



THE BEST OF TIMES, THE WORST OF TIMES FOR THE LCMS SEMINARIES

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For as much as people claim to dislike history, our present is routinely beholden to our own personal intersections with history. The church is no exception. Often our present decisions (or indecision) are shaped by our institutional history. The great challenge to the church occurs when the history with which we live fails to meet our present realities. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the ongoing decline of our Lutheran schools.

When I arrived in the Bronx in 2001, there were four Lutheran schools in the Bronx and northern Manhattan, the Lutheran school in Harlem having just recently closed its doors. By 2006, Our Saviour, my parish school, was the only one remaining. Each of the urban schools had long ago ceased to be “Lutheran schools” in the traditional sense. 95% percent of each student body was non-Lutheran, and the vast majority of the teachers, frequently even administrators, were non-Lutheran. The demographics of the surrounding communities had changed, but in many cases congregational histories failed to record the change and respond to it.

One school that closed was St. Matthew’s, affiliated with the oldest Lutheran church in North America. Despite declining enrollment, its institutional identity continued to be shaped more by its historical founding in 1664 than its current presence in a heavily Dominican immigrant neighborhood. But longevity is not enough to give purpose. Neither is even a more recent historical legacy with names like Oswald Hoffman, John Tietjen, and Herman Otten. Perhaps it was a sense of history that made closing the school so difficult, but by the time the doors were closed, hundreds

of thousands of dollars had been lost and St. Matthew’s was homeless, albeit with an endowment to continue the ministry. Ultimately it was a reimagining of what it meant to be St. Matthew’s that saved the church—but so late in the day, it came at the cost of a school and a building.

Grace Lutheran Church and School was not so fortunate. Long an important presence on the busy Grand Concourse artery of the Bronx, Grace, too, saw a dwindling enrollment, but was slower to react. With significant financial losses over its last few years, a failure to reimagine its own history led to the shutting of both the church and the school.

In contrast, one of the greatest successes of the school closures was at Trinity Lutheran School, where under the leadership of the pastor, John Hannah, the decision was made to close the school before it reached a terminal crisis. Facing financial challenges, the church decided to partner with

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Lutheran Social Services of Metro New York to open a state-funded school for troubled youth. The shape of ministry had changed, but educational ministry continued. The new school use also provided much-needed funds for Trinity to continue its ministry among the residents of one of the Bronx’s poorest neighborhoods, though in a different form.

These three different stories are archetypical of what will become more common as time goes on. An aging denominational demographic means fewer students, which in turn means that congregation-funded schools for church parishioners will soon be the exception rather than the rule. Declining membership levels in the churches may place

pressure on the funding of schools even before the children disappear. Churches that come to grips with their changing realities will survive. Those which fail to answer the questions of “Why do we have a school?” or “Does

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it have to look this way?” with answers other than “history” likely will not. When a school collapses, failure to make the timely and difficult decisions can mean the quick death of a congregation as well.

It is with this in the background that I suggest it may be time to close one of the seminaries of the LCMS, though our history would tell us otherwise. We have always had two seminaries as an important counterbalance to one another. Martin Noland traces their history in “A Tale of Two Seminaries” in the Summer 2008 issue of *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*. Historically, Concordia Theological Seminary (CTS) in Springfield, Illinois (now Ft. Wayne, Indiana) was the “practical seminary,” designed for the training of “second career” pastors or those who had not come through the fabled Missouri system of schools. CTS was the “emergency seminary” for pastors founded in 1846 by Wilhelm Loehe and his missionaries, foremost among them Wilhelm Sihler. St. Louis, the “theoretical seminary,” was founded in 1839 and from the beginning was the apex of the system—with the LCMS’s first synodical president C. F. W. Walther serving also as the seminary’s first president. Over time its reputation grew as it trained not just

pastors but also theologians who had already mastered Greek, German, Latin, Hebrew, and philosophy, usually through the synod’s extensive prep school system.

The institutional histories experienced a dramatic change in the mid-1970s with the closing of the senior college in Ft. Wayne and the subsequent dismantling of the synod’s prep school system, both done to meet changing times and in part to address doctrinal concerns. This in turn led to a new approach to training pastors as gradually more and more students were entering seminary from secular or non-Lutheran colleges.

When CTS, the “practical seminary” in Springfield, was moved to Ft. Wayne in 1976, its president, Robert Preus, transformed it into more of a “theoretical seminary” so that by the mid-1980s there was little left to distin-

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guish the Ft. Wayne and St. Louis seminaries from one another in terms of their target students. Whereas before second-career students or those with limited academic potential would have gone to Ft. Wayne, now Ft. Wayne’s academic reputation was beginning to rival St. Louis’s. St. Louis, recognizing that they now had to compete for second-career students with families to survive, built a whole neighborhood of family houses for their students and welcomed students without the foundation in biblical languages through an ever-growing intensive summer language class. In the end, Noland observes, “At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has two seminaries that basically do the same thing.”¹

The history has changed, but how has the synod changed to meet its changing reality? The continuing

need for “emergency pastors” led to the infamous 1989 “Wichita Resolution” which licensed “lay ministers” for word and sacrament ministry in some circumstances. Later, a “Distance Education Leading to Ordination” (DELTO) program was created to try and provide a non-residential path to ordination for individuals who were already serving in (usually financially marginal) parishes. The establishment of a Specific Ministry Program (SMP) at the 2007 LCMS convention sought to consolidate all of the “emergency pastor” programs into one non-residential, alternate-route program.

As the seminary in Fort Wayne became like the one in St. Louis in the type of pastors they were producing, these alternate route programs became the new “Fort Wayne,” i.e., the producers of emergency pastors. With the two institutional seminaries serving the same role, expensive duplication has occurred: two recruitment offices, two development arms, two facilities, two faculties, two libraries, two theological journals, two sets of overhead expenses. In other words, too much duplication for a limited pool of students who will be sent out to serve too few parishes that can afford a full-time pastor.

What has also changed is the wider church situation in which our seminaries operate. With an ever growing number of congregations that are

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marginal in their ability to fund a full-time pastor, the synod has established the SMP program to try and prepare

men for ordination as “worker-priests” in these congregations. St. Louis seminary president Dale Meyer estimates that 40% of the current student body of St. Louis is made up of these non-residential, non-traditional students.²

Taken all together: the changing situation within the Missouri Synod; fewer congregations able to support a full-time pastor; the development of alternate-route programs leading to ordination; and the growing cost of providing education in America³—the questions have to be asked: “Why do we have two seminaries?” and “Does it have to look this way?”

When you move beyond a simple answer of “history,” is it possible to imagine a synod with one seminary that would be greater than the sum of the current two? Rumbblings of closing one seminary have been heard for at least a decade if not longer. Usually the one mentioned is Ft. Wayne. It does not have as long a history at its current location, is a smaller institution, has fewer graduate programs, a smaller alumni base, and historically less prestige. St. Louis has the benefit of being in the Missouri epicenter of a church that seems to pride itself on being the Missouri Synod.

A different possibility, rarely discussed, is that the synod could sell the St. Louis campus. Admittedly, this flies in the face of conventional historical wisdom, but from a business standpoint it makes more sense. The seminary campus is landlocked in the

exclusive Clayton neighborhood of St. Louis, which makes expansion unlikely. It also makes the property worth significantly more than the Ft. Wayne campus, which by comparison has unlimited room to expand.

After the sale of the St. Louis campus, the faculties of the two seminaries could be combined, providing a much larger pool of faculty while eliminating overhead and duplicate administration. With an endowment created from the sale of the St. Louis campus and the increased size of the faculty, reduced teaching loads would allow for more research, publication, and service to the wider church. That our current faculties are able to publish anything at all with their heavy teaching load is more a testament to their commitment to the church than to an environment that is conducive to publication. The Missouri Synod prides itself on its theology. It is well past time that we equipped our theologians with the resources they need to publish on a much broader scale than in-house Missouri periodicals.

If the purpose of the seminaries is service to the wider church, then we are not beholden to historical institutional models, especially when the history itself has changed. There are certainly institutional obstacles to reform—alumni, guilds, and endowments among them. But if the transformation is seen as being in the service of the church, as a revisioning of the seminary that will actually allow

it to grow and thrive through its “closing,” then perhaps it will be possible to get beyond the personal histories and attachments. Such an approach is akin to what Vatican II called *aggiornamento*, a “bringing up to date.” It is reimagining past history so that it meets the reality of contemporary circumstances without being unfaithful to the past.

Closing a seminary would be a difficult thing to do in church-political Missouri. For as often as people roll their eyes when talking about history, they sure do love their own histories and the way that history intersects with their own lives. But the synod could set a powerful example for its member congregations and schools about how to reimagine ministry for our new age. It would speak far louder than any program or panel on restructuring. A church body with visionary leadership would ask the questions now rather than when things reach a critical financial mass and the decision is made for it. The answers may not lead to the scenario outlined above, but it is doubtful that the answer will be a status quo that no longer reflects our changed present. *LF*

Notes

1. Martin R. Noland, “A Tale of Two Seminaries,” *Concordia Historical Quarterly* 81/2 (Summer 2008): 120.
2. Dale A. Meyer, “A Church Caught in the Middle,” *Concordia Journal* (Winter 2009): 11.
3. The St. Louis seminary reported a loss of \$4 million for the last fiscal year.