

The LISA Curriculum: Theological Education in the Service of God's Mission

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Abstract: The article presents an overview of the curriculum which the Luther Institute—Southeast Asia has developed in response to the request of churches there. Presented first are the principles which have guided its development as a theological education program in the service of God's mission. After the curriculum overview, challenges ahead are suggested. As a "work in progress," the LISA Board invites your response and constructive suggestions so that it might continue to revise and improve its curriculum for a strengthened program of missionary service as it moves into the future

The curriculum of the Luther Institute—Southeast Asia (LISA) has evolved over a period of time. The original architects of the LISA program were the Rev. Dr. Leonard Harms, mission executive of the Lutheran Church—Canada (LCC); the Rev. Dr. Jeff Ehlers, former missionary of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) in Thailand and now president of the Garuna Foundation, a nonprofit organization committed to Lutheran missionary service in Southeast Asia; and the Rev. Ted NaThalang, Asian representative of the Lutheran Heritage Foundation (LHF) and former LCMS missionary to Thailand. The three were responding to the request of the congregations that had been established in Thailand through the mission work of the LCMS and the LCC beginning in the mid-1970s. The request was for theological education to raise up future leaders for the churches there. The three devised a curriculum that covered biblical basics, Lutheran doctrine, and a variety of practical ministry courses. Courses were taught in week-long seminars in Thailand and Cambodia, for the most part by pastors and professors from the seminaries of the LCC, but also some pastors of the LCMS. Courses were offered as instructors were available to teach them, a total of seventeen courses over the span of three and a half years (2006–2009).

In 2010, the author of this article was asked to assume the role of Executive Director of LISA. At the beginning of his service, the LISA Board was enlarged to include the Rev. Vanarith Chhim, the newly elected president of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Cambodia; the Rev. Carl Hanson, the LCMS missionary charged with responsibility for theological education in Asia; the Rev. Dr. Jacob Preus,

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former academic vice president of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, and president of Concordia University, Irvine, California; and the author, a former missionary to Japan, parish pastor, district president and member of the Distance Education Leading To Ordination (DELTO) and Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) program committees. The original LISA Board of three continued to serve. During the next five years through the collaboration of the board, professors and pastors who were recruited to prepare and teach courses, and the interaction with national pastors and teachers, the curriculum was revised to take the form we present to you in this article. As mentioned at the outset, we share it with you, our readers, for your consideration and possible use, and for your feedback and constructive criticism so that it may be further molded for the sake of the Lord's mission.

Principles Informing the Development of the Curriculum

A. The curriculum should be missionary in orientation. What this means is that what we have received is to be passed on. Paul, the great missionary teacher, expressed it well: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received" (1 Cor 15:3). The Son of God Himself made clear this dynamic orientation: no one would know the Father if He did not make Him known. (See Matthew 11:25–27.) In John 14:1–14, Jesus let Philip know that He had shown him the Father and implied that the relay of this truth would be accomplished by His disciples, for they would do greater works than the Son did. His ministry was for the salvation of the world, but His service itself was restricted to one area of the world. Through His disciples all the nations were to know.

B. Christ is the center of the revelation (Lk 24:25, 26, 44–48). This principle highlights not only the Old Testament's pointing to Him as its fulfillment, but also that this message of repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached "to all nations." It moves forward from its center to the ends of the earth.

C. The curriculum should be solidly grounded in the Scriptures and conform to the understanding of those Scriptures as reflected in the Lutheran Confessions. We want to carry out the LISA ministry in the spirit of our Lutheran forebears, who were convinced that "especially the youth who are being trained for service in the church and for the holy ministry may be instructed faithfully and diligently, so that among our descendants the pure teaching and confession of the faith may be *kept and spread* through the help and assistance of the Holy Spirit until the glorious return of our only redeemer and savior Jesus Christ" (emphasis added).¹ If that is what we want for our descendants, is not that what we should desire for all people?

This commitment will be demonstrated in a "spiral approach" to the curriculum, whereby basic teachings and concepts are introduced early in the curriculum, but then repeated again and again, ever seeking to deepen and enrich the students' understanding. As an illustration, the Law-Gospel dialectic appears in the two initial courses and then again in the courses on biblical interpretation, worship, preaching, etc.

D. The program should be open to all who are qualified for its rigors, enjoy the endorsement of their churches, and sincerely wish to study with us, thus placing themselves under the Word and wisdom of God. The founders of LISA believe that the treasure of the Gospel is such that it should be safeguarded from distortion but never buried. Rather it is to be invested in the lives of all who are open to it and desire to be formed by it. The LISA Board sees this approach as a matter of responsible stewardship (cf. Mt 25:14–30.)

E. The curriculum should be contextually and culturally relevant. A series of Ministerial Formation Outcomes was developed by national church leaders and missionaries to guide this process in the areas of (a) desired personal characteristics, (b) biblical knowledge, and (c) ministerial skills. To foster a responsible indigenization, national teachers have been utilized for instruction, where qualified ones are available, so that courses can be taught in the students’ “heart languages” and misunderstandings minimized. National teachers receive training through regular teachers’ meetings. (In effect, this process also illustrates the missionary orientation of “passing on what one has received,” mentioned in the first principle.)

F. The courses are designed with a modular approach. In this way they can be offered in week-long seminars, biweekly all-day classes, or classes held once a week. Typically, a course has 24 hours of contact time, or eight modules. Normally, five courses are taught each year; students can thus maintain their jobs, care for their churches, and be involved with their families.

G. It is understood that courses are subject to revision, that weaknesses may be corrected, misunderstandings clarified, and improvements made so that the courses are the most helpful possible. “Working documents” is a common phrase in LISA discussions. At the end of the second cycle of classes, it has become evident that there is need for greater attention given to helping students realize how their theology is to be put into practice. Evangelical theology needs to be practiced evangelically. At this point a mentoring program for teachers and other church leaders is being developed to meet this shortfall. Envisioned is an intentional mentoring process whereby national teachers are equipped to mentor their students with what might be called “supervised in-service learning.”

The Curriculum Described

A. The courses in Year One can be described as laying the foundation. The first course is *See through the Scriptures*, authored by Dr. Harry Wendt of Crossways International. It is meant to give students an overview of salvation history and acquaint students with key scriptural themes, such as sin and grace. Its transcultural illustrations aid in assisting its students to grasp its content. The second course, *Luther’s Small Catechism*, is designed to help the students realize that the Christian faith is a religion of revelation. They are called to learn its message that they might come to know God and begin living the Christ-like life. The missionary

orientation of the curriculum shows itself right at the outset, for students are expected to pass on to their families and friends, their neighbors and congregations, what they are learning. This is to take place throughout the first year of the program, even as the students move on to the third and fourth courses in the curriculum: surveys of the Old and New Testaments, providing background material such as a good study Bible might provide. The design is to stimulate and encourage the students actually to read the Scriptures with understanding. After being introduced to this literature inductively, the fifth course, *Reading the Bible with Understanding*, is intended to help the students realize that there are basic principles which can and should be followed in biblical studies. Utilized for this course is the book by Lane Burgland with the same title.

B. The courses for Year Two are designed to help students grow in the ministerial leadership roles many are already playing in their congregations. The course on Christian worship (#201) emphasizes that God alone is to be worshiped. Worship should lead us to hear the voice of God and then respond to it with prayer and praise, confession and participation. Since worship has a corporate, communal character, it does well to have order to it, enabling worshipers to participate, celebrating the life of Christ through Scriptures, sermon and song, and learning how it leads to living life as worship. Christian worship has a sacramental character to it, as Baptism is remembered and the Lord's Supper celebrated. Students are taught how to plan for the congregation's worship, that it may lead those who worship to dedicate their lives as an offering to God.

The second course in Year Two is *Homiletics*. As one might expect, the students are helped to move from textual study to proclamation, with the end product of their labors being messages that are Christ-centered and biblically-grounded, leading their hearers to realize their sinfulness and then to receive God's grace in Jesus Christ. The goal is trust in God and life as His people.

The third course, *Christian Education*, is designed to help those who teach to involve their students in the process of learning. The hope is that this will enable them better to assimilate what they are being taught into their way of thinking and relating. This interactive approach to the teaching-learning process can be culturally challenging, but the LISA team believes it reflects Jesus' way of instructing His disciples.

The fourth course is an exegetical one on the Gospel according to St. Matthew. Through this course, we seek to help our students not only gain skill in interpreting the Scriptures by focusing on one book of the Bible, but also grow in their understanding and appreciation of who Jesus is—the Christ, the Messiah—and what it means to follow Him, to be His disciple. In this way, the course is an exegetical approach to teaching Christology and discipleship.

The final course in the second year is *Christian Stewardship*. As the courses on Christian education and discipleship focus on Christian living, so is this course intended to help students grow in living the Christian life by seeing it from the

perspective of stewardship. By seeing God as their Lord and Owner, who has purchased and redeemed them by the high cost of Jesus' life and death, they are urged to see stewardship as a tremendous privilege. They have incredible dignity, for they are trustees, or managers, for God. They are helped to see that stewardship embraces not just time and money, but also their relationships with people and creation, the care and investment of the Gospel. The course addresses, too, leadership of the Christian congregation as a matter of stewardship. The gifts God has entrusted to its members are to be employed in a manner that enables each member to take his or her place in the congregation's life. In this way, the congregation is built up and God is glorified in the world, as the world sees how the congregation works together in love.

C. The courses in Year Three are designed to help students grow in sharing their faith. The first course, *Equipping the whole Priesthood for its Ministry*, can be put into practice in the congregation throughout this year. Students are helped to see the missionary dimension of this important doctrinal concept. God chose Israel to be His kingdom of priests, because the whole earth was His. He owned it all. His design was to use Israel as His servant to inform the world of His lordship through their witness and service. Unfortunately, Israel failed in that mission, but fortunately Jesus was the perfect priest, who brought in the kingdom of God and now entrusts that worldwide mission to the church. Through its witness and service, the church represents God to the world and, through its prayers, it represents the world to God. The course explores how the pastor can equip the congregation for its vital mediatorial, missionary role between God and the world and empower it to carry it out in all aspects of its vocation.

The second course, *Survey of Church History*, is meant to help our students understand that as the church grew it encountered opportunities and challenges: to connect with the people of the new cultures to which the Gospel had led it. Its challenge was to relate meaningfully, but without compromising Christian teaching through cultural accommodation. As Paul had to counter the Greeks' negative view of the body with the positive understanding that the Creator gave to it and with which Jesus endowed it in His care of the body and His resurrection from the tomb, even so every missionary faces the challenge of communicating scriptural truth in culturally meaningful ways without surrendering Gospel truth to the recipient culture. Through this study of church history, students are sensitized to the challenges in their own cultures today.

The third course, *Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions*, is meant to help students see how our Lutheran ancestors responded to their context and challenges and left us a treasure that is more than a model. The focus is especially on the three ecumenical creeds, the Augsburg Confession, and the Large Catechism, which have all been translated into the languages of the cultures where LISA is engaged. By reading these documents in translation, students are helped to see the dynamic nature

of the Lutheran Christian faith and provided motivation to think through how they can stand in that same tradition of faithfully passing on what they have received.

The fourth course, *The Mission of God and our Involvement in It*, is designed to help church leaders realize that all the members of the Christian church are to serve as witnesses and servants of God in the world. We on the LISA Board, however, are sensing that some of the emphases of this course are anticipated in the *Priesthood of All Believers* course and that other of its emphases can probably be more helpfully addressed in a new course yet to be developed: *Encountering the Religions and Churches of Southeast Asia*. The new course will help our national pastors and teachers work through some of the issues they face as they bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to their lands.

The fifth course in Year Three is an exegetical course designed to help students gain interpretative skill in reading a New Testament letter, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*. The study of this letter will lead the students to experience the profound way in which the Apostle Paul, the great missionary to the Gentiles, articulated Christian doctrine in the service of God's mission. It will also serve as a good review of basic Christian doctrine, with which the students have become acquainted in their study of both Luther's Small Catechism (#102) and the Augsburg Confession and Large Catechism (#303), and as an anticipation of their further study of Christian doctrine in the fourth year courses, #402 and #404. In this way, students are experiencing the spiral nature of the curriculum design and are hopefully growing in their appreciation of sound biblical teaching.

D. The courses in Year Four, as just suggested, are designed to solidify our students in their understanding of Christian doctrine and, just as significantly, to help them grow in their pastoral practice.

The initial course highlights the missionary dimension of pastoral theology. It is an extension of Jesus' ministry in the world, a "go and find" ministry in contrast to a "sit and wait" ministry, which emanates from the cross of Jesus Christ. It has a threefold thrust: find My lost ones, feed My lambs, protect My sheep. It is powered by the forgiveness of sins and thus is marked by spiritual authority, which is different from the world's authority. Forgiveness also shapes and forms the pastor to be an agent of the Lord, as he serves God's people.

The second and fourth courses, a deeper look at Christian doctrine, utilize Robert Kolb's book, *The Christian Faith: A Lutheran Exposition*, to help students grow in their knowledge and appreciation of evangelical teaching. The first course covers the material of the first half of the book, through the work of Christ and the teaching of justification by grace through faith; the second course covers the material beginning with the work of the Holy Spirit and continuing through the end of all things.

The third course, *Christian Care-giving*, examines the benefit of a healthy Christian community in caring for those in need and distress. God created the world so that His loving presence (*agape*) would be with His people. Because of sin,

everyone must handle situations in a self-protective manner (*incurvatus in se*). This sinful “selfness” is the cause of mental, emotional, and relationship dysfunction. God’s love in Christ gives new hope. As He lives within the hearts of believers, a *new self* can handle situations much differently, bringing the healing power of God’s love into daily life. This course provides practical strategies and application to the power of the new self in Christian care-giving.

The final course is meant to be a capstone for the LISA curriculum, drawing on the Lutheran “distinctives” to help our students grow in practicing an evangelical ministry. In addition to the traditional emphases of “Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone,” and concepts such as “at the same time saint and sinner” (*simul justus et peccator*), this course highlights especially the theology of the cross and the freedom of the Christian. The course is meant to help our students realize how down-to-earth Lutheran theology is, how it calls a thing what it is, and finds in what God has done for us in Jesus Christ the wisdom and strength to serve with love, carrying out with dignity and hope His ministry as a liberated child of God.

In looking back over the past five years and the development of the above curriculum, I believe that much of the credit for the benefits it has provided to its students and the churches they are serving rests in the professors and pastors who revised existing courses, developed new ones, and served sacrificially and willingly, utilizing their talents for the good of the Lord’s mission. There is no way they can be thanked adequately.

Challenges Ahead

A. Taking the long view is critical. Identified as a challenge by the LISA Board is the necessity of providing “service learning,” “on-the-job training,” “a supervised internship or vicarage,” especially when there is not in any of the cultures in which we are working a cadre of well-trained, experienced Lutheran pastors who can immediately fill the role of mentor, coach, or supervising pastor. A two-year plan is being developed to provide mentoring for our national teachers and leaders so that they in turn might fill the role of mentors to the LISA students. Wrapped around the theme of “the mind of Christ,” these twice yearly seminars and visitations to these teacher-leaders are designed to help the pastors grow as persons, leaders, shepherds, and peers. It is the conviction of the LISA Board that this program of intentional mentoring will also foster the further indigenization of the LISA curriculum and its effectiveness for the Lord’s mission.

B. An additional goal articulated by the national church bodies is to have the program accredited so that its graduates can receive recognition for the knowledge and skills they have gained. At this point, exploratory talks are being held with Concordia Theological Seminary in Hong Kong to see if some collaborative approach to meet this goal can be found.

In submitting this overview of the LISA curriculum², the author, together with LISA’s new Executive Director, the Rev. Dr. Jacob A. O. Preus, III, wish to share

with you the product of our efforts over the last ten years so that you may consider whether they might have value for your missionary context, and secondly, to solicit your constructive suggestions for the improvement of this program of theological education. Our ultimate goal is that our program of theological education will serve the mission of God to reach all people with the good news of what His Son has accomplished for the salvation of the world.

Endnotes

¹ R. Kolb, T. J. Wengert, & C. P. Arand, "Introduction to the Book of Concord" in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 14.

² View the curriculum at https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0B8wR_Yvswp-UZjZwYU5YUDI5LTA&usp=drive_web. At this time, this link allows those who visit it to view the materials, but not to print or download.