
Theological Education

S U P P L E M E N T

Study of Theological Education: 1989-1995
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Volume 36
Supplement

ats

ISSN 0040-5620

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION
Volume 36, Supplement

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Theological Education is published semiannually by
The Association of Theological Schools
IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA
10 Summit Park Drive
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15275-1103.

For subscription information or to order
additional copies or selected back issues,
please contact the Association.
phone: 412-788-6505
fax: 412-788-6510
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This periodical is indexed in the *ATLA Religion Database*, published by the American Theological Library Association, 250 S. Wacker Drive, 16th Floor, Chicago, IL 60606; E-mail: atla@atla.com; WWW: <http://www.atla.com/>.

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Editor's Introduction

Daniel O. Aleshire

The Association of Theological Schools

This supplement to *Theological Education* reflects the completion of a process that began with the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in 1988. It also inaugurates an area of work by The Association of Theological Schools that has just begun.

When the ELCA was formed, it faced questions many American denominations have faced or are currently facing: What is the relationship of a church body to the theological schools that have been founded by a denomination or its predecessor denominations? What is the relationship among the several schools? How do theological schools of a particular denomination provide more diversity of mission than redundancy and competition?

This issue of *Theological Education* tells the story of more than six years of work by the ELCA and its theological schools. Phyllis Anderson, who directed the Study of Theological Education of the ELCA from 1989-1995, is the author of this report. It is a story of effort both on the part of the schools and the denomination that has resulted in a pattern of funding, governance, and operation that is unique among denominations with multiple theological schools. It is also the story of how the schools have reordered their work to serve the mission of the church to which they are related. Much work remains for the ELCA, but the efforts of these schools and this denomination are sufficiently significant to bear notice by others.

The work that is beginning with this issue of *Theological Education* is an effort that The Association of Theological Schools will be undertaking over the next six years: Theological Schools and the Church. The history of theological education in North America is largely one of denominations founding schools to educate students coming from the founding denominations for ministry in that denomination. While that historic pattern remains for many ATS schools, it is changing dramatically in many others. Students come to many ATS schools from scores of denominations, and they graduate to pursue ministry in scores of denominations. What does this mean for the school related primarily to one denomination but serving students from many? What is the relationship of theological schools that have no formal denominational ties to the ecclesial bodies in which their graduates will serve?

Over the next several years in a variety of ways, ATS will be inviting reflection on old, new, and emerging relationships of theological schools and church bodies. We are grateful to the ELCA seminaries and the denomination for the story they are writing, and we look forward to identifying other unfolding stories about theological schools, denominations, and the work of ministry.

Introduction

The pages that follow tell the story of a denominational study of theological education that—against all odds—has forged institutional change in the seminaries, synods, and churchwide organization of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The recommendations of this study were not only approved, but in fact are being implemented with varying degrees of enthusiasm in a surprising number of places.

Why is this a surprise? Institutions resist change. Seminaries and churches are no exception. Institutions jealously defend their autonomy. Proposed changes may represent threats to the identity or core values of the institution. Outside advocacy groups that propose such changes are easily discredited and dismissed.

To add to the difficulty, the change process that will be described here happened at a time of high volatility and stress in the denomination, the newly formed Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and in its eight seminaries. The informal structures for getting things done in the new church were still being developed. The tracks on which decisions could be made and implemented were still being laid. Dependable funding streams had not yet been established. The seminary constituencies had been disrupted and redefined, and the new relationships were still in the process of being established.

The new denomination did not have the legal or financial clout to force change in the seminaries. Instead the task force charged with conducting the study had to draw the leadership of the seminaries into willingly supporting its proposals. The seminary presidents, who bore primary responsibility for the flourishing of their individual seminaries, had to come to believe that it was ultimately to their advantage to work with the denomination and to cooperate with the other seminaries.

A. New Directions Address Common Problems

The directions proposed by the study were not surprising in themselves. Several recent studies of theological education in the U.S., Canada, and Australia have raised similar challenges and proposed similar solutions. There is general agreement among mainline churches that the following needs to be done:

- prepare leaders for a changed mission context in which Christianity is no longer the dominant cultural force;
- improve the quality of incoming candidates and the ministerial competence of seminary graduates;
- identify and prepare more ministry candidates from ethnic/racial communities;

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- provide options for a wide variety of people seeking theological education for both personal and vocational purposes;
- make theological education more accessible to people at a distance from a seminary;
- relieve individual seminaries of the pressure to overextend themselves to serve and to survive;
- strengthen continuing education for pastors and lay professionals;
- provide centers for in-depth theological scholarship;
- increase cooperation among seminaries;
- raise more money for seminaries;
- increase cost-effectiveness in seminary education; and
- maintain healthy relationships and accountability between church and seminaries.

In contrast to recent experience in most mainline denominations, this study produced a surprising degree of change. Within a period of eight years this new church and its seminaries were able to develop a plan to address each of these issues and to take at least initial steps toward implementation. The following list is suggestive of what the task force, seminaries, and various expressions of the ELCA working together have been able to accomplish:

- We formally established theological education as a “foundational priority” in the newly formed ELCA.
- We identified and agreed to a series of qualities needed in the future leaders of a church in mission.
- The seminaries pledged to gear their programs toward the development of these qualities, and indeed have taken steps to do so.
- We changed the churchwide candidacy process to allow the candidacy committees to be more proactive in advising and taking formal action regarding the suitability of potential candidates before they apply to seminary.
- We developed common admissions standards among the seminaries.
- We initiated a structured three-year program of continuing theological education which is required of all newly ordained, commissioned, or consecrated leaders in their first call and which is currently provided by all sixty-five synods in the ELCA.
- We developed new standards and strategies for continuing education of all rostered leaders that call for more involvement from rostered leaders and more financial support from congregations.
- The eight seminaries formed three clusters which are engaged in joint planning and programming, which are working toward joint governance and administration, and which are anticipating greater overall cost-effectiveness through cooperation.

- Clusters are beginning to develop centers to enhance ministry preparation of candidates from the ethnic/racial communities.
- The clusters are beginning to network with other providers of theological education on their territories (colleges, continuing education centers, large congregations, etc.) to provide a coordinated program of lay and continuing education.
- Funding to the seminaries through church grants has been stabilized.
- The formula for distributing churchwide grants was changed to encourage clusters and other forms of cooperative work.
- A new endowment has been established to fund scholarships for ministry candidates and future theological teachers.
- All of the seminaries are involved in forms of distance learning, many of which involve electronic technology.
- A high-level committee has been established to facilitate ongoing cooperative planning among the seminaries and with the denomination.

B. Purpose, Perspective, and Plan of These Reflections

1. Purpose of these reflections

This is a paper about process. It is not written primarily to document the study and demonstrate its achievements. What the task force recommended and what was actually accomplished through its work is detailed in the minutes and printed reports of the ELCA Study of Theological Education and subsequent follow-up reports. Nor is it the purpose of this paper to reflect on the wisdom of the directions proposed. It is too soon to know whether these were the right choices and what their long term effects will be.

The purpose of this paper is rather to analyze and evaluate the process the task force followed. It seeks to get behind the finished reports and discover the inner workings of the task force and the interactions of the task force with others. How did the task force approach its work? What were the operative values and assumptions that informed the task force's use of research, its approach to planning, its strategy in decision making? To what degree did the processes it utilized succeed in moving the entire system toward positive change? What can others learn from the mistakes the task force made in the way it conducted this study?

This paper is written at the request of Craig Dykstra, Vice President for Religion at Lilly Endowment Inc. When Craig Dykstra recommended that the Endowment provide substantial funding for the ELCA Study of Theological Education in 1990, he was at best ambivalent about the likelihood of our work succeeding. He had recently called for an evaluation of three denominational studies of theological education (Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Lutheran) that had received major grants from Lilly Endowment within the last five to ten years. The research produced by these studies was sound and the analysis of needed changes was well documented. In each case, however, these studies

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failed to generate realistic proposals based on the research that were subsequently implemented.

In an address to an early ELCA Consultation on Theological Education convened by the task force in November 1990, Dykstra spelled out with stunning specificity the reasons why denominational studies of theological education are not more productive. He was willing to support the new ELCA effort against his better judgement because the leaders of this study were at least attempting to deal with the political factors that were key to producing real change. He was interested in the processes the group would employ to bring seminaries and the denomination into collaborative planning. He wanted to learn how this could work.

This paper fulfills one of the purposes of the Endowment, which is to learn through the projects it funds and to disseminate that learning to benefit others. These reflections, then, are intended primarily for leaders in other denominations and seminaries who are facing similar challenges. The insights gained here may also be of use in the ELCA when the time comes for it to reevaluate the directions taken here and initiate future change processes with its seminaries or other complex systems. Those with an interest in how change happens in large organizations, particularly religious organizations, may find these reflections helpful. Because this study process was led primarily by women in an environment long dominated by male authority figures, these reflections may be of particular interest to persons seeking to explore and document the difference women are making in institutional leadership.

2. The perspective from which these reflections are written

These reflections are written from my own point of view as the director of the ELCA Study of Theological Education and as staff to the task force which conducted the study. I assumed responsibility for the study shortly after accepting the call to serve as the first Director for Theological Education in the Division for Ministry of the ELCA. I served in both capacities simultaneously for the duration of the study. More information about my own background for such work and my experience of the study process are included in the section on Staff, Part One, I, C.

My reflections are based on my own memories of the events we lived through together and careful attention to the minutes, grant proposals, printed reports, correspondence, etc., that accumulated over the six years of the study. My own memory was often corrected by reference to the written records. These documents are now available for further reference in the ELCA archives in Chicago.

It will remain for others who lived through these years with me or who were variously affected by the process to make the story fuller by adding their own memories and experiences. They will have differing perspectives on what the intentions of the study were and what actually happened and why. My reflections provide a starting point for understanding this study process.

3. Plan for organizing these reflections

These reflections generally follow the organization of the study itself. Officially, the study was called *The Program of Research, Planning, and Action for an ELCA System of Theological Education for Mission*. While we usually referred to our work as the ELCA Study of Theological Education, the longer, more descriptive title became a point of reference for our own understanding of our work. First, the study had data-gathering and analysis aspects to it, which we called *research*. Primarily it was a long-range, strategic *planning* process for an ELCA system as a whole, which followed a standard strategy planning outline. It did not stop with planning, however, but included *action*. Decision-making and initial implementation steps were integral to the study itself.

These three components of the study—research, planning, and action—form the basis of the structure for these reflections. The Introduction provides basic background information to help put the study in its proper historical and political context. The Introduction is followed by a lengthy section which details the organization of the study: the development of the design, the composition of the task force, staffing, financial support for the study, etc. The next three sections describe in turn:

- how the task force approached the *research* or information-gathering aspect of its work;
- the process the task force used in *planning*, with a detailed description of each component of the plan itself: purpose, contextual scan, goals or imperatives, vision, strategies, etc.
- the strategies the task force employed to move its proposals to *action*; that is, how these proposals were moved to general acceptance by those directly involved, to formal approval by the appropriate authorities, and to actual realization within the seminaries and/or church structures.

The fifth section of Part One describes the business planning process, unanticipated in the original design of the study, which took place in the years immediately following the study.

Part Two focuses on five key strategies developed through the study and traces briefly how these specific strategies moved from research, to planning, to action. The strategies highlighted are: ecclesial and academic standards for students entering seminary; required continuation following seminary; seminary clusters and system-wide coordination; increasing the flow of funds to seminaries through various streams; and distance learning and the coordination of technology.

C. Background for Understanding the Study

Readers who were not directly involved with Lutheran theological education in the 1980s and '90s will benefit from a brief overview of the issues, the ecclesiastical structures, the political climate and ethos that affected the seminaries in their relationship to the denomination in the years leading up to and following the formation of the ELCA.

1. The ELCA merger and implications for the seminaries

The formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1988 not only brought together three major American Lutheran church bodies, but also created a new parent church for eight seminaries. Each of these seminaries had its origin in one of the predecessor church bodies and filled a carefully carved out place in that church's strategy for theological education.

The Lutheran Church in America (LCA) took a regional approach to theological education. Each LCA seminary was supported and governed by a group of related synods. The bishops of those synods were influential members of the seminary boards. At the time of the merger, the LCA related primarily to five seminaries: Lutheran Theological Seminary, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, Columbia, South Carolina; Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois; and Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, California.

The American Lutheran Church (ALC) had a more centralized approach to its seminaries. At one point the three seminaries of the ALC were regarded as one seminary on three campuses. Even after that concept was abandoned, the ALC seminaries continued to be governed and funded through a central, churchwide board, with boards of regents exercising limited authority on each campus. While each of these seminaries had some natural constituencies related to their geography, they were each regarded as national seminaries serving the whole church. Regional judicatories, called districts in the ALC, had no formal relationship to particular seminaries.

At the point of the ELCA merger, the three predominately ALC seminaries were Luther Northwestern Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota; Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio; and Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa. Recent seminary mergers had brought Northwestern Seminary (LCA) together with Luther Seminary (ALC) to form Luther Northwestern Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota; and Hamma Divinity School (LCA) together with Evangelical Lutheran Seminary (ALC) to form Trinity Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio.

The Association of Evangelical Lutheran Congregations (AELC) was born out of a schism at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis in 1973. When the

Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod dismissed the president of the seminary on doctrinal grounds, the majority of his faculty colleagues walked out with him and subsequently formed a new seminary: Christ Seminary-Seminex. A church grew up around this seminary in exile. At the point of the formation of the ELCA, Christ Seminary-Seminex had merged into the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. This school had already incorporated five seminaries from previous mergers.

In the newly formed ELCA, these eight seminaries overlapped on a single map. Prior to the merger (1984-86), a Consultation on Theological Education had been convened to work out a plan for what to do with these seminaries. Did one Lutheran church need eight seminaries? Should some be closed, moved, or merged? Which of the distinctive patterns for owning, funding, and governing seminaries would prevail in the new church? Or would entirely new patterns and structures be created? These were pressing questions that needed to be determined before the merger occurred.

After two years of work, this consultation made the following recommendations to the Commission for a New Lutheran Church (CNLC):

- Bring all eight seminaries into the new church as they were, but pair them for cooperative planning. Luther Northwestern and Pacific were paired; Wartburg and Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago; Philadelphia and Gettysburg; Trinity and Southern.
- Combine churchwide and synodical patterns of funding and governance. Each seminary was assigned to a group of supporting synods. These synods were asked to provide financial support to the seminary and appoint eighty percent of its governing board members. The churchwide Division for Ministry would also provide financial support and appoint twenty percent of the board members. The synods and the Division for Ministry together would be responsible for providing to each seminary grants at least equal to the amount they received from those combined sources in their predecessor church bodies.

These recommendations were approved and made operative in the transition to the ELCA. The 1986 Report of the Consultation on Theological Education called for a subsequent study to address the larger questions about directions in theological education. While not specifically stated, these directions were generally assumed to include the number and location of seminaries and strategies for maximizing the potential of the seminaries to serve the changing needs of the church. This new study provided a potential mechanism for reconsidering and possibly correcting the arrangements made in the transition to the ELCA. Each school felt that it had lost something in those negotiations. Many were fearful about whether the new arrangements would prove to be adequate in practice.

2. The New Church Structure: How It Works

The task force attended carefully to the formal decision-making structures in the newly formed ELCA in order to gain approval for its proposals. In the development of those proposals it sought the advice and eventually the participation of people who would finally put these proposals into action or stand in their way. We tried to anticipate the inevitable power struggles and channel them to our purposes. To understand these processes it is important to know what structures were in place and how they worked.

a. Organizational Principles of the ELCA

The ELCA Constitution (Chapter 5) lays out broad principles for how this church will function organizationally. While denominationally related institutions and agencies were not specifically cited in these principles, the task force consistently interpreted these principles as applying also to the seminaries in its relationship with the denomination. The following principles were directly relevant to this study.

- **Inclusivity.** This church, in faithfulness to the Gospel, is committed to be an inclusive church in the midst of division in society. To further this principle, all deliberative bodies in the ELCA are constituted so that 60% are lay, at least 10% are persons of color or language other than English, and 50% of the lay members are women.
- **Interdependence.** The congregations, synods, and churchwide organization of this church are interdependent partners sharing responsibility in God's mission. In an interdependent relationship primary responsibility for particular functions will vary between the partners. Whenever possible, the entity most directly affected by the decision shall be the principal party responsible for decision and implementation, with the other partners facilitating and assisting. Each separately incorporated entity is responsible for exercising its powers and authorities.
- **Stewardship.** As stewards of the resources that God has provided, this church shall organize itself to make the most effective use of its resources to accomplish its mission.

b. Components of the ELCA Structure

1) The Division for Ministry. The study was conducted under the auspices of the ELCA Division for Ministry. The Division for Ministry is one of six programmatic units of the ELCA. It is responsible for churchwide oversight of all dimensions of ministry:

- the identification, evaluation, and preparation of candidates for ministry as pastors, associates in ministry, diaconal ministers, and deaconesses;

- coordination, planning, financial support, and advocacy for the seminaries of the denomination;
- support and continuing education for pastors and rostered lay leaders in service; and
- support and advocacy for the whole people of God for their daily-life ministries.

At the time of the study, the Division for Ministry was comprised of four departments, each headed by a director and each responsible for one of these four areas of the division's work: candidacy, theological education, leadership support, and ministry in daily life. As the Director for Theological Education, I directed the study in addition to fulfilling my other responsibilities related to the seminaries. The scope of the study expanded to involve each of the other departments and their directors in consultation and in the eventual implementation of the study's recommendations. In fact, as the task force began to envision cooperative arrangements that would link the seminary clusters with Lutheran colleges, universities, social ministries organizations, churchwide units, synods, large congregations, etc., other programmatic divisions of the churchwide organizations would have to become involved.

The Executive Director of the Division manages the overall work of the Division, and in this capacity was the direct supervisor of the Director for Theological Education and a regular participant in all the meetings of the Task Force on the Study of Theological Education. Relationships between the Division for Ministry and the other churchwide entities, such as the divisions and departments of the churchwide organization, the Conference of Bishops, the Church Council, and the Office of the Presiding Bishop, are generally negotiated at the level of the Executive Director. The Executive Director and staff of the Division for Ministry are accountable to an elected board of 21 members, which meets twice a year. The Division takes formal action only through its board.

2) ELCA Church Council. The Division for Ministry Board recommended the proposal for the study and nominated a slate of task force members to conduct the study to the ELCA Church Council for final action and authorization. The task force made its reports to the Division for Ministry, which in turn sent on to the Church Council recommendations affecting parts of the church beyond the division. The Church Council, a thirty-seven member body elected by the biennial Churchwide Assembly, has authority to make decisions on behalf of the churchwide organization between assemblies. The ELCA Churchwide Assembly also elects a presiding bishop who, with his staff, oversees overall planning in the ELCA and the Churchwide Organization. The bishop is accountable to the Churchwide Assembly and the Church Council.

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3) Conference of Bishops. Each of the 65 synods of the ELCA has an elected bishop and a synodical council. The bishops meet as a Conference of Bishops twice a year. The Conference of Bishops was consulted regularly in the course of the study and its advice and consent sought for developing proposals. The Conference of Bishops, however, has no legislative authority and the decisions of the conference are not binding on individual bishops.

4) Conference of Seminary Presidents. The Director for Theological Education is constitutionally charged with responsibility to convene the presidents of the eight ELCA seminaries at least once a year. In practice I regularly met with the presidents at least twice annually and more frequently during the course of the study. This group, which eventually came to be called the Conference of Seminary Presidents, has no legislative authority. It is formally connected to the structures of the church only through the Division for Ministry staff person assigned to them, in this case myself and often the Executive Director.

c. Advantages and Challenges Posed by the Structure

The existence of centralized structures for churchwide consultation and decision making facilitated the progress of the study. In comparison to most mainline denominations, the ELCA has a strong theological identity and relatively effective connections between its organizational parts. It intends to be one national church rather than a federation of semi-autonomous regional entities. One key to the unity of the ELCA is the maintenance of a single roster of ordained and lay leaders prepared and authorized to serve anywhere in the ELCA. The integrity of the ELCA's ministerial roster is reinforced through a common churchwide candidacy process, administered through the synods in consultation with the seminaries. A unified denomination depends upon a good relationship with its seminaries. Its ongoing life and mission favors the development of structures and systems which keep the seminaries working together with and for the church.

The complexity of the structures in the new church, however, also presented a significant challenge to the task force in its attempt to make changes that would affect the whole church. The structures' labyrinth provide ample checks and balances on the abuse of power. The strongest centers of authority initially were in the synods and in the separate programmatic divisions of the churchwide organization. This kind of structure does not provide easy and natural ways to develop a churchwide strategy that transcends those boundaries. In the early years of the ELCA, churchwide leadership had not yet developed the trust and the will to take bold action, nor had it forged political alliances that it would need to succeed in this complex structural environment. The financially strapped churchwide organization did not have the capacity to provide incentives for desired change.

Another complicating factor was the unresolved struggle for ascendancy between the synodical and churchwide expressions of the new denomination. While the task force was a creation of the churchwide organization with a mandate to create an ELCA system of theological education, many in the church and the seminaries had more loyalty to and confidence in their local synod than in the new churchwide organization. This preference played into patterns from the former LCA. During this same critical period, commentators on the American religious scene were beginning to regard large, national denominations as dinosaurs destined for extinction.

Finally, the governing documents of the ELCA are vague about who owns the seminaries. The ELCA Constitution states,

This church shall own, govern, and support seminaries for the preparation of persons for the ordained and other ministries and for continuing study on the part of ordained ministers and lay persons.

This constitutional provision is immediately followed by bylaws which provide for seminaries to be separately incorporated, with all normal governance functions exercised by their respective boards of directors. Seminaries hold title to and manage their own property and assets.

While the interests of the study would have been served by a strong reading of the constitutional provision which claims that the church owns and governs the seminaries, it was not at all clear that such a reading would have held up in a court of law if the seminaries and the church had come to an impasse. Furthermore, concern for ascending liability made the General Counsel of the ELCA cautious about claiming too much authority for the church in relation to the seminaries. When we sought to uncover the initial intent of those who had drafted these constitutional documents just a few years before, it became evident that the ambiguity was intentional. The apparently contradictory language covered over real differences of opinion among the drafters.

The seminary presidents eventually became advocates for the study, but their stance was always precarious. By virtue of their elected positions, they were first and foremost responsible for upholding the integrity and well being of their respective institutions. When the presidents—or at least some of them—came personally to believe that strong ties to the church and cooperation within a system of theological education would enhance the security of their institutions and enable them to fulfill their mission more effectively, they had to overcome the natural resistance of their boards and faculty.

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3. Other Studies

Part of the background of the ELCA Study of Theological Education was the recent history of denominational studies of theological education, including the 1986 Report of the Consultation on Theological Education to the Commission on the New Lutheran Church. The limited success of these studies created an attitude of cynicism about the new effort.

a. The Bergendoff Study. A much earlier study of theological education conducted in connection with the 1962 merger of the LCA was also very much alive in the memories of some participants in the current study. Dr. Conrad Bergendoff, a highly respected theological educator and administrator, had conducted a survey of the LCA-related seminaries and made bold recommendations for moving and/or merging several seminaries in order to create larger institutions with greater academic strength, located in close proximity to major universities. The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago was the chief outcome of this study. This new school, located near the campus of the University of Chicago, was created out of the merger of five Midwestern, Lutheran seminaries of various sizes. Other proposed consolidations, chiefly the one between the seminaries in Philadelphia and Gettysburg, failed to materialize. The shadow of the Bergendoff vision plagued the ELCA study. Many were defensive because they assumed we were pushing the same agenda of academic strength through consolidation and university connection. Others compared the task force's tediously collaborative process unfavorably to Dr. Bergendoff's bold, swift, and decisive approach.

b. The ELCA Study of Ministry. The ELCA Study of Theological Education was also in the shadow of the ELCA Study of Ministry that was simultaneously being conducted by the Division for Ministry (1988-93). The Ministry Study was a high profile, well-funded project, with a full-time director engaged specifically to conduct the study. A study of ministry was required to resolve deeply held differences in the predecessor church bodies regarding the structuring of ministry, particularly lay professional ministries. This study lifted up the importance of lay ministry and created more diversity and flexibility in ministry forms. It became the task of the Study of Theological Education to design a system of theological education that could provide the educational diversity and accessibility needed to prepare the array of leaders the Study of Ministry envisioned.

ELCA leaders and members were generally more invested in the ministry issues than they were in the restructuring of theological education. Within the Division for Ministry, the Study of Theological Education was always the "other" study. It did not gain the full attention of the board until after the Study of Ministry was completed. In the long run, it was advantageous to the Study of Theological Education to work in a context of benign neglect outside of the glare of publicity with its polarizing effects.

D. The Mandate and the Vision of the Study

The mandate to the task force was to create an ELCA system of theological education that could prepare the leaders needed for the mission of the church, be adequately funded by the church through grants and individual gifts, and be appropriately accountable to the church. The ELCA study was really driven by two interrelated objectives: God's mission through the church and the unity of the church, or at least the interdependence of the denomination and its related institutions.

The task force was convinced that the mission of the twenty-first century would require not only ministry of Word and Sacrament, but a diversity of creative lay ministries, and indeed the active, intentional ministry of the whole people of God. Church leaders and laity profoundly engaged in the world would all need to be deeply rooted in the faith through accessible, quality, Lutheran theological education. It seemed that the relatively small, independent, clerically oriented ELCA seminaries were not well equipped individually to take on this daunting and revolutionary task. The seminaries working together as a system, however, could redeploy resources and concentrate strengths to get the larger job done. If they could draw in other providers of theological education from beyond the seminaries, the network would be even more effective. How the task force arrived at this vision and brought others in as partners in developing and implementing strategies to further this vision is the subject of the reflections that follow.

Phyllis Anderson
Chicago, Illinois
January 31, 1998

Part One: Process

I. Organization of the Study

This section explains in considerable detail the design of the study, who the players were, and how they did their work.

A. Design of the Study

The formal design of the Study of Theological Education underwent a number of refinements and adjustments on its way to final adoption and implementation, but the basic shape of the study remained essentially intact from its first inception in the summer of 1988 to its completion in 1995.

1. Design Development

The pre-merger Consultation on Theological Education for a New Lutheran Church (1986) recommended to the Division for Ministry that “new directions” for the seminaries be explored with a report and recommendations to be brought to the church by 1991. The first-time seminary presidents and deans met with the newly elected staff of the Division for Ministry in November 1987, where seminary leaders urged the division to move forward with such a study with all deliberate speed.

At a second meeting in April 1988, seminary presidents proposed that the study be done in three phases. The first phase should be a careful documentation of the effects of the transition to the ELCA and the specific changes in patterns of funding, governance, inter-seminary cooperation (pairing), and candidacy that had been mandated in the report of the Consultation on Theological Education for a New Lutheran Church. Although they had participated in the Consultation, the seminary leaders were anxious about the changes it produced. They wanted to be sure that unintended effects of the new policies and disproportionate harm to particular schools were assessed early so that adjustments could be made.

At the same time at least some of the presidents were concerned that the changes proposed by the consultation had not gone far enough. They urged the division to move ahead and settle issues which the Consultation was unable to resolve. Toward that end, they proposed that the second stage of the study take the form of long range, strategic planning for an ELCA system of theological education. They envisioned this phase as highly participative. The third phase would be a process for making the decisions necessary to fulfill the plan.

When the presidents reviewed the proposal at their next meeting in November 1989, they urged staff to make the study more “comprehensive in scope and radical in depth.” They asked that the study deal not only with

coordination and funding, but seek to define the kind of education needed for the Church's mission in the years ahead.

The three-phased approach proposed by seminary leaders was incorporated into the initial proposal and into the final design for a study of theological education. Reflecting the three phases, the study was officially called a *Program of Research, Planning, and Action for a System of Theological Education in the ELCA*.

2. Designed for Action

From the beginning this was to be a process that led to action. The pre-ELCA Consultation had been bold in its educational vision but inconclusive on key structural issues. It offered no program for implementation. The directions it proposed were to be supported by projected church funding which did not materialize. The ELCA study would have to result in decisions that could and would be implemented. This was to be the art of the possible. The politics of bringing about changes in theological education to meet the needs of the church became part of the subject of the study itself.

An initial proposal was prepared by the Director for Theological Education for approval by the board of the Division for Ministry in March 1989. This draft was explicit about the intention that the study would lead to decision and change:

The purpose of the study is to assist the ELCA in making fundamental decisions about how it will structure theological education to take advantage of the new possibilities created by the coming together of several traditions in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and to meet the mission challenges of the twenty-first century. . . . It does this by providing the research, the occasion for reflection, and a decision-making process that will enable the church to define the vision and goals for theological education in the ELCA and to design a system of theological education to fulfill them.

The concern of the task force to make the study effective is evident in the minutes of its first meeting in July 1989.

The task force discussed the need to proceed with the study with an eye to political and practical realities. The conclusions of this study will eventually be acted upon by the board of the Division for Ministry, the ELCA Church Council, and the Church in Assembly in 1995. In order for this study to be accepted and implemented, the task force expressed the need to develop broad based credibility over the course of the study, to secure expert assistance, and to consult widely with those who have knowledge or experience not represented on the task force, or whose testimony will inspire confidence.

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B. The Task Force

The capacity of the study to generate action and mobilize real change in the church and in the seminaries depended not only on the design of the study, but who was authorized to actually conduct the study: the task force.

1. Composition of the Task Force

Staff, particularly the Director for Theological Education, had considerable influence in determining the composition of the task force and the selection of task force members. When the Division for Ministry Board approved the proposal for the Study of Theological Education in March 1989 for recommendation to the ELCA Church Council in April, the slate of nominees for service on the task force was not yet ready for board action. The board authorized a committee of five to work with staff in nominating task force members to be approved by the Church Council along with the study proposal. The committee chose nine persons to serve from a pool of nearly one hundred written applications.

The director had clear preferences about the size and composition of the task force based on recent experience with two similar study groups, the Study of Ministry and the Consultation on Theological Education.

Study of Ministry. The board of the Division for Ministry had taken a more active role in appointing members to a task force to conduct the Study of Ministry (1988-93). Because of the political tensions surrounding the ministry debates, task force members were chosen to represent or balance special interests or "parties." In order to satisfy the requirements for both theological and demographic diversity, this task force grew to seventeen members. With the addition of *ex officio* members, advisors, and communicators, there were regularly thirty or more persons in attendance at task force meetings. The group was too large for informal conversation. Members who had been chosen to represent particular interests or positions were limited in their freedom to grow through the study process and modify their positions. Trust and a common vision among task force members proved difficult to establish.

Consultation on Theological Education. The Director for Theological Education was also influenced by evaluations of the effectiveness of the study conducted by the Consultation on Theological Education (1984-86), which reported to the Commission for a New Lutheran Church. This consultation was comprised of twelve members, three of whom were women and four of whom were persons of color or language other than English. This highly representative group was often overshadowed by the presence and active participation of staff and advisors, eight seminary presidents or their representatives, and five professional staff from the

three merging church bodies. The consultation was directed and facilitated by a staff of four. Staff and advisors totaled seventeen, all but two of whom were ordained white men. The resulting group, in the reports of many who participated, was too large and too politicized for effective deliberation and decision making.

Against the background of these two recent studies, the priority of the Director of the Study of Theological Education was to put together a group that would:

- become a cohesive, collaborative body in which conversation was easy and trust high;
- move beyond the commitments and loyalties of individual members to the group's common vision;
- contain within it the breadth of perspectives, knowledge, and experience needed to get the work done; and
- give sustained attention to this task over a prolonged period of time.

a. Size of the Task Force. With these goals in mind, the first decision was to keep the task force small—less than ten persons. We settled on nine voting members. With the addition of the Director of Theological Education and the Executive Director of the Division for Ministry, there were usually eleven active participants in task force meetings. The meetings were often observed by a member of the ELCA communication staff and a consultant/evaluator appointed by Lilly Endowment.

b. Demographic Considerations. Because this task as originally conceived was so focused on education for ordained ministry, we sought and were allowed a higher percentage of clergy than called for in the ELCA representational principles. The approved proposal for the composition of the task force did not stipulate any specific percentages, but instead stated,

The task force will reflect both the diversity of our own (ELCA) membership and society, and also the variety of perspectives on theological education and ministry which exist within our church.

To begin with, four of the nine members were lay. During the first year, we lost a clergy person and gained a rostered lay person, shifting the balance to a lay majority. One member was African American. After the first year, four of the five lay members and one of the four ordained members were women. The director of the study and five of the nine voting members were women.

There were additional demographic considerations. We sought geographic distribution on the task force. On the original task force eight of the

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nine geographic regions of the church were represented. Some attention was also given to balance among the predecessor church bodies.

c. Experience and Expertise. Within these demographic parameters, we sought specific qualities in potential task force members. The official criteria adopted were:

- comprehensive vision and knowledge of the church;
- theological and educational acumen;
- research skills; and
- persuasiveness and credibility within the church.

This task force would need the capacity for analysis and vision in order to discern wise directions in theological education. Just as important, it would need public trust, communication skills, and political know-how in order to move beyond discernment to decision and action within the seminaries and the church body. To get the range of capacities needed we looked for potential members from the fields of theological education, ministry, and churchwide leadership.

Theological Educators. We wanted members who understood Lutheran theological education from the inside and were interested in the larger issues in theological education. At the same time we wanted to avoid including leaders in theological education with entrenched positions or exclusive, long term loyalties to particular institutions. We decided against including any major ELCA seminary administrators. Instead we chose relatively young but widely known and respected associate professors: Paul Rorem from the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago and Martha Ellen Stortz from Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. Rorem had served on the pre-ELCA Consultation on Theological Education and as the director of a regional continuing education center. To get a broader ecumenical and administrative perspective, we chose Ronald Thiemann, Dean of Harvard Divinity School. When he resigned after the first year, the task force was very much diminished by the loss of his point of view and experience. His stated reasons for leaving the task force were his expanding professional responsibilities at Harvard Divinity School and the growing demands on the time of task force members. By the time the study was completed, Rorem had joined the faculty at Princeton Theological Seminary and we regained the perspective of a Lutheran teaching at an ecumenical seminary.

Ministry Practitioners. We chose two parish pastors and a Bishop, originally all serving in different parts of the country: Rev. Beverly Allert, Rev. Charles Mays, and Bishop Harold Skillrud. Bishop Skillrud had been chair of the board of LSTC during the merger that created the school in the 1960s.

He had written a book on the experience. These three could speak with the authority of experience about the needs of the church and its rostered leaders in various parts of the country.

Churchwide Leaders. As it turned out, all of the lay members of the task force were church professionals or virtually professional church volunteers. Dorothy Marple had served as executive director of the churchwide women's organization and assistant to two presiding bishops in the former Lutheran Church in America. Charles Lutz was the executive director of the Church and Society unit in the former American Lutheran Church, a widely published author and the editor of an area-wide Lutheran publication. Mary Chrichlow, a retired human relations professional, was a member of two seminary boards, active in the Lutheran African-American community and in her synod, and had served on several churchwide boards and committees. These three knew a lot about how to get things done in the church.

Eventually, Marybeth Peterson, who was appointed by the board of the Division for Ministry to be its official liaison with the task force, became fully integrated as a member of the task force. So, after the resignation of Ronald Thiemann, membership on the task force remained constant at nine. As an associate in ministry, Peterson became the only rostered lay professional on the task force. She brought long experience serving on synod staffs, particularly in the area of candidacy. During the last four years of the study, Peterson also served as chair of the board of the Division for Ministry.

Each of the task force members had significant associations with an ELCA seminary, and most of them with more than one. Some taught at a different seminary than the one in which they had studied; some took advanced degrees at schools other than the one in which they earned their M.Div.; some served on boards of other than their local seminary. Several had experience of non-ELCA seminaries. The seminaries could all be assured that they were well known by at least one task force or staff member. Task force members, however, were not limited by their loyalties or experiences—positive or negative—related to one particular school. Because of this broader experience of theological education, the task force was more free to explore new possibilities. They may also have been less sensitive than they might have been to the those key constituencies with strong loyalties to a particular school.

The one area of expertise which we felt we needed but were not able to secure was finance. While many of us had some experience with financial and funding issues, the effectiveness and credibility of the task force would have been strengthened by the appointment of someone with professional competence in finance or resource development.

In short, the task force was comprised of persons of established character and credibility. While these were all people with strong personalities who

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were or who had been leaders in their respective fields, they were not contentious personalities. Most important, they did not come to the task force representing interest groups whose causes they were honor-bound to advance.

2. Executive Committee and Other Subgroups

At its first meeting the task force elected a three member executive committee whose function it was to plan the meetings and work of the task force, develop agendas, preside at task force meetings, keep minutes (with assistance of staff), and handle decisions that needed to be made between meetings. Dr. Dorothy Marple, a lay woman, was elected chair; Pastor Charles Mays, secretary; and Professor Paul Rorem, member-at-large.

The competence of the executive committee in projecting and planning the course of the study and the willingness of the larger group to accept its leadership contributed greatly to the effectiveness of the study process. These three people, with the director, were responsible for looking ahead, anticipating what information was needed and who needed to be consulted, sequencing decisions, charting out timelines and work schedules. As a result, the process, although it was long and often circuitous, always seemed to be on track.

3. Authority and Relationships

In his influential address to the Annual Consultation on Theological Education in November 1990, Craig Dykstra of the Lilly Endowment articulated for us the value of keeping the work of the task force well integrated within ordinary decision-making structures and the real centers of power. In reference to studies which had failed to make real change he said,

. . . by treating studies of theological education as special occasions, we often create more political complications than we solve. The task force typically represents a variety of constituencies and opinion groups who believe that their only chance to influence theological education in a concerted way is this special study. The result is reports that are so overstuffed with recommendations intended to satisfy various factions that they have little use as plans for actual action. . . . For a variety of political reasons, one-time studies of seminaries by special committees are unlikely to produce substantive changes and improvements in theological education.

While this was a time-limited study with a specially appointed “blue-ribbon” panel, several key steps were taken to keep the study closely integrated with the ongoing structures through which the coordination of theological education and the church are managed.

The relationship between the board and staff of the Division for Ministry were established in the original proposal approved by the ELCA Church Council in April 1989. The task force was appointed by and was clearly the creation of the board of the Division for Ministry. For the period of the study, the task force became the instrument of the board to fulfill its constitutional responsibility of planning and coordinating theological education in the ELCA. The board engaged the task force for the purpose of gaining a comprehensive understanding of pressing issues in theological education and proposing possible responses for the board to consider. The task force reported to the board twice a year for the duration of the study. The task force reported its recommendations to the ELCA Church Council and Churchwide Assembly only through the board. A board member served as a member of the task force. For the last four years that liaison member was actually chair of the board of the Division for Ministry.

The director of the Study of Theological Education was the Director for Theological Education on the staff of the Division for Ministry. In other words, the person who did the staff work for the task force and gave professional leadership to the study was the person with ongoing responsibility for the coordination of theological education in the ELCA before, during, and after the study. By virtue of her position on the staff, she met regularly with seminary presidents and deans, attended seminary board meetings, and worked with the seminaries on issues of educational standards, funding, and coordination. She also wrote the original proposal and design for the study and was the primary author of each of the official reports of the study. The Executive Director of the Division for Ministry was a member of the task force *ex officio* and attended all meetings.

The work of the ELCA Task Force on the Study of Theological Education was closely integrated with the ordinary decision-making processes in the Division for Ministry and in the seminaries. The task force and director were sometimes concerned for their own independence and wary of over-control by the Division for Ministry. In the long run, however, this close accountability and integration proved to be an asset.

This integration continued after the completion of the study. In 1994, the board of the Division for Ministry acted on the recommendation of the task force to establish a permanent Theological Education Coordinating Committee (TECC) to begin meeting in the fall of 1995. The purpose of this group was to continue the informed and focused strategic planning and coordination in theological education which the task force had provided. By its composition, the TECC brought together key planning partners: the seminary presidents, Division for Ministry staff and two board members, and five at-large members. The members of TECC were appointed by the Division for Ministry. Like the task force, TECC would report to and have no formal authority outside of the board of the Division for Ministry.

4. Pattern of Task Force Work

The task force held three-day meetings three times a year for six years. Additional meetings were held by telephone conference calls, often for the purpose of reviewing and editing texts. The executive committee held additional one-day meetings between regular task force meetings during the early formative years of the study.

Task force meetings were always intense, with long agendas and volumes of printed materials in advance. Careful preparation, skillful presiding by the chair, time out for festive meals and worship, and a general sense of mutual trust and camaraderie made these meetings highly productive and often pleasant. Strong affection developed among the task force members. With the exception of the one task force member who resigned, attendance remained very steady throughout the study.

At the initial meeting we established a number of common understandings that stood us in good stead in the years to come. We got to know each other and identified the variety of perspectives and strengths we brought to the task, many of which have been alluded to above. We also identified and listed assumptions that we brought to the task, many of which were reflected in our later work. We agreed to work through consensus as much as possible. We agreed that the leaders we elected to the executive committee would function to facilitate the work of the group as a whole, and not to become the official spokespersons for the group or the authors of the final report. In other words, this study was to be a genuinely collaborative project.

Through the first three years of the study, task force members read one assigned book in advance of each meeting. Task force members kept up with voluminous reports, articles, and studies in regular mailings from staff. Over time they became very well informed about issues in theological education and ministry. Individuals or working groups often had writing assignments between meetings.

The rhythm of the task force work also included an Annual Consultation on Theological Education. These meetings regularly brought together the presidents, board chairs, and one other administrator from each seminary and a bishop from each region. For five years, these annual consultations became the primary forum for the task force to introduce and seek response to new data, documents, or proposals it was developing.

Consultations with seminary presidents, selected churchwide staff, and other knowledgeable people were held during task force meetings. Until the Study of Ministry completed its work in 1993, the director of that study met with the task force at each meeting to insure coordination between the two studies. Task force members made additional time commitments to visit seminary campuses and to attend consultations with seminary leaders, deliberative church bodies, and some forty other interested groups. Some or

all task force members also attended the five Annual Consultations on Theological Education and three churchwide assemblies. One member of the executive committee reported being out of his parish on task force business thirty days during our most intensive year of consultation.

From time to time the task force broke into subcommittees in order to facilitate its work. Working groups were established to provide focus on particular aspects of the work or to actually draft proposals. In some cases, where additional expertise was required (e.g., distance learning, funding, and continuing education for newly rostered leaders), non-task force members were incorporated into focused *ad hoc* working groups.

5. What We Learned

- Keep the task force small.
- Choose people with high integrity and credibility.
- Build in diversity of expertise, experience, perspective.
- Find ways to incorporate expertise, experience and perspectives not present on the task force through consultations and *ad hoc* working groups.
- Avoid making members representatives of particular interests or perspectives.
- Balance capacity for analysis and vision with political skills needed for action.
- Be clear and realistic about the time commitment expected.
- Appoint an effective executive committee and allow them scope to develop a work plan, to strategize about process, to plan meetings, etc.
- Avoid public overexposure and inflated expectations, at least in the early formative stages of the study.
- Integrate the special committee into the regular, ongoing structures of authority and decision making.

C. Staff

As the Director for Theological Education in the Division for Ministry of the ELCA churchwide organization, I was the director of the study and only professional staff for the study. I was the only staff member in the Division for Ministry with primary responsibility for theological education in the eight seminaries of the ELCA.

The only staff hired especially for the study was a part-time project assistant, Chris Alexander, who served from July 1990 through July 1994. Her responsibilities were primarily organizational and technical. She arranged for task force meetings, travel, and consultations. She managed a tremendous amount of paper, including regular mailings to the task force and a newsletter which went out to 2,000 persons following each task force meeting. She prepared financial statistics on the seminaries and managed task force records.

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She was trained in the use of the computer model designed for the seminary system by Cambridge Associates. The costs for this position were included in the grant from Lilly Endowment. The regular secretary to the director, Pat Wilder, helped out in particularly busy times and took full responsibility for mailings and travel arrangements after Chis left in 1994.

1. Responsibilities of the Director

As director of the study I was responsible, with the executive committee, to plan and oversee the conduct of the study: plan the task force meetings, draw up timelines for moving proposals forward, propose consultation partners and schedules, etc. I led most of the consultations, sometimes with members of the task force and sometimes alone. Beyond this, I was the primary author of the proposal and design for the study itself and for each of the task force's several major reports. I was also responsible for interpretation of the study, including writing regular newsletters and presenting our work to regular meetings of boards, bishops, church council and anyone else who would listen. With the Executive Director of the Division for Ministry, I kept the appropriate officials of the churchwide organization informed of our progress. I also wrote the grants which maintained the study and reported regularly to our benefactors.

2. Degree of Difficulty

Like any change process, the study stirred up anxiety and anger. As the director of the study, I became the lightning rod for whatever hostility was kicked up by the study to a much greater degree than was true for the appointed task force members. These feelings might have interfered with my ability to carry out the other non-study related responsibilities of my job: to oversee funding, relate to seminary boards, participate in presidential searches, plan conferences, and serve as general liaison between the church and the seminaries. As far as I can tell my effectiveness in the job was not adversely affected by the dual responsibilities. I did personally absorb a lot of study-related anger. Unlike the task force members, I worked continuously with seminary personnel between meetings and seldom was able to achieve any distance from the issues in theological education that we were trying to address through the study.

The work would have been more effective and personally easier to bear had it had the backing of a strong churchwide organization. The ELCA, however, was still largely unfocused, financially strapped, and itself the target of much criticism and mistrust. In my dual role as Director for Theological Education and director of the study, it was my lot more than once to announce to seminary boards in a single meeting that the Division for Ministry was reducing their annual grant due to churchwide shortfalls and that the task force was proposing new programs and services to which the seminaries

should be giving increased attention. Craig Dykstra warned us of the dangers denominations face when they try to reassess their “systems” of theological education during times of transition and uncertainty, after a denominational merger, or during a period of financial difficulty. We were experiencing all three between 1989 and 1995.

Dykstra told the 1990 ELCA Annual Consultation on Theological Education,

Most seminaries will figure out that the lack of stabilizing denominational commitment makes the risks from major changes unacceptably high, and therefore studies conducted at times of instability and crises are not likely to produce any but minor adjustments in seminary structures, programs, or relationships.

As stated above, it was highly advantageous for the study to be fully integrated into the life of the division and the seminaries. To a considerable extent the ongoing relationship between the seminaries and the division was effected through the person of the director. Fulfilling this role, however, was sometimes tough on the director. The dual responsibilities were probably more than one person can reasonably do over an extended period of time. I originally anticipated that the study would take about one-third of my time. In fact it became more than a full time occupation, with other responsibilities related to my primary position added on. In addition to the time involved and the sheer volume of activity, there was also emotional wear and tear. It would have helped to have had a second Division for Ministry staff member working in the area of theological education to carry on some of the more routine functions while the director took major responsibility for the study.

3. Strengths of the Director

While new to the position in the Division for Ministry at the start of the study, I did bring experience and skills that proved useful to the study. I could bridge the worlds of church and seminary, having served as a parish pastor, an assistant to a bishop, a seminary faculty member and administrator before taking my position as Director for Theological Education in the new Lutheran Church in 1988. I held an earned doctorate in systematic theology with a focus on issues of power and ministry. My marriage to a man who has been a professor on three different seminary faculties constituted for me an informal, thirty-year continuing education course in seminary ethos, values, and politics.

Some of my own personal qualities, largely shared by the task force, contributed to making this project work. I apparently had sufficient capacity to conceptualize complex issues and systems and to communicate them clearly in written reports. Just drafting the documents, however, was not enough. The

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director of this study needed the ability to endure and graciously integrate the editorial suggestions of my task force colleagues, sometimes on conference calls that lasted two to three hours. The task required someone who could pursue a long term goal tenaciously while being able to make the necessary adjustments and compromises along the way. I don't think we would have made it without a genuine respect for the wisdom of others and a deep, personal commitment to making the process open and accessible. Finally we, and specifically I, had to be fair and seen by others as trustworthy. Trust was the key in the long run. It also helped to have whatever it takes to hang in there for the long haul. Perhaps that is pure stubbornness; maybe it is patience; but it might also be faith.

The greatest strength that sustained the director and propelled the task force through its years of difficult and creative work was the commitment of the task force to the task and the profound collaborative spirit that enabled us to work as a real team. Working with this group of people will be one of the singular privileges of my personal and professional life. While there were differences among us, we worked them through. When we formulated our final report and recommendations, there were no dissenting opinions. Each person pulled his or her own weight.

It is hard to say how much our collaborative and non-combative style of working was influenced by the fact that the director, the chair, and four of the other eight task force members were women, and strong, feminist women at that. But task force member Bishop Harold Skillrud declared more than once that in all his years in the church he had never been part of a group that worked this way, and he thought it was the leadership of women that made the difference. He acknowledged that it took longer than the old way and was sometimes frustrating, but that this was the only approach that would work for this time and for this kind of a task.

4. Educational Resources

The task demanded all that I had to give and more. Often it felt like there was more going out than coming in. I could have used more skills, training, or mentoring along the way. My own academic background, ongoing reading in the area of leadership and management, and two specific learning opportunities that I pursued proved to be crucial for framing the study in a way that would work.

a. Doctoral Dissertation. I completed my Ph.D. in systematic theology in 1984. The title of my dissertation was *A Theological Investigation of the Issue of Authority and Servanthood in Pastoral Ministry in Light of the Ordination of Women*. My argument included a critique of three major theologians (Kung, Schillebeeckx, and Moltmann) for their failure to assert specifically that power is inherit in the exercise of ministry. They each strongly upheld the ideal of ministry as servanthood. As a woman, whose gender had been excluded from

ordained ministry through most of Christian history, it was clear to me that authority or power was an essential component of ministry. I knew how it felt to lack that authority. As a newly ordained woman, I was highly motivated to understand and describe how power works in ministry, in order both to check its abuse and to use it effectively and intentionally for the sake of the Gospel.

Toward this end, I devoted one chapter of the dissertation to a sociological discussion of authority and power, relying primarily on sociologist Dennis Wrong. Two key insights were most helpful for the argument and for my subsequent administrative work, including the study:

- First, defining power neutrally as a person's "capacity to intentionally influence another." Influencing others is something most people in ministry, and certainly the task force, are sincerely trying to do.
- Second, understanding authority as one of several forms of power. One may exert power or influence in relation to others through authority, persuasion, deception, or brute force. Authority is influence based on trust. People allow themselves to be influenced by someone whom they trust for a variety of reasons: because they perceive that person to have greater competence, because they see that person as inherently attractive, because that person holds an office they respect, and because they believe that person has the capacity to do them harm if they do not comply.

In the course of the study, I was quite conscious that we were engaged at all times in complex power dynamics, seeking to influence other powerful people to change for the sake of a greater good. I was keenly aware of the limits of the task force's power, and sought intentionally to increase our authority, and thereby our capacity to influence, by earning the trust of those with whom we worked through every means available. Trust finally was the key.

b. Reading in Management and Leadership Studies. I was very much influenced from the earliest stages of the study by the book *When Giants Learn to Dance*, written by Rosabeth Kanter of the Harvard School of Business. In this book Kanter describes the historic movement in business from gigantic, centralized corporations, like General Electric, to small, flexible, entrepreneurial companies, like Apple, to a new era of alliances among businesses in order to combine the benefits of size with the creativity of small local ventures. In my own mind this was probably the seed of the idea that eventuated in the clustering of relatively small seminaries and other local providers of theological education into corporate entities in which the individual parts both retained their vitality and also gained the benefits of economy, flexibility, capacity, and resources that come with greater size.

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Because of my long-term interest in issues of power, particularly as they relate to women, I have generally kept up with literature in both feminist theological studies related to power and in management and leadership studies in general. In recent years the emphasis in this literature on softer, less hierarchical management styles has given me the courage of my convictions and the confidence to follow my own intuitions about how to lead and influence change. Probably the most influential book of this genre that I read in the course of the study was Ronald Heifetz's *Leadership without Easy Answers*. His definition of the task of leadership as "mobilizing people to do adaptive work" accurately describes the work of the task force on the Study of Theological Education and my subsequent efforts to implement the directions of the study and extend the planning cycle.

c. Institute for Theological Educational Management. Members of the task force were experienced with various models of strategic planning. The specific approach was basically determined by the director's training in strategic planning at the Warren E. Deem Institute for Theological Education Management (ITEM) in the summer of 1990. Costs for the director to attend this two-week, intensive management course for seminary presidents, conducted by the Riverside Group of the Columbia University School of Business, were included in the grant for the study from Lilly Endowment.

As a major component of the institute, each participant developed a strategic plan for his or her institution. These plans were critiqued at intervals by a seminar leader and colleagues in a small group setting. I took the Study of Theological Education as my project and developed a strategic planning process for building an ELCA theological education system. A high level of honesty and realism were required, because the small group to which I reported included two new ELCA seminary presidents (Dennis Anderson and Darold Beekmann) and my staff counterpart in the Presbyterian Church (Joyce Tucker).

Besides learning the mechanics of strategic planning, this experience proved especially helpful in two ways:

- 1) I was forced to think through and write up for others to consider the political realities we were up against. I analyzed our potential allies and opponents, both overt and covert. I weighed the political clout of various groups and interests in the church and the seminaries. The task force did not utilize this specific analysis to any large degree, but we developed the discipline of reflecting on these questions as individuals and as a group. In a sense this experience gave us permission to think strategically in these crassly political terms.
- 2) Toward the close of the institute, the small group evaluated each strategic planning project while the author left the room. In the feed-back session that

followed, the leader told me three things that bolstered my confidence and stiffened my resolve through some very rough years ahead.

- What you are setting out to do is almost impossibly difficult, but it really needs to be done.
- You are not a bad person to be doing it.
- If you succeed, it will be the best thing you do in your professional life.

d. Organizational Development Consultant

By the summer of 1990 a high level of cynicism surrounded the newly formed ELCA. I was experiencing intense frustration, disappointment, and stress in my position as Director for Theological Education within the Division for Ministry. My growing understanding of my place in the overall structure and the emerging patterns of leadership and decision-making in the new church contributed to make me doubtful about whether this study could fulfill its promise in this church and whether I, in fact, would stay long enough to complete it.

Determined to make the decision about my own future by the end of the summer, I sought outside counsel. I engaged Pat Marshall, a hospital administrator with a background in organizational development, to give me the expert advice I needed to make my decision. She taught me some fundamental lessons in organizational change management. I laid out for her the structure of our organization, my place in it, the relationship between the seminaries and the church, and the political analysis I had developed at ITEM. Her candid assessment was that we could not achieve what we had set out to do in this environment. She recommended that I get out. If I was determined to stay, I would need to be starkly realistic about our lack of power and compensate for it by learning the skills of advocacy and by making sponsors of persons with the power we lacked.

I stayed, and in the end the study succeeded beyond the expectations of almost everyone. These educational experiences were key to my grasping the true political nature of the task and taking appropriate action. Two new approaches grew out of these learnings:

- I applied myself to working more effectively with my direct superior, the Executive Director of the Division for Ministry, who had the access I lacked to the formal and informal decision making structures which were evolving within the ELCA. We had to do this together.
- I, the executive committee, and eventually the task force as a whole became convinced that we needed the seminary presidents to be our sponsors and set about making it happen. It was the presidents who would finally have to validate our work in their institutions. We could not create change over and against these eight men, but only with them

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on our side. Until this point we had sought the advice of the presidents (among others) and came to our own independent conclusions. We would have to learn how to include seminary presidents and other seminary personnel as partners in decision making, rather than simply as consultants.

D. Financial Support

The board of the Division for Ministry expressed concern when the initial proposal for a study of theological education (September 1988) included no budget and no provision for additional staff. The budget the board approved with the March 1989 proposal called for annual expenditures of \$20,500, all but \$4,000 of which was designated to cover the three meetings of the task force itself.

At our first task force meeting in July 1989, task force member Ron Thiemann expressed alarm at the lack of funds and offered the director his help and influence in seeking foundation grants. We began conversations with Craig Dykstra at Lilly Endowment in the fall of 1989. He invited us to bring our proposal to a consultation that he set up for us in December. Joe Wagner, Dorothy Marple, and I met with Craig Dykstra and several Lilly Endowment consultants including Fred Hofheinz and Barbara Wheeler. These consultants were invited to bring their combined wisdom to bear on whether this project was worth funding and how it might be done most effectively.

The group was not very encouraging. The consultants spoke out of experience with a number of denominational studies of theological education which had not produced real change. They helped us understand the difficulty of the task and the naivete of our initial proposal. It became clear that if Lilly Endowment were to fund this project it would be because of an interest in the politics of seminaries and denominations planning and making decisions together. We revised our initial proposal to reflect what we had learned through this consultation and resubmitted it for action.

In March 1990, Lilly Endowment funded the project at the level of \$262,900 to be spent over five years. The grant provided \$60,000 for the project assistant; \$45,900 for task force meetings, \$36,000 for consultation; \$26,000 for interpretation; \$15,000 for research; \$75,000 for an annual meeting with seminary leadership; \$4,500 for staff to attend ITEM; \$500 for task force reading materials. According to this budget the Division for Ministry would continue to contribute \$15,800 annually in addition to salary and benefits for the director.

The director also approached Paul Ramseth of the Lutheran Brotherhood Foundation for support for a financial equilibrium study of the seminaries. We received enthusiastic encouragement and a grant for \$82,000 in January 1990.

In 1994, Lilly Endowment provided an additional \$30,000 to enable us to complete the project. Between 1995 and 1997, Lilly Endowment made a new grant of \$150,000 toward the development of a business plan and case

statement to implement the study results; Lutheran Brotherhood contributed \$65,000; the ELCA seminaries, \$50,000; and the ELCA Strategy Implementation Fund, \$65,000.

The first two sections of these reflections have laid out the background, the personnel, and the overall organization of the study, which we have called a Program of Research, Planning, and Action for an ELCA System of Theological Education. The next three sections in turn will describe the process followed by the task force in the areas of research, planning, and action.

II. Research

By design, the study was oriented more toward action than research. The pre-ELCA Consultation on Theological Education had engaged professional researchers who provided two empirical studies: “Available Theological Education Resources” and “Contexts and Constituencies.” This research documented the growing discrepancy between an increasingly diverse United States population shifting to the South and West and a static and an overwhelmingly white ELCA population concentrated in areas of population decline in the East and Upper Midwest. The researchers brought together data for a full description of seminary programs, enrollment, and finances. This research had led the consultation to recommend a shift of seminary resources toward the mission areas in the South and West. The data were there but did not compel the political decisions necessary to effect such a shift.

The design of the ELCA study did not call for more formal research. The plan was to utilize existing research from the pre-ELCA consultation and other sources: ELCA Office for Research, Planning, and Evaluation; other denominational studies; journal articles and books on societal change; and the developing literature on theological education. The original decision to limit empirical research was based in part on our lack of funds to support research. A total of \$15,000 of the grant from Lilly Endowment was designated for research. The annual preparation of a comparative audit of the seminaries at a cost of about \$3,000 per year consumed the majority of the research funds.

The decision to limit and carefully sequence research projects turned out to be strategically sound. Institutions under threat have every reason to discount or resist the implications of even the most carefully calculated data. In the same speech to the 1990 Annual Consultation on Theological Education, Craig Dykstra advised against putting too much stress on empirical research:

Studies that restrict their methods of research to those that produce “facts” in the rationalistic sense (numbers of persons to be served in a new location, numbers of dollars to be saved by firing long-time employees, percentages of church public that favor one course of action or another) are more likely to be ignored or resisted than to stimulate movement toward change.

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He encouraged us instead to learn more about “the ethos of the institutions, their history and traditions, their values, the interpersonal chemistry among their leaders and prominent figures.” These are more influential in decision-making than quantitative reasoning alone.

A. Phase One Report

The first research undertaken was to document the impact on the seminaries of the changes initiated through the Consultation on Theological Education and the formation of the ELCA. These changes had specifically to do with the areas of funding, governance, pairing of seminaries, and candidacy. As director, I began the research for the Phase One Report in the summer of 1989, in advance of the first meeting of the task force.

Initially, I collected financial data and analyzed the documents of the transition to the new church. Then I visited each campus and conducted in-depth, personal interviews with each seminary president, which were recorded and transcribed. These interviews formed the basis of my analysis of the problems and promise of the new structures. A draft of the Phase One Report was reviewed by the task force at its second meeting in February and approved for distribution in July 1990.

At the Annual Consultation on Theological Education in October 1990, seminary presidents, deans, board chairs, and bishops reviewed and proposed corrections to the document until there was general agreement that it fairly represented the present situation of the seminaries. When those involved felt like their difficulties were recognized and that all the schools were somewhat equally if differently disadvantaged by the new structures, the urgency about adjusting the new structures was relieved. We agreed not to cause further disruption by tinkering with the new structures, but to live with them and to monitor their effects for the duration of the study. Small changes were not judged to be worth the trouble and confusion they would cause. Substantive changes would await the outcome of the study.

Preparing this Phase One Report was very helpful for me as the new Director for Theological Education. The interviews were an occasion for me to get to know these key leaders individually, to learn how the situation and the changes looked from each of their perspectives, and to have to come to some synthesis in my own mind that others recognized as valid. It was my orientation to the job.

What We Learned

There are several respects in which this initial activity of the study became paradigmatic for the conduct of later research, and in fact of the study itself.

- Include the presidents as active partners and focus on their needs and desires.

- Provide information that someone in the system (in this case, the presidents) really wants.
- Time it right. That is, proceed when the information is available and when people are ready to receive and make use of the results.
- Begin with listening.
- Depend on staff to analyze and synthesize research results and interpretation in a draft report.
- Include wider circles of people checking, correcting, adding their insights and perspectives to the report.
- Provide a basis for establishing the trustworthiness of those conducting the study as competent and fair-minded.
- Keep it straightforward and simple.
- Build toward concrete decisions, in this case the decision *not* to change.

B. Financial Equilibrium Study

We deviated from our original design within the first six months of the study to immerse ourselves in a major empirical research project, a Financial Equilibrium Study. This research proved less useful than the Phase One Report, largely because of the ways in which it deviated from the successful pattern of that project outlined above.

1. Need for Financial Data and Expertise

From the beginning, the study was not set up to deal well with the crucial financial matters it would have to face. It was not my area of personal strength or confidence. Although it was a priority to get someone with professional financial expertise on the task force, we did not finally succeed. The task force was resistant to getting immersed in the complexity of funding formulae and audit reports. This was partly because it was not their primary area of competence. They were also concerned that the urgency of the financial concerns would overshadow what they considered to be more fundamental educational and missional issues.

This lack of financial acumen and interest was noted by one of the more experienced and influential members, Ronald Thiemann, Dean of Harvard Divinity School, at the very first meeting of the task force in July 1989. At that meeting, the task force put in place two strategies to address financial concerns using expertise from beyond the group.

- 1) The task force established an *ad hoc* committee of synod, seminary, and churchwide personnel to explore long- and short-range alternatives in the funding of seminaries. The committee was to meet in August and make a report to the seminaries in a consultation already planned for October. Task Force member Bishop Harold Skillrud and I represented the task force on that committee.

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2) Staff was encouraged to seek foundation grants to support the work of the study. Among the specific needs listed in the minutes of the first meeting were funds to “engage the services of a financial consulting firm.”

2. Cambridge Associates

By the second meeting of the task force in February 1990, the executive committee had interviewed representatives of Cambridge Associates of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and received an estimate of the cost for them to conduct a financial equilibrium study for us. By that time I had also secured from Lutheran Brotherhood Foundation a grant (\$82,000) to support this work. Lutheran Brotherhood was very glad to support this aspect of the study, specifically because it was going to get at the tough financial issues and infuse the discussion about seminaries with a more businesslike sophistication.

Cambridge Associates was a highly reputable firm with an impressive record of helping major educational and other not-for-profit institutions assess their financial health and develop strategies to improve it. We contracted with this firm to analyze the financial equilibrium of the seminaries, individually and as a system, and to project the long-term financial implications of present trends and policies. Cambridge Associates consultants were also prepared to calculate the costs of implementing various scenarios the task force might propose for changing the number, location, or function of seminaries within the system.

Consultants Maggie Blakelock and Robert Good quickly went to work visiting each seminary campus, customizing the financial model to fit the seminaries, and running the figures the seminaries provided. Based on this data, the consultants projected that, if present trends continued and the criteria for financial equilibrium were strictly applied, within five years the seminaries would be running annual aggregate deficits of \$4,900,000.

3. Involvement of the Seminaries

The seminaries, of course, were consulted about their willingness to participate in the equilibrium study before it began. Developing the financial models required a significant amount of time from local seminary personnel, particularly the financial officers, some of whom were more comfortable than others with the computer technology involved. This process also required the seminaries to provide financial data in forms that would be more detailed and more comparable than their regular audited financial reports. Seminary leaders were assured that any public use of the findings of this study would not display data or projections of individual seminaries, but only the aggregate of the eight.

The equilibrium study was intended to benefit the seminaries as well as the task force. It would provide them with a realistic assessment of their financial health and a computerized financial modeling tool, specially

adapted to their specifications, which they could use in their own financial planning. In fact, over time the schools did individually move in the directions proposed by Cambridge Associates: planned reduction of spending from endowment income toward a 5% goal to preserve value of endowment; more realistic attention to deferred maintenance; getting spending in line with anticipated income. None of the seminaries, however, trusted the financial modeling tool enough or became proficient enough to make use of it in their internal planning processes.

4. Why the Financial Equilibrium Study Was Not More Effective

The equilibrium study was generated by the task force's need to know, rather than in response to any expressed need from the seminaries. The task force and staff were glad to have access to such expertise. We felt that the prestige of the consulting firm would lend credibility and authority, which we lacked, to any recommendations we made based on their findings. At some level, members of the task force looked to the report of the financial equilibrium study as a means of exposing the financial vulnerability of the seminaries and thereby demonstrating the need for radical change.

It was probably this coercive intent together with very poor timing that doomed the financial equilibrium study. This study was initiated in early 1990, during a time of high fiscal anxiety and uncertainty. Grants to seminaries from the Division for Ministry were reduced 3% (\$168,769) in late 1989 and 12% (\$580,280) in 1990. This sharp drop created a financial emergency in those seminaries most dependent on churchwide funds. There was understandable resistance to building financial projections based on performance during these erratic years. Furthermore, the inability of the newly formed churchwide organization to meet its obligations created anger and mistrust. The task force, representing the church, was in the awkward position of utilizing expensive outside experts to conduct a complex and time-consuming financial equilibrium study to demonstrate that the seminaries had financial problems, problems that were clearly exacerbated by the church's failure to support the seminaries at anticipated levels.

Consultants from Cambridge Associates made a report of their initial findings of significant system-wide financial disequilibrium to the Annual Consultation on Theological Education in October 1990. This consultation was the first occasion when the task force met with seminary presidents, deans, board chairs, bishops on seminary boards, and other leaders. One of the specific objectives of this 1990 consultation was to inspire confidence in the task force and the study design. We were in the very early stages of building trust and finding ways for the seminaries and task force to work together. It was too soon to introduce outside experts, however competent and gracious, to expose the murky depths of seminary finances. The underlying principles, the accuracy of figures representing the respective schools, and the

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interpretation of that data were all sharply challenged at this consultation. That began a pattern of seminary staff dragging their heels about providing information when requested and even trying to run the computer program. There were complaints about the consultants being insensitive or high-handed. Seminary leaders questioned the validity of the research.

At this point in the study, the question about number and location of the seminaries was still unsettled for the task force and was a matter of high anxiety for the seminaries, especially those schools which for historic or financial reasons felt themselves most vulnerable. Even those which did not feel that a decision to reduce the number of seminaries would threaten them specifically were concerned about the adverse effects of the continuing uncertainty about number and location on the increasingly important work of resource development and endowment building.

5. Second Attempt to Develop a Computerized Financial Model

After the church in assembly made the decision to resolve the issue of number and location through clustering (1993) and the seminaries had formed three clusters (1994), the anxiety was finally reduced to a level where realistic financial reporting and planning could begin. In December 1994, at the urgent request of several seminary presidents, the task force agreed to develop a business plan for the seminary system. Another consulting firm was engaged to assist in the process, which included the development of a computerized financial model, very similar to the one previously designed by Cambridge Associates and rejected by the seminaries.

This new financial model, when developed, was hailed by the presidents as a genuine help to their individual operations and a major breakthrough in actually understanding the finances of the other schools and being able to make accurate comparisons among the schools. They predicted that it would help the seminaries within clusters to put informal pressure on one another to contain costs. Since its implementation, the presidents and the financial officers have been active in proposing refinements for the model and increasingly willing to input realistic rather than simply hopeful assumptions about enrollment and income. They have requested that the Division for Ministry update and run the system-wide model and report results more frequently than originally planned.

There are many ways to explain the different responses to these two attempts to utilize the same research tool. Seminary personnel were more directly involved in designing the new computerized financial model, resulting in a product that was a better fit and easier to use. Seminary finance offices were better equipped and staffed for computer technology by 1995. More significant, however, were these four facts:

- The seminaries were looking for and asking for this kind of information and capacity by the end of 1994.

- It came at a time when the seminaries were not experiencing acute financial crises, but were concerned about chronic patterns of underfunding.
- The anxiety that the church would use the information to force closure or merger of seminaries had diminished.
- A modicum of trust had been established between the seminaries and the church as represented by the task force and the Division for Ministry.

6. What We Learned

The early work of Cambridge Associates failed to meet our specific objectives. The failure was not the fault of the competent and committed consultants whose donated services to the project eventually amounted to more than \$40,000 over the \$82,000 we had contracted to pay in fees. While it did not function as we had envisioned, the equilibrium study did contribute significantly to the overall study.

1) Despite their resistance to Cambridge Associates, the seminaries learned from their principles of financial equilibrium and made local decisions in line with the consultants' recommendations.

2) The task force gradually learned that we were most effective when the information we provided or questions we raised became catalytic for the seminaries resolving issues and taking actions on their own. We were less successful when we assumed that research was a tool to help us figure out and impose remedies.

3) Cambridge Associates, rather than the task force, became the focus of the seminaries' anxiety and anger. This allowed time for more positive relationships to develop with the task force. We were extended a period of grace while we learned from the costly misstep of launching into such threatening research prematurely.

4) As a result of the analysis and projections by Cambridge Associates, the task force itself was convinced that the long-term financial viability of the seminaries was in serious jeopardy and that profound changes would be required to correct the trends, changes that the seminaries were ill equipped to make as individual institutions. This conviction gave the task force confidence that its work of research, planning, and action was worth doing. These issues would not resolve themselves. An intervention of some kind was needed and, if done right, could be helpful.

C. Building an Understanding of the Basic Issues

Whether the study was to be research-oriented or not, during the early years of the study the task force members necessarily gave considerable attention to informing themselves about the seminaries, theological education in general, current ministry trends, broader societal issues, and the politics and mission priorities of the newly organized ELCA. The methods employed here were relatively straight-forward, inexpensive, and effective.

1. Reading the Literature

At its first meeting the task force agreed to hold itself accountable for reading three books in common each year, one in advance of each task force meeting. A task force member reported on the assigned reading and led a group discussion. Readings included most of the monographs on theological education commissioned by Lilly Endowment over the previous fifteen years, other studies of theological education, including previous Lutheran studies and those of other denominations, books on multicultural and feminist issues in theological education, societal trends, and pedagogy. Task force members submitted articles they found interesting for others to read. Staff circulated a constant barrage of articles and reports relevant to the study and its reception in the church. Task force members were put on the mailing lists of all the seminaries so that they received alumnae/i bulletins, financial solicitations, board reports, letters from the presidents, etc.

The task force read a lot. Not all the material had direct bearing on its deliberations. The literature on theological education, for the most part, focused on issues related to the internal operations of the seminaries: curriculum and integration among theological disciplines. While these were not issues we were authorized to address directly, knowledge of them increased the overall confidence and credibility of the task force.

2. Learning about the Schools

At the first meeting each task force member agreed to become an expert on one seminary. Most had some natural connection with at least one seminary on which to build. Some were members of seminary faculties or boards. Others were alumni. In one case where the assigned member was not intimately acquainted with the school, she actually traveled to the school and spent several days in residence in order to become more knowledgeable. The intent of these assignments was not advocacy for a specific seminary, but a relationship that would provide a window through which the task force could gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of the school's history, values, and ethos. This person was to provide each school with a clear point of access to the task force and the study process. We hoped that these relationships would reassure the seminaries that their particularity was taken seriously by the task force.

3. Interviewing the Presidents

Between November 1990 and July 1991 the task force interviewed each of the seminary presidents individually in confidential, ninety-minute sessions. The president had an opportunity to tell the task force anything he felt we should know about his school. Each presentation was followed by a very frank and open question and response session between the task force and the president. The task force agreed in advance on the questions that would be raised. We asked sometimes pointed questions about seminary programs, ecumenical consortia, extension centers, and areas of possible specialization. We also asked the presidents for their candid evaluation of our work to date and chances of succeeding. We invited their advice on how to proceed. We kept confidential records of these conversations.

While the director knew the presidents and had already conducted a series of individual interviews for the Phase One Report with those in office at that time, this was really the first chance for the task force to get a sense of who the presidents were, and vice versa. The highly confidential nature of these interviews allowed the presidents to speak freely without fear of being quoted back home. The task force was impressed with the level of churchmanship the presidents displayed. They encouraged us to make tough decisions and to be willing to take the inevitable resistance and anger. For the most part they hoped that radical changes would happen somewhere other than in their own backyards. Some also said that they would be willing to make sacrifices for the good of the church, but we would have to make the decisions. In public, each president would have to advocate for the seminary he had been called to lead and uphold.

4. Listening to Voices in the Church

Through March 1991, the task force was primarily in a listening mode. We were still gathering basic information, shaping the questions, orienting ourselves to the issues, getting to know the players, and acquainting ourselves with their perspectives. We asked many groups with interests in theological education to put the study on their agendas of the regular meetings or include it as a topic for interest groups at larger events. We sent the director or members of the task force to listen to the concerns of various groups and make formal written reports back to the task force. A few of the more than fifteen groups consulted at this early stage were: ELCA continuing education center directors, the Specialized Pastoral Care Steering Committee, seminary internship directors, multicultural seminary faculty and churchwide staff, Lutheran Women in Theological Studies, the Diaspora (Lutherans at non-ELCA seminaries in the Northeast). We held an open convocation for churchwide staff at the Lutheran Center and set up individual consultations with each churchwide unit.

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a. Consultations Initiated by the Task Force. Several key churchwide staff were invited by the task force to provide relevant information from their areas of expertise and to share their hopes for the future of theological education.

- We received from the ELCA's own research staff a comprehensive presentation and written report on demographic trends in the United States and the world, which we used in our analysis of the context for theological education in each of our major printed reports (1991, 1993, 1995).
- We invited the director of the ELCA Study of Ministry (1988-1993) to join the task force at each meeting. The Ministry Study was to make recommendations about basic understandings of ministry and the forms of ministry to be authorized in the newly formed ELCA. It was critical for their work and ours that the eventual system of theological education that emerged from our study was able to prepare and support the varieties of lay and ordained ministry envisioned in theirs.
- Early collaboration with candidacy staff in the Division for Ministry informed the task force about the role of the candidacy process in the life of seminarians before and throughout the theological education process. These regular consultations developed a relationship that allowed for ongoing collaboration in the development recommendations that affected the candidacy process.
- The single most influential visitor to the task force was Malcolm Minnick, Executive Director of the ELCA Division for Outreach, in July 1990. The group wanted the study to be mission-driven. Minnick helped give shape to that intent by laying out the mission directions of the new church. He made it clear that theological education was going to have to expand and become more flexible and adaptable to prepare the variety of leaders needed for mission in a multicultural society. He described the work of his division with congregations in transition. He predicted that 1,000 of these congregations would have to close or find alternative pastoral services within the decade. His direct use of faith language reinforced and refreshed the commitment of the task force to serve God's mission through this study, not just solve political and financial conundrums.

b. Consultations Initiated by the Seminaries. The task force also benefited significantly from major consultations hosted by the seminaries as they explored their own relationships and responsibilities in the new Lutheran church. The seminaries were "paired" coming into the ELCA, and these pairs of seminaries were given responsibility for serving the combined territory of their supporting synods. This arrangement raised expectations in parts of the church where no Lutheran seminary was located that theological education would become more accessible to them.

Two seminary pairs, using funds from Lilly Endowment grants not directly related to the study, held major consultations with their constituencies in the under-served areas. Division for Ministry staff and task force representatives were invited to participate so that these consultations would be integrated into the larger planning process of the study. In this way the seminaries both respected the role of the task force and sought to influence the outcome of the study.

- **A Consultation on Mission and Theological Education in the Southwest** (January 30-February 1, 1991) was sponsored by the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque. It brought representatives of the ELCA Division for Ministry, the Division for Outreach, and the Commission for Multicultural Ministries together with people from the two seminaries and their jointly owned extension program in Austin, Texas; from the Texas Lutheran College and the regional continuing education centers; bishops of all the synods; and local pastors and lay people representing the multicultural convergence in the Southwest. The purpose was to understand the region and its needs for theological education for mission. Three clear conclusions emerged:
 - 1) maintain the approved M.Div. program at the extension site in Austin;
 - 2) coordinate continuing education using local resources to orient and retool pastors for mission in this region; and
 - 3) provide community-based programs of theological education to prepare indigenous lay leaders for service.

- **A Consultation on Theological Education in the Northwest** (Seattle, January 1992) was sponsored by Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (PLTS) in Berkeley, California. It brought together a mix of persons similar to those who attended the Southwestern consultation and came to similar conclusions.
 - 1) The strongest need was for improved continuing education and lay education geared especially to this region. The consultation advised that this need could best be met by coordinating resources already existing in the territory and bringing in additional resources from the seminaries as needed.
 - 2) Also desired, but not of chief importance, were options for candidates for rostered ministry to stay in the region while they completed at least part of their course work toward academic theological degrees at the two seminaries.

5. Learning through Report and Response

After the initial information gathering stage, the task force learned primarily by report and response. This is sometimes called the “single document method.” As a group we reached a certain level of understanding and sense of direction from our discussion of the information we were gathering through reading and consultations with others. We formulated our developing consensus into documents and reports, and put them out for response primarily with leadership groups in the church and with groups with special interest or experience in the area of theological education. We determined early that the level of sophistication and specialized knowledge this study required was beyond the competence and interest of average congregational members and most pastors.

After distributing our reports, we met with selected individuals and groups to hear their criticisms, refinements, and alternative proposals. Again, we primarily utilized in-place meetings of various groups, rather than holding open hearings to which any interested person might travel. In these consultations the director or task force members presented the report and recorded responses on a standardized form which was then shared with the whole task force. Based on these responses, we rethought issues, revised documents, and reissued them for further discussion until we got it right. This was the basic process followed with the Phase One Report (above), with the development of a statement of purpose and list of priorities (or eventually imperatives) in theological education, and with each of the following written reports:

- *Resource for Discussion* (September 1991). This document was the basis of consultations with boards, faculties, students on all eight seminary campuses, and forty-five additional meetings through the spring of 1992. At the request of the bishops, *Resource for Discussion* was sent to all 11,000 ELCA congregations, in the only every-member mailing related to the study. Only 104 congregations returned the response form.
- *Preliminary Report* to the 1993 Churchwide Assembly. Sections of this report were shared with a special meeting of seminary presidents and board chairs and with an all-seminary faculty conference, and revised before public release of what was called the *Provisional Report*.
- *Provisional Report* to the 1993 Assembly. This interim document was circulated widely and discussed with key decision-making groups (seminary and Division for Ministry boards, ELCA Church Council, Conference of Bishops, etc.) Proposals were revised and formal recommendations formulated to incorporate what we learned from responses.

- *Report to the 1993 Assembly*. This report was released in February for discussion prior to the August Assembly, which took formal action on its recommendations.
- *A New Look at Funding*. This study document was issued in February 1994. Seminary boards and synod councils were specifically invited to discuss and respond using a response form. Staff and task force members visited fifteen synods personally. In all, forty synods participated.
- *Faithful Leaders for a Changing World: Report to the 1995 Churchwide Assembly*, issued in March 1995. This was the final report of the task force.

We often characterized this circular pattern of report-response-revise as our primary research method. Indeed it was the chief way in which we learned. We had to clarify our own thoughts well enough to formulate a common document and then listen carefully to the wisdom of others. This intensive consultation process, which became such a dominant pattern of the study, will be taken up again more reflectively and critically in the sections on planning and action.

D. Research Related to the Business Plan

After all the basic proposals of the study had been agreed to and final recommendations formulated, the presidents asked the task force to initiate a process by which staff and outside consultants would develop a business plan for the implementation of the study's proposals. This business planning process involved three major research components:

- The design and compilation of data in a comprehensive information system about all aspects of seminary program, personnel, resources, facilities;
- Market research testing opinions of constituencies toward the seminaries and new directions set by the study; and
- A computerized financial model including the eight seminaries, three clusters, and the system as a whole.

Clearly the most substantial and costly research came after the formal planning and decision stages of the study were completed. These projects came at the request of the seminaries and were funded in part by them. The purpose of this research was not to influence decisions about basic directions, but to ensure wise decisions about implementation of directions already set.

E. What We Learned

- Research is more likely to be received and used when it comes at the request of those who are faced with the need to change.
- Those who will be affected by the research need to be included in defining research goals and consulted about methodology.
- Even the best research can be discredited, and will be, if it is being used to coerce unwelcome change.
- Timing is critical: the most effective research comes at the point when the need for change is accepted as desirable, necessary, or inevitable.
- Access to reliable, relevant research data at the right time gives people the tools and confidence they need to move beyond anxiety to action.

III. Planning

The heart of the Program of Research, Planning, and Action was a strategic planning process. Research, of course, was needed to inform the environmental analysis, to provide planners with accurate data, and to test proposed strategies. Decision and action were integrated into the planning process, although the real decision makers for the most part were outside of the task force. What the task force specifically managed was a process of planning for an ELCA system of theological education that could meet new mission challenges, be sustained financially, and stay appropriately accountable to the church.

This section reflects on the processes the task force used as it developed the following five components of its strategic plan:

- A. A Statement of Purpose
- B. A Contextual Analysis
- C. Goal Statements or Imperatives
- D. A Vision Statement
- E. Proposed Strategies

A. Purpose

The task force began working on the first plan component, a statement of purpose, at its second meeting in February 1990. It was conceptually difficult for the group to clarify the purposes of theological education and then put in some kind of order. In a brainstorming mode, we quickly bogged down in the confusion between ultimate purposes, like glorifying God, and more concrete and immediate purposes, like preparing leaders for the church. We wanted to make the purpose statement simple and clear without prematurely reducing the multiple dimensions of theological education to a single purpose that excluded or made nonessential other activities traditionally associated with theological education.

We could see that developing a statement of purpose, far from being a safe and self-evident starting point, would be an occasion that forced members of the task force to clarify their own assumptions and values and to come to some fundamental understandings about the scope and focus of our study. Would theological education for laity be subordinated to preparation for ordained ministry? Was theological education identical with seminary education? Is theological research part of the purpose of theological education, or a happy by-product? The stakes were high. The task force realized that whatever we said about purpose in our first public document would be closely scrutinized and would have political implications.

We found it useful to postpone the attempt to develop a prescriptive definition of the purpose or purposes of theological education, and to focus first on developing a simple, descriptive list of what seminaries are and do. The list quickly filled a page. We shared the list with the seminary presidents at their April 1990 meeting so they could add any aspects of seminary activity that we had overlooked. The presidents engaged in a heated discussion about the list and read into it clues to the values and hidden agendas of the task force. We were right about the political potential of even such a presumably innocuous, descriptive list, let alone a statement of purpose.

We agreed to begin our formal deliberations on a statement of purpose by first reviewing what already existed in the purpose and mission statements of the ELCA seminaries, the 1986 Report of the Consultation on Theological Education to the Committee for a New Lutheran Church, and the ELCA Constitution. A subgroup was appointed to work on the purpose statement between meetings. On behalf of that group, Martha Stortz developed a paper on the purpose of theological education which analyzed these documents and also helpfully identified for the task force levels of purpose found in these documents:

- 1) Ultimate purpose: to “serve God and the church by advancing the mission of the Gospel in the world.”
- 2) Proximate purposes: ways of implementing the ultimate purpose, some of which relate to the church, others to a specific institution.
 - a. Ecclesial purposes include education and scholarship for the sake of the church.
 - b. Institutional purposes define distinctive emphases or approaches of the school in fulfilling its mission, e.g., focus on rural ministry, a particular theological tradition, etc.

At the third meeting in July 1990, the task force developed a working draft of a “Statement of Purpose for Theological Education in the ELCA.” We were helped by Martha Stortz’s paper and our previous work identifying what

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seminaries are and do. In order to move the conversations toward a conclusion the chair asked Beverly Allert to prepare a short draft of a purpose statement. After further debate the following draft was adopted:

The purpose of theological education is to serve the mission of the church: "The Church is a people created by God in Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit called and sent to bear witness to God's creative, redeeming, and sanctifying activity in the world." (ELCA Constitution 4.01)

Thus theological education is to be a lifelong process and priority for the whole people of God. It is broad: homes, congregations, schools, colleges, seminaries and universities.

One of the ways the ELCA fulfills this purpose is by providing a system of theological education which equips people who:

1. know and believe the Biblical message as understood in the creeds and the Lutheran confessions;
2. witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ;
3. appreciate the various appropriations of the Gospel by diverse cultures around the world and across the centuries; and
4. help all the baptized, especially through the means of grace in the congregations of this church, to apply that Gospel in their own daily lives of witness and service to the world.

The task force presented the draft of the purpose statement for response to the seminary personnel and bishops at the Annual Consultation on Theological Education in November 1990. After proposed revisions were incorporated, the statement was released for broader circulation and response over the next two years. Several improvements were incorporated into the purpose statement as it appeared in the report to the 1993 Assembly. Because it was not formally voted on by the Churchwide Assembly, but received with the rest of the report, the task force was free to modify it again slightly for the 1995 report:

The purpose of theological education is to foster faithful and informed discourse on God's saving activity in the world, and to equip lay and ordained leaders who, by the power of the Holy Spirit and through the gifts of grace,

1. Know and believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures and proclaimed in the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran confessions;
2. Witness to the Gospel by word and deed;

3. Reflect theologically on the mission of God's people in a pluralistic and secularized society;
4. Understand and creatively appropriate the various expressions of the Gospel by diverse cultures across the centuries and around the world; and
5. Empower all the baptized of this church to express the Gospel in their daily lives of witness and service to the world.

In the development and adoption of this purpose statement, several formative decisions were made about the nature of the study and directions for theological education in the ELCA. Through the discussion of the purpose of theological education within the task force and consultation with over fifty groups in the course of the next two years, a consensus was reached that the study would:

- Balance mission and Lutheran identity, with the accent on mission;
- Preserve the traditional dual purposes of theological reflection and leadership development, with a heavy accent on leadership development;
- Focus on educational outcomes: the qualities we need in our leaders;
- Highlight the variety of lay ministries in addition to the ordained;
- Extend its scope to include providers of theological education beyond seminaries;
- Serve the whole people of God; and
- Not lead off with structural or financial issues, but treat these as means toward the ends defined in the purpose statement.

All these points seem self-evident now, but none of them was clear at the beginning of the study. Each was disputed and resolved within the task force and among our several constituencies. The purpose statement remained a reference point that set directions for the task force in many ways. The carefully nuanced points packed in traditional-sounding phrases of the purpose statement were lost on many beyond those most intensely involved. After the initial text was set, it received far less attention in the seminaries than the *imperatives* that were developed subsequently.

B. Contextual Analysis and Implications for Theological Education

The task force needed to describe the context for which the seminaries would prepare leaders and in which the seminaries themselves would function as institutions. The context statement was presented in outline form in the 1991 document *Resource for Discussion* and then updated and expanded for the *Report to the 1993 Assembly*. A copy of the 1993 context statement was included in the appendix of the final report in 1995.

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1. Analysis

The task force did not conduct or commission original research for its environmental analysis, but pulled together relevant research conducted by others. We included data on demographic trends, global interdependence, economic factors, communication technology, cultural pluralism, and the ecology of education as they affected ministry and theological education.

The world, as presented in the context statement, was a place of “rapid change and dizzying diversity.” It was clear from the analysis that growth was happening among populations and in parts of the country where Lutheranism was not strong. Other religions were growing faster than the Christian church, but no group faster than the unchurched. Economic indicators were not positive either for the survival of a large and growing number of small congregations or for the expansion of the budgets of mainline denominations. The projected transfer of tremendous wealth through philanthropy was noted. Cultural pluralism was expected to increase and present seminaries with practical and philosophical challenges. Patterns of American religious life that encouraged general knowledge of the Bible and respect for Christian values were in decline. Advances in communication technology offered both the promise of greater access and the threat of increased depersonalization.

Our contextual analysis was generally regarded as accurate, relevant, and helpful. The Study of Ministry Task Force depended heavily upon this statement in the development of its own, and for a period of time considered simply referencing our statement.

2. Implications

When we considered the overall purpose of theological education in light of our analysis of the contemporary context, it was clear to the task force that to be faithful to Christ’s mission in the twenty-first century those who provide theological education were going to need to make some profound educational and structural changes. In its 1991 document *Resource for Discussion*, the task force began to identify what some of those changes might be and to lay out alternatives for debate and discussion. One set of alternatives had to do with changes in the sequence of the M.Div. program. Another proposed a variety of ways of restructuring, moving, or merging seminaries in order to more effectively meet the contemporary challenges.

In the 1991 *Resource* and throughout the study, the task force had recurring difficulties in communicating clearly to others the connections between our proposals for change and the challenges which we saw as implicit in the purpose statement and the changing societal and ecclesiastical context. We never did succeed in naming the problem in a way that made our solutions obvious or compelling. We seemed to be making assumptions about the connection between the changes in the context and the need for change in theological education that others either could not follow, did not share, or resisted because of vested interests.

Because the *Resource for Discussion* had been criticized for not being clear about the relationship between the contemporary mission challenges and our proposed strategies, in the *Report to the 1993 Assembly* the task force included a transitional section called “Implications of the Context for Theological Education.” In it we tried to make the connections between our description of the context, which seemed to be generally accepted, and the changes we were about to propose to address that context. The text reads,

This church seeks both to retain its distinctive theological approach and to share the radical gospel message with people who have no cultural affinity to this church or in many cases to any church. It seeks to reach out across perceived barriers of race and class, of education and status. It seeks to establish new congregations in areas of growing populations and to maintain and extend sound Lutheran ministries in spite of declining population and economic base. It seeks to grow, not only in the size and diversity of its membership, but also in the spiritual vitality, theological depth, and faithful ministry of its members.

Such a mission requires sustained theological reflection on the distinctiveness of Christ in a predominantly secular culture in which many faiths coexist. The contributions of the Lutheran theological tradition need to be reinterpreted for the present context.

Such a radical mission approach requires a very strong, diverse, and mission-oriented ministry. It has implications for the very shape and forms of ministry. In addition to full time ordained pastoral leaders, there has to be more place for and attention to indigenous or local leaders, unpaid or bi-vocational leaders, laity exercising their ministries at home and at work, and a variety of lay and ordained leaders currently performing specialized ministries in the congregation, institutions, and in the larger society. Such an approach is open to new forms of ministry developing to meet mission needs.

We went on to say, “ELCA seminaries are not presently constituted to address the new variety of leadership needs effectively and efficiently.” Eight relatively small schools working independently with limited resources, each focused on preparation of pastors in residential programs, did not have the flexibility or diversity needed to prepare and sustain the new spectrum of ministerial leaders in all the locations they needed to be. These schools would need to turn themselves inside-out and some might have to die to make room for some different kinds of schools.

C. Goal Statements or Imperatives

A list of ten priorities was the task force's earliest attempt to bridge the gap between challenge (purpose and context) and solution (proposals). If an ELCA theological education system sought to fulfill its purpose in contemporary society, as described in the purpose and context statements, what would it have to do differently? What were the issues or concerns to which it would have to give priority attention in the near future? The task force proposed ten priorities, ranging from renewed excellence in the classical disciplines to new forms of extension education for laity.

1. Process of Developing the Imperatives

As director, I wrote the initial text of the priorities in the course of drafting the 1991 *Resource for Discussion*. The task force participated fully in reshaping and editing this document between May and August 1991, through individual written responses to the draft and several line-by-line editorial sessions by conference call and in person. A text of the *Resource* including the *Ten Priorities* was approved by the task force in August for publication in September 1991.

The *Ten Priorities* received much positive attention in the intense period of consultation from the fall of 1991 through the drafting of the *Report to the 1993 Assembly* in late 1992. The director or task force members led consultations on the priorities in more than fifty groups, including seminary faculties, boards, presidents, deans, bishops, churchwide staff, the Division for Ministry board, and multicultural communities. Every pastor and congregation received a copy of the priorities in the *Resource for Discussion* and had opportunity to comment on them in the attached response form.

In these consultations, there was continual confusion about the meaning of the word *priority* and resistance to the idea of having so many priorities. There was a natural inclination for people to want to *prioritize* the priorities or list them in *priority* order. On such lists the activities most closely related to the traditional work of the seminaries inevitably were among the top priorities, while new responsibilities for lay education or continuing education dropped into the optional zone, resulting in very little need to change. While the task force acknowledged that the ten priorities were not all of the same order or of equal importance, it was emphatic that all ten had to be worked on within an ELCA system of theological education that was intent on fulfilling its purpose in the new context. Eventually the task force dropped the word *priority* and renamed these ten areas needing increased attention the *imperatives*.

The descriptive paragraphs that accompanied each imperative underwent countless revisions with exacting attention to nuance. In the end they were longer and more complex than we would have liked for easy communication, but they were unambiguous and the many partners who had contributed improvements could see their "tracks" in the final product.

When the time for consultation was almost over and almost everyone had their say, Bishop Richard Bansemer of Virginia proposed a new imperative:

mission. This eleventh-hour addition occurred during a presentation by the task force to the Conference of Bishops in November 1992. While the task force felt that the whole report and all the imperatives were mission-related, even mission-driven, the bishop said that if mission was everywhere, then it was nowhere. He could not support the whole report unless *Evangelism* or *Mission Outreach* was added as a discrete imperative. At our best, the task force was more concerned about getting the job done than with having our own way. We certainly were not going to hold out for a round number. We added a *Mission Outreach* imperative on the spot.

2. The Content of the Imperatives

The final list of imperatives came to eleven. Shorthand descriptions are provided here.

1. **Depth in the Faith:** Spiritual and theological depth; faith rooted in Scripture and a Lutheran understanding of the Gospel, sustained by a disciplined devotional life.
2. **Mission Outreach:** The capacity to share the faith with those who have not heard or believed and to equip others for mission outreach.
3. **Practical Congregational Needs:** Practical congregational skills for leadership in preaching, teaching, stewardship, evangelism, administration, community building, etc.
4. **Adaptation for Cultures and Contexts:** Sensitivity to the cultures of those one serves and the ability to adapt to ministry situations.
5. **African American, Asian, Hispanic, American Indian, Alaska Native, and Arab American Candidates:** Identification and preparation of multicultural candidates for ministry in ways congruent with their cultural backgrounds.
6. **Indigenous Lay Leaders:** Flexible, accessible forms of theological education that equip laity for leadership in the church.
7. **Life-Long Learning:** Expanded continuing education opportunities that equip and support lay and ordained ministers for service in a changing world throughout their lives.
8. **Ministry in Daily Life:** Ability to help church members connect their faith with their daily lives in the workplace, in relationships, and in the wider society; and flexible, accessible forms of theological education to equip laity for daily life ministry.

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9. **Scholarly Discourse and Reflection:** Support for theological centers which foster theological research and discourse and prepare future scholars and teachers for the church.

10. **Life Circumstances of Candidates:** Options for training that meet the diverse needs of those preparing for ministry who differ in age, gifts, education, ability to relocate, experience of the church, etc.

11. **Ecumenical Interdependence:** Cooperative relationships with non-Lutheran institutions that promote ecumenical, inter-faith, and global understanding.

3. Acceptance of the Imperatives

Broad consensus developed around these eleven imperatives. They were formally adopted by the 1993 Churchwide Assembly. The Division for Ministry was directed to report on the progress of the seminaries in addressing the eleven imperatives at the 1995 and 1997 assemblies. More important, the seminaries owned the imperatives and within a couple of years had incorporated them into their respective long range planning documents. Even people who were opposed to the work of the task force in general or critical of the proposals coming out of it were in favor of the imperatives. People who could not recall exactly what the imperatives said, were loyal to them. Subsequent proposals coming out of the study could only be sold to the extent that they were related to the imperatives or had a role in fulfilling them.

D. Vision Statement

The vision statement that first appeared in the *Report to the 1993 Assembly* is one more example of the struggle of the task force to clearly link their politically sensitive conclusions about structural changes in the seminaries to the broadly supported purpose of preparing leaders for mission in a changing context. It seemed important at the time to tie the educational and structural ideas together in a single sentence:

We envision the preparation of a wide variety of leaders, grounded in scripture and the Lutheran confessional tradition and equipped for the church's mission in a rapidly changing environment, made possible through the redeployment of resources in an interdependent network of theological education providers.

This statement was devised by the task force after the major proposals had already been formulated and were in various stages of discussion and acceptance. So it was more of a summary statement, filling a structural function in the 1993 report than it was a visionary breakthrough.

In 1995, long after the vision statement and the various proposals had gone forward and the issue was how to communicate this new theological education network to the church at large, this statement underwent significant editorial revisions in which the presidents and others participated. Eventually, after the structural changes had been agreed to and their relation to the missional goals generally accepted, the vision could be divided into two sentences:

The ELCA theological education network will prepare a wide variety of leaders grounded in scripture, the Lutheran confessional tradition, current theological methods and equipped for God's mission through the Church in a rapidly changing environment. This education will be made possible through the identification, cultivation, and redeployment of resources in an interdependent network of theological education providers.

The vision statement never gained the common currency that the eleven imperatives enjoyed. As the plan unfolded, however, and strategies began to be implemented, the vision statement accurately described what was taking place. It became useful to point out that the developing alliances and experimental distance learning initiatives were fulfilling a shared vision that had emerged from a collaborative process and had official standing.

E. Strategy Development

The task force developed increasingly effective processes for identifying and fleshing out possible strategies to fulfill the vision and the imperatives. These general processes are described in this section. How five of these strategies were developed and gained acceptance will be described more fully in Part Two of this document.

1. The Strategies

The following strategies for fulfilling the vision and the imperatives were proposed, approved, and in some cases partially implemented in the course of the study.

- **Ecclesial Readiness.** Standards were revised and the ELCA candidacy process was amended to assure that candidates did not come to seminary before they were ready.
- **Academic Readiness.** Common admission standards were agreed to by the ELCA seminaries.

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- **First-Call Theological Education.** A three-year, structured program of continuing education was required of all newly rostered ELCA pastors and lay leaders. All synods designed and implemented programs according to approved churchwide standards.
- **Distance Learning.** Distance learning was endorsed and plans for coordination of educational technology explored.
- **Clustering.** The eight seminaries formed three clusters to plan and commit resources jointly toward fulfilling the vision and imperatives on their combined territories.
- **Theological Education Coordinating Committee.** A structure was created as an ongoing locus of planning and cooperation among the three clusters and other providers of theological education.
- **Funding.** The priority of theological education for the denomination was formally asserted, churchwide and synodical grants were stabilized, seminary development efforts were encouraged, and the Division for Ministry was directed to prepare a business plan and further proposals for increasing the ELCA's financial support to the seminaries.

2. Creating a Framework for Developing Strategy Proposals

When the task force published the *Resource for Discussion* in September 1991, it presented for wide response several foundational components: the purpose statement, environmental analysis, vision and priorities. It also sought to generate a churchwide discussion about possible strategies to fulfill the challenges of these broad directional statements.

Discussion of two confidential papers prepared for the task force shaped the task force's thinking about possible strategies at this early stage. Paul Rorem wrote the paper on "Sequences of Experiences in Preparation for Ordination," which laid out for the first time the idea extending M.Div. education through the addition of pre-seminary and post-seminary components. Phyllis Anderson wrote the paper on "Patterns of Deployment of Theological Education Resources," which categorized several options for adjusting funding patterns, adjusting number and location of seminaries, and adjusting programmatic offerings of the seminaries.

To get the conversation going about possible educational and structural strategies, the task force laid out the current challenges in theological education and then proposed a range of two or three possible alternatives for addressing them. We presented moving, closing, changing the focus of seminaries as ideas for discussion. We suggested various plans for expanding the M.Div. program either at the beginning or at the end. Our intent was to get

people's attention by giving them something concrete to react to without actually making a serious proposal or even tipping the hand of the task force. At that point and for some time to come, the task force did not have a plan in hand to tip. These were not even trial balloons; just abstract possibilities. We hoped these ideas would generate support from some people and spur others to offer constructive critiques and counter-proposals.

In my estimation, it was a mistake to begin proposing possible strategies so soon. We should have used this first public forum simply to lay out the problems clearly and build a consensus around the need for change. We were concerned about setting a pessimistic tone and eager to avoid harming the seminaries and their development efforts by painting a negative or hopeless image of their current situation. Our subsequent efforts to effect change were hampered by this initial failure to establish clearly what it was we were attempting to fix and what would be the consequences of continuing on the present trajectory.

Despite its limitations, *Resource for Discussion* did create a framework for talking about complex issues in theological education. Perhaps because it was a bit provocative, it succeeded in getting a conversation going. We may have convinced those in the church who were looking for bold change that we were at least entertaining bold possibilities, whether or not we had the power to carry them out. We significantly underestimated, however, the level of anxiety and suspicion these options would generate in the seminary communities and among their constituencies. These partners were not able to participate in a reasoned discussion of the options presented; nor did they feel empowered to offer counter-proposals. Those seminaries most fearful of being closed or somehow diminished read between the lines signs that the task force indeed intended them harm. In some cases we never fully recovered from this early impression. Because it was a false impression, we never fully appreciated the depths or origins of the mistrust directed toward us from some corners.

The *Resource for Discussion* was precisely that: a document drafted and circulated specifically to create conversation and response. It worked fairly well with most constituencies as a way to refine and gain consensus on the statement of purpose, vision, and the imperatives. When it came to developing strategies to fulfill the purpose, vision, and imperatives, this kind of consultation proved less satisfactory. Those who were going to be affected by these strategies would need a larger role in shaping the proposals that were eventually incorporated into the formal documents. We gradually began working more directly with those people in the church and the seminaries who had relevant first-hand experience and who would eventually have to own, champion, and implement any plans we devised.

This method of consultation on texts prepared by the task force was particularly ineffective with faculty. By training and temperament, academics tend to be more critical than constructive. They are the teachers who grade

papers that they could have written better themselves. Faculty respondents tended to critique the language of our documents and what they perceived as philosophical assumptions underlying our proposals, rather than responding to the substance and proposing modifications or alternatives. They had a hard time dealing with the ideas at hand in the terms presented without insisting on their own categories. The faculties did not want to be excluded from deliberation about these matters affecting their life's work, but they resented the time such consultation required.

3. Shaping the Proposals

As we focused more on specific strategies, the task force developed some new patterns of doing our work.

- **Working Groups.** We assigned specific issues or strategies to individual task force members or small working groups. They became the task force experts in their assigned area through specialized reading and consultation with people directly involved. For the November 1991 meeting, the working groups prepared papers for the task force as a whole. In each paper the working groups provided a statement of the issue, rationale for seeking change in this area, questions the task force must resolve in order to make recommendations, practical matters of implementation requiring further research, and partners who should be consulted or drawn into the planning process.
- **Expanded Working Groups.** In some cases these working groups were expanded to include people from outside the task force who were inside the structures we sought to affect. They brought the first-hand knowledge we needed to develop sound strategies and the political savvy we needed to gain a fair hearing and acceptance for these strategies. These expanded working groups met separately from the full task force over a period of a few months to develop particular proposals which were then brought to the task force for consideration. Such working groups were formed to address the following areas: distance learning, first-call theological education, and the theological education coordinating committee. Over the course of the study, three separate groups were formed to tackle the knotty issue of funding.
- **Negotiating Teams.** The task force authorized a subgroup to plan and negotiate directly with the seminary presidents on the most sensitive issues related to number and location of seminaries. In most cases this subgroup comprised the task force chair, the director of the study, and the bishop on the task force. The choice was made by the task force on the basis of perceived credibility with the presidents. It required high

trust from the task force to let the subgroup enter into these power-laden conversations on their behalf. There was always the danger that the subgroup would be co-opted by the presidents. The subgroup had a very delicate task of fairly and accurately interpreting each group to the other. Agreements made in these negotiating sessions were always provisional until affirmed by the task force as a whole.

- **Participatory Conferences.** The task force consulted regularly with various leadership groups and hosted an Annual Consultation on Theological Education. These were occasions for us to gather data and to present and get response to our developing proposals. As we began to work on specific educational strategies, we became aware of the need to develop a more direct working relationship with faculty. At the initiative of one of the seminaries, the task force agreed to sponsor an all-seminary faculty conference in the summer of 1992. Trinity Lutheran Seminary received a grant from Lilly Endowment to underwrite the costs of this conference. The purpose of the conference was to bring faculty together to discuss the specifically educational proposals under development for action at the 1993 Churchwide Assembly. Task force members worked with a faculty committee to plan the conference. The conference itself was presided over by faculty members. The conference was a step in the right direction, but achieved only limited success. It was too late for the faculty to be part of shaping the basic proposals. They again were in the role of responding, even though this time it was up-close and personal.

4. What We Learned

- Establish consensus about the problem before introducing possible solutions.
- Take time to perfect and build consensus around fundamental planning components: context, purpose, imperatives. Everything else depends on these.
- Consistently make the connections between the fundamental plan components and the emerging directions, goals, and strategies.
- Let the vision emerge from the struggle to connect the problems and the solution.
- Advance work between meetings by asking individuals or small groups to develop written documents on specific topics.
- Provide clear assignments and reporting outlines for working groups.
- Include more and more partners in planning as you move toward concrete strategies.
- Don't expect people to implement something they did not plan.

IV. Action

The effectiveness of this Program of Research, Planning, and Action would depend in the final analysis on whether it actually resulted in action. Action requires decision. This section reflects on the approach and processes the task force used in moving its proposals toward decision.

All recommendations to churchwide assemblies were passed by votes exceeding ninety percent. In each case, consensus among the key players was achieved well in advance of putting a recommendation forward. In some cases, proposed changes were put into effect even before a formal decision was reached.

The course of reaching consensus and voting on individual strategies is described in greater detail in Part Two.

A. Evolution in Understanding Who Decides

While the focus on effectiveness remained constant throughout the study, there was a gradual shift toward a less centralized view of who the decision makers were and how the study would actually effect change in the seminaries. In the original proposal for the study and in the minutes of the first meeting, the assumption was that the church (that is, the Division for Ministry, the ELCA Church Council, and The Churchwide Assembly) would be making the definitive decisions that would affect the seminaries and the study would assist the church in that process. Increasingly the decision-making role of the seminaries became more prominent.

Some acknowledgment of the autonomy of the seminaries was implicit in the concern, expressed at the first meeting of the task force, that the results of the study actually be "accepted and implemented." Presumably, even if the church succeeded in being decisive, its recommendations could be rejected or avoided by the schools. Therefore the task force regarded it as essential that the study be of such quality and credibility that its conclusions would be convincing to the seminaries and other constituencies. At this early point in the study, we acknowledged that the effectiveness of the study would not depend solely on the authority of duly constituted ecclesiastical bodies. But we still believed that the integrity of the study process and the soundness of its conclusions could be sufficiently persuasive to effect change.

It is one thing to be concerned about whether the seminaries would accept and implement the church's decisions. It is quite another to view the seminaries as partners in shaping and approving the plans and recommendations that would emerge from the study. Not until after conversations with Lilly Endowment in late 1989 and early 1990 did we begin to change the language of the official documents to reflect the understanding that finally, if there was going to be change, decisions would need to be made by the duly constituted decision-making bodies of several separate entities.

In the design of the study, prepared by staff and refined by the task force at its February 1990 meeting, there are several noticeable changes from previous documents.

1. The Name of the Study

What began as a *Study of Theological Education for Ministry* became a *Program of Research, Planning, and Action for a System of Theological Education for Ministry in the ELCA, 1989-1995*. The new name signaled an important change in the self-understanding of the task force. They would be conducting a program, that is, an ongoing process that included not just research and recommendations, but the actual work of planning, deliberating, and implementing change.

2. The Mandate of the Study

The design document included a statement of the purpose of the study that was missing from earlier documents. It was from this purpose statement, and not from the original proposal approved by the board and the Church Council, that the task force drew what it came to call its "mandate." In its 1991 report, *Resource for Discussion*, and all subsequent reports, the task force said that it was appointed for the following purpose:

- ... to develop in consultation with appropriate partners, a plan for a system of theological education which will
- prepare the leaders needed for the mission challenges facing the ELCA;
 - be sustained financially by the ELCA through a combination of church grants and individual gifts; and
 - be appropriately accountable to the ELCA.

This mandate reflects the growing emphasis on dispersed centers of decision-making and shared responsibilities:

- The task is now defined as "developing a *plan* for a system of theological education," rather than as "assisting the church in making fundamental decisions" as it was described in the original proposal for the study.
- Other partners are now explicitly included in at least a consultative role.
- There is a beginning sense of mutual responsibility and accountability between church and seminaries with regard to program and funding.

In the third Report of the Task Force for the Study of Theological Education to key constituencies (February 1991), the director is quoted as saying, "Finally, it will be ELCA seminary leaders who will implement plans at individual schools based on information generated by the study, recommendations proposed by the task force, and actions taken by the 1993 and 1995 ELCA Churchwide Assemblies."

B. Recognizing and Respecting Appropriate Spheres of Authority

The program would involve many partners with their own spheres of authority. The design document explicitly states,

The program will be conducted in a way that acknowledges, clarifies, and honors the normal spheres of authority of the various decision makers related to theological education in the ELCA.

To underscore that commitment, the design document consistently listed the seminaries along with various expressions of the church among the appropriate planners, actors, and decision-makers.

After wide study and consultation, the task force will make recommendations to decision-making bodies in the *church and seminaries* that will provide the basis for the *church and seminaries* to plan cooperatively and strategically for theological education in this church.

Throughout the study the task force tried to be clear about where decision-making authority on specific proposals resided. It did not always succeed and there was continual tension on that point. The task force had to be reminded from time to time that it had no formal powers of its own, but only proposed recommendations to the board of the Division for Ministry. More substantial and problematic confusion continued throughout the study about the distribution of authority among the seminaries, the synods, and churchwide organization.

1. Who Owns the Seminaries?

The neuralgic question of the number and location of seminaries fueled concern about the appropriate locus of authority for decisions about the deployment of seminaries and their resources. Could the church require one or more seminaries to close or move or change its educational focus? The constitution of the ELCA did not resolve the matter cleanly. All parties were frustrated by continuing ambiguity about who finally owns the seminaries: the church or the boards of the respective schools.

After analyzing the constitutional ambiguities, the board (or at least the Theological Education Committee of the board) and staff of the division in consultation with ELCA legal counsel informally determined to postpone resolving the issue until after the conclusion of the study. They chose not to risk a legal confrontation by testing the authority of the church over the seminaries. Instead, they determined to use the opportunity of the study to work out collaboratively what kind of relationship between church and seminary would fulfill the vision for the future and what kind of constitutional

provisions were needed to support such relationships. Then the constitution of the church and the seminaries could be amended accordingly.

2. Who Controls the Educational Programs of the Seminaries?

Appropriate spheres of authority were clearer in terms of educational programs. Setting broad goals and directions for theological education and standards for rostered ministries was understood to be the proper responsibility of the church, in consultation with the seminaries, while responsibility for choosing faculty and developing curricula belonged to seminary faculty and boards. The study never attempted to prescribe course content or determine curriculum.

C. Taking Formal Action

The formal action of seminary boards was required on matters that we judged to be within the seminaries' appropriate sphere of authority. Often the spheres overlapped. Consequently, on the most sensitive issue of clustering, the board of the Division for Ministry sent to the 1993 Churchwide Assembly for action the recommendation that the ELCA "call upon" the eight seminaries to form three to five clusters according to a timeline that extended from 1994 to 2003. The seminary boards and the board of the Division for Ministry voted individually to approve criteria for clustering proposed by the task force. Each seminary board took formal action to form its particular cluster with other partners. The Division for Ministry in turn evaluated the proposed clusters in relation to the approved criteria and ratified their formation.

Other matters, like first-call theological education and adding an entrance decision to the ELCA candidacy process, were of critical interest to the seminaries, but were not finally within their specific sphere of authority. Seminaries (faculty, boards, and administration) were regularly informed and consulted about developing proposals in these areas and invited to review documents in advance of actions by others. A faculty conference was called to give faculty from all the seminaries the opportunity to understand and discuss these proposals regarding pre- and post-seminary requirements.

Faculty generally acknowledged the problems we were trying to address, but they were critical in many ways of the solutions embodied in our proposals for change. The task force took such advice very seriously and made adjustments to take into account the concerns of faculty. The final decision, however, about the shape of the proposal resided with the task force, and the appropriate sphere of authority for these decisions resided in the church. The Division for Ministry had appropriate authority to act on matters related to the candidacy process, and the ELCA Churchwide Assembly alone could act to establish a churchwide program of first-call theological education involving all rostered leaders and all synods.

It was clear, however, that the candidacy department of the Division for Ministry should not take upon itself to define academic requirements for

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prospective seminarians. That is within the seminaries' sphere of authority. Consequently, the task force drafted a recommendation to the 1993 Churchwide Assembly asking the seminaries to work together on common standards for academic readiness to begin seminary studies. The statement developed by the eight seminary deans has been adopted by each seminary for use in its admissions process. It was ratified by the board of the Division for Ministry, reported by the division to the 1995 Churchwide Assembly, and included in written material produced by the Division for Ministry for prospective candidates.

D. Sequencing Decision-Making

In that famous speech in 1990, Craig Dykstra warned us about the mistake most denominational studies make in scheduling decisions so that seminaries and the denomination have to accept or reject the study's recommendations immediately after they are published.

This schedule precludes extended negotiations and limits opportunities for the kinds of compromise that are built into most serious decision-making Under pressure of time, then, many courses of action that might have been acceptable if they were modified slightly or simply were talked and thought about until they become clearer and more familiar will be rejected. In fact, schedules that require immediate decisions often guarantee that the report and its recommendations will not gain wide acceptance.

Our study went on for six years and did allow time for us to work through issues thoroughly and not rush decisions. The task force itself was committed to full and honest disclosure of issues under discussion and proposals under development, so that objections could be raised and dealt with in advance. It was our goal to surprise no one with our recommendations, but to have them basically agreed to by our primary partners in the seminaries and the church before they came to a formal vote. In fact, we never lost a vote on a recommendation. By the time the vote was taken, the outcome was almost beside the point.

We had the advantage of time more by accident than by design. Two unrelated actions of the Division for Ministry Board happily required us to extend the length of the study and built in some inevitable spacing in the decision-making process.

- **Lengthening the Study.** When staff first proposed the need for a study of theological education to the Division for Ministry Board in March 1988, the recommendation approved by the board called for "the results of the study and the recommendations approved by the board be

presented to the Church Council in 1991," presumably for action by the 1991 Churchwide Assembly. In the fall of 1988, board members expressed concern that the Study of Theological Education should build on the recommendations of the Study of Ministry, also under their purview, which was not scheduled to make its final report until 1993. Consequently, the Study of Theological Education was extended to report at the first opportunity following the 1993 Assembly, which would be 1995.

- **Mid-Study Decision Point.** In March 1989, the board of the Division for Ministry formally approved the proposal for a study that would report in 1995. The task force began meeting in July of that year. The seminary presidents also met that summer in an emergency session to deal with the mounting financial crisis in the seminaries and the beginning of shortfalls in grants from the Division for Ministry. The presidents signed an agreement called the "Statement of Intent to the Seminaries of the ELCA," which the board approved in October. This statement, among other things, bound the seminaries to keep spending under control, not to make any major capital investments or begin any capital campaigns during the duration of the study. But seminary leaders were anxious that this semi-frozen state not extend too long. Already they were concerned that uncertainty about possible recommendations from the task force regarding number and location of seminaries would adversely affect their development efforts and constituency relationships. At the request of the seminary presidents the board agreed at its October 1989 meeting:

To adjust the timetable of the Study of Theological Education to allow for decisions regarding the purpose, structure, number, and location of seminaries by the 1993 Churchwide Assembly, with a further report regarding the implications of the Study of Ministry to be presented to the 1995 Churchwide Assembly.

So, through no deliberate planning on the part of staff or task force, we had the luxury of six years of study, with an interim report and recommendations to be made four years into the study. To our credit, we used the opportunity wisely. The phasing of decision-making between two biennial assemblies proved invaluable for the acceptance of the two most far-reaching recommendations of the study:

- **First-Call Theological Education.** While there was broad popular support for continuing education during the first three years of ministry, there were also questions in many quarters about how it would work

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out in practice and reservations about making it a requirement. We used the 1993 Assembly to get permission for the Division for Ministry to encourage first-call theological education pilot projects in the synods, according to our interim churchwide guidelines. In 1995, when we recommended the requirement for all first-call rostered leaders in all synods, fifty-nine of the sixty-five synods had already initiated the program. The recommendation sailed through.

- **Seminary Clusters.** “Clustering” was our middle-way solution to the number and location question. This strategy linked seminaries in clusters that would plan together for delivery of theological education on their common territory and within a given period of time develop common structures for governance and funding. Seminaries were dubious about the encroachment on their autonomy and many in the church were concerned that the seminaries had been let off the hook and would make only cosmetic changes if any. The opportunity to report to two successive assemblies allowed us to “call upon” the seminaries in 1993 to form clusters of their own choosing and complete certain initial cluster tasks to be reported to the 1995 assembly. The seminaries had the freedom and sufficient time to negotiate their own cluster partners and to sell the idea to their constituencies. At the same time they were held accountable to a churchwide assembly two years later, which was likely to impose more radical measures if the seminary clusters did not progress on schedule. They got the job done.

E. Extending Planning and Decision-Making Beyond the Study

Finally, many of the key actions coming out of the study did not settle disputed issues or force specific changes so much as set in motion structures, processes, and goals for ongoing planning and decision-making after the conclusion of the study.

- Clusters are structures for collaborative planning and deployment of resources. The seminaries in those clusters will make the decisions over time according to goals to which they have formally agreed.
- The Theological Education Coordinating Committee is a structure for collaborative planning and decision-making among the clusters, other partners in theological education and the board of the Division for Ministry.
- The eleven Imperatives set the long-range goals and directions for planning in theological education.
- The development of a business plan for the implementation of the study, endorsed by the 1995 Assembly, ensured that planning would become concrete and result in a case for support for the new, expanded system of theological education in 1997.

F. What We Learned

- Recognize and respect appropriate spheres of authority.
- Where spheres of authority are unclear or overlapping, work with the ambiguity to reach a mutually acceptable goal, rather than spend energy and political capital resolving the power issue.
- Within your sphere of authority, listen to others, but don't be afraid to act.
- Don't press for decisions before partners have time to digest, react to, and refine proposals affecting them.
- If possible, make decisions in steps to reduce anxiety and to allow decision-makers to learn from experience and make appropriate mid-course corrections.
- Building a structure for ongoing decision making may be the most important action you take.

V. The Business Plan

At the eleventh hour the study was expanded to include a business planning phase not anticipated in the original design, timeline, or budget of the study.

A. The Last Annual Consultation

By the time of the last Annual Consultation on Theological Education in November 1994, outcomes of the study were well understood by the seminary leadership even though the final report was yet to be drafted. Seminary development officers had been invited to join seminary presidents, deans, board chairs, and bishops on seminary boards in meeting with task force representatives. The agenda called for them to discuss options for a new formula for the distribution of Division for Ministry grants and to explore the implications of clustering for fund-raising in the seminaries.

At the request of the task force, I had invited an outside consultant for the second day of the consultation. He was asked to present possible strategies and to lead a discussion about development on a cluster-wide basis. Having imposed structural changes on the seminaries, the task force sought to provide some wisdom on ways in which this structure might be used as an asset in fund-raising. Byron Tweeten, President of Growth Design Corporation, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, agreed to lead the session. In fact, he was interested enough in the project that he juggled some other commitments on short notice in order to be present for at least part of the consultation.

Growth Design Corporation is a consulting firm that specializes in resource solutions for not-for-profit agencies. Many of its clients are Lutheran. At the time when we approached Byron Tweeten, his firm was providing regular services to the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and was in

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conversation with two or three other of the Lutheran seminaries. He was aware of our study and enthusiastic about the collaboration we envisioned among the seminaries. His firm had also served as consultants to the ten colleges of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in building a single university system. They had worked with Good Samaritan Homes to strengthen their network. The long-term interest of Growth Design is to develop and serve larger systems of not-for-profit organizations.

B. The Need for a Business Plan

On the first day of the 1994 Consultation on Theological Education with seminary presidents and other leaders, it became clear that there was resistance in the group to moving ahead as planned with the discussion of the funding formula and resource development by clusters. Having been alerted in advance that we might have a problem on our hands, the task force had allowed time on the agenda for participants to raise any major issues or impediments before we proceeded. Four of the eight presidents made formal presentations, three of them from prepared written texts. While there were shades of difference between them, each said that we needed to provide a more concrete implementation plan and a more sophisticated process for determining costs, savings, and revenue streams before handing implementation of the study recommendations over to the clusters. They urged the task force not to decide on a new funding formula or development strategies in isolation from such a comprehensive financial plan.

Having heard these serious cautions, the task force had to figure out what to do with the rest of the meeting we had planned. Task force secretary Charlie Mays is credited with coming up with the winning solution. At his suggestion we agreed to continue with the agenda as planned, with one exception. We would give more than an hour and a half of the first afternoon to allow the group as a whole to discuss the issues raised by the four presidents in the opening session. Furthermore, we invited these four to preside at the special session. They came forward as a panel to present their concerns and field questions from the group. They identified a common need for a business plan and were not interested in debating differences in possible approaches. By the end of the session nearly everyone in the room was convinced we needed a business plan, whether or not they could tell us exactly what a business plan was.

The task force certainly did not know how to prepare a business plan, but it was clear we were going to have to find out or get help. Help came on the second day of this meeting in the form of Byron Tweeten, the consultant we had engaged to lead the discussion about developing resources as clusters. Overnight, task force members briefed him on the turn the meeting had taken the first day. Having interviewed several of the presidents by telephone in preparation for his part in the meeting, he understood their concerns and had

perhaps even helped them to articulate their general anxieties in terms of the need for a business plan.

Byron Tweeten facilitated the second day of the consultation brilliantly. He helped the group define what it needed and begin to envision a way to work together to build a plan that would give us all more clarity and security to move into the new future. He and his firm could help us build a business plan, utilizing their professional expertise in strategic planning, finance, resource development, communication, market research, and group process. By the end of the session with Tweeten, the group was convinced that he was the one to lead us through this next step. Now the rest of the task force had to be convinced.

C. Choosing and Supporting Expert Counsel

It was a considerable risk for the task force members to consider extending the work of the study beyond its official conclusion in 1995 and beyond their life as a task force. We had managed to come a great distance on our own without assistance from professional staff or outside consultants. We were concerned about losing control of a process we had carefully developed over considerable time. We did not want to see the basic directions we had painstakingly set be reconsidered in light of financial exigencies. None of us could be sure whether the seminary people who asked for this additional step were seriously seeking a way to move ahead or an excuse to slow down. Were we going off on a wild goose chase? Had the task force members at the consultation been co-opted by the presidents? Had the presidents been used by the consultant for his own gain?

Within two weeks of the Annual Consultation, Tweeten and I met in a series of high-powered, fast-paced thinking sessions to develop a detailed process for involving a wide circle of leaders inside and outside the seminaries in the creation of a business plan for an ELCA system of theological education. Tweeten presented this planning process to the full task force at its final regular meeting on December 5, 1994. With one dissenting vote (the only one in our history) the task force agreed to authorize the development of a business plan using the planning process Tweeten and I had developed. The task force directed me to engage Growth Design as the consulting firm, assuming a positive response to my reference checks.

The task force also approved a model for funding the effort that included the seminaries, the Division for Ministry, and foundations as partners. I was thrown into a new cycle of seeking major grants from foundations that had supported our earlier efforts.

The task force felt that the language of “business plan” would not be well received in the church culture and substituted the title Programmatic and Financial Planning. The task force included the following recommendation in its final report to the 1995 Churchwide Assembly:

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To affirm the decision of the Division for Ministry and the seminaries regarding the expansion of the Study of Theological Education to include programmatic and financial planning for an ELCA system of theological education; and to request that the Division for Ministry prepare by 1997 a case and strategies of this church's increased financial support of a system of theological education.

The cost estimate for the first phase of the business plan was \$150,000. The Division for Ministry contributed \$40,000; the seminaries \$50,000; Lutheran Brotherhood \$15,000; and Lilly Endowment \$50,000. A second and third phase ensued. By summer of 1996 the total cost of the business planning process had exceeded \$450,000. We financed this ongoing work through an additional grant of \$100,000 from Lilly Endowment; \$50,000 from Lutheran Brotherhood; \$75,000 from the ELCA Strategy Implementation Fund; donated services from Growth Design Corporation; and additional contributions from the Division for Ministry.

D. The Business Planning Process

It took us one and a half years to build the business plan. This very intensive and productive period can be summarized briefly in three phases.

Phase One. The director and Growth Design consultants designed a process for developing the business plan for the implementation of the purpose, vision, imperatives, and strategies of the Study of Theological Education. Together we visited each seminary president and his cabinet to present the plan, to solicit feedback, and to secure ownership. Simultaneously we began working on a comprehensive inventory of seminary resources, programs, personnel, etc., for inclusion in an ELCA Seminary Information System. We also began to design a market research instrument to test the response of our constituencies and potential donors to the new directions that had been set in the study.

Phase Two. With Growth Design counsel, the director enlisted close to fifty persons from inside and outside the seminary system to serve on *ad hoc* action teams to develop strategies and action steps in the following areas:

- A plan management team to oversee the overall planning process.
- Academic and practical programs within and among the seminaries to achieve the missional goals of the study;
- Qualitative assessment of the educational outcomes of the seminary system to measure ongoing progress toward fulfilling the eleven imperatives;
- Financial modeling, utilizing computer technology, to assist in financial planning on the seminary, cluster, and system level;

- Communication of the new developments in theological education in order to attract positive attention and donor support;
- Funding to undergird the emerging ELCA seminary system.

This phase began with a facilitated session of the Plan Management Team and the seminary presidents. This group proposed initial strategies for each action team to consider. The individual action teams began their work in the spring of 1995. They reported their work to one another and to the presidents in a facilitated session including all the action groups in the summer of 1995. By early spring of 1996 the action teams had fleshed out strategies and action steps in each area.

Phase Three. The director and Growth Design counsel wrote the text of the business plan using the planning tools developed in Phase One and the reports of the action teams in Phase Two. The plan included sixty-four items for possible action. Growth Design counsel presented the plan to the February 1996 meeting of the Theological Education Coordinating Committee that endorsed the plan in general, expressed concerns about several proposals, and identified eighteen items as priorities for further development and implementation. In a final facilitated session with the seminary presidents in March 1996, in Naples, Florida, Growth Design counsel led a process to solidify the commitment of the presidents to ongoing planning toward the goals of the ELCA seminary system.

E. Results of the Business Planning Process

As a result of the business planning process the ELCA seminary system gained the following planning tools:

- An information system about the schools that would need to be revised and maintained regularly to be useful.
- A system for converting the eleven imperatives into quantifiable goals.
- A market research report that provides valuable insights about how to gain financial support for the theological education system envisioned by the study.
- A computerized financial model, which has been regularly revised and improved to the point where it is useful for planning at the local, cluster, and system-wide levels.

We also have the beginning of a plan that includes:

- several programmatic strategies for how to fulfill the eleven imperatives;
- several strategies for assessing progress toward fulfilling the imperatives;

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- several strategies for funding the system, including a formula for the distribution of churchwide grants and a new churchwide fund for seminary scholarships; and
- a broad communication strategy to undergird the funding efforts.

Out of the business planning process, we also have a case book that succinctly and attractively presents the achievements of the ELCA seminary system created by the Study of Theological Education and invites support through a variety of channels, including the new Fund for Leaders in Mission. The case book, called *Equipping Leaders for Mission*, was distributed to all voting members and visitors at the 1997 ELCA Churchwide Assembly in response to the 1995 action directing the Division for Ministry to proceed with the business planning process and come to the next assembly with a case and strategies for increasing financial support to the seminary system.

The business plan continues to be used by the Theological Education Coordinating Committee (TECC) as the primary tool for fulfilling its strategic planning function. The plan is revised regularly by staff to reflect progress toward stated goals and reviewed at each meeting of the TECC. As the TECC identifies need for changing goals or new initiatives, these will be incorporated into the plan.

F. Evaluation

Overall, the business planning process accelerated the momentum of the study at a point when it could easily have flagged. The professionalism of the consultants and the effectiveness of the process created excitement and confidence in the directions the study had already established. This process drew in new partners and collaborators with fresh ideas and the ability to generate support for the emerging system. It bridged the gap from planning to action.

It is to the credit of the consulting firm that the consultants respected the planning steps already taken by the task force and affirmed by the seminaries and churchwide leadership groups. The consultants did not seek to change our vision, goals, and initial strategies or to force them into a preconceived model. The business plan built directly on the basic planning elements of the study, but recast them in more concrete terms and added many well thought-out and broadly supported strategies to those already defined in the study.

Because of the incredible pace of this business planning phase, some aspects of the work were not quite on target and have not been consistently maintained or utilized. The development of a vast and complicated ELCA seminary information system is one case in point.

G. What We Learned

- Introducing the right consultants at the right time infuses competence, bolsters confidence, and builds momentum.
- The end of the study is no time to stop researching, planning, and acting. It is an ongoing cycle.
- Moving from imperatives to action takes money.
- Outside consultants do not reduce the work load for staff.

Part Two: Strategies

The section on Planning (Part One, III) describes the general process the task force employed in identifying, fleshing out, and gaining acceptance of strategies to fulfill the purpose, vision, and imperatives they had identified. That section begins with a list of the seven strategies that were included in the plan for theological education that came out of the study. The specific stories of how five of the most significant of these strategies were developed, endorsed, and implemented are told in the sections that follow: pre-seminary readiness, required theological education in the first call, clustering system-wide coordination, funding, and theological education by extension.

I. Improving Readiness of Candidates to Begin Theological Studies

Any serious inquiry or informal conversation about the challenges facing theological education finally concludes that part of the problem lies with the students themselves. Pundits of every age seem to imagine that the ministry candidates of an earlier age were stronger. The argument goes something like this: "There is only so much even the finest theological school can do with the students the church sends."

When the task force tried to explain this problem in its written documents, the faculty members on the task force, who worked directly with these students every day, pleaded for greater understanding of the diversity of students in seminary today and for greater nuance in how they are described. They reminded us that many students coming to seminary are stellar by any gauge. We agreed that we wanted to affirm the diversity of culture, gender, class, vocational experience, and educational background among the new student population. We did not want to fall into the trap of equating diversity with diminished quality and excellence with more young, white males.

We began then to focus on readiness, rather than quality. We described the students as being at uneven points when starting the academic study of theology. We made it our goal to provide structures that would increase the likelihood of students being more evenly prepared before beginning seminary. We sought to establish readiness standards, to impose early checkpoints to test the readiness of individual applicants, and to provide opportunities for those who did not meet the standards to become prepared before they made the break to come to seminary.

Then we consulted with seminary faculty and administrators and with leaders in the synodical candidacy process. Two major consultations dealt with the subject. One was the all-seminary faculty conference in August 1992, initiated and planned by the faculties. Another was a consultation on ministry

hosted by the Division for Ministry in February 1993. Candidacy committee members, with some significant exceptions, favored a revision in the candidacy process that would allow for earlier discernment of readiness. While the seminary representatives generally agreed with the analysis of the problem, many of them argued for a different approach to solving it. They favored strengthening remedial programs in the seminaries. They felt that the seminaries were in a better position than the home congregation or local junior college to address questions of readiness, such as vocational uncertainty or poor writing skills. Deficits in liberal education could be addressed in introductory courses designed to orient students to the academic study of theology.

After listening to the seminary and candidacy personnel, the task force came to the conclusion that it was more prudent to attend to deficits while one was still in the supportive environment of family, employment, and local congregation. Prospective students should resolve major emotional upheavals and financial indebtedness before enrolling in seminary. The task force wanted to discourage adding remedial courses into an already overcrowded seminary curriculum. Students who came ready to learn what seminaries are uniquely prepared to teach would be able to engage in more advanced studies during their seminary years and emerge from seminary with a higher level of overall preparedness for ministry.

As we moved toward actual proposals and tried to envision how they would be implemented, it became clear that we would have to distinguish between standards for “ecclesial” readiness and standards for academic readiness. The church was responsible for the candidacy process, which had the authority to make judgments about suitability of candidates. The seminaries had the authority and competency to make judgments about academic readiness for admission.

A. Ecclesial Readiness

The most pressing need was to ensure that seminarians had the spiritual and psychological maturity to be part of a disciplined process of formation for a role of leadership in the church. The task force defined ecclesial readiness as follows:

The primary element of ecclesial readiness is faith in Jesus Christ. Ecclesial readiness also includes vocational focus, familiarity with Lutheran congregational life, an understanding of the nature of ministry, and a realistic assessment of one’s own potential for service.

The remedy was potentially available within the ELCA Candidacy Process. The initial step in the candidacy process as it existed prior to 1994 was called *entrance*. This was meant to be a period of guidance and evaluation that

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included a formal application, writing an autobiographical sketch, registration by a home congregation, a structured interview with a trained candidacy committee member, and psychological evaluation and career assessment by an approved clinician.

This entrance step was designed to help applicants discern their sense of call before embarking on a major move and career change. Prospective candidates were encouraged to make use of the resources it provided early in their decision-making process. The process at that time, however, did not require that the entrance step be completed until the spring of the first year in seminary. Nor did it give the candidacy committee authority to deny any prospective candidate entrance to the candidacy process and access to at least one year in a seminary program of ministry preparation. There was no regular means for discouraging unsuitable applicants from beginning seminary. Nor was there a significant period of time between a student's applying for candidacy and beginning seminary that would allow those who were inadequately prepared to become ready.

The candidacy process would need to be revised. Candidacy, however, was formally outside the purview of the task force since it was lodged in another department of the Division for Ministry. Careful collaboration with the Director for Candidacy led to a happy convergence of goals. The Director for Candidacy was preparing his own review of the candidacy process in 1993, after five years of experience in the new church. He agreed to make the proposals of the task force a major focus of his review. The 1993 Report to the Churchwide Assembly did not provide any direct recommendations related to candidacy and ecclesial readiness, but referred these issues to the appropriate department. The report states,

The task force commends to the candidacy review process the need for early assessment of ecclesiastical readiness. In addition to current requirements in the entrance step, ecclesial preparation for seminary should include at least one year of congregational participation. A standard resource on the nature of ministry in the ELCA should be made available to prospective candidates during the entrance step.

A revised ELCA candidacy process was approved by the Division for Ministry Board in the spring of 1994 with full implementation not required until the fall of 1995. The new process required that prospective candidates complete the entrance step with their candidacy committees before enrolling in seminary. A printed discernment guide was published. A year's participation in an ELCA congregation became mandatory for entrance.

The new policy allowed for seminaries to grant "provisional admissions" in exceptional cases, thereby addressing the seminaries' legitimate concern that gifted prospective students might be excluded from attending seminary

because they had not gotten their candidacy paperwork done. The seminaries agreed, however, to encourage all applicants to complete the entrance process with their candidacy committees and to deny admission to those who did not receive a positive entrance decision. After initial glitches, the seminaries seem to be generally appreciative of the way this process works and acknowledge that it is helpful to have the candidacy committees screen out applicants who would be inappropriate for admission to seminary.

B. Academic Readiness

In response to challenges from academics on the board of the Division for Ministry, the task force conceded that authority to determine standards of academic readiness for beginning seminary studies belonged to the seminary faculty and boards. The task force was convinced that the seminaries could improve the readiness of their entering students by establishing clear academic requirements for admission and strictly enforcing them. Enforcement of higher standards at an individual seminary would be difficult in an environment of competition for students, where a student who was rejected at one ELCA seminary might be accepted at another. Consequently the task force urged the seminaries to adopt and enforce common academic standards of readiness for beginning theological studies. The 1993 report included a formal recommendation:

To call upon the eight seminaries of the ELCA, during the 1993-1995 biennium, to develop common standards of academic readiness for students entering master's level programs in preparation for rostered ministries in this church for recommendation to the Division for Ministry.

The seminary deans worked cooperatively to develop a common statement on academic readiness, which was subsequently approved by the Division for Ministry Board and printed in the appendix of the Report of the Study of Ministry to the 1995 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. This statement did not cut new ground or raise standards appreciatively, but it did provide a common document that summarizes the seminaries' own standards for admission and thereby calls each to a new level of accountability for maintaining these standards.

C. What We Learned

- Think beyond the institutions narrowly focused on theological education to the broader ecology of systems that affect theological education, including the church's candidacy process.
- Honor the appropriate centers of authority.
- Do not be afraid to take a stand that your consulting partners oppose, but do not take such a step lightly or without the wherewithal to carry it out even without their concurrence.

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- Even if you must finally reject the advice of your consulting partners, try to accommodate their legitimate concerns.
- Allow plenty of time for complex changes to be considered, debated, decided, and implemented. A year's delay in implementation can make all the difference in smoothness and acceptance.

II. Extending Theological Education into the First Call

During a brainstorming session at its first meeting in July 1989, the task force identified that one of the key problems in seminary education was the continual pressure to add content to already overcrowded seminary curricula. The time available in the average M.Div. program is too short to meet the rising complexity in theological studies and the growing expectations for ministerial competence. One strategy for addressing this impasse was to bring students to campus more adequately prepared to begin seminary studies. Enforcement of readiness standards should help to make life on campus more focused and productive. The second strategy was to extend theological education beyond the seminary years into the first call.

A. The Residency Option

Early in its life the task force developed an ambitious agenda for post-M.Div. education. One task force member, Paul Rorem, made this his particular area of concern. He took initiative in developing concrete proposals and worked actively with the director in introducing the idea to various interested groups for their input and feedback. Two alternatives for developing a proposal for post-M.Div. theological education were described in the 1991 *Resource for Discussion*.

- One option presented was a required program of theological education in context during the first three years of ministry under call.
- The second, more ambitious option was called a *residency*. In this model, the student would complete three years of academic and practical preparation at a residential seminary, followed by three years of contextual, integrative education while the student served in the same local parish under the supervision of a pastor, first as an intern and subsequently as an ordained pastor. The residency option would then replace the standard ELCA seminary practice of requiring a one-year internship in the third year of a four-year program. Part of the promise of this plan was to reduce the number of moves and general upheaval for seminary students and their families.

These options were discussed extensively with ELCA continuing education center directors, with synodical bishops and staff members, and with seminary contextual education directors, faculty, deans, presidents, and students.

While there was considerable interest in the residency option, particularly among contextual education directors, serious objections were raised on two grounds.

- Faculty were reluctant to sacrifice the optimal teaching and learning experience that the third-year internship provides. They highly valued having senior seminarians back on campus integrating their ministry experience with continuing academic studies.
- The vast majority of students regarded the proposed residency not so much as a helpful solution to the problems posed by the third-year internship, but an unwelcome extension of their preparation under supervision before they were fully certified to be pastors on their own.

Shifting to the residency model would have required extensive changes in the ELCA's process for calling pastors to their first congregations. Bishops were willing to consider these changes seriously. Without the support of students, however, the idea finally did not seem to be worth the trouble and disruption it would have caused. By 1992, the task force abandoned the idea of making three years of studies followed by a three-year residency the standard sequence of preparation for ministry in the ELCA. It did encourage the Division for Ministry to retain the residency as an option for selected students for whom it would be beneficial. At this point about a dozen candidates have successfully used this model.

B. Development of the First-Call Theological Education Proposal

The task force moved ahead with a proposal for requiring structured continuing education in the first three years under call. A working group comprised of task force members, seminary and synod personnel, pastors and students worked for nearly a year defining the program and developing detailed standards and guidelines for it. They agreed that the program, called *first-call theological education*, should focus on three common churchwide objectives: ministerial identity, contextual awareness, and ministerial skills.

They also agreed on standard programmatic components and time expectations. Two weeks, or fifty contact-hours, of structured continuing education would be required. Half of these would be spent in common or "core" programs designed by synods especially for first-call rostered leaders. The other half would be spent in electives of the rostered person's choosing. In addition all participants would engage in focused individual reading and meet regularly with a group of colleagues or a mentor.

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Synods were given responsibility for the development of curricula and the funding and management of the program. Some had anticipated that this would be a seminary program that brought recent alumni/ae back to campus. The prevailing sense, however, was that more seminary was not what these new pastors needed. Seminary faculty might be called upon for particular offerings and seminary curricula should anticipate the learning opportunities graduates would have in first-call theological education, but the program should be based in the context of the new pastor's first call and utilize local expertise. So first-call theological education became a synodical program operating according to churchwide standards in close cooperation with the seminaries.

C. Gaining Approval and Ownership

Support for this initiative was very high, particularly among synodical bishops who would eventually have to implement it. Continuing objections were raised about cost. How could a churchwide assembly mandate a program that synods had to fund? While it was generally agreed that all new pastors should participate, opinion was divided about whether the program should be required. There were concerns about how such a requirement would be enforced and about the inevitable resistance to any required program.

The task force was convinced that to be effective all synods would have to offer programs and all first-call pastors would have to be required to participate. For the program to have its desired effect on relieving seminary curricula, all seminaries would have to be able to count on their students having a roughly comparable post-M.Div. educational experience.

The task force did not risk putting the idea of a required program of first-call theological education to a vote in 1993. Instead, the task force put forward the much safer recommendation that the Division for Ministry encourage synods to offer pilot programs for first-call pastors, using the standards and guidelines developed by the working group, with the final vote for churchwide implementation postponed until the next assembly in 1995. By 1995, fifty-nine of the sixty-five synods had already begun work on their pilot programs. The recommendation that first-call theological education become a churchwide requirement was approved by a landslide. To allow adequate time for all synods to allocate resources and prepare programs, the requirement was not scheduled to go into effect until 1997.

D. Implementation

The sixty-five synods of the ELCA have assumed responsibility for implementing the program in their territory. In the majority of cases two or more synods work together to provide a common program for their first-call rostered leaders. Several synods or groups of synods have contracted with a

local continuing education center to design and manage the program. The deployed staff of the Division for Ministry interpret the First-Call Theological Education program to graduating seniors at each ELCA seminary.

The director and task force member, Paul Rorem, also helped the implementation process by initiating a successful grant request to Aid Association for Lutherans (AAL). Some \$200,000 in support from AAL enabled the Division for Ministry to provide participating synods with financial support for their initial planning process, to produce resources for local programs, and to convene synodical leaders who were planning the programs so that they could learn from one another. The grant provided funds for the Division to bring a new person on staff for two years to provide churchwide support for the start-up of First-Call Theological Education. We engaged Connie Leean Seraphine who was able to prepare a manual for synods, consult with synod leaders, collect resources for programs, administer grants to synods, and produce brochures and videos to inform seminarians and first-call congregations about the new program.

E. Lifelong Learning for the Rest of the Roster

On the heels of this overwhelming support for first-call theological education at the 1995 Churchwide Assembly, a voting member of the assembly moved that the Division for Ministry be asked to study lifelong learning resources for all rostered leaders beyond their first call and bring recommendations to the 1997 Churchwide Assembly.

Lifelong learning for all rostered leaders was a goal of the study, one of the eleven imperatives. The task force would have been glad to have recommended strategies to strengthen continuing education expectations for all rostered leaders throughout their ministry, but decided this was too ambitious to attempt without much more preparation. Because of our basic commitment to recommend only what we were sure could and would be implemented, we limited ourselves to the more modest and focused goal of launching a time-limited program for a targeted group. We hoped this program would establish a pattern of lifelong learning that would extend beyond the three years.

Our larger hope was put in motion from the grass roots on the floor of the assembly. A new task force was formed and its thoughtful and far-sighted recommendations were enthusiastically adopted by the 1997 ELCA Churchwide Assembly. The report extends the expectations of lifelong learning to include all the baptized, reinforcing the imperative of the Study of Theological Education encouraging more educational opportunities for laity for their ministries in daily life. A copy of the 1997 Report on Lifelong Learning is available from the Division for Ministry.

F. What We Learned

- You can expand theological education without intervening directly in seminary programs.
- Focus on concrete strategies that can be realized.
- Don't force decisions before they are ready.
- Expect to be surprised, sometimes pleasantly.

III. Seminary Clusters and System-wide Coordination of Theological Education

A. The Question of Number and Location of Seminaries

Like most contemporary mainline denominations, the ELCA has more seminaries than it needs to prepare ordained pastors for its congregations. The pre-ELCA Consultation on Theological Education did not, or could not, decide that one or more of the seminaries of the Lutheran bodies forming the ELCA should close, merge, or move. Instead, the Consultation agreed to bring all eight existing seminaries into the ELCA, each with funding at least equal to what it had received in its predecessor church body.

This recommendation of the Consultation, however, did not definitively resolve the question of number and location. The report of the Consultation left the door open for further exploration of directions for these institutions in a new study to be conducted in the new Lutheran church.

The Consultation believes the eight existing seminaries should be brought into the new church. There are new directions for these institutions, however, that should be explored, with report to the church including recommendations by 1991, according to procedures and policies determined by the Division for Ministry in consultation with the seminaries.

Furthermore, the Consultation set the seminaries on a course toward interdependence. The Consultation's great innovation was the proposal to pair the seminaries for collaborative work. For the most part, the pairing was a way to accommodate the existence of two seminaries in the same territory, each initiating from one of the two denominations that had merged. In three of the four cases, pairing was moderately successful in bringing leadership of the schools together, initiating some collaborative planning, and moving beyond direct competition.

The question of number and location, however, did not go away. It remained the most threatening question for the seminaries and a question of great interest and urgency for many church leaders. Severe financial stress in the early years of the church led many to ask whether retaining all the seminaries was a luxury we could no longer afford. The effectiveness of the new ELCA Study of Theological Education would be judged on whether we were able to resolve this ongoing dilemma.

B. The Task Force's Response to the Question

Some would say the task force on the Study of Theological Education, like the Consultation, backed away from the tough decision. The reasons that the task force did not finally propose a radical change in the number or location of seminaries were partly political, but more profoundly missional.

By 1990 the task force was beginning to understand the limits of its power. Not even the legislative bodies of the church could force unwanted change on the seminaries. We would need the sponsorship of the presidents to effect significant change. The presidents themselves helped to convince us of the need for systemic change in the course of our early confidential interviews with them. Several of the presidents privately told us to be bold, to merge or close seminaries, but they could not assure us of their public support if we made proposals that threatened their institutions. They would have to fight us.

At that time, some task force members were beginning to form a vision that did not call for a different number of seminaries, but for a different kind of theological education, the scope of which would be much broader than the preparation of future pastors on residential campuses. We became convinced that the vitality of the Lutheran church depended on a wide variety of well-equipped leaders in both lay and ordained ministries, a biblically and theologically literate laity, and pastors who were growing and adapting to change throughout their careers. In light of this challenge, the idea of closing or merging traditional seminaries seemed beside the point. To do this larger task, we would need more, not less, theological education. The new theological education would have to be more diverse, more flexible, more accessible than what currently was being offered at eight sites. The challenge would be to set the seminaries on a course of evolving into a system that could meet this range of educational needs among its several institutions and whatever other partners could be drawn in.

C. Framing the Question for Discussion

At its February 1991 meeting, the task force decided to prepare a document in order to generate discussion among interested parties in the church and seminaries. This would be a substantial paper that would seek to lay out the questions as we were beginning to define them and then propose a range of possible responses that people could debate. The resulting document was called *Resource for Discussion*.

To advance our thinking in preparation for drafting the *Resource for Discussion*, I was given the assignment to write a paper called "Patterns of Deployment of Theological Education Resources." At our July meeting, we formulated the basic content for the *Resource*, which I then wrote and revised in consultation with the task force. The *Resource* was published and widely circulated in the fall.

I quote extensively from this document here because it gives a sense of the mind of the task force two years into the study and may help to explain some

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of the resistance we received. The document was meant to be open-ended and collaborative. It had the effect of raising anxieties in some of the seminaries that proved to be very difficult to overcome. The task force was quite genuine in its search for clarity through mutual conversation. It hoped that fresh counter-proposals would emerge. Its mind was not made up. But many who read the paragraphs below were convinced that they veiled a hidden plan to eliminate specific seminaries. Certainly the positive, missional chord sounded above was not clear in this early document. The following five indented paragraphs are quoted from the *Resource for Discussion*, under the heading “Alternatives in Deployment of Theological Education Resources.”

The seminaries of the church have served faithfully and well, and deserve to be treasured. Any alternative to the present number, location, pattern of funding, or primary function of the seminaries initially would involve significant loss. But the need for more diverse theological education and the financial stress of the seminaries and the church both compel us to ask hard questions.

- Given the financial constraints of the church and the seminaries, does it make sense to continue trying to support eight schools at diminishing levels? Or should we seek ways of reducing overall costs, increasing economies of scale, directing church grants more intentionally to programs that serve mission needs?
- Given the church’s need for a diversity of theological education programs, is it responsible stewardship to have eight seminaries providing a roughly equivalent range of M.Div.-based academic programs for a pool of candidates that is currently diminishing? Or could some schools be challenged to develop in different directions in order to provide a new range of options in theological education and ministry preparation?
- Given that the administration of existing seminary programs is already highly complex and faculties are overextended, is it helpful to ask all the schools to provide additional programs for a wider variety of students? Or can we begin to plan for compatible functions to be focused in certain schools, freeing others to focus on different functions?

In order to generate discussion of alternatives to the present ELCA distribution of theological education resources, the task force describes below a range of possible options, without now proposing changes to any specific seminaries. The various options are intended to be concrete enough for those engaged

in planning for theological education to grapple with them, build on them, envision their implications, and explore their feasibility. These options are not exhaustive or mutually exclusive. Through churchwide discussion, new options or a combination not yet imagined may emerge that will prove more useful than any proposed here.

Three kinds of alternatives were proposed in the *Resource for Discussion*:

1. The first set of alternatives related to changes in the funding pattern. Basically, we asked whether we should leave the seminaries as they were, but redirect church grants intentionally to enhance those programs and seminaries that were making the innovations needed to serve the mission as it was defined in the study.
2. Another set of alternatives related directly to the question of number and location. We asked whether we should try to move, merge, or close seminaries in order to have larger seminaries with more resources to provide the diversity of programs, faculty, cultures, etc., at a more reasonable cost.
3. The third option was both more modest and more creative. Could we create a system of theological education that could provide the whole range of programs needed for mission by dividing the responsibility for the various programs and emphases among the several schools? This option allowed for the continuance of all the schools, but asked them to change focus and character, in some cases radically.

D. Coalescing around the Cluster Strategy

Looking back, it is uncanny the way this third option, floated tentatively in 1991, became the definitive vision for the study as a whole by 1993. The task force was not of one mind, and individual task force members were not set in their preferences. Some who originally favored option two eventually were convinced of the wisdom of the third option. These members became very effective advocates for putting real teeth into the more evolutionary approach we eventually adopted.

I am convinced that the vision was the right one for both practical and missional reasons. It was a creative breakthrough that had the potential of solving the problems we were called to address while avoiding unproductive confrontation and divisiveness at a very precarious point in the life of the young ELCA.

The vision, however, was never effectively communicated. Clustering was always suspect of being nothing more than a political compromise. It was difficult to say why clusters were the answer because we never felt really free to spell out clearly what needed to be changed and why. We never wanted to say anything that would put the seminaries in a bad light with potential donors, upon whom they were becoming increasingly dependent. We hoped

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to improve things for both the seminaries and the church, but our first and foremost rule was “do no harm.” We short-circuited support for our vision by not stating clearly that the prevailing vision was flawed and could not be sustained into the future.

There were at least three critical turning points between circulation of the general idea in the *Resource* in the fall of 1991 and the publication of the full-blown proposal in February 1993:

1. Presidents Agree to Collaborate. In March 1992, representatives of the task force (Dorothy Marple, Harold Skillrud, and Phyllis Anderson) met with the presidents at their annual retreat in Phoenix. This was the first time the presidents seemed to grasp the idea that we were talking about a broader scope for theological education, including lay and continuing education and various forms of distance learning. At one point President Bill Leshner of LSTC threw up his hands and said, “OK, let’s do the whole damn thing.” The others agreed with varying levels of enthusiasm.

It was also at this meeting that the presidents reached the critical point where they decided that they would work with one another and with the task force to forge a future for theological education in the ELCA, rather than to seek only to further their own institution, even at the expense of the whole. At that point, I ran across the street and bought myself a pair of silver earrings, each shaped like a phoenix. If this turned out to be as historic a day as it seemed, I wanted a token to commemorate it!

2. Presidents Agree to Cluster Strategy in Principle. In June 1992, the same team from the task force met with the presidents at a specially called meeting following the biennial meeting of The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh. In a highly confidential session at that meeting, Dorothy Marple explained that the task force needed to come to a decision soon about which way it was leaning on the crucial number-and-location question. If it was going to bring a responsible recommendation to the 1993 Assembly, a draft of the report to the assembly would have to be complete by the end of the year. She laid out for the presidents three options as the task force saw them after nine months of consulting with various constituencies and assimilating responses to the *Resource*:

- Leave the seminaries alone, to compete in an open market, and assume that the fittest would survive.
- Bite the bullet and make concrete recommendations for the merging, closing, moving, or change in focus of one or more seminaries.
- Work with the seminaries to develop a system of theological education that would commit the seminaries to function corporately in clusters.

It was not a great surprise that the presidents chose the third option, given the breakthrough they had made in March. It was not a surprise, but it was an occasion for great celebration. That evening, Executive Director Joe Wagner and Presiding Bishop of the ELCA Herbert Chilstrom flew out to join the presidents for dinner. Presidents, task force members, and I recounted with exuberant pride the breakthrough we had made. The toasts and joking around the table that night were both euphoric and anxious. We had found a way toward a new future together, but none of us knew exactly to what we had committed ourselves and where this decision would lead.

3. Agreement on Rationale and Design for a System of Theological Education. In August 1992, several meetings happened simultaneously in the course of an All-Seminary Faculty Conference at a Catholic retreat center in Techny, Illinois. The conference had been initiated by Trinity Theological Seminary, was funded by Lilly Endowment, and was planned by a committee that included seminary deans, the Director for Theological Education, and the two faculty members on the task force. The original purpose of the conference was to bring the faculties into direct consultation and discussion about the emerging academic proposals.

The task force took advantage of the fact that several key persons would be in attendance at the conference to schedule a second, closed consultation on clustering at the same time. All the seminary presidents and board chairs were invited to meet with key task force members for several hours in the middle of the All-Seminary Faculty Conference.

In preparation for these interlocking meetings with seminary faculty, presidents, and board representatives, the task force had prepared a "preliminary" draft of the report to the 1993 assembly. The faculty and some members of the task force dealt with the sections of the report related to academic program: first-call theological education, pre-seminary preparation, and distance learning. The presidents, board chairs, and other task force members dealt with the portion of the preliminary report that laid out for the first time in writing a rationale and design for a system of theological education of which clusters would be the chief component.

In the course of the meeting with the presidents and board chairs, we were able to modify language and amend the document until we had basic concurrence concerning the direction we were going. One key language change was to replace the word *system* with the phrase *interdependent network*. This change mollified those who felt *system* sounded too centralized and controlling, but it retained the essential complementarity associated with a system. These revisions were included in a "Provisional Report to the 1993 Assembly," which came out in September of 1992. The Provisional Report was available for further review by the boards of the seminaries and the Division for Ministry, the Church Council and the Conference

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of Bishops. After hearing from all these groups, we prepared our final report to the 1993 Churchwide Assembly in February 1993.

An unfortunate side effect of this conference was that the faculty members for whom the conference was designed were not included in the critical discussion about clustering. They received an oral report after the presidents, board chairs and task force had come to an agreement. The insult was exacerbated by the fact that the perceived leadership of the task force was involved in the meeting with the presidents while the faculty were debating the academic matters on their agenda. Though designed to increase faculty involvement and build their trust in the process, this conference affected relationships with the faculties probably more negatively than positively.

E. Critical Issues Related to Clustering

In the delicate negotiations at these formative meetings and beyond, three issues were gradually clarified, defined, and nuanced:

1. Governance. One was the tension between understanding these clusters primarily as vehicles through which sovereign seminaries would engage in programmatic planning or understanding them as corporate entities with real powers of their own. To have the effect we wanted, these clusters would have to have the ability to make decisions regarding program and resources that were binding on the member schools. The task force held out for requiring each cluster to design and adopt a “governance structure” that would have the capacities to do these things, and to do so according to a clear timetable. The seminaries were reluctant to make decisions about governance before they were clear about what they would be doing together. “Form follows function,” was heard often throughout the discussions about cluster governance.

2. Centralization. Another was the tension between becoming a centralized system or a more regional system. Where would the teeth be? The task force chose deliberately to put the teeth in the regional structure, the cluster. The cluster would be the entity with decision-making powers regarding program, resources, and faculty. The task force sought to keep the clusters coordinated in an overall system with the creation of a Theological Education Coordinating Committee. This would be an advisory body for planning and coordination, without decision-making powers independent of the board of the Division for Ministry.

3. Initiative. The third point of tension was about how the clusters should be formed. Some wanted the task force to take leadership in defining which seminary should be in which cluster and what their special missions should be. The task force members did not have any special wisdom on this matter and

were pretty sure that any recommendations they might make would be resisted. The task force was not committed to any particular grand design, but to the clusters developing in such a way that generated real trust, regular collaboration, deep interdependence, and possibly even some form of merger.

Alliances like this could not be built on grudging, or even willing, compliance with the mandates of a churchwide assembly. They would require actual commitment. Seminaries would have to adopt the vision as their own before they would invest the necessary energy and resources to bring it about. For such commitment to occur, the seminaries would have to have the freedom to decide whether to cluster and to choose their own partners and shape their own unique missions. We used our legislative powers not to make these decisions, but to ensure that the seminaries would.

F. Churchwide Assembly Action

Our recommendation to the 1993 Churchwide Assembly was to *call upon* the seminaries to form clusters. This language honored the authority of the seminary boards. In principle they could have refused this call without directly defying a directive from the churchwide assembly. The recommendation specifically states that the eight seminaries were being asked to form three to five clusters according to agreed upon criteria and according to a timeline. That gave them freedom to remain in their pairings or to forge new alliances, but it had to be accomplished before the fall of 1994. In principle it allowed for one, two, or even three seminaries to choose to be “clusters-of-one” as long as they met the criteria for clustering and the total number of clusters was not less than three nor more than five.

The recommendation to ask the seminaries to form clusters was approved by the Assembly by a margin of more than 90%. Before it came to a vote, however, there were some tense moments. Bishop Kenneth Sauer and President Dennis Anderson, both related to Trinity Seminary, initiated a letter-writing campaign urging bishops to oppose the clustering proposal. In last minute negotiations, the task force agreed to an amendment to the recommendation that reinforced the understanding, already implicit in the original recommendation and supporting rationale, that seminary boards would have to approve cluster governance proposals. The sense of betrayal within the task force and among the presidents toward the Trinity contingent was keen.

The greatest challenge to the plan came from the floor during the debate. A voting member whose seminary had been absorbed in a previous merger made a passionate speech about institutions needing to be willing to die for the greater good. In the end he said he would support the plan, but threatened to come back at the next assembly and call for the closing or merging of seminaries if the seminaries did not proceed in good faith to save money and

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provide better service through clustering as promised. The threat was an unwelcome signal to the seminaries that the disturbing issue of number and location of seminaries was not totally resolved yet. To the task force it added an unexpected exclamation point to our recommendation that the seminaries report back to the 1995 assembly on progress in clustering.

G. Formation of Clusters

The seminaries found the task of choosing cluster partners confusing and frustrating. In fact the clusters they chose were more symmetrical and missionally promising than any the task force had discussed. By February 1994, three of the seminary pairs were well on the way to declaring themselves clusters. Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley and Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, would be the Western Mission Cluster. Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, had decided to become the Heartland Cluster. The seminaries in Gettysburg and Philadelphia were a natural third cluster with a long history of cooperative work.

Trinity and Southern seminaries were the pair that had never gelled. Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, was eager to maintain connection with its traditional southern constituency. Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, was resistant to the idea of clustering at all and was very mistrustful of its northern partner. In the end, Southern made a bold move to join the Pennsylvania seminaries and form an Eastern Cluster.

By the fall of 1993, Trinity was on its way to becoming a cluster-of-one. Despite the appeal of remaining as a single, sovereign school, Trinity leadership insisted that this was not its preference. Trinity was included as a covenant partner with the Heartland Cluster. In time, that cluster agreed that the relationship with Trinity met the criteria for clustering. Trinity then joined with Wartburg and Chicago in what was then called the Covenant Cluster.

H. Progress toward Cluster Goals

Four years after the 1993 Churchwide Assembly action, the clusters were basically on track to complete the tasks required by a formally adopted timeline that extends from 1993 to 2003. The recommendations to the churchwide assemblies in 1993 and 1995 required that the Division for Ministry report on the progress of the seminary clusters toward meeting the goals on the timeline and toward fulfilling the eleven imperatives in their territory.

Currently the seminaries are in full compliance with what they were called upon to do. A broader range of theological education is becoming accessible. A variety of leaders are being better served. It remains to be seen whether their actual commitment to the vision is strong enough to compel the seminaries to

make the more radical adjustments that would be needed to actually become a cost-effective, interdependent system. As long as each school is intent on maintaining its sovereignty and its status as a full-service seminary, progress in clustering is likely to cost money rather than save and redeploy precious resources.

I. Theological Education Coordinating Committee

In 1991, when the idea of clusters and an interdependent network were just coming to the fore, the *Resource for Discussion* anticipated the need for “a structure for cooperative planning.” Any of the options proposed assumed a greater degree of cooperation and interdependence among the seminaries and possibly other educational and ecclesiastical entities. The need for a new structure to enhance coordination among the clusters was cited again in the 1993 report.

The task force convened a special working group to deliberate the need for such a structure and to develop a possible design. The working group included three task force members, a seminary president and dean, and a continuing education center director. They met twice during the winter and spring of 1994. The task force approved and recommended a design for the Theological Education Coordinating Committee at its July 1994 meeting, which the board approved in October 1994.

The board appointed members to the committee in March 1995. The first meeting of the committee was during the fall of 1995. For its first two years the committee was comprised of all the seminary presidents, two Division for Ministry board members, and five at-large members and staff. By design, after three years the representation shifted from one president from each seminary to one from each cluster.

The committee is charged with overall responsibility for strategic planning for the interdependent theological education network as a whole. It promises to become the place where sensitive issues can be hammered out collaboratively and responsibly, because it brings together the right people on a focused task for which they are well prepared. The committee provides a forum for bringing the representatives of the seminary clusters into direct dialog with the Division for Ministry Board. The at-large members bring special expertise and perspectives from other parts of the system, such as colleges, continuing education centers, ecumenical seminaries, synods, congregations, and parish pastors.

J. What We Learned

- You can lead a horse to water and create all the conditions conducive to drinking and threaten dire consequences for not drinking, but you cannot make him drink. Finally, making use of the potential of clustering is up to the seminaries, and the jury is still out on whether they will take it far enough to derive the anticipated benefits.

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- It is hard to get people excited about a solution if you cannot tell them that there was a problem in the first place.
- Even in the most collaborative of processes, watch your back.
- Do not expect institutions to behave other than in their own self-interest. At best you can persuade them to act in their long-term, strategic self-interest, and not solely in their immediate, anxiety-ridden self-interest.
- Keep connecting strategies to the larger vision. The plan moved ahead whenever it was presented as a response to mission challenges. The goal of cost-effectiveness and efficiency did not inspire the leaders of these institutions to change or put their schools at risk.
- Do not compromise the intent of significant meetings by piggy-backing too many meetings on top of one another.

IV. Increasing Financial Support for Theological Education

Funding for seminaries was among the most pressing issues facing the task force. It was also the issue the task force had the greatest difficulty addressing. Some of the reasons for this have been alluded to earlier in these reflections. First, finances were not the primary area of concern or expertise for the staff or task force members. Second, financial trends in the newly formed ELCA were so dire that the church was not able to consider proposals to increase funding to seminaries.

A continuing resolution in the ELCA Constitution established the following goal for the new church: to raise church grants to seminaries (synod and churchwide combined) from an average of 37% to 50% of their educational and general budgets. Instead, grants to seminaries from the churchwide budget dropped more than 18% during the first five years of the ELCA. After some initial shocks, funding from synods stabilized and then began to rise at an average rate of 2% annually. The first increase in churchwide grants to seminaries came in 1998, ten years after the formation of the ELCA and three years after the completion of the study.

At an even more basic level, patterns of philanthropy were changing. While task force members tried to find ways to increase traditional funding streams to the seminaries, patterns of giving, in the church and elsewhere, were changing. Unified budgets, which once supported institutions through the contributions of many small donors, were no longer able to keep up with the need. Grants from unified budgets would have to be augmented and in some cases replaced by major gifts from individual donors.

A. Interlocking Issues of Increased Funding and Cost-Effectiveness

Three issues became intertwined in ways that were hard to untangle: funding for theological education, the number and location of seminaries, and the relationship between the denomination and the seminaries.

1. Funding. The seminaries had anticipated steady increases in church grants in the new church. The reductions caused great turmoil in the seminaries. Most of the seminaries were thrown into deficit spending until they were able to increase the productivity of their development efforts and to reduce costs, in many cases by eliminating or not filling administrative and faculty positions. The damage to seminary programs was real.

The shock of the early cuts gave way to the clear and sober realization that churchwide grants and grants from synods were not going to keep up with the cost of seminary education as we knew it. Even after the new denomination was able to stabilize and gradually increase grants to seminaries, it was inevitable that the percentage of the seminaries' income coming directly from church grants would diminish.

2. Number and Location. The financial stress in the denomination added fuel to the fire to reduce the number of seminaries. While the ELCA responded to the pressure to keep reductions to seminaries to a minimum, it was forced to cut other vital programs, agencies, and institutions drastically. Faced with a diminishing stream of income from the congregations to the synods and churchwide causes, many in the church were saying, "We cannot afford eight seminaries."

For their part, the seminaries tightened their belts and agreed not to embark on any major capital campaigns or building projects until the study resolved the basic issue of number and location of seminaries. But the seminaries' restraint did not satisfy the church's felt need to reduce its financial responsibilities by a reduction in the number of seminaries. Any proposal to increase funding to seminaries raised questions about their cost-effectiveness.

3. Relation between Church and Seminaries. Staff advocated tirelessly to keep grants to seminaries relatively stable throughout the years of the study. In fact, we were successful in protecting the seminaries from the level of reductions experienced by other causes, including colleges, campus ministry, and continuing education centers. We made the case that the promise of steady financial support for the seminaries was essential to keep the schools positively engaged in collaborative planning for a churchly system of theological education. The ELCA formally identified funding for seminaries as one of its three top funding priorities. We were nevertheless up against the growing realization that the church's direct grants to seminaries were not ever again going to be enough to meet the seminaries' needs or constitute a growing portion of their total income.

If seminary costs could not be reduced or church funding increased, the inevitable trajectory seemed to be a widening gap between the seminaries and the church. The trend in most Protestant denominations has been one of

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decreasing support from the denomination, increasing autonomy for the seminaries, and a general loosening of the mutual accountability between the two. To follow in this direction was alien to the spirit of North American Lutheranism. Furthermore, the task force's mandate was to create a system of theological education that could "be sustained financially by the ELCA through a combination of church grants and individual gifts" and "be appropriately accountable to the ELCA." The trick was how to do both in a falling economy.

B. Early Attempts to Address the Funding Issues

The first impulse of the task force was to keep funding issues from dominating the agenda of the task force; the second was to seek outside expertise.

1. First *Ad Hoc* Committee on Seminary Funding (1989)

At its first meeting in July 1989, the task force authorized an *ad hoc* committee to begin looking at the funding issues. The group included task force member Bishop Harold Skillrud, Robert Blanck, Bishop Roger Munson, seminary president Roger Fjeld, seminary development officer Donovan Palmquist, ELCA Foundation executive Harvey Stegemoeller, ELCA budget analyst Gary Brugh, and Division for Ministry executives Joseph Wagner and Phyllis Anderson.

This committee held a one-day meeting in August 1989. It was already clear at that point that churchwide funding would drop precipitously in the next two years. The conversation focused on ways to enhance synodical funding and on ways the denomination could support the development efforts of the seminaries.

2. *Ad Hoc* Committee on the Funding Formula (1990-92)

Discussion at the 1990 Consultation on Theological Education led to the formation of an *ad hoc* committee to consider in depth several aspects of the formula for the funding of seminaries.

- The formula for assessing how much each synod was to contribute to its related seminaries, established in the transition to the ELCA, was not fully accepted. It worked better in some regions of the country than others. The committee was asked to look at the perceived inequities and at alternative systems and to come back to the task force with recommendations.
- Grants from synods and churchwide grants were distributed among the seminaries in such a way as to maintain the patterns developed in the predecessor church bodies. This way of dividing the funds had no

compelling rationale in the new church and was not seen as fair or equal by any objective standard. The committee was also asked to study this matter and propose factors for a new distribution formula and report to the 1991 Consultation.

The committee, consisting of a dozen lay and ordained persons from within the seminaries around the church, met in the summer of 1991. They recommended continuing with the present assessment formula, with some minor refinements in the management of it, one of which was overturned by the 1991 Consultation. So, the task force gained little if any impetus for recommending changes in the way responsibility for funding seminaries was calculated and assessed.

The committee also recommended that a number of factors be considered in the eventual development of a new formula for the distribution of churchwide grants among the seminaries. They suggested that each seminary, regardless of size, receive a basic amount and additional funds based on student enrollment, responsiveness to specific mission needs, cost effectiveness, and good management. They recommended that the Division for Ministry reserve some discretionary funds to meet emergencies and encourage special projects.

C. Preparing Proposals for the 1993 Assembly

The task force felt pressure to come up with a funding plan in the report to the 1993 Assembly, not only because this was a clear part of its mandate, but also because the seminaries were experiencing severe financial stress. Furthermore, any success in moving the seminaries toward structural change seemed to depend on our being able to provide them with some promise of stable financial support.

1. *Resource for Discussion*

In order to get the discussion going, we proposed three possible alternatives to the present funding pattern in the September 1991 document *Resource for Discussion*:

- Redirect grants away from basic institutional support to needed mission-oriented projects;
- Redefine the system as strictly regional and make each seminary directly accountable to and supported by its own supporting synods without churchwide support; and
- Move to a congregationally based system for assessing support for seminaries, e.g., one or two percent of the operating budget of each congregation.

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None of these options received strong enough support to form the basis of recommendations for change to the 1993 Churchwide Assembly.

2. Working Papers

In preparation for the February 1992 meeting, task force members accepted assignments to prepare working papers on various topics that were emerging as possible areas in which we might develop recommendations for the 1993 Assembly. Charles Mays wrote one on funding issues, which raised again the complexity of the questions but did not provide a way through them.

I prepared a working paper on "The Priority of Theological Education in the ELCA." The impetus for this paper came from a small group discussion at the 1991 Consultation on Theological Education. This group had suggested that lack of financial support for the seminaries was a symptom of the deeper issue of the place of theological education and indeed of theology itself in the life of the new church. The paper made the issue of priority primary, and made funding a matter of means to undergird the priority of theological education.

In the course of the February 1992 meeting, we paused to test the level of consensus that we had achieved in the various areas in which we were attempting to develop proposals. The notes of that session record no consensus on a specific approach to funding, but a clear consensus that

theological education as a priority of the ELCA is to be "lifted high" in the report to the 1993 Assembly, with rationale to include the importance of monetary support, but no specific recommendation to be made in 1993.

3. The 10% Proposal

By the summer of 1992, the task force was growing increasingly anxious about its inability to come up with a concrete funding strategy. We tried to coordinate our efforts with a churchwide Stewardship Strategy Task Force, headed by Pastor Richard Foege and staffed by Mark Moller-Gunderson. This blue-ribbon group at one point was considering thirty different funding patterns for the church at large for possible recommendation to the ELCA Church Council. We pressed upon them the importance of theological education in any pattern they developed. It seemed useless for us to develop any specific proposals until we had a sense of what new pattern or patterns were emerging from the Stewardship Strategy. We were frustrated to learn at our July meeting that the Stewardship Strategy Task Force was not going to propose any substantial change in funding patterns.

Against this background of anxiety and frustration about funding, at our July meeting Bishop Harold Skillrud suggested a fresh new approach that would ensure priority funding of theological education as a foundational dimension of the life of the church. He proposed that synods each designate to

theological education a uniform percentage (10% was mentioned) of all undesignated synodical receipts from congregations. This would amount to approximately \$12 million, or more than two million over the amount the seminaries were then receiving from churchwide and synodical funds combined. This plan assumed that most of these funds would flow directly to the seminary clusters. Some would flow through the Division for Ministry for redistribution among the seminary clusters according to churchwide priorities. A third portion would remain in the synods to support programs of theological education administered by the synods, such as First-Call Theological Education, continuing education, and training programs for indigenous lay leaders.

The task force rallied around this bold new approach. We were running out of time to shape, test, and refine proposals for recommendation to the 1993 Assembly. Our final report really needed to be drafted in the fall of 1992 and finalized by early 1993 in order to go into the agenda materials for the August 1993 assembly. The Executive Director of the Division for Ministry, Joe Wagner, cautioned against incorporating this radical new idea into our assembly report without the kind of careful consultation we had so successfully utilized to date. The proposed change would have far reaching effects on all other ministries of the church.

As a compromise we included the "10% plan" as one of five possible funding options in a working paper that we appended to a provisional version of the report to the 1993 Assembly. The provisional report was circulated for review and response between September 1992 and January 1993. This working paper acknowledged that the "10% plan" was the preferred option of the task force and provided a strong rationale for its adoption.

An even earlier preliminary report, containing proposals for clustering and the 10% plan, had been shared confidentially with seminary presidents and board chairs in the course of the All Seminary Faculty Conference in Techny, Illinois, in August 1992. The pairing of these proposals may have contributed to the seminaries' believing that their cooperation on clustering would be matched by a major commitment from the church on funding.

The "10% plan" had a rough reception outside of seminary circles. When Bishop Skillrud presented the concept to his colleagues in the Conference of Bishops in November 1992, the overwhelming majority were opposed, and outspokenly so. He suggested that because theological education was so important for the life of the church, we should scoop the needed resources at the point where the flow of funds was the deepest. He had been willing to stand up and put his considerable reputation on the line for the strongest possible support for the seminaries.

As it turned out, the strength of the proposal worked against us. We appeared to be unconcerned or unaware about other real priorities in the church in our zeal to secure the future of Lutheran theological education. We

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were punished for our indiscretion. Bishop Skillrud had to endure being called “Scoop” or “Skimmer” Skillrud for the duration of the study. When I presented the report to the ELCA Church Council later in November, the secretary of the church, Lowell Almen, referred to our funding proposal as “the great train robbery of 1993.”

4. Recommendations to the 1993 Churchwide Assembly

Not only did we lose some credibility through our premature presentation of the 10% plan, we were left without a clear funding proposal to bring to the pivotal 1993 assembly. Instead we included in the report a discussion of the funding issues and options and two hortatory recommendations. One recommendation asked the assembly

to affirm theological education as a *foundational priority*, recognizing that the preparation of leaders for mission is essential to all the ministries of this church.

The second recommendation directed the Division for Ministry

. . . to promote study and discussion, throughout the 1993-95 biennium, of proposals for funding theological education as a foundational priority for this church’s mission, and prepare funding proposals for recommendation to the 1995 Churchwide Assembly.

D. Preparing Proposals for the 1995 Assembly

1. A New Look at Funding

In response to the directive from the 1993 Assembly, the task force appointed a working group on funding to rethink the issues. They would prepare a document for discussion throughout the church, presumably leading to the development of new funding strategies for action in 1995. The working group included Bishop Harold Skillrud and Pastor Charlie Mays from the task force, President Roger Fjeld from Wartburg Seminary, Pastor James West of the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary development office, Mark Moller-Gunderson from the stewardship department of the Division for Congregational Life, an accountant from Colorado named John Fritschel, Joe Wagner, and myself. We used Anthony Ruger, an independent consultant and researcher in theological education financing, as an occasional consultant.

During the fall of 1993 we developed an eight-page printed document called *A New Look at the Total Support of Theological Education in the ELCA*. After providing background material and assumptions, it sought response to the following four proposals:

- A commitment to support seminary clusters through synodical and churchwide grants at the level of 25% of educational and general expenditures.
- A call for direct support of student scholarships by all ELCA congregations, beyond their regular mission support.
- Official encouragement for a growing partnership between church and seminary clusters in raising funds from donors.
- Creation of a synodical consulting process for negotiating budgets and levels of support for seminary clusters.

This document was widely circulated for response. It was targeted particularly toward synodical councils that were each asked to devote an hour to discussing and responding to it in the winter and spring of 1994. In all, forty synod councils returned response forms. Fifteen invited a task force member or the director to meet with them personally. Seminary boards also participated in discussing and responding to this document.

The response was very discouraging. This working group had come to realize that the economy was shifting. They had made the painful transition in their own minds away from the past dependence on direct church grants to a new future where the seminaries would be raising most of their funds through gifts, endowments income, and tuition. We were ready to try to think creatively about ways to operate in the new environment. We were asking how the church could support the seminaries as they raised the funds they needed from students and donors. This was a big shift from the “10% plan” that promised a future in which church grants to seminaries would grow in proportion to synod receipts.

As I recall the consultations about *A New Look* in seminaries and synods, everyone was mad. The synods were simultaneously nostalgic about the days when they gave the lion’s share of seminary support and unwilling to commit themselves to joining forces with the church to support even 25% of seminary costs. They were afraid the church would continue to reduce grants to seminaries and leave them with growing responsibility for meeting 25% of seminary budgets, the growth of which they could not control. Seminaries were angry that they were going to have to raise 75% of their income themselves. We tried to make the point that even the 75% was coming from ELCA members. The fact that we wanted to interpret tuition, endowment, and gifts from church members as alternative forms of church support only added insult to injury.

2. Recommendations to the 1995 Churchwide Assembly

Dismal as the experience of *A New Look* was, elements of that document found their way into the proposals that were forwarded to the 1995 Assembly and those that have flourished since. Acknowledging the changed economy

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and seeking to be supportive of the seminaries in it, we did give official encouragement for a growing partnership between this church and seminary clusters in raising funds from donors. The task force recommended that the assembly

. . . urge ELCA congregations, synods, and the churchwide organization to support the efforts of the seminary clusters to increase financial support by granting access to seminary representatives and commending the cause of theological education to potential donors.

Furthermore, it urged the seminaries

. . . to invest significant time and resources for cultivating participation in deferred giving programs that will build endowments for the future.

These may not seem like very radical or forceful actions, but in fact they marked a change toward regarding seminary development efforts as churchly and appropriate and necessary. Traditionally, the seminaries had been criticized for raising funds over and above church grants. Most members assumed that the seminaries got all they needed or were entitled to through direct grants. These recommendations were one step in changing that perception and improving the climate for resource development by the seminaries.

A New Look had called for the creation of a consultation process for negotiating budgets and levels for synod support for seminary clusters. A task force recommendation to the 1995 Assembly opened the way for the seminary clusters to hold direct consultations about funding and programming with their supporting synods. The Division for Ministry would continue to be involved in a supportive, coordinating way, but it would move away from establishing standardized levels of seminary support for all synods. Direct synodical consultations would help the relationship between seminary clusters and their supporting synods to grow. The trust and accountability that would naturally develop should result in increased financial support from synods.

The task force still came up short on a clear strategy to increase funding through existing channels or to create new streams of income to the seminaries. Our efforts to do something more dramatic had all been frustrated. In our final report, we kept the door open for further breakthroughs by expanding the study to include the development of a business plan. (The story of the business plan is told in Part One, Section V.) We also asked the Assembly to direct the Division for Ministry to bring to the 1997 Churchwide Assembly “a case and strategies for this church’s increased financial support of a system of theological education.”

E. Beyond the 1995 Assembly

1. New Formula for Churchwide Grants

Concerns about the funding formula go back to the earliest stage in the study, the research for the Phase One Report in 1989. An *ad hoc* committee on funding reported possible factors in a new formula for the distribution of churchwide grants to the 1991 Annual Consultation on Theological Education. The funding formula was one of the issues on the table at the last Consultation in 1994. At this meeting, the seminary presidents asked the task force to postpone any action on a new formula until a comprehensive business planning process could be completed.

By the fall of 1996, the business planning process was complete. This process did yield a new formula to which the seminary presidents, the Theological Education Coordinating Committee, and the Division for Ministry all agreed without dissent. The new formula is elegantly simple. It reinforces the development of seminary clusters and incorporates many of the values expressed as early as 1991. It does so in ways that are simple to communicate and administer.

Beginning in 1999, churchwide grants will be directed not to individual seminaries but to clusters. Clusters will decide about the division of these funds among member schools. The provision that the churchwide grants would go to clusters was included in the original timeline for clustering created by the task force. It ensures that churchwide funds will function to undergird collaboration, creativity, and greater cost-effectiveness, rather than to preserve specific institutions.

The churchwide grants will be dispersed among the three clusters in proportion to their relative contribution of leaders for the church's mission. The contribution of each cluster is measured by the number of ELCA students who graduate from their various programs. Each program is weighted according to its duration, that is, by the relative investment the institution makes in preparing the leader.

The formula is intended to provide a steady and predictable stream of income to the clusters. The number of graduates is averaged over five years so funding will not be affected by spikes in enrollment. The formula will be phased in over five years to further minimize disruption in the funding stream.

The seminaries and the Division for Ministry have agreed that \$150,000 of the total grant to clusters should be retained by the division to be used as a research and development fund to provide funds to the clusters for initiatives that further special churchwide goals.

2. The Fund for Leaders in Mission

The idea for a churchwide student scholarship fund was formally proposed by the task force for the first time in *A New Look*. This proposal could

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not be developed in time for the 1995 assembly. The failure of the “10% plan” reminded us not to try to move ahead with a major funding proposal while it is still half-baked and lacks the full support of key players in the church and the seminaries.

The idea of a scholarship fund re-emerged in the business planning process. There it received confirmation as the best, and perhaps the only, way the church could help to generate new donors not tied to individual seminary constituencies and enlist them in support of a whole seminary system. After much careful calculation and consultation, this idea was resoundingly approved in 1997 as the new Fund for Leaders in Mission. While the funding proposals in the 1993 and 1995 reports sought indirectly to create a climate that would be conducive for increasing church grants and individual gifts to seminaries, the Fund for Leaders in Mission promises to produce a new stream of revenue that will undergird Lutheran theological education for generations to come. The long-term goal is to close that gap between the rising cost of tuition and the level of financial aid anticipated from existing sources. Meeting that goal will require contributions to the fund in cash and deferred gifts of \$180 million or more.

As of January 1998, a fund design had been approved and a steering committee to oversee administration of the fund had been appointed by the Division for Ministry. We have been assured of funds in excess of \$1 million from Lutheran Brotherhood, Aid Association for Lutherans, and the ELCA to provide start-up costs until the fund becomes self-supporting. A director for the fund and two staff members were to be hired and begin work in the spring of 1998. The official kick-off for the fund was scheduled for early 1999. Significant funds have already been received.

Planning and implementation continued long after the study had officially come to an end. All the ins and outs of how this fund was shaped and the buy-in of the churchwide organization and seminaries gained is another story to be told at another time. The fund is included here as a currently visible sign of the progress of the study from research, to planning, through much consultation, to action. At this point, the approval of the Fund for Leaders in Mission represents the golden spike, the final nail hammered into the tracks laid by the task force on which an ELCA system of theological education can run. But there will be more. The process doesn't end.

F. What We Learned

- It is very hard to plan in a changing environment.
- The issues that people care about get played out in the flow of dollars.
- The most difficult decisions are about money.
- Things take time. Some things don't fit into the timeline of a study.

V. Theological Education by Extension

One more strategy that the task force pursued vigorously deserves attention here, even though it did not lead to a specific programmatic result. Theological education by extension (TEE) and distance learning were dominate concepts in the task force's vision of an interdependent theological education system.

Beginning in 1992, the task force began reading about and exploring the potential of theological education by extension. Task force member Mary Chrichlow was the first one to raise the issue. She had become convinced of the need for more flexibility and accessibility in theological education from her own experience in the African-American community, from developments to prepare indigenous leaders in her own synod in New York, and in conversations with the Rev. Craig Lewis. Craig Lewis was the first Executive Director of the Commission for Multicultural Ministries in the new ELCA. He had also served as Director for Theological Education in the Lutheran Church in America. At Mary Chrichlow's suggestion, the task force read Ross Kinsler's *Ministry by the People: Theological Education by Extension*. Paul Rorem also provided us with an article defining theological education and distance learning, which became formative in our thinking.

The task force formed a working group, comprised of Mary Chrichlow, Dorothy Marple, Beverly Allert, and myself. The group conducted extensive research on successful systems of theological education by extension in other denominations, particularly those focused on lay adult learners. They studied in depth the Episcopalian program, called *Theological Education for Ministry*, and the LIMEX (Loyola Institute for Ministry in Extension) program of Loyola University in New Orleans.

Proposal to Promote TEE and Distance Learning

From our own research and in concert with the Study of Ministry, the task force had become convinced that the mission in the twenty-first century would require not just M.Div. educated pastors, but a wide variety of lay leaders, many of whom would have to be prepared locally or in flexible formats because of their primary commitments to families and jobs. We knew that as a church we needed an infusion of educational resources for our rostered leaders, many of whom told us in surveys that cost and distance were critical factors in their being able to take part in continuing education events. Furthermore, many people from ethnic or racial groups needed theological education tailored to their context and their cultural expectations of ministry. Theological education by extension and distance learning became an essential key to resolving these problems.

During the course of our study, advances were made in interactive telecommunication with promising educational implications. Universities

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and businesses were increasingly using distance learning methods for continuing education and for academic degrees. Research was validating distance learning as effective, at least for certain kinds of educational tasks. The Association of Theological Schools redeveloped its accreditation standards in ways that legitimated distance learning for at least part of approved degree programs. These advances gave us the courage to press the seminaries to get involved and to form partnerships that would make theological education more accessible.

In our 1995 report we described nine different audiences that could benefit, ranging from the baptized to indigenous lay leaders, to pre-seminary students, to alternate-route candidates for ordained ministry, to regular seminary students, to pastors seeking continuing education. We envisioned both the development of far-flung extension sites and individualized programs delivered through a variety of media. We were convinced, but did not know exactly how to move the idea forward. Therefore, in our report to the 1993 Churchwide Assembly, we presented a recommendation urging the Division for Ministry to develop models that could further work in this area:

To direct the Division for Ministry to facilitate development of models of theological education and distance learning, and with the taskforce to prepare a proposal for the 1995 Churchwide Assembly for a flexible system to make theological education accessible to a broader spectrum of people.

Distance Learning through Interactive Communication

In response to the passage of this recommendation, in 1993 the task force enlarged the working group on TEE to include two people with greater expertise in distance learning and communications technology. James Moy, Director for Inclusive Leadership Development, holds a doctorate in education and at that time was pursuing advanced studies in distance learning through interactive telecommunication technology. Paul Campbell is a pastor of the ELCA and president of Campbell Communications, an independent consulting firm pioneering interactive technology communications in the church and other venues.

The Division for Ministry received an additional grant of \$50,000 from Lutheran Brotherhood to support our work in distance education with Paul Campbell. This grant assisted Campbell in increasing his own mastery of the field through conferences and workshops. He assisted us in many ways, including:

- managing major demonstrations of learning through satellite communication at the 1992 Consultation on Theological Education and at the 1993 Churchwide Assembly;

- conducting a workshop on distance learning technologies with the participants of the All Seminary Faculty Conference in August of 1992;
- conducting a technology audit at each of the eight seminaries and preparing a composite report of the system, and reports and advice for each seminary;
- preparing a primer and glossary on communication technology;
- participating as a regular consultant in the working group from 1993 through the business planning process.
- linking the eight seminary presidents on an interactive computer meeting.

Coordination of Distance Learning

It was clear to the task force from the beginning that delivery of theological education by distance learning methodologies and technology could best happen within a system. We were eager to avoid wasting human and financial resources by having all eight seminaries starting up their own programs with possibly incompatible technology. We became aware that geographical boundaries would soon become meaningless as seminaries beamed out programs by satellite or interactive video. We were concerned that some real educational needs would go unmet, while the various providers inside and outside of the seminaries duplicated efforts and marketed to the same audiences. The threat of unproductive competition and waste moved us to try to devise ways of coordinating these efforts.

Initially we proposed that the key to coordination would be to designate (or let them self-designate) one cluster or one seminary within each cluster to take on distance learning as a specialization. On behalf of the whole church, these institutions would invest in the technology, build the expertise and appropriate faculty strength, form alliances with other providers, and develop the audiences across the whole church. Other seminaries could be supportive, but from a distance, without major investments or changing their traditional cultures.

No seminaries or clusters, however, were willing to take on the challenge. In fact, there has been consistent resistance from the seminaries to the assignment of churchwide specializations of any kind. The danger of being excluded from any specific kind of program or focus was too threatening. The alternative of trying to move forward on all directions, however, results in frustration, depleted resources, and finally paralysis.

We continued to work with our consultants to find a way to conceptualize a mechanism for ensuring compatibility of technology, for providing technological and pedagogical expertise, and for coordinating and marketing educational offerings. Several formal proposals for such a “hub” were developed and circulated. While people generally acknowledged the need, there was not clear agreement about whether these functions could or should

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be done centrally. Some insisted that the technology itself transcends this kind of control, but that the technological culture develops informal networks that accomplish the same goals informally. There was fear about any single entity exercising control through the exercise of these functions. There were never enough financial resources to actually pull it off.

Without clear agreement about any specific structure for the coordination of theological education, we included in our written report to the 1995 Churchwide Assembly the recommendation:

To request and encourage the Division for Ministry, together with the Department for Communication, the seminary clusters, and other interested partners, to develop an ELCA distance learning service center to be a technological, administrative, and faculty development resource for an ELCA theological education distance learning network.

Consistent with the general concern about centralization of this function, the seminary presidents asked us to amend the recommendation to say *telecommunication consulting service* rather than *distance learning service center*. The recommendation passed, but there was not enough consensus or competence among the central players to actually move to action.

Ongoing Efforts

The task force was not able to initiate programmatic action on the matter of distance learning or distance learning coordination, but it was catalytic in many emerging developments in distance learning at the individual seminaries, in clusters, and in alliances with other educational entities and even churchwide units.

All of the seminaries are involved in various forms of off-campus course offerings. Extension sites have been added or strengthened. Each of the seminaries now has or is far advanced in developing the capacity of providing educational programming through interactive computer and video technology. Lutheran seminaries are offering courses for credit on the Internet.

Two of the clusters have initiated ambitious models for coordinating distance learning resources, both with significant assistance from Lutheran Brotherhood. The Western Mission Cluster is developing a network among a wide range of theological education providers across the West. This effort, called the *Fishers Net*, provides technological, pedagogical, and marketing benefits to develop specific projects proposed and funded by the various partners on the network.

The Covenant Cluster was an early partner in a collaborative effort to provide distance learning resources required by several churchwide units. The ELCA's major distance learning continuing education provider, SELECT, is also part of this emerging organization, called Partners in Distance Learning

Resources (PDLR). The plan is to make high-quality, interactive courses available to wide audiences at rates that will make the overall effort self-sustaining. To date this alliance has produced two challenge-level courses for laity and three courses for lay Hispanic leaders. Efforts are underway to link these two enterprises into one integrated ELCA distance learning network.

The seminaries would probably have moved into these areas of distance learning eventually on their own in response to competition from other schools and to the needs of their learners. I would like to believe that the task force accelerated the entrance of Lutheran seminaries into this new field by providing a missional rationale for it, giving explicit encouragement, staging demonstrations and learning opportunities, and providing occasions for people to get together and share expertise. While we were not successful in establishing a hub or telecommunication consulting service, in these efforts of the clusters we are beginning to see glimpses of the interdependent theological education network envisioned by the task force.

What We Learned

- Some things are just too big and too new to get a hold of, let alone control.
- Things take time.

Conclusion

A few events on the day of the presentation of the final report of the Study of Theological Education to the 1995 ELCA Churchwide Assembly provide some critical insights into the significance of the work we completed that day.

Legislation and Communication

We prepared a comprehensive report to inform voting members of the 1995 Churchwide Assembly about the decisions they would be making with regard to the Study of Theological Education. We called our final report *Faithful Leaders for a Changing World: Theological Education for Mission in the ELCA*. Voting members of the assembly had received it with their agenda materials months in advance of the assembly. We took great pains to keep the text of the report to fifteen pages. We appended all the key documents from the 1993 report so that this single document could serve as an inclusive reference as the study was implemented in the years to come.

We were allotted forty-five minutes on the assembly agenda for the presentation of our report, to be followed by deliberation and action. We had worked with a communication consultant to draft the text and design visual support for the presentation. To make the most of the moment, we engaged Martin Marty, among the most well-known and respected theological scholars in our denomination, to present the material. Sitting on a stool to the front of the stage in the huge Minneapolis Convention Center, Marty addressed the assembly in a winsome, informal manner.

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All this is to say that the task force worked hard to communicate the final results of the study effectively. We did so within the time limits we were given. However, our slot on the agenda came late in the day when voting members were tired and many had left. Furthermore, the whole assembly agenda had fallen behind schedule that afternoon. There was a special order that had to be wedged in before the assembly was recessed for the day. Consequently, our report was interrupted at the end of Marty's presentation. Voting on the proposals that had just been presented was delayed until the next day.

In the end the proposals of the study all passed by margins of more than 90%. The report succeeded as legislation, but fell far short of our expectations as a communications event. We were not able to achieve the build-up and punch that we had tried to create. This was true of the study as a whole. Its achievements far exceeded its hype.

Collaboration and Celebration

Following the presentation, the Division for Ministry hosted a banquet for the task force, seminary presidents, staff, and spouses. Again, it was a little awkward celebrating the end of the study before the final votes were taken, but plans had been made and we gamely followed through.

The highlight of the evening was a musical tribute to the task force by the seminary presidents. President William Lesher introduced the eight presidents as the ELCA Seminary System Singers. They had prepared original lyrics to the tune of "Daisy, Daisy," each stanza honoring one of the task force members and staff. We have snapshots to prove that the presidents did sing together and that they did sing to the task force.

If anyone would have told us at any point in the course of the study that this day would come, we would not have believed it. There was so much rivalry and mistrust among the seminaries to begin with. The task force was the target of so much anxiety and animosity. There was so much at stake. The risk of undermining the strength of the seminaries and weakening their relationships with the church became more clear as the study progressed. It is amazing that we came to the end with a chorus of seminary presidents making music and fun together in honor of these task force members who had steered the course of this study on behalf of the church.

Ongoing Struggles

The passage of the recommendations to the 1995 Assembly and this celebration of collaboration marked the successful conclusion of the study. The directions were set in a way that could not be reversed. The struggles were not over, however. Presidents who had sung "Daisy, Daisy" together did not always enthusiastically interpret the implications of the study to their faculty, staff, boards, and constituencies. We had counted on the presidents to carry home the agreements we had forged together and sell them to their people.

The presidents were counting on us to give them cover for decisions that advanced the long-term health of the system but may have pinched the individual institutions for which they were responsible. The proposals were the result of consultation and compromise. Inevitably, the presidents were not all completely convinced. Some hurt the cause by publicly expressing reservations about directions to which they had initially committed themselves.

To be fair, implementing the provisions of the study has been objectively difficult. Clustering has consumed a great deal of human and financial resources without delivering much in the way of savings as of yet. To deliver on its promise, clustering will have to move beyond the stages of trust-building and outward compliance. It will have to become a new way of doing business, rather than another layer of complexity.

While the provisions of the study had all been approved by the appropriate officers in the Churchwide Organization, by the Church Council, by the Conference of Bishops, and by the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, support even at the churchwide level was never completely enthusiastic. Long after the completion of the study, doubts persisted in some corners about whether we had missed the chance to reduce the number of seminaries and about the degree to which the stated priority of theological education should be honored.

Presiding Bishop H. George Anderson, elected in 1995 at the conclusion of the study, was directly supportive of our work. In an early meeting with seminary presidents and staff, he told us that the work we had been about over the last six years was a gift to him and to the church. Our system would help the church to realize the mission goals he was envisioning. He also put his weight behind the proposal for the Fund for Leaders in Mission, the one clear financial concession we won in the course of this planning process.

Evaluation of Potential Long-Term Effects

If everyone ends up on the same side singing, one has to raise the question of whether the task force failed to make the tough decisions that would have positive long-term effects for theological education in the ELCA. Some would say that the task force missed the last good opportunity for the church to offer real leadership. In their opinion, had we had the will to close or merge some seminaries, we would have created a field in which a few strong Lutheran seminaries would grow larger and receive substantial funding from the church.

I am not convinced. At the end of the day, I believe that the course we chose has the greatest potential for making high-quality Lutheran theological education accessible to a variety of lay and ordained leaders across the church. The task force rightly focused on the questions of mission. It did not ask what it would take to preserve our seminaries as they are, but what would it take to

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reorient the seminaries toward building a theological education network to serve new audiences in flexible formats. The study laid the tracks for the future, the tracks on which such a system can run.

The church and the people—both donors and students—will have to invest the funds to make this possible. Regardless of whether we have eight or five or two seminaries, I believe the costs inevitably will be borne more and more by students and individual donors. Each seminary has a loyal and expanding circle of donors and friends committed to building a reliable base of support for the future. If the cost of maintaining eight seminaries becomes more than students and donors can support, the seminaries themselves will form more cost-effective unions with their current cluster partners.

Theological education in our time will have to expand and adapt to meet the needs of growing, diverse audiences. Some of these audiences will have the resources to pay for the education they receive. Others should be subsidized so that the church will have the leaders it needs. The new Fund for Leaders in Mission enlists the help of donors to defer costs to those students who will be the future leaders of the church. The fund has a realistic potential of delivering on this promise because it is forward looking and geared to the new economy of philanthropy.

While questions about funding and the number of seminaries were the most controversial and difficult to solve, it may be that the educational initiatives will have the greatest long-term impact. First-call theological education establishes a pattern of lifelong learning for all rostered leaders. Theological education has been redefined to include lay theological education. The study has given impetus for the seminaries to utilize distance learning technology and methodologies to reach a much broader audience. A set of educational imperatives gives the seminaries direction for their own curricular development and long-term planning.

The Method as Model for Ministry

The method of the study was the secret of its success. It began with the realization of the task force and staff that they did not have the wisdom or the power to accomplish what they were asked to do. It grew as the task force members really came to act on the realization that they were not the source of all the good ideas and that they could not command compliance with even their best ideas. The only hope for a good outcome was to work with the faculties, boards, and administrations of the seminaries, to listen seriously to the voices of church leaders, and to draw on the experience and specialized knowledge of experts from many fields. The task force had to learn to check its natural inclination to seek to impose its will on others. The task force at its best was catalytic in getting others to do the hard work of making the necessary changes to adapt to a changing mission context. That work continues far beyond the conclusion of the study and the authority of the task force to propose new recommendations.

This kind of humility and interdependence is a model for ministry in a time when the dominance of Christianity and the influence of ecclesiastical authorities are in decline. Denominations no longer have the resources to impose solutions on other parts of the body of Christ. Ecclesiastical bossiness, which was never Christ's will for his church, will not be an option for pastors and denominational leaders of the future.

And yet the need for leadership is greater than ever. When the study worked, the task force exercised leadership through relationships and hard-earned trust. A common vision for the future was forged through a sustained interactive process, where those responsible did most of the work but did not finally control the outcome. Strategies for fulfilling the vision were developed in close collaboration with those who were going to raise the money and do the actual work of implementation. More and more toward the end of the study and the business planning process that followed, we were creating environments and providing useful tools for others to do the hard work of changing institutions.

That is leadership for today. It is not leadership that attracts much attention, but it gets tough work done. And what it gets done and how it gets things done are fundamentally congruent. How does the leadership continue? The task force is disbanded and the director has since assumed a new position in ecumenical theological education on the edge of the network we worked too long with others to birth and shape.

The future flourishing of this vision depends not so much on whether the continuing leaders and the new players follow the specific timelines and directives set forth in the study. It depends on whether they have the resources, the skill, and the will to sustain the continual process of collaborative research, planning, and action for an interdependent system of theological education for mission in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.