June 30, two esteemed global theologians, José David Rodríguez and Javier “Jay” Alanís, retired from full-time duties at LSTC and the Lutheran Seminary Program of the Southwest (LSPS). Rodríguez began teaching at LSTC in 1981 and joined the faculty full-time in 1990. Alanís served at LSPS since 2000 and as its executive director since 2009.

In January, LSTC welcomed Eliseo Pérez-Álvarez as associate professor of Lutheran systematic theology and global Lutheranism. Like Rodríguez and Alanís, he earned his doctorate at LSTC.

The three have known one another for decades. Rodríguez was a professor and advisor to Alanís when he was a student at LSTC. Alanís and Pérez-Álvarez helped shape the program at LSPS and became teaching theologians there.

Their wide-ranging areas of expertise intersect at global, Latinx and Lutheran theologies. They recently met via Zoom to reflect on theological education, LSTC, the cost of their call and where they find joy.

How did you decide to come to LSTC?

Rodríguez: I first came to LSTC in 1959. My father was a student at the School of Missions at Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary in Maywood, Ill., a predecessor school of LSTC. I returned to LSTC in 1971 to study for my master of divinity degree because of LSTC’s long history of working with Puerto Ricans. At that time, LSTC had the best program of advanced studies—ThM and ThD that later turned to a PhD—in the Lutheran Church in America (LCA). In 1988, when the LCA joined the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC) to form the ELCA, LSTC developed one of the best Hispanic Ministry programs of study with the greatest number of Latinx students for the MDiv as well as Latinx candidates for the PhD.

In the 1960s, LSTC established a relationship with the seminary in Argentina, where my father was a professor. When I went there in 2011–2013 to serve as rector (president) of the University Institute (ISEDET), people there remembered that relationship.

Alanís: I was invited by the LSPS faculty to do a PhD and return to LSPS to teach. I never dreamed that a PhD would be part of my faith journey. LSPS and local churches helped fund my studies.

LSTC was the right seminary for my PhD studies. Richard Perry Jr. was my first advisor, followed by José David Rodríguez, who advised and guided me during the PhD dissertation stage. Their global perspectives on theology formed me into a global theologian more than a Latinx theologian.

My dissertation specifically addresses the borderlands, a unique and particular region of the U.S. with global implications. I’ve spoken about the borderlands at places as varied as ISEDET in Argentina and the Walls Conference in Germany.

The experience of studying with a global community at LSTC allowed me to hear their voices and to see myself beyond a person from Texas. All of it was set in motion by faculty who were sensitive to the calling of the Spirit to serve the global church.

Pérez-Álvarez: I went to seminary at 22 with a call to be a rural pastor, but then my Old Testament professor encouraged me to pursue graduate studies. I had to wait 10 years to get a scholarship.

While I was the director of the Presbyterian Publishing House of Mexico, David White, the first history teacher of Justo González, offered me his help to continue my studies. I didn’t think I could afford to go to graduate school. He wrote to Justo González about me, which resulted in a scholarship to Atlanta [Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Ga.]. In a class with Walter Brueggemann, I was so fortunate in teaming with Judy Bailey, who was our neighbor as well. She
This is a time to revisit the nature of the TEEM program, namely an alternative route to ministry of Word and Sacrament for marginal people who are already serving neglected congregations. It won’t hurt to remember that the TEEM program is neither a shortcut to ordination to Word and Sacrament nor a springboard to be “upgraded” through more studies into the “canonical” MDiv. 

Eliseo Pérez-Álvarez, associate professor of Lutheran systematic theology and global Lutheranism

How do you see theological education evolving?

Pérez-Álvarez: I’m overjoyed by the re-launch of the Lutheran Theological Colleges of African Descent leaders. Now, regarding Latinx theological education, this is a fateful moment for LSTC to reclaim Latinx theological education, given the fact that 10 years ago practically all the ELCA Latinx programs were dismantled. Instead of evolving, we have experienced resistance. The need of going forward we go backwards. The U.S. is the second largest Spanish speaking country in the world and Spanish is the first spoken language of world Christianity. This is a time to revisit the nature of the TEEM (Theological Education for Emerging Ministries) program, namely an alternative route to ministry of Word and Sacrament for marginal people who are already serving neglected congregations. It won’t hurt to remember that the TEEM program is neither a shortcut to ordination to Word and Sacrament nor a springboard to be “upgraded” through more studies into the “canonical” MDiv.

Rodríguez: It has been a challenge that the Latinx community in the U.S. has had very few resources for theological education. Eliseo and Jay designed the courses for students in the TEEM programs at LSPS for candidacy for ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament in the ELCA that broke new ground. Future efforts in developing programs for Latinx candidacy will need to be based on their work.

Alanís: TEEM is not a shortcut. The TEEM program never values quantity over quality. The gift that TEEM students bring is life experience and practices of ministry while studying. At LSPS we had over 40 TEEM graduates, with more than half of them people of color.

Rodríguez: One of the most important things about Jay’s and Eliseo’s work at LSPS is their design of courses for TEEM and credit has to be given to them. That’s an important contribution. Other ELCA seminaries borrowed this design for their TEEM programs of study.

Alanís: In the Lutheran church we live with the tension, “How much is good enough?” Lutheranism is meant to be contextualized. Students of color should not have the burden to prove they are Lutheran enough culturally. This misses the point of the priesthood of all believers and how we’re formed differently.

TEEM started with this sort of grounding in character even without the professional academic background. But even faculty members at LSTC questioned the TEEM alternative for ordination in the ELCA. At that time, we were focused on the need for the academic master’s degree for ELCA ordination.

I will be honest with you. The best work that we three have been engaged in has not been a happy one. We have experienced resistance. The biggest frustration I have as I move toward retirement is that LSTC discontinued its Hispanic Ministry Program. It seems that working with the Latinx Community has not been a priority for the ELCA or LSTC. Programs of this nature seem to develop only by the efforts of those who are going against the current. I need to share this frustration. I’m not trying to make other people feel guilty, but to allow for some space for my Latinx community. The Latinx community is not perceived as having the opportunity to enrich the church as a whole.

Alanís: In conversations, writing, teaching and proclamation, we are speaking the truth to the church. We don’t have the luxury of skirt more issues; we come together to name things for the global south as well.

Rodríguez: Daniel Aleshire, former long-time director of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), recently published the book Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education. He says that after WWII, theological education became a profession—preparing people to be “professional theologians” in congregations. He argues that we need to go from profession to formation. He traces this back to an earlier model of theological education that focused on formation of character: being a person of character, grounded in foundational leadership skills that would serve leaders in the church and in the public arena.

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Javier “Jay” Alanís, former director of the Lutheran Seminary Program of the Southwest

Are there joys that have helped you keep going?

Rodríguez: The work I have been doing is for the benefit of my Latinx community as well as other communities that constitute the ELCA and other Christian and non-Christian denominations. I find joy in people who take the opportunities offered them as a gift. I see that people with no academic background go far beyond the opportunities offered to them. The work of a systematic theologian is to bring things together that are fragmented. That is not easy in a society that is individualized and fragmented. I find joy in moving into marginalized communities, other ethnic groups, finding relationships with marginalized communities. I enjoy relating to the number of people from African American, Native American and Asian communities who have begun to learn and use the Spanish language to open a door to a different culture. Our Latinx community has come together to name things for the global south as well.

Alanís: We are coming from experiences of being at the margins and we’re willing to take the hit or the backlash. It is part of our call to serve a world and a church that is broken. We are called to speak truth and we are called to heal. It is part of our giftedness. We speak out of our wounds.

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Alanís: I’m overjoyed for being able to live at the borderlands. I thank God for all the blessings accompanying these borders. I accompany worshiping, serving, teaching, unlearning, having table talks, dancing and laughing together with my people. For the blessing of being able to live in five countries of the Greater Caribbean and in Denmark, I’m speechless.

Every morning I awaken with a sacred sip of coffee gives me joy. I’m usually optimistic at the sunrise, pensive at the sundown, and realistic while dreaming.

Bednar is public relations manager.