

## Reflections on the 2008 Annual Conference

Last Updated Friday, 22 August 2008

### Lifelong Learning: Challenges and Opportunities in a Digital Age

Around the theme of "Lifelong Learning: Challenges and Opportunities in a Digital Age," Dr. Mary Hess of Luther Seminary in Minneapolis stimulated reflection and discussion among participants with her two keynote presentations. In her presentations she shared YouTube videos and other web sites to demonstrate the extensive social networking and digital culture ethos which influences, and even pervades our present educational contexts.

Some of her ongoing work on learning in the digital age ("Can we risk being learners?"), and her recommendations are represented in this list:

- Discern what is a technical challenge and what is an adaptive one
- Gather at watering holes and avoid tar pits
- Tap the creativity of the "miscellaneous"
- Enter into storying
- Share resources widely
- Err on the side of openness and access
- Reflective practice
- Multi-layered leadership

You may visit her evocative website and its blogs at <http://www.luthersem.edu/mhess/web/Home.html> . Also, find her powerpoint slides from the SACEM at this link: <http://wiki.religioused.org/CC/HomePage>

The Conference validated that leaders in lifelong learning are experiencing a bewildering complexity of challenges and opportunities in these early years of the 21st century:

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An explosion of media and technology-based learning systems affecting every aspect of life and ministry

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Growth to dominance of digital culture, including all its gifts and liabilities

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Generational and cultural barriers and alienation in churches and communities, with greater challenge to cross-generational and cross-cultural communication and engagement

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Economic challenges and injustices deeply affecting institutions providing continuing education, all in context of a fractured and violent world

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Globalization as never before experienced, bringing new awareness and new griefs, as we seek to discern God's work in the world and our distinctive part in it

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Evocative faith-community movements related to the "emerging, ancient-new church"; as many seek to move beyond "worship wars";

As promised, the gathering offered multiple opportunities for reflection on this question:

How do we discern ministry programs, peer colleague projects, deeply personal yet distance-spanning learning appropriate for the 21st century church? Steve Simmons, newly elected secretary of the SACEM Board, summarizes some of the comments made during one roundtable discussion, these by Seminary-related educators at the conference:

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An overarching theme was the continuing process of moving beyond the "classical" theological disciplines and models of education to encompass new subject areas and constituencies.

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Princeton sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow has argued that the main reason mainline denominations aren't in greater decline than they are is the ongoing presence of the arts in their worship and other aspects of congregational life. This indicates a rich vein for continuing education - "training the imagination" for the church.

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Even as the need for continuing education is becoming increasingly evident in every field, continuing educators in theology often find themselves increasingly marginalized at their own institutions. We are constantly in the position of negotiating with faculty about the relevance and importance of what we do, and of continually attempting to assess what people want (of course, this last is just part of the territory, but it becomes both more imperative and more difficult with accelerating shifts in church and culture).

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In line with this, peer learning among continuing educators has been an ongoing theme at this SACEM meeting, and it is clear that we do form a community of practice and interest.

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Perhaps we need to think increasingly in terms of identifying and appealing to niche markets, and to consider changing our criterion for success from "big" to "sublime";- sometimes it's best to do invitation-only events for small groups, and to do resource-lean programs.

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Along similar lines, it will probably serve us well to move from the episodic to the formative and extended in much of our programming; it is tempting to do a succession of "neat things" that we hope will appeal to people but that may not have much coherence or formative power over the long haul.

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We need to be more attuned to what lay people are doing in CE outside the church. There is a vast, informal network of continuing ed out there that is usually off our radar screens.

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An ongoing concern has to do with forming more dense and creative links between seminaries and congregations, especially in view of the rise of the "teaching congregation" as a source of theological education.

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Select Multimedia Resources has been a great tool for exposing Lutheran congregations to seminary professors via video, and has been part of the ethos of the ELCA for some time. Note: It remains the case that much of what happens in the congregation vis a vis Christian education is shaped by the interests and concerns of the pastor.

Additional evaluative comments about the Conference, which was broadly appreciated as evidence of a newly energized commitment to the value of SACEM, included these, as summarized by Janet Maykus, our new Vice-President:

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Announce dates and plans for Conferences two years in advance

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Allow more time to network informally and in guided sessions

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Provide more handouts

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Give more online/distance/connected learning options

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Concern for financing and expense of holding the gatherings

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High endorsement of the networking and collaborative efforts manifest in the gathering

Additional highlights of the Conference 2008 included a panel led by Bruce Roberts, including Robert Reber and Janet Maykus, featuring reflections by those who have worked with Lilly's peer colleague programs; worship celebrations, including Taize prayer and a closing Eucharist; a 40th Anniversary Banquet honoring founders of SACEM, hosted at Trinity School of Theology by outgoing SACEM President Dick Bruesehoff; New Directors Pre-Conference

Seminar; practical workshops on an array of topics; the Business Meeting and Elections, with gratitude expressed to outgoing officers/Board members Rev. Dick Bruesehoff and Dr. Marvin Morgan.