

Context: Where Call and Culture Meet

First Call Theological Education

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Christ the King Retreat Center

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Reading Congregations and Their Contexts

- **The Myths:** "If you build it, they will come" and "One size fits all"

At first these may seem to be obviously false statements, but I begin with them because I think that all too often when it comes to our identities as leaders working for change and for contextualization in the church, we can easily fall prey to one or both of these myths. We want our congregations and their ministries to grow - to reflect the rich contexts represented within them and in the surrounding culture at large. This is a wonderful, God-given desire.

But...how can we make it happen? What can we do to make the changes our congregations need? Ah...the first myth - namely that you and I as leaders can "make it happen" or do what needs to be done for the good of the congregation all by ourselves. The contextualization of a congregation's ministries is **not** something that we as leaders **cause** or **make happen** in our congregations. Rather it is something that we as leaders facilitate **in and with** our congregations. Just as the ministries in our congregations are not our possessions as leaders, but belong to all the people and to God, so also the pathways toward authentic contextualized ministries must be traveled together by all the people and their leaders in faithfulness to God's calling to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. So...if we are serious as congregational leaders about the contextualizing of our calls to ministry, we must first recognize that even if we build "the perfect" ministry approach or program in isolation, chances are, the ones we most wish to include will not come. Contextualized ministries are mutual ministries.

Which brings us to the "One size fits all..." myth. Now as a professor and a scholar, I have a lot of respect and love for books. And, as a systematic theologian, I have a similar respect for and confidence in a well functioning system of thought or action. But sometimes, we can fall prey to believing **too much** in a book, a program or a system that someone else has developed. You know what I mean. Perhaps we as leaders, see a well-functioning, powerful ministry at another congregation. We think we should try the same thing in our congregation and then wonder why it didn't work out. Or, we try to follow the steps for success outlined in something we read, and wonder why we meet only a lack of enthusiasm from our church communities for this innovative approach. When it comes to contextualization, it is most certainly true that one size, one program, one approach does not always, or even usually fit all situations. What works across town or across the street may not precisely fit the contexts in which you and your congregation do ministry. Am I suggesting that there is no value in reading books about congregational studies, contextualization approaches, or outreach strategies? **I am not**. I am suggesting, however, that this kind of study is not the end of the work, but only the prelude to some next steps. Developing and implementing contextual ministries takes study, prayer, and something else: **fieldwork**. It is to one approach to this kind of necessary fieldwork that we now turn our attention.

- **Observing Your Congregation And Its Contexts**

Much of what I am going to talk about next reflects a process I have developed for teaching a first-year course at PLTS called "Reading Congregations." In this course, participants make site visits to a variety of Sunday church services [both Lutheran and other Christian denominations] and make notes of their observations about the church's physical space and the congregation's neighborhood; about worship leadership and participation; and about theological

language and congregational pieties. We do this for the sake of developing skills of observation and reflection that allow us to "know or read" a congregation from the inside out. We work hard to become astute observers of congregations as they function in their own contexts so that we can reflect together in the classroom about leadership styles and theologies of ministry and mission that might "fit" a particular congregation and its contexts. Rather than developing models of ministry and mission and imposing them on congregations, our course begins with the congregation and its contexts, and on the basis of what we learn, attempts to deduce effective practices for ministry and mission in that particular context.

I want to suggest that something similar to our work in the "Reading Congregations" class could be helpful for your own work as called leaders engaged in mission and contextualized ministry as well. Now, be careful - this is not a new "one size fits all" system - rather it is a way of learning about your congregation and its contexts that honors the particularity and the strengths of your community. It can also help to disclose particular challenges and obstacles your community may face as it seeks to live into authentically contextualized ministry in its location. To know a particular community's strengths, gifts, challenges, and obstacles will go a long way, I believe, toward helping that community and its leadership travel a path that embraces contextualized ministries that are authentic to the members and concerns of that community; that are responsive and welcoming to those the community wishes to serve; and faithful to God's call to be the body of Christ in the world.

So...as we take a look at the handout together, please have your own congregation in mind. And one further suggestion - just so that we don't fall prey to myth #1 - this fieldwork, this research, is best done not by you alone, but by an interested group of congregational members who seek to find ways toward contextualizing the ministries in which they are engaged. So, while you keep your

congregation in mind, also be thinking of those members you could invite into the following process:

- **Looking at the Neighborhood** - After checking the census website, take a walk [don't drive] around the immediate area surrounding your congregation. What do you see? What kinds of housing are available in your neighborhood? Are there businesses in your neighborhood? Schools? Other public buildings? What other communities of faith are represented in your neighborhood? What languages and cultures are represented in your neighborhood? Make detailed notes to share with the other observers.
- **Looking at Congregational Spaces** - Take time to look at your congregation's physical plant, both inside and out. What did you observe about the physical setting and its location? Is there sufficient parking? Is the entrance clearly marked and accessible for those with disabilities? How is the worship space organized and utilized? Are there places for children to learn and to play? Make a rough drawing of the worship space. Are there specific observations you made about the physical space [inside and out] that help you understand how sacred space is created in your congregation? In what ways do the physical spaces of your congregation reflect the community's Lutheran identity? Make detailed notes to share with the other observers.
- **Looking at Congregational Leadership/Participation** - Choose a Sunday morning and ask the observation group members to pay particular attention to the dynamics of worship leadership and participation. What do you notice about the worship event itself? How is it organized with regard to sequence? What do you observe about the worship leaders, the worshipers and their participation? Are there specific observations that you made about worship participation that can help you understand what worship means to your congregation? In what ways does the worship service reflect your congregation's Lutheran identity?
Engage in the same observational exercises at a church council meeting, a congregational meeting, and an educational event.
- **Looking at Congregational Theologies and Pieties** - As a group, look carefully at the publications available to your congregational members. Pay particular attention to the Sunday morning worship bulletin. What do you observe about the language and theological content of this worship service [hymns, liturgy, sermon, prayers]? How was God spoken about in

the readings, the sermon and the prayers? Are there specific observations that you can make that help you understand who God is for your congregation, and how your congregations understands how God works in the world? In what ways do the theological language and content of this worship service reflect a Lutheran identity?

After completing this exercise, ask each member of the observation group to reflect individually about the following questions: How would you describe your own worship history? Are you a lifelong Lutheran or a more recent Lutheran? What kind(s) of worshipping communities [Lutheran and non-Lutheran] have you been a part of before coming to this congregation? How has this congregation influenced the ways in which you think about God, God's activity in the world, and about your own life of faith and discipleship? Invite those who are willing to share their reflections.

- **Thinking Theologically About What You Have Observed**
 - Who is my neighbor?
 - Explicit and Implicit Theologies -- Congregational Spaces
 - Explicit and Implicit Theologies - Congregational Leadership/Participation
 - Explicit and Implicit Theologies - Congregational Language and Pieties
 - Small Group Exercise - Looking at the Sunday Bulletin
 - Large Group Discussion

- **Toward Contextually Authentic Congregational Ministries**
 - Leave the myths behind! - Contextual ministries are mutual
 - Opt for achievable goals - Contextual ministries take time to mature
 - Value partnership - Contextual ministries are joint ventures
 - Evaluate, evaluate, evaluate - Contextual ministries are adaptive

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Helpful Additional Resources:

- *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook*, edited by Nancy Ammerman et. al., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998. A helpful text in a workbook style to help pastors and lay leaders reflect upon the many cultural contexts operative both outside a congregation and inside its walls.
- *It Comes from the People: Community Development and Local Theology*, by Mary Ann Hinsdale, et al. Temple University Press: 1995. An excellent discussion of ways to organize a faith community for both awareness of and action in a local context.
- <http://hrr.hartsem.edu>. The Hartford Seminary Institute for Religion Research website. A thorough bibliography of available resources for congregations and pastors involved in developing/enhancing contextual ministries.
- <http://www.census.gov>. With some effort, this can be a very usable site for amassing data regarding the populations, economic bases, and educational interfaces in one's community, region, and state.