

Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference  
Twelfth Triennial Convention  
May 29–June 1, 2026—Lusaka, Zambia

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## The Strategy and Success of *Academia Cristo*

Henry Herrera  
*Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional – Colombia*

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### Introduction: The Power of the Gospel<sup>1</sup>

Martin Luther said in his sermon based on John 7:33-34:

The Gospel has its day and takes its course from one city to another. Today it is here; tomorrow, there. It is like a heavy shower which passes from place to place. ... Even if a certain place accepts the Gospel today, it will not stay there long. People hate it; they view it with envy; they curse it; yes, they starve it out. ... See to it that you do not neglect it; do not sleep your opportunity away. ... We should not suppose that the Gospel, which we now have, will stay with us forever. Wait, and see what the situation will be in twenty years. Then tell me about it again. After the death of the present pious and sincere pastors, others will appear who will preach and act according to the pleasure of the devil.<sup>2</sup>

The first time I read this quote from Luther, I did not understand what the Reformer was saying. Now, though, years later, I have had the opportunity to read the same words again and meditate on them.

This meditation has led me to look back and confess my sin. I did not fully grasp the power of God in the gospel. Now, however, I can see the power of God at work in my life as the Holy Spirit has used law and gospel to make me a child of God, although I was once dead in transgressions and sins and an object of wrath (Ephesians 2:1–3).

By the power of the gospel, powerful in all times and places, we can proclaim that we do not belong to the devil, that we are free from guilt, free from hell. All this because we are justified by faith in Christ Jesus. We have come to this faith by the Spirit's work through the gospel in Baptism and the Word, which are the very means of grace by which God gives us faith.

### An overview of the current spiritual situation in Latin America

In the previous section we recognized the spiritual situation of the many people who live without God in the entire world, not just in the region we will discuss, Latin America. Specifically in our context, in Latin America, there is a population of about 680 million people across 33 countries. In the region there are various cultures, languages and religions.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was translated from the Spanish by WELS missionary Andrew Johnston, who also will read the essay in English at the CELC convention and will serve as the interpreter for the discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 23, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 261–62.

Spanish is the primary language in 19 of the 33 countries. Of those 680 million people, 425 million identify as Christian.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Christianity is the majority religion in the region, with more than 50% of the population claiming to be Christian in most countries.

When we look at these statistics, we might think that Christian churches exist because the power of the gospel rains down in the region.<sup>4</sup> In a certain sense, this is true. It is also true in the region, though, that the devil has done his work of spiritually deceiving people—people who have the Bible open and who gather in churches but are spiritually dead because they live every day obeying a list of man-made rules about what they have to do or have to stop doing to be saved. Sadly, we meet many such people in Latin America—people who are spiritually lost and are completely unaware of their precarious position.

God does know their spiritual situation, as he himself clearly says: “No one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law” (Romans 3:20).<sup>5</sup> This problem is the same one that Jesus addresses, as Matthew records, inspired by the Holy Spirit: “For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Messiah,’ and will deceive many. . . . And many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold” (Matthew 24:5; 11–12).

These verses foretell what we see in Latin America. There are many who go from church to church or even start new churches based on testimonies, supposed miracles, and extraordinary conversions. They claim that in visions they have gone up to the seventh heaven in order to obtain their faith, or that they have descended into hell to deliver a message to the people they are evangelizing. Therefore, in our spiritual tour of the region, we conclude, first of all, that false doctrine flourishes in our region, and, as a result, there are many souls who are without a shepherd.

Secondly, along with this rise of false doctrine, we also see constant divisions in the same churches. Pastors fight with other pastors to gain influence over people . . . and their money. Sadly, religion is used as a weapon in the sinful struggle to influence people and their pocketbooks.

The result is so many pastors and their followers focusing on so many things other than the saving work of Christ. Sadly, we know this leads not to salvation but to God’s judgement.

These things that we witness around us—this rise of false doctrine and this strife among heterodox churches—are the spiritual reality in our region. As in the times of the Reformation so also today, synergism is doing its work. The message shared by priests and pastors is one and the same. It is salvation by works. They just use different words to entice the people to join them on a supposed route to salvation. It is common to hear about these: pilgrimages, vigils, fasts, tithes, confession to the priest, celebrating certain festivals for forgiveness, necessary acts of penitence, giving up dancing/smoking/watching television/dressing in a certain way, and the list could go on and on. These are all examples of synergism in our day and in our region.

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<sup>3</sup> Included in this group are both Catholics and “Evangelicals.”

<sup>4</sup> As Luther describes in his quote at the beginning

<sup>5</sup> All Bible quotations are from the New International Version (2011).

The second article of the Formula of Concord addresses whether or not human beings cooperate in their conversion. In the article, speaking of the concept of “free will,”<sup>6</sup> the issue of synergism is discussed (synergism meaning “to do something in mutual cooperation”). In contrast to the true biblical teaching laid out in our Confessions, many people in their various congregations in Latin America place their confidence in their own cooperation in order to become believers and children of God.

### **An overview of the history of Christianity in Latin America**

Now that I have shared a spiritual overview of our region, I would like to share a bit more about how we got to this point from a historical perspective.<sup>7</sup> Europe was threatened by the rise of Islam in the late Middle Ages. By this time, the Mohammedans had conquered North Africa, Palestine, Syria, and Asia Minor, destroying Christian churches wherever they went.

Meanwhile, the bishop of Rome had become the leader of the Christian church in Western Europe (covering modern day Spain, France, England, Germany, and Italy). Thus, the Spanish pope Calixto III issued a bull in 1455 authorizing a new crusade against the Turks. Spain, according to Calixto III, was the country that had been divinely chosen for this crusade against Islam and all forms of heresy and idolatry.

For seven centuries the Spanish had struggled to free themselves from Mohammedan dominance. Once they finally managed to take back their territory, they undertook the great challenge of re-evangelizing the people in the newly freed lands. For this “re-evangelization” of the Iberian Peninsula, both the military orders and the famous “Spanish Inquisition” were employed.

Of special note are the momentous events of 1492. In that year, the city of Granada, the last stronghold of the followers of Mohammed, was reconquered. While that was happening, the explorer, missionary, and crusader Christopher Columbus sailed from Spain to outflank the Turks and give Spain a new route to the riches of the distant Orient. We notice specifically that Columbus was moved not only by his desire for riches. He also set off from Spain full of missionary zeal to establish Christ’s kingdom on earth.<sup>8</sup>

I share this historical review for two reasons. First, this shows what we heard from Luther: “The Gospel has its day and takes its course from one city to another. Today it is here; tomorrow, there. It is like a heavy shower which passes from place to place.”<sup>9</sup> God used the nation of Spain and the individuals mentioned above so that the Word would reach the Americas (even though we know it was far from pure doctrine). The second reason for sharing this historical overview is so that we can understand the influence of the Roman Catholic Church that has existed in Latin America since the Spanish first touched American soil.

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<sup>6</sup> Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II: Free Will.

<sup>7</sup> While it is not quoted directly, note that what follows is the summary of the history of Christianity in Latin America as presented in *Teología y Misión en América Latina (Theology and Mission in Latin America)*, a book written by Rodolfo Blank which has been used as a textbook in confessional Lutheran theological education in Latin America.

<sup>8</sup> As was previously noted, this, as with details in the preceding paragraphs, comes from Blank.

<sup>9</sup> Reference to Luther quote from the introduction

The following early account of Roman Catholic missionary work in the Americas illustrates their methods:

The methods used to evangelize our indigenous ancestors varied greatly. One example is that of a certain Franciscan, Jacobo de Testera, who traveled from town to town carrying large posters that very graphically depicted the sacraments, the catechism, heaven, hell, and purgatory. The same Friar Testera ordered the construction of a portable oven, which he always carried with him on his mission journeys in order to demonstrate the agonies of hell. After heating the oven until it was red hot, the friar would throw into it a certain number of dogs, cats, and other live animals. The horrifying screams of these unfortunate animals generally produced in the indigenous people a profound sense of fear and terror.<sup>10</sup>

While this was happening, what was the Lutheran influence at the time of the discovery of America? The followers of Luther were not able to take the gospel to the newly discovered territories of Latin America because the great maritime powers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century were Spain and Portugal. The Lutheran states did not have the necessary ships to send missionaries across the sea. Even if they had been able to, the Spanish authorities, fearing the “heretical contamination” of Lutheran doctrine, strictly forbade the entrance of Protestants into its territories in the New World. In addition to this, one author suggests that groups such as Lutherans, Anglicans, and Presbyterians were more focused on spreading their new ideas in Europe than sharing them in Latin America.<sup>11</sup>

While this accounts for the historical influence of Roman Catholicism in Latin America, it is also necessary for us to share a bit concerning the rise of Pentecostalism in the region as a majority of non-Roman Catholic Christians belong to this movement. In fact, we have noticed that in some countries, more attend Pentecostal services than Roman Catholic mass. The result is that many charismatic practices have also penetrated the historical Protestant denominations in Latin America (there is even a charismatic movement within the Catholic Church). The result is that it is almost impossible to work today without bumping into the Pentecostal influences at every turn.

### **The development of a new synod and *Academia Cristo***

Up to this point, I have reviewed how God brought the rain shower of the gospel from one place to another, as Luther observed. This not only helps us understand the religious context of the Christian churches in Latin America; it also helps us to see the mission field where *Academia Cristo* operates.

Beginning in 2012, we<sup>12</sup> began to realize we had two challenges before us. One challenge was how to make confessional Lutheranism known in Latin America. The other was how to work together as churches that came into existence as a result of the work of WELS. Since 1960 WELS had sent missionaries who faithfully shared the Word and planted

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Ricard, *La Conquista Espiritual de México* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986), 193. (Rendered in English by translator as I could not find it in English translation.)

<sup>11</sup> As above, the historical background shared in this paragraph and the one to come relies heavily on Blank.

<sup>12</sup> Note that from this point forward, the story follows the author’s experience as one of those principally involved in the events described.

congregations in Puerto Rico, Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Bolivia, and Haiti.

With these two challenges before us, a meeting was held at *Santísima Trinidad*<sup>13</sup> Lutheran Church in Medellín, Colombia at the beginning of April 2016. Pastors and leaders of churches of our fellowship throughout the region were invited (both those previously mentioned and others which had resulted from ELS mission work).

The main question which we met to discuss was this: “What would we teach if we were to teach courses on the internet?” After spending several days as Lutheran brothers, we concluded that we wanted to begin by teaching the Catechism to others. And so, videos began to be recorded teaching the Catechism and a collection of studies on Bible history. Our plan was to share these recorded lessons online.

As things tend to be at the beginning of a project, we did not have everything in order at that time. Our videos were very simple—a voiceover with corresponding images on the screen. We knew we wanted to teach Luther’s Catechism, but we had not yet established a defined curriculum. We knew we wanted to reach people using social media such as Facebook and Instagram, but we did not know how to keep students active.

In short, we were working hard from the beginning but had a lot to learn. There were two things, however, that we did have clear. The first was that we wanted to make confessional Lutheranism known in a region where it was mostly unknown. The second was that we wanted to create a new synod in order to work together to take the name of Christ from one place to another, a rain shower of the faithful Word.

### **A plan takes shape**

The *Academia Cristo* mobile application, launched in 2020, started to give a certain order to the program’s curriculum. This application offered initial self-study courses to students in order to gauge their understanding and desire to continue to study. This self-study level both filtered students and provided a framework for their coursework.

While the app was important in the strategic development of *Academia Cristo*, what really gave the whole program order at about this same time was the “*Ruta Cristo*.”<sup>14</sup> This is a strategy which we developed which outlined progress towards a clear goal: 1000 “*grupos sembrador*”<sup>15</sup> in 10 years in the countries of the Americas where Spanish is spoken.

The *Ruta Cristo* is laid out as follows. We begin by seeking and inviting students to study using social media. Then, those who are interested begin to study via WhatsApp where they take 40 self-study lessons.<sup>16</sup> Those students who successfully complete self-study coursework are then invited to live courses taught via Zoom. The first stage of live study is the Discipleship level and has 13 courses. The next stage is the Church Planter level and has ten courses. While they are studying at this highest level, students are typically also gathering

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<sup>13</sup> “Most Holy Trinity”

<sup>14</sup> Literally, “Christ Route,” in the same way that *Academia Cristo* literally means “Christ Academy”

<sup>15</sup> “Sower/planter groups” or church plants

<sup>16</sup> Note that this WhatsApp study using an automated (“chatbot”) process took the place of the previously mentioned *Academia Cristo* mobile application.

a *grupo sembrador*. These groups focus on developing the habits of a healthy body of believers. Once they practice the habits of a confessional Lutheran congregation they are welcomed into the fellowship of our synod—the *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*.

Looking back at the development of this program, the *Academia Cristo* mobile app was key. It automated the process of registering new students and receiving their contact information. At the same time as the app was launched the world plunged into the Covid pandemic.

In our case, God used that pandemic for the good of our work. During this time of loneliness and lockdowns, there were many problems. Unemployment, closed congregations, and other issues caused people to look for answers on social media, and they found “*Academia Cristo – Aquí tu Paz.*”<sup>17</sup> I recall being overwhelmed by the number of students as we offered live courses to those who finished self-study at all hours of the day. We were witnessing the rain shower of the gospel in our region, and now with sound doctrine!

By 2023, continued work on our plan resulted in the *Academia Cristo* plan as it now stands. Self-study level courses were adjusted to be taught by WhatsApp instead of through a mobile application. Additionally, the last course of the Discipleship level (the first level of live courses) now marks a new beginning for students. Students become teachers as they are taught to share “Four Key Concepts” (sin, grace, faith, and works)<sup>18</sup> to people in their communities.

This reminds us of the prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. The inspired writer records Solomon’s prayer:

As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm—when they come and pray toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name. (2 Chronicles 6:32–33)

In the People’s Bible commentary, these verses are explained as follows:

Solomon sees the kingdom of God being extended by people coming *in*, to the land and to the place where God has chosen to reveal himself. We might contrast this with the way we, on the basis of the Great Commission, tend to view the extension of the kingdom of God as a matter of missionaries going *out* into all the world to preach the good news about Jesus. Whatever the perspective, it amounts to the same thing whether we pray, “Lord, bring *in* all those whom you have chosen to be your own” or “Lord, let your gospel message be spread *throughout* all nations.” All this is a way of emphasizing that Solomon’s petition here is simply filled with a zeal for missions.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The ubiquitous tagline of *Academia Cristo* is “*aquí tu paz*,” which means “Here is your peace.”

<sup>18</sup> This course is a translation of a course in English by the same name developed by Pastor Jonathan Hein (WELS). In contrast to the course in English, the Spanish version uses a Bible story to teach each of the four concepts.

<sup>19</sup> Paul O. Wendland, *2 Chronicles*, The People’s Bible (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2002), 87.

### From students to congregations

When a student has finished the 13 courses of the Discipleship level,<sup>20</sup> we consider the student ready to start the “doctrinal agreement” process. The student, together with one of our professors, reviews 95 points of confessional Lutheran doctrine one by one. These points, phrased as confessional questions, were developed over the years to give each student the opportunity to confirm that the teachings of Scripture that they have been taught are their own.

This process also encourages the student to share that previously mentioned study of the four key concepts (which is taking place at approximately the same stage). Thus, the student is now a confessional Lutheran who has completed the Discipleship level. The joy of the gospel leads him to desire to share the sound doctrine he has learned and reviewed.

This is just the beginning. The student who gathered a group of people to share the four key concepts, continues to share the Word with them using “*Grupo Sembrador*” materials while he also continues his *Academia Cristo* studies at the Planter (*sembrador*) level.

And, thus, you see how the *Ruta Cristo* works. In this way the “foreigner” with whom we did not have fellowship becomes a brother in the faith and is on the *Ruta Cristo*—bringing the Word of God to others and carrying out the Great Commission. Every day we pray as Solomon did, thanking God because those who are coming to study are becoming *sembradores* (church planters) and are carrying out the Great Commission “so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel” (2 Chronicles 6:33).

God has blessed our work. As of this writing<sup>21</sup> *Academia Cristo* has had 1552 students who have finished all the self-study courses and proceeded to successfully complete (by submitting a final project) at least one Discipleship level course. Forty-three *grupos sembrador* have started. We are in 15 of the 19 Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America.

But this is only because of the means of grace, as our Confessions state. Article V of the Augsburg Confession states concerning the ministry of the Word,

So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel, that is to say, in those who hear that God, not on account of our own merits but on account of Christ, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace on account of Christ. . . . They [our churches] condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Spirit comes to human beings without the external Word through their own preparations and works.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Note that the 13 courses average 10 lessons each.

<sup>21</sup> Late July 2025. Updated numbers can be shared with the CELC convention attendees if desired.

<sup>22</sup> AC V:1–4, in *The Book of Concord*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 41.

The Holy Spirit is producing faith in many people. Our strategy is merely a way to connect people to the means of grace—meeting them first through social media and then inviting them to study with us online.

It should be noted, though, that *Academia Cristo* is not just an online ministry. Yes, we use digital means to initially reach people, and we instruct them using Zoom. Once this initial contact is made, though, missionaries work hard to travel to regularly meet faithful students, talk to them about the *Ruta Cristo*, and to counsel them as they form *grupos sembrador*. Missionaries continue to work with these students as they advance through the *Ruta Cristo* so that a group becomes a congregation of the *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*.

Juan Reyes of Tenancingo, Mexico, is one example of how the *Ruta Cristo* works. Juan began to study with *Academia Cristo* on August 12, 2020. After taking that last course of the Discipleship level, Juan taught the four key concepts to his family. He also invited friends to his house and visited them in their houses to teach them the course. Over these five years, God has blessed faithful preaching and teaching. Today the group that Juan started has 40 members, gathers every Sunday around Word and sacrament, and has been received as a congregation of the *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*.

### **Missiological challenges and adjustments**

In missiology, regardless of the strategy or the method of outreach, there is an early stage marked with a certain disorderliness. In our case, the students come from all different backgrounds. Some come to *Academia Cristo* from “evangelical” congregations with legalistic doctrine. Others have a typical Roman Catholic background. When they first come to us, we expect a time of spiritual detoxification from false doctrines of their past: prayers to the saints, denial of infant baptism, general misunderstandings of the sacraments, decision theology, and, in general, many forms of legalism prohibiting music, dancing, smoking, styles of dress, etc.

It is amazing to see the work of the Holy Spirit in so many who are spiritually contaminated, without peace and without hope. The Holy Spirit, using the means of grace, brings them to the true faith.

There is, yes, that time of initial disorder as the Spirit works in people, but we do still want to have order wherever possible. To that end, a governing board for *Academia Cristo* was formed. The board consists of missionaries focused on *Academia Cristo* work as well as leaders of the *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*. This board meets every three months to call those who are planting churches and those who are teaching *Academia Cristo* courses. This board also reviews proposed changes to the curriculum to ensure that we teach sound doctrine and are working together toward the goal of 1000 *grupos sembrador* in Latin America.

Before we go on, it would be good to clarify what type of call this board extends to *sembradores*. The board calls those who are faithful to the Word and have a desire to share it in their communities. The divine call, in this case, is temporary in length with the plan that the group, once it matures and becomes a congregation, will call the *sembrador* to another office of the ministry, to be its pastor, for example. With the call issued by the *Academia Cristo* board, the *sembrador* receives neither money as a salary nor financial support to begin

the *grupo sembrador*. This is because, within our mission strategy, we want each *sembrador*, together with his group, to develop habits of stewardship, sustainability, and financial self-support.

Besides the call, we also encourage an orderly practice of instruction. After teaching the four key concepts, the *sembrador* proceeds to lead his *grupo sembrador* through a 16-lesson course of basic biblical instruction called “*Aprendan de Mi*.”<sup>23</sup> The lessons of this course are designed so that the *sembrador* teaches his group the same biblical doctrine he has learned in the Discipleship level. Those who complete the four key concepts and *Aprendan de Mi* become members of the group.

While doing this, the *sembrador* is not left to figure things out on his own. He is working through the courses of the Church Planter level. These ten courses teach the *sembrador*<sup>24</sup> advanced doctrine and practical theology so that he can lead his group. When a student has completed all *Academia Cristo* coursework, he has been in live courses for more than 200 hours. These courses are designed so that the student can take all these courses alongside his other vocations such as an employee, husband, father, etc., while also leading a local group of believers.

Besides this structured curriculum, the called *sembrador* is also assigned a counselor. The counselor, a missionary or pastor of our fellowship, meets regularly with the *sembrador* both online and in person. During these meetings he uses a format that focuses on the development of habits of a confessional Lutheran congregation in the *grupo sembrador*.

As you would probably imagine, this process is not without its challenges. We have much to learn in general. There are also some specific situations which we are working through.

One of these specific situations is the case of female *sembradores*. These co-heirs of God’s grace study with us and take courses. They also have been working side-by-side with us within the *Ruta Cristo*. The problem, of course, is that some local *grupos sembrador* do not have a qualified man to carry out the male leadership role that God desires for his congregations.

What do we do? The female *sembrador* is encouraged to share the gospel carrying out the Great Commission. Female *sembradores* have been called by us to serve with confidence but their call also specifically states that they serve in a way that is consistent with biblical roles of men and women. For this reason, a called female *sembrador* does not exercise authority over men but instead will encourage men to carry out their proper role within the church of God.

For this special ministry, *Academia Cristo* has a female missionary. She works with these women and their groups within the *Ruta Cristo* in the hopes that a man emerges who can be trained by *Academia Cristo*. In this way the God given order can be maintained within a congregation with men taking the lead.

It is amazing, brothers! We witness these women, by the power of the Holy Spirit, understanding their role in the church. We continue to pray for these women and their groups

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<sup>23</sup> Entitled “Learn of Me” from Jesus’ words in Matthew 11:29

<sup>24</sup> Note again that *sembrador* means “planter.”

so that slowly but surely they can also help form confessional Lutheran congregations that have the order that we want to have in our biblical, Christocentric churches.

In ten years, we have learned much concerning our missiology and strategy. This has led us to guide our groups and congregations to practice five habits. The purpose of these habits is to help guide our church planters and their groups not only to grow in numbers but also spiritually. The five habits that groups are encouraged to continually practice are as follows:

- 1) seek the lost,
- 2) instruct new people,
- 3) deepen faith in worship,
- 4) widen faith in Bible study, and
- 5) support one another in a Christian community.

As has been previously mentioned, when a *grupo sembrador* practices these habits together with their trained leader, they have reached the goal of the *Ruta Cristo* and are received into our confessional Lutheran fellowship as a congregation of the *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*.

It is our prayer that even after they become congregations, these groups of believers continue to practice these five habits and thrive for many years. We also encourage these groups not to depend on one single person (the original *sembrador*), but that others are instructed in the same system of doctrinal training.

Our desire is that the congregation itself take responsibility for its continued existence by safeguarding sound doctrine and, through its leadership, calling qualified brothers to serve as teachers, pastors, or other spiritual leaders according to its needs. We do this knowing that Scripture allows the church to issue divine calls to brothers to serve according to the needs of the congregation and in keeping with the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given them for service in the Kingdom.

While a *grupo sembrador* is growing and maturing into a congregation, a handoff occurs between *Academia Cristo* and *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*. The president of *Academia Cristo*<sup>25</sup> and the called missionary of *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*<sup>26</sup> are in constant communication concerning these groups and their progress.

Each *Academia Cristo* missionary also understands and supports the idea of the *Ruta Cristo* and works so that the groups with whom they serve as counselors are practicing the previously mentioned habits and working towards belonging to the synod.

All involved in the program have the same understanding of the role of the synod. Its work is ongoing theological education (including its seminary program), practicing fellowship, and continued mission work. Thus, brothers, we use the *Ruta Cristo*, with all its synchronized components to show each *grupo sembrador* what its strengths are and what areas need to improve in order to continue to develop by the power of the gospel.

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<sup>25</sup> The translator and English presenter of this essay at the CELC convention

<sup>26</sup> The author of this essay who also serves as the president of the synod

### Concluding thoughts

Perhaps many who had heard of *Academia Cristo* had not previously understood the training we provide to *sebradores*. This is normal considering that what is here described is different than our traditional method in which men are enrolled in a seminary and spend hours preparing themselves for the ministry.

There is, at times, the danger of thinking that the only form of the public ministry established by God is that of the pastor. With this comes the accompanying problem of thinking that the only way to train a prospective minister is through such a seminary. I am not personally opposed to this form of training. I myself passed through a program similar to that which many seminarians have gone through, and I also help with the *Seminario Cristo*—the seminary program of the *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*.

But I would like to be clear on this point—there are many ways of training Christians so that they can develop their Spirit-given gifts and serve in current and future congregations faithfully teaching law and gospel, administering the means of grace in an orderly way.

We hold in high regard our brothers who have received training at a seminary or directly from a missionary. In our situation, however, we have students who are adults, who have families and work and daily responsibilities. If we closely analyze the curriculum of *Academia Cristo* and the curriculum of *Seminario Cristo* (formed with the counsel of the WELS' Pastoral Studies Institute), we find a strong emphasis on identifying law and gospel and sound biblical hermeneutics. Students learn the "4 C method" by which they are able to study and teach Bible stories and, by using questions, identify the principal law/gospel points. The way of learning and teaching Bible stories is accompanied by careful attention to every point of doctrine because we desire that those who are teaching share, as Paul said, "the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27).

It is in view of this process that trained *sebradores* are called by the governing board of *Academia Cristo* to administer the means of grace. When they accept this call, our *sebradores* do so with an understanding of the Scriptures and hold in high esteem the privilege of administering the sacraments in their *grupos sembrador*. We cannot ignore the work of the Holy Spirit, who has made each of us leaders in the church and works in these students as well so that they can do what we cannot do, serving in many places we cannot be.

In such a way the number of voices proclaiming sin and grace has multiplied, and, by the power of the gospel, the lost are being brought to faith. These people are then gathered into the above-described congregations where the marks of the church are present. It is important to understand the time that each student dedicates to the study of God's Word and also to understand the time that we, the counselors, spend with them so that we can consider those serving to be workers worthy of the calling they have received according to the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3.

The experience of putting this missiology into practice (and learning as we go) has also taught us not to stay fixed in one place or attached to just one method. We acknowledge that the way our sister synod, WELS, has formed pastors and established congregations has served them well for many years. We thank God that they have been able to serve communities in the United States with the faithful preaching of the Word through local pastors and missionaries.

But with increasing migration and the changing ways people connect today, can traditional missiology and long-established church practices continue in the same way? And, speaking to the CELC as a whole, do all understand what kind of missiology works in a particular country or city?

I am not asking these questions because I consider myself an expert in missiology or pastoral training. I ask them because these are the questions that must always be present in our congregations, our synods, and the CELC itself for the advancement of the gospel. Continually evaluating our missiology is important if we want to bring the message of salvation to as many people as possible.

For this reason, we need to stay rooted in the law and gospel, thanking God for every mission strategy we have as brothers in the faith, never thinking that one is more successful than another because of human achievement. We all recognize that mission strategies are only effective because of the work of the Holy Spirit. Finally, we learn to share and listen to one another's strategies, to explore why certain things work and others do not, and to discern what might work in our own setting and how to adapt plans with culture in mind.

After all, the mission work we carry out in different parts of the world is the same task given to us by our God when he commissioned us to go and make disciples of all nations.

Our synod, the *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*, may be, at present, the youngest of all the synods here at the CELC convention. We are now in a period of learning, having just established our Constitution and Bylaws with the help of our brothers of the WELS. We have organized ourselves, though, with the specific purpose of encouraging fellowship in our region, working together in theological education, and reaching out in all of Latin America.

It is also worth emphasizing that we have not lost the teachings we received from our spiritual fathers, the WELS missionaries who have been serving in our region since the 1960s. It remains our fervent desire to maintain our confessional Lutheran character.

I say this because maybe some may wonder, "How does a student learn our Lutheran confessions? How do we maintain that confessional character?" These important tasks are carried out in our work from the beginning.

This formation takes place through the study in *Academia Cristo* as students come to know the truths of Scripture and as they form their groups and are taught to use the Lutheran liturgy (for example, using the historic creeds in their worship). This also takes place within our synod, *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*, through its seminary program (*Seminario Cristo*) which exists to train and equip God's servants for effective service in the context of the *grupos sembrador* and, later, in the congregations of the synod.

This seminary strives to maintain that Lutheran character. It teaches the Lutheran Confessions and Church history. It provides Christ-centered resources online with the goal of supporting called leaders in their faithful preaching of law and gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments.

The rest is that these *sembradores* may be called by their groups to serve as pastors, teachers, or evangelists, according to the needs in each place. This is done understanding that Scripture teaches that the public ministry is broad and that there are many ways to serve

within a congregation. This calling often takes place as *grupos sembrador* begin to develop into congregations of the synod as they come to the end of the *Ruta Cristo*.

This training is done because we gladly and continually affirm that the Lutheran Confessions are a vital part of our church body's character. And, to reflect this character, we also instruct every one of our congregations to know and practice the doctrine described in our synod's official doctrinal statement, "*En Esto Creemos*."<sup>27</sup>

From the time I received the invitation to write an essay with the title "The Strategy and Success of *Academia Cristo*," I only had one phrase in mind: "It is all because of the work of the Holy Spirit." It is likely that I have forgotten important events that happened during all this time. The writing of this essay, however, has moved me personally to be grateful to God for making me a part of this ministry without any merit on my part. I also thank God that I share the same faith and the same mission (although not the same language) with every one of you here.

It is this same faith that is now shared with so many new brothers who have joined us through *Academia Cristo* and now have groups that they have gathered. It is only by the work of the Holy Spirit that we can work in so many countries where he has permitted us to work. And it is only by the work of the Holy Spirit that we can preach in our pulpits and teach in our classes.

To God alone be the glory. Amen.

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<sup>27</sup> "This We Believe"—the official doctrinal statement of the *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*, which reflects the doctrinal statement of the WELS of the same name