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Seminary Curriculum in the Mission of Christ's Church: A Look Back at the 1990s

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Abstract: Though not directly initiated by the mission needs of the church, the Curriculum Review process at Concordia Seminary in 1991–95 connected to the growing awareness of our North American context as a mission field. It also opened doors to a collaborative relationship with the mission leadership of the LCMS. Among the changes that resulted from that process were various specific innovations related to the changing context of mission and ministry, along with seeds for further, ongoing curriculum evaluation and review in light of the mission needs of the church.

Shortly after John Johnson became president of Concordia Seminary in 1990, his various discussions with both the internal and the external constituencies of the seminary led him to initiate a needed curriculum review. The result was a four-year process led by a Curriculum Review and Design Committee (CRDC—which almost became, at times, a four-letter pejorative in its own right, as these projects tend to do). This began in 1991, concluded in 1995, and extended into a “phase 2” to evaluate the changes and implement further work in 1998–2000. This latter follow-up then somewhat lost its way in the face of various stresses, including the spikes in enrollment in 2001–2002 and the economic downturn at that time.

Here we will focus on the CRDC process itself, in light of mission interests of the church-at-large and as the mission of Christ's kingdom relates to pastoral ministry and its formation through a seminary curriculum. I was a member of that committee from the outset, representing the Exegetical Department, and eventually chaired the committee after L. Dean Hempelmann, then Academic Dean, left to become president of Concordia Seminary, Edmonton.

The mission of Christ's kingdom underlies the mission of a seminary and the



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seminary curriculum, but the impetus for this process was more focused on an evaluation of how the pastoral needs of the church were being met than a specific endeavor to meet the mission needs at that time. The fifteen years following the Seminec crisis in 1973–74¹ were focused on rebuilding, and the time had come to take a detailed look at the overall curriculum and its effectiveness. A second driver was the overdue recognition of the loss of Concordia Senior College,² which closed in 1977. It had served as a remarkable funnel that provided a pre-seminary student body grounded in a strong, humanities-based liberal arts curriculum and built into a fraternal community committed to the pastoral leadership of the church and its mission. Its curriculum provided an emphasis on biblical theology within an understanding of history, science, literature, and culture, including the social sciences and communications. In sum, it grounded entering seminarians with what one might call an understanding of the human condition, both *coram deo* and *coram hominibus*. Most students came to the seminary with a minimum of two years of Greek and one or two years of Hebrew, not to mention a general grounding in Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman history.

To be sure, the function of the Senior College was originally transferred to Concordia University Ann Arbor and then became dispersed among the other Concordias, as they converted from two-year junior colleges into four-year colleges and then into full-service universities.³ And while approximately half of the incoming seminary students would continue to come from the Concordia University System, approximately half of those did not come through the pre-sem tracks. What this meant is that about 75–80% of new seminary students needed some level of biblical languages, and the seminary found itself providing intensive courses in elementary Hebrew and Greek, largely to “make up” those prerequisites. One major effort in the CRDC process was trying to address the flow of the curriculum based on the fact that the large majority of students were engaged in making up what had been pre-seminary curriculum for much of their first seminary year.

While this might seem a more mechanical issue dealing with sequencing of coursework and generally unrelated to the larger mission concerns of the church, it is worth noting how this problem was actually driven by changes in the pastoral formation programs of the larger church, of which the seminary was a part. It was the major part, to be sure, but the seminary program connected to and even relied on other parts. Any comprehensive, systemic, and synodical approach was further hindered by the rising independence and even growing competition between the components of the “old system.”⁴

All this is fodder for a different essay at another time. The point related to the mission concerns here addressed is the ongoing need, still largely unaddressed, of a more comprehensive approach to good stewardship of God’s resources, unlimited as to God’s design, but often limited by our own human designs. That suggests much

more collaborative, even cooperative, ways and means of considering critical issues such as seminary curriculum *in light of the mission needs of the whole church*.

This brings us back to the first driver of curriculum review and design in 1991: the need to evaluate and recalibrate the effectiveness of the curriculum in meeting those needs of a church in a changing culture. Of course, determining those “needs” is a tricky thing and by no means obvious or unanimous. However they may be defined or expressed, it is another question if they are aligned with the larger mission of Christ, and that is a fundamental question that must be taken seriously. While the seminary is often a leader in such matters, it is also a servant of the church (and properly dependent on it as well!).

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So we listened. The first phase of CRDC was an extensive process of surveys and interviews with our constituencies throughout the church, from individuals, congregations, district and synodical leaders, boards, commissions, and mission leaders. After a time of great trauma and division within the church, this was a healthy exercise. On the one hand, it helped to rebuild bridges and mend fences. On the other, we gleaned very helpful feedback and garnished some productive relationships.

One of those that played out into the next decade was a stronger connection with the mission leadership of synod itself, including a more active role of the seminary president’s advisory seat on the Board for Mission Services. When Robert Scudieri, as Associate Executive Director for National Missions, developed an advisory group to serve as a coordinating council and think tank for the burgeoning opportunities and challenges that followed the *Mission Blueprint for the Nineties*, both seminaries were represented. While seemingly small examples of collaborative work, I remember the stark recognition of an amazing gap of understanding—and with it a certain suspicion—between seminaries and those entrusted with mission leadership around the church. Some participants lacked awareness of what was all going on across the church, especially as the 1992 synodical convention had declared the US as a world mission field and passed the *Mission Blueprint for the Nineties*.

Again, this leads to a longer story too far afield (though it is a mission field) for this short reflection. That story would include the incorporation of the Hispanic Institute of Theology, originally at Concordia River Forest with a loose connection for certification, to Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne. Then heavily subsidized directly by the Missouri Synod, the Center for Hispanic Studies was incorporated into the mainstream, campus, and budget of Concordia Seminary. It would also include the engagement of Concordia Seminary with the North American

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Mission Executives (NAME) and the annual Mission Partners meeting. These connections played a role in starting what became the Cross-Cultural Ministry Center at Irvine, a seminary presence on the board of the Center for U.S. Missions, the increased role and curriculum development of the Deaf Institute of Theology, and the collaborative development of the Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology and the Multiethnic Symposium. All of these roles sought to bring seminary resources and servant leadership to these critical areas of mission today.

This was also the time when a “mission-planting” track was introduced into the seminary curriculum for specialized evaluation and training for this specific context of a first call. That, in itself, was a bit of a *novum*, as it actually linked a portion of seminary curriculum to go beyond the generalized curriculum preparing a “general pastor” who could go anywhere and presumably do everything at least reasonably well. Specialized training and even screening for mission-planting and cross-cultural awareness engaged cooperative and collaborative work with synodical and district mission leadership and field pastors. This later morphed into the Mission and Ministry Seminar. Missionaries and mission leaders connected well with the Concordia Seminary campus, visiting classes, engaging in table talks and fireside chats, and calling the campus community to greater awareness of mission issues.

President Johnson himself called for placing a mission professor in each of the four traditional departments (Kolb in Systematics, followed by Raj in Exegetical, Rowold in Practical, and Schumacher in Historical), and he established the Institute for Mission Studies (IMS) under Robert Kolb. IMS also ran the College of Fellows that involved faculty and LCMS leaders. Though not directly related to seminary administrative decisions, it is worth observing that the Lutheran Society for Missiology (LSFM) began in 1991, the genius of conversations between Robert Scudieri and Eugene Bunkowske (then at the Ft. Wayne seminary). The LSFM journal (predecessor to *Lutheran Mission Matters*) *Missio Apostolica* began in 1993 with Won Yong Ji from the seminary faculty as editor, and strong participation from Robert Kolb and Victor Raj, who have carried forward the editorial responsibilities.

The point here is the rich collaboration and cross-fertilization of seminary and mission leadership at both synodical and local levels. This is but one example of the need to listen and learn from one another across the spectrum of pastoral and mission needs of the church, and yes, to critique and even correct, in collegial respect for the checks and balances that are our respective roles and responsibilities in the *corporate* church in the service of our Lord's kingdom.

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Finally, we turn to some specific curriculum changes that were actually implemented as a result of CRDC in 1996 and the years following. The press releases announced “35 recommendations,” some clearly more significant than others. But I have often quipped that the most important statement we made, to ourselves as much as to the church, is that it is all right to change—in fact, it is necessary to adapt and adjust to changing contexts. Basic as that may sound, especially in light of the cultural changes since the 1960s and the surge of immigration and multicultural awareness since the 1990s, it was a major reminder that seminary curriculum and pastoral formation are anchored in the unchanging truth of God’s Word of life and connected to the changing contexts of ministry and mission.

What did change? We complemented the standard “Religious Bodies” course that compared various Christian approaches with a new “World Religions” course, taking seriously the rise of Islam and Asian influences in our North American culture. We added a new “Theology of Mission” course, led in large part by Dr. Won Yong Ji with Dr. Victor Raj adding a significant biblical foundation component. These two Asian faculty members brought together philosophical/systematics and exegetical expertise along with non-Western worldviews. We added a course in “Pastoral Leadership,” both in terms of organizational dynamics and of mission leadership, to address the concerns of potential disconnects between pastor and people and to foster alignment between the office of pastoral ministry and the priesthood of the baptized. A new foundational course, “Lutheran Mind,” began the systematics sequence, shaping the increasingly varied backgrounds of seminarians into the Lutheran “ethos” and way of thinking theologically. In doctrine courses we consciously engaged contemporary issues, noting the need to be able to explain profound truths to interested seekers without our traditional, insider jargon. We developed a foundational course in historical theology that presented both a broad overview of church history (providing a larger framework often lacking) and an introduction to methodology and critical thinking that would foster analysis and insights into any mission context. We reinforced the connections between exegesis and the preaching and teaching roles of the pastoral ministry and in bridging the cultural gap from the biblical world to contemporary challenges—also a “cross-cultural” enterprise.

Perhaps most significant was the creative work in Residential Field Education, a practicum that had long been criticized as only loosely connected to curricular goals and generally driven by the needs of the local parish. Three specific modules were introduced for at least one academic quarter of emphasis: evangelism, an institutional experience (e.g., hospital, nursing care, prison ministry), and a cross-cultural experience, where the goal was simply summarized as “gaining the experience of being the only outsider in a room of insiders.”

In time, the local evangelism module proved unworkable, as it depended heavily on the interests and resources of the local congregations, and it became attached to the

vicarage requirement. The other two remain, though the cross-cultural module has come to include more short-term mission trips, both internationally and to key national mission contexts such as urban centers. We soon began to offer credited coursework in such contexts, led by local pastors as short, intensive courses. At the time, these were deliberate changes directly related to developing mission awareness and engagement. Eventually more and more students *came* to the seminary with such experiences, as a generation began to arrive who had already experienced life in a multicultural and increasingly unchurched world. For some, these are a relatively new experience; for many this kind of cross-cultural mission is simply expected and anticipated.

Overall, what we had accomplished was a first step, a large one, to be sure, but a first step. The follow-up evaluation encompassed a list of unfinished items that included addressing the pressures of time, money, credit hours, and even semesters, all of which would have to wait. As is too often the case, a thorough review with evaluation and assessment of the outcomes we had intended to achieve never fully happened. We did begin to think in terms of outcomes, including several attempts at learning outcomes with competency checklists, but that time had not yet come. What we did do was establish a pattern of participation and cooperation with those on the front lines of church and mission and with those entrusted with their support through synod and her institutions. We renewed a sense of what can be done when God's people work together, not just as a coalition of the willing, but as iron can sharpen iron toward common goals in the common cause of our Lord's mission. We understood the need for continued evaluation and program assessment going forward. And we tried to model a pattern for a more holistic approach to ministerial formation via the ecclesial means of working together, even walking together, as the whole church.

What we did do was establish a pattern of participation and cooperation with those on the front lines of church and mission and with those entrusted with their support through synod and her institutions. . . . And we tried to model a pattern for a more holistic approach to ministerial formation via the ecclesial means of working together, even walking together, as the whole church.

A final observation. This was also the time when our major accrediting agency, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), was in the midst of a thorough review and redesign of its own standards, approved in 1996. While not yet fully cresting the hill toward outcome-based standards, the shift was now complete from more quantitative qualifications (e.g., how many PhDs on the faculty, how many books in

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the library, appropriate financial resources for the number of students and programs) to those that focus on quality and achievement (Is anyone reading the books in the library, and how has that changed them in light of curricular goals? Can the PhDs on the faculty actually stimulate learning toward the goals of student formation?). In short, the ATS was asking schools to define their mission, develop the ways and means to accomplish their mission, and to demonstrate that they were, in fact, achieving that mission.

Following the CRDC of 1991–95, Concordia Seminary (as did Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, and many other organizations) developed a Mission Statement, along with the now traditional “values and vision” statements that were popularized then. Though these can also become static, they do serve as reference points and as reminders that there is a defined purpose to what we do. Any process of planning and decision making must start with a reminder of why and toward what end we do what we do, with evaluation of how effectively and faithfully we are doing it. That is no less critical in the mission of Christ’s kingdom, entrusted into our frail and often failing hands, yet always under God’s graceful forgiveness in Christ and empowered by His Spirit.

Endnotes

¹ Theological controversies eventually led to the suspension of seminary president John Tietjen, which was followed by a walkout of the majority of faculty and students to form a “Seminary-in-Exile,” aka “Seminox.”

² The LCMS had developed a “system” of secondary schools across the country for the preparation of pastors and other church workers. These followed the German “Gymnasium” model of a six-year program, which corresponded to high school and junior college. As part of regularization into the American system that concluded with a college degree, the Senior College was established in 1957 to bring together all pre-seminary pastoral candidates for the final two years of college before matriculating at Concordia Seminary with a BA degree.

³ As the “system” adapted to the American educational culture, the first four years (high school) fell away, leaving junior colleges that could not be sustained either as two-year programs or as schools dedicated only to the preparation of professional church workers.

⁴ As the system of schools now became more independent of each other, they became more dependent on tuition revenue than synodical subsidy and needed programs and faculty to attract students from the regional territory that often overlapped (e.g., five schools in the upper Midwest: Ann Arbor, MI; Milwaukee, WI; River Forest (Chicago), IL; St Paul, MN; and Seward, NE). In the 1960s, both seminaries became accredited to offer the MDiv degree and began to overlap programmatically. Moreover, the theological controversies at the St. Louis seminary in the late 60s and 70s caused some pre-seminary (“first career”) students to matriculate at the Springfield (IL) seminary, which otherwise was programmatically distinguished as somewhat of a “second-career” seminary, more “practical” and less academically rigorous. This blurring of the distinctive but complementary niches led to recruitment from the same prospective student pool. As synodical subsidy gradually declined, every institution needed to seek direct development support across the synod.