

Welcome to the Ernst Strüngmann Forum podcasts—a series of discussions designed to explore how people collaborate under real-life settings. Joining us in the series are high-profile experts from diverse areas in society, whose experiences will lend insight to what collaboration is, what it requires, and why it might break down. This series is produced in collaboration with the Convergent Science Network.

P. Verschure My name is Paul Verschure and together with my colleague, Julia Lupp, we are speaking today with Rafael Malpica-Padilla, who is the Executive Director for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Division for Global Mission. Welcome, Rafael. Could you give a short description of your biographical trajectory that brought you to where you are today?

R. Malpica-Padilla Thank you Paul and Julia for this opportunity to be in conversation with you. As my name may suggest, I am of a Hispanic or Latino background and was born and raised as a Lutheran in the island of Puerto Rico. I did my undergrad in Puerto Rico and then my theological studies at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Afterward, I returned to Puerto Rico, where I was ordained and served at my first parish. When the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) came together as a merger of three church bodies in the United States, I was elected the Bishop of the Caribbean synod, that is Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. After serving as bishop in the Caribbean synod, I joined the church-wide staff as part of the Division for Global Mission as area secretary for Latin America, then became the executive director for the Division for Global Mission for about 16 or 17 years. As of February 2022, the ELCA has entered a new redesign: I was appointed executive director of a new home area known as Service and Justice, which brings together all of our global work in terms of mission, development work, advocacy, and ethnic and racial ministries.

P. Verschure In how many countries is your organization active?

R. Malpica-Padilla We are active in about 90 countries with companion or member churches of the Lutheran World Federation, but with other organizations and churches as well.

P. Verschure So Rafael, could you give me your definition of collaboration and what it is good for?

R. Malpica-Padilla Well, I think that collaboration is coming together to build on each other's strengths and to provide a space where the skill competencies that we all bring, come together to address a specific issue. As we collaborate, they are three things that are really important. First, that we understand the differentiation between the two collaborators, whether individuals or entities. What each one brings, their own idiosyncrasies, their own identities. Second, what is the complementarity between those two companions, where they can work together? What is the intersectionality between those skills and competencies? Third, who has the capacity to implement and how can we do that either individually, together, or any other way, that will benefit the goal that we have before us?

P. Verschure Thank you for this comprehensive definition. Is it predicated on, let's say, the context of a church, the religious context in which you operate? Or do you see this as a generic model that would work outside and inside the context in which you are actually active?

R. Malpica-Padilla Well, I think that it came up primarily within the context of a church and my work there. But in my experience, it is something that works across sectors. It is something that will work outside of a church structure because the basis for this understanding of collaboration comes from outside of the church. I was very influenced by the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator, who understands that journey toward collaboration as paying attention to the other that we meet in that venture of coming together. So, I would say that it will work outside of a church setting as well.

- P. Verschure In your example now, there is a shared sense then of, let's say, the humanity: the coming together, which might also be a form of empathy toward another and a flexibility where there might be a collision between objectives. Is that correct to say?
- R. Malpica-Padilla Yes, that is central. In addition to a theological or educational perspective, that will inform our notion of collaboration. I think that there is something more fundamental and basic and it is what you just shared Paul. How do we understand the other? I say from my perspective of a church that that the biggest methodological question is not the theory behind mission. The methodological question is how do I engage the other? Because if I am not able to see the face of God in the other, or to see the relationality between me and the other, then my engagement with the other, each one in which I made that other the object of my actions, that is not collaboration. So otherness, or alterity as Emmanuel Levinas would define it, is key for this understanding of collaboration.
- P. Verschure Very clear, but there is an interesting relationship because you might argue that this idea of the other – someone to relate to and to understand as opposed to instrumentalizing or controlling – might exist prior to a religious elaboration of the other. Would you agree with that? Would you see that that is actually a more fundamental, let's say, human drive or instinct on which religion also is predicated?
- R. Malpica-Padilla Sure, it is that basic core of our shared humanity. It is our common understanding of ourselves. I mean, philosophically there are some people that say that you need the other to gain understanding of yourself. So the process is reversed. It is not me making the other an object of my action; at the end of the day, it is through engagement with the other that I achieve my self-consciousness. So, there is this dynamic relationship between the "I" and the "thou": both need each other. They need that basic humanity. And if we use that as a basic principle, then, as you said, we can expand that theologically as well as anthropologically and develop systems that will allow us to achieve the end, which is the common good for that other and myself and the community that is formed through that engagement.
- J. Lupp I'd like to go back for a second, Rafael, if we could, to the way that you described collaboration in this three-step fashion: understanding the differences of the other, understanding where there's intersection or complementary interests, and then a capacity to implement. I could imagine that understanding the differences and the people that are involved in that collaboration might pose a few problems. What binds people together to enable one to look for the intersection or the commonalities between people? So that not only the differences are perceived but the commonalities as well. What binds people together beyond a belief structure? Obviously, the belief structure would do that. But are there other factors or methods that you use to get past the differences?
- R. Malpica-Padilla Well, I think that the first step is to acknowledge the differences, not to assume those differences. So, when two cultures meet, they never meet on a level plane. There is what I would call the asymmetry, seeing the relationship. Those are the differences, whether those are historical, social, political, economical. So, once you understand those differences, that is the differentiation, then you can move toward that complementarity. You acknowledge the differences, but the differences are not used for the domination of one over the other, or the exclusion. In the end, the basic question when we meet another person is, who's subjectivity is going to be raised to the level of normativity, and that is always a transactional relationship, that is the give and take between the differentiation and the complementarity to create something anew. So you have your story and my story. But when we meet it is a new reality. It becomes our story. Then we need to create the conditions for this space, while maintaining our specific differentiation. How do we live in that space that brings us together and creates a new reality? That for me is basic, it is the stepping-stone toward

something else and that something is: How can we build together a better world for you and for me? I would say that that is the basic goal.

P. Verschure So, in the way you describe it now, in a very objective, neutral way, you can see how that would work in a small collective like our conversation right now, maybe a family. But if we start to scale that up to hundreds or thousands of millions of individuals, how do we maintain those principles? How does such scaling occur? Within your own organizations, which entail thousands of people, how do you get that scaling step from these very core human values into a complex collaborative system?

R. Malpica-Padilla It may sound reductionist, but it involves a basic, simple communication and engagement with the other. When I meet you, your life is a text (either as an individual, a society, or a community); my life is a text. As some philosophers have proposed, the key is: How do we enter into conversations so that we can create intertextuality, this meeting of the horizons, yours and mine. You need to really work hard on that because you have to come to the table assuming a level playing field: that the other has the same values as you; that the other has the capacity to articulate his or her own context so that that context will meet mine and then together envision that new reality that will serve as the starting point for our conversations. That's the system that we use when we engage a very small community or the government of South Sudan, e.g., when we addressed the issue of health care in Juba. It is that basic principle of understanding the differences, identifying the complementarity, and then empowering individuals to engage together in that new space that we are creating.

P. Verschure I understand. However, what I am trying to see is whether religious frameworks may not be so effective to stabilize and consolidate collaborative processes, because (a) they're very sophisticated systems and (b) they do give a shared ontology. You say, well, if we are part of this same church, the same religion, there are certain things we agree to that we're not going to question. There are certain rules of conduct, for instance, and certain realities that we just accept. We won't question them. Would you agree with the point of view that religion is a scaling step in collaboration because it takes away ambiguity and potential sources of conflict? People believe in a similar reality and in the methods to access that reality, in certain value systems that make us conduct in certain ways, even when the immediate situation looks very adverse.

R. Malpica-Padilla Yes, that is true. I think that in religion, we can find either a tool that will support that engagement, some shared values, either in a sophisticated way or in the very basic ways, e.g., in the Latin American context with the Christian-based communities. There, we saw it come to a very basic understanding. At the same time, and that's the flip side of religion, it also has the capacity to divide people rather than bring us together; it also creates divisions. So that's why we need to always find systems that give us a check and balance to avoid those pitfalls.

P. Verschure Could you elaborate on those pitfalls? Why would a system which enhances collaboration or stabilizes it also instill division? What's the mechanism here? Why does this happen?

R. Malpica-Padilla Could you repeat that question?

P. Verschure Earlier you said that although religion can enhance collaboration, it can also lead to division and thus obstruct collaboration. Why does that happen? Can you provide examples of this kind of breakdown?

R. Malpica-Padilla In my experience of when engaging that other (whether it is a religious order or political order), we are going back to what the common denominator that will allow for greater engagement. In the end, that is our shared humanity. Whether you understand that from a religious context or a political context, both of us as human beings have needs, aspirations, and dreams for a better society. These things transcend political or

religious systems and speaks to basic needs. The mother in a community in Africa wants to provide better health care, better food, and better housing for her child. The same is true for a mother in south Chicago. My job or role is then how to become a broker, a midwife, so that those two stories knit together and create shared space. The function of people like me and organizations like a church or NGOs, or even governments is to support that system that has been created, that shares a space of humanity, that brings together the hopes and aspirations.

- P. Verschure Such common humanity is the foundation upon which we can build a collaboration. You said earlier that if we start to elaborate in a religious context or a context of ideas or knowledge systems, this could lead to conflict because religions can collide; dogmas might be different, and people might get confused about the reality behind the dogma. Have you experienced this kind of breakdown? How can it be overcome?
- R. Malpica-Padilla It can be overcome. This is my very personal opinion, and I'm sure that there are theologians who will disagree with me, but as you said, the problem with the religious encounter is when that encounter is mediated by dogmatism, by a need to not only clearly state what "I" believe, but in the end to make you believe in my own system. However, if we go to a very basic definition of religion using the Latin root, *religare*, which means to reconnect, the basis or common denominator for every religious system is how that *religare*, that reconnection happens (a) between an individual and God, however they define their God, and (b) between individuals themselves. So, if we understand religion as that ability for us to reconnect with one another based on some shared principles, we have a better chance to avoid the pitfall of dogmatism which leads to the imposition of my subjectivity as normative for everyone.
- J. Lupp Can we look at a specific example? In your work with this global mission, I could imagine that you encounter many different groups of people in many different cultural settings, so there certainly cannot be a one-size-fits-all to manage the various things that go on among these different groups. For example, what would happen say, in a church in Germany, would be perhaps different than in the Sudan or in Latin America. I would imagine that the cultural values of these different settings would somehow impact the narrative between you, the global missions program, and the individual groups. How do you manage this potential conflict?
- R. Malpica-Padilla Well, that's why, again, going back to Paolo Freire and the hermeneutical or interpretation cycle of Latin American, either pedagogy or theology, which is always the action/reflection method, one always needs to be in conversation with the context and to reflect on that. Once you agree on something, you need to do more reflection. This constant dynamic between action and reflection allows you to identify the pitfalls and build a system that goes beyond that. If you don't do this, you are just leveling the playing field using your own tools. So, for example, I am Latino by birth and the missionaries that came to Puerto Rico were people from a Swedish background who came from the United States. We Puerto Ricans are a fun people. We love our music and dancing, which I was doing during the day. But when it came time to worship, then I had to worship like the Swedes. There were elements of my story that were not allowed in that relationship between me and the other. So, as I say, I was Puerto Rican by day and Lutheran by night.
- J. Lupp How is that managed nowadays?
- R. Malpica-Padilla You have to come to a point where you deconstruct that system. And in deconstructing the system, you need to come with your own story, with your own idiosyncrasy – meeting that other and engaging in that conversation to discover what is common, what is the shared space, and from that shared space to figure out how we continue to build without the imposition of one to the other. Because once you enter into imposition, we are talking about, you know, colonizing. You draw a line between your

story and my story. And usually when you do that, God is on my side and God justifies whatever actions I want to do to you. I mean, that is the history of humankind right there. So, we need to deconstruct that system. And the only way for us to deconstruct that system is to engage in otherness and embracing differences.

P. Verschure I get that and I agree with you, however, this is not easy, right? So what you're describing, the route that you're describing is a route of reflection, meditation, and intellectual effort. How do you communicate that? How do you educate people to follow such a route, especially in the face of very fundamental existential threats? How do you approach that from the perspective of your church?

R. Malpica-Padilla Well, as you said, we need to do it through education. We need to present what we understand is the core of our beliefs and how that shows up. I usually say to people, and this may sound simple at times, it may sound offensive; I am speaking of the American context, now in the United States; I say to people: "If I offend you, I must apologize, because I try to seek together a better place for all of us here in the US context. But if the gospel offends you, then you have to pick it up with someone else." Jimmy Carter, our former president, said, "How could you describe yourself as a Christian nation?" And right now, we have an impasse in our Congress where a sector of the political spectrum doesn't want to invest 3.5 trillion dollars to provide health care, childcare, tax credits for children, and to build the human infrastructure. So, I criticize that from a religious perspective and the basic common denominator between the one that I shared with you earlier is what Jesus said: Jesus came to give life abundantly for us. That is my bottom line. That's what I engage. My job, from the perspective of global missions or service and justice, is how to engage any other—be it a political other or a religious other—so that together we can build a society where there is sufficient sustainable livelihood for all, because that's what Jesus came to do. Now, within my own church, I have people that will label me as a political animal because they operate not from the perspective of the way of Jesus, but from the perspective of American civil religion. And that is different. The process of education, as Paolo Freire said, is very interesting because from the perspective of the oppressed, the educational process will lead to your own liberation. But then the onus is on you; that is: How do you free your own oppressor? That is really the challenge.

P. Verschure I would like to go back in time a bit, because your career, a large part of it, also developed in parallel to a lot of turmoil in Latin America. Revolutions, dictatorships, attempts to build democratic societies in which I would imagine that you, as you became increasingly more active and more important in in your church, were trying to have an influence, were trying to mediate. Can you describe that process and what the impact has been on your own thinking and on the countries in point?

R. Malpica-Padilla The hardest part for any individual or for any church is that you need to have clarity about what is about to happen to you. You cannot do it from a noncommitted perspective. There were many that engaged the Latin America reality or the reality of life under apartheid in South Africa, from what I will call an intellectual perspective. Let's understand this to see how we can work with it. The process that I envision is harder because the first step is for you to be immersed in the reality that you seek to understand or to address; you have to be committed. You have to put, as we say here in the US, some "skin in the game." That will determine the level of engagement for you as an individual or as a church as you accompany those processes. I firmly believe in one of Karl Marx's critiques of Feuerbach's philosophical system. In 11th thesis, Karl Marx says the purpose of the philosopher, and I will adapt this, the purpose of the theologian is not to understand the world, but to change it. Now, for you to create the space where such change could happen, you need to put in some skin. You cannot pretend to engage it from a noncommittal space.

Right now, in the US, my church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, is one of the whitest denominations in this country: 96% white. And now we want to be new, younger, and diverse. We want to invite people from other ethnic communities. When speaking about this change, my own conversation or my conversation with my own church is to raise a simple question: Just because we now want to be more diverse, what gives you the idea that Latinx people, African American people, etc. will come to our church when historically we as a church have not been present in their struggles. That is the crucial. The church or any organization that engages communities needs to be part of their struggle. That's what the church rediscovered after the Second Vatican Council in the Latin American context. That's why you had two churches: the hierarchy and the church of the poor.

P. Verschure Are you saying that during the time of the dictatorships in Latin America (e.g., in the 70s, 80s) your church did not have sufficient skin in that game to be of any influence?

R. Malpica-Padilla Well, in that particular case, not that much. We had missionaries that were serving there, and during the Pinochet dictatorship, an organization came together which served marginalized, economically marginalized societies. So, there was some skin. That happened in communities; resiliency was built in those communities. But in terms of engaging with the political scene, we didn't have that much skin. There was, however, a German missionary, Helmut Frenz, who really confronted Pinochet. So, I think that the church has to be part of those processes for liberation when marginalized peoples raise their voices. Look at what happened in Namibia, for example, where 90% of the population was at that time Lutheran. Why? Because the church was driving, the church was part. Not necessarily because the church saw itself as a protagonist, but the church was one among many that were working together toward the liberation and transformation of those societies. And transformation is not just a cosmetic change to a system. All systems will allow for transformation; that's how they keep minority people happy. We think that we are making progress, but we are not. Because in the end, the system leads to homeostasis, to that balance; that's how they keep their hegemony from a system perspective. Transformation needs displacement – displacement at the margins. That was the experience of the Latin American churches, of the church in Namibia, of the church in South Africa. And I believe that that is where God is calling the church in the context of the United States. When you have the rise of nativism and populism from the right, or as some people will say fascism, how does the church respond? I believe that God is calling Jesus's church to a new exodus, an exodus to the margins, for it is there at the margin that we will find others, and those others will become not the object of our actions; they are our liberators. They will become the disrupters for hegemonic systems that engage from the perspective of doing something for others, not doing things with and among. In turn, not only is the life of the other is transformed, but my life is transformed as well. Transformation needs to happen on both sides.

P. Verschure But in terms of displacement, you could argue that confronting the bigger struggle (the nationalism, nativism, fascism or neoliberal forces that's on the rise) becomes a rearguard battle. In some sense, you are evading a direct confrontation with those when you say, well, let's then focus on the ones that have been displaced by these main forces that now seem to structure our society. Are you not marginalizing the potential of your religion and your church to bring about a larger change in society, or do I not understand the process?

R. Malpica-Padilla No, because it is not an either-or type of process, it's both-and. At the same time that we journey toward the margin to find those oppressed and work together in their liberation, we need also to address the system. In 1993, we adopted a social statement, [For Peace in God's World](#), to describe the church in three unique ways. And most ELCA members will agree with two wholeheartedly. First, we say that the church needs to

be a healing presence in the world. That is when we go to the margins, etc. Second, the church needs to be a reconciling presence in the world, and no one questions that because at the end of the day, we try to do that, to become bridges between individuals. But the third can make people pause: the church is to be a disturbing presence in the world, and it is precisely that disturbing presence—through our advocacy efforts on Capitol Hill, at the United Nations, at state legislatures—that addresses the larger question. So, again, it's not either-or, it's both-and.

J. Lupp

I find this very interesting because if you are not intimately involved with a group like this, it's very easy to equate global missions with what you described earlier: as the Swede who comes into Puerto Rico and brings in their top-down system of whatever. Now you are describing a completely different situation. And I find that a really positive change. From your position in global missions, I assume you have quite a lot of influence in the ECLA. How do you practically go about this? Is this organized on a local level, like the going to the state legislatures or food bank drives? If so, how does it scale up to a more effective national level, say, in the United States, to impact policy?

R. Malpica-Padilla

Yes, we try to use the learnings from our global engagement to understand and to work in the local context. Why do we do that? Well, because before we needed to go outside of the United States to find the world. Well, the reality is that the whole world is living next door to us. From that perspective, we are using a word that was coined by a Roman Catholic theologian here in Chicago, "glocal," meaning global and local. We face a glocal reality. We start from that base of transformation in local communities: How do we organize to provide better food or address health care needs? Or in these days, the negative, the impact of COVID on black communities in the United States, the issue of refugees from Haiti, or from Latin America; that is our starting point to provide services to those communities, engaging them, reconciling them. So that's the healing and the reconciling. But we cannot stop there. We need to advocate at the level of state legislatures, e.g., in Texas where they have passed, from my perspective, a horrific law about abortion. How can we engage in supporting women's reproductive rights? At the same time, how do we work with the U.S. Congress through our offices? Right now, we have the situation with COVID. How do we engage with the United Nations to address the issue of intellectual property and challenge Big Pharma to allow for the generic production of vaccines, so that people in Africa, where only 1% of the population is vaccinated, gain access? I can love people, feed them, I can do all that, but if I don't work with the system to effect transformation, nothing will happen. We will get stuck. So our actions have to be really comprehensive.

P. Verschure

But Rafael, the consequences of what you're saying is that in order to disrupt, you have to set your targets to disrupt, and that in some sense now becomes a discussion that is not only within the confines of a religious organization. Now, you are a social organization that has political objectives (e.g., in defense of female reproductive rights). That involves political commitment. How do you shape the political agenda to understand where to disrupt and where to be, let's say, compliant and empathic?

R. Malpica-Padilla

We do that through various ways. For example, as we have mentioned, the educational component is really important. We need to educate people, and we have a network throughout the church that provides for that engagement. We need to provide the tools for individuals to really engage in an issue, to understand it. We have a strong social teaching policy basis and we have what I will call the system to deliver that. We also have a very strong advocacy network, both at the level of state legislatures, where we have offices throughout the United States, as well as in Congress. And, we have the way to activate those networks. That is important.

But here comes the issue—the issue that is currently affecting the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—and that is: such engagement in this blue and red reality of the United States is seen as partisan. So many people that sit in the pews of our

congregation think that those of us involved at the national level are way too liberal. I don't apologize for this. I cannot allow any political ideology to claim for itself what belongs to the gospel. So when I engage, and when I engage to advocate for women's reproductive rights, I am not supporting Joe Biden's agenda; I am not against Donald Trump's agenda; I am following the way of Jesus. And I have to explain that, which is often the hardest thing for people to understand. There is a cartoonist called the Naked Pastor and he has a cartoon that depicts a church with people inside the church leaning against the door while Jesus is outside the door. And the caption reads: "Don't let him in, he will change everything." We need to adopt the mindset of Jesus. As one of my friends and former bosses says, "Jesus did not come to die. We need to do away with those atonement theories. Jesus came to live. It was his mission, his radical mission that placed him on the cross." And if we are a group of people that bear that name, we must be open to assume that consequence. So that is at the heart of everything we do, it is to follow the way of Jesus, which was a way not only for those that followed him, it was the way for everyone. Whether they were in the church or external to it.

P. Verschure OK, I understand. Your commitment to the teachings of Jesus defines implicitly where your political commitments will lie. Still, within that you must prioritize. For instance, we can look at ecological collapse, the rights of female reproduction, and a whole slew of other political challenges: How do you prioritize action?

R. Malpica-Padilla Well, we do we do that in conversation with people. I cannot prioritize from my office at the building in Chicago or from my home. Priorities will come from my engagement with the communities. One staff member asked me the other day, "Rafael, I like when you speak about liberation as the outcome. How can we shape that liberation?" I said, "We never shape someone else's liberation. We need to engage with those communities in conversation and they will define how liberation will look like. Then I need to decide whether or not I will join that cause, whether or not I will join the struggle." The church produces, as I said, social statements. I have budget priorities. I have programmatic emphasis. All of that is secondary. That helps me make decisions. What is key and where the priority comes is when I enter into conversation with that other and in that conversation, they define how they understand their context and how liberation will look like. And then the question comes to me, are you willing to walk with them? And then I align the resources according to those programmatic priorities, but they set the agenda.

J. Lupp So, you're not talking about top down, but rather this concept of being immersed within the group and accompanying the needs or responding to the needs of the people that you walk with.

R. Malpica-Padilla Yes. All politics, as someone said, is local. All engagement is local. I cannot come from the outside and say this is what you need. I need to listen to you and carefully listen to what that other is saying. And then I need to make the decision whether or not I will join in that walk. And when I commit, I need to understand that when I go into that walk it is not to redirect others so that my outcome will be the goal. I have to commit so that their outcome becomes a reality, and that's always hard, especially for Americans who always like to be in the driver's seat. We need to be in the passenger seat, really listening to those communities. And that happens outside of the United States as well as when we listen to vulnerable communities.

P. Verschure Still, in that collective process there might be disagreement or even a stalemate. How do you break deadlock in such a process?

R. Malpica-Padilla That is the hard question, and there is no magic wand for us to do that. I would say that it is all about sitting down and listening to the other; about give and take. It is for us to never lose the elasticity. Just imagine a rubber band. When things go bad it is when the rubber band loses its elasticity. So you go to one side or the other. In any engagement,

I always need to work on the possibility of expanding, but then coming to that center. The key is for us to identify what is that common center, what is that shared space that will provide for the stretching and the coming back together. We have talked about many possible ones: our shared humanity, the shared space for engagement and how we define it. And, for some of us, in a certain context, the way of Jesus—that basic way of Jesus, full of life, full life for all of God’s children, whether those children are Christians, or Muslims, or atheists, or no faith. Our goal is to build a better world. I believe that God’s dream for the world is for the world to be a reflection of that extreme relationality that we find in our understanding of God. And, in the end, I think that we can work together with people of all faiths as well as with civil society to create that kind of world. The question for us is: How are we going to address the -isms that are rising up, that get in the way of that? That is really the hard political question.

P. Verschure To propagate that within your own organization, I assume that you rely on a hierarchical structure in which these considerations are being made and communicated, because otherwise it will be unmanageable? How does hierarchy then work within that context?

R. Malpica-Padilla I would say it is an instrument. It is an instrument for achieving a goal. I have never believed in trickledown anything, trickledown economics or anything else, so the dangers of understanding the hierarchy in that sense is problematic. But yes, for example, we have this space for ideation, coming together. We bring together members of the Conference of Bishops, people from congregations, and community organizers and create the space to bounce around each other’s ideas and then agree on (a) to identify the strengths of each member around the table, (b) to pinpoint the complementarity, and (c) to identify who has the capacity to do what and the structure facilitate that conversation.

P. Verschure Working outside the organization, we may encounter competition or collaboration with other religious organizations, which may make very different assumptions about the world. So how do you promote collaboration between different religious organizations? You mentioned Muslims earlier, but this might involve Hinduism, Buddhism, or the different variations of Christianity or the Judeo-Christian tradition. How can such collaboration be managed constructively?

R. Malpica-Padilla Well, as I have been saying, you need to come together and create the space for that conversation; this will permit the identification of a common denominator and allow for collaboration. That is key. After that process has happened, if a possible complementarity cannot be identified, either due to dogmatism or strong differences, then what I do is to move on. There is a management theory developed by a French woman and a Japanese fellow called the “Blue Ocean Strategy.” The principle of that theory is that you never engage your competition because this would result in a red ocean, where you feed on each other; you need to move away from this and create a blue ocean. So if I cannot find a common space for collaboration, I do not engage the resistance because this will consume time and energy. I just move on to create that blue ocean. And for that, I need to find the meeting of minds, people that are willing to build not on their specificity, but on their commonality. It is hard work. You have to be very selective about who are or will be your strategic allies. But also in that conversation, you need to have very clear in your mind what your non-negotiables are. I am willing to negotiate, but you need to understand what are your non-negotiables, because I cannot cross that line. To identify that line is very important.

P. Verschure So what are non-negotiables for ELCA?

R. Malpica-Padilla I don’t know if at this moment I can identify those, but if I use the social teachings, one non-negotiable is our understanding of economic life or, which is a sufficient, sustainable livelihood for all. That is a non-negotiable. Justice, equity is a non-

negotiable. Dismantling patriarchal, dehumanizing systems is a non-negotiable for us. And for me, at the end of the day, so too is the way of Jesus. There is a philosopher, a theologian here in the United States by the name of John Caputo, who wrote a book playing off the popular notion of W.W.J.D. (What would Jesus do?) and redefining it as: What would Jesus deconstruct? His theory is that Jesus is the main deconstructionist for the church, and the challenge for the church lies in the “irreducible gap”—the irreducible gap between Jesus and itself. What I’m trying to do is to reduce that gap between Jesus that is called deconstructionist and the church as it exists today. For me, that that is my non-negotiable: the way of Jesus, the gospel of Jesus, which stands to deconstruct all these *-isms* and this self-centeredness of the individual or of nations. It is Jesus that stands up against American exceptionalism, against individualism, against nativism. That will be my non-negotiable. I cannot reduce Jesus to an ATM that gives blessings to people. No, Jesus is the deconstructionist that comes...

P. Verschure But do you see social media companies (e.g., Google, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) as being at loggerheads with these non-negotiables.

R. Malpica-Padilla Well, look at what happened yesterday here in the United States with Facebook. That is the conversation that we had early on in our political analysis programs, and we are debating that. What is the role of these companies in, for example, benefiting from hate, from misinformation? Then the question is, from a church perspective: What will Jesus say in that context. How can you bring Jesus into that conversation? That is always the difficult thing because, you know, in my experience, many Christians don’t want to bring Jesus into it. They bring Christ, and Christ is a human construct. So, we build Christ with our sociopolitical ideologies, but Jesus of Nazareth? He is clear. Well, clearer, some theologians would say. So the question is: How can we bring the disruption that Jesus brings to those lives of *-isms* that are so prevalent in our context?

P. Verschure To follow up, if we look at all of these challenges we face, do you believe humanity will ever be able to create, manage, and sustain constructive collaboration? Or are we incapable?

R. Malpica-Padilla Paul, if I answer that question for you, I could sell a lot of books. It is really a very important question. But the simple truth is, I don’t know. I don’t know. At times I feel that I am trapped between Luther and Karl Marx. Luther had a very negative anthropology; he described human beings as a bag full of worms. On the other hand, Marx had a very positive anthropology, and that’s why his system failed. He wasn’t able to factor in that small word “sin.” So how do you live between those two? At the end of the day, I need to believe in the potential of humanity, but there are certain things that we need to do. We will not solve any problem with nice clichés or ideas. We really need to get to work on the basis and really, really hold, “we the people,” as the US Constitution says. The people need to rise up. We the people need to hold our governments accountable and say enough is enough. There are enough resources in this world for all of us to have and enjoy the life full of abundance that Jesus promised. So how do we get at it? Not by making everyone Christian, but by working from our basic humanity. We have the capacity to build resilient communities where people will enjoy life and happiness. But we have to get to work.

P. Verschure But every individual human is able to get that message right. So if I would give you magic powers and you could change one feature of humans so that they would be able to actually establish collaboration, what’s the one feature you would change?

R. Malpica-Padilla I would, either...I don’t know if I would call it change of feature or appropriate one. You know, of course, I will come at this from my religious perspective that is deeply rooted in social transformation. And that is what we Lutherans understand happens to all through justification. Justification is a big theological word. But Luther said that God comes to us to free ourselves from us, so that we can concentrate on the other. So if

every human being could receive that gift to displace our eyesight from our own belly button and engage the other and concentrate on serving the neighbor in need, neighbor love, that's what I would give to everyone. My magic wand would give every human being neighbor love. And if we do that, then I think that we can go back and dream the dream that God dreamt when God decided to create. We have messed this up, but neighbor love can get us back to that original intent.

P. Verschure      Rafael Malpica-Padilla, thank you very much for this conversation.

J. Lupp             We appreciate your time and insights.

R. Malpica-Padilla      Thank you, Paul and Julia, for the opportunity. It was a pleasure to be in conversation with you.