

THE FUTURE OF ELCA INSTITUTIONS

Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson

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I begin with a word of gratitude to each of you for your leadership. On behalf of the ELCA, I also express profound gratitude for your institutions, synods, congregations, and churchwide units. Our interdependence is one of the many strengths of the ELCA upon which we build as we adapt to changing and diverse contexts.

I am grateful also to Bob Tuttle for his insightful and helpful keynote. I appreciated receiving his outline and have tried not to be repetitious as I prepared mine. Where there is repetition, it will serve to emphasize agreement and the importance of the point we both have made.

Some would say that thinking about the future of ELCA institutions is a futile exercise. A speaker at one meeting predicted that, given current trends and demographics, the ELCA will “turn out the lights” in 2046. Those who predict the death of mainline denominations would further suggest that the future of denominationally related institutions is dependent upon their ability to achieve autonomy, perhaps making provisions so that the denominations might go gently into the quiet night of post-modernism.

My intent in this paper and in my leadership—as I believe is yours—is not to provide transitional leadership for dying institutions, hoping and praying to keep them alive, at least under our watch. No, I believe the Lutheran institutions we are privileged to lead are marked by vitality and have significant contributions to make as participants in God’s work in and for the life of God’s creation.

My task is neither to predict nor guarantee the future of ELCA institutions. Rather it is to suggest six challenges that will significantly influence the future of ELCA institutions. Some will be more fully developed, while others will simply be sketched. I am grateful for the contributions of many that have shaped my thinking for this presentation.

Holding in tension identity and mission

In *Chasing Down A Rumor: The Death of Mainline Denominations*, Robert Bacher and Kenneth Inskeep make an assertion for denominations that is also true for related institutions. They say, “It is not enough for denominations to have a strong grasp of their identities. . . . it is in the interplay of identity with mission that denominations will have a future. They go together. . . . and together they provide a promising path to the future.”¹

¹ Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005, p. 33.

Bacher and Inskip argue that mainline denominations must embrace more fully who they are rather than “. . . [jumping] out of their collective skins to become something else.” They suggest that the tradition not only must be simultaneously honored and reformed, but also “. . . re-presented . . . made present in a useable way” so that mission will flow from it.³

What they have suggested is now taking place as we fully implement the ELCA Plan for Mission. When nearly 30,000 ELCA members participated in conversations on priorities for this church, the third most frequent response was that we should tend to Lutheran identity. We have an opportunity to make or solidify the connection for which Bacher and Inskip are calling. If we do not connect identity with mission and context, then tending to Lutheran identity could become a call to return to a time of ethnic homogeneity and supposed institutional identification with, and loyalty to, “mother church.” An era that may have never existed—at least as nostalgically remembered—certainly will not, and should not, exist as we live into a dynamic and increasingly diverse future.

At the first connecting institutions event in 2000, Jonathan Strandjord shared observations on ELCA seminaries and their church and institutional relationships. He said that, in addition to planting and reforming the church, “. . . institutions have been places where the world interrupts the church’s self-preoccupation [and] as places where the church can stand outside of itself, where it can know the world and be for the world. . . . Ecclesia voconda is the church which not only has a calling, but which is here, now, today being called—called out.”⁴

We as the ELCA are being called out for the sake of the world. Our mission statement and five strategic directions reflect this lively tension between identity and purpose: “Marked with the cross of Christ forever, we are claimed, gathered, and sent for the sake of the world.” The five strategic directions relate directly to the mission statement: to support congregations; to grow in evangelical outreach; to step forward as a public church; to deepen and extend our global, ecumenical, and interfaith relationships; and to bring forth and support faithful, wise, and courageous leaders. The churchwide organization, its programs, personnel, structure, and budget are being aligned to breathe life into this mission plan.

It is the proclamation and implications of the gospel and our identity given in baptism that shape the identity and mission of ELCA. Social ministry organizations increasingly describe their identity and mission in variations on the Lutheran theme of faith active in love and service. ELCA colleges and universities ground mission and vision statements in the Lutheran understanding of faith seeking understanding, Luther’s two kingdoms, and most clearly a Lutheran understanding of vocation.

William Frame, president of Augsburg College, is one example among many for whom the Lutheran understanding of vocation has become increasingly foundational for his personal life and the mission of the institution he serves. In the September 2002 issue of *The Chronicle Review*, he wrote, “A vocation is a called life of service. Luther certainly did not limit vocation to the profession of clerics. . . . Indeed, the competence that vocation demanded was reconciled in Luther’s thought much more thoroughly with citizenship and civility than with theology. It was to be practiced in the venue he called

³ Ibid., p. 34.

⁴ Given at the Connecting Institutions conference, St. Paul, Mn., March 18-20, 2000.

the ‘Kingdom on the Left,’ which he hoped would be served primarily by schools and colleges—as distinguished from the ‘Kingdom on the Right,’ which was to be served by the church.

“What Luther taught me,” he says, “is that . . . it is through the faith side of cognition rather than the reason side that the beckoning voice of vocation comes. I could see in Luther’s idea of vocation the makings of a life-changing educational concept . . . Indeed vocational lives are in, and of, and for the world . . . [The concept of vocation] has allowed me to make real progress in drawing together into a satisfying whole both thought and action, theory and practice, work and leisure, and ultimately reason and faith. That wholeness is the ultimate gift of the called life of service and what I believe we should strive to achieve for ourselves and our students.”⁵

Darrell Jodock, who teaches at Gustavus Adolphus College says that the primary characteristic of a Lutheran approach to education is the emphasis on educating leaders of the community for vocation. California Lutheran University’s Web page says, “The Lutheran tradition of higher education means we . . . encourage development of talents, abilities, and interests as a means to more meaningful work, a deeper sense of vocation, and greater joy in endeavor.”⁶ Lutherans know that vocation is not only about careers, but about being called out by God to live in households and communities as citizens, co-inhabitants, and caretakers of a fragile creation.

That is why the churchwide organization returned to the vocation of the baptized as the core of our vision statement.

CLAIMED	by God’s grace for the sake of the world. We are a new creation through God’s living word by the power of the Holy Spirit;
GATHERED	by God’s grace for the sake of the world, we will live among God’s faithful people, hear God’s Word and share Christ’s supper;
SENT	by God’s grace for the sake of the world, we will proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, serve all people following the example of our Lord Jesus and strive for justice and peace in all the world.

Identity and mission must remain grounded in a Lutheran understanding of vocation. I agree with my colleague Mark Wilhelm’s conclusion that, “The future of our institutions will be increasingly a future of service to the larger community, not just our own.” Many of you raised your voices to ensure that one of the new units in the churchwide organization describes this uniting focus and grounding. It is called Vocation and Education.

Stewarding our ecology of interdependence

As I mentioned before, the principle of interdependence is foundational to the polity of the ELCA. Last year, Dr. Craig Dykstra of the Lilly Endowment described the ELCA as the only denomination that is working today. The basis for his assessment is the ELCA ecology of interdependent eco-systems, including ELCA seminaries, colleges and

⁵ William Frame, “A President Looks Back 500 Years and Finds His Calling,” in *The Chronicle Review*, September 6, 2002.

⁶http://ww2.clunet.edu/university_ministries/, accessed on January 9, 2006.

universities, outdoor ministries, and social ministry organizations. The image and the affirmation are wonderful, but are most helpful if they elicit probing questions and concrete behaviors that reflect a commitment to stewarding that ecology of interdependence.

Perhaps the most important question we must together continue to probe is, “What do we mean by interdependence?” As funding patterns and governance systems change, how do we define and experience our interdependence?

Mark Wilhelm argued for the importance of defining interdependence in a July 2003 memo on ELCA structure and governance. He wrote, “The principle of interdependence seems to denote something substantive or even visionary. . . . Yet we have not actually defined interdependence and how we can use it to assign or organize responsibility and accountability. . . . It’s hard to exercise legitimate authority under a fluid and undefined core organizing principle. . . . the concept of interdependence, if undefined or ill-defined, can easily produce unclear boundaries for an organization because responsibilities and accountabilities remain vague.”

Perhaps the most significant contribution we can make this weekend to the future of ELCA institutions is to respond to this challenge by defining and describing interdependence more clearly and considering what interdependence looks like in the concreteness of our relationships, which necessarily involves conversation regarding mutual accountability.

Stan Olson, Executive Director of Vocation and Education, reminded me how our situation has changed from the days when the same individuals were involved in establishing multiple types of Lutheran institutions. Today, with these institutions well established, we focus more on collaboration, asking the question, “What do we do together next?” He asked, “Dare we say that such collaboration is not occasional, coincidental, and personal but rather intentional, persistent, and institutional and thus that it is a programmatic presupposition with its own claim on institutional time and resources?”

As we ponder Stan’s questions and probe a behavioral definition of interdependence, it may be well to consider some examples and questions.

To what extent do strategic alliances manifest interdependence and collaboration? ELCA seminary clusters and Lutheran Services in America are two examples of strong and growing alliances. The churchwide organization is creating four alliances on poverty, young adult ministry, multicultural ministry, and justice for women. Charles Miller has developed a helpful brief summary of what most authors and practitioners in the field of strategic alliances agree are foundational precepts, two of which merit emphasis here: the chief executives of the participating entities must be champions of the alliance and an alliance challenges the structure and culture of the participating entities.

Can global mission’s concept of “accompaniment” contribute to a behavioral definition of interdependence? According to ELCA Global Missions: “Accompaniment . . . is a walking together in Jesus Christ of two or more [partners] in companionship and in service in God’s mission.” Accompaniment involves affirming the diversity of viewpoints among us; encouraging questions about priorities and practices; transparency and honest dialogue; moving past traditional relationships; involving others in decision-making processes; and being in solidarity

with each other in weakness, strength, and mission. In other words, accompaniment is “. . . about a God who is in mission among us; and it is about us being in mission with God and with others to whom God reaches out.”⁷

Rethinking authority and leadership

A discussion of the implications of the principles of interdependence leads to a discussion of the issue of legitimate authority in organizations. All organizations must have an accepted understanding of legitimate authority; that is, all organizations must have an accepted answer to the question, “Who gets to decide?”

Interdependence, according to Mark Wilhelm, commits the ELCA to a version of the popular democratic type of legitimate authority that is commonly known as participatory democracy. The ELCA has embraced that ideal in the ELCA Constitution’s principles of organization.⁸ It reads, “Whenever possible the entity most directly affected by a decision shall be the principle party responsible for the decision and implementation, with the other entities facilitating and assisting.” Wilhelm contends that when we lack clarity about matters of authority, procedural issues are problematic. We spend time determining who is most directly affected by a decision and then more time trying to facilitate and assist.

The role of the churchwide organization not only must change, but is changing. In a talking paper developed for the Lilly Endowment, we suggested that convening is becoming a principle form of authority for the churchwide organization. Convening, we said, is the power and authority to frame issues, teach, enable changes, endorse, and legitimate. Convening recognizes that wisdom is widely dispersed throughout this church. It recognizes that it is part of the vocation of the churchwide organization to assemble—or convene—other expressions of this church and its institutions in order to gather that wisdom. These connecting institutions gatherings have been one expression of that authority.

Not only must we rethink authority, but also leadership. One of the five strategic directions for the churchwide expression commits us to “assist this church to bring forth and support faithful, wise, and courageous leaders whose vocations serve God’s mission in a pluralistic world”

The topic of leadership is both complex and multi-faceted; it merits extensive conversation. The just-completed Academy of the Conference of Bishops focused on the topic of leadership for public life, a theme that is consistent with our commitment to hold together identity and mission. We are growing in our commitment to teaching the arts of public leadership. We must develop leaders who reflect and guide us into the church we seek to become in our changing and diverse context.

Individual leaders in the ELCA are part of a larger system of leaders, learners, and workers who are interconnected with each other, the community, and the world. Within this web of relationships, leaders can serve as initiators and attractors. They can provide

⁷ *Global Mission in the Twenty-First Century: A Vision of Evangelical Faithfulness in God’s Mission* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1999).

⁸ Provision 5.01c. in *Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*.

clarity and articulate purpose. Leaders in the ELCA are connected to a vast ecology of influence. Together we can create and change communities for the sake of the world.

Reflecting on the ELCA strategic direction on leadership, Wyvetta Bullock, ELCA Executive for Leadership, gives us helpful insights into what it means to be faithful, wise, and courageous. Faithful leaders, she says, pass on the faith. Mission today requires leaders who share a vision of God's story for a future filled with hope. If ELCA leaders do not pass on to the next generations what has been added to us—the gift of faith in Christ—we will miss the core reason for our leadership.

Bullock says that wise leaders make spiritual vitality a priority and practice spiritual discernment. They understand that their spiritual vitality is a necessity, not a luxury. Wise leaders listen, discern, speak, and act. This involves meditation and prayer. Wise leaders make time to think!

Finally, courageous leaders are open and willing to change. They are willing to embrace the unknown and trust God to provide all that is needed. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

As we discuss leadership and the future of ELCA institutions, the temptation is to focus on who are the leaders who will lead us. As important as that question is, it is secondary to the questions of identity, mission, and the capacity for institutions rather than individuals to lead.

John Thomas, general minister and president of the United Church of Christ, suggests that, instead of asking, "What kind of churches need pastors?" we would enrich the conversation by asking, "What kind of mission needs leaders?" I am not implying that ELCA institutions are not framing their search for leadership in terms of mission, whether for presidents of academic institutions, CEO's of social ministry organizations, directors of camps, or churchwide executives. Yet I do believe there is a tendency to look for leaders with experience and expertise at least comparable to the outgoing leaders. I agree with Wilhelm's assertion that "We need to temper our anxieties about future leadership . . . shifting away from "experience in" model to a "capacity for" [leadership] model in searching for candidates."

The capacity of the one called to leadership must serve the institution's capacity to be engaged in mission. John Thomas suggests that mission means the church (and I would argue its institutions) will need leaders who are pontiffs, prophets, and poets. Pontiffs are bridge builders in an American society, while prophets are truth tellers in a culture rampant with self-deception, when the temptation to deceive ourselves is encouraged in the highest offices and sadly in many pulpits. Finally, in a time lacking community building and imagination, we will need leaders who are poets, "literal poets in some cases, but perhaps in most cases leaders equipped to use language and symbol, liturgy and song, ritual and sacrament, silence and dance to help us imagine a world that is more than market place, to claim a life that is profoundly connected and communal . . ."⁹

⁹ John Thomas, "Pontiff, Prophet, Poet: What Kind of Leaders Will We Require?" Given at the annual consultation, San Antonio, Tx., February 20, 2002.

Naming self-interest while being other-wise

In addition to questions of leadership, the future of ELCA institutions will also depend upon an honest statement of institutional self interests and the implication of those self interests for our relationships with one another. How can we more intentionally discover our mutual self interest that can strengthen our interdependence and expand our capacity for mission? To what degree does the institutional self-interest in surviving or thriving make us competitive with one another, whether for financial resources in a growing donor driven context or for people resources such as customers, clients, students, faculty, staff, board members? Do we need to accept the givenness of competition for seemingly limited pools or can we—even in the context of this gathering—imagine ways to move beyond competition to collaboration?

What stories can we tell of where this is already occurring? One example that comes to mind is the Thrivent Fellows program that began with colleges and universities, but now is being expanded to include seminaries and social ministry organizations.

Another important area of discussion is how do our institutional self-interests shape our relationships with government on all levels: federal, state, and local? There is growing dependency upon government for funding and increasing requirements for institutional compliance with government standards and regulations. How do we express gratitude for and compliance with these things, gain grants, and value freedom without becoming what Bonhoeffer found leaders of churches to be: so beholden to the government for the church's freedom that they did not ruffle feathers.

In the Affirmation of Baptism, we declare that the vocation of the baptized includes both serving all people and striving for justice and peace in all the earth. There will always be lively tension in the interplay of these two, not only for us as individuals, but also for our institutions. For example, how do our social statements on economic life, the environment, health, and now education not only educate individuals and inform our advocacy, but also shape our policies and practices as ELCA institutions?

We acknowledge the need to coordinate work with government agencies, especially in immigration, disaster response, social service, relief and development, and health care. At the same time we have seen a strong prophetic witness by ELCA members and leaders on the impact of federal budget appropriations on those who live in poverty and we have participated in a growing ecumenical and inter-religious convergence around issues of ending hunger, reducing poverty, and caring for the environment.

One of the strategic directions of the ELCA is to “step forward as a public church that witnesses boldly to God’s love for all that God has created.” I believe this needs to be a shared commitment and mark of all ELCA-related ministries and institutions. It calls us to be communities of moral deliberation and lively debate, which are both humble and bold in our public witness.

Serving and standing in solidarity with those who live in poverty is a unifying and identifying mark of this church’s mission. Rebecca Larson, Executive Director for Church in Society, said in her board report in October 2004: “Poverty—and its dehumanizing impact on the lives of the too many millions of people in this country—is the red thread that permeates all aspects of our work: our social statements . . . are all intricately linked to the lives of these individuals and families. Social ministry organizations struggle to deal with insurmountable economic challenges as diminished

funding for social programs means reduction and closure of programs within an environment that exacts cruel choices, including those of caring for their own staff, many of whom are . . . too poorly paid. Our advocacy work, including Corporate Social Responsibility, maneuvers carefully through the political diversions and manipulations of an election year to name policy priorities and to witness in the public sphere as to their impact on people living in poverty. The World Hunger Program continues to make hard choices with too few dollars and too many needs. Lutheran Disaster Response knows that when disasters hit, it is people living in poverty—already living too close to the edge—who have less ability to survive and recover from the impact.”

Yet God, she says, “continues to do a new thing through us.” As we live out our shared commitment to be a public church, we will need to learn what it means to be, as Jonathan Strandjord says, other-wise. To be other-wise, he argues, is deep thought for the sake of the other. It is mindful generosity. It is wisdom as a feast for whomever could use the nourishment. “The public witness of the other-wise,” he says, “is a feast for all who hunger and thirst.”¹⁰ To such wisdom I believe we as the ELCA are called and committed.

We have spent significant time reviewing four tasks and challenges: holding in tension identity and mission; stewarding our ecology of interdependence; rethinking authority and leadership; and naming self-interest while being other-wise. In the remaining time, we can only briefly touch on the final two. Since they are both significant and critical, I look forward to future opportunities to discuss them more fully with you.

Nurturing curiosity while engaging in communal discernment

The questions of identity, mission, authority, leadership, and interdependence are too complex and significant to ponder together only periodically. They call for us in our particular institutional contexts and together to be public communities of deliberation. Communities of moral discernment will seek signs of God working amidst the beauty, confusion, and wreckage of history, so that we might praise God for that work, witness to it, and—as Luther wrote—be “the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings.”¹¹

I commend to you Cynthia Moe Lobeda’s *Public Church: For the Life of the World* for a fuller development of this theme. I share only this quote to encourage your engagement with her material. She says, “The heart of discernment is to hold ‘what is’ and ‘what could be’ in light of the life-giving, life-sustaining mystery of God’s ongoing work toward the redemption and flourishing of creation. . . . A church committed to discerning where God seems to be at work and developing tools for that process may be a church well equipped to provide space and leadership for the broader public to wrestle with ambiguous moral issues.”¹²

Let us remember what Bonhoeffer reminded us: as Lutherans, embracing a theology of the cross is central to our seeing, which means seeing from below, from the

¹⁰ Jonathan Strandjord, “Theological Education for Public Worship: Becoming Other-Wise in the World.” Given at the opening convocation of the Lutheran School of Theology at Philadelphia, 2002.

¹¹ *The Large Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. and trans. by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 368.

¹² Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004, p. 67.

perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled. May that perspective be a mark of the future of ELCA institutions as we engage in public moral deliberation.

May our future also be marked by the nurturing of curiosity. A church body that bears the name of the one who taught us to ask the catechetical question, “What does this mean?” will embrace curiosity. In her exceptional inaugural address, Concordia President Pamela Jolicoeur said, “I believe Concordia College is poised to play a lead role in defining and delivering a new form of liberal arts education that cultivates compassionate imagination and connects students to the world.” Is that not a claim we can make for all ELCA institutions—that we cultivate compassionate imagination and seek to make connections to the world? Unquenchable curiosity in a culture that seeks certainty is one indication that we may increasingly find ourselves on the margins of society rather than in the mainline or midstream. Bacher and Inskeep contend that is where we have always been.

Exhibiting humility, integrity, and courage

We exhibit humility because as Lutherans we are grounded in the gospel and the confession that we are at the same time saint and sinner. What my colleague Jonathan Strandjord said about theological education applies to all ELCA institutions: “Lutheran theological education is . . . not primarily about the formation of a cadre of excellent Christians nor about the reformation of the church. Rather it is primarily about the oration of the Gospel by persons and communities which are all simul justus et peccator. Institutional imperfection, recognized as ineradicable, makes institutional pluralism and networkability a positive good, enabling mutual affirmation and admonition.”

In an age of mistrust of authority and authoritative structures, let us be committed to integrity as a mark of ELCA institutions. That includes our willingness to publicly confess our failures rather than succumb to the spinning that defines a culture of deception. If Richard Lischer is correct that the first casualty of the information age is truth, then we have work to do, since there is no hope for our future if that future comes at the expense of integrity. Professor James Childs reminds us that “a healthy public life and a just community cannot flourish where trust is eroded by the habitual compromise of truth.”

In a conversation with lead pastors of ELCA large member congregations, Ronald Heifetz suggested there is one characteristic that describes leaders in virtually all American institutions: the absence or meltdown of courage.

In his book *Credo*, William Sloan Coffin says, “Our faith should quell our fears, never our courage.” He continues, “So what the Christian community needs to do above all else is to raise up men and women of thought and of conscience, adventuresome, imaginative people capable of both joy and suffering. And most of all they must be people of courage so that when the day goes hard and cowards steal from the field, like Luther they will be able to say, ‘my conscience is captive to the Word of God . . . to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me.’”¹³

¹³ William Sloan Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville, Ky., Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 70-71.

I will end where I began: with gratitude for you and your leadership and with deep appreciation for the vitality of the institutions you lead. I am personally committed, as is the churchwide organization, to telling the ELCA story with vibrance and persistence, both to our members and to the world. The story we tell is infinitely more rich and exciting because of you, your institutions, and their relationship to the whole church. Although the challenges I have named may seem daunting, I believe that together we can face them with confidence and hope in God from whom the future comes.