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# World Mission Institute Welcome

21 March 2019 — 6:45pm

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Rev. Dr. James Nieman, president

*Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

It is my distinct pleasure to welcome you to the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Along with our friends from Catholic Theological Union and McCormick Theological Seminary, we have been pleased to co-sponsor the World Mission Institute since 1970, and this year to host this event on our campus once again. Of course, many of you are regular attendees of the Institute whom we are glad to greet once again. Others of you may share interest in our work and theme this year but are new to us, and to you in particular I offer our heartfelt greetings. Thank you for joining us for what promises to be a stimulating evening.

During just the half-dozen years I have been at LSTC, the themes for this conference have ranged widely and deeply—from African immigrant churches to early-modern Protestants of the global South, from the meaning of discipleship to ethical questions in prison ministry, and more besides. Tonight’s speaker, who will be introduced in a moment, brings her thoughts to the conference theme of “dual belonging,” about which I personally have a special interest that stretches back many years and in fact involves a few others in this room, though there was no way any of you could have known it at the time.

Back in the mid-1980s, my second call was to a Lutheran congregation in Anchorage, a ministry comprised mostly of Iñupiat. These Native Alaskans were urban-dwelling “Eskimos” who originated from and still had family on the Seward Peninsula, the part of the state nearest Russia. These were fourth generation Lutherans proud of their religious heritage, which turned out to be more complicated than at first glance. As just one example, each summer Agnes, the council president, would dip-net salmon in the streams around Cook Inlet, and while so doing spoke to the spirits of the fish, asking them to give themselves up as food for her family and vowing to honor their bodies as she prepared the feast.

Of course, Agnes was not alone in such practices. Whether hunting or cooking, during trial and hardship, or amid sickness or death, most of those parishioners drew from a deep well of traditional beliefs, quiet yet insistent ways their ancient forms intermingled with a quite vibrant Christian expression. Trust me, these were devout Lutherans who could recite Luther’s Small Catechism by heart. They also lived in a religiously complex world where spirits and shamans rubbed shoulders with saints and angels in ways that enriched everyone.

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Which brings me back to a few of you in this room. As a young pastor in those Alaska days, I didn’t know how to make sense of the dual religious patterns these Iñupiat at first concealed from me but later so cautiously disclosed. And it was just then that I stumbled upon Bob Schreiter’s amazing book on local theologies, followed soon thereafter by Steve Bevans’s work on contextualization.<sup>1</sup> Across the miles and long before we met, your insights and others gave me a new way to see and appreciate, something for which I will always be thankful. My larger point is that events like this are not stuffy, arid forays into remote and trivial topics. There’s something at stake in what we engage in this place tonight.

This is especially true for me with this conference theme and our keynoter and panelists who will address it. Perhaps you all found my Alaska example cringeworthy and something you would rather avoid in anything you wish to say. All I’m saying, Dr. Cornille, is that I have been awaiting your lecture for about thirty-five years – no pressure, though – and look forward to Dr. Bevans’s introduction of your remarkable scholarship. And to you all, thank you once again for joining us this year. May God bless our deliberations.

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1. Editor’s note: Robert Schreiter’s influential *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985) is now available in a revised, thirtieth anniversary edition (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2015). Professor Stephen Bevans’s *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), now available as revised and expanded by the author (Maryknoll, 2004).