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## Gordon Jensen: teacher, guide, and role model

Matt Lyseng<sup>1</sup>

I grew up attending Scandia Lutheran church. Even now, as a pastor of the Synod of Alberta and the Territories, I still look at Scandia as my home congregation. During my lifetime, that church was served by many fine pastors, some of whom were contemporaries of mine from seminary. In that roster of pastors, I was blessed to have Gordon Jensen as my pastor during my teenage years. Not only was he one of the longest serving pastors to serve Scandia, but he was also my confirmation pastor. To say that it was good fortune to have a Luther scholar as my confirmation pastor is a bit of an understatement. Gordon provided a very rich confirmation experience that, unbeknownst to me at the time, helped set the table for my future career.

But even prior to that, the lessons I learned in that class helped inform how I lived my life. The idea that God was present with me in all aspects of my life gave me courage to do things I likely never would have done otherwise. I went to Mexico on the rural development exchange through Augustana. There I learned what it meant to live in community and to serve that community. It was there that I heard the first stirrings of a call to parish ministry. It was there that I learned that a life of service was the life that I wanted.

I also learned about God's grace. I learned that in God's love, and through Christ's actions on the cross, humanity had been set free. I learned that on the cross, everything had changed. God's love had been made manifest in a way that could never be denied. When we spoke of the Creed and really peeled back the layers of meaning, I saw a God who was love. I saw a God who gave me back my life through the cross and then told me that gift could never be taken from me.

In our church at the time, we still held to the practice of only confirmed members taking part in Holy Communion; the children received a blessing. When I finally confirmed and was allowed to come to the table, I remember feeling a sense of great awe sweep over me when I realized what it was I was about to partake in. I was overwhelmed by the sheer power of that moment. How could I partake in such a gift? Who was I to be given God's love so completely, so fully? Yet, at the same time, I could remember my confirmation lesson. I was a child of God. I was loved and cherished now and always and because of that, I was always welcome at the table. It was a beautiful moment, made so by the confirmation lessons I had received from Gordon.

Incidentally, Gordon was the pastor that encouraged our congregation to move towards more frequent communion and to open the table to all, children included. Now, communion is celebrated most Sundays, and all are welcome at the table.

To say that a theology of the cross was essential to my development as a Christian and to the choices I made in life would be an understatement. Anything good that I have gone on to do in my life has been done in large part because of that theological grounding. And I was able to put flesh on those beliefs in confirmation through the tutelage of Reverend Doctor Jensen.

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After Mexico, I came back to Canada to find those early seeds for ministry beginning to take root and bear fruit. Gordon began to speak to me about seminary and pastoral ministry. He took me to an open house at the seminary to get a sense of what the community was like and what seminary was all about. On the drive there, he asked me a question that has stayed with me ever since.

*“Why do you think you might want to go to seminary and become a pastor?”*

After some consideration, I answered with, “I want to become a pastor because I love serving others and I love philosophy and theology and really wrestling with my faith so it can grow and change.”

His response is what I remember most. “Then this is the right profession for you.” And so, as I have moved through my career, I have tried to keep those two things as the pillar of my ministry: to serve, and to work at gaining a better, deeper understanding of my faith and to help others to achieve the same. My contact with Gordon didn’t stop there. When I did start at seminary, Gordon and his family graciously offered up a place in their home so my transition to a new city and a new chapter in my life would be a lot less jarring.

As a professor, Gordon continued his formative role in my faith and in my career. Our first-year course on hermeneutics helped set the stage for both a challenging and enlightening time at seminary. Gordon co-taught a class that helped us question everything we believed—not for the purpose of surrendering those beliefs, but to understand them better and to help make those beliefs central to who we were as people. That course was a key course for the rest of our time at seminary. To look with a critical eye on everything and to understand that under every belief is a series of hidden assumptions has been valuable for my ministry and my personal life. To be self-aware is so important to parish ministry. Without it, our own biases and prejudices will trip us up and threaten to render our ministry inert.

That same level of instruction continued in the Confessions class and in classes like Ecumenism. To dig even deeper into Lutheran theology and to understand the 500-year history that we are heirs to was a gift. Every time I quote Luther from the pulpit, I am both proud of the education others labored so hard to give me and a little nervous. Did I get that quote right? Did I get that theological point correct?

The Ecumenism training has also borne fruit, as through my ministry I find myself pursuing ecumenical partnerships wherever my ministry takes me. Whether with the Baptist church and Presbyterian church in Edmonton or the Anglican church and United church in Leduc, ecumenical relationships have been incredibly meaningful and important, especially as we move to a future wherein collaboration between churches will be of outmost importance for the good of the whole church.

The Reverend Doctor Gordon Jensen has been a teacher, guide, and role model for many pastors currently serving in the ELCIC. His sharp intellect and pastoral disposition have helped create a generation of pastors that share several things in common.

## 1. Our faith

We all came to know how important our faith was and how important Luther’s doctrine of justification was to that faith.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup> not the result of works, so that no one may boast.<sup>10</sup> For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” Ephesians 2:8–10

There may be nothing more freeing than this beautiful promise. We are loved. We are loved so deeply that nothing could ever lessen the love that God has for each of us. And that love was on full display on the cross, where our sins were taken from us, the power of death was dispersed, and we were set free to live in love for the sake of the world.

It is the key point to everything I do as a pastor. If anyone in the pews can come away knowing that they are loved and they are free to be who they are created to be and to serve with the gifts that God gave them, then the Gospel has been proclaimed.

Gordon helped to shape each of us as proclaimers of that Gospel, in word and deed. It is who we are as pastors, and if we can proclaim that Gospel truth and administer those sacraments rightly, sacraments that are a physical embodiment of that same promise proclaimed from the pulpit and lived out in the world around us, then we have done our jobs. If these things are done, then the church continues, no matter the challenges that we face. It is a call, a gift, and a hope to proclaim that beautiful Gospel.

## 2. Dialogue

We don't have to build walls with our faith. When the above Gospel truth becomes central to who we are, then we don't need to use it to fence people out. Instead, we can enter into dialogue with anyone, because we know who we are. We know the core values that make up our faith. Thus, we can listen to another and learn from them and about them and we don't have to feel we are risking who we are. We know who we are—and that is God's child.

## 3. Ecumenical Partnerships

The above point makes the work of ecumenism possible. Gordon emphasized the need for these partnerships. Our full communion with Anglicans was a relatively new thing while I was going through seminary, but it paved the way for more discussion and more obvious partnerships. Those who were taught by Gordon understood the importance of ecumenism. This wasn't just a way to honor our Christian siblings, it was the way to move into the future. We shared more in common with our siblings in Christ, and it so it was important to give over ourselves and work together for the sake of God's hope made manifest in the world.

In my career, I have seen the benefits of ecumenical partnerships. The pastors from other denominations I have partnered with joined together for worship and shared programming, but also for mutual support. When my first church was looking at options to restructure, the Baptist church opened both office space and worship space for us while we waited for our new space to be completed. Though we couldn't continue in the end, our Baptist siblings wanted us to survive and continue alongside of them in our ministry of hope and love.

As we journey through this liminal time, it becomes more and more apparent that we will need each other. Not just Lutheran churches connecting with other Lutheran churches, but Christian siblings coming together, to work for a world in need and provide a place for

the faithful to come together to worship and pray and find community together. We are all in this together, and Gordon helped me and my colleagues see how important this was.

#### **4. Community**

Gordon helped teach us the importance of community. We had many events at the seminary, and Gordon was often a fixture at all of them. He was a gracious presence when we met for supper as a seminary group, or when he opened his house for supper to poor students who were likely surviving off noodles and tuna. He often hosted a gathering at his house to start the seminary year.

Through his modelling, we could see just how important community was. We didn't exist in intellectual silos. We were meant to be a part of whatever community we would go to serve. This was vital, as any community is a blessing, and to become a part of that community was one of the greatest blessings that our profession gave to us.

#### **5. Laughter and joy.**

Gordon taught us to laugh and be joyful in pastoral ministry. I can remember many moments of joy with him, whether in confirmation, youth group camping trips, seminary classes, or community gatherings. He loved what he did and that was infectious. It helped teach us that what we were doing, though hard, was joyful and a gift to treasure.

After leaving seminary, I didn't have the chance to see or interact with Gordon a great deal. But he still preached at my ordination and at my wedding. He was still a joy to encounter at something like a synod convention, and I enjoyed catching up when we could. His teaching was formative to so much of who I am as a pastor. Everything he wanted to express helped shape a whole generation of pastors, of which I am a part, and I will be forever grateful for his passion and pastoral presence through my journey.