The *Missio Dei* Under the Southern Cross: Some Considerations

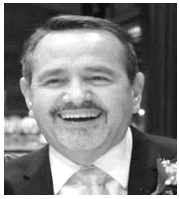
Acir Raymann

Abstract

This essay aims to present the history, challenges, and development of God's mission in Brazil. These are some observations that come from a short and humble analysis of my *alma mater*, where I also had the privilege of teaching for the last forty-eight years. These observations also deal with the challenges and opportunities faced by seminarians in relation to theology and culture. Academic programming is an ongoing process and requires regular analysis and revision. New horizons may also illuminate the curriculum that can be amplified when we look at the proclamation of the *officium proprium* of Christ under the Southern Cross.

The term "seminary" derives from the Latin *semen*, which means "seed." Since biblical times and by Lutheran interpretation, a theological seminary does not develop by itself but by the seed of the Word of God. Seminário Concórdia, like other Lutheran institutions in the Southern Hemisphere, is located under the constellation of the Southern Cross.[1] From a historical perspective, Seminário Concórdia is older than the Igreja Evangélica Luterana do Brasil (IELB) church body. Mario L. Rehfeldt, church historian and son of a missionary, notes that the seminary started in 1903 in South Brazil, and the IELB church began one year later in the same geographical area. The seminary's president and only professor was sent by the LCMS to be "pastor and missionary" in Brazil. So, both the seminary and the church herself developed out of the Missouri Synod's missionary mind and work,[2] and the fact that the seminary is older than the church demonstrates that the first missionary recognized how essential pastoral formation is for the *Missio Dei* in this country under the Southern Cross.

In this vein, the seminary was not established to visualize an "external" mission but an "internal" one, because it was mostly about serving Germans in Brazil. This made communication easier since the Germans came looking for those who could speak their language. But, still, the early days were not easy. There was strong opposition. Local people accused the missionaries of being agents and spies for the benefit of a foreign country.[3] In South America, the presence of Christianity was more often than not associated with violence and exploitation. Douglas Rutt, a former missionary in this continent explains, "In the conquest of the Americas a partnership



Rev. Prof. Dr. Acir Raymann is professor emeritus in Old Testament Theology at Seminário Concórdia, São Leopoldo, Brazil. In that institution of the Igreja Evangélica Luterana do Brazil (IELB), he has served also as the Academic Dean.
acir.raymann@gmail.com

between the sword and the cross was forged in which . . . 'The sword opened the way for the cross, and the cross sanctified the work of the sword.'"[4] In other countries, too, Christianity has been seen through even a darker lens. In China, for example, the arrival of Christianity and Buddhism have been compared like this: "Buddha rode into China on a white elephant, while Jesus rode in on a cannonball."[5]

As heirs of the culture and worship styles of German Lutheranism, Lutheran churches on Brazilian soil did not face great difficulties in transplanting the culture and mission mind from their ancestors. However, this insular perspective changed during World War II when pastors and missionaries were forbidden to use or speak the German language. They were forced to learn and speak Portuguese only. Moreover, enemies of the church burned their German books, hymnals, and liturgies. Some were put in prison for several years. But by God's grace new horizons were opened for the church in terms of vision and mission.

Mission and theology

When we talk about mission, we are talking about theology. Rutt asserts, "Theological education is mission in a very real sense. Mission is theological education in a very real sense. The two go together as two sides of the same coin." He adds, "The practice of mission engages with theological education in a dialogical manner."[6] With that, Klaus Detlev Schulz agrees: "Lutheran theology and mission are not antithetical terms but that missionary potential springs from deep within Lutheran theological articulation."[7]

One cannot look at the church without looking at the Office of the Ministry, just as one cannot look at the Office of the Ministry without looking at the seminary. There is constant interaction among the seminary classrooms, the pulpit, and the church pews.

Challenges

In the nineteenth century, the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher popularized a concept of "church" as the free association of people who, having the same faith, decided to come together and organize a church. According to him, "The Christian Church is formed by the gathering of regenerated individuals for orderly interaction and cooperation."[8] The emphasis is on the organizational and social aspect of the church, namely, a human organization like any other. The church is seen from an anthropological and sociological—rather than theological—point of view. It is the world doing the church's agenda.

This is a challenge and danger that surrounds the church in Brazil and affects the formation of theology students as they feel attracted by other factors, either for economic reasons or for greater representation in society. Decades ago, Hermann Sasse called attention to this danger when he affirmed that "to proclaim the gospel of forgiveness, to declare to repentant sinners the forgiveness of their sins, to distribute the Sacraments with all the gifts of divine grace contained in them, this, and nothing else, is the proper task of the minister of Christ as it was the *officium proprium* of Christ Himself. This the Church had to learn in the great crisis of the second century."[9]

And thus he gives a clarion call also to churches today that follow the pattern of a purely sociological organization: “The consequence is that also the parish minister becomes more and more an administrator and organizer who rushes from meeting to meeting and has not enough time for his proper calling as a shepherd.”[10]

Reinhard Slenczka retrieves the definition of theology given by Albertus Magnus (ca. 1200–1280). It says in Latin, “*Theologia a Deo docetur, de Deo docet, ad Deum ducit*" ("Theology is taught by God, it teaches about God, it leads to God”). Slenczka points out that God Himself is the subject of theology insofar as it is He who teaches theology. The second part of the definition concerns the theologian/pastor for whom God is the object of what he teaches or preaches. The third part, however, shows that it is the purpose of all theology to bring God back those who are distant or estranged from Him.[11] It is interesting to note, continues Slenczka that all three parts of this definition are in the present tense. This means that they all happen at the same time, coincidentally, simultaneously. For those who are confessional theologians, pastors, and theology students, this means that God Himself is currently at work in what we do.[12]

The pastoral office does not exist outside the Means of Grace, just as there is no church or biblical and confessional theological formation without Word (absolution) and Sacrament. Ministry, therefore, is not an agency for coordinating gifts, but the ministry of Christ Himself for the forgiveness of sins. We cannot emphasize enough the importance of the absolution of sins whether public or private. Sometimes I have the impression that God's people are not sure about the forgiveness they receive from God during a church service or outside of it. Perhaps they doubt because they imagine their sin is too great and cannot be forgiven. This applies also to pastors and seminary students. It is often observed among those who care for seminarians, from the dean of students to the various professors who provide academic, emotional, and spiritual support that what seminarians need is forgiveness and absolution.

The world offers alternative forms of treatment: palliative measures to reduce stress, psychological trauma, and feelings of guilt. Jacob A. O. Preus III analyzes the alternatives often suggested by world experts when the Church becomes inattentive to forgiveness and God's grace. He writes, “All of them see the solution to the human problem in us. The “grace” suggested by these theories is found, one way or another, in us. Either it is in the inexorable course of history itself (Hegel) or in the restoration by whatever means possible of the original equilibrium (Marx) or in therapy (Freud) or in creating a more positive environment (Skinner), or in manipulating our genetic make-up (Wilson). In every case, the answer is within us.”[13] Such influences are relatively popular, at least in Brazil.

Sometimes a congregation and its pastor allows psychologists to take precedence in the therapeutic process of people who need help. One should not condemn psychology or other social sciences, which are important disciplines and auxiliaries to theology. But we must question the extent to which this can lead to an invasion of fields, of interference in sectors whose functions are quite distinct. Of this relationship between theology and culture, Andrew H. Bartelt is optimistic, arguing that both complement one another and stand in dialectic tension:

> We cannot and will not "build the church" by sociological means and methods (and many church planting methods show that it can be done, without attending to much theology!). But why would we not engage sociological insights in a ministerial (not "magisterial") way as a "first article gift" of our Creator that may assist our understanding of the human and social world into which the Creator came as Redeemer to form the Body of Christ among us?[14]

The tension exists. Pastors and the seminary students should expect to wrestle with it. Perhaps what the distressed person really needs when seeking help is simply the certainty of forgiveness—forgiveness that only the church, in the name of Christ, can offer. And that is our *officium proprium*.

Adolph Köberle states that, distanced from the Gospel, namely Baptism, Holy Supper, and Absolution, human beings will seek access to God in three ways: moralism, rationalism, or mysticism. Moralism seeks access to God with the assumption that our good works and virtues should promote our status before Him. Rationalism exalts human reason, confusing human wisdom with God's revelation. Mysticism, on the other hand, seeks an immediate union with God through emotional experience. Moralism, rationalism, and mysticism—all motivated by law—represent substitutes for God. This problem borders on idolatry.[15] The fact is, as Scripture shows, God works ways that confound all man-made systems of religion and all forms of self-styled spirituality. The question is, How can the seminary, with its curriculum, face a complex situation like this?

Curriculum and mission

Presently, our seminary has a theological program that includes six years of study, including a vicarage year. With some variation, our curriculum is organized around the four basic areas of theology, but these have gradually become more fluid to include the study of anthropology and culture. The idea is to engage students in God's mission among all people who represent the diversity of God's creation. As is characteristic of a Lutheran seminary, the program requires students to study biblical languages (Hebrew, Greek) along with courses in exegesis; history of the Christian Church and the Lutheran Confessions; Lutheran liturgy, worship, and church music; homiletics; and pastoral counseling.[16]

With some variation, our curriculum is organized around the four basic areas of theology, but these have gradually become more fluid to include the study of anthropology and culture. The idea is to engage students in God's mission among all people who represent the diversity of God's creation.

We have three required courses in the specific area of missions and evangelism. They are (1) The Formation and Person of the Missionary, (2) Practice in Mission, Diaconal Program, and Urban Ministry, which involves the application of theological

foundations of the missionary and diaconal practice in different social contexts, and (3) Seminar on Mission, which deals especially with theology and missiological principles as applied to the challenges and opportunities of urban ministry.

Under the umbrella of the Urban Mission Program, the seminary has an agreement with a Lutheran congregation in Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro, where, twice a year, seminary students go for voluntary mission work under the supervision of the pastor of the local congregation. This project includes mission in the favelas. The curriculum also includes missionary training in the form of practical experience witnessing in hospitals, schools, prisons, and other institutions.

Together with the IELB and the LCMS, the seminary is sending several missionaries to different countries in Africa and in Latin and Central America thanks to the "Alliance Project" agreement.[17] In addition, every two years the seminary and the church offer a mission forum at the seminary that is open to seminary students and pastors. Currently, seventeen countries around the world are served by missionaries who graduated from Seminário Concórdia.[18]

The Church of Brazil has an agreement with the Brazilian Lutheran University (ULBRA) which allows our students to graduate with a baccalaureate degree in Theology. The courses are taught either by seminary professors or other Lutheran professors. Specific and supplementary courses related to exegesis, pastoral theology, and Lutheran Confessions are offered at the seminary exclusively for the future pastors of the Lutheran Church. While most of the courses offered at the university are now migrating to a fully online format, the program at the seminary is entirely residential. Of course, during the pandemic we all learned that distance education is an important asset that may be also a possibility for the future.

Culture and images

To talk about culture and context is complex, as noted above. But I would call attention to one aspect of culture in Latin America related to theology and worship, and of course to mission. The culture of Latin American people is one of icons: people believe what they see. Historically, images are parts of Lutheran theology and art as well. We confess that we were created in God's image. When humanity rebelled against God, how would that image have to be restored? Chad Bird says that it was renewed by the very image of God, Jesus Christ. "The Image would restore the image."[19] Bird says that like an artist, God does not restore a human's image from scratch. But "he summons the original man, the one whose image is on the canvas, and has him sit down again so he can repaint his portrait on the existing canvas. The Father, looking to his image, the Son, repaints us in Christ's image, that we might reflect him and know him once more."

That is good Lutheran theology, but this is not the concept of "image" for most people in Latin America. "In the minds of many Latin Americans, the suffering Christ, always dying, is a Christ with whom they can identify."[20] Many Catholic churches are filled with images and paintings, and the crucified Christ is publicly exposed. However, instead of a dead Christ on the cross, the painting shows a dying Christ—a Christ that never dies.[21]

Seminarians must understand this culture to repaint this negative Christological image. Several years ago, our seminary had a course in art appreciation. This raised the question about whether the time has come to restore the art on canvases and stained-glass windows to promote preaching and theology through the eyes. The reredos in the altar of the church where I spent my childhood, for example, was adorned with a beautiful statue of Jesus in front of a painting of Christ's open sepulcher. It was a very comforting vision.

Luther was in favor of paintings and statues because they may help people to remember and understand God's Word. According to him, they do no more harm on walls than in books.[22] He goes on to say that "images for memorial and witness, such as crucifixes and images of saints, are to be tolerated."[23] Unlike the iconoclasm of both Anabaptists and the Reformed, Luther asserted his approval of artistic expression in church life and worship. Mark C. Mattes asserts that "together with the Reformed and other Christians, Lutherans applaud art in daily life. But counter to the iconoclasm of either the Reformed (Zwingli) or the enthusiasts (Karlstadt), Luther affirmed a role for the visual arts in public worship."[24] Mattes notes that "Luther preached on St. Christopher, using images, and took his staff to be the Word of which we learn."[25] He concludes, "Thus physical things, including human artistic creations, are fit vehicles for God's address to sinners."[26] The minds of Latin Americans are open for a more artistic and iconic presentation of the Gospel of the dead and resurrected Christ.

Final considerations

We must pass on what we have received from our ancestors. God says that we should not love the world (1 Jn 2:15), but to do His mission implies that we must love people (Lev 19:18; Prov 25:21–22). This is a difficult task, and Christians causing offense to the world is to be expected (Jn 15:19).

We certainly face challenges at the seminaries in Latin America because those who aspire to the Office of the Ministry are, like all of us, *simul iustus et peccator*. Usually the candidates come young, still somewhat immature, and with little biblical or theological knowledge. At the seminary they start to form a community that Helmut Thielicke calls "theological puberty."[27] Early in this theological formation it is wise to consider the advice of Harold L. Senkbeil: "The challenge for pastors [and seminary students] in every generation is to link the person and work of Jesus to every shifting era by means of his unchanging word—not to contextualize the message, but to textualize people into the text of Scriptures."[28]

God's mission in Latin America has extraordinary opportunities. We need more prophets and "sons of prophets" as was the case among the people of Israel in the time of Samuel and Amos (1 Sam 10; Amos 7:14). For that we have a great opportunity to follow Jesus's advice: "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Luke 10:2). The Lord has answered this prayer for 120 years. He will continue to bless His mission carried out through the seminary and the church, not only under the Southern Cross, but under every other star in His created universe—*ad maiorem Dei gloriam*.

ENDNOTES

[1] The Southern Cross is the constellation most represented in flags around the world. Because it is visible in the Southern Hemisphere, its use is always associated with the southern countries. Australia, Brazil, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and Samoa are countries which use the Southern Cross on their flags.
[2] Mario L. Rehfeldt, *Um grão de mostarda: A História da Igreja Evangélica Luterana do Brasil*, trans. Dieter Joel Jagnow (Porto Alegre: Concordia Editora, 2003). Rehfledt writes, "The beginning of Concordia Seminary in Bom Jesus was compared with the beginning of Concordia Seminary in Perry County, Missouri, United States, by Dr. Fuerbringer because it became so vital for the future of the Brazilian District as Perry County became for the Missouri Synod, USA" (55). Concerning the church, he adds, "Almost a year later, on June 23, 1904, was established the Synodical District, that is, 'the 15th District of the Missouri Synod'" (64).
[3] Rehfeldt, 45.
[4] Douglas L. Rutt, "Luther, Tentatio, and Latin America," *Logia* 19, no. 1 (2010): 7.
[5] Jiang Menglin, quoted in I'Ching Thomas, "Why Do Chinese People See Christianity as a Cultural Invasion?" *Christianity Today*, November 7, 2022, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/november-web-only/chinese-christianity-western-culture-imperialism.html. Thomas writes,

> Since the 19th century, Christianity has been associated with Western imperialism in the minds of Chinese people. Both Catholics and Protestants came to China together with Western imperialists. In fact, many of the Western missionaries of that generation rode on the coattails of the European opium traders to bring the gospel to the Chinese. For example, Karl Gützlaff, an early Protestant missionary to China, joined the Jardine Matheson opium fleet as an interpreter in order to reach more Chinese with the gospel. Former Peking University president Jiang Menglin aptly described this historical baggage when he compared the arrivals of Buddhism and Christianity in China: "Buddha rode into China on a white elephant, while Jesus rode in on a cannonball."

See also Herbert E. Hoefer, "Why Are Christians Persecuted in India?: Roots, Reasons, Responses," *Missio Apostolica* 7, no. 2 (November 1999): 77–86; Sam Thompson, "Christology in Asia: Major Trends in Christological Reflection from an Indian Context," *Igreja Luterana* 81, no. 1 (2020): 82–97.
[6] Douglas L. Rutt, "Theological Education and Mission," *Lutheran Mission Matters* 28, no. 2 (November 2020): 200.
[7] Klaus Detlev Schulz, *Mission from the Cross: the Lutheran Theology of Mission* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), xi.
[8] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (New York: Harper, 1968), section 115.
[9] Hermann Sasse, "The Crisis of the Christian Ministry," in *The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters*, trans. Matthew C. Harrison et al. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 371.
[10] Sasse, 371.
[11] Reinhard Slenczka, "Confessional Church and Theology—Confessing Theologians. A Global Challenge Today" (keynote address, 3rd World Seminaries Conference on "Challenges to Seminaries in Forming Lutheran Pastors Today," International Lutheran Council, Erlangen,

Germany, March 29–April 1, 2007), 5, http://ilconline.wpenginepowered.com/files/2011/10/Slenczka-International-Lutheran-Council-2007.pdf
[12] Slenczka, 5.
[13] J. A. O. Preus, "Sola Gratia: God's Gracious Favor for the People of God in a Secular World," in *O Povo de Deus*, ed. Gerson Luis Linden, Ely Prieto, and Clóvis Jair Prunzel (Porto Alegre: Editora Concórdia, 2014), 212.
[14] Andrew H. Bartelt, "Keeping our Balance in our Own Context: Keeping the Cross in Cross-Cultural and Taking the Con Out of Contextualization," *Concordia Journal* 47, no. 1 (2021): 61.
[15] Adolph Köberle, *The Quest for Holiness*, trans. John Mattes (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1936), 1–18.
[16] The Seminary offers also a program for lay people called Theological Education by Extension. The focus is on evangelization and is divided into three modules involving an introduction to the Bible, principles of interpretation, biblical and theological fundaments of mission, Christian life, and Christian witness.
[17] This program is a partnership between the LCMS and the IELB that sends graduated students to develop mission projects with seminaries, especially in Africa. The program requires three intensive months of learning the local language and culture.
[18] Seminário Concórdia, *Catálogo Acadêmico 2022* (Porto Alegre: Editora Concórdia, 2022), 20.
[19] Chad Bird, *The Christ Key: Unlocking the Centrality of Christ in the Old Testament* (Irvine, CA: 1517 Publishing, 2021), 24.
[20] Rutt, "Luther, Tentatio, and Latin America," 10.
[21] Rutt, 5–6.
[22] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Liturgy and Hymns,* ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 84.
[23] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: Church and Ministry II*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 91.
[24] Mark C. Mattes, *Martin Luther's Theology of Beauty: A Reappraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 134.
[25] Mattes, 135.
[26] Mattes, 135.
[27] Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, trans. Charles L. Taylor (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company,1968), 12.
[28] Harold L. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor´s Heart* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2019), 17.