

Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne For the Life of the World

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Seminary Past

By Cameron A. MacKenzie

Seminary Present

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By Lawrence R. Rast Jr.

Seminary

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Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1-2, ESV)

We humans are parochial beings. God’s Word recognizes that and challenges us to lift our eyes up beyond our immediate circumstances to the ultimate reality that is our life in Christ. The Hebrews passage above captures that. So does Rev. 14:1(ESV): “Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads.”

Still, if I’ve heard it once, I’ve heard it a thousand times. Someone says “we’ve never experienced change like this before; the challenges we face today are greater than any time in world history.” There’s a certain truth there; history never absolutely repeats itself. And, yes, today we do find ourselves in rapidly changing circumstances. Yet, such a perspective reveals a restricted understanding of the incredible experiences, both mountaintop and valley, of those who have gone before us and cut us off from learning from them the imaginative ways in which they faced the unique character of their times.

Nevertheless, I believe it is a perfectly natural response. For we human beings are by our very nature tied to time. From a human perspective, world history begins with the day of our birth and ends with the day of our death. As a result, to engage the past is something that we must *work* at; it does not come naturally. Further, the future is out of our reach. We think about it, plan for it and prepare for it, but it remains hidden. “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” (1 Cor. 13:12, ESV)

God, on the other hand, is eternal and not time-bound as we are. All things are immediately present to Him. Our past, present and future is bound up in Him and His unchanging Word to us. In the Second Person of the Trinity, the eternal God became incarnate and bound Himself to our time and our experience. “For we do not have a high priest

who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Heb. 4:15, ESV)

This is the christological center of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind. It has been so from our beginning, it is so in our present and it will be, with the grace and help of God, into our future.

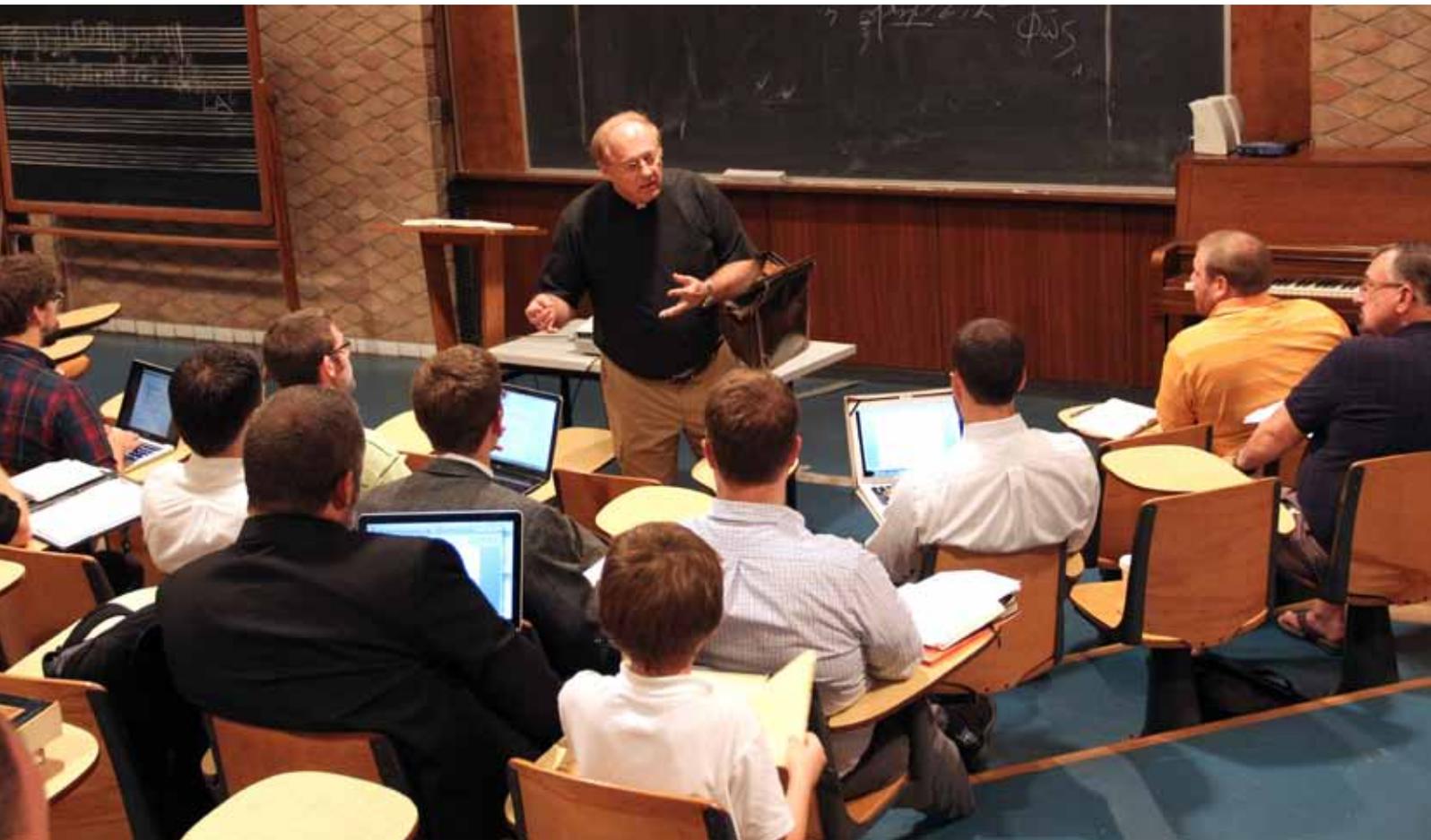
There are many questions about the future of institutions of theological education, whether they be stand alone, denominational seminaries or divinity schools within a larger university or even simply departments of religious studies. This is surprising to no one who is involved with theological education in particular or even the church in general. Many are worried—rightly so!—about the future of Christianity in the United States. Older denominations are struggling and the preferred position that the church used to enjoy is now a thing of the past.

As a result, some wonder whether the golden age of the residential seminary has passed as well. The trends can be disturbing. Enrollment at seminaries of all traditions has dropped for a number of years running now. In 2009, *USA Today* reported that 39% of seminaries in the U.S. were “financially stressed.”¹ Concerns about student debt have continued to press themselves upon the church. Finally, the rise of online learning has rearranged the field of higher education in a remarkably short span of time.²

Humanly speaking, these are significant challenges;

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there is no question about that. At the same time, however, challenging times can bring forth creative solutions. Concordia Theological Seminary itself was formed in response to the unique circumstances of the American frontier and developed a curriculum designed specifically to prepare pastors within that context. Even as it grew into the institution it is today, with pastors serving throughout the United States and the world, it remains committed to the vision of its founders to provide faithful servants who teach the faithful, reach the lost and care for all.

One of the biggest questions is the role, place and

Dr. William Weinrich, professor of Historical Theology at CTS, engages students in Gospels III.

impact of distance education, particularly as it relates to residential pastoral formation. Point one is this: distance education is here to stay. As such, Concordia Theological Seminary will continue (we've been at this for almost 20 years now!) to strive to provide the highest quality offerings possible. Point two is this: we'll need to continue to assess distance programs as carefully and intentionally as we do residential programs—especially in respect to their effectiveness in pastoral formation.

I am convinced that rumors of the demise of the residential seminary are greatly exaggerated. I believe the following, written in 1997, still holds today: “The impact of the seminary’s culture on a student is in large measure a function of the extent of the student’s exposure to it. One must be there to be formed by it.”

on a student is in large measure a function of the extent of the student’s exposure to it. One must be there to be formed by it.”³ Seminaries and especially their faculties—of which ours is one of the finest in the world—have an obvious impact on their students, particularly in the residential setting. Beyond that, however, they simultaneously reflect and shape the culture of their church body, both domestically and internationally. Because they play such a key role in the life of the church, we must continue to support the residential seminary. For, as Daniel Aleshire, Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools, says, “The case for theological schools is not that they can do everything that needs to be done, but that they do many things that are absolutely essential to learning for religious vocation, and they do them better than any other kind of educational program.”⁴

All of this being said, the center of the seminary is its students, the men and women who are preparing for service in the church as lay leaders, the women who are preparing to be deaconesses and the men preparing for the pastoral office. All of them are critical to the well being of Christ’s body, the Church. And each individual student contributes in key ways to the health and functioning of the church (see 1 Cor. 12:12-31).

One of the greatest challenges we face, however, is the cost of student attendance at the seminary. We are determined to reduce the burden on our students. To that end, on December 1, 2012, Concordia Theological

Which brings us to the question of the future of the residential theological education. Paraphrasing Mark Twain, I am convinced that rumors of the demise of the residential seminary are greatly exaggerated. I believe the following, written in 1997, still holds today: “The impact of the seminary’s culture

Seminary was awarded a grant that will allow us to engage in a vigorous and ambitious program that will produce research that will educate the seminary itself, its internal and external stakeholders, including its students, local congregations, along with the circuits, districts and Synod itself. This effort will:

- ✦ determine the most equitable method of distributing aid,
- ✦ explore student financial literacy and ways of improving our student’s understanding in this area,
- ✦ develop new funding methods to help reduce student debt,
- ✦ conduct a church-wide campaign to educate the seminary’s major stakeholders as to the economic challenges currently facing students,
- ✦ and finally produce a “Student Economic Challenges and Opportunities” curriculum.

With the Lord’s help we are confident that the church will be moved to respond in ways that will help reduce the financial burdens facing future church workers.⁵

There is no doubt things are changing for theological schools in the United States and Canada; but that has always been the case. Since denominational seminaries began to appear in the late 1700s and early 1800s, they have consistently experienced the tension of forming pastors for service in rapidly changing circumstances. That was true then; it is true now; and it will continue to be the case. Yet, in the face of the fundamental human experience of change, we have the unchanging word of God to us: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8, ESV) and because of Him, the church will endure (Matt. 16:18). 

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- 1 http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-03-17-seminaries_N.htm, accessed August 23, 2013. Granted, this report appeared in the midst of the “Great Recession”; yet finances have remained a challenge for most seminaries.
- 2 See “Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States,” available at http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/changing_course_2012, accessed August 23, 2013.
- 3 Jackson Carroll et al., *Being There: Culture and Formation in Two Theological Schools* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 268.
- 4 Daniel O. Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 58.
- 5 Information on student preparedness and satisfaction in as a result of seminary pastoral formation may be found in Jackson Carroll’s excellent book, *God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership and the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).