

# Response to the “Specific Ministry Pastor Task Force Report”

Prepared by faculty members of Concordia Seminary  
at the request of President Dale Meyer, May 2013



CONCORDIA SEMINARY, ST. LOUIS

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The faculty of Concordia Seminary read with great interest the SMP Task Force recommendations which were released to Synod in March of 2013. We know that we share with our brothers on the Task Force an earnest desire that congregations be shepherded by pastors who are committed to making disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, are prepared to preach and teach God’s word in light of our Lutheran Confessions, and pursue excellence in all they do. We know that we share the desire that any man called into service in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) be adequately prepared to begin his ministry; have the ongoing support of wise, more experienced brother clergy; and have received a proper call. We do not know, however, if we are in complete agreement with the theological foundations that underlie the Task Force’s recommendations. We seek above all to clarify the theological assumptions which the Task Force brought to their work. After prayerful consideration of how to respond most helpfully and collegially, we have put our thoughts in writing so that we all might, as brothers in service to the Gospel, come to clarity and consensus.

We’ve organized our thoughts as follows:

- Background observations regarding theological education in the 21st century (page 1)
- A brief overview of how we understand the fundamental theological basis that should guide decisions about pastoral training and formation
  - o As laid out in the New Testament (pages 2-3)
  - o As taught in the Reformation (pages 4-7)
  - o As put into practice throughout the history of the LCMS (pages 7-8)
- Finally, based on these theological fundamentals, a point-by-point response to the SMP Task Force Report proposals (pages 8-11).

### **Background Observations**

How does God make pastors for his church? The Lutheran church, reflecting Scriptural teaching, trusts that the Spirit, through his Word, calls men to preach the Good News that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself,” and has entrusted to them the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19). The Spirit has worked through his church in every generation to identify, equip, send (Rom. 10:14-17), and strengthen servants of the Gospel down to this very day.

The means by which men are identified, trained, examined, and called into the preaching office has always reflected both the Christ-centered message which it proclaims and the innumerable

contexts in which the church carried out the Lord's work. Again in our day the context for life as church is rapidly changing due to globalization, changing economic forces, technology, shifting societal values, and a younger generation that is growing up without any connection to the church. In this rapidly changing context, the Lutheran church has sought not just to maintain, but even more to strengthen and enhance the training of pastors for service in this challenging age. The historic M.Div. and Alternate Route programs should be continuously updated and strengthened, and both seminaries have a regular curriculum review process.

But these programs, as effective as they have been and will continue to be, were seen by the LCMS as not taking full advantage of the opportunities of the 21st century for the training of pastors. Concordia Seminary is rightfully proud of its residential M.Div. program and remains committed to its success as the primary means of pastoral training and formation in the Missouri Synod, both now and into the future. The Specific Ministry Pastor (SMP) seminary-training program, thoughtfully crafted over several years and then reviewed and approved by the convention of the LCMS in 2007, is one effort to meet the challenge of raising up faithful workers for Christ's harvest fields in this generation. The 2013 convention will be asked to consider the program once again, on the basis of the "Specific Ministry Pastor Task Force." The faculty of Concordia Seminary was heavily involved in the development of the program and has taught scores of students in the four years that the program has been in operation. We have monitored very closely the feedback from district presidents, congregations, pastors, students and faculty, and we have come to respect our students' dedication to theological reflection and to the development of their pastoral skills. We have come to see the effectiveness with which SMP students continue to serve in the specific context from which they are sent. We are, frankly, delighted with the quality, maturity, teachability, skill, and service to God's people that our SMP students demonstrate. Therefore, we read with great interest the Task Force recommendations. Unfortunately, we do not find ourselves in complete agreement with the theological foundations used in the Task Force recommendations, nor do we believe that the recommendations themselves will further the preaching of the Gospel in our generation.

## **The Training of Pastors: A New Testament Perspective**

Scripture says a great deal about the ministry of the Word. What it does not do, however, is prescribe any single specific method of training men to teach and preach in that office.

The New Testament teaches a high regard for the pastoral office. It strongly emphasizes the need to teach and preach faithfully, because the preaching of Christ brings salvation: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach Good News" (Is. 52:7; Rom. 10:15). Christians at Corinth, for

example, were instructed to “be subject to” Stephanus, Fortunatus and Achaicus, three of the Apostle Paul’s co-workers, “and to every fellow worker and laborer” (1 Cor. 16:15-18). Such honor recognizes the Lord whose name those in the office proclaim.

The NT also provides very specific criteria regarding a man’s character, suitability and skills. Because those who serve in the office of pastor are servants of the Christ whose name they preach, the New Testament writings list special qualifications that men must meet (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Tit. 1:5-9). Of particular note is the strong emphasis on the need to be a faithful teacher and preacher of the Word: “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Tit. 1:9).

Thirdly, Scripture is also very clear that the person of the pastor is not of consequence: “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each...neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:5-7).

In this context, it is therefore perhaps surprising that the NT describes a variety of methods of formation and training. In some cases, the Apostle’s co-workers “appoint elders” (Tit. 1:5); in others, Timothy himself seems to have been simply chosen by Paul as a kind of apprentice (Acts 16:1), and eventually becomes a faithful and trusted colleague (e.g., 1 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 2:19, 22). His training seems to have been “on the job” as he worked with Paul. Paul (Saul) and Barnabas were apparently set apart for their work without any indication of specific preparation (Acts 13:1) except that he had been part of a delegation from Antioch that brought relief funds to the struggling church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30; cf. Paul’s description of his life after conversion in Gal. 1:11-2:10). Clearly one should use the example of Paul with extreme caution (his conversion and ministry is unique, and he uses himself as a rhetorical example, not merely a historical one). The NT has several descriptions of both the work of the ministry of the Word and of how men are trained and placed into that work.

In summary, the New Testament focuses on the goal of the pastoral office: to preach Christ. It does not focus either on the person of the pastor himself, his aptitudes or on his training: “For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake... we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor. 4:5, 7). Needless to say, the church in every generation has sought to do the utmost to prepare men to faithfully teach and preach Christ. It has done so, reflecting the New Testament, in countless ways. The focus, however, was always to be on Christ and his Gospel, not the person of the pastor nor his accomplishments, titles, degrees, etc.

## **The Training of Pastors: A Reformation Perspective**

Prior to the Reformation, this Christ-centered, Gospel-focused work of the church and her pastors became obscured. Although in many areas Luther agreed with what the medieval church taught regarding the Christian faith and Christian living, a number of differences emerge quickly in Luther's writings. Among the most fundamental is his re-definition of what it means to be Christian, a believer in Christ, and with it, what it means to be the church and the role of the pastor within it.

Western Christianity in the Middle Ages defined the practice of Christianity largely in terms of the performance of ritual actions. Human creatures were viewed as far inferior to the unknowable and distant Creator. The medieval church, then, saw as its main function the performance of "sacred" or religious activities which were deemed to bring favor from God. These religious activities were viewed as being more important than good works in the secular or "profane" realm of daily life in family and society. Popular piety revolved around, above all, attendance at the mass and around the performance of other liturgical and religious rituals. Church leadership defined being Christian in terms of faithfulness and obedience to the bishop of Rome, the regional bishop, and the parish priest, a hierarchical definition of being Christian. Jan Hus was burned at the stake in 1415, among other reasons, for proposing that the church was composed of all the faithful elect, not primarily of the hierarchy.

Luther rejected the definition of being Christian in terms of the performance of liturgical rituals and obedience to the hierarchy. Instead, he understood the Holy Scriptures to be defining what it means to be a child of God within the framework of God's sole initiative, coming to his human creatures, and doing so through his Word. God communicates his Word primarily in oral, written, and sacramental forms (what later sixteenth-century Lutherans summarized as "the means of grace"). Luther found in Scripture a view of God that had been lost: a God of conversation and community, who comes as the personal Creator, who brought all things into existence through his Word in Genesis 1. Ultimately, God came as the Word made flesh to deliver and re-create sinners into children of God.

Therefore, Luther placed the proclamation of the Word of God at the center of Christian liturgical worship and at the heart of the believer's existence. "Since the preaching and teaching of God's Word is the most important part of the divine service, we have arranged for sermons and lessons as follows: For the holy day or Sunday we retain the customary epistles and gospels and have three sermons." Other sermons followed on certain days of the week in larger German towns (German Mass, 1526, Luther's Works 53: 68). As Melancthon wrote in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, "...the chief worship of God is to preach the gospel" (Apology XV, 42).

Luther understood God's Word as something more than simply descriptive of some distant reality, as some Christians believed in the sixteenth century. He was convinced by the Biblical way of speaking of the gospel that it was indeed God's "power for salvation" (Rom. 1:16) and that the pronouncement and proclamation of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, like God's creative Word in Genesis 1, effected a new creation of the sinful human being into a child of God. It did so by creating trust and reliance in Jesus Christ as Savior as it bestowed the benefits of his death and resurrection (Rom. 4:25) upon God's chosen people. God's Word in all its oral, written, and sacramental forms is more than the performative speech of which modern linguists write; it is actually re-creating speech that kills sinners and makes them alive as new creatures in Christ.

For the purpose of regular public proclamation of his two-fold message—the expectations he has for human performance (his law) and his bestowal of this new identity and new life in Christ (gospel)—God has established the pastoral office. "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ's merit, when we so believe" (Augsburg Confession, German, V, 1-3). The pastoral office is not a means of grace; God's Word in oral, written, and sacramental forms, constitutes the means of grace. The Holy Spirit uses the "office of preaching" as a tool for the public application of the Word to human beings.

In sixteenth-century Germany some reformers, chiefly Anabaptists, claimed the right to preach outside the normal establishment of order in the church. Luther and his colleagues labeled them "Winkelprediger," those who sneak off into a corner to preach or teach God's Word apart from the church's placing them in office (Luther's Works 40: 383-394). Therefore, Melancthon insisted in article XIV of the Augsburg Confession: "Concerning church government it is taught that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper call." The intention of this article was to establish the catholicity and legitimacy of the Wittenberg reform and particularly those priests who had supported it. Some of them were still among the vast majority of early sixteenth-century Germans who were illiterate; in 1530, when Melancthon composed the Confession, almost all had been ordained by Roman Catholic bishops and nominated for office by local nobles or town councils. Ordination is not mentioned, probably because Melancthon wanted to avoid the sacramental implications associated with it, even if he could admit, by changing the definition of "sacrament," that Lutherans approved ordination as they understood it (Apology XIII). "Properly called" (in Latin, *rite vocatus*; in German *ordentlichen Beruf*) meant, in 1530, "decently and in order" according to the expectations of the Roman Catholic party within the German Empire.

The procedure for training pastors in the Reformation era varied slightly from place to place, however, several key steps were consistently practiced among Lutherans. One example of this process is the order established for the churches of Electoral Saxony. In May 1535, Elector Johann Friedrich, after consultation with the Wittenberg theologians, issued a new regulation regarding the ordination of pastors. Men seeking to be placed in the Office of the Holy Ministry would come first to Wittenberg, study at the University and be examined by the theologians. After successful examination, the candidates would be ordained at St. Mary's, the parish church in Wittenberg, and sent out to the churches to which they were called. This practice, which was new for Electoral Saxony, was in response to the great lack of pastors who were put into office by bishops. The training and calling of pastors now involved the theological faculty of the University as well as congregations and superintendents. The calling of pastors was now to be preceded by ordination by the Wittenberg theologians (of which the examination was a part), and this ordination would stand in place of the episcopal ordination of a priest.

In 1535, Luther himself preached at the ordination of a man in Wittenberg. He later reported to the superintendent of the event, reporting that the man was being sent to the congregation which had called him as its pastor. Luther noted that the faculty had examined him and he was publicly ordained in the presence of the fellow pastors in Wittenberg, according to the mandate of the Elector. He pointed out that Bugenhagen was still of the opinion that a candidate ought to be ordained in the congregation in which he would be serving, but Luther added, "This will be done in the end when such new practice and ordination have put down deeper roots, and the regular practice will have been made more consistent. We commend [the ordinand] to you, that he is fit. And at the same time pray on our behalf, just as we pray on yours." (From *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Schriften*. 68 vols. Edited by J. F. K. Knaake, et al. Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883–1999, Briefwechsel 7: 302–303). What stands out in this process are the basic stages in the preparation of a pastor: training in theology, examination, ordination, call, and sending. The order of these steps may have changed slightly over time, but the essentials have remained.

Some falsely attempt to play off Luther's revolutionary concept of the priesthood of all the baptized against his concept of the pastoral office. To do so is to profoundly misunderstand Luther's way of thinking. Luther taught from early in his career as reformer that all the baptized are priests before God. That means that they may go directly to God in their prayers without human mediation, and it means that they are called by God to bring his Word to others (his sermons made that clear frequently, see, for example, Luther's Works 30: 11, 64-65; "Luther's Church Postil, Sermon on Matthew 9:1-8," 1526, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. John Nicholas Lenker 5 [1905; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983], 209; "Sermons on Matthew 18-24," 1539-1540, D. Martin

Luthers Werke [Weimar: Böhlau, 1883- 1993] 47:297,36-298,14). At the same time he always insisted that God has established the pastoral office and that it is a mark of a Christian congregation (On the Councils and the Church, 1539, Luther's Works 41: 154). Some have suggested that Luther abandoned his insistence on the priesthood of all the baptized later in his career, but he did not. The balance of emphasis shifted from time to time in the amount of space and time he dedicated to discussing universal priesthood and pastoral office, but both are an integral part of his understanding of the church and the life of the congregation from the early 1520s to his death in 1546.

## **The Training of Pastors in the History of the LCMS**

The Missouri Synod has always had more than one pastoral training program. For much of its history, Concordia Seminary in St. Louis was normally regarded as the "Theoretical" Seminary, because its intensive curriculum stressed academic and positive (or propositional) theology. For example, it placed greater emphasis on the instruction of systematic and exegetical theology (using the biblical languages), even while other courses were taught in homiletics, catechetics, hermeneutics, and church history. Students were required to have a solid preparatory training before entering the Seminary. At the same time the first Fort Wayne (later Springfield) Seminary was referred to as the "Practical" Seminary since its key areas of instruction were in homiletics, catechetics, and other practical-theological disciplines. The prerequisites to admittance in the Fort Wayne school were not as stringent as those of St. Louis. During the early decades of the Synod's history, the Fort Wayne school had a larger number of students.

The system in the Missouri Synod, based on a German model, was a college preparatory program for students for Seminary and teacher-training institutions (called the "Gymnasium" in German). It likely included some higher-level elementary education as well as a high school education and a college preparatory program for students. The pre-seminary curriculum was strong in biblical study, as well as in the areas of languages (Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German and English) and the humanities (e.g., history, literature, mathematics and geography).

While Seminary training was always academic, it was also conducted in connection to local congregations. The Resident Field Education program has long been an indispensable and valuable part of Seminary training, allowing residential students to gain experience in local congregations, missions, and institutional settings. However, "residential education" was usually not solely residential. This is true even at the beginning of the last century. Due to the great need for pastors and the requests for men to be sent out to congregations or into the mission areas, many students interrupted their studies to serve in the field. Some graduated early, while others returned at a later

time to complete their studies. Frequently, students were requested to help with preaching and teaching in congregations for an interim of several months. Over time the program of a year-long vicarage was developed, both to meet the needs of congregations on a short-term basis, and to help students gain practical experience. This demonstrates the responsiveness of the seminaries to use different programs of training to meet the variety of needs in the congregations.

That same responsiveness drives many of the programs Concordia Seminary offers in the present day. The Missouri Synod has long authorized and directed the Seminary to offer a variety of alternative routes to pastoral ministry. From the correspondence school programs of years past, to the more recent DELTO (Distance Education Leading to Ordination) program, to EIIT (Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology), to the Seminary's Center for Hispanic Studies, to SMP, and more. Concordia Seminary has sought to provide excellence in pastoral training and to serve the Missouri Synod by helping to provide pastors for the church. Although curricula and programs have changed over the years, the core content of theological training has not changed. Above all, neither has the need for well-trained pastors to serve the church.

We should also note that the so-called "Licensed Deacon" program, approved by the 1989 LCMS convention, is not a pastoral training program. Concordia Seminary has never been involved in that program, and we have strong theological concerns as to its assumptions and results. We hope that the SMP program can alleviate, if not remove, the perceived need for "Licensed Deacons."

## **Responses to the SMP Task Force Proposals**

This section is a point-by-point reaction to the proposals offered in the "SMP Task Force Report to the President," pages 33-35. We offer these responses in the hope of clarifying the issues and working together to strengthen the training of men for service. The SMP report seems to assume its readers will hold certain theological views about the pastoral office that we find troubling. That said, our concerns are not with explicit theological statements, but implicit assumptions we suspect are taken for granted. In the interest of being able to have an open conversation, we've spelled these out below.

### *1. Retain the SMP Program*

We are in agreement with this recommendation.

## *2. Narrow the Specificity of the SMP Program*

While we agree that there is “breadth, rigor, and depth” to the M.Div program, we disagree with the presumption that the SMP program as developed by Concordia Seminary is not capable of sufficient “breadth, rigor, and depth” to prepare men for faithful pastoral service. Indeed, Concordia Seminary’s SMP program is likely more rigorous than some previous training programs in the LCMS. There is a tremendous amount of rigorous assessment on a weekly basis in the courses by seminary faculty, so much so that we count SMP courses as a heavier faculty workload than residential courses. Furthermore, the attrition rate for the M.Div. and the SMP is virtually identical: around 19% of Concordia Seminary students who begin each program fail to complete their program. Notably, however, there is a striking difference in the reasons for leaving seminary training. Of the M.Div. students who leave, most do so because of vocational questions and discernment concerns. Clearly, a good number of our M.Div. students enroll in Concordia Seminary as part of a process of deciding whether the vocation of the ordained ministry is the godly place for them. In contrast, of the SMP students who leave, the majority are for family or personal reasons that prevent their full attention to their studies and congregational work. Discernment of vocation has generally already been made in the context of being raised up from their congregations before they begin their training.

Furthermore, there is no biblical or theological justification for the recommendation to “limit” this program to “small congregations who are not able to support a full-time pastor and for ethnic ministries.” For example, why would smaller congregations need a pastor with “lesser training” than a congregation with several pastors on staff? Such recommendations show a concern that does not reflect the central concern of the New Testament and the Reformation: faithful teaching and preaching of the Word. Rather, there seems to be a concern for finding one single way of delivering theological education, as if the mode of education itself was most important and not the faithfully proclaimed Word.

## *3. Conduct a Study of the Alternate Routes to Pastoral Ministry*

This recommendation is not necessary. In fact, Concordia Seminary undertakes a regular review of all its programs. The report itself does not indicate any confusion regarding the different education programs. Each meets a specific need, and by eliminating programs that meet specific situations, reducing the number of programs will result in men who are less prepared for service for those situations.

#### *4. Add Greek to the Curriculum*

We continue to advocate without reservation the need for formal training in biblical languages as the basis of exegesis which leads to faithful teaching and preaching of the Word. The M.Div. program has and will continue to have this requirement. While a lack of the biblical languages is not ideal, we do not believe that it is necessary to require a Greek course for all pastors, including graduates of the SMP program. Under supervision and with an awareness of the limitations of reading the Bible in translation, pastors certified through the SMP program are fully capable of preaching Lutheran sermons and teaching Lutheran doctrine. The program is designed to help students preach such sermons using resources based on the original languages.

Concordia Seminary works actively on many fronts to provide resource for all pastors that are based on the original languages: Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. For instance, we will continue to make exegetical and homiletical resources (Homiletical Helps, Lectionary at Lunch, Preacher's Studio, etc.) available to all our pastors so that they may have access to careful careful exegesis on the basis of the original languages. We have also included formal instruction in Greek in the "continuation path" for SMP students who wish to move on to the "general" certification and become eligible for calls to other contexts.

#### *5. Maintain a Level of Enrollment that Protects Residential Seminary Formation*

We do not see a need for this proposal. The goal of any program for training pastors is faithful teaching and preaching of the Word as understood through the Lutheran Confessions. This, as the recommendation acknowledges, "takes a long time, a lifetime; it takes a village and more." The SMP training takes place explicitly in a mentor relationship, ideally with the support and encouragement of brother pastors in the local circuit, so that a lifelong habitus of collegiality and continuing education is developed. Furthermore, the Concordia Seminary SMP program does have twice-yearly, week-long, intensive sessions on campus. During these periods especially critical topics are taught, such as the theology and practice of the Lord's Supper. The students attend chapel and interact with the faculty and other students both formally and informally. Furthermore, nearly half of the Concordia Seminary SMP students return to campus for two-week intensive courses, and we are looking to expand this method of course delivery into the January short term. The recommendation assumes an either-or, "all or nothing" divide between residential and distance learning that is simply not accurate. Additionally we have no statistical or anecdotal evidence that indicates that the SMP adversely affects residential enrollment. Concordia Seminary consistently researches this question and finds that virtually all SMP students could not or would not enroll in residential seminary formation.

## *6. Continue to Provide Appropriate Paths to Certification as a General Pastor*

We agree with this proposal, and Concordia Seminary will have a program for formal continuation in place in 2013.

## *7. Conduct a Feasibility Study for an Ordained Diaconate*

The relationship between this recommendation and the rest of the document is unclear; nothing in the preceding pages suggests this novel and un-Lutheran approach. It is here that the biblical and theological weakness of the recommendations is most evident. As was laid out above, the office of pastor is Word-based, not ritual-based. To distinguish one pastor from another on the basis of education, so that the non-M.Div. pastor cannot “consecrate the elements” makes an unacceptable distinction between the means of grace, as if consecrating the elements is the chief task of the pastoral office. This has never been the Lutheran position. Furthermore, the Lutheran Confessions do not regard “ordination” as that which qualifies one for the office; rather, it is that the candidate be “rightly called,” of which ordination may be viewed as a recognition by the wider church of this man’s training and call. However, by no means is ordination a necessary element.

We are also concerned in the apparent dichotomy in this proposal between the act of the consecration of the Lord’s Supper and the preaching of the Word. To regard the act of the consecration of the elements of the Lord’s Supper to be the chief function of the pastoral office seems to indicate a shift toward a Roman Catholic perspective. This same tendency is to be seen in the nomenclature and function of an “Ordained Deacon,” which is drawn from the Roman tradition but has never been viewed as helpful in the Lutheran tradition.

## **Recommendation**

The faculty of Concordia Seminary recommends that the SMP program be continued, within the parameters passed by the 2007 convention of the LCMS. We see no theological or practical reason to “limit” or “curtail” the program, and we are concerned that biblical and Lutheran understandings of the ministry are not always clearly driving the expressed concerns in the report. The faculty of Concordia Seminary remains committed to the highest standards of education for all its programs, and remains committed to serving the church as it seeks to prepare men for faithful service to Christ and his church to fulfill the work to which Christ has called it. We will continue to review, revise, and strengthen the M.Div., SMP, and all our programs, seeking input from the larger church as together we “work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work” (John 9:4).