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Study guide

Seminary status check

By Robert C. Blezard

For centuries in Europe, and since 1826 in the Americas, Lutheran ministers and thinkers have found that seminaries are the place to learn and grow into church leaders. As the church changes to meet the needs of a changing world, our seminaries are working hard to give leaders what they need to meet the challenges facing God's people and congregations.

Exercise 1: Seminary basics

Do you know what role our ELCA seminaries play in the life of the church? As a study group, learn about the mission and ministry of our seminaries. As one way of approaching it, assign people or teams to research a different seminary and report back. (Information and links to all the seminaries can be found at elca.org/Our-Work/Leadership/Seminaries.) Discuss:

- Where and when was the seminary founded, and why? What are the highlights of its history? How many pastors and deacons has it trained in its years?
- Has its mission evolved over the years, and how?
- What is the seminary doing now? What are the challenges? How is it hoping to meet them?

Exercise 2: Trained clergy

The ELCA, like most mainline churches, has a long tradition of highly educated and trained clergy. What would be some advantages of ensuring that clergy are trained and educated?

- Academic work ensures that leaders receive basic exposure in fundamental church topics such as the Bible, theology, history of the church and worship. What might be the consequences if a leader didn't have that training? Why is this important to any church? What might be the consequences if a leader didn't have that training? How and why has this been important in the life of your congregation?
- Leaders learn the basic practical aspects of pastoral work in both the classroom (through classes in such areas as preaching, stewardship and pastoral care) and in "field-education" experiences (including a yearlong internship and a placement in clinical pastoral education). Why is it important for a future church leader to learn about congregational ministry in both theory and practice? What might be the con-



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sequences if a leader didn't have that training? Have you seen it work to the advantage of your congregation?

Exercise 3: Candidacy process

Seminary is a key part of a rostered leaders training, but it isn't the only element of the credentialing process that they must undergo. In addition to receiving seminary education, future leaders undergo psychological testing and are each connected with a candidacy committee from one of the ELCA's 65 synods. Working closely with seminary officials, candidacy committees monitor the candidate's education, fieldwork and leadership development. At specific points along the process the committees formally evaluate the candidate and must give the green light for him or her to continue. On rare occasions a committee may decide to discontinue the process for a candidate whose academic work or fieldwork is unsatisfactory or points to unsuitability as a rostered leader. (To learn more, go to the candidacy page of your synod's website.) Discuss:

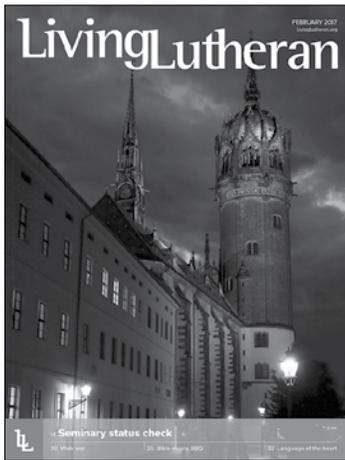
- Does book learning alone make a pastor or deacon a good leader? Does practical experience alone make a pastor or deacon a good leader? Explain.
- Why do academic learning and practical experience complement each other to produce a good leader?
- Have you seen this modeled by the leaders that have served or are serving your congregation?

Exercise 4: Seminary reflections

Ask the rostered leader(s) of your congregation to share with your study group reflections about seminary.

- What seminary did you attend? When? What was the curriculum? What did you do for internship/field education? What was seminary community life like back then?
- What were the expectations of a minister in those days? What were the assumptions about congregational life? How well did seminary prepare you for the ministry you encountered? Explain.
- In what ways have the job and expectations of a congregational minister changed since you were in seminary? What are the reasons for the changes? How has congregational life changed? Did seminary prepare you to adapt to a changing world? How have you coped?
- To meet the needs and demands of today's church, how would seminary education have to be different from what you experienced? Why? What specific courses would you suggest to be offered today?

Variation: If your church has two rostered leaders, or if there is another



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leader nearby who is agreeable to a discussion, bring them together and use the questions to compare and contrast their seminary experiences and observations.

Exercise 5: Relationship

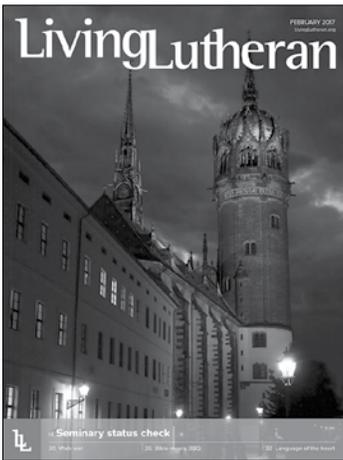
Many congregations, by reason of geographical proximity or experience with a former leader, have a relationship of support and communication with one or more of the eight seminaries in the ELCA. Does yours? Explain.

- Brainstorm at least five reasons why it's important that congregations stay aware of what's happening in seminaries, just as they do for other ELCA ministries.
- If yours currently has a relationship, how and why did it start? How is it lived out? What communications do you receive? Do you support the seminary with financial gifts? Go on the seminary's website and report to the study group the school's trends, news, highlights, as well as challenges for the present and future. What else can your congregation do to further support and deepen its relationship with the seminary?
- If your congregation does not have a relationship with a seminary, explore starting one—perhaps the school your current rostered leader attended (see exercise above). Research what's happening at that seminary and report to the group. Make a case for supporting the seminary through prayer and financial gifts and present it to the congregation council for action.

Exercise 6: Seminary debt

The cost of seminary has been rising, and the educational debt for the more than 80 percent of ELCA seminarians who take out loans has been rising dramatically. For example, Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn., reported that the average debt load of its students about tripled from \$17,000 in 1995 to \$50,838 in 2010. Today it reports that the *median* student debt is \$53,467, which means half of the students with debt carry more than \$53,467. Discuss:

- Assuming an interest rate of 6.8 percent for a federal Stafford Loan paid over 10 years, the monthly repayment for \$53,467 would be \$615, which totals \$7,380 a year. What would that mean for you to have to absorb that debt repayment into your family budget? How might you cope?
- If a pastor received \$50,000 per year in salary, the annual student loan repayment debt of \$7,380 would be about 15 percent of gross pay. What would it mean for a hypothetical pastor's ability to live on the salary your congregation pays?



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- Fewer students are enrolling in seminaries, and this is contributing to a pastor shortage. Given the debt load, why might the cost of a seminary education deter people from choosing ministry as a career?
- What assumptions might you infer about the financial background of someone who is able to incur \$53,467 in debt? (Would they have to be middle class or above, for example?)
- Should cost of education be a prohibiting factor in whether someone decides to become a pastor?
- Could your congregation help by giving to the ELCA Fund for Leaders, or giving to an ELCA seminary scholarship fund or a rostered leader from your synod who has a lot of educational debt?

Exercise 7: Congregational challenges

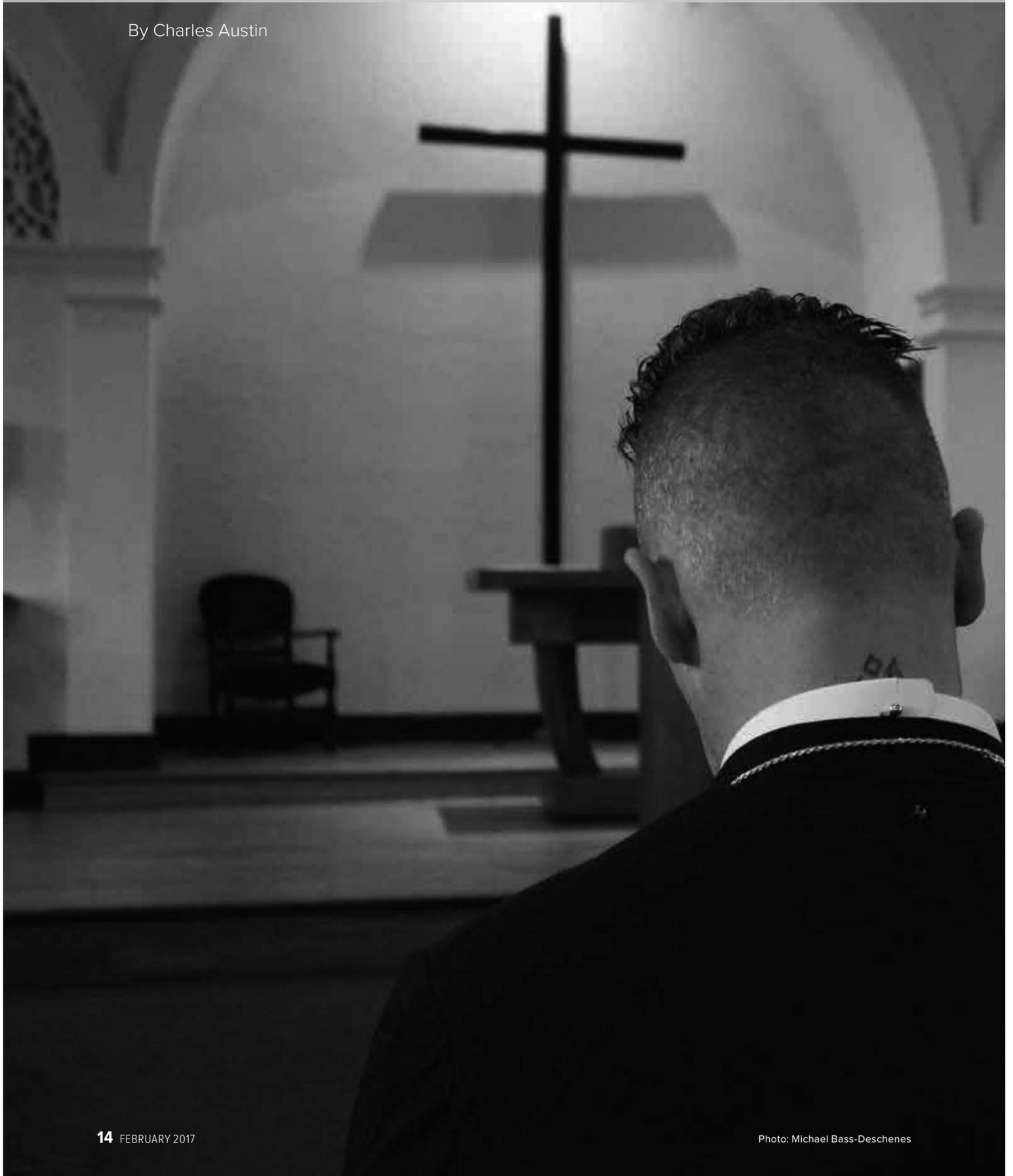
How have things changed in your congregation over the last 50 years?

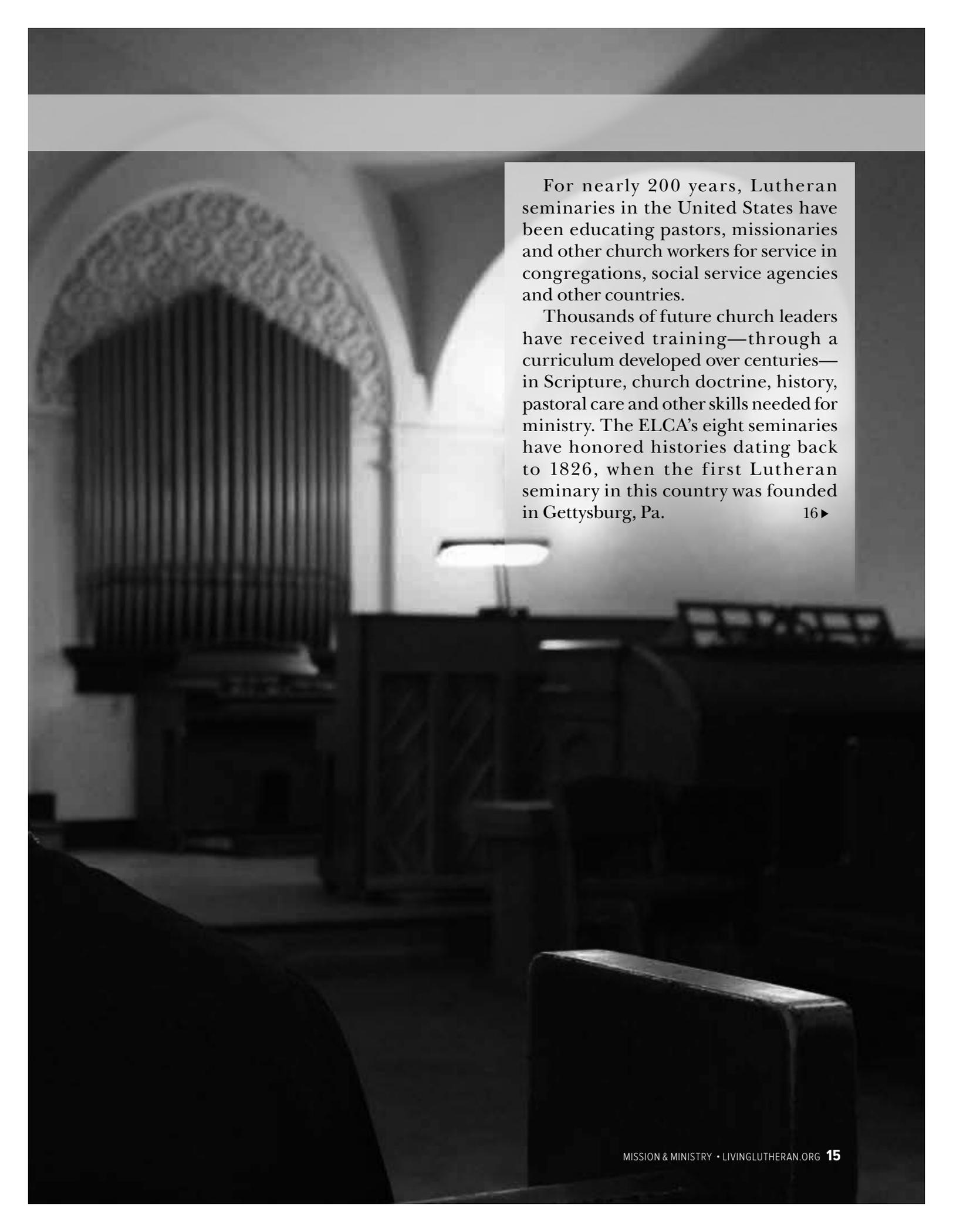
How has membership changed? Finances? Staffing levels?

- How has the quality of church life changed, both for Lutherans in general and for your congregation? What words would describe church life 50 years ago, again generally and for your congregation? What words would describe today's church life?
- What are the biggest factors for those changes? Make a list.
- When done, identify and explore those over which the church has no control. Who does have control? Did your pastor's or deacon's seminary education adequately equip and prepare your leader to deal with these? What would be needed?
- Looking at the factors over which the church has control, to what degree does the congregation have control over them? In whose authority could that control be exercised? Did seminary adequately prepare and train your church leaders to face these factors? If so, how? If not, why?
- What kind of education and training is needed for congregations to meet the needs of God's people today?

SEMINARY STATUS CHECK

By Charles Austin





For nearly 200 years, Lutheran seminaries in the United States have been educating pastors, missionaries and other church workers for service in congregations, social service agencies and other countries.

Thousands of future church leaders have received training—through a curriculum developed over centuries—in Scripture, church doctrine, history, pastoral care and other skills needed for ministry. The ELCA's eight seminaries have honored histories dating back to 1826, when the first Lutheran seminary in this country was founded in Gettysburg, Pa. 16▶

Today those seminaries face problems—some might call the situation a crisis—due to high costs, declining enrollment and changes in the type of education needed for pastors in the 21st century.

In response, ELCA schools have begun a massive effort to reorient almost everything about themselves to fit seminary education to the needs of today's church. Two seminaries are merging. One is relocating, largely to save money. Others are uniting their work with ELCA colleges. Degree programs are being altered and curriculum revised. All are looking at ways to help the seminaries and students bear the high cost of graduate school education.

Michael Cooper-White, president of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, said seminary education today takes “a new approach to formation and leadership development. [This] goes beyond checking off a list of courses. We are all looking for ways to better prepare people for the amazingly complex and challenging context of today's ministry,” he said.

These efforts are occurring amid declining enrollment. Last year 1,627 students were involved in all seminary programs, said Jonathan Strandjord, ELCA program director for seminaries. That reduced number includes people not preparing for pastoral ministry or those already ordained studying for additional degrees.

In 2008, ELCA seminaries graduated 271 students with the Master of Divinity degree that usually leads to ordination. In 2016 there were 173 such graduates, down nearly 100 from eight years ago.

Those numbers parallel the decline in other seminaries affiliated with the Association of Theological Schools, where total seminary enrollment is down as much as 40 percent in other denominations.

Merging and moving

Several ELCA schools are already making major changes. Gettysburg Seminary, the oldest of the ELCA theological schools, is merging with the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia—a union contemplated as long as 50 years. This year the two schools will become United Lutheran Theological Seminary, with campuses in Philadelphia and Gettysburg.

Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, is merging with nearby Capital University, an ELCA school, in a union that will be completed this year.

Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, Calif., merged with the ELCA's California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks. The seminary will sell its aging and expensive-to-maintain campus and is moving downtown near Berkeley City College and the University of California.

Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, S.C., is now affiliated with Lenoir-Rhyne University in Hickory, N.C.

School officials see these moves as not only cost-saving but also as ways to expand the seminary experience.

“For some time, many seminaries had become monastic in nature,” said Wayne Powell, president

The “traditional” path to ordination



Candidate earns a bachelor's degree and is certified by the candidacy committee of his or her synod.

Candidate attends seminary for two years.

Candidate spends one year on internship in a congregation.

Candidate attends another year of seminary.

Candidate graduates with a Master of Divinity degree.

of Lenoir-Rhyne. Today, he said, “seminaries are becoming more interactive with the real world, which, of course, provides the students with a more practical education.”

Cooper-White said the Gettysburg union with the Philadelphia school was not just a “merger, but a new approach to formation and leadership development.”

Seminaries will seek more “partners” in the education of church leaders, said Louise Johnson, president of Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. The partners will include other schools, synods, congregations and other agencies, she said. For example, working through the campus ministry program at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, Wartburg has five undergraduates taking seminary courses while still in college. The seminary is exploring similar partnerships in Iowa, Minnesota and North Dakota.

The Philadelphia seminary works with congregations in Rochester, N.Y., and Boston to develop local sites for theological education, said David Lose, president of the school.

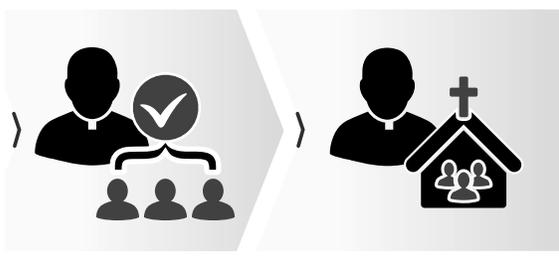
Curriculum and teaching style is also changing dramatically because the church doesn’t have “the same center of gravity or cultural prominence that it once did,” Lose said. “Congregations can no longer imagine that they are a spiritual destination that people informed by the culture will come to seeking inspiration.” Rather than a “concert hall attended by people who love music,” churches need to be more like a “community music school that equips people to better play music, to play the faith,” he added. 18 ▶

What’s TEAC?

The reorganization of ELCA seminary training is guided by the report of the Theological Education Advisory Council (TEAC), a group appointed in 2013 to look at leadership development for the church.

The group recommended that the ELCA:

- Set a higher priority for theological education, involving synods and congregations, and develop a “common learning platform” of internet-based resources for theological education.
- Actively seek out new leaders for the church, expanding programs that introduce young people to church leadership and asking synods and seminaries to designate people to help congregations, colleges and groups such as campus ministry to encourage people to discern whether they’re being called to ordained ministry.
- Ask seminaries to develop more cooperative programs, do common research on future needs, and work toward balanced budgets and increased reserves and endowments.



Candidate is approved for ordination by candidacy committee of the synod.

The ordination takes place after the candidate receives a call to a congregation.

Alternate path to ordination

Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) is a way of ordaining people “who by reason of age and prior experience” seek an alternate program of preparation for ordination. It is for people who are identified for ministry in a specific context, taking into consideration “the leadership gifts, ministry skills, cultural learning styles/experiences and/or age” of a candidate. TEEM candidates will serve in “emerging ministries” or “ministry settings that are without ordained pastoral leadership.”

A pastor who leads a congregation will be “less of a performer and more of a coach,” Lose said, adding that the challenge to seminary education is to develop a curriculum content and style of teaching “to train that kind of leader.”

Congregations calling newly ordained pastors will have to prepare themselves for these kinds of leaders (see “A new kind of pastor,” page 19).

The value of seminary

Those studying for ordained ministry are also more diverse and varied in age than previous generations. The needs of these people, sometimes entering seminary after a career in another field, are different from those who have prepared for seminary in college and begin their theological education as soon as they receive their bachelor’s degree.

To expand their service to students who might be interested in seminary but aren’t seeking ordination as pastors, some schools are adding degrees. “We offer seven new degrees,” said Rick Barger, president of Trinity, including a master’s in leadership and two-year degrees in areas such as anti-racism, environmental justice and global ethics.

“The future of seminary education,” Barger added, “goes beyond divinity degrees.”

At Lutheran Southern Seminary, leaders are developing more programs of interest beyond Lutheranism to attract more students.

The high cost of postgraduate education is also a major concern for the seminaries and their students, and there are significant plans to make it possible for people to get through seminary without incurring tens of thousands of dollars of debt. The seminaries, too, often operate on a deficit budget, draining reserve funds or incurring the heavy costs of debt.

In an effort directed both at reducing student debt and developing a new form of seminary education, Trinity is changing its master of divinity program into a “2+2” package. A student spends two years in seminary and then two years on an internship during which time they also take online classes.

When he was a parish pastor, Barger said he had 15 interns and eight of those were in the congregation for two years. “The difference that

the two years made was astonishing; it was a much better formation of a new pastor,” he said.

Distance learning technology makes that kind of education possible, said Johnson from Wartburg. Her school was working with students in North Dakota who would be serving in congregations while taking online courses. “Our distance learning programs use video so the faces of the online students are seen in the classroom by the other students,” she said.

To help, synods and congregations are encouraged to support seminarians with grants for housing and living expenses, as well as tuition costs. The ELCA Fund for Leaders will provide full tuition scholarships for up to 60 students over the next three years (elca.org/fundforleaders), and seminaries are seeking to build endowment funds to help students pay tuition costs.

“We are re-prioritizing our budgets, and scholarships are at the top of the list,” said Cooper-White, adding that the new United Lutheran Seminary hopes to make it possible for all students to have full scholarships.

The declining number of students in seminary remains a concern. A report from the Theological Education Advisory Committee (see “What’s TEAC? on page 17) says it is the job of the whole church—congregations, synods, seminaries and churchwide agencies—to help people discern whether God is calling them to professional ministry in the church.

The ELCA also has fewer congregations than previously, and this changes the number of pastors needed to serve them. Seminary leaders, however, say the schools can also serve as educational resources for laypeople in congregations. Lose of Philadelphia says if seminaries are only seen as schools for training pastors, the ELCA may have too many such schools. But if seminaries are places for “lifelong learning, for laypeople learning more about their faith,” then we have too few, he said.

The future of seminary education and the training of new pastors is the task of the whole church, Lose said, citing the report from the advisory council. “The question in front of our church is: do we value a network of Lutheran seminaries? We will succeed or fail to the point that congregations and synods and the whole church decide that we do,” he said. **L**

A new kind of pastor



As seminaries rework the ways they train new pastors, congregations may have to alter their “image” of a pastor.

“We look at the world around us, and the church, as beautiful and wonderful as it has been, is not effective in reaching out to new people,” said Louise Johnson, president of Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa. “We’re not growing.”

Congregations often believe it’s the pastor’s job to get new members and increase attendance at worship, but evangelism is actually the task of every member. Furthermore, “serving the world” is the goal of today’s church, and that means more outreach in the community.

One participant involved in the listening portion of the Theological Education Advisory Committee study said, “The entire Christian church in North America (not just Lutherans) has focused much too heavily in the past 60 years on meeting the needs of its members.”

“Our congregations have for too long been places where people had their needs met without being sent out to meet the needs of the world,” said another person involved in the research. “We need to form and equip leaders who can both cast a vision and help people own and live it.”

Pastors prepared for greater service in the world will be teaching members how the gospel enables everyone to reach out and engage in the needs of the world, not just

their own spiritual lives. This is a different image than the view that the pastor is primarily the spiritual leader of a congregation.

New pastors, trained for this kind of outreach, may meet resistance in congregations that see the leader’s role as primarily providing care within the church walls. Those new pastors will need to have the leadership skills to handle opposition.

But it’s vital to the spiritual health of congregations and the whole ELCA, said one participant, that churches focus on missions and ministries that extend beyond the walls of individual congregations.

Said another respondent: “I believe we are being called to create ways in which seekers/nones/the lapsed can gain an experience of the living God. I believe we are being called to find new ways to create genuine community.”

ELCA seminaries as of Dec. 31, 2016

- Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn.
- Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.
- Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa.).
- Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.
- Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, Columbia, S.C.
- Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, Calif.
- Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio.
- Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa.

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Charles Austin is a retired ELCA pastor living in Teaneck, N.J. He has also been a reporter for *The New York Times* and other news organizations.