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Leadership in Lutheran Key at a Time of Pandemics



All of us on college and university campuses face incredible challenges brought on by the pandemics of Covid-19 and systemic racism. Many if not most of us are looking for guidance on how to rise to meet these unprecedented moments. There are many places from which to seek

guidance, inspiration, and hope—from movement spokespersons to trusted faculty and staff on our campuses.

I'm at St. Olaf College where the college's mission includes the language of being "nourished by Lutheran tradition." In addition to numerous contemporary voices of wisdom, I propose that the tradition might also offer insight for the living of these days. Sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther challenged the religious hierarchies and systems of his day, calling for reforms of structures that harmed those who were often ignored by the powerful. For Luther, the Christian story of God becoming human, suffering, and dying on the cross means that God is not to be found among the powerful, but rather among the suffering. Therefore, Luther believed, being attentive to the pain of those in our midst means attending to the spaces where God is present.

One of Luther's big ideas is that we cannot earn our own salvation; we can't justify ourselves or earn our way

to heaven. Therefore, our living is in response to the gift of life we are given rather than an attempt at achievement on our part.

Because our living isn't about proving ourselves to God or to others, Luther understood humanity to be freed up to focus on the needs of our neighbors. Not to the exclusion of our own basic needs, but caring for those in need, he believed, should be our primary orientation.

Drawing on these insights from Luther, I suggest that leadership in a Lutheran key in a time of great hardship includes:

1. Being attentive (to the pain)
2. Being responsive (to the pain)
3. Being nourished (that is, fortified for your role as leader)

Let's take a closer look at each of these in turn.

Being Attentive (to the Pain)

Martin Luther was a pastor and a monk dedicated to studying, preaching, and teaching. While many religious leaders of his day were focused on building grand cathedrals and amassing wealth for the church, Luther paid attention to those who were being exploited under the current church system. The church was getting rich by charging parishioners to participate in practices such as

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indulgences and the viewing of relics, practices billed as enhancing one's status before God. Luther spent his days speaking out about such practices, exposing the economic harm these practices were causing for those who were already struggling.

During this time of the dual pandemics of 2020, we are keenly aware of large-scale suffering all around us. At the time that I write this, there have been over one million cases of Covid-19 diagnosed worldwide and the over 200,000 American deaths caused by the virus. Equally painful, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless other Black and Brown people have been killed by the police or harmed by other societal structures. We are steeped in anger, grief, and lament.

The language of trauma is becoming more a part of our collective vocabulary as we seek to better understand long-term effects of such suffering. Theologian Shelly Rambo calls trauma "the suffering that remains" (15). When something traumatic happens, we experience a kind of death, the death of bodily safety or integrity, the death of health, the death of a particular way of life. But life continues on and the suffering that accompanies us is the trauma.

"Leadership in a Lutheran key calls on leaders to pay attention to where God is—in and amidst the pain."

Leadership in this time of pandemics calls us to attend to the suffering and trauma of those around us—to notice it, inquire about it, call attention to it. For Luther, the story of Jesus's life, which leads to crucifixion, illustrates that God is where the suffering is, that God is present with those who suffer from the virus, from the pandemic of racism, from the trauma of illness and police brutality and more. Leadership in a Lutheran key calls on leaders to pay attention to where God is—in and amidst the pain.

Being Responsive (to the Pain)

Even though Luther was a professor of Old Testament, he didn't spend his days holed up in a monastery writing big ideas about God and the world. Instead, he spent time on

issues calling for his attention. It is important to acknowledge that he didn't always live up to his own insistence that Christian faith frees Christians up to serve the needs of the neighbor. Still, his vision of Christian life and dogged emphasis on love of neighbor led him to take action in ways that helped support the needs of those around him who were suffering.

Students, faculty, staff, and administrative leaders often have strong visions for what their student organization or team or department might be able to accomplish. Many of us have several big ideas we plan to implement.

And yet, we are more aware this year than most that life doesn't always go as planned. Leadership in a time of pandemic includes responding to those who are in pain, especially those within our circle of care. Whether it is those in one's student organization or residence hall, in one's department, office, or team, being a leader involves working with others to address the needs of those in your community.

Some of the initiatives we've been hoping to implement may not happen. Our roles—our vocations—as leaders may entail tasks that we haven't yet envisioned, but that are called for in this time of pandemics. Given the unprecedented reality of the Covid-19 and systemic racism pandemics, being responsive to the needs of others may be the most important action we take in these exhausting days.

Being Nourished for the Work Ahead

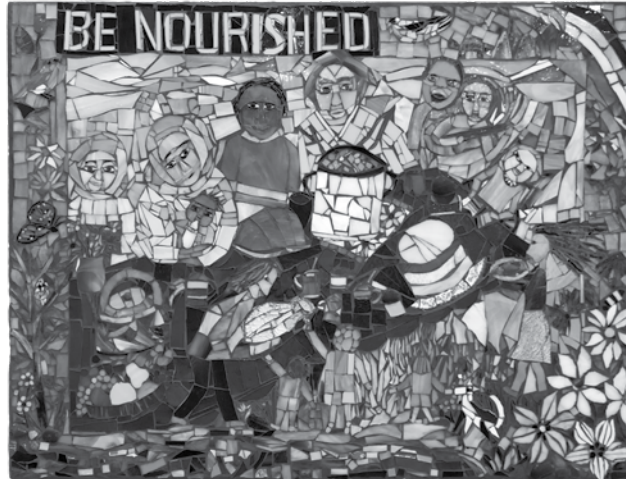
Being an attentive, responsive leader takes time, energy, courage, and stamina. We also must be nourished for this demanding calling.

Looking back at life of Martin Luther, he also took being nourished very seriously. Luther was known for his almost-nightly "table talk" gatherings at his home, where friends, students, and colleagues would gather around the Luthers' table to eat, drink, and debate issues that mattered in their lives. To live most fully into the leadership roles to which we now are being called, we are in need of multiple forms of nourishment—of good food and drink, of quality time with friends, of time for deep conversations about the issues that matter most to us.

A couple years ago, I invited Lena Gardner, then one of the leaders of Black Lives Matter Minneapolis, to speak to one of my classes. As an activist, she has offered

trainings throughout the country on the methods and approaches of Black Lives Matter. She told my students that when she asks these groups what they need the most to continue their work, they often tell her that they need spiritual nourishment. Their spirits need nourishing in order to help sustain them in their role leaders.

There's a mosaic that now hangs on a wall in the Lutheran Center at St. Olaf that was created last fall as part of the Center's launch (see above image). It was created by two Lutheran pastors, Patrick and Luisa Hansel, who served a mostly immigrant church in Minneapolis until their retirement the summer



before. Several dozen members of the St. Olaf community participated in putting pieces of the mosaic together. It captures the sense of what it means to be nourished to do the work that matters most in this world. The people in the mosaic come from different religious and cultural backgrounds and gather around a table where they are nourished

by food and drink. They are nourished by the rich natural world that surrounds them and by their connections to one another. I think the mosaic provides a vision of what nourishment for the work ahead might look like.

This is an incredibly challenging time to be a leader. But your campus, your neighborhood, your communities needs you. We'll be better at being community because of your attentiveness, responsiveness, and the ways you'll come together with others to nourish and be nourished as you help us move toward better days.

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Works Cited

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