

ACADEMIA CRISTO AND TELL ENGLISH:
OVERCOMING CHALLENGES WITH THESE MISSION EFFORTS

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CONTENTS

CONTENTS.....	II
ABSTRACT.....	IV
INTRODUCTION	1
WELS WORLD MISSION MISSIOLOGY IN THE PAST	5
THE HISTORY OF <i>ACADEMIA CRISTO</i>	9
A Brief Overview of WELS Latin American Missions.....	10
The Start of <i>Academia Cristo</i>	13
HOW DOES <i>ACADEMIA CRISTO</i> WORK?.....	15
WHAT IS TELL NETWORK?	17
TELL English	18
LITERATURE REVIEW	21
<i>Missionary Methods: God’s Plan for Missions According to Paul</i> , by Roland Allen	22
100 Years After Roland Allen	25
THE CHALLENGES.....	29
Becoming Known	29
Finances	30
Identifying Leaders	31
Maintaining Motivation.....	33
The Transition from Online Training to In-Person Churches	34
Doctrinal Purity	35
Women’s Ministry	37
THE FUTURE OF TELL NETWORK	39

TELL English	39
<i>Academia Cristo</i>	41
TELL Mandarin	42
TELL Tagalog	42
CONCLUSION.....	44

ABSTRACT

Academia Cristo is the multi-faceted effort of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) Latin America mission team to spread the gospel and plant churches in the Spanish-speaking world. TELL English is a Multi-Language Productions (MLP) program – part of the WELS world missions team – to spread the gospel and train leaders to share the gospel in an effective and repeatable way in the English-speaking world. *Academia Cristo* and TELL English carry out this effort by recruiting and teaching people online with the help of Facebook, WhatsApp, and Zoom and then helping those trained individuals to start churches. Significant challenges have faced WELS World Missions, and new challenges have arisen in these more recent ministry training programs. These challenges include becoming known, financial cost, leader identification, student motivation, the transition from online training to in-person churches, maintaining doctrinal purity, and women’s ministry. This paper aims to demonstrate how *Academia Cristo* and TELL English have successfully addressed both old and new challenges through organic church planting, technology use, in-person visits, and personal counselors.

INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 will forever be burned into the memory of those who lived through it. The pandemic shutdown changed almost every aspect of life. The changes were particularly drastic in the realms of work and school. The shutdown increased the necessity of technological tools in society, making services such as Google Meet, Zoom, Outlook, Gmail, and Google Drive essential tools if they were not already. Quarantine and social distancing required most to quickly learn the ins and outs of these online tools to stay connected.

Work and school went remote, and workers and students alike lamented the challenges of remote work and distance learning.¹ Those who did not have a laptop, tablet, or smartphone needed to get one quickly, and those devices are not particularly cheap. Many had a substantial learning curve as they tried to figure out how to make and send videos and presentations or save and share them online using email and shared drives. It was sometimes difficult to stay motivated when work and school were only “virtual” endeavors. Being out in society to work and learn in person was practically impossible.

However, some advantages were also discovered through the increased use of technology to work and learn while quarantined. Many saved substantial amounts of money during

1. “Overall, about a third (34%) of all parents whose children’s schools closed at some point say their children have encountered at least one of the tech-related issues we asked about amid COVID-19: having to do schoolwork on a cellphone, being unable to complete schoolwork because of lack of computer access at home, or having to use public Wi-Fi to finish schoolwork because there was no reliable connection at home.” Collen McClain et al., “The Internet and the Pandemic,” [pewresearch.org, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/09/01/the-internet-and-the-pandemic/](https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/09/01/the-internet-and-the-pandemic/), 2021.

quarantine.² Businesses and schools needed to explore more digital resources and tools. Business teams, students, and teachers learned to use technological tools to maintain communication. Many businesses and schools discovered what could be done online versus what should happen in person.³

The term “online ministry” can evoke strong emotions and opinions. In addition, “online ministry” can mean many things. It could be as simple as having an online presence so that people can find you in person. It could also be as comprehensive as streaming services online without an in-person congregation and exclusively doing outreach online. Some online ministry advocates would posit that the online world is a new mission field, and we ought to use online resources as a primary tool in our ministry efforts.⁴ “Online ministry” also has its opponents. Some have pointed out that the constantly changing digital landscape can be harmful to ministry efforts.⁵

2. Savings rates hit highs of 32% and 26.1% in 2020 and 2021 respectively. “Personal Saving Rate,” <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/PSAVERT>.

3. “Nearly two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, roughly six-in-ten U.S. workers who say their jobs can mainly be done from home (59%) are working from home all or most of the time.” Kim Parker et al., “COVID-19 Pandemic Continues to Reshape Work in America,” [pewresearch.org, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2022/02/16/covid-19-pandemic-continues-to-reshape-work-in-america/](https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2022/02/16/covid-19-pandemic-continues-to-reshape-work-in-america/).

4. “the church has entered into a ripe mission field full of unchurched people. The mission field is the digital world, with an estimated 70% population of unchurched people of all ages and stages of life. Yet, with this ripe harvest before us, we are missing the opportunity to harvest because we focus on those already gathered, rather than the yet to be gathered.” Kay Kotan, “From Online Worship to Online Ministry,” [churchleadership.com, https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/from-online-worship-to-online-ministry/](https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/from-online-worship-to-online-ministry/).

5. “The Scripture warns believers to avoid putting ‘new wine into old wineskins,’ but how can the faithful make the gospel fit into new wineskins shaped by issues of cultural relevance and complicated by ever-evolving technology? What are we to do when wine turns into bottled water and wineskins become recyclable? This is more or less what is happening with ministry development in the digital age. Recent news events and research studies suggest that new social, cultural, and media usage paradigms have emerged that create constantly changing ‘new wineskins.’” Carolyn L. Gordon, “The Art of Digital Ministry: The Good, The Bad, and The Uncertain,” [fullerstudio.fuller.edu, https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/the-art-of-digital-ministry-the-good-the-bad-and-the-uncertain/](https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/the-art-of-digital-ministry-the-good-the-bad-and-the-uncertain/).

Academia Cristo and TELL English (TELL) seek to utilize online tools to train church planters worldwide. They use online tools in a positive way to start in-person ministries with the Lord's help. Since the start of *Academia Cristo*⁶ in 2014 and TELL a few years later, they have encountered old and new challenges as they developed their mission efforts. These challenges include becoming known, financial cost, leader identification, student motivation, the transition from online training to in-person churches, maintaining doctrinal purity, and women's ministry. This paper will examine how *Academia Cristo* and TELL have attempted to solve these problems. It will conclude that *Academia Cristo* and TELL have successfully addressed these challenges with organic church planting, technology use, in-person visits, and personal counselors.

First, we will look at the missiology of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) Board for World Missions (BWM) with a brief overview of WELS's world missions missiology. It is essential to have a point of comparison when assessing current mission work. A particular emphasis will be on the history of missions in Latin America because *Academia Cristo* represents a shift from the previous mission work in that context. In addition, *Academia Cristo* was the predecessor to TELL.

Next, we will explore the current state of the TELL Network program. This explanation will include a brief overview of the purpose, curriculum, and strategies of TELL Network, focusing on TELL and *Academia Cristo*, as they are the most developed platforms with students far enough along to start the church planting process.

The literature review will examine *Missionary Method: St. Paul's or Ours?* by Roland Allen. WELS's BWM used this book for years as they trained missionaries. Some helpful

6. Translation: Christ Academy.

comments from Professor Glen Thompson's review of *Missionary Methods* will help demonstrate the issues Roland Allen highlighted in a modern light and from a WELS's world missions perspective. This review will help provide some context for some of the challenges that were considered in many of WELS's world mission fields for years, and it will also help provide a point of comparison to show how *Academia Cristo* and TELL have addressed these challenges.

The paper's main section will address *Academia Cristo* and TELL's challenges in online leader training. We will look at challenges from the program's start in the student recruitment stage to the end when students form groups and eventually churches. Through information provided by WELS missionaries, we will see how *Academia Cristo* and TELL have solved these problems throughout their development.

The last section of the paper will look at the future of each platform in the TELL Network. This last section will demonstrate that there is a desire for online ministry in various contexts despite the unique challenges and differences that each context presents.

WELS WORLD MISSION MISSIOLOGY IN THE PAST

It is incredible how the Lord works through his humble servants who carry out the great commission by simply telling others about Jesus and what he has done for them. It is as simple as that: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19–20a, NIV). However, I imagine every missionary would say that mission work is often a complex task with constant challenges. The Word of God never changes, but missiology does. Ernst R. Wendland defined missiology as “the theory and practice of missionwork”⁷ in a paper concerning Lutheran Missiology. While the theory of mission work finds its root in the never-changing Bible, the practice of mission work may need to change based on the context. A brief look at WELS world missions’ missiological principles in the past will help provide context for the efforts of *Academia Cristo* and TELL.

WELS world mission work began in 1893 when the young missionaries John Plocher and George Adascheck arrived at the Apache Reservations in Arizona.⁸ Previous WELS mission scouts had been directed to the Apache people by a Presbyterian missionary who had worked with the nearby Pima Indians for years.⁹ Missionaries Plocher and Adascheck faced a difficult task. They needed to learn a complex language, learn a different culture, live in a new land, and share the gospel with a people who had never heard it before. The Lord blessed their work, and

7. Ernst R. Wendland, “Cultural and Theological Specificity in Lutheran Missiology,” Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/handle/123456789/4292>, 4.

8. Theodore A. Sauer, Harold R. Johne, and E. H. Wendland, eds., *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People: A Century of WELS World Missions* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992), 27.

9. Sauer, Johne, and Wendland, *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*, 23.

130 years later, there are eight congregations, two schools, two national pastors, and one evangelist serving the Apache people in Arizona.¹⁰

While WELS world mission work started with an effort to reach peoples previously unreached with the gospel, many of the efforts in the early- to mid-twentieth century were responding to “Macedonian calls” and helping to maintain or train current church bodies in confessional Lutheranism. These calls came from European countries such as Poland and Germany and African countries such as Nigeria and Cameroon.¹¹ These efforts did not center specifically on church planting but on the encouragement, guidance, and training of confessional Lutheran churches to continue working in their respective contexts.

The WELS has spearheaded efforts to reach more people with confessional Lutheranism throughout the world in places such as Zambia, Puerto Rico, and Colombia.¹² In these efforts, the missiology of the WELS centered around planting confessional Lutheran churches. The 1987 WELS BWM Handbook states, “WELS missionaries are sent to win souls for Christ, train them for ministry, and thereby plant solid, confessional Lutheran churches.”¹³ For many years, this involved the “Application of Indigenous Concepts” or the “4-selfs.”¹⁴ The “4-selfs” were as follows:

10. “Native American Missions,” wels.net, <https://wels.net/serving-others/missions/native-american-missions/#toggle-id-3>.

11. Sauer, Johne, and Wendland, *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People*, 67, 95, 119, 135.

12. Duane K. Tomhave, ed., *WELS World Mission Handbook* (Milwaukee: WELS Board for World Missions, 1987), 2p1.

13. Tomhave, *WELS World Mission Handbook*, 4p1.

14. Tomhave, *WELS World Mission Handbook*, 4p3.

- 1) Self-administration: the responsibilities of the church are eventually transferred completely to the national church.
- 2) Self-discipline: the national churches are trained to know the Word and put it into practice as they detect and correct departures from the Word.
- 3) Self-propagation: the national church produces natural growth within its culture.¹⁵
- 4) Self-support: the national church provides and administers its own funds as soon as possible.¹⁶

These “4-self” concepts provided the missiological framework for years of WELS world missions. They helped many missionaries work toward creating native churches and church bodies that could continue the work of sharing the gospel in their context. The 2023 BWM Missionary Field Manual does not include a section about applying the “4-self” concepts to mission fields. It simply states the purpose of the BWM in this way: “The Word for all, to all, by all.”¹⁷

The structure of WELS BWM was historically a top-down administrative structure. “The board is responsible for directing the world mission program of the Synod and shall counsel, direct, coordinate, and equalize the work of its executive committees who shall be responsible to the board for the administration of their respective fields.”¹⁸ This structure provided accountability and a centralized decision-making process from the largely stateside administration.

15. Tomhave, *WELS World Mission Handbook*, 4p4.

16. Tomhave, *WELS World Mission Handbook*, 4p5.

17. 2023 BWM Missionary Field Manual, 1.

18. Tomhave, *WELS World Mission Handbook*, 1p4.

In 2013, the BWM introduced the “one team” concept and the “flat structure” of administration.¹⁹ The “one teams” created unified world mission teams based on their regions. Regarding the “flat structure,” the 2023 BWM Missionary Field Manual states: “In comparison to traditional organizational structure, a flat structure is a more collaborative and less hierarchical way of organizing work. It de-emphasizes roles and titles and puts the focus on sharing responsibility and strengths across the team.”²⁰ This change in structure allows the “one teams” to determine their mission strategy and work with the administration to carry it out effectively. There are now “one teams” in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America.

19. Andrew Johnston, Zoom interview by author.

20. 2023 BWM Missionary Field Manual, 2.

THE HISTORY OF *ACADEMIA CRISTO*

WELS's work in Latin America began in 1948 when Pastor Venus Winter was called to start a Hispanic mission in Tucson, AZ, that would serve Latinos in the US.²¹ This mission marked the beginning of a decades-long effort to reach Spanish speakers in the US and throughout the world. An advantage that many US-based missions have is that Lutheranism is a larger and relatively known denomination of Christianity. There are few confessional Lutherans in most Spanish-speaking countries, especially in Latin America.²² Michael Hartman, a WELS Latin American Mission Team member from 1999 to 2021, noted a crucial question in his 2019 thesis, "Everyday Means of Communication": "How can Confessional Lutheranism impact a region when there are such a tiny and insignificant number of Confessional Lutherans there as to be irrelevant?"²³ Through everyday means of communication including Facebook, WhatsApp, and Zoom, *Academia Cristo* seeks to spread the gospel and plant confessional Lutheran churches in the Spanish-speaking world. The following brief overview of Latin American missions will provide context for an explanation of the development of *Academia Cristo* and TELL.

21. Thomas Behnke, "La Iglesia Luterana de San Pablo, Tuscon, Arizona, WELS' First Spanish Mission," Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/handle/123456789/380>, 7.

22. The population of Central and South America combined was about 620 million in 2023. (<https://worldpopulationreview.com/continents/central-america-population> and <https://worldpopulationreview.com/continents/south-america-population>) The Lutheran World Federation reported about 760,000 members in Latin America and the Caribbean with about 85 percent of those Lutherans living in Brazil (<https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/LWI-Statistics-2013-EN.pdf>) That means only about 114,000 Lutherans live in Spanish-speaking countries in Central and South America.

23. Michael A. Hartman, "Everyday Means of Communication" (PhD thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2019), 6.

A Brief Overview of WELS Latin American Missions

1964 marked the start of WELS mission work in Puerto Rico. The idea was to start with Puerto Rico as a “stepping stone” to Spanish-speaking Central and South America. Due to the strong ties between the US and Puerto Rico, this seemed like a logical starting place.²⁴ The goal was to create an indigenous church on the island. Through years of ministry, training, patience, and the Lord’s help, there was a fully functioning indigenous church body with four churches and 191 souls by 2004.²⁵ Despite Hurricane María's devastation to the island, the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Church of Puerto Rico – a sister church of WELS – has four established congregations and two national pastors.²⁶

Work in Medellín, Colombia, began in 1974, with the target population being the large working middle class. The missionaries quickly found it much easier to do door-to-door ministry in the lower-class barrios surrounding the city, where the population was generally more receptive. A church, *La Santísima Trinidad*,²⁷ was established in 1975, with a provisional seminary opening a few years later in 1979. The missionaries were dedicated to making this mission a self-supporting, indigenous one. By 1982, the first national pastor graduated, and four groups in different neighborhoods were consolidated into one church near the city's center.²⁸ The work expanded to Bogotá when two missionaries moved there and opened a Christian

24. Carlos Leyrer, “The Evolution of Spanish Outreach in the WELS,” Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/handle/123456789/3040>, 4.

25. Leyrer, “The Evolution of Spanish Outreach in the WELS,” 5–6.

26. “Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Church–Puerto Rico,” celc.info, <https://celc.info/membership/member-churches/evangelical-lutheran-confessional-church-puerto-rico/>.

27. Translation: The Most Holy Trinity.

28. Leyrer, “The Evolution of Spanish Outreach in the WELS,” 8–9.

Information Center to teach nationals to teach others through a Bible Information Class. In the late 1990s, the violence from the Colombian Conflict prompted the removal of all WELS missionaries in Colombia. This left the Colombian churches to work on their own with their national pastors and lay leaders. By God’s grace, the congregations survived and grew. The Colombian national church currently has three congregations and two established *Grupos Sembrador*.²⁹

Work began in the Dominican Republic (DR) in 1993 with one missionary. Several Bible study groups were formed in Santiago, resulting in the first worship service later that year. In 1995, another missionary arrived, and by 1999, exploratory work started in Haiti. Work expanded to San Pedro and Santo Domingo in the early 2000s, and training of leaders from the DR and Haiti began. Several missionaries from the Latin American Traveling Theological Educators (LATTE)³⁰ arrived to continue Bible Institute and seminary training for local leaders.³¹ In 2007, Rona Abraham became the first graduate of the seminary. He is currently the Haitian national pastor with four congregations and several groups throughout the country.³² In the DR, there is one congregation in Moca that several national lay leaders serve. Pastor Henry Herrera serves as their mission counselor from Medellín, Colombia.

29. “Sobre Nosotros,” luteranosconfesionalescolombia.com, <https://luteranosconfesionalescolombia.com/nuestra-iglesia/>. *Grupo Sembrador* literally means “Sower Group.” *Academia Cristo* uses this term for the Bible study groups that are formed by the students. They are groups that gather around and study God’s Word with the goal of bringing the gospel to those around them as they grow in the faith themselves.

30. See explanation on the next page.

31. “Dominican Republic,” wels.net, <https://wels.net/serving-others/missions/latin-america/dominican-republic/>.

32. “Haiti,” wels.net, <https://wels.net/serving-others/missions/latin-america/haiti/>.

Mission work in Mexico was a necessarily indigenous effort from the beginning. The laws in Mexico did not allow foreign residency for missionaries. The missionaries could only visit throughout the year to provide support and training. By 1969, there were two national pastors received into fellowship. They were called to serve missions in Mexico City and Guadalajara. A WELS mission team was based in El Paso to facilitate visits to these pastors and provide seminary training and congregational support.³³ In 1993, the government granted some missionaries visas, and they took steps to plan the self-support, self-administration, and self-propagation of the mission in Mexico.³⁴ In 2017, the *Iglesia Evangelica Luterana Confesional*³⁵ (IELC) made a five-year plan for self-support.³⁶ They currently have seven congregations and six national pastors.³⁷

LATTE was implemented in 2003 as a “traveling seminary” for Latin America. The team was composed of missionaries who would go and train pastoral candidates in Latin America over several years to become national pastors. LATTE used a curriculum based on the one used at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary (WLS). Some of the challenges involved questions about financial support for students and the future impact that might have on a congregation’s ability to be self-supporting.³⁸ Additionally, it was difficult to identify and train many students

33. Leyrer, “The Evolution of Spanish Outreach in the WELS,” 6.

34. Leyrer, “The Evolution of Spanish Outreach in the WELS,” 7.

35. Translation: Evangelical Confessional Lutheran Church.

36. “Mission History in Mexico,” wels.net, <https://wels.net/serving-others/missions/latin-america/mexico/history/>. No current information was found as to whether the plan for self-support was realized.

37. “Mexico,” wels.net, <https://wels.net/serving-others/missions/latin-america/mexico/>.

38. Leyrer, “The Evolution of Spanish Outreach in the WELS,” 18–19.

who would complete the program. For example, in Colombia, only two pastors completed the program developed by LATTE.³⁹

The Start of *Academia Cristo*

In 2013, after violence in Mexico forced WELS missionaries to pull out, the Latin American mission team (later known as 1LA) decided to take a new direction with their efforts. Missionary Hartman noted in his thesis that “a plan had to be developed that was not dependent on the physical location of the team members.”⁴⁰ *Academia Cristo* eventually launched in 2014. It started as an effort to teach anyone how to share Jesus with Spanish speakers through online classes.⁴¹ After trial courses and more development, *Academia Cristo* launched a self-study app in 2020 to bring people into the program. From its launch in 2020 until March 2023, over 1 million people downloaded the app.⁴²

Academia Cristo seeks to: “1) make disciples in Latin America by sharing the message of God’s grace with as many people as possible, 2) identify and train potential leaders, and 3) encourage those leaders to make disciples who plant churches.”⁴³ This strategy has created a

39. Nathan Schulte, “How Do You Start Churches Without Pastors? The Development of WELS Latin American Missiology in *Academia Cristo*,” Unpublished paper, 2023, 2. This is not to demean in any way the work of LATTE. This is only to demonstrate the difficulty of identifying and training leaders at the time. The courses could not be offered frequently, so it took a long time for students to finish the program.

40. Hartman, “Everyday Means of Communication,” 1.

41. Hartman, “Everyday Means of Communication,” 5.

42. Schulte, “The Development of WELS Latin American Missiology in *Academia Cristo*,” 3. Both TELL and *Academia Cristo* originally supported applications that hosted the self-study courses. This option was eliminated due to the cost of running a phone application and the ease of using respond.io in its place. Respond.io is an AI messaging platform that uses automated messaging. With respond.io both TELL and *Academia Cristo* can host the self-study courses and eliminate the need to create a separate application.

43. “Latin America,” wels.net, <https://wels.net/serving-others/missions/latin-america/>.

structure for systematically reaching out to Spanish-speaking Latin America and teaching sound, biblical doctrine to train church planters. Digital tools such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and even TikTok have made it easier to “cast a wide net” and find more people who want to learn about Jesus and share the gospel with others.⁴⁴

44. Schulte, “The Development of WELS Latin American Missiology in Academia Cristo,” 3.

HOW DOES *ACADEMIA CRISTO* WORK?

Academia Cristo is a training program divided into three tiers:

- 1) Self-study through WhatsApp: Academia Cristo offers four self-led courses at the Bible information class level of study. The last course in this tier focuses on training students to share what they've learned with others. Students must complete all four courses before they are able to sign up for live classes.
- 2) Discipleship 1: Students work through 13 Bible Institute-level classes that are taught live online by a WELS missionary or national partner. At this level, a large emphasis is placed on gathering a group of people to share the gospel message. The goal is that students who finish Discipleship 1 are in doctrinal agreement with WELS.
- 3) Discipleship 2: Students who complete the Discipleship 1 tier then move on to Discipleship 2, where they take advanced Bible institute level classes, still taught live online by a WELS missionary or national partner. Students at this level are actively sharing the gospel message with a group of people and are in doctrinal agreement with WELS. They are also matched with a WELS missionary or national partner mission counselor and receive face-to-face visits.⁴⁵

45. "Latin America," wels.net, <https://wels.net/serving-others/missions/latin-america/>.

This structure of the training program is based on an hourglass model.⁴⁶ The 1LA team uses “self-identification” to describe the program’s course.⁴⁷ The wide top of the hourglass is where social media work comes into play. The goal is to reach as many people as possible and get them to take the self-study course. Those who complete the self-study courses are invited to study in live classes online in Discipleship 1. Only those who complete the capstone course and reach doctrinal agreement continue onto Discipleship 2. Only those who form Growth Groups, take them through the designated course of study, and demonstrate the five habits of a healthy group receive a recommendation to become an official church of *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*⁴⁸ (the South American synod in fellowship with the WELS).⁴⁹ In every step of the process, students identify themselves as potential leaders by continuing in the program as it focuses more and more on putting the learning into action by forming groups with whom to share God’s Word.

While *Academia Cristo* utilizes many online tools to do their outreach and evangelism, it is not an “online ministry.” The goal is to plant real, physical churches in Latin America. This goal involves a lot of training online, but perhaps more training in person as missionaries travel to meet students and groups that are forming to help guide and train the leaders in their church-planting endeavors.

46. Schulte, “The Development of WELS Latin American Missiology in Academia Cristo,” 4.

47. Schulte, “The Development of WELS Latin American Missiology in Academia Cristo,” 4.

48. Translation: Christ Church WELS International.

49. The hourglass is clearly seen in the numbers at each level of the program: 6 million are reached every week with Social Media. There have been 1.12 million app downloads, 318 thousand have taken at least two self-study courses, there are 3,554 app finishers, 2,186 app finishers have signed up for live classes, 697 students have passed at least one course in Discipleship 1, 86 have completed Discipleship 1, 30 have completed Discipleship 2, there are 25 *Grupos Sembrador* (Growth Groups). Information was taken from the “How does Academia Cristo work?” pamphlet.

WHAT IS TELL NETWORK?

TELL Network is a program of MLP⁵⁰ that serves as the umbrella term encompassing platforms in English (TELL), Spanish (*Academia Cristo*), Mandarin (找尋聖帶), and Tagalog (ISIP).⁵¹

“The letters T, E, L, L, represent the TELL Method. TELL students use the TELL Method—Think, Evaluate, Learn and Lead to share the gospel with others as they are guided through the TELL Program.”⁵² TELL Network focuses on this method of teaching the Bible and teaching others how to teach the Bible. The goal is for the method to be easy to teach and remember.⁵³ In this way, even people new to the faith can teach Bible stories to others. While the TELL Method of teaching the Bible is generally the same across all platforms, each platform has a different context and audience. This means that there are differences in wording and format among the platforms.

Academia Cristo and TELL English (TELL) are the most developed platforms in the TELL Network. The following section will describe a student’s path in the TELL program. This

50. “Multi-Language Productions (MLP), an arm of WELS World Missions, has created more than 2.9 million video, audio, and print materials and is growing their online training resources in more than 56 languages to date. Through these resources MLP can assist and enhance outreach for all churches, especially in places where WELS does not have resident missionaries. The majority of MLP products are evangelism and Bible study resources to be used by anyone who sees a need for ministering to others in Christ.” wels.net, https://wels.net/servingothers/multilanguageproductions/?vimeography_gallery=46&vimeography_video=655108714#toggle-id-1.

51. The platforms in Mandarin and Tagalog are currently not developed enough to be included in the scope of this paper. They will be addressed in the section covering the future of TELL Network.

52. TELL informational packet, 4.

53. Pastor Seiltz and Peg Thiele, Zoom interview.

description will give a framework for understanding how the program works and what the intended result of the program is.

TELL English

The TELL Program includes three levels of courses. The first level is a set of three introductory self-study courses that teach Bible basics. This course is available through WhatsApp,⁵⁴ and upon completion, students receive instructions for enrolling in live classes online. The second level is the Discipleship level. This level consists of twelve classes taught live via Zoom by theologically trained instructors. These courses teach the basic teachings of the Christian faith.⁵⁵ Upon completing all the courses in level two, students are assigned a counselor. The counselor goes through a list of almost one hundred statements with the student that concern doctrine and practice as taught from the Bible by the WELS. Upon completing this process, if the student desires and makes a subscription to these statements, doctrinal agreement with the WELS is acknowledged. After this, a counselor works with the students to help them gather and teach a group called a “Growth Group”⁵⁶ as they start courses in the third level of the program – the

54. Both TELL and *Academia Cristo* originally supported applications that hosted the self-study courses. This option was eliminated due to the cost of running a phone application and the ease of using respond.io in its place. Respond.io is an AI messaging platform that uses automated messaging. With respond.io both TELL and *Academia Cristo* can host the self-study courses and eliminate the need to create a separate application.

55. These courses include six course on the Bible (In the Beginning, The Chosen Nation, The Fallen Nation, The Coming of the Savior, The Work of the Savior, and The Christian Church), three courses on Jesus’ teachings (The Ten Commandments, The True God, and The Sacraments and Prayer), two courses on fellowship (Legalism: The Enemy of Grace, and Spiritual Identification), and two courses on “The Word Grows” (Living as a Disciple, and Disciple Makes Disciples).

56. TELL informational packet, 13.

Multiplication level. These seven courses⁵⁷ are more in-depth and focus on putting doctrine into practice as the student starts to teach their Growth Group the basics of the Bible using the TELL Method.

TELL provides students with a resource called “TELL Bible Pathway” that they can teach to their Growth Group. TELL Bible Pathway⁵⁸ is a series of Bible class courses that contain 4–13 lessons each. The class videos, teacher guides, and student guides are all found on the TELL website and are free for download. In addition to teaching these courses, Growth Group leaders are encouraged to regularly meet and worship with their group. TELL has an archive of worship and music materials to aid in this. There is a simple service outline on the TELL website, as well as music that is free for worship.⁵⁹

Two options exist for students who complete the Multiplication level with TELL and desire more training. The best option is to attend a local seminary that is in doctrinal agreement with WELS. The student is still responsible for completing the enrollment requirements of the seminary but TELL can help in this process. The second option is to apply to become a Pastoral Studies Institute (PSI) student.⁶⁰ “PSI stands ready to provide support in the area of higher

57. The courses include: three courses of The Word Grows (Multiplying Disciples, Multiplying Churches, and Multiplying Ministers), two worship courses (Let Us Worship 1: The Biblical Principles of Worship and Let Us Worship 2: Worship in Practice), The Epistles, and Devotional Life in the Psalms.

58. There are two parts to TELL Bible Pathway. The first part includes course on Sin, Grace, Faith, Works, the Ten Commandments, The True God, and Sacraments and Prayer. The second part is much longer and includes courses on Living as a Disciple, The Work of the Savior, The Bible: in the Beginning, Forgiveness, The Coming of the Savior, Communion, The Chosen Nation, Bible Fundamentals, The Christian Church, The End Times, The Fallen Nation, Legalism, and Spiritual Identification. Most of these courses are ones that the group leader has already taken. It is easier for someone to teach a course that they are already familiar with.

59. TELL informational packet, 16.

60. The TELL Program was designed to match roughly the first two levels of the PSI program. The first two levels are considered the pre-seminary courses. Completion of the TELL Program is taken into consideration as students apply for entrance into the PSI program. (Conversation with Professor David Bivens, a professor with the PSI program).

theological education for TELL students who do not have a local seminary or TELL mission support team.”⁶¹ The hope is that those who desire and have the gifts to become pastors after completing the TELL Program would have the opportunity to study for that noble task.

61. TELL informational packet, 17.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many books on the challenges of world missions and on world mission missiology. There are currently no books that identify and address the specific challenges of the missiology of *Academia Cristo* and TELL. Not only that, but there are currently no other groups doing comprehensive leader identification and training the same way that *Academia Cristo* and TELL are. Because of this, the literature review will look at *Missionary Methods*⁶² by Roland Allen. Many WELS world missionaries read this book in years past, and it has impacted the foreign mission policy of WELS world missions.⁶³ This review will help highlight some of the challenges Allen notes in trying to start self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-governing churches in foreign mission fields.⁶⁴ Professor Glen Thompson's review of *Missionary Methods* in a modern light provides helpful notes. This review will help to provide a further point of comparison before looking at the current challenges that TELL and *Academia Cristo* and how they have addressed them.

62. This review will use the Aneko Press edition of Roland Allen's book. The Aneko Press edition has been updated and revised. I could not find any differences in the cited sections from the original edition and the Aneko Press edition.

63. Glen L. Thompson, "PAUL'S MISSIONARY METHODS AND OURS—100 Years after Roland Allen." (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 116:185–206), 186.

64. Thompson, "100 Years after Roland Allen," 188.

***Missionary Methods: God's Plan for Missions According to Paul*, by Roland Allen**

Roland Allen was an Anglican missionary to China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He saw many of the challenges that he describes in his book while on the mission field. With *Missionary Methods*, Allen attempted to demonstrate that many of the challenges that missionaries of his day encountered could be avoided or solved if they only utilized St. Paul's missionary methods. He claimed that Paul's focus was on creating "indigenous" churches as opposed to a "national" church.⁶⁵ Allen contended that Paul "maintained a profound belief and trust that the Holy Spirit indwelt his converts and the churches of which they were members, which enabled him to establish them at once with full authority" and that "we do not trust the Holy Spirit as easily today."⁶⁶ Allen went on to analyze Paul's missionary methods by studying the position and character of the cities in which Paul founded churches, the way Paul presented the gospel, Paul's method of teaching and training converts, and how Paul dealt with the organized churches. In his conclusion, Allen showed how to apply these methods today.⁶⁷

Allen focused first on the strategic points where Paul started churches. He noted that Paul seemed to target cities and centers of Greek civilization so that the gospel might spread to the surrounding towns and villages.⁶⁸ The fact that most of the cities he visited spoke Greek and had a Hellenized Jewish population created easy points of contact and an instant audience for Paul as he started churches. In addition, it appears that Paul did not aim for a particular class of Jew or Gentile. Upon reception of the Word, however, "Luke draws a sharp distinction between the

65. Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: God's Plan for Missions According to Paul*, Edited by Sheila Wilkinson and Ruth Zetek (Abbotsford: Aneko Press, 2017), Kindle Edition, loc. 35.

66. Allen, *Missionary Methods*, loc. 36.

67. Allen, *Missionary Methods*, loc. 171.

68. Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 7.

obstinate refusal of the Jews and the eager readiness of the Greeks to listen to Paul's teaching."⁶⁹ The Gentiles, those without the deep-rooted religious knowledge of the Old Testament, were the ones who latched onto the gospel that Paul preached thanks to the Holy Spirit.

Allen continued by exploring whether miracles, finances, or Paul's preaching had anything to do with his success. Regarding miracles, Allen noted that Paul did not go about attempting to convert people through miracles.⁷⁰ Regarding finances, he said: "There seem to have been three rules that guided his [Paul's] practice: (1) He did not seek financial help for himself; (2) he took no financial help to those to whom he preached; (3) he did not administer local church funds."⁷¹ The goal seems to have been to put the focus on the gospel and take any focus off of financial gains or interests. Regarding Paul's preaching, Allen notes four characteristics: 1) Sympathy with his hearers, 2) Courage in speaking the truth while acknowledging difficulties, 3) Respect for his hearers and their abilities, and 4) Confidence in the truth and power of his message.⁷² Again, the focus was on the gospel by speaking the truth in love.

The section on teaching and training converts is fascinating and pertains to the issues discussed in this paper. Here, Allen demonstrated that Paul taught with the vision of a self-supporting church in mind.⁷³ Paul would teach for a time, train leaders to oversee the church, and

69. Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 15.

70. Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 43.

71. Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 52.

72. Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 72.

73. Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 94.

then leave.⁷⁴ The amazing thing is that he would do this in a matter of months. However, Paul would not lose contact with the newly planted churches.⁷⁵ He continued to teach and preach the gospel even from afar.

The last part of Paul's missionary method that Allen analyzed was how Paul organized churches. Allen demonstrated how Paul handled churches individually in their unique contexts while never losing sight of the fact that each church was a part of the Church – the whole body of believers. The churches that Paul planted were established congregations of new believers who naturally encountered challenges with congregational life and doctrine. Allen noted that when Paul addresses these challenges in his letters, “He avoids in every possible way making clear-cut, legal demands, which must be obeyed in the letter. Rather, he suggests principles and he trusts the Spirit who dwells in the church to apply them.”⁷⁶ In this way, he let the congregation apply the Word of God to their situation instead of simply relying on Paul's verdict.

Allen suggested five rules of practice drawn from St. Paul's missionary methods:⁷⁷

- 1) All teaching must be easy to understand, retain, and pass on.
- 2) All organizations must be necessary, understandable, and sustainable by the people.
- 3) The people must be able to control and manage the finances independent of foreign subsidy.
- 4) A culture of mutual responsibility among Christians must be taught.
- 5) The people must have the authority to exercise spiritual gifts from the start.

74. A weakness in the argument here is that Paul did not always leave by choice.

75. Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 98.

76. Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 135.

77. Allen, *Missionary Methods*, 171-172.

The idea was that if these rules of practice were put to work, the mission would have a better chance of handling the challenges of church planting and hopefully result in a self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-governing church.

100 Years After Roland Allen

Professor Glen Thompson's reexamination of Roland Allen's *Missionary Methods* highlights some critical points to remember when attempting to draw principles from St. Paul's missionary methods. The first is that the outlining of St. Paul's mission work is mainly descriptive, not prescriptive.⁷⁸ However, it is wise to study the work of Paul in context and to draw lessons from his impressive and blessed mission work.

Thompson's comments on the audience and location of Paul's missionary efforts in the light of WELS's mission efforts are enlightening. Thompson points out that Paul was sharing the gospel with a non-Christian world. The people to whom he ministered had never heard the gospel of Jesus. In contrast, Thompson summarizes the modern context for much of WELS's world mission work:

Modern world missions, on the other hand, operate in a world that already has Christians in every country; in some cases, they form a majority of the population. When we enter new areas, most of the time other Christian churches are already in existence there. We justify our evangelistic work in these areas on the basis of one or more of the following three reasons: 1) the percentage of Christians is very small (Nepal, Pakistan, India, Taiwan, Hong Kong); 2) there are no other Lutheran churches there (Zambia, Malawi); or 3) the Christian population is not doctrinally sound, being either quite heterodox (Latin America) or merely nominally Christian (parts of Europe, Russia), or both. Thus, while conceptually the *raison d'être* for world missions is reaching the lost, our synod has seldom concentrated efforts on the "unreached peoples" that still remain in many parts of the world.⁷⁹

78. Thompson, "100 Years after Roland Allen," 188.

79. Thompson, "100 Years after Roland Allen," 189.

This difference is important to keep in mind. The methods used to reach previously “unreached peoples” look different from those used to guide a heterodox Christian group to the pure gospel.

While he highlights the urban work Paul did, Allen does not stress urban mission work as a key strategy drawn from Paul’s ministry.⁸⁰ Paul went to the cities because that is where the Jews were. As the world rapidly urbanizes, it seems essential to consider urban mission efforts. However, WELS missions have not historically found much numerical success or many open doors in large urban centers, either in the United States or in world missions.⁸¹

Thompson observes that perhaps Paul’s work is more comparable to home missions. Most of the cities and provinces Paul visited were predominantly Greek-speaking and had populations of Hellenized Jews. It seems that Paul’s work was not so cross-cultural.⁸² Despite rapid globalization and the increased use of English as a *lingua franca*, some WELS world mission fields still require the missionary to learn a new language and culture. Language learning presents challenges as missionaries strive to communicate the gospel and train leaders in a new tongue. However, it is important that ministry and training be carried out in the mother tongue of the people whenever possible. Especially when it comes to high-level theological training, it is beneficial when students learn and understand the truths of the Bible in their own language.

Another critical issue is whether Paul had a set “strategy” for his mission work. While there were specific patterns, such as preaching in the synagogue first in every city, Thompson explains that “if one restricts oneself to the information provided in Acts and Paul’s letters, it is

80. Thompson, “100 Years after Roland Allen,” 191.

81. For more information on WELS work in urban centers read Prof. E. Allen Sorum’s paper, “Bringing the Gospel to North American Cities,” <http://essays.wisluthsem.org:8080/bitstream/handle/123456789/3806/SorumCities12.pdf?sequence=1>.

82. Thompson, “100 Years after Roland Allen,” 192.

difficult to discern a detailed ‘strategy.’”⁸³ It is easy to wish that Paul had given us a handbook with a step-by-step process for mission work, but perhaps Paul gave us something better. We can see that wherever Paul went, he treated each congregation individually. Paul wrote his letters in a specific context. He used law and gospel to address the needs of each group. In this way, the “method” changed from place to place as Paul preached and taught the gospel to different people in different contexts.

Thompson concludes by analyzing whether the “three-self’s” are Pauline or biblically mandated. He raises thought-provoking questions about whether the idea of “three-self’s” comes from our Western cultural values of independence and self-reliance. Thompson poses a thoughtful hypothetical: “If we came from a more collectivist culture, one that stressed interdependence rather than individual achievement, perhaps we would have a different view of the ‘three-self’s.’ This observation may also help explain why many of the ethnic Christians in our missions do not seem to prioritize their becoming completely independent as highly as we do.”⁸⁴ It is vital to question our presuppositions as we enter new mission fields and explore new contexts. While the “three-self’s” are not in and of themselves unbiblical goals, they ought to be considered and applied with much discernment.

Of particular interest to the discussion of church planting is Thompson’s question of whether Paul would support “seed sowing ministries” of distributing materials through media:

Would Paul act differently today? Would he support “seed-sowing ministries” of printed, audio, video, and internet materials? Although, interestingly, it is only in the Catholic Epistles that we find letters that were not written to specific congregations or church leaders, I think that Paul would defend ministries that evangelize by publishing and distributing materials just as he would defend his practice of doing personal evangelism in every circumstance. At the same time, I do not think he would have separated such

83. Thompson, “100 Years after Roland Allen,” 194.

84. Thompson, “100 Years after Roland Allen,” 196.

ministries from his strategy of establishing congregations and would probably caution us about doing the same, except where and when it is necessary due to political or other issues. The strategic emphasis should remain on establishing congregations even if the “boots on the ground” make that proposition costlier.⁸⁵

This type of ministry is precisely what *Academia Cristo* and TELL have aimed to do. Not only do they distribute the materials to capture an audience, but they also work to train these people to plant churches. Both ministries aim to get missionaries’ “boots on the ground” to help encourage and train these church-planters in that work.

85. Thompson, “100 Years after Roland Allen,” 199–200.

THE CHALLENGES

Mission work is difficult. The use of technology can provide some solutions, but it presents its own challenges as well. *Academia Cristo* and TELL have spent the last few years learning about and addressing those challenges both technological and otherwise as they strive to develop, modify, and expand their programs to serve the Lord's harvest field by preaching the gospel and training church planters. The following sections will identify challenges and demonstrate how *Academia Cristo* and TELL have addressed them.

Becoming Known

A particular challenge for Lutheranism in Latin America and Africa has been to become known. Yes, many Christian missionaries have worked in these parts of the world and Christianity has grown greatly in these areas, but heterodox Christian groups have done a large portion of that work. Many people are seeking sound biblical doctrine. That is something that *Academia Cristo* and TELL have to offer. Thanks to the relatively low cost of Facebook advertising, millions of people in Latin America, Africa, and worldwide have been directed to the website and study courses of these WELS mission efforts.

The number of online contacts has been truly impressive. *Academia Cristo* and TELL's various social media platforms reach millions every week. Since the switch to the WhatsApp

self-study courses, *Academia Cristo* has had about 50 self-study course finishers a week.⁸⁶ The ad spending and accessibility has produced results. While that may sound fantastic – and it is – it brings to light another challenge.

Finances

How can *Academia Cristo* and TELL continue to support ad spending and the number of students it attracts? The plan is not to continue spending aggressively on ads in the future. *Academia Cristo* and TELL have encouraged their group leaders to get other group members to take courses. This type of organic growth has already increased the student population without extra ad spending. It will hopefully reduce the need to target ads in certain countries and zones as confessional Lutheran groups and churches start forming. Additionally, *Academia Cristo* and TELL are working on plans to train current group leaders to become mission counselors for other group leaders.⁸⁷

Another financial challenge has historically been the topic of subsidy in foreign missions. Almost every missionary has an interesting story about dealing with money in foreign missions. Some difficult questions about subsidies are: When should subsidies stop (if they should stop at all)? Will the mission be able to support the current expenses without subsidies? How much do you pay a national pastor or worker if at all? *Academia Cristo* and TELL practically eliminate many of these questions. They offer instruction free of charge to all students. This free access

86. 1LA February 2024 Update, 1.

87. 1LA February 2024 Update, 2.

removes the question of money right from the start.⁸⁸ The students also start their groups without financial subsidies from the mission teams. This type of start empowers the group to use their resources to grow naturally.⁸⁹ Without the need to buy and maintain buildings, mission money can be used to support the missionaries who provide the training and guidance to these group leaders as well as develop resources to aid in teaching and equipping group leaders.

Identifying Leaders

As reviewed in the historical background, identifying leaders has been challenging. The very nature of going to one city or one country limits the number of people a missionary can have contact with and limits the pool of potential church planter or pastoral candidates immediately accessible. With the hourglass structure and extensive media presence at the top of the hourglass, *Academia Cristo* and TELL have broadened the pool of candidates. This approach has created a new opportunity previously inaccessible to many worldwide: receiving doctrinally sound instruction in the Word of God for free. The hourglass structure also allows people to self-identify. This is not self-identification in the sense of someone raising their hand and saying, “I’ll be a church-planter.” This self-identification is through action. Each step a student takes through the program is another step in identifying themselves as a potential church planter. During the

88. In a Zoom interview, Missionary Andrew Johnston noted that on a recent visit with a student it was amazing that the student insisted on paying for every meal during the visit. It is interesting that when money and subsidy are not on the table to begin with, conversations are different. It provides more room to talk about the work being done.

89. I was blessed with the opportunity to visit a group in Chigorodó, Colombia twice during the 2022–23 school year. During the first visit, the group leaders were asking about how to secure a building or some land so that their group could meet. After some discussion, one of the leaders said that he would be moving soon anyway, and that he could look for a house with a little space so that they could put up chairs for their group to meet. Sure enough, several months later during the second trip, the leader had moved and found a house with a meeting space.

second level of online classes, students must start forming a group as a requisite for some of the courses. This requisite makes students consider whether leading a group or planting a church is something they would like to do.

Self-identification can bring some challenges. Missionary Matthew Behmer noted two examples. One example is that some students are faithful in classes, understand doctrine well, show a sincere desire to form a group and even some potential, but when “the rubber hits the road,” they do not have the skills to get a group together and teach them. Another is that some students are great at forming groups – in fact, some students already have several groups or even a church – but they just will not come into doctrinal agreement.⁹⁰ These two examples happen often. It is not as common to have students who are apt to teach, are in doctrinal agreement, and have the skills to gather a group all at once.

An excellent example of a student with all those skills to some degree would be Dr. Eduardo Milanesi in Cochabamba, Bolivia. He downloaded the *Academia Cristo* app in 2020 and quickly finished the self-study courses. He went on to the live Discipleship courses and finished those in under two years. Many from the group he formed and started to teach consisted of patients from his practice. Not only did he learn the doctrine well, but he also put it into practice by telling others the good news. The Lord has blessed the gospel work in Cochabamba, and in 2022, they became the first church to enter the ICWI synod from the *Academia Cristo* program.

An additional challenge that Missionary Joel Sutton mentioned is stewardship.⁹¹ When tens and hundreds of students started to go through the *Academia Cristo* courses, it was difficult

90. Missionary Matthew Behmer, WhatsApp voice message.

91. Missionary Joel Sutton, email and Zoom interview.

to decide who the team should spend time on, assign a counselor, visit, and encourage. *Academia Cristo*'s program development made it clear that the team had to be more selective in who they visited. Now there are general milestones in the program that identify when a student will receive an in-person visit. The assignment of a counselor usually happens after doctrinal agreement is recognized and they are admitted into the second level of live courses, considering that the group formation process is when many need guidance and encouragement. In the TELL program, students are put on "counselor watch" after completing four courses and six months in the program.⁹²

Maintaining Motivation

An issue in any education program can be maintaining motivation in the students. Many students who studied online during the COVID-19 pandemic found it challenging to maintain motivation while learning from a distance. Some teachers felt the impact of this as many students returned to the classroom far behind where they should have been.⁹³ Lack of motivation is a challenge in learning online. Professors teaching for *Academia Cristo* and TELL have noted how few students from those enrolled in the course will show up for the live class on Zoom. Especially in the beginning courses with more significant course enrollment numbers, it is normal to have less than half of the enrolled students show up for class. Often, less than half of the class finishes the course, as demonstrated by the numbers illustrating the hourglass structure.

92. TELL Marketing Operations Manager Grace Ungemach, email conversation.

93. "The average U.S. public school student in grades 3-8 lost the equivalent of a half year of learning in math and a quarter of a year in reading." "New research finds that pandemic learning loss impacted whole communities, regardless of student race or income," cepr.harvard.edu, <https://cepr.harvard.edu/news/new-research-finds-pandemic-learning-loss-impacted-whole-communities-regardless-student>, 2023.

To address this challenge, *Academia Cristo* and TELL have tried several things. They have considered adding a more demanding test at the end of the self-study courses to ensure that only those who agree with the most basic beliefs of confessional Lutheranism are admitted into live classes.⁹⁴ This test could aid in increasing the number of students motivated to learn the Bible and sound doctrine. They have also considered limiting class sizes to encourage more class participation.⁹⁵ Finally, the media teams have done excellent work sharing motivational stories from other group leaders to encourage fellow students to continue studying and putting what they learn into practice. For example, *Academia Cristo* made a video about Camilo Herrera and his group in Bogotá. The video shows how he uses his restaurant to host Bible studies on Sundays for his group. It also explains how studying with *Academia Cristo* has been a blessing to him. TELL has many video testimonials from their students who explain how they have learned the truths of the Bible through the TELL program.

The Transition from Online Training to In-Person Churches

While *Academia Cristo* and TELL do much of their training online, the end goal remains to create real church plants. However, the jump from online training to forming an in-person group is significant.⁹⁶ That is why these ministries are not purely online ministries. To this end, TELL usually assigns a counselor to students after eight live courses, and *Academia Cristo* typically assigns a counselor after Discipleship 1 courses. The mission teams recognize that online

94. Missionary Andrew Johnston, Zoom interview.

95. It can be difficult to participate when there are 60 or 70 students in a course.

96. Pastor Seiltz and Peg Thiele, Zoom interview.

learning is difficult and that forming a group by oneself is even more difficult. Counselors guide the group formation process and help the group leader with obstacles or challenges he may encounter in his specific context.

An example will help illustrate the value of counselors and in-person visits in providing motivation. Louis Bello is an *Academia Cristo* student in Baradero, Argentina. He was a member of a large non-denominational church in the area. Louis was a small group leader for this congregation, and he held Bible studies at his house every week with other church members. After a series of scandals and splits in the congregation, the pastor's wife took over as pastor of the remaining congregation that Louis stayed with. While studying with *Academia Cristo*, Louis realized that his church was not teaching what the Bible says. Louis reached the end of Discipleship 1 courses and was in doctrinal agreement with what *Academia Cristo* teaches. However, he was unsure if he should break from his church, form a group, and start teaching the Bible to them. His counselor, Missionary Sutton, visited him to study God's Word and discuss the situation with him. After hours of thoughtful discussion with his family, friends, and Missionary Sutton, he decided to break from his heterodox church and start a group. The in-person visits are never meant to be pressure-inducing. Instead, the visits show the students that the missionaries are real people who care deeply about the gospel, their situation in particular, and helping in any way possible.

Doctrinal Purity

They spent all morning talking about points of doctrine and biblical truths. Hours of discussion quickly passed as group leaders and missionaries discussed what the Bible teaches about tricky doctrinal issues. As the missionaries got up to leave and head home, one of the group leaders

wanted to show the missionaries a video. The video was of an American evangelical preacher. The leader said he enjoyed listening to the evangelical preacher's sermons. While some sermons may be doctrinally correct, many confessional Lutherans would quickly recognize that American evangelical doctrine is often heterodox.

Missionary Behmer observed that fellowship is different in Latin America.⁹⁷ Students may go through the *Academia Cristo* program with its emphasis on pure biblical doctrine and find no issue with attending or being a member of a church that represents and/or teaches a heterodox doctrine. It takes patience and teaching over time to show the differences in doctrine and explain the dangers of heterodox teaching.

This challenge has mostly affected the work of *Academia Cristo* due to its larger number of advanced groups. Confessional Lutheranism rightfully values pure doctrine. When multiplying ministries, variance in doctrine and practice can quickly get out of hand. It is important to create a system of constant learning wherein the students and groups can constantly learn from and teach the Word in its truth and purity. For this reason, *Academia Cristo* is not simply an online school. Both *Academia Cristo* and TELL have courses that teach everything from the basics of the Bible to denominational doctrinal differences. Beyond that, both ministries have Bible study and worship service resources that help groups conduct biblically based worship and study.

In addition, groups in the *Academia Cristo* program are encouraged to grow in the “5 habits” of a group:⁹⁸

- 1) Constant search for the lost.

97. Missionary Matthew Behmer, WhatsApp voice message.

98. Taken from the “How does Academia Cristo work?” pamphlet.

- 2) Initial instruction of new Christians.
- 3) Deepening faith in worship.
- 4) Expanding faith in Studies.
- 5) Mutual support and encouragement.

These habits reflect the attitudes and actions of a healthy church guided by the Word. Groups are encouraged and guided by their counselors to develop and strengthen these habits as they seek to become an official church of ICWI.

Women's Ministry⁹⁹

The advertising efforts of *Academia Cristo* and TELL are generally targeted toward men. This makes sense when the goal is to find and train church leaders and pastors. This strategy has worked well to create a largely male student population in TELL. About 90 percent of the students are male, and of the 97 students who have completed four courses and have been in the program for six months, only eight of them are women.¹⁰⁰ This is not to say that women are not welcome in the program, they are simply not the targeted demographic.

On the other hand, *Academia Cristo* has had a different experience. During the first few years of *Academia Cristo*, the 1LA team found that they were getting many women to complete the self-study courses, enter live classes, and start groups. The question was what to do with these groups and advanced female students. When the 1LA team was considering a proposal to double the number of missionaries, a female missionary was added as one of the positions. The

99. The information in this section comes from an interview with Missionary Elise Gross unless otherwise noted.

100. TELL Marketing Operations Manager Grace Ungemach, email conversation.

idea was that a female missionary could speak to and counsel the female demographic of the *Academia Cristo* student body. Elise Gross was called to the position and now serves as a female missionary on the 1LA team. Her duties are the same as the other missionaries with an additional area of emphasis on Women's Ministry.

Elise noted some of the specific challenges that come with Women's Ministry in this setting. It can be difficult to counsel some of the female groups. They consist of women constantly looking for and encouraging men to be strong leaders, but the men are simply not interested. It can also be tricky to navigate the roles of men and women in some situations. Women in the program sometimes realize that they are the only ones in their heterodox church with pure biblical teaching. In those cases, it can be difficult to navigate the next steps of changing their church's teaching, confronting the church leaders, or even leaving the church. Other difficult questions have arisen such as: When a group finally encourages a man to study with *Academia Cristo*, where do the women fit in then? What constitutes teaching with authority? What should the women do if the man is new to the faith?¹⁰¹

Thankfully, what started out as a challenge has been a huge blessing for *Academia Cristo*. There are several women who have completed the *Academia Cristo* courses and are currently taking test courses with *Seminario Cristo*.¹⁰² In addition, some of these women are leading the Women's Ministry workshops that are hosted throughout the year for *Academia Cristo* students.

101. These questions require patient conversations and the constant study of God's Word. There is no easy answer to many of these questions. Each situation is different. It is a blessing to have groups who are wrestling with these questions as well as a missionary who can help with those discussions.

102. Translation: Christ Seminary. ICWI is currently developing an online seminary that hopes to serve the group leaders that would like to further their theological learning.

THE FUTURE OF TELL NETWORK

TELL Network directs students to platforms in English, Spanish, Mandarin, and Tagalog. There are currently no plans to get the platform into other languages for several reasons. 1) The current platforms in English, Spanish, Mandarin, and Tagalog are not complete. Additionally, as ministries under the umbrella of MLP, these platforms are limited to the financial resources of MLP. If there is no imminent demand for resources in another language, it is difficult to justify the cost as MLP uses its resources to develop and finish current projects. 2) Translating the materials of the TELL curriculum into another language is a mammoth task. It not only involves the translation of course materials and videos into the target language, it involves making changes to the curriculum so that it applies to the context and culture of the target student body. 3) As Pastor Nate Seiltz noted, a “champion” is needed to head up a project of that size. There needs to be a motivated and knowledgeable person to lead the way and see the project through to the end.¹⁰³ This has happened in a few cases. For example, Rona Abram in Haiti has worked with MLP to make videos that teach the TELL method in Haitian Creole. However, they do not currently have an official platform in Haitian Creole.

TELL English

TELL English currently focuses its efforts on English-speaking Africa and Asia. This is not to the exclusion of other English-speaking parts of the world. This is simply where advertising

103. Pastor Seiltz and Peg Thiele, Zoom interview.

efforts were focused first. To give a snapshot of where TELL English is at currently with their student body:¹⁰⁴

- There are currently have active students in 36 countries.
- 90% of the students are male.
- 97 students on “Counselor Watch” (more than four classes complete/six months in the program).
- The student who is furthest in the program is currently taking his fourteenth course. There are fifteen students behind him with ten, eleven, or twelve courses completed.
- 150 students have completed the first course.

It is a common theme that many students ask where they can receive further training.¹⁰⁵

When there is no WELS-affiliated Seminary close, TELL English can direct students to the Pastoral Studies Institute. “Pastoral Studies Institute provides pre-seminary and seminary training to North American students from a variety of countries and cultures. ... In many cases this training leads to international opportunities as well, since many of these spiritual leaders want training both for themselves and for church leaders in their countries of origin.”¹⁰⁶ The Pastoral Studies Institute (PSI) has partnered with TELL English and offers the possibility of program credit upon completion of all the courses in the TELL program. Students can receive credit for up to two out of the four levels in the PSI program.¹⁰⁷

104. TELL Marketing Operations Manager Grace Ungemach, email conversation. These statistics are current as of December, 2023.

105. Pastor Seiltz and Peg Thiele, Zoom interview.

106. “The Pastoral Studies Institute,” wels.net, <https://wels.net/serving-others/missions/jointmissions/psi/>.

107. Pastor Seiltz and Peg Thiele, Zoom interview.

Academia Cristo

Academia Cristo maintains its focus on reaching the entire Spanish-speaking world.¹⁰⁸ Their partnership with the Latin American synod, *Iglesia Cristo WELS Internacional*¹⁰⁹ (ICWI),¹¹⁰ has provided a clear path for church planters. Now groups that have completed the *Ruta Cristo*¹¹¹ have a church body that they can join and enjoy fellowship with. WELS Administrator for World Missions Rev. Larry Schlomer noted, “For years, our sister churches in Latin America have just been small, individual groups fighting against the wind. For them to be able to have this much broader ministry that’s clearly being blessed by the Lord, there’s an excitement there.”¹¹² Every church body will also want to provide and train pastors to shepherd their people. To this end, ICWI is in the process of forming an online seminary: *Seminario Cristo*.¹¹³ They are currently teaching test courses as they develop the curriculum.¹¹⁴

108. There are even Spanish-speaking students from Spain, Brazil, the United States, and Equatorial Guinea who have taken classes.

109. Translation: Christ Church WELS International. The question has been asked, “Why include WELS in the name?” There is currently another church group named “Iglesia de Cristo Internacional” in Colombia. To avoid confusion, emphasize their “Lutheran-ness”, and acknowledge their close connection to the WELS, the founding members of ICWI decided to include WELS in the name.

110. ICWI was formed in 2021 in Medellín, Colombia. The synod includes churches in Bolivia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Venezuela. The hope is that there will be a confessional Lutheran presence in every Spanish-speaking country in Latin America. The Synod President of ICWI is Pastor Henry Herrera, a pastor in Medellín, Colombia who was trained by WELS missionaries. Fellowship with ICWI was reaffirmed at the 2023 WELS national convention in Saginaw, MI.

111. Translation: Christ Path. This is a program of Bible studies and lessons that teaches the basics of the faith. The program lasts about two years and is one of the prerequisites for applying to be and ICWI church.

112. “New Synod in Latin America Forms,” wels.net, <https://wels.net/new-synod-in-latin-america-forms/>.

113. Translation: Christ Seminary.

114. Pastor Henry Herrera, Zoom interview. The seminary curriculum is divided into five areas of study. The first unit is the fundamentals and would be required by everyone. The idea is that the other four units can be studied as independent emphases. The leaders of ICWI understand that not all the students from *Academia Cristo* that form groups will have the time or desire to complete a four-year seminary education. This design leaves the option open for students to further their education where and when possible. The hope is that the full curriculum would mirror the content of the curriculum of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.

TELL Mandarin

TELL Mandarin currently has the three self-study courses completed. TELL Mandarin cannot currently serve mainland China due to the strict policies on religion there. Because of this, TELL Mandarin targets other Mandarin speaking countries.¹¹⁵ TELL Mandarin is primarily used as a recruitment tool to identify people interested in studying in Asia Lutheran Seminary (ALS).¹¹⁶ To this end, TELL Mandarin utilizes robust email marketing campaigns to direct the students going through the self-study courses to ALS's beginner programs.¹¹⁷ There are plans to make the course more comprehensive and possibly allow students to earn a some sort of course credit for ALS upon completion of the course.¹¹⁸

TELL Tagalog

TELL Tagalog is “an E-Learning program – promoted through Facebook – that teaches basic truths from God’s Word to prepare Filipino students to be able to share the good news of Jesus with others in their native language.”¹¹⁹ TELL Tagalog currently has the three self-study courses and one course in the first Discipleship level completely translated. More courses are currently being translated.¹²⁰ TELL Tagalog focuses its efforts on the Philippines, where there are the most

115. TELL Marketing Operations Manager Grace Ungemach, email conversation.

116. TELL info packet, 5.

117. TELL Marketing Operations Manager Grace Ungemach, email conversation.

118. Pastor Seiltz and Peg Thiele, Zoom interview.

119. TELL info packet, 4.

120. TELL Marketing Operations Manager Grace Ungemach, email conversation.

Tagalog speakers. There is a large overlap where both TELL English and TELL Tagalog can advertise due to the prevalence of English in the Philippines as well.¹²¹ Pastor Alvien De Guzman is the national pastor running the program. He is currently the pastor of Law and Gospel Lutheran Church which serves Metro Manila, Philippines.

121. TELL Marketing Operations Manager Grace Ungemach, email conversation.

CONCLUSION

Chigorodó is a small town in the Urabá region of Antioquia, Colombia. With a population of about 60,000, Chigorodó, Colombia would not be the first place most mission groups would target to start a church plant.¹²² However, that did not stop the Lord of the harvest from guiding César Augusto and Joaquín Restrepo to study with *Academia Cristo* and eventually start a group of about 20 individuals who meet weekly around the Word of God in Chigorodó. The process of study and group formation has had its fair share of challenges. However, on a visit to the small town with some missionaries, I was blessed to see the Lord's work through both *Academia Cristo* and its students to start sharing the gospel with people who needed it.

César and Joaquín are just two examples of the many people searching for comprehensive biblical training. Thanks to the efforts of *Academia Cristo* and TELL, many of these people have easy access to that training. The goal of WELS World Missions has always been the same: to share the good news with all creation. Many challenges have been encountered in pursuit of that goal. *Academia Cristo* and TELL have used new tools and strategies to accomplish that steady goal despite those challenges old and new. As TELL Network develops, my prayer is that the Lord continue to bless their efforts as they encounter and handle the challenges ahead.

122. "Chigorodó," citypopulation.de, https://www.citypopulation.de/en/colombia/admin/antioquia/05172__chigorod%C3%B3/.

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