

Speaking for the Church—Speaking to the Church

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Who speaks on behalf the church?

Augsburg 2009 marked an historical event in the life of the Department of Theology and Studies (DTS) of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). This consultation, the closing one in a series of seminars held throughout the world, brought together theologians from around the world, from various socioeconomic, religio-political, cultural, ethnic and gender realities to reflect on how different faith experiences and theological perspectives can become an enabling and transformative Lutheran theology in the twenty-first century. It is the apex of a process that formally began in 1995, when the Council of the LWF, meeting in Namibia, received the “Ten Theses on the Role of Theology in the LWF” drafted by the Program Committee for Theology and Studies. This seminal document stated that, unlike the way in which theology had hitherto been practiced in the LWF (with DTS producing and disseminating theology), the times called for theology to be done by way of connecting local theological knowledge, produced throughout the whole of the communion, to (a) give expression to theology in the life of the churches and (b) to offer guidance that could orient and correct the ministry of the church as it carried out its missions. As theses 6 and 7 succinctly state:

6. In the history of the LWF as a communion of diverse churches, the awareness of the tension between the gospel that hold us together, and the diversity with which we express it, grew as a creative challenge for both the self-understanding of the LWF as a communion and its theological practice.

7. This challenge offers new opportunities for the exercise of theology in the LWF through which the communion will be promoted if, and only if, these characteristics of a theological practice are followed: a) the LWF offers itself as a place for different articulations of diverse experiences; b) as a catalyst for innovation within theologies in different contexts; and c) as a guarantor of both the diversity and of the necessity of expressing commonalities.¹

What was envisioned at the time was to continue carrying out theological studies in the LWF despite the substantially reduced availability of financial and human resources. This situation offered the possibility to reimagine theological formation in and for the life of the churches. The culmination of this process, as witnessed in the 2009 Augsburg consultation and the earlier events that had led up to it, evinced a tension that the churches of the Reformation inherited from their inception: the Reformation was not about reforming theology, but about “re-forming” (in sense of reshaping) the church, for sake of a renewed formation. Theology is a function of this re-forming.

¹ The theses were formulated by the Program Committee for Theology and Studies at its meeting in 1995 and were reproduced, in Wolfgang Greive (ed.), *Between Vision and Reality: Lutheran Churches in Transition*, LWF Documentation 47/2001 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2001), pp. 497–98. They are also available at http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/Dts/DTS-Welcome.html .

Exercising this function implies certain questions of power. Who speaks for the church? Who holds the authority to “present” it in the public sphere? Who “authors” its claims of legitimacy? Speaking for the church implies: to speak as church, as the authoritative voice of the church, as *ecclesia docens*, the teaching church, and to speak to the church, addressing it and correcting it, as *ecclesia discens*, the learning church.²

Communion takes place in this tension between the teaching church that speaks and the learning church that is spoken to, but only as far as this tension is maintained. In other words, communion is the event that takes place in the actual interface between the teachings of the church (its dogmatic function) and its mission (its receptive function). If teaching means being faithful to the apostolic witness, mission means listening to the other and speaking back to the church.

An example here may be helpful. When Paul uses *koinonia* in Galatians 2,³ the pillars of the church of Jerusalem (Cephas, John and James) were speaking as the church, but Paul, because of his mission to the uncircumcised, was speaking to the church. In that tense meeting, *koinonia* happened even without settling the differences in theological or dogmatic convictions. The pillars spoke as the church; Paul, from a mission perspective, spoke to the church for the sake of the people. The one feature that kept the communion together was that they agreed to remember those who were considered the least, those who had the face and the wounds of Jesus.⁴

We are truly inheritors of the Reformation not only because of our theological formulations, but above all, because the audacious spirit with which we speak as and speak to. In that sense, we become points of intersection. In this crossing, the feeble, unstable and weak (re)formation of the community of the cross happens. Tension, conflict and strife are not transitional moments in the process of finding new stable ground and settling there. The Reformation itself survives insofar as this audacious spirit keeps on breathing life into the church. In the spirit of the Reformation, there is no guaranteed stable ground for the church to be church, but it is on this unstable ground between the church and challenges of its mission that communion ensues. This is precisely what is meant by the expression *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est* (the reformed church is always to be reformed), which was coined later.

How did this come about? It came about at the moment when those who spoke as church, its magisterium, had to be spoken to; they had to be held accountable on the basis

² See Vitor Westhelle, *The Church Event: Call and Challenge of a Church Protestant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), p. 56

³ See the chapter by Barbara Rossing in this publication, pp. *ibid.*

⁴ Barbara Rossing, “Models of *Koinonia* in the new Testament and Early Church,” in Heinrich Holze (ed.) *The Church as Communion: Lutheran Contributions to Ecclesiology*, LWF Documentation 42/1997 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1997), pp. 65–80.

of the foundation of their legitimacy, the very apostolic witness which they claimed as the very basis for speaking as church. The theological voices of protest were raised by those who experienced in their lives the transforming power of God's Word (this is all that *sola scriptura* means). Experience, indeed, makes a theologian, as Luther pointed out. Certainly, the Reformation did not separate speaking as from speaking to, much less cancel the former. One cannot exist without the other: the teaching church needs simultaneously to be a learning church. Speaking to is already speaking as and vice versa. Nevertheless, the distinction is important because one of these "voices" at any given moment takes the commanding tone: there is a time to teach and a time to learn.

The picture and the proxy

Over the second half of the millennium times changed. Today, hardly a theologian, church representative, or office in the tradition of the Reformation would claim to be speaking as the church. Yet, the same attitude, grounded in a claim to an entitled voice, was present among the participants at Augsburg 2009. It is recognizable when the commanding, magisterial tone of theological discourse presents a case in the same way that a picture purports to describe something. The "picture" is framed by what supports its claim to the truth, such as Luther's writings, the confessions, ecumenical agreements, a tradition, a liturgical practice, a philosophical foundation, an epiphany, and so forth. It can be quite impressive and elaborate, very inclusive and sophisticated, detailed and clearly to the point. If one accepts what is portrayed in it, there may be no dispute as to its representational accuracy. However, the frame always excludes something, cutting off that which is deemed unimportant or irrelevant. In speaking to, there is always also a speaking for, on behalf of that which the frame leaves outside the "picture."

The other theological voice comes through those who represent or are a proxy for something or someone, standing in for those realities the frame excludes. This voice claims the right for inclusion, or at least contests the hegemonic function of the portrait. When this happens, we have the spirit of reform at work and the tension that (re)forms community. When these two are unhinged, and the "picture" is impermeable to anything else, we have fundamentalism and all other forms of authoritarianism. When we have only the "proxy" attitude without any claim to a place in the picture we have anarchy. If the "proxy" voice frames an alternative picture, then we have sectarianism. But when the two are in a tensile relation then we have disputation, controversy, revolt or, hopefully, a conversation, which means "to keep company with," "to turn about with."

This conversation, which may include revolt, controversy, or protest is what was evident in the "texture" being woven at Augsburg 2009 and the communion that took place there. Distinct voices could be heard in the discussions after the lectures, in the seminars, group discussion and personal exchanges. While the lectures were attempts to hold the hinges in place with an emphasis either on the "picture" or on the "proxy" side, occasional interventions lifted up the distinct tonalities of the two voices that I refer to as the conversational parties that make Reformation a living event.

The axes of conversation

This conversation runs along different axes in which we can identify elements of the tensile polarity between speaking as and speaking to the church for sake of the people:

Methodological axis: This is about the operational principle at work: text vs context; acculturation vs inculturation; academic vs practical; center vs margin; proclamation vs dialogue; theory vs praxis; one vs many; unity vs diversity; the solid vs the fluid; stability vs instability; disciplinary vs interdisciplinarity; and so on.

Thematic axis: The topic or theme here is Ariadne's thread: purity vs hybridity; dissemination vs networking; confessionalism vs ecumenism; colonialism vs postcolonialism; orthodoxy vs orthopraxis; outreach vs indigenization; Luther scholars vs biblical scholars; systematic vs pastoral theology; anthropocentrism vs environmentalism; straight vs gay; liturgical rigor vs spontaneity; biblical literalism vs secularism; formalism vs event; and so on.

Geographical axis: Here the topics reflect the emerging awareness of the planetary dimensions of Lutheranism. Topics included West vs East; North vs South; global vs local; cosmopolitan vs parochial; and so on.

Institutional axis: Tensions here are between hierarchy vs egalitarianism; academia vs community; church vs society; conservative vs liberal; liberalism vs liberation.

These poles that carry the position of the "picture" and the "proxy" happen at different levels. This is something that is commonly observed at international meetings as well as in local contexts, very much like the dynamics in a family, or even in one's own personal experience, when we have cognitive dissonance, the process by which our mind keeps changing, evincing that we are still alive.

The opposing sides in these pairings in the four axes identified above are not static, but unstable and full of tensions. The forms of representation—whether picture or proxy—slide as on a slippery slope and, depending on the context, the sides might be changed. For example, in some contexts, literalism may be the "picture" (as for some Evangelicalism in the USA), while secular liberalism carries the voice of the "proxy;" while in others it is the reverse (for many mainline Protestants in the USA).

"To each tribe its scribe" conveys the contextually bound character of this equation between the two forms of representation. Within these contexts, there is relative stability—because no context is hermetic and globalization has made them ever more porous. Within these "tribal" contexts, conversation is also relatively stable. Contexts can be defined, among other things, by the fact that they administer dissent. Complications occur when contexts of relative stability encounter other contexts in which the "picture" and the "proxy" are different. Then, what in one context might be the "picture" turns into

the “proxy” and vice versa. This is what happened at Augsburg 2009, where people from every corner of the world came together.

Hegemonic overdeterminations

Who spoke as and who spoke to, and how was that decided in this multi-contextual meeting? The first set of factors is related to entitlement. One of these is the official language utilized, English, which entitles some to a better command of the discursive practice. Other factors of entitlement are symbolic and carry genealogical weight, in this case, the historic city of Augsburg, Germany, the birthplace of the most acclaimed confessional document of world Lutheranism. Genealogies establish birthrights which, in turn, generate entitlement (e.g., in the references to “our Luther”) and lay claim to a preferential tradition (five hundred years on the European continent—which, admittedly, is significantly more than in any other part of the world). A further entitlement is the control over disciplinary borders (e.g., what is allowed and demanded by what is called “Luther research,” history, biblical exegesis, etc.). This set of entitlement factors interfaces with power—political, economic and ideological resources—which was amassed by the North Atlantic world during and through the colonial enterprise. In summary, if we put these elements together, we have hegemony, i.e., power linked to entitlement. This produces overdetermination, in which one pole overrules the opposing pole, regardless of its intrinsic claim to legitimacy. The first term in the above axes is likely to define the contours of the hegemonic position to the extent that the categories fit. The second term is likely to define those who have limited power and little claim to entitlement. So, in a multi-contextual environment, those who identify with the second set of terms are likely to speak to hegemony, on behalf of the communities they represent. Even back home they probably are the ones who hold the “picture” and set the frame. In other words, a hegemonic position at home might turn into a subaltern one abroad.

The good news is that this intercontextual conversation is happening in the midst of and because of our differences. This superb example of communion is happening for at least three reasons. First, when challenged to expand its picture of what is Lutheran, the very hegemonic center came to realize that what it had was indeed an idiosyncratic picture bound to a given context and framed by its limits. This is European theology becoming aware of its own contextuality.

The second reason is the mirror image of the first. To a certain extent, those who are the theological subalterns of European (and later North American) Lutheranism are eager to learn it, because this knowledge gives them leverage in addressing hegemony. Postcolonial studies have shown that the subalterns are more adroit at reading the entrails of hegemony, than the hegemons are at reading the subaltern.

However, the third reason is more pertinent: the voices that speak to and for have become more audible. If half a century ago, the Lutheran presence outside the North Atlantic axis was all but negligible, today at least forty percent are already outside Europe and North America—and they are growing at a fast pace. When we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the majority of those who can claim a legitimate

invitation to the banquet probably will be outside of the traditional axis of Lutheranism. Lutheranism is migrating *en masse*, and the father of the German language is now speaking many tongues. Luther's figure is being transfigured. Catchwords of the Reformation assume new meanings, with theological as well as social, economic and political overtones (e.g., "Here I stand!"). This is what DTS recognized more than a decade ago. It has responded to the challenge, which resulted in the Augsburg 2009, a panoply of people and voices. Here the networking that was envisioned happened; here the tapestry into which we are woven produced new and beautiful patterns.

What did not happen? Deficits

The hypothesis laid out at the beginning of this summary is that the intercontextual conversation happening in the midst of and because of our differences is imbued with the very spirit of the Reformation. This spirit was described as the tense encounter between the voice that speaks as church and the one that speaks to church and for the people, breathing life into the body of the communion. As times have changed, the content of the debates over the centuries, the tonality of the voices represented and the tension into which they are inscribed testify to the same spirit, and indeed the spirit of restlessness that enlivens.

By its very nature, true conversation is always and by definition an event that ends in a deficit, and in this deficit lies the key to what still needs to be talked about. Some of them became evident and remain on the agenda to be pursued as we continue to converse. For example, there is a need to deepen and broaden our eschatology to other questions. Probably we need to move into such questions as, Where is/are the *eschaton/eschata*? Where are the dead? Where is hell? There was also a certain amount of uneasiness with regard to probing more deeply into the question of sexuality. Further, the ecological challenge requires reexamination so as not to be cast primarily as a so-called First World agenda. What is a so-called Third World agenda for understanding how humans relate to the rest of creation? A similar issue that often cuts across latitudinal lines is the dialogue with people of other faiths. This dialogue will increasingly be a challenge. Consider the upcoming scenario: not only are increasing numbers of Lutherans migrating to traditionally non-Lutheran parts of the planet, but the majority of Lutherans in the global South will be members of churches in places where they are small minorities in relation to other faiths, particularly in Asia and parts of Africa. If communion happens in the tension between church teachings and the challenges of mission, what will communion mean in these contexts? What was also surprising was the absence of a discussion about Lutheran theology and economy, particularly in this crucial crisis of unprecedented global scope. While the last day was dedicated to topics related to church and state, theology and society, little attention was given to the relationship between the church and political regimes, particularly in the context of Islamic states (which is related to the upcoming majority-minority challenge). There was also deficit in the discussion of theology and its relation to church structure. Is it enough (*satis est*) to call upon Article VII of the *Confessio Augustana* to settle the issues pertaining to church structure, ministry and practices?

These deficits are symptoms signaling emerging challenges that invite us to further conversations, even if it is to revision old, unsettled disputes. Conversation that evinces the life-giving spirit that animated and continues to animate the Reformation movement here and now, breathes life into the body communion.

Trajectories: Where from here?

I called the Augsburg 2009 an apex or culmination of a process begun more than a decade ago. But culminations are not terminations. They resemble a summit in a mountain range. Once one is climbed, it is time to go down and to plan for the next, maybe even higher peak. What counts is the hiking and the climbing. The conversation needs to be ongoing.

If the practice of communion and spirit of the Reformation are to keep on giving life to the people of God, the task ahead is to take heed of what has been accomplished, make a note of what has not been addressed satisfactorily, and be attentive to the signs of the time and places where tensions arise and the promise of community abides. When and where we meet to keep the conversation going, the labor is in weaving the tapestry until all strands are woven together. In what has been accomplished we realize how much more is left to be done. The lack of good communication, or the exasperation at not having someone agree with us on what seems an obvious point can easily bring the conversation to a halt. Not allowing that to happen is the challenge to which we all are called.

John 20, recounts the well-known story of doubting Thomas, a person for whom I have deep sympathy. He was not there when the disciples were gathered and Jesus came into their midst. He had not seen what the others had already seen. Asking for evidence of a claim that is rather unlikely is not too much to ask. He probably thought that his friends were delusional, were trying to fool him, or were simply nuts. This would be the perfect reason for him to keep some distance to those less than reliable people. But the text continues: "A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them." This is the center of the Thomas story. No matter how much in disagreement he was with his comrades, he did not give up the conversation. Thus a communion was born.