

## An Outlook into the Future and the Implications for the ELCA - Quo vadis ELCA?

This global crisis has left us with a global landscape that has been transformed. Only a few years ago, the global economy was riding a wave of robust and widespread expansion where there was some considerable progress made on the fight against poverty and inequality. Events of the last two years have changed this outlook with progress stalled or reversed and millions pushed back into extreme poverty.

### **What is the impact of the global financial crisis on developing countries?**

The transmission of the economic downturn from rich to poor countries has occurred through a number of channels. This global crisis put pressure on all important sources of revenues for developing countries – with significant effects on their economies and on the most vulnerable people living in them.

There will be long-term implications for developing countries:

**Exports:** In developing countries, which are far more dependent on trade for growth, exports shrank by double digits.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, many thousands of trade related jobs are lost.

**Remittances:** Remittances provide a lifeline to many poor vulnerable people and help alleviate poverty. Remittances to developing countries plummeted by more than 20 percent in 2009.<sup>2</sup> In terms of remittances, Latin American countries have been most negatively affected as a large percentage of the remittances to Latin America comes from the US based Hispanic population. Remittances to South Asia and East Asia have also slowed down.

### **The Future and its Global Challenges:**

As the crisis and its challenges take on an increasingly global nature, the world also takes on a new economic power configuration. New global players, such as China, India, and Brazil have emerged. This new configuration requires robust institutions that can convene powers, old and new, to reach effective development solutions that solve **global challenges**.

For instance, with only five years remaining before the deadline to reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), there is an urgent need to intensify efforts to achieve these targets. Efforts will especially need to be intensified in Africa, where by 2015, 38 percent of the population or 366 million people; will be living on less than \$1.25 per day.<sup>3</sup>

**Global Public Goods:** One of the most daunting challenges is climate change. As the world is struggling to cope with the effects of climate change, there is a huge difficulty in identifying the basis for durable, equitable, and effective global agreement. Other complex interactions include

<sup>1</sup> Source: World Bank - Development Data Platform (DDP)

<sup>2</sup> Source: World Bank - Development Data Platform (DDP)

<sup>3</sup> Global Economic Prospects, 2010

the need to strengthen the global financial and trading system, the concern for agriculture and food security, and the need to find solutions to address water scarcity and security. Special attention should be given to the challenge of promoting stability in fragile and post-conflict environments, which create risks that can cross borders—through civil conflicts, risks to public health, and humanitarian crises.

***Promoting an environmentally and socially sustainable poverty alleviation process:***

Another major challenge on the global level (with repercussions for the US) is to protect against irreversible environmental damages such as biodiversity loss, collapse of fisheries, and water pollution. Demand for energy, for example, in developing countries is expected to increase dramatically over the next two decades, as 1.6 billion people still lack access to electricity today.<sup>4</sup> Meeting these energy needs in an environmentally sustainable manner is an urgent but very difficult challenge.

One thing that the financial crisis has highlighted is the ***importance of robust social safety nets***. Safety net programs such as Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) or school grants have played a critical role in helping the people who have been hardest hit. Moving ahead, design and implementation of programs for food, health, education, maternal and child health will take on even greater importance.

***Reassessing the role of government and institutions:*** After years of debate over big versus small government, what the global crisis drives home is the importance of having *effective* government and effective institutions. There is growing recognition that committed, credible, relevant and capable governments and institutions will play a critical role in shaping the future.

**What do these new challenges mean for our local communities and where does the ELCA fit in?**

The current recession marked unprecedented changes in the lives of ordinary Americans, our congregations, our Church, our communities, and our neighbors. There are a few I would like to highlight.

Young adults have been and will continue to be the hardest hit group by the recession. Young adult unemployment levels are now almost three times the national average.<sup>5</sup> This is bringing an increased need for social services which are progressively being cut. There will be consequences on emotional and mental health of our young.

Unsurprisingly, the growing unemployment rate among the young has not been distributed equally along race and wealth lines. Places once occupied by the least affluent have simply been carved out. I have read the phrase that this “is not an equal opportunity recession.” A

<sup>4</sup> World Bank: Designing Sustainable Off-Grid Rural Electrification Projects: Principles and Practices, Nov 2008

<sup>5</sup> New York Post, September 29, 2009

recent Northwestern University study states, “If you are both low-income and black or low-income and [Latino], you have lost the most<sup>6</sup>.”

Many older people find themselves in financial distress as well. Results from a 2009 University of Michigan survey<sup>7</sup> indicate that about 65 percent of workers ages 50 to 61 expect to be working full-time when they reach age 62 and that over 55 percent of workers ages 50 to 64 expect to be working full-time when they reach age 65 - definitely an increase over previous years. *Do we find ourselves or our pastors in these figures?*

Another area of concern should be the overall health of the population. Household expenditure on health has almost always fallen during crises increasing the reliance on subsidized care, especially public health services. With funding for public health services decreasing throughout the country, it should be expected that the health and well-being of the American population to be negatively affected in the near and medium future.

And all these effects are exponentially worsened for our migrant citizens. Job losses continue to occur. There have been reports of reductions in wages or non-payment, fewer working days and poorer conditions in the workplace. There have been instances of discrimination and xenophobia against migrant men and women, who are mistakenly perceived as taking the jobs of local workers.

We cannot think about our future without knowing the people who will shape our future. Demographics are another very important factor in LIFT’s deliberations: The face of America is changing. I want to highlight a few phenomena that will need to be considered in your deliberations within the LIFT taskforce.

Did you know that:<sup>8</sup>

- In 30-40 years we will no longer be a majority-white country.
- The number of children speaking a language other than English at home has doubled since 1979
- 43% of Americans under 20 are people of color<sup>9</sup>
- Latino Undergraduates will exceed 15% of all undergraduates by 2015
- Current millennials have grown up with the largest income gap of any generation (23.1% under the poverty line, and a Gini index<sup>10</sup> of 46.6 in 2008)
- 32% of millennials have been raised in a single-parent household
- 89.4% of millennials have a mother who works outside the home

<sup>6</sup> American Affairs, Northwestern University Study, Nov 25, 2009

<sup>7</sup> Population Reference Bureau, The Impact of the Recession on Older Americans, March 2010

<sup>8</sup> Data is from the Pew Research Center unless otherwise specified

<sup>9</sup> New York Times, August 7, 2008

<sup>10</sup> The GINI index is a measure of income inequality in a given country

- Millennials are achieving the Highest SAT scores this country has seen in 30 years
- 75% of college freshman say that they intend to pursue graduate degrees
- 25% of millennials are unaffiliated with any religion far more than the share of older adults when they were that young.

This younger generation is socially very aware and is active when it comes to matters of social justice, community outreach etc.

What does this all mean for the ELCA? *Does anyone on the task force believe that the ELCA is ready for these challenges in its current form?*

The ELCA is a great institution with tremendous potential to shape our future and be relevant to those who need it most – but it needs to change its approach to be effective and relevant. *We need an ELCA that is nimble, flexible, responsive, and most importantly, relevant.* In the process, it needs to have a mindset that tells *“it is the [blessed] water that is sacred, not the pump that delivers it.”* An early Greek philosopher noted: To deny change is to invite decay.

From a perspective of young, caring, passionate, non-white, Lutheran person with a non-Lutheran, non-Christian background, it seems to me that the ELCA -as many other institutions- is facing some daunting challenges and stumbling blocks. These stumbling blocks are not unique to the ELCA. However, the ELCA is also not immune from them.

#### **DENIAL:**

Denial of realities we face, denial of our own effectiveness, and denial of how we are really perceived are highly toxic. We need to be ruthlessly realistic. Why didn't Digital Equipment see the PC as a threat to minicomputers? How long did Henry Ford think he could keep selling black-only Model Ts. My question to the ELCA is *“are we in a state of denial ourselves”* Do we think that we are doing the right things even though American communities do not perceive it that way? The ELCA's slogan is *“God's Work our Hands”* – If we are truly doing God's work, why are people not lining up, cheering, clapping, praising us where ever there is an ELCA function or gathering? Thus, either we are not communicating well what great work we do or how effective we are doing it or we are not really doing the relevant things. Both points of views can be argued.

- People around us change, cultures change, people's worries change, perceptions change, but has the ELCA changed its approach to delivering the Gospel to the people accordingly? Do we speak the same language as our neighbors?
- Do we make an effort to understand our surroundings, our new neighbors or our old neighbors' new concerns? Do we know how they tick? What makes them happy or sad, nonchalant or concerned, apathetic or enthusiastic, bored or energized?

- Is the Church concerned about the same things that the people are concerned about? How does the ELCA help in response to these concerns?

For example, Robin Steinke’s article “Dispelling Myths and Musing about the Future” attempts to rebuff some myths about the Church and its seminaries in particular. While attempting to rebuff these myths, in her argument, the author unintentionally confirms some of the impressions people might have about the Church; for example, the perception that Church leaders are detached from the realities on the ground. From the perspective of many people inside and outside of the Church, many of these myths stated in the article are actual realities on the ground that cannot be rebuffed convincingly.

It seems as if we were not concerned about the same things that our communities are concerned about.

This then leads to another potential stumbling block in the ELCA - our sacred cows.

#### **PITFALL of (IMAGINARY) SACRED COWS:**

Certain things are truly sacred and must not change. The proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacrament cannot change but anything else is game! We can change the medium of how we proclaim the Gospel without changing the Gospel. Leadership models change, but not the need for leaders to function as foot washers and shepherds. Again it is the *[blessed]* water that is sacred, not the pump that delivers it.

What are the imaginary sacred cows of the ELCA? *Can the task force think of any?*

Some are our buildings, the color of carpets, elevators, hymns, organs, and even the liturgy. Many of the Lutheran leaders (national and congregational) will disagree. But the future doesn’t care about these things – many think that some of these “sacred cows” are vital for the Church and for its future – and therefore “waste” energy, resources and reputational credit on these. These imaginary sacred cows blind us and distract us. Because of these imaginary sacred cows, many of our churches are inward looking rather than outward looking.

#### **CHANGE LEADERSHIP:**

No brilliant idea, no brilliant plan, no brilliant strategy will be effective without strong leadership. Leading change is one of the most difficult leadership tasks. In organizations today, there is a strong desire to change but a limited capability to lead change successfully. This might be true for the ELCA as well. The most critical ingredient in any change effort is leadership, and it is important to remember that managing change is fundamentally a people issue. A famous economist said ones that the “The greatest difficulty in the world is not for people to accept new ideas, but to make them forget their old ideas.”

After deliberations, consultations, and prayer, the ELCA should identify a few strategic priorities. Rather than doing everything in a mediocre way, let's do a few things excellently. The new generation is very knowledgeable, tends to be well informed and critical. They will lose interest in mediocre activities, but they will buy-into and support excellently executed relevant initiatives. Why can't the ELCA be known, respected and loved for its leadership and excellence in one major issue?

ELCA leadership needs to outline the vision and direction of this Church.

- Start With Yourself
- Spread the change by making it actionable, functional, tangible and visible.
- Motivate Key People
- Find the Change Ambassadors in your congregations and other entities
- Make resources available

#### **SEMINARIES:**

The success of these change initiatives and consequently of the ELCA will be highly dependent on our local congregations. Therefore, local congregations will need leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Seminaries are key for ELCA's future:

- How well are our Church leaders prepared for the future? Are they equipped with the skills and gifts they will need to carry this institution into the future?
- What are our Seminaries doing? Are our Seminaries the high-quality theological institutions we need for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Do they "produce" excellent theologians and entrepreneurs at the same time? Our congregations are de facto micro, small, and medium-size enterprises (MSMEs) and bring with them some of the same challenges that running small companies bring (Finance, Accounting, Marketing, Fundraising, Leadership, Human Resources, Organizational Development, Strategy etc.)
- How is our candidacy process? Is the selection process in the candidacy committees geared towards selecting leadership for the future? Are we looking for the right people with the right skills and potentials?

The ELCA is a fantastic organization, which is doing great work in many different areas. But it needs to design a new approach to how it lives out the Gospel. It needs a vision for the future and a clear strategy needs to be developed, well articulated and executed. The ELCA needs to identify its imaginary sacred cows and if these are in the way -sitting between the Church and the people it is trying to connect with- it needs to be willing to reconsider them. The ELCA needs to aspire for excellence in everything it does, because -after all- it claims that it is doing God's work with our hands. Why wouldn't we want to give our best to God? ("God's Work. Our Hands.")