

PREPARING STUDENTS TO BE ORDAINED AS PASTORS? IT'S NOT QUITE THAT SIMPLE

When most people think of a seminary, they imagine a school that has as its primary purpose that of preparing individuals to be ordained as pastors in the church. While that is undoubtedly one of the primary purposes of Augsburg Lutheran Seminary and the other three seminaries that together make up the Theological Community of Mexico where I teach, the fact that the different church bodies to which our students belong have very different practices and policies with regard to pastoral leadership and that many of the students are not in fact preparing to be pastors makes it difficult to restrict the purpose of our seminaries and school to that of preparing students to be ordained as pastors.



This semester, for example, I am teaching five courses in which I have a total of 34 students, half of whom I have in more than one class, and 13 of whom are Lutheran. However, the Lutheran students belong to five different Lutheran church bodies in the U.S., Central America, and South America, and several others are part of independent Lutheran mission efforts. In most of these churches, the congregations and missions are led by pastors who have not finished a formal seminary degree but have been prepared in local programs of their church.



The situation is the same with regard to the other 21 students I have, who come from 11 different denominations and church bodies, almost all of which have different levels of pastoral leadership. In total, of my 34 students (nine of whom are women), five have already been ordained as pastors and ten do not intend on becoming pastors but are studying to serve in their churches in other ways or simply due to an interest in theology.

While the other 19 students are preparing to become ordained as pastors, all but three of them are already fulfilling pastoral duties at a congregation or mission, and 12 of them are already pastors who actually lead a congregation of their own even though they have not yet been formally ordained. In these cases, in addition to wishing to grow in their biblical and theological knowledge and improve their pastoral skills, they hope to be ordained or accepted into a higher level of pastoral leadership or formal status within the church bodies to which they belong. Even when that happens, however, very few of them will actually be able to make a living as pastors and will still need to depend on other occupations or sources of income, since very few congregations in Latin America are able to pay the salary of a full-time pastor.



One further twist is that many of those who are already pastors but are studying to get a formal seminary degree are doing so in order to be able to teach and train students in the programs that their churches have for preparing pastors and other church workers. In these cases, they will continue to serve as pastors in a congregation or mission as they raise up other pastors in the training programs where they will teach or are already teaching.

MEET MY STUDENT CARLOS

One of the students with whom I have worked very closely over the past six years is Carlos Sánchez, who is from the state of Guanajuato in central Mexico about four hours northwest of Mexico City. Carlos is a pastor in the Interdenominational Christian Church and also serves as director of the local Theological Institute that his church has for training pastors, even though he is still awaiting formal ordination (see the article above). Since finishing his university degree in Psychology in 2007, he has worked as a licensed clinical psychologist providing personal, family, and group therapy for patients at a clinic run by the Guanajuato state government and also in his own private practice.



From 2013-2017, Carlos (at right in photo with Rev. Hugo Gallardo) studied at the local Theological Institute that he now leads as its director. When he finished his study program there, he was assigned by his church to develop a new congregation in the town where he is from. In addition to founding this congregation, which is named “Dios Es Amor” (God Is Love, see photo below), Carlos has established two new missions in the rural areas surrounding his town.



Having observed Carlos’s gifts and leadership skills, in 2019 his church asked him to become the director of the local Theological Institute from which he had graduated. Recognizing that he needed much more biblical and theological training of his own in order to fulfill that role, Carlos enrolled at the Theological Community where I teach, studying online. Carlos credits the Theological Community with broadening and deepening considerably his vision for the work he is doing not only as a pastor and teacher but also as a psychologist.



Carlos works full-time from Monday through Friday at the clinic where he is employed and at his private practice, and then in the evenings takes his online classes with the Theological Community and does pastoral visits in addition to leading activities at his congregation. Most of his time on Saturdays is dedicated to his responsibilities at the Theological Institute, where classes are held on that day. Then on Sunday, he leads worship and other activities at his congregation, while also finding time to attend to the rural missions he is establishing.

Among the things that Carlos especially enjoys is working with the youth of his congregation and engaging people one-on-one in his ministry, both to provide them with accompaniment and to create spaces and opportunities where they can use their gifts to serve others.

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