

5-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

McKenzie, Lyle (2007) "Convocation address," *Consensus*: Vol. 32 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol32/iss1/7>

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Convocation Address

Lyle McKenzie

*Pastor, Lutheran Church of the Cross
Victoria, British Columbia*

(The author presented this Convocation Address on May 5, 2006, on the occasion of the Fifth Joint Convocation of the Saskatoon Theological Union, comprising the following institutions: University of Emmanuel College / College of Emmanuel and St. Chad; Lutheran Theological Seminary; and St. Andrew's & St. Stephen's Colleges.)

I greet you and I am honoured to speak to you on this evening of celebration and thanksgiving as one people of Christ's Church, in the Spirit of the risen Christ. Christ is risen! If you would indulge my reminiscing just a little, it was twenty years ago, on May 8, 1986, that I was a member of the graduating class of Lutheran Theological Seminary Saskatoon. We were the first graduating class of the newly formed Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. Bishop Don Sjoberg and Joan Meyer (recipients of honorary degrees this evening) were elected Bishop and Vice President respectively of the new church, and Bishop Sjoberg was the convocation speaker that evening. I also spoke on behalf of the graduating class, thanking the faculty and staff of the Seminary for being not only inspirational theologians and scholars and competent practitioners of pastoral arts, but ultimately being our mentors in faith and life, embodying for us the Biblical, theological and pastoral knowledge and tools we sought to acquire for ministry; but even more, embracing us with the grace of Christ Jesus to live and grow as imaginative and impassioned people of faith. And I am still thankful. It's true I maybe "laid it on a little thick," to use my mother's phrase, but, understandably, because I had not yet received a call.

That was then, and this is now. And despite heartfelt connections between the two, at least for me, other than a few more comparisons between that time of looking forward and this one, I want to speak of this time for you, the Graduates, and all of us with you, all God's children, in what are interesting times.

Have you heard the story about the Zen Buddhist Monk with shaven head and traditional black prayer attire; the United Church

University Chaplain in comfortable fairly traded kaki pants and hemp tee-shirt; the unassuming Christian Science healing practitioner; the scruffy Irish Catholic lay theologian under tartan cap; the enlightened and ever compassionate Bahai faith representative; and the nondescript Lutheran pastor – all on a ferry together to see whales? The monk exclaims, “Over there!” and as they see two tall black dorsal fins knife through the water and the white and black backs of the orcas arching out of the blue and then disappearing again, they all exclaim in unison, “Wow!” I know it sounds like the makings of joke, a cute and harmless and therefore appropriate-for-sermon-illustrations joke. But it isn’t. It is just one experience of being people of faith and ministers of Christ in this time, in your time.

In this case, it was a trip by a few of the University of Victoria Interfaith Chaplains (we are about fifteen in all, mostly part-time chaplains, from Anglican to Wiccan and everything in between – as our Salvation Army Chaplain fondly describes us) to visit the University of British Columbia Interfaith Chaplains. The ferry ride over and back to that “Nineveh” called “Vancouver” was smooth sailing (no one had to be thrown overboard to be swallowed by the whales) and the day spent together was fascinating and fun and engaging and ultimately revealing. We were all (*are* all) colleagues. Or to use Walter Brueggemann’s term in *Hope for the World*,¹ we are all “allies” in a common calling to engage the University, the community, the world in what authors William James and subsequently Marcus Borg term, “the more,” within all of life. We are naming together that “more” lies just below the surface, and witnessing to “thin places” where “more” is revealed and sighted by our various traditions and practices.

Each semester a number of us plan a program called “Sessions in Spirituality.” A weekly gathering for students, faculty, staff and community members, invited guests present on an area of passion and interest in their lives that intersects with their spiritual practice. The sessions have interesting titles like: “Core Shamanic” experience; Energy Healing; Dragon Boat Racing / Cancer recovery; and Spirituality, Science and Islam; Tear Gas Mysticism – to name but a few examples. I often find myself going from these sessions to meetings at the Church with my head spinning a little, sometimes with new insights and often with questions of how these worlds of spirituality meet. All is not on the same plane of significance to me.

I don't accept simplistic summations like "we all worship the same God," or "every religion is the same at its core," although these statements hold truth. But these sessions, like University "Clubs Days" where every possible interest group under the sun sets up a display table including all the "spiritual" groups on campuses, reveal we are in a spiritual marketplace, in which we as Christians have a few tables among many. It makes for interesting times.

On one of my first Sundays after moving to Victoria to serve as Pastor of a congregation, I glanced at the morning paper before leaving for Church and discovered the headline, "Victoria, Canada's Most Godless City." The article described census data that indicated fewer Victorians participate in religious services than the rest of the country. Having just uprooted a large family to Victoria, to serve a religious community in what I now learned by one assessment was Canada's most "Godless city," how should one respond to this news?

This Holy week and Easter, magazines like Macleans headlined what papers and other media were also covering, "Did Jesus really die?" And just in time for Easter, news about the Gospel of Judas was released suggesting Judas was not a betrayer, but Jesus' best friend and collaborator helping him do what he needed to do, which was of course, according to other "coded" sources, not really die but marry Mary and live happily ever after in Egypt. The epitome came on Easter Sunday morning as I walked past a car in the parking lot of the church and noticed a paper lying on the front seat with a bold headline that read something like, "Is Da Vinci Winning Over the Church." Such headlines and timing help to sell books and magazines and papers, to be sure; but what a context for preparing Holy Week and Easter sermons!. These are interesting times to be Christian, even more to be a graduating theological student, in many cases entering professional vocations within the Church – very interesting times.

Maybe it was just as interesting 20 years ago, but with a different set of issues and challenges. Twenty years ago in a thoroughly modern world the concerns I recall were gender-equality in language and leadership within the church; a liberating theology that had as its first concern those most in need; growing ecumenical relationships; just getting on board with environmental stewardship; aging churches that seemed to be reaching a plateau if not showing first signs of decline; and the "Jesus Seminar" in the news ... together with scandals of sexual abuse.

Today, in this so-called post-modern, one-global-mega-economy, thoroughly-webbed, information-overloaded world, it is to bless or not to bless people of differing sexual orientations and their relationships that is the fixation of two of our churches and a continuing concern for the third; increasing ecumenical partnerships determined as much by economic limitation as what has become the luxury of ongoing dialogues; an urgent need for interfaith dialogue and understanding and cooperation in an increasingly multicultural, multi-faith and politically charged and dangerous world; a near religious movement of sustainability and simplicity, environmental crises and the foreseeable end of our planet's finite supply of basic resources; mainline (actually, now more "sideline") churches that continue to decline hoping for a plateau while more conservative evangelistic communities are bursting at their seams in what seems to be their time; and news headlines like I already mentioned; and wildly popular books and movies of the passion and the conspiracy of Christ and his Church. Need I say again, these are very interesting times to be Christian, even more to be a graduating theological student, called as we all are through Baptism to Christian vocations in the world?

How will you faithfully serve in your time? Claiming no special insight into the future or what is most needed, I propose just a few ideas or images for you and all of us to consider. There is a continuing broad based personal and public conversation happening in interesting places from blogs to ferry rides, about what people are "putting their faith in." It is happening, as much, if not more, outside the Church as in it, sometimes under the banner of spirituality, often times with language that bears no resemblance to the faith words we use, but often to the same end of saving our world and our lives from destruction that we look to in hope as followers of Christ.

Join the conversation wherever and whenever you can. Don't be embarrassed or diminish what "you put your faith in," the particular Christian perspective you bring – and that is no small challenge. This means helping our churches recover the more traditional understanding that a parish, whether you serve in it as pastor or lay member, is the neighbourhood community that surrounds our churches extending from there into the whole world. And take every opportunity to meet the people of your parish, inviting them into the conversation, face to face wherever possible because we believe in God incarnate not of the internet. And never be afraid to ask others

the question, “Where do they see “more” in life?” And listen, listen, listen, because we have done and do so much talking, talking, talking. And when graced with the opportunity, share a glimpse you’ve had by God’s grace of a thin place of holy surfacing, out of the blue.

I have taken to calling this the “chaplaincy of all believers.” I think I heard a phrase similar to this in my Seminary days. Chaplaincy is a drawing alongside of others in their context, joining their conversation and yours with God’s. This freedom to be with people requires an understanding of Church stewardship and structure that for “self-service” is as lean as possible in order to free us up as much as possible for community service and world service in the way of Jesus. By God’s grace, yes, I said by God’s grace, this has been imposed on our churches by our decline.

We are lean and ready for service if we also let go of the need to expend most of our energy shoring up old structures that once were but can be no more ... and if we see others within but especially outside the Church, people engaged with us in heartfelt concern for the world and all its creatures, as allies with us to this end, which for us is Christ’s way of faithfulness and love. This will be essentially domestic work of hospitality in the Spirit of Christ. We live “out” our Baptismal vocation “out” in the world, meeting, working with and inviting others home. And when they come – as we unconditionally welcome them in, give them opportunity to be washed clean of past hurts and failings, encourage them to join in sharing the stories that shape and define us, offer a meal; and when they are fed and we bid them farewell with our blessing, our benediction (that is, our “good words,” “the best being”) – then God be with you. To use the image that President Ogilvie has shared here and at the BC Synod Convention last weekend: as with Jesus, we are hosts and guests, never sure when the tables are turned and one becomes the other. Doesn’t that make for interesting times?

In twenty years I hope and pray that one of you will stand up here and speak to the 2026 graduating class of the STU, by this or any other name, identifying where the Church is in their time. I say this believing news of the church’s death, even this week, may be greatly exaggerated.

I hope and pray that you will be able to say that our fixation on sex has shifted entirely to a focus on loving one another, which is what sex and the church were for in the first place (in admittedly different ways!).

I hope and pray that you will be able to say that interfaith understanding and cooperation is the norm of our communities and nations, allies that we are for the healing of the world, in concern for those most vulnerable and in faithful stewardship of the earth.

I hope and pray that you will be able to say that our respective churches have turned a corner, having faithfully kept the home fires burning and joined the conversation beyond ourselves so as to serve in wonderfully diverse, multicultural, multigenerational communities of those who are making an intentional commitment to an alternative, countercultural practice of living Jesus' passionate and joyful way of love and mercy and grace in and of the world. Won't that be an interesting time to be a Christian?

I end offering you a curse and a blessing. It's the phrase I have already repeated: *May you live in interesting times*. The phrase itself has an interesting and mysterious story. Suggested to be an ancient Chinese curse in its first popular usage in 1966, in a speech by Robert Kennedy on a "Day of Affirmation" in Cape Town, South Africa, Chinese scholars suggest its origin is neither ancient nor Chinese. Appearing before this in 1950, in a story by Eric Frank Russel in the journal *Astounding Science Fiction*, some suggest its origin is North American. Of these and all the other claims, I prefer the one that suggests it is a Scottish curse and blessing. I liken it to another ironic Scottish phrase, "It's good ta see yer back!"

Blessing and curse. I say to you, *May you live in interesting times*. May you serve the Church of Christ in interesting times. May you, and all of us with you, faithfully live out our Baptismal vocation in interesting times. I believe that is much more a blessing than a curse. For isn't it true that Jesus lived and died (and lives on!) in very interesting times, never ceasing to go before and with us, into every time bearing God's eternal interest in redeeming the world?

Thank you for this honour of speaking to you. God is with you!

Notes

- 1 Walter Brueggemann, ed., *Hope for the World: Mission in a Global Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).