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## For the Life of the World

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture verses are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

# Curriculum for 21st Century Challenges in Ministry

Charles A. Gieschen



As many of our graduates and readers know, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne (CTSFW), went through a major curriculum revision that was implemented in the 2005-2006 academic year. Then in 2017-2018, the faculty completed a comprehensive review of this “new” curriculum that resulted in some changes, which have since been implemented this fall. Why would a seminary faculty go through a curriculum review and additional changes about 12 years after a major revision?

The faculty does not approach a curriculum for forming either pastors or deaconesses with the basic approach that “if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it.” We are constantly engaged in assessing how we are forming pastors and deaconesses so that we are sure the students we are offering the Church are prepared in the best ways possible to be faithful and effective in these vocations. We also regularly listen to pastors and church leaders in the field, seeking to address the needs that they highlight. Thus, while seminary curriculum changes are often neither radical nor quickly done, there is nonetheless an ongoing careful process whereby such changes are made.

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What was the process for the curriculum review? First, the faculty reviewed assessment data since the new curriculum was implemented in order to see and preserve its strengths and to note any weaknesses. A primary source of assessment data for the Master of Divinity (MDiv) Program is the vicarage reports; for the Master of Arts (MA) in Deaconess Studies Program, it is the internship reports. Here we receive feedback on how our students integrate and practice what they have learned in a real ministry context. For example, the MDiv data showed strengths in areas like knowledge of the Gospels, sermon preparation and delivery, and leading worship. Areas of concern included evangelism visitation and Bible class teaching. Based upon what this data showed, faculty made suggestions on how to address areas of concern.

Second, we surveyed all the MDiv graduates from 2010-2016 who had gone through the entire new curriculum and asked for their feedback in light of their pastoral experience. Their feedback reinforced what the faculty observed as strengths of the new curriculum, but also identified a few unexpected concerns. Once such concern was the desire expressed by a majority of graduates for an even more thorough course sequence in the Lutheran Confessions than the three, two-credit courses that were currently required. The committee that oversaw this review process then presented their recommendations to the entire faculty, who voted to implement them. It was a careful and deliberate process with input from many sources.

What changes resulted from this process? By recognizing the many strengths of our current MDiv curriculum, we made only a few minor structural changes. The first was to offer an additional course in our Church History sequence, one dedicated to church history since 1580, to help our students more thoroughly understand the current context of Christianity in the world. Another change was to expand our Lutheran Confessions curriculum by making Confessions I and III into three-credit courses. This will give our students 20 more class contact hours in their study of our Lutheran Confessions, a change requested by both students and our Systematics faculty. We also changed Hebrew I and II from three-credit to four-credit courses, since those classes were already meeting for 40 class contact hours rather than 30 in an effort to prepare students to read the original language of the Old Testament. Finally, we dropped the requirement of extra modules (often offered on Saturday mornings) and are incorporating exemplary module presentations by current parish pastors into our Pastoral Ministry and Missions courses, such as Field Education and Pastoral Theology.

There were also numerous small, non-structural recommendations adopted by the faculty, which should result in improvements to present courses. The recitation of *Luther’s Small Catechism* in the Catechetics course was a challenge for some students, so we have moved the recitations from that course to a separate recitation of one chief part each quarter spread over six quarters (i.e., the first two years before vicarage). We are also strengthening the evangelism skills and experiences of students through our Confessing Christ in Today’s World course, Field Education, and Vicarage. In addition, we are giving more attention to teaching pedagogy in the Catechetics course, and are adding a “Methods for Teaching Bible Class” component to the Pauline Epistles and Pentateuch courses.

Due to concerns about the loss of Hebrew language skills over the vicarage year, we also now require vicars to watch a weekly podcast on the Old Testament reading for the following Sunday. With the help of a grant from

the Association of Theological Schools, we have also studied and mapped the pastoral competencies to be developed in contextual education (meaning fieldwork and vicarage) so that we can be more intentional in assuring that each student has certain experiences and develops particular competencies. Some of these curriculum changes prompted the faculty to evaluate and make related minor changes to the MA in Deaconess Studies and the MA Programs, in areas where the curriculum between the MDiv and MA programs overlap.

Although there are other things that could be shared, this overview confirms how seriously and thoroughly we review, change, and implement curriculums for pastoral and diaconal formation. The real test of a curriculum, however, is how those who have completed it function once they are actually pastors or deaconesses. One of our 2018 Master of Divinity graduates wrote to me about this recently, upon completing his first year of service as a pastor:

Due to my formation at CTSFW, I feel qualified to perform my duties as pastor. I have three Bible studies every week. In answering various

questions, I have realized, ‘Wow, I learned a lot at seminary!’ I feel confident in preparing for sermons from the original languages. I confidently proclaim the Gospel when I visit my people. I still have so much to learn and share with my people, but CTSFW gave me a solid and sure foundation from which to enlarge my studies. I would not trade the time or training that I received at CTSFW for anything in the world. It is indeed world-class and allows me to perform my duties with skill and confidence. Thank you!

These comments—as well as the feedback of many other graduates, vicarage and internship supervisors, and district presidents—are confirmation that the curriculum at CTSFW continues to be effective in forming faithful and well-prepared pastors and deaconesses for service in Christ’s Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. 🏡

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