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The Vision Thing in Lutheran Higher Education Finding Enough Sometimes Means Starting Over

By Dr. Scott Yenor

Why are almost all universities the same? The same general curriculum. The same departmental structure. The same political bent. Universities in Wyoming and Idaho are just as left-wing as universities in California and New York. Many private universities look just like public universities. Most Christian universities have dropped their distinctive missions and now look like all the other private universities.

Because the universities are machines. To get hired, Ph.D. disciplines produce Ph.D. holders molded by disciplinary standards. Those Ph.D.s then go out into the country and get hired by universities everywhere. They make departments. They make syllabi. They design curriculum. A political scientist at Berkeley is prepared the same way a political scientist at Loyola is prepared (mostly). English profs at University of Pennsylvania come from the same mold as those who land jobs at Notre Dame, Brigham Young and even “Our Concordias.” Everytime a Christian or distinctive university hires someone it has to worry about hiring someone “on mission,” because graduate programs are designed, these days, to ensure that candidates are aligned with their professional standards not some “distinctive” mission of a Christian university.

University administrators come out of the same mold—they move from department chair, to associate dean, to dean, to provost, and then to president. The same kind of general education plan gets put in place at nearly every university. And the same distribution requirements do too: take two English, three science, and three social science classes. Now take an ethics of diversity class.

Higher education is a factory for depositing near-identical universities at different locations around the country. And for putting students through the same mass production process. The machine is manifestly political. In 1997, 24% of professors in the country were conservatives. In 2006, 9% were. Today it is less than 5%. The machine always veers left.

We have known about this machine for a long time. It was built in the Progressive Era but was made ruthlessly efficient in the 1970s. Yet conservatives have not tried to dismantle it. They have instead defended free speech on campus. Free speech, however, does not disrupt the machine—it just imposes an external limit, insisting that the machine continue its leftward march while respecting free speech.

Conservatives have fought racial preferences in admissions too, but meritocratic admissions standards will only change the racial composition of those who are in the machine. And they will only affect a few universities nationwide.

Conservatives also say they want “choice” in education. But we already have choice in higher education, after a fashion. We can

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The Concordia University System Focus on Future Lutheran Pastors and Teachers¹

By Rev. Douglas Spittal

The Concordia University System exists, first and foremost, for the education and formation of future Lutheran pastors and teachers. The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, from its founding, has valued educating our pastors and teachers so that they can make an informed, clear confession of faith in unity with the whole Church according to the symbolical writings of the Lutheran church because this confession is a correct exposition of the Word of God. This is important to state from the beginning because I hear voices among us that are suggesting that “Lutheran” is just one choice among many faithful expressions of Christianity. May God preserve us from this diabolical notion! In our nomenclature, let us understand and be clear that “Lutheran” and “Christian” are synonymous. There is no such thing as “almost Lutheran” or “Lutheran enough.” For saying these things, it is to suggest that Jesus’ words in Matthew chapter ten can be reduced or minimized to some fundamental confession that is “good enough.” Do we want Jesus’ confession of us before His Father in Heaven to be just “good enough?” Certainly not! Jesus asks us daily, “Who do men say that I am?” A generic “some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” is insufficient. Only “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” is the specific, saving confession that Jesus expects from us. In his 1858 essay to the Western District convention, C.F.W. Walther said, “Since all divisions within Christendom appeal to Scripture, the mere confession that one believes what is in Scripture is not a confession that clearly distinguishes the confessor from the false believer.”² It has always been the official understanding of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod that the confession of the Lutheran church, proclaimed publicly by our ordained and commissioned workers, must be an informed, hearty, robust, unconditional (*quia*), and life-long one. For the congregations of the LCMS to be sure that our pastors and teachers proclaim the strong confession of Jesus Christ in our midst, we have built a system of universities to prepare people for a life of service in the pastoral and teaching ministries. This core mission is crucial to proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a hopeless and dying world.

Over the decades, our universities have branched out into preparing our students for many secular vocations in addition to reli-

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The Concordia University System Focus on Future Lutheran Pastors and Teachers

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gious vocations, even becoming places where unbelievers come for a traditional education and come to faith. Our ability to prepare people for service in the world through critical secular vocations and even to rejoice in the salvation of students who formerly did not believe is rooted in our core mission to educate and form Lutheran pastors and teachers. Our emphasis, even insistence, on a clear Lutheran confession of the Faith for our pastors and teachers is the very confession and worldview that informs our approach to all education and vocations.

Over the past four decades, our Concordia universities have been buffeted by several societal and demographic challenges that have seemingly changed them. While it is true that the student bodies of today have little resemblance to those of the mid-twentieth century and the course offerings are greatly expanded from the days of the old teacher colleges, the core mission and confession of our universities have not changed. The adaptation that has taken place and is still in process requires all of us as Synod to plan strategically to provide the best Lutheran education to our students and a churchly environment of generosity and support that encourages new students to study to be pastors and teachers.

Since the beginning of the LCMS, institutions of higher learning for the training of pastors and teachers have been a priority. While the history of the St. Louis and Fort Wayne seminaries is often mentioned, the first Concordia College is frequently forgotten. Founded as a German-style residential *gymnasium* (a combined high school and junior college) in Perry County, Missouri, in 1839, it was subsequently moved to St. Louis in 1847 and then to Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1861, where it remained until it closed in 1957 as the new Concordia Senior College was opening north of the city on what is now the seminary campus—originally begun to provide boys and girls a Lutheran classical education, preparatory courses for pastors and teachers was added to the curriculum in 1843. When the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and other States was founded in 1847, it was no surprise that one of the primary missions of the new Synod was the training of pastors and teachers. In the early years, the term “seminary,” which we today associate only with schools for preparing pastors, was used for schools preparing both pastors and teachers.

As the LCMS grew and the years rolled on, many institutions for training pastors and teachers came and went. The closure or moving of schools is nothing new to the Synod. Schools that were opened and closed between the Nineteenth Century and the 1970s include:

- Concordia College, Fort Wayne, IN (1839-1957)
- Concordia College, Conover, NC (1878-1935)
- California Concordia College, Oakland, CA (1906-1973)
- Concordia Senior College, Fort Wayne, IN (1957-1977)
- Immanuel Lutheran College, Greensboro, NC (1903-1961)³

Each of these institutions served the needs of preparing pastors and teachers for the Church’s work in various times and circumstances. As the LCMS entered the post-World War II era and the baby boom, the Synod and its institutions experienced rapid growth. Having moved away from the German language and the German-style gymnasium education model, the LCMS was swept up in the organizational model of the American higher education

system. New colleges were opened in Irvine, California, and Ann Arbor, Michigan, to accommodate the increased number of students. The senior college in Fort Wayne became a focal point for men studying for the pastoral ministry to complete their bachelor’s degrees before moving on to the seminary for the Master of Divinity degree. Education students in junior colleges completed their bachelor’s degrees at one of the existing teacher colleges.

By the early 1980s, the baby boom generation was waning, and the pool of students for our colleges began to shrink. Rapidly declining birth rates in the 1960s, coupled with the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s that led many people away from the Church, began to cause institutions that were projecting unlimited prosperity just twenty years before to start facing an existential threat. Unfortunately, there was no coordinated plan to confront this threat, leaving each college to chart its course.

Until the 1980s, churchwork students, for whom the colleges had been built, were nearly the exclusive constituents of the student body. As their numbers declined, the colleges had to choose between adapting and closing. Both options happened across our system. At my alma mater, Concordia College in Ann Arbor, then-president David Schmiel opted to supplement the revenue from traditional church work students with expanded programs for secular vocations. Some programs, like nursing, were a natural carry-over from when Lutheran hospitals nationwide had nursing schools. Nursing education was becoming more sophisticated, and a four-year college could offer a degree program in addition to the traditional Registered Nurse certification. Other programs, like business education and non-profit leadership degrees, were a completely new area for our colleges. As a student leader with the ear of the president, I personally and vocally questioned and opposed these changes as short-sighted and revenue-driven. The need to remain solvent took precedence over consideration of the institution’s core mission, which, in turn, began a drift in the mission of the institution. I was a student at the time, knew my place, and believed that Dr. Schmiel and the Board of Regents had the best interests of Concordia at heart, even if I questioned and disagreed with their methods. Forty years later, Concordia Ann Arbor is facing its most challenging trial yet.

As an aside on that issue, I can only offer my personal thoughts. As one who does not believe that the church should walk away from real estate because it is usually difficult to buy back into the neighborhood, I support President Ankerberg’s plan to use the North Campus as a revenue anchor to support keeping Concordia Ann Arbor viable. While the internet is abuzz with speculation that there are plans to sell the main campus, I have not heard of any such plan. Again, speaking for myself, not as an alum but as a pastor who served my entire ministry in the East, I would like to see the main campus retained as an incubator for new church work and technical training. The campus on the Huron River could serve as a center for apologetics, deep formation for church work students as it was when I was a student there, a CUS test campus for two-year technical degrees in the trades, lab-tech, pharm-tech, applied arts, and business administrative aids. CUS does not control the fiscal operations of the universities. These are my personal ideas, and none of them have ever been mentioned in a boardroom to my knowledge. If we can overcome any financial hurdles and keep our Eastern-most campus open, I will pledge my work at CUS to help make that happen.

Program offerings were not the only changes at our colleges.

As the number of degree programs multiplied, each of our Concordia Colleges took on the moniker of “University.” Each has several schools or colleges within their institution, and some even include research in the soft and hard sciences. One by one, the schools became known as “Concordia University.” The 1990s American business principle of “grow or die” became firmly rooted in our institutions of higher learning even as the demographic pressures of declining birthrates worsened. The proliferation of government-backed student grants and loans homogenized the financial aid process for admissions. While remaining part of the package, Church-based scholarships were largely supplanted by FAFSA-generated Expected Family Contributions, PELL Grants, Stafford Loans, and PLUS Loans.

Beginning in the mid-1980s and accelerating after the turn of the century, athletics became a significant focus of our campuses, just as it was across the American educational landscape. Concordia Universities, being small schools, fell under either NCAA Division III or NAIA athletic governance. Scholarships began to be offered to athletes as outright athletic scholarships (NAIA) or as academic aid directed at athletes in Division III schools where athletic scholarships are not provided. Aaron Basko states, “While the average percentage of athletics participation at Division III institutions is 26 percent, at some small institutions, the percentage is much higher. At Springfield College, in Massachusetts, 34 percent of students are D-III athletes, while Saint Joseph’s College of Maine reports an athletics-participation rate of 51 percent.”⁴ Currently, our Concordia Universities range above 60 percent student-athletes. Before we dismiss the importance of athletics to small colleges, it is important to remember that we are now competing with large state and private universities for a dwindling number of students. Basko points out, “Over the last few decades, colleges with mammoth athletics programs have leveraged them to compete with the most selective academic institutions in the country and to draw away thousands of students from smaller local colleges. Institutions like Oklahoma State and the University of Cincinnati are posting record enrollments, while their regional neighbors struggle to fill classes.”⁵

Athletics programs at small colleges are a mixed bag, which is seen by some as a blessing and by others as a curse. On the positive side, student-athletes who graduate with a degree have a strong work ethic, know how to work with a team once employed and show a high level of personal discipline. On the other hand, athletic programs are expensive. Factoring in facilities, staff, equipment, promotions, and incidental costs, a student-athlete can cost 1.25 to 1.5 times what a traditional student does. Basko notes, “While D-I and D-II programs have roster-size limits at the national level, D-III does not. This allows coaches to recruit more players than they actually need to field their teams.”⁶ A recent study found that “When controlling for exogenous variables and institution-specific trends, the impact of football appears to be concentrated in the year that colleges added the team. Subsequently, it simply fades out. This would appear to make the promised gains of football evanescent at best.”⁷ What is the purpose of having a plethora of student-athletes? Do athletics enhance a student’s education who will probably not play the sport beyond college? For a Lutheran college, the question needs to be asked about how the athletic programs further the institution’s core mission. Neither nostalgia nor the American love affair with sports can be the driving force

behind the development and retention of athletics. A holistic understanding of the place of athletics within the structure of Lutheran education and formation needs to be at the heart of our consideration. This is an opportunity for our coaches, chaplains, and theologians to have a fruitful discussion and develop a proper theological philosophy of athletics. Athletics may benefit our schools; the question is how they support and enhance our core mission and academic programs.

The issues of government funding and control and the rise of college sports are subsumed under the present reality of a shrinking pool of students. Declining birthrates and a decline in religious observance have reduced the number of students enrolled in church work programs in the LCMS from thousands a half-century ago to 802 this year. The question before the Church today is not simply whether our Concordia Universities will survive but what their future says about the future of our congregations, parochial schools, and the Synod.

Presently, since 1980, where there were once twelve schools, there are now five. Unfortunately, the twin closures in 1986 of St. John’s and St. Paul’s Colleges are forgotten. At the beginning of the demographic shift, these schools had to take the second aforementioned option and close due to their very small size and locations. What we today call the Concordia University System, including the schools that have closed, looks like this:

1. St. John’s Winfield KS (1893-1986)
2. St. Paul’s Concordia MO (1905-1986)
3. Concordia College Selma AL (1919-2018)⁸
4. Concordia University Portland (1905-2020)
5. Concordia University Bronxville NY (1881-2021)
6. Concordia University River Forest⁹ Chicago (1864)
7. Concordia University Mequon¹⁰ Wisconsin (1881)
 - a. Concordia University Ann Arbor MI (1962-2013)¹¹
8. Concordia University St. Paul (1893)
9. Concordia University Seward Nebraska (1894)
10. Concordia University Austin Texas (1926)¹²
11. Concordia University Irvine CA (1976)

Each of the three recent closures was for a different reason, but the core problem was the same – declining enrollment and revenue due to demographic shifts. All five closures were emotionally charged events that elicited nostalgia, anger, and relief. Historically, it is important to note the earlier list I presented that places these closures in the context of others who had come before. Faithful Lutherans of good intent serving on the boards and administrations of these institutions did what they believed best to further the system of higher education in the LCMS, even when that meant the closure of their institutions. The legal and moral implications of the situation with the sixth institution are a matter beyond the scope of this paper.

The demographic and societal pressures on our institutions of higher learning present a perilous path ahead. A significant threat to our universities is mission drift. Mission drift is best understood on a macro level by considering the case of some of the oldest institutions of higher learning in the United States: Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. These schools were established by Puritan, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist religious leaders, respectively. Each one still maintains a divinity school to this day. If the average American were asked to name three Christian schools today, these three would probably not make the list. Three centuries of societal

change and the uncoupling of these institutions from their founding churches made them into universities far removed from their original mission and confession.

Aside from being much younger than our pre-revolution cousins, two things protect our Concordia Universities from this same kind of mission drift. The first bulwark is the direct ownership and ecclesiastical oversight of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod of our universities. The congregations of the LCMS are physically and financially invested in our schools. The Concordias are “our” schools in which we should and do take an interest. The second strong defense is the ecclesiastical oversight of our universities. As Synod, this is the primary way our congregations exercise their interest and care. The 2023 LCMS convention enshrined in our bylaws the Lutheran Identity and Mission Outcome Statements or LIMOS. Reviled by a few as “purity laws,” nothing could be further from the truth. The LIMOS directly speak to Jesus’ question, “Who do men say that I am?” To be sure, the LIMOS are contained within the bylaws of the Synod, thus giving them a legal tone, but reading and applying them pastorally, one sees that they are, in fact, a gift from our beloved Synod to her beloved universities. The LIMOS function mainly as a road map to help navigate the hostile territory where our university administrators, faculties, and students find themselves. They act as a starter and guide for conversations that allow our universities to walk together with the Synod in unity of faith and resolve. Like all the other bylaws of the LCMS, the LIMOS were written under the presumption that the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions are our only rule and guide of faith and life. The LIMOS are the present expression of our first president’s assertion that “If our Church, which is now [1858] lying in the dust shall rise again and not gradually degenerate into a body which is Lutheran in name only, without any characteristics of the Church of the Reformation, then all the fine words about ecclesiastical propriety, about the re-introduction of ancient rites and ceremonies, all attempts to invest the office of the ministry with special glory and authority, all this will be utterly in vain. The only help for resurrecting our Church lies in a renewed acceptance of its old orthodox confessions and in a renewed unconditional subscription to its Symbols.”¹³

The clear Lutheran confession of Jesus Christ before the world will face the challenge of our time – the shortage of pastors and teachers. The Synod has struggled to fill pulpits and experimented with “alternate routes” to ordination, but the new generation is returning to residential seminary training. This renewed emphasis on residential training appreciates not only the benefits of in-person learning from esteemed doctors of the church but also the formative aspects of learning, worshipping, and living intentionally in a community of confessing Lutherans for at least four years. Encouraging our men to spend four years earning a bachelor’s degree on one of our Concordia University campuses also gives them the entire eight years of Lutheran formation that many older pastors enjoyed.

As concerning as the shortage of pastors is, the shortage of Lutheran school teachers is more severe. Unfortunately, here is another area where the Synod has only begun discussing the issue. For the last several decades, our parochial schools have dealt with the shortage of commissioned Lutheran teachers by hiring teachers who are neither trained nor commissioned by the LCMS. This is not to disparage these teachers’ characters or pedagogical

abilities in any way. The concern is that this practice places the teachers, their students, and the church in a compromised position. While our schools expect the non-commissioned teachers to uphold and support the mission of the school and the congregation(s) to which it is attached, this expectation is without a confessional foundation. Our Lutheran Service Book Agenda, in the first two rubrics for the “Installation of a Lutheran School Teacher,” says,

This rite is used for teachers who have previously been commissioned as Lutheran school teachers and are now beginning a term of service in a new location. It is used for rostered teachers whether they hold a tenured call or are filling a “contract” position. ... When a teacher who is not on the roster of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod is to be installed, the rite for the Installation of Servants of the Congregation (page 243) is used.

The former rite includes questions asking the teacher to confess their beliefs about our Lord as He is revealed in the Scriptures and confessed by us in the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran symbolical books. The latter rite includes no such questions or confessions of faith. One may hope that a person of good reputation would serve a Lutheran school without introducing any strange teachings or practices, but we have no promise to that effect, nor should we demand it. The teachers in our schools who are not commissioned by the Church and may not be Lutheran, as good as they may be pedagogically and in their reputation, have not been taught to be Lutheran school teachers, have little or no training in the confession of the Lutheran faith, and should not make any conditional (*quatenus*) subscription to our confession. A short-term solution to some of this concern is for our Lutheran school teachers to be members of local LCMS congregations and to use the CUEnet system to colloquize onto the roster of the Synod. I will discuss longer-term solutions later in this paper. Suffice it to say now that I understand and sympathize with our LCMS parochial schools as they struggle to provide quality education to their students. A non-commissioned “substitute” teacher, even for an extended time, may be a necessity, but simply hiring multiple teachers who cannot, will not, or should not unconditionally subscribe to the Lutheran confession ends up betraying the very reason for the existence of a Lutheran parochial school – Lutheran education. This condition in our schools has been building over decades, and I do not expect we will change these things quickly. But if we resolve to do so and begin now, a problem that started a generation ago may see a resolution by the next generation.

We are blessed to be able to return to our Concordia University System as a bulwark against demographic, political, and theological threats. Historically and theologically, our universities’ core strength is educating and forming pastors and teachers for a lifetime of work in the church. Formation in religious vocations requires strict adherence to the Scriptures and Confessions, which act as an anchor in rough seas. This adherence, far from a legalistic forced one, is formed and taught in our universities’ classrooms, chapels, dormitories, and gathering spaces. The Lutheran confession of Jesus Christ is lived, confessed, and proclaimed daily in our words and deeds.

The core mission of our universities has not changed. Even if the number of churchwork students is a fraction of what it once was, the Universities still exist primarily to prepare pastors, teachers, and other church workers. Those church workers will

proclaim and teach the Gospel in our parishes across the Synod, raising the next generation of Lutheran students. The educational formation of pastors and teachers on our university campuses is crucial not only for the future of the LCMS but also for the paradigm by which we prepare all of our students, regardless of curriculum or vocation. Whether students are studying to work in the Church, healthcare, the arts, business, or some other vocation, the Concordia University System approaches their education in the same way. We provide a robust education built upon the rock of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. We have a liberal arts curriculum emphasizing Lutheran culture rooted in classical literature, art, and music. All of this is taught within the context of a four-year residential community with a Lutheran chapel and worship life at its core.

The core values and curriculum used to educate and form students entering religious vocations are also the core for the education and formation of students entering non-religious vocations. All students at our universities are required to take a Lutheran core curriculum of Biblical and Foundational theology courses. All our universities have a robust campus chaplaincy and worship life. All our universities are working to restore a more robust dorm, athletic, and campus devotional life. Concordia University Nebraska operates with a “critical mass” of LCMS students and faculty that automatically influences the campus community. While the other universities would benefit from a larger core of LCMS students, especially those preparing for church work, to further proclaim Jesus in word and deed to the rest of the campus community, their true heart is still the clear Lutheran confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

The Church’s mission to confess Christ will meet the challenges ahead of us with resolve and determination. If we are to make disciples of all people, baptizing and teaching them all that our Lord has commanded us, then we must raise up faithful pastors and teachers who boldly confess the Lutheran faith. Over one-half of the pastors in the LCMS are over the age of fifty-five. This means we can expect a wave of pastors retiring and falling asleep in the Lord over the next decade. The numbers for teachers may be nearly the same. The statistics look grim and would have us despair. But let us remember that Jesus Christ is the head of the Church, and the Holy Spirit provides all increase in the Church. That means that our efforts with regard to our corps of pastors and teachers need to align with the gifts that the Lord gives us. First and foremost, let us pray for our pastors and teachers. Pray that the Lord will sustain them in their callings. Pray that He will help them and support them in their needs. Then, be an agent of the Lord by helping and supporting our pastors and teachers where and when possible.

If there is to be a season in which we have fewer pastors and teachers to serve our churches and schools, then this is the season in which we need to maintain the best-educated clergy and teacher corps we can. There are two ways to fill pulpits and classrooms. We could go with cheap and easy licensure requirements to produce as many candidates as possible, regardless of quality or qualification. Or we can go for the more expensive, rigorous education and licensure requirements to make life-long, committed, and highly qualified candidates. The LCMS has historically chosen the latter route and committed its prayers, resources, and students to it. We, the LCMS, can only do this together. No institution, congregation,

district, or other entity can do this independently. Tribalism and factionalism are a recipe for failure. Let us all work together as a Synod to provide our students with the best Lutheran education in the world through the Concordia University System. Let us be willing to make difficult decisions on how best to do this through open and honest discussion, setting aside our nostalgia or grievances for the sake of our students and fellow Lutherans. Let us be open to new educational and vocational opportunities, such as classical education or vocational-technical training. Our teachers will need to be prepared to work in various settings, from a 19th-century one-room school to a 20th-century industrial school to a 21st-century cyber school. With classical education on the rise, we will need Lutheran teachers trained in that discipline just as we need Lutheran teachers who can aid and support Lutheran homeschoolers.

Let us support Synod-wide efforts like “Set Apart to Serve” and CUS’s “For the Sake of the Church” to boost enrollment in our church work programs. Let us be honest: even the best recruiting efforts cannot overcome the stigmas and negative impressions that future students will receive from their experiences. To put it absurdly, if every teacher in the LCMS made a six-figure salary, we would not have a recruiting problem or shortage of teachers. Realizing this is absurd, the point is that we cannot continue to expect our teachers to work for peanuts, all the while hoping our children will want to enter this vocation. That means we all must commit significant monetary and physical resources to this effort. As you are able, give our universities substantial gifts and bequests to keep them out of debt and deferred maintenance. At all levels, congregational, district, and synod, we must make significant scholarships available to church work students to make education affordable and mitigate debt. Your generous contributions to CUS funds will help with this. Probably the most difficult but crucial need is for congregations and schools to organize themselves to pay full salaries, housing, and benefits so that their pastors and teachers can make their living from the Gospel, not getting rich but not being poor. A pastor or school teacher should be able to provide a modest living for his family in keeping with the average person in your community. This may mean having fewer teachers who are better kept. It may mean two congregations combining their resources. It may mean many things depending on your location and circumstances. Whatever it means, support your pastors and teachers. Pray and help them so that their work may be joyful. Be open and honest with them, be kind, forgive them when they are wrong, and treat them like family members in the household of faith. You will find such Christian love and joy contagious, especially to our youth who aspire to take up the difficult work of ministry after seeing the love of a supportive parish family.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is a Confessional Lutheran church body. Our source of authority is the Holy Scriptures. Our proclamation of the Gospel is one in the Lutheran Confessions. Guided by these principles, we live together as Lutherans, extolling the Gospel of Jesus Christ with one voice in our various vocations, serving our neighbors in works of mercy and our God in worship. Our unwavering confession of Jesus Christ has led us to value high-quality education for all vocations. We have built a system of universities that are unrivaled worldwide in their ability to educate young men and women from a Biblical, Lutheran confession and worldview. Unless our confession has changed (and

it has not), we cannot abandon our educational values. The way ahead of us is difficult and expensive. The devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh will pressure us to give up and give in. But God's Word never returns void. Stay the course, Missouri! God shall bless us.

1 The LCMS has several other church work programs, such as those that prepare Deaconesses, Directors of Christian Education, and Directors of Parish Music. This paper focuses on pre-seminary and teacher education because these have been part of the curriculum since the beginning and are the most prevalent church work vocations.

2 C.F.W. Walther. "Why Should our Pastors, Teachers, and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of our Church." *Concordia Theological Monthly*, April 1947, Vol. XVIII, No. 4, page 244.

3 Founded in Concord, NC. Operated by the Synodical Conference to train black pastors and teachers.

4 Aaron Basko. "Can Sports Save Small Colleges?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2023) 70:2. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/can-sports-save-small-colleges>. December 20, 2024.

5 Basko.

6 Basko.

7 Welch Suggs, Alex Monday, Jennifer May-Trifiletti, James Hearn. "Institutional Effects of Adding Football:

A DifferenceinDifference Analysis." *Research in Higher Education* (2024) 65:1243–1268. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-024-09786-7>

8 Known as Alabama Lutheran College, Alabama Lutheran Academy and College, and Concordia College Alabama, the school was closed during the Great Depression. Accreditation to grant bachelor's degrees was gained in 1994 by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

9 Founded in Addison, IL.

10 Founded in Milwaukee, WI.

11 Acquired by CUW as a satellite campus.

12 Currently in secession dispute.

13 Walther, 253.

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choose any college or university, but almost all of them are part of the machine. By offering a huge range of functionally identical options, leftists can formally satisfy demand for "choice" while maintaining total ideological lockstep. Choice matters when it's among meaningfully different options. Today, we can mostly choose from different varieties of leftism.

It is time to be honest in our evaluation of past attempts to reform universities. They have failed. The first to acknowledge the problem was William F. Buckley in his famous *God and Man at Yale* published in the early 1950s. In my life, we have had soup to nuts criticisms put forward by Allan Bloom in the late 1980s and a spate of others in the 1990s about Tenured Radicals. Today we have a vibrant and increasingly successful movement to squeeze out DEI administration. Let me continue with my theme: Banning DEI is not enough.

All of these criticisms have a certain power to them, but they fail on the most basic level of institutional building: they fail to ground criticisms in a positive view of higher education. We do not just want colleges and universities that respect free speech (if we even want that), we do not want just them to be color-blind in admissions, we do not just want them to be free from diversity, equity, and inclusion policies—we want them to accomplish intellectual and moral formation of a certain kind. But we are afraid and unwilling to articulate what that kind is. We defend an "open" vision of higher education. We defend a non-political vision of higher education. But there is no such thing as an "open-ended" vision of education and all education is on some fundamental level political. We say things like "we want education not indoctrination" but all education is indoctrination on the deepest level. We have lost because we have denied reality and people who deny reality deserve to lose.

This problem is particularly acute at Christian schools with a deep sense of Christian mission. Their highest principles cannot be "academic freedom" or protection of free speech. Christian schools want to indoctrinate, to propagate sound doctrines in the classroom and among their graduates. An English professor who glories in deconstructing literature to show that Shakespeare was a "transgressive" defender of modern feminism or queer theory (unknown to Shakespeare) is intending to undermine Christian sexual ethics. A historian celebrating perversity in ancient Rome is often doing the same thing. No self-confident Christian university tolerates the academic undermining of their distinctively Christian mission under the guise of "free speech" or "academic freedom." Yet these English and history professors are, by and large, following their professional norms in emphasizing sex, gender and class in their professional lives. Academic freedom is an anti-missional principle for Christian universities. So are actual faith standards in hiring. Faculty who must adhere to statements of faith are not simply free.

Any truly workable reform must get at the guts of the academic machine. It must reorganize hiring, curriculum, purpose. This is a quandary, since almost all accreditation standards require participation in the machine. (Higher education institutions must be accredited if they would like to receive student loans.) Getting at the guts means abandoning the old conservative efforts of placing external limits on how the academic machine operates. We must re-engineer the academic machine itself. This is a monumental task, and an immensely liberating one too. How did we get to this machine? What might a different education approach look like?

What does this mean? (A good Lutheran question!). We must return to the moment before the higher education reforms of the 1910s and rethink what the country did. Our education system is only about 100 years old. It has not proven to be a wonderful success in all respects or even in most respects. We must rethink how K-12 links to higher education. We must rethink how higher education links to professional education. Do we need PhD's teaching in higher education? Do we need majors? Do we need "general education" at schools? Is the best way to structure curriculum in higher education between majors, general education, and electives? Do accreditors guarantee quality or do they reinforce homogeneity? Must people go to undergraduate before going to medical school and seminary? Must universities be broken into departments? Do we want professors primarily loyal to professional associations rather than their colleges? Should Christian colleges participate in this system if they want to maintain their distinctive traits? I am a deeply conservative man. Our systems are failures. Everything should be on the table. Everything. That is not the kind of thing conservative men usually say!

Let me give you two examples of this rethinking. First, the division of undergraduate education between courses in a major field of study, general education, and electives arose when there was hardly consistent K-12 education. General education was adopted in part to ensure that students had a consistent set of skills among those who entered higher education and in part to salvage vestiges of the old liberal arts education. Since K-12 degrees are now required for admission into every institution of higher education, perhaps it is time to revisit how we organize colleges and universities and their relationship to professional schools. Students have already received a general education in K-12. If so, what is going on in K-12? If so,

an undergraduate degree is no longer necessary for admission into specialized professional schools like medical school, pharmacy, dentistry, seminary, law school and such. Our system of credentialing and certifying just draws out school for doctors and dentists. We could shorten it. Would we want to do that for seminary students? I am open to argument on this score—would a serious K-12 education suffice to send people to seminary? Would we be able to construct such serious K-12 schools in an environment of school choice? As I say, let us rethink the whole of the matter.

The second proposal is more radical in one sense and less radical in another. Could we build a new kind of college within the system? The college would not have majors. The college would have a common curriculum. The college would have a serious purpose. It may not be staffed entirely with PhDs so it could even end its reliance on other non-aligned schools for its teaching staff. This is what is being tried at Luther Classical College, on whose board of regents I sit. This is called a Classical, Christian college.

Classical Christian colleges are a return to the college experience before the rise of the progressive university in the early 1900s. They have a set curriculum. Faculty are generalists. There are no departments per se, but most faculty can teach most anything in the curriculum. They emphasize languages. They emphasize the great books, which raise the greatest questions of human destiny. Where did we come from? What is human nature? What is happiness? What is the best way of life? What is the ultimate stuff of the universe? What is the meaning of man's thirst for righteousness? But they raise these questions to provide Christian answers to them. The faculty is mainly attached not to their professional norms, but to the Christian mission of the college. Admissions standards involve not only the ability to do the work—what we call meritocracy—but also alignment with the mission of the school. Since the school will have a distinctive mission, it will only really be able to accept students with particular backgrounds. They must know Latin. They must be Lutherans. This leads to unique approaches to admissions—and the hope is to build a pipeline between classical K-12 schools and the Luther Classical College. Not the SAT, but the CLT and our own Latin exam. Not a diploma, but mastery at high school.

You see the issues that conservatives have worried most about are sideshows. Free speech is not the issue. Racial preferences are not the issue. Choice is not the issue. Vision is the issue. Having a Christian-centered education involves raising the biggest questions and showing the Christian answers to them. It is interested in the pagans and the post-moderns as contrasts to the Christian view. We should seek to reconquer lost colleges and universities, but that will only be done with vision. We must also build anew—and disentrall ourselves from the current education system to make that possible.

God's Work in River Forest

Russell P. Dawn, DPhil, JD
President, Concordia University Chicago

In the middle of 2021, one of the more unfiltered members of Concordia-Chicago's Board of Regents told me that CUC had better be a demonstrably faithful institution by the middle of 2024. I did not speak my mind at the time, but I thought that the goal was

unrealistic. It was simply too ambitious. I thought that 2029 was a more reasonable timeline.

As it turns out, my faith in the Lord and the work He is doing in River Forest was too little. Under a new protocol adopted in 2023 by the Synod in Convention, the Concordia University System conducted its first informal visitation of Concordia-Chicago in September of 2024. The outcome, set forth in this visitation report, could not have been more lovely to my eyes.

What the visitation team found is perhaps best summarized in words from the Report's conclusion: "The institution demonstrates a strong commitment to Lutheran Identity from the top down and a desire to continue to strengthen its expression throughout the campus."

Here are a few additional highlights:

- In conversations with the administrators, faculty, staff, and students, the intentionality of Lutheran Identity was repeatedly mentioned. Further, the transition toward the intentional focus on Lutheran Identity was frequently identified by those the team interviewed as a significant improvement in the life of the university.
- Lutheran Identity is not merely stated; rather, it is intentionally integrated into the life of the institution through campus worship and ministry activities as well as in the classroom.
- The calling of a new campus pastor has been a tremendous blessing for the campus. The Rev. Simeon Raddatz has a clear understanding of Lutheran Identity and the importance of its infusion into the life of the campus. Flowing out from the solidly liturgical chapel life of the campus, this is evidenced in his participation in various aspects of the life of the campus.
- The mission fit interviews and education of the faculty in the mission and ministry of the institution has an extremely positive effect on the spiritual and academic life of the institution. The permeation of Lutheran Identity resulting from these efforts is palpable.

I am not so naïve or prideful that I believe our work toward greater faithfulness is complete. There is more to be done, and we are not about to shrug our shoulders where we see problems lingering. Rather, we thank the Lord for our gains and seek to build upon them. The day I believe that the battle for the soul of the University is behind us, is the day I should resign as unfit for my office.

Equally, it would require great naivete and pride for me to think that I did this work, building from a base of utter apostasy. The Lord did the work, continues the work, and was doing it for years before I arrived. I am not His first faithful mask in this place, nor in my office. When one spends time in this community, what is notable is how many faithful people have been here for a very long time.

As a final note, while Concordia-Chicago delights in the Lord's work through us as a mission school, bringing the light of biblical and natural Truth to the young people of Cook County, at our core we are an agency of the Church whose central task is to train up workers for the Church. With that core in mind, we have just introduced, Prepared to Serve: Church Professional Guarantee. This program guarantees a ceiling of \$5,000 in annual tuition and required fees for all new church work students, beginning in the fall of 2025. Check it out at cuchicago.edu/prepared-to-serve.

May the Lord continue to bless RF, bringing us the students, colleagues, and investors we need for a long, flourishing, and faithful future.

Lutheran Concerns Association
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Future Lutheran Pastors and Teachers***

***The Vision Thing in Lutheran Higher Education
Finding Enough Sometimes Means Starting Over***

God's Work in River Forest

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