

TEACHING A LUTHERAN THEOLOGY THAT TRANSFORMS

When many people hear the word “theology,” they think of something abstract and complex that has little to do with everyday life and its problems and challenges. Rarely do they see it as a subject that can transform deeply the way people relate to one another in their families and communities and enable them to address issues such as injustice, poverty, inequity, violence, and abuse so to bring healing and wholeness. Of course, that can happen only when it is taught in a way that actively promotes these things and allows them to happen.

This past semester I taught an online course on Contemporary Lutheran Theologies for our Lutheran Seminary. We had 18 students from Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Bolivia, Venezuela, Chile, Puerto Rico, and Arizona. Half of the students were women, and several were from churches that are not Lutheran. All were eager to discuss the relevance of our Lutheran understanding of the Christian faith for the various types of ministry and service in which they are involved.



I divided the course into four parts. In the first part, we began by drawing up a long list of the everyday issues, challenges, needs, and interests of the people among whom the students are working. We asked what questions and problems people are facing today and what concerns them the most.



In the second part of the course, we spent six weeks looking at the primary emphases, principles, and characteristics of our Lutheran understanding of the gospel. As we did so, we compiled a second lengthy list of points that summarized the transforming aspects of that gospel. These included things such as our focus on grace and unconditional love, inclusivity, dialogue, Christian freedom, and the rejection of every form of injustice and oppression.



Following this, the students spent several weeks sharing presentations on the writings of some of the most prominent contemporary Latin American Lutheran theologians. As they did so, they were asked to identify how these writings reflected and articulated the points on the two lists we had drawn up.



In the final five weeks of the course, each of the students chose a subject from the first list of contemporary issues and concerns we had drawn up and prepared a presentation of their own in which they applied the principles and characteristics of our Lutheran theology to see how it can address those issues and concerns. It was a joy to observe their creativity and insights and hear them share their convictions as to the way in which all that we had studied could truly make a difference in the lives of the people among whom they are working!

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE THROUGH THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS

Over the past few months I have been working with a committee formed by the Theological Community of Mexico to gain accreditation for its theological program at the university or “Licenciatura” level. In Mexico, accreditation for schools and universities works very differently than in the U.S., primarily because instead of an agency like the Association of Theological Schools that gives accreditation to the seminaries of the ELCA, it is the Mexican government that must accredit all of the study programs at the university level, in particular the Ministry of Public Education. Since the accreditation process is costly and can be somewhat complex, the four seminaries that make up the Theological Community (Lutheran, Anglican, Baptist, and Reformed) are seeking accreditation together rather than doing so separately.



Due to the strict separation between church and state that was originally established in the Mexican Constitution, it has only been a couple of decades since the Mexican government was willing to accredit university programs in theological studies. When accreditation first became possible shortly after the year 2000, I was serving as Dean of the Theological Community and worked with the participating seminaries to draw up a common curriculum and program. For a number of reasons, however, it was not possible to complete the accreditation process. This meant that while our students who completed their theological programs had their studies recognized by the churches of which they formed part and on that basis could be ordained into the pastoral ministry, their degrees in theology did not have any legal or official status in Mexico. This limited their possibilities for employment or further studies outside of their churches and denominational organizations and institutions.

When the current administration became aware that conditions had recently changed in the Ministry of Public Education and that it has now become possible to complete successfully the accreditation process for our programs, they asked me to participate in the process due to all of the work I had done with the seminaries in designing the curriculum over 20 years ago. That work provided the basis for most of the documentation that is needed and thus saved the administration a great deal of time and effort!



One of the biggest challenges was designing a proposal that would allow each of the four independent seminaries to continue to follow its own curriculum and program while at the same time presenting a common curriculum and program to the government office in charge of accreditation. Hopefully that process will go smoothly now, though it will probably take a year or two until it is completed. Once that happens, it should allow the Theological Community and its seminaries to grow and expand their study programs considerably!



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