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## THE CHURCH IN EDUCATION? EDUCATION IN THE CHURCH? TEN THESES ON WHY THESE QUESTIONS MATTER

Leonard G. Schulze

You should also take pains to urge governing authorities and parents to rule wisely and educate their children. They must be shown that they are obliged to do so, and that they are guilty of damnable sin if they do not do so, for by such neglect they undermine and lay waste both to the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world and are the worst enemies of God and humanity.

--Martin Luther, Preface to *The Small Catechism*

...assist this church to bring forth and support faithful, wise, and courageous leaders whose vocations serve God's mission in a pluralistic world.

--Churchwide Organization Strategic Direction

I skate to where the puck is going to be.

--Wayne Gretzky

*Intersections* editor Tom Christenson has asked me to describe my vision for the Division for Higher Education and Schools (DHES). Within a few weeks, at its August 2005 Churchwide Assembly in Orlando, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will almost certainly vote to put DHES out of existence. The decommissioning of DHES is the result of an ongoing initiative by Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson to restructure the work of the churchwide organization of the ELCA.

Almost two years ago, Bishop Hanson issued a restructuring plan that would have terminated not only DHES, but the entire churchwide program for schools and early childhood education. That plan was withdrawn a few months later, in the midst of significant controversy about both its process and its content. Under the revised restructuring plan to be voted on this summer, all of the ministry areas heretofore served through DHES—including schools and early childhood education—are scheduled to be integrated into a newly created larger program unit responsible for “Vocation and Education.”

Pondering the significance of these developments for the life of the church, and for education in North America, is a bittersweet experience. On a rational level, I am not fully persuaded that the loss of DHES will be good either for the church or for education. And on an emotional level, I mourn the loss of something that has been precious to me and to many others, both in the church and in education.

Therefore I humbly confess at the outset: these reflections are not dispassionate. I pray fervently that the new structure of the churchwide offices does in fact make possible synergies and energies that renew the church and its understanding of its mission in education. There is

much good language in place describing the proposed new unit for “Vocation and Education” (see Thesis #9, below). Realizing the full potential of the new unit will require the vision and labor of many people. May God’s blessings shower upon it and upon them.

So, what *was* my vision, and how did it shape my leadership of the division? Actually, much of it can be found on the current Web site of DHES: [www.elca.org/education](http://www.elca.org/education). There you will find succinct statements of mission, vision, core values, contexts and commitments, and strategic directions for the division. These statements are appended to this essay for convenience of reference.

All of these statements emerged through much intensive work over a period of three years with the DHES staff and over five meetings with the board. I am deeply grateful to all these colleagues, especially to Board Chairs John Andreasen and Rod Schofield. Without their leadership, collegiality, and support, these important formulations would have remained at best institutionally inchoate.

On one level, these reformulated statements of mission, vision, core values, and strategic directions speak for themselves. They do not represent a major departure from the work of DHES under the leadership of my predecessor Bob Sorensen. But they do represent some new vocabulary, new emphases, and new specificity about the role and work of the division itself, as opposed to other expressions of the church or the educational institutions connected with our work. It is, perhaps, useful to know that these new emphases and foci were designed as explicit responses to *urgent strategic exigencies*.

I had—and continue to have—a sense of urgency about responding constructively to those exigencies. Visions of executive directors and strategic plans of boards are irrelevant unless they connect us vibrantly to our identity, on the one hand, and to our changing expression of our mission in a changing world, on the other hand. As I saw them, these exigencies all related to *the church, to education, and to the relationship between the church and education*. Invoking Martin Luther's own intellectual style, scholarly rigor, and pedagogical heart, I shall present them as *theses* that shaped my leadership of the division.

The claims presented in these theses represent touchstones of my public communications during my tenure as executive director of DHES. And my use of the discourse of “theses”—along with Luther's persistent catechetical question, “What does this mean?”—is intended to invoke the discourse of the *academy*, as distinguished from the dominant contemporary discourses of the church or of modern management.

Asking you to receive these statements as *theses*, rather than, say, as pronouncements, or policy edicts, or for that matter merely the personal preferences of someone who happens to find himself in a position of leadership, is itself a meta-thesis about discourse and communication styles. It is a meta-thesis, I propose, that both the church and our increasingly “managed” public sphere might do well to ponder. Whatever else they are, theses are invitations to join in a *reflective community of discourse*.

**Thesis #1: Critical thinking and reading, deep learning, rational public discussion, and moral deliberation are dominant traits in the gene pool of the Lutheran Church.**

#### **What does this mean?**

Martin Luther was both an Augustinian monk and a university professor. His persistence in remaining true to both these expressions of his Christian vocation fueled both the Protestant Reformation and the establishment of the church body that now bears the name “Lutheran.”

The use of “theses” as modes of discussion and debate (“disputatio,” in Luther's day) came naturally to Luther as a university professor. Without his commitment to rigorous public discussion of important issues, there would have been no Lutheran church. But, more significantly, critical thinking and passion for the truth came naturally to Luther not only as a university professor, but also as a faithful Christian. The integrity and courage with which Luther entered into honest

debate with the leading theologians of his age was grounded in his profound respect for the unity of God's truth.

**Thesis #2: Luther's personal and public devotion to learning as an expression of his Christian vocation was not a mere personality quirk or the unreflective habit of a university professor. It was a direct and faithful expression of his understanding of Scripture, of the teachings of Christ, and of the writings of profound theological thinkers, notably St. Augustine. These sources all tell us that as Christians we are called to be disciples and to make disciples of all nations. Luther radically renewed the church's understanding of that Christian vocation.**

#### **What does this mean?**

Through centuries of ownership by the priestly class, the original liberating power of the call to be disciples—to be *learners*—had by the time of Luther become obscured, and it seems to have become obscured again today among many Christians. It is by *coming to know the Truth* that we become free.

And the truth we are called to know and share is the Truth conveyed to us by *all* persons of the Trinitarian God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Our call to discipleship—to learning—is a radical summons to open ourselves to the wonder of the whole world in its full reality. Faith is called to seek understanding—of the created order and of our place in it, of our sinful-yet-redeemed status as followers of Christ, of our intimate kinship and spiritual fellowship with all people in the world.

Too many people who claim to be Christians behave as though they have completed their apprenticeship as disciples and rush to claim their authority as apostles representing the Truth as something we have already gotten under our complete control. The church does not own the Gospel, but is called to proclaim it. And proclaiming it effectively can only be done if we ourselves remain forever open to being transformed anew by it—that is, if we ourselves remain disciples. The church needs lifelong learning as much as any individual does. The church needs education at least as much as education needs the church.

**Thesis #3: The continuing vitality of the Lutheran church as a reforming movement in the church catholic is intimately bound up with these features of its genesis and its gene pool.**

### What does this mean?

Dogma and doctrine remain important to any faith community, especially, perhaps, to the confessing church. But the merely dogmatic and doctrinaire are alien to the spirit of Lutheran Christianity. The energy of the Lutheran church itself as a distinctive voice in the Christian community derives from its capacity to *renew* its understanding of foundational principles. That is, the very identity of the Lutheran church is constitutively bound up with its capacity for learning and teaching.

**Thesis #4: Many different cultural and national strands of Lutheranism are represented in the ELCA as it exists today. Unexamined assumptions underlying disparate conceptions of the appropriate relationship between church and education, faith and learning, have produced misperceptions, caricatures, and mistrust that undermine the relationships between education and the church.**

### What does this mean?

The history of Lutheranism in North America is a history of mergers. Dozens of smaller churches grounded in disparate polities, ecclesiologies, and even theologies finally landed in the ELCA with the 1988 merger. Many of these churches originally had their own organic relationship with their specific educational institutions, including seminaries and colleges.

Some traditions are assertively grounded in social service as the motive for education, others in a more classical understanding of the liberal arts as learning for learning's sake, still others in pietism. Some had a deep commitment to a Trinitarian view of education, others a more Christological view. Some saw higher education as diaconal service that the church should provide to the broader world, others as the in-house guarantor of faithful church workers. In each case, the (often implicitly) shared understanding between a given church's congregations and its related colleges and seminaries ensured mutual loyalty and support.

But as successive mergers threw both congregations and institutions into close corporate relationships with other strands of Lutheranism, the grounds of the relationship between "church" and "education" often became blurred. Articulating a consensus regarding these grounds required energy and commitment at all levels of the church, but especially at the national level. Individual congregations and synods cannot be expected to provide such conceptual and theological leadership.

To the degree that energy and commitment of both educational institutions and the church have been pre-empted or diverted by other more "immediate" concerns of their respective cultures, tending to the vitality and integrity of their relationship has been accorded relatively low priority, especially among individual congregations. If a sense of shared purpose among the educational institutions of the ELCA is to be fed and nurtured, if campus ministry is to remain a significant ministry of the whole church, then some significant centripetal activity at the churchwide level will be necessary to counteract the centrifugal effect of congregational and synodical preoccupations.

**Thesis #5: The single most significant development in American higher education during the twentieth century was the steep decline in the significance of the residential church-related liberal arts college, concomitant with the steep increase in the significance of the research university. As a result, the landscape of American higher education in 2005 is strewn with "formerly" church-related colleges.**

### What does this mean?

This story can be told with varied protagonists, and it would be shortsighted to dismiss them. There is much to celebrate in the diversification of institutional settings, the democratizing of access, the increased social mobility, and the growth of knowledge associated with these changes. But several concomitant developments profoundly impacted the questions we are examining here: the role of the church in education, and the role of education in the church.

The research university displaced the liberal arts college not only demographically, but also professionally, as the certifier of disciplinary rigor in the academy. Increasingly, college faculty were socialized during their graduate training to aspire to research, rather than teaching, careers. Those who wind up at church-related liberal arts colleges anyway—whether by choice or by default—are often systematically devalued by their colleagues at research universities. Not only is pedagogy devalued, but the very structure of the academic disciplines is often shaped by the hyperspecialization prevalent in the profession.

As a result, there is enormous pressure on colleges and their faculties to "grow in excellence" by emulating the dominant research-university model. Under this model, the locus of excellence is the discipline, not the institution and its character. Indeed, the "church-relatedness" of a college is viewed by many academics as

suspect—as a danger to academic freedom, or as a dilution of intellectual rigor.

These developments represent not merely a failure of nerve on the part of faculty at church-related colleges, but a massive shift in the broader public consumption of higher education. The people in the pews of ELCA congregations have been conditioned by this paradigm shift along with the rest of America. Nowadays, more than 90% of Lutheran 18-year-olds attend public universities. Thankfully, Lutherans foresaw these developments and took steps to ensure that both “our” colleges and public institutions would be places of Lutheran witness. With the establishment of a campus ministry in 1907 at the University of Wisconsin (now UW-Madison), Lutheran Campus Ministry was launched as a ministry of the whole church.

**Thesis #6: In connection with the paradigm shift described above, the default public understanding of “religious” education (including schools and colleges) has shifted. Current public opinion regarding the very word “evangelical” is that it must entail something essentially irrational, sectarian, and stubbornly fundamentalist—and that it is inherently bound up with certain political views. Those who want their children “trained” in sectarian fashion will seek out precisely schools and denominations that have narrow definitions of both faith and learning, and rigid understandings of the connection between them. Those whose vision of education is more liberating will avoid such institutions like the plague.**

#### **What does this mean?**

The dialogical relationship between faith and learning that has been central to Lutheran theology and Lutheran education since the Reformation is virtually defined out of existence by this binary mode of thinking. To the degree that the leadership of the ELCA does not boldly hold up the distinctiveness of this Lutheran understanding, the categories of the culture will sweep over church and education alike. To the degree that most of the membership of the ELCA has already been deeply influenced by these categories, the church itself loses the ability to speak to the culture with a distinctive voice.

**Thesis #7: There is much to celebrate. The ELCA has inherited an enviable presence in this changing landscape of American higher education, and congregational investment in early childhood education is growing faster than any other part of the church. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the 28 colleges and universities of the ELCA have a closer**

**relationship with one another, and with the various expressions and agencies of the church, than the colleges of any other Protestant denomination. (Colleges sponsored by Roman Catholic orders offer fascinating comparisons, especially the Jesuit Order, which also has 28 colleges and universities in the United States). Almost one-fifth of ELCA congregations are engaged in early childhood, primary, or secondary-school ministries. And the 200 campus ministry sites of the ELCA have been the envy of other denominations for decades.**

#### **What does this mean?**

The vitality of these educational ministries, often in the face of overwhelming financial and organizational challenges, is reassuring evidence that the gene pool of Lutheranism continues to generate lively educational ministries. Often this vitality persists despite meaningful recognition of this work *as* a ministry of the church, and with minimal and dwindling infrastructure and support for it from one or more of the three “expressions” of the church. Reports persist that some congregations continue to view schools as sources of supplemental income, rather than as congregational ministries. Campus ministries must cobble together resources from local individuals and congregations, in the light of dwindling financial support from synods and the churchwide organization. And operating grants to colleges and universities have plummeted since the 1988 merger.

Comparisons with the devolution of educational ministries in other denominations clearly show the wisdom of clear and visible leadership for education at the churchwide organization. Given the centrality of learning to our theology, loss of such focus would be unconscionable. The ELCA would experience what has happened to other denominations: campus ministries would be further curtailed; colleges would see diminishing rationale for remaining distinctively Lutheran; and early childhood centers would not receive the managerial, organizational, and theological counsel they need. Congregations and synods, while they do many things well, are simply not constituted to provide leadership in these areas.

**Thesis #8: DHES and the agencies and institutions it supports have been traditionally perceived by the whole church as working at the *margin* of the church. This perception is shared by many who work in the church itself, and by many who work in those institutions and agencies. While such “rim-walking” can be understood as a form of healthy outreach, it can also—especially in a time of dwindling resources**

**and organizational restructuring—easily be characterized as a “lack of congruence with central institutional agendas.”**

### **What does this mean?**

The three ministry areas assigned to DHES at the founding of the ELCA were more heterogeneous than the ministries of any of the other five program divisions. Initially called the “Division for Education,” the name was quickly changed to “Division for Higher Education and Schools,” with the plausible rationale that “education” was also within the purview of several other units. What the name change certified, however, was a perception that DHES did not have a mission of its *own* for the sake of the church, but merely existed for and on behalf of higher education and schools. Contrast the names of the other five divisions: Congregational Ministry, Outreach, Global Mission, Church in Society, Ministry. Their very names carry clearer legitimization of ecclesial functions.

Changing the name of the division signaled its secondary status. The name invited perception of DHES as an institutional support service, rather than as a home for a major, identifiable ministry of the church. It seemed important to me to redress this marginalization. We tried to do this by continuing to serve the institutions and agencies with whom we were partnered, but in such a way that the foundational theological rationale for the work of the division in the *Lutheran* church was foregrounded. The proposed name of the new unit that will absorb DHES is in this sense a heartening development: Vocation and *Education*.

**Thesis #9: The reformed concept of vocation is one of Martin Luther’s most significant contributions to theology, the church, and the world. There is no single concept that is more important to our understanding of why the church must be involved in education and why education is crucial for the continuing vitality of the church.**

### **What does this mean?**

Luther’s bold, incarnational redefinition of the concept of vocation involves the central insight that we are called to excellent work in the world and in service to our neighbor. Being “called out” (*ek-klesia*), being the church (*ecclesia*) is not an end in itself. The church, if it is to be faithful to the God it worships, must return to the world “that He so loved.”

And in order to serve with the genuine excellence which our love of God and our neighbor compels us to, we need to do at least two things: we need to do everything we can to sharpen our ability to hear with full volume and clarity the call that is ours, and we need to develop the full range of capacities and skills—intellectual, manual, emotional, professional, interpersonal, technical—that will allow us to respond to that call fully. That is, we need *discernment* and *equipping*.

Discernment and equipping are the goals of the sort of “practical liberal arts” education that Lutherans of many varieties have cherished through the centuries. If Lutherans are to be credible witnesses to the incarnational God in the twenty-first century, now is not the time to abandon that precious heritage. In this context, the rationale for the soon-to-be-created program unit for “Vocation and Education” should stir our souls.

This unit brings together ELCA churchwide ministries involved in the development and support of faithful, wise, and courageous leaders whose vocations serve God’s mission in a pluralistic world. This unit assists this church and its institutions in equipping all people to live out their callings for the sake of the world. This unit seeks mutual accountability among congregations, synods, institutions, and churchwide units for engaging all arenas of knowledge in the context of faith and fostering a culture of theological wisdom.

Responsibilities include: encouraging a sense of vocation in children, youth, and adults; lifting up the centrality of the church in education and education in the church; sustaining the foundational place of seminaries and theological education; overseeing the preparation of people for ordained and lay rostered ministry; and serving as a steward of the ELCA’s networks and systems for leadership development and support for leaders in church and world.

If this unit lives up to its charge, the place of education in the church will once again be central, not marginal. The rationale for the church’s involvement in education will be clearer for both committed Lutherans and for those “outside” the church who may be prone to dismiss or caricature its motives for such involvement. Many active Lutherans are completely unaware of the emphasis Luther placed on deep and broad education, and on the significance of education for Christians, indeed, for all people. Moreover, 75% of the students at ELCA colleges and universities, an even higher percentage of the faculty

at those institutions, and many teachers in ELCA elementary schools and early childhood education centers are not members of any Lutheran church. How will these partners in, and beneficiaries of, "Lutheran" education appreciate what a precious gift and task it is—unless that preciousness is lifted up boldly and clearly?

**Thesis #10: The emergence of an ELCA Social Statement on Education is an important step in raising the consciousness of current ELCA members about the centrality of learning and teaching in our heritage and about the crucial role they will play in the ability of the church to speak its Word meaningfully in the diverse world of this century.**

#### **What does this mean?**

The study documents relating to the social statement are available on the Web site of the Division for Church in Society, [www.elca.org/socialstatements/education](http://www.elca.org/socialstatements/education). I urge you to engage them and the task force as it continues its work. It is essential that our deeply theological understanding of incarnational vocation be reflected in this document, for that will enable generations of Lutherans to grow in their appreciation of the perfect freedom and the perfect servanthood to which Christians are called, here, now, and in the world, as well as in the church.

The relationship between the church and education that is articulated in this document must lift up Luther's celebration of education—lest we "by such neglect...undermine and lay waste both to the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world."

#### **A Gift to the Oikumene**

Shortly after I accepted my election to the position of Executive Director of the churchwide program unit Division for Higher Education and Schools in March of

2000, I received a letter from then-Presiding Bishop H. George Anderson. He wrote:

It is rare among other denominations to have a division that is directed to the educational ministry of the church at all levels. In the case of the ELCA, I believe it demonstrates one of our distinctively Lutheran traits: in a sense it is a gift that we bring to the *oikumene*.

Bishop Anderson's endorsement of the distinctiveness and significance of DHES gave me courage and hope, for it echoed my own conviction that the ELCA is the steward of a remarkable and precious understanding of the relationship between learning and faith. Now, as DHES is decommissioned, I pray fervently that the program unit for Vocation and Education will nurture in highly visible and publicly celebrated ways this church's glorious heritage in education.

"Lifting up the centrality of the church in education and education in the church" will require renewed "interdisciplinary" understanding of evangelism, outreach, global mission, and much other work undertaken by the church. All of this work is grounded in discipleship, that is, in learning. The prospect of "mutual accountability...for engaging all arenas of knowledge in the context of faith,"—accountability that explicitly involves synods and congregations as well as institutions and churchwide units—is inspiring.

The church and the world cry out for "faithful, wise, and courageous leaders whose vocations serve God's mission in a pluralistic world." The next chapter in the story of Lutheran boldness in education is about to unfold. Let us confidently claim our discipleship and humbly commit ourselves to excellence and mutual encouragement as we respond joyfully to our vocation.

Now, where's that puck headed?

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#### **Appendix: Strategic Planning Overview, 2005 Division for Higher Education and Schools**

##### **Mission Statement**

The mission of the Division for Higher Education and Schools is to provide leadership in defining, supporting, and advocating for the interactive ministry of the church in education and education in the church.

## **Vision Statement**

The Division for Higher Education and Schools nurtures grace-filled communities of faith and learning that inspire service to God, church, and the world.

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## **Core Values**

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<i>Truth</i>	We strive to know the truth of Christ and to understand the truths about God's creation.
<i>Intellect</i>	We affirm intellectual curiosity and wonder, while striving for faith-informed understanding.
<i>Individuality</i>	We acknowledge each human being as uniquely created in the image of God and possessing intrinsic worth.
<i>Vocation</i>	We believe that we are called by God to be people of God, empowered for service in the Church and the world.
<i>Community</i>	We profess that we are created by God to be in relationship with each other and that liberal arts learning helps build relationship in community.
<i>Inclusivity</i>	We affirm that the educational mission of the Church is to serve all the people of God.
<i>Freedom</i>	We simultaneously affirm the expression of academic freedom and Christian freedom in the pursuit of education.

## **Contexts and Commitments**

The Mission, Vision, Strategic Directions, and Commitments of the ELCA Churchwide Organization inform and guide the work of this unit. Specifically, the Division for Higher Education and Schools affirms and commits itself to the following:

- Lively and creative exchange of resources and ideas;
- Recognizing and encouraging the vital contributions and deepening relationships with institutions and agencies of this church, especially its colleges, universities, campus ministries, schools, and early childhood education centers;
- Confronting the scandalous realities of the multitude of barriers that manifest themselves in exclusion, poverty, hunger and violence;
- Engaging ardently our diverse, multi-cultural, multi-generational and global context.

## **Strategic Directions**

Shaped by these Contexts and Commitments, and by our own Mission, Vision, and Core Values, the Division for Higher Education and Schools will:

- Articulate and advocate for a Lutheran understanding of the relationship between faith and learning, the role of this understanding in evangelical outreach, and the significance of this understanding in response to the rise of fundamentalism and civil religion in the culture of North America.
- Contribute to the ELCA's call for a social statement on education.
- Provide resources in faith formation and leadership development to assist and affirm our schools, early childhood education centers, colleges, universities, and campus ministries to achieve excellence as they discover and fulfill their vocations in Jesus Christ.
- Provide staff support and create other resources of high quality that are easily accessible and responsive to the needs of our constituencies and partners in ministry.
- Build strategic relationships with
  - Other units of the churchwide organization;
  - Synods;
  - Congregations;
  - ELCA and related agencies, institutions and entities;
  - Ecumenical partners;
  - International companion churches;

that strengthen and expand ministries to and with children and their families, youth, and young adults.