
There's a Crack in Everything

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*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.¹*

Episcopal priest, author and consultant Loren Mead wrote in 1991 about the church in the United States: “Mission, which had once been both central rallying cry and basic assumption, has become instead a subject of debate and disagreement.”² Mead went on to write that in this context of debate and disagreement, three things were happening simultaneously:

First, our present confusion about mission hides the fact that we are facing a fundamental change in how we understand the mission of the church. Beneath the confusion we are being stretched between a great vision of the past and a new vision that is not yet fully formed.

Second, local congregations are now being challenged to move from a passive, responding role in support of mission to a front-line, active role. The familiar roles of laity, clergy, executive, bishop, church council, and denominational bureaucrat are in profound transition all around us.

Third, institutional structures and forms developed to support one vision of our mission are rapidly collapsing. I argue that we are being called to invent and reinvent structures and forms that will serve the new mission as well as the old structures served the old vision.³

Mead, using the tools of theology and social change analysis, described cracks that were becoming increasingly evident in the system called “Christendom.” While the cracks are a cause of confusion, fear, and anxiety, they are allowing the light to get in.

Needs, opportunities, and initiatives

The Christendom paradigm supported a particular vision of *where*

1. Leonard Cohen, “Anthem,” Sony Music Entertainment, 1992.
2. Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (Washington, D.C., 1991), 4.
3. *Ibid.*, 5.

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mission took place. The assumption was that within Western Christian society, for whom membership in church and culture were nearly synonymous, mission occurred outside the boundaries of that culture. The Christendom paradigm also supported assumptions regarding *who* carried out that mission. Mission as outside-the-boundaries work—where few ordinary people were able to go—was carried out by religious professionals.

With the decline of Christendom, however, there is growing awareness that the *where* of mission is on the streets outside the church doors. The *who* includes every baptized person who walks those streets. Yet these people often cannot imagine themselves carrying God’s mission to their streets.

During the time of the Christendom Paradigm, the formation of the laity was a matter of little concern. The entire social order was supposed to be so rooted and grounded in the Christian faith that ordinary community life produced faithful people.... As the Christendom Paradigm collapsed, a widespread need for better formation of the laity in the faith thus became increasingly clear.⁴

The cracks are letting in the light!

The Life of Faith Initiative, a grass-roots movement in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), is part of a movement contributing to a re-defining of the mission of God’s church in the world. “The purpose of the Life of Faith Initiative

4. *Ibid.*, 49.

is to stir up a culture of change that frees us to make the service by the baptized in the arenas of daily life the central focus of the church's mission."⁵ Mission is being re-defined and all the baptized are being called into God's mission in the world! This is both inviting and requiring different priorities and behaviors on the part of the structures, institutions, and people whose calling it is to equip these very people for ministry. "There are apostles and prophets, in addition to evangelists, pastors and teachers who apparently serve particular functions in accord with their gifts. The *actual work* of ministry, however, is not carried out by these officers or leaders but rather is entrusted to 'the saints'—that is, to the laity who compose the rank and file membership of various congregations. The task of church leaders is to 'equip the saints for the work of ministry' (Ephesians 4:12–13) so that all may come to experience God's plan for unity in its fullness."⁶

While Mead and others were exploring *what* constituted mission, *where* it was happening, and *who* was carrying it out, the cracks in the system were allowing light to reach new and unexpected corners. In some people's minds, theological education was exclusively the work of seminaries and was largely confined to seminaries. But voices were being raised that cast a vision of *more* theological education being accessible to *more* people for the sake of *more* ministry in God's world.

The education of ordained pastors and other leaders in the church should prepare them to assist the people of the church to integrate their life and faith. These lay members live on the cutting edge of mission. Their faith and ministry could be enhanced if they had access to programs of theological education at an advanced level. Such programs would have to relate to their ministries in the world and be adaptable to the demands of their primary commitments to family or work.⁷

This vision was being embodied not only in seminaries but also in colleges and universities, in middle-judicatories (for example, synods and dioceses), in congregations and by other organizations that specialized in education.⁸

One of the programs that has helped provide access to theological education for all the baptized is *Education for Ministry (EfM)*. Begun in 1975, *EfM* is part of the Beecken Center of the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, primarily serving Episcopal laity. *EfM* is a four-year theological education program using group reflection and study to support formation for Christian ministry in daily life. It offers opportunity to explore a broader understanding and practice of ministry, based on an understanding that baptism, the fundamental rite of entry into

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Christianity, marks the call to ministry to one another in Christ's name in the course of our daily lives.⁹ Examining life through a theological lens is the central spiritual discipline in *EfM*.¹⁰

Common to *EfM* and the growing number of lay-oriented theological education programs offered by nearly every denominational tradition is a commitment to a robust curriculum including study of the scriptures, theology, history, worship, spirituality, prayer, and Christian vocation.¹¹ Like the majority of theological education programs, there is an expectation that the teaching and learning will take place within a community and that participants are involved in regular prayer and worship. Participants have opportunity to explore all aspects of their lives, including their occupations as expressions of their Christian vocation.

In his contribution to the *Centered Life Series*, which was an initiative of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, Marc Kolden wrote:

Simply believing in Jesus Christ and believing that we are called to serve him in our roles in daily life will not automatically tell us *what* we are to do or *how* we are to do it. The Bible does not teach us how to cut hair or raise corn or run a computer; and though it does say some things about parents and citizens, and about responding to humans in crisis situations, even there faith by itself may not give us enough guidance.¹²

Many who participate in these lay-oriented programs are drawn by the opportunity to explore the arenas of life in which the risen Christ calls us into life-giving, creation-sustaining service. These include our lives as family members, neighbors, citizens, consumers, and inhabitants of the earth.

Theological reflection

In response to this expressed need and desire to explore indi-

9. *Education for Ministry Reading and Reflection Guide*, Volume A, 2017–18 (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 4. See also <http://efm.sewanee.edu/about-efm/about-efm>.

10. *Ibid.*, 5.

11. At one point in the early 2000s, there were more than seventy-five lay-oriented theological education programs within the ELCA alone.

12. Marc Kolden, *Christian's Calling in the World* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Centered Life, an Initiative of Luther Seminary, 2002), 31–32.

5. <http://lifeoffaith.info/>

6. Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 337 (italics added).

7. *Faithful Leaders for a Changing World: Theological Education for Mission in the ELCA* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 1995), 29–30.

8. For example, Select Learning, <https://www.selectlearning.org/>.

vidual callings and find support for living them, *EfM* pioneered the practice of vocational discernment and crafted resources to support a communal process of reflecting theologically on one's various vocations. Two resources provide an excellent overview of the Theological Reflection process: Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer's *The Art of Theological Reflection* and the *Education for Ministry Reading and Reflection Guide 2017–2018*.

According to Killen and de Beer, "Theological reflection is the process of seeking meaning that relies on the rich heritage of our Christian tradition as a primary source of wisdom and guidance. It presumes the profoundly incarnational (God present in human lives), providential (God caring for us) and revelatory (sources of deepening knowledge of God and self) quality of human experience."¹³ They go on to write, "Without theological reflection, faith becomes something that belonged to our forebears. It can become a protected zone, off limits to all but theological experts. Faith is reduced to possession. Theology serves to justify what we already think and legitimate whatever psychological, sociological, economic or political theory we hold."¹⁴

The *EfM* Theological Reflection process follows four basic movements:

1. *Identify a focus*: This is the most crucial step. An engaging focus propels one into reflection.
2. *Explore the focal image or statement*: Asking questions from a theological perspective is what turns reflection into theological reflection.
3. *Connect other sources to the reflection*: This is the heart of reflection that helps us connect our lives and our faith.
4. *Apply learning and insight to ministry*: A reflection that does not end with implications for our own lives as ministers in the world is incomplete.¹⁵

The detailed consideration of the four movements of Theological Reflection that follows draws heavily on the *Reading and Reflection Guide 2017–2018*¹⁶

Identify a focus

Theological Reflection is typically a part of each *EfM* session. One of the participants agrees to be the presenter. The Theological Reflection process begins with identifying a focus. It might be a personal experience or an activity from the everyday experience of the presenter. The focus may draw on the Christian tradition, including biblical texts, a portion of the liturgy, art, and music, and the historical doctrines and traditions of the church. The focus may be something from the culture, such as stories in the

news, popular music, movies, or literature. Another source may be a personal belief or position, something that affirms the way she thinks or something that motivates the way he behaves.

The presenter begins by telling the story, incident, or experience on which he or she would like to focus. It is important to tell the story by emphasizing *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, and *how*. One should try to avoid *why* questions, because these can lead too quickly to interpretation and judgment. If the presenter begins with a personal experience, she identifies a central moment, a critical point in the experience. What thoughts and feelings occurred at that moment? If the focal point is a biblical text, what is the main idea or image? If it is something in the culture, what is central? If it is a personal position, what is the core value or deeply cherished view of the world that is in question or being challenged? The presenter describes what happened in the first person and present tense. She avoids judgments, explanations, and analysis at this point.

The whole group then joins the presenter, identifying the shifts in action and the point in the story at which the energy is most intense, the moment with the most emotional impact. Together they ask questions and offer insights that help the presenter identify more clearly what is at the heart of the story. What is challenging? What is surprising? What has stopped you in your tracks and invites your reflection? They work with the presenter to recapture and identify the feelings and thoughts associated with the incident. This first movement is meant to describe the event, not decide what it means or place any value judgment on it.

When the group enters experience by talking about it openly and attentively, they may find it saturated with feeling. This is essential to our nature as human beings. Our feelings are our most human responses to reality and reflect the desire to know reality intimately. Unless we can locate a feeling in our body and with our whole body being involved, we have not really named the feeling.¹⁷ Killen and de Beer go into great detail in *Theological Reflection* on the importance of naming feelings precisely, accurately, and nonjudgmentally.¹⁸

The group then moves from the area of focus to create an image, a metaphor, or a concise statement that captures the energy of the focus. Several images or metaphors may emerge. Participants list them all and then narrow them down to the one that seems most apt. At this point they will set the original experience, story, or incident aside and focus on this metaphor or image.

Images work differently from conceptual language. They are less definite, less defining, and less precise.¹⁹ Images lend themselves to our imaginations. Because they are not as precise or defining, they may allow new insights and meaning to come forth. They may surprise us and show us something unexpected. They may help us move to reflection and insight before engaging in problem solving. These insights can then lead us, if we are

13. Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), xi.

14. *Ibid.*, 14–15.

15. *Education for Ministry Reading and Reflection Guide, 2017–2018: Living Faithfully in Your World* (New York: Church Publishing, 2017), 247.

16. *Ibid.*, 247.

17. Killen and de Beer, 27–28.

18. *Ibid.*, 30.

19. *Ibid.*, 37.

willing, to action—action that is reflective of the new, unexpected things that God is doing. These insights can reflect not only greater knowledge and understanding but also the lived truths we receive, so that we come to embody the love of God in the world.²⁰

Explore

Once a metaphor or image has been chosen, the group continues to explore it by posing questions such as “What kind of world is this?” “What is destructive in this world?” “What could change things?” and “What would make this world better?” These are questions that make use of classic systematic theological categories such as creation, sin, judgment, and redemption. Other ways of expressing these theological perspectives include the language of wholeness, brokenness, recognition, reorientation, and restoration. What separates, alienates, shocks, and causes tension in this metaphor? What sheds new light, brings reconciliation, redemption, restoration, and new life? What can we say about God, human nature, and grace as a result of our exploration of the metaphor? How does the image or metaphor expand our understanding of what it means to live in relationship with God, others, ourselves, and the natural world?

Connect

Exploring theologically the focal image, metaphor, or statement invites participants to make connections. They may recall biblical stories, doctrinal statements, stories of saints, phrases from the liturgy, or hymns that relate to the focus. Participants may recall other personal experiences, thoughts, feelings, fears, hopes, and concerns.

Connections with culture can prove to be difficult for some, because they are like the water in which we are swimming. We are so close to the experiences of our own culture that it is easy to become blind to them. Making connections invites participants to reflect on events in the news, practices in the culture, social mores, art, music, or literature.

Personal beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and convictions may also come to mind. Deeply held personal positions can take on a life of their own. Learning to identify and revise our positions is an important part of growing in faith because our positions can both make us attentive to God's activity and prevent us from seeing it.²¹

Apply learning and insight to ministry

Insights can lead to implications that are applicable to one's ministry in daily life. However, unless we write, speak, or in some other way claim and acknowledge our insights, we are likely to forget them. Our habitual processes will take us back to our familiar ways of living.²² Implications may take the form of new awareness, commitment to action, a changing attitude, or value. Some of the questions that can help move from incident to action include:

Have you discovered something new? and Has this affirmed or changed an opinion you already held? Participants may ask, “What will you do differently as a result of this reflection?” or “Is there a decision you've made or that you may need to make?”

Yes, with the help of God

Early in 2018, John De Beer, who for decades has played a key role in the *EfM* movement, mused on some of the assumptions behind theological reflection. He wrote:

- a. *Certitude makes reflection impossible.* If I assume that my cultural heritage as I understand it provides infallible guidance for life, there is no need or space for reflection.
- b. *Self-assurance makes reflection impossible.* If I believe that my own common sense, however I have acquired it, is the most reliable guide for my life, there is no need or space for reflection.
- c. *Curiosity is the essential standpoint for theological reflection.* I trust that when I allow the four sources of Tradition, Culture, Personal Experience, and Personal Position to be in conversation, I am likely to gain unpredictable insight into one or more of the sources.
- d. *Problem solving assumes the need for a time bound solution to some present or future problem. Reflection seeks insight, the implications of which are unpredictable.*²³

De Beer echoes sentiments expressed by author and priest Henri Nouwen who wrote: “Both theological reflection and spiritual formation require an articulate not-knowingness and a receptive emptiness through which God can be revealed. Just as theology asks us to empty our cup so that we can open our mind to the incomprehensible things of God, spirituality asks us to empty our hearts so we can receive life as a gift to be lived.”²⁴

One of the marks of the time in which we are living is new opportunity for all the baptized to engage in the core practices that inform, shape, and form people for ministry—living in community, regular prayer, worship, study of the Christian tradition, theological reflection, and vocational discernment. But this would be little more than empty striving without an attitude of openness to the Spirit and the confidence that God is already engaged in our lives. Formation of a life of faith must finally be rooted in the confidence that our learning, our life-in-community, our theological reflection, and our vocational discernment must always begin by asking: What is God already up to here and now? and How are we being invited to become part of the mission in God's beloved world? With that openness and confidence, we can “Ring the bells that still can ring and forget our perfect offering.” These are the cracks that let the light get in.

20. Ibid., 43.
21. Ibid., 58.
22. Ibid., 67.

23. John de Beer, unpublished manuscript, March 2018.

24. Henri J. M. Nouwen with Michael J Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 4.