

Craig Dykstra
Opening Remarks for the Panel on Institutions

This is our last panel, and it is on institutions. Why do we want to talk about institutions during this concluding moment in our conversation about life abundant? To answer that question, it is important to reflect briefly on what an institution is. In *The Social Construction of Reality* (a book from the past, which I encountered early in my own theological education), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann wrote that institutions—at their most fundamental level—are patterned processes of social interaction. Patterned processes of social interaction. Institutions are not buildings or organizations; rather their function is to pattern human processes of social interaction. Patterned processes of social interaction are what human beings need in order to thrive. Just as patterned processes of biological interaction are absolutely essential for the physical existence of human organisms, patterned processes of social interaction are absolutely essential for human well being and human thriving. If that is what institutions are, then they are necessary and important.

Michael Welker wrote an essay some twenty years ago on law and gospel in which he explored these patterned processes theologically. One of the functions of institutions, he argued, is to secure mutual expectations in trustworthy ways. Biblically, this is a function of both law and gospel in complementary and mutually fructifying ways. And when institutions are well formed, this is the function they serve as well. Without institutions, especially institutions that are shaped and sustained by the wisdom embodied in Christian faith and life, there is surely no life abundant for human beings on this earth.

As we all know, however, institutions can become routinized and drained of purpose and meaning. They can be corrupted. They can be used by persons for their own devious, greedy, selfish, evil reasons. They can be manipulated. They can become oppressive or, more usually, just confused, turning into the tangled machines Willie Jenkins spoke of yesterday. Because of this, if these absolutely necessary realities of human life are to be life giving, they need constant attention, renewal, and reformation all the way along. Still, we have no life without them.

Institutions are necessary but fragile and finite goods, and that is why we are going to talk about institutions in relationship to the questions we have been pursuing during these last couple of days. This final panel will reflect on key institutions of theological education in the light of the telos of life abundant. We will hear from institutional leaders representing a denominational office of theological education, a free-standing seminary, and a university divinity school. We have asked them to address the following questions:

- How do the missions of these institutions intersect with the vision of theological education for life abundant?
- What could these institutions learn from this proposed vision, and how would they expand and revise it?
- How would these institution need to change in order to serve a vision of life abundant?
- How would university divinity schools, free standing seminaries, denominations, foundations, and congregations need relate to one another in order to live out of and toward a telos of life abundant?

To address these questions we have a marvelous panel.

Maryann Moman is the Associate General Secretary of the Division of Ordained Ministry of the General Board of Higher Education in Ministry of the United Methodist Church. That's a long title and a good one. She leads a 26-person staff in the denomination's work to support and train ordained ministers in the UMC. She is thus in a perfect position to reflect with us on how denominational agencies and judicatories, seminaries, colleges, congregations, and other bodies work together to foster life abundant and the participation of pastors in that life. Maryann is an ordained elder in the UMC. Prior to taking up her current position in Nashville nine years ago, she was senior pastor or co-pastor of five churches in Indiana, including Broadway United Methodist Church, which is right around the corner from the Lilly Endowment offices in Indianapolis.

Our second panelist will be Barbara Holmes. Barbara is Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dean of the Seminary, and Professor of Ethics and African American Studies at Memphis Theological Seminary. Barbara has written that she felt a call to ministry at an early age but initially pursued teaching and law. While she was working as a corporate lawyer for the J. C. Penney Corporation, she was ordained as a minister of the Latter Reign Apostolic Holiness Church in Dallas, Texas. Then she went on to complete the M.Div. degree at Columbia Theological Seminary and the Ph.D. in religion and ethics at Vanderbilt University. She is now a minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). She has written several wonderful books: *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*; *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently*; and *A Private Woman in Public Spaces*, a marvelous refection on Barbara Jordan's speeches on ethics, public religion, and law. So we can see how beautifully positioned she is to help us think about theological seminaries, congregations, and public institutions and how they function and operate.

Finally, we will hear from our host, James Hudnut-Beumler, the dean of the Vanderbilt Divinity School and the Anne Potter Wilson Distinguished Professor of American Religious History. Before coming to Vanderbilt University in 2000, Jim was dean of the faculty and executive vice president and professor of religion and culture at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. Before that he worked with me at Lilly Endowment for a couple of years as a program officer. He was a marvelous colleague, and I hated to see him go. But I have loved to see what's happened to him since. Jim is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church. His wife Heidi is also a Presbyterian minister and she was my pastor for several years in Indianapolis, so I got the benefit of knowing both parts of this wonderful couple. Jim has also done some really interesting work in his field. His first book, published in the mid-1990s, was *Looking for God in the Suburbs: The Religion of the American Dream and Its Critics, 1945-1965*. That was the period of "the comfortable pew" and "the suburban captivity of the churches"—a diagnosis of American religious life that proved to have enormous consequences for theological education. He also wrote, with a number of colleagues, *The History of the Riverside Church in the City of New York: Religion, Race, and Ethnicity*. More recently, he has been working on issues of money and institutions in American Protestantism. *Generous Saints: Congregations Rethinking Ethics and Money* is a short book that is enormously useful for local congregations thinking about this very touchy, very difficult, very, very important topic. His larger study, published in 2007, is *In Pursuit of the Almighty's Dollar: A History of Money and American Protestantism*.