

Whirlwind Redux

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When I went back to school to do my doctorate at the beginning of this millennium, I felt like I was in the midst of the whirlwind of transition. And I was as we were starting to fully appreciate the transitions of postmodernity on culture and congregations. That sense led to a collaborative dissertation titled *Thriving in the Whirlwind*, co-authored with my Oates Institute colleague Vicki Hollon. After my journey through these last eight months, I feel like an even bigger storm is coming ashore.

It has been an interesting year as I have encountered cultural transitions pushing my learning curve to adapt. It has been a year of converging experiences pushing a sense of urgency in learning. I started the year leading an Oates Institute online seminar on Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix. This is an area that I have been working with for a number of years now but one of the joys of the Connected Learning approach used for the Oates Institute seminars is that it feeds the reality that we are all teachers and learners all of the time. After three weeks of intense dialogue—the kind where collaborative exploration and insight contribute to an expanding flow of meaning—all of our heads were spinning with new horizons and opportunities. We knew that we needed to continue the conversation and the exploration. So we scheduled a continuation seminar for a time when the group could come back together, which also meant that I had to create another seminar that went on to the next level. At the same time, I encountered Rex Miller's book, *The Millennium Matrix: Reclaiming the Past, Reframing the Future of the Church* (2004) as part of the future thinking dialogue of the SACEM board as we gave thought to the future of the organization and lifelong learning for ministry. What struck me in Miller's perspective was his application of communications theory to understand transitions taking place in culture and congregations. His narrative that "the medium is the worldview," rang true to my experience and intuition. It also rang true to what I heard from my Drew students and from the group of ministers that participated in the Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix seminar. At the same time, Donald Tapscott's new book, *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (2006) had just come out (released the last week of 2006). I found a couple of his earlier books, *Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation* (1998) and *The Digital Economy: Promise and Peril of Networked Intelligence* (1996) to be extremely valuable, so I was eager to get into his latest. While I had been following some of the conversations around the development of the Web 2.0 technologies, including Wikipedia and YouTube, I had not really had time to pay close attention to what was actually happening. Even though I work in cyberspace as a theological educator and an online program developer, which puts me on the cutting edge in theological education, I quickly discovered that my perspective and my skill set had become outdated. That is a startling revelation for an innovator. It was with a new sense of urgency that I received the announcement about an education technologies conference that I try to participate in at least every other year. The theme was "Voyaging into a New Era," just what I needed. Among other things, it included my introduction to some of the educational work being done by the New Media Consortium (made up of a collection of universities) in the simulated world of Second Life and some connections to some new open source platforms that are coming into use on the Web.

As part of an online seminar that Vicki Hollon and I put together in 2004 on "Thriving in the Whirlwind: Developing a Lifelong Learning Plan," we wrote: As the musical group REM sings, "It is the end of the world as we know it," we know in our gut that they are right. We may not be able to understand it all or even fully identify the reasons. The one thing we know for sure is that our world is in the midst of a whirlwind of transition that affects everything. The challenge is to keep up with the transitions in order to provide meaningful ministry, to adapt our theological explanations to the current context, and to equip congregational participants for the practice of faith and ministry relevant to these days. The challenge is simply discovering ways to learn-unlearn-relearn adeptly enough to survive the changes. Leonard Sweet (1998) writes: "Where education was once thought of as a period of preparation for a lifetime of work, it is now seen as a lifetime of preparation for various work assignments. Perhaps the most important law of ecology is this: $L > C$. It means that to survive, an organism's rate of learning must be equal to or greater than the rate of change in the environment. That is why the "learning organization" metaphor must be as applicable to church life as it is to corporate life." (*Eleven Genetic Gateways to Spiritual Awakening*, p. 47-48) A convergence of opportunities/challenges emerges in our own opportunity/challenge as an organization of theological educators committed to lifelong learning for ministry. How do we create an organizational context that facilitates a community of learning and collaboration that advances opportunities for lifelong learning for ministry and advances our ability to equip congregational leaders through those opportunities to meet the leadership opportunities/challenges of five generation congregations that span three major communications eras? In part, that is what has prompted the approach that we have taken in the renovation of SACEM Online as an interactive, community environment. We have implemented a platform that offers a lot of possibilities. I anticipate a fascinating journey as SACEM voyages into the next era; although it will involve a lot of learning and some risk taking. But then, we are a learning community that recognizes that we are all teachers and learners all of the time.