

The transition is REAL

The pastor's journey from seminary to first call

“The struggle is real” is one of the top 15 phrases used by millennials (ages 22–37). This phrase is used to express annoyance with a problem, yet it’s a bit humorous because both parties know the situation is not the worst problem in the world.

The focus of this *Reporter* insert is the pastor’s (and his wife’s!) transition from seminary to first call. **The transition is real!** And putting all kidding aside, the struggle is real!

As a former district president, I witnessed this transition firsthand with new seminary candidates beginning their first call. While everyone goes

through transitions in life, I pray the Church seriously considers the transition of our new pastors from the seminary.

If you’re reading this insert, I know you love the Church and her pastors. I hope you will take time to read through these stories and words concerning the transition of our Synod’s pastors into their first call. Please pray for our districts, congregations, seminaries, pastors and their families as we work together in supporting our pastors for the ongoing proclamation

of the Gospel for the salvation of the world.

“Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (Rom. 14:18–19). While our church body created and utilizes PALS (Post-Seminary Applied Learning and Support) to address this issue, every one of us plays an important role in helping our pastors transition from seminary to first call ... because **THE TRANSITION IS REAL!**

– The Rev. Dr. James Baneck, executive director of LCMS Pastoral Education

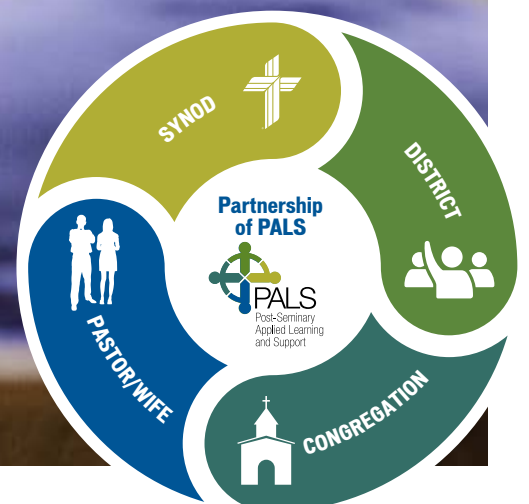
I forgot to set my alarm, and then I realized I had *no coffee* in the house. Then I didn’t get to church on time because I hit all the red lights.

Wow, really?

The struggle is real.



PHOTO: LCMS/ERIK M. LUNSFORD



We're all in this TOGETHER



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO

THE HOSTS

Steve and Marilyn Miller, members of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Edmond, Okla.



"PALS provides an opportunity for [pastors] to meet and have a discussion with their colleagues where they can be open and learn. It gives them a leap forward as they're able to collaborate with peers and better serve their own congregations. We were happy to provide a nice atmosphere, quiet and accommodating, for them to have their conference. It's important to help out where we can. My wife enjoys entertaining and cooking, and it was a good fit."

THE PASTORS



Rev. Joel Heckmann, senior pastor of St. John Lutheran Church, Okarche, Okla.

"One challenge [in the ministry] has been the constant demand to create. Additionally, my lack of experience has shown in various areas, resulting in more than a few poor decisions. It's unpleasant seeing where you make mistakes and taking responsibility, but there is also good room for growth in these areas. My wife has

adjusted well, although she has never lived in a city as small as Okarche, Okla. (pop. 1,200) and is still learning to adjust to the unique features of rural life. It has been a little difficult to find a balance between work and home so far, but I am finding a better balance now than at first.

PALS has helped make me aware of some common challenges people in our situation have. It's also given us some ways to cope with these challenges and honestly reminds us we're not alone and many others have the struggles we do! [The PALS event] was a much-needed time of refreshment and learning. Most helpful was the segment on ministry to inactive members, and most memorable was sitting down for the various worship sessions, using the offices from the LSB and singing hymns with everyone. [The porch talk] gave me an opportunity in a relaxed environment to voice some challenges I was facing and ask [President Henke] a few questions. [The retreat] was a refreshing break from daily parish responsibilities and gave me a chance to spend some quality time with my brothers and sisters in Christ."



Rev. Mark Blakeman, pastor of Zion Lutheran Church, Fairmont, Okla.

"The first year of being a pastor is stressful. Besides the logistics and time involved in

getting settled into a new home, there is much to be done, even in a congregation that has its operations in order. Conflict and problems are a part of daily life in working with sinners, even the sinner-saints in God's Church. How to handle these situations is not always clear and certain, even though God's Word is! Much more so, there is always more to be done than there is pastor to go around. What can result is a loneliness, even for married and socially active pastors. Add to that sin, for which a pastor needs daily forgiveness and Gospel, and a tipping point can be reached.

[An important aspect of PALS is] time spent with other first-year pastors and the experienced pastor serving as guide. The advice itself is helpful, but the fellowship and camaraderie is more important in healing loneliness and stress. By far the most important thing in PALS — and the most important thing for a pastor in general — is to hear the Gospel from other pastors, to hear that your sins are forgiven because of Christ's death on the cross ... and to hear that this vale of tears and loneliness is passing away, that we have the hope of the resurrection because Christ himself rose from the dead."

THE FACILITATOR

Rev. Jonathan Meyer, PALS facilitator for the LCMS Oklahoma District and assistant pastor at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Edmond, Okla.

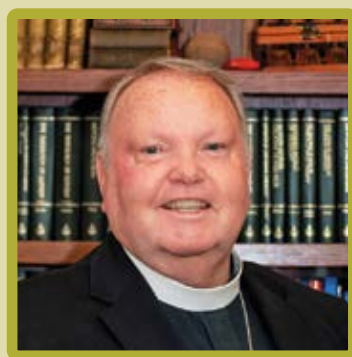


"Perhaps the greatest challenge I've seen among the pastors and their families in the Oklahoma District is a sense of isolation. While Oklahoma is what I call 'The Buckle of the Bible Belt,' with many, many Christians, the number of Lutherans (especially those of the LCMS variety) is quite slim. What often happens, then, is our new pastors come straight out of seminary — leaving a place of built-in community, with people of similar situations — transplanted into rural areas where the nearest brother LCMS pastor is several miles away, parishioners of a younger demographic are sparse and, depending upon the location, other opportunities may be limited as well.

From my perspective in the Oklahoma District, PALS helps fill in the gaps where isolation may occur. The time together [in May 2018] was most edifying for us all as we took time away from the busy pastor life, enjoying exquisite food, relaxation by the pool, opportunities for pastors and wives to study and uplift one another in prayer (while the kids went off with the babysitter for a few hours). But, above all, we took the opportunity to open and close each day with worship. [Also,] allowing the PALS participants to enjoy time with the DP, knowing he sincerely cares for them and is ready to support them, goes a long way to combat that looming sense of isolation, I think."

THE DISTRICT PRESIDENT

Rev. Barrie Henke, president of the LCMS Oklahoma District and senior pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Edmond, Okla.



"Transitioning into a congregation for a first-call pastor can have many challenges, especially if the community to which he has been called is far different from his own experiential background. Assumptions by the congregation can offer a great and even frustrating challenge. PALS helps in this transition because it gives an opportunity for the first-call pastors to discuss their concerns but also to receive mentoring by those who have had previous experience in dealing with any congregational assumptions. This mentoring is done in a relaxed, conversational and non-threatening setting.

The PALS group [in Edmond] was very blessed to enjoy the hospitality of a couple who opened their home to them, as well as providing all meals and a swimming pool. The PALS families were encouraged by the hosts to relax and consider the place their own. In this type of surrounding, any barriers seemed to disappear as the participants became very open in their discussions. The Porch Talk ... was for the men to discuss with their district president [DP] any concerns, struggles or casuistry pressing on their minds. It was also an opportunity in such an informal setting for the DP to encourage and mentor them and share any district or Synod concerns that might impact their ministry."

In May 2018, a PALS group in Oklahoma attended a three-day retreat hosted in the home of parishioners from Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Edmond, Okla. The pastors enjoyed time together discussing ministry to inactive members, best practices for teaching and issues of casuistry. They were even treated to a casual evening on the couple's back porch with the Rev. Barrie Henke, president of the LCMS Oklahoma District. The pastors' wives and children also attended the event, as the hosts' home had a pool and plenty of space for children to play. The wives enjoyed a morning together at a local café, and the families visited a local berry farm on the final day of the retreat. There were multiple opportunities for the whole group to worship, including Divine Service, Matins, Morning Prayer and Vespers. **The transition is ... easier.**

Many players SUPPORT the transition

The transition may be real, but there are many players involved in PALS throughout the Synod who work together to assist new pastors to be successful, vibrant, faithful, engaging, confessional, confident, competent, evangelistic shepherds in Christ's Church.



ILLUSTRATIONS: GETTY IMAGES

SET up for success

Now's the time to update your Self Evaluation Tool (SET)! Here's why: An additional field has been added where pastors can enter their continuing-education experiences, including PALS. A calling congregation would love to read about all the ways in which its future pastor has continued to engage in pastoral formation.

Questions? Contact the Pastoral Education office at 314-996-1254 or robyn.armbrust@lcms.org.

PUZZLING OUT the Transition

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- Word Bank**
- TRANSITION
 - DISTRICTPRESIDENT
 - SYNOD
 - MENTORING
 - SUPPORT
 - PASTOR
 - WIFE
 - FAMILY
 - CONTEXTUAL
 - CONTINUINGED
 - PALS
 - CONGREGATION
 - COHORT
 - APPLIEDLEARNING