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RESPONSE TO DR. ALBERT COLLVER, “THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND THE GLOBAL SEMINARY INITIATIVE —A REVIEW AND LOOK TO THE FUTURE”

LCMS Mission Summit, Nov. 19, 2015

by Jeffrey Kloha

DR. COLLVER’S ESSAY FOCUSES on the nature of a seminary: What is a seminary? What should its programs look like? These are important questions not only for seminaries around the world but even — perhaps especially — for established and “successful” seminaries in North America, which draw students from around the world. Hence, I find helpful a comment by Dr. Collver near the end of his paper:

When conducting theological education overseas, it is important to listen to the needs and desires of the overseas partner, and not simply to impose or export the latest discussions about theological education paradigms upon the partner. [p. 18]

I might add that it is not only the “latest theological education paradigms” that sending churches should avoid imposing on partner churches. *Always* foremost should be the needs and desires of the partner church that is seeking to confess Christ faithfully in accordance with the Lutheran Confession, not the sending church’s goals.

For this reason, I will reflect here on possible futures for the Global Seminary Initiative. What are the ways that this remarkably successful project can bear even more fruit, not only in the partner churches of the LCMS, but also within the LCMS itself? As a framework for my remarks, I would like to reflect on one aspect of the church, as described in Philippians 4:

“And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church participated together [the verb is ἐκοινωνήσεν] with me in giving and receiving, except you only.” (Phil 4:15)

In the New Testament, church is always a manifestation of *κοινωνία*, a result of being united to Christ by faith and by being united with Christ, therefore united

to one another through Christ. Neither *κοινωνία* nor “church” (ἐκκλησία) are abstract ideas; they are always concrete manifestations of people being gathered together “in Christ” (to use NT language) or by “Word and sacrament” (to use Lutheran vocabulary).¹ For Paul, the people gathered by the word in Philippi were now actually working with him in his own service to Christ, even though Paul was in prison in Rome, 1300 kilometers away from the baptized in Philippi. Specific people, in fact, are mentioned as embodiments of this participated together *with* Paul: Timothy, who is also a co-author of this letter (Phil. 1:1) and whom Paul will send to Philippi (2:19–24), “who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.” Likewise, Epaphroditus was sent from Philippi to “minister to Paul’s need” in prison (2:25–30). Paul describes him as his brother, his coworker, and his fellow soldier (2:25). Again, the *κοινωνία* shared in Christ resulted in actual people being sent from one place to another, from one congregation to another, to encourage, strengthen, and teach one another as a manifestation of the unity that they have in Christ. That Paul singles out Philippi as unique among all the churches in manifesting the desired unity in Christ (“no church participated together with me in giving and receiving, except you only”) shows both the power of the Gospel at work in Philippi, but also a reminder that such unity seems difficult to achieve in this present age. Even Corinth — big, wealthy, powerful Corinth — had to be called to task and reminded that the poor little church at Philippi had outdone them: “their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord” (2 Cor. 8:2–3).

¹ Jeffrey Kloha, “*Koinonia* and Life Together in the New Testament,” *Concordia Journal* 38 (2012): 23–32.

What does all this have to do with seminaries? Seminaries are not, at their core, institutions of higher learning and advanced study; they are not, at their core, buildings; they are not, at their core, books and libraries and they are not programs of study. Rather they are at their core people: People who have gathered from different locations around the teaching of the Word, for the purpose of sending them out again to serve in the name of Christ. Gathering and sending, gathering and sending the rhythm of a seminary. Year after year, 176 of them now at the institution known as Concordia Seminary. Seminaries, at least confessional Lutheran seminaries, would not exist but for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and their sole purpose is form pastors and teachers and deaconesses and missionaries so that the Word of the Lord increases and prevails mightily into this generation and, until the Lord comes again, future generations.

The New Testament does not describe seminaries, but it does describe people gathering and being sent out from different locations, different churches, for the purpose of teaching, encouragement, formation, and manifesting the unity that they have in Christ. To look to the future of the Global Seminary Initiative is to look to the future of the church, and one of the things about the LCMS that gives me pride is that our church body commits significant resources, indeed millions of dollars, to the formation of pastors — and not only LCMS pastors, but also those of our partners in the Gospel around the world. When I meet with colleagues from other seminaries around the country, they are surprised at the large number of international students at Concordia. That is possible only because the people of Missouri generously participate together in the giving and receiving, all for the sake of the Gospel. In this brief “response,” I offer five ways that this partnership of giving and receiving might be strengthened through GSI.

1. Focus on Student and Teachers

Dr. Collver notes, with concern, some trends in education in general and past experience in some forms of education overseas. There is, and always will be, in any educational program and especially in seminary education, a tension between the urgency of the mission and the desired length of study; a tension between cost and quality; a tension between what is good enough and what is excellent. We should not forget that stand-alone seminaries were invented by the Roman Catholic church at the Council of Trent, in the seventh session in 1563. Martin

Luther and Philip Melancthon were university professors, not seminary teachers. And, as Dr. Collver pointed out, different models of seminary have existed throughout the church’s history. One that is receiving a great deal of attention is online education, in particular Massively Open Online Courses (or MOOCs).

Discussion of MOOCs has resulted in a great deal of spilled ink — or rather, many pixels in the last several years. The prophesied radical revolution in higher education has not materialized, however. Already in late 2013 the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported a University of Pennsylvania study that found that fewer than 2% of students who signed up for a MOOC course actually completed the course.² Perhaps not surprisingly, “The researchers say that courses with lighter weekly workloads and fewer assignments had somewhat higher completion rates than those that expected more of participants.”

Those championing online education as a panacea have failed to observe what teachers for centuries already knew: It is in access to information that results in learning and formation, but encouragement, accountability, some to walk alongside the student and by turn encourage or chasten, praise or correct. One observer in the *Chronicle*, commenting on the failure of MOOCs, notes:

The real obstacle in education remains student motivation. Especially in an age of informational abundance, getting access to knowledge isn’t the bottleneck, mustering the will to master it is. And there, for good or ill, the main carrot of a college education is the certified degree and transcript, and the main stick is social pressure. Most students are seeking credentials that graduate schools and employers will take seriously and an environment in which they’re prodded to do the work. But neither of these things is cheaply available online.³

So we are back to the ancient *paideia* model, where students come together alongside those who have both drunk deeply from the well of Scripture and knowledge of Christ and have themselves served in congregations where they have had to bring the condemnation of the law and the light of the Gospel to actual people. Who

² Lawrence Biemiller, “From a Million MOOC Users, a Few Early Research Results,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* December 6, 2013. Available online: <http://chronicle.com/blogs/wiredcampus/from-a-million-mooc-users-a-few-early-research-results/48841>

³ Kentaro Toyama, “Why Technology Will Never Fix Education,” *Chronicle for Higher Education*, May 19, 2015. Available online at: <http://chronicle.com/article/Why-Technology-Will-Never-Fix/230185>

know both the content and the urgency that the content brings into the lives of people; that study of theology is not an end in itself but the theological content of the Gospel propels, prods us, and forces us to bring that Gospel into hurting lives. Seminary students, then, learn *with* professors in the sense that they are brought into the same experiences, come to the same understandings, learn from the same mistakes that the professor himself has had. To this day a sure and certain way to recapture the attention of wandering students on a warm, breezy St. Louis spring afternoon is to tell one of my sure-fire “when I was a pastor” stories that connects the text to a context, that allows the students to imagine for themselves why it actually matters that they are studying Greek instead of tossing a Frisbee in the quad at that particular moment.

Now if the teaching moment is most critical in the formation and education of pastors, it should be quite obvious that it is the *teacher*, even more than the curriculum, more than the content of the class itself, more than the length of the program, certainly more than the buildings, and, indeed, even more than whether the course is delivered in person or online, the *teacher* will have the most significant impact on student learning and formation.

In this light, that of focusing on the teacher-student interaction, I want to emphasize that technology is not a panacea, but neither is it inherently harmful to theological education. Concordia Seminary’s experience with online pastoral formation has been very successful, both in terms of student confession and in terms of fruitful ministry in their first calls. But it comes at a cost; in our experience, in order for the courses to be successful, we must limit classes to 12 students at time, so that there is significant faculty/student interaction; students must do 10+ hours of reading and writing per week, and faculty must provide feedback and grades on 5–7 pages per student per week; there is a required two hour live online class session each week; and the student must meet with his local mentor/supervisor each week as part of the assignment. Furthermore, students are required to come to the St. Louis campus at the beginning of the program, near the middle, before ordination, and again at the end of the program for a residential course. So we have, in reality, a hybrid distance/residential program. And while we are very pleased with the courses and the student learning, the fact is that it costs the seminary more to deliver an online course than it does to deliver a residential course. This model is effective for 21st century

tech-savvy Americans, most of whom have high-speed internet access. But it would likely not translate well into contexts where technology is not so readily available. Again, a focus on *student learning* should determine method of delivery, not one’s own personal experience of seminary education.

Therefore, the future of the Global Seminary Initiative is solely to be found in the students it forms. What is critical is that the student *learns*, that the student *grows*, that the student graduates not merely with a degree, not merely because he has sat in the mandated number of classroom hours and credits, but because he has been fundamentally shaped by the Word of God and the Confession. He does not merely receive a set of lecture notes that he can return home to read back to others. He himself is called by the Gospel and enlightened with the gifts that come from the Spirit through the Word about Christ. Therefore, I concur with Dr. Collver’s concern:

The challenges, needs, and desires of North America (or Europe) often shape worldwide theological education because it is what the churches of the Global North export, whether or not such a form or shape for theological education is desired by churches in Africa, Asia, or Latin America. [p. 12]

I could not agree with this statement more, hence the best thing that we can do is to teach, that is, bring others to the same source from which we have drunk, the Gospel, the Scriptures, the Confessions. Allow them to drink deeply, and to return them to their homes eager and capable of teaching the faith and future pastors in ways that are informed and shaped by biblical and Lutheran patterns of thought. These teachers are then able to bring biblical, Lutheran theology to bear on the situation before them in their own setting. They may well develop teaching methods and programs that are very different from ours, but also much more effective in their situation. A four year, residential, masters degree model of education is what has developed in the LCMS as the gold standard over the last 50 years, but that is certainly not the only way to do pastoral formation, nor should it be the way that we expect other churches around the world to form their pastors. There are different economic, governmental, and cultural realities that must be taken into account—just as they had to be taken into account in the US. Let’s not forget that the vicarage year was added to the seminary curriculum in the 1930s, during the Great Depression in America, when congregations could not afford to call a

new graduate as pastor. An extra year of off-campus, in context training was instituted primarily for economic rather than formational purposes. Now, I happen to agree that time in a congregation, being mentored and guided by an experienced pastor, is of inestimable value. But why stop at one year? Why not two, as other Lutheran seminaries do? The point is, just because the LCMS does it and is effective at it does not mean that it must be duplicated in other settings.

2. Develop a Core of Culturally Sensitive and Effective Faculty

Not every theology professor can effectively teach every topic; neither can every theology professor effectively teach every student. Students learn from some professors more readily than they do from others. Much of this has to do with the student's learning style, but also with the faculty members gifts in teaching, in particular in a classroom setting that in North America is becoming increasingly varied, with students from different backgrounds, different levels of exposure to theology and the biblical languages, different ways of interacting with technology.

It is also the case that not every North American faculty member is able to teach effectively in a non-western setting. There is a sensitivity to the student and the willingness to listen to what the student is saying back to the teacher, so that the teacher can be sure that the material is not only taught but most importantly *learned*. In Concordia Seminary's experience, it is our best teachers in our traditional classroom who are also our best teachers online and also our best teachers in overseas settings. For years Robert Kolb, Robert Rosin, and William Schumacher have spent significant time in teaching in other seminaries; this spring Dr. Schumacher will spend the entire semester at Mekane Yesus Seminary, the third consecutive year in which we have given him up for this work. In this generation we are raising up Joel Elowsky, Paul Robinson, and Erik Herrmann, also all excellent teachers, to be available on a regular basis for teaching at our partner seminaries. Ft Wayne, I know, has likewise cultivated faculty who are particularly adept at teaching students from backgrounds different than their own.

3. Focus on the Scriptures

We are living in an age where the biblical revelation is dismissed as outmoded, antiquated, and merely a collection of traditions and opinions. Even among some who claim

the name of Christ there is a dismissive attitudes toward the Scriptures, as if they cannot provide the truth in an age of many truths. As a result, we have seen in the West — in a single biblical generation of 40 years — a loss of our human identity as God's creatures, gifted to live in accordance with his will and according to his purposes. Divorce is commonplace; a culture of death is celebrated at both the beginning and end of human life; consumerism is, indeed, all consuming while a life of service and sacrifice is forgotten; a person's gender and sexuality is no longer a gift from God but an individual's "choice," so that a man can choose to "identify" as a woman and we are all forced to act as if it were actually so.

It is only the grace of God and the power of his Word which preserves us; this should result in pride but in a humility which drive us ever again and ever deeper into the Scriptures and under their power. The need to study the Scriptures in depth, in their original languages, was deemed essential by the Lutheran Reformers. Luther, after all, was a professor of the Old Testament. He knew enough Greek to translate the New Testament into German in mere weeks. One weakness in what the LCMS has been able to provide to our sister churches is that we have not produced teachers of the Bible in their original languages. Ft Wayne does not offer a Ph.D. in Bible, and St. Louis' program has proven exceedingly difficult, perhaps more *Wissenschaftlich* than ecclesiastically oriented (which is always a tension in a seminary graduate program). We must find a way to make it possible for future teachers of the church from around the world to attain advanced degrees in biblical studies, to become teachers of the Bible.

Luther is famously quoted as saying that if we lose the biblical languages, we lose the Gospel. He said that, but he also said much more in that essay, *To the councilmen of all the cities in Germany that they establish and maintain Christian schools*:

There is a vast difference therefore between a simple preacher of the faith and a person who expounds Scripture, or, as St. Paul puts it, a prophet. A simple preacher (it is true) has so many clear passages and texts available through translations that he can know and teach Christ, lead a holy life, and preach to others. But when it comes to interpreting Scripture, and working with it on your own, and disputing with those who cite it incorrectly, he is unequal to the task; that cannot be done without

languages. Now there must always be such prophets in the Christian church who can dig into Scripture, expound it, and carry on disputations. A saintly life and right doctrine are not enough. Hence languages are absolutely and altogether necessary in the Christian church, as are the prophets or interpreters.

As a professor of exegetical theology, I happen to agree. This is one area where I think the seminaries collectively need to communicate and coordinate so that we can identify and train and form outstanding readers and teachers of the Bible. I think a goal of the GSI should be that each church body that is able to sustain a seminary would have at least one professor with a PhD in Bible who can teach Greek to their pastors and guide them faithfully through the Scriptures. After that, we can work on Hebrew.

4. Accreditation

Dr. Collver raised issues of accreditation. This is a changing landscape in North American higher education. In the U.S., the federal government is putting pressure on accrediting agencies because of perceived concern about abuses particularly in the student loan system and are students getting value for what they are paying for. The accrediting agencies are responding by putting even more pressure on education institutions for data regarding costs, student completion rates, student debt upon completion, and beginning salaries for graduates. I receive a weekly email update that links to articles related to higher education accreditation issues; yesterday's email had these headlines:

“Challenges of an Accreditor Crackdown”

“Senator Asks Government Accountability Office to Review U.S. Department of Education Oversight of Higher Education Institutions’ Eligibility for Federal Financial Aid” — that senator, incidentally, is Claire McCaskill, senator from Missouri.

“Accreditation Reformers Propose a Model of Their Own”

You might think that this puts seminaries at a distinct disadvantage; indeed, some seminaries in North America are dealing with increased external probing, particularly about cost to students and the institution's own financial model and sustainability. And, it is the case the Concordia Seminary has found the need to have two staff persons

whose primary responsibility is to handle accreditation and federal loan program issues, which ironically adds to costs and further strains the financial model.

On the other hand, accreditation can be very helpful to seminaries. At least it has been to Concordia Seminary, which received its fourth consecutive ten year reaffirmation of accreditation with no notations from both the Association of Theological School and the Higher Learning Commission, just 18 months ago. In fact, our accreditation review was so positive that the HLC has shifted us into a rolling accreditation process, where we submit regular updates on program and operations improvements and avoid altogether the ten year cycle. This is one example of how a good relationship with an accrediting body can be helpful to a seminary; they provide resources as well as someone, in a sense, peeking over your shoulder to make sure that you are doing what you are supposed to be doing anyway. And accrediting agencies offer consultation and resources to move forward in strengthening the mission of the seminary. Concordia Seminary has never been forced by an accreditor to do anything that it did not want to do; in our experience, accreditation has allowed us to do what we need to do even better.

Accreditation will be a challenge for non-western seminaries; standards of accreditation for what a North American seminary should look like have, in some cases, been foisted upon non-western seminaries. This is not helpful. However, seen as an opportunity to do self-assessment and improvement, all within their mission of providing pastors for the church, accreditation has the potential to be helpful. One area where North American seminaries can be helpful to our partner seminaries is, in addition to providing professors to teach courses and graduate programs to train their own professors, to assist with curricular, administrative, and student processes in order to not only satisfy accreditors but, more importantly, to strengthen their service to the church.

5. Focus on the Gospel

It may express one caution regarding a point of emphasis — not disagreement, but emphasis — in Dr. Collver's paper, he places the development of seminary education on the view of the office of the ministry: “Ultimately, the shape of theological education is determined by the views held about what is the church and what is the ministry (Articles VII and V of the Augsburg Confession)” [p. 8]. If I may place the emphasis in a slightly different place: while

certainly one's view of the office of the public ministry does determine the nature of the training and theological formation that is developed, it is the Gospel itself and the doctrine of justification by faith which is central to any teaching done in the name of Christ—the teaching on justification by faith alone is the article by which the church stands or falls, after all. And in the Lutheran Confessions the public office always follows and is derived from the Gospel itself; Article IV of the Augsburg Confession on justification precedes Article V, and the Apology likewise keeps the office in its place as a servant of the Word: "It is, however, the opinion of merit that we exclude. We do not exclude the Word or Sacraments, as the adversaries falsely charge us. For we have said above that faith is conceived from the Word, and we honor the ministry of the Word in the highest degree." This is simply repeating the New Testament teaching on faith being conceived through the spoken word: "How can they hear apart from those preaching? And how can they preach if they are not sent... faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word about Christ" (Rom. 10:14–17). So the sending of pastors is derived from the message which God himself has sent in the person of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit's giving of the Word. This word is an effective word, regardless of the speaker, because it is God's Word. The office of the public ministry serves only to speak that Word, preached and connected to water, wine, and bread. But the ministry itself is never the focus; the spotlight never shines on the office. Hence the apostle Paul had to remind the church in Corinth: "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but God gave the growth" (1 Cor 3:5–7). The pastor is important only in so far as he speaks the true Word.

We should not take for granted that justification by Faith is easy, and that the teaching on the office of the ministry is what is difficult. Not only around the world, but even in North America the centrality of Christ's work on the cross and in his resurrection is obscured. A social gospel orientation, which views salvation as merely justice in the present age has lost the centrality of justification by Faith; a Pentecostal orientation, which focuses on what I claim to have received from the Spirit, apart from the work of Christ, obscures the centrality of justification by Faith; a prosperity gospel, which seeks to turn God into a provider merely of wealth and success have each certainly lost the centrality of justification by Faith. This is the

Lutheran contribution to the church—to focus on Christ, on his work for us, and on the Word which bestows that righteousness on us. These must remain our focus, in any seminary which genuinely claims the name of Christ, and even more so the name Lutheran. We are not teachers of the office of the ministry, we are servants of Christ. I know that Dr. Collver agrees completely that justification by Faith is central; may the Lord keep us steadfast in this Word.

Conclusion: Giving and Receiving

Finally, returning to the letter to the Philippians, "no church participated together with me in giving and receiving, except you only." This model of being partners in both giving and receiving should be the model that we adopt as we develop closer relationships among seminaries that share the Lutheran confession through the Global Seminary Initiative. We should not presume that the large, apparently successful seminaries are the givers, and everyone else the recipients. North American seminaries need to learn from our partner seminaries, including biblically and theologically, even practically. If you would permit a personal example: I am working right now with a Master of Arts student from Liberia, a very bright young man. In Liberia he started several churches from nothing. This is his second year of studies; he has now learned Greek and was actually excited yesterday when I told him that the next step in his thesis project is to translate and do the exegetical work on some key passages for his project—and I know that when I see him on Tuesday he will have it done. His project is to develop a theology of giving, specifically giving to the local congregation, in support of its mission and to allow pastors to serve the congregation without the encumbrance of an external employment. He explained that when western missionaries came, they brought the Gospel and, out of good intentions, taught the people that they did not need to pay them or support them financially in their work. It made sense; here are westerners being paid western salaries and they are serving people who earn comparatively very little. But now that the missionaries are gone and the local pastors are responsible for the work, the good intentions of the missionaries are proving challenging, because people do not have a habit or a theology of giving and pastors are not being supported. Yet, the student explains, his culture is one of community and hospitality and giving. It is an honor to welcome someone into your home, share a cola nut and a glass of water. His work with the Scriptures

shows that in some ways he understands the point of a text better than I might; for example, in 2 Cor. 8 when Paul commends to the Philippians for their generosity, I hear that as a rebuke on wealthy Corinth and of people like me. But he hears that as praise and encouragement for Philippi, and for people like those that he serves. His context allows him to teach me something about a text that I have read scores of times. His work on a theology of giving might also be of benefit not only in his context in Liberia, but also in our congregations, particularly among immigrant populations. How do we, together, develop a theology and practice of giving among what we would consider low income people, one that retains the Lutheran focus on Christ and life together in him, rather than a prosperity Gospel?

Examples can be multiplied. The more that North American faculty and students have the opportunity to study the Word together with our colleagues and students from around the world, the more faithful we will all become. Blind spots that we have become more obvious when we interact with other people who do not have those same blind spots. To name a few that merit exploration: A theology of prayer, especially in conversation with those who do not have western, Enlightenment notions of a materialistic, closed universe. We live in an environment that assumes that there is *not* transcendent;⁴ this has perhaps shaped our prayers, so too often it seems to me, we ask too little and do not exhibit the kind of trust and confidence that is encouraged both by our Lord and by Luther's Small and Large Catechisms. Another possibility: A theology of persecution, suffering, and even martyrdom. The North American Lutheran church has never been forced to endure persecution; in fact, we fled religious persecution to come to America to be free to worship according to our confession. My great grandparents were part of that migration to Michigan in the mid-nineteenth century. Other churches face this daily. Mekane Yesus have been strengthened by martyrdoms; Kenya and other African churches are facing life and death threats from radical Muslims. North American Christians have never been forced to think about, let alone live through, life-and-death persecution. We will have much to learn, I suspect, from our brothers around

the world when that comes to our shores.

Giving and Receiving — that is the future of the Global Seminary Initiative. The seminaries of the LCMS are grateful for the partnership that we have already, and look forward to sharing teachers and students with our sister churches and seminaries in the days and years ahead. May the Lord of the church, who has brought us together in his name, allow the Gospel to flourish among us all.

The Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Kloha is provost and director of the Center for the Study of Early Christian Texts at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

⁴ For a narrative discussion of Western thinking, see the massive narrative by Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard, 2007). A recommended summary and commentary on this book is James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Eerdmans, 2015).