

# Ministry Education in Context



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**This Issue focuses on “Ministry Risk-taking”**

## HONORING THE PAST, LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

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One of my strongest and fondest memories of my internship at Jackson Lake Lutheran in Amboy, MN (pop. 500), was a meeting I had with my internship committee early on in my time there.

My internship was a detached site, with my supervisor being in the next town to the east. He was an excellent supervisor, but by his own admission he didn't know my congregation real well.

I had noticed that the communion rail around the altar area was always closed (i.e., the gate in the middle was shut even on non-communion Sundays). This wasn't a big deal per se, but it gave me pause. I wondered if a bit of a barrier had been set up visually, and we were creating a kind of “Holy of Holies” area at the front of the sanctuary.

So, about a month or so into my internship, I had a meeting scheduled with my internship committee anyway, and I thought I'd broach the subject of opening that gate on non-communion Sundays.

Being quite new to the congregation and context, I was extremely careful in how I worded my idea for changing the look of the altar area. I wanted people to be sure I wasn't just rushing in and making change for the sake of change.

After verbally falling all over myself for about ten minutes, one of the dear old saints of the church said, “Troy, why don't you just give it a try. If we don't like it, we'll let you know.” He said this with much warmth and grace. I heaved an internal sigh of relief.

The next Sunday, during our opening announcements time, I explained why I had made the change. Nobody raised a big fuss. In fact, folks ended up liking the more open look to the altar area.

Now I realize not every story of change in our parishes turns out this way. Often even the smallest change can generate hard feelings and conflict. However, I do think we often don't give people credit for being flexible and willing to try new things. (And I've introduced a “contemporary” service in a very traditional high church setting without losing my call. Yes, it can be done.)

I think the key to introducing change of any kind to a congregation—especially when traditions are involved—is to make sure you've done your homework. First, think (and pray!) through theologically, missionally, and procedurally why you feel a change is necessary. Second, seek out clergy colleagues and key lay leaders to get their input. Third, approach any change carefully and respectfully. Fourth, explain, explain, and explain again why the change is taking place.

If folks believe you're proposing a change to make the Body stronger, chances are pretty good they'll support you. You may well still have some disgruntled folks, but you cannot control or own those reactions. Change is rarely easy, but it is a constant in our lives. Thankfully, so is God's love!



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## Who? Me? When? Now? Where? Here?

Written by: Rev. David Maxfield, Trinity Lutheran, Stevens Points, WI  
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I like Moses. Or at least I can relate to him. Remember the story in Exodus chapter three where God encounters Moses via the burning bush? I wonder what it must have been like to listen to flaming foliage. You know the story. God calls Moses into mission. God is like that. Whenever, wherever God comes down in the Bible, someone gets to go. It happened to Abraham and Sarah, to Moses and Miriam, to Peter and Paul. It happened to us when we were baptized.

What I appreciate about Moses is his honesty. Listen to his questions. Who am I? How can I do this? His fear speaks. But God who speaks “fear not,” not only has the first word, God has the last word. “It’s not about you Moses, it’s about me.” Not to be outdone Moses comes up with all sorts of excuses. No equipment? God provides. No talent? God will give the words. In frustration Moses pleads, “Lord please send someone else.” (Exodus 4:13) “No can do Moses, you’re the man- here’s the mission, it’s time to move.” (My paraphrase)

Now I am not so bold as to suggest I am anything like Moses, I don’t look or speak anything like Charlton Heston (he is Moses isn’t he?). But in this time and place, whether I like it or not, God has called me, challenged me out of the security of my now and into the wild adventure of God’s forever future better known as his kingdom.

I’ve been asked to reflect on my adventure with the art of risk taking and like the reticent Scandinavian that I am I naturally find risk uncomfortable. Others are better versed, there’s greater risk-takers out there, learn from them. As a descendant of Ole and Lena I think cream sauce is a spice.

But then I stop and think. My great grandfather literally left his brother Ole on the family farm near Lena Norway (that was a risk). Settling in Iowa was a risk. Eating lutefisk is a risk. So maybe it’s not my heritage, maybe it’s me. I’ve tried my excuses, explored my alibis and its time to get on with it. But how do I know? How do we know when a risk is a risk worth taking or an adventure in folly. Is the only wisdom I know to be found in those timeless words of Yogi Berra? “When you get to a fork in a road, take it?”

I serve as a pastor in a congregation in central Wisconsin. The congregation is nearly 130 years old. It is steeped in tradition. Part of the heritage and mission of the congregation has been to help students discern the whisper of God towards ordained ministry. At a council meeting a vote was being taken to apply for a grant for our seminary students. In the midst of discussion I asked if the congregation would ever consider participating in an internship program as a part of our mission with the larger church.

We are a healthy congregation. We are for our size and ministry fully staffed. The congregation I serve places a high value on mission and education. To my surprise, the council voted to explore the issue and bring it to the congregation at the next annual meeting. At the annual meeting the question was asked: should Trinity explore the possibility of being an internship congregation? We’re good Lutherans; we feel very strongly both ways. So we voted to study it.

During the year a group of highly motivated people explored the question. Congregational analysis was done. The seminaries were contacted. Our synodical bishop was consulted and sons and daughters of the congregation who now serve the church were referenced. Everything seemed to validate what the council had discerned; an internship program would be a natural fit for this congregation.

But there were more challenges to be met. The greatest challenge was money. We honestly did not know where the funds would come from. The staff had decided to step back and see what would happen. Rather than try to persuade or manipulate, we were content to let the process work itself out. In all honesty, heading into the congregational meeting we were convinced of nothing. We did not know how the vote would go, nor did we know where the funds would come from.

Now it is November and we are four months into our first internship year. The funds came from an unexpected source. The vote of the congregation was unanimous. Our intern? Well you would have to ask Michael, but from my perspective he is a gift from God.

I’ve spent a bit of time looking back on this experience and several others that have involved risk taking. More often than not I scratch my head and am amazed at what God is about in the lives of the people and congregation I serve. I am still not bold or an expert in the art of risk taking, but here is what I am learning. *(continued on page 3)*

## It's not about me; it's about God.

That thought, which is the thesis of the New York Times bestseller, The Purpose Driven Life says it best. What I learn again and again about the art of risk taking is the need to be centered, focused and in tune with God. I know that visioning is a useful tool in our time. It is a chance to imagine the future, the opportunities which lie beyond the here and now. But whose vision am I seeking? God's, or mine?

The futurist Len Sweet uses a child on a swing as an image statement. The critical point on a swing is not the center of the fulcrum it is at the end where the child leans back and kicks forward simultaneously. So it is with the art of risk taking. Lean back into the One revealed in Scripture. Lean back into the presence of God in prayer. Lean back and learn the spiritual art of waiting. Lean back and kick forward. But if it is about me, my programs, my desires, that is where the story ends. But the vision is of God? Well, go ask Moses. It did not mean in his day that everyone or everything lived happily ever after, nor is it so today. But it does mean that things fall into place, there is a grit and determination in the struggle and someone is always there when you need to lean back, or run back into the arms of grace.

## It's not about me it is about all of us and God.

I know it's obvious, but it is true. The art of discernment by nature involves more than the self. In the congregation discernment is a whole body experience. The buzzword of the day is ownership; it used to be called unity. The greater the risk, the greater the need for discernment. The greater the risk the greater the need for unity within the body of Christ. Unity and popularity need to be discerned. Jesus was crucified by a majority vote. That which is popular, trendy or hot may not be of God. That is why I have learned it is critical to again and again call my people to prayer. Listening takes many ears.

## It's about God

In the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy looks out on the strange New World. Her only remnants of what has been is the house behind her, the clothes on her back, the basket in her hand and her beloved dog Toto. She pats him on the head and says, "We're not in Kansas anymore Toto."

You know it and I know it, we no longer live and do ministry in the culture of Christendom. What worked then may not work now. My assumptions for ministry are challenged on a daily basis. More and more I am convinced that we are closer to Rome and Corinth of the first century than we are to Wittenburg and Worms of the Reformation. The postmodern context for ministry is inherently more risky and more challenging. Christianity and culture no longer shake hands. How do you communicate the timeless truth of God's grace to a culture that no longer knows either God or grace?

Risk it seems is the new paradigm of ministry in this place- and this time. At times it seems like the very survival of the church may well be involved somehow with how much God's people are willing to risk. The rate and intensity of change brings me back to where I started. In one of my favorite stories from the desert fathers and mothers a weary traveler seeks the wisdom of a wise hermit. He shares his life, his frustration, his busyness, and his exhaustion. After listening to the story the hermit gets up and returns with a bowl and pitcher of water. "Tell me what you see," and begins to pour the water.

"I see water," the pilgrim replies stating the obvious.

"Tell me what you see."

"I see that the water swirling around the bowl until the last drop is added, then it quiets down."

"Tell me what you see"

The pilgrim looks over the bowl. I see two things. I see the depth of the bowl and I see my reflection."

The needs of ministry, the rate of change and the call to risk for the gospel swirl around me. It is only in stillness that water is calmed and I begin to see two things- depths and the reflection of God. The crazier it gets the more I sense the need for stillness. I have found these thoughts to be helpful guides as together we have stepped into some significant risk taking in the life of this congregation. Not only in the area of internship development, but also in the areas of worship, small groups and new ministries, these are the lessons we are continually learning. In our time we are learning to lean back on God and kick into the future. We are learning the art of discernment and the holy call of stillness.

Moses left the bush and learned the art of risk taking and the risk of taking God at God's Word. I am learning the same. Some successes, some excellent learning opportunities, but a growing sense of wonder and awe at what God is doing.

Yes you. Yes, now. Yes here. The kingdom of God is in our midst.

## Mid-Year Evaluation Forms

The ELCA has revised the intern mid-year and final evaluation forms. For supervisors and lay committee members who have used previous forms, this change may seem cumbersome at first. You will have to go to the following web site to obtain those forms.

[http://plts.luthersem.edu/cli/internship/eval\\_forms.asp](http://plts.luthersem.edu/cli/internship/eval_forms.asp)

Interns, please be prepared for the mid-year reporting process by going to this web site and downloading the forms. Your pastor and committee will appreciate your leadership with the technology. Please give Laure Schwartz a call if you have difficulty with the new forms (651/641-3266). Reminder, those who started in June, your mid-year evaluations are due approximately in December.

## Faith-based Community Organizing

### FOR YOUR RESPONSE

Part of what we hope to encourage through the Contextual Leadership Initiative is the opportunity for students to experience and learn about faith-based community organizing and in doing so to explore how and to what extent such involvement contributes to preparation for ministry and strengthens the mission of the church. I am aware that some, perhaps many, of you have had experience with faith based community organizing. As we think about making that a more integral part of our work in the CLI, we would be helped by hearing about your experiences and your thoughts about that experience. I invite you to e-mail your thoughts to me at

[rnelson@luthersem.edu](mailto:rnelson@luthersem.edu) or write them up and send them to me. Thanks for your help.

Randy A. Nelson, Director

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## NEW LAY INTERN COMMITTEE WEB SITE:

[www.plts.luthersem.edu/cli/internship/lay\\_committee.asp](http://www.plts.luthersem.edu/cli/internship/lay_committee.asp)

To strengthen our communication with the Lay Intern Committee, we have a new web site that provides guidance for the committee as well as a downloadable handbook. We have added a new feature to this site which asks for information about your committee members—i.e. name and e-mail address. You can find this form at the following web site -

[http://plts.luthersem.edu/cli/internship/committee\\_info.asp](http://plts.luthersem.edu/cli/internship/committee_info.asp)

Please encourage your committee members to complete and submit it back to the Contextual Leadership Initiative office electronically. This is a very simple form with a “submit” button!! Having committee members’ e-mail addresses will allow us to send them the newsletter. I can also e-mail your committee members the link to the mid-year evaluation forms and help them with the process.

## December Issue Topics

- Church Budgets, How do they work?
- Stewardship Council Survey on the book, Speaking of Stewardship