

Archives in the Seminary Classroom: Developing Critical Thinking and Historical Awareness in Theological Education

by Victoria Jesswein

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the integration of archival materials into seminary education, focusing on their pedagogical value for both in-person and distance-learning students preparing for ministry. Drawing on two case studies from United Lutheran Seminary courses, the paper demonstrates how working with primary sources cultivates critical thinking, historical awareness, and interpretive skills essential for theological education and pastoral leadership. Students learn to analyze historical documents, synthesize sources, and draw theological insights from archival texts. Particular attention is given to strategies for overcoming access challenges for online learners, including the use of LibGuides and digitization efforts.

In an era of rapid theological change and increasingly digital seminary education, it is more important than ever to ground theological study in its historical contexts. Seminary classes should cultivate an awareness of the historical contexts in which theological ideas emerged and evolved, and highlight the necessity of historical awareness for developing informed theological perspectives. Studying church history enables students to understand the roots of their beliefs and practices, equipping them to engage with contemporary issues with historical insight. Primary sources and archival materials are central in this process, and archivists at theological schools are in the perfect position to ensure students gain skills in historical awareness and critical thinking by bringing archives into the seminary classroom. As stewards of historical resources and potential educational partners, archivists can contribute directly to theological formation and “must join with faculty as partners in building the foundation that will support the growth of independent learners” (Robyns 2000, 365). When archives are integrated into the teaching process, they help students develop a deeper understanding of both historical method and theological development. By engaging directly with original, uninterpreted documents, students gain a nuanced understanding of how religious beliefs and practices have both shaped and been shaped by history.

Spraggs argues that “archival research teaches students how to extract information from a large amount of disparate material by distinguishing what is relevant and useful: a valuable and highly transferable skill” (2008, 1). Additionally, working with archival materials cultivates a range of scholarly and practical skills essential for both ministry and academic work. Students learn to evaluate evidence in its raw and unfiltered form, critically assess the provenance and reliability of documents, and synthesize their findings to construct coherent historical narratives. In doing so, students “gain a much deeper appreciation of the problems inherent in using documentary sources, and the resourcefulness and creative thinking needed to interpret them” (Martin-Bowtell and Taylor 2014, 27). Developing archival literacy fosters critical thinking through diplomatic analysis (Robyns 2001; Cooper 2014). Students must be aware of the motivations behind record creation, such as who produced the documents, under what conditions, and for what purposes. This awareness is especially important because, unlike secondary sources students may be more familiar with, “the material was not designed to provide answers to historical questions” (Spraggs 2008, 4).

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Studying history through archival materials is particularly important in theological education because it connects students to the lived experiences, debates, and developments that have shaped faith over centuries and “creates a real sense of intimacy with people of a different time” (Matyn 2000, 349). By analyzing historical records, students gain insight into how theological concepts were formed in response to specific social, political, and spiritual challenges. Many criticize the use of rote memorization in theological teaching (Holifield 2003; Jarosz and Kutay 2017). With archives, “rather than seeking evidence to support an already-formed opinion, student arguments emerge from primary sources” (Jarosz and Kutay 2017, 209-10). This process fosters critical thinking and historical and contextual awareness, skills invaluable not only in historical scholarship but also in ministry settings, where leaders must navigate complex records, interpret foundational texts, and respond thoughtfully to contemporary social and theological issues. For future church leaders, proficiency in interpreting church records and historical documents is especially important. Leaders are often called on to engage with historical texts, articulate theological positions, and respond to contemporary issues with historical and theological insight. Engaging with archives allows students to trace the evolution of core doctrines and practices, deepening their understanding of the church’s theological identity while equipping them to articulate that identity meaningfully in today’s context. It also reveals the patterns and priorities that have endured over time, helping students to discern what is essential. By immersing themselves in the historical witness of the church, future leaders are better prepared to honor tradition while addressing the social and theological questions of the present.

Yet as seminary education increasingly moves online, students are interacting with historical documents and the archives that hold them less frequently and more superficially. In many online or hybrid programs, archival encounters are limited or absent altogether. This trend risks disconnecting students from the raw material of the historical record and its benefits (Roff 2007). Without these experiences, students are less equipped to engage in church history research. Now more than ever, it is crucial to incorporate archives into theological education to continue to cultivate the skills of interpretation, contextual analysis, and critical inquiry that ministry and historical study require.

This paper examines how archival materials can be effectively integrated into the theological education classroom, with a particular focus on students preparing for ministry while enrolled in distance learning programs. Drawing on two case studies from courses taught at United Lutheran Seminary (ULS) that incorporate archival resources into their assignments, this paper explores the pedagogical value of engaging with archival material. It addresses three key questions: What skills do students develop through working with archival materials? How does direct engagement with primary sources deepen students’ understanding of church history, theology, and ministerial practice? And how can access to such materials be meaningfully extended to students in online or hybrid learning environments? Using the syllabus and assignment prompts for each course, examples of student work, and student feedback, this paper demonstrates the value of archives in the seminary classroom.

CASE STUDY 1: HISTORY OF LUTHERANISM

The first case study is on a course called the History of Lutheranism. This is a one semester course offered in-person and online to Master of Divinity (MDiv) and Master of Arts (MA) students. Most students who take it are on the track to become a Lutheran pastor or deacon. The rationale for the course indicates that it introduces students to the complex history of social and environmental conditions, racism, poverty, and migration within Lutheran history, and that what they will learn will help them critique, understand, and discern the vital aspects of Lutheran witness locally and in the wider church.

The final assignment for the course is a project centered on historical periodicals. The periodical project includes both a group presentation and an individual paper. Each group chooses a topic or short span of history (like a decade), and each member focuses on a distinct aspect within that area. The assignment aims to introduce students to the use of historical periodicals, develop their familiarity with denominational journals and newsletters, and encourage critical comparison across periodicals from different synods, denominations, youth organizations, missionary efforts, and more. The ULS library has a large collection of Lutheran periodicals from the nineteenth through twenty-first centuries. In-person students are expected to explore the periodical collection on their own to find resources that interest them. However, the collection remains largely undigitized and minimally indexed, presenting significant access challenges for distance-learning students.

To introduce this valuable resource to distance learners, a LibGuide page was created featuring a selection of previously scanned periodicals. The goal was to have a few examples of each of the biggest titles of Lutheran periodicals to give students an idea of their format and content. Because so much of the material is available on-site only, the success of this assignment relied on the professor's willingness to search the periodicals on behalf of the students and the archivist's willingness to scan selections and send them to students as requested. This process, while effective in the short term, is not sustainable for ongoing instruction. However, from the archive's viewpoint, this initiative has directly informed our digitization priorities. By identifying the titles and time periods that resonate most with students, we have been able to focus our efforts on making the most relevant materials available online in advance of future iterations of the project. As this digitization project progresses, it will significantly improve the feasibility and effectiveness of similar assignments for distance learners.

One student group focused on the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, exploring how these events were reflected in Lutheran periodicals. One student examined ecumenical relationships to determine whether cooperation among denominations increased during times of economic hardship. Another analyzed discussions around tithing and missionary support to see how financial giving was impacted. A third student compared how different denominational publications addressed the environmental and theological implications of the Dust Bowl, focusing on how the natural disaster was framed in relation to climate and divine providence. By collaborating across a range of periodicals, the group was able to highlight key differences in denominational communications and reveal broader trends in interdenominational discourse during a specific time.

Another student group explored the development of the Service Book and Hymnal, a worship resource used by several Lutheran church bodies in the mid-twentieth century. In investigating how the Hymnal was created, received, and adopted, students examined periodicals from a wide range of Lutheran denominations to understand the diverse perspectives and theological debates surrounding it. Their research revealed not only varying opinions on the Hymnal's content and liturgical structure but also produced deeper reflections on theology and Lutheran identity. One student observed that the process of creating the Hymnal contributed to an emerging idea of worship that reflected common belief and calling. They noted that the development of the Hymnal "was also a move toward a different theological position" with emphasis on unity through worship that became a significant factor in fostering interdenominational dialogue and cooperation, ultimately contributing to the merger of several Lutheran bodies in the latter half of the twentieth century.

By comparing various Lutheran periodicals, students developed a deeper understanding of the theological perspectives held by different Lutheran denominations and organizations. This comparative approach allowed them to observe how theological positions were reflected in discussions of contemporary issues, and they had to infer theological viewpoints from editorial choices, tone,

language, and the topics that were emphasized or omitted. This required careful reading and critical analysis, encouraging students to engage with the material more thoughtfully and to recognize the nuanced ways positions are expressed in the periodicals. Through this process, they gained insight into both the diversity and commonalities within the broader Lutheran tradition.

CASE STUDY 2: CHRISTIANITY BECOMES A WORLD RELIGION

The second case study examines the Master's-level course *Christianity Becomes a World Religion*, taken by students from a range of denominational backgrounds. A particular focus is on missionaries, and a central assignment in this course is an archives analysis paper. In this assignment, students are given an example of an archival document with very little context and asked to write a detailed analysis paper about everything they could determine from looking at that document alone. The prompt asked the students to assess:

What was the intended audience? Are there biases or assumptions that indicate a limited perspective? Give examples. And then, are there cracks in the depictions of the missionary context that help us see beyond the perspective of the creator for us to begin to see other perspectives, or the ways the subjects of the mission, the indigenous people, represent themselves of their culture? What were the key issues facing this mission?

To support this assignment, a dedicated LibGuide was created. It includes:

- 1) The instructions for the assignment.
- 2) A downloadable PDF of the archival document: Four letters comprising nine pages were scanned in-house at maximum quality, so that students could note physical features (e.g., type of paper, whether it was typed or handwritten, signs of folding or staining, copy vs. original) as if they were seeing the original document in person.
- 3) Optional deeper dive resources. No additional research was necessary to complete the assignment, but if students wanted to dig deeper, the LibGuide also provided materials parallel to exploratory paths students on-campus might follow. They included: A scanned alumni record entry for the document's creator (a seminary alumnus), links to the finding aid for his manuscript collection, related newspaper clippings, photographs, and other missionary collections in the archive, as well as contact information for the archivist.

The assignment prompt asked the students to describe the form of correspondence (copy or original), note physical and textual features (marginalia, format), identify recipients, and summarize key issues. One student observed: "The materials are type-written letters with penciled-in corrections. They are in reverse chronological order...and presumably the original order, as newer letters would be placed on top of older ones." This attention to the physical arrangement of the documents demonstrates a growing awareness of archival practices and how the organization of materials can itself provide historical clues.

Another student noted: "It is interesting to compare the content of the letters with other historical documents [looked at in the course.] By combining personal manuscripts and official administrative records, a historian can get a fuller picture of the activities and concerns of the missions at the time." This reflection reveals a key learning outcome of the assignment: the ability to synthesize multiple types of sources. Students learned that personal letters often contain personal details and unofficial comments that can complement the more reserved or formal tone of published reports or institutional records. Together, these sources help build a richer, more layered understanding of historical events and attitudes.

The same student concluded that “it is important to learn what you can from looking at a record, but also understand the archival silences and the reasons why some things have been preserved and other things from different creators have not been saved in the archives.” This comment highlights two essential learning outcomes. First, the importance of interpretive skills, noticing what the document conveys both explicitly and implicitly. Secondly, it shows an awareness of archival silences and the recognition of the limitations in the archive’s records. It is important to understand how and why certain records end up in an archive, and to question what documents or broader voices have been lost or never collected. In a theological context, this awareness invites a deeper reflection on which voices have been historically preserved in the shaping of religious traditions, and which have been marginalized or silenced. Such awareness cultivates a sensitivity to the lived experiences of individuals whose stories may not be fully acknowledged or valued by religious institutions, and pastoral caregivers who recognize these silences are better equipped to listen deeply, honor diverse experiences, and offer care that is contextually aware of the spiritual wounds caused by exclusion and erasure.

In the archive analysis paper, students learn to engage deeply with a single primary source. In closely examining the physical aspects of the record, students analyze how the document was used. They elicit context clues, identify authorial intent, and evaluate the document’s original purpose, recognizing that the records in archives were created for a primary use, not with future historians in mind. This realization helps students understand that historical records are not neutral or complete narratives but reflect their creators’ intentions and limitations. It also teaches them how historical arguments are built: when presented with an uncontextualized document, students are empowered to form their own interpretations, identify patterns, and develop a critical, independent approach to historical inquiry.

CONCLUSION

While the value of archival work in historical research is well established, its relevance for students preparing for ministry is sometimes less immediately recognized. Yet, as demonstrated by these pedagogical outcomes, the integration of archives into theological education offers significant benefits beyond historical literacy. The use of primary sources cultivates essential skills in critical thinking, historical awareness, and textual interpretation.

In a post-hoc survey, students in classes that utilized archives as part of their assignments were asked to comment on what value they saw in such assignments. An MDiv student writes:

If one considers academic pursuits part of ministry to the greater Church then the ability to read, understand, and apply the wisdom of past theologians and of people more generally is of the utmost importance. In parish ministry I often cite the writings of various saints and scholars in my preaching and teaching.

This reflection underscores the integral role of archival engagement in forming ministers who not only appreciate the church’s theological heritage but actively draw upon it to enrich their preaching, teaching, and pastoral leadership.

Incorporating archival research into theological education is not just a tool for imparting historical knowledge but also cultivates interpretive and pastoral skills that shape students’ understanding of the church, both past and present. As another MDiv student reflected that working directly with primary sources “not only gave me insight into what the church historical was thinking about in ministry and worship but also gave me skills to see what historical themes or omissions were underlying in

[sic] the sources.” This kind of engagement equips students to recognize patterns and gaps within historical records, fostering a more nuanced understanding of the development of church practices.

Moreover, archival work encourages attentiveness. In the words of the same student: “working with the sources allowed me to listen to the voices of the past and truly hear them, which is a skill I have translated to my pastoral care interactions today.” This unanticipated outcome highlights how learning to hear the subtle and often marginalized voices in historical documents nurtures a kind of deep listening that is essential in pastoral contexts. In this way, archives are also spaces for theological formation. They train students to be discerning interpreters of the past and present, a skill that enriches both scholarship and ministry. Attentiveness to both what is said and unsaid in historical records translates directly into pastoral settings, where active listening and interpretive discernment are essential tools for empathetic ministry.

Importantly, work with archives is vital for distance learners. As seminaries increasingly offer online and hybrid programs, students are often at risk of engaging less deeply with historical materials and losing the opportunity to develop the interpretive skills that come from working directly with primary sources. Integrating archives into distance theological education helps ensure that these students have meaningful encounters with historical sources, fostering the same intellectual and pastoral formation as in-person coursework. Equipping distance learners to engage with archival materials also prepares them for real-world ministry tasks, such as interpreting local church records, navigating denominational archives, and tracing theological developments within their communities.

Theological education that includes archival engagement prepares students to interpret church records, critically analyze theological texts, and grapple with both historical and contemporary social issues. Especially in digital learning environments, archival work is valuable in providing tangible examples of church history. It promotes scholarly inquiry and helps students contribute thoughtfully to doctrinal interpretation and contemporary church discourse. Additionally, incorporating archives into the classroom strengthens collaboration between faculty and archivists, facilitating the design of assignments that are both academically rigorous and contextually appropriate. It also raises awareness of archival resources and enhances institutional understanding of their pedagogical value. By actively engaging in the classroom, archivists not only enrich the academic experience, but also help shape future theologians and church leaders who are historically informed, critically engaged, and better prepared to navigate the complexities of ministry in a diverse world.

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