

## Sabbatical Report: February 1, 2011 – July 31, 2011

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I begin this report with a word of thanks to my PLTS colleagues – to faculty, staff and students who supported my sabbatical by graciously agreeing to take on extra tasks and by gladly adjusting their Spring 2011 class schedules. I also offer thanks to the PLTS Board of Directors for granting me a time of sabbatical to pursue. My sabbatical efforts had three foci, although I had originally proposed only two. These foci were: a) quality seminary education online; b) Lutheran theologies of the global south; and c) course construction and redesign.

### Quality Seminary Education Online

I began my research into online teaching and learning by conducting a little experiment in which I visited websites offering graduate online education to see what I could learn. The results of my non-scientific survey reminded me of something right out of Goldilocks and the Three Bears!

Sites like University of Phoenix or Carrington College were **too hard**. In order to find out even the basics as to course offerings and degree programs supported, I was asked to give permission for an admissions counselor and a financial aid officer to contact me by phone.<sup>1</sup> Sites like PLTS, GTU, and most other brick and mortar seminaries were largely **too soft**. That is, it was too difficult to find information quickly as to what was offered online [if anything at all]. Sometimes I spent 20 minutes or more searching for who to contact about online learning opportunities. In addition, most of these sites had little or no provisions for a quick online application procedure.<sup>2</sup>

Sites like Luther Seminary, with a link to its Distributive Learning M.Div. program clearly visible from the home page, seemed to me to be **just right**. When I “googled”

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the admissions, recruitment, and financial aid practices of these online learning environments have come under increasing governmental and financial scrutiny. Such so-called “for-profit” universities have been found to target poor persons, previously incarcerated individuals, and returning service personnel largely by promising students as much loan money as they “need,” and by assuring students post-degree employment assistance [which seldom results in employment, rather in more schooling]. See for example *Frontline*, “College, Inc.” originally aired May 4, 2010 and available to stream at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/collegeinc/view/>.

<sup>2</sup> This observation about “clunky” websites cannot be overstressed. If PLTS hopes to attract young adults under the age of 30 [to say nothing of its desires to offer education online in the near future] our presence on the Web must become more intentionally directed to these persons. Youth and young adults quickly tire of websites whose interface is not user-oriented. Potential students considering PLTS may in fact go elsewhere on the web to a site designed with them in mind. To rebuild our website in this way will require significant financial investment.

Hybrid M.Div. programs, Luther Seminary's site came up on page one.<sup>3</sup> I clicked the link Google provided me, and was taken very quickly to the page on the Luther Seminary website that explained the shape of their Distributive Learning programs, where I was quickly drawn into learning more. In addition, there was a link easily visible which invited me to "apply online now."

Perhaps equally important is the pedagogically exciting and culturally aware [including awareness of web cultures] design and implementation of the Luther Seminary Distributive Learning M.Div. I encourage you to take a few minutes to visit the site and experience first hand what the mission, design, and outcomes for the program are at: [http://www.luthersem.edu/mdiv\\_distributed/](http://www.luthersem.edu/mdiv_distributed/). You will notice that many of the characteristics and pedagogies evident in the Distributive Learning M.Div. are similar to those employed in the PLTS TEEM program. Most notably, the Distributive Learning M.Div. has online components, on-campus course intensives three weeks per year, and reliance on the mentoring partnership of a pastor and congregation. We at PLTS know very well how well the TEEM program is working to meet the ministry needs of congregations and the educational needs of emerging leaders. Thus, the addition of a Distributive Learning M.Div. to the PLTS portfolio can make good use of its own TEEM program as a kind of initial canvas.<sup>4</sup>

Recommendations:

1. Significant overhaul of our PLTS website with the recruitment of and outreach to young adults between the ages of 16 and 30 years as one of its top three priorities. In order to invite people this age to consider ministry, PLTS must meet them first and foremost on the Web.
2. Continuing our partnerships with GTU with regard to online learning, especially to the use of Moodle in residential classes.
3. Further faculty and administrative conversations re: design of a PLTS Hybrid M.Div. using the pedagogies of TEEM and Luther Seminary's Distributive Learning M.Div. as initial design templates.

### **Lutheran Theologies of the Global South**

I began my project to learn about Lutheran theologies of the global south by reading a selection of essays from the Lutheran World Federation's recent publications<sup>5</sup> written

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<sup>3</sup> This kind of "page rank" is increasingly important to any seminary wishing to establish a connection to young adults seeking to follow God's call to public ministry.

<sup>4</sup> The Luther Seminary Distributive Learning M.Div. is just now "old" enough to begin gathering assessment data with regard to the successes and struggles with providing theological education in a hybrid format. In addition, the PLTS TEEM program has recently undergone a curriculum review [January 2011]. Learnings from this information should be included in anything we develop.

<sup>5</sup> These publications are: *Being the Church in the Midst of Empire: Trinitarian Reflections*; *Deepening Faith, Hope and Love in Relations With Neighbors of Other Faiths*; *Identity, Survival, Witness: Reconfiguring Theological*

by theologians mostly from the global south. After completing this reading, I decided to focus my learning by engaging in some concrete fieldwork. Because the Lutheran Church of Rwanda is the companion synod of the Sierra Pacific Synod and because I have been working already with several Rwandan pastors, and churchwide officers<sup>6</sup>, I knew I would learn a lot about what Lutheran theology looks like in the context of the people and ministries of the LCR by continuing and deepening our existing partnerships.

Partnership between LCR youth and the PLTS *Faith Active in Love* program which I direct has been developing strength and direction since summer 2008<sup>7</sup>, with the overall objective of building partnerships between Sierra Pacific Synod youth and youth from the LCR. At the time of my sabbatical, our partnership had reached the point of sending youth delegations to experience life and the church in one another's contexts. Sponsored by *Faith Active in Love*, in July 2010, the Sierra Pacific Synod Youth Committee (SPSYC) and I had traveled as a delegation to the LCR. In July 2011, then, we were able to "complete the circle," receiving a delegation of 12 Rwandans to the Sierra Pacific Synod<sup>8</sup>. In the context of this delegation, two ongoing projects for the LCR were outlined and designed for implementation once the delegation returned to Rwanda.

#### The First-Ever Lutheran Church of Rwanda Youth Gathering – December 2011<sup>9</sup>

Something that the Rwandan youth and Pr. Ntidendereza identified as important to them was the help of SPSYC youth in developing a comparable structure for Rwandan youth involvement in the LCR. For two years we have been teaching and learning from one another about how SPSYC works and how it empowers youth leadership. While the delegation was here this summer, we finalized a formal proposal for funding to Bp. Holmerud, requesting funding for a first-ever LCR youth gathering (60 persons – including two SPSYC youth as observers). As of this writing I am pleased to report that

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*Agendas*; and *Lutherans Respond to All* are published by the Lutheran World Federation and comprise the "Theology in the Life of the Church" series.

<sup>6</sup> Pr. David Ntidendereza, Nagatare Parish Pastor and Director for Youth in the Lutheran Church of Rwanda (LCR); Mr. Gerard Muvunyi, Coordinator for Planning, Capacity Building & Development for the LCR; and Pr. John Rutsindintwarane, the LCR General Secretary.

<sup>7</sup> In 2008, an East African Youth Summit was convened in Kigali, Rwanda. At the planning team's invitation, four youth and two adults from the Sierra Pacific Synod traveled to Kigali as representatives to the Summit.

<sup>8</sup> I coordinated this entire effort while on sabbatical. I was involved in significant fundraising, all aspects of international trip coordination, event planning, curriculum, etc. In this effort I was assisted very well by Erin Horne, the assistant program director for *Faith Active in Love*, Pr. Craig Minich and Pr. Katy Grindberg, all PLTS alums. In addition to our Rwandan guests, the SPSYC youth traveled with us, making for a delegation of 35.

<sup>9</sup> The LCR is quite young as a denomination, having its start post-genocide in 1995. Thus, structures of governance and decision making are still in the process of shaping themselves.

the LCR youth have elected officers among themselves and the gathering appears to have been funded in large part by a sister parish here in the Bay Area. All seems ready for the gathering to occur in December on schedule.

### Theological Education in the Lutheran Church of Rwanda

I will never forget a conversation I had several years ago with Pr. Ntidendereza in which I asked him what the thought the most pressing need in the Lutheran Church of Rwanda. Without hesitation, he told me that the LCR needed a seminary. “Really”, I thought, “a seminary?” He explained that more than anything, he believed that the pastors serving in the LCR wanted opportunities to come together to study the Bible, theology, and pastoral care from Lutheran perspectives.

Because pastors must also work fulltime in other jobs to support themselves and their families, it is not possible for them to travel for theological education, since it would mean leaving not only congregations, but livelihoods as well. Likewise, they cannot pay for such education. So it is, Pr. Ntidendereza explained, that pastors are tempted to preach, teach, and read the Bible the way their Pentecostal counterparts do. But of course, he continued, Lutheran theology teaches us a different, more faithful way to love God and neighbor.

From this conversation and many others has come the second project with which I am now involved – a plan to secure Lutheran theological education for the LCR by building partnerships between the LCR and ELCA professors wanting to spend part of a sabbatical period offering a class [one or two weeks at most] in an area of expertise. Fortunately, a sister parish in the Bay Area has recently completed a dormitory building that could house pastors during the study – allowing them to travel back home from time to time during the duration of the class. Now that it is practical for us to actually meet, our next tasks will be to identify some mutual goals for the establishment of this kind of theological education in the LCR, as well as for Pr. Ntidendereza and Mr. Muvunyi to conduct a series of one-to-one conversations<sup>10</sup> between LCR pastors as to availability and educational interests.

These two projects provided an excellent chance for me to put into practice what I learned in the readings with which this project began. Most especially I was able to see first-hand the legacy of empire with which Rwandan people struggle – a legacy they refuse to pass on to their children if they can help it. In addition, the allowing youth to identify their own needs and aspirations for the program reminded me again of the importance of community organizing principles used in conjunction with an action-

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<sup>10</sup> The LCR organizes itself using PICO community organizing models, like that of the one-to-one conversation and listening campaign in its development work.

reflection model of inquiry as a way to encourage the development of leaders in the church. Lastly, I learned first hand about the clashing of worldviews among Christian churches at work in Rwanda's reconstruction after genocide. Specifically, the LCR has come to recognize the theological incommensurability of their Lutheran theology and the practices and theologies of the Pentecostal movements at work in Rwanda.

### **PLTS Course Construction and Redesign**

I was asked to construct and teach a course for the TEEM program focusing on Christian Education in the Parish, which I did in June 2011. In addition, I redesigned "ED2088: Engaging Youth and Family Ministries," adding among other things a section in which the impacts of race and class on children and youth are identified.<sup>11</sup> As of this writing, the redesigned course is well received by students.

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<sup>11</sup> see especially, Christerson, Brad, et. al. *Growing Up in America: The Power of Race in the Lives of Teens*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.