Dialog in Diversity

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The past: Where we have been

Dialog: A Lutheran Journal of Theology was founded in 1962, with the following leadership: Carl Braaten as the first editor; James Burtness of Luther Seminary as managing editor; and Robert Jenson of Luther College as Book Review Editor. At that time, Braaten was based at Chicago Lutheran Theological Seminary, located in Maywood, Illinois. It was begun as a quarterly journal and it remains so today. (In case you are wondering, the first annual subscription rate was $5.00!) The journal was wholly and thoroughly Lutheran, with a Lutheran editorial board, Lutheran authors, and a primarily Lutheran audience—specifically Lutheran professors and pastors. The inaugural issue was titled “Death and Resurrection,” and the first editorial mentioned the impending visit of Karl Barth—this would be his first visit to the United States—and also the Freedom Riders. Interestingly enough, the author of the latter article, George Forell, challenged Lutheran churches and their leadership in particular for their “lethargy and apathy” in support for the movement.

Ted Peters took over as editor with the Spring 1993 issue, and he remained editor until I took the position with the Spring 2008 issue. During that time, the journal experienced its own “death and resurrection” of sorts. In 2000, it seemed the journal would have to fold for lack of funds. At that point, however, Wiley-Blackwell brought the journal into its publishing portfolio and with this change in journal ownership, big changes took place in terms of readership. Dialog moved out from its Lutheran roots, acquiring a global, online presence through bundled library subscriptions at all sorts of different institutions, not only theological schools (and certainly not only Lutheran schools). Correspondingly, we have seen our individual subscriptions drop dramatically; and it is clear that Lutheran pastors no longer make up a large percentage of our audience. There have been both losses and gains over the past fifty-plus years.

The present: Where we are now

As I said, I began editing the journal in the spring of 2008. I always have seen myself following in Ted Peter’s footsteps and continuing to deepen and expand the vision he had for Dialog. This is what I wrote in my inaugural editorial:

I also hope to carry forward one of the special strengths of Dialog, which has been there from its very first issue back in 1962, and from its first editor, Carl Braaten. In an editorial written on the 25th anniversary of Dialog’s ex-

istence, Christa Klein offered an answer to the question of why Dialog continued to survive when so many other theological journals had not. She wrote that “among bland Lutherans,” it can be rare to find “the outspoken.” I would argue that Ted was a fine example of the academic courage that dares to speak a faithful, even if controversial, word, when that is what the situation requires. In his inaugural editorial, Ted wrote that “I would like to see Dialog embody the principles of dialogue”—that is, both respecting the dignity of others and also desiring a bond of unity despite differences. Ted called these the “two correlates of love.” He never shied away from controversy, writing that “I believe as most Dialog readers do that our academic and ecclesial community needs an organ in which the theological controversies of our time can rage, in which opinions can be frankly stated, the issues parsed, the assumptions examined, the arguments scrutinized, the implications analyzed, and the solutions projected.” Yet, he also set for the journal the high ideal of “talking something through” together, in order that the relationships already in place might be enhanced, strengthened and even transformed. This ideal is still before us today, and I hope to continue in that courageous spirit, maintaining openness to difference, while always being inspired by the loving, irenic spirit without which true dialogue cannot occur.

For the most part, I believe we have lived into that hope well and, with a crack editorial board, we are not only excited about where we are now, but where we are going in the future. In the space remaining in this article, I will lay out some of the guiding principles that are shaping the conversations going on in the pages of Dialog today.

The future: Where we are going

The overarching concern and commitment we have as an editorial council is diversity; and in our context, we strive for diversity in four areas in particular. The first area of diversity we continue to prioritize is ethnic/racial/gender diversity. I hope that in this context it is not necessary to explain why diversity is important for a theological journal, but I will take a few sentences to make explicit the reasons we value it so highly. The activity of seeing, describing,
Christian theology becomes richer and fuller as it dialogues with people of other faith traditions; and transformation happens on both sides.

few years we have sought a Buddhist perspective on sexuality, a Muslim perspective on salvation, and a Hindu perspective on interreligious dialogue itself.

Finally, the last area of diversity to which Dialog is committed is disciplinary diversity. In my view, Dialog owes much to Ted Peters for this specific point of diversity—and for this, we are grateful. In his own education, in his work training doctoral students, and in his own writing, Ted always has seen the value of thinking broadly and creatively, and bringing theology into conversation with a wide range of academic areas. After all, if theology's proper scope of inquiry is not only God, but all God has created and all things in which God engages and takes an interest, then nothing is off-limits to the theologian. (When I say “nothing,” I really mean “nothing”—Ted just published a new edition of UFOs—God's Chariots?) Dialog thus regularly publishes issues that involve theological engagement with different scientific fields, technology, the social sciences, and the arts. The Spring 2015 issue on “Pre-humans, Humans, and Post-humans” is just one example.

Going forward, we are committed to continuing and expanding this kind of diversity—not least because our online audience also continues to diversify. For example, according to the latest statistics we have from Wiley/Blackwell, 37 percent of Dialog readers—the single largest category—are found outside Europe, the United States, Japan, Canada, China, and Australia. In addition, we are committed to growing our presence in social media venues. We have a Facebook page that generates many new visits every month, thanks to active tending by several editorial council members, Rob Saler in particular. It is an exciting place for Dialog to engage theologically with issues in “real time,” and get prompt feedback from readers. Who knows? By the time this article comes out, maybe Dialog will even have an active Twitter account!

In his editorial in the Spring 2000 issue, John Benson wrote that “theology needs to carry on a conversation with both those inside the church and those outside its walls.” I believe that Dialog has faithfully carried on that conversation, nurturing and supporting it in different locales all over the world. In the twenty-first century, we are committed to continuing it, with an ever growing, ever expanding chorus of voices. Again, to quote Benson, “We are convinced that this is the way God has called us to serve [God’s] Kingdom.” This work is a privilege and a blessing that we do not take lightly—but we sure do have fun doing it.

3. Ibid.