

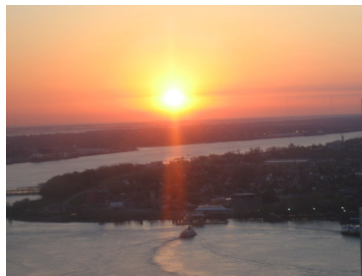


# LERNing

May 2005

A newsletter of the Lutheran Ecumenical Representatives Network

## In This Issue



The National Workshop on Christian Unity is the focus for this issue of *LERNing*. We thank theology student Benjamin

Dueholm and LERN reps Al Niebacher, and Rocky Piro for their contributions. In The July issue: ecumenical formation. *Merlyn*

## Keynote: Bishop Sklba

One of the most interesting and compelling presentations of the entire workshop was the keynote presentation by Bishop Richard Sklba in reporting on Round X of the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue in the USA. As Catholic chair of the dialogue, Bishop Sklba gave us interesting insights into the process and methodology of this dialogue in comparison with earlier dialogues.

He said that many question whether dialogue is continuing to be important and whether we may not have met an increasing lack of interest in ecumenism because of the failure of earlier dialogues to be “received” by the churches. He defended this dialogue series as of continuing significance not only for Catholics and Lutherans, but for the entire Christian community.

Indicating that there can be long periods that appear to be “dry” and unproductive in our movement toward full communion, he pointed to the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” as a breakthrough that gives us a fresh “boost” and thinks that Round X provides the possibility of another

breakthrough both in terms of methodology and content.

Recognizing that this series of dialogues has dealt with some of the most difficult issues in the past, it now addressed the most difficult issue: differences in structuring and ministries between Lutherans and Catholics. He suggested that the results from this dialogue should provide us with a new way forward.

As a keynote speaker, Bishop Sklba met the high expectations of workshop attendees both in content and style. Many workshop participants cited this presentation as the highlight of the workshop.

## Overcoming Volatile Religious Rhetoric

*By Dr. Rocky Piro, Northwest Washington*

One of the more engaging sessions at this year’s National Workshop in New Orleans, was Robert Schreiter’s presentation on Religious Rhetoric/Obstacle and Opportunity in Ecumenical Discussions. Dr. Schreiter, who has served as the Vatican II Chair in Theology at the University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands, cites gay marriage, the Terry Schiavo case, and the 2004 election as recent examples of how divisive religious rhetoric has become all too commonplace in American life. Schreiter identifies a number of both cultural and religious issues contributing to overly divisive rhetoric. Among the cultural issues are (1) the advance of globalization, which has created an ambiguous and uncertain competition that confronts the comfort of our cultures and communities, (2) a growing sense of instability based on issues of multiculturalism and security, (3) current media practices, which reduce

complexities of human existence to sharp, overly-simplified contrasts. Among the religious issues Schreiter identifies are (1) the use of “totalizing language,” and (2) the growing acceptance of apocalyptic interpretations that are used to justify extremist polemics and to legitimate violence.

Schreiter draws from both revered religious leaders and the rich heritage of American ecumenical discussions to present what he terms “the art of peacebuilding.” For example, he builds on efforts such as Cardinal Bernardin’s Catholic Common Ground Initiative that advanced listening and understanding among polarized elements in Chicago. Peacebuilding focuses on building relationships that allow the “social space” to be created for safe, trusted dialogues. Peacebuilding moves beyond polarizing language, recognizing that the world is not simply binary — not easily reduced to black-and-white. For people of faith, peacebuilding requires creativity, which Schreiter describes in terms of being open to that which is unexpected or unplanned — in the spirit of what St. Paul calls “new creation” (II Corinthians 5:17-20). Finally, peacebuilding requires a commitment to values that run deeper than issues — a commitment to healing — a commitment to community.

## Student’s View of Workshop

*Benjamin J. Dueholm, University of Chicago*

This was my first experience at a formal, national ecumenical gathering. After some acronym-based confusion, I was able to focus on the main areas of activity: the LERN plenary sessions, the morning keynote speaker and Bible study, the mid-day workshops, and the evening worship events. The plenary sessions were a great opportunity for me to meet pastors and church leaders interested in ecumenical dialogues and ministries, about which I learned a good deal. Bishop Richard Sklba, Milwaukee, called us to prayerful and sincere local ecumenism.

The two main worship services were a high point. The first, a service of the Word in which a Disciples of Christ pastor preached and the Dillard University choir provided excellent arrangements of classical and spiritual pieces. There was an impressive collection of clerical garb in the chancel at St. Louis Cathedral, but probably the most affecting moments for me came during the hymns, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ecumenical Nicene Creed, when people who are separated on Sundays spoke and sang with one voice. The following night there was a Lutheran–Episcopal Eucharist at the Episcopal Cathedral. ELCA Bishop Kevin Kanouse celebrated and retired Episcopal Bishop James Brown preached on addressing issues of sexuality without rancor or self-righteousness. The reception in the parish hall caused envy on the part of some Lutheran clergy (here anonymous) of the Episcopal policies on wine in church.



As with any conference of peers and colleagues, the most memorable and perhaps valuable time seems to be spent in informal moments and gatherings. This was particularly valuable for me—the spare time around events for conversation, the meals with new acquaintances. The event impressed upon me, more than anything else, the idea that ecumenism is a journey on which we move, not backward to an imagined time of consensus, but forward to a new reconciliation. I was grateful and deeply heartened for the opportunity to travel some tiny part of it with the ecumenical community.

*Benjamin Dueholm is the 2005 winner of the LERN-DEA sponsored student essay writing contest, Dueholm won a scholarship and a trip to the NWCU.*

## The Rapture Exposed

*By Al Neibacher, Minneapolis*

Barbara Rossing began her seminar with a taped interview she had on TV's "60 Minutes." Tim LaHaye, author of the famous Left Behind series of novels, was interviewed in the same segment. "Theological snake oil," she called the Novels. LaHaye stated that the "liberals have invented this loving wimpy Jesus."

These novels, according to Rossing are anti-ecumenical, anti-Roman Catholic, anti-Arab, anti-peace, and, contrary to what it may seem to be on the surface, anti-Semitic. God is not portrayed as loving, forgiving, and accepting, but as wrathful, vengeful, and hateful toward all people who do not accept LaHaye's view of what means to be a Christian. War, the more violent the better, is good because it will hasten the Second Coming of Jesus and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, that devout Jews long for today.

LaHaye bases his entire "theology of rapture" on two obscure Bible passages: Daniel 9 and 1 Thessalonians 4. He emphasizes the image of Jesus as a vicious lion and puts down the imagery of a lamb. As he analyzes the book of Revelation, almost chapter by chapter, he could never include the last chapter according to Rossing. Why? Because that chapter tells us what the book is all about; how it all ends—at the victorious, glorious feast that has no end.

If Revelation is referring to current events for us, it had absolutely no relevance for its original readers and no use for the readers for the last 2,000 years. In reality the last book of Bible is dealing with the new exodus of the early church, similar to the exodus of the Israelites—the new exodus to the New Jerusalem.

*Barbara Rossing is Professor of New Testament at Lutheran School of Theology and the author of The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation.*

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## Erling: Ecumenical Formation

At the National Workshop Prof. Dr. Maria Erling, Gettysburg Seminary, spoke at the Lutheran, Anglican, Roman Catholic luncheon on Wednesday about "The Seminary and Ecumenical Formation." With a presentation rich in ideas and images about the task of making our Lutheran tradition accessible and inviting, it is difficult to narrow the reporting for a short article so we will focus on two ideas: friendship and modeling our ecumenical theology through our behavior.

Those awaiting a review of seminary curricula learned that our various Lutheran seminaries do not necessarily teach courses in ecumenism. Ecumenical dialogue in which comparisons of doctrines and worship practices are done, as well as conciliar ecumenism in which denominations work together in attempts to right social injustices, are very important. But the seminary task is to provide students with a framework in preparation for daily life. Erling indicated that basic to the development of ecumenical framework is the need to develop an attitude of friendship, an attitude fundamental for students in preparation for ecumenical and interfaith encounters.

In the past our interest in confessional and denominational identity led to pointing out the differences between ones own tradition and that of others. Now there is a shift to see that the stranger or the other whom we encounter has a rich tradition from which we can only learn and understand if we are willing to listen, observe, and open ourselves to recognizing the gifts the other has to share with us.

An important part of formation is our own ability to demonstrate or model the practice of hospitality, openness, and a willingness to listen in the way we relate to persons from other traditions.