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The Pastoral Luther as Guide for "Experience-Near" Theology: Reflections from Sabah, Malaysia

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Abstract

While Lutheran theology is often framed as a set of core theological principles or commitments, Martin Luther's theology functioned pastorally, engaging specific needs and situations he encountered, with the experience of faith being central. In the terminology of missiologist Robert J. Priest, Luther's theology is "experience-near." Thus in seeking to develop a sense of Lutheran identity with the Lutheran churches in the "new" context of Sabah, Malaysia, this essay argues that the pastoral dimension of Luther's theology should be enlarged, using the process termed "transfiguration" by theologian Vitor Westhelle, rather than starting with theological first principles. This approach allows the theological questions and concerns that emerge from that context to be fore-grounded, rather beginning from an assumption that Luther's own questions and concerns are universally relevant.

Lutheran theology is often posed as a set of core principles or theological commitments: justification by grace alone, the distinction between law and gospel, *communicatio idiomatum*, theology of the cross, and so forth. Yet Martin Luther developed his theology out of an engagement with concerns specific to himself or to his time and place. Indeed, as we shall see, much of his theological thought came from his pastoral concerns. In this essay, I contend that this pastoral identity of Luther provides a more compelling approach to introducing Luther's thought in new contexts than starting with his theological principles does. More specifically, I will argue that following Luther's pastoral theological approach provides a means for allowing what the Brazilian Lutheran liberation theologian Vitor Westhelle calls a "transfiguration" of Luther, where elements of a contextualized understanding of Luther and his theology begin to speak anew in a different context. Such a transfiguration allows for the creation of what American Evangelical missiologist Robert J. Priest calls a "missional" or "experience-near" theology that begins with local concerns, rather than traditional systematic or "experience-far" theology that begins with philosophical considerations. Highlighting the pastoral Luther allows for a theological methodology that builds up from issues encountered in new contexts rather than proceeding from abstract first theological principles. In order to develop this sense of a bottom-up approach to employing Luther's thought today, I will use insights I have gleaned from my own work in Sabah, Malaysia, in the northernmost portion of the island of Borneo, where I have spent the past several years there introducing Martin Luther and his theology to indigenous communities who are members of Lutheran churches through the Lutheran Study Centre (LSC) at Sabah Theological Seminary.[1]

The Lutheran Study Centre and the Introduction of the Small Catechism

Before turning to Luther's theology or the concept of experience-near theology, it is first worthwhile to frame the context of the encounters in Sabah that have shaped my thoughts. The Lutheran Study Centre was established in 2012 by the bishops of the five churches of the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Malaysia and Singapore (FELCMS.)[2] It is based at Sabah Theological Seminary, an ecumenical seminary in Sabah's capital city, Kota Kinabalu. The location was chosen in part because the two member churches located in Sabah are the two largest of the federation members. Even more, however, the site was chosen because those two churches have the least clearly articulated sense of Lutheran identity. They both come from the Basel Mission tradition and originally identified themselves as Reformed before eventually joining the Lutheran World Federation, in both cases without any formal commitment to the Lutheran confessions. The LSC was formed because the leaders of all five churches wanted to encourage a more clearly formulated theological stance within the churches, and more specifically one more strongly influenced by the Lutheran tradition then had previously been present. The FELCMS requested that my church body, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), send a lecturer to assist with the LSC. In response, I was sent in 2012 as a lecturer at Sabah Theological Seminary while also assisting with the LSC's teaching programs, and was eventually named the Associate Director and then the Director of the LSC.[3]

One of central tasks I have undertaken in recent years on behalf of the LSC has been to help introduce Luther's Small Catechism to the pastors and lay leaders of the indigenous churches in Sabah.[4] Translation of the Small Catechism into the Bahasa Malaysia, the Malaysian national language, was completed in 2014, and so at that point the Small Catechism was completely new to nearly all of the church leaders.[5] As I read the Small Catechism with a group of PCS pastors for the first time, it was Luther's Introduction that particularly excited them. In it, Luther writes,

> The ordinary person, especially in the villages, knows absolutely nothing about the Christian faith, and unfortunately many pastors are completely unskilled and incompetent teachers. Yet supposedly they all bear the name Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, even though they do not know the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments.[6]

In this passage, the pastors reported hearing an echo of their own situation. Among the Rungus people, found primarily in the northernmost reaches of Borneo, many of the villages have a PCS church at its center.[7] Most people in this region have only a basic education, and many of the pastors little more. The pastors themselves have responsibility for several congregations, thus leaving much of the leadership responsibility to lay leaders.[8] Thus the pastors expressed that one of the challenges they faced was a lack of time and resources for carrying out Christian education, so that they felt that many of their church members resembled the villagers to whom Luther refers. Thus when they heard the introduction to the Small Catechism, they identified with Martin Luther in a new way. He became a pastor dealing with similar problems to the ones they faced, rather than a faceless and thus decontextualized theoretical theologian from a distant time and place.[9] This new image sparked for these pastors an interest in Luther's thought. His thought resonated with them, I suggest, because their image of him shifted from being an experience-far theologian to being an experience-near theologian, a concept to which we will turn next.

Experience-Near Theology and Experience-Far Theology

Drawing on terms coined by Clifford Geertz, Robert Priest argues for two complementary types of theology: systematic theology, which he describes as experience-far, and missional theology, which is experience-near. Systematic theology, he suggests, is developed in dialogue with philosophy to the exclusion of human sciences and so tends to be concerned with abstract principles. Even when experience is considered here, he suggests, it is only reflected upon theoretically. Thus he advocates for the development of a missional theology that draws on human sciences, and particularly anthropology, in order to better understand the concerns of diverse people.[10] While his distinction here greatly underestimates the range of methodologies and interlocutors engaged by contemporary theology, he does point to a tendency to prioritize theological principles and philosophical concepts as a starting point rather than identifying the questions from a local context first. In fact, he is challenging the understanding that certain fields, such as missiology and pastoral care, are "applied fields" that simply take insights from systematic theology and appliy them to concrete situations. Rather, he argues, "A missiologist does not merely apply hard intellectual work done by systematic theologians. Rather a missiologist engages the same biblical text that a theologian engages but in the context of a dialogue with anthropology and diverse human experience rather than in the context of a dialogue with philosophy."[11] Missional and pastoral theology are valid paths to theologizing, he argues, with as much theological validity as systematic theology, simply using different sources.[12]

Priest argues that systematic and missional theology cannot ultimately be separated, but rather must work together. Here he roots his insight in John Calvin's statement, "Nearly all wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. And although they are closely connected, it is difficult to say which comes first." [13] Priest thus gives a helpful nuance on Calvin's thought, as Calvin is often viewed as a systematic theologian focused on the sovereign God rather than human context. The top-down and bottom-up approaches must also be in dialogue with one another in order to attend to the two parts of wisdom noted by Calvin.

Yet I suggest that if we turn this experience-near/experience-far framework towards Luther's theology, a different picture emerges. Rather than the focus on balance that Priest finds in Calvin, in Luther I would suggest we see the scales tipped towards the experience-near aspect. Luther's theology, that is, is deeply shaped by experience, both his personal experience but also because his writings frequently address pastoral situations. Indeed, as we shall see below, Luther's thought rejects the division of the theoretical from the practical, instead seeing both as expressions of the experience of faith. In this sense Luther's theology, I contend, would fit more closely with what Priest terms missional theology rather than his understanding of systematic theology.[14] To support this contention, let us turn more fully to the pastoral and experiential dimensions of Luther's theology.

Luther as Pastoral Theologian

Luther was deeply situated in his time and place. His experiences shaped him into being the theologian he became, and he spoke from his context. It was his experience of never knowing if he had done enough to fulfil "his part" of living righteously before God that shaped his hearing of the word of grace anew through his biblical study. As Luther scholar Robert Kolb argues, Luther's theological understanding was shaped by two factors: his study of scripture and his "personal experience of feeling guilty before God and a victim of forces beyond his control."[15] From these two factors came his understanding of the dynamic power of the Word of God. Kolb further insists that this theology was inseparable from Luther's pastoral concern. His greatest theological commitment was to communicate his experience of the living Word of the gospel to the lives of people he encountered through his ministry. Thus Kolb notes that Luther's definition of the gospel in the Schmalkald Articles is "the preached Word, Baptism, absolution, the Lord's Supper, and the mutual conversation and consolation of believers one with another."[16] In other words, the gospel is for Luther the means of grace by which God extends a promise, and for Luther God's promise cannot be separated from the faith that such a promise provokes.[17]

Because his thought was so pastorally oriented, Luther recognized that many theologians of his time dismissed it as being intellectually inferior to more speculative modes of theologizing. As Westhelle notes, Luther, "was made fun of for not writing the tomes recognized as the standard of high theological scholarship."[18] Further, Westhelle adds, "Luther was a German from Saxony, which at the time was a rather 'backward,' 'underdeveloped' corner of Europe."[19] Thus his writings were considered too occasional by some to be deemed serious theology. To follow Priest, Luther was missional rather than systematic.

Building out of his own personal experience, many of Luther's writings were pastoral or occasional. He was not primarily an abstract theologian contemplating universal principles but rather was a theological practitioner engaging the theological questions of his day. Theodore G. Tappert, another noted Luther scholar, points out that while Luther is usually defined as daring reformer and theologian, "It is sometimes forgotten that he was also – and above all else – a pastor and shepherd of souls. It is therefore well to remind ourselves that the Reformation began in Germany when Luther became concerned about his own parishioners who believed that if they had purchased letters of indulgence they were sure of their salvation."[20] Thus the Reformation itself was not begun over abstract principles or even Luther's own theological insights but rather over pastoral concern.

Such concerns can be found throughout Luther's writings. Whether sermons or advising his barber Peter Beskendorf in response to Peter's request to be taught how to pray or addressing political and economic issues of his day, most of Luther's writings address concrete issues that he encountered.[21] As Lutheran theologian Dennis Ngien observes, "People of all sorts frequently called upon him for advice,

and even arbitration. As such he was a spiritual adviser in many important areas of the Christian life."[22] Indeed, rarely did Luther lay out abstract principles, but rather he developed theological principles out of his wrestling with the concerns of his day and age. As church historian Mark Ellingsen notes, "We can best understand [Luther] when we recognize he functioned 'pastorally.' ... In view of the textual evidence it is surprising that this approach to Luther has not been more widely recognized."[23] Ellingsen goes on to point out a variety of instances where Luther made explicit the pastoral rather than universal nature of his theologizing. These include his urging in the Small Catechism to focus on those portions of the Ten Commandments that most require attention in one's own particular context and his assertion that certain portions of scripture are not the Word of God in some situations.[24]

Further, Ellingsen points to a portion of the Table Talks where Luther discusses the law/gospel distinction with his student John Mathesius: "This [relationship between law and gospel] shouldn't and can't be comprehended in a fixed rule. Christ himself preached [law and gospel] according to circumstances."[25] Arthur Drevlow likewise points to the contextual and pastoral element of Luther's distinction between law and gospel. He holds, "The friar of Wittenberg lived, moved, and had his being in a religious setting in which the distinction between [law and gospel] had been blurred beyond recognition."[26] Drevlow goes on to explain that it was because of a pastoral concern about the effects of this lack of distinction in his context that Luther so emphasized the idea of the two forms of the Word of God. Luther saw both law and gospel as means of provoking faith, depending upon the need.

In Luther's own words, in responding to the position that contrition takes precedence over faith, we read:

> A contrite heart is a precious thing, but it is found only where there is an ardent faith in the promises and threats of God. Such faith, intent on the immutable truth of God, makes the conscience tremble, terrifies it and bruises it; and afterwards, when it is contrite, raises it up, consoles it, and preserves it. Thus the truth of God's threat is the cause of contrition, and the truth of his promise the cause of consolation, if it is believed. By such a faith a man "merits" the forgiveness of sins. Therefore faith should be taught and aroused before all else. Once faith is obtained, contrition and consolation will follow inevitably of themselves.[27]

There is much to notice in this passage. We can understand "God's threat" as the law and God's promise as the gospel. Each works towards the inspiration of faith, which is then manifested in disposition to contrition and consolation. Beyond that, we see that faith is closely connected with the encounter with God. While he speaks of the immutable truth of God, his understanding of this encounter is rooted in his own search for a gracious God. He is taking the speculative thought on confession to its experiential limit and showing that it breaks down through its failure to provide a pastoral word of hope which inspires faith, and thus is not the site of a living encounter with the Word of God. My contention, in other words, is that it is not the specific doctrine of confession or of the law/gospel distinction that is immutable for Luther here but rather the encounter with the God who resists our attempts at capture within rational argumentation. Instead the encounter with God both shakes us to the core and inspires us to trust. It is true that Luther does seem to understand this encounter with God to be a universal for all of humanity, but more fundamental than the specific doctrine of how that happens is faith in the mystery of God.

For Luther, then, theology cannot be divided into Aristotelian categories such as abstract theory and concrete practice but is rather a response to the inspiration of faith. As German Lutheran theologian Oswald Bayer explains of what was revolu-

tionary in Luther's methodology, "Theory and practice are no longer related to each other in a binary scheme but both are now related to faith as a third element, and it is faith that determines whether they are true or not."[28] In this sense, for Luther Christian life is a passive experience in that it begins with the reception of God's work in inspiring faith, which then shapes all theological engagement through reflection and action.[29] For using Luther's thought for contemporary theological reflection, I suggest understanding him to be applying the precedence of the experience of the mystery of faith to the context of his ministry. In other words, all theology for him is experience-near. Theory and application are but two modes of expressing the experience of faith. In the case of the above passage he is dealing with the sacramental system and confession in particular, but again at other times it could be applied in other ways. Thus we can see that for Luther even core theological principles like the law/gospel distinction are not so much unchangeable universal truths but are rather a framework for discerning God's work in inspiring faith in a given situation. There is an interplay between the theological principles that arise out of the experience of God's grace and the contexts in which ministry occurs.

The Predominance of Experience-Far Approaches to Lutheran Identity

Yet while Luther's theology itself may be predominately articulated through pastoral formulation, there is a long history of formulating Lutheran identity through listing foundational principles, in what Priest would call an experience-far approach. Theologians have often succumbed to the desire to prioritize the theoretical element of Luther's theology, thus decontextualizing and essentializing Luther's thought. They have done so in various ways. As Westhelle notes,

> Luther's apparent lack of systematic discipline has led to a tendency to ignore him, as has been the case even in his time. ... Another tendency is to recognize some of his insights, but bypass the corpus of his writings for more systematic and less compulsive elaborations of those insights, as in Calvin, for example. Or, then it was to take some concepts that play a pervasive role in the Reformer's theology and organize the rest of the material around these foci, relating them, and dismissing most of the rest as the idiosyncratic expressions of an immature mind or the derailed musings of an old man.[30]

Thus the experience-near element of Luther's thought is glossed over in formulating a systematic theology out of Luther's pastoral or missional theologizing. It is particularly the third approach that seems to be especially common among those seeking to articulate a Lutheran identity in recent decades. Various themes such as the justification, *theologia crucis, communicatio idiomatum,* and the distinction between law and gospel are but a few examples that have been put forward as keys to Luther's theology.[31] By making one of these themes a key, it becomes possible to organize Luther's theology into a manageable set of principles or doctrines that can be said to represent "authentic" Lutheran theology.

This approach of drawing universal principles or doctrines from Luther and the Lutheran Reformation has continued with us to this day. It is possible to cite a range of influential works on Luther and Lutheran theology employing this tact, such as Paul Althaus' *The Theology of Martin Luther* or Carl E. Braaten's *Principles of Lutheran Theology*. More directly relevant to reflection on the nature of Lutheran identity within the context of Sabah, however, is the ongoing discussions of Lutheran identity in Asia more generally. These discussions seek to balance theological principles with contextual formulation, but nonetheless tend to begin from a presumption that the Lutheran theological principles are universally valid and must be translated into local contexts. Specifically within Asian Lutheranism, a

process for articulating an Asian sense of Lutheran identity was launched by the Lutheran World Federation's Asia region in 2012, with annual conferences aimed at culmination in 2017. The report from the third conference, from November 2014, is the most recent to be published.

The report from the 2014 conference begins with the introductory paper by Zimbabwean theologian Kenneth Mtata, representing the LWF, on "Basic Elements of Lutheran Identity." In the paper, Mtata lists thirteen key elements of Lutheran identity. In introducing them, he notes, "They are, first of all, theological elements."[32] That is, he argues, the core identifier of the Lutheran Reformation is as a theological movement rooted in the clarification of the intellectual foundations of church teaching. Among his list of theological elements are justification of sinners by faith alone, divine action through the proclamation of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments, the distinction of law and gospel, that Christians should be cooperators with God in the world, and the supreme authority of scripture for faith and the life of the church. Mtata hastens to add, however, "But these theological elements were at the same time pastorally orientated." Thus he is framing Lutheran identity as a theological movement that has consequences for the pastoral practice of the church. Indeed his list of elements concludes with the final element being the expression of Lutheran identity coming through "tangible forms of Lutheran life" such as Christian education, liturgical life, church music, diaconal work, and so forth. In this division between theology and pastoral practice might we hear an echo of the Aristotelian divide between theory and practice, or indeed between systematic and applied theology? In this divide we lose Luther's turn to the encounter with God which instills faith in people in concrete situations that are then engaged pastorally in an interplay between principle and context.

Some of the presentations from this conference most interested in contextualizing Lutheran theology for Asia come from an assumption that Lutheran identity is a matter of taking universal truths discovered in the Reformation and re-articulating them in various Asian contexts. Korean theologian Jin-Seop Eom, for instance, argues, "In addressing to people from other religious or secular background[s] and to new generation[s], we need to speak new languages to deliver the 'meta-language' of justification."[33] Justification is thus taken as a foundational truth that must be contextualized. It is understood to address a universal need. At the same time, while he notes that the doctrine of justification for Luther answers the question of how to find a gracious God, "Almost no one asks this question in the world in which we live."[34] Thus he sees one challenge for the church is to overcome indifference to the doctrine of justification.[35] Nonetheless, he also contends that other concerns function analogously in other contexts, such as the search for meaning in many contemporary contexts, or a focus on being able to take good works with you into the afterlife in many Korean religions.[36] Thus he recognizes a malleability to the doctrine to address different contexts in different ways. That is, for him the second challenge is contextualizing the doctrine. Yet this approach works from the assumption that by knowing the doctrine of justification through the Lutheran confessional writings it is then possible to identify forms of self-justification in various contexts. While this may work for many cultures, justification here could easily become an experience-far rather than experience-near concept. That is, too easily it assumes that all contexts have a question to which justification provides an answer, rather than seeing justification as the means by which Luther's faith was inspired in his encounter with God in his context.

Is this representation of Lutheran theology as working from core universal principles to then putting the principles into practice the best way to formulate Lutheran identity? Does it not, in fact, run counter to Luther's own approach? After all, the implication of this approach is that in addressing the pastoral and institutional issues present in his context, Luther managed to articulate the core universal truths of theology that apply to other times and places in the various contexts contained

in those times and places. Are we not treading closely to a colonial framework, where the truth as articulated in one context is exported to other contexts as universal truth? For instance, if not many people are asking how they can find a gracious God, perhaps it is not that they are oblivious to a central human concern, but rather that this question is simply not essential in an increasing number of contexts. Perhaps it is an utterly different question that haunts people and which needs answering in order to interpret an encounter with God that inspires faith. For example, to a group that is marginalized and destitute, Jesus' announcement in Luke 4:18 that he came to give good news to the poor and to set the oppressed free may be the answer to a more fundamental need than justification by grace is. To insist that all people must have a driving question to which the answer is justification by faith, if only it can be formulated properly, is to beg the question. It is not necessarily uncovering a latent concern but rather telling people that either they are already asking the question without knowing it or that they should be asking it. In either case it runs the risk of imposing ideological assumptions of a problem rather than carefully listening before offering a theological diagnosis.

My intention is not to single out any of the contributions noted above as particularly off-the-mark, but rather to lift them up as methodologically typical in their approach to addressing the continually asked question of Lutheran identity. Indeed, if asked for a list of features of Lutheran identity I would likely give a response similar to Mtata's. Nonetheless, I also wish to problematize the assumption that Lutheran identity is a theological identity first and that pastoral implications flow from theological first principles or core theological concepts. It is an approach that feels alien to my work in Sabah; most church members with whom I speak do not disagree with the idea of these kinds of Lutheran principles, but it is the pastoral Luther who helps them address concrete problems that fires up their imaginations. Put differently, formulating Lutheran identity as a set of theological principles prioritizes rationalist forms of knowledge as having intrinsic superiority to other forms of knowledge. Yet I would argue that by foregrounding Luther as a pastoral theologian there provides a better opportunity to engage the forms of knowledge dominant among the indigenous peoples in Sabah while appreciating Luther within his context more fully. Therefore I suggest that a more effective route to developing Lutheran identity, at least in Sabah, is through foregrounding other images of Luther. In teaching about Luther in Sabah, again, it is the pastoral Luther who has most connected with those with whom I have worked.

Grassroots Lutheran Identity

Yet if we view Luther's theology as deeply embedded in his context, how can we speak of its relevance to a new context separated by many miles and many years? Is Luther helpful for understanding church history but irrelevant for contemporary ministry in Sabah? Here I find Westhelle's use of postcolonial theorists Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Edward Said in challenging the hegemonic use of top-down forms of knowledge to be helpful in considering the dynamics of speaking of Luther in different contexts.

Westhelle argues that Luther is a figure who has been brought into colonial contexts; the consequent question for Lutheranism then becomes whether and if so how Luther might speak anew in these new contexts. For Westhelle, in dialogue with 20th century philologist Erich Auerbach, a "figure" is a character or event rooted in concrete historical circumstances. Westhelle distinguishes figures from concepts, symbols and doctrines, which he considers to be held out as having universal validity and so act as a hegemonic tool for minimizing insights from colonial contexts. He suggests, for instance, that for Lutheran theology doctrines such as justification, the law-gospel distinction, and two-kingdoms suffer from this hegemonic tendency. He argues, "The problem [with these examples] is that … these doctrines have become so reified that their contexts can hardly be detected.

They are doctrines and no longer figures, no longer attached to their contexts, and thus also incapable of migrating to other contexts."[37] Thus he is suggesting that the approach of defining Lutheranism through top-down principles is an inherently colonial approach to theological reflection.

Figures, on the other hand, are understood to be embedded in a particular context. Thus when they are introduced into a new setting, they are not presented as universal but as particular. Drawing on Said, Westhelle suggests that bringing a figure into a new context creates "contrapunctual" dissonance. That is, while there are differences between the originating context and the new one into which it is introduced, there are aspects of the two that are consonant with each other. Thus the figure introduced into a new context can spark new experiences drawing on certain aspects of that figure. Different contexts will invest different aspects of the figure in which consonance is found as the sites of emerging experiences.

For Westhelle, the postcolonial project is one of transplanting figures into new contexts, in a practice he calls "transfiguration." His use of "transfiguration" has an obvious connection to the story of Jesus' transfiguration. Westhelle reads the account in Matthew 17 as speaking to the question of context. "The figures of Moses and Elijah," he explains, "emerge from different times and contexts, and their own mantle, which charged them with historical and popular repute, is laid upon Jesus. Their figures were transmuted (*metemorphothe*) to Jesus, and in him they again became alive and present."[38] Thus transfiguration, in Westhelle's thought, means taking a figure and bringing it to new life in a new context. This new life of a figure in a new context acts as a catalyst for experiences from one context to spark new experiences in a new context. Through transfiguration the experience of the divine is hybridized, crossing from one context into another so that the two contexts intermingle in a new way and give rise to a new framework for interpreting that encounter with the divine.

The process of transfiguration, Westhelle argues, gives a particular image of the figure of Luther, as any transfiguration process does with any figure. Certain aspects of Luther's thought will be enlarged in the new contexts into which he is transfigured, while others are adapted or outright rejected. Of the former, Westhelle suggests Luther's creation theology as a means of addressing the ecological crisis, his criticism of the emerging financial capitalism as addressing contemporary economic issues, and his theology of the cross being read alongside the arguments of liberation theologians as some dimensions of Luther's thought that could be enlarged in contemporary theology through the transfiguration process. Likewise, Westhelle points to Luther's "last stance on the peasant's revolt, his doubled-edged pronouncements on Jews and Muslims, his disregard for the Epistle of James" as aspects of Luther's figure that require diminishment or rejection.[39] Each new context will be unique in which aspects of Luther becomes enlarged and which are diminished, however. As the figure Luther dynamically engages the questions found in a new context in which he is introduced, his thought comes to life anew in a uniquely transfigured manner.

Through his discussion of transfiguration, we can see that Westhelle is leery of decontextualized doctrines. As we have seen, he lifts up justification, two-kingdoms thinking, and the law-gospel dialectic as examples of doctrines threatened by becoming too abstracted from their contexts. Thus these doctrines that pose as universal are actually unable to speak in new contexts specifically because of the erasure of the original context as a constitutive element of the concepts. Thus we might say that his proposal is strongly experience-near, with a significantly lesser role for an experience-far approach. He holds that for Luther the experience of struggle and being on trial before God and the religious/political powers of his day formed the essential need and question for which the doctrine of justification provided an answer; it was the nearby experience that shaped his theology. Without

this longing to hear a word of peace and acceptance by God, the answer of justification is irrelevant. The decontextualization of theological principles renders them incapable of creating the contrapunctual dissonance necessary for dynamic and vital theological engagement with the world in its ever-emerging new contexts. As we have seen, Luther himself recognized the contextual character of his theological emphasis.

Westhelle thus argues that Lutheranism must strive to understand the essential longing at work in new contexts before offering a theological response, much as Priest contends in his argument for experience-near theology. Repeating the same encrusted doctrines without first discerning the core longing of a context would amount to an exercise in theological colonialism. Doctrines presented without context, I suggest, have lost the nearness of the experience of the mystery of faith which gave them meaning in the first place. Thus Westhelle argues, "Being a Lutheran and, for that matter, the church itself can be understood only as a reality which is at the same time at ease and in tension between and amidst the new, diverse contexts."[40] He continues, "Our identity as Lutherans does not lie in laudatory proficiency in reciting articles from the Augsburg Confession, but in our willingness to be vulnerable. While being immersed in the church's traditions, our theologizing should allow the cries of the broken, forsaken and the frail to interrupt what we usually hear, so that God's voice might be heard."[41] Thus Lutheranism must listen for the questions being raised in new contexts, rather than assuming what the questions are. It must be experience-near. Yet at the same time it is not the mainstream of a culture that raises these core questions, but rather those at the edges. It is in the places that a cultural narrative unravels that driving questions emerge and God's voice may be heard. In some circumstances this may be through the monk who takes his religious obligations so seriously that the legalistic assumptions behind them are exposed as a parody of spirituality. In other circumstances it may be the need for acceptance and justice by those who are politically, economically, or socially marginalized that provide insight into the abyss of longing that shapes a context. Yet it is in these spaces of brokenness or contextual deconstruction that God's voice may be heard and an encounter with the divine that inspires faith might be had.

Thus rather than assuming that justification, for example, is the universal key to theology that must be rearticulated into new contexts, Westhelle is suggesting that in some contexts other questions may be more central. He does not give specific examples of what these questions might be, but rather only points out that it cannot be assumed that justification is a "meta-question" that all humanity either is or should be asking. To be Lutheran in this view then is not to insist on repeating the same answers but rather in striving to theologize about how God is working to inspire faith in a given context. Here Luther can certainly be a trusted guide, but he need not be looked to as the final arbiter of how divine activity and faithful response manifest themselves in every circumstance. That is, in Luther's theological and pastoral writings, a wide range of situations are addressed. Once questions central to a context are identified, one can search whether Luther addressed any similar questions. If so, it is then possible to ask whether his response to those questions might provide insight for the contemporary ones. Might his experience of faith be transfigured to live anew in addressing the new questions raised?

Indeed, we can look again at the examples from the Asian LWF conference that I cited earlier and re-read them through the lens of transfiguring Luther. Jin-Seop Eom's suggestion to embrace Luther's call to the use of the vernacular and contextualizing the doctrine of justification could be seen examples of finding a resonance between the figure of Luther searching for a gracious God and the Korean context. While this is somewhat against the grain of his argument, there may be some resonance in the actual practice and its search to effectively articulate that which inspires faith in a new context.

Yet it is worth noting that Westhelle's examples, such as Luther's creation theology, the theology of the cross, and Luther's use of the vernacular language, focus on theological principles employed by Luther. That is, he suggests that ideas encountered in Luther's writings may find consonance with questions raised in new contexts. He does not specifically limit Luther to these concepts, but at the same time does not pursue other dimensions of Luther that might be transfigured. Yet I would suggest that an important aspect of understanding Luther as a figure with a particular context is to include his identity as a pastor and pastoral theologian. It is this identity, I submit, that is particularly important in providing a context for his principles that thus make his writings figures rather than static doctrines. His doctrinal thought cannot be separated from the experience of faith that inspired his insight. Justification by grace cannot be separated from his concern for his parishioners who placed their trust in purchasing letters of indulgence rather than in Christ, for instance. Thus in reflecting on other elements of church or community life in a contemporary context, it might be found that something else is attracting people's trust rather than inspiring an experience of faith. In such a case Luther's understanding of justification might helpfully be transfigured into the new context. It is impossible to predict ahead of time what pastoral concerns of Luther's might be helpfully transfigured, however, as it requires listening for the pastoral needs in each context. In my role at the LSC, I am not equipped to recognize the pastoral needs of the people in Sabah because I work primarily with pastors and church leaders and not the wider membership. Rather, what I am able to do is encourage the local leaders to listen for the questions and to see in Luther a source of contextualized pastoral reflection that may be capable of being transfigured so that an experience of faith may be engaged.

Thus facets of Luther's identity other than as theologian may in fact be particularly important in connecting to new contexts. Focusing on Luther's identity as a pastor, as a fellow Christian who had an intense experience of God's grace, or as a person concerned with the needs of the poor are means of foregrounding aspects of the figure Luther that are not reduced to abstract principles but rather engage other modes of thought.[42] This can be a helpful way of connecting the event embodied in Luther with modes of thought that do not work from abstract principle to practice but instead draw on other ways of organizing and employing thought and practice. In other words, rather than engaging in theological colonialism, these other images of Luther may be more helpful in inviting discussion of the driving questions and means of encountering the God who inspires faith in some contexts while still taking Luther seriously as a figure and theological conversation partner. At the least, the image of Luther as pastor has been the most fruitful route I have found for stimulating theological imagination in discussions with pastors in Sabah.

Transfiguring Luther in Sabah

In presenting the introduction to the Small Catechism to those pastors in Sabah, I suggest that I witnessed a transfiguration moment. Luther to them had previously been a symbolic figure; he was part of a decontextualized cloud of theologians from Christian history who should be revered as important ancestors in the faith but who had little relevance to their daily life, faith, or ministry. He is generally portrayed in Sabah's Lutheran churches as a "heroic defender of truth" with few other details about him discussed.[43] In getting a glimpse at the context of Luther's ministry and his intended audience for the Small Catechism, Luther suddenly became a figure for them. This sudden contextualizing of him foregrounded the consonance between the villages around Wittenberg and their own villages and so it became enlarged in their image of Luther. Thus in the context of Sabah it may be the image of the pastoral Luther visiting the villages that becomes the central aspect of the Luther narrative. It becomes the point of connection.

From this beginning point of Luther as an occasional and pastoral theologian, Luther can be seen as a colleague and resource for effectively engaging the issues that the churches in Sabah confront. Indeed, while modes of thought are difficult to describe – particularly when speaking of someone else's – several members of indigenous groups in Sabah have suggested that traditional thought for all of these groups has focused on a problem-solving approach.[44] In this sense, there is resonance between Luther's identity as a pastoral theologian and the local form of knowledge that might be enlarged through the process of transfiguration. That is, rather than any particular Lutheran doctrines being the key to engaging faith, it is in working through specific problems with Luther as an experienced guide that a faith inspired by an encounter with God might best be engaged.
As an example of how this might work in Sabah, one issue that has come up in nearly every forum on Lutheran theology that I have led with the PCS is the role of the Holy Spirit in Lutheran theology. This comes up because of the questions raised by some Pentecostal groups new to Sabah that was noted earlier. According to what the pastors at these forums have explained to me, these groups ask people from the Lutheran churches how they know that they have been baptized, since they were baptized as infants. Further they accuse the Lutheran church of not having the presence of the Holy Spirit because they do not regularly exhibit charismatic gifts. The pastors have struggled to formulate a response to these accusations.[45]

Yet Luther addressed these same problems, such as in his writings about the enthusiasts and his defense of infant baptism. In fact, Luther directly addresses the charge of not knowing if one has been baptized. He responds:

> Surely this seems to me to be a pretty shaky argument. For were I to reject everything which I have not seen or heard, I would indeed not have much left, either of faith or of love, either of spiritual or of temporal things. I might reply, "My friend, how do you know that this man is your father, this woman your mother?"[46]

Likewise, Luther addresses charges of lacking charismatic gifts. He insists:

> But I am sure that we who have and acknowledge the gospel, even though we be poor sinners, have the right spirit, or as Paul says, "the first fruits of the Spirit" [Rom. 8:23], even if now we do not have the fulness of the Spirit. There is none other than this one Spirit who apportions his gifts in a wonderful way. For we know what faith is, and love, and the cross; and we can learn no greater thing on earth than faith and love. Hence we can know and judge what doctrine is true or not true, and whether it is in accordance with the faith or not.[47]

Thus we see again a return to the presence of faith as negotiating the boundary between theory and practice. The point in both of these cases, however, is not to present Luther as infallibly correct on these issues. Rather, the point is to acknowledge Luther as one who theologized in circumstances that may have resonance with contemporary ones, and whose answers are worth serious consideration.

In other words, the more traditional approach to presenting Luther's positions on these issues would be to give the key points of Luther's arguments on the work of the Holy Spirit and in defending infant baptism. This may very well help the pastors feel better about the validity of their church practices, but it is unclear whether they could repeat the arguments later. Even if they could, it is further uncertain whether knowing such arguments would engage their faith or the faith of the people to whom they minister. Rather, the approach I am suggesting is to present the context of Luther's writings on infant baptism and the enthusiasts as case studies and inviting the pastors to formulate their responses to the situations before presenting Luther's writings. This, I suggest, would allow them to compare

their theological response to Luther's as a means of creating a discussion about engaging the faith of the people in their congregations, thus honoring the process of solution-seeking rather than presenting Luther as giving the solution and final word.[48]

The most useful place that I have found to begin with, however, is again in the Small Catechism, specifically in his discussion of the Third Article of the Creed, which is positioned centrally in the Catechism. The Catechism begins with the Law – the 10 Commandments – that we are commanded to follow but are unable to do. We then move to the First Article of the creed, where we find all of the things that we should be thankful to God for, but in reality we fail to be truly thankful for. Then in the Second Article we find that in Christ we are forgiven of the sin that we have encountered in the earlier parts of the Catechism, but only if we have faith. Yet where does this faith come from? In his explanation of the Third Article, we find:

> I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in JesusChrist my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins – mine and those of all believers. On the Last Day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life.[49]

Thus we see that the Holy Spirit is in fact central to the theology presented in the catechism.[50] More germane to our discussion here, Luther has organized his theology of the Holy Spirit as the answer to the problem of sin. Thus the law/gospel distinction can be framed as a problem/solution methodology to theology. Thus rather than a reified and decontextualized universal doctrine, Luther's use of the law/gospel distinction can be transfigured to address the question of the role of holy living in the Sabah churches.

In identifying these issues as ones that Luther has addressed, Luther as pastor becomes a theologically sophisticated colleague who can offer guidance in a specific situation, rather than merely a sage spouting eternal truths that are important but have little specific to do in the daily life of the church.

Methodology for Nurturing Growth of Lutheran Identity

What I am suggesting is a methodology for developing Lutheran identity for the churches of Sabah. Rather than a top-down approach, it works up from the issues encountered. This is true of the theology: it starts with questions and problems rather than theological principles. It is also true for my role as missionary invited to come to Sabah by the Lutheran churches to help them understand Luther better. My function is not to tell what it means to be Lutheran, but rather to listen to the questions raised and then point the church to passages where Luther has engaged similar problems or questions. I can suggest sites of potential transfiguration. Luther and the Lutheran tradition thus become a resource in tackling particular problems, and in the process imparting some theological insight. To be clear I am not saying that theological principles should be abandoned, but rather they are to be employed in the service of addressing concrete issues that arise and judged by whether they inspire trust in God through a dynamic encounter with the holy. In doing so, a Lutheran thought process and Lutheran content might begin to help shape the theological engagement of the church in Sabah with the specific issues that arise there. It is impossible to say what kind of Lutheran identity might be produced by this approach, however. Indeed, as we are at the beginning of this engagement with Luther I must note that it may not lead anywhere. Luther may

end up proving not to be helpful. Assuming for the moment, however, that Luther does indeed prove to be a worthy collaborator in addressing whatever problems arise in Sabah, the Lutheran identity that is produced will be uniquely contextual and dynamic. This is because Luther would be valued not for final answers but because he can continue to speak in the never-ending challenge of solving whatever new problems may emerge. Lutheran identity thus becomes a way or means of theological engagement with the world rather than clinging to a set of unchanging doctrines.

Conclusion

In Luther's thought, then, we find that the line between theoretical and applied theology breaks down. What is essential is the experience of the encounter with God which produces faith; this faith is then expressed through theological thought and pastoral practice. Thus for Luther all theology is experience-near: both in the experience of faith that creates the theology but also because that faith is manifested in human lives. All theological articulations are contextual based on how faith is best mediated in a given situation.

Given this experience-near quality of Luther's thought, simply exporting his ideas into new situations as universal doctrines fails to appreciate the dynamic character of theology. Rather, he must be understood as a figure shaped by his time, place, and experiences. Only then can his ideas be transfigured and brought to new life in new contexts. In particular, the pastoral nature of his thought in addressing specific situations must be recalled if those ideas are to be transfigured today. In this, his pastoral theology becomes a missional theology as it can be employed to address diverse questions, challenges, and experiences of faith among diverse people in new contexts around the world.

In terms of applying this transfiguration approach to Sabah, this means that building a stronger Lutheran identity within the PCS and BCCM need not necessarily entail first learning to think in a Western mode that first identifies core theological commitments and then expounds on doctrines based on those theological positions. It is rather the pastoral image of Luther that may become enlarged in the transfiguration process in Sabah. Thus, I submit that it is in line with the spirit of Luther to listen for the places where God speaks through the cracks in the social constructions and inspires faith rather than to simply to repeat doctrinal formulas. In doing so, it may very well be that a word of justification by faith comes, but at the same time it may not. It is not the specific answer that is essential. What is essential is listening for how God is speaking in the context of Sabah and how that message inspires an encounter with the mystery of God. As Westhelle points out, to do this effectively requires a familiarity with church history; nonetheless it is not the history nor the received decontextualized doctrines that produce faith. Faith is a gift from God, received in the context of situated human existence.

Endnotes

1 Sabah recognizes 32 ethnic groups in the state, of which 28 are considered indigenous, or "bumiputra." Many of these bumiputera groups contain some members who are part of either the Protestant Church of Sabah (PCS) or the Basel Christian Church of Malaysia (BCCM), both of which are members of the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches of Malaysia and Singapore. The PCS is particularly concentrated in the northern part of the state near the town of Kudat, while the BCCM's Bahasa Malaysia-speaking congregations (that is, the congregations within the indigenous communities) are spread throughout the state but are particularly numerous in the Pensiangan area in the southern portion of the state. The BCCM also has a significant Chinese section along with its bumiputra communities, while the PCS is a fully bumiputera church. My reflections here are drawn from my work with the PCS and the portion of the BCCM in indigenous communities, not the BCCM congregations in Chinese communities, with whom I have had considerably less contact due to my linguistic limitations.

2 Along with the BCCM and PCS, the other members are the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Malaysia (primarily an ethnically Tamil church, based in peninsular Malaysia), the Lutheran Church of Malaysia (primarily an ethnically Chinese church, also based in peninsular Malaysia), and the Lutheran Church of Singapore (primarily an ethnically Chinese church based in Singapore). These churches have their roots in the work of specifically Lutheran missionaries, and thus have a quite distinct history from the PCS and BCCM. In this essay I am only considering my work in Sabah, and not with these other churches.

3 The LSC is thus under the direction of FELCMS, but is also supported through personnel and finances by the ELCA, the Lutheran Church of Bavaria's Mission One World, and the Lutheran Church of Australia.

4 Dr. Michael Press from the Lutheran Church of Bavaria, the first Director of the LSC, was also significantly involved in this endeavor. The reflections here, however, are specifically my reflections on the sessions on the Small Catechism that I have led.

5 The Lutheran Study Centre published this translation made by BCCM members, and distributed it to pastors and congregations of both the PCS and BCCM.

6 Martin Luther, "Small Catechism," in *The Book of Concord*, Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 347:2.

7 Because the Rungus are considered to be a subgroup of the Kadazan Dusan people in the federal government census, hard data on the religious make-up of the Rungus people is unavailable. The Evangelical missionary organization The Joshua Project holds that of the approximately 60,000 Rungus people, 65% are Christian, of whom 45% is Protestant. See https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/14593/MY, accessed March 28, 2016. These numbers are similar to the unverified verbal report that I have received from these pastors that the PCS has roughly 30,000 members with most but not all members being from the Rungus people, thus suggesting the estimates are at least roughly accurate, but again this cannot be confirmed by independent sources, as many congregations do not have precise membership rolls.

8 Again hard data is unavailable, but the estimates I have received is that there are roughly 60 ordained pastors in the PCS and around 300 congregations. The PCS has a two year training program for pastors at a non-degree granting training center. After a few years of service, pastors may request support to study at Sabah Theological Seminary for a secondary-equivalent diploma. Some pastors eventually complete Bachelor degree at Sabah Theological Seminary, and a few complete Master-level degrees.

9 I am not directly interested in the veracity of their characterization of their congregation members' level of knowledge of Christian doctrine, which I have no means of assessing. Rather, my interest here is in the pastors' new identification with Luther after seeing him in a pastoral light. While I am specifically recounting an encounter with PCS pastors, I have since had similar encounters with BCCM pastors.

10 Priest is bringing together Geertz' terminology with the argument for two types of theology advanced by Tite Tienue and Paul Heibert. See Robert J. Priest, "'Experience-Near Theologizing' in Diverse Human Contexts," in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity,*Craig Ott and Harold Netland, editors, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 183-184. While neither Priest nor his sources come from a Lutheran background, his work has been influential at Sabah Theological Seminary where many BCCM and PCS pastors receive training. Thus his framework has some familiarity in those churches, and thus making these terms helpful for describing Luther in the Sabah context.

11 Priest, 194.

12 Again his sense of "systematic theology" is quite narrowly defined, as his entire argument is geared towards discussions within his own Evangelical tradition. It does not consider feminist, ecological, liberation, contextual, queer, or other theologies that place a high value on experience as part of theological methodology. Yet it is not necessary to adopt the theological outlook of this tradition to appreciate his critique of the predominance of a stark division between "theoretical" and "applied" approaches and the historical preference for the theoretical as a source of theological insight while "practical" theology is simply seen as applying those insights.

13 Quoted in Priest, 180.

14 Priest mentions pastoral counseling as being analogous to missiology in being "applied" fields that should be understood to produce constructive theological insights. Doubtlessly, there are nuances between pastoral theology and missiological theology, but I understand Priest to be saying that both are "missional" in seeking to understand theology through considering human experience.

15 Robert Kolb, "Luther as *Seelsorger," Concordia Journal,* January 1985, 2.

16 *Ibid.*

17 For example, Luther writes, "For anyone can easily see that these two, promise and faith, must necessarily go together. For without the promise there is nothing to be believed; while without faith the promise is useless, since it is established and fulfilled through faith." *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* LW 36:42.

18 Vitor Westhelle, "Transfiguring Lutheranism: Being Lutheran in New Contexts," in *Identity, Survival, Witness: Reconfiguring Theological Agendas,* Karen L. Bloomquist, ed., (Lutheran World Federation, 2008), 11.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Theodore G. Tappert, "General Introduction," in *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel,* Theodore G. Tappert, ed., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1955, 2006), 13.

21 For Luther's advice to Beskendorf, see "A Simple Way to Pray," LW 43:189-210. For an example of Luther addressing economic issues, see "Trade and Usury," LW 45:241-309.

22 Dennis Ngien, *Luther as a Spiritual Advisor: The Interface of Theology and Piety in Luther's Devotional Writings,* (Milton Keynes, UK and Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2007), xvii.

23 Mark Ellingsen, "Luther's Concept of the Ministry: The Creative Tension," in *Word and World* volume 1, number 4, 1981, 339.

24 "Small Catechism" *The Book of Concord* 349:18, and "How Christians Should Regard Moses," LW 35:170-171, both noted in Ellingsen, 340.

25 quoted in Ellingsen, 340.

26 Arthur Drevlow, "Law and Gospel in Luther's Ministry," *Concordia Journal,* July 1984, 130.

27 Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,* LW 36:84.

28 Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way,* edited and translated by Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes, (Eerdmans, 2007), 23.

29 For a more complete discussion of Luther's understanding of the *vita passiva* see Bayer, especially 21-27.

30 Vitor Westhelle, "Pugnacious words: justification and justice in Luther," in *Lutheran Theological Journal,* Vol. 48, No. 2, August 2014, 76.

31 Walther von Loewenich, for instance, argues that the theology of the cross is central to Luther's theology. See his *Luther's Theology of the Cross,* trans. Herbert J.A. Bouman, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976). Gerhard Ebeling, meanwhile, holds that justification is central for Luther, giving meaning to all other doctrines. See his *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought,* trans. R.A. Wilson. (London: Collins, 1970). More recently, Johann Anselm Steiger has argued that Luther makes the idea of the *communicatio idiomatum* the "hermeneutical motor of his whole theology," in "The *Communicatio Idiomatum* as the Axle and Motor of Luther's Theology," Carolyn Schneider, translator, *Lutheran Quarterly,* 14:2, Summer 2000, p. 125-158.

32 Kenneth Mtata, "Basic Elements of Lutheran Identity," in *Towards and Asian Lutheran Identity and Self-Understanding,* 2014 Conference on Asian Lutheranism Report, Wilfred J. Samuel, ed. (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation Asian Lutheran Desk, 2015), 5.

33 Jin-Seop Eom, "An Asian Response to the Western Idea of Proclamation and Mission – A Korean Case," in *Towards and Asian Lutheran Identity and Self-Understanding,* 2014 Conference on Asian Lutheranism Report, Wilfred J. Samuel, ed. (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation Asian Lutheran Desk, 2015), 91. The phrase "meta-language of justification" is taken from Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson's *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and its Confessional Writings,* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 42-43.

34 *Ibid,* 88.

35 *Ibid,* 88.

36 *Ibid,* 88-89. In particular he points to Won Buddhism in Korea but also contends that this thought is held by other Korean religions.

37 Westhelle, "Transfiguring Lutheranism,"21.

38 *Ibid,* 19.

39 *Ibid,* 21.

40 *Ibid,* 22.

41 *Ibid,* 23.

42 While I only have the space within this essay to develop the pastoral dimension of Luther's thought, in my teaching and other presentations I often suggest the three images of Luther as pastor, fellow believer, and one who cares for the needs of the poor as ones that are important to set beside the images of Luther as reformer and theologian.

43 My thanks to Rev. Joefrerick bin Ating of the BCCM for this phrasing and insight into how Luther is perceived, particularly in the BCCM churches. The pastors that I introduced the Small Catechism to in this instance were from the PCS, but the view of Luther is virtually identical in the two churches.

44 As an example, Rev. Joefrerick, in our discussions of an earlier version of this essay, described the typical Sabahan mindset as, "problem-solving oriented to our daily concrete problems or issues; and we are very responsive to our surroundings and actively interacting with them," but not interested in deeper or more abstract issues.

45 It should be noted that the Lutheran churches have a strong relationship with some charismatic and Pentecostal churches; it is a minority with whom the relationship has some hostility.

46 Martin Luther, "Concerning Rebaptism," LW 40:234.

47 Martin Luther, "Letter to the Princes of Saxony Concerning the Rebellious Spirit," LW 40:55.

48 There is a resonance between this proposal and the work of Catholic religious educator Thomas Groome's "shared praxis" model of religious education. His model is for students to identify a theme from their experience, name a present action related to that theme, and critically reflect on the present action. There is then an opportunity to encounter the Christian story and dialogue about how the Christian vision helps to make sense of the noted theme from their life. See Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Eduation and Pastoral Ministry: A Way of Shared Praxis,* (San Fransisco: Harper 1991). Groome, however, is considering religious education for individuals while my focus is on a method for supporting a church in engaging with pastorally identified theological issues from its context.

49 "Small Catechism," 355-356: 6

50 For a more detailed analysis of the structure, see Timothy J. Wengert, *Martin Luther's Catechisms: Forming the Faith,* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).