Realities and Trajectories

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Many of you will no doubt have encountered numerous reports over the last decade or so of changes going on in the Lutheran seminaries in this country, reports that perhaps have triggered hard questions or feelings of alarm. “What in the world is going on at our (local, favorite, alumni) seminary!” you might have said. These reactions are realistic, because there has been an entire raft of changes in Lutheran seminaries in the past few years, and from the sound of them, one could reasonably conclude that these changes were undertaken because the seminaries were in trouble. Well, these perceptions are at least partially correct, and it can rightly be said that seminary education as a whole in North America, and among the Lutherans, is undergoing some dramatic changes, ones that are not always for the better. But there are forces that are relentlessly driving many of these changes, and it is important to understand these underlying dynamics. As a seminary professor and as a historian of American Lutheran history, I’d like to lay out both the recent and long-term contexts for the current position of the seminaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. (Much is parallel with those of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, but I will leave their particulars to others). My purpose here is not necessarily to defend all the recent decisions made by the ELCA seminaries, nor to dissect particular changes, but rather to lay out the over-arching realities that have driven the seminaries to take the actions that they have.

Over the past fifty to seventy-five years (after World War II), American Lutherans developed a consensus model of seminary education, one that was actually quite a fine process

for producing pastors. There were two streams of influence for this model. The first was the long tradition of university-based theological education that was brought to this country from the European state churches, a tradition that was rigorously academic and theological, including the study of classical languages and dogmatic theology. The second stream came through the more pietistically influenced European mission schools, whose initial goal was to produce pastors for home and foreign missions, focusing more on faith formation and practical ministry skills. The ambitious goal of postwar American Lutherans was this; to combine the best of these two traditions into a single process, forming pastors to be academically sound, spiritually wise, and practically ready for ministry. Throughout the nineteenth century, and into the 1950s, this goal was often compromised by outside realities; financial weakness, Lutheran divisions, and the crushing need to take poorly prepared students and develop enough pastors to meet the demands of the congregations. This often led to short-cuts in seminary education that belied their lofty visions of themselves, but those visions still animated their hope for the future.

By the 1960s, a number of those previous limitations had eased, and the possibility of fully implementing this ideal of seminary education seemed to be within reach. Seminaries were able to hire a new generation of faculty with full academic credentials (PhD or similar) from research universities, some even from Europe; they were also able to pay these faculty members better. Professionalization of the arts of ministry was also a key goal, and a new generation of faculty was developed here. Seminary facilities were upgraded, and in the Lutheran Church in America and the American Lutheran Church weaker regional seminaries were merged into stronger, consolidated ones. The degree programs were strengthened, and the old Bachelor of Divinity (BD) was upgraded to a Master of Divinity degree (MDiv). The ideal model of a student was this: a young man, recent graduate of a liberal arts college (preferably one of the

Lutheran colleges) would move to the seminary campus. He would take a degree program that lasted four years, first two years in academic study, then a third year internship, and a final year back at the seminary; to this was also added a quarter-year of pastoral education in a clinical setting (CPE). This was a cohort model of education, where a class of seminarians went through the process together. Pastoral and spiritual formation would occur in common activities on the seminary campus, led by the example of the faculty. Even when the ALC and LCA decided to begin ordaining women, this model held full force, well into the 1990s. As it was conceived it was a very good model of theological education, even if were not always fully attainable.

It must be remembered, however, that this model of seminary education was both expansive and expensive. Upgrading seminary facilities and faculties was quite expensive, and a prolonged, four-year Master's degree (much longer and more intricate than others) was quite a stretch to sustain. The seminaries managed this with robust financial support from the denominations, with the sacrificial personal contributions of young women and men (mostly single) who could commit to a lengthy degree program, and by still rather modest salaries for seminary employees. A number of factors from the 1970s to the 1990s stressed this model; rampant inflation drove up costs faster than could be met, more second-career students and their families came to seminaries, and denominational contributions to seminary support stagnated. Seminaries generally met these challenges by raising tuition for the students, and by implementing new programs for direct fund-raising. These developments stressed the seminaries, but they managed to hold on to the basics of the model.

However, since the middle of the 1990s, these efforts to stem the pressures on seminary education have reached the end of their effectiveness, and additional external and internal factors have arisen to further complicate the current model. These new factors include significant

periods of financial downturn which limited external fundraising from donors, the "draw" from seminary endowments, and the personal financial resources of seminarians. The cost of undergraduate education, especially at the favored church-related liberal arts colleges soared, meaning that many candidates enter seminary with tens of thousands of dollars (or more) in student loan debt. Conflicts and recent decisions in the ELCA have occasioned the largest Lutheran schism since the 1860s, with the departure of over ten percent of ELCA congregations (more than 1,000), and the weakening of many others. After twenty-five years the national ELCA budget is, in real dollars, one-third of what it was in 1988; to its credit the national ELCA has attempted to shield the seminaries from the worst of the budget cuts, but there is no hope of additional resources from that direction. On top of this, there has been in the past few years a significant decline in the numbers of candidates entering the seminaries, thus reducing tuition revenues. It could be said that these factors combined have been a "triple whammies" or an un-holy trinity of trouble. The seminaries have held on as long as they could with the "easier fixes," and now are being forced into substantive change.

One of the key issues facing the ELCA seminaries these days is the financial situation of their students, something of which the seminaries are keenly aware, and which drives much of their thinking about change. The question of raising the tuition substantially is not possible – this was done from the 1970s to the recent past, and simply cannot be continued. With generally substantial undergraduate student debt load, and the need for meeting seminary costs, many of our students carry educational debt that is verging on the unsustainable, especially for those who will go out into parishes where their salaries will be modest. This debt load also burdens congregations, who struggle to be able to afford and employ our graduates. What this means is that the seminaries have had to focus on ways to allow students to either work more while they

are in seminary, or to find ways to reduce the time it takes them to finish their degrees and move toward ordination. Some strategies have been to bunch classes, or offer them as intensives, so that a student might have to be on campus less often, allowing them to work, or to take over childcare for a working spouse. But this is not enough. There are a number of potential seminary students for whom it is not feasible to move to a seminary campus; they have situations with jobs or family or other local commitments that hold them where they are. Often many of them are in rural areas or scattered around the country, and they are already doing substantial ministries in their local congregations, many as pastors in everything but name. Not only can they not move to the seminary campus, but if they were to do so, their local congregations would suffer or even collapse. Programs for commuting students or distance (online) seminary education are often the only way to make it possible for these students to become pastors.

All these factors, and the accommodations that have been made, have seriously eroded the traditional formative model of pastoral education that peaked in the late twentieth century. Fewer students on campus means less revenue for housing, food services, and other auxiliary enterprises. Campus bookstores have been devastated by competition from on-line booksellers like Amazon.com and others. With thinning budgets, the seminaries cannot support these activities at a deficit. Visitors to campus notice these effects and the cuts in personnel and services, and wonder what is going on – they say the campus seems like a ghost town. There is pastoral education going on, but perhaps not in the same way that have been typical in the past. But it is certainly tough on all concerned: the student, the faculty and staff, and the seminary supporters. Having developed expansive physical facilities, the seminaries struggle to maintain them for more limited educational programs, hence the efforts to sell off or rent under-used properties, or other similar arrangements.

One major trend, well documented in the recent years, has been the process of ELCA seminaries seeking outside partners with which to affiliate. Southern Seminary with Lenoir-Rhyne, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and California Lutheran, and now Trinity Seminary with Capital University are three such affiliations right now; others may come. Luther Seminary is not merging formally with Augsburg College, but they are exploring ways to combine services and share costs. PLTS is selling its campus and moving to downtown Berkeley. The most dramatic of these developments is the merger (or whatever it is called) of the Gettysburg and Philadelphia seminaries, although some of the details of this are still to be determined. Obviously, these changes have many people (rightly) concerned, and the question of the hour is this: how far can these cuts and changes go before they seriously compromise the theological education of our pastors? This is a reasonable concern, and one, frankly, that is of concern for us in the seminaries, as well.

The trouble is that many of these changes have happened in haste, being necessitated by compelling circumstances, and have not happened in the best ways. This has led to hard feelings, complaints of stakeholders not being consulted, and sometimes in uneven or inconsistent results. There has been real, personal pain involved, and has left some of those remaining in the seminary communities fearful or demoralized; these factors should not be minimized. There is the lingering doubt in many minds – are we done, have we “hit bottom,” or is there more to come? These are realities that many leading our seminaries have to face. The seminaries are also accountable for sometimes foolish decisions and/or positions that they have taken over the years, and the ways in which they have sometimes compounded the outside pressures they have faced. I would not attempt to defend some of these decisions, but simply say that each seminary community must face up to the effects of these decisions.

Now, it is time to consider the future, near and far. I take to heart the maxim of my doctoral adviser, Martin Marty, who would say that while he was not optimistic, but he was hopeful about the future. Without being "Pollyannaish" about it, there are possibilities that these pressures and circumstances can lead to new models of theological education, models that might well help to develop programs of ministerial education that actually fit the situation of North American Christianity in the early twenty-first century. And perhaps there are older models of pastoral education and formation from our history that can help, understanding that the genesis of our now beleaguered current model is actually fairly recent. Remember that historically, seminaries are a fairly recent development for American Lutherans, dating back to the first seminary in 1826. Before this, American Lutherans had almost 200 years of training pastors without seminaries, along an apprentice model. Other innovations, such as an internship year, were also a hastily implemented change, necessitated by the trauma of the Depression of the 1930s. Being forced into new models can be managed into substantive improvements, if they are thoughtfully carried out.

Much of what is happening is forcing theological education back into the parish, and this is not necessarily a bad thing. For a number of reasons our seminary students now are working significant jobs in their home or local congregations, which has the effect of a contextualized education. The old apprenticeship models might bear revisiting, as long as the seminaries can partner with supervising pastors in meaningful and significant ways. The trend toward less time and fewer credits toward the degree means that continuing theological education after graduation is an absolute necessity, and all of us in the ELCA must find meaningful ways to make this happen. Partnerships with the ELCA colleges could assist both colleges and seminaries, perhaps with programs that would combine a BA and MDiv degree into a single process (another

historical model to emulate). Seminary curriculums are becoming more streamlined; the question is how to keep them focused and meaningful, and how to assure that such education is pointed and appropriate to our new religious world.

This has not been a defense of all the changes, it is an attempt to honestly set forth the context in which they have been made. We in the seminary world are trying to make sense of our new realities, and we need your help, your support, and even your correction (when needed). Above all, we need your engagement and your positive ideas, so that we might serve Christ's churches in North America into our twenty-first century.

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