

# Reflections on ELCA Strategic Planning

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Many thanks for the opportunity to participate in this discussion of the ELCA mission and vision by offering both a few observations on the material sent to me and a few suggested directions arising from both my administrative experience and my on-going love affair with scripture. I was invited to be playful! First, let me say that engaging in some sort of strategic planning is quite a fine idea for the church at this particular point in its history. The importance of having a common mission statement, vision, and strategic plan was not so evident to me before Luther Seminary engaged in this activity over the last several years. I learned a few things: 1) writing the mission statement took time; 2) writing a coherent plan took even longer; 3) the end result is very helpful, so long as the results are never taken as written in unchangeable stone and the community is encouraged to continue to breathe new life into the plan even after completion; and 4) most importantly, the end of the planning was not nearly as important as the process. The process enabled all of us to "catch" the vision and the plan, not merely to subscribe to them. Argument, complaint, and endless rewriting were more birth pangs than problems. Keeping a whole church involved in such a process is certainly more complicated than keeping a whole seminary community and its constituency involved, but any vision or plan that comes "top down" is doomed to failure no matter what its intrinsic value. So one must ask who is this plan for and who are the stakeholders who must be involved? More on this later.

## COMMENTS ON THE MATERIALS

**The Mission Statement:** None of the three suggested mission statements are particularly appealing as currently written. I have not read the comments by Drs. Powell and Stortz, but from references to them in the materials I have read, I suspect I wish to add my voice to theirs and ask us to use the inviting and multivalent language of scripture as the basis of the statement. I like the language of the body of Christ because it is biblical, true, and because one can move with this metaphor in so many ways. I would prefer a mission statement something like the following:

The ELCA, a gathered community of the body of Christ, is called and sent by God to proclaim and to live out the mercy, grace, and justice of God made manifest in Christ Jesus in whose name we daily pray.

The mission, of course, is God's, not ours, and God goes before us in the world. I value for this mission statement a sense of invitation and boldness coupled with humility. Not easy.

**The Vision Statement:** The vision statement is (and should be) difficult to write without the mission statement in place. Without being stated explicitly, the prologue should be "In the light of this mission, in 10 years the ELCA will\*..

We will continue reforming in the following ways\*

Some of the ways I would express them our vision, based on my sense of the ELCA's mission as well as the material gathered so far, are as follows:

The body will be strengthened through

- renewed commitment to sharing the Good News of God's love both far and near;
- renewed love for and understanding of the bible;
- renewed worship;
- renewed leadership development;
- renewed language that communicates across boundaries of age, race, and gender;
- renewed acceptance of other cultures, traditions, and perspectives;
- renewed work for the sake of all our neighbors, particularly all those in need; and
- renewed care of all the world that God so loves that he sent his only Son.

**Other Supporting Material:** I enjoyed perusing the supporting documents. Particularly helpful were Bishop Hanson's speech and the material prepared for January. I would hope that some of the sparkle, humor, imagination, and power found in the Bishop's speech might find its way into the final documents. I would hope that the fine questions raised by the subcommittee not get lost. I actually found that reading the material from the constitution again for the very first time was quite helpful. The "constitutional catechism" is not a bad place to begin. One might ask: what should be different about the language of the mission, vision, and plan, from the language of the constitution? Well, it should be more visionary, more inviting, and finally more specifically strategic. One specific aspect of the language of the constitution caught my attention. When I looked at the list of verbs beginning the list of "the duties of the churchwide organization in relation to the overall purposes of the church," I began to get uncomfortable with words like "provide, oversee, establish, and determine." Just what is the relationship of churchwide to the other parts of the body from individuals, to congregations, to seminaries, to camps, to colleges, to nursing homes, to synods? Some of the need for strategic planning centers around this profound and often inflammatory ecclesiastical question.

## **MAJOR QUESTION**

Which brings me to my major question concerning this planning process. Who is this for? Is it primarily for the churchwide expression of our common body? Is this plan meant to help primarily with churchwide organization and planning? I would think so. Strategic planning for churchwide is doable, appropriate, and needed. If you are clear from the beginning that this planning is being done with churchwide as the body part currently at the center of attention, it will help the process enormously. Part of the underlying issue, of course, is what stake we all have in this part of the body and how inter-related we indeed are. But we certainly do not mean to be doing strategic planning for individual congregations here or for colleges, seminaries, camps or even for synods. At any rate, top down strategic planning is not helpful and will not work. Churchwide planning will affect the whole body to be sure, and each part of the whole needs be part of this planning. We might, for example ask who the rest of us are in relation to churchwide. Are the rest of us customers, constituents, interested onlookers, stake holders, inter-

related partners, fellow members? Which is to ask the question which part of the body is which and how do we work together. Both the answer and the metaphor matter. If we recognize churchwide to be both part of all of us and separate from all of us, then we are beginning at a healthy place. A place we can trust. And engendering leadership that is trustworthy is, particularly in our current age, a crucial matter. Paul was wise in not linking the various body parts with specific spiritual gifts and in using an organic rather than a mechanical metaphor. We would be wise to live into this metaphor in the planning and remember always that Christ is the head.

## **MAJOR CONCERN**

Briefing paper #5 The Bible, Different Religions and Levels of Satisfaction with Ministry among Clergy particularly caught my attention. This paper picked up an issue that was discussed at length when the Lutheran women theologians met to discuss this strategic plan in Toronto in November and will be discussed again at the convocation of teaching theologians when they gather this coming summer under the theme Interpreting the Bible: The Promise and Challenges of a Lutheran Hermeneutic. The issue is this: how can we help the ELCA to grow into a common Lutheran understanding of scripture that runs counter to the understanding found in American biblicism's emphasis on inerrancy and its refusal to allow for a canon within a canon. A Lutheran hermeneutic would invite us to read scripture as the written word of God that participated in God's Word along side of the Word embodied in Christ and the word as preached and communicated throughout the church. A Lutheran hermeneutic would invite us to hear both law and Gospel and to come to scripture in community and with eyes and hearts shaped in faith. A Lutheran hermeneutic would come to scripture through the cross and resurrection. Or, as Brother Martin says so beautifully:

These are the scriptures which make fools of all the wise and understanding, and are open only to the small and simple, as Christ says in Matthew 11:25. Therefore dismiss your own opinions and feelings, and think of the scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest of mines which can never be sufficiently explored, in order that you may find divine wisdom which God here lays before you in such simple guise as to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies. (Luther's Works, vol. 35: Prefaces to the Old Testament, 236)

I am enough of a lover of and believer in the power of this written word of God as to believe that the ELCA could best be renewed by a common engagement of this word in ways deeper and less issue-driven than we have here-to-fore.

## **BIBLICAL TOP TEN**

This major concern brings me now full circle to your request both that I make contributions to this planning process from my own discipline (Old Testament with a bit of the New thrown in for leaven) and that I have a bit of fun. To that end, I offer à la Letterman my not-too-random top ten list of important bible passages to help ELCA with strategic planning --

## **On Structure**

Bible Passage #10 Exodus 18:13-23 \*17 When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?" \*18 "What you are doing is not good. 18 You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. 19 Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! In this wonderful passage we learn with Moses that trying to run everything alone is not wise. This prophet of the Lord and great leader has much to learn from his foreign father-in-law who, in response to the good news of God's salvation, shares his own worldly wisdom.

Bible Passage # 9 Numbers 11:24-30 27...a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." 28 And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, stop them!" 29 But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!" Amen, and again I say, AMEN! The gift of the Spirit cannot be controlled. We do well to look for leadership from unexpected quarters, particularly from those outside the camp.

### **On Vision**

Bible Passage # 8 Exodus 3:1-15 \*2 There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.... 7 Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, 8 and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians,\* 10 So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." 11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" 12 He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." 13 But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

Now here is a statement of vision -- ongoing, on fire. Here is a vision that leads to a call. And here is a call that leads to a mission. Here God (as well as God's name) is revealed not for the sake of information, but rather for the sake of invitation.

Bible Passage # 7 Psalm 121:1-8

- 1 I lift up my eyes to the hills-- from where will my help come?
- 2 My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.
- 3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.
- 4 He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
- 5 The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

6 The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

7 The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

8 The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forevermore.

Another vision -- one to which we can all relate. This vision of the hills helps us to do theology in the interrogative (good questions are always better than bad answers). We do not have all the answers, but we do have God's promise. And through that promise we move from question to proclamation, from "I" to "you" (notice the grammar of the psalm!).

Bible Passage # 6 Genesis 21:15-19 When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. 16 Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. 17 And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. 18 Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." 19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

Yet one more vision to remind us that God speaks also to the outsider, to the stranger, to the outcast. The one who seems beyond the promise is indeed also a child of promise and beneficiary of vision from God. Oh, and note as well, refusal to look on the death of one's child is blessed as surely as the willingness to offer up sacrifice.

### **On Discipleship**

Bible Passage # 5 Micah 6:8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

This passage states so memorably where our discipleship begins. Except that one might note that what is desired is not so much "loving kindness" as love akin to God's mercy-filled love for us (hesed) as in Hosea 6:6 - I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings, a passage so near and dear to the heart of Jesus (Matthew 9:12-13; 12:7). Well, now we have four passages for the price of one.

Bible Passage # 4 Ecclesiastes 2:24 There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God.

I read this passage helped once more by Brother Martin:

"This," says Luther, "is the vanity of the human heart, that it is never content with the gifts of God that are present but rather thinks of them as negligible; it continually looks for others, and then still others, and is not satisfied until it achieves what it wishes, whereupon it despises what it has achieved and looks for something else." (Luther's Works, vol. 15: Notes on Ecclesiastes, 10)

Part of our discipleship is found in the everyday joy of our vocations, a true gift of God.

Bible Passage # 3 1Corinthians 1:18-25 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. \*21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. I cannot consider speaking about discipleship without considering the theology of the cross articulated so profoundly by Paul in I Corinthians. What looks like wisdom is foolishness; what looks like strength is weakness. True strength and true wisdom are hidden under their opposite, nakedly proclaimed in the crucifixion of Christ. The body of Christ is a crucified body.

### **On Mission**

Bible Passage # 2 Matthew 28:5-7 But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you."

What a surprising way for mission to begin, with women gathered at what, for all the world, looks like a place of death! And first the Good News must be told to the disciples. And they and we need not be afraid because Christ goes before us.

And my top, #1 Bible Passage for thinking about mission and vision is Matthew 28:19-20 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

An obvious choice for #1. But let us not, as is our frequent habit, cut verse 20 off from verse 19. After proclamation, baptism, and Trinity come teaching and the promises of God in Christ to be with us to the end of the age. A potent mix for mission.

Now my random guess is that the second part of this contribution was more engaging than the first, inviting questions, comments, and mutual conversation of the saints. What does this mean?

### **Addenda:**

The following are the complete passages of my top ten bible passages for strategic planning:

### **On Structure**

Bible Passage #10 Exodus 18:13-23 The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening. 14 When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?" 15 Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. 16 When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God." 17 Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. 18 You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. 19 Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God; 20 teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. 21 You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set such men over them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. 22 Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you, but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. 23 If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace."

Bible Passage # 9 Numbers 11:24-30 So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. 25 Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again. 26 Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. 27 And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." 28 And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, stop them!" 29 But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!" 30 And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

## **On Vision**

Bible Passage # 8 Exodus 3:1-15 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. 3 Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." 4 When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. 7 Then the LORD said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, 8 and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land

to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 9 The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. 10 So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." 11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" 12 He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain." 13 But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" 14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" 15 God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

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2 My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

3 He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber.

4 He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

5 The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

6 The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

7 The LORD will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.

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### **On Discipleship**

Bible Passage # 5 Micah 6:8 He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

(Hosea 6:6 For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Matthew 9:12-13 But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. 13 Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

Matthew 12:7 But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless.)

Bible Passage # 4 Ecclesiastes 2:24 There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God. Bible

Passage # 3 1Corinthians 1:18-25 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." 20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

## **On Mission**

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Bible Passage #1 Matthew 28:19-20 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."