

Report on the LCMS Pastoral Formation Listening Session

Silver Spring, Maryland

March 26, 2026

Prepared for circulation among brother pastors

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Date of report: March 30, 2026

Event Information

Event: LCMS Pastoral Formation Listening Session

Date: Thursday, March 26, 2026

Time: 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Location: The Lutheran Church of St. Andrew, Silver Spring, Maryland

Stated purpose of the event:

The session was presented as an opportunity for pastors, commissioned workers, laity, district staff, and others to listen, ask questions, and share their perspective with LCMS leadership concerning pastoral formation in the Synod.

Panel of Listeners

The panel consisted of the following participants:

- Rev. Dr. Thomas Egger, Seminary President
- Rev. Dr. Jon Bruss, Seminary President
- Rev. Dan Galchutt, LCMS Interim Chief Mission Officer
- Rev. Dr. James Baneck, Executive Director, Office of Pastoral Education

Southeastern District President Bill Harmon participated as the emcee.

Executive Summary

This report summarizes the LCMS Pastoral Formation Listening Session held in Silver Spring, Maryland, on March 26, 2026, as observed by an attendee. It is intended to provide a candid and accurate account of the major themes, exchanges, and concerns raised during the session.

The seminary presidents opened by reaffirming the value of four-year, in-person, residential seminary education as the church's preferred model for pastoral formation. While they stated that they do not wish to eliminate alternate routes such as SMP, their comments consistently emphasized residential formation as the norm and online or non-residential approaches as exceptions.

As the floor opened, several pastors and church leaders pressed the presidents on the urgent shortage of pastors across the Synod. Multiple speakers argued that SMP and other alternate routes were created precisely to address this need and should be expanded rather than restricted. Testimony from the floor highlighted long pastoral vacancy timelines, congregational instability, concerns about seminary admissions practices, frustration over the current SMP waiting list, and objections to recent policy decisions such as the new age restriction on SMP applicants.

A central tension emerged throughout the session. The seminary presidents largely framed the issue in terms of preserving the quality of pastoral formation, especially through residential education. Many pastors in attendance, however, argued that the church is confronting an immediate quantity problem: there are not enough pastors being formed and ordained to meet the needs of congregations now. In the judgment of many speakers, current seminary rhetoric and recent decisions are not adequately addressing that crisis.

Several participants also challenged the assumptions behind current seminary policy. Some argued that pastoral formation happens not only at the seminary but also through congregational life, mentoring, and the broader life of the church. Others questioned whether online and hybrid learning have been too quickly dismissed, especially given evidence from actual teaching contexts that outcomes may not differ significantly across modalities. Still others raised concerns that seminary leadership appears too distant from the realities of congregational ministry in places such as the East Coast, urban communities, smaller congregations, and minority contexts.

The overall impression left by the session was that seminary leadership remains firmly committed to a residential model and is not yet responding with sufficient urgency or flexibility to the pastoral shortage many congregations are already experiencing. The report concludes that the most significant issue on display in Silver Spring was not disagreement over whether residential formation has value, but whether seminary leadership is honestly and effectively addressing the church's present and growing need for more pastors.

Full Report

Introduction

On Thursday, March 26, 2026, I attended the LCMS Pastoral Formation Listening Session held at The Lutheran Church of St. Andrew in Silver Spring, Maryland. The event was publicly announced by the Southeastern District as part of a series of listening sessions on pastoral formation and was presented as an opportunity for pastors and others to share their perspective with LCMS leadership.

What follows is not an official summary, but my own report as an attendee. It is an attempt to describe, as accurately and candidly as possible, what was said, what concerns were raised, and how those concerns were addressed. An LCMS Communications officer was present and took pictures during the event. I anticipate an official LCMS communication to be printed about these listening sessions. Whether it will report the event as it unfolded, or as the institution would prefer it to be remembered, remains to be seen.

Opening Remarks

Dan Galchutt opened the session and said there would be opening remarks from each of the seminary presidents. The two presidents then spoke for roughly twenty minutes total. Their remarks laid out their general view of pastoral formation.

Both presidents emphasized the value of four-year, in-person, residential seminary education. That theme remained central throughout the session. Dr. Egger in particular stressed that the seminaries believe they are meeting the needs of the students they currently serve. He said they are offering both residential formation and alternate routes, including SMP. He stated that they do not want to eliminate SMP or other alternate routes, but that they do want to encourage both routes, especially the on-campus residential route.

Throughout the session, the presidents repeatedly returned to several related claims: that in-person formation is the preferred and proper norm, that it is "incarnational" in a way online formation cannot be, that online learning should be the exception rather than the rule, and that the church already has multiple routes to ordination.

Early Floor Comments: SMP, Congregational Formation, and Languages

After the opening remarks, the floor was opened for questions and comments.

The first speaker was Emeritus Southeastern District President John Diefenthaler. He spoke about his role, while serving as district president, in chairing the floor committee that brought forward the SMP program at convention. His point was that SMP was created to provide more pastors for the LCMS, and that convention adopted it by a very wide margin despite the contentious nature of the issue. He argued that the current decision by the seminary presidents to limit the number of men admitted to SMP runs against the original intent of the program, and he urged them to end the limit and admit more men.

An SMP pastor then spoke positively about his own formation. He said his mentor had been a key factor in his successful transition into the pastorate and encouraged the seminaries to continue building the SMP program.

A recent seminary graduate made a different but related point. He urged the presidents to remember that pastoral formation does not happen only, or even primarily, at the seminary. He said that his own primary formation came through pastors and teachers in congregational life, Lutheran schools, and college. His argument was that pastoral formation is rooted first in the life of the church.

Another pastor raised a serious concern from the opposite side. He described trying, together with his circuit visitor, to prepare a textual study in the original languages, only to realize that the effort would be largely fruitless because many of the pastors in the circuit were SMP and had not learned the languages. He warned that increasing SMP without addressing this issue would weaken pastoral capacity for direct engagement with Scripture. In his judgment, reliance on commentaries or on English-only work was not sufficient, and the result was a diminished form of circuit fellowship.

Former Concordia Seminary Professor Bruce Hartung then urged the presidents to reconsider their assumptions about what counts as "quality" pastoral formation. He described pastoral formation as learning to read three "books": the book of Scripture, the book of the congregation, and the book of the self. That was one of the more conceptually important interventions of the day, because it challenged a narrow academic definition of quality and pressed for a broader, more pastoral understanding of formation.

The Presidents' First Responses

The seminary presidents responded to those early speakers in turn. As I heard it, Dr. Egger seemed unfamiliar with Bruce Hartung's "three books" formulation, and there was no substantive engagement with that point. President Emeritus John Diefenthaler was thanked for his past work on the committee that helped establish SMP. Supporters of SMP were told, in effect, that SMP had not been in especially high demand until this year, but that there is now a waiting list.

What was striking was not simply that a waiting list exists, but that no concrete solution was offered. No commitment was made to enlarge cohorts or increase admissions. The emphasis remained fixed on encouraging more young men toward residential seminary formation.

That pattern would repeat itself throughout the event. The presidents verbally affirmed alternate routes, but almost every practical response redirected attention back to residential education.

The Quantity Problem

One of the clearest and most urgent comments came from a pastor whose congregation has an 80 year commitment to sending men into residential seminary training. At the same time, as circuit visitor, he described the reality in his circuit: five vacancies, expected wait times of two, three, or even four years, and smaller congregations wondering whether they will still be able to remain open if that timeline holds. He also noted that more retirements are coming, which will only increase the number of vacancies.

His appeal was direct. He urged the presidents to respond more quickly and more urgently. His point was that kingdom witness is being lost in these places simply because the church is not ordaining enough pastors.

President Bruss responded with a historical argument, saying that in the early 2000s the LCMS had even more pastoral vacancies than it does now, that these things ebb and flow, and that there is no reason to panic. He said the seminaries are doing all they can. President Egger said the seminaries really need congregations to send more young men to them, and that this is how the problem will be solved.

This exchange exposed one of the central tensions of the session. Pastors on the ground described an immediate and worsening shortage. The presidents responded largely in terms of long-term recruitment and institutional patience.

Other Proposals and Exchanges

A pastor from New Jersey raised the idea of compulsory continuing education for pastors. The seminary presidents pointed to continuing education efforts already carried out by seminary professors in congregations over the summer and suggested that pastors' conferences should also be places where this happens.

Another speaker proposed not reducing seminary quality but increasing its rigor. He suggested that this might produce more serious theologians, drew a comparison to Roman Catholic formation, floated the possibility of ordaining deacons for some pastoral functions, and even suggested involving women professors in areas such as art and philosophy.

Another pastor addressed the new age limit of forty for SMP applicants. He argued that the restriction was unnecessary and counterproductive, especially if the church says it needs more pastors. He added that keeping younger men in their own communities during formation could help bring more Lutherans into the ministerium, especially in Black communities. Dr. Egger replied that the age restriction was adopted because of a significantly higher attrition rate among men under forty, which he later estimated at around 30 percent, compared to roughly 15 percent for on-campus students. These were presented as estimates rather than hard figures.

That reply was revealing for two reasons. First, it showed that attrition data is playing a major role in policy decisions. Second, it showed again that the presidents were willing to defend restrictions on alternate routes more readily than they were willing to explore ways to expand them.

Questions of Trust, Access, and Institutional Distance

A pastor from a larger church in the district delivered one of the sharpest critiques of the afternoon. He spoke of what he regarded as unprofessionalism in the seminary's admissions process for new SMP candidates. He said he knows capable, high-capacity professionals whom he could recommend for pastoral formation, but that he is embarrassed to do so under present conditions.

He also spoke about the difficulty of ministry in communities that do not uniformly share the political views associated, in his mind, with statements made by the current LCMS president. He argued that when seminary leadership appears aligned with politically charged rhetoric rather than focused on strictly churchly matters, it makes ministry harder in places like those many East Coast pastors serve.

Most pointedly, he condemned the letter the seminary presidents signed criticizing former Concordia Seminary Provost Jeff Kloha's online seminary training. In his judgment, that letter was not merely misguided but exposed their hypocrisy. He argued that, if the seminaries truly believed in a both-and approach to pastoral formation, they would not have taken that step. More broadly, he charged that the seminary presidents are too removed from the real needs of actual congregations and too influenced by the current LCMS president.

Another pastor pressed the issue from another angle. He reminded the presidents that Martin Franzmann did not possess what many today might call a "gold-standard" seminary education. A notably well-regarded theological teacher who taught at the seminary, Franzmann chaired the exegetical department for decades and served on the CTCR - all without an MDiv, PhD, or ordination. His point was to challenge the premise that today's preferred model should be treated as the only norm for faithful formation.

He also said that, in his own teaching experience across in-person, online, and hybrid modalities, he has not seen significantly different student outcomes. On that basis, he asked why the seminaries are not more aggressively exploring online avenues that could train more pastors in more places. His conclusion was that the seminary presidents are not doing all they can to form more pastors for the LCMS and suggested that their unwillingness to use all modalities demonstrates an ingratitude toward God for the gifts he has given to help form pastors. .

My Own Remarks

When I spoke, I argued that the seminaries exist to serve the congregations and therefore should not dismiss the needs they were hearing from the floor. I specifically challenged Dr. Bruss's "ebb and flow" response to pastoral shortages because its tone was unduly dismissive. In my judgment, it minimized what many pastors are experiencing as a real and urgent crisis.

I said that there is clearly a quantity problem, while the rhetoric coming from seminary leadership is focused almost entirely on quality. The practical, boots-on-the-ground problem in many places, especially away from St. Louis and Fort Wayne, is that there are not enough pastors. That is the problem pastors are asking the seminaries to help solve.

I also said that their present rhetoric and recent decisions are not helping solve that quantity problem. If the church genuinely needs more pastors, then more men need to move through SMP and other available routes into the pastoral office. I pointed out that the seminaries have not succeeded in significantly

increasing the number of students coming to campus, and that this must be faced honestly rather than treated as a future hope.

Finally, I said that I do have men I would like to encourage toward full-time ministry, but that the seminaries' recent rhetoric and decisions have made me unsure whether I trust them to form those men well. My concern was not that the presidents speak too highly of residential education, but that they say "both/and" while in practice sharply restricting one route in favor of the other.

There was no response to these remarks.

Themes That Emerged

Several themes became clear over the course of the session.

First, the seminary presidents strongly prefer residential formation and continue to regard it as the church's normative path. That preference was not subtle. It was the interpretive center of nearly everything they said.

Second, even where alternate routes were verbally affirmed, the practical posture toward them was restrictive rather than expansive. This was evident in the SMP waiting list, the age-limit defense, the emphasis on attrition, and the lack of any concrete plan to enlarge access in response to present demand.

Third, many of the pastors who spoke were not arguing against quality. They were arguing that seminary leadership is framing the issue too narrowly. What they see in the field is not merely a quality question. It is a quantity crisis, and one with immediate congregational consequences.

Fourth, there was a repeated sense from some pastors that seminary leadership is too removed from the realities faced by smaller congregations, vacancy-plagued circuits, urban and minority contexts, and politically diverse ministry settings.

Fifth, the presidents repeatedly spoke as though the church had already largely been heard. They said they are in constant contact with district presidents, have surveyed pastors, and have already listened to the great majority of the church body. That may be so institutionally, but it did not erase the impression in the room that several pressing concerns were acknowledged without being meaningfully engaged.

The "Sent to Serve" Theme

At one point, the head of Sent to Serve spoke about the initiative to change LCMS culture so that congregations identify, encourage, and provide clear pathways for men to enter seminary. Closer partnerships with Concordias were described as part of that effort. An early sign of success was claimed in roughly ninety students entering church-work pathways in undergraduate study this year, with the number said to have risen in each of the last three years. A related point made during the session was that pastors are the number one influence on a young man's decision to enter seminary.

Those remarks matter, and no one should dismiss them. The church should indeed identify and encourage future pastors. But the larger problem raised in the room was that this long-term strategy does not answer the short-term and medium-term vacancy crisis now facing many congregations.

Final Assessment

My overall impression is that the session revealed a growing disconnect between seminary leadership and many pastors serving in the field.

The presidents clearly believe they are defending the quality and integrity of pastoral formation. They are convinced that residential education must remain the normative path, that online formation should remain exceptional, and that the church's long-term solution lies mainly in sending more young men to campus.

Many pastors in the room were making a different argument. They were not dismissing the value of residential education. They were not asking for a lower quality of education for pastoral students. They were saying that the church is already in a pastoral shortage severe enough to damage congregational life and kingdom witness, and that seminary leadership's current rhetoric and decisions are not responding adequately to that reality.

For that reason, the session did not leave me with confidence that the seminaries understand the urgency of the present moment. They continue to speak as though the central issue is the preservation of an ideal model. Many pastors are asking them instead to help the church respond to an actual emergency.

That, in my judgment, was the real issue on display in Silver Spring.