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# LUTHERAN EDUCATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY IN VIEW OF MODERN COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

**International Lutheran Conference, Prague, Czech Republic, October 6, 2011**

by Alexey Streltsov

The title of this presentation may presuppose that it will be dedicated primarily to questions of a technical character, such as how the incredibly fast development of the IT sector in recent years is capable of revolutionizing the ongoing process of theological pastoral education in the Lutheran church. However, in the global sense the question of naïve romantic trust that scientific-technical progress will lead to the building of a paradise on earth was taken from the general agenda already by the epoch of World War I. Since then a sober perception of reality has replaced fruitless dreams and people understand, for example, that the other side of the “peaceful atom” achievements presupposes not only the ever-present possibility of nuclear conflict, but also technogenic catastrophes on a previously unthinkable scale.

In principle, if the technical aspect were the sole, indeed, the main aspect of this report, then the whole lecture could be reduced to one minute. It is undeniable that new and progressive communication technologies may be utilized in the field of Lutheran education.

Virtually any technical observation on the topic of modern communication technologies is destined to become obsolete in a short time. For example, in the 1990s the high cost of modem-based internet access was a significant factor.<sup>1</sup> The author of this presentation also remembers how thirteen years ago a discussion was held concerning the possibility of acquiring expensive specialized equipment for conducting classes from Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, IN, for the students

<sup>1</sup> See, for example Jill M. Galusha, “Barriers to Learning in Distance Education” (paper, University of Southern Mississippi, 1998), <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED416377.pdf>, accessed September 30, 2017.

If the pastoral ministry is viewed first and foremost as a transfer of information to people enabling them to make better decisions in their lives, then indeed this information may safely be obtained in a remote mode to be later retranslated to the audiences. . . . But Lutherans significantly differ from the majority of other Protestants in that they especially value the sacramental context of church life. In the Lutheran tradition the pastor is indeed a Seelsorger, and this part of the ministry takes place through a personal interaction between the pastor and a layperson.

in Novosibirsk, Russia. Since that time technical progress has completely changed the landscape of communication, not only for businesses, but also for personal users. Now extraordinary complexities of a technical nature are for the most part a matter of the past.<sup>2</sup> It would suffice to say, “We will implement education via Skype,” and the case is closed.

Still, the philosophical or even the theological aspect of this question looks more interesting. Where is the world going? The famous Latin maxim states, *tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis*, but how decisive are the recent changes as applied to the sphere of Lutheran education?

Certainly, modern technologies are neither good nor bad in and of themselves. The problem, or something that may turn into a problem when one approaches the matter incorrectly or simply underestimates the role of technology, is that it is virtually impossible to escape the influence of modern communication technologies in the contemporary world, and so they influence us in more ways that we can imagine. In this sense the minimum goal is to prevent any harm that modern communication technologies can do in the sphere of education, while the optimistic goal is to learn to use them for the benefit of the church.

In order to move further, we must specify what education and what technologies we imply in this report. In

<sup>2</sup> It does not equally apply to the “primitive” countries, which are technologically behind the first-world countries. However, even in such regions it may become reality in the not so distant future. It would suffice to remember the recent worldwide booming of the cell phone industry, including in the world’s poorest regions, which did not even have telephone landlines prior to the advent of mobile phones.

a certain sense all Lutheran tradition, with its emphasis on Luther's catechism, is closely related to education. This includes Christian education in the family, for which the head of the household is responsible; educational activity on the congregational level, such as instruction of the newly converted; Sunday School or its equivalent for children; classes on Scripture or the confessional writings for adults; and special seminars and conferences, at which a number of laypeople and specially invited guests participate. It also involves professional education of the clergy and other church workers. The latter is done today, as a rule, in specialized seminaries or theological institutes. In turn, while the most habitual form of such education implies internal or on-site training, in the last century or so the concept of distance or extramural education, though still somewhat a recent phenomenon, has been able to claim a serious place in the structure of education in general. Accordingly, the usage of modern communication technologies differs significantly, based on the format and goals of training. The picture is made more complex in view of the fact that we rarely deal with one of the pure forms, but rather with a combination of various types.

This report pays attention mainly to the professional education of pastors and church workers. Implications of technologies for on-site, combined, and distance forms of education will be touched upon.

### Education in the Context of Church and Secular History

One might define a "traditionalist" approach as viewing the seminary with an on-site training as a normative model of higher education in the Lutheran context. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that in a certain sense even the so-called traditional seminary represents somewhat of a compromise in the question of pastoral training.

Any educational model in the context of Lutheranism as well as Christianity in general should be viewed against the christological background of the ministry. Christ, as

the one who has called disciples, personally instructed them over a period of three years, and then sent them to make disciples of all nations—that must be the true starting point of any genuine model of professional Lutheran education.<sup>3</sup>

Christianity is a path of discipleship. While a Christian always continues to have Christ as his principal teacher, he acquires specific instruction from a minister: a bishop or a pastor/priest.<sup>4</sup> It is impossible to obtain adequate understanding of the goals of education in the Lutheran church

without grasping the central role of the holy ministry in this process. Not only is the teacher-disciple model represented as the norm in the New Testament and the history of the ancient church, but even in today's secular context the private lessons are still considered the elitarian type of education accessible only to select individuals.

Antiquity provides a number of examples of such personal instruction both in the non-Christian and Christian milieus. Aristotle taught philosophy to Alexander the Great. Numerous prominent bishops and teachers of the Christian church have received their education from their teachers, also

bishops. Thus, many archdeacons who personally served the bishops and shared in their duties subsequently became bishops themselves. Examples include Athanasius the Great, who as a deacon and secretary of Alexander of Alexandria, was with him at the Council of Nicaea in 325, and Leo the Great who, prior to his episcopal office, served as an archdeacon of the Roman church.

Even Augustine, according to his recollections in *The Confessions*, gained his major Christian instruction (we by no means want to diminish the influence of his mother Monica on him becoming a Christian) from the Bishop Ambrose, whose sermons he listened to so carefully while he was in Milan.<sup>5</sup>

The internal character of the preparation of a pastor has to do with the character of the incarnation of our Lord. God chose not to function in a remote mode, but rather the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (JOHN 1:14). . . . The relations of Christ and his bride the church presuppose a certain intimacy, including personal interaction in the matter of education.

<sup>3</sup> Matt 9:36–38; 10:1, 5; 28:18–20.

<sup>4</sup> Rom 10:14–15; 2 Tim 2:2.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. Edward Bouverie Pusey, (Public Domain, 2012), Book V. Kindle edition.

In this way the system of internal education provided by the universities and seminaries appears to be a certain departure from this original model. However, the person of the teacher has continued to play a major role. Conceptually, internal education remains the king and the sole player on the field.

It is fashionable today to compare the rapid spread of the internet in its importance to the invention of the printing press by Guttenberg and thus await a certain “breakthrough” in relation to the internet comparable with, or even exceeding, the sixteenth-century Reformation. Although the rapid spread of the Reformation throughout Europe is justly associated with the printing phenomenon, it is worth noting at the same time that in this case “distance education” offered through pamphlets and theological works was not considered sufficient enough to fully trigger Reformation ideas in real-life situations. On the contrary, students from all over Europe rushed to Wittenberg University to obtain an education there, and it was afterwards that they brought the Reformation to their homelands with more or less success.<sup>6</sup> For example, paths that the Reformation took in Sweden and Finland depended on the character and content of education that Olavus Petri and Mikael Agricola personally received from the major theologians of the Reformation.

The very high standard of professional university education they received distinguished Lutheran pastors for a long time. And where such conditions did not exist initially (such as on the American frontier or in the Russian Empire), measures were undertaken to correct it and provide means for future ministers to get a full-time education.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the rapid technological progress and resulting social changes requiring more basic literacy and skills of workers brought to life the concept of distance learning. The idea that it is possible and desirable to provide education even to those people who for some reason were not able to attend ordinary university classes and be involved in full-time studies would not have been viable without the development of the postal system in the nineteenth century, and this is why England at the time was the natural choice for this new approach. Isaac Pitman began teaching by correspondence in Bath, England, in 1840. Students were

expected to rewrite passages of the Bible and return them for grading through the new penny post system. Although an analysis of the connection between extramural education and the colonial mindset is outside of the parameters of this report, it is interesting that the spread of distance learning also coincided with the growth of the colonial system.

In the world of education new communication technologies were thus closely, though not exclusively, associated with the context of the extramural education. As new means appeared, such as radio and then television, they contributed to advances made in this type of learning.

In the course of the twentieth century, distance education established itself even in such academically conservative regions as Germany. However, even now there remains a general public uneasiness having to do with the quality of such education; questions are still asked as to whether or not distance education is inferior to traditional internal education. Adherents of distance education keep stating that soon the day will come when the whole world will realize that such learning is no different from any other, but in a day and age of the increasing proliferation of degrees, it becomes harder to believe this.

Further we will address theological and practical issues having to do with distance education as it is applied to preparation for the pastoral ministry in the modern context.

### **The Incarnation as Key to the Nature of Pastoral Training**

We often tend to think that new technologies would irreversibly change many aspects of life to the point that the old ways would be completely forgotten, but it does not always happen this way. When the cinema came into being many thought it would abolish the theater. The invention of television did not eliminate radio. Motorcycles did not phase out bicycles. Likewise, in the area of education, modern communication technologies do not necessarily make obsolete what was before.

We must avoid extremes in our approach to the preparation of pastors. In this sense the core of the problem is not the form of distance education itself or the possibility of partial usage of extramural education for pastoral training, but rather the model that views exclusively or heavily accentuated extramural pastoral training as plausible and even desirable. We must resist this understanding primarily for theological reasons.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis W. Spitz, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements*, Vol II, *The Reformation*, rev. ed., (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1987), 560: “Wittenberg... soon began attracting great numbers.”

The internal character of the preparation of a pastor has to do with the character of the incarnation of our Lord. God chose not to function in a remote mode, but rather the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (JOHN 1:14). A fundamental disconnect with the theology of the incarnation is inherent in an exclusively extramural approach to pastoral education, whether or not it is accomplished with the means of modern communication technologies. The relations of Christ and his bride the church presuppose a certain intimacy, including personal interaction in the matter of education.

Any attempt to organize preparation of a pastor through off-site training is equivalent to an attempt to conceive a child through the internet, though with usage of some extracorporeal fertility means. The chances are not that great. In addition, in the area of pastoral training the matter is not so much that no pastor will result from it, but that the pastor coming out of such a program would have difficulties applying himself to flesh-and-blood ministry in the parish setting.

A pastor is trained to publicly proclaim the gospel and administer baptism, absolution, and the Lord's Supper. He also conducts weddings and burials, consecrates houses and other places, and does other things that require his personal presence and do not happen at a distance, in a remote mode.

In this sense the ministry that the pastor carries out for his parishioners is inherently "internal" (not extramural). At least it is this on-site activity that the pastor must consider his priority in the course of the ministry. It is true nowadays that more pastors are quite active on the internet, and there is nothing wrong with this, except when a new pattern emerges revealing shifted priorities in the ministry—when, for example, instead of conducting a Bible study in the church or visiting a hospital, a pastor pursues his project on the internet, considering it equally or even more important than his regular duties.

If the pastoral ministry is viewed first and foremost as a transfer of information to people enabling them to make better decisions in their lives, then indeed this information may safely be obtained in a remote mode to be later retranslated to the audiences. This is why the generic Protestant mentality seems to be more compatible with the distance approach. Jesus is infinitely far from us,<sup>7</sup> he is up there in the heavens, and so the extramural pattern

of education would correspond to the theological presuppositions (there may still be problems of a social or fiscal character, but not so much theological). But Lutherans significantly differ from the majority of other Protestants in that they especially value the sacramental context of church life. Besides, in the Lutheran tradition the pastor is indeed a Seelsorger, and this part of the ministry takes place through a personal interaction between the pastor and a layperson.

At present even some confessional Lutheran pastors do not mind taking confessions over the phone. While we would not necessarily claim the lack of reality of the sacramental act of absolution performed, the confessional seal may be broken in this case because of deficiencies in technology or some external intentionally malicious activity. Maybe I speak this way because I come from a country where unfortunately there is some tradition of listening in on phone conversations (and now internet and cell phone providers in Russia are required by law to divulge all content to the police in case of enquiry), but in any case people here entrust their souls not just to the person of the pastor but also to anonymous technology and whoever may stand behind it. Few people would agree to walk out to a central city square and confess their secret sins right there, and yet this is exactly what happens when acts that presuppose confidentiality are performed through modern communication technologies. Unfortunately, the modern communication technologies simply cannot provide for us the same level of privacy that is enabled when sins are shared in a traditional confessional.

When theological education primarily implies remote access to certain materials and further work with these materials, the result will be impersonalization of education. In this model there are no teachers to speak of, and that will violate our original teacher-disciple model. When the incarnational approach is lost, there remains virtually no distinction between Christian pastoral education and secular education or education within other religious systems, such as Islam.

### **Complexities of Technical Character**

Besides the major theological difficulty with respect to distance education some observations are in order concerning challenges or potential dangers of a more technical character.

Firstly, an important principle must be followed: the technological level used in the educational process should naturally blend with the local context. It is appropriate

<sup>7</sup> In some ways Protestants also think Jesus is close by, "in my heart." He's my friend. His human nature is far away but as a spirit he is near.

when the suggested technical decisions generally correspond to or only slightly exceed the level of development of a particular society. Thus, usage of special technological devices in a situation where similar patterns are generally unfamiliar outside of the educational institution may turn out to be not very effective. Modern technologies should not by themselves attract students' attention, as all emphasis must be rather on the content of instruction. The less noticeable these technologies are by themselves and the more they correspond to the normal pace of life in a given context, the more efficient their application.

Secondly, and this is a technical aspect of the previously mentioned "impersonalization of education," online communication through text correspondence cannot provide total assurance in the positive identification of the person on the other side. A random person may well speak on behalf of your contact while pretending to be your contact. A life story comes to mind how in one case both a Lutheran pastor and his wife wrote from the same account in a social network group dedicated to Lutheranism, which created major confusion among the group participants.

Thirdly, the sad downside of rapid technical progress is that numerous technologies that were considered new just recently quickly become outdated. It does not make much sense to use tapes as a primary medium for an audio course once the CD and then the MP3 audio format have gained popularity and become the standard. Likewise, there is hardly any need to produce special DVDs when there are more modern, simple, and versatile ways of recording and delivering video content. It is important to take this aspect into consideration especially when starting a new project.

Fourthly, modern communication technologies may become quite dangerous when they get into the wrong hands. That is, technologies will greatly multiply the negative effects of bad teaching. Thus, advanced communication technologies used by the Lutheran Hour in Russia in the previous decade were partly responsible for the creation of a new "schismatic" church through sheep stealing and similar techniques even though this was not part of the original evangelism plan. In another country the local Lutheran Hour office is led by a Baptist minister, who, as one can easily imagine, does not particularly see to it that his contacts get only Lutheran confessional materials in their hands. No wonder that some recipients of these materials later find themselves in non-Lutheran churches and their educational institutions.

## Possible Usage of Modern Technologies in the Sphere of Education

Up to this time you were exposed mostly to concerns or problems having to do with modern technologies, so your thinking by now may be that this report presents a very one-sided, ultra-conservative approach to pastoral training, with no other devices allowed other than a blackboard and a piece of chalk. Nonetheless, opportunities for the integration of modern communication technologies into the educational process are enormous. The following description, while far from being complete, will give some idea of how these technologies may be incorporated into the educational process, thus facilitating equipping theological students for their future ministry in the church.

**1. Internet resources.** The potential for expansion here is virtually limitless. The big question is whether or not there must be free public access to such resources. Even though it might be tempting to limit access to users in an attempt to sell resources directly from the internet or through publication, I would argue that free content is definitely a desirable option. The rapid development and recent political success of the so-called Pirate Parties in Europe may signal in which direction things will develop in the future.<sup>8</sup> We live in a time of easy accessibility of information, much of which is instantly available, and if church or seminary institutions restrict access to their information, then they could eventually fail to impact the target audience.

**2. Organization and modification of libraries.** This is connected with the previous section, but it is a special issue. This is where technologies really come in handy. New and recent educational institutions that have no large traditional library resources must do whatever it takes to provide internet access for teachers and students and develop some ways to use electronic resources either instantly accessible or downloaded from the internet for course work and research. Libraries should make every effort to also make their book collections (at least the catalogue, if not the content) accessible through the internet.

**3. Textbooks.** Next to internet resources and digitization of libraries' content comes the usage of textbooks for

<sup>8</sup> "Pirates' Strong Showing in Berlin Elections Surprises Even Them," Nicholas Kulish, NYTimes.com, September 19, 2011, accessed September 27, 2017, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/20/world/europe/in-berlin-pirates-win-8-9-percent-of-vote-in-regional-races.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/20/world/europe/in-berlin-pirates-win-8-9-percent-of-vote-in-regional-races.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all). Recent success in Berlin may be just the beginning.

particular courses. It appears that electronic book readers will supplement traditional textbooks in our classrooms. That would help to cut costs in the long run. And for a student (especially one coming from a remote area) it would be easier to assemble his personal pastoral library in this way.

**4. Podcasts.** This is a new and highly mobile form of education. It allows a student to study on the go using a number of modern mobile devices for this purpose. It is especially useful for the study of disciplines that take a long time to master. In particular, languages may well be studied through podcasts that seminaries develop specifically for the needs of their students. That will allow the seminaries to better prepare capable prospective students for theological training at the seminary, similar to earlier days when biblical and/or classical languages were normally mastered before seminary enrollment. Thus disintegration or deterioration of the Lutheran school system may at least be partly compensated by these technologies. Of course, modern students are still required to know languages despite all the wonders of Google-translate if we are talking about modern languages, or specialized programs such as BibleWorks if we are talking about biblical languages.

**5. Skype or similar means of live connection.** This mode implies interaction. It would work best if it is implemented in combination with on-site training, that is, if the students already know the instructor from a previous personal engagement with him or if a part of a specific course is done in a classroom. Skype also makes it possible to bring guest lecturers to a classroom setting, eliminating geographical boundaries. It is also possible to continue to privately tutor students via Skype when the class is finished, or use Skype for special programs for the alumni. The list may grow long here; our task is just to mention a few possibilities.

**6. Social networks.** Even though these do not appear to be the first choice of means for education, since they have a reputation as a medium for primarily entertainment or career purposes, their ubiquity and their potential make them a worthy tool for use in both formal and informal types of education. One of my sons recently dropped a remark about his classmate who was not represented in the popular Russian network “V Kontakte”: “He lives in the Stone Age.” To be sure, the very name “social network” implies that such networks may be used to develop

social skills that are important to have for any Lutheran pastor or church worker.

One potential student for our seminary in Novosibirsk resides in a remote place in the Ural region. I did not expect him to be an active internet user, but when we discussed how to stay connected he asked me what social networks I was on, and he named more than three for himself. Another prospective student contacted me through Facebook and asked me questions based on his reading of the Book of Concord. In some way his education has started even now before he has formally enrolled at the seminary. So it is not a question of starting a special project and utilizing any special resources: communication technologies that we already have available to us make the process of interaction very simple and allow us to proceed in the matter of distance education much quicker than before.

There may be a very good use of social networks within the framework of regular education too, provided that all or nearly all students in the class are a part of the same network. Communication via social networks comes naturally for younger people today, and so it is convenient for the students when an instructor sets up a special group in a particular network where he makes announcements, gives assignments, and answers questions that the students might have. That has been the recent experience of our staff instructors and other church members who do the teaching at higher educational institutions.

### **Future-in-the-Past**

If the church attempts to race with the contemporary secular culture in an attempt to become more accessible to modern people at the expense of her integrity, then she is bound to fail. Modern methods of education cannot create a “new reality” by themselves. This is just a form, while it is the content of instruction, the confessional doctrine that matters, provided that this doctrine is grasped by the students. Overemphasis on distance education would come into conflict with the basic theology of the incarnation as it is expressed in the liturgy and pastoral care.

Traditional seminaries are in danger now from both the outside and the inside. When the seminaries are forced to follow some alien educational and ecclesiastical ideologies, this cannot be approved. Thus, when a seminary makes a decision about the permissibility of exclusive distance education for the purpose of the pastoral ministry,

it cuts the branch on which it is sitting. One may view it as a reasonable compromise that will allow the seminaries to stay floating for a while, but in the end this is a way of self-destruction. It will lead to a situation where there will be no perceived need, practically speaking, for the traditional seminaries. The root of this problem as I tried to delineate before is lack of understanding of the nature of the holy ministry. In a context where formal theological education is understood as just a cumbersome and dull barrier to be crossed in order to finally get to the exciting practical work understood mostly in psychological terms, there indeed remains little place for the classical seminaries.

With the ever-increasing pace of the spread of information technologies, the problem of teaching authority becomes more acute than ever before. Anybody can teach anything and quickly share these ideas using modern equipment. If the seminaries or equivalent institutions are forced to close down and are replaced by alternative decentralized ways of providing education, then the level of competence among the clergy will dramatically decline. Therefore, the solution must be of an institutional nature: seminaries must be specially supported by the church even though it is a major undertaking, especially under present circumstances.

Sometimes opponents of the seminaries go so far as to say that it is sinful to bring the students to the seminary for theological instruction. The rationale behind this claim may vary, ranging from concern for the mission work that is already going on in the local contexts from which the students will be detached for a while to statements that the four years spent at a seminary would hinder future secular career advancement of a seminary graduate in case the church is not able to support him and he has to earn a living on his own (or hinder the career of his wife). To be sure, on-site training is a difficult procedure for the parties involved. But it is part of the theology of the cross beautifully expressed in Luther's famous maxima of *oratio, meditatio, tentatio*. With no *tentatio*, which implies a certain sacrifice on the part of the student, we cannot be sure that we will get a faithful and confessional Lutheran pastor in the end.

As it is important to use modern communication technologies with caution and in a limited way so as to not undermine the meaning of the incarnation, so for the same reason it is desirable for seminary professors to be actively involved in the church and parish life on the liturgical level. Being just a staff instructor with limited

involvement in the church reality outside the school is the same as living in the world of virtual reality alone. Even in secular universities ongoing research is very important to keep the professional teaching staff up to date. How much more then this applies to the ecclesiastical context where practical involvement in the ministry on the part of the teaching clergy<sup>9</sup> is vital for them to be able to contribute to the pastoral formation of the students.

So the questions having to do with modern education and the usage of modern technologies within it are complex and multifaceted. My practical report is not designed to make any conclusive judgment on the matter, but only to highlight some issues that have meaning for the seminary and for the church. So should we use modern technologies? It is not an either-or but a both-and dilemma. We must not be fearful of new technologies, that is, we must not be apprehensive that they would necessarily undermine our seminaries. The real issue is not technologies and not even the quality of education per se (this can grow over time if the whole perspective is correct), but understanding of the spiritual nature of the holy ministry, to which pastoral education leads the candidates. We understand pastoral formation vis-a-vis the christological dimension. As long as we keep our priorities straight and goals clear, we will be able to use modern communication technologies for the benefit of the church.

In a way, such usage of modern technologies for the ultimate goal of pastoral formation may well begin before the official seminary course starts. Then it continues alongside the seminary classroom and does not stop after graduation either. But, in any case, there is neither need nor sense in replacing the traditional seminary with an alternative model just because of current missiological or educational conjecture. Even among current internet freelance-based companies, their staff meets in real life from time to time. We may consider seminary training as an instruction for several years in real life, even though online or similar advanced training and interaction may precede, go alongside, and follow the main education.

The key to the future of Lutheran education is in the past: in the confession that does not change over time. Paraphrasing the words of our Lord from the Sermon on

<sup>9</sup> Certainly, not all instructors at the seminaries or at the departments of theology in the universities are clergy. The most prominent example in Lutheran history is Philip Melancthon. However, proper pastoral education may hardly be envisioned without the central role of the instructors who are pastors themselves.



the Mount, we may thus conclude: Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things—including the modern technological means—shall be added to you.

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