When the Pastor President invited me to prepare this presentation, he told me that I could understand the invitation as an assault or as an honor. I have yet to decide which it is. The request to discern the current path of the IECLB (Igreja Evangelica do Confissao Luterana no Brasil) -- at this important moment in the church´s life and before its principal leaders -- caused fear and trembling in me. To practice discernment is not easy and is not always welcome. However, it is absolutely necessary for a church that seeks a vision for and perspectives on the future. The ancient desert fathers and mothers compared discernment to an axe. One anecdote describes how many in the church go through life with an axe on their shoulders – but never cut down a tree. Please forgive me for the ecologically incorrect image, but I am going to attempt to cut down some trees with this presentation.

When I started to prepare this presentation I bumped up against the fact the everything has already been said – and said with accuracy -- about the IECLB´s current priorities, difficulties, and biggest challenges. I can´t recall having seen a report to the Council so rich with information and analysis, be it from the President´s office or the General Secretary. Add to this the large quantity of quality material analyzing the current state of the IECLB published by the Forum, the seminaries, consultations, or the ex-Pastor President Dr. Brakemeier o ex-General Secretary P. Dr. Kliewer. All this material is available and certainly is known to the majority of those present.

As such, I don’t believe it is necessary or interesting to analyze all that has been written or said in the past four years about the current state of the IECLB. Brothers and sisters, what I propose is to discern with you some of the challenges widely understood to be the church´s priorities at this moment in history. I will do this from the perspective of someone involved in the body and soul of the IECLB´s parish and community-level development process. The challenges that I will expound upon are the following:

- The challenge of sustainability.
- The challenge of quantitative and qualitative growth.
- The challenge of identity.

Casting the Nets in Deeper Waters

To illuminate and inspire our reflection on the challenges mentioned above, I would like to first take a moment and share some aspects of a meditation on a Gospel text that recently has become very important for me personally and for my work: Luke 5: 1-6.

In my imagination I transport myself to Palestine, to a place in Galilee near Lake Gennesaret. It is an agreeable place with pleasant temperatures. I take in the smell of the sea, the warm sand beneath my feet. I hear waves breaking. I see Jesus approaching and following him is a multitude.
Luke 5:1 “Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear to word of God…”

The first verse says the crowd was pressing in on him; the men and women wanted to hear him. Finally they had found a teacher that authoritatively interpreted the Scriptures in a way that resonated in their hearts and brought meaning to their lives. They followed him from here to there because they wanted to hear and know more. It is not often in our ecclesiastical lives that the “crowd (…) pressing in on” us. We are accustomed to our small flocks and we have even created solid arguments to justify the minimal participation and the absence of satisfactory numerical growth. We praise quality and scorn quantity. However, today’s multitudes continue to seek; like in Jesus’ day they seek words that come from the heart along with orientation and meaning for their lives. The journey that returns us to the sacred is intense. It seeks a spirituality that sustains us from day to day. But this journey is sidestepping our congregations and community centers. We are not ones people go to any more in these matters. We cannot rest on the laurels of the axiom that the quality of our theological content is what is important. Urgently we need to perfect the quality of the transmission of this content – the Gospel of God’s unconditional love for us.

Luke 5:2 He saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets.”

Two empty boats side by side on the beach and the fishermen busy with their nets. They are at the end of a frustrating experience; they had spent the night fishing, casting their nets and catching nothing. It is not surprising that they were focused on the upkeep of their nets. The fish were there as they always are, but the nets failed to catch them. What is wrong with the nets? Maybe they are broken, full of holes, the mesh is not holding together. I think of the holes created in the IECLB´s nets by the lack of theological coherence and practice, and by divisions and conflicts. The work of fixing the nets is arduous, and as such is on-going. What is going on with the nets? Maybe the fish are learning how to swim around them. Could it be that the fish have changed, evolved? Maybe our nets don’t attract today’s fish. Frustration is inevitable because today it is impossible to fish with forty year-old nets.

Luke 5:3 He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat.

Jesus getting into a boat to preach and teach could appear to be an unimportant detail. In fact, it becomes vital to history. The empty boat becomes the symbol of the missionary. What I am, that which I possess, my time, my goods, my capabilities, my gifts, I offer it all to Jesus, to God’s Mission in the world. This mission does not belong to the church nor is mission a function of the church. Rather, the church is a function of God’s mission. We are but instruments, empty boats at God’s disposition. Or perhaps we are floating warehouses, heavy, burdened under the weight of our political and ecclesiastical interests, traditions, and rules. As I deepen my study of Christian spiritual history, I perceive that in its various aspects and traditions the process of emptying is essential for transformation and personal and spiritual development. This

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1 All quotes from the Bible are NRSV unless otherwise noted.
transformation frees us from ourselves and makes us available to God. **Availability** is a key word for mission. To what degree are we prepared to empty ourselves and let God’s passion for the world fill us and become the reason behind our existence? I recall the boy with his pieces of bread and fish. It is not uncommon for God to also use our limitations for mission, as well as our tears and frustrations. It is worthwhile to read 2 Corinthians with this in mind. My mother would often say that God’s Kingdom is built with little pieces. Stain-glassed windows are nothing more than little pieces of colored glass through which a divine sun shines.

The Gospel narrative tells how Jesus preaches, teaches, consoles and guides the people from his floating pulpit. In this moment Jesus’ resounding command to Peter can be heard:

*Luke 5:4* When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

**Go forth one more time and cast your nets in deeper waters.** This command contradicts the experience of the fishermen in at least two ways: a) It is known that in the Sea of Galilee the schools of fish are near the coast, not in the deep waters; b) on the other hand, nocturnal fishing in the Sea of Galilee was better while the day offered exhaustion and not a lot of fish. On top of these common bits of knowledge the fishermen also had the failure of the previous night’s catch.

But Jesus was not a callous or conceited person. He was the fishermen’s friend, especially Simon Peter’s. Nevertheless he challenges them saying: *Cast your nets in deeper waters.* This was the same as saying: *Forget about yesterday’s experience.* For us this phrase could be very thought-provoking. *Forget about yesterday’s experience.* It is true that also in the church experience can become a relative good. In today’s world where human knowledge doubles every two years, it is true that no one has “experience”. On a daily basis we are learning to deal with entirely new and previously unknown situations. This is the meaning of the term *mathetés* or *discípua*, she or he that can constantly learn. Are we a church of men and women disciples willing to learn and relearn all the time? I believe that one of the most complicated and painful points along this topic is our willingness to unlearn what at one time produced results, but today is obsolete and not producing fruits.

Imagine how this story would have ended if Peter had responded with a phrase that is typical among us: *No Teacher. This is not going to produce results.* In spite of the recent frustrating experiences to the contrary, he responded as a disciple:

*Luke 5:5-6* Simon answered, “Master we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yes if you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break.

Peter set aside his experiences as a veteran fisherman and obeyed the Master’s command. What is happening here symbolically foresees all of the church’s missionary experiences. *Only by following Your Word* can we expect fruits and hope for our Lord’s miracles. God’s faithfulness is experienced in obedience and perseverance.
A number of interesting aspects of this text lend themselves to further meditation. Our time constraints limit us to these five verses. I propose that individually we continue this meditation at another time. Let us permit this story of the Gospels to resound within us.

**Perspectives for the future of the IECLB**

Illuminated and inspired by the Gospel text, we begin this reflection on some of the principle challenges currently faced by the IECLB.

*The challenge of sustainability*

Definitions and parameters:

I define sustainability as the capacity of a system to avoid depleting or overburdening the resources that maintain it, as to create favorable conditions for the system’s current and future survival and development.

The history of the concept of *sustainability* is part of the growing concern over balance among economic activity, the environment and humanity’s well-being. The idea behind sustainable development is to promote harmony among these parts for a better quality of life, greater equity among nations in social and economic development, and conservation of the environment and management of essential natural resources like water and food. The environmental question and the global problems like for example, population growth, the depletion of energy resources, climate change, and global warming, together signal the urgency of the reflection found in documents of international consensus like Agenda 21. The issue is the sustainability of our planet.

It is not surprising that a concept so vital and important would also end up influencing the administration and management of organizations in every sector. Sustainability -- or sustainable development – has rapidly become a key concept for the administration of companies and organizations. It has especially had repercussions in the management of organizations within Civil Society, the so-called “third sector” where NGOs, foundations, associations and churches are found. It is commonly understood that sustainability, or be it the sustainable realization of the mission of these organizations, results from processes of development and/or institutional growth.

According to the sociologist Domingos Armani² certain key parameters exist that can be used to analyze the degree of institutional development and sustainability in an organization: social base, legitimacy and relevance of its mission; autonomy and credibility; compatibility between leadership and the needs of the organization; workflow, democratic management and efficiency; good human resources (employees); an efficient and participatory system of planning, monitoring, and evaluation (PME); capacity to systematize and produce information and knowledge; capacity to influence social processes and public policy; capacity to establish companion relationships and joint activities; and I would add: agility with internal and external communications; absolute transparency in financial reports to donors.

² O DESENVOLVIMIENTO INSTITUCIONAL COMO CONDICAO DA SUSTENTABILIDADE DAS ONG NO BRASIL. In: http://www.aids.gov.br/final/biblioteca/sustenta/desenvol.htm
Sustainability and Lutheranism:

It is necessary to be aware that this topic will always find resistance in the context of Lutheran theology. A first look finds little room for the topic of sustainability in the context of Lutheran theology. From this point of view, that which creates and sustains the church is not at our disposal and cannot be manipulated or managed. Theologically speaking, the sustainability of the church is connected to the Holy Spirit which acts to create faith and community where the Word is preached and the sacraments are administered. Article 5 of the Augsburg Confession affirms that the church is sustained “where and when it pleases God.” Nevertheless, early on the Reformers took steps to sustain the nascent church. For example, the visits that took place in 1527 and 1529, in addition to firming up doctrine, were aimed at ensuring the “material” survival of the parishes, pastors and professors. In the years following, the sustainability of the evangelical-Lutheran church was guaranteed by territorial princes and national governments, a model that has been maintained over the years. More recently, with the transplanting of Lutheranism in the New World, new sustainability concepts emerged which responded to a different context. A concern about sustainability has become an on-going task of the Lutheran churches in the region as models for survival and institutional development are recreated.

Practical guidelines – *Casting the nets in deeper waters.*

Although time does not permit greater development of this topic, I would like to highlight three important aspects of the practical guidelines:

- It is urgent that we ask about the mission effectiveness and financial viability of the various levels of our ecclesiastical structures. The old question – what kind of church are we, can we be, do we want to be – continues to be relevant. Inspired and encouraged by the visions and images of church found in the New Testament, it is important to start constructing a vision of church that is simultaneously characterized by the high quality of its community life, unmistakable confessional identity and practice of wholistic mission. In other words, a vision that would allow the IECLB to realize the mission described in its governing documents. It is important to highlight the following: the topic of sustainability is not simply a fund-raising strategy. Rather, sustainability needs to be consistently packaged within an understanding of church development that balances the fundamental aspects of what it is to be church: *martyria, diakonia, koinonía* and *leitourgia.* Later I will return to develop these aspects further.

- Currently organizations from every sector seeking sustainability and institutional development are being challenged to use the tool of strategic planning. This tool is also called participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation (PME). As organizations within civil society, churches can avail themselves of this methodology to promote qualitative and quantitative growth. Strategic planning allows churches to take positive measures to both confront external threats and internal difficulties, as well as to take advantage of opportunities in their environment. Where medium and long term planning exists, it is possible to apply and concentrate all the capacities that the church
disposes of, facilitating the achievement of objectives and the effective collaboration with God’s mission in the world. It is also in the church that continuous institutional development depends on the on-going promotion of a culture of planning. At first blush, strategic planning might only seem interesting for businesses and secular institutions.

In the church, we operate with non-measurable “products” like faith, love and hope. And truly, these are fruits of Divine Action, of the Holy Spirit, not of our plans and strategies. Even so we have various indications that planning was also known and valued in the Bible. In Exodus 18 Moses receives the advice of his father-in-law, Jethro, on how to better organize service to the people. In Ecclesiastes 10:10 the voice of the sage advises: *If the axe is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed but skill will bring success.* (NIV) In Luke 14 Jesus talks about discipleship and asks that the costs of this work and future growth be calculated: *For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it (…) Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand.*

The Apostle Paul, in turn, emphasizes *kybérnesis* – whose original meaning is the “art of piloting or steering a boat” -- among the charisms of the New Testament communities. It relates to the gift of “governance” (1 Cor. 12: 28) or the “guidance” of the community. To navigate a boat in New Testament times required great ability, knowledge, and the ability to plan. Navigation required careful planning. Of first order was knowledge of the sea, the contours of the coast, astronomical orientation, as well as an understanding of the wind and the sea’s currents. All were necessary to safely reach the destination port. It was not by chance that a ship became the symbol of the church (Matthew 8:23-27; 14:22.33).

Steering the ship we call “church”, and taking on the challenges of ecclesiastical leadership, is also accepting the responsibility for planning with criteria and for the safe navigation of God’s people toward their eternal future. Evidently, it is not easy to instigate a culture of planning in the reality of IECLB parish life. The experience of directing the Strategic Planning process since 2004 in nearly 20 IECLB parishes has moderated my enthusiasm when evaluating this instrument’s potential. For some parishes, strategic planning became the process for constructing the path toward a bright future and replaced merely reactive attitudes with proactive ones. From the inside, it is possible to observe that only the parishes that persevered in the execution of their action plan reached their objectives. The biggest difficulty is in learning to manage the planning process with humility. This means correcting goals and timeframes when necessary rather than succumbing to frustration or even recalcitrant pride.

- Additionally, an effective strategy to develop the self-sustainability of the church is the persistent and on-going promotion of Christian stewardship. Central to any stewardship program is the conviction that individual gifts, material goods and time are nothing more that God’s property that has been entrusted to human beings. As collaborators in God’s mission to the world, the
work of administering this divine property has been given to us in accordance with God’s will. The concept of “stewardship” was promoted by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in the 1950’s and put into practice by the IECLB in the 1960’s. Today this concept needs to be reevaluated as a useful instrument for fomenting a faith life that – through gratitude – can also expressed through a financial commitment.

It is a hopeful sign that in all synods there are initiatives related to the topic of faith, gratitude and commitment. However, I would like to draw your attention to some of the dangers that I perceive in the treatment of this topic: 1) it cannot simply be a subject for cognitive reflection followed by a moral appeal for a contribution. The topic must get to the heart of our members or we will be left with one more frustration to put on the books. To deal with faith, gratitude and commitment is to evangelize starting with the first item – faith. 2) It is also necessary to elaborate a comprehensive project that brings theology, materials, trainings, methods, etc to bear. Without this infrastructure there will be no impact. 3) A very important pedagogical factor is the ability to connect the willingness to donate and contribute with mission projects and diaconal work. I recall that the Christian stewardship movement in North America grew out of the evolution of missionary projects. It was only after that it was directed at church sustainability. The result would be frustrating if in our large parishes this topic were only addressed to stabilize ordinary budgets.

It is fundamental to overcome the temptation to use the theme of faith, gratitude and commitment for the objective of only supporting oneself. The perspective needed is that of the IECLB’s missionary and diaconal vocation. It is necessary to be sensitive to the fact that the IECLB needs more resources for the sustainability of its diaconal, educational, missionary, etc. projects, as well as the survival of small parishes in the north, northeast and center of the country and for greater financial support of sister Lutheran churches in Latin America. When it comes to sustainability, success – or better put – blessing, depends on the willingness to cast the nets beyond our own shadow.

The Challenge of Quantitative and Qualitative Growth

The IECLB, as a whole, hasn’t grown as it has desired. In some areas, actually, it has stayed the same or decreased. In others, some growth has been observed, included here are some missionary projects and other initiatives motivated by PAMI. In July of this year, the Forum for Mission exhaustively covered this subject and its documentation gives ample vision of how the IECLB understands and develops mission. A comforting fact is that the concern for radiating mission has reached all corners of the IECLB. A consensus was reached that the IECLB should be a missionary church and that each member, each community, church and synod owes its mission testimony to its context. It is equally understood that mission can’t be delegated to specialists. Mission is the very existence of the church.

The critical issue in the mission of the IECLB, however continues to be the challenge of developing and growing quantitatively and qualitatively its communities and churches – this is in spite of the slogan of PAMI – “no community without mission and no mission
without community”. I see here a clear separation in the reflection and practice of mission. We have been efficient in articulating the theological bases of mission in fomenting and executing exemplary mission projects that are holistic and contextual. We fail however in the conception and vision for the quantitative and qualitative growth of our communities and churches. The few visions we have, are not shared – as a result of the existing limits and rivalries between synods, movements and institutions. I consider it urgent the realization of a national forum to share experiences in order to reflect on current ecclesiological conceptions and ministerial models in order to construct a common vision and project, adaptable to different contexts.

If we want in fact to promote a process of development capable of making quantitative and qualitative growth viable in our churches and communities it will be necessary first of all, to qualify each one of the fundamental aspects of community and ecclesiological life.

One of the most complete definitions of the aspects that outline the mission of the church was given to us by the World Council of Churches. In the context of the discussion about the missionary structures of the church in the 60’s of the past century established that the church participated in the mission of God in this world promoting martyrdom – the testimony of the Gospel, koinonia – the communion of those who live based upon the Gospel, diaconal service – the service to neighbor and society, liturgy – worship and the celebration of the love of God. (Footnote – In these aspects Pr. Nestor Friedrich, Secretary General of the IELCB added a fifth one oikonomia – the administration of that which God confides in us, including here the community and the church. The first four are said to be first to last, the activity through the church. It would be worth it to refer to the 14 aspects of good eclesial administration proposed by Friedrich in http://conferencialiderazgo2006.blogspot.com/ or http://www.mastro.combr/col/nestor.pdf).

These aspects are the parameters with which we can evaluate the quality of our community life. It is in the balanced and perseverant realization of these aspects that we can expect to grow quantitatively and qualitatively. “Casting the net into deeper waters” in each one of these aspects will be decisive for a promising future of the IELCB.

• “Casting the net into deeper waters” – what does that mean for martyrdom – the testimony of the Gospel? It means to speak the Gospel in a basic and creative form, motivating people – members and non-members of the IELCB- to a personal faith response to the grace of God. The unconditional love of God is the content of our evangelization. It is important to invest in forms that communicate the Gospel in an effective manner for the world of today; evangelistic courses, spaces of reflection that integrate faith and life, utilizing modern multimedia, optimization of communication, training of members for the articulation of faith, incentives and formation for evangelization through relationships.

• “Casting the net into deeper waters” – what does it mean in the koinonia aspect – the concrete life as the body of Christ? Christian faith in order to develop needs the experience of communion. The great challenge is to provide in our community life, places where we live together in mutuality. Places where the grace of God determines our relationships, creating a positive climate. The most important characteristic of a positive climate is the valuing of people as
It is to try to take each person seriously, respecting their desires, experiences and potential, to encourage them to voluntarily contribute their time, their gifts, and goods. It is community that includes and values members and non-members and is a community that invests in having a good climate and in small groups, possessing high attraction, will grow in numbers. The contrary is also true – the community marked by conflicts, tensions, ruptures and either lay or pastoral oppression will stop being attractive. Its members will move away and probably stop contributing. A community with a negative climate will stay the same or decrease. (Footnote- I urge all leaders of the IELCB in every level to acquire competence in conflict resolution. One instrument that has been used with success in the Vale do Itajai Synod is the mutual counsel of members, helping in the prophylaxis of conflicts. It is worth reading the article of Synod Pastor Mariane Beyer Ehrat – Fraternal Intervision: A Method of Mutual Counsel. Equally important is the promotion of a culture of dialogue characterized by a clear structure and transparent decision-making. Finally, it is fundamental to invest in a constructive relationship between lay leaders and ordained ministers.)

• “Casting nets into deeper waters” what does it mean in the diaconal sense – service to the neighbor and society? Lutheran faith and spirituality desire to be active in love (Gal 5:6). They are disposed to diaconal practice, to voluntary solidarity, to the commitment in the mission of God, promoting life in its fullness in this world. In this way, diaconal commitment is a privileged place for the priesthood of all believers in which we were anointed in our baptism. The growth of the churches and communities of the IELCB will depend in good measure on the diaconal relevance that they can achieve in the society in which they are inserted. It will depend on whether they are disposed to be in solidarity as a church and community with others. Service to people in situations of psychic, spiritual, economic and physical suffering has great relevance today. It is important to develop sensitivity for the needs and pain of society. It is important to recognize Christ lying on my doorstep (Luther). We already have a good number of diaconal projects available to improve the competence in solidarity of churches and communities.

• “Casting nets into deeper waters” – what does it mean in this aspect of liturgy – the celebration of the love of God? In no other aspect has the IELCB advanced so much in the last decades as in liturgical renewal. It would fit to advance even further in the comprehension and better development of the anthropological elements of the communion so that dialogical knowledge is incorporated and gives it the experience of communion. The centrality of worship in the life of the community in which a place for the means of divine grace is offered, is a theological postulate that isn’t always found in communitarian practice. What fits here is high investment in liturgical formation of the community, contemporary sacred music, the communicative quality of the preaching and the elaboration of the service so that it is inspiring and transparent of the love of God.

Testimony – communion – service – liturgy. It is in the constant qualification of these basic aspects that promotes our development and growth as a church.

The Challenge of Identity
Identity is the content of that which moves the church and makes it what it is. This is related to its reference points which make it original, unique and finally clearly distinguishable as the church from other social groups, from other religious associations, even from other denominations. It is that consensus on the clear and defined identity that has the decisive influence on the vitality of the church. Aside from making them possible, it brings together and reunites the development of vision and transparent and precise objectives, known and supported by all its members. On the other hand, a church without a clearly articulated theological profile is irrelevant in today’s religious market. In this way, the missionary efficiency of the IELCB and consequently, its quantitative and qualitative development depends on its capacity to articulate its theological identity and its vision in an unequivocal and convincing form in the medium in which it lives. (Footnote – A silent threat to the existence and growth of the IELCB is the lack of knowledge of the identity of the church by a large portion of its members. Those who don’t know the identity of the church have at best a nebulous notion and don’t know how to value it. Lack of knowledge generates indifference and lack of capacity to give testimony, making the missionary church less viable. Not less dangerous and disintegrating is the plurality of identities - many times at the same time and exclusionary within themselves. It was highly important to have the National Forum on Unity. The final document of the Forum: Unity Context and Identity of the IELCB is a great help in the search for theological consensus in the church and the strengthening of unity around theological identity.)

There are two complementary aspects that form the identity of a church: tradition and interpretation. These two aspects also are present in the identity of the IELCB:

a) Tradition: the primary aspects points toward the immutable, toward the everlasting, toward that which gives equilibrium, stability and solidity. In the case of the Lutheran Church, this tradition is theological and determined by the Sacred Scripture and by the Lutheran Confessional Writings in addition to the elements that provide the historical development of the IELCB (Footnote- I include here the texts of Ernesto Schlieper that promote the theological reorientation of the church after the Second World War, the programmatic dentrices of the Sinodical Federation formulated by Hermann Dohms, the Manifesto of Curitiba, the document “Our Social Responsibility” among others.) Along with the theological documents, it is important to consider here also the tradition of Lutheran spirituality and its basic elements. (Footnote- I identify nine basic elements that historically complete the richness of the evangelical Lutheran spirituality: service, the sacraments – baptism and Holy Communion, fraternal fellowship, the hymnal, Bible reading, prayer (books of prayer) the Small Catechism. See Butzke, Paulo Aspects of a Lutheran Spirituality for our Days). These basic theological, ecclesiological and spiritual aspects make us indisputably the Lutheran Church in our Brazilian religious context.

b) Interpretation: The second aspect gives mobility, flexibility and agility. Identity needs to be continually reformulated and reinterpreted into its existential context. The church today has responsibility for the tradition inherited from its forefathers and mothers, throughout its history. However it also equally has responsibility for the life and reality of the society in which it lives. From that comes our job to define who we are today in the here and now and indicate with clarity our objectives and our work.
The challenge of identity is to combine with equilibrium and discernment, tradition and interpretation. It is to be able to maintain with dynamic complimentarity the two aspects of the church which has an identity which on the one hand is firmly anchored in biblical-confessional theology and on the other hand, will be flexible and agile in order to respond to the challenges of our time. To extract our identity solely through our confessional tradition would be like sitting on a trunk in which all theological truths are thrown. To extract our identity solely through the demands of the time or the religious context would be equivalent to letting go of the anchor and the compass. We would be a boat in the religious sea until we hit the sandbank of neo-Pentecostalism. (Footnote- In this way, the conflict with the charismatic renewal movement didn’t begin with the charismatic expression of faith but rather the incapacity of the linking this expression with Lutheran theological identity, a possible fact for many Lutheran churches around the world.)

In Lutheranism, the construction of identity is dynamic: it is the exercise of theological-spiritual discernment that relates life itself with the challenges of the Word of God and with the challenges of the world, extracting from there the positioning and living of faith and spirituality. This positioning is the confession of faith and testimony, living and concrete expression of theological —spiritual identity.

If the IELCB makes itself available to “Cast its nets into the deeper waters” in the question of identity, it will have to unleash all its possible forces in order to train its members for theological-spiritual discernment. More than it has done to date, it will have to invest in Christian formation. The Continuing Christian Education program elaborated in a participative way in two national seminaries about this matter in 2005 and 2006 is a solid conceptual base for this task. With this program, continuing Christian education is recovered as a consequence and requirement of baptism, reaffirming the central thesis which is called Permanent Catechism (the idea of life-long learning in the faith). Assuring the fundamentals of this formation project is precisely to indicate with more clarity its theological — ecclesiological intention. The cross-cutting theme that articulates this is the education and Christian formation of the priesthood of all believers — that for which we were anointed and ordained on the occasion of our baptism.

(Footnote- this is the thesis of Martin Reusch, the docent of Christian formation in the IELCB. During his long pastoral trajectory, Reusch inspired generations of theologians on the idea of a Permanent Catechism, aside from the fact of having been the author of one of the model projects of formation in the IELCB in the old region 6).

Christian formation defines our full life in this priesthood of all believers and must train all in the functions of this priesthood in accordance with the proposal of Martin Luther: the exercise of the secular profession as service to the neighbor, spiritual motherhood and fatherhood and the fundamental catechesis in the family, stewardship of material goods, the Christian testimony in word and action, baptism, fraternal counsel, intercession, and theological-spiritual discernment. The effective participation of the church in the mission of God in the world depends on the quality of the education program and the Christian formation of its members, collaborators, leaders and workers. The missionary church is that in which the majority of members are living the Christian priesthood in the community and the society, promoting martyrdom, koinonia, liturgy, diaconal service. Aside from its criteria as continuing, it must form and educate people for the demands of the mission of God in the world. In this way, the Christian education
process is part of the spiritual biography of each baptized member and the necessities of
the church, synods, congregations, communities and work sectors.

Education and formation in the church are not exhausted in a single pedagogical-
cognitive operation. Beside the transmission of knowledge and information, it includes
experience and spiritual initiation. For the formation project of IELCB, “to cast nets in
deeper waters” also means education for the life of Lutheran spirituality. Interior faith,
motivated by the spirit, is pre-disposed to outward and corporal expression- spirituality.
Christian formation must introduce the concrete living of Lutheran spirituality under the
conditions of daily life, respecting the necessities of the different stages of human
development and conditions of life. The priority is the teaching of prayer, of the reading
and meditation of the Word of God, of the active and real participation in the liturgy of
the service, of contemplative silence among other aspects. It is important to remember
that for the development of a healthy spirituality, one must look for equilibrium
between its diverse dimensions: personal, familiar, communitarian, and social. The
exercise of the priesthood of all believers, in order not to be inconsistent and superficial,
needs to be anchored spiritually.

Conclusion

The major challenge of the IELCB in this historic moment is to hear the order of Jesus –
“to cast nets in deeper waters” and respond as disciples “in spite of the difficulties,
under Your Word, we will cast our nets” If the boat called IELCB is available for the
mission of God, then we will be able to count on His fidelity and where and when it
pleases God, we will experience the miracle of the nets full of His blessings.

I will close remembering a well-known poem by Lindolfo Weingartner:

Practice of Hope

A boat at the edge of the lagoon
An old fisherman
His feet firmly in the bow
Casting the net.
For one half hour
I am watching him.
It is the Lord Fisherman

In a perfect circle
The net falls over the water
It goes out and comes back in.
The net is empty
He takes it out and
Prepares to launch it again
I counted the times that he flings it out
Twenty-three times right after each other,
He casts the net.
Twenty three times,
He pulls it out of the water empty
He knows
Many days ago
In which is necessary to cast the net
Contrary to expectations
Contrary to good sense
Twenty times
Fifty times
One hundred times

Because it is necessary
To cast the net
Teaching hope
Practicing hope
Because to stop casting it would be
The same as desisting and
Desisting would be the same as to die.

The practice of hope:
I thank you, old fisherman
Your work was not in vane
Today I needed you desperately
For someone to give me the message
That you have just given me.
I understood it.

Lindolfo Weingartner