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As people are recovering from the devastating effects of COVID-19, many feel that their trial is a sign of their weakness, sin, or unrighteousness. When trial and testing come upon us, we so easily presume that they are a sign of God's wrath, that He is punishing us with such burdens and sorrows. If we find the meaning of our trouble in our own hearts, we will never know what God wants to teach us by our trial.

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The Seminary They C

In the early 1990s, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne was the setting for a synodical controversy over the involuntary retirement of the Seminary's president, Robert Preus. Powerful men in Synod started to discuss closing "the Fort" and selling the property. Thankfully, those plans went nowhere and by the late '90s, CTSFW had recovered. It would remain what it is today — an essential part of the synodical system for training men for the pastoral ministry, and now also women for service as deaconesses.



The Seminary origins go all the way back to Wilhelm Loehe (1808–72), Lutheran pastor in Bavaria, who started training men in 1841 for service in America, when the need was great on account of German immigration. In 1846, Loehe sent 11 students and a teacher to Fort Wayne, to Pastor Wilhelm Sihler, to begin a seminary. The idea was to get men ready for frontier ministry as soon as possible and not to worry about whether they had the kind of academic training that Lutherans in the old country would expect of their pastors. So CTSFW was established to meet an “emergency” situation.

But this was not the first time that people had talked about closing this Seminary. In fact, there were several previous episodes in its history that went a lot further than talk. Part of the explanation arises from the circumstances in which the Seminary began. Its origins go all the way back to Wilhelm Loehe (1808–72), Lutheran pastor in Bavaria, who started training men in 1841 for service in America, when the need was great on account of German immigration. That was still his thinking when in 1846, Loehe sent 11 students and a teacher to Fort Wayne, to Pastor Wilhelm Sihler, to begin a seminary. The idea was to get men ready for frontier ministry as soon as possible and not to worry about whether they had the kind of academic training that Lutherans in the old country would expect of their pastors. So CTSFW was established to meet an “emergency” situation.

But when would the “emergency” end? As long as Germans kept coming, the need for CTSFW remained evident. But what would happen when that immigration slowed to a trickle in the 1890s? And what if the more “academic” track into ministry represented by the prep schools (six years, basically high school and junior college) and St. Louis was producing more and more

graduates? Would the Synod still need a “practical” seminary for men who, for whatever reason, did not attend St. Louis, the “theoretical” seminary?

Ironically, in 1896, just when the Seminary was marking its 50th anniversary, the synodical convention of that year considered the question of whether to close it. When the discussion concluded, the delegates voted unanimously that, for the welfare of the church, CTSFW should remain open. The Synod could “not yet” do without the school. That “not yet” would haunt the school for decades.

Of course, one might expect the question of school closures, including seminaries, to arise in the 1930s during the Great Depression, and it did. What one might not expect is for the question of closing the Sem to have arisen in the 1920s, but it did then as well. Some of the motivation for considering whether or not to close Springfield (where the Seminary was located from 1875 to 1976) was a new campus for the St. Louis seminary. In 1926, that institution moved from facilities that dated back to the 1880s, to brand new ones, erected at a cost of \$2.5 million dollars in Clayton, Missouri. Couldn't this campus also house the “practical” program? At least, that was the suggestion of a “special conference” from Wisconsin that the

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Cameron A. MacKenzie



synodical convention of 1926 took up. After all, the proponents argued, the Springfield facilities were so poor that the whole campus needed to be rebuilt and anyway, wouldn't it be better if the training of all Synod's pastors was as uniform as possible? For many subjects, the theoretical and practical students could actually attend the same class. Besides, many of the prep school graduates weren't really capable of succeeding at the theoretical school, but if the practical program moved to St. Louis, such students could still go there and take a less rigorous route into the ministry instead.

But the Springfield Seminary responded with several objections, e.g., the difficulty of instructing two kinds of students with substantially different levels of academic preparation in the same class or the risk that the theoretical division would so overshadow the practical program that the latter would suffer neglect or die out entirely. For 80 years the practical Seminary had demonstrated its value to the Synod. Why should the church risk losing it by merging the two institutions? When the debate came to a conclusion, once again the Synod resolved to maintain the Seminary in Springfield and even appropriated money

Above, clockwise from upper left: Luther Hall at the Concordia Theological Seminary Springfield campus; Logo to celebrate CTSFW's 175th Anniversary; Luther Statue on the Springfield campus; an aerial shot from 1961 of the then Concordia Senior College campus. CTSW moved to the campus in 1976.

for new buildings. There was still room for an alternative to the more academic program represented by St. Louis.

But more debate was on its way. Although the 1929 convention did not consider closing the Seminary, it did appoint a committee to assess the entire Synod's system of education, and in 1932 that committee reported the Seminary had accomplished the purpose for which it had been founded. Furthermore, the practical program led to an inferior kind of pastor—one who could not use the biblical languages. Therefore, Springfield should be repurposed to offer courses on missions for men going overseas to teach, as well as courses for lay workers in the church. Once again, however, Synod rejected the recommendations and the practical seminary remained open.

But by 1935, the synodical tide was definitely turning against Springfield. On account of the Depression, the task of placing graduates of both seminaries into the ministry had become severe. By that year, there were about 300 candidates who had not been placed. So once more a Synod convention considered a motion to close the Seminary and this time it passed by the narrowest of margins, 266 in favor of closing, 265 opposed. But with the vote that close, Synod leadership decided to consider the question again so as to achieve a broader consensus—and they did, but perhaps not the one they expected. Two days later the convention voted to reopen the Seminary by a vote of 283 to 256.

Many still had their doubts. In response to changing expectations in America about educational qualifications for all professions, including clergy, Springfield began raising its admissions standards and strengthening its curriculum, but were changes like these consistent with the original objective of the Seminary? Furthermore, was there really any need for a way into the ministry for men who did not have the education and training provided by the prep school/St. Louis system? At the 1941 and 1944 conventions, these questions were

debated once again, but once again the Seminary persuaded the Synod that it was still needed.

But now the tide turned in the opposite direction. First of all, there were soldiers returning from battle after World War II and then Korea, who were excellent candidates for the ministry but would not be going to prep schools. Springfield was the obvious place for them. Secondly, congregations were beginning to establish local Lutheran high schools that would naturally encourage some young men to think of becoming a pastor. Campus ministries were also being established at secular universities. Once again Springfield was the logical choice for graduates of such schools who wanted to be pastors. So finally, in the late '40s and '50s, the Seminary secured its place in the synodical system, even though it changed its actual place by moving to Fort Wayne in 1976.

So “the Fort” was here to stay. But what about today? New challenges now face the Seminary. One of these is demographic. For some time now, the Missouri Synod has been shrinking in size, in part due to white American Protestants having fewer children. Secondly, American higher education is making more and more use of nonresidential, internet-based education. So what does the future hold for CTSFW?

We don't know the future, but we know who holds the future. As The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod sorts through the challenges the need for the faithful work of your Seminary remains vital. Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne stands ready to adapt as needed in order to continue its service to the Synod in preparing church workers. It has done so for 175 years and, by God's grace, it will continue to do so for many years to come. 🏰

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Photo: Erik M. Lunsford/The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

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