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# 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 25<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

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,

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1. Kristin Johnston Lergen, “Greetings from *Dialog*’s New Editor,” *Dialog: A Lutheran Journal of Theology*, 47:1 (Spring 2008), 1–2.

and interpreting the word and work of God in the world can only be done in context; and to be authentic and faithful, one must acknowledge and attend to one's context in that interpretation. The reason for this is straightforward: while the unconditional and radical love of God certainly is universal, the imagery and language one uses to understand and explain that love are not. Instead, they vary across both time and space. Hildegard's language is not James Cone's language is not Ivone Gebara's language is not Roberto de Nobili's language. And, equally as important, this is something to be celebrated, not mourned. We all need each other to best understand and proclaim God's self-revelation in the world; and the more voices in that joyful chorus the better.

In light of that core theological truth, we then recognize that to properly cover a theological "theme"—all issues of *Dialog* have a specific theme—it is simply untenable to have a collection of authors who speak only from a white, male, Euro-American perspective. When soliciting contributions for our issues, both the editor and the guest editors work very hard to get as diverse a slate of authors as possible. This strategy yields rich fruits. Let me list just a few articles we have published in the last few years: "You Must Follow Our Belief or Else You Can't Receive God: a Sexual Bi/Theology of Eucharist," by Joseph Goh (Summer 2014); "Praying with the World at Heart," by Cláudio Carvalhaes (Winter 2013); and "Adoption in Judaism," by Ophir Yarden (Winter 2012).

Let me be clear: this does not mean that we also do not value the diversity of perspectives that we find in Scandinavia, for example, where many of our editorial council members live and work: Denmark is not Sweden is not Finland is not Norway. However, it is disingenuous to pretend that authors from countries that share a great deal of history and culture offer the same diversity of perspective as authors from halfway across the world, from families that have perhaps been Christian for just a few generations.

The second area of diversity that continues to grow is what we might call "denominational" diversity. That is, *Dialog* no longer seeks only Lutheran theological voices on any specific theological issue, but instead we recognize the value in hearing a Pentecostal perspective on the Holy Spirit, for example, or an Anglican perspective on theological education, or an Eastern Orthodox perspective on prayer (all of which can be found in recent issues). As the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America itself has moved into a number of full communion agreements and respectful denominational partnerships, *Dialog* has sought to reflect that movement with a variety of theological partnerships of its own, hosting lively ecumenical conversations in its pages.

The third area of diversity is related to the second, but, in my view, warrants its own paragraph: religious diversity. In our twenty-first century context, it is no longer possible to "do" theology in a Christian silo. Christian theology is deeply affected by—and affects—Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism; and many other smaller religious traditions as well. As before, this is a gift, not a curse. Christian theology becomes richer and fuller as it dialogues with people of other faith traditions; and transformation happens on both sides of the table. To this end, in the past

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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 theologially 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."<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> This work is a privilege and a blessing that we do not take lightly—but we sure do have fun doing it.

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2. John Benson, "Some Thoughts After Thirty Years," *Dialog* 39:1 (Spring 2000), 1.

3. Ibid.