

Discerning the Purpose of the Church in the Twenty-first Century

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

John 12:21

When Jesus entered Jerusalem after raising his friend Lazarus from the dead, crowds of people gathered around him. Visitors from Greece who had come for the festival of the Passover sought out Jesus’ disciple Philip and said, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

There is growing energy in the Churches today to form an “emerging church” that will replace what many people describe as an “outdated institution.” I am convinced that as we move into the present and future challenges for the church and society we should not lose sight of riches we already have that will guide our journey into the future. Our primary challenge today is not to discern an emerging church in a changing society. Our primary challenge is to discern a constantly emerging Christ and collaborate with the Holy Spirit in the continuing formation of the Christian community for the Twenty-First Century. Ministries are born in intimacy with God. Experience of God forms the Church. It is the womb of our compassion, community, wisdom, and vitality. We are called to value and be faithful to personal and corporate contemplative prayer as our fundamental means of listening to God, the world, and each other. The richness of this listening will help us hear God’s voice and discern God’s presence in society. The mystery each of person’s never-ending transformation in God will guide our collaboration in the continual transformation of the Church. Our collective transformative experiences will guide, also, the challenges for change in theological education and spiritual formation in schools of theology, seminaries, and especially in our local faith communities. In the midst of what is emerging are we willing to let go of control of the outcome and trust the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst?

What do society, the church, and local congregations need in the midst of today’s complex and conflicted world? The threads that hold the fabric of modern society together are very thin and hallowed institutions seem unable to cope with the fundamental challenges of limited resources, globalization, multiple cultural and religious identities, and basic the needs for food, shelter, education, health care, safety, and interdependence.

Local, national, ecclesial, and international competition for power and resources have led to chaotic and unpredictable struggles that strain the abilities of leaders to resolve military, economic, political, and religious conflicts. The minds and spirits of people everywhere are scattered and strained by voices competing for their loyalty, energy and personal resources. The Church, itself, while seeking to minister in the midst of what seems like chaos, has itself taken on some of the dysfunctional aspects of other societal institutions that are unable to serve the common good.

At the same time there are millions of caring and compassionate people who take the risks of serving their neighbors and are working toward institutional transformation. How can the Church provide community and support to empower these “care givers” of society? This is a primary question for the future of theological education and, indeed, warrants spiritual discernment within any “market analysis” of needs, opportunities, resources, and ministries for the challenges described above (and others.) Even though the chaotic, urgent, and random

needs are crucial to address as part of our current perception of the *societal context* for theological education, they do not provide a full picture of what society and the Church actually need for the *long-term*. This supports a strong rationale for an appropriate balance between market-driven and mission-centered strategies in theological education at every level of the Church's life.

The crucial gift the Church can give in an age when we are battered by conflicting, violent, and random situations that drain our patience and energies is *the ability to discern within those same situations the possibilities for health and restoration*. The Church, both at prayer and actively engaged in responding to the challenges we face, offers a *different way of seeing and being present*. The Church is a steward of God's power to create in humankind *a change of heart and an expansive heart*. But for these spiritual gifts to be manifest in our lives we must avoid limiting our focus to the chaotic and scattering aspects of society. In this sense we must, indeed, be a people who are *in the world* but not *attached to the world*. Otherwise our horizons for transformation will be limited to what we are able to see and accomplish.

From the earliest Christian faith communities to the variety of expressions of Christian life today there have been three fundamental sources of the vitality and ministries of the Body of Christ. These are the vessels of grace for the transformation of individual Christians into the presence of Christ in the world. They are:

- Personal prayer and experience of God
- Centrality of study of the Bible and experience of God's presence through meditation on biblical texts
- Participation in the sacramental life of the Church, especially the Eucharist

These are the pillars supporting each person as a temple of the Holy Spirit. The fruits of this trinity of personal and ecclesial life are:

- Purity of heart (non-attachment to self and complete openness to God's grace)
- Humility
- Love of neighbor

If our vision and discernment for the future of the Church and theological education, especially in local congregations, are rooted in these three fundamental and enduring sources of Christ's presence in our lives we will remember who we are as Christians in the midst of our chaotic world and be rooted in and guided by the Source of our life and wisdom. This will enable us to discern the specific ways we can bring direction and life to the urgent needs identified by initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals (and identify other needs we may not be able to discern ourselves). We must first remain rooted and centered in God who alone will provide the strength to identify and minister to those needs.

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Excerpted and adapted from:

David G. R. Keller. "*Affirming Mission-Centered Strategy in Planning the Future of Theological Education*", *Sewanee Theological Review*, Pentecost 2010, Volume 53:3, pages 303-315 passim.

