors that led us to this dollar figure and lead us to maintain it at present:

1. Two synod resolutions at two separate conventions (2013 and 2015) have encouraged congregations to invest \$1,000 per year in the spiritual and professional growth of each called

worker. The 2015 synod resolution “affirmed the wisdom of calling bodies budgeting \$1,000 per called worker” for these purposes. In other words, congregations that get a new pastor or teacher graduate are not being asked to bear a burden that other congregations don’t have. The hope is that when the new teacher induction [a separate but similar program for new teachers] or pastoral mentoring ends, congregations will continue to recognize that investing in called worker growth is wise. Once these programs end, there is a natural progression for the pastor or teacher to seek out other ways to continue strong growth patterns that have begun. That’s why the investment in the growth of the congregation’s gospel ministers wisely does not end when formal pastoral mentoring or new teacher induction ends.

2. The \$1,000 per year matched the cost of the New Teacher Induction program that had been operating among us for a much longer time. While there are differences between the two programs, there are also significant similarities. By choosing a dollar figure that is the same as New Teacher Induction, we also wanted to avoid unnecessary confusion or any sense of competition in costs.
3. During the pilot initiative years, we tracked costs for the mentoring initiative since we had to write grant proposals with the Foundation (Antioch II) that underwrote the costs. Costs sometimes vary greatly because of the distance a mentor may need to travel to visit his mentee and because of the difference in distance of the mentors from the Seminary, where they assemble for annual training. But the \$1,000 per year amount was an “average” cost that takes the variables into consideration.
4. Because of increased costs the Conference of Presidents in 2024 raised the fee to **\$1,500 for congregations entering the program in 2025.**

Question: What specifically is the \$1,500 used for?

Answer: Here is a list of aspects of the mentoring program that require funding:

1. *There are ongoing “operating costs” that are incurred.* There are travel expenses for mentors who live some distance from a mentee and there are sometimes meal expenses when a mentor may meet with his mentee during lunch. There may be study resources that mentors choose to use with their mentees. And there is an annual training for all active mentors that is held at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary each September. Future training of mentors may not require an annual trip to the seminary campus, but the need for and value of ongoing training of all mentors will continue. Inevitably, costs will be there as we prepare materials and make use of guest instructors.
2. *There are ongoing “administrative costs” involved.* At present we make use of a retired seminary professor as part-time administrator who is paid to function in this capacity. We have a Mentoring Leadership Team – seven pastors who maintain contact with several mentors (currently about 9 mentors for each Lead Mentor) to offer encouragement and foster accountability. These Lead Team members serve on a volunteer basis, but receive a modest honorarium to serve and the program covers travel and meal expenses for them as they participate in the annual mentor training event.
3. *The largest expense that is incurred has to do with a retreat that is held in the third year of the recent graduate’s ministry, as the formal mentor-mentee relationship is nearing its conclusion.* The retreat is called *Celebration of Ministry I: Begun in Grace*. (There are parallel retreats or celebrations for pastors who have completed 10, 25, and 35 years in the ministry, respectively, and these are funded by congregations where the pastors are serving at that time.) These retreats should be viewed as continuing education events and not vacations or mere pleasure trips. Congregations are still responsible to cover related costs so that the recent graduate (and his wife if he is married) can attend the retreat and receive encouragements and resources that will serve him in his pastoral ministry after the mentoring phase is concluded. The mentoring program, however, will cover much of these costs rather than the congregation, since about half of the annual fee is set aside each year for this purpose. (Please note: Due to wide variations in travel costs to and from the retreat, some congregations and the Seminary may need to share costs beyond what the annual fees can handle in a particular case.) In some cases, it may cost less than \$1,500 a year for a recent graduate to be

mentored and attend the retreat. In such cases the Pastor Partners initiative can use these leftover funds to defray the costs for another mentor when related costs are above average.

Question: What if the \$1,500 per year cost creates a hardship for a needy congregation?

Answer: While we hope that this expense can be handled by all congregations who receive a pastor through the Assignment Committee, we are willing to explore ways of giving help where needed. If financial hardship results, we ask the congregation to contact us and make us aware of this, so we can explore options together. There may be donors who are willing to support the establishment of a “scholarship program” of sorts to help needy congregations cover the costs. What we can say for sure is that we want no congregation to hesitate to ask for a seminary graduate because of this mentoring cost. We trust that sufficient funding will be found to implement this initiative for new pastors.

Questions: Who receives the \$1,500? How is this money administered and applied? Where should congregations send their \$1,500 each year?

Answer: The synod convention resolution said that the mentoring program would be administered and developed through Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. No details in protocol were mentioned. For the sake of consistency, we have chosen to model the gathering and disbursement of money after the New Teacher Induction program. Here are the main parts of this procedure that participating congregations should use:

1. In the fall of every year Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary will send a bill to each calling body and ask that the \$1,500 annual cost for the program be remitted by the end of the calendar year. For congregations that might have someone in the New Teacher Induction and in Pastor Partners mentoring, the only difference would be that one check is sent to MLC and one to WLS. Regardless of potentially varied costs from one mentor/mentee relationship to another, each congregation pays the same amount to fund the entire program jointly.
2. The money will be channeled to the Pastor Partners mentoring fund and dispersed as needed to maintain the entire mentoring program (operating expenses, administrative expenses, and retreat expenses as mentioned earlier).
3. In time and with a track record to illuminate the Pastor Partners mentoring costs, the adequacy or inadequacy of the \$1,500 per year fee will be revisited—and adjusted upward or downward. Congregations who seek a new pastor through the Assignment Committee will be kept informed of any changes to the annual fee amount.

Concluding Comments:

It is our prayer that the Lord will continue to bless the efforts of everyone involved in the Pastor Partners mentoring initiative to enrich and prolong the ministries of new pastors among us. We invite your prayers on behalf of all called workers in our churches and schools – and all their continuing education efforts.

More information on the Pastor Partners mentoring initiative is also posted on the Grow in Grace website at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary: <https://www.wisluthsem.org/grow-in-grace/retreats-mentoring/11853-2/> For additional information or clarification on this topic, you are also invited and encouraged to contact our part-time administrator, retired WLS professor John Brenner (email: john.brenner@wisluthsem.org; home phone: 262-353-9613). You may also contact Professor Bradley Wordell, Director of Continuing Education at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (email: bradley.wordell@wisluthsem.org; mobile phone: 262-899-1082).