

An Open Letter to the Members of Lutheran Church-Canada from the President of Concordia University of Edmonton

Dear Friends of Concordia,

I pray that everyone in our synod, and indeed all those who faithfully confess our Lord Jesus Christ, reflect upon our need of a Saviour from sin, death, and damnation as we journey through the season of Lent. Concordia as a whole is also preparing for Lent, which also includes me. And this year, I feel there is much to repentant of. ***I specifically need to ask the Church for forgiveness as one who belongs to its ministerium.*** That request needs be put into a context, however.

The article in the Canadian Lutheran has made its readers in our church aware of Concordia's decision to no longer identify itself as a religious institution. More on that below. But in the first place, I need to present the following, even as it addresses what is in essence an accurate report of what transpired over the past few years in the Governance and direction Concordia has taken. These changes go as far back as 1978, when Concordia began operating as a primarily government funded institution. I understood little of our funding when I first became a faculty member at Concordia in 1987. However, after being appointed President some 20 years later, our Board Chair at that time and his successor alerted me to issues of accountability to the government that had been critically neglected. I don't want to rehearse the whole process here, but ultimately, I sought to have Concordia achieve a state of operations that would pass scrutiny by Alberta's Auditor General; this included good governance, fiscal controls, and transparency.

It is here that I fear that I lost sight of the following: I was both a Pastor in the Church and the President of a publicly funded College (University). While in many instances I would assume one role or the other, and sometimes both, I did not realize that holding both offices could lead to the kind of conflict of interest that has caused such consternation as the Canadian Lutheran article intimates. For example: in ideal circumstances, I had drafted the Mission/Vision/Values Framework that celebrated everything that I believe a confessional Lutheran university should be. I articulated that conviction publicly at the June 2014 LCC Convention in Vancouver. I did so in my role as Pastor, but also with the belief that I could do so as Concordia's President. But recently, circumstances have become less than ideal.

From May to November of 2015 the Board wrestled with the following reality: of the 26 post-secondary institutions in Alberta, only Concordia lacks support from a third "leg" (in this case, any substantial support from the church). What if one of the two legs on which we balance were to be cut? Concordia would fall. I presented the Board Executive with options at the November 13 meeting and stated that our only hope of getting funding outside of government and tuition would be to present ourselves as

non-religious institution. Businesses, corporations, and in most provincial governments do not support religious entities. A motion was drafted to take this to the full Board.

Now, as a Pastor in the church, I would have fought this motion (*that I myself made*) tooth and nail! I should have pointed back to my commitments to the Church and the promises made in 2014. But I could not act as a Minister in our Church in this situation; I am the President of Concordia with a fiduciary duty to faculty, students and staff, and accordingly, I had to leave my pastoral side behind and do what's best for Concordia. In a sense, to avoid a conflict of interest, I had to recuse the pastor in me and let only the President speak. As Pastor, I should have spoken to the church; but I didn't, and I know this blind-sided the church. President Bugbee can legitimately say he did not see this coming and had no warning whatsoever. Rightly, all the odium of the decision as felt by the Church falls on the President and Board of Concordia. However, while the President of Concordia stands by his decision, ***it is Pastor Krispin who does need to repent of having reneged on promises and assurances given only months before.*** I am truly and sincerely sorry that this has grieved a number of members in our church to the degree that their anger has led them to unwarranted conclusions. I can say with all sincerity that there was ***no*** long-term, pre-conceived plan or plot to lead Concordia in a path that disconnected us from our "ecclesiastical bond." But in November 2015 there was a decision, and it has offended brothers and sisters within the Body of Christ. ***I am responsible. I have sinned against those who put their trust in me as a Pastoral leader of Concordia. And for this I ask forgiveness.***

As a final note, I also recognize that for some this will not be sufficient. The reason I know that this will not be sufficient by some is that they will not acknowledge that the President of Concordia can and needs to be separated from the Pastor; and I fear even my sincere asking for forgiveness will be dismissed as disingenuous as a result. ***Consequently, and as I have been made aware that I have lost "all credibility" within Lutheran Church-Canada, I have asked President Bugbee to remove my name from the Clergy Roster of Lutheran Church-Canada. As of February 11, 2016, only the President of Concordia remains.***

In a way, for me, this article is therefore a fare-well to the church in which I was a Pastor and Teacher for the past 33 years. And in a little over a year, I will also leave Concordia as President. But there will be Concordia that has a solid connection to its past and the prospect of a future as Concordia University of Edmonton.

This, despite the nay-saying of several posts in the on-line world. I want to emphasize that Concordia remains much as it was before November 27, 2015. We have daily chapels and festive events that feature our choirs and ensembles. All these are Concordia's heritage and tradition in the most positive sense of that word. After all,

"For nearly a century Concordia University of Edmonton has been a part of a growing Edmonton and an important educational institution in the province of Alberta. Concordia was the realization of a dream of German Lutheran immigrants who valued education highly; with the help of Lutherans from the Missouri Synod, Concordia was established in 1921 in the tradition of Lutheran universities [going all the way back to the University of Wittenberg].

Since then, Concordia has evolved to become one of Edmonton's best smaller university and professional degree granting institutions; it is a university committed to academic excellence in teaching and research; and it has become a university that annually welcomes nearly 2000

students from the Edmonton Capital Region, from around Canada, and from over 40 countries from around the world. Concordia is a university that values its history and traditions. And it is a university that knows that it is this history that provides a solid foundation for its future.”

The words within the quotation marks above are the preamble that introduces the recently passed Mission and Vision statement for Concordia found on our website. These words highlight that where we came from has a bearing upon who we are today, but also where we are going tomorrow. Most importantly, they are also the framework for our Mission and Vision statements:

MISSION

Concordia University of Edmonton is a community of learning grounded in scholarship and academic freedom, preparing students to be independent thinkers, ethical leaders, reflective servants in their occupations, and citizens for the common good.

VISION

Concordia University of Edmonton will be recognized nationally and internationally for its graduates' knowledge, skill, integrity, and wisdom.

There are many reasons why I personally, and the Board at my request, chose these words for our current Mission and Vision statement. As a preliminary explanation to our Concordia community, I wrote the following after the November 27 Board meeting: “Essentially, the not insignificant words removed [from our previous statement] are “Christian faith” after the first comma in the Mission, and the word “academic” was added before “freedom”. Both are important, as I contend that the latter ensures the continuation of the former, while our Academic Freedom vouchsafes the fundamental right of professors to maintain their academic (and religious/faith) positions; but faculty are now also able to exercise their academic freedom without circumscription or qualification. ... I presented these changes to the Board within the context of the Board’s fiduciary obligations, as well as their duty of care for the employees of Concordia and their duty of loyalty to the institution itself. This Board of Governors took all these obligations and duties very seriously and voted [to approve the changes] accordingly.”

Concordia’s faculty and staff have since met for a Town Hall on December 15 to discuss the reasons and the implications of these changes. I think it well to summarize for Concordia’s supporters, alumni, and friends what stood behind this move in the face of so many well-meaning, heartfelt and sincere appeals to maintain the status quo.

Several years ago I wrote a short brief to the Ministry of Advanced Education of the Government of Alberta with the title: “*The Status Quo is Not an Option.*” It was a time when our government funding was being reduced and I and my administration were forced to implement further cuts to our staff and programming. By that time I had been president for a little over six years and had (over those years) been compelled to let some 58 employees of Concordia go in order to maintain a balanced budget. These cuts are not just a number: they were colleagues and long-time friends. Most left with the sad understanding that they were being sacrificed so that Concordia as a whole would have a future; others left in disbelief and despondent, unable to fathom why they and not someone else was terminated. It is never easy, and anyone who has been compelled to dismiss a valued and trusted employee for no other reason than the bottom line knows how horrible this feels. Yet even with the cuts, the financial stresses

were only relieved temporarily. In real terms, Concordia's fiscal picture has looked rather dire over the past six years.

In fact, during these last years (and actually going back nearly four decades earlier), Concordia has received only notional support from the Synod or its members. *But that is fully understood by all of us at Concordia in light of all the needs within the church, from the needs of the seminaries to International Missions, District Outreach, and local parish ministry.* In light of this I personally keep in mind Jesus' praise of the widow's mite, valued not for its amount but the spirit in which it is given. In other words, I want to be very clear that **I appreciate greatly and value each and every gift that has ever come to Concordia from the members of our church and remain very grateful**; but we are few in a very small church, and the needs of Concordia have long outgrown the capacity of LCC to support its operations. For this reason, Concordia has received government support to varying degrees over the years: that government funding currently stands at \$12.5 million, or 47% of our operational income. The remainder is drawn from student tuition, fees, and some services sold to our students and the community. In point of fact, during 2015, Concordia received under \$30,000 in gifts from the synod, churches, and individual donors combined in the face of a \$27 million dollar operational budget. The status quo is not an option.

To cut to the chase, when all is said and done, the changes made at Concordia are about fiscal and human resources to operate and maintain the work of Concordia. The \$27 million dollar annual operational budget supports 500+ full and part-time employees, and serves close to 1800 students. But political and economic circumstances have changed in Alberta. For example, recently the Minister of Education indicate might initiate a review of funding for students in private schools in the K-12 system. He suggested that such schools might consider a different business model; I was personally informed that "private religious schools" in the post-secondary system should not take funding for granted going forward in a stressed Alberta economy.

Furthermore, time will tell what the Adult Learner Review (as a post-secondary system review) will mean for the Independent Academic Institutions (i.e. the private faith-based universities) in terms of their place in the post-secondary landscape in Alberta. It goes without saying that I as President and the Board as a whole need to evaluate any risk, *potential or real*, and make decisions that provide for Concordia's future. Such is our fiduciary obligation, but more to the point, our duty of care and of loyalty to past and present students, faculty and staff, and the heritage to which we are obligated. It is for this reason that the decision was made on November 27 *to cease presenting Concordia to the government and the public as a religious institution.* To be blunt: this decision was made in order to maintain the funding that we are currently receiving and to establish the conditions that ensure Concordia's sustainability. Adequate resourcing remains a primary concern.

It remains to be seen if I and the Board will be found on the right side of history with this decision, even as history has disclosed the fate of many Canadian faith-based institutions that preceded us down this path: Waterloo Lutheran University which is now Wilfred Laurier University; McMaster, which began in 1887 as a Baptist university and became public in 1957; Concordia in Montreal, which merged two long-standing Christian institutions: the YMCA based "Sir George William" and the Roman Catholic "Loyola University" in 1972; the University of Winnipeg, which until 1967 was the Presbyterian/Methodist "United College"; St. Francis Xavier, the jewel of the Roman Catholic university system, became a public university only recently; and the list could go on. Admittedly, there are some very successful faith-based institutions that remain across the country. Yet they remain because the circumstances allowed for

affiliations and federations with larger universities (e.g. the Kings University College at Western or St. Thomas Moore in Saskatoon). But Alberta has no history of such affiliations/federations. Rather than federation, university colleges such as Augustana (formerly Camrose Lutheran College) have simply been assimilated and absorbed into the University of Alberta. Others, like Redeemer in Ancaster, ON or Trinity Western in BC have to charge tuition of over \$25,000 per year; even in Alberta, despite the government grant, institutions such as the King's University (Reformed) charge \$13,000 to an ever dwindling student body, and this despite getting over 30% operational funding support from their denomination. To repeat, Concordia, even at the height of synodical support, never received more than .6% of its operational funding needs.

I was once asked, "Gerald, how can you keep Concordia going the way of Augustana?" This decision is part of that answer. We did not think assimilation with the University of Alberta to be an option. It would mean a loss of identity, history, and opportunity. We believe this decision retains all three. As I stated above, the term "Academic Freedom", a term much used (and abused) in the post-secondary world allows Concordia's faculty and all who work here to continue to confess their faith, celebrate Concordia's distinctiveness, and acknowledge our history. That said, I am not so naïve as to think that this changes nothing; and it would be disingenuous for me to state that it will be business as usual at Concordia. While in point of fact nothing has changed yet, it will. That's the experience of all the institutions mentioned above. I suspect Concordia will end up very much like them, as well. It may take a generation, perhaps two.

But Concordia will be here in a generation; it will be here providing an educational environment that encourages respectful sharing, discussion and debate, including its continued engagement with the Christian faith. With significant foresight, Concordia has created its own Institute of Christian Studies and Society. This Institute has the mandate to develop and enhance informed connections among the academic world, various branches of Christianity, other religions, local communities and society at large. The Institute will facilitate research, study, and discussion of Christian Studies and societal issues across academic disciplines and to the public arena. The Institute will ensure the maintenance of Concordia's commitment to its heritage and will define our connection to practical matters in Christianity and other religions, particularly in relation to ethics, societal affairs, and current events. We continue to have daily chapels in conjunction with the Seminary; we continue to employ an LCC pastor as part-time chaplain; as an institution that has historical ties to Bach and Buxtehude, not to mention Luther, we have musical events that celebrate that heritage and will continue to do so. But all this exists in a very different Concordia than the one I arrived at in 1987. And that is so because the status quo was not an option; the Board and I have had to make a very difficult decision.

Let me close with an analogy: as a community of faith, and as a liturgical people, we Lutherans have just come through Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany and are approaching Lent. In my house that means a festively decorated house, Advent Devotions, anticipation of Christmas, warm feelings, wonderful hymns, and a joy in the knowledge that we are anticipating Him who comes to us with the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation. After January 6, the decorations were taken down, the tree is gone, and the festive atmosphere dissipates. It all seems so sterile, empty, and in some ways very sad. But really, nothing has changed. For Jesus did come; He is God with us; and because God is with us, it is what we believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths as the baptized people of God that remains no matter how the world changes around us; no matter how an institution changes; and no matter how our church

and its structures change. For He has promised to be with us, no matter what, to the very end of the age.

Dr. Gerald S. Krispin is President of Concordia University of Edmonton.