

Survivors

M.E.M.O. in the [August 1, 2001](#) issue

Richard Lischer of Duke University is a fine teacher of preaching and author of an excellent memoir of small-church pastoral life: *Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey Through a Country Church* (excerpted in the May 9 Century). This Protestant nonfiction parallels Georges Bernanos's Catholic fiction *Diary of a Country Priest*.

I checked Lischer's accuracy and authenticity by comparing our experiences—mine earlier than his—at one of the pretheological schools that used to feed into the Missouri Synod's Concordia Theological Seminary. We called them "prep schools," though they were more like Catholic "minor seminaries" (four years of high school and two of college) than "real prep schools like Andover."

Lischer's Dickensian-Gogolesque portrait of his years at the Milwaukee prep school is unrelieved. My copy of his book includes the following highlighted phrases: "dogmatic axioms in Latin"; "vilified all heretics, including the Roman Catholics, . . . and the Calvinists, . . . and Pentecostal types"; "we rebelled by drinking beer and wasting time in . . . epic poker games"; "we were distracted by the genuine nuttiness of our professors"; "a penal colony"; students whose fathers had sent them to the school against their will "alchemized their resentment into a perfect hatred for the school, the church, God, and themselves. I never again experienced the nihilism I met in the dormitories of my religious prep school"; one especially cruel boy "came in drunk . . . urinated in [a newcomer's] Samsonite suitcase"; "routine alcoholism"; "the usual carousing with student nurses"; "a number of openly homosexual relationships which I recognized as different but could not define with a name"; "nihilistic atmosphere of . . . the stale worship services"; "the safe spirituality of structure but not of passion or abandonment"; "dogma . . . gray and oppressive as Milwaukee in midwinter."

Through various strategies many of us survived. My roommate, later the first husband of my second wife, was the late Don Meyer, the deepest intellectual I've known. He and I used to take refuge daily in the Milwaukee Public Library, where he pursued Occamist philosophy and I haunted the modern poetry room.

Lischer reminds readers that a six-year survivor at one of the Concordias would have had six years of German, five of Latin and four of Greek—all this before entering seminary. These languages were never taught for meaning, but always in rote fashion, so we would get grammar and vocabulary down cold. Still, many of us cheated and read Plato and Virgil in the original for their meaning.

Lischer also accurately describes the delayed unrush of grace and the evangelical clarity of studies we later experienced at the Concordia Seminary of those days. Perhaps the Concordia “prep schools” had so confined our spirits that we were receptive reactively to the subsequent call of the Spirit. While some graduates turned into Missouri Synod enforcers in their later years, many others became faithful pastors. Alumni of such schools include greats like historian Jaroslav Pelikan of Yale or writers like the late editor of the *Christian Ministry*, Alfred P. Klausler.

I would never recommend the course of study or ethos that Lischer and his classmates began at age 13 or Meyer and I started at 14. But for those who did not spend their lives either perpetuating “the System” or wasting time rebelling against it, there were some positives in it all and some wonderful products in spite of it all. Take the case of Lischer himself. QED.