

Report R13.3 (2026)

# Report on Unapproved Programs Preparing for the Office of the Holy Ministry



**Pastoral Formation Committee, 2023 Res. 6-03A**  
**The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod**  
Unofficial Resetting and Reformatting of the Report

## Report R13.3

### Report on Unapproved Programs Preparing for the Office of the Holy Ministry (Pastoral Formation Committee, 2023 Res. 6-03A)

#### LCMS Bylaws on Placement, Ordination, Commissioning—Why?

*“Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (1 Tim. 4:16)*

At the conclusion of the “Preface” to the Christian Book of Concord of 1580, the confessors enumerate four chief motivations in drawing together and drafting the Book of Concord:

- the extension of God’s name and glory;
- the propagation of His Word, from which we hope for salvation;
- the peace and tranquility of churches and schools; and
- the instruction and consolation of disturbed consciences. (Preface, 22)<sup>1</sup>

For these reasons also The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod was formed and still exists, as Article III, “Objectives,” of the constitution of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod attests. Enumerated among those objectives is also the recruitment and training of pastors. The bylaws of Synod reserve for the two seminaries of Synod, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis (CSL), and Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne (CTSFW), the duty, to the exclusion of other seminaries, to recruit, educate, form and train the pastors of Synod (Bylaws 2.7, 2.8, 2.9, 2.13.1, 3.10.5.7.10(h)).

Why?

In the cultivation of a pastorate fit for the high calling of serving the congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, the Synod has developed a handful of critical mechanisms to ensure two things:

- that the promise extended by the pastor at ordination can be knowledgeably, faithfully and conscientiously kept;
- that the congregation’s expectation of the pastor’s fidelity can be met.

The pastor’s promise is to “perform the duties of [his] office in accordance with [the Lutheran] Confessions, and that all [his] preaching and teaching and [his] administration of the Sacraments will be in conformity with Holy Scripture and with these Confessions.”<sup>2</sup> In the

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, references to the *Book of Concord* are from Paul T. McCain et al., eds., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> “Rite of Ordination” and “Rite of the Installation of a Pastor,” in *Lutheran Service Book Agenda* (St. Louis:

boilerplate language supplied by the Commission on Constitutional Matters and typically encoded in a congregation's constitution as Article 2 or 3, the "Confessional Standard," the congregation expresses its expectation of the standard to which the pastor will conduct his ministry when it says: "This congregation accepts without reservation: 3.1 The Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and practice. 3.2 All the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and < 2 of 12 > unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God, to wit: the three Ecumenical Creeds (the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed), the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Large Catechism of Luther, the Small Catechism of Luther, and the Formula of Concord."<sup>3</sup> One might express the matter this way: LCMS pastors for LCMS parishes; LCMS parishes for LCMS pastors.

Apart from that understanding and the practice that follows from it, the doctrinal fidelity of the member congregations and pastors of the Synod is wantonly and carelessly placed at risk. Indeed, as one sadly witnesses all too often, it fails. Such failure is a matter of both temporal and eternal consequence. No one is saved by his orthodoxy, but a right faith in Jesus cannot be long maintained under a false confession.

### **Why This is Vitally Important**

In the temporal realm, this failure violates the congregation's and pastor's obligation to proclaim the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), to abide by the teaching of the apostles (Acts 2:42) and "not [to] speak or write anything contrary to this Confession, either publicly or privately" (FC SD XII 40). It also violates the congregation's *right*, as baptized children of God, to receive the unadulterated teaching, witness and confession of the Holy Scriptures.<sup>4</sup> For their failure to preach this Word, the Lord Jesus upbraids the Pharisees who corrupt His Word when He calls them sheep-killers and opposes them (John 10). It also causes division (Rom. 16:17) thereby constituting a breach of love (1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:3-16).

Eternally, the consequences are dire. Paul warns the Galatians that a little leaven leavens the whole lump (Gal. 5:9), that the message of the "Christian" Judaizers is a "different Gospel" that cannot be called another, equal Gospel (ἕτερον εὐαγγέλιον, ὃ οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλο, [Gal. 1.6–7]). It is "the truth" — the Lord's Word — that sets free from sin, death and the power of the devil (John 8:31–32), not just a part of it or that truth mixed with error.

Heeding the imperative to keep love and a true confession of Jesus Christ, for the sake of both the saints and the lost, the LCMS has insisted that the formation of our pastors not be left to

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Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 166, 179.

<sup>3</sup> Commission on Constitutional Matters, "Guidelines for Constitutions and Bylaws of Lutheran Congregations," rev. 2012, 4–5.

<sup>4</sup> "Wherever the Church is, there is the authority [right] to administer the Gospel" (Tr 67).

others who ignore, despise or eschew the truth or mix it with falsehood, but that, for the sake of both the ministry and mission of the LCMS, this formation be committed to the LCMS' seminaries — Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, and Concordia Seminary, St. Louis (Bylaws 2.71., 2.8.1 (a), (c), 2.8.3 (a)). Indeed, to ensure the fidelity of the theological education and pastoral formation, the LCMS further requires that all faculty members staffed to the two seminaries receive prior approval. The prior approval committee consists of nationally elected representatives, to wit, “the President of the Synod (or his designee), the chairman of the Council of Presidents (or his designee), and the chairman of the Board for National Mission (or his designee).” It may grant prior approval for a man to be called to the faculty of a seminary only on the basis of “a thorough theological review” of the man and his work (Bylaw 3.10.5.7.3 (a)).

While clergy from other denominations who later in life discover their agreement with the teaching and confession of the LCMS may be admitted into membership in the Synod and serve parishes in our Synod through our colloquy program (Bylaw 3.10.2), the Synod, for good and self-evident reasons, does not admit to the roster men from LCMS congregations who have chosen (a) *not* to seek a theological education and pastoral formation from one of the two LCMS seminaries and instead (b) *to* seek a < 3 of 12 > theological education and pastoral formation from a seminary lacking the guarantees of fidelity provided by the bylaws cited above or from a seminary that is heterodox in teaching or unionistic in practice.

These two bylaw provisos — the exclusive use of pastors formed in Synod seminaries and prior approval of seminary faculty members based upon thorough theological review — protect the right of congregations to receive the ministration of the Gospel and the whole counsel of God in their midst and the ability and freedom of the pastors to conduct their office in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. Without these two bylaw provisos, this right of congregations and this ability and freedom of pastors are abrogated, and the truth of the Gospel, which alone creates saving faith, is placed at risk.

### **Unauthorized Seminary Programs**

Notwithstanding our Synod's agreement described above, two extra-synodical routes to earning the M.Div. have gained attention in the LCMS: a cooperative between Unite Leadership Collective (ULC) and Luther House of Study (LHOS) and, more recently, the establishment of The Center for Missional and Pastoral Leadership through the Center (thecenter.info) within the Institute of Lutheran Theology's Christ School of Theology ([cst.ilt.edu/cmpl/](http://cst.ilt.edu/cmpl/)).

Since at least 2020, the Rev. Dr. Tim Ahlman, along with his congregation Christ Lutheran Greenfield and the ULC, an organization dedicated to “connecting the dots between theology, ministry, and leadership to empower you to spread the Gospel in explosive ways,”<sup>5</sup> has been

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<sup>5</sup> “Get Started,” [uniteleadership.org](http://uniteleadership.org), accessed Feb. 9, 2026

running what Ahlman on his podcasts, *Lead Time* and the *Tim Ahlman Podcast*, has repeatedly referred to as an “experiment.” This experiment consists of enrolling students from Christ Lutheran Greenfield and numerous other LCMS congregations in LHOS to receive a degree from Kairos University, a completely online program for theological study. Students may enroll in an M.A. in counseling or an M.Div.

In addition, in February 2025 at the pre-conference in Phoenix, Ariz., for Best Practices in Ministry, the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey Kloha announced a new initiative through the Institute of Lutheran Theology (ILT) to create an online-only M.Div. program known as the Center for Missional and Pastoral Leadership (CMPL). Earlier, less public, announcements of the launch of CMPL were made by Tim Ahlman and Jeff Kloha at the Large Church Network Conference in San Diego on Jan. 24–25, 2025, and on Facebook on Feb. 7, 2025, respectively.<sup>6</sup> The program confers M.A., M.M., and M.Div. degrees.

### **Luther House of Study**

The LHOS curriculum is readily available. What follows is an analysis of that curriculum.

### **Overall Structure**

The LHOS curriculum, since its accreditation is through Kairos University, is characterized foremost as being “contextual” and “competency based.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Competencies**

The competencies outlined by the Kairos model consist of the following: < 4 of 12 >

1. Articulate how their life in Christ exhibits the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit as formed in their Christian community and devoted to the glory of God the Father.
2. Demonstrate skillful exegesis through in-depth biblical study and awareness of methodological frameworks.
3. Demonstrate effective cultural exegesis and awareness of cultural frameworks, empowering them for effective, faithful, dynamic, and culturally appropriate communication of the Gospel.
4. Demonstrate a coherent Christian theological understanding and awareness of theological frameworks, informing their life and ministry, including corporate worship of the Triune God.
5. Demonstrate appreciation and critical awareness of their own and other Christian traditions as implemented in strategies for ministry.

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<sup>6</sup> Source of January 22–24 announcement, Ron Mudge, CSL Provost, who was in attendance at the Large Church Network Conference; the Feb. 7, 2025, announcement is found at [facebook.com/watch/?v=2010013649497735](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2010013649497735). Accessed Feb. 9, 2026.

<sup>7</sup> [kairos.edu/academics/programs/master-of-divinity](https://kairos.edu/academics/programs/master-of-divinity), accessed on Feb. 9, 2026.

6. Articulate their understanding of Christian ethics and demonstrate how it informs daily living and their philosophy of leadership.
7. Demonstrate competent care and collaborative leadership informed by integrative reflection, an understanding of human and organizational systems, and emotional-relational intelligence.
8. Demonstrate competence in the integration of knowledge, character, and ability specific to their ministry context.
9. Articulate and engage their vocation in a mentored life, intentional Christian community, and whole-life stewardship.<sup>8</sup>

Chris Croghan, the academic director of LHOS, has indicated that as he and his team at LHOS were developing their curriculum in conjunction with Kairos, he advocated for competencies broad enough to allow for the “Lutheran emphasis” that LHOS sought to have in its curriculum.<sup>9</sup> The same set of competencies are thus used not only by Lutherans, but by a broad mix of differing confessions.

### **Mentorship**

Each student in the Kairos/LHOS program is assigned three mentors, who accompany the student all the way through his or her education: an LHOS faculty mentor, a vocational mentor and a personal mentor.<sup>10</sup> Students must demonstrate their nine-fold competency to these three mentors.<sup>11</sup>

### **Distance education modules**

Aside from their interactions with their vocational and personal mentors, students’ academic work consists of readings, written assignments and online modules. On average, 60–70% of the learning directed toward gaining a competency is not achieved synchronously, and the ratio of synchronous to asynchronous work varies greatly. Asynchronous elements require students to watch pre-recorded lectures, for example; synchronous elements are conducted via Zoom or other similar platforms. Because of the flexibility allowed by the preponderance of asynchronous learning modules, there is no specific curricular schedule to which students must adhere: Students thus pay a \$300 monthly fee for access to the curriculum and may take as short or as long as they wish.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> “Luther House of Study Curriculum Master of Divinity Kairos 9.0,” [docs.google.com/document/d/1e8okNL2DW1G0ZA9fLHIqgr6FMOKVEVJqWrX3dbevIUk/edit?tab=t.0](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1e8okNL2DW1G0ZA9fLHIqgr6FMOKVEVJqWrX3dbevIUk/edit?tab=t.0), accessed Feb. 9, 2026

<sup>9</sup> Zoom meeting between J.S. Bruss and Chris Croghan on Jan. 2, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> “Master of Divinity,” [kairos.edu/academics/programs/master-of-divinity/](https://kairos.edu/academics/programs/master-of-divinity/), accessed Feb. 9, 2026.

<sup>11</sup> Zoom meeting between J.S. Bruss and Chris Croghan on Jan. 2, 2025.

<sup>12</sup> “Students,” [lutherhouseofstudy.org/students/](https://lutherhouseofstudy.org/students/), accessed Feb. 9, 2026

Despite claims to the contrary, the Lutheran faculty of LHOS are not “confessional” Lutherans in the sense that LCMS has typically understood the term. Confessional Lutheranism, as understood by the LCMS, is undergirded by (a) confessing the verbal inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, and therefore both their inerrancy (errorlessness) and their infallibility (their inability to mislead or to fail to accomplish that which they set out to do); (b) subscribing the entire *Book of Concord of 1580* as a correct exposition of the verbally inspired, inerrant and infallible Scriptures, still determinative of doctrine and practice.

LHOS faculty have varied roster status. Chris Croghan, LHOS’s chief academic officer, was educated as an undergraduate at Augustana University in Sioux Falls, holds the M.Div. and Ph.D. from Luther Seminary (ELCA) in St. Paul, Minn., and is rostered in the ELCA.<sup>13</sup> CEO Sarah Stenson is a Lutheran, but holds the M.Div. from Sioux Falls Seminary (Baptist, now Kairos University); she is rostered in the LCMC with significant NALC ties.<sup>14</sup> Lars Olson, director of pastoral formation, is rostered in the ELCA; his wife also serves as a pastor.<sup>15</sup> Despite protestations to the contrary (and even the ELCA ordination vows) and based on the clear evidence of breaking with Scripture on the ordination of women, none of the faculty hold a quia subscription to the Lutheran Confessions<sup>16</sup> nor do they uphold the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures. They cite as their favorite work of theology a book by Gerhard Forde,<sup>17</sup> which is telling given the significant departures of Forde-esque theology from Confessional Lutheranism, as the LCMS has traditionally understood it.

## Curriculum

Transcripts from Kairos/Luther House of Study are markedly different from those of institutions, showing little concern for academic and theological rigor. With one exception, the transcript shows no credits and no grades; students may meet the requirements for a competency without taking the accompanying coursework. The confusing nature of the

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<sup>13</sup> “Chris Croghan,” [kairos.edu/faculty/chris-croghan](https://kairos.edu/faculty/chris-croghan), accessed Feb. 9, 2026; Rostered Ministers Results for “Croghan,” accessed Feb. 10, 2026

<sup>14</sup> “Sarah Stenson,” [kairos.edu/faculty/sarah-stenson](https://kairos.edu/faculty/sarah-stenson), accessed Feb. 9, 2026.

<sup>15</sup> “Get to know the Luther House of Study staff,” [lutherhouseofstudy.org/get-to-know-the-luther-house-of-studystaff](https://lutherhouseofstudy.org/get-to-know-the-luther-house-of-studystaff), accessed Feb. 9, 2026.

<sup>16</sup> A *quia* subscription to the Lutheran Confessions indicates that the one who subscribes them does so because they are a correct exposition of Holy Scripture. Conversely, there are Lutherans who hold a *quatenus* subscription — a subscription that indicates they accept the teaching of the Lutheran Confessions only to the extent they feel the Lutheran Confessions accurately represent the teachings of Scripture. While there are numerous varieties of *quatenus* subscription, they all tend to fall into one of two varieties. In the first variety, the subscriber holds a different confession than that of the Lutheran Confessions on one or more points; in the second variety, the subscriber verbally assents to the Lutheran Confessions (*quia* subscription) but teaches and allows teaching and practices that deviate from Lutheran Confessions.

<sup>17</sup> “Get to know the Luther House of Study staff,” [lutherhouseofstudy.org/get-to-know-the-luther-house-of-studystaff](https://lutherhouseofstudy.org/get-to-know-the-luther-house-of-studystaff) accessed Feb. 9, 2026

transcripts makes it nearly impossible to understand what a student has learned.

## Overview

Despite these difficulties, the curriculum does have a shape. It groups readings and written assignments under the nine competencies. Competency assessment seems to be built into the curriculum on the basis of a fairly standard pattern of written assignments: Students may choose one of a handful of parish-level writing assignments, such as a series of five 75- to 100-word bulletin inserts summarizing the four Gospels and Acts, or five 300-word newsletter articles that give an overview of the four Gospels and Acts, or a Bible study lesson plan to cover the four Gospels and Acts. The assignment for what appears to <6 of 12> be academic assessment is a 750- to 1000-word treatment of a passage from the Gospels or Acts.<sup>18</sup> The assignments are at best appropriate for an undergraduate survey course on the New Testament. This level of appropriation of theological content is found throughout the curriculum.

Finally, each of the nine competencies are measured by a “master assessment.” In the case of competency two, which focuses on the Bible, students submit two sermons, one on the Old, one on the New Testament, for evaluation. The sermons may be written out or recorded. Presumably the three mentors come to an agreement, or at least vote, on whether the sermons demonstrate competency.<sup>19</sup>

It is difficult to see how the ability to engage in close, critical reading is engendered by this curriculum.

## Reading Assignments

Perhaps the most distressing element of the curriculum, besides its low expectations for the level at which theology is to be grasped, is the reading list. While punctuated here and there by LCMS authors and Luther, the reading list is utterly dominated by Steven Paulson, Gerhard Forde and James Nestingen, ELCA and former ELCA theologians. With their well-known problems in the areas of scriptural inerrancy, the atonement and the third use of the law, and their Barth-inflected proclamation theology, the preponderance of these authors in the secondary literature that makes up so much of the curriculum represents a significant divergence from confessional Lutheranism. According to one student, LCMS theologians and teaching are often used as a foil.

Furthermore, the assignments in Luther are surprisingly basic. The vast majority consist of his introductions to the books of the Bible and some of his basic writings, such as those contained in Dillenberger’s *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*.

Students do encounter the entire *Book of Concord*. The interpretive readings that accompany the Book of Concord assignments tend to come from Paulson, Forde and Nestingen, along

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<sup>18</sup> “Luther House of Study Curriculum: Master of Divinity Kairos 9.0,” 7

<sup>19</sup> “Luther House of Study Curriculum: Master of Divinity Kairos 9.0,” p. 9.

with some LCMS authors. But on the whole, the “pattern of sound words” (2 Tim. 1:13) that our LCMS seminaries, CTSFW and CSL, uphold is utterly lacking.

### **Center for Missional and Pastoral Leadership**<sup>20</sup>

According to a video on the CMPL site, the program is intended to be “a fully-online, fully-accredited master of divinity program” aimed at missional leadership in the local congregation.<sup>21</sup> The CMPL program rests on five pillars: biblical, reformational, missional, affordable and global.

In line with its name, the video referenced above claims that the Center for **Missional** and Pastoral Leadership weaves mission into every class.

More concerning is the Center for Missional and **Pastoral** Leadership’s claim to be educating and forming pastors for the church. Such formation occurs entirely outside of the healthy LCMS oversight to which the LCMS seminaries willingly and gladly submit for the sake of maintaining sound doctrine. According to the CMPL FAQ, CMPL was founded at the request of (presumably LCMS) “congregations and church leaders” to “equip potential **pastors** and church workers for missional ministry in areas that are not < 7 of 12 > currently being served.” Quite explicitly, “The program is designed for students who are seeking to grow in service in their local ministry context, perhaps eventually to become a **pastor** or church leader.” “Congregations in every tradition, and in particular Lutheran congregations, are struggling to find **pastors** to serve them. In some cases, congregations go without a **pastor** for three and four years. This program will help raise up more **pastors** and leaders for congregations that need them, and especially congregations in settings where maintaining a full-time pastor is a challenge. Students are equipped not simply to occupy the office of **pastor**, but with tools to engage their congregations and communities with the Gospel, so that the Lord of the Church might call even more people to himself.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Overall Structure**

CMPL is housed in the Institute of Lutheran Theology in Brookings, S.D., a completely online institution of theological education, offering seven degrees: Ph.D., D.Min., S.T.M., M.Div., Master of Chaplain Ministry (M.C.M.), Master of Ministry (M.M.), and an M.A. CMPL presently enrolls students in one of three of those programs: M.A. [in Religion], M.M., and the M.Div. The curriculum for those three programs is structured in such a way that the M.A. (36 credits) uses a subset of coursework for the M.M. (45 credits), which in turn uses a subset of coursework for the M.Div. (90 credits). According to CMPL leadership, the enrollment of the “25–26” students is split roughly 1/3, 1/3, 1/3 among the programs. In other words, students

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<sup>20</sup> Information on CMPL can be found on the Center for Missional Pastoral Leadership Facebook page, *thecenter.info* and at *cst.ilt.edu/cmpl*

<sup>21</sup> “The Pillars of the Center for Missional and Pastoral Leadership Formation,” *cst.ilt.edu/cmpl*, accessed Feb. 9, 2026

<sup>22</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions,” *cst.ilt.edu/cmpl*, accessed Feb. 9, 2026. Emphasis added.

who enroll and begin coursework in one may apply for admission to another and bring their credits along.<sup>23</sup>

### **Mentorship**

Mentorship in the field for the program, which, as noted, enrolls both LCMS and non-LCMS students, is coordinated by CMPL faculty member the Rev. Todd Jones (LCMS rostered pastor), who serves as CMPL's Director of Formation.<sup>24</sup>

### **Distance education**

The CMPL program uses primarily synchronous, online coursework. While the CMPL model seems to have been dependent upon the formation of cohorts as a powerful educational tool, most students enrolled in Fall of 2025 vary in how many courses they are taking,<sup>25</sup> meaning that the starting cohort will soon break apart and its power as an educational tool will diminish. These distance courses are taught on a Fall Semester/J-Term/Spring Semester/Summer Semester schedule.

### **Faculty**

The CMPL faculty includes the following: Jeff Kloha (Associate Pastor at Our Savior Lutheran Church, Arlington, Va. [LCMS]), James Marriott (Associate Pastor at Faith Lutheran Church, Georgetown, Texas [LCMS]), Todd Jones (Candidate, living in Bella Vista, Ark., but rostered in LCMS Michigan District), Benjamin Haupt (Assistant Pastor at Christ Memorial Lutheran Church, St. Louis, Mo. [LCMS] and Global Executive Director at the Pastoral Leadership Institute, a non-RSO para-church organization).<sup>26</sup> Dale Meyer (President Emeritus of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis [LCMS]) served as a guest professor during <8 of 12> Fall 2025; and Matthew Borrasso (Pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Lexington Park, Md. [LCMS]) was likewise enlisted to teach in Fall 2025.<sup>27</sup> None of these faculty have received Synod prior approval for these teaching positions and are not sanctioned by the LCMS. CMPL instructors in Fall of 2025 included:

- Haupt — Introduction to Pastoral Ministry
- Borrasso — Faith, Knowledge and Reason
- Meyer — 1 Peter (elective)

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<sup>23</sup> Zoom meeting with Jeff Kloha, Sept. 22, 2025.

<sup>24</sup> [facebook.com/61572676226956/videos/718371994311322](https://facebook.com/61572676226956/videos/718371994311322), accessed Feb. 9, 2026

<sup>25</sup> Zoom meeting with Jeff Kloha, Sept. 22, 2025. At least one student is presently enrolled in three ILT/Christ School of Theology courses (some which are not CMPL courses), while others are enrolled in one or two.

<sup>26</sup> "Center Contributors," [cst.ilt.edu/cmpl](http://cst.ilt.edu/cmpl), accessed Feb. 9, 2026; current assignments from [locator.lcms.org/worker](http://locator.lcms.org/worker), accessed Feb. 9, 2026

<sup>27</sup> Zoom meeting with Jeff Kloha, Sept. 22, 2025. Current assignments from [locator.lcms.org/worker](http://locator.lcms.org/worker), accessed Feb. 9, 2026

- Kloha — Biblical Hermeneutics

Notwithstanding the numerous LCMS clergy associated with and teaching in the CMPL program, CMPL students may take ILT/Christ School of Theology courses, and ILT/Christ School of Theology students may enroll in CMPL courses. While the courses in the first term of offerings were taught by the LCMS pastors listed above, as of February 2026, CMPL courses are cross listed with ILT courses and staffed by ILT instructors.<sup>28</sup>

## Curriculum

The CMPL M.Div. curriculum is a boilerplate four discipline, theological seminary curriculum with courses in Biblical Theology (24 credits), Historical and Systematic Theology (24 credits), Philosophical Theology and Ethics (12 credits) and Pastoral Theology (21 credits). Together with introductory courses in hermeneutics, New Testament Greek and classical Hebrew, the M.Div. program comprises 90 credits. The M.A. [in Religion] (non-thesis, 36 credits) and the M.M. (45 credits) use smaller bits of the same curriculum. While the M.Div. requires Greek and Hebrew, the M.M. requires Greek only, and the M.A. requires no language. Language is taught not with the goal of interpreting or even translating the text on one’s own (“The student will still be dependent upon others’ translations”<sup>29</sup>), but with the goal of being able to make sense of a commentary. The curricula are shared with ILT/Christ School of Theology. Definite marks have been made on this shared curriculum by the CMPL faculty: Biblical Hermeneutics and the entire Pastoral Theology curricula have been rewritten by CMPL faculty and adopted by ILT/Christ School of Theology.<sup>30</sup>

To be noted is that only three credits are devoted to the reading of the *Book of Concord*, while the description of Biblical Theology courses is isagogic rather than exegetical (related, no doubt, to the Greek and Hebrew proficiency aimed for in the curriculum).<sup>31</sup> In other words, the level of close reading of the text of the Bible is diminished. The quick reading of the *Book of Concord* represents a deficient exposure to and encounter with the *Book of Concord*, and may hint at what is meant by the term “reformational” in the five pillars that undergird CMPL. The LCMS does not take “Lutheran” to mean a vaguely defined “spirit of the Reformation” but connects it specifically to the teachings and spirit of the *Book of Concord of 1580*. Nor should the sub-minimum level of proficiency in Greek and Hebrew be waved off. As Martin Luther put it, “We will not long preserve the gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit [Eph. 6:17] is contained.”<sup>32</sup> <Workbook page 70> <9 of 12 >

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<sup>28</sup> Conversation with ILT faculty member on Friday, Feb. 6, 2026.

<sup>29</sup> *Academic Catalog 2025–2026 The Christ School of Theology Institute of Lutheran Theology*, p. 44; [cst.ilt.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2023/10/CST-2025-2026-final-5.3.pdf](http://cst.ilt.edu/wpcontent/uploads/2023/10/CST-2025-2026-final-5.3.pdf), accessed Feb. 9, 2026.

<sup>30</sup> Zoom meeting with Jeff Kloha, Sept. 22, 2025.

<sup>31</sup> *Academic Catalog 2025–2026*, pp. 25, 45, 49.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Luther, “To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 45 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 360.

## Student Body

Of the “25 to 26” students currently enrolled in CMPL, “between five and six” are not in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. The remaining students “have a connection” with the LCMS and identify their congregational and synodical membership as LCMS, but when queried on the ILT application regarding the church body in which these students wish to serve, many put down a question mark.<sup>33</sup> Four to five of the 26 students in Kloha’s Biblical Interpretation class in Fall 2025 are from other [Lutheran?] church bodies, and at least one is an ELCA woman seeking ordination in the Canadian Association of Lutheran Congregations, whose official seminary is the Institute of Lutheran Theology.<sup>34</sup> CMPL leaders express hope that their graduates may be rostered in the LCMS, despite Bylaw 3.10.2.4.

## Is CMPL Distinct from ILT/Christ School of Theology?

(1) Since the CMPL link on *thecenter.info* directs to the Christ School of Theology site, CMPL and Christ School of Theology share a curriculum, even as CMPL faculty have had a hand in re-shaping some coursework.<sup>35</sup> (2) Because of (1), there is no evidence that Christ School of Theology and CMPL courses are *different* courses. (3) Because of (2), the only conclusion one may reach is that the courses CMPL students enroll in are those that Christ School of Theology students enroll in. (4) Finally, because of (3), the only conclusion one may reach is that CMPL students, notwithstanding the advertisement of four LCMS clergy as “Center Contributors” (namely, Ben Haupt, Jeff Kloha, James Marriott, and Todd Jones), may or will be taught also by ILT faculty members.

Indeed, the statement on the CMPL FAQ in response to the question, “How does the [CMPL] program balance deep theological learning with practical application in daily life?” that “the faculty of ILT and CMPL have years of experience” gives every indication that it is the intention of CMPL that its students will, indeed, learn from ILT faculty.<sup>36</sup> Finally, in a CMPL Newsletter 1:7 dated May 8, 2025, Kloha directs prospective CMPL students to ILT courses that were on queue for Fall 2025. Along with LCMS instructors Kilcrease (non-rostered), Kloha, Kolb and Schumacher, the instructors for those courses include Robert Benne and Dan Lioy.<sup>37</sup>

There is a certain amount of opacity regarding the roster status of ILT faculty, though with some investigation one may discover members of the ministerium of the LCMS (Rynearson), the NALC (Sorum), CALC (Kwok) and the LCMC (Hillmer). One member of the faculty holds

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<sup>33</sup> Zoom meeting with Jeff Kloha, Sept. 22, 2025

<sup>34</sup> “Training Clergy,” *calc.ca*, accessed Feb. 9, 2026.

<sup>35</sup> Note that [thecenter.info/cmpl](https://thecenter.info/cmpl) directs users to [cst.ilt.edu/cmpl](https://cst.ilt.edu/cmpl); accessed Feb. 9, 2026

<sup>36</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions,” [cst.ilt.edu/cmpl](https://cst.ilt.edu/cmpl), accessed Feb. 9, 2026.

<sup>37</sup> Jeff Kloha, “Fall Courses Announced!” in <https://thecenter.info/cmpl-notes1-7>, accessed Feb. 9, 2026

dual roster status in the NALC and the Evangelical Church Alliance (Lioy).<sup>38</sup> That said, of the nine teaching faculty, a couple (Benne, Kilcrease) are not ordained and others' ordination status is unclear (Hackman, Vestrucci), at least calling into question assertions by CMPL that "the faculty of ILT ... have years of experience serving as pastors, missionaries, and church planters..."<sup>39</sup>

Like the LHOS program, the CMPL/Christ School of Theology/ILT program is inadequate for the purposes of cultivating a ministerium in and for the LCMS that is faithful to the Holy Scriptures and our Confession. The affiliation of numerous faculty with the North American Lutheran Church (NALC), a church body < 10 of 12 > which, contrary to the Scriptures, ordains women — indeed, affirms the ordination of women<sup>40</sup> — betrays the unfaithful stance on Scripture shared or tolerated by numerous of the faculty.<sup>41</sup>

### **A concluding word on online theological education**

There is clearly not no value in online education (yes: the sentence reads "not no"). It has been widely effective in helping students earn certifications for various professional specialties. It helped, albeit limpingly and with significant negative downstream impacts, sustain U.S. education through the recent pandemic. And, in the absence of other modes of learning, it is one way to learn.

Indeed, numerous studies uphold the value of online education. Truly, students come out of online education knowing more than when they entered. But no one measures the value of education that way. The measure of educational goodness must always be of the *relative* value of one mode of education versus another, one curriculum over against another, this teaching method in comparison to that. Thus, the question before the church is not whether online is of *some* value — we readily concede it is. The question for the church must be of its value relative to that of face-to-face, in-the-flesh, residential seminary education. Nor is the church's question limited merely to education and knowledge; it must also extend to the formation of a man personally, spiritually, intellectually, emotionally and pastorally. The answer to the question of the value of online education is more sober and sobering when considered in relation to face-to-face, in-the-flesh, residential education, as numerous studies demonstrate.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The Evangelical Church Alliance denies the efficacy of the Sacraments, confessing Baptism merely to be a symbol and for believers only and the Lord's Supper merely as a commemoration. See "Tenets of Faith," [ecainternational.org/images/uploads/ECA\\_Standards/Tenets\\_of\\_Faith\\_15\\_July\\_2020.pdf](http://ecainternational.org/images/uploads/ECA_Standards/Tenets_of_Faith_15_July_2020.pdf), accessed Feb. 9, 2026

<sup>39</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions," [cst.ilt.edu/cmpl/](http://cst.ilt.edu/cmpl/), accessed Feb. 9, 2026

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Ames Fuller, "An Affirmation of Women in Ordained Ministry," [thenalc.org/en-us/2020/07/23/anaffirmation-of-women-in-ordained-ministry/](http://thenalc.org/en-us/2020/07/23/anaffirmation-of-women-in-ordained-ministry/), accessed Feb. 9, 2026

<sup>41</sup> The NALC's "The Bible as the Word of God," p. 8, shows this weakness. See [thenalc.org/en-us/2018/11/28/the-bible-as-the-word-of-god](http://thenalc.org/en-us/2018/11/28/the-bible-as-the-word-of-god), accessed Feb. 9, 2026.

<sup>42</sup> A good study on the impact of screen culture, including online education, is Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin, 2024). Most studies of online education are undertaken by advocates of online education. The following studies were undertaken

One study frequently cited by LCMS advocates for online theological education is titled “(Not) Being There: Online Distance Theological Education.”<sup>43</sup> A closer look at the study, however, reveals significant flaws: It deals with only one year of data and asks no longitudinal questions on issues such as attrition from the ministry. It also works with a data set that asks only students whether they feel they are prepared for the ministry, with no objective evaluation of their preparedness. One alarming statistic < 11 of 12 > cited in the study indicates that overall seminary enrollment among schools accredited by the Association of Theological Schools declined by 11% from 2006 to 2016, even as online enrollment grew by 195%. In other words, the expansion of online theological education coincides with an overall drop in enrollment in theological education.

In fact, in the online game, there are a handful of huge “winners” and a mountain of “losers.” In a study of 14 prominent seminaries who offer the M.Div. online, 3 show a gain in M.Div. enrollment (both online and residential) after introducing an online option for the M.Div.: Midwest Baptist Theological Seminary posted a gain of 358%, Reformed Seminary, a gain of 22%; and Palmer, a gain of 2%. But they are the outliers. The remaining 11 seminaries posted an average loss of overall M.Div. enrollment (both online and residential) of 32%. The average length of time it took to achieve that loss of enrollment was 8.3 years — a 4% decline per year. The same seminaries have lost 31% in their M.Div. enrollment since 2016, a time during which the two LCMS seminaries have enjoyed a fluctuating but stable enrollment in their M.Div. and Alternate Route programs.<sup>44</sup> While some M.Div. programs have seen astounding growth, that is coupled with global and extra-denominational expansion. But if the most pressing need LCMS seminaries fill — indeed, if this is their only charge — is supplying pastors for LCMS congregations and missions, both domestic and overseas, the surest route to meeting that need

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by people who are genuinely interested in the most effective and cost-effective way to educate: William T. Alpert, et al., “A Randomized Assessment of Online Learning,” *American Economic Review* 106, no. 5 (May 2016): 378–82; Eric P. Bettinger, et al., “Virtual Classrooms: How Online College Courses Affect Student Success,” *American Economic Review* 107, no. 9 (Sept. 2017): 2855–75; Cassandra Hart, et al., “Online Course-taking and Student Outcomes in California Community Colleges,” *Education Finance and Policy* 13, no. 1 (2018): 42–71; Nick Huntingdon-Klein, et. al., “Selection into Online Community College Courses and Their Effects on Persistence,” *Research in High Education* 58 (2017): 244–69; Stephanie Cellini and Hernando Gueso, “Student Learning in Online College Programs,” *AERA Open* 7, no. 1 (2021): 1–18. These studies indicate significant deficiencies with online education. Most interesting, perhaps, is the California Community Colleges study. The State of California clearly has an interest in maximizing outcomes and reducing costs. The study found that students who take the same course online as peers in person lag in learning, and that the lag in learning only builds over time. Deficient learning in a fundamentals course leads to greater deficiency in a mid-level course, which leads to even greater deficiency in an advanced or capstone course

<sup>43</sup> Sharon L. Miller and Christian Scharen, “(Not) Being There: Online Distance Theological Education,” *Auburn Studies*, no. 23 (Fall 2017). Available at [auburnseminary.org/reports/as2017-distance-education](http://auburnseminary.org/reports/as2017-distance-education). Accessed Feb. 9, 2026.

<sup>44</sup> Statistics available at [ats.edu/Data-Visualization](http://ats.edu/Data-Visualization) - DVT. Schools included in the study: Midwest Baptist Theological Seminary, Reformed Seminary, Palmer Theological Seminary, Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Luther Seminary, Fuller Seminary, Denver Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Asbury Theological Seminary, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Bethel Seminary, Talbot School of Theology, Northern [Baptist Theological] Seminary.

is through the residential M.Div. and Alternate Route programs. Inflating enrollment numbers through overseas and non-LCMS enrollments does not help the LCMS. And the surest way to decrease the number of theological candidates is by offering online M.Div. and Alternate Route programs.

But even such studies are insufficient. The charge given pastors is of eternal consequence: They must give an account, before God, for those in whose midst they are called by the Lord God to proclaim the Word and administer the Sacraments (Heb. 13:17). At every turn they encounter troubled consciences, a world set against the Lord and His Chosen One, and a cacophony of false teaching meant to deceive and mislead the believers, jeopardizing their eternal salvation. Yet, it is specifically in this context where they are called upon by the Lord and their solemn charge to shepherd the flock of Christ, to be ready in season and out, with patience and persistence, to reprove, rebuke, exhort (2 Tim. 4:2–5). For that reason, Paul instructed Timothy not to lay on hands hastily. It takes time, concentrated, intense time, to instill in a man in the theological, pastoral, personal and spiritual qualities that make a pastor.

Nor is the church's long-standing insistence on residential education a historical hiccup, as if the only hurdle to be cleared for non-residential, dis-enfleshed theological education and formation was the lack of online delivery. The word has been technologized and available for broad dissemination since before the time of Jesus, since the invention of papyrus. It was enhanced with the development of the minuscule script; the minuscule's impact was multiplied many times over with the advent of scriptoria; printing press followed scriptorium; voice recording succeeded printing press; the wide dissemination of video superseded even that feat. And yet, at no time throughout those two millennia did the church use those means to replace the face-to-face, in-the-flesh, residential formation of pastors.

That's because residential education and formation of the future pastorate of the church are rooted in the Lord's own enfleshment among us (John 1:14). The reflection of His enfleshment among us cast itself over the education and formation of His emissaries, who stand vice Christi (in Christ's stead), in both the Old and New Testaments. The Levites, charged with teaching the people the things of God, dwelled in < 12 of 12 >their own cities, where their business was the transmission of the things of God so that every new generation of Levite could faithfully teach it to all Israel. The "sons of the prophets" located in Bethel, Jericho, Gilgal and Ephraim gathered, lived, slept and ate together as they learned to become prophets in Israel (2 Kings 2–6). The apostle Paul was educated and "raised up" in his own rabbinic training far from his home, Tarsus, at the feet of Gamaliel in Judea (Acts 22:1–3). And the Lord Christ called His disciples, the future apostolate of the holy Christian church, to drop their nets and follow Him (Luke 5:1–11; John 1:35–51). To those unwilling to leave behind nets, parents, plough and livelihood, the Lord Jesus had words of rebuke (Luke 9:57–62; Matt. 8:18–21): he cannot stand *in loco Christi* who must have a place to lay his head. Indeed, in one of the few educational-formational scenes we get in the New Testament after Christ's ascension, Apollos, the teacher, has gathered around himself "about twelve" disciples (future pastors) in Ephesus, where together they were instructed and grew in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ so

that they might in turn bring this message to church and world (Acts 19:1–10).

*O Lord, grant unto Your church faithful pastors who shall declare Your truth with power and live according to Your will. Send forth laborers into Your harvest and open the door of faith unto all unbelievers and unto the people of Israel. Amen.*