An Interview with Pastor Brand

25 Years of Ordained Ministry

32 Total Years of Ministry

The Call

The summer after his freshman year in high school, a series of events took place that shaped Pastor Brand’s life. One, his very good friend Chuckie had drowned. Then two, his dad got transferred and they moved to Antigo, WI, where his new school was not going to let him play hockey.***Pastor Brand****: “At that point in time, I was serious about my faith and my love for the Word of God, but it was more of a head faith than a heart faith. Because of all that was going on and because Antigo was so big and so different, I was in a bit of a wasteland.*

*And then out of the blue one Sunday at Faith Lutheran, Appleton, where my mom was at an LWML meeting, their DCE (Director of Christian Education) Paul did the devotion for the meeting and he heard that there were High School kids there and he sought me out and personally invited me to youth group and the Youth Gathering, through which I met life-long friends and took a full dive into the idea of going into ministry. It was at that Youth Gathering when I heard Ozzie Hoffman, the keynote preacher. I knew he was looking straight at me, and he had basically told my story of the last couple years…and I was like, okay, here I am, Lord, please send me. Here I am. Later after talking with Paul, he agreed that God called my name right there. So that’s when I got the call. But first I had a lot of growing up to do.”*

Time to Grow Up

After receiving his Call, Pastor Brand spent several years chasing “idols”. Although he was very serious about his calling and the Word of God, he had “too much energy” and got into some sticky situations. While these situations were not terrible, they were precarious, nonetheless; and he was using his talents to pursue his own goals. In the meantime, the Lord had different plans. It started when he was sitting in the hospital for the first time when he fractured his neck. The youth group kids came into his room and prayed. Monday morning he walked out of the Hospital. **Pastor Brand:** “*I was like, what's going on here (the sudden healing), Lord?*

*And then the next year when I broke my femur, unbeknownst to me, my high school tennis coach knew the coach at Concordia - River Forest. And so, God even used my idol of tennis, He got me to CRF. I never thought I would play tennis in college. It was so unconventional to actually go the next step. Then I joined the reserves. My whole intention was to be an Army Chaplin. I was going to go through the system my own way, through my tennis and academic scholarships, then join the Army and be a chaplain.*

*Then I got bitten by the youth ministry bug. Once I made the choice not to go to the Seminary right away, I decided to be a DCE for a while.*

*Looking back if I would have gone to Seminary right away, I never would have met Sue. I would have been out of there (Concordia - River Forest) in the fall. So I know that when I ran into her, it was a God thing. He thrust her into my life and it was awesome. Her for me and me for her, with both grace and mercy abounding. Then God just kept throwing surprises, some tainted by sin, but always made good. The path was very good, and there's nothing like God**making you grow up, and extending some really incredible grace.*

*I've always told people, when Satan gets in that crack, don't cover it up, be honest and deal with it. Then with a repetitive heart, when the next step is good, God will take it and use it. The real hinge of all this was Dr. Lyle Kurth. He was my DCE advisor and Sue’s professor. We went in his office, (to tell him about Sue’s pregnancy) and our lives would have been so different if he wasn't gracious and merciful, and just took us under his wing and said these kids are talented, the church needs them and let's not eat our wounded. In that sense, that was a real big hinge. And it was almost as if everybody in our lives followed his cue. It was fantastic. The church I went to serve at as an intern, as I got to know them, I'm surprised they accepted me given our circumstances. The grace they showed us was absolutely unbelievable. That was a big deal. So, then it was kind of like, all right, this is it. I was growing up really quick.”*

From Director of Christian Education to Seminary

**Pastor Brand:** *“Looking back, I had the most awesome pastor at every church I served in as a DCE, even though all of them were cut from a little different cloth. When I got into the church and the ministry, and saw these guys, they were preparing me very well for service in the Kingdom. A lot of what I do and how I am, how I deal with people, I did not learn at the Seminary, I learned it from those guys.*

*And then there was the added benefit of me continuing to serve the church almost full-time while I was at the seminary, that was phenomenal. I can't imagine what it would have been like if I was just going to classes. It was so good to have a church, have a community, and I think that's why I've tried to pay that forward, multiple times with young hearts of the vicars and SMP vicars I’m mentored. David (Miller) is the 5th.”*

Teaching and mentoring vicars and SMP vicars.

***Pastor Brand:*** *“You know the mountain tops and the valleys, and it's a difficult thing to teach another person that. And because most guys, when they get the Call, they see nothing but the glory. They see the preaching and the teaching, the baptisms and the weddings, the high times. They don't necessarily see the walking through the valley with people. And so it's bittersweet because you have to show them that side and then help them to see the glory that's there also in the valleys. It's a collective thing and then prepare them as best as you can to be able to handle those things. Because the sufferings and the negatives, the cross bearing, can really wipe you out. And especially these last 25 years with the cultural shift that's been going on. It has just severely fractured a whole lot of believers.*

*And then there's that moment that I think they got it. I think they are ready, and then I step away and send them off. I believe now that a few years at the seminary can in no way prepare someone for actual ministry. They have to go through and get knocked down, bloodied and bruised, and shed some tears over people to really then step into the next level of what ministry is all about. And not lose sight of the context and content of the faith while you're caring for souls. And it's tough. I remember when I used to do the interviews for the District, guys that felt the calling and they were thinking about going to the sem and then they would come and have this interview and I did everything I could to scare them away because I wanted to see if they had a realistic view of what this is. And some I would have to say, ‘okay this person needs to go visit with a member in hospice care with a senior pastor, to find out if this is something that they can handle’, because you can't be taught compassion.”*

More on mentoring:

***Pastor Brand:*** *“It’s important to make sure that mentors give the opportunities for the vicars to be by their side and see what they actually do. And slowly change positions and let them go. And then the cool thing to see is when they personally get to a moment, they can stand on their own. And that happened here (at St Paul), a month ago (referencing the miscarriage experienced by Pastor David and his wife, Kiristin).”*

Lessons from a cousin with spina bifida.

***Pastor Brand:*** *“Going way back, I had a cousin who was at Bethesda, the Luther home for handicapped kids in Watertown, Wisconsin. He had spina bifida and when he was 6 his parents could not take care of him at home anymore. And every Thanksgiving - after we moved to Antigo, Wisconsin, we would meet his family at Bethesda and the two families would have Thanksgiving together. So from a very early age, I saw Bethesda, and I saw what they did, and how they handled the nasty effects of sin on the world with children. And I never have had a problem with any of the nasty underbelly stuff that pastors have to deal with and handle. So that was a big moment too, in my growth.”*

Future opportunities with supervision of SMP vicars:

***Pastor Brand:*** *“I think I will have more opportunities to be a multiple supervisor of SMP vicars, and maybe the Seminary will have one guy who oversees all the overseers, and perhaps maybe if a role like that came about, if I could have a roll in the training of supervising pastors, so they're not just ‘all right we got a guy to do the tough work’, but you're actually leading them in the how to do it, maybe that is something in the future I could do. I'm just kind of excited about where and what and to be ready for it. “*

What parts of ministry are the most joyful and energizing?

***Pastor Brand:*** *“This will seem weird, the most contentment I have is when there is a member in the valley who is not wavering in their faith. They can be going through the toughest thing and they're not shaking their fists at the Lord, asking ‘why me?’. Although they might feel that way sometimes, they are not blaming God and they are not going into despair…that they did something to deserve it. Their feet are on the rock of Christ, and their salvation is not in question. And the other thing is that they embrace the idea that God will make something good of the valley. A lot of times looking backwards proves that God's Word is right. Sometimes it's easy to do all this in the context of the swamp.*

*Also, it is energizing to see when young kids who were struggling come out of tough situations. And then when they go away and then come back using their gifts, that's always fun to see. And then the typical weddings that are so joyful.”*

If you could start over again, what would you say to your young self?

***Pastor Brand:*** *“There are those moments I look back and I see different mistakes, and different moments that God has turned into very good stuff. I marvel at that. Really there's only one spot in my life that I go, man, He (God) really hasn't made that good for me. He's made that good for a lot of people, but I'm not sure why I had to have that. It's when Chuckie drowned. I blamed myself for it for quite a while. And there was finally a discussion where I basically had to verbalize that to someone. They were able to see it from a different perspective. So, if I could have said something to myself, it would have been back there at age 13; to say ‘you would have the best friend you’ll ever have right there. Let’s not be a stupid \*\*\*’. Because I know I hurt him dearly. And I have a feeling that was the only thing on his mind was what had happened between us. And then he wasn't thinking - his guard was down and just like that, just like that - he dove in the wrong side of the pool, hit his head on the bottom and never came up. That would be the only spot. I would say there is nothing else. Chuckie’s death made such an impact on me, it slowly changed my importance and slowly smashed some of my idols. God made it good for Chuckie's family. I didn't know it for years, but his brother Mark, years later I got to see him, ‘Mark, you were six years younger than us, what's going on’, and he just talked about how his family changed after Chuckie’s death. Because a month later we moved to Appleton - so I never saw it, it was the back story and the future story. I was never there. I know there was a reason but…. the compassion I have for people never held a candle to Chuckie. The kid was a living embodiment of being a Christian at 13 years old. Yeah, that's the only thing.”*

What pleasantly surprised you about taking your call here, at St. Paul?

***Pastor Brand:*** *“Nothing. I’m joking! I was actually surprised because I was looking for a challenge. I just didn't want to take a cushy call. I wanted to be somewhere where I could use my specific gifts and my unique perspective. And so, when I came here and started to ask some questions, and really figured out what St. Paul had to do in some of the controversies and some of the things that were not done well and should have been done better, I really didn't think I was going to last very long. I thought I’d be here two or three years because of the hard work that had to happen, that had to happen soon. I actually think at the very beginning of this I started to think that this could be my dissertation. And so it just came at the right time. But I thought it was going to be such a hard omelet to make, and the hinge was when I got Dar on my side. And I realized this wasn't going to be a quick change, that we had to put more time in it. And Dar allowed me to lead. He was able to step back until he had something to add. And that was huge. And the trust* *level went up really quick. We had talked enough and prayed enough together that the trust level was there. That was really, really good. So, I didn't have very high expectations at all when I came here as far as longevity. I even saw it as an, ‘OK, if this has to be a struggle and a fight, then I'm willing to do it and then moving on down the road wherever the Lord calls me.’ But thankfully people here saw it and got on board, and I think we had the exact right people in place to make it happen. And that was a big surprise, that it happened so well. And now we're wondering what was the big change you made? We're so used to it. I never really liked administrative stuff, but the freedom to get stuff done in-between meetings, to just go, ‘OK here's what needs to happen, here are my options,’ and I always tend to pray on it and sleep one night on stuff that is up to me to decide. And by the next morning, boom, I stand by it and the awesome thing is that I've had very little vocal pushback from some decisions and things. There was one thing I misunderstood and we sat down and talked about it. The system of it worked. Here there's enough checks and balances and oversight and enough people are using their gifts in the areas that I'm not strong in, and it works, it works beautifully. So far, so good.”*

What have been your biggest disappointments?

***Pastor Brand:*** *“My biggest disappointment is the loss of the momentum we had here as far as meeting some of our three and five-year goals. COVID just creamed them. And it's almost like we're back in pre-thinking mode. In the bigger scope, we don't have to do anything, but we have the resources and people here and we are compelled to serve our neighbor. But it's going to take a little while to get back to where we were pre-COVID.*

*I try to be engaged in the circuit, synod, and district. I go to stuff that pastors are talking at. I like to be engaged; and one thing I've noticed is that we don't like to talk about the bad, the hard experiences, the underbelly stuff. It's almost like we're in a time that we're looking at the successes and the numbers, and we're forgetting that the first place we need to meet the need is in the fallen world. The wider Church, the non-denomination, those kinds of ministries, they find volunteers to do the hard work. Their pastors are not caring for souls. They are not doing the hard stuff. They (non-denomination pastors) have made a place for themselves where it's all easy and they do the fun stuff. They have stopped doing the hard things. And I think that has done a lot of harm to the perception of the Christian faith. During COVID when we (St. Paul and her pastors) were considered ‘non-essential’, that said it all to me. Hospitals and nursing homes said, ‘we don't need pastors here’ because they don't ever see any.”*

Other goals met.

***Pastor Brand:*** *“My big goal was getting more into the local community. We were really good at the big projects, but we need to take care of our community here; and the opportunities have fallen into our laps. It's almost like we changed our thinking a little bit, and then God opened doors just for these little projects to get going. And it's great to hear people in the Caledonia community know we're doing something, we're not just this castle on the hill.*

*I have noticed something with the Methodist Church implosion, that a lot of people are coming over here. It's really interesting and great to see them immediately get involved in some of the service stuff. I just go, ‘WOW!’*

Being proud is not a goal of ministry;

but if there is anything you are proud of, what would it be?

***Pastor Brand:*** *“If there is anything I would say I am proud of here at St. Paul, it's that for a lot of people, either some that were sitting dormant, or others that just kind of got a fresh start, it’s the ease of which we do things now. For example, it's amazing that we can actually be in Caledonia High School with Hand2Hand, and we have high school kids coming here for FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes). This is stuff that has nothing to do with me, it’s more, ‘His love our response’. Let's not forget about our response.”*

What have you had a hard time with and what have you gotten better at?

***Pastor Brand:*** *“More of the body of Christ. And less of me. I have the hardest problem with that because I'm on the stage and my whole life has been one of things have come easy- and with accolades - and there's times that I really thrived on that. But that just feeds the worst of me, and it doesn't do me any good. I’ve learned to say, ‘No it can't be about me. It can't be a cult of personality’. And if there's anything going on with American Christianity it's you have cults of personality. They have a strong guy who's taking all the credit, he's did this, he did that, he sold these books. And then he’s got to be ready for the fall. He can be brought down so low, so quick. I have to say thank you to Susan because she won't put me on a pedestal. If I do get on one, she knocks me off right away. That's her given duty. She'll say, ‘Are you sure you have the authority to make that decision?’*

*I’ll look at her and say, ‘Yes, honey, I do have the authority’.*

*And she’ll add, ‘Remember, more of the gifts of the people, and less of you.’*

*Also, I realize I don't have to be busy all the time. It’s that thing, “Jesus is coming. Look busy!” Almost like we have to constantly be busy. And then when things don't have roots and you don't have the people and the resources…then it will tumble. I think the mistake I made early in my ministry was that I would always be doing stuff and I didn't care if we didn’t have the people, I was doing it. Not good. How did I ever get that idea? That has shifted, really shifted for the better. And the only way it shifted was through the suffering.”*

Expound on what you’re pessimistic and optimistic about:

***Pastor Brand:*** *“Ministry is hard. Wear helmet and a cup. However, I'm not a woe-is-me kind of person. But in a way I'm a pessimist about the world. I've learned that I just don't need to turn on the TV anymore to hear the things of the world, the craziness that's out there. I'm constantly harping in, pointing things out. But I'm a total optimist about the church. I mean, Jesus said the gates of hell are not going to prevail against it!”*

Talk about your longevity.

***Pastor Brand:*** *“I think looking back to the longevity, if you want to call it longevity, is that I've taken some hits, and I've, mostly, learned from them. And second, people have kept me accountable, I've always tried to have someone I'm accountable to. And for me that continues to be a PCH pastor that I've struck up a friendship with. We’ve been friends for a long time, and he has helped me through some things. We don’t talk that much anymore weekly, like we used to, but there continues to be that accountability partner outside of my marriage. Outside of the congregation. Outside of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Which has been very helpful. We just talk life and family, And then I'm that for a lot of people, a lot of guys, a lot of servants. But I think that's important, to trust their words even when they may get a little harsh.”*

Who are your favorite theologians and why?

***Pastor Brand:*** *“Saint Paul. He was the ultimate theologian expanding on the words of Jesus. And he's just a man. He was inspired by the Holy Spirit, but he had to believe it and receive it and there had to be an understanding in order to be the conduit for the message of the Gospel.*

*Martin Luther. He is really an extension of Saint Paul.*

*Then for a modern theologian, John Klimek, of the Lutheran Church of Australia. His book, a devotional, is basically called, Suffering with Jesus. He doesn't soft pedal the spiritual welfare and the suffering that goes with the office. Klimek’s message is that God is always using broken people to do his work.*

*And another one I go to, is Chad Bird. Chad was a classmate of mine, the smartest person I've ever known. I've always thought that I’ve been pretty smart; I’ve retained, applied, but Chad is just brilliant. He is a scholar in residence for 1517; he always connects me with the Old Testament. And he’s the only awesome theologian I actually know. The one thing he has taught me is even when he was in the valley, he is not on the ordained roster of synod anymore, he is serving in a capacity that is impactful to the much wider church. His works are tremendous. For example, he wrote a devotional that has 350 Hebrew words that normally do not translate well, and he has created a daily devotion around the impactfulness of each of those words.”*

If you were to write a book, or two…

***Pastor Brand:*** *“The title would be,* Diamonds to Coal*. Usually contemporary Christianity is all about ‘God is going to give and bless and glorify’. I've seen Him work more when he takes the things of the world that are idols (diamonds), and he reforms them into the image of what is useful for the Kingdom. So it is the opposite of what you think. You look at coal and you think, what good is that? Coal is very valuable - - when you see just how God is at work in the “coal” of our lives. It’s the value of bearing the cross. We’ve been so inundated by the theology of glory – thinking if we are faithful then we deserve this - but the opposite is actually true. We need to realize that God is working through our imperfections and the times that we’re broken, to say it’s all about Jesus. The book would essentially be talking about the lessons I’ve learned through the people who have impacted me and unexpected events in my life.*

*And I still want to write my historical fiction novel. I started it years ago. It’s about the children's crusade of 1212 where the Pied Piper legend comes from. I believe that the crusade was all directed and conspired by the papacy. And so I want to write a book that weaves the thought that the Pope actually had people behind all of it and that none of it was just accidental or grassroots. That it was all directed and the whole purpose of it was, in a sense, to sacrifice the children of the realm to get the bigger goal of getting Jerusalem back. And it worked.”*

Express your longevity in football or any sports terms*:*

***Pastor Brand:”*** *In football terms, Tom Brady-ish. A little long in the tooth, but still able and finding great joy. He is going to play as long as he can physically do it and he is enjoying what he is doing. Not necessarily always winning but certainly enjoying the work.*

*In hockey terms, Gordie Howe; Gordie transcended age.”*

Pastimes:

***Pastor Brand:*** *“I wish I could play more hockey. My mind thinks I can still do what I used to do, but physically, that ship is gone. Just to go out and skate and play would be enough. Tennis on the other hand, I would love to get back to playing competitive in my age group. Also, I just love being on the golf course. It’s not all about how I am golfing. It’s that I like to either to be by myself, working through my preaching and my teaching, or golfing with my flock, people I know. There is a lot of good conversation and togetherness on the golf course. And it’s a challenging game, you can do everything right and then the ball bounces wrong. It’s more a reflection of what being a Christian is, where you have all the tools and all the knowledge but there are forces bigger than us moving things the way they want. I think that’s kind of cool.*

*I love traveling with Sue, seeing things we've never seen. Doing stuff we've talked about. The Lord is giving us the opportunities to see and do some really cool things. And spending time with my family.*

*There are a couple of things I want to do down the road. One that has always been in the back of my head, ever since my first ride in the crop duster at my dad's farm, is that I want to go to flying school and get my pilot’s license. My dad had a full-time pilot that dusted his and my uncle’s land. He let me sit in the copilot seat when I was like 7. And I just loved it. I'd like to do that someday, just to say I did it and to learn something there. Other things also, like continue to read and continue to learn and grow, especially reading history. There are certain periods I enjoy, like the Reformation and World War II.”*

Life Bible Verses

***Pastor Brand****: “I’d like to continue to live out my theme verse, Acts 4:20, where John and Peter are before the Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus and they're told to stop preaching the name of this so-called Messiah, and they say, ‘We cannot help but speak what we have seen and heard. We can't help it. We can't do anything else.’ I hope my words - and not just my words - but in many ways my life, speaks to that. And my other one is Acts 17:28; ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’We can never fully do this under our own power, but we certainly can ask the Lord to work it in us every day. No matter what.”*

If you were shipwrecked on a deserted island with Sue – and all your needs were met, what three things would you want with you?

***Pastor Brand:*** *“I would not need a Bible because there is so much of it in my brain. I’d like a jet ski because I love jet skiing, (but we couldn’t get off the island with it). A golf club and some floatable golf balls so I could hit balls into the ocean, and they would float back. And a board game of some kind.”*

If you could have one superpower, what would it be?

***Pastor Brand:*** *“To be able to fly!*

*I did a sociology project in college. I had this idea that if you are a Christian and you have dreams that you're flying, that you are more satisfied in your faith. I interviewed 100+ students and it was crazy, there was a correlation. Once in a while I have these dreams that I'm flying. A lot of times the situation is where I am in trouble or in danger and I am able to escape it by flying.”*

If you could be an artist, who would you be and why?

***Pastor Brand****: “I would be Michael Asher. That again is a little bit the ‘diamond to coal’ thing. When I see Asher’s work, I think of things that can be, not things that are. And so, it takes my view away from our earthly stuff to eternity. That is where I am. Sometimes our mind is so limited to what we see here, we forget that in the new creation everything is going to be elevated from the original. It's going to be better than the original. Not just without sin without Satan, without evil, but better! Like a city that is as high as it is long and wide. I think that is what John is trying to say (in Revelation), what life was really intended to be like in the beginning. And Asher helps me do that. And it always puts my mind on what is within the possibility of what is going to be.”*

Name one thing you would make compulsory in

the church office and one thing you would ban.

***Pastor Brand:*** *“II would ban candles. I don't like smelly froofy candles. At all. I don't mind spray, when something smells bad, but I wouldn't do it just to make something smell good. Once in a while someone else burns candles, I won’t say who….*

*Compulsory? For me it’s a moving scale depending on the situation. I guess some of it would be to make sure we are always seeing the big picture. Some specific things are necessary, yes, for good order, but I would say the larger picture should be more important than the pieces that get us there.”*

Who would you like to thank for your longevity in ministry?

For your opportunities?

***Pastor Brand: “****First, I would like to thank my parents. My mom was the example of faith, my ministry all started with her example; and my dad was always a strong Christian. Then my little sister Lesa. My in-laws, Ray and Sharon, they loved me for who I was. They saw the good, saw my heart and overlooked some of my flaws. Dr. Kurth, Dr. Burtles at River Forest,**Pastor Kirshner at Zion in New Holstein,**Pastor Ron Getlar at my vicarage church, and Sue and my family.*

*I just love parish ministry. I’m so thankful I got to experience so many places and people….and yet been able to sink roots up in Traverse City.”*

On Traverse City

***Pastor Brand:*** *“I am so thankful we’ve been able to sink roots there. I just love our piece of land and am thankful for it. And I’m thankful we’ve been able to keep it and retire there some day. When you talk about ‘the land’, there is a connection there. I start to feel what my dad must have felt when he sold his farm, how hard that must have been.”*

This or That

Vacation or Staycation?

***Pastor Brand:*** *Vacation - but more staying when we are vacationing. Go someplace and not be so much go, go, go, but go and stay. A go-staytion.*

Disney or Netflix?

***Pastor Brand:*** *Disney*

Art Museum or History Museum?

 ***Pastor Brand:*** *History*

Disney or Universal?

***Pastor Brand:*** *Disney.*

To be embarrassed or be afraid?

 ***Pastor Brand:*** *Embarrassed.*

Alaska or Hawaii?

 ***Pastor Brand:*** *Alaska – haven’t been there yet.*

Salad or sandwich?

 ***Pastor Brand:*** *Sandwich*

Plans or surprises?

 ***Pastor Brand:*** *Surprises*

Books or movies?

 ***Pastor Brand:*** *Books*

Rollercoasters or waterslides?

 ***Pastor Brand:*** *Rollercoasters*

Bargains or Top shelf?

 ***Pastor Brand:*** *Top shelf (within moderation)*

Protagonist or sidekick?

 ***Pastor Brand:*** *Protagonist*

Watch sports or play sports?

 ***Pastor Brand:*** *Play*

***25 Years of Ordained Ministry***

***32 Total Years of Ministry***

***1996 - Ordained: August 22, 1996, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne***

***1996 - Senior Pastor: Saint Michael’s & All Angels Lutheran Church, TC, MI***

***2008 - Vacancy Senior Pastor in Interlochen, MI***

***2011 - Sole pastor at Salem National Lutheran Church Westland, MI***

***2015 - Current Pastor St. Paul Lutheran Church, Caledonia, MI***