

Lutheran Mission Matters



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Seminary Curriculum in the Mission of Christ's Church: Mission in the Curriculum and a Curriculum for Mission

Joel P. Okamoto

Abstract: Concordia Seminary launched a revised curriculum in 2017. This article reflects on ways that mission informed this curriculum, gathered under the headings of “mission in the curriculum” and “curriculum for mission.”

In the preceding article, Andy Bartelt discussed how and why mission mattered in Concordia Seminary's curriculum revision in the 1990s. This article is a companion piece. It offers some reflections on mission and theological education based on the revision of Concordia's Master of Divinity (MDiv) program more than twenty years later.

The situation was different in this most recent round of curriculum review and revision. By this time, the upheavals that so deeply affected Concordia Seminary were, for both the school and the Missouri Synod, definitely in the past. New things had been happening in the meantime. The Hispanic Institute of Theology, centered in the greater Chicago area, was succeeded by the Center for Hispanic Studies and brought onto the St. Louis campus. A deaconess program was established. Online education became an important part of the seminary's mission with the Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology (EIIT), the Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) program, and Advanced Studies programs like the reduced-residency option for the PhD. Bartelt noted that an evangelism “field-education module” proved unworkable. But an evangelism module was successfully integrated into the vicarage program, while the seminary founded a *MissionShift* Institute for its students and for pastors and congregations in the St. Louis area.¹ Later, the evangelism module on vicarage was succeeded by a Community



Joel P. Okamoto is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, where he also holds the Waldemar and Mary Griesbach Chair in Systematic Theology and serves as chair of the Department of Systematic Theology.
okamotoj@csl.edu

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Outreach Program, which integrated some of the key features of *MissionShift* and gave students and the congregations to which they were assigned both wider opportunities for reaching into their communities and a wider range of ideas and tools to use. In the curriculum, new courses like “Lutheran Mind” were added and long-standing courses like “Religious Bodies in America” were updated. In 2015, Kou Searing, a man of wide experience and great enthusiasm, was called to the faculty as Lutheran Foundation Professor of Urban and Cross-Cultural Ministry and served as Associate Dean for Urban and Cross-Cultural Ministry.² New things kept happening.

At the same time, new things also had been happening outside of the seminary. Culture had been shifting: institutions, structures, and standards in US society had been eroding, while expectations and symbols had been changing. The Church in the US, as often the case, was lagging behind like someone who has just missed the last bus for the evening. It took only a few years into the twenty-first century before different thoughts and suggestions about the curriculum began to circulate among the faculty, and by the end of 2013, a curriculum review and revision committee was established.

The result was an even more thorough and comprehensive curriculum revision than that in the 1990s. The most visible change was a shift from quarters to semesters. This allowed us to schedule a short “Winterim” term for intensive, on-campus sessions with SMP and graduate students without overlapping with residential courses and overloading the faculty. But the shift to semesters meant more. Courses in the old MDiv curriculum had to give way to new courses. As I will explain later, the curriculum became “outcome-based,” and students would have to demonstrate their achievement in specific, concrete ways. The curriculum also introduced a program for personal and spiritual well-being and growth, in which every MDiv student was assigned a mentor and assigned to a group of fellow students. Greek and Hebrew became part of the curriculum, rather than prerequisites, and students would be required to demonstrate competence in the languages in their final year, not just when they entered.

I could go on for a long time about the good, the bad, and the ugly of this curriculum revision, because I chaired the curriculum review and revision committee, and I served as interim chief academic officer during the year when we launched it. But your time and mine are better spent in being specific and forward looking. So what follows are some reflections about mission and theological education. I have gathered my thoughts under two headings: “Mission *in* the curriculum” and “a curriculum *for* mission.” This distinction is heuristic rather than precise, helpful rather than exact, but this goes along with the character of this piece.

Mission in the Curriculum

“Mission *in* the curriculum” means matters like witness, outreach, and missiology as *part* of the curriculum.

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We launched our current Master of Divinity (MDiv) curriculum in the fall of 2017. If you had read the Academic Catalog for that school year, you would not have found any required course with “Mission,” “Missiology,” “Witness,” “Evangelism,” or “Outreach” in the title.

This might have alarmed the mission-minded, but alarm over just missing some jargon would be hasty. This is not only because you cannot tell a curriculum by its course titles, but also because we adopted an *outcome-based approach* to designing a curriculum. The outcome-based approach is also called “backward design,” because it begins with the end, that is, with the *outcome* of successfully completing the curriculum. It does not begin by asking questions like “What should we teach?” or “What courses should we have?” Instead, it begins by asking questions like “What should a graduate be able to do?” and “What kind of a person should a graduate be?”

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Why would we do this? And why should you consider this approach when you contemplate or suggest curriculum design for theological education? The most important reason is that this approach makes *student learning* the goal, not content, courses, teachers, or sentiment. Content, of course, matters, and so do courses and teachers—sentiment, not so much. But content, courses, and teachers are means to an end, not ends in themselves. Of course, hardly any teacher or school would deny this, but, as the saying goes, actions speak louder than words. “Don’t tell me it matters to you. Act like it matters.” We did.

Another important reason is that the outcome-based approach facilitates ongoing improvement. Having specific outcomes makes it easier to ascertain concrete answers to “How are you doing?” How so? Because outcomes require that you specify what and how you will assess achievement, and because these assessments dictate what and when teaching and experiences need to take place in the curriculum.³

This is quite abstract, but I can make it more concrete in the case of *mission* in our curriculum. Turning to the outcomes, we first see that there is an explicit one that students learn to participate in the Church’s mission. The outcome for MDiv students is:

A graduate of the MDiv program will demonstrate the ability to prepare and lead members of a congregation to bring the Gospel to those outside the Church.

If this is the outcome, then how do students demonstrate this ability? By

satisfactorily completing and reporting on a community outreach project during their vicarage year.

Taking matters back another step, you would ask: How do students learn what is needed to complete this project? Well, they *don't* take a specialized course for this. Instead, the knowledge, skills, and attitudes for doing this come through a number of courses and other experiences. For example, this project requires specific skills. For them, there are special sessions scheduled throughout the first two years. The theology of mission is dealt with in one required course, and theological considerations for mission are dealt with several other courses.

Finally, the courses themselves should work backward too. What will students be able to do after taking this course? What will they be like? These are the starting points for course design too. After this come the assessments and the grading rubrics, then the content and the class sessions.

This is how we get to *content* like this: The answer to the question, “What is a Christian?” Being capable of faithful witness today is one reason that the first-year course “Introduction to Systematic Theology” begins by considering this question and by working with this answer: “A Christian is a person who lives according to a particular account of everything.” Why such an abstract definition? Because we want to identify and distinguish ourselves, our message, our lives, and our reflection in a situation in which there are Muslims and Hindus, one in which Buddhism, paganism, and neo-Darwinian materialism have credibility. Put more generally, a situation in which people have a different account of everything. If we want to witness faithfully, we have to witness adequately. For example, it makes no sense to begin by speaking about an “unknown god” (cf. Acts 17) to those who think that talk about gods is probably the product of wishful thinking, as Buddhists may; or superstitious, as many of today’s atheists think. Moreover, in the contemporary North American situation, one does not have to be a Buddhist or atheist to be impressed by their thinking. So, Christians not only must earn the right to engage them with talk about our God, but they also must be able to put all talk about our God and ourselves into an appropriately large context—an account of everything. This is why we take up the question, “What is a Christian?” and why we work with this answer: “A person who lives according to a particular account of everything.”

And from there we consider the question: “What is the Christian account of everything? And how do you know that this really is the Christian account?” And off we go.

That, in a nutshell, is how we worked *backward*.

The case of mission also shows how the outcome-based approach *facilitates improvement*. After just two years, it was clear that the theology of mission was not

being dealt with adequately. Adjustments were made. If you read the 2020–21 Academic Catalog, you will see this new required course:

PRA507

The Pastor and Church in Mission

This is an introductory course that builds on the skills learned in PRA506, with particular attention paid to the dynamics of cross-cultural communication and contextualization. Case studies will be examined to see how the four-fold framework of doing practical theology can be applied to the pastoral task of motivating the church to awareness, understanding and action in its missionary calling to confess the Gospel “in season and out of season.”

Of course, this course description should prompt questions and comments about the theology of mission, but they would be beside my point here, namely, to illustrate how a backward curriculum design has actually led to a more clearly defined sense of mission in the curriculum.

Mission figures in the curriculum in other ways. One important reason for overhauling the curriculum was to try to prepare pastors, missionaries, and deaconesses for service in circumstances that are not only different than they were twenty-five years ago, but also promise to be different twenty-five years from now. The previous round of curriculum review that Andy Bartelt surveyed made world religions a theme. Today the Church needs also to account for the “New Atheists,” “neo-pagans,” and the “nones.” In what situation will the Church in the United States live in 2040 or 2050? What will this mean for Christian life and witness?

We don’t know, but we can work to be better prepared for changing situations and unexpected developments. Here, too, our new curriculum accounts for them through its outcomes. Problems like racism and poverty, realities like immigration and climate change, topics like sexuality and gender will only become more important in coming years. Christians, especially their pastors and leaders, need to be ready to engage them faithfully. Our new curriculum puts cultural awareness, social circumstances, and global matters on its first pages with its outcomes, and it works them out in courses and as an emphasis across the board in the classroom and also in field education and vicarage.

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A Curriculum for Mission

At this point you might be thinking, “Is this really ‘mission in the curriculum’?” The point is well taken. I am crossing over from “mission in the curriculum” to “a curriculum for mission.” But, as I observed earlier, the distinction is heuristic and helpful, not precise and exact. This is more like long-track speed-skating, where skaters switch lanes, than the 100-meter dash, where you had better stay in your lane. Where exactly skaters have changed from the inner lane to outer or outer lane to inner doesn’t matter, as long as they have done so in the allotted space. Earlier I showed how something particular (mission) found its way into the general (curriculum). Now I will show how the general (curriculum) supports something particular.

When I am asked about the most significant change in the curriculum, I answer that it is the attention to personal and spiritual well-being and growth. Concordia Seminary has always understood that who the pastor is as a person—how he relates to people, how he deals with your emotions, how he grasps and works with cultural differences and diversity, his own spiritual life, his commitment to his different vocations, the life of both mind and body, his home and family—all matter a great deal. The difference with the new curriculum is that we are considerably more deliberate in seeing the well-being and growth of all students. It starts when incoming students gather in cohorts and work with faculty mentors, and these relationships continue throughout their program.

What relevance does this development have to mission in particular? It lies in the fact that a key reason for making this move is that ministry in the United States is becoming more challenging and stressful. Ministry, of course, has always been demanding, but the reasons that make the United States a mission field are the reasons that ministry is even more demanding.

I won’t go into the mechanics of our program, like how it is organized, what part psychological testing plays, who is involved in guidance and assessment. They are, after all, fairly specific to a residential seminary for the Lutheran Church in the United States. But giving deliberate attention to personal and spiritual well-being, and helping to equip every student for awareness and growth as persons throughout their lives, certainly could benefit the Church everywhere in witness, life, and confession.

Finally, I will turn to theology for mission. So far, I have attended mostly to the “education” part of “theological education.” I will give some attention to the “theology” in “theological education.”

And I will focus on what we call a “theology *for* mission” rather a “theology *of* mission.” By “theology *of* mission,” I mean a theological account of mission. By “theology *for* mission,” I mean the theology that contributes toward the Church in mission. Contemporary theology pays a lot of attention to “theology *of*.” When someone says, “Your sacramental practice is Reformed” or “Your use of the Bible is

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fundamentalist,” that person is giving a theology *of* the sacraments or a theology *of* the Bible. Most labels for theological positions reflect “theology *of*”: liberal and conservative; orthodox and heterodox; Lutheran, Reformed, Catholic, Pentecostal. By contrast, a theology *for* something makes that something possible. The clearest recent example in North American Lutheranism is Gerhard Forde’s articulation of systematic theology *for the proclamation* of the Gospel.⁴ Forde took to heart that theology is not an end in itself, but rather must make possible, indeed, must foster and promote making the promises of God. Accordingly, he spelled out how we should speak about God, sin, Christ, and the Word so that the Gospel in clear, unmistakable terms would be proclaimed. In a similar way, a theology *for* mission is theology articulated to make possible, indeed, to foster and promote the mission of the Church.

You might be asking yourself, “Isn’t the theology that contributes toward the Church in mission simply all of Christian theology?” I would answer, “Yes,” and then, before you could say anything more, I would add “And the point of speaking of a theology *for* mission is to ensure that we deal with theology fully.” Mission—understood broadly as witnessing to, dealing with, living among any and all people, including those who are not followers of Christ—represents the broadest horizons for theology. If you have a theology that makes you ready and able to witness to, explain, and defend the Christian story, message, teachings, reflections, practices, life, and values; if you have a theology that makes you ready and willing to listen carefully and respond empathetically to those who live according to a different story; if you have a theology that allows you to learn and grow and to repent and do better among those who have doubts and fears about Christ and Christians, then you have a theology *for* all kinds of situations.

“The point of speaking of a theology *for* mission is to ensure that we deal with theology fully.” Mission—understood broadly as witnessing to, dealing with, living among any and all people, including those who are not followers of Christ—represents the broadest horizons for theology.

This does not mean you have all the answers or know all the right responses. This rather means that your theology is something that will be able to grow and deepen with experience, even (and especially) trying ones, and something into which you also will grow and deepen.

I have used the verb “grow” deliberately, because theology should be *organic*. It should be capable of developing and maturing. It should grow more and more natural and also more and more rich and deep. It should be resilient and tough.

What kind of theology would be organic in this way? One that is *intuitive*. By *intuitive*, I mean where one thing leads readily to another, and to another, and to

another. A piece of theology that is intuitive and organic is one that starts from something basic and grows and grows. An excellent example of this is in the first part of the Augsburg Confession (articles 1–21). The Augsburg Confession (AC) itself builds upon the ancient creeds (articles 1, 3, and 17), and its starting point is this familiar claim: “The righteous will live by faith.” No, the AC does not actually state this as a starting point, but “The righteous will live by faith” is clearly the theme. What is sin? Unbelief—not having true faith in God but always wanting things to go *your* way (AC 2). What is righteousness? You are justified not by your own works or merits or intentions but by faith (AC 4). How do you obtain this faith? From God when He gives the gospel and the sacraments (AC 5). What does this mean for your life? Faith will produce good fruit and good works; your life of faith will be one of new obedience to what God commands (AC 6). How do you understand the Church? The one holy Church consists of all believers among whom the gospel is preached purely and the sacraments administered rightly (AC 7). What about false Christians, hypocrites, and openly sinful people in our churches? The Church, properly speaking, consists of believers, but the sacraments are still at work even if the ministers themselves are wicked (AC 8). What about the sacraments? How do they matter? They are signs of God’s grace toward us, and they are intended to awaken and strengthen faith (AC 9–13). AC 14 deals with public ministry of the word and sacraments. AC 15 deals with the humanly devised traditions and ceremonies so important to the medieval life (they have a point, but don’t let them contradict the gospel). AC 16 considers the life of believers in the world (go ahead; have a life). AC 18 and 19 deal more with sin. AC 20 deals more with faith and works. And, finally, AC 21: What should we think about saints? You should remember them so that your own faith is strengthened by the grace God showed them and by how faith sustained them. As I said, an intuitive and organic theology, working from the claim, “The righteous will live by faith.”

The key to an intuitive and organic theology is, in the end, Jesus. But this turns out not to be helpful as a starting point. Why? Because, as I sometimes joke, half of the right answers in seminary is “Jesus,” but you don’t know which half. As I observed earlier, our systematic theology curriculum begins with “What is a Christian?” and works with the answer, “A Christian is a person who lives according to a particular account of everything.” Then we take up the particular Christian account of everything, which is the story of God and His creation. This story, in turn, comes to its climax in the mission, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. At this point, the theology opens up and becomes capable of dealing with all sorts of questions and challenges. Why do you think this is true? If it is true, how does one escape judgment when Jesus returns? Where did you get this story? If your God is truly God, then who am I—and who are you? Where do we find your God now? How do you know how God considers you personally? How does God matter for life right now? What are the social and political implications of your God, and of the presence of you believers? Do you have any standards, and, if so, where did they come from and how do you use

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them? These are some of the questions that we in effect deal with in our introductory course, along with their answers and implications, not only for self-reflection but also for engagement with others.

I have to draw matters to a conclusion, so I won't pursue this any further. But I do urge all of you to work for a genuine, intuitive, organic theology *for* mission.

Concluding Thoughts

Because it is widely used, formal theological education has an important impact on the mission of the Church. This impact may not always be positive, but in any case, it certainly exists.

I am glad to say that Concordia Seminary has some awareness and appreciation of this impact, and it does work to make it more and more positive. I believe our most recent curriculum revision amounts to several steps in the right direction, and I am confident that we aren't about to stop.

But we didn't do this alone, and we won't continue alone either. I mean not only the God who comes through His Son and by His Spirit, but also the people of God, including you. The latter part of this piece focused on the "theological" in theological education. My experience has convinced me that mission and mission thinking will benefit from more thorough, more thoughtful, and more honest conversation. I hope you will engage me and others in it.

Endnotes

¹ *Vicarage* in Missouri Synod parlance is "in-service education," conducted under the supervision of an experienced pastor. Residential MDiv students are required to complete a twelve-month vicarage. Students in the EIIT and SMP programs serve vicarages that run concurrently with their studies, which normally run four years. For more about Concordia Seminary's *MissionShift* Institute, see "Concordia Seminary Creates Branch of Twin Cities' *MissionShift* Institute," <https://www.csl.edu/2012/08/concordia-seminary-creates-branch-of-twin-cities-missionshift-institute/>.

² As regular readers of this journal know, Kou Seying died in 2019. The May 2020 issue of *Lutheran Mission Matters* included several remembrances of Kou and also two of his articles. I know I speak for many in saying that I eagerly look forward to seeing him at the resurrection of the dead and in the life of the world to come.

³ If you would like a fuller summary of our approach to curriculum design, see two articles I wrote for the seminary's magazine: "Revised Curriculum Aims to Prepare Better Pastors," *Concordia Seminary* (Summer 2016), 14–17, https://issuu.com/concordiasem/docs/csm_summer_final; and "Revised Curriculum: Preparing Pastors to Serve Effectively, Faithfully," *Concordia Seminary Magazine* (Summer 2017), 10–13, <https://issuu.com/concordiasem/docs/csmsummer2017>.

⁴ Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).