

First Listening Report for the Theological Education Advisory Council

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Members of the Theological Education Advisory Council (TEAC) were asked to distribute a set of questions to individuals (and groups) to help inform the work of the Council. As of December, 126 individual responses had been received by Research and Evaluation and this is an initial report on those responses. We have also reviewed the responses we received from five seminaries and provided a very short summary at the end of this report.

Question 1: What is the vocation of the Lutheran movement in our North American context?

While Lutherans have no exclusive claim to an emphasis on the graciousness of God, it is central to the Lutheran tradition and when asked about the vocation of the Lutheran movement in North American, many formed their response around this and other central Lutheran themes.

The vocation is the steadfast proclamation of grace, and boldly proclaiming and living out radical inclusivity and the celebration of diversity.

The vocation is to bring the theology of grace to bear. For that we need both to continue to delve into a theological understanding of Grace and how it impacts everything we do and say and we need to develop a practical theology of grace that impacts our actions.

When it comes to teaching the faith, it is increasingly my experience there is a hunger in Lutheran congregations for understanding our Lutheran Confession of faith—and not only historically and how it is our lens for understanding scripture, but also in relating to the world around us in ways that are not only meaningful and relevant, but are also acted upon and articulated with a Lutheran understanding of our faith . . . in sacramental ways . . . giving flesh and life to God's grace that we have in Christ Jesus.

Our vocation is to live into the paradoxes of the Lutheran life: saint/sinner, law/gospel, etc. We are called to preach the gospel of grace through faith with both our actions and our words.

We are called to live a life reflecting Christ's love alongside the people in the communities we serve by meeting them where they are in life, seeking to engage in authentic relationship, and living in a grace-filled way to accompany others in life.

In short, to communicate and respond to God's grace.

Our vocation is to serve boldly in the name of Jesus Christ, embodying His love, grace, forgiveness, and peace through daily ministry with and for a world in need. We are to seek out those places of brokenness and opportunity, sharing our gifts in community to the glory of God and for the sake of the world, inviting others to come to know the unconditional, redeeming love of our Savior.

In this context, what's the witness of Lutherans, which we speak best? And if we don't speak it well, it won't get said? Three things: 1) Incarnation: God loved us enough to become one of us; 2) grace: that love is utterly surprising, unconditional, ecstatic; 3) death and resurrection, that mysterious breaking and re-making that fashions a new creation that is really new, not the old creation warmed over.

The unique charisms of the Lutheran movement in the North American context involves bridging the catholic and evangelical traditions, i.e. honoring the scriptural and liturgical traditions we have inherited while maintaining a strong emphasis on God's saving work in Jesus Christ and a realistic assessment of humanity's limited capacity to save ourselves. With all Christians, we share the call to reveal God's saving work in every context in which we find ourselves, continuing Christ's ministry of compassion, healing, forgiving, liberating and reconciling.

Embedded in the responses were at least two additional components of the vocation which describe the great potential of the movement.

1. There was an emphasis on education—being a learning community including the use of approaches which are relational and which produced and are further informed by service. This Lutheran approach to education is a response to God's grace which, in turn, generates a vocation intent on contributing to a better life for all.

I think the Lutheran church should work harder at being relationship-centered—in the context of building relationships through intentional listening and actively caring about individuals within the church community, whether churched or unchurched. Pastoral leaders are expected to care for their parishioners and they can help those they serve by being good listeners, and not necessarily problem solvers, while sharing God's love.

To receive and hold Jesus' Word of Grace and build faithful Christian communities around it and to allow it to motivate us toward service and partnership with others.

The vocation of the Lutheran movement is, along with other Christians, to offer others an experience of God's grace in a word of forgiveness, an unbidden act of kindness, in a cup of cold water, in food, shelter, clothing, in setting the prisoner free, in worship, fellowship, and stewardship. The particular charism of the Lutheran tradition is to be unrelenting about grace, which involves a radical commitment to telling the truth about what it means to be human and what we know about God. Although, we do not often talk about or practice things that reflect it, I also believe that the Holy Spirit is calling us to engage new people

who are not in church, who are interested in God. In this case, our vocation is to listen, learn and wonder and worship together with others who may not have as set an understanding of who God is.

I think an even more critical role for the Lutheran movement involves its local congregations. When Lutheran congregations cling to their own best traditions (including, at least in my mind, essential law and gospel distinctions, the transformative power of the preached Word, a deep love of sacramental worship, great freedom with regard to tradition, and a provocative, paradoxical understanding of Christian ethics) they provide powerful and significant “instances” of the Body of Christ. In other words, the Lutheran movement can make for some unique and vital Christian congregations. It’s my hope that these congregations continue to survive in the ‘marketplace’ of North American organized religion—principally because they are a gift to their members, the broader community, and the Church of Christ in that place.

To connect people to God’s grace in such a way that they are empowered to serve and love, rather than squabble and grasp at power.

We are a people that understand the promise and value of paradox (sinner and saint, ancient and future, right now and not yet), a gift to a North American society that is filled with ambiguities. As our society transitions from modernity into post-modernity (for I do not believe we are entirely post-modern yet), our ability to speak confidently and clearly about the nature of our loving God and God’s use of paradox and grace will speak powerfully to this North American context.

2. There was also the perception Lutheran potentially offers a strong alternative many might find compelling if only more were aware of it. This alternative is based in a communal experience of God’s grace which is not dogmatic but remains faithful to Lutheran theological convictions.

I think the specifically Lutheran understanding of Grace and Vocation are much needed in the North American context. The idea that God comes to us as a gift of grace and not as a result of our own achievement is a message US Americans desperately need. We need to equip our members to be willing and able to articulate this understanding in a clear and affirming way.

Time and time again I find people discover the radically open theology of the ELCA to be refreshing and warming; however, they seem unaware that such a theology existed. If I had to synthesize I would say that the vocation is to reach out to others, as it has always been. However, this is not meant to be a conversion, but more of a “witnessing through witnessing” to steal the language of Brian McLaren.

In a culture based on fear of the other, and fear of rejection, the Lutheran take on Christianity offers a God who accepts us unconditionally, freeing us from saving ourselves

and fearing others. It opens the door wide for us to equip all the baptized to live out their vocations in the world, serving others rather than saving themselves.

To bring the hope of the gospel, justification by grace through faith, to a continent in bondage to works righteousness and tit-for-tat living. To let the continent know that there is church where questions and doubt are accepted as part of the faith journey, and where faith is not expressed or practiced as in the judgmental way of the most visible forms of Christianity in North American—fundamentalist and cold evangelicalism.

Ultimately, the North American context reveals a deep longing for true relationship. Lutheran theology is well at home in this context, valuing dialogue over diatribe and paradox over pat answers. Therefore call and equip leaders who are comfortable in the messiness of life and faith, who are willing and able to engage in meaningful conversation. “Orthodoxy” may be seen as our trump card in the conversation, but we should perhaps lead from a position of serving and mutual respect. Lutheran folk have the theology that embraces the broken and the redeemed parts of life. Claimed and called in Baptism. This is as “real” as it gets! This certainly does not mean that we compromise our Lutheran identity. In fact, just the opposite - our Lutheran identity is perfect for this context. Be Lutheran to the core and not ashamed of it!

I believe our vocation is to be a voice for God’s grace, unattached to our potential to earn, achieve, or purchase that grace. I believe that we are uniquely positioned theologically to offer food for the deep craving that many people express and seek to fill in a variety of ways. Our understanding of care of neighbor and creation because of our freedom speaks to generations who find meaning and truth in service and experience of community in what would be considered ‘non-traditional’ contexts.

We have an amazing emphasis on God’s grace, and an amazing world-view that is, generally speaking, open-minded and open to differing views. We offer a different flavor of Christianity that does not fit into the stereotypes of American Christians. We need to claim this niche and use it to serve others and share Jesus’ love with them.

To build and equip communities around the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a manner that connects to people who are increasingly suspicious or uninterested in institutional religious structures.

To be able to answer the question, ‘Tell me about Jesus’ with each other, and more importantly, with the people who are not presently Lutheran or even Christian. Could we dare suggest that our answers might be changed/affected by what we hear from each other, or (gasp) from the afore mentioned “Nones?” I believe the people of this North American context we seek to serve would be intrigued by such a witness.

These two components of a vocation grounded in traditional Lutheran themes suggest finding a compelling and functional answer to two related questions might be key to the future of the Lutheran movement in North America.

1. How can Lutherans be simultaneously non-dogmatic and faithful?
2. How can the truths or insights Lutherans hold be more available, more easily recognized, understood, and embraced by more people?

Working toward a better and wider cultural understanding of ELCA Lutheran commitments is ambitious particularly in a world which appears to be increasingly uninterested in the role of theology in making important distinctions. Or, put differently, it is an ambitious goal in a culture where many believe theological distinctions are more likely to produce maliciousness than good. This goal also challenges what appears to be the case for a typical ELCA Lutheran. For example, one issue is the extent to which ELCA Lutherans are willing to claim some level of “truth” for their beliefs especially in contrast to the beliefs of others. To illustrate, we have included the following from a 2008 survey of Lutheran congregational leaders from the survey panel *Lutherans Say . . .*¹

A Lutheran Theological Identity

While these Lutheran leaders are typically not literalists, they also hold beliefs that are not clearly identifiable as Lutheran. These Lutheran leaders are, at best, ambiguous in terms of a Lutheran theological identity. They are not, for example, convinced Lutheranism as a theological system is better than any other theological system. Seventy-six percent “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that no Christian group can legitimately claim its beliefs are more true than those held by any other Christian group. Forty-six percent “agreed” or “strongly agreed” and 22 percent were “not sure” that “it is possible for a faithful follower of any religion, including Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism, to find the truth about God through that religion Perhaps most significant is the proportion of these leaders who accept a high view of the capacity of individuals, as individuals, to respond positively to God. Again, it is very difficult to sort out nuances among different theological points of view using a questionnaire, but when these leaders were asked to agree or disagree with the statement “Salvation is freely given by God but only to those who have made a decision to accept Jesus as their personal savior,” 62 percent of the respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed.” Nine percent said they were “not sure” while 22 percent “disagreed” and 7 percent “strongly disagreed.” When asked to respond to the statement “It is possible by honoring God and with God’s help to overcome sin and live a holy life,” 73 percent of the respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed.” When asked to respond to the statement “Those who honor God are often blessed materially,” 31 percent of the respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed.”

Divergent Responses

There were very few divergent responses among the TEAC respondents. Perhaps the selection process produced a group of similar mind. Nevertheless, the following comments show somewhat divergent views.

¹ *Lutherans Say . . . 6, 2009*, was a survey of lay leaders who receive the ELCA congregational resource “Seeds for the Parish”. A full report of the survey is available from Research and Evaluation, ELCA.

It is unclear where the Lutheran movement is headed in our so called North American context. I am asked over and over again by Lutheran church members of diverse backgrounds, races and ethnic groups, "What is our Church up too and trying to prove"? Congregants are saying we seem to have lost our way. Some say the Good News has become watered down. Others say we need to market the Pentecostal staff driven model and worship style. I say the Church is in danger of letting the world dictate its future, as head knowledge seems to prevail over and above the foundational teachings of the Lutheran Church. No doubt, we the church must look at the culture and the masses, and ask God to help us share the message "GRACE" with Holy Spirit fire.

I would stay away from this kind of religious language! [Referring to how Question 1 was worded.] I do not even know what this questions means! Love God and love neighbor as yourself. Keep it simple. Emphasize the message of Jesus. Make the message relevant to our lives.

People are not looking for a Lutheran church, they are looking for God. Therefore, spend less time talking about what it means to be a Lutheran in a multi-denominational culture and more time talking about what it means to be a Christian in an increasingly skeptical and unbelieving culture. We do not witness to the Lutheran church but to Jesus. We need leaders who grasp this paradigm shift. We will learn this better from other denominations and expressions rather than our own.

I believe we are being called to open our minds and hearts, our theologies and liturgies and discover again what it means to reclaim faith as trust in the living God (and not a subscription to a set of beliefs). I believe we are being called to create ways in which seekers/nones/the lapsed can gain an experience of the living God (not 'learn' about God). I believe we are being called to find new ways to create genuine community (instead of fostering membership with a mug and a new member class). I believe we are being called to lay down our theological and confessional weapons and open ourselves up to how God might be at work in our world, changing not only those around us, but us, too. Leaders need to be conversant in the ways in which non-church people understand and come to faith, what sorts of communities they are longing for, and how to engage and build those communities.

Question 2: Into what forms and contexts of public witness and service is God calling this church for which we need to prepare leaders?

The responses to this question were overwhelming focused on preparing leaders to engage a social context in which traditional congregations are increasingly marginalized.² To a great extent, this may have been a function of the focus of the question on "public" witness and service assuming what happens inside a congregation is "private". In this case, leadership means having the ability and taking

² Defining tradition as a community with a stand-alone building where worship is held weekly, with a professionally trained leader responsible for Christian education and the pastoral care of members.

the initiative to express and act upon, in everyday life, one's commitments as a Lutheran Christian. The focus of this church on leadership should be to assist in creating the conditions under which this happens.

We need leaders of all sorts, not just pastors and rostered leaders, but community leaders, parents, professionals who can speak in ways that are biblically literate, theologically sound, and free of jargon. We need to put the best resources of our tradition, biblical and confessional, in new language. Ears are hungry to hear, but we have to say it fresh.

We need to become a church that prepares its members to understand their home life, their work, their schooling, and their daily tasks as infused with meaning and God's presence.

We need to move beyond "inviting others to join us" (welcoming), and gain comfort in speaking a word of faith into our ordinary and daily lives and circumstances. Congregations that continue to thrive need to be encouraged to see themselves in real partnership beyond their own comfort and community –for accompaniment even more than for service.

Increasingly I think that we need leaders who can lead Eucharistic communities whose primary function is not necessarily to worship, but to serve in their communities and around the world. Such leadership might take the form of programs housed by larger congregations, or they might resemble non-profits in their structure. And, perhaps most importantly in the new age of Christianity, we need leaders in dialogue. We must be able to talk with our neighbors to come to common understandings, to work for the common good, and to heal each other's hurts. To this end, we need must prepare leaders who can engage in interfaith dialogue, intercultural dialogue, and constructive political dialogue. And we need to prepare leaders to listen so that they can start dialogue in their own communities about the shapes and directions of the future.

The entire Christian Church in North America (not just Lutherans) has focused much too heavily in the past 60 years on meeting the needs of its members. In that sense, denominations and their leaders have fallen into the same trap as politicians – giving people what they want in order to encourage and reward their financial support. It is vital to the spiritual health of congregations, synods, the wider church, and church leaders to focus the attention of congregations on mission and ministries that extend beyond the walls of individual congregations.

Our congregations have for too long been places where people had their needs met, without being sent out to meet the needs of the world. We need to form/equip leaders who can both cast a vision and help people own and live it. Those leaders will meet huge resistance, and thus they need to be well skilled in both systems thinking and Lutheran Theology. In addition, when people actually do begin to engage their communities, they

are unable to share how/why their belief in Jesus has freed them to be of service to others. They don't know the Biblical story well enough to actually speak with confidence about how their lives are a continuation of the Biblical trajectory.

Again, there was an occasional dissident voice questioning the very premise of the question.

Don't jump so quickly to public witness and service. Leaders need to be educated to welcome, orient, and incorporate people into communities of faith grounded in worship, study, and service. It is not at all clear that seminary education connects with these primary pastoral responsibilities. There seems to be little education in formation or education, little education in the central things of worship and prayer, little education in discerning service appropriate to one's location.

A good grounding in Bible, preaching, pastoral care and music will enable leaders to deal with just about any form or context they find themselves in.

According to a significant number of respondents, the qualities of these outward-focused leaders include:

- a deep concern for those who are on the edges or outside mainstream society
- a love for those being ministered with
- the ability to be inspiring
- the ability to ground pastoral work in a secular, complex, interdependent and emerging world
- being adept and passionate about worship leadership, Christian education, stewardship, pastoral care
- the ability to teach and articulate the faith
- the ability to equip the laity to understand and live out their ministry in their daily life
- the ability to understand, appeal to, and organize the 'nones'
- the ability to host respectful conversations

The prevalence of responses stressing an outward focus raises an important challenge. Recent survey work with clergy ordained in 2006 suggests a pastor with high debt may be more compliant with the existing norms of congregational life and more cautious about making difficult decisions or taking any actions in a congregation which may produce conflict.³ Several of these pastors were interviewed and some indicated they were so anxious to receive, accept, and begin working in a call (in part to begin to pay down their debt or at least to stop incurring it), they wanted to do nothing which might jeopardize their future in that call. These findings should be set alongside those from recent survey work with lay leaders in congregations conducted in support of the ELCA's Living into the Future Together (LIFT) task

³ This finding is made as a part of the forthcoming report from Research and Evaluation on the Lilly funded M.Div. student debt project. The report will be available from Research and Evaluation, ELCA. The survey work with ELCA clergy ordained in 2006 involved the participation, in various ways, of about 100 clergy.

force.⁴ This work showed ELCA congregational leaders like their congregations and are not interested in changing them. It also found the vast majority of congregational leaders believe the main problem is the predominant beliefs and attitudes in the wider culture and there is little they can do in the face of these powerful trends.

Finally, research on congregational vitality in the ELCA has found that member assessments of vitality are considerably more positive than those of the congregation's pastor.⁵ In an attempt to understand why this is the case, it became very apparent members and pastors define vitality differently. For most members, a congregation is vital if there is little internal conflict and it has sufficient resources (financial and in terms of volunteers) to provide pastoral leadership for worship and the care of members along with a program of Christian education. Pastors, on the other hand, were much more likely to assess vitality based on the impact of the congregation in the local and global community. In short, if these perspectives are widespread among the members of ELCA congregations, it will take very skilled pastoral leadership to alter these views. But, is there a commitment to this internal change? Many of the comments of these respondents suggest considerably more interest in producing leaders who are better working outside a traditional congregational context than within it.

3. What kinds of forms of education and contexts will best create the learning and equipping communities needed to live faithfully into God's mission?

While there were clear themes in response to this question (which we will review below), there were respondents expressing opposing views (more or less informed) about the role of a seminary. In addition, the responses tended to focus primarily on the education of rostered leaders.

The value of residential seminary education for forming leaders cannot be underestimated. A year or more of living together as Christians in a community centered on word and sacrament provides a good model for helping shape life in congregations.

If you want to be a leader in our church you must leave your current way of life, travel to one of only eight possible Lutheran institutions and spend four years of your life living in a fantasy world where your only task is to sit in classrooms and learn with others who have similar passions and ideas as you.

I personally think that perhaps less seminary and more "in the trenches" experiences supported by on line education and a strong mentor might be effective and less costly.

To me as a pastor, seminary is still the best for in depth, interactive biblical study as well as other core curriculum components.

Our emphasis needs to shift toward extension education—training willing servants while they work in other public jobs. Until we find a way to bring down the cost of a four-year,

⁴ This report is available from Research and Evaluation, ELCA.

⁵ This work is on-going and being conducted in behalf of Research and Evaluation in a pilot project with the Western North Dakota Synod, the Upstate New York Synod, and the Rocky Mountain Synod.

on-campus degree, fewer and fewer will chose that option. "Education in place", with a few weeks of intensive class meetings, are more suited to the needs of the emerging church.

I totally support intense, on-site education AND spiritual formation (which Lutheran seminaries don't do well, but others do). Our leaders need a center that I'm skeptical online learning can provide. But that seems to be the new wave. Online folks still need a community and the face to face joy and accountability that provides. Plus learning by human osmosis, not cyberstuff.

On the other hand, most of the respondents argued neither for nor against seminary, but for an approach to learning which focuses on enhancing the student's ability to assess the context (the critical challenges faced by people in their everyday lives) as well as the student's ability to respond in a compelling, practical way (making a positive difference) both of which should be well informed and guided by Lutheran theology (an expression of God's grace).

While I will always believe there is a need to wrestle with scripture and to grapple with good theology, I also believe that it is important for this work to be done in the context of everyday life. So, it is important to move learning communities out of the ivory towers and into the streets. It is also important to have the spaces where the activities that we engage in on the streets can be reflected on theologically. I also believe that these reflections should take place in a broadly diverse context: in terms of age, race, and also breaking down the wall that has arisen between the "church professionals" and the lay leadership of our congregations. It is so important too for this education to take place in terms of listening and learning how to ask questions (not just answer them!). Let's free people to wonder about God and about how God is showing up in the world.

We need a nimble, flexible delivery system that can work with leaders as they are "embedded" in the local context similar to the action/reflection model but using all the bells and whistles of today's technologies.

While the calls of church leaders may look different than in the past, I think that the message and education for the most part should remain the same. We still need an education rooted in Bible, theology, history and pastoral care but it must always be set in context. We also need to learn practical skills: how do you read your audience/context? How do you share your faith in a parish setting vs. business setting? What does bi-vocational ministry look like? I think that this type of focus on the practical should bring students out of the classroom more and into their called contexts where they can immediately put their education into practice.

More hands on. I think it is such a strength of the Lutheran church to have pastors that are so well trained and educated theologically, but it's in the acting out of that knowledge. But it's not just the education of the pastors but the cultures within the

churches that need to change—a change to what can we do to help those around us rather than what can we do to help ourselves.

As leaders are prepared, an intentional component of didactic and contextual learning should include encouraging students to engage the communities where they serve. This would include learning a neighborhood not just through demographics and tertiary sources but through direct conversation with people in the communities, being out amongst the people, engaging those who are not currently members of the church in authentic relationship and partnership.

All should have the opportunity and requirement in contextual education to serve in a context very different from what has been their experience in growing up or is their current experience. This will allow the opportunity to understand ministry and engagement of people through a lens other than what comes familiar and will allow for a better understanding for the whole church to which we are called. Additionally, more robust opportunities for development of lay leaders are essential. Lay schools of ministry across the country will help to develop stronger ministers of the gospel in our communities.

If we think how the Christian church first began, we see the disciples learning through their experience of living with Jesus for those three years. We see them learning through these life experiences. I think it may be important for our Lutheran leaders (pastors and other rostered leaders) to become most aware of understanding people's lives through those people's lives. We may need to learn how to do more creative thinking to consider various and alternative means of sharing the gospel . . . and of worship. Life experiences may be more significant in the future . . . or learning how to apply such life experiences into the context of mission and ministry.

I believe, in encouraging students to empathize with those around them, to understand the challenges real people are facing in society, and to wrestle with the question of how our faith calls us to actively respond to the world around us.

We need deep theology and deep praxis. We need practice with cultural diversity and ways to not only develop cultural competencies, but also learn our real histories from this country and around the world.

A solid understanding of how Lutheran theology speaks into the lives of people is a necessity as other things change around us.

We need mature leaders who have taken the time to be formed in community with others. But we need those leaders in ministry contexts while they learn. They need to grow with the reality of Christian community in their faces.

. . . I do not necessarily think that means a focus on community organizing rather than parish life, but we need to do better helping religious leaders to understand the contexts in which people live, their questions and needs, and what the church can offer them Often seminary education is much more about the “content” of theology and scripture and divorced from these contextual concerns, other than field work and internship. Context, thus, is not only the individual location, but the wider context of postmodernism, individualism, technology, etc.

The respondents also developed a long list of educational outcomes.

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| • theology | • the Confessions | • Bible | • worship |
| • preaching | • ethics | • stewardship | • pastoral care |
| • change | • listening skills | • teaching skills | • history |
| • congregational
administration skills | • conflict management | • spiritual formation,
development, direction | • entrepreneurial skills |
| • contextual
assessment skills | • awareness of sexism,
racism, classism | | |

The respondents also suggested a substantial list of strategies.

- approaches which embed students in the local context (parish-based, community organizing, mentors, cultural/community emersion programs, institutional emersion programs, work with community leaders)
- life-long learning approaches
- approaches which recognized different learning styles or stages of development
- action/reflection models
- on-line learning alternative
- cohort based learning approaches
- participation in a learning community
- synod based lay schools
- 50 small coordinated, integrated, learning communities
- intentional vocational discernment, faith formation, spiritual direction activities
- education in-place

At least one respondent argued the infrastructure already exists but it needs to be more actively coordinated. The infrastructure includes congregations, camps, campus ministries, lay schools, colleges/universities, seminaries, TEEM.

Finally, there was this exchange of views on the popular “best practices” approach.

I suggest bishops identify key churches which are effective. Then assign interns to those churches. THE, and I stress - THE ---- KEY PLACE TO EDUCATE FUTURE LEADERS IS AT THESE SITES. Most seminaries, I suspect, are rooted in traditionalism. It is the

entrepreneurial local pastor who is breaking new ground. Why is it that the mega-churches of the 1990s held their own conferences? They were breaking out of the traditional mold. People went to these conferences because, obviously, seminaries were not equipping people and I would guess that seminaries dismissed these places. Assign future leaders to creative places. I find it highly dubious we will EVER reform the seminaries. It just will not happen. It is the nature of organizational change. Many churches, which get interns, are not necessarily doing much new or creative, they just have sufficient funds. As a result the first call pastor (typically, serving a small parish) is not as well educated/experienced as he/she might be to help develop that parish.

I'd like to see us move away from raising up "best practices" and "successful" congregations and more toward congregations and communities that see themselves in partnership with others. This would mean a greater emphasis on learning about the various agencies and services that already exist rather than congregations trying to make their "own" services to "help" others. Real relationship requires mutuality and shared benefit, not simply providing service to those we perceive to be in need. Family and neighborhood structures have broken down to the extent that people end up isolated from genuine relationships of cooperation and accountability. Education and contexts that help leaders and communities empower people at each stage of life would be very valuable.

Brief Summary of Responses from ELCA Seminaries

Many of the themes developed in by the individual respondents were also made in the responses from each of the seminaries. We have not included the verbatim responses from the seminaries but have summarized those responses into categories.

1. What is the vocation of the Lutheran movement in our North American context?

Responses to this question fell into three categories.

- To share the message of grace in a world which is increasingly complex, pluralistic, and multicultural
- To maintain a Lutheran perspective while working ecumenically with partners from other Christian denominations as well as interfaith partners
- To share a theology that is willing to live with tension and paradox

2. Into what forms and contexts of public witness and service is God calling this church for which we need to prepare leaders?

Responses to this question fell into the following categories.

- Although it was mentioned, the traditional church context received little emphasis as a context of future public witness. Rather, the responses from the seminaries stressed the importance of work outside of the church building in different contexts and witnessing to those outside the church setting.
- There will be greater utilization of an online setting as a context for ministry. Leaders will likely be using online interactions and social networking as part of their ministry. The use of these technologies will allow for witnessing opportunities at both local and global levels.
- Denominations are no longer as strong a factor in informing people's decisions about the congregation that they will attend or join. It is more common now for people to begin attending and joining churches because they like the pastor's sermons or the children's ministries, as opposed to the theological distinctions identified by denominations.

3. What kinds of education and contexts will best create the learning and equipping communities needed to live faithfully into God's mission?

Responses to this question fell into the following categories.

- Heavy emphasis was placed on the need for theological education in some form for lay leaders, as their role would likely begin becoming more important in future contexts.
- Given the changing context for ministry, there is a need to provide opportunities for continuing education for all, not just the future leaders. Although the Biblical truths have not changed, the culture and its challenges have; this makes it all the more important for those who have been in ministry for some time to refresh their learning.
- Education should prepare leaders for multiple vocations. This reasoning for this is more than financial. Leaders should learn and develop skills that would be beneficial in more than one vocation: "administration skills, public speaking, social research, conflict resolution, community organizing and small business skills...are all necessary and conducive to creative ministry."
- The continuation of distance learning is a near certainty. Although this type of learning has definite advantages over a traditional residential model, it must be done in such a way that students can experience community and grounded learning.