
ORDINATION PROCEDURES IN THE LUTHERAN CHURCH

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Similar to the history of many other mainline denominations in the United States, immigrants from European Lutheran strongholds needed to adapt their old-world patterns and ways of being church to the new-worlds' geographical, social, and political realities.¹ Once this foothold was secured, the number of American Lutherans continued to grow until it reached its peak in the early 1970's.² Initially a continuous stream of immigrants fed this growth, which was later fed by America's population surges. Since the 1970's, there has been a slow decline in the number of American Lutherans.³ Yet, even with an overall decline in numbers, the various Lutheran denominations combined are still the third largest Protestant denomination in the United States—after Baptists and Methodist/Wesleyan traditions.⁴ However, with the massive changes in modern culture, American Lutherans are challenged to rethink what it means to be church in this time and place. In this article, the authors identify some of the questions, challenges, and implications facing two branches of the Lutheran Church in the United States—Missouri Synod (LC-MS) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)—in order to better prepare effective leaders for Twenty-first Century America.

A well-educated clergy has always been highly valued for Lutherans.⁵ Currently, a four-year Master of Divinity

¹ James P. Wind and James W. Lewis, *American Congregations*, Vol. 2, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 225

² See www.LutheranWorldFederation.org; 2001 database.

³ Although as Roozen and Hadaway, *Church and Denominational Growth*, and Kelly, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*, remind us that the rate of declining membership has slowed.

⁴ See www.barna.org.

⁵ The focus on an educated clergy began with the founding of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg in 1826, and in 1830, the Lutheran

degree is standard for ordination candidates. This degree includes three years of resident study and a full year internship. Generally, the course work for this degree includes classes in Old and New Testament, doctrine, history, theology, and integrative studies such as pastoral care, homiletics, Christian education, liturgics, and parish administration and Leadership. The rest of the course work is composed of interdisciplinary studies and electives. It is a very prescriptive program. Given this high standard and value, primary questions about leadership development in the Lutheran arena are at least three fold: “What are the fundamental capacities this curriculum develops?” “Are these the ministry capacities needed for effective Lutheran leadership in the Twenty-first Century?” and “Can these capacities be developed in alternative ways?”

Alternative programs raise many questions about the importance of a traditional seminary academic education. Crassly asks if these programs are a lowering of the bar or a “dumbing down” of traditional standards for the pastorate. Who funds and manages alternative route programs? Do these programs reduce both the funding and the pool of students for established seminary programs? In both denominations students in the traditional route need faculty approval to move into the final ordination process, who will serve in that role in the alternative programs? How and by whom will fundamental biblical, theological, and polity knowledge and ministry capacities be assessed?⁶ Are the alternative routes more about different pedagogies than different learning? Since both denominations understand their seminaries as a place of faith and identity formation, how will this practice be continued for non-resident seminary

Theological Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, and the German Theological Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. The founding of Concordia Seminary (St. Louis) in 1839 and Concordia Seminary (Fort Wayne, IN) in 1844 quickly followed.

⁶ On the other hand, these highly contextual alternative routes question if traditional resident M.Div. education should be more contextual?

students?⁷ And finally, since a very high percentage of the candidates in the alternative tracks are ethnic minorities, is there an inherent racial bias between the two systems?

Seminaries as the delivery system for providing pastors for Lutheran congregations is also challenged in both denominations by their decisions to license lay Christians for public Word and Sacrament ministry. The ministries that are in geographically isolated regions where a resident called pastor is not available supported this initiative. In the ELCA, these persons serve in Synodically Authorized Ministry (SAM) sites. Bishops have appointment and oversight responsibility for these ministries. Although these SAM calls need to be renewed annually, many persons have served a variety of sites over a number of years and are now asking to be ordained on the basis of their experience. In the LC-MS, the possibility of authorizing laity to publicly preach, baptize, and preside at the Sacraments in circumstances where an ordained pastor is not readily or consistently available, came through a resolution adopted at the Wichita Synod Convention in 1989. This resolution provides measures for proper supervision and accountability. However, since Lutheran confessional norms state that only properly trained, qualified, and ordained persons shall publicly preach the Word and administer the Sacraments, the press to grant privileges of public ministry to the laity proved to be a conundrum.

Licensing laity raises questions not only about theological education but also about the public ministry, the indispensability of ordination vis-à-vis the pastoral office, and the very meaning and significance of ordination itself. Some say that the very act of licensing laity is in reality a de facto ordination. Both Lutheran denominations must also wrestle with how this move to license laity interfaces with the Lutheran understanding of the concepts of the priesthood of all believers and ministry in daily life. Positively, the licensing of laity

⁷ This concern is also raised for the growing number of students who seek to do a major portion of their seminary work online.

challenges seminary education delivery systems to become creative in serving remote areas perhaps by moving more forcefully into the arenas of distance learning and life long continuing education for church leaders as well as the raising up of bi-vocational pastors. Of course this raises another systemic issue: can seminaries add to their already full plates the task of being the provider of quality lay education for the denominations?⁸

Also, large congregations are training laypersons, and then authorizing them to fulfill various auxiliary ministries as members of a church staff.⁹ Other congregations are looking to para-church organizations for the primary education of their leaders. These movements raise at least two fundamental concerns: Even if the training is efficacious, are its fundamental principles congruent with Lutheran theology and practice? Are those individuals raised up, trained and called to serve one congregation able prepared and able to negotiate a new context?

These varieties of paths to ordination also raise questions about rosters and placement. In the eyes of congregations is pastoral status weighted in light of the pastor's theological education? Should different paths in theological education warrant varied levels of pastor recognition in the church? Should certification or eligibility for a call to the pastoral office be qualified in some manner for the non-resident trainees? For example, in the ELCA TEEM program most candidates are considered not open to serve the whole church but are called back to the site at which they did their training. Should the church confine this new pastor to the local ministry? Perhaps their recommendation for ministry

⁸ This is a pressing and very complex question since both denominations have lay rosters, which have required educational standards. For example, the ELCA has three lay rosters: Associates in Ministry, Deaconesses, and Diaconal ministers.

⁹ In the ELCA, at least one congregation has done a congregational ordination.

should be strictly contextual (i.e., only for a particular ministry) but is this ordination?

Given the structured educational and formation process of both denominations, newly ordained pastors also raise concerns about the seminary preparation system. The heavily structured curricular requirements do not provide opportunities for specialization. Could seminary education provide additional contextual opportunities? Since the faculty has so much power in final approval for ordination, can students trust the faculty enough to articulate and explore the breadth and depth of their questions and doubts in seminary? New pastors also speak of a structural paradox. While in seminary they feel constrained to not deviate or challenge well laid out protocols. In the parish they are expected to demonstrate great entrepreneurial skills.

Frequently in church and ministry discussions, there is a suspicion that the seminary's response to these new challenges registers some insecurity. For so long, they were *the* authority responsibility for training pastors. The suspicion, however, may have only a small kernel of truth. Seminary faculties give serious attention to these issues. Faculty colleagues dialogue about candidacy, ordination, and placement. They debate best practices and styles of pedagogy. They research, read, and write about the nature of cultural changes, congregational changes as well as the competencies necessary for effective ministry. Faculty members are passionate about the well-being and effectiveness of new pastors and the future of their beloved denomination.

Finally, it must be said that the multiple tracks described above reflect the gift of the growing diversity in both denominations. Some would say that denominational officials should deal with the diversity of programs and arrive at a consensus about the education and training of candidates for the pastoral office. Others say that we should seek an even broader spectrum of training routes that reflect the complexities and diversities of the twenty-first century. Regardless of different viewpoints, we all share in common the belief

that the Lord of the Church gives the gifts necessary for public ministry¹⁰ and, through the Spirit working among us, the Gospel of the Lord is made known.¹¹

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¹⁰ Ephesians 4:11; 1 Corinthians 12:28-29.

¹¹ For Lutherans, these subjects are expressed and taught in the Lutheran Confessions; e.g., the Augsburg Confession Articles V, XIV and XXVIII, the Apology to the Augsburg Confession Articles XIII and XXVIII, as well as the Treatise in the Book of Concord.

The path leading to pastoral ministry in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is clear and direct. Clarity and focus notwithstanding, entry into the public ministry is clouded, if not confused, by recent developments. Significant change has occurred, and not a few educators and church leaders in the LC-MS are uncomfortable with what appears to be a lowering of the bar or “dumbing down” of traditional standards for the pastorate. On the other hand, proponents of alternate routes of pastoral education and training are pleased to see doors opening to Word and Sacrament ministry other than traditional matriculation through the church’s two seminaries at St. Louis and Ft. Wayne, Indiana.

Multiple Tracks

In recent decades, no less than five new programs of study leading to the pastoral office have come into being. These programs are distinct from the church’s M.Div. resident seminary education, though the two seminary faculties monitor each. What are these alternate paths? The Hispanic Institute of Theology, Distance Education Leading to Ordination (DELTO), Ethnic Immigrant Institute of Theology (EIIT), Deaf Institute of Theology (DIT), and, Ethnic and Multicultural Pastor Certification Programs (EPCP/MPCP). Much of the teaching and learning in these programs happens online and the students work closely with a local mentor. Obviously, the programs are strong contextually. For instance, the latter program (EPCP/MPCP) is established by Concordia University, Irvine, California, in conjunction with Concordia Seminary and the Synod’s Pacific Southwest District in order to provide preparation for ordained ministry to men who will serve in socio-cultural contexts of specific ethnic populations in Southern California. The jury is out! At this time, we do not know how graduates of the new non-resident programs will fit into a ministerium comprised largely of pastors who were trained uniformly in residence at one of the regular seminaries.

Certification for Ordination

New questions abound. Shall different requirements in theological education warrant varied levels of pastor recognition by the church? Is the status of pastors viewed in light of their theological education? How much importance should be attached to traditional seminary academic education? The assumption is that the regular seminary program, three years of resident study plus one year of internship, is the grand prix of pastoral training. If contextual non-resident programs offer less, does it mean that pastors who were trained in such programs are less equipped for pastoral ministry than their counterparts who attended one of the seminaries? Should certification or eligibility for a call to the pastoral office be qualified in some manner for the non-resident trainees? Perhaps their certification should be strictly contextual, (i.e., only for a particular ministry). Many of these candidates study while serving a congregation. Ordinarily, the same congregation calls the student after he has been certified. Should the church confine this new pastor to the local ministry? This would preclude his candidacy for calls in a later time.

None of these questions has led to altering the Synod's longstanding polity regarding entry of candidates into the pastoral ministry. The rubrics are stable. Candidacy signifies that one is qualified to receive a first call into the pastoral ministry. And proper certification establishes candidacy. The certifying agency, one of the seminary faculties, attests that the candidate has met all personal, professional, and theological requirements for public ministry in the church. In a few instances the candidate is an ordained pastor from another denomination, seeking entry into the LC-MS ministerium. A Colloquy Committee, a party of three consisting of the First Vice President of the Synod and the presidents of each of the two seminaries, serves as the certifying agency for these persons. Following certification, the candidates are recommended to the Council of Presidents for placement into the ministry. This Council, consisting of the District Presidents and the Synod's Presidium,

serves as the Board of Assignments, who match candidates with calls received from congregations or other church entities—mission boards, chaplaincy ministries, church colleges or universities, and others. Seminary placement committees are advisory to the official Board of Assignments. LC-MS polity stipulates that receiving a first call is *sine qua non* for ordination. The call and ordination are in closest proximity. When the candidate receives and accepts a call through the placement process, the District President authorizes ordination. The Rite of Ordination normally takes place in the presence of the congregation or other agency to which the candidate has been called. Exceptions are made when a candidate for personal reasons desires to be ordained either in his home congregation or another supporting congregation which supported the candidate during the seminary years. In these instances, a service of installation in the presence of the calling congregation takes place before the candidate commences ministry.

Expanded Horizons

The rubrics for certification and ordination into the pastoral office are followed uniformly in the LC-MS. Candidacy issues, however, represent a diversity of understanding, and practice across the Synod. The multiple tracks described above reflect this diversity. Many persons sense that the Synod should deal with the diversity and arrive at a consensus over education and training of candidates for the pastoral office. Perhaps the church's confessional theology will show the way. Regardless of different viewpoints, the Synod's pastors and congregations share in common the notion that all wait upon the Lord of the church to give His gifts for the public ministry (Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:28-29). Ordination is highly respected and celebrated, as is the assurance that the Lord is working and that His Spirit falls like a mantle upon trained and qualified candidates for the pastoral office. A congregation in which the Spirit is working among the people of God through His Word and Sacrament issue the call. For Lutherans, these subjects

are expressed and taught by the Lutheran Confessions, (e.g., the Augsburg Confession, articles V, XIV, and XXVIII, also the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, articles XIII and XXVIII, as well as the Treatise in the Book of Concord).

A serious return to theological moorings is paramount in view of an earlier decision by the Missouri Synod to license lay Christians for public Word and Sacrament ministry. This unusual initiative was supported and advanced by ministries in geographically isolated regions where a resident called pastor is not available. Also, large congregations are finding it desirable to train laypersons, and then authorize them to fulfill various auxiliary ministries as members of a church staff. In view of the Synod's confessional norms, and its strict rubrics, in the sense that only properly trained, qualified, then ordained persons shall publicly preach the Word and administer the Sacraments, the press to grant privileges of public ministry to the laity has proven to be a conundrum. By resolution adopted at the Wichita Synod Convention in 1989, the LC-MS authorized lay Christians to publicly preach, baptize, and preside for celebration of the Sacrament in circumstances where an ordained pastor is not readily or consistently available. The arrangement provides measures for proper supervision and accountability. But licensing lay members, who are not ordained, raises questions about the public ministry, the indispensability of ordination vis-à-vis the pastoral office, and the very meaning and significance of ordination itself. Frequently in church and ministry discussions, the suspicion is that the seminary faculties register some insecurity in regards to this issue because previously they were the only authority with singular responsibility for training pastors. Now, new tracks of pastoral education are afoot, and even the laity are licensed for public ministry in particular situations. The suspicion, however, may be unfair, even unfounded, in that seminary faculties, more than most, give serious attention to these issues. Colleagues on the faculty at Concordia, St. Louis, dialog about candidacy, certification, and ordination.

Numerous ideas are exchanged. Could traditional resident M.Div. education be strengthened contextually?

Indeed, the traditional M.Div. model may be more about shaping a student theologically than training that student for contextual ministries. What about the seminary delivery system? Is it possible to put online the entire M.Div. curriculum, available now only in the resident program? Would the online curriculum satisfy a high standard in terms of outcome competencies for pastoral ministry? Should those persons taking the current non-resident program be required to continue formal theological education following ordination?

These kinds of questions occupy faculty discussions at Concordia Seminary. Enough questions for now, hopefully they will lead to satisfactory answers. For our purposes, the more questions and answers the better, because it will lead to better prepared pastors who will lead twenty-first century congregations.

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Henry M. Muhlenberg arrived in Philadelphia on November 25, 1742 to lead three churches of the growing body of Germans who had immigrated to the United States. He made it his task to shape the congregational polity to function in a “free church” society. He organized the leadership of the scattered churches into a ministerium of its leaders from New York to Maryland. The gathering of the ministerium and the congregations is still evident in the constitutional structure of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) with lay voting members from congregations and clergy voting members from the Clergy Roster of the church.

The ELCA has four rosters of leaders: Associates in Ministry (AIM), Deaconesses, Diaconal Ministers, and Pastors. The first three are considered lay rosters of the church that are asked to comply with a set of Basic Standards. Persons approved and continued as associates in ministry, deaconesses, and diaconal ministers of this church shall satisfactorily meet and maintain the following:

- 1) Commitment to Christ;
- 2) Acceptance of and adherence to the Confession of Faith of this church;
- 3) Willingness and ability to serve in response to the needs of this church;
- 4) Academic and practical qualifications for the position, including leadership abilities and competence in interpersonal relationships;
- 5) Commitment to lead a life worthy of the Gospel of Christ and in so doing to be an example in faithful service and holy living;
- 6) Receipt and acceptance of a letter of call; and
- 7) Membership in a congregation of this church.

The varied ministries of Word and Service have a variety of educational qualifications, which must be approved by one of the sixty-five synods (geographical jurisdictions) and their committee on candidacy for ministry. These committees are selected by the synod offices from the synod roster of lay members, lay roster

leaders, and the synod clergy roster. This makes the process for church-work certification a responsibility of all those baptized. The process is a partnership of the candidate, the home congregation, the home synod, the seminary, and the Vocation and Education unit of the ELCA. This affirms the equal standing of laity and clergy in the work of the church, which has an historical significance back to the eighteenth century.

Many of these committees, though responsible for all of the persons already listed, see their primary responsibility as the acceptance and approval of candidates for ministry of Word and Sacrament in the church. The process for ordination starts with active membership in an ELCA congregation for one year. This is required prior to application for entrance to the candidacy process and seminary. After registration by the home congregation, the synod candidacy committee makes an entrance decision. The committee assesses the applicant's sense of call, potential for leadership, and spiritual, psychological, and situational readiness to begin the process of preparation. In consultation with the candidacy committee, the applicant applies for admission to one of the eight ELCA seminaries or plans another course of study.

The committees are instructed to assign a contact person to follow a candidate on any of the rosters through their educational process. The AIM candidate is guided through a plan for education, which matches the area of service for which the candidate is preparing, along with Bible, history and theology. The Deaconess, the Diaconal Minister, and the Pastoral Ministry candidate are expected to obtain a theological degree. Generally this is done at one of the eight seminaries, but other educational routes can be arranged. After the first year of study, the candidates in consultation with the candidacy committees are examined for endorsement for candidacy, which usually leads to an internship. Near the end of the educational process or the end of the internship the candidates are to present themselves to the committee once again for final approval and recommendation to the

synod in assembly for Commitment (AIM), Consecration (Deaconess), Called (Diaconal Ministers, or Ordained (Ministers).

Entrance, endorsement, and approval are the primary times when the church, through its representatives, questions and/or affirms the call to ministry. At each of these stages, the current process seeks a written response by the candidate to a uniform set of questions that are asked of all candidates. With the entrance essay, the endorsement examination, and the approval examination, the candidate is asked to demonstrate his or her competence in biblical exegesis, doctrinal soundness, and thoughtfulness in determining a response to ministerial experience. Combined with a face to face interview with the committee, a faculty and candidacy panel (2 members of the committee) and shared interaction during the seminary/educational process, the candidacy committee seeks to guide and instruct the candidate on a path the will foster a ministry that finds favor with God.

Approved candidates then have to receive and accept a call to their roster ministry prior to a public affirmation of their calling. Public affirmation of the process normally has a Bishop presiding. The location is determined in consultation with the Bishop by the candidate.

There are exceptions to rules. It is possible for an ordained pastor of another Lutheran body, or of another denomination to be a candidate for the roster of the ELCA. There is an expectation that there will be an application, a meeting with the Bishop, an entrance interview with the Candidacy Committee, and a meeting with the Theological Review Panel, prior to any additional education, approval interview, and reception/ordination to the church. A Theological Review Panel (TRP) consists of two seminary faculty, the bishop or a designated staff person, the area Mission Director and, if needed, a representative of the candidates ethnic or language community. All are to be specifically trained for this task.

The Conference of Bishops has for a number of years assisted congregations, which can no longer afford a full time clergy, to be served by lay members of synods. These lay leaders have sometimes emerged as spiritual leaders in their own or other congregations. They have been assigned to serve “for a time” in specific congregations. Some synods have developed training programs which offer significant theological training and education to laity who wish to make themselves available for service in the church. These programs of *diakonia* have sometimes served as training grounds for the Synodically Authorized Ministries (SAM) that are supported and assigned by the Bishops. As some of these ministries have extended far beyond the second and third year, some Bishops are encouraging the lay staff involved to be a part of an ongoing theological education process that leads toward ordination. The Bishops at a recent meeting have asked about offering theological education via distance learning methods to facilitate the enhancement of these lay leaders lifelong learning without having to leave their home territories.

Prior to the ordination of women in a previous church body (before the ELCA), the church had a program called Older Men for the Ministry program that provided guidelines for all candidates over the age of 40. It was designed as a short-term course that was a quicker route into service in the congregation. The educational outcome of such a program was a certificate of education completed. The conference of Bishops challenges the church to offer shared resources for SAM candidates and to the candidates who are coming to the church from other emerging ministries. The TRP would play an important role in determining what additional education would be needed for candidates as they continue in service and learning. This assessment role is also important in today’s current standard for the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) process. The TEEM program is designed for those who are identified and being raised up in communities and cultures that seek

leadership out of their cultural heritage or language specific community.

The seminaries of the church are being challenged to offer educational routes for laity to continue in lifelong learning. All of the ELCA seminaries have offered courses on the Internet, by videotape, CD-ROM, or videoconference. No one to date has completed the degree program available as distance learning. All are considering some form of short term course and short term seminars on campus to meet the increasing call for significant continuing education for laity, both those seeking roster status and those seeking personal education.

For a Master of Divinity degree a student needs to complete around 30 course units at one of the ELCA seminaries. The educational program is almost evenly divided among Biblical material (Old Testament and New Testament); Doctrine/History/Theology; Integrative studies (Pastoral Care, Homiletics, Christian Education, Liturgics, Parish Leadership); and Interdisciplinary studies and Free electives.

In some institutions a person considering a TEEM program can choose between a degree program and a certificate program. In the TEEM program a candidate faces a degree Program of Study which includes a minimum of eight course units (study of Scripture, Christian theology, the Lutheran confessions, church history, worship, preaching, and the polity and practices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). These are minimum requirements and the TRP may exercise judgment in determining additional requirements prior to ordination. All courses offered in this track lead to a degree from the seminary. Additional course work may be completed after ordination.

A certificate program course of study may be focused upon eight semester-long courses which address biblical, theological, historical, and educational ministry competencies (two are offered each semester in some seminaries). These courses are CD-ROM or Internet based, and/or assisted by a mentor. The mentor will

follow the entire course of study with the candidate. They will be offered additional training to assist in this educational process. In addition there are six weekend seminars in preaching, pastoral care, worship, leadership, evangelism/mission, and doctrine. There is an expectation that the program will start with participation in the seven-day seminary Formation/Prologue event, Clinical practicum/CPE and Internship/Residency.

The continual focus on an educated clergy continues a process that in the American context began with the founding of Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg in 1826 and in 1830, the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina and the German Theological Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. This focus on education continues to support a roster of pastors and laity who have the education and skills that have been approved by the partners in their educational process; their congregations, their synods, and their seminary educators.

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