

Departure Interview conducted by Archive Department

Interviewee: Alan M Spurgin	Division: Education
Years of service to MLC: 25	Years of service to the church at large: 46

Bode: This is an Archives interview of retired Professor Alan Spurgin, recorded on October 30, 2017, by Interim Archives Coordinator Lois Bode. Good morning, Dr. Spurgin.

Spurgin: Good morning, Lois. Nice to see you again today.

Bode: Thank you. Thanks for agreeing to this interview for the Martin Luther College Archives. You are concluding 46 years of service to the church at large, of which 25 were served in the education division at Dr. Martin Luther College and Martin Luther College, right? (Spurgin: Yes.) A few questions for you this morning. What or who inspired you to enter the ministry?

Spurgin: There's a couple of people that actually did that, but the majority of it was our pastor. He wanted me to be a pastor and, you know, go to Watertown—the prep school there. I just couldn't, you know, that was the beginning of high school. I just couldn't do that. And then the other person who inspired me is actually my sister, who went to Dr. Martin Luther College for four years and taught for some time. It was kind of like following in her footsteps, so she was inspiring—still is inspiring. She told me a while back that we've got to walk every day, so . . . got to walk to get stronger, and that's kind of the relationship that we had. So I followed her up here; so I had family here when I started. And then, the last thing—and this might not be the best—but I was looking for a Christian wife at the grand old age of 18. (Bode: Not uncommon, now.) I kind of knew that I had all my foolishness done and now it was time to settle down. And I did, I found a wonderful woman up here to be my wife for 47 years. (Bode: That's Gerane?) Gerane, that is correct.

Bode: What was your greatest concern when you began your teaching career, it was in—at St. John in Watertown?

Spurgin: The biggest fear that I had when I began teaching is that I would have to send a student down to the principal. See, I had 47 seventh graders that first year, and 42 the next, but I really felt that I would be showing how weak a teacher I was if I had to send somebody down to the office. Because that was my little kingdom, and being king of the kingdom is great most of the time, but when you have oppositional children, being king of the kingdom gets to be very lonely. So that was probably my biggest fear. The second fear was, and we talked about this briefly before, but not knowing how children learned, how children learned how to read—how some of the major players, like Vygotsky and others—what did they really have say about things and how could I apply it to ministry? So, that was probably my biggest concern. As far as physical ability, I had played sports, so I knew pretty much about being physical—but that mental part of it, that took some going back to school to get that figured out.

Bode: Did that turn out to be justified, or was it just a new teacher issue?

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Spurgin: I would say that most of it would be a new teacher [issue], because once I learned how the children learned, things got easier.

Bode: What was it like when you started at Dr. Martin Luther College, at that level?

Spurgin: Yeah, that's interesting. I taught Intro to DMLC [Introduction to Education]—that was probably my first course that I taught up here—and I found out in a hurry that students liked application. You can talk about all the theorists and stuff like that, but they wanted application, and if you could tell a story to apply what you wanted to say, that they enjoyed. It came through on reviews and things like that. A couple of times I would get a review coming back from my courses and it said, "Too many stories!" So, I could relate to the children—or relate to the high school or college students—because of what, you know . . . I taught kindergarten through eighth grade, one-room school is an experience—and things like that. So, it wasn't that I was, you know, coming up to the college here was not a threatening thing. I had to sort a few things out, but once we got going and got the kids tapped into things, that became really a joy. So, if I would sum up what I would say about beginning at college, I would say, once I kind of got figured out a little bit about what the students wanted and what they enjoyed, it became very . . . it's a ball to teach, it really is. If you can't have fun teaching, and you can't have things going on, then that's not good.

Bode: Well, is there something in your time in ministry—you said it was a ball to teach—that makes you want to recommend the ministry?

Spurgin: Oh, absolutely! Yeah, ministry is such a privilege, it really is. It took me a while to figure that out, but ministry is really a privilege. God gives us the privilege of being a public minister, to share his gospel, and besides having fun, everything is couched in God's Word. So, when you had an interesting problem, you figured it out using God's Word. If you had a story going on, or something going on in science or social studies or whatever, and connect it with God's Word, that was really a blast. Every day you'd walk in front of the classroom and the children would be different than the day before. And that was inspiring, really, because I walked around, I talked to all of the children just briefly every morning—I went up and down the rows and I could tell when the kids were having problems. And we sat down, I went down on my knees, so we would be at eye level—and then we would talk about it, pray about it, and then come back at different times during the day to make sure that things were going in the right direction. If a child is so hung up on their emotional end of things, academically they'll be very, very poor.

Bode: That's a good point. Which of the courses that you've taught at the college level did you think were the most thought-provoking, and why?

Spurgin: Okay. The pastor level course called Abnormal Psychology. It was a case study about the teacher, so that was really . . . I'm sorry, no, I just had to throw that in. But they're relatively small classes but very dedicated students, and they're all—well I had one girl in that class, but mostly it was just pastor track guys; it was an elective on the pastor track. But abnormal psychology—understanding how the brain, and how the chemistry and everything goes awry in a human being. Because, again, the application of

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that was so critical. If we're talking about schizophrenia, are we talking about some type of dysphoria, or stomata form disorder, or whatever—that was interesting for the students because that was not I gave them a little teaser when I taught them in Intro to Psychology, but when they came back to me in Abnormal Psychology we just—we had a good time. And it was really a lot of information that was new to them, but I always looked forward to that class.

Bode: So, either that one or some other way—how do you feel that you've impacted the students that you've taught? It could be some other course, it could be some other issue altogether.

Spurgin: When I read that question, what came to mind was, how did I know that I was getting through to the students? And I knew that when I would go out and do presentations. I knew that when my sister would come back to me and say, "Hey, I talked to so-and-so, and so-and-so said that you're really a good teacher!" So I think that was such an encouragement, to be well-received at conferences and presentations that I was giving, and then things coming back left-handed from the field that were positive. That is probably the best answer that I can give to that question.

Bode: What advice would you give to a new student at Martin Luther College?

Spurgin: Time management.

Bode: Alright, how about advice to a new professor at MLC? There's a lot of them this year.

Spurgin: Be yourself. You have to have—you have to be—kind of a separate entity. You know, I think about the professors I had up here back in the late '60s and they, some of them, had kind of an aloof attitude—an "I'm special," or whatever—but you have to be yourself. You have to inject yourself into it and don't be hesitant on giving, you know, maybe things that're bugging you, too, or things that are going on in your home, or whatever—you have to be a human being. I think that's another really, really important thing—that you don't say, "I am the king and you are the vassals, and I will open your brain and pour in all kinds of knowledge," or whatever.

Bode: You said "Be yourself." So what are three words that might describe what you're all about?

Spurgin: Family, fun, just a child of God. I hope that's what came across pretty loud and clear.

Bode: During your 25 years at DMLC and at MLC, what major changes have you seen, and how do you evaluate them?

Spurgin: Well, I think probably the major change that comes to mind was the amalgamation in 1995. That really upset the apple cart up here at New Ulm, that year we changed to Martin Luther College from Dr. Martin Luther College. That was probably the biggest thing. Depending upon—I never thought that I would be so dependent upon—a computer. You know, I had six weeks of typing in Medford High School in northern Wisconsin and that six weeks has proven invaluable to me. Once we hit the computers, it was, you had to know how to type, and type fast. (Bode: Interesting.) So, that was it. And then the

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access of things—you know, I would order stuff for the library here and then I would use it until I could find it on YouTube, and then it was just easier to do it on YouTube, you know, and just trying to keep up with that. (Bode: Okay.) I've always felt that I've been a step behind, but I'm not very gifted when it comes to figuring out what's going on with a computer. But I know what I can—hopefully, I know what I can—put into it and get out of it.

Bode: Well, it sounds like you've managed it, because people were positive about your teaching. Tell us some of your favorite memories from teaching or your student years here.

Spurgin: Teaching—I think one of my favorite memories of teaching was when somebody came up to me after I was out of Good Shepherd in West Allis for many, many years, and said, "I am so-and-so, do you remember me?" and I said, "Yes, I do remember you." "Well," and he started going, "this and this and this and this and this." And I didn't think I had that big an impact on that person, but it certainly seemed that way.

Bode: Was there, how about a memory from your student years? Is there anything?

Spurgin: I think one of the memories was . . . I was working when I was going to school here. And one of my people in the dorm had a paper to write, and I left for work as he was sitting down trying to get going, and I came home from work and he was gone, but there was no paper written, you know. It was like, okay, if I can prioritize here a little bit, I should be able to make it. The other thing, of course, is, you know, the foolishness that started. When I met my wife, I was going up the hill and she and some friends were going down the hill, and I was wearing a goofy hat and just kind of clowning around, kind of . . . (Bode: That's when you met Gerane?) Yeah.

Bode: I understand as Lutherans we don't usually "shout out" our accomplishments. However, I am sure the Lord has blessed you with some proud professional moments. Would you fill us in?

Spurgin: I think, probably some of the best professional moments is, I went down to Prescott, Arizona—Yavapai county is a big county up in northwestern Arizona—and there was pediatricians and there was social workers and there was all kinds of people, and I started out my presentation with the assumption that they knew something about reactive attachment disorder, but I found out that they didn't. So I went back to the beginning and kind of filled them all in and what they could expect, etc. (Bode: We're talking to teachers here?) We're talking to physicians, we're talking to social workers, we're talking to a whole gamut of people, foster parents, educators. I was very early into my research on reactive attachment disorder. But they knew nothing, and they said, "Wow, you just described so-and-so!" and I said, "Okay, now do you know how to do things differently?" "Yeah, I was trying to do this reward system, you know, you do well and you get a sticker, or a ticket, and at the end of the week you can trade your ticket in for some little trinket. And it doesn't work." I said, "It never will work, not with that type of student. So here, try this, this, and this." And they were so receptive to that. It was just amazing, you know, that—well, I guess I never felt that I was intimidated by the people there—but just the lack of knowledge and how to help children who have this issue. . . . I've studied that for years and years, and I've kept up on it, because it hits very close to home.

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Bode: The Lord put you in the right place at the right time to give them the right answers.

Spurgin: Yep. They were supposed to be done by a certain time, and an hour and a half later we were still yacking away. (Bode: Excellent.) That was neat. I think another thing that would be a highlight is that, at Good Shepherd—Good Shepherd was always at the bottom of the league. You could always beat Good Shepherd. I went there, was the athletic director, and started meeting the lay coaches that were there. And I kind of tried to wiggle my way in with them, and once we got the attitude changed that we can be winners, and gracious winners . . . especially our basketball coach, Ron Mathwig, he made sure that these kids—we won 9 out of 10 games in our league for years and years and years—and there was no jumping up and down, there was no hollering, or “we’re better than you,” or whatever. It was just okay, we won, that’s excellent. We’ll go shake the other team’s hands, and we’ll go back in the locker room.

Bode: Is there anything else you’d like to share with us?

Spurgin: Yeah, it seems that when I was up here at MLC, there were always students that needed a little extra help, or needed some things, or were goofed up, or whatever, and I got very close (hopefully I kept my professional distance, but I got very close), and usually when one graduated there’d be another one to take their place. So it was always, nothing ever, you know, too severe or anything, but just being there for certain students who felt that they could say things to me and know it wouldn’t get around, and we talked through a lot of girl/boy issues, we talked a lot of occupational issues. There was always things, and that was cool. I thought that was probably a big part of helping people get into ministry and understand it—or not get into ministry, because if you don’t like it and you’re around, you’re not going to be an asset, but a detriment.

Bode: That is cool. Everyone has to have someone that they can talk to when they need to, and you were one of those people. That’s fabulous. I understand that you wanted to teach a little longer than the Lord has decided to grant you. So your retirement plans changed. Tell me what’s going on in your retirement.

Spurgin: Well, in my retirement I spend a great deal of time looking at medical things. I’m on a medication right now that’s \$15,000 a month (Bode: Wow!) and I can’t take that medicine unless I get some help. When you’re trying to get help, you know, you’re calling and leaving numbers. I would say that I spend an hour or two hours every day, just on the medical side of things. I have so much stuff going on that it just takes that. And I’m not as sharp as I used to be. I know that. I know that my ability to think and to reason and things like that has reduced quite a bit. So it takes me longer to do things. Where I could just do things in a snap, now I have to just plod along from step to step to step, to make sure I don’t miss something. My other piece of ministry, which will continue, is working on the master’s level. That has always been enjoyable, and being it’s an online course, I will have more time to contemplate things. If it takes me a little longer to do it, I have the time to do it.

Bode: Dr. Spurgin, the Archives at MLC appreciates that you’ve interviewed with us today. I personally can assure you that those who hear or read this interview years from now will also appreciate what you’ve shared with us today. We wish you and your wife, Gerane, God’s blessings during your retirement, and

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thank you.

Spurgin: You're welcome Lois. Always good to chat with you.

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