

Overview of Standards for Theological Education and Pastoral Formation



NALS

North American Lutheran Seminary



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North American Lutheran Church

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The matter of the proper education of preachers of the gospel is worthy of our ultimate commitment.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer

We live in a time of unprecedented cultural change. The cultural cohesiveness provided by a broad religious and ethical consensus has collapsed. Our culture is increasingly pluralistic, secular, technological, individualistic, and religiously agnostic. In this post-Christian milieu, the Church is struggling with how to respond. Some Christians have opted to mirror the culture and become more pluralistic, technological, individualistic, etc. It's reasoned that this makes the Church more "relevant" and able to engage the culture.

The North American Lutheran Church is grateful for the many blessings and benefits of contemporary culture. We do not reject all the good things given to us through scientific and technological advancements. However, we believe that the gospel always resists captivity to any prevailing culture and its attendant worldview.

As members of a confessional movement, we believe that the Church is the community built on biblical truths which are confessed in the ecumenical Creeds and given clarity in the Lutheran Confessions. In other words, we seek to respond to the cultural changes by intentionally becoming a denomination that reflects the faith and ensuing ethical commitments of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. We are convinced of the timeless truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ and seek to bear witness to that gospel. Therefore, we believe that the best response to the unprecedented cultural changes is to be disciples, and make disciples, of Jesus Christ. The call to make disciples is shared by all confessing Christian. It is truly ecumenical.

Crucial to this endeavor is the formation of pastors and lay leaders. The purpose of this document is to provide a clear snapshot of the NALS system and its structure, along with an overview of the residential requirements for each of our students. This document has been approved by the NALS Board of Regents and the Executive Council of the NALC and is supported by the NALS President and the NALC Bishop.

♦ Basic Overview of the NALS

The North American Lutheran Seminary (NALS) is comprised of a network of seminaries working together to provide theological education and formation for pastors and lay leaders preparing for ministry in the North American Lutheran Church (NALC). The seminary center is currently located at Trinity School for Ministry, which is an ATS accredited seminary located in Ambridge, PA. The NALS is under the oversight of the Board of Regents and the NALS President and is responsible to the Executive Council of the NALC and the NALC Bishop. As an extension and ministry of the NALC, its overall purpose is to prepare pastors to serve in the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, and to equip lay leaders to serve in ways consistent with their specific ministry callings. The NALS also provides opportunities for continuing education and spiritual formation for the clergy and laity.

¹This document is an overview of theological education and pastoral formation. Since it is an overview, specific exceptions can be made on a case-by-case basis. Some students may have additional educational or formational needs, and some may have less. In such cases, the Candidacy Committee and the Seminary President may develop an individualized plan for students. The goal is to provide students with the best opportunities for growth as they prepare to serve Christ and his Church.



♦ Life Together: Pastoral Formation

The NALS is committed to providing seminary education that is academically rigorous, and pastorally and spiritually enriching. We want to prepare faithful pastors for the hard, but joyful, work of ministry in a culture that is increasingly distanced from Christ and His Church. Therefore, we want students to experience and be formed by the richness of life together in Christian community through prayer, worship, conversation, confession and absolution, and fellowship. We are convinced that pastoral formation and discipleship happen best in the context of Christian community (koinonia). This is why our seminary system includes a requirement for students to come together for two 2-week periods.² This residential requirement takes place on the campus of Trinity School of Ministry (TSM) in Ambridge or at another site approved by the NALS Board of Regents and President.

During these times of residential study, students have the opportunity to learn from first-rate scholars. Weekday mornings will be spent in the classroom. Built into the schedule students will also have opportunities to meet with the NALS President, the NALC Bishop, members of the Candidacy Committee, and learn more about Life-to-Life Discipleship. There will be time for study, retreat, prayer, confession and absolution, spiritual direction, and fellowship. Students will learn together about and discuss the unique ethos of the North American Lutheran Church. Discussions will be held around such topics as:



1. the four Core Values of the NALC
2. the Common Confession
3. the CREDO discipleship initiative
4. the role of Discipleship Guides
5. the placement and purpose of the internship year (vicarage)
6. and other central aspects of the NALC identity

²This is an approximation. The actual time together will probably be 9 to 12 days depending upon the schedules of students and professors; and also the availability of the facility to host the all-seminarian gathering.

♦ Discernment (Candidacy in the NALC)

It is the responsibility of the Candidacy Committee to help men and women prayerfully to discern a call to ordained ministry. All those interested in ordained ministry should contact the Candidacy Committee. To do this, go to the NALC website (thenalc.org) and click the tab for Ministry Discernment. Then, click the Candidacy tab and email candidacy@thenalc.org. A member of the Candidacy Committee will contact them.



♦ Our Residential Requirement

The residential requirement is also important because seminary students are future members of the NALC Ministerium. The Ministerium is the collegial bond of all the ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament of the NALC. The residential requirement provides opportunity for future pastors to know each other and establish friendships.

The residential requirement is for all NALC seminarians regardless of where and how their primary seminary training takes place. Some students may want to incorporate this NALC seminarian residential requirement into their internship experience. This approach would require their internship to include the two residential courses offered every June. The fulfillment of this requirement would be coordinated with the Candidacy Committee and the internship congregation. Some of the courses offered may include:

1. Christian Ethics in the Lutheran Tradition (ST 755) Introduction to Lutheran Liturgy (PT 670)
2. Spiritual Formation: Catechesis and Discipleship (PT 700)
3. Lutheran Confessions (ST 550)
4. Elective in the Lutheran theological tradition

Note: The Candidacy Committee will work with the seminary to arrange the necessary housing, transportation and meals for all students.

♦ Theological Education: Seminaries and the NALS Network

After a student is entranced into the candidacy process, he/she is a student within the NALS. This is true regardless of which seminary our students attend. However, we strongly encourage students to consider:

Trinity School for Ministry, Ambridge, PA (NALS Center)
Beeson Divinity School, Birmingham, AL
Concordia Seminary, Edmonton, Canada
Sioux Falls Seminary, South Dakota
Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California and Houston, Texas



♦ Distance Learning

Many students seeking to serve as ministers of Word and Sacrament in the NALC are choosing distance learning. Distance learning has the obvious advantage of allowing students to remain in their current locations. Core Lutheran courses can and should be taken through TSM or one of the other approved seminaries. These courses are available online.

Before enrolling in specific courses, students are urged to be in contact with the NALC Candidacy Committee to enter the candidacy process and to ensure that the courses taken meet the standards set for ordination in the NALC.

Other Seminaries

Some students seeking ordination in the NALC will, for a variety of reasons, choose to attend other seminaries. Students attending these seminaries should find out if the seminary is accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). This accreditation is important for the following reasons:

1. All ATS accredited seminaries must meet strict academic standards. They have been properly vetted to ensure that the demands of theological education are maintained.
2. ATS accreditation allows students who choose to do so to go on for further graduate study at the doctoral level.
3. ATS accredited seminaries allow for the transfer of credits to other ATS seminaries.

All students attending non-affiliated and/or non-ATS accredited seminaries must still fulfil the residential requirement of the NALS. Again, this is true regardless of where and how their primary seminary training takes place.

As with each of the other possibilities for seminary training outlined in this document, it is even more important that students taking a majority of courses online, take part in as much residential learning as possible.

Note:

Those considering attending the NALS at Trinity School for Ministry (Ambridge, PA) should know that two full years may be completed by distance learning. Two full semesters in residence are required for the M.Div. awarded by TSM.

♦ Transferring Students and the Lutheran Diploma Program

Some students entering candidacy may have already completed all or a portion of their course work at another seminary. All incoming students are required to take the two 2-week intensive courses mentioned above.

Occasionally a person may have obtained an M.Div., but still lacks the necessary Lutheran-specific courses. When this is the case, it is important to know that all the necessary theological courses can conveniently be taken online through the NALS (Ambridge). The courses are offered through the Lutheran Diploma program. These core courses are taught in a yearly rotation and are ATS accredited. For more information about the Lutheran Diploma program please see the NALS website (thenals.org).

Concluding Comments

It is the fervent hope and prayer of the NALS that we provide a system of theological education which forms pastors to serve faithfully and with excellence. Pastors are to be disciples who are committed to the task of making disciples. All questions should be directed to the Candidacy Committee (candidacy@thenalc.org) or directly to the seminary center (NALS@tsm.edu).

We invite you to consider the NALS system. For more information, contact:

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