Pastoral Formation in the Missional Church

By Gene Edward Veith

Training pastors in a seminary that bestows a graduate degree is a relatively recent development in the church, an attempt to give the pastoral ministry the status of a "profession" on a par with medicine and law. Historically, the education and formation of pastors has varied according to the church's mission—that is, to the cultural and educational context of the people the church is trying to reach.

A Brief History of Pastoral Education

In the New Testament times, apostles appointed leaders of the local congregations that they established, laying their hands on them in a rite that became ordination. As the early church became more organized, local priests took on assistants—or, in effect, apprentices—who themselves often became candidates for ordination by a bishop.

Very early, certain educational standards became pre-requisites for the priesthood. Basic literacy was necessary in order to read the scriptures and the liturgy. But the Greco-Roman educational system offered more. Luther commented that when it came to education, "all the bishops, priests, and monks in Germany put together would not equal a Roman soldier."[1] The priest with the Roman education would have studied grammar, so that he could read; logic, so that he could defend the faith; and rhetoric, so that he could preach. He would also have studied pagan literature and philosophy, which would have helped him reach Roman soldiers.

1"Letter to the Mayors and Aldermen of All the Cities of Germany in Behalf of Christian Schools," in Luther on Education, ed. F. V. N. Painter (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), p. 181.

In the Middle Ages, most pastoral formation took place in the religious orders. But the church also invented the university in order to educate the clergy. The curriculum was based on the classical education given to those Roman soldiers, but the emphasis was on logic and philosophy, the disciplines necessary for the Aristotelian analysis that characterized scholastic theology. The medieval universities did have schools of "Divinity" for graduate study, but a bachelor's degree in the liberal arts was sufficient for the priesthood. And the majority of medieval priests lacked even that credential, receiving their ordination at the behest of their religious order.

With the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, uneducated priests were seen on both sides as contributing to the dysfunctions of the medieval church. The Council of Trent sought to combat the Reformation by instituting a system for the education of priests. The council decreed that every diocese should provide a "seminary"—literally, a seed bed from which plants can grow—to cultivate and raise up new priests. This was the first use of the term. The diocesan seminaries, which still exist today, were for boys as young as 14, offering a secondary-level education in Latin and Philosophy, as well as spiritual disciplines that might lead to the discerning of a vocation for the priesthood.

The Reformation, begun by a university professor, made a point of giving its pastors a university education. The University of Wittenberg, Oxford, Cambridge, and other Protestant institutions were, again, liberal arts institutions. But instead of emphasizing logic, as did the scholastic universities, the Renaissance schools emphasized rhetoric. This included the study of Greek and Hebrew, as well as Latin, and reading original sources. In practice, this meant setting aside the medieval commentaries in favor of reading the Bible in the original languages. While pastoral students studied divinity, they also acquired a

broad liberal arts education that helped them carry out their mission in the rapidly-changing Renaissance society.

With the Enlightenment and the rise of scientific rationalism, a new kind of university was invented, and the church followed its lead in the education of pastors. The University of Berlin, founded in 1810 by the King of Prussia, was built around science rather than the liberal arts. In place of the wide-ranging scope of classical education, the so-called "German university model" would be highly specialized. Faculties were divided into rigid "departments." Students would concentrate on a "major" along with a "minor" within a department. The primary concern of the university would not be teaching, as in the classical liberal arts universities, but research. In short, the University of Berlin was the first modern research university.

The humanities and theology would be retained, but they too had to be based on "science"; that is, objective empirical research, and, increasingly, a materialistic worldview.

The impact of the new university model on the church was dramatic. Theology still had a place at the table, with a department of theology and majors that could turn out pastors for the new ecumenical Prussian church. But making theology "scientific" required setting aside supernatural assumptions in studying the Bible, resulting in the higher critical method. And building on the assumptions of scientific naturalism meant playing down the supernatural, reinterpreting Christianity according to secular movements, giving us liberal theology.

The German model was the project of the King of Prussia, the same monarch whose union of the Lutheran and Reformed churches into one state church led to the immigration of many confessional Lutherans to the United States, including those who would form the

Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Another architect of the model was the Friedrich Schleiermacher, hailed as the "father of liberal theology."

In the United States, each of its many denominations founded liberal arts colleges and seminaries to serve its members and equip its pastors. Universities such as Harvard and Yale established divinity schools, following the Protestant pattern for theological education. But the new universities founded by philanthropists and the state landgrant colleges adopted the German model. Eventually, even the liberal arts colleges switched over to the new model, keeping old terminology and some required humanities courses, but emulating the modern research university as much as they could. Denominations, however, kept their stand-alone seminaries as a way to keep their theological integrity and their church distinctives.

Meanwhile, with the 20th century, many of the divinity schools attached to universities, influenced by the ecumenical movement and the supposedly universal findings of objective theological research, became *non-denominational seminaries.* A student could go to the divinity schools of Duke, Vanderbilt, Yale, or others, and then seek ordination in the Presbyterian, Episcopal, Congregational, or other mainline Protestant denominations.

A number of conservative evangelical institutions also became non-denominational seminaries. Since the evangelical movement is more concerned with personal religious experience rather than ecclesiology, seminaries and even congregations could be "non-denominational." Fuller, Gordon-Conwell, Trinity, and others attracted students from Baptist, Evangelical Free, Wesleyan, and Pentecostal traditions. This was a great service to small denominations, which were freed from the burden of providing their own seminaries.

This also made possible the surge in independent "non-denominational" churches. A young pastor straight out of an evangelical seminary or Bible college can go out, rent a building, and start a megachurch. Free of any ecclesiastical red-tape or oversight, such religious entrepreneurship is responsible for planting innumerable churches throughout the country.

Scandinavian Church & Mission

Today society has become highly secularized. The same can be said of most mainline Protestant denominations. This poses new challenges for churches and pastors that would be "missional." Scandinavia can serve as a case history both of these challenges and how missional Christians can overcome them.

The Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland are sometimes described as among the most secularist nations in the world. In these tolerant and well-run welfare states, with high standards of living and top scores on the "happiness indexes," the churches are all but empty. But this does not mean that Christianity has gone away.

Membership in the Lutheran state churches of Scandinavia remains very high: 61%, in Sweden; 71.5%, in Norway; in 72%, Finland; 76%, in Denmark. This is true even though members must pay up to 5% of their incomes as a "church tax," which pays the churches' expenses, including the pastors' salaries. (Compare that to the 17% of the population of the United Kingdom belonging to the Church of England.) And yet attendance is indeed very low, with only 3-5% of Scandinavians attending weekly.[2]

2The statistics are from the entries on the various state churches in Wikipedia.

But Christianity exists in two tracks in the Scandinavian countries. There is the state or national church. And there are the "mission societies." These had their origin in the Pietist movements, dating back to the 18th and 19th centuries. The state churches more or less ceded their "missional" responsibilities to these new organizations full of zealous lay-people. The "outer mission" groups devoted themselves to sending missionaries around the world. They played a major role in the evangelization of Africa and are largely responsible for the still-growing Lutheran presence in Ethiopia, Namibia, Madagascar, and Tanzania. The "inner mission" groups concentrated on work within the Scandinavian countries, including evangelism, Bible studies, youth work, and serving the poor

To this day, nearly every Danish city and small town has its "mission house," where people gather during the week for prayer, Bible study, Christian fellowship, and Christian service. The mission organizations in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland are taking the lead in evangelizing and catechizing the large wave of Muslim immigrants who are converting to Christianity. Yes, the churches are mostly empty, but the mission houses are often full.

The national church has become extremely liberal, but the mission organizations are mostly conservative. Though early Pietism tended to set itself against the "dead orthodoxy" of Lutheran scholasticism, today's mission groups are for the most part committed to Lutheran theology. And now the mission groups are forming their own ecclesiastical structures.

In Finland, mission organizations are conducting their own divine services. Since they are allowed to call their own pastors, this amounts to the formation of alternative congregations. One group, the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland, acquired

its own bishop (consecrated by a Swedish bishop involved in a similar mission movement) and became, in effect, a separate church body.

In some ways the secular governments have been limiting the perogatives of the state church, which works to the advantage of the mission Christians. In Denmark, any 50 people may form their own congregation and choose their own pastor. Mission groups are taking advantage of this opportunity, so that a network of conservative congregations (usually well-attended) is growing up within the state church. In Norway, the church tax can now be applied to whatever church or religious body the taxpayer joins, which makes it easier for independent denominations. Most Scandinavians feel strong ties to the national church and keep their membership even though they worship at mission congregations or not at all. Unbelievers do not attend services of the state church, of course (though many retain their membership); but believers do not attend either because the churches have become so liberal and now they have other options.

So how do the mission societies find and develop pastors? Denmark's Inner Mission works closely with conservative state church pastors, many of whom themselves had been active in the mission houses. When Inner Mission staff evangelize Muslim immigrants, they then send them to their co-operating pastors for catechesis, baptism, and church membership. (These converts typically attend services faithfully and often inspire other members to become more actively involved.) The mission organizations also have pastors on their staff, paid not by tax money but by the organization. Since these are authorized by their ordination to consecrate the elements of Holy Communion, divine services outside the ecclesiastical structure are possible.

In Finland, the challenge for the mission groups is not pastoral education but getting their people ordained. The Lutheran churches of Scandinavia, unlike many Lutheran church bodies in the United States, are episcopal in polity, holding to the view that pastors must be ordained by a bishop who is in historic succession to the apostles. The state churches often refuse to ordain conservative candidates. So the mission groups and independent church bodies have turned to confessional foreign bishops, such as the Lutheran archbishop of Kenya and the Bishop of the Ingrian Lutheran church in Russia to ordain their pastors.

In Scandinavia, pastoral education is the work of the universities. As a Finnish pastor explained to me, "You go to the university and major in theology. Then you try to get ordained." But the university theology faculties are overwhelmingly liberal theologically. How can the mission societies cultivate missional pastors who hold to a high view of the Scriptures and the Lutheran confessions? Denmark's Inner Mission, whose funding comes not only from donations but from the businesses it operates, has considerable financial resources and has endowed professorships for conservative faculty members. But the practice in all of the Scandinavian countries is to establish parallel institutes on or near the university campuses to support and help prepare conservative candidates.

These Theological Institutes or Bible Institutes function in different ways. The Finnish Theological Institute offers lectures, a library of orthodox resources, and other programs to supplement—from the conservative side—what the students are learning in their more liberal classrooms. It also provides a support group for the young Christians who are likely to find their faith challenged in their theology courses. The Institutes also help the theology students in their spiritual formation with Bible study, prayer, and worship.

The offerings of the Institutes are normally not for academic credit, but some of them have made arrangements with accredited foreign institutions, making it possible for students to earn a degree—perhaps from an African university—at the Institute. In Sweden, the Mission Province operates the Lutheran Institute of Theology in Gothenburg for the preparation of pastors. Originally, it offered only supplemental programs for theology students enrolled at the University of Gothenburg, but now it offers a complete program accredited by the European Evangelical Accrediting Association. A graduate program, offering the S.T.M. degree, is currently being operated through Concordia Theological Seminary of Fort Wayne, Indiana, a seminary of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod.

Conclusions and Applications

Clearly, a self-contained denominational graduate seminary is not the only way to prepare pastors, as church history clearly shows. If the goal is to produce "missional" pastors, it might not be the best way.

Being "missional" emphasizes the fact that Christians have a God-given *mission*, not simply to retreat into their embedded enclaves, but to go out into the world to seek and to save the lost, taking the Gospel of Jesus Christ into every corner of the world. Clearly an education only in the technicalities of theology is not enough. A pastor with a mission to the culture must know that culture, just as a missionary to a foreign land must know the language, customs, and issues of that society.

The ancient, medieval, and Reformation model of training pastors first in the liberal arts—which involved broad study in many different subjects, including in depth interaction with pagan authors—served the church well in its mission first of evangelizing Greco-

Roman pagans, then of building a Christian civilization, and then of restoring the centrality of the Gospel and teaching ordinary Christian to read the Word of God.

In contrast, the model of the German research university, which has profoundly influenced American higher education—including seminaries—arguably encourages a non-missional approach to the ministry. Not only does the "scientific" approach encourage non-missional theology. The hyperspecialization that is another value of the German model can leave a pastor in a theological bubble, ill-equipped for mission in the world.

The model of the Scandinavian mission organizations may well address that: Pastors receive a secular university education, which teaches them about their mission field. At the same time, they participate in a parallel, not-for-credit theological institute, which grounds them in orthodox theology and the skills they will need for their mission.

The weakness of this approach may be that the Nordic pastoral students are studying theology in the universities. Perhaps they would do better to study in a cultural field—history, literature, film, etc.—so that they would learn about the people they hope to reach, while learning good theology from the Institute. In the United States, seminary offers graduate education, so students may well come with an undergraduate degree in the liberal arts or a culturally-oriented field. This should be encouraged, as opposed to pre-seminary students majoring in theology, thus keeping them in that theological bubble.

Starting a new denominational seminary would be a daunting task. Accreditation standards alone—requiring a large theological library, extensive facilities, and a faculty with doctorates—would be enormously expensive. And yet accreditation is necessary so that the pastors in training would qualify for federal loans to pay for their education. Which, in turn, saddles new pastors with crushing debt that they can scarcely repay and

that drives many of them out of the ministry. Rethinking pastoral education should consider these financial implications, working to minimize or even eliminate the financial burden on future pastors. Except for those offering academic courses for credit, usually through another university, the Scandinavian Institutes are unaccredited and they are free.

Would non-denominational seminaries be an option for a new Lutheran church body? Lutheran Christianity tends to resist generic theology. The Law/Gospel hermeneutic shapes the study of the Bible and the methodology of preaching. Lutheran sacramental theology will have no place in a non-denominational seminary. And evangelical seminaries will be of little help in leading Lutheran worship. Generally, Lutherans have always kept to their own seminaries. And yet, there are *some* seminary subjects that Lutherans can take without sacrificing their Lutheranness, such as Biblical Greek and Hebrew, church history, and church administration.

The newly formed Anglican Church in North America (ACNA), which has recently broken away from the Episcopal Church, is in a similar situation to the North American Lutheran Church. ACNA has set standards for approved programs to meet and lists six seminaries deemed suitable for the preparation of Anglican priests. Three are conservative Episcopal seminaries, representing three schools of Anglican theology: Nashotah House (Anglo-Catholic), Reformed Episcopal (Calvinist, currently serving its own breakaway denomination), and Trinity School for Ministry (evangelical). The other three are evangelical non-denominational seminaries—Gordon, Regent, and Beeson—*that have added an Anglican track*. That is, these schools have added courses in Anglican theology and practice designed for those seeking ordination as Anglican priests.

Is there a non-denominational seminary that would put together a "Lutheran track"? Could the NALC provide enough students to make that worthwhile? Or could Lutheran CORE provide an Institute that could provide Lutheran formation, as students attended a non-denominational missional seminary like Fuller?

One way to solve the accreditation conundrum is for seminaries to affiliate with a sympathetic institution. For example, the North American Lutheran Seminary is affiliated with the Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, which is an Anglican seminary. This is similar to the European and Reformational practice of affiliating seminaries with universities. The Lutheran Church of England trains its pastors at Westfield House at Cambridge, where they take seminary courses as they also pursue degrees from Cambridge, which is still, like Oxford, a bastion of the classical liberal arts. The Lutheran Church of Canada has two seminaries: St. Catherine's, connected to Brock University, a public institution, and Concordia, connected to the Lutheran college by that name in Alberta.

Could online learning be construed as "missional" in our digital age? Certainly online technology would be the cheapest way of educating future pastors. Courses could be put together once—complete with video lectures, readings, and activities—and then used over and over again. Online courses can incorporate real-time discussions with the professor and fellow students, mitigating somewhat the lack of interaction in virtual classrooms. Both seminaries of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod have developed online seminary programs for specialized ministries, particularly to prepare pastors in ethnic missions. The distance learning program supplements online coursework with short intensive residential

classes and—of supreme importance—mentoring from other pastors. That dimension of pastoral formation returns us to the practice of the early church.