
Reimagining Theological Education through the Convergence Leadership Project

for Reimagining Theological Education, an initiative of Convergence Network, 2017

www.theoedu.org

by Brian McLaren

Summary:

The Convergence Leadership Project innovates in four key areas: 1) building multi-racial collaboration into project design and presentation, 2) training congregational cohorts (and others) by bringing clergy and lay leaders together, 3) integrating diverse online and in-person experiences on a daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual basis, and 4) learning in the context of a contextualized public theology.

Background:

The Convergence Leadership Project arose out of conversations between Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Lewis and Rev. Dr. Brian McLaren. Lewis and McLaren first got to know each other through the Auburn Senior Fellows Program. They discovered they had both devoted much of their professional lives to the emergence of vital progressive churches that address emergencies of the common good, including race, peace, environment, and economics. In 2016, as part of a sabbatical reflection process, Dr. McLaren invited Dr. Lewis to join him in an innovation in

theological education experiment called Convergence Leadership Project, in cooperation with Convergence/Center for Progressive Renewal, of which they were both board members. Dr. Lewis had launched a project of her own (in collaboration with her husband, Dr. John Janka) in this regard called the Middle Project (<https://www.middleproject.org/>). The project had goals similar to those McLaren was proposing:

The Middle Project prepares ethical leaders for a more just society. It is an institute that brings together youth, young adults and adults from many fields and faith traditions. The Middle Project unites progressive leaders who are ready for a revolutionary and prophetic way of using power and resources to act locally and think globally to heal the human family. The Middle Project takes its strength and approach from the progressive faith traditions that have played a major role in America's greatest democratic achievements: the abolition of slavery, civil rights, universal suffrage, and the anti-war movement.

Engage in Spiritual Practices

Lead with Vision for a Just Society

Negotiate Difference and Conflict

Understand the Dynamics of Change

Understand Leadership Styles and Building a Team

Exert Ethical Leadership in the Public Square

Understand Race, Culture, and the Dynamics of Power and Privilege

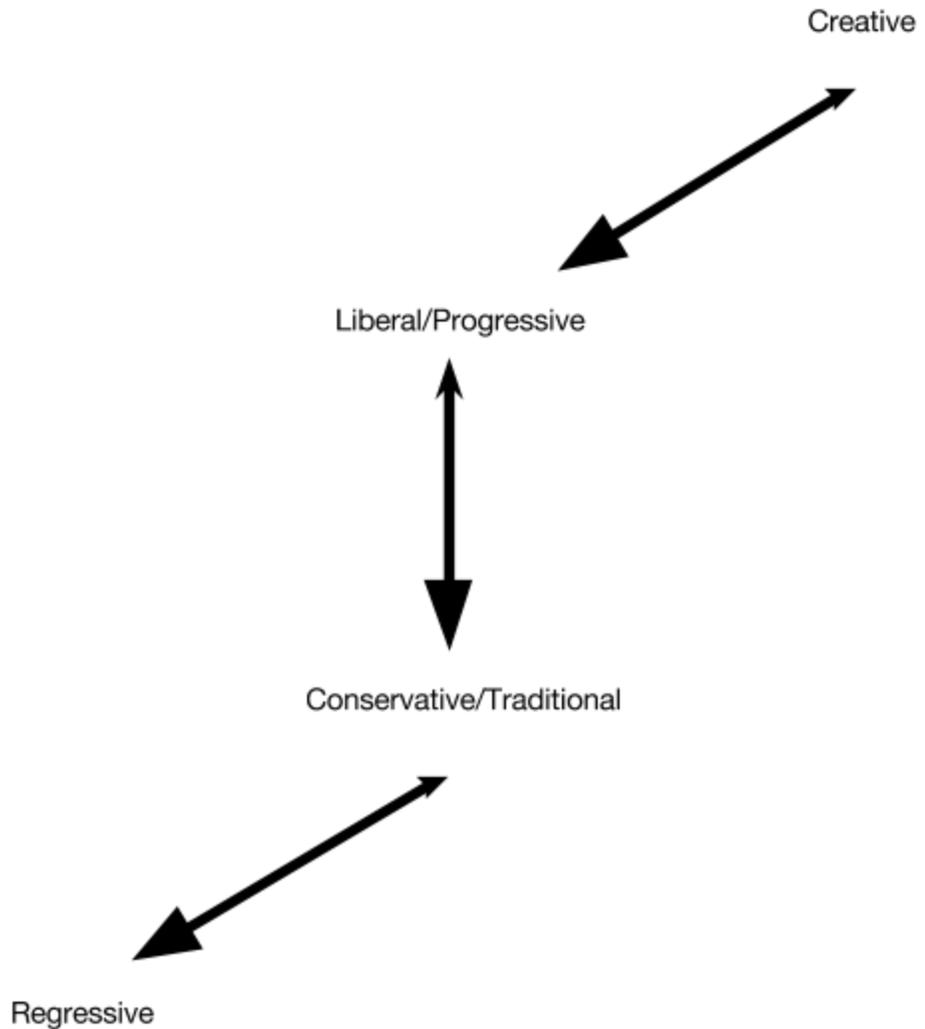
Drawing from the Middle Project and Lewis' and McLaren's experience as public speakers, consultants, and pastors, the Convergence Leadership Project took shape and launched its inaugural class in July 2017.

Problem:

Project designers agreed that there were arising the stirrings of a progressive Christian movement to join other streams in a larger multi-faith movement for justice and peace. Yet there were still too few churches that were solidly embodying the values and practices of the nascent movement. The CLP would seek to align, activate, and accelerate these congregations so they could become local instantiations of the movement, and, where possible, the CLP would seek to help new congregations form. They were guided in this process by these words from Pope Francis:

Along this path, popular movements play an essential role, not only by making demands and lodging protests, but even more basically by being creative. You are social poets, creators of work, builders of housing, producers of food, above all for people left behind by the world market... The future of humanity does not rest solely in the hands of great leaders, the great powers and the elites. It is fundamentally in the hands of peoples and in their ability to organize. It is in their hands, which can guide with humility and conviction this process of change.

This emphasis on movement-building, Lewis and McLaren knew, was significant. Most mainline Protestant denominations were obsessed with institutional survival on both congregational and denominational levels. McLaren pictured the problem in the following diagram.



Much of mainline institutional life had been preoccupied with the liberal/conservative divide. But in recent years, the conservative wing had been largely supplanted by a regressive movement, eager to roll back gains made by people of color, sexual minorities, women, etc. Meanwhile, the liberal/progressive wing had become comfortably institutional and had lost a sense of movement. A new creative (emergent) movement was challenging the liberal/progressive mainline to move from an institutional to a movement-driven ethos, suggesting that getting from “institutional here” to “movement there”

could not happen by normal incremental institutional means. Evangelical, historic Black and minority, peace churches, and others faced a similar polarization within their denominational silos.

Convergence Leadership Project would seek to add momentum to that creative movement across denominations. In this way, it would not be an advocate of conventional renewal, which tended to let congregations define renewal in terms of their own institutional metrics - attendance, income, “customer satisfaction,” etc. Instead, it would measure success by other indicators. These indicators would include attendance and income because they are necessary for sustainability, but they would focus on concrete action contributing to the “quadruple bottom line”:

People: Supporting the dignity of all people - beginning with the most vulnerable in terms of race, religion, gender, ability, wealth, citizenship, and sexual orientation.

Planet: Contributing to ecological regeneration locally, regionally, and globally.

Poverty: Addressing economic injustice and growing inequality.

Peace: Contributing to reconciliation rather than conflict across differences of race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, party, etc.

Design:

Drawing from principles of adult and online education, and guided by insights from the Carpenter-Funded Reforming Theological Education initiative, the project developed along these lines:

Daily Inspiration: To help participants maintain a sense of identity and belonging, we would provide a daily quote (usually from one of the primary instructors) delivered via an app (MightyBell) or email. Participants would be invited to do something with this daily reflection - and to tweet it, respond to it, etc., thus facilitating both personal engagement and peer learning.

Weekly Module: To help participants engage with new material, weekly modules would combine reading, video, presentation, interview, poetry, music, and other media. Each module would invite participants to respond to specific application questions in a comments section, facilitating peer learning and personal processing. Some modules would require additional interpersonal interaction in dyads, etc.

Monthly Gathering: Cohorts would gather in person (where possible) for monthly interaction, to heighten their sense of belonging, to reflect on learnings together, to enhance cohort/team development, and to plan for congregational action.

Quarterly Symposia: Lewis and McLaren would gather with participants in person in quarterly gatherings around the country. Those who could not attend in person would learn via live streaming and recordings.

Annual Retreat: Senior leaders (and a chosen colleague) would be invited to a weeklong retreat midway through the project, focusing on their unique leadership roles and building movement identity.

Pre/Mid/End-Project Assessment: The project would incorporate self-assessment and project assessment to ensure quality control, improvements, and accountability.

The Project Scope and Sequence are available in Appendix 1, and the Syllabus in Appendix 2.

Learnings to Date:

As we near the halfway point of year 1, six learnings have already become clear.

1. Application Process: Most important, we believe that future courses must intensify the application process. The application process will help us assess whether a cohort has a critical mass of participants with sufficient commitment to derive benefit from the project. Because we are assessing not just individual learners but cohorts, we plan to design an application process that requires a minimum number of committed core members, probably 6 - 10. Each of these core members will complete an online application process including a group interview conducted via videoconference. This process will ensure a) applicants have counted the cost, b) they have sufficient computer skills, and c) they understand the vision and values of the project. Applicant cohorts will receive a green/yellow/red response - you're accepted, you could be accepted if you strengthen identified areas, you should reapply in a future year.

2. Scholarships: Because we were deeply committed to racial and economic diversity and inclusion, we offered a number of free and partial scholarships to interested learners. Very few

of these learners have been active in the program. Without significant personal investment, it appears that the project doesn't elicit sufficient personal commitment. We need to find a way to include motivated learners with financial need, but we feel we are not serving participants by giving them a missed opportunity. Before proceeding, we will review literature on this subject and consult others whose experience can supplement our own.

3. Cohorts/Individuals: Because we were launching a new program and because we had a number of interested individuals who could not form a cohort, we admitted individuals as well as cohorts. Many of these individuals have been highly active and are benefitting from the program. However, our original design targeted cohorts who could promote congregational transformation and movement-building. We will need to address the tensions between individual and group participation as we move forward, perhaps creating two separate tracks with their own online space.

4. Cohort Coordinator: Our most successful cohorts have highly invested cohort coordinators who are senior ministers. The role of cohort coordinator, whether fulfilled by a senior clergy or a designee, is more important than we originally realized, and we will need to increase attention to this role, perhaps through monthly online chats and mentoring with instructors, etc. The effectiveness of monthly gatherings along with frequency of peer-to-peer learning depends largely on the leadership of a cohort coordinator, and so to add value to these gatherings, we need to increase attention to coordinator training and support.

5. Regional Hubs: To strengthen collaboration and to host in-person symposiums, we should seek to build regional hubs in future years. Some cohorts and individuals that complete year 1 may be ideally placed to be hub coordinators for future years.
6. Silos: Evangelical and Mainline silos are even more significant than we realized. The need to build a sense of cross-silo movement will require direct attention and “cross cultural” training.
7. Scheduling: The most vital churches are already and always quite busy, sometimes over-busy. We will need to help them assess their year in CLP to make sure there is margin for engagement.
8. Expansion: We believe CLP could be targeted to house churches, church planting teams, home and neighborhood groups, classes, campus ministries, youth ministries, and mission organizations along with traditional congregations.
9. Certification: To increase the value of CLP and intensify commitment, we need to strengthen the certificate offered at the end, and specify behaviors required to earn it (number of posts, replies; attendance at events, etc.)

We are beginning a mid-point program evaluation in January 2018 which will add to our learning from this prototype.

Conclusions

There is a desire for transformative learning among pastors and lay leaders in progressive churches. For innovative theological education to be truly transformative, committed and

motivated learners are essential. Another key factor in transformative theological education is the presence of skilled and committed facilitators. Increasing access while also maintaining this level of motivation and commitment is challenging. However, with greater attention to participant and leader selection, even greater connections regionally and across denominational silos can be built and used to leverage learning into action in the church and in the world.

Appendix 1: Project Scope & Sequence

Vision/Mission:

We can see ...

A more just, joyful, generous, and regenerative future ...

birthed by a dynamic and diverse multi-faith movement

with a vital Christian wing (Vision).

We will contribute to this vision by ...

Building leaders who embody “just, joyful, generous, regenerative Christianity,”

These leaders are empowered to create, align and activate churches and other faith communities in that path;

They can accelerate needed change, and

They are eager to share what they are learning. (Mission)

Values:

1. Local church emphasis, for the good of the community and world

2. Innovative/creative emphasis, learning from history and tradition

3. Authenticity emphasis: balancing inner and outer work
4. Christian emphasis: Theologically/biblically rooted, spiritually empowered, relationally connected, dedicated to multi-faith collaboration.
5. Emphasis on Critical Issues : Engaging People, Peace/Race, Poverty, Planet

Methods:

1. **Daily** meditation/interaction via email/ap
2. **Weekly** modules for personal and interpersonal learning
3. **Monthly** gathering with experiential team learning
4. **Quarterly** intensives (symposiums)
5. **Annual program** with personal growth plan
6. **Additional resources** (retreat, self-assessments, readings, checklists, etc.)

Theory of Learning:

1. Cohort-Based: We design the program for groups in which learners interact with one another in real-life contexts of work and community.

2. Multi-Format: We create online modules to help learners a) engage with content privately, b) engage with others using that content and building on it, and c) reflect on the content and interaction with the help of relevant questions.

3. Experiential: We have monthly and quarterly face-to-face experiences which combine pilgrimage with conference; we ask people to come prepared to give and share as co-creators, not just consumers.

4. Active/Contemplative: We integrate personal/spiritual growth with organizational and missional growth, emphasizing both inner and outer work.

5. Multiple Instructors: We bring together a wide variety of leaders as models for learners, diverse in race, gender, age, denomination, etc.

Obstacles:

1. Denominational, racial, economic silos
2. Individualism, loss of concern/hope for local church
3. Busy-ness, focus on survival & tyranny of trivialities
4. Fatigue, cynicism, surrender to narrative of decline

Measures:

1. Viable year-one participation
2. Fulfills objectives identified in grants to Center for Progressive Renewal/Convergence.
3. High ratings mid-year and year-end evals/Solid suggestions for improvement throughout.
4. Waiting list for Class of 2018, with regional hubs forming
5. Churches that are aligned, activated, accelerating change, collaborating through Convergence Network.
6. Instructors enthusiastic about continuing CLP because CLP was joyful, fun, and fruitful.

Appendix 2. *Monthly Syllabi*

August: Preparation

MODULES

Module 1: Welcome aboard! Story of CLP, instructors.

Module 2: Self-Assessment

Module 3: Peer Mentoring Project

Module 4: Leadership & Love

WEBINAR: Orientation and Sharing of Stories

PLUS NEW YORK SYMPOSIUM: Rising to the Occasion

TOOLS: Daily reflection, Self-Assessment, Congregational Assessment, Personal Growth Plan,
Peer Mentoring Training & Meeting 1, Speaking from the Heart Guide

September: Leadership and Teams:

MODULES

Module 5: Leadership is a Team Sport

Module 6: Stages of Work/Linking Skills

Module 7: Team Skills and Habits

Module 8: Being and Doing

WEBINAR

Goal: Help participants understand their own and others' leadership in relation to team roles and dynamics, increase interpersonal sharing. Introduce forming, storming, norming, performing.

TOOLS: MBTI, Enneagram, Stages of Work Diagram, Linking Skills, Self-Reporting Guide/Check-In, team stages of development.

October: Spiritual Leadership Competencies

MODULES

Module 9: Leading and Convening

Module 10: Theological Leadership: What is the Gospel?

Module 11: Biblical Competencies

Module 12: Competencies of a Public Theologian

WEBINAR: Leadership Competencies

Goal: Help participants understand the dynamic and contextual demands of spiritual leadership in these transitional times.

CHICAGO SYMPOSIUM (28-29) Leadership & Alignment

Goal: Instill the value of alignment, guide participants in designing and implementing a plan to align theology, liturgy, structure, schedule, etc.

TOOLS: Video Interviews

November/December: Leadership & Alignment

MODULES

Module 13: Why Theological Alignment Matters

Module 14: Alignment in Liturgy

Module 15: Alignment and Music/Singing

Module 16: Alignment in Gratitude

Module 17: More on Music/Singing

WEBINAR: Liturgical alignment

Goal: Putting symposium content into practice, preparing for in-house retreat.

TOOLS: Checklists for music, prayer, sermons, silence, schedule, etc.

December: Inner Life of the Leader

ONLINE SYMPOSIUM (Dec. 1-2) - Leadership and Empowerment (inner life)

Goal: Equip people for an in-house retreat, including introduction/practice in contemplative prayer.

MODULES

Module 18: Four Stages/2 Halves of Life

Module 19: Believing in/Becoming Miracles

TOOLS: Videos on spiritual practices, guided practice, questions for dialogue

January: Leadership as Recruitment

MODULES

Module 20: Review/Alignment in Budget and Schedule

Module 21: Rediscovering the E-Word - nones, dones, etc.

Module 22: Marketing/Branding as Missional Practices/Seeker's Journey

Module 23: Mid-Project Self-Assessment/Improving CLP

WEBINAR: Welcoming SBNR's/Planning a Dinner/Interview

Goal: Help people rediscover a new kind of evangelism, Marketing/Branding as missional practices. Introducing Mid-Course Assessment.

TOOLS: Plan for Nones/Dones Dinners/Interviews, Welcome/Inclusion Assessment, Peer Mentoring Meeting 2, Mid-Project Progress Review

PASTORS' RETREAT (Jan 22-26): Transformational Leadership (from/to)

Transforming Leadership: Our week will combine fun and relaxation with study, worship, and conversation. Each day, we'll consider one or more From/To transformations in pastoral leadership. We'll have two 2 hour sessions each day, with afternoons or evenings off, plenty of free time for rest and recreation and informal conversation. Each day, one instructor will lead a

20-minute Bible study and one will lead a 20-minute prayer/meditation/reflection time.

Instructors will be available for meetings over meals, etc.

Monday:

Welcome, introductions, theme of the week

From Private Pastor to Public Theologian

From Organized Religion to Organizing Religion

Tuesday:

From Service Provider to Messenger/Motivator/Model

Wed:

from Expectation Meeter to Expectation Setter

from Money Avoider to Money Raiser

Thur:

from Tradition Preserver to Tradition Creator

Open - Q & A with Brian & Jacqui

Friday:

from Professional to Amateur

February: Conflict Transformation

MODULES

Module 24: Understanding the Necessity/Benefits/Dangers of Conflict

Module 25: Pre-empting Conflict Through Communication

Module 26: Key Conflict Transformation Skills

Module 27: Self-Care in Conflict

WEBINAR: Conflict Transformation

Goal: Equip participants with best practices for anticipating, acknowledging, transforming, incorporating conflict in transformative leadership.

TOOLS: John/Jacqui interview/training.

March: Crisis and Opportunity (4 P's)

MODULES

Module 28: The Societal Machine

Module 29: Planet, Poverty

Module 30: People (Race/Gender/Origin/Ability/Identity), Peace

Module 31: Framing Story

WEBINAR: The Gospel as a Revolutionary/Healing Narrative

Goal: Guide participants to understand the “quadruple threat” as an opportunity for effective mission. (people, peace, poverty, planet)

TOOLS: Everything Must Change resources

April: Revolutionary Love

MODULES:

Module 32: 4 P's Checklists

Module 33: Saints & Elders

Module 34: Rising Stars

Module 35: Multi-Faith Allies

WEBINAR/SYMPOSIUM (April 6-7): New York - in concert with Revolutionary Love conference.

Goal: Inspire participants to think about their work as part of a larger spiritual and social movement of revolutionary love, exposure to wide range of national speakers.

TOOLS: People, peace, poverty, planet checklists

May: Organized Religion and Organizing Religion

MODULES:

Module 36: Organizing Plans for the 4 P's

Module 37: Aligning Christian congregations

Module 38: Building Multi-Faith Partnerships

Module 39: Collaborating Non-Religious allies

WEBINAR: The church as warehouse or movement

Goal: Equip churches with action plans for engaging the planet and poverty.

TOOLS: Organizing Plan Template

June/July: Celebrating Progress, Building the Movement

SYMPOSIUM/WEBINAR: The Christian Wing of Multi-Faith Movement (June 8-9, DC)

Goal: Highlight progress made by participants, share stories, struggles, and dreams, expose new participants to old.

MODULES:

Module 40: Self-Assessment

Module 41: Peer Mentoring

Module 42: Improving CLP

Module 43: Gratitude & Celebration

TOOLS: Organizing Plan with Checklists, Post-Assessment Questionnaire, Peer Mentoring Meeting 3.