

Departure interview conducted by Archives Department

Interviewee: President Mark G Zarling	Service area: Administration
Years of service to MLC: 13 years.	Years of service to the church at large: 40 years.

Bode: This is an archives interview of retiring Martin Luther College president, Mark Zarling, recorded on June 4, 2020, by Interim Archives Coordinator Lois Bode. Good morning President Zarling.

Zarling: Good morning, Lois.

Bode: Thank you for agreeing to the interview for the Martin Luther College archives. You are concluding 40 years of service to the church at large. That includes St. Matthew's, Danube, Minnesota, 4 years, Bethany, Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, 12 years, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, 11 years, and now 13 years at Martin Luther College. Right?

Zarling: Correct.

Bode: What was your greatest concern when you began your career at MLC?

Zarling: I would probably boil it down to a dual concern that was interwoven. The first was a concern for enrollment and to continue to recruit students. Not saying I was a prophet, but I thought, it won't be long and we are going to have some vacancies in our Synod. But even before looking at vacancies in reality of a world that needs the Gospel. And sometimes a little church body would be somewhat content that there are enough to fill classrooms and vacancies and not have an urgent passion to expand and see the world. And I know that more and more young adults have so many different opportunities to consider vocations. And try to get the message out about the noble task of ministry and the eternal impact of ministry.

Related to that, of course, is the whole fiscal stability. And while we are trying to recruit students, college becomes expensive and in my 13 years here, costs kept going up. Can we somehow, under God, encourage students, that if they want ministry, money won't be an object? We're not there yet. And how can we have a college with fiscal stability, with the resources needed to have enough financial aid to make it an available vocation for anybody with the desire to consider it. That they can explore it by coming to MLC.

So those are kind of the interwoven concerns.

Bode: What was it like when you first stepped onto the campus at MLC?

Zarling: Ahhh—a little bit of fear. OK. More than a little bit. It's kinda' one of those, "Lord you gotta help me."

Bode: (Chuckle.) OK.

Zarling: And walking into things I really don't know. But I knew there were some great people here. And I knew that a lot of people were doing their responsibilities very, very faithfully. And then I would learn.

Bode: So, were your concerns justified or just a matter of something new?

Zarling: I think it was something new, but I think it was justified in that it was so different from my previous ministry experience. And one of the things, you know, I was trying to be a pastor so you end up thinking in terms as a pastor and you have to grow to think in terms as an administrator and all that goes with it then. (Lois interrupts.) It's an ongoing learning task. (Lois: Go ahead.) It's just ongoing learning

Bode: So, what was your favorite or least favorite responsibility for this job?

Zarling: My favorite was anytime I had an opportunity to introduce people to the people at MLC, whether it was students, faculty, or staff. I found great joy in trying to present to people the ministry of MLC and to help them learn the connection to the great commission. To help them learn God extends us some wonderful young candidates. God has sent us some wonderful people, both faculty and staff. But so many people really don't have an understanding of how integral MLC is to the great commission work we do as the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

So. Look. My favorite part is, "Can I introduce you to the college?" And that might mean introducing them to a student who—on occasion I had some come with me when I preached and they would maybe do—you know, they would maybe play organ. I had two sisters once came and they sang a duet. I had a young gentleman in pre-seminary do some readings. Whatever the case might be. But to try to make MLC a concrete reality in the work of the church. To see how the Spirit was impacting young students. That's (pause) by far-and-away—and I would tell people one of the perks of being the president is I got to meet God's children before we even meet in heaven. I met wonderful Christians all across the country. I never would have met them until heaven. And now, when we get to heaven to be able to say, "Oh, I remember when I met you, back during the pilgrimage days."

Bode: Excellent. What do you think the students will remember most about you?

Zarling: That's a good question. As you know, the president doesn't teach on a regular basis so it's hard to get to know the students. I hope, that they maybe remember the times that I would sit down at a table with some students and just chat a little bit in the "caf." Have lunch with them. I hope they remember the times that I would have opportunity, a little bit, one-on-one, in the hallway. But it's—I don't know. I suppose—what would they remember? That maybe I helped them move in as a freshman? And that, maybe, was the only time I got to meet with them. At least they—I hope they know I was praying for them.

Bode: In that respect, what three words would describe you whether it was reaction by staff or colleagues or students?

Zarling: Lois, I struggled to answer this. I really—these are the three words I put down. Quiet. And I guess by that I mean my normal personality is a little bit more reserved. In the position of president you have to be out there. You have to be the face of the college. But, by nature, I think I am a little bit more quiet than just, you know, an extrovert. You know, I think I am probably more on the introvert side.

I think I am a listener. I would rather listen to people first and find out. And part of that is simply the reality of what I talked about before. I walked into the situation. I'm not trained as an administrator. And I better listen to people who've been doing things here. How they've been doing them. Why they've been doing them. It doesn't mean changes can't be made, but I need to learn, and I think that's true for all of us. God gave us two ears and only one tongue and I think there's a reason for that.

And the other word I use is processing. And, like it or not, by that I mean, as I think through decisions I enjoy the consensus approach. I enjoy processing other people's ideas. You know—the Administrative Council—sometimes the meetings maybe got longer than if you had a person come in and say, “This is what we're doing. Anybody object?” But, to try to just listen. And what are the other viewpoints. So, right or wrong, those are the words I've chosen.

Bode: They are excellent choices. During your time here, what major changes have you seen at MLC and how would you evaluate those changes?

Zarling: Man. There's a lot of stuff. I mean, there's been additions in buildings. There's been additions in curriculum. There's been additions in how we teach and how we learn including various distance learning.

But, I guess I would go back to the number one change is when God's people brought the offerings forward to build the Chapel of the Christ. And the very first spring, when the hole for the foundation was being built, and watching students when they saw the size and the scale of that hole. And you could almost see, you know, if you look at it, students kind of stop and go, “Wow!” And hopefully, subconsciously, they began to think, “People do care about this college. They understand the great commission.” And, as the chapel went up and they saw the beauty of it and the scale of it, there was no doubt in their mind. Jesus was most important here and our connection to Jesus through the Word. And to see students then use the chapel; to go into the entry way and sit on the furniture and just talk and hang out or have informal bible studies

The Chapel of the Christ had a profound impact on this school as far as school culture or hidden curriculum. Anybody that comes here sees that first because of the size. Anybody that goes to worship there, they leave, not just impacted by the building, but the art in the building that points them to Christ and the message in the building, which is, of course the Gospel. And, for me, that's probably been, I think, the most profound blessing from God that had a lasting impact. It impacts students that come for a visit. Even if they don't come to school here, they remember that. And, hopefully, that clearly is a visible sermon on the vision and mission of this college.

Bode: Sounds like a favorite memory, in a way. Are there some other, smaller details that you remember?

Zarling: Boy. I'll never forget. On campus we had kind of a soft opening just for the campus family. We started that worship service in the [Academic Center] auditorium where, you know, for years, for decades, they had chapel in the auditorium. Then we closed that little short introductory worship with a prayer of thanks for the years being able to hear the Gospel there. And then it was a silent procession as the students and the faculty and staff that were in attendance walked out the door. Walked to the center sidewalk. Turned left and walked the sidewalk to the doors of the chapel. Beautiful, sunny day. Absolutely quiet. And we're talking, probably, at that time, must have been 8 - 900 people, students, faculty, staff and others. And you heard the birds. (Sound of amazement from Bode.) And you walk in silence. And then you walk into the chapel. You know, it's pretty unforgettable.

Bode: I understand in our world of Lutheranism we don't usually shout out our accomplishments. However, I am sure that you have some and I would like to know about one or two of your proudest professional accomplishments.

Zarling: Oh, Lois. I (pause). What I put down, and I consider it to be, by God's grace, an accomplishment. I put down getting to know and working with the team that He brought to this campus. He brought the faculty through a divine call. It was the Lord's choice. The Lord also had His hand in bringing staff

people in the hiring process and so forth. And to be able to try to encourage, and I'll say, the team, those called to teach, to preach, and to administer to the students. That those who willingly work so hard, hired to be, if you will, the support, the under girding of the ministry to make sure things were in place that we could carry out the mission. And to try to help each other see each other in those complimentary roles.

I guess the other thing—as far as—I'm not necessarily proud, but I had two symposium papers about, I suppose, eight years apart, maybe, at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. And it was a distinct blessing to be able to present the papers. But, I'll say it was also probably a blessing, not that I gave to others, but that God gave to me. The working, the getting it ready, and having that opportunity. The one was to try to talk about Christian education. And I thoroughly enjoyed trying to provide a little bit of important background as far as why we have schools. It's not private education. It's great commission education connected. And the other one had to do with the priesthood of all believers, which certainly ties in to training here and to help future called workers understand that doesn't mean you are a notch above the people you serve.

Bode: Sort of in connection with that, then, what in your time of ministry makes you want to recommend ministry to others?

Zarling: God will allow you, if you are faithful in using the Word, to see trophies of grace. Not always. Because it's the spirit in the heart and only God knows the heart as well as the individual. But His people do also let their light shine. And others see their good deeds and you see visible sermons by God's people. You see the impact of the words you share at a hospital bed and someone about to go to glory. And the Gospel brings the peace or the Gospel brings the strength to the family around the bed to sing, "I Know that My Redeemer Lives." And maybe, through tears, they have smiles on their face because they know where their loved one is going. To have an impact in which people troubled are calmed. And sin is still around. And they are sinners and work with sinners and live with sinners. But you see them, ready to look to Christ. And what's coming out of their mouth is not just complaints and whining but the promises of Jesus, "I gotta hang onto you." The Lord will allow you to see trophies of grace. And to begin to understand the profound reality that you are the instrument of the Spirit through which He can, by the power of the Gospel, have an eternal impact on the students. Nothing else compares.

Bode: I really like that phrase "trophies of grace." It's new to me. I will remember that. Is there anything else we have not talked about that you would like to share?

Zarling: Ummm. Just that they got to know MLC. Its history began to kinda' seep in. And I grew up—my dad was actually an alum of Dr. Martin Luther High School. I didn't really know that until, I suppose, I was in college. But he grew up in Minnesota. His boyhood and high school years were here. And then, my brother served here in ministry for eight years. I've been here for 13. And I started looking at my dad's siblings. I had an aunt graduated from high school from the two year teaching program here. A couple other, several other Zarlings that are related. And it was one of those things you never really realize that, as a family, we had some roots on this campus. And I had been born in Wisconsin but grew up in Michigan. I never really got—I was in the pastor track through Northwestern College. I just didn't get to Dr. Martin Luther College very often. But to leave with a little bit more, not just my ministry connection and the memories. I have spent time in a place where generations of Zarlings have been. So that's—it was kind of an enlightening, growing instruction on me, I guess.

Bode: What do you and your wife, Colette, plan to do in retirement?

Zarling: First and fore most we are going to try to take some time and see our kids and our grandkids. We have grandkids out on the west coast. We have some on the east coast. We have some in Wisconsin. But we really do want to spend some time getting a home set up. But also [being] together, and together visiting the blessings of family that God has given us.

Bode: Sounds like a wonderful thing to me.

Zarling: Looking forward to it.

Bode: (Joyful laughter.) All right!

Mark. We appreciate very much that you have interviewed with us today. And I know the Archives at MLC appreciates it and, I assure you, those who hear or read this interview years from now will also appreciate what you've shared with us today. We sincerely wish you God's blessings, and Colette, blessings in your retirement. Thank you.

Zarling: And thank you for the joy of getting to know you and you taking the time to set up the interview. Blessings to you and your hubby and your family.

Bode: Thank you.