

## MISSIONOLOGIST REFLECTION ELCA LEADERSHIP STRATEGIC DIRECTION

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***“Assist this church to bring forth and support faithful, wise, and courageous leaders whose vocations serve God’s mission in a pluralistic world.”***

The five strategic directions of the “Faithful Yet Changing: ELCA Planning for Mission” document provide important commitments for implementing the Mission, Vision and Values that are grounded in an introductory Theological and Biblical Foundations. These materials follow the standard practices that are common today in the field of strategic planning. The purpose of this short paper is to reflect on the 5<sup>th</sup> strategic direction that deals with leadership.

By way of introduction, I want to commend the leadership of the ELCA for framing these materials. It is critical and timely for the church to give attention to our shared understanding of how we participate in God’s mission in the world.

**Leaders and Leadership** – A critical distinction being made in the field of leadership studies today is between persons who function as leaders, and the practices associated with the exercise of leadership. The former tends to focus on the style and approach of individuals, while the latter incorporates a set of leadership practices that are shaped and implemented by a diverse range of persons who are functioning within a common community. This latter perspective reflects more accurately the organic, social reality of leadership, and reflects as well, a Trinitarian “in-relation” theological understanding of Christian community. This strategic direction might be served by some attention being given as to how “leaders” are related to and inter-related with the best practices of leadership.

**Context, Vision and Theological Imagination** – This strategic direction calls the church to help bring forth leaders who are “faithful, wise, and courageous.” These adjectives, I would suspect, were carefully chosen and represent a good balance of leadership requirements. I would encourage some critical reflection on the third adjective – courageous. It is the closest of the three to a crucial element of leadership that is essential for engaging in ministry in today’s context – vision. Vision has to do with a Spirit-led communal discernment of answering the questions, “What does God want to do in this context?” and “What is God doing in this context?” This type of vision requires a thorough awareness of the world around us. This type of vision requires a theological imagination for seeing God at work in the world. It requires of us that we be able to think from the “outside in” relative to our mission.

It is interesting that in the Executive Summary of “The Context for Mission and Ministry in the ELCA” that the 16 bullet points largely address the question of context from an “inside out” perspective – how ELCA congregations function or do not function

in relation to particular contexts. In addition, the four guidelines for implementation related to the five strategic directions tend to focus on internal opportunities and issues in relation to the larger context. If the outcome indicated in the signature phase for the mission statement is to be taken seriously – “for the sake of the world,” then more attention may need to be given to starting with the context before coming to some critical reflection on the church. This is profoundly important if we are to be effective in “assist the church to bring forth and support. . . leaders.” The calling forth of leaders for the sake of the world will require the Spirit-led communal discernment of a context specific vision for ministry. It is such vision that inspires both leadership and followership.

**Leadership Formation** –God prepares leaders over a lifetime. Learning to engage in effective leadership is a journey that is taken over time. While there are critical contexts that contribute to formation, such as a seminary education, there is a need to develop a set of expectations, practices and processes that allow leaders to continue to experience formation for the purpose of strengthening their engagement of leadership. Part of this on-going formation has to do with spirituality – the fruit of the Spirit in the life of the believer. Part of this on-going formation has to do with maximizing ministry strengths – the gifts of the Spirit. And part of this on-going process has to do with identity – the vocational call by the Spirit which usually comes to expression in ordination and office. My perception is that the present system at all levels tends to focus more on the third, than on the other two. A more balanced approach is required. Seminaries and synods, in particular, need to be alert to shaping processes that encourage a more holistic understanding of leadership. In addition better collaboration and integration of educational, first call and continuing education processes might need to be developed.

**Abundance/Scarcity & New Wineskins** – It is clear that leaders are emerging throughout the larger church today and are exercising leadership. It is also clear that many of these persons are coming into church leadership through “unconventional” processes. My premise is that God is prepared to give the church the leaders and leadership that the church needs, if we are prepared to participate fully in what God is doing. We are in a situation of abundance, not scarcity, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. But responding to this abundance will most likely require some new wineskins. For example, restricting Word and Sacrament ministry to fully credentialed and ordained pastors was done for the “good order of the church” in the context of the established church of Constantinian Christendom at the time of the Reformation. Perhaps the good order of the church, especially in relation to many STaR congregations and mission development ministries, may call for us to broaden our definition of those who are qualified and credentialed to engage in Word and Sacrament ministry.

While other reflections could be offered, the two-page response limit has been reached. My prayer is that these thoughts will be useful for our continued conversation and shared journey as we seek to participate fully in God’s mission for the sake of the world.