

Journeys from the Crossroads

Stories on living, studying,
and doing theology



THE
LUTHERAN
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Preface

The centrality of the cross has always been essential for how we in the Lutheran communion live and do theology. In two well-known quotations, Martin Luther succinctly states:

“A theologian of the cross calls a thing what it actually is.”¹

“The cross alone is our theology.”²

Centrality of the cross entails a theologically realistic approach to God, faith, ministry, and our mission in the world. This is why it is important to equip people with such a perspective and emphasize the relevance of theological education that is transformative.

LWF has been supporting theological education in member churches through the scholarship program since the 1950s. More than 2,000 women and men have been educated and trained to understand and interpret the Bible, our faith and doctrines, and to offer theological perspectives on what is happening in the world. As there are many voices that clamor for our attention and dominate the public discussions, theological education that offers tools for distinctive perspectives and critical thinking is much needed.

With the scholarships awarded, LWF supports theological education and formation that transforms not only individuals but also the life of our churches and the world in which

we live. Over the last three years, LWF has initiated new activities and platforms around the scholarship program which bring together scholarship holders around the communion and provide a space for joint reflection and exchange of ideas. The idea of this publication originated in the recurring “Coming Together” online meeting in late 2021 after a vivid and profound conversation on Lutheran identities. The meeting was followed by an open invitation to LWF scholarship holders. Ultimately a group of ten students volunteered to contribute, and the content and structure started to take shape. Based on a collective reflection one of the scholarship holders, Hans-Christoph Thapelo Lange, established the methodology and pedagogical framework for this publication.

Journeys from the Crossroads: Stories on living, studying, and doing theology is a unique publication because it brings to our attention a much-needed student-centered perspective. The contributions by scholarship holders enrich the global discussion on theological education and formation. The personal stories of the nine theology students are honest and authentic narratives of their educational journey and how they experience their formation. They offer insights into life behind the scenes where students reflect on their lived experiences and how studying theology has transformed their thoughts, lives and faith. The stories show that studying theology is not neutral nor does it happen in a vacuum. The meaning of theology arises from its practice and in relation to others as well as how one self-critically reflects on joys and challenges in life and ministry.

1 Martin Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation,” in *Luther’s Works*. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 53.

2 CRUX sola est nostra Theologia. WA 5.176.32

Although the stories are personal and reflect each students' own experience, and they do not necessarily reflect the views of the LWF, the final chapter highlights common factors in their writings that significantly influence how formation is experienced. This publication opens a way for both theological students and theological educators to gain further understanding of the students' experience, recognizing that even the more challenging stories present opportunities for exploration and growth on an individual and church level. It also complements more academically oriented publications and research. It is our hope that this publication will challenge readers to discern the findings and explore how these areas of influence can be further considered and applied to theological education in Lutheran communion.

Furthermore, this publication is a joint collaboration of different actors. It illustrates the creative and transformative power which arises from believing and trusting in others

and delegating responsibility to the theological students who are at the center. On behalf of the students and the LWF, we express our gratitude to all those who have supported and encouraged these emerging theologians throughout their educational journey and during this process.

We trust that *Journeys from the Crossroads* will inspire individuals and LWF member churches to further deepen how we live and do theology in a complex and challenging world. May the breath of the Spirit accompany us as we engage the stories to come, and transform us in our own theological journeys too.

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Introduction

By Hans-Christoph Thapelo Lange



Recent dialogue within the LWF communion has revolved around questions of Lutheran identities. General Secretary Rev. Dr Anne Burghardt stated in her report the LWF Council in 2022 that “it has become clear that Lutheran identity is formed through a normative theological tradition...lived experience and spirituality of worship in dialogue with our cultures and daily life.”¹ Dr Burghardt affirmed that ongoing discussion and study processes around Lutheran identities “contribute to a shared understanding of the theological and spiritual identity of LWF member churches, rooted

in a common confession while witnessing in diverse contexts.”² Perhaps the reflection itself is part of our Lutheran identity as questions of identity have been driving joint theological reflection within the LWF since the inception of the global communion.³

Journeys from the Crossroads: Stories on living, studying and doing theology seeks to add another layer of reflections to the discussions in the LWF communion directly from the community of its theology students. Never before have the scholarship holders themselves as students directly participated in global discussions on Lutheran Identity.

The central question considered by each student is how theology students experience their formation. This question relates to a plethora of other questions under consideration by the LWF, including: “What is a Lutheran understanding of the church’s ministry? How do Lutherans understand the connection between justification and justice? What is the relationship between worship and culture? How do we understand ourselves as a communion of churches? What is the church’s role in the public space? How do we interpret the Bible?”⁴ Many of these questions are addressed from a student’s perspective in the following reflections.

A short overview of the discourse around theological formation in the LWF is presented below for contextualizing this study, followed by an introduction of the study’s methodology – autoethnography – and its theological backing. The framework used in the chapter

1 Anne Burghardt, “*Report of the General Secretary*” (LWF Council: Geneva, 2022).

2 Burghardt, “*Report of the General Secretary*.”

3 Martin Junge, “Preface,” in *We Believe in the Holy Spirit: Global Perspectives on Lutheran Identities*, eds. Chad M. Rimmer and Cheryl M. Peterson (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2021), 7.

4 Junge, “Preface,” 7.



The authors of *Journeys from the Crossroads* at their in-person meeting in December 2022. Photo: LWF/S. Gallay

contributions of each author is then presented, concluding with an outline detailing the study process. The results will then be discussed in the final chapter of this publication.

Recent Discourse around Theological Formation in the LWF

The most comprehensive and recent study of theological education and ministerial formation comes from Rev. Dr Johannes Habib Zeiler, who studied theological education

and formation in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT).⁵ According to Zeiler, theological education has been a “hotly debated issue for decades” involving “a broad range of actors in all levels of the church including many global partners, all with certain claims, agendas, and expectations of what theological education entails.”⁶

Drawing on interviews with bishops and theological educators, Zeiler identifies the “leading motives and ideas behind their current

5 Johannes Habib Zeiler, “Crafting Lutheran Pastors in Tanzania: Perceptions of Theological Education and Formation in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania” (PhD diss., Uppsala University, 2018).

6 Zeiler, “Crafting Lutheran Pastors in Tanzania,” 184.

engagements in the field of ministerial studies.”⁷

The motives and ideas of the ELCT involve:

- “high expectations and far-reaching demands” for their ministerial students,⁸
- the theological institutions, and
- the future prospects of the ELCT.⁹

With regards to the future prospects of the church, Zeiler notes in a separate article that “theological education is generally high on the agenda among Lutherans, considered key when strategizing for the future, and often described as ‘the backbone of the church’.”¹⁰ Consequently, the assumptions and ambitions of theological education must be well understood for the formation of solid contemporary Lutheran identities.

In the LWF publication *We Believe in the Holy Spirit: Global Perspectives on Lutheran Identities*, an important distinction is made between identity “formation” and “information”: “formation” implies that we “are formed in the context of diverse cultures, languages, worldviews and political realities,” while information references the “common theological, normative heritage” that informs our Lutheran identities.¹¹

The annex to the publication further notes that a matrix of normativity and experience—including confessional, theological, liturgical tradition, ecumenical realities, and pluralistic societies—contribute to the formation of Lutheran identities.

The role of liturgy is specifically emphasized by the publication’s editors Chad M. Rimmer and Cheryl M. Peterson, who posit that the formation of a solid Lutheran identity is related to the call to make disciples and the “lived spirituality of our experience of God’s Spirit.” Finally, the annex concludes by sharing the authors’ hope that the publication would inspire “theological reflection on the Holy Trinity’s faithful work of continually forming, reforming and transforming our identity as the baptized.”¹²

The processes of identity formation and information (similar to the constructs of normativity and experience referenced above, where normativity refers to information and experience to formation) that occur within theological education are a focal point of this study. Instead of engaging people of authority such as bishops and educators, we look at the other side of the “pedagogical coin” to understand the diverse experiences of theology students.

Moreover, instead of looking only at the Lutheran church in Tanzania, global experiences of LWF theology students from Chile, Ethiopia, India, Malaysia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and additional perspectives from Tanzania, are also considered. These autoethnographic accounts aim to provide insight into the expectations and demands on the students, the theological institutions involved, and a glimpse into the lives of future pastors.

7 Zeiler, “Crafting Lutheran Pastors in Tanzania,” 184.

8 Zeiler, “Crafting Lutheran Pastors in Tanzania,” 185.

9 Zeiler, “Crafting Lutheran Pastors in Tanzania,” 191.

10 Johannes Habib Zeiler, “Lutheran Theological Education and Formation: A Risky Business in Changing African Landscapes,” in *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 263–272.

11 Rimmer and Peterson, ed., *We Believe in the Holy Spirit: Global Perspectives on Lutheran Identities: Global Perspectives on Lutheran Identities* 273.

12 Rimmer and Peterson, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 277, 278, 280.

Autoethnographic Method

To understand how theology students experience their education, the lived experiences of participating scholarship holders will be considered through autoethnography. In the autoethnographic method, the “life of the researcher becomes a conscious part of what is studied.”¹³ In each chapter of this study, the authors consciously outline and study their experience in and throughout their theological education.

The authors vary in their emphasis on self (auto), their church and culture (ethnos), and their writing (graphy). A seasoned reader of academia should note that autoethnographies break somewhat with the conventions of academic writing, since they are inclusive of narrative and personal writing. The personal perspective and narrative writing—even emotional details—are therefore in line with the method. As such, the credibility of the following chapters is closely linked to the credibility and authenticity of the various authors.¹⁴

Each author’s chapter in this study consists of two parts: the presentation of their first-person experience in their theological education, and their analysis thereof. While experiences vary greatly between chapters, the analyses proceed from a common framework outlined in the following section.

Theological Background

The framework used by scholarship holders in consideration of their theological formation

should be relevant to all authors while also accounting for their diversity. Membership in the LWF is a common denominator among authors, making a theological framework an obvious option. Another common denominator is the pedagogical environment, i.e., the educational context where the authors studied, making a pedagogical framework another viable option. Rather than viewing this as an either/or choice between a pedagogical or theological framework, a radical pedagogical framework is appropriated on a theological basis in acknowledgement that pedagogy is not neutral but informed by theology.

The idea that education is theologically neutral is pervasive in much public education. Universities, for example, aim to provide rational and open spaces for information transmission and purport not to promote any explicit theology. This problematic view is already under consideration within the LWF communion: in Malaysia, the view of education as gaining information has been defined as a “challenge for seminary administrations and professors/lecturers alike to develop [...] methodologies to help students develop critical reflection and discernment.”¹⁵ It seems counterintuitive that education should prove a challenge to the discernment of theology students. Surely, gaining information is the point?

Universities excel at obtaining and transmitting information and pride themselves

13 Carolyn S. Ellis, “Autoethnography,” in *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, ed. Lisa M. Given (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2008), 48.

14 Carolyn S. Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Boechner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Historical Social Research* 36, no. 4 (GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, 2011), 273–90.

15 Song Mee Chung, “Understanding and Responding to Charismatic Influences in the Protestant Churches of Sabah/Malaysia,” in *Identity, Survival, Witness: Reconfiguring Theological Agendas*, ed. Karen L. Bloomquist (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2008), 120.

Theology student Rev. William Charles Jayaraj talks about his identity. Photo: LWF/S. Gallyay



on being “rational” spaces which facilitate the transmission of ideas and information. However, an identity based solely on information implies an anthropology where the body is neglected: the body is only relevant as far as it is a vessel for “correct” ideas. This view of the human person “owes more to modernity and Enlightenment than it does to the holistic biblical vision of human persons.”¹⁶ The problem with educational institutions claiming neutrality when it comes to the heart is the implicit dualism of the head and the heart: the head includes information and ideas separate from the heart—*kardia* in the New Testament, which deals with the deepest desires and loves of humanity.

Here we are close to Luther’s definition of God in his catechism. He describes having

a God as having something which the heart trusts and believes: “A god is that whereto we are to look for all good and to take refuge in all distress; so that to have a god is to trust and believe him from the whole heart; as I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. [...] I say, upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god”¹⁷.

In claiming neutrality by sidelining the body and the heart, universities neglect the role of the human heart and leave an opening to other formative powers. Consequently, there is no such thing as neutral education. Of course universities and seminaries are spaces for information transmission, but not only that. They need to account for their information as well as their formative

¹⁶ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom : Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 28, 31.

¹⁷ Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism of Martin Luther*, trans. Jacobs, H. E. (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication Society, 2018), 16.

Karl Michael Barría (left) and Adrian Lopez sharing experiences of their theological education and formation during the in-person workshop in 2022 in Geneva. Photo: LWF/K. Kiilunen



influence on persons holistically. They need to shape not only the minds of their students, but also their hearts.

To discern what the formative impact of so-called ‘neutral’ educational spaces are and how these shape students (as any engagement not only contributes to an individual’s sense of “who” they are, but also strengthens our sense of “what” is valued¹⁸) it is useful to return to the two notions of formation and information related to our Lutheran identity matrix.

The liturgical perspective noted earlier for its relevance in Lutheran identity and faith transmission offers insight into the formative impact of universities. Liturgy in its wider scope refers to the material practices of the holistic human being. Since the human is an

embodied actor,¹⁹ material practices shape our surroundings and the human her/himself. So while material practices reveal what the human worships, namely, what the human heart loves, participation in material practices in turn shapes what the human loves through the formative power of participation. Consequently, this liturgical perspective provides a way to uncover the formative impact of universities and other pedagogies claiming only to transmit information.

Official institutional liturgies might include activities such as lectures, tests, exams, and other ceremonies, but participation in “unofficial” university liturgies (societies, party cultures, orientation week, induction ceremonies, study groups, etc.) also has a

18 Sheila McNamee, “Relational practices in education: Teaching as conversation,” in *Collaborative Therapy: Relationships and Conversations That Make a Difference*, ed. Harlene Anderson and Diane Gerhart (London: Routledge, 2007), 313–335.

19 Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 35.

formative impact on students. An analysis of the impact of these “unofficial” liturgies starkly contradicts the assumption that universities are neutral learning spaces. Far from neutral, these liturgies often involve a “frenetic and frantic pace, rhythms of expenditure and exhaustion, with little room for sabbath.”²⁰

Unlike the ministerial formation required of pastors and theologians, these liturgies form students into “productive, successful consumers.”²¹ It is no surprise that the theological *information* obtained at university conflicts with the *formation* that students undergo: the head knows things that the heart does not love. The universities’ love of consumerism and productivity has been more formative for the students than the love of God and neighbor.

It is clear, then, that pedagogy is not neutral. It always has an informative and a formative (liturgical) component. Consequently, every pedagogy shapes its students and forms them to love (worship) something. As Lutherans, we must attend to the formative effect that university and seminary pedagogies have on students and begin to critically engage with these pedagogies and develop our own. The next section contains such an explorative effort, and then provides the framework for analysis of the various chapter contributions that follow.

Pedagogical Framework

The above liturgical critique of dominant pedagogies at educational institutions does not stand alone. Alternative pedagogies have been developed and proposed,

²⁰ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 117.

²¹ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 115.



Rutendo Immaculate Gora shares about her theology studies during the December 2022 workshop in Geneva, Switzerland. LWF/S. Gallay

including a strand of radical pedagogy suitable for our quest for a theological pedagogy. The application of this radical pedagogy is justified as follows: Firstly, radical pedagogy—a marginal educational philosophy—proposes valuable critiques

of the shortcomings of the current predominating pedagogies.²² Secondly, the critique and suspicion of authority and hierarchies in radical pedagogy offers a point of resonance in the resistance against the productivism and consumerist liturgies in favor of Lutheran alternatives. Thirdly, radical pedagogy is a pedagogy based on values.²³ It hopes to form people into enacting “fraternity, solidarity, and mutual aid; empathy, care, and compassion; and joy and love”²⁴ while abandoning “egoism, competitiveness, greed, and puritanism.”²⁵ It does not purport neutrality but is explicit about its formative content. Lastly, radical pedagogy defines educational spaces loosely: the lecture hall can be an educational space, as can a chapel service or a communal meal. Education and formation are viewed as taking place everywhere.²⁶ Consequently, the formative impact of “unofficial” liturgies is taken seriously.

On this basis, radical pedagogy presents itself as an apt framework in the autoethnographic analysis of the following chapters. Selected features of radical pedagogy, outlined below, will serve as the framework for autoethnographic analysis.



Rev. Katarina Kiilunen, LWF Program Executive for Capacity Building and Leadership Development, addressing the theology scholars at the 2022 workshop in Geneva, Switzerland. Photo: LWF/S. Gallay

These features are:

- 1. Hierarchies and Authorities:** Radical pedagogy questions authority that exists for its own sake. It favors equal relationships and practices²⁷ and is critical of the misuse of authority in creating and sustaining

22 Jonathan Purkis, James Bowen, *Changing Anarchism: Anarchist Theory and Practice in a Global Age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Noam Chomsky, *On Anarchism* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2013); Abraham P. DeLeon, “The time for action is now! Anarchist theory, critical pedagogy, and radical possibilities,” *Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies* 4, no. 2 (2006): 72–94.

23 S. M. Swanick, “An Approach to Transformational Pedagogy in Higher Education” (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012), 23–25; Kevin A. Carson, “An anarchist critique of power relations within institutions,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Anarchy and Anarchist Thought*, ed. Gary Chartier and Chad Van Schoeland (New York: Routledge, 2021), 365–380; Kevin Currie-Knight, “Anarchist approaches to education,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Anarchy and Anarchist Thought*, 360–365.

24 Alexander Andrason, Vuyisa Gysman, and Hans-Christoph Lange, “Doing–Reflecting–Comprehending, or: How We Found Resonance with Anarchist Pedagogy,” *Anarchist Studies* 31, no.1 (2023): 84.

25 Andrason et al., “Doing–Reflecting–Comprehending,” 99.

26 William T. Armaline, “Thoughts on Anarchist Pedagogy and Epistemology,” in *Contemporary Anarchist Studies, An introductory Anthology of Anarchy in the Academy*, ed. Randall Amster et al. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 136-46; Swanick, “An Approach to Transformational Pedagogy”; Stephanie Spoto, “Teaching against hierarchies: An anarchist approach,” *The Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 7/8 (Fall 2014/Spring 2015): 78–92.

27 Jamie Heckert, Deric Michael Shannon and Abbey Willis, “Loving-teaching: Notes for queering anarchist pedagogies,” *Journal of the American Educational Studies Association* 48, no.1(2012):19; Carson, “An anarchist critique of power relations within institutions,” 365-80.

oppression.²⁸ Authority must therefore be rational, based on competence, knowledge, and experience.²⁹ It must serve a function or be eliminated: coercive authority must be replaced with non-coercive authority.

- 2. Awareness:** All pedagogy is located in a specific sociopolitical and cultural context. Radical pedagogy seeks to make the teacher and student aware of this context, focusing on power dynamics and the situatedness in historic processes. It also seeks to raise awareness for the potential and possibilities of alternate visions of reality.³⁰
- 3. Engagement:** Successful education requires the full participation of teachers and students. Students should be free to take initiative and explore with curiosity and creativity. This should be nurtured and enhanced by the environment for individual and collective growth.³¹
- 4. Values:** The substantive core of radical pedagogy and its crucial components are moral principles,³² including feelings of mutual care, commitment to action for mutual aid, developing a sense of social cohesion, discovery of a positive core

of values, and existence in sympathy, fraternity, and radical love. Radical pedagogy seeks to reinforce these values and diminish greed, egoism, and other vices.³³

- 5. Empowerment:** Learning should lead to growth,³⁴ self-improvement,³⁵ and empowerment.³⁶ Both students and teachers should feel in charge and responsible for their learning environment.³⁷ Structural inequalities should be removed,³⁸ and social justice should be promoted.³⁹ This should enrich one's sense of life, maximize the voices of participants, and permit spiritual struggle and growth.

Study Process

Let us now turn to how this publication proceeded. Earlier in 2021 the idea for this study was brought forth in an online “Coming Together” meeting by Rev. Katariina Kiilunen. A notice was sent to all scholarship holders and a voluntary core group assembled on our online Discourse platform and met regularly. The conceptualization of the study was introduced and discussed. Guidelines were developed and provided for the

28 Abraham P. DeLeon and Kurt Love, “Anarchist theory as radical critique: Challenging hierarchies and domination in the social and “hard” sciences,” in *Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An Introductory Anthology of Anarchy in the Academy*, ed. Randall Amster et al. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 160.

29 Suissa, *Anarchism and Education: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oakland: PM Press, 2010), 59.

30 Suissa, *Anarchism and Education*; Caroline K. Kaltefleiter and Anthony J. Nocella II, “Anarchy in the academy: Staying true to anarchism as an academic-activist,” in *Anarchist Pedagogies: Collective Actions, Theories, and Critical Reflections on Education*, ed. Robert H. Haworth (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 175–199; Swanick, “An Approach to Transformational Pedagogy”, 24.

31 Armaline, “Thoughts on anarchist pedagogy and epistemology”, 137-139; Swanick, “Approach to Transformational Pedagogy”, 26.

32 Suissa, *Anarchism and Education*, 121.

33 DeLeon, “The time for action is now!”, 72–94; Abraham P. DeLeon, *Subjectivities, Identities, and Education after Neoliberalism. Rising from the Rubble* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 520.

34 Armaline, “Anarchist Pedagogy and Epistemology,” 138.

35 Suissa, *Anarchism and Education*, 13.

36 Swanick, “An Approach to Transformational Pedagogy”, 30.

37 Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, (New York: Perennial Library, 1970); DeLeon and Love, “Anarchist Theory as Radical Critique,” 163.

38 Suissa, *Anarchism and Education*, 64.

39 Manu J. Brueggemann et al., “Reflexive practices for the future of design education: An exercise in ethno-empathy,” *The Design journal* 20, no. 1, (2017): 1263.

participating volunteers to assist with both the autoethnographic part of the study and the pedagogical analysis.

Encouraging creativity, authors were advised to reflect on their theological formation and education by considering their background, relevant institutions, pastoral formation, theological impact on faith and practical life, stories of calling, and other consequences of theological study.

Following the initial reflection phase, authors were then given guided questions to analyze their experiences within the framework of radical pedagogy. For example, with regard to the feature discussing hierarchies and authority, the guideline suggested analyzing authorities that were encountered during the journey, and how these authorities functioned. Such guidance was given for all features.

Each step of the study was accompanied by a mutual peer-review process in which participants reviewed each other's work at various stages. After everyone drafted their first autoethnographic part and uploaded it to a common online platform, authors were paired up for peer reviews and feedback throughout the writing process. Through the wonderful support of the LWF scholarship program, a large part of the review process was done in person as part of a workshop in Geneva, in December 2022.

Introducing the Subsequent Subsequent Chapters

This publication provides a first step toward understanding how theology students experience their formation. Departing from recent discourse around theological formation in the LWF, this introductory chapter provides the methodological foundation – autoethnography – as well as theological considerations for the chosen pedagogical framework of analysis, which are implemented in the subsequent chapters. The findings of this study – beyond the individual analysis – are then presented in the final chapter. The reader is invited to consider the following chapters with curiosity and grace.



Cross puzzle pieces identifying scholarship holder values including hope, joy, justice, and unity, pieced together during the in-person workshop in 2022. LWF/K. Kiilunen



The authors of Journeys from the Crossroads reviewing each other's stories at in-person meeting in December 2022. Photo: LWF/S. Gallay



Journeying toward transformation

By Rev. Mimi Kwerakwiza
Brown Rubindamayugi

Since the age of three when I started kindergarten at a Roman Catholic institution, I have dreamed of serving the church. Inspired by the Catholic nun who taught us there, it was my first call: I never knew the responsibilities of pastors and nuns and priests beyond working with others in love.

I have many fond memories from childhood. Our family was always full of visitors—grandfathers, grandmothers, uncles, daughters, cousins, friends—and growing up we could not distinguish between relatives on

our mother's side and our father's side. My father called me chaupole (meaning polite) because I was very quiet when I was young and could not defend myself. My mother—an accountant student—loved working with me. I always remember that we had similar shoes and it made me think I was so loved. I also count myself lucky to have a sister and a brother who believe in me and encourage me to this day.



In Tanzania, most parents prefer their children to attend boarding school because it is much safer, which was also my experience. My father was a tutor and his work sent us to urban and rural areas where I attended many different schools for primary and secondary, including a government day school for girls and then a private girls' boarding school. My time in day school as a young girl was not good, tainted by bullying from bus conductors and men who idled on my path to school. As a result of the bullying, as a young girl I was shy and not so free to speak. I thank God that at the age of 14 I was able to defend myself.

Despite the bullying, my early education blessed me with many positive experiences and life lessons that I still hold close today. I remember in the rural areas some students came to school without shoes but with a lot of heart and love. They brought me small gifts of peanuts and sweet potatoes, which reminds me that love comes in many forms. From ordinary secondary I learned about autonomy and responsibility: we had farms and gardens to take care of where we nurtured and tended plants. In high school, which was a Roman Catholic school, I learned to love God and be faithful with praying and discovering my calling.

After high school, I applied to study theology at the Tumaini University Makumira because I wanted to serve the church, which I thought to do as a social worker following my theology studies. Tumaini university is an institution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT). I had never met a female pastor in Tanzania, but a church magazine introduced me to Pastor Joyce Mayer from America whom I admired greatly. At that time,

I did not understand what becoming a female pastor in my context would entail but I knew with certainty that I wanted to learn more about God and serve in the community through the church.

When I went to my diocese in 2001 to ask for the opportunity to study, I was given one year to volunteer with church activities so that they could get to know me. I began church service duties under the supervision of an evangelist while at the same time studying Journalism and Mass media at St Augustine University. One year later I was accepted at a theological college where I eventually studied five years, including one year of internship.

After my theological training I worked as a coordinator of Christian education and secular education for nine years in the ELCT East Lake Victoria Diocese. This gave me a passion to improve the quality of education in faith-based schools and colleges and to reach the excluded and forgotten in the community. I completed a master's degree in missiology and a master's degree in "quality of education in developing countries" at the University of Bamberg. Germany, and this reinforced my passion for work in education.

I got married at 30 to Kahema Mziray. My married life is filled with joy, hope and many questions. Currently we have six children in our family: in addition to my two daughters, Abra and Billie, our family includes the children of our brother and sister whom we embrace like our own: Adeline, Josephine (Fetty), Salmin and Prince (Junior). We have seen them grow up among us calling us father and mother and feel blessed to have many children stay with us in love. It brings happiness in our daily life, where we also learn to nurture and be responsible.

Life Formation through Theological Education

My journey into theological education at Makumira was a new beginning in my life and shaped my thinking and behavior in many ways. The university environment was amazing: I remember calling the place paradise because of the trees and the rivers flowing and giving sound. That I lived and studied in such a beautiful environment was hard to believe. The teaching was good and friendly as most of the teachers were pastors and taught us about divinity. At the university, I felt at home and learned to live the scriptures.

Life outside the classroom was pure African life: when you got sick students visited and prayed and brought fruits and love. But there were still challenges. Our environment has very high expectations of women and there is no school that provides this education—it must be learned through observation.

When I started at Makumira I didn't understand the importance of dress code in pastoral work and how my presentation affects how others perceive me. Through the gentle guidance of more experienced women, I grew to understand that in my cultural context as a female pastor how you look matters: as a woman in Tanzania, revealing clothing is considered indecent and presents temptation, so it is important to wear long and loose-fitting dresses. I remember my mother gave me her clothes so that I would look more decent and my friend who now is a dean of theology took

me to buy long skirts and dresses, telling me how to be confident and believe in myself despite being young and in a community dominated by male students. I learned the importance of context in reaching my community: I needed to meet my community within their context to proclaim the message of Christ, peace, and love.

The power of God's love in my life and in creation inspired me to share God's love by preaching the gospel to all and welcoming them into the communion of Christ. A Bible verse I often look to for inspiration is the last line of John 13:1, which reminds me that God loves the world unconditionally: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."¹ This verse nourishes my soul and is one I will continue to share because above all it emphasizes an unfailing commitment to love for humanity.

Understanding the fundamental teaching of the *missio Dei* (God's mission)—that God has called us to participate in God's mission and that the Holy Spirit guides us—has had an impact on my faith and the way I do my work. I participated in the mission of God by working in Christian education, advocacy, social services, and the department of women and children. I am also a board member of the ELCT Njombe School for the Deaf and a reform ambassador for the Global Teacher Education Network (GTENreformation). When I cross borders to reach the marginalized my faith grows as I see changes in people's lives, especially when they are in the communion of Christ.

¹ All Bible verses are quoted from the New Revised Standard Version.

Rev. Mimii Kwerakwiza Brown Rubindamayugi (left) and other leaders at the 2021 Nyakato Lutheran Bible College graduation ceremony.
Photo: Virve Rissanen



Transformed to Transform: Authority Influences

My professional life in the church made me love and know more about the church. After my theological studies at the age of 27, I started working as director of Christian and secular education in the diocese. I was also a member of the management, of the diocesan council and of the general assembly.

Throughout my education I received much advice that I should not study theology because I'm female and young. Many perceive that working in the church is not a woman's job, or that women should only hold the lowest jobs in the church. Working in the church for four years before ordination and hearing discussions about whether women should be pastors made me dig into understanding women in my context, where ironically there are more women than men. I am lucky that I was not discouraged by doubters, as from day one of my theological education to this day I continue to see the blessings of God

around me. I see God working with the church through men and women to reach the unreached. Being in school all my life could not have given me the chance to understand the expectations of the patriarchal system toward women.

In a Missions and Evangelism course, our lecturer, Rev. Sylvester Kahakwa, emphasized that the church is God's tool to reach people and that we are participants in God's mission, as pastors play an important role for God and the world. However, I also realized in many college discussions that the patriarchal power structure pervades even in higher education and the church. I heard classmates joke that women should not talk loudly in front of a man, only to realize they were serious. I remember people laughing at me and judging me when I called older people by their first names, but it was serious that people expected me not to do so. However, in college life, I learned to stand up and speak for myself even when it contradicted cultural norms.

Contextual Awareness: Education for All

Along my educational journey, I learned to try to adapt to the context. This does not change who you are or your purpose, but makes people invite you to listen. I learned from Ghanaian theologian Prof. Mercy Oduyoye that when you sit at the table you should not talk about yourself, but rather talk with the voice of those who cannot reach that table. I learned how to direct the context so that people listen to the words of God and are understood by the community. I feel God's love through the many people around me who have encouraged and guided me on my journey. While I was silent at first, I now see the importance of communicating and expressing my ideas when the opportunity is right.

As a young woman I did receive encouragement from some, including Bishop Nehemia Bomani, who told me he was confident that I will "transform the department of Christian education" after I finished my theology studies in 2007. His voice still echoes in my ears and inspires my advocacy for quality education to help the younger generation see the challenges before them and feel equipped to change the situation.

I believe the church has a responsibility to provide education to the concerned community, to teach free thinking and thereby liberate people from the bondage of thought. Education has informed my way of thinking, my love to serve God, and my conviction that society needs to know God. My own calling and faith have strengthened my relationship with God, and my desire and commitment to work in the church grows daily.



Rev. Rubindamayugi (left) visiting Luandai Seminary during her master's thesis research; on the right is a member of the seminary board. Luandai, a former missionary school, is where Tumaini University Makumira started. Photo: Private

Moreover, through my theological training and work experiences, my life in the church has exposed me to the diversity of the world around me and enabled me to share the gifts of God with others. Meeting different people with the same call who share the vision and desire to serve in God's mission makes me see God in my life. While working in the church, I have been able to work with different people to meet the needs of community members in advocating for the rights of children and women, interfaith relations, interfaith dialogues and ecumenical cooperation in the discussion of social issues.

Through the LWF scholarship, which I received from the Hélène Ralivao fund, I am going to do my research on the role of the ELCT and Christian education in addressing gender disparity. There are many attitudes that lead people to keep others in a state of bondage and mistrust, unable to see the responsibility of self-management and independence. Theological education in Tanzania has gone through different phases—from the pre-colonial (oral) phase to the colonial and post-colonial phase—which have shaped the theological education system in Tanzania. As a member and pastor of ELCT, my dream is to transform Christian education into responsible education that helps people solve problems caused by ignorance.

Theological Education, Experience, Call and Context

“O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!” (Rom. 11:33).

God teaches us in different ways and sends us differently. I take my personal life story as testimony. I consider my studies in theology a tool which facilitates growth and empowerment through transmission of intelligence, wisdom, and knowledge. I see media education and educational knowledge as a gift from God that allows me to work in this world full of diversity and many challenges. God gives us everything, empowering us so that we can transform the world into a place of peace, joy, and love.

The context in which I live has many challenges: gender disparity, poverty, and lack of quality schools, to mention a few. I have addressed three of these challenges in my own writing and continue to reflect on how the

church can better address these needs.

For example, during my internship, I discovered that most Christians consider church leaders role models. They have high expectations of these leaders, especially in the spiritual life that goes hand-in-hand with certain values in context. This can create conflict when church leaders fail to meet expectations. During my first degree, I addressed this in research papers and suggested that the church aim to educate the community at large and facilitate dialogues between Christians and church leaders in the hope that these initiatives can facilitate the coming together of critical minds in search of mutually agreeable solutions. If we can approach difficulties with love and not judgment and identify ways to talk about our faith in God and how we can work together as children of God, together we can shine a light on the dark places of the world.

My experience in the church and working with the different partners of mission work strengthened my conviction that the church needs to deepen its understanding of partnership in mission, especially in light of colonialism’s lasting influence on power dynamics in my region, which have affected the way people view partnership. For me, the meaning of partnership in mission is to participate together in God’s mission by sharing God’s gifts. As human beings we need each other: men and women, African and Asian, Europeans and American. In the context of Christianity, we are all children of God. In my second research into missiology, I looked at partnership in mission. My recommendation was the concepts of *missio Dei* (mentioned above) and *Ujamaa* (meaning

fraternity in Swahili, but more generally a concept of cooperative economics) as the best foundations for creating a good partnership.

The Bible says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov 1:7). Believing in quality education—particularly in Protestant education—I studied and wrote about the perception of Protestant principals in ELCT and the educational profile of Protestant schools. Through my studies I found that the church contributes significantly to education, suggesting that more studies be conducted on the benefits of inclusive education in Tanzania, particularly in Lutheran schools, to maximize the church’s potential. Lutheran schools will be able to reach more people if the government allows them to identify as public schools owned by faith-based institutions. This ultimately will benefit the larger community by expanding the reach of education in Tanzania.

History shows us the contribution of theological education in other disciplines: during the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther influenced general education by asserting that all boys and girls must attend school. Philip Melanchthon, Luther’s

colleague, who is recognized as the founder of Protestant schools argues that “ if [man] only be properly formed and educated in the human virtues, [he] is intrinsically capable of improving the state of the world.”² The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) publication *Education for All 2000-2015: Achievements and Challenges*, states that the quest to achieve education for all is fundamental to assuring that children, youth, and adults gain the knowledge and skills they need to better their lives and play a role in building more peaceful and equitable societies.³

Theological education has impacted my life through education and exposure, strengthening my own calling in the church and my commitment to serving my community. I believe the church must continue to evangelize as it is commanded in Matthew 28:18-20, and I hope to contribute to the enlightenment of the secular world through education—to give education to all and open all the disciplines for women and men, boys and girls. For we need one another to transform this great gift of the world which God has given to us to care for.

2 Sascha O. Becker and Ludger Woessmann, “Luther and the Girls: Religious Denomination and the Female Education Gap in Nineteenth-Century Prussia,” *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics* 110, no. 4 (December 2008): 778.

3 EFA Global Monitoring Report. *Education for All 2000-2015: achievements and challenges*. UNESCO (2015): 8.



Posing questions to God: my theological journey

By Kidist Bahru Gemedà

Genesis

Two months prior to a class discussion about the book of Job, my best friend was diagnosed with stage one cancer. Job's complaints/questions to God seeking answers in the face of loss and uncertainty resonated with me. So, when our lecturer suggested that Job's questions such as "Who rejoice exceedingly, and are glad when they find the grave?" (Job 3:22) were as mundane as "What is the state capital?" my stomach clenched. Without knowing it, my hand was in the air to voice my disagreement. The teacher gently said, "Kidist, do you have a question or a different view?" I replied, "I do not think comparing Job's question with that example is fair."



My friend's life changed after receiving her diagnosis. While she took comfort that it was only around stage one, I am her exact opposite, and my heart was full of questions: Why her? Why now? She had just been married and was only on her honeymoon. The fear of losing her made me bitter.

Her journey with cancer was both complicated and miraculous. After her diagnosis, she gave birth, naturally, to a vibrant boy. Then she went to chemo and radiation therapy and was cancer-free for a short period. The cancer returned and she fought it back and was declared free, but another complication arose, and this time she did not win. The Lord took her home in December 2021 and she was buried on the darkest day of the year in Norway—22 December 2021.

After her passing, the days gradually grew brighter and brighter, a comforting reminder that light shall win over darkness. My friend is now entirely in the face of the light, free from pain and tears. This uniquely blessed friend of mine who showed the utmost courage and faith in the middle of a cruel trauma finally inherited her new home. But she left me with questions.

Before my friend passed away, I audited an Old Testament course on the book of Psalms. The lecturer read the psalmist's questions posed to the Lord in the context of grief, such as "Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord" (Ps 44:23)? These questions resonated with me: I too felt indignation at what I perceived to be the Lord's inaction—it seemed as though the Lord was turning his presence away from me and my pleas. Instead of defending the Lord from the psalmist's accusations or explaining why the psalmist was in this position, our

lecturer just let us wrestle with the psalmist's questions. I left the class being more curious about these questions.

In my culture, many people tend to comfort those who have lost their loved ones with phrases such as, "It is for good," "God knows why," or "God is good." As a member of Gulele Bethel Mekane Yesus Church (a small Lutheran congregation in the middle of Addis Ababa), I believe these claims about the Lord are true. Yes, our creator is always good; he cannot be otherwise. Our creator is omniscient; he even knows the number of curly hairs on my head. No doubt my creator has a reason for everything; is he not the one who gives us the gift of thinking? But would these claims comfort a community that lost its village to war? Would they help quiet a mind wondering about the ways of the Lord in the middle of a storm? All these questions and uncertainty whetted my interest to further study the psalmist's questions posed to God in grief.

Turning Point

In 2007 a group of fifth-year graduating students from Addis Ababa University School of Law filled the round bench at a local café and engaged in weekly Bible study. Eager to finish their final academic year and go out into the world to address the broken legal system, their enthusiasm was contagious kudos to the courage of young people! As a member of this group, I also dreamed of being a successful lawyer and a minister in the church and parachurch organizations. But to be a full-time minister was not yet on the table.

That day, we discussed the life of Hannah from First Samuel. We acknowledged that it was probably not easy for Hannah to give away

her firstborn, Samuel, and then challenged ourselves to think about things we should give to the Lord.

From then on, I could not stop thinking about giving up the professional road, joining the student ministry as a full-time minister and giving away the days of my life to the service of the Lord. My interest in theology school began as a campus staff at the Evangelical Students' and Graduates' Union of Ethiopia (EvaSUE). I did not have friends or family in full-time ministry, so I did not know how to walk that path, but I knew my heart was burning to serve the Lord.

Writing the final thesis and processing my life after graduation was very stressful. So, I called my counselor, Tariku Gebre, who frequently held the campus fellowship in church. We sat in the café near my campus. I sipped from my coffee again and again, distressed. As usual, he looked at me with care, and I shared my thoughts. “Is the burden that I am feeling a call from God? How do I know that God is calling me? How am I going to share it with my family?” I burst out my questions, one after the other. Tariku was not eager to answer them. Instead, he let me see the importance of finishing my thesis and the courses in good standing. He emphasized that this was not a time of deep processing or stressing about the future. It was the time to finish well and pass over my responsibilities at the fellowship. He was sure God would eventually make his voice more explicit if he called me. He encouraged me to trust the Lord. I took his advice to heart. I prioritized finishing my responsibilities at the law school and the fellowship. With the help of God, I graduated from Addis Ababa University law school.

As Tariku said, I got time to process my thoughts. The burden I felt in the Bible study

did not leave me, and through Bible studies and prayers I came to a decision. I started pursuing ministry to the Lord. I talked to our campus staff, Ruth Osmundsen (a Danish missionary in the student ministry), about my decision. She was happy to welcome me. I passed through the screening process and joined the student ministry. Reflecting, I think the campus journey's main purpose was to prepare my heart for God's purpose in my life and to train my mind to think critically.

In the middle of my ministry, I joined a theology school part-time. I went there to equip myself for further ministry. I served in the student ministry for around seven years first as campus staff, then as a training secretary, and finally, as a regional coordinator. During this time, I was lucky to receive various training, including leadership training in Kenya and Denmark. Seven years passed like a single day. Then I fully joined theology school to study the Old Testament.

Theological Discussions

My life in theology school was full of questions and curiosity which spurred me forward. Lecture rooms and intense class discussions served as a breeding ground for my marvels. In 2014, I attended a classroom discussion on Genesis 3:16—the woman's punishment—in which God says: “I will make your pangs in childbirth exceedingly great; in pain, you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” Classmates commented on two crucial terms: “desire” and “rule over.” One of the comments was “The woman desired to rule over the man, but her husband should rule over her.”

Curiosity to know more about the “desire” of the woman, motivated me to conduct my Master of Theology (MTh) on the Ethiopic reception of Genesis 3:16. This thesis studied the Hebrew and Greek terms for “desire” and the reception of these words in the Ethiopic biblical texts, Ethiopic non-biblical texts, and selected patristic commentaries. My research noted that the LXX, most of the Ethiopic and some patristic writings use “return” instead of “desire.” Instead of referencing the woman’s desire for her husband, the Ethiopic versions emphasize that she will “return” to her husband. Some commentaries suggest that this word implies that after giving birth in pain, the woman would return to her husband seeking refuge from distress and infliction. So, not all Ethiopic materials indicate that the woman is cursed to relinquish her own desires in submission to her husband. This shaped my view of Christian marital relationships: married women have their own desires, and they are free to pursue them.

In addition to the lecture room discussions, theological reflections in academic seminars and informal gatherings shaped my theological views and sharpened my mind and spirit. I was blessed with friends that enjoyed discussing theological matters. I did not know that lunchtime and coffee breaks would have long-lasting impacts.

The classroom dialogue and the formal and informal discussion platforms were enriched when they were backed up with readings. Before joining the theology school full-time I did not take the time to read books with theological content. Now, between school and student ministry I was challenged to find enough time for reading and rest. In high school, my Sunday school teacher, Fasil Shibru, loaned me books

from the small library at the church. I preferred to pick books that did not have spiritual content, but Fasil gently recommended books with spiritual content to me and my youth group and step by step, I started to request books with a biblical range.

Fasil was very willing to discuss some of the books with me that I also enjoyed discussing with friends—my church was only a ten-minute walk from my high school, and some of my friends would walk over to borrow books and then chill out in the compound together. Returning to that compound always brought back childhood memories: playing football with the boys, playing the character of St. Mary at Christmas gatherings, sitting under the shadows of a tree for Sunday school classes and eating candies on special days.

My relationship with books with theological content was nurtured well in theology school with the help of lecturers and good friends. The theological school in Ethiopia was a refuge for me for a limited period. I rested from the busy ministry activities and found time to settle and process my thoughts. In that place, the importance of listening to lecturers, having informal and formal discussions, engaging with books, and processing thoughts from life experiences was reinforced. Most of my theological views were challenged and shaped here through listening, reading, talking, and everyday life experiences.

Working for two years as a research assistant at the theology school also contributed significantly to my theological journey. In my youth and early adulthood, I served in various leadership capacities through high school and the campus Christian students fellowship, and led evangelism teams, sisters’

Kidist Bahru Gemeda in front of the Reformation Wall in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2022. Photo: William C. Jayaraj



teams (women’s ministry) and Bible study teams. These engagements made me fall in love with the Lord and my fellow brothers and sisters. Attending spiritual training also allowed me to observe the needs in student ministry (Evangelical Students’ and Graduates’ Union of Ethiopia, (EvaSUE)). Teaching at the local church and using the theology school platform was a new experience for me. My ministry to my church had been limited to leading a Bible study group and preparing Bible study material for the youth group.

After my graduation, the elders and priests encouraged me to teach at regular Friday gatherings where the congregation learned about biblical books. Teaching was intimidating, especially because most of the attendants at the Friday night gathering were older than me. But the prayers and encouragement from the elders and priests

kept me moving forward. I taught the book of Genesis for around two months. I also taught about the book of Daniel at our church’s summer Bible school.

The two years at the research office were also a time of application for my current PhD project. Knocking on doors for university acceptance and funding was exhausting. Opening emails of rejections was depressing. From multiple failed applications and failed interviews, I learned patience. Finally, I opened an email from the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies (IOCS), United Kingdom, that began with “Congratulations.”

Day by day

After I got married to my beloved husband, Sigurd Grindheim, I was filled with joy. But even the most joyful experiences in life can be shadowed by sorrow, worry or fear—and

usually they are. When I received news that my candidacy to be a faculty member had been withdrawn, it cast darkness and doubt over my long-term dream of teaching in a theology school in Ethiopia. I was confronted with sorrow and worry as I faced challenges that I was not able to overcome – at least not at that time. Yet, I decided to continue pursuing my dream and flew to Cambridge to start my PhD studies.

The few summer days I spent visiting the beautiful Aarhus, Denmark, the ancient city of Ghent, Belgium, and Oslo, Norway, offered nothing to smooth my transition from Addis Ababa to Cambridge a few months later in November. Unlike the year-round warm and bright Addis, Cambridge was cold and dark. We arrived at our single dormitory in Wesley House, Jesus Lane, around 9:00 pm. The next day, my husband traveled to the United States of America (USA) to present a paper at the Society for Biblical Literature, while I took a walk around our new neighborhood to the beautiful park, Jesus Green. It was cold, but the sky was clear and radiant blue. I felt that the sun was smiling at me. I laid a hand on my tummy and whispered to my three-week-old unborn baby that we were in a new place, perhaps the place where he would meet the bigger world. Then I went back to my dormitory and tried to have a good night's sleep before my scheduled lunch with the academic staff at IOCS the following day.

Despite the fierce wind blowing in every direction, the faces of the three academic staff were beaming light when I met them for lunch at a nice restaurant. I could tell that they were happy to see me. I looked for a familiar meal, relieved to find chicken and

rice on the menu. We had a great discussion about my research topic. They advised me to take time to rest and get to know the city well. They cared for me. Their kindness was like rain on dry land. My wounded heart from the broken relationship with the theology school in Ethiopia and with church leaders received a drop of healing.

I had already met my primary supervisor in Addis when he visited the institution where I worked as a research assistant. He visited my office where we talked about my proposal. I was encouraged by his passion and energy, but also intimidated. One of the leading experts on the traditional commentary of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, he has lived in Ethiopia for around 16 years and speaks Amharic (the official language in Ethiopia) perfectly and reads *Gə'əz* (the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church). Despite my insecurities that I was not the right match for his audacity and ingenuity, I decided to work with him.

He was the right person for my project because we share the same passion for Ethiopic studies. When I went to visit his office on the second floor of the new and cheery Faculty of Divinity building at the University of Cambridge, his face was also cheerful as he welcomed me in. “እንኮን ደህና መጣሽ” or, “welcome,” he said with a warm and firm voice. That brightened my face. We walked around the city together and visited the glamorous and historical King's and Queen's Colleges on the same day. He also recommended that I rest and learn about the city's ways and some prominent places. Following his advice, my husband and I took time to explore the beautiful city. The time came to meet my two supervisors together.

My late second supervisor was also kind and brilliant. After my first meeting with these two scholars, I received my first assignment: revising my proposal.

The leaders I met in Cambridge were concerned about my proposal and academics, but they also cared about my emotional state. I could not have imagined my supervisor giving me a tour of the city; I could not have imagined a team of scholars having lunch with me and encouraging me to take one step at a time. They opened my eyes to the importance of not separating academic life from the rest of me.

Despite my renewed understanding of “the self” and the excellent treatment from my superiors, I could not escape from the storm of depression and loneliness. I saw students in the café circling a table, eating, drinking, and laughing, and it was a consistent reminder of my friends back home whom I missed greatly. In addition to the cruel loneliness, my first three months of pregnancy were filled with nausea and the darkness and cold did not help my downcast emotions. I started to spend days at the dorm. My husband tried to cheer me up but to no avail.

In addition to revising my proposal, I had to do tons of readings and translations from the traditional commentary of Psalms to English. My presentation for the annual review was approaching. Both the Gə’əz and Greek classes felt burdensome. All this added anxiety to the existing depression and unhappy pregnancy.

As a way out, I read a few pages and translated daily. Somehow, I had faith that I would slowly overcome the heavy blanket lying over my head and heart. Day by day, I

managed to edit the proposal. I also selected around thirty 30 questions posed to God regarding grief and lamentation from the *’Andāmta* Commentary of Psalms (ACP). The *’Andāmta* is a sixteenth-century traditional commentary on the book of Psalms in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. While reading this, I posed my own questions to the Lord. The time I spent reading and translating questions was perhaps therapeutic. The way this traditional commentary receives the questions is unapologetic.

Slowly, the days became brighter and warmer. The baby in the womb got settled, and the morning sickness passed. Thanks to the students from Ghana and USA with whom we shared a living room and kitchen, the dizziness faded away. I became familiar with other students I met at various places of training, informal and formal classes. Life became easier. Then the time came to announce my pregnancy. I was nervous because I could not guess how my institution’s principal and supervisor would receive the news.

I love the aroma of the principal’s office, which usually smells of fresh coffee. He invited me for a coffee, and I did not hesitate. Holding a cup of coffee is a way of comforting and calming myself. To stop my fear, I immediately said, “I have some news to tell you... I am three months pregnant.” He stood from his chair with a big smile and bright eyes. He could not contain his happiness. He congratulated me over and over again. The next day, I told the same thing to my first supervisor. He was also happy for me. We took the time to discuss practical matters. I decided to do the presentation for my annual review

before the month of my scheduled delivery, which meant before July.

God's Whisper

Students who live in Luther Hall come from various countries, including the United States and Ghana. We shared the main room, entrance, and kitchen. In our limited free time, we discussed studies, politics, and many practical and silly matters. In that historical building, the culture of caring for one another stood out.

To my fellow students, I also voiced concern about my application for an LWF scholarship. I was afraid it would not be accepted and if not, how could I continue my studies? Therefore, when I received the announcement of my scholarship approval, joy invaded the room filled with worry. Again—joy and sorrow. For me it was God's way of hugging and whispering, "I care for you; you are my beloved daughter." God is spirit, yet he borrows kind hands to hug his children.

I once again imagined myself as a minister in Ethiopia and beyond. My dream to serve the Lord was revived. I shouted Hallelujah. The flood of questions and uncertainty about God's plan for me and my future in the church subsided.

In June, I finished translating the questions posed to God in the ACP. I also did my analysis and finally submitted my paper to the reviewers. My supervisor and I met early on the day of my presentation, and he complimented my original and well-articulated research. His confidence in my work was encouraging and calmed my worries. After my presentation, the reviewers asked several questions about the actual work and the motivation behind my work

on the questions in the Psalms. My answers were short and to the point. Their faces looked satisfied. Thank God. I went home and watched movies consecutively to shift my mind from the review process.

At the end of the week, the reviewers emailed me that I had passed the review. I shouted and shouted and shouted and shouted. I was proud so I emailed a few friends and family members to share my news. The task for the year was done, and now the time to prepare for my baby's delivery had arrived.

Per was born on 8 July 2019. He was sick in the first month of his life, but God was merciful and the nurses and doctors at the Cambridge hospital were exceptionally great. Friends, family members, and prayer warriors interceded with us. They showed us abundant love and care. In December 2019, we moved to Stord, Norway where Sigurd had received a full-time job offer at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences.

Empowered to Forge Ahead in the Face of Uncertainty

I have now submitted the final draft of my thesis. A few steps remain to finish my study. Most importantly, my long-term dream may finally come true as me and my husband have been invited to consider teaching theology in Ethiopia.

I am emboldened on my journey when I consider the psalmist who courageously pours out his heart to the Lord, saying, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me" (Ps 13:1-2)?

These interrogative phrases display the psalmist's fearlessness in showing his authentic self to the Lord. He does not pretend to be happy. He does not hide his sadness. Probably, the psalmist understands that God is bigger than his emotional states and various questions.

This makes me reflect on how the Lord is vast, understanding and embracing. When I cry out, "Why do you neglect me?" I am crying out to the God who surpasses my limited knowledge and temporary emotional state, who reaches beyond all the possible questions that this world can embrace. God's greatness, kindness and love are my comfort, my refuge. I want to spend the rest of my life in this comfort zone, in worship, in dialogue, and posing my questions to God.

My journey has opened my eyes and resulted in a theological shift toward fearless questioning and radical acceptance. It has taught me to embrace my questions, doubts, and disappointments as the Lord embraces them. I strive to be true to myself, and in the way the Lord embraces me, I will also embrace others. I will embrace them when they cannot put themselves together. I will embrace them when they are in doubt and distress. My intentional choice now is not to judge anyone but to be with them, pray their prayers, and argue for them with the Lord. When they cry, "Why do you neglect me?" with them, I say: "Lord, why do you abandon them? When are you going to come to their prayer?" I hope that God will return their hope as he returned mine.

God has used my supervisors and leaders at Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies

(IOCS) to guide me through this academic journey. In addition to giving constructive comments on my paper, they treat me respectfully in a way that radiates the love of God. They showed how theology schools teach about hope and love in Christ and give that hope and love to others. These institutions can be where students feel safe, free, hopeful, and encouraged. There, the yolk of fear and intimidation can be cast off; creativity, courage and freedom of thought can shine.

God also uses family members, friends, counselors, and mentors to teach me that God's love surpasses questions and arguments. My confusion settled in their presence. God uses LWF leaders and fellow scholarship holders to whisper his love and plan for my life. Meeting these people gives me a sense of belonging to a global Lutheran community where my faith resonates. They remind me of the gathering at heavenly Jerusalem, where race, culture and color have no power of division.

My theological journey brings meaningful transformation to my life. I think this change happens because of the interaction with God, people, and books. I hope and pray that this transformation will continue.

"Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:12-14).



Traveling toward a transmuting theological training

By Rev. William Charles Jayaraj

The Call of a Lifetime

“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pt 2:9).

My mother delivered a baby boy—my elder brother—who passed away as soon as he was born. My parents prayed that if they were given another child they would submit and surrender the child for God’s ministry.



Then I was born. This prayer and dedication of my life for God's ministry was recounted to me by my parents all my life growing up, and since childhood I thought that I would eventually become a pastor. However, I was not very serious about my calling in the early stages of my life: before entering the ministry I was more engaged in the temporal activities of dance, song, and performing in fine arts.

All my life I have had an interest in church activities like singing in the choir, playing musical instruments in church service and engaging in Children, Youth and Junior Ministry of Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church (TELC) in India. This kept me connected to the church and its activities from childhood into adulthood. Rev. John Rajah, the pastor from my hometown church, TELC Christ Church, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India, would notice me and often encourage me to join theological studies. I don't know why, but from the time he met me he always cared for me and kept motivating me to become a minister of God. It had an impact in my decision to take up theological studies.

On 21 November 2007, my pastor's mother passed away. I attended the funeral service with a heavy heart. Even after the funeral service of his mother, Rev. John Rajah came toward me and asked me about my plans for my future, advising me to take up theological studies. On this day, I very much felt God's love for me and realized that being God's minister could change many things and people around me. I was filled with tears at that moment and after the funeral service I prayed at the altar of my hometown church, dedicating myself wholeheartedly to God's

work. This was the turning point in my life toward God's ministry.

Embarking on a Theological Voyage

The first year of my theological journey was filled with questions about my faith. My year group mates were all different ages when I started my Bachelor of Divinity (BD) four-year journey in college. My studies included preliminary Greek and Hebrew, introduction to the Old and New Testament, introduction to Religions, and Communication. Learning about the many religions represented on Indian soil shook my faith in the initial stages. Later, I grew to understand where my faith lives in me even in the face of the diverse faiths all around me. Grappling with these challenges helped me understand the different dimensions of theology which nurtured me in the initial stages of my theological journey.

In the second year, I studied subjects such as Synoptic Gospels in Greek and Witness of Israel to Liberation in Hebrew. I adapted to the situation and slowly shifted my theological studies to a deeper level. The third year I studied topics including Person and Work of Christ, Christian Ethics, Worship and Preaching, History of the Ecumenical Movement, Awareness of Mass Media Issues, Christian Mission, Witness, and Evangelism. All these subjects enabled me to grow in awareness and concern for the needs of society and the church.

During the final year of my studies, I was exposed to many areas of theology such as Liberation Theology, Dalit Theology, Gender Theology, real-life situations, and practical engagement in ministry. I also assisted in

various TELC church services and involved myself in the liturgy during worship and other ministerial activity in the churches.

My BD thesis was titled “Theology of Dance in Tamil Saiva Tradition and Its Insights for Using Dance in Christian Worship.” It enabled me to pursue a comparative study with Hindu religious traditions, especially in Tamil Saiva Tradition. This included various dance forms of god/esses with examples and diverse forms of dances by several characters in the Bible.

Dance is a very positive aspect of worship that is underutilized in present day liturgies. Today’s churches are very much in need of renewal and enrichment. By attracting young people and engaging children in active worship participation, the future of the church is strengthened. This can be attained by incorporating dance as one of the elements in our worship services, as it expresses mixtures of feelings and enables us to use our whole body to praise and worship our God.

After my positive experience completing my BD, I returned to pursue a Master of Theology (MTh) in Christian Theology. One person behind this was my former class teacher and the Principal of GLTC & RI, Rev. Dr Songram Basumatary, whom I address as my guru (meaning *teacher* or *mentor*). His simple teaching with deep thoughts ignited me to outshine in the branch of Christian Theology. With this support and my new knowledge, I was able to reflect, compose songs, write articles, essays, and many liturgies and essays locally and globally for the LWF, the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), the Student Christian Movement India

(SCMI), the GLTC & RI College magazine, and the TELC Church magazines.

My MTh thesis titled “Liberative Motifs in the Select Hymns of Martin Luther and Tamil Lyrics in Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church Hymnals” explored the vital role of music in the life of every human being. Music is a gift from God which can act as a means of communication and at the same time create a sense of communion. Many Lutheran churches including TELC are proud of their tradition of hymns with Tamil Christian Lyrics.

However, often the liberative theological contents in those hymns and lyrics are not recognized as theological texts by congregations. For my research I reread and analyzed selected hymns of Martin Luther and hymns with Tamil Christian lyrics to unveil the depth of theological meaning and formulate a Liberative Theology of Music. It is my hope that going forward, these hymns can be intentionally used by churches to reach a wider population and make connections with those who might otherwise feel excluded or forgotten.

After considering many topics, in 2019 I began my Doctor of Theology (DTh) studies in Christian Theology at the GLTC & RI. The first two years of DTh studies were an assessment period where three assessment papers related to my thesis had to be approved before continuing studies. During this time, the COVID-19 pandemic situation raised several doubts and confusion over how to proceed, but ultimately strengthened my call to serve. After this, the dissertation period began and I submitted my thesis proposal to the university for approval before continuing my research work.



TELC Christ Church in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India, was built in 1892.
Photo: William Charles Jayaraj

Ministerial Expedition

Several years into my MTh studies I was involved in church ministry as an assistant pastor. I engaged in village ministry with the congregation members and their difficulties in social and spiritual life. My theological education helped me engage with them in simple preaching and illustrations from everyday life which related to their contexts. At this time I was also engaged in youth ministry and formed the church youth members by actively engaging them in church and village ministry.

After the successful completion of my doctoral studies I hope to work in churches—especially in village congregations and

theological institutions—to motivate, strengthen and uplift everyone toward the broadest spectrum of understanding theologies with the word of God. I hope to train youth students to engage in church activities and society with justice, peace, equality, and fraternity. I also plan to compile various worship orders and compose inclusive songs and music to renew worship services. I wish to become an author and write books in the branch of Christian theology, where contemporary theologies are needed for the betterment of the church and society at large.

As we are called in Proverbs 31, I will use my voice in the church to “speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and the needy” (Prov 31: 8-9).

Progressive Systems and Specialists

For me, Progressive Systems and Specialists (also referred to as “Hierarchies and Authorities”) during my theological journey were a source of nourishment. Church authority enables me to move forward to reach the people who are in real need by moving alongside them spiritually and psychologically in every aspect of life. My theological teachers, addressed as gurus, and other authorities in my theological path paved their way toward spiritual and academic engagement to enlighten everyone toward equality and sustainability.

One such instrumental educator whom I mentioned above is my guru, Rev. Dr Songram Basumatary. Rev. Basumatary is my guide and mentor, and also the principal and a professor of GLTC & RI. He is the motivating



Rev. William Charles Jayaraj administers Holy Communion during worship at the Arcot Lutheran Church Community College, in Parangipettai, Tamil Nadu, India. Photo: Johnson Jerom C.

factor in my theological journey and nourished me with his academic excellence in the branch of Christian theology. His life, teachings, and preaching enabled me to lay a strong foundation for my Christian faith and helped me to understand theologies and their contexts more clearly.

I would also like to acknowledge Rev. Dr A. Joshuva Peter, the Executive Secretary of the United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India (UELCI), who has been a constant source of encouragement and support in my ministerial and theological journey from my studies till the present. I also would like to thank TELC Bishop Dr A. Christian Samraj, for his unwavering support throughout my theological journey through the moral, spiritual and ministerial guidance he provided.

Consciousness of Horizons

I am very much aware that I am in a unique environment, enriched by the diversity of my theological classmates who are from different parts of my state. Everyone is unique in their way, and we share our traditions and cultures which prompts further theological exploration of our similarities and differences. Through these exchanges, we are introduced to new worldviews and ideas, which inform our own current belief systems and identities.

My horizons of awareness expanded through opening myself to new people and perspectives in ministry and in society. These horizons of awareness ignited my interest to equip and engage in God's ministry from the grassroots. It also enabled me to sensitize toward people's pain and stand in solidarity with them for the betterment of the church and

society. My theological journey in BD and MTh studies helped me to understand and be aware of the situation and needs of the church and society today.

Shortly after I joined my doctoral studies program in 2019 there was a lockdown period due to COVID-19. There was much individual suffering and the mission and ministry of the church were in a state of crisis. With the church and seminary completely locked, I had difficulty meeting regularly in-person with my doctoral supervisor and finding articles and books for my dissertation and research work.

More broadly, the pandemic presented challenges with reaching certain communities. Fortunately, I was able to engage in the TELC Youth Ministry by conducting various singing, drawing, oratory, and Bible quiz competitions online. Another creative solution to pandemic-related obstacles was the implementation of an online platform called Discord. Discord was implemented for LWF scholarship recipients in 2020 so that scholars from around the world could continue gathering for academic discussion, prayer, Bible study, and fellowship. Designed for “Think Tanks” to learn and share reciprocally, the platform facilitated coming-together opportunities that were invaluable for everyone’s learning and sharing during this challenging time. For me, a highlight of this experience was presenting a paper on the relationship between theology and climate justice from an Indian perspective in the online Coming Together meetings for LWF scholars. All these experiences have empowered me in every situation toward a bold theological vision.

The COVID-19 situation made me starkly aware of the ongoing difficulties and losses experienced by those around me—especially

those who lost loved ones in the family, friends, church, and community. I tried to overcome the situation with God’s guidance and help, recognizing that new and creative solutions were required to respond to such an unprecedented crisis.

I would like to wholeheartedly acknowledge and thank the LWF for helping me pursue my doctoral studies by granting the scholarship which strengthens me in every way toward my progress. This LWF scholarship for my doctoral studies anchors me in my theological voyage, bestowing me with confidence as I navigate the rough seas ahead.

Theological Formation and Commitment to Service

In the first year of my theological studies, I was taken along with my classmate for an exposure at Quo Vadis, an Inter-Faith Dialogue Centre by Arcot Lutheran Church (ALC) in Tiruvannamalai district of Tamil Nadu, India. In a country that is known for its multireligious pluralistic society, such an interfaith dialogue is impactful for our theological development, as it allows students to observe the other prevalent religious faith practices, traditions and beliefs. This exposure helped us understand more about diverse Christian faith and practices, opening my eyes and thoughts to look upon other religions in Indian society with an open mind.

During my third year, the concurrent practical ministry was held in Odisha in Eastern India. There, my classmates and I lived in the small village of Putsil in the Koraput district of Odisha for almost a month to learn about the life of the Tribal and Adivasi people. This village has a small population and one

Lutheran church. This practical ministry gave me a different understanding of preaching in the wilderness and meeting people who had not experienced God's love, like Jesus' ministry at Galilee. To share God's word with these people, especially during times of trials and tribulations was truly a blessed experience. In my commitment to God, I strongly feel that I am supposed to work for the people who are in real need: I commit myself to stand with people in their struggles and pain, so that together we may overcome these hardships for the common good of all.

During my MTh Studies I grew to understand several theologies from the West with the contributions of Indian Christian theologians, which strengthened my own sense of calling. Moreover, I was able to understand Christology, eco-theology, feminist theology, Dalit, Tribal and Adivasi theology and contemporary theologies around the world. Through expanding my own knowledge and understanding of theologies, I hope to reach those with whom I might otherwise struggle to connect.

Integrity and Virtues

Moral values dictate a person's standards, behaviors, and intentions, and are a fundamental aspect of human identity and existence which inform our social interactions and daily conduct. Values can be influenced by our surrounding environments and communities, evidenced by the enrichment and strengthening of my own moral code throughout my theological journey. My values of honesty, respect, and courage among others were renewed through encounters with biblical texts. Particularly impactful were the moral

teachings of Jesus' ministry shared through parables and stories.

My academic experience also nurtured my shepherding nature through the active practices of caring for people, praying for them, nurturing them, taking part in their struggles, and standing in solidarity with their suffering. I am blessed to have received these gifts along my journey, which I hope now to be able to pass on to others as they forge their paths toward living out the gospel in everyday life.

On the Road to Empowerment

Along my theological journey I have been gifted with knowledge and tools to empower myself and others to grow stronger and more confident in God's love. Individual empowerment of the self is the first step in the process of empowering larger communities and institutions, including the church and society.

Scripture is given in the hands of everyone so that we may empower ourselves in the areas of justice, upholding the right, rescuing the weak, and delivering people from the hands of the wicked. Psalm 82 offers poignant instruction on how we might realize empowerment: "Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed" (Isa 1:17). It is high time to reread the scriptures and reinterpret them in today's context with current theologies, wisdom, thoughts, and revelations gleaned from our ongoing theological journeys.

A theology of empowerment is the need of this hour, beginning with the grassroots into every structure toward a common union. Such empowerment enriches the learning process and reshapes the futures of everyone.

It has the potential to cultivate and strengthen values such as self-understanding, service to society and church, care and concern toward all creation and creatures, mutual respect, mutual dependence, mutual love, trust, harmony, reliability, resistance, equality, and solidarity. By transmuting the mission and vision of Jesus Christ in every aspect of daily life, theological and spiritual empowerment can be realized. I continue my journey toward transmuting my theological training into a lived reality, which I know will be a life-long learning

process with no end. I have grown in my understanding of the realities of my time and the needs of the church and society and look forward with eager anticipation to the work that lies ahead of me. I am blessed to surrender myself to this lifelong journey which nourishes, engages, enlightens, uplifts, and strengthens me in my search for justice, peace, and integrity for all creation. As Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9: 23).



Taking the plunge: theology as a path to awakening

By Karl August F. Michael Barría

Why Theology?

“That’s your vocation!” The youth ministry pastor, Rev. Rodolfo Olivera, exclaimed loudly when I told him I was interested in studying theology and serving in the church. It was the second semester of 2016, after a pastoral board meeting. Before the meeting I had wondered whether I should tell him about this notion—maybe it was just a crazy idea that would pass in time. But the urge to tell my desire to study theology and serve others through the church was much greater than any doubt that could arise in my head.



After that conversation, I decided to "jump into the pool," as we say colloquially in Chile when someone makes a decision involving risk and adventure. I didn't know exactly what the path to theology studies would be like, but I had immense confidence that I would arrive at a safe harbor, at a pool that would greet me at the end of the road.

So, during my theology studies I continued to swim in the pool. And in it I was not alone, but together with companions who swam with me. There were also teachers who taught us how to swim and how to discover our own swimming style. I am still swimming in this pool, which feels to me more like a sea that begs to be explored.

Dipping My Toes into the Waters of Christianity

My father's family is of Lutheran origin, but I was not raised in the Lutheran tradition. My childhood and adolescence were spent in Puerto Montt, a rainy city in southern Chile surrounded by volcanoes, green forests, and blue lakes. It was in this city that I had my first encounters with Christianity, spending most of my adolescent years in a charismatic church marked by an active community life where members built strong relationships with each other. While the church community's robust support network appealed to me, my early experiences with Christianity were marred by the transmission of an image of God that was not always loving and often judged people by their actions without seeking understanding.

When I turned 18, I moved a thousand kilometers north to the city of Santiago, capital of Chile. It was here that I completed my first studies in history and also decided to join a local Christian community of Protestant origin.

Recalling the religious background of my father's family, I searched the Internet for a Lutheran church in Santiago and found a community in my neighborhood, a 20-minute walk.

So, in 2012 I joined the Lutheran Church in Chile (ILCH). There, I first participated in the youth-adult Bible study group and then in the youth camps held every summer in Puerto Fonck, southern Chile. These experiences were very positive for me: they allowed me to meet Lutheran Christians who spoke from an understanding of and empathy for other human beings. I saw a community that was able to reflect on human complexity while understanding that God embraces us and accompanies us in our life processes without judgment.

But how did I come to lean toward theology? Looking back, 2016 was a "hinge" year in my life when I had the opportunity through my church to participate as a representative of our Youth Ministry in two events held in Brazil: the first an international meeting organized by The Lutheran World Federation and the second the Evangelical Youth Congress (CONGRENAGE) of the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB).

I had never met another Lutheran church outside of Chile before these travels and honestly did not know what to expect from this meeting. My surprise was great: I met young Lutherans who were very committed to their faith communities, and I witnessed how the church could be a valuable contribution to society. I especially remember a visit we made to a diaconal project of the IECLB with an indigenous community: about 1,500 young people gathered in this important space of spirituality to participate in the CONGRENAGE.

I had never seen so many Lutherans together!

These experiences marked me and awakened in me a calling that I did not know before. I asked myself: why not serve in the church? How can the church also contribute to society? This newfound interest and curiosity for the well-being of other people helped me realize the value we all have as human beings and awakened the vocation to serve. I intend to serve my neighbor and to seek that this neighbor is well, healthy, listened to and loved.

Nurturing Theology: My Inspirations during Theological Studies

After my conversation with pastor Olivera, whom I thank for this “first push into the pool,” the road to Faculdades EST in Brazil was fast. Lutheran churches are a small religious minority in Latin America, a continent historically marked by Catholicism, so there are limited options for the study of Protestant theology. The IECLB has a long tradition in the region and serves as a reference for the Latin American Protestant world. The Faculdades EST (formerly Escola Superior de Teologia), located in São Leopoldo, south Brazil, is a faculty with a strong relationship to the IECLB and has been the home of hundreds of theologians. So, within half a year I left Chile and found myself in a new country with a language and culture different from my own.

During my studies at Faculdades EST I learned that theology is intrinsically connected to reality, that theology is lived. Faculdades EST is a close-knit community where theology students from various parts of Brazil (a huge country!) and Latin America live together

on the same premises as the faculty. Living with classmates required sharing common spaces, respecting housemates’ lifestyles, and establishing rules of coexistence that promoted respect and responsibility, but I found living in community is also a way of putting Christian theology into practice—seeking to live the value of love for your neighbor.

Many of my classmates came from rural areas of Brazil, where Lutheran faith communities had great relevance in their lives. Many of them also came from simple contexts where agricultural chores and community living are important. From them I learned that *mutirão*—a Portuguese concept describing group and solidarity work—is not just a word found in the dictionary but exists in reality.

A fond memory from my studies is the famous "Academic Week of Theology Students." Planned by students, the event required intense teamwork to coordinate topics, presenters, and workshops. Students and professors collaborated to organize liturgies and meditations for an international seminar in our house of study which emphasized creativity and novelty. In “Grupos de Convivência” (Coexistence Groups), small groups of students worked together with a teacher/guide to explore the Christian perspective on issues of human coexistence such as conflicts, discrimination, dialogue, and inclusion, among others. Through these types of social ministry experiences I learned that theology is not only sitting down to read and write *papers* (which is also very important), but it is also doing, putting into practice, living together, making mistakes, taking risks, giving opinions, being silent, embracing, loving. It is *mutirão*.

God as the Source of Life and Love: The Impact of Theological Education on my Life

Parallel to this social openness of the gospel that I experienced in my first years of theology, there were some deep questions that still echoed in my head: How does God relate to the world, to oneself? What is the image of God that I should have? Is God indifferent to human reality? Is there a "true" way of understanding God? While these questions may seem very theoretical, to me they mark an essential part of our Christian identity.

On one of my trips to Chile I met with the then-president of my community. I remember talking with him about a book by the Lutheran pastor from the United States, Nadia Bolz-Weber, whose writing strengthened my desire to look for new ways of openness within the church.¹ He told me to write down the name of a former Episcopal bishop in New York, John Shelby Spong.

Months later when I returned to Brazil I searched the library catalogue for a text by the author that had been recommended to me. To my surprise, there was only one copy of his book in Portuguese, titled *Um Novo Cristianismo para um Novo Mundo - A Fé Além dos Dogmas*, which translates in English to the tendentious title, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*.²

This text and its author helped illuminate the path I was already following in my search for an image of God using language that made sense to me today in the twenty-first century. Many times, theological language offers elaborate explanations and creates complex



Karl Michael joins other youth delegates at the 2016 IECLB Youth Congress in Timbó, Brazil. Photo: Private

systems to explain the reality of God, but I believe that understanding God need not be so difficult. I am grateful to have been able to continue working on this subject with the support of my professors during my studies. I have come to understand God as existence—the source of life and love.³ Now perhaps I understand why professors used poetry, visual arts, or the liturgy itself to transmit the great mystery of God, which is at the same time palpable and real.

Through the exploration of personal theological questions, I became aware of spirituality's relevance in Christian life and how to consciously encounter the loving presence of God through everyday experiences: a moment of silence, of prayer, of observation, of conversation, of human contact, of contact with nature.

In this way I have come to understand that the mystery of God manifests itself in creative and sometimes unconventional ways. The loving

1 Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Santos Accidentales: Encontrando a Dios en las Personas Equivocadas* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Juan1 Ediciones, 2019).

2 John Shelby Spong, *Um novo cristianismo para um novo mundo: a fé além dos dogmas* (Campinas, Brazil: Verus Editora, 2006).

3 Spong, *Um novo cristianismo para um novo mundo*.

Karl Michael (second left) with other community members at the Faculdades EST campus in São Leopoldo, Brazil, in 2018. Photo: Mayara Frees Longo



feeling which connects us with the source of life and love, and which I call God, impels me not to stay in my own place. It urges me to move and make a change, as the Greek concept *metanoia* (the change elicited by spiritual awakening) represents well. All these reflections from my time as a student led me to the conviction that love can be transformative in lives. I cannot see the treasures of the Kingdom of God and remain indifferent (Mt 13:44). With this new awareness, *diakonia* took a space in my heart.

Diakonia is more than an individual value or personal directive, it is a task for our communities and churches alike. There is great need in today's society for social ministry of all kinds. As a visitation volunteer for a pastoral council program, I visited people in a hospital in the city of Porto Alegre who were undergoing organ transplants. Many of them came from other localities and states in Brazil and would go for days or weeks without receiving a visit. For me it was very special to

give my time to these people and to realize that a simple gesture such as listening can be fundamental in a person's life.

As Christians we are called to move out of our comfort zones and take this lesson a step further. As Jesus says in the so-called works of mercy: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Mt 25:35-36).

"My theological studies at Faculdades EST have undeniably shaped the person I am today, making me more open, sensitive, and compassionate. I learned to know myself in this period. I tried to be honest with my questions about God and the church. And I still try to do so. I learned that theological studies—in their theoretical and practical realms—have the potential to be a source of life and love to the world in which we live.

From Hierarchical Competitiveness to Community Building through Christ

The academic environment at Faculdades EST challenged me in new ways. I had studied history at a large university in Santiago de Chile where thousands of people studied in a competitive and individualistic environment under pressure to be the best. Faculdades EST, a campus hidden in a hill in the city of São Leopoldo, was different. I discarded my old perception of studies for one where cooperation among peers, listening, and building together was important.

Experiences of community creation (*mutirão*) between students and professors, such as the creation of liturgies, meditations, and even classes were transcendental for me. I was used to more hierarchical forms of power where knowledge came "from above" with little consideration given to the life experiences and contexts of the students. In that sense, my professors showed me that another way of exercising authority was possible. My teachers knew the context of their students—many from rural and simple backgrounds but filled with knowledge and wisdom unknown to me—and tried to adapt to that reality. This was a pleasant surprise and made me more aware of realities and ways of life that I had not had the opportunity to know before.

On the one hand, theology is a discipline that has the potential to question those who study it. It challenges us to consider how we see ourselves, our image of God, and how this God connects with our faith community, society, and the world today. On the other hand, engaging with these challenging questions in a theological environment—that

is, among a diverse body of students and educators living and studying in community—might provide some answers. It did for me, as Faculdades EST acted as a kind of laboratory of theology—an encounter between theological theory and practice.

During my studies, my understanding of theology was particularly influenced by the lived experiences of some of my professors: Roberto Zwetsch, professor of practical theology, relocated his family among tribes in the Amazon for ten years as part of a missionary project. This professor's radical decision to enter a new cultural and spiritual context made me reflect on how Christianity can connect with other forms of spirituality. My Hebrew teacher, Marie Krahn, coordinator of the NGO Serpaz, was another source of inspiration: through her fervent advocacy for human rights and the search for peace, she modelled determination to denounce situations of violence occurring in the world and a commitment to working for their end.

Professor Márcia Blasi recounted to us the struggle of students in the 1990s to include feminist theology in the theology curriculum. Professor Blasi constantly urged us to organize as students, analyze our reality and encourage changes that promote fair and equitable treatment among faculty members.

The life story and struggle of Professor André Musskopf, whose book *Talar Rosa: Homossexuais e o Ministério Na Igreja* detailed the complexities of power relations even within our own churches, also helped me see how the Spirit continues to drive us to create more just and dignified communities for all people, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity or social background.

As a student, the powerful life examples of my teachers made me realize the potential we have as Christians to change realities: we have a message that inspires us strongly and makes us question our comfort zone, our context, its injustices and the possibility of change.

In Search of Compassion and Humility

The theology curriculum itself and the extra-curricular activities that took place in the faculty motivated us as students to expand our cultural and social horizons. We did this through hospital visits facilitated through our pastoral counseling course and national and international congresses held on campus. These congresses focused on topics of gender justice, spirituality, and good living, among others, and were an opportunity for students to come together in “coexistence groups” to share life experiences and feel heard. Through meeting new people and encountering new realities, we become more sensitive to human diversity. These experiences made me more sensitive to human pain. They also helped me see how important the role of the church is in addressing this pain through, for example, *diakonia* and the accompaniment of people.

Many of the professors at Faculdades EST identified with or were close to Liberation Theology, which by definition has a special commitment to the poor and those who suffer in society. Through their life experiences and academic work, professors such as Professor Zwetsch with the indigenous people of the Amazon, Professor Blasi and the history of the feminist theology chairperson, and Professor Musskopf in the struggle of the LGBTIQ+ church members encouraged us

to be more compassionate, open to the world and empowered. This special encouragement by faculty for the students to be critical of our social, political and cultural contexts made me more sensitive to the reality of the people who suffer and are most discriminated against in society.

Intellectual Curiosity as a Way of Cultivating Sensitivity

During my theological studies, my values and worldview underwent a major change. I became a more empathetic and compassionate person toward others, which challenged my personal vices of selfishness, individualism and competitive spirit. I grew to understand the interdependent and social nature of humans. And in understanding and valuing people's experiences, my own horizons and understanding of the world expanded. Thus, I learned to be more humble and more respectful of the diverse forms of knowledge and learning, and to be open to things outside of "traditional academic intelligentsia."

As my studies progressed, I became more curious and found my areas of interest. At first it was difficult for me to connect in depth with the classical contents of theology, but with time, questions and concerns arose that motivated me to enter the field with interest and a clear purpose. I puzzled over whether we can truly understand God's love beyond the ecclesial context, and if so, how to live this reality. I wondered if spirituality was transversal to the human being, and about how to pursue inter-religious dialogue as a Christian. In grappling with these questions, I have become a more sensitive, open and empowered human being.

I have always felt responsible for my own learning and the pursuit of my own intellectual quest for freedom. Along my journey, crises and internal debates arose that were not always easy to reconcile with my existing religious dogmas. But I have been gifted the freedom to investigate topics of personal interest such as the image of God and spirituality in society and I am grateful to have been so well received by

my professors in an environment that promotes free thinking. In my search for understanding I have absorbed new ideas and theologies and feel at ease with them, empowering myself intellectually and theologically. Through my readings, questions, research, and my own intellectual/experiential processes I am enabled to understand my relationship with the Divine in a much more honest and coherent way.



Bearing witness to the strength of Tamar: God's call to love the oppressed

By Rev. Witness Issa Maratu

A Victim of Sin, Not a Sinner

While first working as a pastor, I was challenged with the case of a 13-year-old girl in my parish who got pregnant while she was in secondary school. At this time, our government did not allow pregnant girls to continue in public schools and the legal system harshly punished men responsible for unplanned pregnancies. The situation was further complicated by speculation from the girl's school that she had been impregnated by her father.



Because incest is such a taboo in our culture, she was not able to identify the man behind her pregnancy. Disclosing that you are carrying your father’s baby is like revealing the nakedness of your father in African tradition—it is simply not done. She was called shaming names like prostitute by the community, who assumed she could not identify the perpetrator because she had been seeing different men at the same time.

As with many girls in remote African communities, the girl was condemned by her mother for what had happened and being cast out of school. But what about the church? The girl was a student in the confirmation class and confirmation day was approaching, so although I had never considered a teenager’s pregnancy in the church before, I now had a responsibility toward the girl. And everyone was watching to see the future of her confirmation class and faith life in general.

As a pastor, my primary concern was for her wellbeing and the wellbeing of the baby in the womb—I knew she would certainly face hardships as a young mother, especially if she continued to be rejected by the people and institutions she looked to for comfort. With my limited experience—I had just been ordained—dealing with such a situation needed additional support from senior pastors. To my astonishment, I was advised that because she had committed adultery she didn’t deserve to be treated as a “clean girl” and should be thrown out of confirmation class.

While in other churches having a child out of wedlock may be overlooked, in my context

it is not uncommon for women and girls impregnated before marriage to be subject to church disciplinary measures. This can result in denial of Holy Communion and exclusion from other church activities including choir singing, teaching Sunday school and even preparing tea for ministers. Dispensed by church administration, church discipline is based on sociocultural norms and is intended to protect the church in ethical matters.

Working as a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT), I was challenged by these so-called church disciplines.¹ Every time a girl came into my office asking for repentance so she could be accepted back as part of communion, I struggled to listen and understand her account of what set her under the church discipline. I found myself grappling with questions to which I had no answers: why are women/girls held to different standards than men when it comes to pregnancy out of wedlock? Where are the boys/men responsible for the pregnancies? How should the church respond to girls who have conceived unwillingly? Is having a baby a sin to repent? What sins does God forgive when we repent weekly in our Sunday services, and what does repenting for rape do for a traumatized victim? Is it right to adhere to the church disciplines even when I know the truth about someone’s conception?

In an undergraduate class I learned about situational ethics, which posits that how we respond to a situation should be determined by context rather than an absolute moral code.

1 Faith K. Lugazia and Olivier Ndayizeye: “The Dynamics of the Practices of Church Discipline in Protestant Churches in Rwanda: A Source of Koinonia or Disruption?” in *Managing Conflicts and Violence in Families and Communities: Factors Contributing to Failure and Successes in Rwandan Traditions and Modern Approaches*, PIASS Publication Series no. 7 (2016), 27-51.

According to the Bible, Jesus came for the lost and desperate, poor and marginalized, sinners and those who have lost hope. Why should we not care for victims and survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) and abuse as Jesus would? To my understanding, there should be room in the church for the victims and survivors of rape.

If not for this kind of application of the church disciplines, the church could serve as a safe refuge for this girl and other victims of abuse and violence—not only victims of rape but also domestic violence. I saw a need for change in how the church intervenes in such cases and similar situations where the realities of abuse and violence are witnessed. The church has a mission to help the poor and marginalized and not to judge them, a mission I am eager to help realize.

Questioning Culture

I was left with many questions and confusion over the problems I was noticing with church disciplinary procedures, especially in cases related to sexual violence. Particularly of interest for me were the taboos that silence voices of the victims, the practice of denying victims Holy Communion and the requisition of repentance. If theology is faith-seeking-understanding, then going deeper in theological understanding could help answer some of my questions, perhaps even help transform the status quo in my church. When I received the LWF scholarship I felt immense relief: here was my chance to challenge outdated and potentially harmful church practices through theology. I could help the

church rectify the issues I had observed based on the truth of the gospel.²

With the LWF scholarship, I am completing my PhD research on incest rape in African families, focusing primarily on the biblical interpretation of the Tamar story in 2 Samuel 13. My task is to fill in the missing voice of the victims of domestic rape by contextualizing the significance of victims' weeping within the church and our contemporary culture. I use a character analysis method to study our sisters in the Bible who have been in the same situation: to learn their behavior, how they themselves and the people surrounding them dealt with the situation and what we can learn from their failures or successes in our context today. In my discourse, I use Tamar who was victimized sexually by her half-brother as a mirror for today's sexual violence victims. Deep studying of Tamar's behavior supported by Hebrew language courses has deepened my understanding of the negative taboos that mute the voices of victims. As a girl from Hebrew patriarchal culture, she had limited chances to make her voice heard. There were reasons enough for Tamar to remain silent, but she chose otherwise: she cried out loudly. Tamar's story builds a case for a paradigm shift in our churches and society to oppose cultures that silences female victims and survivors of sexual violence and abuse. Tamar made her voice heard despite her status as the daughter of a king and the royal family's reputation. She chose to cry for justice.

The theological education I have so far gained has sharpened my understanding of sexual violence within family settings in

2 Karen L. Bloomquist, ed. *Transformative Theological Perspectives: Theology in the Life of the Church*, (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2009).

the Bible context and given me confidence to challenge the norms. The progressive theological education I am receiving has been instrumental in acquiring authority over many issues facing the church, including discriminatory disciplinary measures against victims of sexual violence and abuse. My education has empowered me to challenge outmoded practices, but I also recognize transformation is a challenging task in the current church social and cultural environment.

Theology Changes Lives

For me, theological education has influenced my personal behavior and how I interact with others. I grew to better understand people’s psychology and relate to others within their contexts. Pastoral care and counseling have strengthened my interpersonal knowledge and soft skills, and I find myself to be a better listener able to offer help to those who are vulnerable in the church and community at large.

Theological education has also widened my understanding of scripture and its interpretation through various methods and tools for exegesis. This is especially important nowadays when people use scriptures to mislead people in favor of their personal agendas.

It is through theological education that I came to understand that both men and women possess the *imago Dei*—the image of God, meaning we are equal in the eyes of God. In the context of my culture, men are privileged and positioned higher than their female counterparts. Before pursuing theology, I too subscribed to this unequal view of gender roles, but an understanding of *imago Dei* has transformed my thinking against any



Rev. Witness Issa Maratu conducts infant baptism at ELCT’s Njiro Parish in Arusha, Tanzania. Photo: Courtesy ELCT Njiro Parish

oppressive rhetoric in society and church. It has made me advocate for gender justice and preaching equality. My faith has grown to understand that both men and women have equal value in the eyes of the creator.

My quest now is to advocate a holistic decent life for all people regardless of gender and lift church-imposed barriers to salvation, especially when those barriers oppose the essence of the church: salvation to all.

The Church is Her Amnon

My experiences with church authority have been mixed. On a personal level, I was received positively by church leadership when I shared my desire to continue studying. I received an endorsement, my diocese communicated this to the head office and they were cooperative in helping me pursue my studies. However, when it comes to the authority of church discipline it becomes more complex.

The situation with the girl in my confirmation class seemed to me a misuse of authority by the spiritual leadership office, and the more I reflected on it the more

determined I became to enact changes in church disciplines. The challenge here was that I had to contradict the church disciplines which have been in place throughout the history of the church in Tanzania. Also, those who go against the administration are considered to withdraw themselves from the church and denied privileges—including the holy sacraments.

When I did not expel the girl from my confirmation class I was surprised that there was no response from the senior pastors I had spoken with. Fortunately, my decision was supported by the Tanzanian constitution, as the girl in my class was too young to be considered sexually responsible. In this case, the church supported me passively by allowing me as the lead pastor to have the final say on the matter. This reflected my advantage of authority, which can be positive or negative depending on the attitude of the pastor in charge: when pastors favor the patriarchal system (or other hierarchical structures), it leaves room for the church disciplines to be used as a tool for oppression. Instead of being rooted in cultural and societal norms, church discipline should look to biblical text for guidance and suit the essence of the church—for all to have life in abundance.

I had to start from somewhere and recognized that furthering my education would give me many useful tools to engage in transformation. Education through my PhD level research is a pillar and I intend to use the knowledge obtained as a tool for transformation. As the saying goes: “No research, no right to speak.” At this point, my church authority was very supportive and recommended me to continue with my



Rev. Witness Issa Maratu in the library of Tumaini Makumira University, Arusha Tanzania. Photo: Private

doctoral studies despite my controversial research topic. They were ready to look for a scholarship and permit my continued studies for the benefit of the church.

Inspired by Theology, Saved by Grace

My previous studies including my bachelor’s in divinity and theology master’s in gender and health opened my eyes. In an undergraduate course I studied how misinterpretation of biblical texts can contribute to gender disparities, such as in Genesis 2:18, where

the idea of the woman as a helper originated. I did my master's thesis on Christian marriage vows and how they can be a tool for GBV. My theological education helped me to understand Lutheran theology and recognize when church actions are contrary to the teachings and essence of the church.

After completing my studies, I was ordained and sent to my first congregation as pastor in charge. Based on Luther's theology of *simul justus et peccator* I found no reason to deny the Holy Communion to someone who relies on God's grace. According to Luther, we are all nothing but justified sinners. Those we consider sinners deserve to be shown the love and grace of God so that they may change their ways and not be excommunicated.

My personal life experience and theological formation have influenced my character, behavior and understanding of the world. As a Lutheran, I am deeply inspired by Luther's integrity to stand for what I believe in even if I stand alone. I learned and now proclaim Luther's theology of grace—we are saved by grace alone. I found this contrary to Lutheran practice in my church, where much attention is given to personal efforts of salvation.

It may be radical to challenge the church disciplines which have been part of the Tanzanian Lutheran tradition since the plantation of the church in Tanzania, but I am committed to raising my voice for the victims of sexual violence which is directly connected with patriarchal practices: challenging the system instead of the victims of sexual violence, I understand the church's role is to reach out to those victims, empower them, heal their souls and rebuild their esteems.

Hope for Today's Tamar

Our theology is constructed from different sources, including experiences, tradition, revelation, and above all scripture. The Bible was written in a patriarchal society similar to ours. Therefore, there must be something to learn from our sisters in the Bible who also faced patriarchal evils. What did they do in situations of sexual harassment from people they trusted? How did they overcome fear and shame from society? What lessons can be taken from the girls in this situation about rebuilding self-esteem? These questions motivate my gender and biblical studies: I want to find the truth that will free the victims of injustice.

The scholarship news from the LWF through my home church, ELCT, came at the right time, when I really needed to pursue doctoral studies in biblical and gender studies. From my undergraduate theological education, I was inspired by the essence of the church—salvation for all. I am also empowered in my studies by teachers such as my supervisor Dr. Cynthia Holder Rich, who is such a supportive professor and always encourages me. She advised me to include Old Testament Hebrew for helping in comprehensive exegesis of how the Old Testament dealt with sexual violence. She also arranged for my online class and wrote a letter to ask for a special scholarship for my Hebrew class and it was approved.

So, the first years of my doctorate have been full of readings and exploration of African culture and sexuality, Lutheran traditions, and adultery as well as how the Hebrew Bible dealt with rape and sexual violence. My university has a very supportive environment and

infrastructure. For me it is special that I am given an office to do all my writing and online classes. As days go on, I am becoming more curious about what the future has in store for me as a rising biblical feminist theologian. I cannot wait to be the change I want to see in the church; to take part in reforming our theological formation to accommodate those who most need to see grace and compassion in the church.

As a pastor I am expected to show compassion and love for vulnerable people in society. That is what the Bible teaches and what Jesus demonstrates throughout the New Testament. Jesus never neglected sinners or other marginalized people in the community. He stayed with them, healing them, feeding them, having fellowship with them. This is the meaning of the true gospel: feeling compassion for those who are suffering. This is the reason I was moved to help young girls and women who are being victimized by patriarchal culture which is present even in the church. I am privileged to have received the LWF scholarship which is helping further my knowledge and will help me bring positive change to the church.

Driven by Purpose to Protect Tamar's Faith

I pursue my doctoral education in theology with the motive of helping the church and community better understand the Bible and our theology so that we may live out the gospel in our daily lives. When I encounter situations where the Bible and Lutheran theology are being misinterpreted or misused, I am only more driven to bring about transformation within the church to accommodate all.

Today, I see myself growing in gender theology and as an upcoming Old Testament and Hebrew scholar. This program has opened the world for me: it has introduced me to the scholarly world of writing, intensive reading, critical arguing, and presenting my opinions with confidence even when I stand alone. Through research and writings and presentations, my voice will be heard breaking the silence for gender injustices, especially for those who face unfair discrimination based on stigmas and socio-cultural stereotypes. I am looking forward to an inclusive church which I will continue to work toward in accordance with the church's mission of bringing the lost sheep into the fold.



Sola fide: insights from my theological journey

By Rutendo Immaculate Gora

Journeying into Active Faith

Before I was even born, I was Lutheran. My parents met at the church where I would later be baptized in the Lutheran tradition. First daughter of Fiyiwe Gora and Rev. Kennedy Gora, my three younger siblings and I are all from Masvingo, Zimbabwe.

My name, Rutendo, is derived from Luther's 'sola fide' (saved by faith alone) and means faith in ChiShona, my native Bantu language. Lutheranism was a way of life for me before I even had an awareness of how it shaped my life: my Lutheran faith belonged to me instead of me belonging to it.



Being a Lutheran meant to be Christian, to belong to the church. This was where the African drum beat to the rhythm of the good news and people gathered to meet and listen to my father preach, where I complained that his prayers were too long, and where I met the mothers in purple church clothes who laid their hands on my head and blessed my life with their smiles. Being Lutheran was simple and all I knew in my small village/hamlet in Chegato Mberengwa, Zimbabwe. Until my world became bigger.

I traveled beyond Zimbabwe for the first time in 2006 when my family vacationed in South Africa, and my world literally expanded. Only six years old, I was awed and enlivened by the new sights and experiences. I saw huge buildings and strange architecture and ate foods that made me want more. I saw tarred roads marked with yellow and white lines that lit up like Christmas at night and I was amazed by their beauty. The contrast to the ill-maintained gravel roads with potholes I was used to at home was eye-opening: our roads in Zimbabwe allowed us to get from place to place, but if a big storm came we had to just wait for the hot sun to dry up all the water before the roads were passable again. Comparing that to the comfort, speed and ease of travel on these new roads was amazing.

Even as a small child I found excitement in going back and telling my friends what I had experienced. Luckily for me, I was called upon by my primary school principal at an assembly to tell everyone about my holiday experience. Little did I know that I was making a political statement by returning to tell my classmates that there is more to the world than the little

we can see right before us—there is more in the world than Zimbabwe to explore.

This is the experience that I reflect upon when I look at my theological experience and how I understood God. It was simple: just like the unlit gravel roads in my hometown that received minimal maintenance beyond adding more gravel here and there, how I experienced God was functional but rudimentary: I would go to Sunday school, listen to the message, and probably let it go. It was a wonderful temporary event that I renewed once a week. It wasn't until later in life that I fully realized how my life and theological understanding was enhanced by deviating from the norm, from diverse experiences and exposures.

Shaken Foundations: Growth through Destruction

My theological journey began in Sunday school and continued with confirmation class, which prompted some of my first theological questions. I enjoyed the classes so much that I did an extra year, which also allowed me to be confirmed with the rest of my classmates and temporarily escape the responsibilities of home. When I entered the first year of my theology degree I did so as an excited student recently matriculated from high school. I expected to study and learn the verses of the Bible and their corresponding commentaries which I would then relay to the congregation, but my experience was not so linear: it took much destruction and unlearning for me to start rebuilding a sound theology.

Beyond the questions prompted by my confirmation class, my journey into deep theological questioning was catalyzed by the destruction of the Lutheran Theological

Institute, the church where my family was based for my father’s work when I was 15. I remember my shock when all of a sudden a fence was erected to block the heaps of soil that once were the foundation for homes and the church. It was a major shift. A place we once lived and worshiped was now covered in heaps of sand and demolished.¹

Our family then joined The Hayfields Lutheran Church in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, which I previously attended for Kid's Club every Friday until I started confirmation classes. It was a time of great confusion for me. I questioned why the building was demolished, where we would go to church, and why God would allow God’s house to be destroyed. In retrospect this pivotal time marked a change of direction for my theological path. I am grateful for The Hayfields Lutheran Church, which was my primary theological influence during this turbulent time.

Faith Seeking Understanding

My chosen institution of Theology is in Stellenbosch, South Africa, a town in the Western Cape where Afrikaans is the primary language. The University of Stellenbosch is a public research university established in 1918. Historically Afrikaans, the university only recently transitioned to a multi-lingual institution committed to including both IsiXhosa (a Bantu language) and English course options. For me and the many international students who call this university home this is a welcome initiative, as language can be a resource or an impediment to learning depending on its usage.

My theology school provides a wide array of modules, which offer insight for any theological journey. Our seminary—a parallel module to the academic curriculum—is called “Iziko,” which is an IsiXhosa word used to describe being around a fire. In African traditions being around a fire is symbolic of being in community, which has been a crucial part of my educational experience. My educational experience introduced me to diverse people. And from the moment that I started experiencing more than my small world my curiosity was ignited.

Curious by nature, during my theological studies my yearning for answers was affirmed by a systematic theologian named Daniel Migliore, who speaks about faith seeking understanding. This concept in theology derives from the original Latin *fides quaerens intellectum*, interpreted as “Jesus Christ prompts a questioning search for deeper understanding.” This created a platform to question but also helped me realize that through the love of God I had embarked on a life-long quest for deeper understanding. This helped me find peace in light of not having all the answers.

Finding My Identity as a Black Female Zimbabwean in a German Lutheran Church

A pivotal concern for me in my studies was that of language, identity, and inclusion. There is an African proverb that proclaims, “I am human only because you are human.” The depth and beauty of this proverb has only become more apparent to me through my extraordinary education at Stellenbosch and Iziko.

1 Francis Garaba, “The Demise of the Lutheran Theological Institute Library and Archives in Retrospect - Reflections of a Manuscript Librarian in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa,” *Missionalia* 46, no.3 (July 2019): 355–366.

The town of Stellenbosch is colloquially called 'Little Europe', in reference to the beautiful Dutch-style buildings that populate the area and also the university's rich colonial history. The lasting influence of colonialism continues to pose barriers to diversity, with cultural and language barriers impacting the university's international student population and making it hard for them to feel at home.

Most people in Stellenbosch can speak English, so students who share their native or preferred language with a lecturer have an advantage. But for international students unfamiliar with other dominant languages in the region—Afrikaans or Isixhosa—language is a barrier. It can be difficult to follow along in the classroom when students or teachers switch to Afrikaans spontaneously. And when classmates or church members speak Afrikaans or German and no one acknowledges that a translation is necessary it feels silently exclusive. As international students we may ask, "Where does our native language fit in this establishment?" This question applies in church spaces as well: for example, can a different language be added only on Pentecost?

Initially my coping mechanism was to simply work hard to learn the language and culture and assimilate into the environment, but this was not easy or authentic. It was then that I encountered the literature of Steve Biko, a prominent anti-apartheid activist who spoke about "who the black man is," and I underwent my own identity crisis.

I started questioning what God says about me, a Zimbabwean black girl. What does the Bible say to my context? What would Luther think of me, a black woman reflecting on the

foundations of my Lutheran theology about 500 years after his death? I struggled with these questions and my connection to God, and through this process of questioning and rediscovering myself, I was guided toward God's gospel.

I do not present my race as a barrier or a symbol of victimization. Rather it is an enhancement of my existence, a positive quality that brings another perspective to the table. I am a black female Zimbabwean in a predominantly white Lutheran German church in South Africa. It is safe to say that the parallels are difficult to decipher between these two cultures, but I like to think that I am proof that they can coexist and enhance one another.

Communities that live within their stereotypes and own realities usually stay isolated, but the church functions as a unifying force in this world with its socially constructed divisions. Societies are strengthened by the interweaving of its members' diverse narratives, reflected by the rich Gospel narratives which present a reality where paradoxes can coexist. Being truly human and living in community are inseparable.

During my time at theology school, the Bible has become closer to my reality. The humanness of the Bible was heightened through theological interpretations I encountered. Many controversial topics are discussed in classes where students raise their opinions. The more conservative views can create tensions, especially when they are justified with biblical texts. But these were opportunities where I learned from which backgrounds students see their worlds and

preach their gospel. I became more inclined to approach questions with grace and logic rather than simply attributing uncertainties to the mystery of God. The fundamentalist in me had to drown for my theological journey to progress.

How Theological Education Rocked My World: Questioning Destiny

As I write this autoethnography I am presently in my third year of studies. The past years have been a roller-coaster experience where the questions I asked of God were answered with more questions. And the main question remained: was my belief based on faith, or evidence of that faith? It was disheartening not to have an answer, but as my mentor always says, “theology is where the questions are more important than the answers.”

Initially, theological education at the university level seemed to have a negative impact on my life. Having grown up with the African understanding of calling which is something you cannot escape, I unconsciously and uncritically believed in predestination and fate: there was no choice, and if you tried to get away, one’s life would be tormented until you returned to the calling. Like many of my peers, I believed that I had no choices but that I was merely God’s puppet walking a predetermined path.

I shudder when I think of how naive I was for someone who is by nature curious about the world around her. As a youth, I was naturally dependent on my parents and when decisions were made for me, my growing mind interpreted it as fate or destiny. The turning point was when my studies were not going well and I had a wake-up call into reality: I couldn’t understand how God would let me struggle to learn about God. Slowly, university



Rutendo Gora outside Stellenbosch University, Western Cape, South Africa. Photo: Private

broke down my perceptions and ultimately left me saying, “I know that I know nothing,” like Socrates before me. But this was not in defeat. The support from my mentor – Pastor Felix Meylahn – kept me afloat.

Theology rocked my boat because it confused my faith. Hours of solitary reflections on texts and scrutinizing scripture raised questions that seemed to invalidate the gospel, leaving me frustrated. When I encountered contradictions and improbabilities within biblical narratives I felt my spirit shift, and wondered: was my faith based on satirical stories and mythical narratives that I consider historically accurate? Was my faith based on the story that

Ms Rutendo Immaculate Gora
with her family members.
Photo: Private



God created the world in seven days, the parting of the Red (or reed) Sea, or the narrative of a God who kills an entire nation to protect those who perceive themselves as God's own? Was my faith based on Jonah in the fish, Jesus walking on water, resurrection? It was hard to see God working in the face of these contradictions.

Through encounters with existing theologies and my own theological journey, I began to think more critically and adopted a new approach to understanding contradictory biblical texts. Instead of attempting to understand God alone, through surrounding myself with people on the same theological journey things became clearer. Today when I consider stories in the Bible I recognize that they may not all be true in the sense of reality, but what they attempt to theologize about human experience is the true value.²

I am fortunate that my educational journey happens in and out of classes. For example, I was a panel speaker at the Language Policy discussion held in 2022. It was terrific to consider the international perspective on language's impact on learning at the university: the Bible itself presents different narratives that can only be understood by understanding the original language and context in which they were written. These language exposures have allowed me to find deeper meaning when listening to sermons and reading biblical texts. I am grateful to have had the experience of engaging with new languages, as well as the travel experiences my theological education has granted me. Travel opportunities like my transition to Stellenbosch are linked to funding opportunities for my education. I am grateful for this support.

² John J. Collins, *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

Consequently, my calling no longer feels set in stone. I have choices to make and agency in those choices. I am one of many people attempting to find their way through this world. While in some ways I am still trying to align with my purpose, I firmly believe that God has taken me this far and will guide me the rest of the way. For now, the call is to complete the learning process. The next steps shall follow.

Border and Thought Control

Throughout adulthood and my theological journey I have encountered authority in various contexts. Pastors and friends have modeled authority based on love different from that of lecturers and officials in academic and official business contexts. As an international student from Zimbabwe, I am subject to inflexible government authority regarding laws and border control requirements. Through recent interactions with Visa Facilitation Services (VFS), I realized that even foreigners holding permits and visas in South Africa have limited freedom. The country's Afrophobia (xenophobia) has led to the abuse of authority, with some South Africans thinking they can harass foreigners. For example, in Stellenbosch central, a group of people forced company owners to stop hiring foreigners which left many without a source of income and in fear.

In my culture authority is bestowed based on age. Grey hair signifies authoritative wealth indicating wisdom and experience, and dictates how you treat the person next to you. This authority which makes older people deemed more knowledgeable also creates a barrier to conversation and innovation by diminishing the voices of youth. As a child and even occasionally now as an adult, when

my parents felt like I have overstepped the respectful lane they gently ask if I am their agetate—which I clearly am not. They easily win that game and watch me squirm into my young shell.

I am naturally a “do my thing” individual and enjoy exercising my freedom responsibly without being disciplined, but as an interdependent human I recognize where my freedom starts and ends. As a student, I am subject to the authority of my lecturers and professors when submitting assignments. I remember thinking that university would be similar to high school and that professors would be even more strict. But I quickly learned that the university experience is drastically different. What a culture shock to be in an academic environment where authority is healthy and grace is given freely: now I can eat my apple in class in peace. In contrast to the high school experience, there is more authority that one also has over one's life. However, authority comes with responsibilities.

Despite conforming to cultural norms, my parents were generally open-minded and raised me with an authoritative style like what I experienced as an adult with my professors. I have become more confident and vocal because I have learned that I am likely to be listened to. My learning environment allows for attentive listening and asking many questions, and my insight is considered valuable. I feel heard in lectures even when I ask what I consider difficult questions. I have not felt pressured to adopt the presented perspectives but rather remain open to hearing many perspectives. Age in the classroom is not used to overpower the other person—we recognize that everyone is still learning.

Staying Woke-the Art of Awareness

My awareness of my context changed drastically over time and with new experiences. I have been fortunate to travel from Zimbabwe to South Africa where I lived in the cities of Pietermaritzburg, Kwa-Zulu Natal, and Stellenbosch, Western Cape. As expressed earlier, I experienced much positive culture shock. These experiences have broadened my perspectives and shifted my mental paradigms; they made me aware of the different realities that exist within one country. Ironically, I never thought I would live in Stellenbosch, which boasts to be the wealthiest part of South Africa and at the same time is considered the most socio-economically unequal city in South Africa. Coming from a country where poverty is a norm, I was greatly interested in exploring the dynamic between extreme wealth and extreme poverty.

A country that claims democracy but oppresses its people while proclaiming they are well displays an authority of ignorance that exists to maintain oppression. The oppression is seen through the lack of essential government services which leave many residents to weather hardship like price hikes, and lack of electricity and food supplies without support. Sadly, such experiences are not unusual in South Africa, and the church in Zimbabwe finds itself a place of refuge with limited resources: the church's social impact is weakened under the shadow of the country's depression. Consequently, the gospel message in Zimbabwe has a different emphasis than the gospel message in Stellenbosch, South Africa: the focus is not only freedom, liberation from one's religiosity and sin, but also the promise of God for a flourishing lifestyle.

My cultural context shifted because I was exposed to different ways of existing. My culture was no longer the only norm. It was important for me to recognize that culture usually makes us focus on what makes us different instead of how we are the same. I have found community by looking at how we are similar and embracing our differences instead of seeing them as barriers for communities ordained by God.

Values in Action

My learning experience was essentially voluntary, but based on my learning experiences, following a calling can feel involuntary. I hear people say that they “could not deny their calling anymore,” as though it was set in stone. That is the mindset I carried but have unlearned. My learning experience allows me to explore my interests, which can be overwhelming at times—how could I focus on only one academic interest? Fortunately, the learning process ensures a continuous supply of questions to keep me curious and move me to search. My learning environment continues to be very enriching, thanks to a library of unlimited collections and experienced lecturers who are professors and doctors. I am also surrounded by people who have been through the years ahead of me and can share a plethora of wisdom and guidance.

My personal values including the importance of God, family, education, healthy eating, and kindness toward people have been mostly affirmed during my education. Although the values that are prioritized change from season to season, what matters for me is how they are influenced. In my experience, values should not be based only on what people in

my learning environment say because even their own perspectives change based on their contexts and experiences. My personal values are not limited by social constructs formed around the gospel, but based on the liberation that the gospel provides.

I experienced and continue to experience radical love. I have learned that people are more graceful than I imagined. The people around me continue to help me recognize my flaws and work through them in love. There is no limit to how people love, and it has taught me to love more. Of course, the opinion of others matters to me, but when I reflect on my ego I realize that I have become less concerned with what people think of me and more about what God says about me when I look at myself in the mirror: are my integrity and identity in sync?

The Art of Empowerment

I consider myself to be quite privileged. I live in a safe neighborhood with running water, ample food, and electricity (though even as I write, we have been without electricity for the past two hours). I can play sports, explore the city, and have a relationship with God; I live near my mentor, Pastor Meylahn, who provides a rich supply of wisdom and guidance whenever I feel disconnected. I am discovering that the learning process is not just a means to an end that motivated me to discover my identity and potential.

I naturally do not fit in with everyone and do not seek to please everyone as that is impossible: no group of people perfectly align with each other, but the faith journeying makes me belong with those around me. Having a family you

choose and feel welcomed in is gold. Included in my chosen family is the Maties Soccer team, which gives me a community that physically plays for each other and a greater goal. My communities empower me to grow in faith and develop as an individual.

And I have grown as an individual, even in recognizing more growth can be done. There is more to learn that is beyond my knowledge, but my learning is an ongoing process for which I now take responsibility. When I first began my studies, I had considered theology to be more spiritual than academic and thought God would provide all the answers. Silly me. The possibility of failing modules became more real and made me realize that my education was dependent on me and not just on God.

As much as I am responsible for my learning, I am also responsible for the quality of my life. For me, the biggest struggle was spirituality. You would think reading all that theology would turn me into a spiritual guru, but no such thing happened. My questions multiplied in theology school and I learned to believe within a pool of doubt. A practical theology module highlighted the importance of doubt as a facilitator of faith formation, not merely a vice to faith. Although my spiritual struggle persists, with Pastor Meylahn's guidance in the Lutheran student mentorship program I can re-center and reconnect with God over and over. I am grateful for the opportunity to present my experience and for the support from the LWF. The continuous programs including the Coming Together meetings, voice chats and the trip to Switzerland in 2022 have been nothing short of a blessing.



Planting a seed for the future harvest

By Adrian Lopez

The Beginning of a New Journey

In February 2020 the head of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia (ELCM), Bishop Steven Lawrence, contacted me to ask if I was interested in pursuing my theological studies. At the time I was a pastoral assistant and serving in the youth and worship ministries: 40 years old, happily married with two wonderful children. I was surprised by the timing of this call to serve God in full-time ministry.



Since childhood, church ministry has played an important role in my life. But to pursue my studies full-time now meant resigning from my position as a building manager and giving up my income. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic at this time further complicated my decision, as companies and organizations all over were downsizing or shutting down altogether. Fear of unemployment and general panic about the uncertainties of the pandemic were widespread among the people and it definitely did not feel like time to quit my job.

Yet I felt joy and contentment at the prospect of accepting the call to pursue my theological studies. The uncertainties even strengthened the call as I saw the need for the community to grasp faith in God and not lose hope in Christ during this time of pandemic. I felt that good theological knowledge would give me the opportunity to better serve the community. It was not an easy decision but with the support of my wife and children I took a leap of faith with complete trust in God and left my career for good in December 2020, and on 4 January 2021 I started a new journey. As we are called in Matthew 28, I readied myself to “baptize and teach people to obey Jesus’ command and guide them to God” (Mt 28:19-20).

Although my time in seminary was altogether different from previous experiences, my position as a building manager had prepared me well for my future in the church. As building manager, my routine tasks were to ensure the residential building was functioning perfectly and respond to residential service requests. These responsibilities made me a more task-oriented person, but I also believe

that this service work focusing on helping others laid the foundation in me to serve others in ministry.

Despite being in the ‘secular’ world for almost 20 years, I did not feel directionless on this new journey, thanks in part to the guidance of leaders like Bishop Steven Lawrence, who steered me through my first year of theological education and service in the church, often reminding me of how the two are related.

For example, learning the introduction and background to the New and Old Testament through coursework assisted me in conducting Bible study classes in church, and serving in the church deepened my understanding of the theological education that I gained in seminary. When the LWF extended its scholarship to fund my studies it was further encouragement to fully commit to doing my best in seminary.

The exposures that accompanied my first year of theological studies at seminary aided me as I began to serve the church and community. I am blessed to be guided on my journey at Seminari Theoloji Malaysia (STM) by well-experienced and theologically qualified lecturers. I have access to good theological commentary and reference books in addition to those that I frequently borrow from the seminary’s library. This is a gift, as it is my belief that lectures and notes should be read in conjunction with other sources to understand subjects more holistically.

I am 43 years old now and currently in my third year at STM pursuing my theological studies full-time to become a theologian and pastor. My LWF scholarship was a timely blessing that has enabled me to pursue my studies with profound exposure and immaculate

knowledge: guided by God, I continue on my journey to be a servant of Christ.

Sowing the Seed

Even before STM, my theological foundation began during my days in Sunday school, as with many young children in the Christian community who learn and grow in the fellowship and unity of the church. Sunday school ministry is important for young Christians, nurturing youth at a vulnerable age when they are quick to learn and remember with ease.

As for me, I enjoyed my days in Sunday school singing and reading Scriptures, listening to Bible stories, and producing plays and dramas for Christmas and Easter. To this day I recall many Bible stories from Sunday school, names of prophets still fresh in my mind thanks to memory verses we regularly recited and the frequent Bible quizzes meant to challenge and encourage the children to study the word of God. Even now as I am writing, the song “Jesus Loves me this I know” echoes in my mind, serving as a concrete reminder of the impact songs and events from childhood can have. These experiences molded the way I think and enabled me to mingle with children of all ages.

I joined the church confirmation class as a teen. Here I was exposed to Luther’s Small Catechism. The lessons were guided by our local church confirmation class booklet which covered many important topics including the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Apostle’s Creed. I reviewed the lessons and the pastor gave more explanation of each topic clearly in tandem with Luther’s Small Catechism, and so I experienced my preliminary theological formation.

The other ministry that I was actively involved in was Youth Fellowship, where I realized the importance of theological education at all stages of life. Stepping into maturity as a teenager is never easy but being in fellowship with other believers provided me with meaningful peer support and relationships. I started as a participant learning and studying the Bible with the fellow youths that I grew up with in church and was later appointed the youth leader and began to lead Bible study for fellow youths. In preparation for lessons I read and studied the Bible which cultivated a hunger and thirst for knowledge of the word of God.

Through youth fellowship I also organized church activities such as fundraising day, carnivals, and worship seminars. Organizing events created opportunities to meet people and explore diversity, and this ministry gave me a wider understanding of managing and counseling youths with various challenges experienced by teenagers. Little did I know the impact these experiences and exposures would have on who I am today. But after all, theological understanding and formation are influenced by lived experiences, information picked up in daily life and local cultural context. From Sunday school to confirmation classes and then to youth fellowship the continuity in my theological education nurtured my formation.

Today, I give high importance to the Sunday school ministry in the church that I serve, inspired by my own early formational experience. In my opinion, Sunday school ministry and confirmation classes are equally important in contributing to a person’s understanding of Christianity and Lutheran



Adrian Lopez attending a graduation event with fellow seminarians at the Seminari Theoloji Malaysia in Seremban, Malaysia, in October 2022. Photo: Private

teachings: these are the seeds sown in anticipation of a future harvest.

The basic foundations from Sunday school and confirmation class, along with other youth ministries, should be interconnected and filled with biblical teachings to avoid a vacuum which leaves room for unhealthy conduct. The teen years are a critical time when adolescents explore their surroundings and engage with curiosity to understand how people and things around them operate. With guidance from the church, early foundations can be further strengthened during the vulnerable teen years to help point our youth in the correct direction.

Growing through Ministry

Another formative ministerial experience was my time in the junior work ministry program. This initiative was led by ELCM and held on Saturdays. At weekly junior work gatherings, we sang Christian worship songs, taught basic camping and life skills, read Bible devotions, and had lots of fun and laughter with games and food.

Besides meeting weekly, we also organized a yearly junior work camp at which all ELCM Lutheran Congregations' junior work teams met for fellowship. I still reminisce about my time as a youth there—sitting in our favorite spot at the Lutheran Center in Port Dickson with an awesome view of the Port Dickson beach, eagerly watching the sea until it was time for a swim.

Unlike the ministries mentioned earlier, junior work ministry was conducted in the church compound for children from the church and surrounding neighborhood including nonbelievers. Many of the children came from middle and lower-class backgrounds and were deprived of basic needs due to lack of family income, so their prospects of continued education were bleak. Without outside support and basic resources, it was easy to see how these children might end up socially and economically marginalized.

With assistance from the church, we provided free school tuition for these children and made sure they did not drop out of school. We often visited the families which gave us the chance to check in with parents and offer assistance when needed. The children especially enjoyed our visits and the activities we did together, and so we were able to plant the gospel seed. This experience nurtured my care and love for the poor and the need to serve them.

After this early formation, I stayed involved with my church through ministry while working as a building manager. On 22 July 2018, I was commissioned as the pastoral assistant in my church. With the guidance of my pastor Rev. Caleb Santhosam, I learned to prepare and deliver sermons in English and Tamil and

learned to sing the liturgy. I was given the opportunity to preach every last Sunday of the month, which was a youth Sunday. Rev. Santhosam encouraged me and taught me to take on leadership roles in the church, giving me the opportunity to lead the men's fellowship and be part of the local council (a church administrative group).

I also had the opportunity to lead the church cell group, a small group which meets regularly to discuss topical biblical issues. As I taught cell group participants and guided them with lessons from topics related to Christian living, I grew to better understand the church community. I learned about group members' backgrounds and the challenges they braved in weathering life's storm. These leadership experiences in ministry enabled me to journey with congregants in their moral struggles and relationship challenges and teach them faith and hope in God. The knowledge and experience gained from these ministries contributed to my understanding of theological education in STM. The merging of my experiences and the education that I am receiving in STM empowers me significantly and edifies my faith in God.

God-Given Leaders

Throughout my theological education including Sunday school, junior work, and youth fellowship, my teachers and leaders journeyed with me in maturing in the word of God. They encouraged and guided me through the foundational teachings of theology and Lutheranism with unfailing patience, a virtue that I learned to inculcate in my very own pedagogical processes of teaching and preaching. The commitment and dedication

shown by the leaders in these ministries became a source of inspiration for me: they never grew tired of educating and guiding the children and youth, which I believe is due to the love of Christ.

At STM, pedagogy was enriched by minute attention to scriptures and exceptional leadership and pastoral skills which I hope to carry into my church context. Unlike my siloed experiences with other church ministries, the pedagogical structure at STM offers a holistic church ministry which deepens my knowledge and skills. The non-coercive leadership shown by the faculty and the positive group discussions enabled me to explore ecumenical exposure.

Pastoral groups (PG) in STM facilitate meaningful fellowship amongst seminary students. Seminarians are assigned to groups headed by a lecturer, often a pastor, who facilitates conversations about our studies and ministerial challenges that we face. We gather every Wednesday morning, sometimes over a special breakfast, to worship, pray, and discuss our experiences in ministry and education. The love and care we have for each other provides space for us to pour out our emotions and receive support and comfort from peers.

On weekends seminary students complete field education requirements at a church ministering together with the church pastor. Participating in Sunday ministry in addition to weekday studies is overwhelming and exhausting at times, but experiencing God's love and care through working together with others has been an invaluable experience: we are fortunate to receive hands-on practice addressing the ministerial needs that we will face in the near future.

Bishop Lawrence and other pastors guided me throughout my ministerial work in the church. I was engaged in house visits, providing medical and financial aid to the poor, as well as starting an outreach center. The preaching and teaching by the pastors and bishop served as a guide, imputing doctrinal understanding complemented by our academics. The lecturers in STM taught me relentlessly and encouraged me to pursue further and concentrate on thesis writing. Their passion for establishing solid theological foundations in seminarians like me has only made me more eager to serve society as a servant of Christ.

Nurturing Diakonia Ministries

In my junior work ministry, we moved according to the guidance of the church, completely participative in our service to the needy. During this time, I was very focused on doing my part as a Christian performing my diaconal duties. These service exposures shaped my views and deepened my concerns for the poor and neglected.

As I began my studies in STM, my view and awareness grew further as I embraced the wider need in the community and recognized the social and economic disparity chasm. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been particularly harsh, its effects on incomes and livelihoods felt in the church congregation that I serve, not to mention the loved ones lost. Caring for congregants and meeting their needs has now become of utmost importance just as back in the time of junior work: beyond mere Christian duty, it is necessary to ensure that society returns to full function after the pandemic and that the lives and livelihoods of our community are secured.

There is a handicapped man who lingers outside our local church. Having been denied a decent home by his family members, he now clings to the status of “homeless man.” Despite several attempts by our church to secure a home for him, he is determined to be on his own at the walkway. The foundation of service ministry from my days in junior work and exposure from STM helped to humanize this man: through talking with him, I learned that he once had a family but when he lost both his legs to diabetes his home life fell apart. He endures much pain and suffering, emotionally and physically. I assisted the man by meeting his medical needs and though he is not a Christian, he sits at the church entrance as a passive participant.

Society can treat such people quite harshly at times. For example, families in the locality who do not possess valid identification cards (as required by the government) are excluded from education and job opportunities at large. Many families outside of the “believers” circle come to church leaders requesting prayer for their health, jobs, and other needs. It was here that I understood that theology and sociology are intertwined and saw the need for engaging these communities in the hope of Christ through fellowship in the church communion.

The pedagogical guidance and knowledge obtained throughout my journey in STM have informed my approach to ministering to the congregation and meeting their needs as they weather the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Engaging in the harsh realities of society serves as a constant reminder of how valuable it is for these societies to embrace Jesus.

Building the Church for the Community through Love, Humility and Integrity

Theological education is the foundation needed to serve and contribute as a theologian. I am privileged to receive guidance in my education from my bishop and support from my lecturers who encourage critical thinking and creativity in the subjects taught. This has broadened my perspective and with the experiences and knowledge I now possess, I am able to more actively engage in my studies and the community.

Through my journey in STM, I realized that values shape a person's identity. One of the key values in my life is the royal law, "love your neighbor as yourself," (Mk 12:31). Love is important in Christian life as it shapes our view of ourselves and others and enables us to have compassion for suffering.

Theological education must be formative and transformative: formative because it must inculcate biblical values in a person's life, and transformative as it changes society through us as we live out those values in daily life. It is hard to meaningfully engage with society without genuine love for those who cry out. Being a Lutheran in a pluralistic society taught me the importance of an identity reinforced by values from the Bible: love should extend beyond all racial barriers, social hierarchies, and political stands.

Another value I have learned to embrace through my education is humility. My fellow students in STM are much younger than me and seeing their learning agility and adaptability made me aware of my own shortcomings. Entering full-time academia after 20 years in the secular workforce was definitely trying. The first few months were particularly challenging,

even more so because I no longer received my monthly wages. My family and I subsist on a student's allowance from the church. However, I realize how God is molding me. The situation humbled me enough to understand the plight of the community that I am supposed to serve. It changed my view of the circumstances surrounding me and made me realize that God is my ultimate provider.

A third value that played a crucial role in my theological journey is integrity. Being honest and truthful is fundamental in Christian life. As I serve the community, I am being a witness of Christ. It means those I am serving in the community are observing me. There should not be a hidden agenda when it comes to lending a helping hand to those in need. As mentioned earlier, being in a pluralistic society involves people from various religions and races. Hence, it is crucial for us to maintain integrity in every circumstance.

Empowered to Serve Christ

The lectures and positive environment in STM empowered me to express my views, which was truly encouraging and made me feel responsible for my growth and maturity in my studies. Through exploring views and different perspectives from various theologies—both West and Asian—and encountering students from different denominations who freely express views without being judged or sidelined, my theological and social perspectives held since childhood expanded. The empowerment of the supportive, constructive, and accessible learning environment and pedagogies at STM have allowed me to fine-tune these perspectives for my ministry's benefit.

My theological and ministerial formation did not happen quickly but started from my days in Sunday school where the gospel seed was planted and nurtured continuously over the years, continuing even now. At STM, these experiences enabled me to learn and serve better. I am now serving in the church as a pastoral assistant, where I am faced with

challenges and opportunities as we recuperate from the blows of COVID-19. I see that people's need for God has not changed. The church and the community need to be taught about God's love and the hope and grace that accompanies it. I believe this theological education in STM will shape me to be a theologian and a pastor, Christlike in order to serve.



Braving the unknown

By Tristan Dieter Krüger

Growing up my world was small: I lived in a homogenous, German-speaking community in Rustenburg, South Africa, that kept me safe but also isolated me from the rich diversity of the region. I belonged to the Kroondal congregation, a tight-knit community dear to my heart which focused more on their own heritage and culture and less on the diverse

cultures and communities around them. Traditions and communal activities made the homogenous congregation a thriving one and laid the foundations for my passion for communal living. People were fascinating to me, although I learned that they are no angels and are often lonely and seeking love.



I attended our congregational primary school up to seventh grade and felt right at home with my classmates from our rather traditional German Lutheran congregation. High school was different: I had to adapt to a radically different environment at Lebone II – College of the Royal Bafokeng. I no longer had the comfort of speaking in my mother tongue and had to rely on my rough English to make friends with English and Setswana speakers.

Eventually, I adjusted to the significant changes and this high school became a fantastic place of learning for me: I interacted with people from diverse Southern African cultures and religious backgrounds and learned how to participate in dialogue with them about our difficult past of racism and oppression. We had deep and meaningful discussions in our history classes which prepared me for hard discussions I would have later at university. There, I would not be afraid to voice my opinion, particularly when I knew that I could learn much from the other. I began reflecting more on life and faith, which shifted my mind toward an exciting future that God might be calling me into—a world that was bigger than I had previously imagined.

Taking the Leap of Faith

My theological journey began in May 2018 when I decided to discuss my calling with the pastor of my home congregation. For the past two years I had been contemplating going into ministry as it seemed God was calling me. I shared personal experiences as well as interactions with wise people who knew me well with my pastor. He asked me several important questions and explained what I could expect from theological studies

and ministerial work. I confidently stated that I was prepared to go through the process of five years of studies, first and second church examinations and approximately two years as vicar in Germany.

The university experience was new and exciting in the beginning. I travelled far from home to Stellenbosch University and met my mentor, Pastor Felix Meylahn of the Lutheran congregation in Stellenbosch. I was not sure what role Pastor Meylahn would play in my theological journey. Eventually, I learned that he was responsible for our spiritual wellbeing, development and teaching.

As the theological faculty was predominantly Reformed, Pastor Meylahn was also responsible for teaching me and the other theology students of Lutheran churches in South Africa the fundamental aspects of Lutheran theology to prepare us for our first church examination at the end of our five years of study. It was difficult to have regular meetings or classes with him as we were very busy with our normal university studies while he was busy pastoring the Stellenbosch Lutheran congregation. The lectures at the Stellenbosch Theology Faculty were certainly of high quality, nevertheless, I learned more in those comparatively few sessions with Pastor Meylahn than in most of my lectures

Reforming a Mature Faith

Pastor Felix gave us insights that put what we learned at the faculty in a radically new light. We learned what distinguished us from and united us with other denominations involved at the faculty, which helped emphasize the essential aspects of our church's theology. These aspects guided me in my studies

and my diverse experiences with people of different cultures, religions and economic backgrounds.

There were times when I overlooked the value of Lutheran theology while learning at a Reformed theology faculty. Now in my fourth year, the significance of my studies has begun to sink in. Through readings of the Augsburg Confessions, Luther's Small Catechism, the Heidelberg Disputation and Klaus Nürnberger's *Luther's Message for Today*, I learned valuable lessons that apply to my professional and personal life. Nürnberger's book especially resonated, as he considers the Lutheran perspective within the South African context. Nürnberger's emphasis on God's unfailing love in all that he does for humanity even in recognizing our flaws eased my mind about God's relationship with me. Freed by my faith in God's love I am empowered to move forward in life with hope and courage. God indeed became a gracious God for me.

At the faculty, we learned about the reign of the Lord, judgement and justice, beautiful creation, and Christology and salvation. A crucial aspect of Lutheran theology for me was the emphasis on grace. When we felt that heavy burdens lay on our shoulders, the proclamation by Pastor Meylahn that "God gives us the free gift of grace," offered great peace. Based on personal experience, I can claim with certainty that the mentor pastor makes a significant difference. Perhaps he was particularly significant in my journey because I needed to hear the Lutheran message in tandem with my academic studies. The emphasis on the grace of God had a beautiful impact on my doubtful, skeptical and sinful mind.

Faith as Wrestling

I came to the Theology Faculty of Stellenbosch thinking that I would meet people who were nonbelievers and that my faith would be challenged. My pastor had told me that there would be difficult times and he was right. I certainly wrestled with God, at times even questioning my calling and my relationship with God. But the lecturers at the faculty were not non believing or attempting to throw me off my faith as I had been told by friends who went to charismatic churches. The staff at the faculty, from the janitors to the dean, were genuinely trying to guide us in faith, although they all had their different views on what that guidance meant.

Some lecturers made controversial statements to prompt fascinating debates while others offered sensitivity that could give us a break from the heaviness of contemplating weightier ideas. Of course, there were some more heated encounters with fellow students and lecturers about, for example, queer theology. The faculty places a strong emphasis on social justice, which I fully support but which also made it feel as though differing perspectives were not always tolerated. For example, in discussions of capitalism or enlightenment I sometimes withheld my opinion for fear of being ostracized.

Some lecturers were more open for debate than others. These lectures were often the most challenging because I felt compelled to make logical, convincing arguments. Nevertheless, these were often the most enjoyable as I could attempt to find the truth freely while keeping in mind my own context and biases.

Tristan Dieter Kruger and fellow students during high school graduation. Photo: Amanda Goosen



In these lectures, I learned to be intellectually honest by arguing not solely to win, but also to learn. Dr Pieter Nagel especially encouraged us to discuss critically as well as humbly. He listened well and showed appreciation for every comment, offering critiques or leading the discussion further to maintain an energetic interaction between him and us. This had a profound impact on me and my friend and fellow student, Hans-Christoph Lange. We began having discussions where we listened deeply and tried to find the truth together instead of debating as though we knew everything (although that type of debate was enjoyable as well). The humble discussions were more fruitful than the heated debates. I applied this lesson to discussions with my family, where I began listening more instead of preaching to them.

Righteous Love

Through experiences such as those mentioned above, my interactions with other people improved. I was told by my home congregation members that my public speaking and my attitude toward others changed: I was no longer closed off in my discussions with others, but open and caring while remaining confident in what I said. I grew in awareness of the complexity of themes such as tradition, liturgy, the image of God and racism, amongst others. This has allowed me to care for others by listening to their issues without judgement and asking good questions rather than trying to give answers. Life is more complex than just having the right answers. Some issues cannot be solved easily, but listening can help us grow in connection and understanding with those who are suffering.

As a result, I also related to God differently. I became more patient with myself as I realized that some wounds take time to heal. My faith does not need to be perfect because it will never be, but I am grateful to be able to face my issues with God through speaking with others, playing music, hearing the word in sermons, participating in meaningful liturgies and reading the Bible. I no longer feel the need to defend my righteousness before God because I now see that the only righteousness I have was gifted to me by God. I can be honest with God instead of attempting to hide myself, and so I learned to love God and myself more. In the classical Lutheran way, I claim: God's righteousness is my righteousness.

Sharing the Message of Light

As I discovered this wonderful, loving side of God I became more eager to witness to others. I knew, however, of the great responsibility and difficulty of preaching to others and was still slightly anxious about it in my second and third years of study. It was a radical shift from my first year when I thought I was completely ready to shine a light to other people. I was not ready; I had much to learn.

Now in my fourth year, I know that it is not a simple task to shine a light for other people, especially if you need to reach them in dark places. Preaching is not as simple as reading the Bible and relaying the text. I have the responsibility of translating the concepts and messages of the ancient text in a way that comforts, encourages, challenges and humbles listeners. Of course, there is also simplicity in much of what we do and say, but I learned that a sermon is more than just a Sunday message. It is a life-giving event that people need, often desperately.

Non-Coercive Learning Spaces

In my theological journey, I have been made aware of the function of authority in the church. Pastors are often seen as persons of authority, as they are often the first ones we seek for spiritual guidance. This can become a temptation – to become preoccupied with your status as a pastor and with power over others. However, as I experienced, in my church the pastors are easy to approach and they use their authority for the benefit of others.

The pastor who came to my home congregation, for example, helped me understand my dreams, subconscious thoughts, fears and doubts. He did not seem preoccupied with his authority in my church and did not use his position for any other purpose than to help me and others by listening and guiding us. When I shared that I was fearful my father would respond negatively to my decision to enter ministry in the church, my pastor listened patiently and responded to my fears with compassion. I did not fear judgment from the pastor, as he clearly was not trying to maintain his authority but gave the impression that he was listening with open ears.

As for my father, he was quite flabbergasted when I shared my decision but responded positively. He did not express any judgment and has actively supported me throughout my studies, listening to all my sermons and devotions, giving me constructive criticism and affirmations. In fact, my father became more involved in my faith journey: inspired by what I do, he became an active leader in my home congregation. For this, I am grateful.

My mentor, Pastor Meylahn, also guided me with reassurance and hope. In my first two years of study, he taught us valuable lessons, listened openly, and validated my distress as I dealt with personal issues. The first time we met him, he jokingly said he was part of the ground staff of the Lord, assuring us that he wanted to be with us in humility and equality. He jokingly referred to himself as a self-described anarchist; thus, we could expect that he did not hold authority for the sake of having authority. His role as pastor was primarily a marker of the function he needed to fulfil in our lives, not of the authority he had. As a result, we could be honest and open with him while maintaining a sense of equality.

In lectures and modules at the university, lecturers had rather different approaches. Some led the lectures as discussions while others performed and presented more, but they all understood their role and it felt like they lectured for the sake of teaching students. I struggle to think of a time when a lecturer spoke down on students, although free dialogue did not take place with every lecturer: students knew that some lecturers would mark them down if they had opinions that strongly opposed that of the lecturer. Most lecturers granted us the opportunity to voice our opinions, however.

Dr Pieter Nagel, mentioned above, created a space of free learning as he performed his role as lecturer with the clear purpose of teaching us how to think by having open dialogue with us. There were several different opinions in the class, and as long as they were argued well, he would merit them. Dr Nagel was clearly more knowledgeable than

us students and thus deserving of his position of authority, yet we were all equal in the discussions. He paid close attention to our arguments instead of regarding us as students who had no authority.

Acting with Love: Context and Compassion

Pastor Meylahn was well aware of the diversity at Stellenbosch University. At one point, a German (white) student and a Xhosa (black) student had a conflict. The pastor rightly pointed out that cultural differences between the two was part of the issue: the German student's focused pragmatism came across as unfriendly to the Xhosa student, who felt disrespected by the German student's singular focus on their work. Pastor Meylahn recognized that in the Xhosa community, people always greet and first talk about one another's friends and families, while in the German community people try to maximize efficiency by only discussing the task at hand. Pastor Meylahn keeps factors such as these in mind when he teaches us about being pastors. He reminds us constantly that some people need to be approached differently, depending on age, culture and tradition.

Lecturers at Stellenbosch University were significant proponents of plurality in religion and culture and, in my view, approached the gift (and challenges) of diversity well. Prof. Dion Forster, for example, intentionally encouraged women to voice their opinion as historically their voices have been undermined. By heeding the power imbalance between different genders, he ensured that no one felt unheard and created a learning space of relative freedom and equality.

In most modules, reflections on context were included. We were reminded to think of the poor circumstances in which many Christians in South Africa find themselves. Lecturers also reminded us of the power imbalance between races caused by apartheid. I would claim that all the lecturers had a keen awareness of cultural, socioeconomic and historical factors.

The people who taught me all showed love and compassion. In Luke 10:25-37, the good Samaritan quickly becomes aware of the beaten man. Similarly, the pastors and lecturers have shown this kind of compassion. At times, their abundance of compassion seemed to lead to intolerance of views that lacked compassion. However, they always tried to make the unheard heard. They showed how our contexts are important and most lecturers were open to our arguments as long as we reasoned well and did not discriminate against anyone. They greeted the ground staff humbly as most of them were trying to spread a transformative message that was built on the crucial values of love and awareness. I, the Other and God: Freed by Grace

Loving others is not always easy. I was treated poorly by some people that I met at university and loving them in spite of their unkind actions was a constant struggle. Loving myself was also difficult at times when I thought my sins were too great for God to love me. Fortunately, Pastor Meylahn constantly reminded us of the profound grace of God – a gift from God to us that could make us new. Through engaging with the concept of

the grace of God I became enthused by God's unfathomable love. God's grace was indeed more powerful than my sin and I needed to remember this every day. Of course, grace should never be taken for granted and sometimes I did, unfortunately. Nevertheless, in dealing with the concept of grace, I learned to accept myself as I knew that God accepted the unacceptable unconditionally¹.

Due to this discovery of the incredible depth of God's love, I took each day on with a daring faith instead of persistent self-judgment. I dared to *be*, that is to be alive, in spite of my anxieties about my own sin and my future. Because of grace I began engaging other cultures and concepts freely. I was not limited to a certain pious understanding of faith but knew that I could venture further. The unknown is frightening, yet by the grace of God I may have the courage to be.² Through engagement with Soren Kierkegaard regarding anxiety and faith in God, Paul Tillich regarding God's acceptance of the unacceptable, Klaus Nürnberger regarding Christ's salvific work for us and Martin Luther regarding the grace of God, I feel "geborgen" (safe) in God's hands.

As mentioned above, the lecturers were well aware of cultural, gender and racial power dynamics and were keen to teach us about the sensitivity with which one should deal with these topics. I had learned already in high school that difficult engagements with other cultures can bear great fruit. It made me aware that other cultures are so rich and that human beings are special, especially because they are diverse yet not so different at the same time. We all yearn for attention and love. We all need

1 Klaus Nürnberger, *Martin Luther's for Us Today: South African Perspectives* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2005), 106.

2 Paul Tillich, *Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 164.

to know that there is something greater that we can strive for and look to.

I engaged with people of different ethnic backgrounds at university which affirmed my opinion that engaging respectfully with others about any topic can teach you the most. Lectures are valuable but the truly meaningful experiences were the ones where I could really get to know the other, their denomination, their culture, their attitude and their life. Through engagement with them and the concepts that I mentioned above, I was empowered to encounter the other with openness and a sense that human beings are valuable, regardless of their culture, gender, or race. They are valuable children of God.

Hope for the Future

As I am almost at the end of my Bachelor of theological studies, I can describe myself well. I am Tristan, an open-minded yet

stubborn learner who grew up in a German South African household. I have a deep appreciation for community and know that a meaningful, well-expressed tradition is incredibly valuable. The Lutheran liturgy is not simply there; it is there with aliveness, which I am a part of through my living relationship with God. My responsibility as a theologian and future minister of my church cannot be taken lightly, but the grace of God thankfully makes it lighter.

God has a relationship with me, a sinner who is redeemed. I should always be learning in my life, and I must never forget that I must be humble, caring and intellectually responsible toward others as I witness to the love of God that was revealed through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This beautiful message is what I have learned from my theological studies thus far, and propels me forward along my journey.



Called to renounce oppression in the house of God

By Rev. Kagiso Harry Morudu

It was 6 a.m. and a few drops of rain drizzled on the broken window of my bedroom, wind buffeting my colorful curtain through a hole in the broken window. “Is it that day?” I asked myself silently. My thoughts were interrupted by

a loud knock on my door: “Tsoga monna, kante ha o tsamaye le mogotsi wa gago kerekeng?” (Wake up lad, aren’t you going with your friend to church?).



My heart resisted the call, but suddenly remembered that it was one of those days which were vibrant: formal clothes, worship service, fellowshiping with church mates, Sunday “several colors,” (a special Sunday dish with many colorful vegetables), and a full English lunch. My sister prepared breakfast for everyone to eat before going to church, and after eating I stood ready waiting for my friend at the gate. A few seconds later, my friend’s blue Toyota Cressida approached. Without hesitation, I jumped to the rear seat and we drove to the church. While parking the car inside the churchyard, the church bell rang inviting all as far as five kilometers away.

As we entered the church and I noticed that men and women sat separated by gender, men at the right-hand side of the aisle and women on the left. So, although congregants were together praying and singing, they did not interact until the worship service ended.

This type of division is a common practice in many churches and made me wonder about Christian love: how do we embody Christian love in daily practice and interaction? The practice of gender segregation emphasizes the otherness of women in the church, which has historically been dominated by men. In my church today, men still hold most church leadership positions. To my mind, this contradicts the values of unity and equality which are fundamental to Christian love.

This contradiction raised many questions for me about the church and its functions in society, especially in relation to gender. Domestic violence is a common reality in South Africa, as many bodies of women and children experience unmentionable pain and

trauma. To my shock, I soon discovered that the church was not beyond these problems. Women faced gender-based violence (GBV) and it was not a safe space for survivors.

Despite the church’s mission to proclaim the gospel and work for healing and justice in the world, the church continues to sustain walls of mutual suspicion, bitterness built over centuries of prejudices, misunderstandings, and the failure to be truly Christian toward each other. My interest in church matters increased in the face of this discrepancy and the candle of pastoring was born, which continues burning and beaming to this day.

Reclaiming Toxic Texts

In 2012, I began my bachelor’s degree in theology at the Lutheran Theological Institute (LTI) in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Leaving home was harder than expected since I had to separate from my family and friends, yet at the same time I was filled with joy and excitement: I knew that I might be confronted with different beliefs and values which would push me to reexamine my faith with a more critical eye.

The acceptance of joining the studies did not come easy as some people felt that I was too young to become a minister of Word and Sacrament. Nevertheless, I completed my degree in 2015 and continued with my honors degree at the University of Kwazulu-Natal Pietermaritzburg Campus. Both these educational institutions created safe spaces for learners to thrive along our academic journeys.

Through the learning process of actively reflecting on and critically reviewing past ideas and understandings, many of us experienced shifts in our worldviews. For me, a major shift occurred when I learned about how potentially



Rev. Kagiso Harry Morudu (middle) at the May 2023 LWF Africa Pre-Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya. Photo: LWF/Albin Hillert

dangerous the abuse of Scripture can be to a society. Sadly, in South Africa the Bible has been used to perpetuate racism, patriarchy, classism, and ageism, and has played a significant role in the marginalization of women in church and society as old as biblical history itself.

A poignant example is how the Bible was used to justify Apartheid in South Africa. Another painful example is the use of biblical text to oppress women, justified with a reading of the creation story that sees Eve as a secondary and unimportant gender because she was made from Adam's rib. Such an interpretation alienates women from their humanness, reducing them to the "second sex." We see this played out today in the church context when a woman who has just had her period is barred from communion with others for fear of making others unclean.

In my journey I have encountered people who argue that Jesus chose 12 men as his disciples, forgetting that in the early

Jesus movement women held leadership positions and were the first missionaries who preached the risen Christ. This was a radical transformation from ancient Jewish culture which viewed women as liars and deceivers unfit to proclaim the gospel. This could be another reason why when Mary Magdalene proclaimed to the disciples that Christ was alive, they would not believe (Mk 15:11).

The systemic exclusion of females and youth even within the church community is a disadvantage to our society and represents misuse of church authority. The church should be an enabler of youth and women's emancipation from prejudice and a community that ensures that biblical texts are used correctly. Through higher education I learned to look to the Bible not only for liberating and empowering texts which can offer spiritual nourishment, but to also consider more challenging and potentially harmful texts with the aim of finding new and liberating meaning.

As theological students we should not dismiss texts which seem oppressive to women and children but rather critically examine those texts for evidence of women's historical victimization and, more importantly, their strengths in coping with oppression. Despite that the Bible was written during patriarchal times by men from their perspective, I believe that within it we can nevertheless discover truths about the role of women in the church.

Flipping the Script: Celebrating the Gifts of Humanity

I was very excited to start serving God and God's flock. My ministry began in the Central Diocese where I served for five years. During this time, I was troubled to see how even

in the church community women were marginalized, their presence and potential often ignored despite constituting most of the church membership. When it came to leadership positions, women were relegated to the background. I was further troubled to see that men of the church never engaged in these issues. Instead, their suggestion was that women must take charge and turn around the situation for themselves.

This suggestion seemed shortsighted and problematic on many levels. As God's people, we are all one body sharing the gifts that God has given, not for our individual benefit but for the benefit of God's whole church today. Joel 2 speaks of the Holy Spirit gifting men and women, old and young. The whole community—every member of the body, not a selected individual or group—is the “minister” of the church. This is the crux and essence of the Lutheran principle of the priesthood of all believers.

The appropriate and fair distribution of gifts is not a new challenge for the church, but an age-old struggle as recorded in 1 Corinthians 13. The church of Corinth did not lack gifts, but we are told they were challenged with the coordination and direction of the use of these gifts in church. Because all our spiritual gifts are given by God, no gift should be considered superior to others.

The disciples once asked Jesus who was the greatest among them, to which he replied: “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mt 20:26).”

Jesus' response should be a central reference point for Christians defining what leadership is all about: Jesus advocated for servanthood. According to Jesus, ministry is about service to others and not about superiority and subjectivity.

So, the church need not reflect the attitude of the disciples, but rather must be transformed by the response of Jesus. This transformation cannot be the work of women only, but men must also partner with them so that this can be realized. We need each other to be fully human and no one's humanness should be denied.

Men and Youth as Agents of Change: Empowering Others for a Better World

My worldview changes the more I learn. In a way, this helps me grasp new concepts and ideas. During COVID-19, I coordinated a project on Lutheran youth identities in partnership with the LWF. This project was meant to give young people a safe platform to explore and express what it means to be young, Lutheran, and African today. Among issues discussed were GBV and youth and women leadership. During these discussions, young people expressed how GBV happens not only in homes but is also commonplace in institutions including even the church. Worse, there are no policies or processes for reporting abuse or protecting survivors.

While working on this project on Lutheran youth identities, the state President Cyril Ramaphosa declared GBV a second pandemic. Despite South Africa's constitutional guarantee of gender equality, domestic abuse and violence increased under the COVID-19 lockdown which trapped victims and abusers

together under one roof. Over 21,000 calls reporting domestic violence were received by the state helpline between April – May alone, as reported by the South African government.¹ GBV continues to spiral, with perpetrators (usually men and boys) protected while survivor stigma persists.

In terms of women and youth leadership, students expressed confidence in women and young people as capable leaders who might bring a new and much-needed perspective to the church. The consensus was that the church would benefit from being more youth-friendly and creating spaces where both women and young people feel free to exercise their gifts as capable leaders.

My theological formation has shaped my ministry of advocating for the rights of women and youth in the church and society: I believe the church is responsible for empowering men to alternative masculinities that are life-giving (Jn 10:10) and ensure respect and care for women and children. In 2022 I was blessed to be awarded an LWF scholarship to study masculinities during economic hardship to understand how men construct their identities during difficult times and how their inability to provide affects them and their families. Traditionally in my culture, men are expected to be successful in life and become respectable heads of families. But as mentioned, GBV is widespread in South Africa, and it is on the rise. As such, men who do not confine themselves to hegemonic masculinity are commonly regarded as dangerous by women, children, and even other men. How do those that are

unemployed or low-income reassert their power? Are attempts to reassert their power linked to, among others, violence, high crime rate, and substance abuse in men?

The church has an opportunity to engage with the men and boys who perpetuate these behaviors for their own benefit and more broadly the benefit of society. Recognizing this opportunity, I am writing my master's dissertation on how men faced with economic challenges reassert their power.

Deliver Us from Oppressive Power Structures

My observations about gender roles in my church compelled me to understand if this is what God wanted for life—if God intended these power dynamics which now so strictly dictate life for an oppressed portion of the population.

I now understand and hope to show others that power structures exist in the church of God because churches themselves are managed by human beings, who are sinful by nature: in no way can the church on earth be perfect, but encouraged by the love of Christ we must continue to strive for a church that is loving and equitable.

Power is experienced in many aspects of society, from family life to politics. Since childhood I encountered various structural forms of power, including the patriarchal system, which ordered actors in relation to one another. Patriarchy is a system that makes men dominant and enables the oppression and exploitation of women. It runs deep in the fabric of society even today, informing power

¹ IOL Independent Online <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/saps-received-87-000-gender-based-violence-calls-during-first-week-of-lockdown-cele-46024648>.



Rev. Kagiso Harry Morudu shares a remark as young people and women from Africa gather at the May 2023 LWF regional Pre-Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya. Photo: LWF/Albin Hillert

relations between women and men, girls and boys. Even within faith spaces it is the main stumbling block that prevents women from being fully equal to men.

Another predominant power structure I encountered while pursuing my theological studies was reverse ageism. My age was used as a barrier by some religious leaders who believed that I was too young, inexperienced, and immature to become a church pastor. This is common in my culture, where older individuals are consistently given preferential treatment and decision-making roles over equally or more qualified younger individuals based on their age. Yet the Bible tells us many stories of the power of youth: Josiah became king at eight years old (2 Kings 22:1), Jeremiah was called at 17 to minister to Judah (Jer 1: 4-8), and God also called upon Samuel and David as young teenagers.

My experience with lectures at seminary and university introduced me to different power dynamics that did not forcibly dominate or subvert. Instead, the teachers adopted liberationism as a pedagogy intended to liberate the learner through education. This means that their approach to teaching was not curtailed around them as authoritarian leaders or dictators of knowledge. Instead, they recognized the value of student perspectives and encouraged student autonomy in acquiring knowledge. Students were given opportunities to critically reflect and scrutinize learning materials presented, and we then applied new knowledge to daily life. The knowledge shared through these institutions was not only about passing exams but also about skills that can be applied in any learning, in academia, in ministry, and in life in general.

The Path to Progress

I am grateful for the opportunity from my church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa and the LWF. Through their support and theological education, I was empowered to use my personal and social resources to assume an active role in taking charge of my own life and goals. I know that I do not have total control of my life, but education has taught me that I can control how I react to things outside my control. In my theological journey, therefore, I was empowered to make a change in people's lives. As a young inspiring theologian, I am becoming more curious about these issues and as a pastoral care theologian our ministry starts and ends with action. This action is not a mindless one but rather a reflexive one. The study process, my master's work, and advocacy in my church attest to how I have been empowered.

Drawing from my experience as a young person who was considered inexperienced and immature to lead God's flock, I became more curious about the experiences of other young people in the church. I saw that it was important to engage youth members in my church on issues pertaining to them. The study process was an approach that allowed more young people to voice their aspirations on their Lutheran identity. Spaces of dialogue for women are also created whereby patriarchal ideologies were dismantled, although this was a process and not a one-day success.

For example, the study process on Lutheran youth identities was a key driver for advocacy for social and political change in the church and society. The study process ultimately created a safe platform for young people to talk about their realities and most importantly to find solutions. As ELCSA Youth league, we are excited to be hosting our first annual Youth Gender Summit that will unpack gender and sexuality, including the spectrum pertaining to LGBTIQ+ people and how they intersect with religion. Moreover, we will analyze the church's current gender context.

We live in the tension between oppression and freedom, seen in our history and our daily lives. The church is located in the midst of it all among the poor and rich, employed and unemployed, male and female members. Desmond Tutu reflects on the concept of incarnation and says, "If we take incarnation seriously we must be concerned about where people live, how they live...as friends we do so not because of our politics but because of our religion. Blessed be our God for being such a God".²

The church has the opportunity to make a call of social justice not only by empowering poor and marginalized communities, but also by engaging the rich, powerful, and employed, so that they can see the need of sharing bread with the poor and power with the powerless.

2 Desmond Tutu, *The Rainbow People of God: The Making of a Peaceful Revolution*. (New York: The Crown Publishing Group, 1992), 117.

Renewed vision

By Hans-Christoph Thapelo Lange

The reflections shared by LWF scholarship holders intend to shed light on the journeys of theology students and more specifically, how they experience their formation. It is not possible to summarize these diverse accounts into a monolithic generalization of the ‘what-it-is-like’ to undergo theological education. However, many common and notable themes surfaced in the narratives of scholarship recipients which inform the development of contemporary Lutheran identities. Prompted by the question of how theology students experience their formation and guided by a framework of radical pedagogical analysis, the preceding chapters offer unique insight into the journey of an LWF scholarship holder.

The focus of this analysis extends beyond information students gained through studies, mainly considering how students were shaped holistically—how they changed and grew as people through their theological experiences. Below is a comparative analysis of the scholarship holders' experiences, broken down by key features of the pedagogical analysis: hierarchies and authorities, awareness, engagement, values, and empowerment. What the scholarship holders experienced with regard to each of these features is outlined in what follows.

Discussing the Experience of Theological Studies

Hierarchies and Authorities

For the LWF scholarship holders, ecclesial and educational hierarchies and authorities played a prominent role in guiding theological formation. In this context, common authority figures referenced by scholarship holders included pastors, bishops, teachers, and/or professors, as well as authorities outside of religious and educational institutions such as government officials and even parents.

Karl Michael experienced equal and relationally focused authorities throughout his theological journey. His pastor encouraged him to pursue studies in theology, where professors sought to teach “from below” by considering the lived experience of the students rather than exercising authority “from above.” Much of his experience was a “lived” theology of liberation, which itself is critical of oppression and coercive authority. Michael’s direct ecclesial authorities were receptive enough for him to voice his concerns about the church’s inclusiveness. And in response to the image of a judgmental God who is not always loving or understanding of circumstances, Michael learned to love the God who accompanies and embraces the complexity of human life.

Kidist B. Gameda was gently guided by her supervisors at Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies. For her formation it was important that the supervisors did not only provide support for her research work but showed respect in a way that radiated the love of God. Through her journey Gameda learnt that one of the most valued qualities of

a leader is the ability to create a space where others feel safe, free, hopeful, and encouraged. William C. Jayaraj encountered various “gurus” along his path who have guided him tirelessly throughout his theological studies. Their life, teaching, and preaching were an example for his way forward.

Rutendo I. Gora similarly received guidance and support from her mentor which kept her “afloat” through her academic challenges and spiritual turbulence. She also noted the competence of the lecturers, as well as the “healthy” authority of the staff over students.

This was echoed by Tristan D. Krüger, who noted a feeling of equality with the lecturers. Adrian Lopez also reported similar experiences of being guided by his leaders to maturity which he traced from his Sunday School days into his theological studies.

Kagiso H. Morudu, on the other hand, recognized inequities in his church authority on the basis of gender and age. As a young person Morudu himself experienced discrimination in ministry because of his age. Moreover, he became critical of the misuse of scripture as a directive authority for oppressing women.

This is consistent with the experiences of Mimii B. Rubindamayugi and Witness Issa Maratu, who both encountered barriers in their theological education because they are women. Issa was driven to study further after being confronted with a coercive use of church authority.

So, not all encounters with authorities were positive. A recurring theme which many scholarship holders noted was the unjust distribution of authority across gender lines

and age even within the church. It is worth noting that these examples are not exhaustive: particularly in cases where relevant authorities are potential future employers/superiors, scholarship holders may have refrained from detailing negative experiences.

But for many, authority figures served as a source of intellectual and spiritual nourishment and elicited interpersonal growth. In accounts where authorities were competent, equal, relational, and engaged “from below,” scholarship holders tended to reflect more positively on the role of authority in their theological journey.

Awareness

All scholarship holders grew in their awareness of their own context. For many, travel and ministry opportunities linked to the church or educational institutions exposed scholarship holders to various kinds of diversity. This strengthened their sense of global connectedness and their awareness of societal needs and human nature.

Michael noted his awareness of belonging to a Protestant church in a Catholic context and reflects on the different God-images transmitted by church congregations he encountered. The exposure to an alternative way of life gained at a youth congress informed his calling to study theology, where he learned about the connectedness of theology to lived experience and how it is consequently part of a historical process: theology must continuously be made sense of within our current contexts.

Morudu similarly noted how theology must continuously re-examine biblical texts, especially those that seem problematic. In his case, this was born of the awareness of gender and youth discrimination.

Gemeda realized the importance of critical study: the Christian life is an examined life. Moreover, through the various encounters in her journey, she discovered and experienced the global connectedness of God's church: community dispels confusion. Consequently, she dreams of a world where "race, culture and color have no power of division."

Jayaraj's studies illuminated the great diversity of his context. He was challenged to grow in understanding of the many cultural and religious alternatives in his region to his own Lutheran background. Moreover, he grew in awareness of the pain and suffering of his surroundings which sensitized his theological vision: this reality of pain should be the starting point of his church's work.

Lopez, too, learned to see his cultural context with new eyes, noting specifically the painful impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic devastation. His awareness grew through service and ministry to those in need, which at the same time strengthened his sense of mission.

Gora experienced many cultural diversities as her journey led her from her village in Zimbabwe to her arrival at Stellenbosch. This enriched her life in ways previously unimagined while also posing challenges in terms of culture and belonging within the church. In the face of the uncertainties about identity and vocation, Gora noted that full understanding and total knowledge may not be possible, but doubt facilitates faith, and through faith we are saved.

Krüger had a similar experience growing up in a German-South African setting and gradually being introduced to and challenged by the diversity of his country. For Krüger, this

awareness strengthened his sense of humanity—he grew in appreciation for the individual differences we possess while recognizing shared traits of the human species.

Through her studies, Rubindamayugi grew in awareness of her context to understand the unequitable "expectations of the patriarchal system toward women." Her own theological journey showed her the importance of context in ministry and daily life. She gained new eyes to see where and how people are excluded and marginalized and to recognize where the church might be a lifeline for these people in need.

Similarly, Issa gained a greater awareness of her cultural context as she increasingly questioned the givenness of its practices. This awareness spurred her forward in her studies and ministry, where she advocates for reanalyzing the value of potentially exclusionary practices for the sake of all.

Overall then, scholarship holders grew in awareness of their current contexts, allowing them to better understand themselves and concurrently recognize and respond to the needs of the community. New people and new realities made them more sensitive to human diversity and pain. Old ways of looking at context were replaced with new eyes which saw, for example, entrenched inequalities, alternative ways of being and vibrant diversity.

Moreover, all scholarship holders realized that theology is a lived process: it must be made sense of in our current contexts, and it does not occur in a vacuum but is lived out in daily life. Texts should be reread and life should be examined and lived according to a vision of a diverse, equitable world.

Engagement

Engagement in the learning process was most fruitful when teachers and professors were part of the learning process and not above it (as noted in the authority and hierarchy section). Many scholarship holders recounted learning from teachers who were just as interested to see how their teaching was relevant for their students' contexts and learning alongside students who were interested in the material and context of the teachers. In cases where teachers encouraged students to grapple with hard questions and acknowledged that these questions oftentimes had no easy answers, their humility leveled the playing field which encouraged students in their academic pursuits.

Michael shared examples of teachers who took part in the learning process rather than being above it. They encouraged students to explore theology in a way that was relevant for their contexts. Here, freedom was taken by the students to explore theology in aspects of daily life.

Gemeda's time in theology school offered her freedom as well – the freedom to discuss, read, and debate with her classmates in informal gatherings. Her MTh thesis is an example of the free pursuit of curiosity as well as a sharpening of mind and spirit.

Issa also embarked on further studies following the crucial questions that she had, supported by encouragement from professors. She engaged with biblical text in its original form through a course on Old Testament Hebrew, which she then used to conduct a comprehensive exegesis of how Old Testament dealt with sexual violence.

Similarly, Gora pursued her studies spurred forward by curiosity and questions about her faith. Hers was a voluntary learning experience, discovering questions that she had not known before. This was encouraged by her mentor as well as the lecturers, whose engagement she credits with strengthening her own voice and self-confidence.

Krüger found the academic engagement with the lecturers a satisfying endeavor, which pushed him to revise his arguments and perspective.

Jayaraj gained an open-minded perspective of his “multireligious pluralistic” context, leading him to creatively engage the implications of this on his Christian faith. Notable is how the scarcity of resources hampered his exploration.

In following his dream of pastoring in church, Morudu also underwent a shift in worldview after critical reflection. He saw an opportunity for men to change the upward trend of gender-based violence in South Africa. This sparked his engagement in advocating for constructive ways to empowering men who have faced obstacles.

Lopez, on the other hand, embarked on his studies to be equipped for service in the diakonia and ministry of the church. Crediting his own deep commitment to the church to his strong early ministry involvement, Lopez now works to engage today's youth in his own church ministry.

For Rubindamayugi, the way she engaged in her ministry changed after learning about the *mission Dei*. She views herself as a participant in God's mission through her service to his communion and those in need.

Curiosity and the freedom to pursue it are pivotal to engagement and growth within a subject, alongside continuing discussions outside of the classroom setting with peers. This is especially true in instances where pressing questions from daily life motivated the learning process. Unfortunately, the freedom to explore can be restricted by lack of resources, social and cultural pressures, and hierarchical structures.

Values

Throughout their respective theological journeys all scholarship holders learned to value human interdependence: theology is best studied in community. Another recurring value was that of equality of humans before God. Most scholarship holders also realized the importance of embodying values and loving beyond social and cultural norms and barriers. How the church can fall short of this can be gleaned from Morudu's experience.

Michael learned that theology demanded he let go of the vices of "selfishness, individualism and competitive spirit." He came to see the importance of human interdependence which fostered in him humility, respect, empathy, and compassion.

Gemeda honed the value of persistent hard work, benefitting from the resilience that this can offer during challenging times. Moreover, she too saw the importance of human interdependence: how she was treated by her supervisors radiated "the love of God" when other aspects of her life seemed not to.

Krüger also related to the challenge of embodying positive values: a self-proclaimed "sinner," Krüger authentically described the challenge of growing to love himself and

others, especially when they are very different. For Krüger, an understanding of grace played a key role in his transformation and is now a value he actively embodies in daily life.

Rubindamayugi learnt the value of education in her own life, but also learnt to appreciate the role it can play in uplifting neglected communities. She now works toward increasing access to quality education for boys and girls across Tanzania.

Issa emphatically grew to support the value of equality, influenced especially after learning that both men and women are in the image of God (*imago dei*) and therefore equal before God's eyes.

Values give our lives direction. They deepen its meaning and our relationships with others. Scholarship holders attested to the changing nature of some values, and how important it is that values, identity, and actions align – for individuals and institutions alike.

Empowerment

Perhaps the most impactful way scholarship holders were empowered in their formation was through engaging with struggle. Without exception, each scholarship holder described how a particular struggle helped them grow. Growth through struggle often included a process of unlearning and relearning at a deeper level, and was usually accompanied by an increase in action for a more just society.

Morudu felt himself empowered by discovering the imperative of faith to adopt radical change in working toward a better world.

Michael has taken charge of his learning environment by developing a healthy amount of skepticism toward the "traditional academic

intelligentsia.” This seems to have followed Faculdade EST’s openness to permitting – even encouraging – students to struggle, as it is honest struggle that leads to growth.

Gora’s journey highlighted that empowerment often occurs in the face of uncertainty. She was empowered to take control of her studies when she realized that she would not be successful without working to discover her identity and potential. She points to doubt as a facilitator of faith in her journey. Embracing faith-seeking understanding empowers her to act in love even in the face of uncertainty.

Similarly, Gameda experienced growth through struggle. She learnt to “embrace [her] questions, doubts and disappointments as the Lord embraces them.”

Rubindamayugi relates how her studies have empowered her to be confident: she arrived as a shy student but “learned to stand up and speak for [her]self” and others.

Jayaraj went through a process of unlearning preconceptions and took educational opportunities to discover and embody new values as part of an ongoing empowerment process. For him this process is in service of a more just society.

Lopez enjoyed continual growth since his days in Sunday School which empowered him to trust in himself and answer his call to ministry. He now places high priority on youth ministry initiatives in his church.

Krüger noted how a respectful encounter with others empowers dialogue, leading to more fruitful learning and increased participation.

Issa also advocates for an inclusive dialogue, raising her “voice for the victims of sexual violence.” Her crisis with church disciplines have led her to substantial growth

and self-understanding through her search for justice.

For some, empowerment occurred through a lifetime of church involvement. Others experienced empowerment more succinctly through hardships they faced and made peace with. Many scholarship holders noted how students are empowered by maximizing the participants in a dialogue through respectful encounters, observing that the inclusion of more voices in a dialogue is also a matter of speaking up for equality.

So what does theology do to its students?

So how do theology students experience their formation? Key takeaways from the narratives of the scholarship holders on how they experience their theological formation are as follows:

- Positive experiences with leaders and teachers were marked by competence, equality, relationality, engagement “from below,” openness, receptiveness for concern, leading by example, and a willingness to guide/ facilitate the learning experiences.
- A different way of looking at the world is granted through theological studies, giving light to what is, but also to what is *not yet* – a world of more love, peace, and justice.
- Deep engagement with theology occurred where the teacher is still learning, where curiosity and freedom to explore prevail, and where discussion continues outside of the classroom.
- Theology is learnt in community by incarnating values.

- The experience of personal growth by theological students is linked to struggle. Therefore, to permit or even encourage struggle is to risk change and growth.

A Way Forward

The value in this study is twofold: this process presented an opportunity for scholarship holders to reflect on and share their theological journey, which holds value in itself. Such a reflective approach to doing theology becomes a reality especially when individual theologians - and we collectively as churches and a global communion- are at the crossroads of life. It is at the crossroads that we are face to face with concrete realities of both joy and sadness, success and struggles, pain and suffering as well as learning and

hope. The theological reflection that arises from these experiences has depth which is truly transformative.

Furthermore, the analysis provided above addresses the common factors that influence how the students experienced their formation. These areas of influence present an opportunity for the LWF communion. It is a call for member churches and theological institutions to study further the findings addressed in this publication and to revisit qualitative models, means and methods of theological education and formation. If it is a case that theological education is the backbone of the church, then paying attention to the ways in which people change during their studies is crucial to the church's ability to move.

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