

**A Vision for the Future of Theological Education
In The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
For 2015 and Beyond**

Preamble

On November 4-5, 2009, forty-eight Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) participants gathered on the campus of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind., for a Pastoral Ministry Summit. The Summit was a collaborative effort between the Office of LCMS President Kieschnick and the LCMS Board for Pastoral Education (BPE). It was designed to further an effort begun by the BPE in January 2009: the formation of a vision for the future of theological education in the LCMS for 2015 and beyond.

Summit participants were divided into eight vision formation groups. The groups were given considerable time to construct the components of their visions for the future of theological education in the LCMS for 2015 and beyond. Groups were instructed to describe what they would observe (and not observe) in 2015 if theological education in the LCMS were operating in optimal fashion. While the groups were given latitude to include many components in their vision descriptions, they were asked to be certain that their visions contained details concerning the following items:

- Identifying, informing and encouraging (raising-up) appropriate candidates for pastoral ministry (who does it and how is it done – humanly speaking);
- A description of the seminaries(y) of the church;
- Desirable characteristics for seminary graduates (describe the most desirable characteristics of graduates);
- What will be observable in congregations where these graduates serve as a result of their formation?
- Supporting (financial) the formation of men for pastoral ministry;
- The accessibility of seminary formation by appropriate candidates;
- Residential (on campus) formation;
- Distance (in context) formation;
- The role of the church (congregations, districts) in pastoral formation;
- The role of the CUS schools-seminaries partnership in pastoral formation;
- Continuing education (formation) for pastors;

The following narrative provides a description of the future of theological education in 2015 and beyond, utilizing vision components that were noted by at least two of eight vision formation groups.

Pre-seminary formation

God's gift of pastors to His church (Eph. 4:10-12) is cherished by the members of the Synod in recognition of the close connection that exists between the work of pastoral ministry and the salvation of souls (AC V). The "noble task" (1 Tim. 3:1) of pastoral ministry is highly regarded, as are those who serve in the pastoral office, due to what God accomplishes through the proclamation of His Word and administration of His sacraments.

As a result, congregations in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) are actively identifying, informing, and encouraging appropriate candidates for pastoral ministry. Pastors, commissioned ministers and laity are eagerly seeking those who will serve as the next generation of pastors. Large numbers of boys and men are reporting that they were encouraged to consider the pastoral ministry during their participation in Sunday school, confirmation class, youth group, and LCMS elementary school and high school. Second-career candidates are reporting in large numbers that pastors, commissioned ministers, and lay leaders encouraged them to consider service in the pastoral ministry. Gifted and appropriate candidates of all ages in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) to whom God has given the desire to serve in the "noble task" of pastoral ministry are eager to explore and discern the "inner call" they are experiencing.

Pastors throughout the LCMS realize and appreciate that formation for service in the pastoral ministry begins at the baptismal font and continues through the experiences of congregational life. Pastors provide personal mentoring for those expressing the desire to serve in the pastoral ministry, which includes prayer, the study of God's Word and the Lutheran Confessions, the communication of personal insights, opportunities for the candidate to gain greater understanding concerning the Monday-Saturday life of the pastor, and opportunities for the candidate to witness and experience lay leadership at work in the local congregation.

This process also provides an opportunity for pastors, district officials, and other leaders to assist a candidate who is feeling the inner desire to serve as a pastor discern whether it is God's will to take the next steps of seminary application and enrollment. Candidates are lovingly led through a discernment process that includes prayer, study of the Scriptures, and discussions with pastors and church leaders. At the end of this discernment process, each district president is able to make a definitive recommendation to the seminary admissions committees concerning each seminary applicant from his district.

Congregations and districts are forwarding the names of appropriate candidates for the pastoral ministry to the admissions offices of the Concordia University System (CUS) schools and the seminaries. The CUS schools and seminaries, in-turn, are providing essential information concerning the formation process that leads to service in the pastoral ministry of the LCMS. This information is conveyed through print and electronic means, but also through the experiences and insights provided during numerous on-campus visitation opportunities offered by the schools on an annual basis.

The Concordia University System (CUS) schools are working in close partnership with one another and with the seminaries in the pastoral formation process. Each CUS school and seminary is viewed as a valuable partner in the process of forming the next generation of pastors. The result is a formation process that is seamless and one that distinguishes the CUS schools in the perception of the church as the premier providers of pre-seminary formation.

Together, the seminaries and CUS schools have developed specific formation outcomes for pre-seminary program students who wish to matriculate to the seminaries and methods to assess students annually in terms of their development toward these desired outcomes. Annual discussions take place between CUS and seminary officials which review student assessment data in light of expected developmental outcomes for students at both the CUS and seminary levels. These annual discussions lead to the suggestion and implementation of agreed-upon changes in order to improve student formation.

Since the seminaries and CUS schools are partners in the pastoral formation process, seminary-level courses are offered on the CUS campuses. Advanced standing is granted to CUS students who meet specific course and formation standards. This advanced standing reduces the time needed to complete the baccalaureate and seminary degree programs by as much as one year while at the same time providing high-caliber spiritual, intellectual and professional formation. Advanced standing for CUS students and the resultant reduction in time needed to complete the entire formation process serve as the most tangible results of the CUS-seminary partnership. They also lower student educational indebtedness, move pastors into the field more rapidly, and provide a recruitment advantage for the CUS schools when high school students contemplate options in pre-seminary formation.

Seminary formation

The two seminaries of the LCMS, located in Fort Wayne, Ind. and St. Louis, Mo., are recognized within and beyond the LCMS for their fidelity to biblical teaching, their excellence in theological scholarship and their effectiveness in pastoral formation. Both form pastors for service in the LCMS, but each is also known for distinctive programs of theological education that complement one another and exercise appropriate stewardship of resources.

The people of the LCMS view the formation of the next generation of pastors as one of the most important priorities of their walking together. As a result, the seminaries and their students are supported enthusiastically with prayers, referrals of prospective students, and financial gifts. Many pastors frequently include the seminaries and their students in the general prayers offered during worship, and most congregations of the Synod include one or both of the seminaries in their annual budgets.

As a result of this support, the seminaries are able to attract and provide appropriate compensation for a gifted theological faculty. They are also able to provide faculty members with the necessary time and opportunity to engage in theological research, publication, or acquire additional pastoral ministry experience. The campus facilities are also maintained and endowments are growing in order to provide a buffer of resources to meet unexpected challenges in the future.

Students are also supported in the cost of pursuing seminary education so that educational debt at graduation does not provide a significant source of stress for pastors. This support comes not only from individuals, groups, and congregations of the Synod, but also from a large endowment that has been established at the Synod level for the exclusive purpose of providing student financial aid to the next generation of pastors in the church. The level of support is sufficient to allow the seminaries to charge a realistic, non-discounted tuition amount without the concern that it will prove to be a significant source of stress for students.

All of these sources of support stem from the priority the people of the Synod are placing on the formation of future pastors. They realize that the formation of pastors is not just the responsibility of the seminaries, but rather is the responsibility of the entire church. Both the formation and the support of future pastors in the Synod are conducted in a spirit of partnership between the congregations and districts of the Synod, the CUS schools, and the seminaries.

While the two seminary campuses serve as the “anchors” for theological education and pastoral formation in the Synod, they have forged mutually-beneficial partnerships with CUS schools, congregations, and other entities inside and outside of the Synod to provide theological education and pastoral formation in venues beyond the seminary campuses. Partnerships with the CUS schools in particular have resulted in CUS students receiving advanced standing status and a shorter baccalaureate/masters completion time in recognition of the high-caliber formation they have received prior to seminary matriculation.

Theological education and pastoral formation utilize the best aspects of both contextual and residential education. Residential and contextual components are included in all seminary formation programs, with different emphases in each to achieve the objectives of each program. Distance education is utilized to transmit data-intensive courses, including prerequisite courses and introductory courses. Residential components emphasize critical reflection, discussion, and the formation of a Lutheran, pastoral ethos (“way of being”) in students – including attitudes, actions, and approaches to people and issues that are God-pleasing and consistent with biblical teaching.

Faculty members are called to serve according to their ability to model and form students in the spiritual, intellectual and professional aspects of pastoral ministry. In turn, faculty members view their role as one that extends beyond the transmission of intellectual data, and includes the formation of a habitus that is conducive to effective pastoral ministry.

Students are receiving the most beneficial internship (vicarage) experience possible as a result of serving at one of the “Top 150 Teaching Congregations” of the Synod. These 150 congregations, roughly 2.5% of the Synod’s congregations, have been selected as those who meet or exceed criteria established through discussions involving both the seminaries and the Council of Presidents. The pastors, commissioned ministers, and laity serving in these congregations view their teaching role as a service to the church at large. In turn, the church at large recognizes the importance of this positive learning experience by providing 50% of each vicar’s total annual compensation.

Each year, congregations may make application to be recognized as one of the “Top 150 Teaching Congregations.” Each year, an assessment of the “Top 150 Teaching Congregations” is conducted by the seminaries and the Council of Presidents to ensure that each congregation meets or exceeds the established criteria. As a result of this annual application and assessment process, individual congregations may be deleted from the list or added to it. The Council of Presidents oversees the standards and the list of the congregations recognized as the “Top 150 Teaching Congregations.”

Post-seminary experience

First and foremost, graduates of the LCMS seminaries possess a love for God as a result of the grace they have received from God. They embody and exude an attitude of gratitude for all that God has done for them in Jesus Christ. Their desire is to serve Christ in response to the way He served them, giving His life for them and for all people.

Graduates of the LCMS seminaries are noted for their effective combination of “the pastor’s head” and “the pastor’s heart.” In terms of the pastor’s head, they are known for their command of biblical, confessional theology. They are eager to acquire a deeper understanding of God’s Word, Lutheran theology, and the world around them, and are naturally inquisitive about all three.

In terms of the pastor’s heart, they exhibit a genuine love for people, which flows from their sincere love for God. They exhibit the best qualities of a “shepherd” caring for his sheep and the sheep clearly perceive that their shepherd loves them. The members also reflect this same type of unconditional, sacrificial love for one another, following the lead of their pastor.

LCMS seminary graduates communicate Law and Gospel in ways that are meaningful to people across a wide spectrum of generations, from the World War II generation, to the generations described as Baby-Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, Millennials, as well as children and teens. Graduates seek to be well informed on contemporary social and cultural issues. They are able to analyze and think critically about these issues and offer a theologically-informed response to them.

In turn, the congregations where these graduates serve are thriving in worship, study of God’s Word, and service directed to both external and internal ministry objectives. Laity have a clear understanding of God’s mission, as communicated by their pastors, to seek the sheep who are lost and feed the sheep who are found. Laity of all ages in the congregations in which they serve are excited and enthusiastic about their involvement in the work of the Kingdom and are eager to be equipped for more effective and diverse service.

In terms of external ministry activity, the congregations fervently seek to reach beyond their walls into the community with the Gospel of Jesus Christ in ways that are creative and entrepreneurial, including the desire to plant new congregations. They are welcoming communities that model and extend the love of Christ toward those who are outside the Kingdom of God. Their authentic embodiment of the love of Christ results in their innate ability to attract non-Christians who seek to learn more about what lies at the core of this self-sacrificing, unconditional love for all people, including people from different ethnic groups.

Pastors are eager to engage in continuing education and have been supportive of the requirement that they receive minimal levels of continuing education periodically. Pastors encourage annual evaluation by their congregational leaders and the resulting evaluation data help to define beneficial areas for continuing education. The seminaries are responsive to the continuing education needs of pastors and seek to meet these needs with courses and learning experiences that are accessible.

Congregations are supportive of their pastors engaging in continuing education. They provide this support in word and deed by covering the financial costs associated with continuing education and providing the time away from ministry responsibilities as necessary. Congregations and pastors recognize that pastoral formation is a life-long process and appreciate the role that continuing education plays in this process.

As a result of all of these dynamics, all blessings from the Lord of the Church, the congregations in which these seminary graduates serve are growing in terms of membership, worship attendance, study of the Word, and service to church and world. The congregations have a vibrant enthusiasm for the Lord’s work and it is contagious to new members. There is great joy as the congregation aggressively seeks to bring the Gospel to its community and to plant new congregations in neighboring communities.

Conclusion

This vision is offered in service to the Risen Savior, Jesus Christ, through whom we have a sure and certain hope for eternity. With Paul, the members of the LCMS Board for Pastoral Education encourage all members of Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod congregations to “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58, ESV).

Respectfully submitted,

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