

JOURNAL OF LUTHERAN
Mission

April 2016 | Vol. 3 | No. 1

 THE
LUTHERAN CHURCH
Missouri Synod
Witness Always



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Published by The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.
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This journal may also be found at
www.lcms.org/journaloflutheranmission.
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A REFLECTION ON THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by Robert H. Bennett

Brief Historical Origins

WHEN I WAS INVITED to speak tonight, I was told me to keep it light and tell some jokes ... Well, I could tell you few great and hilarious jokes, but I don't know any; and if I did, they would no longer be recognizable as jokes by the time I was done with them. I simply don't have such abilities. So I will talk to you about what I know.

But before we get to that, first let me say that I am both honored and thankful for the opportunity to be the banquet speaker for such an important event. As we gather here at the Mission Summit we continue to engage the difficulties of a fallen world, but we do so in the light of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who has rescued us from the "domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of ... [the Father's] beloved Son" (1 Col. 1:13).

One of the major themes of today's Mission Summit was the topic of pastoral formation and the role of theological education. While many times the necessity of theological education is minimized within our culture, it remains God's prescribed method of formation for those He calls to be His pastors. This is what I mean: the Word of God creates and forms pastors. Pastors must abide in and confess the Word of the Great Shepherd before they can be under-shepherds. Based on my experience, this best takes place within a residential program, or at a minimum, a program that provides an opportunity for men to engage with one another in confessional theological reflection.

If you will allow me, I would like to demonstrate this point with a personal story. When the idea came to me to

enter the seminary, I remember asking my wife to come sit outside with me because I had something to tell her. Ours has never been a relationship built on formalities so she thought it odd that, rather than just blurt out what was on my mind, I would set a date and a location to talk to her about something affecting our relationship. After

waiting for my three (at that time) children to go bed, we sat down together outside for "the talk." I remember it going something like this, "I want to go to the seminary to study to be a pastor." When I finished telling her the "great news," she responded in laughter, falling off the backyard swing where she was sitting. The words I remember her saying when she realized I was serious sounded something like this, "You?"

Now you must not think too negativity about my wife's response, because she was right in her observations. You see, my wife knows me like no one else knows me. After her initial shock wore off, she reminded me of four important obstacles that were in the way of my new dream to become a pastor. She reminded me that I could not read more than a few words out loud "without falling all over them." She knew that public speaking was terrifying for me. She knew that I had only a high school education. Moreover, she knew that both of us had just recently returned to the Church. She was right on every point. However, neither of us had remembered or maybe we had not even yet read St Paul's words to the Corinthians:

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were

Confessional theological education is about Jesus forming those He calls to go out into a lost world and preach the Gospel that changes lives and brings people from spiritual death to eternal life.

wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1Cor. 1:25–29)

In view of these words, I guess the idea of the ministry is not so hard to accept. I definitely had the foolishness and spiritual weakness requirements down cold. Well, to make a long story much shorter, my wife eventually agreed. Within a few years we were on our way to Concordia Theological Seminary (CTS) in Fort Wayne, Ind. It was in the residential program at CTS that I was formed to be a pastor.

Pastoral Formation and the Role of Theological Education

So what does any of this have to do with our conference or with theological education?

Our Lutheran system of theological education is unmatched in this world. Let me explain. We have a strong theological system that provides our pastors with the very best. It includes all of the necessary disciplines such as exegetical theology, historical theology, systematic theology and practical theology. But our program does more than that! Our theological program does not only inform the mind and provide practical skills for the ministry. Our theological programs change hearts and make the foolish into new men of God,

those who are foolish in the world to shame the wise; those who are weak in the world to shame the strong; those who are low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

This is what theological education does! It is not of the intellect alone, but it is formative upon the entire personhood of those who are called to speak in the stead of the Savior of the world, our Lord Jesus Christ.

As the executive director of Luther Academy and as a guest professor of Missions at CTS, I have the wonderful opportunity to see the formation of pastors on a daily basis. Did you notice I said pastors, not seminary

students? I see and interact with the seminary students, but I don't teach them. In my role as professor, I teach pastors who are seeking higher degrees. Many of the pastors I teach are not Lutheran. Many different denominations from around the world send their pastors to our seminary to study for their Ph.D.s. Moreover, many of these non-Lutheran pastors have never experienced the theological education that our Lutheran seminaries provide. To be sure, they have all received some form of seminary education, but for most of them the seminaries they attended focused only on teaching theology. What was missing from their programs was an emphasis on the Word of God within a confessional subscription. In other words, these pastors learned theology that was separated from confession. Jesus taught His disciples, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31–32).

The truth of Jesus' Word must be confessed, not as an individual truth, but as the objective truth for all people at all times and in all places. Such a confession is contrary

to the worldview of our times, but when taught it is formative upon the individual. It sets them free from themselves and makes them to be the voice of God, as Jesus speaks through them with His Word, a Word that brings life and

salvation, a Word attached to water, bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins!

This is something that is difficult to find outside of Lutheran theological education, something my non-Lutheran students remind me of all the time. It is formative! The world is sending their pastors to our Ph.D. Program at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Ind., because they recognize the formation that is taking place within our institution. World Christianity is beginning to recognize that CTS is the place to learn missiology that speaks in a confessional way to today's context.

I am also wonderfully blessed to be the executive director of Luther Academy. For those who are not aware of Luther Academy or its mission, let me give you a short, very short, description of Luther Academy's ongoing work. Luther Academy seeks to provide Confessional Lutheran theological materials and continuing education for Lutheran pastors around the world. We do this in the United States through our publishing and worldwide by sending the best theological minds to teach pastors

Pastors must abide in and confess the Word of the Great Shepherd before they can be under-shepherds.

around the world, pastors, who for the most part, have not had the benefit of a theological education. Our focus is reaching pastors that cannot make it to seminary or those who have received minimal theological education and deeply desire to learn theology. Each year Luther Academy provides approximately 20 conferences all over the globe for pastors. The content of these conferences is prescribed by the presidents or bishops of each of the Lutheran Synods. The point is that Luther Academy only provides instruction in the areas of need.

World Lutheranism is an astonishing phenomenon that too often is not recognized by the members of our churches. Too often churches are looking for some new way to present the Gospel. However, as I will demonstrate, the Lutheran Church is a growing church, not one of decline or collapse. Therefore, for the remainder of my time with you this evening, I would like to tell you a little more about some of the pastors I have met over the past year. Tonight I will focus on the Lutheran churches of Madagascar and the Philippines.

Madagascar

I was recently in Madagascar. Luther Academy was there in connection with LCMS Disaster Response. The purpose of the trip was to provide a theological conference on the theology of mercy. The location of the conference required two days of travel through the bush and into some of the most beautiful rainforests you could imagine. While the travel seemed long and difficult for us, it was nothing when compared to the travel endured by the Malagasy pastors who attended the conference. They had traveled unbelievable distances, some by foot for days in the tropical climate of coastal Madagascar. When the pastors arrived, they slept together on the floors of some local church members who had offered their homes to the pastors. This particular conference drew more than 50 pastors. They suffered through the travel and the accommodations because they understand the importance of theological education. To them such education is a dear luxury that few are able to receive.

By now most of you have heard about the Lutheran Church of Madagascar. It is one of the largest Lutheran churches in the world. To date there are around 5 million Lutherans on the island. This church body continues to grow by the tens of thousands each year. The average pastor has up to five or sometimes more churches to

serve. Moreover, these churches average between 400–800 members per congregation. Few if any of these pastors have cars, but the distances they must travel to their churches is great. Even with so many churches to serve, only the pastors preach and administer the Sacraments. To do anything else would be inconceivable to them. They recognize that theological education is about far more than academic degrees. They recognize the necessity of formation that is attached to theological education. Moreover, they recognize the special calling given to the pastor to fulfill that role.

The Office of the Holy Ministry is not a functional office. It is an office filled by Jesus as He creates and forms His pastors. The workload on these pastors is inconceivable to us here in the LCMS. There is no time for these pastors to come up with new strategies of mission, nor is there time to rethink the traditional liturgies. These pastors simply confess the faith and trust that which was handed down to them from the early missionaries. In spite of the problems that would drive some of us insane,

these pastors are faithful and their churches are growing.

The growth of their churches is amazing when we understand the culture in which they operate.

Most of the island's population remains animistic. This means they worship the spirits and the ancestors through their traditional rituals, which include a very subjective and emotional component of worship. In other words, their worship is as far away as you could imagine from our understanding of a liturgical service. Nevertheless, this growing church in Madagascar does not attempt to adjust their theology or practice to meet the culture. They are instead as countercultural as one could imagine. The Lutheran Church in Madagascar is a liturgical church. The liturgy they use is similar to that you would have once found in all of your LCMS churches. Their churches are growing in ways that we could not believe possible.

Another interesting thing about the Lutheran Church of Madagascar is that while we are forming them by providing theological resources and education they are, in turn, forming us. They are reminding us that a confessional church holding to the Scripture and the power of Jesus' Word is the only real possibility of reaching lost people. Their interaction with our pastors and seminaries is teaching us things we have lost because of the influence of Rationalism and the Enlightenment.

Our Lutheran system of theological education is unmatched in this world.

If you were to travel to Madagascar and speak to the average Lutheran on the street, he would speak to you in the language of the Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Moreover he would do so in the framework of Luther's Small Catechism. The Lutheran Church in Madagascar is a prospering and a thoroughly Confessional Lutheran church that wants what we so often take for granted. Yet, at the same time they have what we so desperately need. They have answers for us on how we can speak the Gospel to a world that is claiming to be spiritual but not religious. In other words, they can teach us how to speak the Gospel to a culture that is seeking spirituality apart from organized religion.

The Philippines

The Lutheran Church in the Philippines is much smaller than the Lutheran church in Madagascar. But there are many similarities between the two. The cultural circumstances are similar in the sense that both are islands and both are heavily influenced by animism, or what we generally refer to as spiritualism. Much like the pastors of Madagascar, the Lutheran pastors in the Philippines also serve six or more churches. Likewise, many times these churches are only accessible by foot. While the church is relatively small in number its growth comes from the countryside not the cities. Once again the Gospel is precious to those who are under the law of the false gods and spirits. Moreover, the Lutheran Church in the Philippines is a liturgical and confessional church. They are growing by simply following a confessional subscription to the Confessions and the historic Lutheran forms of worship. These are faithful pastors that have much to teach us as we provide for them the theological education they so desire.

Lutheranism in the 21st Century Is Encouraging

As we look at the problems of our own culture and the losses we are experiencing in our churches, such stories are encouraging. However, there is more to be found in these stories than encouragement. These stories should inform us as to how we proceed in our churches, seminaries, universities, high schools and church schools. Only the Word of God grows the Church. The growing churches around the world have a high regard for theological education that is biblical and confessional. In fact, the

Lutheran churches that are growing are the confessional ones, but they also share something that has always been found in the Lutheran Church. These growing churches are liturgical. This should not surprise us. A liturgical church is simply practicing in an outward manner what it confesses. A liturgical church is a biblical church.

Theological education is the hope for our future. While the future of Western Christianity seems bleak to many, the future of world Lutheranism is exciting and vibrant. Moreover, our Lutheran partners are exactly where our hope can be found. As pointed out in a few of the papers, these mission partners are showing us our blind spots.

As I travel the world as the director of Luther Academy I have the benefit of seeing Lutheranism at its best. Moreover, reflecting on Lutheran theological education in the 21st century, it is clear to me that our theological education does not need a new roadmap to follow, but simply a firm hold on the road that has lead from the Reformation and to the great history of our Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod as a confessional Lutheran church sought out by the world for our faithfulness to Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

The growing churches around the world have a high regard for theological education that is biblical and confessional.

Therefore, the summary of my speech tonight is similar to our Synod's 2017 Reformation theme: "It's still all about Jesus!" He is the one that creates and holds all things together. He is the Savior who carries the sins of the world to a cross and rescues us by His resurrection. He is the one who promises to attach Himself to the simple words, water, bread and wine. Confessional theological education is about Jesus forming those He calls to go out into a lost world and preach the Gospel that changes lives and brings people from spiritual death to eternal life. Confessional theological education is formative; it shapes pastors by the biblical and confessional truths and provides a residential opportunity for the men to grow in the confession of the faith through the dialogue with their teachers and fellow students. Confessional theological education is the roadmap for our future in the 21st century.

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