



Formation: The CTSFW Experience

By Paul J. Grime

When I attended Concordia Theological Seminary (CTSFW), Fort Wayne, Indiana, some three decades ago, I remember well the frustrations that would occasionally be voiced concerning the training of future pastors for service in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. “Require more experience in evangelism,” were the cries of some. “No, it’s stewardship training that they need,” others countered. Meanwhile, professors struggled to cover everything that was on their course syllabi. Truth be told, there just wasn’t enough time.

At the heart of our current training are the traditional theological disciplines. Some things simply cannot be reinvented. Thus, in-depth study of the Scriptures remains a high priority. And for future pastors, that means studying the biblical text in the original language. There is simply nothing that can substitute for a careful study of the inspired text with all of the nuances that the Greek and Hebrew bring to that study.



Any visitor to our campus is immediately drawn to Kramer Chapel with its commanding presence at both the center and highest point of the campus. That presence, however, is more than just physical. Ever since the Seminary's move to the Fort Wayne campus nearly 40 years ago, the chapel and its rich Christ-centered worship has commanded the attention of students and faculty, guests and visitors. Receiving the gifts of God in Word and Sacrament are at the very heart of the Church's mission, something that has defined CTSFW for generations.

There still isn't. While congregations hope and pray that their pastors will be well prepared to address every conceivable issue and need that they have, the Seminary faculty knows that that is an impossible task. And so, more than a decade ago, the faculty undertook a careful review of the curriculum, seeking to address the ongoing challenge of preparing pastors, and now deaconesses as well, for service in an increasingly complex and, at times, hostile world.

Pastoral and Diaconal Formation

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Lest our study of the Scriptures become divorced from the generations of Christians who have gone before us, pastoral and diaconal formation also lead into an examination of how Christians contended for the faith in past centuries. Central to that study is a focus on the theological formulations that have been

the hallmark of the Lutheran tradition, namely, the confessional and doctrinal writings of the Lutheran church. This study is not for the purpose of satisfying some intellectual curiosity but to equip future servants of the Church to apply these timeless insights to the present-day work of ministry.

Where the Rubber Hits the Road

Translating these theological insights into real life application comes in a variety of ways, both in and out of the classroom. Future pastors, for example, have courses in worship, preaching and teaching, to name but a few. Deaconess students explore various ways in which the Church carries out her work of mercy in meeting a world of need.

Recognizing that no faculty would ever be fully equipped to address the many ministry settings into which our students will be placed, the new curriculum added a component of modules that are taught by experienced pastors and other experts in a variety of fields. Students choose from a number of topics in which they either have an interest or no particular experience. Module offerings change from year to year; in the past year, students have had the opportunity to attend sessions covering such topics as time management, suicide prevention,

assimilation of new members, campus ministry and ministering to those in hospice.

But that's all still classroom learning. Students move beyond the classroom on a regular basis. They are all assigned to a local congregation for fieldwork during their first two years of study. There seminarians begin the task of learning by doing, namely, by assisting in the service and even preaching on occasion. They and the deaconess students also learn by observing and participating through visits with the pastor to the hospitalized and homebound, by first sitting in on and then teaching Bible classes or Sunday School and by taking part in visits to potential members.

The experiences also take our students beyond the Seminary. Past trips have included an immersion in urban and rural ministry as well as several overseas mercy trips to Madagascar. Students sometimes arrange individual trips to broaden their horizons and experiences.

Capping the learning that occurs outside the classroom is the vicarage/ internship year. Here the student spends a full calendar year with a mentor pastor who gives direction and guidance that gives future pastors a true sense of the calling for which they are preparing and deaconess students a taste of the rich opportunities that await them.

At the Center of It All

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So central are these gifts that the curriculum revision mentioned earlier in many ways reflects the place of worship in the life of the Church. We established interdisciplinary courses that focus on the central pastoral acts of Baptism, preaching and the Lord's Supper. It isn't uncommon for courses in Pastoral Theology to turn to the Synod's *Agenda* as a way of demonstrating how our liturgical rites reflect the very essence of our theology. Even a class as unassuming as Greek Readings, which seminarians attend every week for their first two years of studies, enables students to form a connection with the Church's worship life as they study—in Greek—the Gospel reading for the upcoming Sunday. Again and again, students are encouraged to place their theological studies in the broader context of the Church's life.

Conclusion

Some might argue that the theological formation of future pastors is more complex than it has to be. While such a conclusion is tempting to draw, the reality is that our world is more complex than ever, with new and often subtle challenges to the teachings of Holy Scripture that bring confusion to God's holy people. More than ever, the Church needs pastors who are thoroughly grounded in the Word of God and fully conversant in how the Scriptures speak to the current challenges. CTSFW rejoices in the opportunity entrusted to it to prepare men and women who will carry out their vocations with integrity and joy. Faithfulness to the Gospel demands nothing less. 🏰

The Rev. Dr. Paul J. Grime (Paul.Grime@ctsfw.edu) serves as dean of Spiritual Formation, dean of the Chapel and associate professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.



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