

**“Reformation and Transformation Today: Challenges, Potentials and Learning
Experiences for Leadership Development and Diaconia”**

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Introduction

It’s a privilege for me to address the participants of the Twin Consultation in Halle, Germany, on the topic, “Reformation and Transformation Today: Challenges, Potentials and Learning Experiences for Leadership Development and Diaconia.” If I may, I will put a disclaimer before you, before beginning. That is to clarify that you are hearing from a practitioner and not a scholarly theologian. This presentation will be different from my esteemed colleagues who preceded me as it will be from my esteemed colleague to follow, for sure. I am humbled by the invitation from the conference planners to share my experiences with such an august group, and by you for your willingness to listen and think along with me in this common area of great significance in our respective ministries around the world.

The outline of my presentation is as follows:

- I. Why is Our Reformation Heritage Important Today?
- II. Transformation and a Closer Look at a Transformative Leader
- III. A Look at Relevant Aspects of the U.S. Context
- IV. One Perspective of International Leadership Development – Current Trends and Learnings
- V. Strategic Directions of the Association of Theological Schools
- VI. Concluding Thoughts

The Relevance of Our Reformation Heritage Today

I won’t spend much time here. Much has already been said. I think we can agree that our Reformation heritage remains relevant in church and society today. Perhaps there is variance as to whom it remains relevant and the extent of that relevance.

As was summarized in the communique of the first Reformation – Education – Transformation consultation held in Brazil in November 2015, “we realized that reformation processes continue to happen. In such dynamic processes churches of the Reformation emphasize education for transformation, for liberating minds, bodies and to impact societies and to help the churches to raise a distinctive voice in the public sphere.” Further, it is

important to note that it was also said, “In the context of World Christianity, we recognize that such emphasis is not a privilege of the churches of the Reformation and that we need to strengthen dialogue and cooperation with other Christian families.”

If we can agree that it is important to recognize the relevance of the Reformation heritage today, can we also agree that it is not enough to simply pass on and interpret its theological understanding and practices? As Dr. Vitor Westhelle writes, “It is far more than just translation or application, but involves creative re-envisioning and making new connections.” He further speaks to “transfiguration” and interprets it in the following way, “transfiguration refers to how figures rooted in concrete historical circumstances migrate across time and space and emerge in new situations, catalyzing new associations and meanings, through surprising and unexpected connections.”

A central awareness emerging from the time of the Reformation is that all theology needs to be contextual – engaging with the real questions and challenges confronting people in a given time and place (Karen Bloomquist and Martin Sinaga, *Theological Education and Lutheran Churches*). Isn’t that when theology comes alive and is most relevant?

Transformation and a Closer Look at a Transformative Leader

Arguably the most transformative leader of his time and the most famous contextual theologian in the United States was someone born 430 years after Martin Luther. More noted and remembered for his prominent leadership in the Civil Rights Movement¹ in the United States in the 50s and 60s, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was also a brilliant theologian. Martin Luther King is remembered for his significant contributions as a visionary and an agent of change. What he is not remembered for, according to Noel Leo Erskine in “King Among the Theologians,” is the theological contributions he left to the world.

Martin Luther King received his formal education in theology at Crozer Theological Seminary and went on to do his doctorate at Boston University. His theological influences include Paul Tillich, Karl Barth and James Cone. It is said that you can see evidence of these great theologians in the theology that King articulated. Though King went further in his own theology than any one of these intellectual giants. Dr. James Earl Massey said that King sought to give theology a human shape and place it at the service of the human community.

Faith for him was the victorious struggle against injustice and oppression of all sorts. Faith as the power of reconciliation becomes faithfulness to God as one lives out one’s commitment for a restored and reconciled community. King’s understanding of God required changes in the foundation of society in order that God’s children may be free.

¹ The Civil Rights Movement or 1960s Civil Rights Movement encompasses social movements in the United States whose goals were to end racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans and to secure legal recognition and federal protection of the citizenship rights enumerated in the Constitution and federal law. (Wikipedia)

King practiced his theology from within the struggle of the civil rights movement. He joined faith and practice. As a leader for justice he “lived” his theology. He would talk the talk and walk the walk. King marched and went to jail. He took great risks in the streets as well as from the pulpit as he preached a prophetic word to the downtrodden, disenfranchised and disheartened. He saw early on a connection between the gospel of Jesus and the community of the oppressed... he refused to separate the religious and the ethical, the spiritual and the secular, and the personal and the social. King used love and faith and reconciliation in the hope to change a society from being unjust and inhumane to a beloved community reconciled in Christ Jesus. Martin Luther King’s commitment to reconciliation and his belief in an inclusive covenant was at the heart of his method of nonviolence. He believed that all people belonged in God’s beloved community.

Martin Luther King said, “Every human life is a reflection of the divinity.” Like Howard Thurman he believed that within each person there is the presence and power of the divine. Ervin Smith understood King’s understanding of *imago dei* as “human personality mirrors divine personality and that divine personality is the infinite expression of the best in human personality.” As he led the fight against oppressive forces, King put this understanding into practice with the Christian conviction that God created all people in God’s own image and that each person has equal value and worth.

There is much that we can choose to import from this great theologian and practitioner of human justice and liberation, whose practices, beliefs, theology and ideologies parallel the basic tenets of the Reformation. A common dedication of most of the leaders of the reformation was to return the church to its stated mission.

The many challenges present in our world today, beg for more prophetic leadership (like Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr.) within the church and society to courageously step forward to call out the “empire” and empower people to stand firmer in their faith and to keep God as the center of their lives with the Holy Spirit as our great advocate.

It is not enough to talk about “what is” but we have to give people hope in our daily conversation, through sermons and other forms of presentations, about what the world can be. It is imperative that the leader of today be a “prophetic clarifier” and give people permission to use their holy imagination about what God is up to in the world and what God is calling us to as we participate in God’s work in the world. I believe it is the only way to be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

A Look at Relevant Aspects of the U.S. Context

THE SUSTAINABILITY OF DENOMINATIONS IN THE U.S. AND A LOOK AT THE SUSTAINABILITY OF EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA CONGREGATIONS

I will now turn your attention to the United States and share some important changes in our religious landscape. Currently there is no major mainline religious group in the United

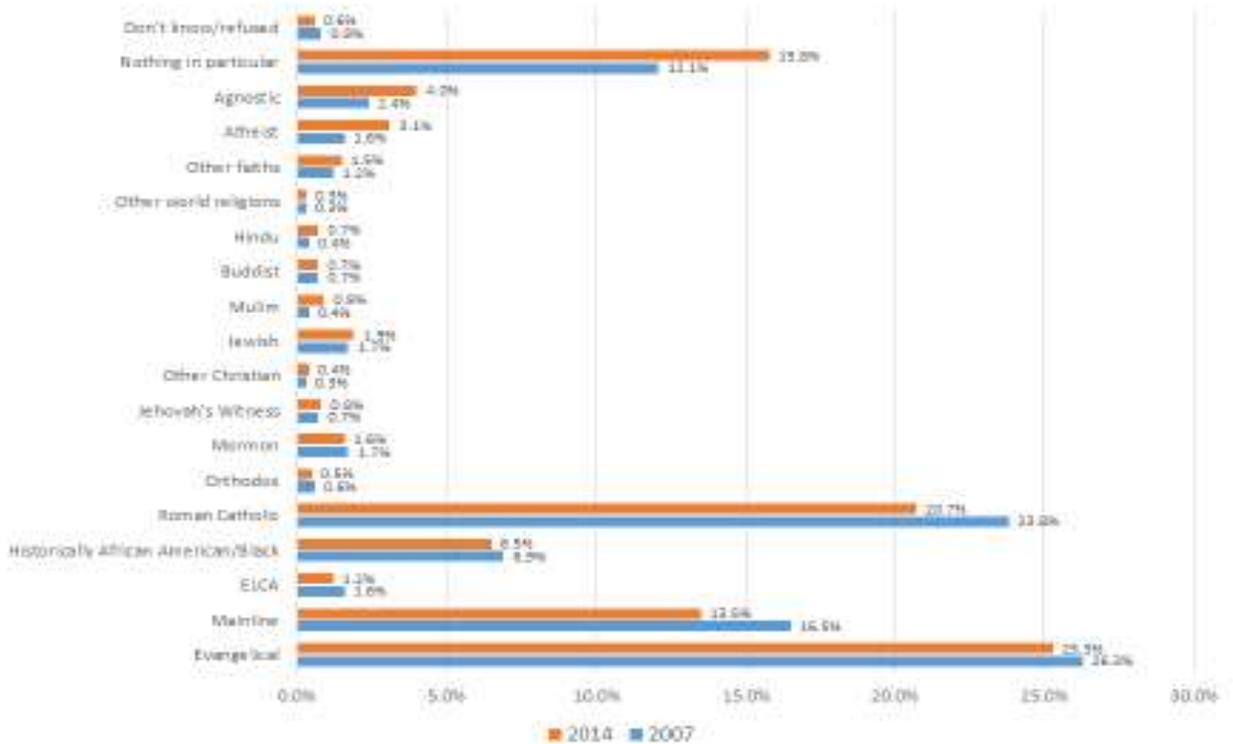
States experiencing membership growth. The figures are as follows:

Membership in Selected Denominations from 2000 to 2013

	2000	2010	2013
Assemblies of God	2,577,560	3,030,944	3,127,857
Church of the Latter-day Saints	5,208,827	5,523,124	6,398,889
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	5,125,919	4,274,855	3,863,133
Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod	2,554,088	2,278,586	2,231,258
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	2,525,330	2,016,091	1,760,200
Roman Catholic Church	63,683,030	68,202,492	66,600,000
Southern Baptist Church	15,960,308	16,136,044	15,735,640
United Church of Christ	1,377,320	1,058,423	979,239
United Methodist Church	8,340,954	7,679,850	7,390,691
Episcopal Church (U.S.A.)	1,877,271	1,576,721	1,549,008

You can see the percentage changes in the following slide:

Trends from 2007 to 2014



America's Changing Religious Landscape, Pew Research Center, 2015

The ELCA's chief researcher, Dr. Kenneth Inskeep, recently produced a paper title, "Priorities in Context: Sustainability and Membership Growth" in which he addresses the sustainability of the mission and ministry of the three expressions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America – its congregations, synods and its national expression referred to as the churchwide organization. I will share some of his thoughts here as I think its instructional to our topic today.

A quick look back to the 1950s. Dr. Inskeep points to several factors that contributed to the growth of the church in the U.S. in that era.

1. There was real increase in expendable income in the United States during the 1950s and people gave generously to the church.
2. Within a predecessor church of the ELCA, there was a strong and widely shared Lutheran identity with two components: first, there was a strong Lutheran theological identity. Theology was primarily the domain of clergy but many lay members knew the basics and could recite from Luther's *Small Catechism*. Second, there was a strong Lutheran institutional identity. Among the laity, there was an appreciation for, and loyalty to, Lutheran congregations, social ministry organizations, colleges and seminaries. In addition, there was support for local synods and their oversight of the church and, there was support for a national church to which members ceded responsibility for ecumenical and interchurch relationships, as well as national and global missions.
3. Local clergy not only held the system together, they promoted it. There was high regard for the office of pastor among members and in local communities (schools, hospitals, governments and businesses). I would add, pastors had a lot of what young people in the U.S. call today, "Street cred." (*Street cred definition, popularity with and acceptance by the general public, especially young people.*)
4. There was a good fit between the sensibilities of the society and the church. The clergy in particular believed that society was progressing and Christianity could and would produce a bright future. The spread of faith in God, mediated by the church, was the path to realizing the Kingdom of God on earth and with the guidance of the church, Americans were on that road together.

Do any, most, or all of these factors resonate with occurrences in your own contexts for ministry?

Dr. Inskeep goes on to say, by the mid-1960s, the social, cultural and economic conditions supporting this system had started to unravel.

1. Roman Catholic immigrants from Europe gained a substantial presence in many major metropolitan areas across the U.S., and their growing strength put the Protestant mainline hegemony in question.

2. Conservative evangelicals began to re-emerge in a “new” evangelical movement headed by Billy Graham² which was intent on competing with the mainline denominations for social dominance.
3. The baby boom and the suburban expansion it produced, which fueled both membership growth and new congregation development, began to slow.
4. The cultural ideal of a household began to waiver. Married couples began to have fewer children and their commitment to raising children as the primary focus of their lives began to give way to more personal and individualistic ambitions.
5. There were protest movements demanding gender and racial equality. These stood alongside a volatile anti-war movement. Each, in its own way, with different constituencies, produced a deep suspicion of institutional authority.
6. Economic competition from Europe and Japan re-emerged to challenge the supremacy and dominance of American engineering and manufacturing.

In mainline religious circles in the U.S., the collective impact of these developments posed a serious challenge to mainline Protestant hopes. In the 80s and 90s the member churches of the National Council of Churches of Christ found their efforts increasingly muted. No longer were they “the” religious voice Americans heard and listened to but they were simple “a” voice to be heard.

Dr. Inskip states that the sustainability of the church is dependent upon a shared set of sensibilities between members, clergy and the leadership of the wider church. He asks, what can be shared that opens doors rather than closes them? Going forward, he suggests, these sensibilities need to be more theological and less cultural (based in ethnicity and social class). The emphasis should be on the values of the church (expressed in its history and theology) and members who have learned and are expressing and living those values. There should be more clarity about what it means to be church, to be Lutheran [in my case], to be church together, and to be church for the sake of the world. He asserts that these values have to be presented in such a way that they are relevant and connect with the interests of the whole church – young people, young adults, their parents, new members, old members, people in urban areas, people in rural areas, people of color and language other than English, people all along the theological, political and social class spectrum. The church must recognize in a highly educated and mobile society, people have a wide range of choices.

CURRENT U.S. POLITICS AND RELIGION

A Pew Research Center article in January of this year [2016] made the point that “the conventional wisdom in American politics has long been that someone who is not religious

² William Franklin "Billy" Graham, Jr. (born November 7, 1918) is an American evangelical Christian evangelist, ordained as a Southern Baptist minister, who rose to celebrity status in 1949 reaching a core constituency of middle-class, moderately conservative Protestants. (Wikipedia). Sometimes referred to as "the Protestant Pope," Graham has often advised U.S. presidents and continues to be listed as one of the "Ten Most Admired Men in the World" in many polls. (Theopedia.com)

cannot be elected president of the United States. Most Americans have consistently said that it is important to them that the president have strong religious beliefs.” Maybe you have been paying some attention to the current U.S. presidential election process and perhaps you’ve heard of a certain candidate who has been more famously known for his real estate deals and his American reality TV show. His name is Donald Trump, and guess what? He is viewed as not being particularly religious and yet he is the presumptive nominee of the Republican party.³

The Pew study underscores “that having a president who shares their religious beliefs is important to many Americans, with about half of U.S. adults saying it is “very important” (27%) or “somewhat important” (24%) to have someone in the White House who shares their religious perspective. This view is particularly common among Republicans [Donald Trump’s party], among whom roughly two-thirds say it is at least “somewhat important” to them that the president share their religious beliefs.

In spite of his publicly expressed views of Mexicans, Muslims, differently-able people and the plight of refugees around the world, Donald Trump has received unprecedented support from constituents within and outside of the Republican party. So, what do you think is going on here? I am very interested in your thoughts. Many of the Republican party leaders are confused by this. Has our moral compass stop working? Do we see religious beliefs as something that is compartmentalized and separate from the many factors by which we predict, measure and evaluate good, just and effective leadership?

International Leadership Development – Current Trends and Learnings in the ELCA

My work in the Global Mission unit of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) focuses on providing access to education and training to our global companions towards the goal of increased leadership capacity within these churches and their institutions. Through the offering of academic scholarships (short and long-term), the ELCA, along with many other mainline churches, has been blessed to contribute to the leadership development efforts of many churches of the global south. Church leaders first identify particular leadership needs in their church and through a well-developed process, we accompany them through our leadership program to fill these needs by investing in identified leaders from their context.

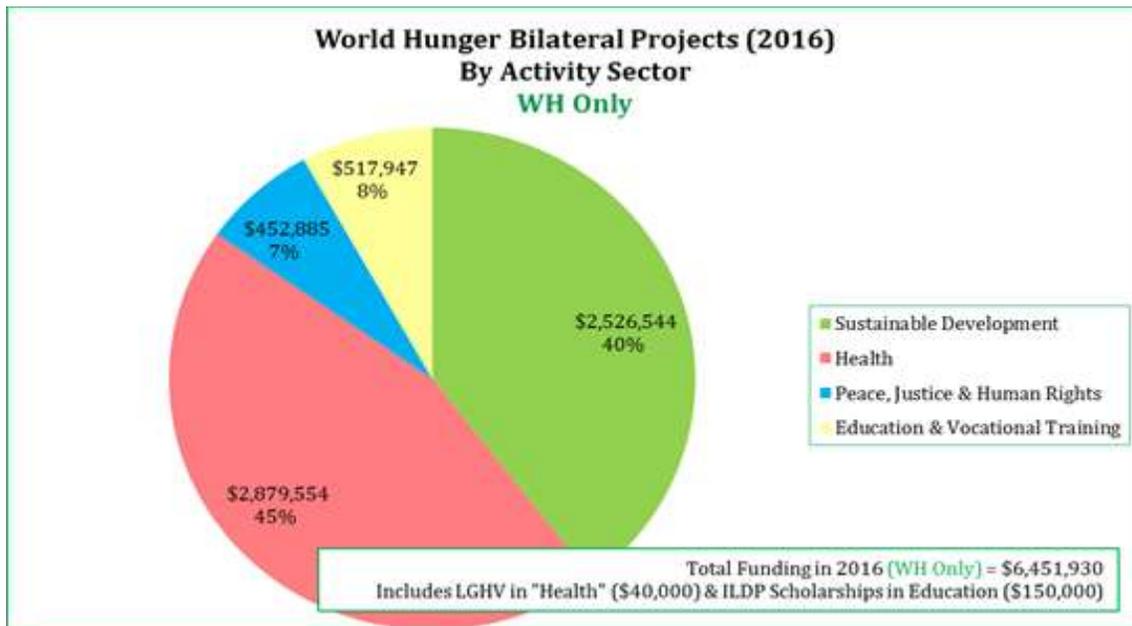
To date the ELCA has awarded over 1,000 scholarships to individuals who have successfully completed programs of study in the United States and in contexts closer to their homes. The vast majority (over three quarters) of the programs have been theological, however, the current trend is evidence of the expanding leadership skills (beyond theological) identified by churches as priority needs. This has resulted in a significant increase in award distribution for sustainable development study and training programs related to the churches’ diaconia work.

³ The Republican Party, commonly referred to as the GOP (abbreviation for Grand Old Party), is one of the two major contemporary political parties in the United States, the other being its historic rival, the Democratic Party.

In a recent survey conducted by the ELCA to its former scholarship recipients, the following comments were highlighted as they described the ways communities were impacted and their churches capacity for mission and ministry was expanded once they returned home from their study programs.

- “Our church program has reduced the suffering of the poor”
- “Increased number of patients, successful surgery of newborn malformations and development of spiritual aspect of the workers”
- “My department is busy to work out the program for prisoner reintegration”
- “The community where we are based has seen the caring of the church to all HIV affected and infected”
- “Opening of a clinic and training women to become self-reliant”

The following graph outlines the ELCA financial contribution to our companion projects by activity sector in our FY2016.



In 2015-2016, the ELCA allocated scholarship awards to 65 individuals. 55% of the total awards allocated supported individuals enrolled in theologically-related study programs and the remaining 45% was disbursed to individuals enrolled in diakonia-related programs of study.

What conclusions should we draw from this shift in the priority needs of global companions who request scholarship support? Or, should we draw any conclusions? Is theology losing its relevance in society? Where is the intersection between theology and development in the ministry of the church? Is there a need for more academic programs with a dual focus on theology and development? What are your own thoughts and experiences in the evolving priority needs of the church today?

Strategic Directions of the Association of Theological Schools

Dr. Lester Ruiz, director of Accreditation and Institutional Evaluation of the Association of Theological Schools in the U.S. and Canada, listed in a December 19, 2014, paper presented to an international consultation on religion and development, “Five strategic directions that will constitute the programmatic work of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) in the area of global awareness and engagement.” These directions are a result of Dr. Ruiz’s and ATS’ strategic directions and commitment on the theme of religion, development and theological education in the U.S., Canada and the global context. These five strategic directions will constitute the programmatic work of ATS in this area. I found them to be informative and instructional, so I thought to share them with you today.

The five directions with abbreviated descriptions:

1. Understanding effective partnerships
Many ATS member schools have partnerships with educational institutions outside North America. These partnerships take many forms, including degree program extension sites and joint degree programs, student and faculty exchanges, and other organizational patterns of partnerships. While these kinds of partnerships have increased, there is no consensus regarding the characteristics or practices that maximize their effectiveness.
2. Global Engagement within North America
Another strategy will focus on the global reality within ATS member schools in North America. Many schools are founded by immigrant denominations, and they maintain strong ties with their countries of origin. ATS programmatic attention to the global realities present in North American theological education could prove to be a rich pattern of engagement.
3. Cultivating scholarly and programmatic “trade routes”
Theological scholarship, resources, and expertise have flowed more readily from the Global North to the Global South than the other way. Increasingly, good theological education depends on meaningful bilateral and multilateral flow of scholarship, resources and expertise, and North American schools will be hampered in their scholarly task if they are not well informed by scholarship in the Global South. Ruiz furthers states that, better trade routes need to be established. While some resources are developing, like GlobTheoLib.net, more are needed. He asks, what can be done to enrich and strengthen the flow of scholarly information? What criteria should govern such flows?
4. Contributing to a Pan-Christian conversation on theological education
ATS leaders have noted that although their conversations for the past fifty years have been across the broad spectrum of North American Christianity, and the inclusive character of this conversation has benefitted the work of the Association and its member, they note that these conversations have tended to be with either mainline

Protestants, or evangelical Protestants, or Roman Catholics. Other conversations with representatives in the majority world have identified a desire to talk across Evangelical, Ecumenical, and Catholic/Orthodox lines, but the inability to do so without a trusted partner. Because ATS includes and works with all of these ecclesial families, it is seen as a likely partner in this work.

5. Educational and degree programs of study

While continuing to insist on keeping procedures that respect the integrity of theological schools and their regional associations outside North America, ATS will begin exploring ways it can be involved in collaborative efforts with new partners outside North America to ensure educational improvement. This could include a range of more formal procedures ranging from degree program recognition to the approval of degree programs offered by schools accredited by agencies in other parts of the world.

Concluding Thoughts

As financial resources continue to shrink for programmatic work of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and other mainline denominations, I view the ATS strategic directions as a helpful resource. The ELCA remains committed to continuing our partnership with global companions in a variety of ways, inclusive of the granting of educational scholarships. The financial realities we face today will continue, thus requiring us to consider different options of education accompaniment. The need to enhance and expand their leadership capacity among existing and emerging leaders continues to be a priority of our global companions. It is my hope that these leaders, whether their focus is theological, diaconia, or both, will make theology real and relevant to the societies they serve. I hope that they will be the transformational leader that burned at the hearts of both Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr., and that they ultimately seek to build the community where “every human life is a reflection of the divinity.”

Thank you and God’s blessings in believing and serving.