

Imperatives for Theological Education

These 11 imperatives for theological education were approved by the 1993 ELCA Churchwide Assembly as the planning and guiding focus for preparation of leaders for this church into the 21st century.

(Note: These imperatives, prepared between 1991 and 1993, do not reflect the present reality of three lay rosters — associates in ministry, Diaconal ministers and deaconesses — officially recognized by action of the 1993 Assembly on the Study of Ministry. In most instances, where associates in ministry is used, all lay rosters can be assumed.)

1. Depth in the Faith

This church needs pastors and lay leaders whose various ministries are rooted in the Bible, history and theology, and shaped by the Lutheran confessional heritage. We seek men and women whose personal faith in Jesus Christ is nourished and renewed through a disciplined devotional life. No longer can we depend on a Christian culture to transmit basic Christian knowledge and values. Leaders must be competent to teach and preach the truth of the faith with accuracy and clarity. Secular ideologies, spiritual movements and world religions offer competing faith claims to which Christians must be prepared to respond out of the depths of their tradition. People look to their lay and ordained ministers for theological and spiritual leadership that is based on an intimate knowledge of scripture, a distinctively Lutheran theological understanding, and contemporary methods of theological reflection.

2. Mission Outreach

God's mission requires leaders in all the ministries of the church who are prepared and committed to proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. Evangelical outreach by faithful and articulate leaders is obedient to Christ's Great Commission and essential to the identity, vitality, and continuity of this church. Approaches in theological education are needed which help pastors and other leaders recognize and respond to the spiritual hunger of people in their congregations and in the communities beyond their congregations. Pastors must themselves be equipped so that they can equip others to join with them in sharing their faith with those who have never heard, those who have not believed, and those who are out of touch with the means of grace within the community of faith. They must learn to lead congregations which serve as mission outposts for the faith.

3. Practical Congregational Needs

Congregations are asking for leaders with a high level of competence in the practice of ministry. Practical competence includes not only specific skills of ministry, but also the integration of practice with spiritual and theological depth, sensitivity to interpersonal relationships, and beyond that an overall capacity for leadership. If congregations are going to become mission outposts for the renewal of the faith in our secular context, they need pastors who inspire through their teaching, preaching and leadership at worship who empower members for their ministry, and who provide vision and direction for the ministry team. They need associates in ministry and other lay leaders who provide expert leadership in specific areas such as education, evangelism, music, and youth ministry. In order to meet the demands of congregational ministry today, leaders need both the gifts that come from the Spirit and practical competencies that must be learned. Seminary education provides an introduction to basic ministry skills and the art of theological and practical integration. These must be refined and expanded through continuing education, practice, supervision, and reflection. Most seminary graduates need to develop competence in a variety of practical areas, including evangelism, stewardship, and administration.

4. Cultures and Contexts

With the growing diversity and interdependence of cultures that increasingly mark contemporary American society, we need lay and ordained ministers who are sensitive to and knowledgeable about the cultures of those they serve and who are able to adapt their ministry to different contexts. Global economic, political, and cultural realities shape the overall setting of contemporary ministry. At the same time, ministry is always carried out in a particular culture and a local context. The practical demands of

ministry are more complex and difficult to meet when one is ministering in cultures and contexts other than one's own. This church needs leaders who can minister effectively with people from a diverse range of life situations including ethnic origins, vocational and educational experience, family situations, regional variations, types of community, and political value systems. Awareness of cultures and contexts should also lead Christian leaders to speak out against trends in society that are contrary to the faith they hold.

5. Africa American, Asian, Hispanic and Native America Candidates

This church needs to invite Christian leaders from the African America, Asian, Hispanic, and Native America communities to consider service in the church as pastors or associates in ministry. It also must provide these candidates with theological education that is congruent with their varied cultural perspectives and that prepares them for rostered ministry throughout the ELCA. Mission in North America requires that the ELCA learn how to relate the Gospel to the growing number of African America, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American persons who live here. These communities are often better served by pastors and associates in ministry from these communities. Furthermore, people from all communities will be nurtured in the faith more effectively within the ELCA if this church body recognizes the particularity of each community and becomes more inclusive of a variety of cultural values and styles. This second task belongs to this whole church, but it will not happen without the leadership of a growing number of pastors and associates in ministry who are themselves Asian, African-America, Native American, and Hispanic.

6. Indigenous Lay Leaders

This church needs to find appropriate ways to provide indigenous lay leaders identified by their communities with the basic theological education they need for ministry in their settings. Many of those with potential for being effective ministers in their communities are not able to leave their communities for extended periods of time for training. Furthermore, there may be ways in which their effectiveness for certain ministries is enhanced by their continuity in their community. Some indigenous leaders are already being licensed for local service by their bishops. Various training programs are being developed locally and synodically to serve them. If the ELCA authorizes a wider range of ministries, such as lay catechists and evangelists, the demand will increase for approaches to theological education that are highly accessible, adaptable, and portable.

7. Life-Long Learning

Because of the changing, diverse context of our mission, it is necessary that leaders continually grow in faith, expand their skills and increase their knowledge through continuing education. Even at their very best, seminary degree programs cannot teach all one needs to know for the practice of ministry. While continuing education is expected of all pastors and associates in ministry, it is certainly needed during the early, formative years of ministry in a specific context. Continuing education is critically important at other points of personal and professional transition which call for fresh theological reflection, refinement of skills, response to changing society issues, or orientation to new ministry contexts. This church must encourage and provide resources for its lay and ordained leaders to continually develop and renew their gifts for ministry through disciplined patterns of life-long learning.

8. Ministry in Daily Life

The education of ordained pastors and other leaders in the church should prepare them to assist the people of the church to integrate their life and faith. In addition, an increasing number of Christians who are not pursuing a church occupation seek intellectual exploration of their faith and theological reflection on their ministries in the world. Many have the time and interest to study theology with the same academic thoroughness that they apply to secular and professional fields of study. These lay members live on the cutting edge of mission. They engage structures of society and are in regular contact with people of other faiths and with people scarcely related to organized religion. Their faith and ministry could be enhanced if, in addition to congregationally based adult education, they had access to programs of theological education at an advanced level. Such programs would have to relate to their ministries in the world and be adaptable to the demands of their primary commitments to family or work.

9. Scholarly Discourse and Reflection

How the church engages its mission is constantly challenged, focused, and refined by lively and critical

theological reflection. Since their origin in a sixteenth century university context, Lutherans have been committed to preparing pastors, teachers and other leaders to engage in theological reflection in congregations, colleges, and seminaries. The seminaries of the Lutheran church have had a special responsibility for transmitting the Lutheran theological tradition to successive generations of leaders. For the sake of the integrity and vitality of the Lutheran theological tradition and the contribution it makes to the ecumenical church, it is essential that all Lutheran theological faculties not only prepare leaders, but also serve as communities of theological discourse, which are a resource to this church in the development and review of theological positions. Furthermore, to ensure the continuation of a strong Lutheran theological tradition, this church needs to encourage and support some centers where theological education at the doctoral level can be pursued: major divinity schools where a strong Lutheran presence is consciously developed and maintained, ecumenical consortia in which a Lutheran institution collaborates with institutions of other denominations, seminary-based academic doctoral studies which may draw in scholars and expertise from neighboring academic institutions.

10. Life Circumstances of Candidates

Just as the context of the ELCA's mission is diverse, so also are those who come to be prepared to serve that mission: candidates young and old; candidates just out of college and candidates with a variety of work and life experience; single candidates and candidates with families; candidates who carry high debt loads and work to support themselves and their families while they prepare for ministry; candidates with advanced degrees and candidates who lack academic preparation for theological study; candidates steeped in the Christian tradition and Lutheran ethos and new Christians with little experience of the church; candidates who are mobile and candidates who are bound to particular places and communities; candidates who bring a variety of perspectives as women and men, as members of the dominant culture, and as members of various racial and ethnic communities. Some within this diversity have experienced systemic discrimination. This church needs to provide options in theological education that are responsive to the varied circumstances in the lives of ministry candidates.

11. Ecumenical Interdependence

Since a diversity of religions and Christian communions is part of our context for mission, people preparing for leadership in the ELCA need to learn how to work and study together with people of other traditions. It is vital that theological education in the ELCA build ecumenical understanding and model patterns of dialogue and cooperation among Christians and adherents of other faiths. Wherever possible, cooperative relationships and scholarly exchange programs should be fostered between Lutheran seminaries and those of other traditions and among Lutheran seminaries around the world. Major ecumenical seminaries which prepare some leaders for service in the Lutheran church play a role in fostering ecumenical interdependence.