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***Convening and Conversing on Innovations in Theological Education:***

***Insights from our 2017 Gathering***

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

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On November 8, 2016, RTE convened a diverse array of individuals trained in pedagogy, technology, and/or leadership formation in November 2017 to share insights for and dream about innovation in theological education. At this gathering, panelists and participants included:

- Letitia Campbell, Candler School of Theology
- Rob Dalglish, EDGE, United Church of Canada
- Melissa Browning, McAfee School of Theology
- Trey Lyon, Urban Seminary
- Ernest Brooks, III, Academy of Preachers
- Brian McLaren, Convergence Leadership Project
- CJ Childs, McAfee School of Theology
- Heather Bardole, Southeast Conference, United Church of Christ
- Joy Warren, Cumberland Presbyterian
- Jacob Gunter, Twin Radius
- Daniel De Criscio, Gen Church
- Ellen Gadberry, Centerform, Columbia Seminary
- Carlos Moore, Square Mile Gallery
- Holly Duncan, EIRO
- John Heinz, Centerform
- Kathryn Heinz, Centerform
- Tashara S. Void, Interdenominational Theological Center
- Andy Odle, Remerge
- Jen Lyon, Park Avenue Baptist Church

Along with 115 online participants.

Topics discussed at this gathering included:

- Contextualizing theological education
- Theological education outside of traditional seminaries
- Access for underserved and underrepresented learners
- Social innovation as theological education

- Game theory as a strategy for self-direction and engagement
- Open systems in/as classroom spaces
- Art programs as theological education
- Community engagement skills training
- Insights from innovative programs and prototypes

We heard from 6 leaders on particular innovations they are currently leading.

Letitia Campbell from Candler School of Theology presented on how Candler contextualizes their theological education through innovative programs and partnerships. Their efforts focus on building knowledge while also building skills for practical ministry through two full years of required on-site learning in ministry contexts, one year in the congregational context and one year in community institutions or ministries such as prisons and detention centers, food pantries, and healthcare facilities. This learning is then intertwined with academic coursework and professors facilitate critical reflection on how the two intersect. Lessons from these efforts have included the relevance of and concern for theological ideas in people in all situations and walks of life. Candler also works to increase access to theological education by designing alternative programs, including certificate programs for women at Arrendale State Prison and programs for pastors who don't have a seminary degree. Lessons from these programs include that theological education offered in for innovative contexts changes those contexts, as many graduates of the prison certificate programs are incarcerated for life or long terms and so end up applying their knowledge in their relationships and duties inside the prison.

Rob Dalgleish from the EDGE Network, United Church of Canada, presented on how Social Innovation Challenges are seeding and nurturing innovative social ministries and building stronger partnerships with non-church organizations. The Social Innovation Challenges gather those with innovative ideas to positively impact the church and the world and supports them through coaching, mentoring, and opportunities to pitch their idea to funders. Over the last 2 years, the program has held 10 challenges, and 400 people have participated in the mentorship program. So far, the program has demonstrated that while the church can be antagonistic to innovation, non-church organizations are

very interested and invested, and new partnerships are arising between seminaries and business schools, and between church and non-church organizations as a result of these events and conversations.

Melissa Browning from McAfee School of Theology presented on their pilot of a Social Enterprise Certificate program. This program, designed to prepare seminarians and alumni for social innovation accelerators, was open to seminarians, alumni and community members in the summer of 2017 in partnership with McAfee and Centerform, and contained 9 hours of coursework for seminary credit designed to build and practice skills for social entrepreneurship accelerators. Lessons from the pilot include the value of short term intensives, gamification and open systems for promoting learning and innovation in theological education.

Trey Lyon from Urban Seminary presented on this free program for theological education of practicing urban ministers. The program delivers a core of theological education to those called to urban ministry, completely free of charge. This program has demonstrated the need for free and accessible theological education for nontraditional students actively engaged in practicing professional or lay ministry. The program has helped students take theological ideas into their practice of ministry. Challenges include providing technological access points and expanding or duplicating such programs with little to no funding.

Brian McLaren presented on the Convergence Leadership Project. This year long program for pastors and lay leaders innovates in four building multi-racial collaboration into project design and presentation, training congregational cohorts (and others) by bringing clergy and lay leaders together, integrating diverse online and in-person experiences on a daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, and annual basis, and learning in the context of a contextualized public theology. The program has highlighted the desire for transformative learning among progressive pastors and lay leaders. A key lesson from this

program is the need for a way to screen applicants and facilitators for those who will be able to commit and stay motivated throughout innovative programs while also increasing access to underrepresented groups.

The gathered body then took on an open discussion of priorities and concerns for theological education, facilitated by Lindsay Andreolli-Comstock. The discussion primarily addressed the following:

1. How do we re-allocate resources from declining ministries and churches to serve the greater community, marginalized communities and new churches?
2. How to equip younger clergy and newer clergy with the education and resources to serve the changing demographics and serve in this changing landscape of ministry, given the realities of high debt to low income ratio and the reality that more and more churches are hiring part time clergy?
3. How do we help pastors and ministers who are called discern their call when they know that parish ministry is not necessarily what they feel called to do? For example: how do we train future ministers to serve in other contexts that don't primarily involve worship leadership but might involve community organizing fundraising & community development?

Those gathered gave positive feedback on the conversation. One seminarian provided the following feedback, "As a seminarian, it was quite invigorating and inspiring to hear all the avenues that are currently present in the theological field.... Prior to hearing the panelists, I had not heard of most of the programs, organizations, schools, etc. which is disheartening as they would have been extremely helpful to me throughout my journey thus far. Everything that was shared today resonated with me and reacted the call I believe I have been hearing over the years.... I want to THANK YOU for today was the second wind I needed!!!" We believe this highlights the need to continue to identify, research, and

disseminate information about innovative programs, as well as to continue to facilitate generative conversations on innovative theological education in the years to come.