

“The Place of the Local Church in Global Pastoral Training”

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SUMMARY:

Greg Strand framed the discussion with three scriptural foundations for the pursuit of theological training. He noted that such training must be christologically grounded, pneumatologically motivated, and missiologically focused [3–7]. He then invited three of the dialogue participants, each representing a different organization, to share their response to the question: “What is the role of the local church in global pastoral training?” [9].

First, Doug Wieber, a local church pastor, noted that training in the context of the local church is beneficial (a) because it helps overcome an “anti-education” or “anti-seminary” bias that is felt in many contexts and (b) because it is approachable for people of all educational backgrounds [12–13]. Second, Alejandro Mandes, a church planter and co-founder of the EFCA’s Gateway program, added that training pastors in the context of the local church is especially beneficial when, as is often the case, when a pastor is actively working without having had any formal theological training [16]. He was careful to add, however, that this type of training can work alongside formal seminaries, rather than as a replacement [18–19]. Third, Mark Hendrickson, co-founder of ProMETA, an overseas training organization, commented that the local church ought to take responsibility for training their own leaders [23]. He noted that training should have the mission of holistic discipleship rather than simply leadership skills development, and that this could be accomplished by equipping students for transformation rather than merely transmitting information [24–26].

On this foundation, the conversation centered on several foci. The group developed Hendrickson’s comment that leadership training is best accomplished in the broader context of discipleship [24–26, 30]. It was noted that, apart from this context, the value of theological training is lost [52]. That is, when students are actively involved in the work of ministry in a discipleship setting, they are faced with theological questions that are relevant to ministry [54]. In this way, students gain an awareness of the value of theology, and theology is modeled as a guide for life change and growth in Christlikeness [56, 68]. This provides students with intrinsic motivation for seeking theological training [57]. In this sense, Dave Butler noted, theology is “the most practical matter that the church can pursue” [53].

The importance of validation was approached from two different angles: validating the training programs themselves and vetting those trained by the programs. First, regarding the need to validate the training program, the question arose how one could go from a church-based training program—such as Gateway—to an accredited institution [70]. This question is all the more relevant, it was observed, because different denominations have different requirements for the formal training of their pastors [36, 39–40]. One proposed solution, the one used by the Gateway program, was to work toward an accredited degree through CLEP. In the end, however, it was noted that the local church would ultimately have to step into the role of validating training [86–88, 98, 102].

Second, the dialogue participants noted the importance of vetting those trained by church-based programs because, they agreed, training programs alone cannot qualify a pastor for ministry [50, 64]. Thus, with either training through a formal, accredited institution or through a church-based program, a local church would be obligated to confirm that a pastoral candidate is gifted for and called to pastoral ministry [65, 67]. This led to the recognition of an additional benefit of church-based training, namely, that a church-based program of theological education can provide training to people in every area of the church's ministry [60]. In this way, all church members would have the opportunity to grow in Christlikeness through this training [81–82]. From here, those who are gifted and equipped for pastoral ministry can further pursue this calling [67, 76, 82].

Several other considerations were mentioned throughout the dialogue. Training in the local church helps to overcome language and literacy barriers to education [13, 42, 44–45]. While the local church should be the primary context for theological training, it was agreed that collaborating with parachurch ministries allows for a broader range of theological perspectives to be taught within the local church [41, 96, 107]. It was also stated that formal theological institutes will be increasingly unable to fill the growing need for theological training, further necessitating the local church to take up this work [100].

Greg Strand concluded the dialogue by noting several questions that still needed to be addressed: What content should be taught? What are the means? How will the content of this theological training be delivered? What are the strengths and weaknesses of proposed models? What obstacles remain to be overcome? [109]. The dialogue was closed in prayer.

TRANSCRIPT:

[4] Greg Strand: All of you have received information, and so thank you, Matthew and Jonathan, for pulling this together. I thought it might be helpful if we take just a few minutes to frame the dialogue. These are familiar texts of Scripture, but I think it's vital for us Bible people to frame what we're going to talk about in Scripture. I thought I would just briefly look at three texts, and there's a reason for that that grounds our discussion.

[5] Our first comes from Colossians 1, a text that we're very familiar with, and Paul says this: "Him," that is, Christ—well, go back one: "To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me" [Col. 1.27–29]. This situates what we're doing as seeking to bring people to maturity in Christ, christologically. That is, it's grounded christologically, so that's the first thing to bear in mind: what we are about today is christologically grounded.

[6] Notice, secondly, again, a very familiar text which we are committed to ourselves, and it's really the heart of this discussion. It comes out in Ephesians 4, verses 11 through 16, and I will take just a moment to read that. Here's what Paul writes: "He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" [Eph. 4:11–16]. This, friends, is in many respects pneumatological. That is, it is the Holy Spirit who gives gifts. And it's the gifts that the Spirit gives, which are people, that really have a christological focus.

[7] The last one, very familiar, but this completes our focus this morning, and it comes out of Matthew 28:18–20: "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age'" [Matt. 28:18–20]. Friends, not only is this christologically grounded, not only is it pneumatologically motivated, but the end goal is a missiological focus, and that's really, friends, what we're about as we talk about this topic and answer the question, or at least respond to the question: "What is the role of the local church in global pastoral training?"

[8] Let me now pray, and then I'll frame where we're going to go. I've asked a few of you to introduce the topic for us by sharing what you're doing, and then we'll open it up for further discussion. Let's open in a word of prayer.

[Greg Strand opens in prayer.]

[9] The question that is before us is as follows. You've been asked the question, or you've been sent that question. And that is: "What is the role of the local church in global pastoral training?" I thought it would be helpful to frame this, or at least get the discussion rolling, by asking three individuals representing three different entities as we consider answering this question, and the first is Doug Wieber. You'll see his information in the material that was sent to you. He is a local church pastor, been a pastor for many years, and has served in that location for many years. And he's committed to training pastors or leaders in the context of a local church. And so I've asked Doug to lead out. And then secondly, following Doug, will be Alejandro Mandes. Alejandro has church planted, has been part of a local church, and has started the Gateway ministry for training people, not only in English but in Spanish here in the States. He is the director of All Peoples, and so represents, to some degree, the EFCA [Evangelical Free Church of America]. And he'll be the second. Then the third, Mark Hendrickson, who oversees and co-founded ProMETA, reaching people in another culture, and so I've asked him, thirdly, to share, answering this question from his vantage point. And we'll give these individuals five or ten minutes, whatever they need, and then from there, be prepared, jot down your questions, and be prepared to engage and share what you're doing, or ask questions in between as well. So with that, Doug, would you please begin?

[10] Doug Wieber: Sure! Is David Smith or Dave Butler in the conversation? A couple guys I invited.

[11] Jonathan Armstrong: Dave Butler is with us.

[12] Doug Wieber: Good! Dave and I have had numerous conversations, and for us, one of our dilemmas is that we live in an area where there are a number of small churches with small congregations, single pastors—and Dave can comment on this—but there is almost an anti-education or anti-seminary feel that I'm sensing from some of the guys. And I'm not sure where that comes from. It's a bias that says, "If you go to seminary or if you are theologically educated, then you are somehow above the average person of your congregation."

[13] Another dilemma we face here, and this surprised me a little bit, in our neck of the woods—we are in North Idaho and we have a number of folks, particularly men, who are not readers. And so our education has to consider the fact that it is very difficult for them to read books. So, what we're trying to do is establish—and we've done it by fits and starts, we're not very far along—we're trying to establish a grid whereby we up the education level for the average person in the congregation. Those who are going into pastoral ministries begin in that kind of leadership pipeline thing, and then increase and go through some additional formalized education or more formalized education like Gateway or those kinds of things in our church. We're writing pastors from all around our community in smaller burghs, and what I'm excited about is the possibility of them getting into some of the education without having to travel so far. So, briefly, that's what we're trying to do.

[14] Greg Strand: Thank you, Doug! Let's hang onto our questions. I'll think we'll frame the whole dialogue here first, and then we'll ask specific questions. So Alejandro, if you'd be kind enough to share.

[15] Alejandro Mandes: First, I want to give a disclaimer. I have focused my presentation, but I have many, many who spoke into it, including Ricardo and Greg Strand. I think one of the things that really helps EFCA is our ethos. Three things in particular, which are not foreign to anybody else, but lay leadership was a very key part. That's where the word, "free," comes from. And so there's a high value on that, or there was for a long, long time. And then of course, people of the book and people of the mission. So, whenever you're trying to craft something, you want to make sure that those are the guardrails that you keep on reminding people of, so that they don't think you're importing something new.

[16] Now, in some ways, Gateway is back to our future. But I thought it was very interesting what my brother just shared about how some people devalue people who study [12]. Sometimes that does happen among Pentecostals, because their epistemology is more experience-based. But, you know what, here's the interesting thing: when we started Gateway, people who were going through Gateway were also thought of as "less than," so it was a little bit hilarious to me that whatever people aren't is what they don't value. But, you know, when you have a polar, like Greg and I, who really do get each other and yet get the non-other, it makes it easier, but we always have to frame it within our ethos. In the Evangelical Free Church, "autonomy" means the church hires the pastor. If he's a butcher, a baker, or a candlestick maker—but they voted for him—he's in! So, you know, Greg and I and Ricardo had to start realizing that we've got these men that have been recognized by their congregation, but they're not credentialed. It's creating a real unhealthy situation because we now have people that don't know who we are or what we think, but they're part of us.

[17] So Gateway was really a Trojan horse into a vacuum area that I think has really been a blessing. Ricardo can affirm this, but we used to talk with the Hispanics, and they would say—well, their giving to the denomination was called "fair share"—and they would say, "Where's the 'fair' and what has been 'shared'?" They don't say that anymore. In fact, three quarters of Gateway now is not ethnic led. It has really gone viral. It has gone into our movement and the beauty of it is that pastors are training and mentoring pastors. When I was in seminary, my favorite teachers, and if I could do anything in terms of picking the professors, they were always people who had been pastors. There's something real. Not that I spurn the academic, but I certainly thought that.

[18] I did want to say one other thing that I think is really, really critical to help bring these two different groups together. Our seminary, Trinity, that I love very much, really—I had a daughter who worked in Trinity, and she would hear some of the blow-back about Gateway, and they thought we were sort of cutting them out, but most of the people that go through Gateway can't afford Trinity or face linguistic barriers. So they didn't understand what we were doing even though it was clear what we were saying. And then there was one of our district supervisors who said, "I'm not going to support anything Gateway, because it's kind of sabotaging our seminary, and who are these guys anyway?" And I came up with an illustration

that really, it was the Lord giving me this. I said, “Listen, brother, I have seminary degrees, I value them. Keep doing seminary, please! But you guys, in warfare, are like our Abrams tanks. You guys can go places. You can blow the big rocks. At Gateway, we’re training the guerrilla warriors, or the infantry. And these men and women can go places where you can’t take your tank. So why would an artillery unit or a mechanized unit not want to have the infantry?” And so it’s not a matter of competition; it’s a matter of where God is at work.

[19] The last thing I’ll say, and then I’ll pass it on, is that one of our leaders made this comment that is so true: “It takes all kinds of pastors and churches to reach all kinds of people.” And if we start narrowly saying: “This is where God is going to work,” then we’re going to go the way of Jerusalem, the seven churches, Rome, and everybody else. We’re just going to be blown away. We’ve got to be very, very open to what God is doing and working there. Ricardo and the other team [*unclear*]. So many of the leaders keep speaking back into what is Gateway, and really, they’re the ones with the boots on the ground. They’re always morphing it and changing it and suggesting, and so the most important thing is to be sensitive to God. People are going to get their pride bubbling up here and there. We’ve got to make sure we don’t let that bend us from what the main objective is, which is to evangelize, make disciples, and plant churches.

[20] Greg Strand: All right, thank you, Alejandro. I’m sure everybody is eager to jump in, but hang on, hang on, we’ve got one more. Mark, are you there?

[21] Mark Hendrickson: Yeah, I’m here.

[22] Greg Strand: Yes please, thank you, Mark, for joining, and if you would be able to share a little bit further, and share a little bit with us your thoughts as well.

[23] Mark Hendrickson: You bet! I’d just like to share three things trying to answer the question: “What is the role of the local church in global pastoral training?” The first is that I think that as much as practically it’s possible, the local church should assume the responsibility for training its own leaders. And we can use outside sources and programs to help that, but the church itself should not absolve itself of being—the buck stops with the local church. And that hasn’t often been the case. When I was at Trinity 35 years ago, I felt my training in theological education was somewhat incomplete because I was going to start new programs overseas, so I snuck over to Wheaton at night and took a night course from Dr. Lois McKinney, which I think was one of the best courses I ever took. And she made the statement that when theological education programs fail to meet the needs of the local church, the local church has no one to blame but themselves. The church gets the leaders that it deserves. And part of that is because the church is disconnected from theological education, so they really can’t complain. They get what they deserve. And so I think there needs to be a reconnecting of the local church as the ultimate entity responsible for theological education.

[24] Secondly, I think it’s really important that the local church make discipleship the mission of the church, not leadership development, and then situate pastoral leadership training within the context of discipleship. And this is another problem, speaking of the majority world, that is not happening as much as it should, because if leaders are not first and foremost disciples, global pastoral training is in big trouble. And by discipleship I mean a lifelong process of being

transformed into greater Christlikeness. And then you can lead by your own example. And the Lausanne Conference of 2010 addressed this need in what's called the Cape Town Commitment. And I just want to read it to you, because I think this is really relevant to this discussion:

[25] "Training leaders to be godly and Christlike is the wrong way around. Biblically, only those whose lives are already displaying basic qualities of mature discipleship should be appointed to leadership in the first place. The answer to leadership failure is not more leadership training but better discipleship training. Leaders must first be disciples of Christ himself, and it is the role of the local church to see that is done." And I think as the local church assumes more of the responsibility of pastoral training, it's better positioned to do that.

[26] And then thirdly, the local church should employ equipping strategies that transform rather than merely transmit information. We tend to teach as we've been taught, and unfortunately we've had a lot of people talk at us for years and years through monologues, and so much of our teaching is limited to knowledge transmission rather than life change, and local churches need the kind of leadership programs that develop the whole person. Global leadership training must not be limited to merely foundational knowledge, although it's foundational. We need things like mentoring, coaching, dialogue, problem-solving, counseling, etc. And then the other comment that was just made is that people are not readers [13]. So the aspect of the delivery of knowledge needs to be more in the form of orality rather than PDF files, because people don't read as much we wish they would. So those are just three things that I think are key in kind of repositioning the local church in the driver's seat of theological education and training.

[27] Greg Strand: Thank you, Mark, that's very helpful. This has been very helpful to hear the perspectives of each of you three. Please, now, others of you, I've got a whole series of questions, but I would like for others, first of all, to ask any questions of these three that you may have. And subsequent to that, if you'd prefer, to share what's your answer to the question, please, let's do it.

[28] Curt Parton: If I could—oh, go ahead!

[29] Ricardo: No, go ahead.

[30] Curt Parton: I was just interested. I wanted to ask Mark, the idea of leadership training, pastoral development, that happening within the context of discipleship, that's huge. And I want to say a hearty amen to that! The idea that the local church should be taking the responsibility and be somewhat in the driver's seat of pastoral training and development, within the context of discipleship, could you flesh that out a little bit, how you see that? How do you see that happening and being facilitated?

[31] Mark Hendrickson: Well, it's one of the errors that we've made in our own ministry that we're trying to correct, because when we started ProMETA, which is offering two master's degrees internationally, we basically ignored the local church. So we've fulfilled a need, but I don't think it's the best way to do it after all these years of experience. We need to decentralize

our program and put it more in the context of local churches and regional areas in a combination of what we offer and what they need, which are different. That is, it's just better educationally rather than—because what happens is, whether you do it online or through resident seminaries, at the end of the day, the church exists to serve the seminary rather than the seminary exists to serve the church. So we've got to flip that around—and I want at some point without preaching, but since my training is in educational technology, I want to say that we have opportunities at our doorstep that a few years ago would have been unthinkable. God has given us the wherewithal to actually do that globally, and it's going to get better and better. And so that's just something we need to do.

[32] Obviously every local church can't run its own seminary and it shouldn't, but I think education is much better done, much better contextualized when the local church sees itself as really being the ultimate foundation or group entity responsible. Obviously we need to cooperate and we need programs like Gateway, which is excellent. Gateway is a lot better positioned to put the local church in the driver's seat than just about anything, so I think that's a really good model.

[33] Greg Strand: Does that help, Curt?

[34] Curt Parton: It does, yes, I just wanted to hear a little bit more.

[35] Greg Strand: Do you have a follow-up at all?

[36] Curt Parton: Here's a question that I have that I think is related to this and also just a broader question, if we could hear from some of the people who shared on this. One of the questions that I've been perceiving, and this is not just in a Free Church context but in a broader evangelical—Western evangelical, admittedly—context: Is there somewhat of a cognitive dissonance in the perception of what is sufficient pastoral training? On the one hand, it's very common for us to encourage guys who need training, "You don't necessarily have to go to seminary to be trained in pastoral ministry, and you can get training through other means." On the other hand, there is also this expectation, often, that's implied or sometimes even communicated, that seminary and a Master of Divinity or whatever, is really kind of the gold standard, and those are the kind of guys that are really trained. For example, many of the training programs—and again, this is in the broader evangelical context—many of the training programs that train guys in a non-formal setting, the trainers often have to be seminary graduates, which communicates that you can take this training and you can become a pastor, but that doesn't really give you the training. And so one of the things that I'm curious about is if that perception is shared.

[37] And also, is there some consensus? As Mark shared, there are things that we have available to us now that are just absolutely incredible [31]. It's amazing how many seminaries are now offering fully online M.Div.'s and these types of things, and I think there are opportunities now for non-formal church-based training and seminaries to come into partnership in many ways. But it seems like there is a need to come to some kind of consensus on what is actually necessary for pastoral training, and either come up with means to get the non-formal guys to be receiving that same level of training, or maybe readjust our expectations

on the academic level as far as pastoral training is concerned, in pastoral theological education. So, does anybody else share that perception of the cognitive dissonance?

[38] Greg Strand: Yeah, Will, go ahead.

[39] Will Savell: Curt—well, first of all, thank you guys for letting me be here today. Curt, just to add, thinking of the world that I operate in, some denominations are requiring a certain standard of education for ordination. And you can't function as a real pastor unless you have that certain standard with the presbyteries or assemblies or whatever. To throw that in there as well, from what I'm seeing, would be ordination. If we go back to Mark, maybe Mark can answer that question, but I wanted to put that out there on top of what you were already saying.

[40] Greg Strand: Yeah, if I could add to that, then, Curt and Will, there's also that some denominations have expected an accredited degree. So in the past, it's not just a degree from, say, a Liberty, that doesn't have the ATS accreditation; that wouldn't suffice. But you need an M.Div. from an accredited school. And there are some that still would consider that. Now, the Free Church moved away from expecting an M.Div. degree. We would refer rather to a certain level of competency, regarding ordination, just so you know our policy, but it doesn't matter how it's attained, that is, whether it's non-formal or whether it's formal. But there is a certain level of theological competency that is required, but how you get doesn't matter, really. It really doesn't matter. So that's how we have attempted to apply and live out some of what Curt said, and then Will, as you are also saying, how do we live this out without making two tiers or a standard someone can't attain anyway.

[41] The other thing I would throw out here is—and I'd be interested to hear some further discussion about this—and Mark, this gets to some of what you're saying as well [31]. I fully agree that the local church is the primary locus of the theological education of God's people. The local church is the primary locus. It's not the exclusive, but it's the primary. Now, there are churches, large churches, which live this, for which I'm grateful. One of the things that I'm noticing is that what happens then is the local church is the place, but then it almost becomes the only place, and what I mean by that is that the—I'm going to use the expression, but forgive me—the celebrity pastor—forgive me, that's not always the way the pastor sees himself—but that person becomes the view. Everything that that pastor holds, and there's a tendency to, in a sense, narrow on some of the broader issues in which evangelicals have allowed some liberty and charity. So it seems to me that that's where the rightness of a local church, and some of the limitations, which then someone who has had further training, who has been exposed a little bit further to these things, and it is okay to have differing views on this. Well, I throw that out there for thoughts and further discussion.

[42] Ricardo Palmerin: I would like to make a comment about what our brother Doug says, because I think we have some similarities among the Latinos in the EFCA [12-13]. We've had pastors that were doing the ministry but didn't have theological formation, so it was a good problem to have congregations led by pastors, but they need training. So Gateway was the answer, I would say, to provide non-formal theological training that was affordable and

accessible to Hispanic pastors. We start with Hispanic pastors in mind, the wave of immigrants coming through the United States from Latin America countries was very, very evident. I'm going back maybe 50 years ago. And then there was a real need to train our pastors and put them in the paths to get credentials with the Evangelical Free Church. So definitely they were not able to attend and get theological education like Trinity, but then again it was a response.

[43] And then, of course, there are some cultural issues involved, and in that sense we think we're in that missional and global perspective, because the Latino community is not a monolithic culture. We have multicultural churches, actually, no matter that all of us speak Spanish. So it was a good challenge to approach the Latinos and then provide this training, and actually we see the connection between Latinos in the United States and now Latinos in Latin America. So in that sense, for instance, the motivation of one of our pastors—and this pastor is training his congregation using Gateway—is to provide theological training for those who maybe in the future will go back to their countries in Latin America. So what I'm saying is that Gateway was a response for that situation, but we have questions. We try to maintain the level of training and capacity that pastors can apply to be licensed with the Evangelical Free Church, eventually be ordained, and some of them from being lay leaders are now ordained in the Evangelical Free Church.

[44] So we see that connection that was mentioned [13], that we have the same problems, we have our non-readers, basic educated lay leaders, and how we can provide theological formation for them.

[45] Greg Strand: I guess I could add—thank you, Ricardo—I would also say this, that one of the major books, it's a theological exposition of our statement of faith, which is a foundation of affirmation and articulation for those that are pursuing credentialing. We have that book. *Evangelical Divisions* is what it's called. We're in the process of reading that, and so now there will be a recording, so that someone who is not a reader, as Ricardo has said [44], and I think Doug said at the front [13], that they will be able to hear it. And so we're being intentional about creating some of these means, using some of these means and some of these resources to recognize some of the realities. I was going to say limitations, and you know, they're limitations if we have a unified and uniform expectation, but if we have an end goal, and we allow some liberty of how to get to that end goal, then I think "limitations" would be the wrong way to look at it. It just looks at some other sorts of means of attaining the end goal.

[46] Alejandro Mandes: Can I address the literacy issue? I have a brother who claims to be semi-illiterate. He claims to be illiterate, but it's interesting, he's an auto mechanic. When it comes to reading technical books about fixing a car, all of a sudden he's un-illiterate! I'm not using it right, but brothers, let's be real honest here, it's about a value. And people will read what they value. I know that there's such a thing as illiteracy, I know it, but I think—in Gateway, one of the things that we did was we geared down, and the things that they read they all of a sudden started changing the literacy issue. Once they finished at Gateway, they started asking, "What else is there?" And I think when we keep that level up high, we're not really tempting them, but when we bring it down to the level of what I call "T-shirt" theology—you know, Grudem is really interesting because he's got three levels of theology. He's actually got four.

He's got his big, he's got his little one, which is in English and Spanish, then he's got the littler one, and then he's got the audio. But when people start seeing value, all of a sudden, the literacy starts going up. And I think we are the problem. We keep on saying, "Come on up here where we are," and we don't provide this scaffolding. Remember, the disciples were uneducated, illiterate men, and they turned the world upside-down.

[47] One other thing, and then I'll put my hand down and mute myself. Another program I work with is called Immigrant Hope, which deals with immigrants. By the way, 82 million first and second generation—they would be the 22nd largest country in the world. There was a council meeting of all different denominations, and I mean very different denominations, sitting side by side and talking about how they deal with immigrant leaders in their church. And I won't mention names, but for example, we won't license or ordain an undocumented immigrant. Part of it is because of the Timothy and Titus passages where it talks about "above reproach," [1 Tim. 3.2, Titus 1.6-7] but one of the other denominations (I didn't even give our point of view) said, "We are licensing and ordaining all kinds of immigrants in our denomination. Immigrants are the future. They are growing. Our denomination has seen a steep rise in church planting and making disciples through these immigrants." Now that's a very utilitarian view. I'm not going to call it unbiblical. I'm not even going to go there. The point I do want to make is that there's a value issue there in terms of raising that value, but there's also an understanding that we've got to get to them because they are the future. And sometimes that means changing our value system, what we consider as necessary.

[48] I like the way that Greg says it, you know, what we're trying to do is get people up to a certain capacity level [40], and I like what you all are saying in terms of doing it in the church. But I don't think we should surrender the high ground at all in terms of literacy. I understand orality and I love that, I do that. I think we maybe even start with orality, but we really need to help people scale up to the level of their ability, and I think it's really crucial. I'm not saying everybody needs to be up here, but remember that little saying, "All kinds of pastors for all kinds of churches" [19]. And we shouldn't set the bar so low. If someone has a gift and a calling and a value, and they want to go up—and one of the things we've found is that as our Hispanic pastors started going to Gateway and getting theological training, all of sudden, guess what, they started sending their kids to seminary. They now see the value. Whereas before they would reject, "You don't want to go there," all of a sudden we have more of our pastors' children who are moving on, so don't discount the value of what's there.

[49] Greg Strand: I appreciate that, Alex. Part of it is this, just so you know. And Dave Butler will speak next, he's had his hand raised, so thank you for your patience, Dave. But the thought is this: that that is something that really needs to be said from Alejandro as a Latino, not me as a white, because too often, if it's a white guy saying this stuff, it's sort of like you're expecting people to come up to our white standards, and of course that's a huge discussion right now as well. But to have my Latino brother say these things, and we are in partnership together on these things, it's a powerful reality, so it's really not compromising the standard, but doing all we can to ensure we're helping people, coming alongside of people to help them to get there.

[50] The other thing I would say, and then, Dave, please speak, and that is that we need to remember as well that as we're doing training, not everybody is called and gifted to serve as a pastor. And so, there are different levels of ability, there are different levels of giftedness, there are different levels of required preparation, so it's not completely egalitarian. It is in the fact that we are the priesthood of believers, but it's not in the sense that God has given some as teachers and preachers, and we're to equip the body. So there's also that which I think is helpful and important to bear in mind. Dave, please!

[51] **Dave Butler:** I would like to hitchhike on Alejandro's comment [48]. I think one of the struggles in terms of teaching theology in the churches is that ultimately where the church is today in the West is there's no consequence for bad theology, either real or perceived. Sit in on an elder meeting and one will watch what takes place when a question about finances comes up. Rather than viewing it through theological grid, a church or the elders will slide over to a business grid, and the church will survive. And I think we can not only miss the value of good theology, we can just simply build hedges around ourselves so that we don't have to operate within solid theology. We can take all kinds of organizational structures that come from outside of what the Scriptures have to say and apply them, and the church can survive for decades, and so there's no real motivation to take a look at matters deeper.

[52] I was impressed by this thought by reading the book by Packer called *A Quest for Godliness*, where he describes the theology of the Puritans as having been very real because average lifespans were quite short and the difficulty of days was quite high. And what sustained people was really solid theology, and I think hitchhiking actually onto that was a comment made by Art Azurdia in a message I was listening to this last week from the Book of Revelation, where he described Puritan preachers, Edwards and Newton and Bunyan, as being really quite high-level theology, and the congregation tying into it because it was demand by their lives. And I don't know how to bridge over that gap, but if I might say this, I do believe that theology can be taught in the classroom, but I also think it's life to life. And I would encourage and challenge fellow pastors in this, and do, as Doug and I have had this kind of "iron sharpens iron" conversation over many years, is that as we invest in the lives of the men that God has led us to we have to show them the value of theology and why they want to be involved in a deeper understanding of the Scriptures, so that they might understand who God is.

[53] And then I actually think that theology is one of the most—no, I'm just going to be straight, it's the most practical matter that the church can pursue, because just think of the things that people struggle with. I struggle with my marriage. Well, who better to lead one in marriage than the Bridegroom, Christ himself? If we understand who Christ is, we're going understand how to interact better in our marriages.

[54] **Doug Wieber:** Greg, this is Doug. I can't put my hand up because I'm on a phone. One of the things that I think—and it may be Mark who alluded to it—is that what we need to do is train those who are already godly and maturing [24-25]. I think part of our problem that I see is that we sort of try and educate upside-down. We take young guys and send them to seminary hoping they might be able to parlay that into ministry. I think what happens, and I think it was Ricardo or Alex who was talking about the literacy thing [46], when people need more theology

and more accurate theology and more of God because they're encountering real life issues, suddenly their value goes up and now they're hungry to learn. And it's almost as if we could in the local church find those who are actually involving themselves in ministry, and I realize the Great Commission is for all us, but those who are actually practicing it and interested in it, the people I find most interested in learning now. Even if literacy was a problem, I agree with Ricardo, if they have been encountering particularly unsaved folks who are asking them questions they don't have answers to, they're now desperately hungry to have answers. So I think maybe we've got the cart before the horse in some ways.

[55] Jonathan Armstrong: Doug, this is Jonathan Armstrong. May I express my hope that the changes that will be possible in theological education in the years ahead—they're already somewhat possible now, but that are increasingly possible—should allow us to reach those people who will use that education best in the churches? So, because theological education for the last number of years has been a campus-based experience, we've sent our young people there. The education has required the investment of the preparation for a professional career. I think all of that will change with the ability that we have now technologically to bring bits of curriculum to the people who need it and will use it. So I'm just hoping that that vision, Doug, will be something we can really in a very concrete way pursue now and in the next couple years.

[56] Doug Wieber: Yeah, I think you're exactly right, and I think it's why it excites me so much to think about other models of education—rather than be linear and sequential, so you go to a campus and take 101, 201, 301. There are people who are hungry for 401 because they've just encountered a real issue in their neighbor next door. I think it has to be back, and it was where Greg led, it's missionally driven [7]. So if our people are missionaries where they're living, then now they have a hunger to become theologically attuned, but we'd better answer that immediate need theologically, and so it's more like building the layers of an onion or a papier-mâché model from the ground up, but it's driven by the needs of those who are actually involved in the mission, I think.

[57] Mark Hendrickson: I just wanted to affirm what Alejandro said, you know, to not set the bar too low and to challenge people [48]. I think that's a very good point. One of the key terms I think we need to take into consideration is "intrinsic motivation," tapping into really where the person is at the moment and linking the training with that motivation. Then, if you're motivated, look at Abraham Lincoln, under a candle, and the guy had the most adverse circumstances you can imagine, but he was motivated and he was able to learn and so I think that's a really key point.

[58] We also, though, have to be learning-driven rather than content-driven, and that means we've got to understand the learner so that we can make it effective and appealing. And then also, in all of these challenges of different ways of doing it, we need to be careful not to confuse ends with means. And we've had ways, systems that worked in the past to a degree, but they may not work today and we dare not keep them as sacred cows.

[59] And I think we're both, ProMETA and Gateway, we've been innovators. And we both were criticized because of it. Gateway was criticized by doing an end-run around the tradition and going straight to the student. We were criticized by the audacity of trying to offer master's degrees internationally online. Why would you do that when there are so many poor people out there with basic, basic needs and you guys are addressing the elite? Well, I think both came probably through an analysis of a needs assessment, and the needs assessment showed there was a huge vacuum in the EFCA and nobody was meeting it. And we did a similar needs assessment internationally through eight or nine countries, and in 1997 master's degrees for the leaders of the leaders were nonexistent in an accessible way in Spanish. It just did not exist then. We would interview leaders and they would tell us all about the things they needed, but then they would end the interview and say, "Oh by the way, do you have anything for me? Because I'm really at a dead end educationally."

[60] So I have to go back to Lois McKinney again and that course I took [23]; she had basic Sunday school teachers all the way up to scholars at the top, and she says, "We need leadership at every level." And in missions, if we don't think about training scholars, or leaders of leaders, we're going to create an eternal dependence on the West. And that's why we need to do what we're doing, but we also need to do what Gateway is doing. And she also, in comment to how you have to have all these requirements to be able to teach that are confusing the ends and the means again, McKinney had this thing called the McKinney One Small Step Principle, and it was that the teacher should be just one small step above the learner, rather than way up here and the learner way down here, because they relate, but they're further enough down the road where they can coach and mentor.

[61] **Greg Strand:** Mark, you've frozen!

[62] **Jonathan Armstrong:** He will probably come back. If his internet sustains, he'll be back maybe in 20 seconds, or the connection will break, but in either way it's unpredictable.

[63] **Greg Strand:** Okay, so he will be able to join us again though if it does break? Okay, great. My thought was this: maybe we could pick up just what Mark said. One of the concerns raised—I think it may have been Curt—that there are seems to be that you need a certain level, you need an M.Div. degree to lead someone else [36]. Well, what we're finding here Mark is saying that they did create an M.Div. degree. There are certain levels of expectation, there are certain requirements. So is that bad? Is it recognizing that there is a means of sort of vetting so that we don't end up with anybody teaching? People often say that we want the Christian faith to go viral. Praise be to God, we do! But let's not forget that what's going viral in South Africa and many of these nations is the prosperity gospel, that that's a virility that is infectious and will cause problems.

[64] So it seems to me there is something important to the vetting, the training, and I think the problem often is that it's the training itself that equips somebody. That is to say, if someone has an M.Div. degree, they are now qualified and equipped to serve as a pastor. Um, no that's not necessarily training. There are host of other components and aspects that make—the gifts and other—that qualify one for pastoral ministry. So, any thoughts on that? How do we then

balance such that everybody is capable of teaching and yet also having some expectation and where's too much and where's not enough? I think that would be a helpful discussion to have.

[65] Paulo Freire: This is Paulo from New Jersey. I do think vetting is important. And even going through Gateway, there have been some folks who have taken part in a class, and as I'm teaching I'm wondering, "Why are they in the class?" Those are the exceptions, though. By and large, the vetting, I think, needs to be in terms of character and quality. Now, some people are going to be Sunday school teachers, or they're going to be lay leaders perpetually, but there still has to be a vetting of character and calling. And I think that's where it begins, and then the church jumps in at that local level and teaches the theology. And as it's been said before several times now, I do agree that it has to be given at the church level, and that theology is the foundation by which all the trials of life are addressed. And so I think it's wonderful that we would be able to teach at that level.

[66] I do believe, though, that a program like Gateway is vital because most of these people, whether they've been vetted or not, are on Sunday morning preaching. They're getting up and they're going to be teaching the Word of God. I got involved in Gateway and then the credentialing process because these people are teaching come Sunday morning. The question is: *What* are they teaching on Sunday morning? And in some cases, it was poor theology. In many cases it was poor theology. And so it's too late to vet now. They're already behind a pulpit. And so now there's an opportunity to teach them, and sometimes correct them, elevate their understanding, and maybe it won't be a seminary level, but I don't know that it needs to be seminary level. I think it's a wonderful thing that we could start wherever they're at, provide an audio book, I think that's a good idea, and then to move them forward so that they will do better, read more, understand more, and serve properly. And in that sense, develop the healthy church that is God-honoring. The pulpit will reflect—rather the church will reflect the pulpit, on and on.

[67] Greg Strand: That's helpful. For some that may not know, our polity is such that a person is actually called to a local church before they can even begin the credentialing process. So it's not a matter of whether they have been vetted first; the local church vets them. And because of our commitment to our polity, local church autonomy, and that is the denomination nationally. But the local church calls them, and by virtue of that call, that then gives them the liberty or it's the context from which they can then begin the credentialing process. So it follows it, not just instructing the people in the local church, which we want to raise the level of biblical understanding, theological awareness, etc., which is a good thing, but it's also for those that are serving in pastoral ministry. The call to serve as a pastor in a local church vocationally is the process by which the credentialing can begin. So that's part of our process.

[68] By the way, I just want to make mention as well, I think there is this notion that Doug mentioned earlier, this notion that not only is academia bad or at least questionable, formal stuff, but there's also this notion that theology is dry and dusty and abstract [12]. And so I wanted to include to you, you can see it in the chat, John Frame's definition: "The best way to define theology in my view is as the application of the whole Bible to the whole human life." Now, friends, who does that exempt? Well, nobody. And I think we're also working with a

flawed or faulty, misguided understanding of what theology is. And frankly, probably because that's how people have lived it. So the modeling has been such that it's just abstract, it's just out there and it doesn't apply to life. And so really, theology for us as pastors called to local churches, theology begins by how we live. And theology is best lived in community. That's the context of life together in a local church. Well, okay, others, I'm not seeing hands raised at the moment. Any other thoughts? Thanks, Curt, and then Will, if you can follow Curt, please.

[69] Curt Parton: One of the things that I think, going back to the vetting issue, I think part of what we're dealing with, and this has come out in previous conversations that Aqueduct Project has put out, we're kind of dealing with parallel tracks as far as pastoral training and even theological education is concerned. Church-based theological education has been around for a long, long time, and obviously academic-based seminary training has been around for a long time. And there's been some crossover, because many people in the academy have understood what's been going on and there's been theological education by extension and a lot of these types of things, and there have been people who have gone from non-formal training and then sought formal training and so there's been some crossover.

[70] But to a large extent there's been these parallel tracks and so what we're seeing now is because of a growing interest on both sides in partnering together and more opportunities to partner together. Now we're dealing with the question: "How do we vet these types of things?" I mean, isn't M.Div. the standard? And that's not necessarily a bad way to go, but if it is then we've got to create bridges for people to cross from the non-formal side to an M.Div. So, for instance, has there been any discussion on Gateway possibly being entry-level, maybe constituting a bachelor's degree for people to be able to go from Gateway to TEDS [Trinity Evangelical Divinity School] or something like that?

[71] I mean, I'm just throwing that out there as a possibility, but I think we have to think—we're at a point, not just in the Free Church, but in the church as whole, where we've got to start coming up with ways to bring these together in workable ways. And I totally agree with what other people are saying: it needs to be scalable. We need to begin where they're at, but we need to be helping them grow. You know, it's a continual discipleship process for all of us. We never stop our theological training, really, and so for many of these guys—and I talk to people all the time that are looking, considering formal training versus non-formal training, and one of the things that they want to know is, "How do I get," as someone coined the term, "cultural currency?" They feel like they need, at least in a Western context, a degree and they need something to show—it's for the vetting type thing—to show that I have this legitimate pastoral training. So I think we either need to create avenues for people to go from the non-formal side of things into formal degree programs or come up with a new standard and a new consensus that covers both. And then I think the vetting would then be informed by that consensus.

[72] Greg Strand: Just before Will jumps in, yes, that discussion has been happening, it's been had, of Gateway turning into a degree with Trinity. There are, as you would imagine, accrediting issues, but it's been intentionally a good discussion between Gateway, Alex, Ricardo, and Trinity. And they can come back later. I just want to mention that initially, Curt, before Will speaks. And Ricardo and Alejandro, if you want to speak to Curt's question about that, and

maybe talk about some of the challenges of making that work, that would be helpful. But Will, if you would please jump in.

[73] Will Savell: Yeah, I feel like I'm a bit behind. I'm part of an Evangelical Free group. Is everybody here Evangelical Free? There's some language that's kind of—Gateway, I think I know what it is now, but I'm learning a lot, so allow me to ramble a little bit, because our ministry is the *[unclear]* and our focus is pastors and church leaders who are in rural areas who would never be able to enter into a formal setting, and so a lot of our ministry is focused on getting the best biblical education that we possibly can. A lot of our content providers such as Third Millennium Ministries Biblical Training Institute, some of those guys, we try to put it on a contextualized delivery system, and I know you guys have been talking a lot about how we're almost there where we can get education out to a large number. And we're able to do that now, we're figuring out.

[74] And then we do everything through what we call “transformational learning communities,” and we value not just learning online or on your own by yourself, although I think you can do that. I did that. I graduated from Covenant Seminary that way. But we think it's better to do it in a learning community, and with a facilitator, someone who is maybe not an M.Div. level, but someone who might just be a little bit familiar with the program who has some clout with the group. And we're seeing great success with that throughout. What we've done is we've focused on the seminaries or Bible institutes in their own country, like Los Pinos Nuevos in Cuba, reaching out to all their church pastors, and that's been a network of about a thousand who are actively involved in seminary-level education with their local house church contexts who have partnered with David right now who is down there. It's been about a four year process. In northern Columbia, we're in some of the really rural areas, in their networks. And I guess people would have accused a ministry like mine of being against the seminary and higher education. For me, specifically, I'm not against it—we're talking about it going viral. I would totally agree and I would think when you look at any viral video or anything, you see different platforms that it goes viral on. It doesn't have to be just one.

[75] So I'm not against the seminary at all. In fact, I'm for it. We work with seminaries underneath their umbrellas, but usually the seminaries have a desire to reach out to the pastor who couldn't to them. And the reason that is, is because that's going to be the majority pastor. Those are the ones who are taking over the world. In my travels throughout Africa and throughout Latin America, those are the ones who are, I mean, they're the majority. When we're talking about these that want to get an M.Div., I think that's going to be the minority for sure, from what I'm seeing. I don't think it's bad for them to go into the Covenants or the Trinitys or whatever, but just as all the seminaries around the United States, I feel, are having trouble financially to sustain themselves to be funded, I'm really seeing it in Latin America as well. Particularly in Latin America they're not able to be sustainable charging the majority pastor \$100 per class to come and enter into their program.

[76] So I too would value the local church. I would value the local seminary supporting the local church, but if they're not supporting the local church, I don't really see how viable or how sustainable they're going to be in ten-plus years. I know they're going to have endowments and

this and that and the other. But I think they're having to reposition themselves, and I think the future of this honestly, personally, are the seminaries who are willing to reach out to their people who have for the longest time been forgotten, who have for the longest time received the theological scraps or the theological leftovers. And I think the future is going to be—and I'd like to hear your thoughts on this—I think the future is going to be in the people who are committed to taking the pastors who are getting saved, the church members who are getting saved and who are just taking over the world right now in the southern parts of the world. How do we get them, and how do we continue to get them the best? [*unclear*] The absolute, the very best. And it is going to take maybe some adjustments on the credential for the ordination for individuals who are [*unclear*] real pastor, because the reality is that they are functioning as pastors right now anyways. They have congregations, they're preaching, they're serving communion, they're baptizing, they're doing these things. And I think we're in the discussion right now of whether they have M.Div. options for them.

[77] I think for the majority of pastors, of the ones I talk to, which I've talked to many, many of them, they're not even in this conversation. They're—I'm sorry, Alejandro, it looks like you have something—but that's my context where I am.

[78] **Greg Strand:** I would say this, and then Alex, in light of Curt's question earlier and Gateway and TEDS, Will, what you've described is parallel to Gateway here, what we're doing. It's training in local contexts, it's done over a year period of time, it's writing their papers. They get together in cohorts and they're working on writing their paper which is required for the credentialing process. And so it sounds very similar, and I do think that there is a changing face of seminary education academically, and with the financial issues I think that's going to be a significant shift.

[79] The other thing I would say is that among those seminaries that are denominationally connected—or let me say denominationally birthed, that is to say, they were birthed by local churches—there is an increasing awareness that I'm sensing amongst many of them that it's important this day not just to be confessional but to be denominational. I think that there is a realization that they're there to serve the local church, at least in some, not all. So thank you for sharing that, Will. Alex, if you would maybe respond to Curt, and then Jonathan, if you would come in afterwards, please.

[80] **Alejandro Mandes:** Curt, yes, we've connected, so there's now a real good affinity between us. There's a desire to see that connection. The speed-bump really is the money. They want to CLEP [College Level Examination Program] Gateway, and they're being very generous with the CLEPing, but then the students that want to go on, there's still a big financial bump. We need to work through that. But I do want to respond to something Will said. I'm not sure I want to work with you, brother, because I love crazy people who are doing different things. I think sometimes creativity comes in the margin. I'd love to know what you're doing, I'd love to learn from you, but I wouldn't want you to imitate me or me you unless that's really of God, because I think too often we gravitate to what's working, but it's that crazy creativity that God is calling you to do that may be really instructive to the rest of us.

[81] So let's connect and talk about what we're doing. I'd love to learn from you but I want to encourage you. There's one thing that you said that really does cause me concern. That is, when we say that we want to make sure that people get "the best." I think sometimes the enemy of people even getting started is when we say, "We want to make sure you have the very, very best." The very best the disciples had was time with Jesus. And I think what we need to understand is that when we're walking with Jesus, there is a lift, an educational lift. You start loving the Word, you start focusing on your gifting and on your calling. And I think what we need to do is allow people to be lifted into what their calling is. So I think we can provide the best, but I think we need to make sure we're not telling everybody, "The best is this for you all," and I'm not saying you are. I'm just saying I think that's been a real tragedy of the past, and that's probably why some groups are saying, "You know, if you have seminary, we don't want you." So please understand my context when I attack "the best."

[82] And this is one more thing I want to say, Jonathan, then I'll hand it over. I think part of our problem is we get stuck at a level and we're not working on letting people have that range. I think the biggest problem we have in the church is that we're asking people to do the wrong thing. We keep on looking for leaders without having disciples. If we start really emphasizing the Great Commission that everybody needs to be a disciple, not everyone is a leader. And by "leader" I'm talking office. When we start setting that baseline in the whole church, every mother, father, daughter, son, *tío, tía, abuelita* needs to be a disciple, all of a sudden leaders start lifting and rising, and then we can skim them, rather than reach down, grab somebody who we have assessed as a leader, not having seen. And then we're not wasting the effort that we're putting into people who maybe aren't gifted and called because in this day, we have this paradigm that you can only do what you have been college-trained to do. And so, I think that's part of what we need to really clearly understand: that the barriers that our paradigm of culture today are working against us. So the big point between those two that I made is: we've got to understand the lift of the Scriptures. We need to set the baseline as discipleship, we need to realize we ought to not be aspiring to lift up leaders. We need to be seeing them and testing them and at every level we have training that can take them to "the best" for their gifting and calling.

[83] Greg Strand: Thank you, Alex.

[84] Ricardo Palmerin: I'd like to say something about what Alex said, very briefly, about the process we follow between Trinity and Gateway. I only want to mention that Trinity made a very careful consideration of the Gateway curriculum. So we present everything: phase 1, phase 2, curriculum materials, how we organize the class. And I will say they give credit to what we are doing at Gateway, and this is very important for us because we have the qualification, in some way the approval or the accreditation of Trinity in our Gateway courses. So it was a very careful process. It took months, actually, and finally they said, "We can take those who go through Gateway, we can take them and go for what we call now the 'phase 3' which is completing a master's degree and a bachelor's degree at Trinity." So this is good news for Gateway students, that they can continue their education. And actually something we are confronting right now, where students are applying to other universities around the country, Christian universities, and now they are presenting the Gateway courses and we have this

background with Trinity and we say, “We’re really confident that your Gateway training is really something valued that other universities will appreciate.”

[85] Greg Strand: That’s been some of the encouraging fruit from this discussion and we thank the Lord for it. Jonathan, please!

[86] Jonathan Armstrong: I think I can serve people by summarizing some of the things very briefly that have taken place in past conversations. And so I think the building block here of this discussion is that if we’re envisioning a church-based system of theological education there has to be some sort of currency or validation, certification. That’s come up in a number of our dialogues, and it’s kind of the nature of the project, because as we think about theological education, it’s by definition an intra-church relationship. You’re bringing churches together for this endeavor, which means that your individual churches, being from different denominational backgrounds, are reluctant to be the mentors of that currency, because, in the schools, we’re bringing together different theological traditions. So immediately it seems problematic that the church would be the one that creates the currency or validation for the training, but I do believe ultimately it has to be the church that steps into that role.

[87] So, not just in these conversations but in other conversations that I’ve been pursuing with folks, I’ve been asking a number of folks in accreditation agencies if they would imagine it to be possible that there would be a sort of certification that is a non-accredited validation, if these agencies could create a certification that could serve pastoral training institutes all around the world. I don’t believe the accreditation agencies will move into that space, for various reasons, but mostly because the constituency they’re serving are the currently accredited bodies and so your currently accredited seminaries are beholden to these older models of accreditation and to HLC, Higher Learning Commission. So there’s governmental relations there that would make it very difficult for them to re-imagine what accreditation looks like. So, I’ve been talking with people in accreditation agencies, at one time hopeful that they would provide the validation bodies for what the church needs, and I don’t believe that’s going to ever come through.

[88] So what I think is happening here is the technology, as we look down the road, the technology is going to allow for a proliferation of schools to connect with local churches. Once upon a time, it was a very few number of seminaries that could be—well, once upon a time you’d have to send your students to the seminary, and only that was the option to receive a seminary theological education. Now many seminaries have extension sites and online programs, and that trajectory is only going to proliferate massively into the next decade or two. There’s about 7,000 schools around the world. I imagine that in 20 years, you’ll be able to get an online education from all 7,000 schools, and it’s not just a question of TEDS or Moody or Asbury or somebody else, but you’ll have thousands of options for seminary. So I would charge the church that the church is going to have to be the one that sets the accreditation standards or the validation standards. The schools don’t have the motivation or the capacity to provide those standards for the church. So, Greg and anybody else, what’s your view on that, and if that’s correct, how do we get the attention of global church bodies to create that certification standard?

[89] Greg Strand: Any thoughts?

[90] Alejandro Mandes: I think we're fortunate in the Evangelical Free Church that our paradigm allows for that scalability. I can't remember who said it, but there are really some denominations that have really said, "It's got to be *this*" [39].

[91] Greg Strand: I think it was Will.

[92] Alejandro Mandes: Yeah, Will. And I really feel sad for them in a way. They've asked me to kind of be a consultant to get them going, but the polity and the constitution and the ethos may not allow for that. Some people are really adjusting, but I think, Jonathan, there's going to be a reality motivation: Do it or die! Do it or be marginal. And you see that happening. In fact, there was this chart I once showed BOMS, very, very early.

[93] Greg Strand: Who is BOMS, Alejandro?

[94] Alejandro Mandes: Thank you. The Board of Ministerial Standing for the Evangelical Free Church. So I showed them these charts of the fastest growing denomination and then another chart: the fastest disappearing denomination. And there was a strong correlation. Don't get this wrong. The more educated you are the faster the denomination is dying.

[95] But my challenge, and it was accepted, was: let's not play games with that paradigm. Let's figure out what it's going to help us do our mission. We've always got to get back to what our mission is as a denomination and what will it take for us to get there. And so, different avenues are necessary. There's one standard in terms of who will we license and ordain. But what we do then as a denomination is help them reach that. And so even programs like Jonathan's and ProMETA and Gateway, whatever it takes, you do not need to go through—I mean, if an individual on his own wanted to bone and do it, they could. So what other denomination needs to do is ask the painful, critical questions. And that is: What is our mission and how are we going to equip our leaders to get to that critical point? The ones that will not address that issue won't be around anyway. And you see that happening, according to that axis.

[96] Greg Strand: Thank you, Alex. One I other thing I would add to that that in some respects, Gateway and other of these means have become the means by which they are being theologically trained, so at the end of the day, they have reached the "accreditation level" that we have put in place as a denomination. And so it's been said a number of times that we haven't compromised on the back end, that is to say, the expectation. But we have provided many means of getting there and resources to get there, and our commitment to come alongside to help you to get there. Other thoughts? Other responses?

[97] Curt Parton: Could I ask Jonathan a question? Jonathan, is there any—do you see TOPIC [Trainers of Pastors International Coalition] or any group like TOPIC coming up, facilitating this type of certification for non-formal pastoral training? I know there's been a lot of discussion and conversation recently about it, but do you see any real motivation for this actually happening?

[98] Jonathan Armstrong: No. So at one time I was hopeful that TOPIC, Ramesh Richards' organization—Ramesh is out of Dallas Theological Seminary—I was hopeful that TOPIC would step into this space and provide a non-accredited certification for global pastoral training, and I was hopeful that ABHE, the Association of Biblical Higher Education, would step into that space. I'm quite confident neither will at this point, after conversations. And I think I agree with the burden, Alex, I agree with the burden of your statements. The church is going to have to—the schools are going to have to do this or die. Yeah, but what happens if the schools just die? That's a very real scenario, a very real possibility.

[99] Alejandro Mandes: I don't think the schools will die. Not the ones that are on mission, because people are always going to want to go there. I went to seminary where my pastor went, where there was life. So even that statement for denominations is true for seminaries.

[100] Jonathan Armstrong: You're right. I'm speaking in hyperbole. They won't completely disappear, but what happens if they become quite marginalize in their efficacy? So the world becomes 8, 9, 10 billion people and they're just training very tiny numbers of folks?

[101] Alejandro Mandes: I think God will raise. You said 7,000 or more. I agree with you. I don't think we should be trying to prop up a seminary or a denomination that is not on mission. Not that I'm against—I don't celebrate church divisions, I don't celebrate seminaries. But if they're not on mission, I'm not going to—please don't think me heartless—I'm not going to cry about it.

[102] Jonathan Armstrong: So I think I agree with you philosophically. My question would be this: Anticipating these large scale changes, however they actually play out, wouldn't the church now be best advised to take control of its standards of accreditation, not to be beholden to these frail systems, but to step into that space, and proactively think across the board, across denominations? What do we need to prepare best ministry trained leaders?

[103] Alejandro Mandes: Absolutely.

[104] Curt Parton: That's going to require a lot of John 17 prayers.

[105] Greg Strand: Yeah. Well, that's what I was going to say, Mark. So, is there an "evangelical standard"? So let's start with that question. Then let's ask the next question: Do we even want to be called evangelical anymore? Well that's another question and discussion.

[106] Alejandro Mandes: I'm going to mute myself!

[107] Greg Strand: Yeah. To be cognizant, Jonathan, that's sort of what pushes back, and to what Mark was saying as well. I don't think it's healthy, personally, for each local church to determine that. That's where I think there's an association of churches that does have this discussion that does have some sort of relative common, uniform-without-absolutely-forcing-that-conformity standards. Who's going to chair that meeting? Who's going to chair those discussions? And, so I don't disagree in principle, Jonathan. I think the challenge is in fact—and we are such individualists and so privatized—*Maranatha*, come Lord Jesus! But I want to continue to pursue that discussion. I think it's critical.

[108] Jonathan Armstrong: I think we have to try. Otherwise, I mean, better to try and fail than to let that ship sail without us on board. And if the real problem that's holding up this whole thing is church division, maybe we just need to take that question on head on.

[109] Greg Strand: I think we probably do. I'd like another discussion. I think you're probably having these, Jonathan, but here we're talking about what sorts of content and what does it consist of? What are the means? What is the delivery? All these different things that we've talked about. What are the strengths? What are the weaknesses? What are the obstacles? And Jonathan, maybe—you're the convener, brother—maybe this could be a follow-up. This has been extremely fruitful. And I'm looking at the clock, and we've got a minute. Brothers, thank you so much for taking the time. Jonathan, thank you for convening. Thank you, Matthew, for helping us as well. Thank you, all of you, for giving an hour and a half of your time. And we've got some chat comments as well. Jonathan, if you would close us. Any last summarizing comments and then at the end if you would close us in prayer, I would be grateful.

[110] Jonathan Armstrong: Thank you so much, Greg. I should say that Doug Wieber and I will be meeting in person at the end of May, May 29, and we're going to be convening a small group of pastors. We're inviting a large group of pastors from North Idaho and Eastern Washington. We don't know how many will come, but that's where Doug Wieber's and my conversation will pick up with those pastors: What are the types of content that we should be providing to churches? So if you want to speak into that process and help Doug and I prepare for that conversation, the questions would be: What type of training do you want in your churches? What would the relationship between an educational institution and a local church look like? What's your vision for church-based theological education? Thank you.

[111] Greg Strand: Okay. Hey Doug, I'm a little offended you didn't invite me, but that's okay!

[112] Doug Wieber: Well, that's because Jonathan invited me, and I haven't had time to invite you! We're going to invite you when we have our ducks in a row a little more.

[113] Greg Strand: I'd love that! Thank you. Thank you again so much. Jonathan, if you would please close us in prayer, I would be most grateful.

[114] Jonathan Armstrong: Absolutely!

[Jonathan Armstrong closes in prayer]

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