

WISDOM INCORPORATED

A THEOLOGY OF INSTITUTIONS ACCORDING TO PETER SENGE AND THE APOSTLE PAUL

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Precis: This essay will explore a theological understanding of institutions as earthen vessels shaped to bear either the treasure of the Gospel or the human arts to make the world a more trustworthy place. This interpretation is “theological” in that it testifies to the work of God in, with, and under human institutions.

I. Setting the Question

Robert Greenleaf first published his essay on “The Need for a Theology of Institutions” thirty years ago in the hope that “with the guidance of that theology, the churches may become a vital new society-building influence.”¹ His essay expressed a critique that the churches were failing to make a significant social impact and offered a prescription for a vital social role for the churches. He saw the doctrines of Karl Marx that shaped the twentieth-century world as critiques of failed social understandings of the theologians of his day. Greenleaf’s inspiring idea of institutions permeated his proposal:

“An institution at its best is not just a housekeeping arrangement for an assortment of functions. It has the potential for synergy, for the whole to be greater than the sum of its parts, and for individuals to perform to a higher ethical standard than if they were operating wholly on their own. An institution’s justification for being is the realization of these potentials.”

Greenleaf’s vision of institutions fit with his greater legacy of “Servant-Leadership.” It would be intriguing to explore the impact of Greenleaf’s Quaker tradition in his work, perhaps in comparison to Elton Trueblood’s The Idea of a College, which is an earlier Quaker’s quest for “a theology of institutions.” But Greenleaf was not simply pursuing “the history of ideas.” His work was a protest against teutonic “Dogmengeschichte.” His inquiry was practical, focused on what makes institutions effective in their service to persons and communities.

His critique of “the theology of persons” anticipated the next quarter century of theology when “the social construction of reality” touched every academic discipline² and the decline of the churches of European Christendom could no longer be ignored. Even theological traditions that are traditionally centered in personal understandings of salvation are increasingly receptive to the

¹ Robert K. Greenleaf, “The Need for a Theology of Institutions,” written in 1979 and republished in Seeker and Servant: Reflections on Religious Leadership. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996), p. 191-198.

² Fundamental contributions to this work were made in the fields of the sociology of knowledge (see the seminal work of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality. Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1967) and social anthropology (see Clifford Geertz, Local Knowledge)

declaration of the Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools: “Theological Education is Leadership Education.”³

To be sure, many congregations still want only a “shepherd who will take care of us,” and a minimum number of seminaries are focused on preparing leaders for the kind of impact in society Greenleaf envisioned. But the therapeutic paradigm of previous decades has largely been displaced in schools where awareness has grown that the chaplaincies of white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism are not a vital future for the church. The definitions of leadership are as varied as the spectrum of Christian traditions, but probably most accredited theological schools now claim to do the work of educating leaders for changing times surrounding communities of faith, including congregations.

In these same decades when the character of theological education has become more attentive to leadership as social, Richard Broholm and David Specht continued to enrich Greenleaf’s quest. They have developed the institution of The Center for Seeing Things Whole, now under-girded by the publication of Toward a Theology of Institutions.⁴ Three significant aspects of their contribution call for attention in this context:

- 1) Their premises for “a practical theology of institutions” invite rich exploration from every theological tradition. A “theological tradition” is more than a denominational label because vital traditions must continue to demonstrate the difference they make. In describing the role of traditions in ethics, Alisdair MacIntyre observed that “a living tradition is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition.” “When vital,” added MacIntyre, traditions “embody continuities of conflict.”⁵ Traditions contend for what matters to communities.

Specht and Broholm’s “four premises” challenge every theological tradition to identify its distinct wisdoms about: a) the relationships between “God’s order” and the “*powers and principalities*,” b) what it means to confess that “God loves institutions;” c) how to regard institutions as “living systems;” and d) what it means to declare that “Institutions are called and gifted, they are fallen, and they are capable of being redeemed.”⁶

- 2) Their theological clarity is commendable as they define their “Theological Framework for Seeing Things Whole in Organizational Life.” Their use of Walter Wink’s biblical scholarship establishes a strong warrant for the conviction that “Humanity is not possible apart from its social institutions.”⁷ Their use of Gabriel Fackre’s interpretation of John Calvin’s *Threefold Office of Christ* infuses their analysis of organizational life with theological vitality, drawing deeply from Reformed theology: The Identity

³ See Daniel O. Aleshire, Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

⁴ David Specht with Richard Broholm, Toward a Theology of Institutions: The Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, Booklet 10 (Indianapolis, 2003).

⁵ After Virtue (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 222.

⁶ Specht and Broholm, pp. 14-15.

⁷ Specht and Broholm, p. 14, citing Walter Wink Engaging the Powers (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 66.

(Priestly) Dimension; the Purpose (Prophetic) Dimension; and The Stewardship (Royal) Dimension.⁸

- 3) Their attention to congregations is a refreshing effort to move them from their focus on “their interior life and the needs of the congregation as institution” to “becoming centers of support and empowerment for their lay members in their role as institutional servant-leaders.”⁹ Their call to convert seminaries toward preparing leaders to equip God’s people’s work in the world is prophetic.

In his recent book On Thinking Institutionally,¹⁰ Hugh Hecló has enriched the discussion with philosophical depth, political intelligence, and poetic beauty. His historical analysis is worthy of careful study in itself. He identifies the prevailing view of “the liberated, morally concerned but nonjudgmental individual” as a cultural norm that helps explain “our widespread distrust of institutions.”¹¹ His critique is even more severe than Greenleaf’s. In this context, the following extended quotation must suffice for providing a glimpse of the theoretical power and practical courage of Hecló’s vision:

“To be institutionally minded is to enter and participate in a world of larger, self-transcendent meanings. On a grand scale, the self-transcendent reference may involve some profound cultural ideal, or sense of historic purpose, or religious understanding of what God expects of human beings. Or the self-transcendent meaning may be something in the middle distance, such as a professional calling, family business, artistic tradition, or community identity.

Whatever the case, because institutions are an inheritance of valued purpose and moral obligation, they constitute socially ordered groundings for human life. Such grounding in a normative field implicates the lives of individuals and collectives in a lived-out social reality. That is a far different thing from pursuit of the socially disembodied ideal. Those pursuing the undefined, institutionally ungrounded ideal seek to bring down to earth the abstractions of social justice, nationhood, holy truth, and the like. It is the lure of utopianism”¹²

Hecló’s book came to my attention after I announced the title for this paper: “Wisdom Incorporated: A Theology of Institutions According to Peter Senge and the Apostle Paul.” My hope continues to be to honor the theological visions of Greenleaf and Specht-Broholm with a complementary tradition of understanding and action. Two aspects of Hecló’s work help my effort: 1) his critique of idealism; and 2) his holy regard for the mediating value of institutions, bearing the transcendent without presuming to possess it.

II. Institutional Realism and Human Hope

An old joke about marriage communicates a common cynicism toward institutions. “I’m not opposed to the institution of marriage,” insists the comic, “but who wants to live in an

⁸ Specht and Broholm, pp. 17-19.

⁹ Specht and Broholm, pp. 29-30.

¹⁰ Hugh Hecló, On Thinking Institutionally (Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm, 2008).

¹¹ Hecló, p. 35.

¹² Hecló, p. 107.

institution?” Institutions, organizations, and bureaucracies are regularly lumped together as confining personal freedoms and inhibiting creativity, but more is at stake in “a theology of institutions” than a lament about expressive individualism. The argument for the value of institutions also needs to be distinguished from bureaucratic compliance and organizational loyalty. “Institutional thinking has to do with living committed to the ends for which the organization occurs rather than to an organization as such.”¹³

As Specht-Broholm have recognized, ancient cultures had institutions for maintaining the identity (priesthood), purpose (prophecy), and stewardship (governance) of their communities. A recent letter from Cambridge University Press reminded its authors that the University was observing its 800th anniversary and the 425th anniversary of the Press. These organizations have sustained the stature of their institutional vocation for centuries.

The Industrial Revolution prompted a proliferation of organizations, many with rich and lively institutional character, in the profit, not-for-profit, and governmental sectors. For a time, the ascent of Enlightenment science appeared to displace all other ways of knowing, provoking assertions of infallibility of one kind or another. The 19th century poet, Matthew Arnold, lamenting the “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of “the Sea of Faith,” envisioned a human future, not of enlightenment, but “a darkling plain, Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, Where ignorant armies clash by night.”¹⁴

Arnold could not have anticipated the amazing growth or the carnage of the 20th century. After viewing the first atomic detonation, J. Robert Oppenheimer declared, “In some sort of crude sense, which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose.” Science itself is an institution. Now in the midst of the technologies of terrorism, communities of conviction are challenged in the digital age to sustain their deep trust even as communication systems, global marketing, and the entertainment industry threaten to relativize enduring commitments in a world of many cultures and religions.¹⁵

Institutions will demonstrate their worth not in resistance to change, but by bearing a hope that transcends simplistic economic, social, genetic explanations of human realities.

III. Down to Earth Wisdom

Without quarreling with other Christian traditions, the identity, purpose, and stewardship of Lutheran institutions is modest and earthy. Garrison Keillor has linked the “militant modesty” of the tradition to its northern European origins, and he may be right that the cold weather of Scandinavia and Minnesota is a deterrent to grandiosity. But the prairie populism of middle America includes many non-Lutherans, and down at the theological roots of the Lutheran heritage, there is more going on than ethnicity.

¹³ Hecló, p. 90.

¹⁴ “Dover Beach.”

¹⁵ Thomas Friedman appears to wear the public mantle of the bard of the new tomorrow. See especially, [The Olive Tree and the Lexus](#), [The World is Flat](#), and [Flat, Crowded and Hot](#).

Martin Luther, the Augustinian scripture scholar who founded the tradition hardly suffered from a lack of ego strength. He railed against the triumphalism of the papacy, then ridiculed the “enthusiasts” who “swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers and all,” then critiqued Calvin’s theocratic rule in Geneva. “Militant?” Yes! “Modest?” Hardly. Still, Luther’s polemics were not merely personal. Without pretending to be a scholar of the Reformation, let me identify a few central convictions, then move inside their scriptural foundations, and begin to explore their consequence for institutions.

Luther was seeking to reform the witness and practice of the church according to his scriptural understanding. In a superb study of Luther’s hermeneutics, James Samuel Preus captured the decisive metaphor in his title: From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther.¹⁶ During the Renaissance of learning, the advent of the printing press, and the discovery of the new world, Luther subverted the idealistic and spiritualizing interpretations of medieval theology.

Luther wrestled with the theological integrity of Genesis years before his famous rediscovery in Paul’s Letter to the Romans of the liberating power of divine justification. Christian Platonism had reduced the Old Testament to foreshadowing Christ, but the plain meaning of the narrative resisted the spiritualizing of the philosophers. God created and loves a real world, earthy, living, and broken. The Gnostics were right to be offended by Genesis. The Bible story is not about escapes to distant heavens. Human history is an arena where God’s reign is enacted and God’s will is defied,¹⁷ and God’s justification in Christ is a divine strategy to justify the ungodly, reconcile the world, and restore creation.

To read the scriptures as allegories shadowing heavenly realities missed, twisted, or attempted to control God’s promise for the world. Both the church’s authority and the philosopher’s “apprehension” of the truth prove their interpretative worth in serving, never in supplanting or controlling, God’s scriptural commands and promises. The watchword was, “Let God be God.” Instead of spiritual ascent aided by infused grace and mediated through sacramental ritual, the word and wisdom of God (*logos*) became incarnate in Christ Jesus.¹⁸ No longer did scripture testify to “a future that was dark and unknown, save to an elite few.”¹⁹ Through the continuing presence of the Spirit of the Triune God, that wisdom continues incarnate among us, active in word and sacrament, accomplishing on earth what God promises, creating faith, justifying the ungodly, and liberating mere mortals to act. The Gospel is pure gift.

The Bible is the rough-hewn cradle bearing Christ and his benefits to the world. Its power is protected neither by reserving it for expert interpretation nor by grand claims about empirically proving it to be true. The risk of putting the scriptures into people’s hands is merely an extension of the risk of divine embodiment. Furthermore, just as the New Testament was written in vernacular (*koine*) Greek, the *lingua franca* of the first century, printing the Bible, translating it

¹⁶ (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969).

¹⁷ See Abraham Heschel, The Prophets (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962).

¹⁸ It is no accident that the Gospel According to John was Luther’s favorite. Entering into the first century Hellenistic-Jewish attraction to and avoidance of gnosticizing Platonism, the prologue to the Fourth Gospel insists radically that “The word (*logos*) became flesh (*sarx*) and lived among us (John 1:14).

¹⁹ Preus, pp. 267-269.

into every language, and digitizing its “every jot and tittle” are acts of faith of successive generations. The two-edged sword of God’s word delivers promise and command to every generation, and faith comes by hearing.

With apologies for the fact that the previous two paragraphs sound like a catechism, “let the reader understand” that Luther’s rhetorical skill is communicated forcefully in the small and large catechism he wrote for popular dissemination. The memorization of the ten commandments, the Lord’s prayer, and the Apostles’ Creed began in homes before children could read, and parents were charged to follow each memorized piece with the question, “What does this mean?” The “explanations” were exercises in Gospel theology, moving the focus beyond mere compliance to the rules toward trust in God’s promise. The healthiest form of Lutheran modesty is embedded in gratitude for undeserved mercy.

Luther responded affirmatively to the medieval question of whether it is possible for the finite, created world to bear or convey that which comes from God’s infinite realm. The Latin phrase for this confidence is: *finitum capax infiniti*. The tradition (apart from rigid confessionalist orthodoxy) refrained from metaphysical claims. In debates about Christ’s “real” or “true” presence in the sacraments, for example, Luther rejected arguments for either “transubstantiation” or “symbolic presence,” as if we know *how* God does all this. Faith in Jesus’ word “This is my body” means trusting *that* Christ will keep his promise “in, with, and under” the physical elements (bread, wine, and water).

Confessing the truth that is embodied in Jesus Christ, therefore, again drew Luther deeply into the witness of John’s Gospel: e.g. “the Word became flesh ... full of grace and truth” (1:14); “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17); “and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (8:32 *et passim*). This understanding of truth is itself a profound testimony to God’s engagement in the world. And freedom is viewed relationally as a calling bestowed by Christ for the sake of the world. Even human institutions called “corporations” may derive holy identity from this incarnate truth.²⁰

A thorough exploration of a Lutheran theology of institutions will require a more extensive and expert discussion than is possible here of the theological concept of “Two Kingdoms:”

“The concept of two kingdoms and twofold governance is one of the great attempts in human history to provide a theological understanding for the totality of human experience. ... the traditions related to this theme have revolved around a single question: What is the relationship between the gifts of the Spirit that are bestowed upon the Christian community on the one hand, and what is called ‘reason’ on the other – both in terms of our personal life and our institutional existence?”²¹

²⁰ “Incarnation” is literally, “in the flesh.” “Embodiment” is “in the body.” And “Incorporation” at least derives the “in the corpus” idea from the historic expectation of an organization or enterprise becoming a legal person with a life of its own.

²¹ For a concise introduction, see Ulrich Duchrow, Two Kingdoms – The Use and Misuse of a Lutheran Theological Concept (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation Department of Studies, 1977), p. 28.

Fraught with political history, notably in its perversion during National Socialism in Germany, the concept, however, constitutes a protest against theological justifications for abuses of power. This critical analysis is deeply informed by the biblical conviction of “the eschatological struggle of God’s power against the forces of evil (i.e. the devil) which seek to destroy His creation.”²² In the midst of this struggle of contending forces, human beings and their institutions are continually required to justify the use of their considerable powers.²³ The risks of abuse rise when those in power (rulers, CEO’s, parents) arrogate divine authority for their actions. Naïve confidence in human reason or progress, especially when reinforced by the “doctrinaire optimism” of a market economy, may enslave individuals, communities, and their institutions in ideologies and idolatries.

God’s final purpose is the restoration of the creation and the human community in righteousness. Jesus Christ is God’s way of being in the world and ultimately ruling the world in mercy and justice. In the “present time,”²⁴ God in Christ reconciles people at enmity with God, entrusting them with callings²⁵ to exercise their powers to benefit the neighbor and the world. No longer deluded by idealistic schemes or perfectionist claims, Christians build institutions to serve God’s mercy and justice in the Spirit of Christ Jesus.

IV. The Mission of God and Apostolic Vocations

This essay may be a peculiar exercise in historical regression. Is there logic in beginning with contemporary discussions of institutions, moving back through the Industrial revolution and scientific Enlightenment, into the 16th century Reformation, then visiting the world of the New Testament, in order finally to propose a witness to the work of God in, with, and under human institutions? Perhaps this route only makes sense to an unreconstructed New Testament scholar who knows the Bible cannot simply be mined for “a theology of institutions.” Ask a direct question, and you get a pageant.

The quest, however, is complex for a “non-religious way of gaining theological perspective together on the challenges and decisions we face.”²⁶ The argument is that our quest will be enriched by a tradition with a distinctive diagnosis of the human situation and a profound hope in God’s purposes at work in, with, and under human agency. Furthermore, the tradition under consideration, is best understood and critiqued as a sustained interpretation of the Christian scriptures. In particular, Lutheran engagement with the Apostle Paul is fundamental to its witness. The Lutheran tradition is not as deeply imbued as are the Calvinists with the Threefold Priestly, Prophetic, and Royal Offices of Christ. Still our understanding of Paul gives a

²² Duchrow, p. 33.

²³ Even the standing of the believer before God (*coram deo*) is continually that of the “justified sinner” (*simul iustus et peccator*) because the struggle is at work both within the realities of each person’s life and in the social structures. The freedom from genetic, psychological, and social determinism comes not from denying their power, but from an identity and vocation from beyond the social self (*extra nos*).

²⁴ See Luke 12:50.

²⁵ See Gustaf Wingren, Luther on Vocation. (Translated by Carl C. Rasmussen. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957).

²⁶ Specht-Broholm, p. 17.

distinctive character to how we will speak of the Identity, Purpose, and Stewardship of Organizational Life.²⁷

With respect to “The Identity Dimension of Organizational Life,” contemporary scholarship on Paul, much of it from Lutherans, has critiqued traditional Lutheran interpretations for being preoccupied with personal salvation or existential *angst*.²⁸ Paul’s letters may be best understood as “an exercise in community formation” in the context of the Hellenistic world.²⁹ Paul was, after all, writing to communities: “To all God’s beloved in Rome, called to be saints” (Rom. 1:7); “to the church of God that is in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1); “to the churches of Galatia” (Gal. 1:2); “to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons” (Phil. 1:1).

Deeply imbued with Israel’s scriptural faith, Paul identified these Jewish and Gentile (i.e. non-Jewish) communities as heirs through Christ Jesus of God’s historic promises to the chosen people. Paul defined the “church of God” as the “assembly” or “gathering” which is elect of God, then testified both to why this identity was truly theirs and how they should live together and in the world in the light of the gift. Drawing upon Stoic metaphors of citizens in the city state (*Gk: polis*) as members in the “body politic,” each with their own roles, Paul welcomed the diversity of gifts and roles in the Christian community with his affirmation of the “church” or “assembly” as “the body of Christ.”

The identity of the collective precedes that of the individual. “Now you are the body of Christ,” he testified, “and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:12). . “For as in one body, we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us” (Rom. 12:3-8).

The identity of the community also reveals its purpose. Being called, chosen, or elected by God is to be under commission for God. God’s distinctive mission of mercy constitutes the community and defines its character, beginning with the apostle: “Paul an apostle – sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead” (Gal 1:1). This is also how God empowers the community for its callings: “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters; not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” etc. (1 Cor 1:26-31). The goal of God’s mission through the apostolic community, however, is neither weak nor modest: “For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not ‘Yes and No’; but in him it is always ‘Yes.’ For in him every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes.’ For this reason it is through him that we say the ‘Amen,’ to the glory of God” (2 Cor. 1:19-20).

²⁷ Specht and Broholm, pp. 17-19

²⁸ See especially Krister Stendahl, “Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West.” Harvard Theological Review 56 (1963). Pp. 199-215.

²⁹ Troels Engberg-Pederson, “Stoicism in Philippians,” Paul in His Hellenistic Context (ed. Troels Engberg-Pederson) Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995. P. 259. See also the superb work on Paul’s social world by Wayne Meeks in The First Urban Christians (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) and The Moral World of the First Christians (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

Paul's personal modesty expressed proper confidence in God. In the Hellenistic world of traveling philosophers and religious propaganda, Paul made ironic comparisons between his vocation from God and the grandiosity of his adversaries. "I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles," he declared, "So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me" (2 Cor. 11:5, 12:9).

Paul's stewardship was also "theological" in the simple sense that it is from God. "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. We have this treasure in clay jars," Paul declared, "so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (2 Cor 4:7).

This Pauline declaration lies at the heart of this essay.

The clay jars of human institutions can bear the treasure because it is God's way. This is not a knowledge (*gnosis*) of idealistic or spiritual ascent. From God's first word ordering creation, "Let there be light" (Gen 1:3) to the gift of "the knowledge (*gnosis*) of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ," the story is that of divine condescension. Like their identity and purpose, therefore, the stewardship of human institutions is humanly modest and theologically confident. As Paul drove to the conclusion, he envisioned human agency bearing the mercy and justice of the "righteousness of God."

"So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:16-21).

V. Wisdom Incorporated: Making it Happen

The lengthy Pauline quotation above may seem to have compromised the quest for "non-religious way of gaining theological perspective together on the challenges and decisions we face."³⁰ It is cited, in fact, as a contrast to spiritualities that are often thought to be more inclusive in a world of many cultures and religions. Both Paul and Luther professed a prophetic and biblical faith that challenged the religiosities of their times. Christian "theological perspectives" are not disembodied spiritualities. At the same time, the task of translating the message into the language of the people must continue.

Joining a college faculty after eighteen years as a seminary president and thirty-five years as a theological professor, I can testify to the importance of defining "A Practical Theology Capable

³⁰ Specht and Broholm. p. 17.

of Undergirding Those Seeking to Hold Institutions In Trust.”³¹ This essay seeks to demonstrate the importance of valuing what differing theological traditions bring to the task. The traditions embody their wisdom in complex ways, and they also learn from one another and from the practical, public wisdom of institutional leadership.

Among many sources that were valuable to my years as a president and now as a friend of institutions and their leaders, Peter Senge’s The Fifth Discipline³² stands out. His wisdom about systemic thinking in organizations teaches his readers the practical importance of deep understanding. Like Hecló’s Thinking Institutionally,³³ Senge is not drawing directly from “religious” or “theological” resources, but the book is full of clues that he is conversant with the embodied wisdom of historic traditions. He calls for “A Shift of Mind” which turns “from seeing parts to seeing wholes, from seeing people as helpless reactors to seeing them as active participants in shaping their reality, from reacting to the present to creating the future”³⁴ His metaphor for this shift is the Greek word *metanoia*. He notes this word was used in the New Testament. The word is usually translated as “repentance,” but this is not merely “penance.” The Greek word *metanoia*, like the Hebrew word *shuv* before it, is better understood as the “turning, “conversion,” or “return” which is given by God with a new heart or mind (see Acts 5:31; 11:18). “Thinking outside the box” is just the beginning of a transformation of mind and heart.

Senge is writing for the corporate world. His work gains significance at a time when the current global economic crisis has revealed the dire consequences of naked greed. Even the media are calling for renewed corporate identities, purposes, and stewardship. Senge argues that enduring organizations must develop deeper capacities to learn, and their leaders must yearn to experience “The Indivisible Whole,”³⁵ lest they become mere technical or managerial operations, unable to adapt to profound changes.³⁶ His definition of “shared vision” is worth the price of the book, when read in its larger context:

“A shared vision is not an idea. It is not even an important idea such as freedom. It is, rather, a force in people’s hearts, a force of impressive power. . . . Personal visions derive their power from an individual’s deep caring for the vision. Shared visions derive their power from a common caring. In fact, we have to come to believe that one of the reasons people seek to build shared vision is their desire to be connected in an important undertaking.”³⁷

With deep respect for all the traditions that are engaged with “Seeing Things Whole” in quest of a “Theology of Institutions,” let me conclude this essay with a few glimpses of how the Lutheran tradition has practically enacted its convictions concerning a “theology of institutions” to greater or lesser effect.

³¹ Specht and Broholm, p. 9.

³² Peter M. Senge, The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of Learning Organizations (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

³³ Op. cit.

³⁴ Senge, p. 69.

³⁵ Senge, pp. 368-371.

³⁶ See also Jim Collins, Built to Last and Good to Great, and Ron Heifetz, Leadership without Easy Answers.

³⁷ Senge, p. 206.

In general, Lutherans have done a creditable job of rehearsing Martin Luther's conviction that God calls people into all walks of life and thus it is a theological mistake to regard clergy or religious leadership as a "higher" or "more holy" calling. To be sure, this conviction is regularly compromised in seminary recruitment and may be confused in the appropriate reservation of the office of the gospel for the sake of its clarity. Still, the fundamental witness to Christian freedom as an empowerment for callings of all of God's people is at least regularly taught. And the earthly, social arenas in which these vocations are exercised are consistently rehearsed: home and family; public life; occupations; and the community of faith. Furthermore, institutions and communities can embody callings as they bear the identity, purpose, and stewardship of the body of Christ in/for the world. A remarkable literature demonstrates the sustained appreciation of this conviction.³⁸

On the other hand, the work of congregations is too little about people's vocations, and the public mission of congregations has often been dissolved in mere personalism. Investigating what leadership communities of faith need to receive from seminaries, Luther Seminary learned how weakly people felt informed and supported in their work in the world. This discovery fit within the insight that seminaries needed to be more than historic Abbeys, nurturing the spiritual lives of leaders, and more than Academies, sharpening intellectual capacities, but even Apostolates, equipping the communities of faith and their members for God's mission in a world of many cultures and religions. Calling the congregations and their leaders to enact "the unfinished Reformation," the "Centered Life" initiative at Luther Seminary was inaugurated under the leadership of Jack Fortin, whose book communicates the promise of the work persuasively.³⁹

Lutherans have also done impressive work in building institutions, nationally and internationally. Lutheran World Relief, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, and the hundreds of agencies in Lutheran Services in America continue to be deeply grounded in the conviction that God has called us to serve our neighbors, particularly the vulnerable neighbors.⁴⁰ The magnitude of this work far exceeds the proportion of Lutherans in the United States, much of it done, along with Catholic Charities, without appropriate recognition by the previous U.S. presidential administration as "faith based." Many Lutheran congregations and members also have limited knowledge of the impact of this work. Lutheran modesty can, at times, impede "what needs to be done."

The Lutheran Colleges, Universities, and Seminaries are also an impressive collection of institutions, most of which are viable. The challenge of knowing what it means to be a Lutheran institution is complex, much like the goal of sustaining the Catholic identity of the University of St. Thomas. The recent Lilly grants for "the theological exploration of vocation" have helped renew the heart and soul of many Lutheran institutions in higher education. The work is not easy or without dispute, but the intentional effort to equip graduates of these institutions with a vital

³⁸ In addition to the classic study of vocation by Gustav Wingren (cited above), an exceptionally clear and brief study in the "Centered Life" Series is an excellent point of entry into the discussion: Marc Kolden, Christian's Calling in the World (St. Paul: Luther Seminary – Centered Life, 2002).

³⁹ Jack Fortin, The Centered Life (St. Paul: Luther Seminary - Centered Life, 2006).

⁴⁰ A remarkable literature interpreting this work can also be cited, beginning with the accessible work of Foster McCurley

sense of their vocations is inspiring within and beyond the institutions. To be immodest for a moment, this vocation of Augsburg College is being nurtured by its president, Paul Pribbenow, and embedded in the college through the Augsburg Center for Faith and Learning.

Lutherans need to be involved in Seeing Things Whole because the discernment of the future of institutions and their vocations is now highly dynamic and indeterminate. This essay may partially demonstrate that it is possible to make the case that the Lutheran tradition has something to bring to the ecumenical conversation about the theology of institutions. This tradition modestly embodies and boldly confesses the faith that God has come in the flesh in Jesus Christ. We have the treasure of our callings in the incorporated clay jars of our institutions. Those called to lead these institutions in times to come will need and deserve God's incarnate wisdom for the future of human life on planet earth.

“But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture – ‘I believed, and so I spoke,’ – we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, at it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.” (2 Cor 4)