
Heroic Leadership in Challenging Times¹

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I was among the first wave of women to be ordained in the Lutheran church in this country. That began a whole lot of firsts in my life, culminating in being the first woman president of an ELCA seminary. I was able to serve where I would have been excluded just a few years before. There was also a lot of pain and risk and rejection and self-doubt for me and other women pioneers, as there is for all of us who blaze new trails. There was a lot of change for the whole church, reflecting ripples of change in society. Today nearly half of our seminary presidents and bishops are women. And the presiding bishop to boot!! Unthinkable when I began.

The merger that formed the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in 1988 was another time of great upheaval. It became personal for me when I was called to serve as Director for Theological Education on the original churchwide staff. For those first ten years, my job—with a lot of other people—was to imagine how our eight valued seminaries could adapt to prepare leaders in new ways for a fast-changing, wildly diverse, and increasingly secular world. And how could they possibly be sustained by this struggling new church?

Back then, thirty years ago, we projected the need for a wide diversity of leaders—lay and ordained—trained in a variety of ways through multiple degrees and certificate programs. Thirty years ago, we anticipated the scourge of student debt and launched an endowed churchwide scholarship fund (the Fund for Leaders) which has greatly reduced the cost for many students. We called on the seminaries to make their programs more accessible through distance learning. We challenged them to embrace cultural diversity. We encouraged ecumenical hospitality. And yes, we proposed seminary mergers—like the one you have achieved at United Lutheran Seminary.

Faculty, staff, and students have lived through those changes in recent decades, plus a pandemic! Lutheran seminaries have been heroic in their capacity to change. Hard work. High risk. Not without loss. But United Lutheran Seminary is here today—reinvented and thriving. It has served you, the class of 2024, in ways its founders could never have imagined, would never have tolerated.

All this is to say that Elizabeth Eaton and I were called to lead

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during major historical shifts, and, by the grace of God, we didn't fall on our faces. We led. The same is true for your seminary and those who have led here and learned here through those changes. And I'm here to say that you, the class of 2024, will face even more radical change in your time:

- Attacks on human rights we thought were secure,
- Political division and the rise of autocracy around the world,
- Artificial Intelligence—and snowballing technological innovations of all kinds,
- Loneliness and isolation in our people—especially young people,
- Climate change and the degradation of the environment,
- Mass migrations of displaced people,
- The threat of White Christian Nationalism that gives all of Christianity a bad name.

All this at a time when our church and churches in all developed countries continue to lose both members and influence in the public sphere.

These times—these conditions—call for heroic leadership. Leadership that matches and exceeds what any of us here may have offered before. In your time, you will have to reinvent the church, maybe more than once—while you are flying it. Strong counterwinds of nostalgia and resistance will make that work harder. The people you serve—the people who call you pastor, the people who depend on you to help them make sense of all the changes—may not be able to pay you a living wage.

Still there is hope. Hope is hidden even in these challenging

1. United Lutheran Seminary Commencement Address on May 18, 2024, St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

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times. For all the wonders of Christendom—great cathedrals, art and music, hospitals and universities, theologians as superstars—the church was never at its best when it was most powerful. Like all human institutions, our churches have succumbed to the temptations that come with power: domination, arrogance, exclusivity, abuse. We have a lot to answer for. You come to leadership in a time which theologian Douglas John Hall has called the “humiliation of the church.” This time, your time, may be the time when the church finds its true vocation once more—as the servant of all, as advocate for the oppressed, speaking truth to power, following in the way of Jesus, living the way of the cross, giving up its very life for the sake of the world.

Your time calls for “heroic leadership.” “Heroic” doesn’t mean invincible or without struggle. Heroic leadership is to look at a fractured world and a fractured church and decide you want to be part of the healing. We are all hoping you will take that challenge. We know it won’t be easy. It will take courage for one thing. You are going to have to be audacious, daring, enterprising, venturesome, **brave**. Such courage is born of faith that God is at work making something new even when it all looks hopeless.

Along with courage, you will need *heart*—great heart—to lead through disruptive change. The word *magnanimous* comes to mind. And *generous*—generous with yourself and with others. The love of God fuels lives spilled out for the sake of others, for the sake of the gospel.

Today you receive the degrees you have earned. You have gained a deep, nuanced understanding of the faith that will ground you for the ministries ahead, whatever they turn out to be. You’ve integrated that faith into your very being so that it radiates in a way that others can see and believe. You have begun to learn the arts of ministry, how to be with people in a way that makes them better. You have a lot to give. You have a lot to be proud of as graduates of United Lutheran Seminary. We honor you today for all that you have done.

But wait, there’s more. I also want to nominate you today for future high honors for what you are about to do. I would love to be around twenty or thirty years from now to see you recognized for the heroic leaders you became, to celebrate how you met the challenges of your time, as Elizabeth Eaton and I are being honored today. I envision not just academic hoods but laurel wreaths, trumpets, speeches, processions, confetti, and applause. Lots of applause. We know the kind of ministry you are being called to seldom results in such extravagant honors.

Thank you for leading through challenging times with great courage, love, and humility, so that the transforming love of God in Jesus Christ becomes real for new generations and so that our ever-changing church becomes a sign of healing and hope for the world—and for us.

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