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THE MARKS OF AN ELCA COLLEGE: ONE BISHOP’S REFLECTIONS

Stanley N. Olson

INTRODUCTION

Last January Arne Selbyg invited me to make a presentation at this event and I jumped at the chance. You know the old Latin motto dear to most professors and preachers—*carpe podium*, seize the podium. I have a passionate commitment to Lutheran higher education. It has been interesting and challenging to put some thoughts in order for today’s presentation.

Arne invited me to offer my perspectives as a bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Since many of you are not Lutheran and you who are probably have not had much reason to pay attention to ecclesiastical functions, let me do some explaining. The Greek word *episcopos* means overseer and is translated “bishop” when it occurs in the New Testament. The title and office have persisted for two thousand years but functions, understandings and incumbencies have varied widely. One of the constants from the first century until now, has been that bishops have been expected to know the church’s principles, doctrines and beliefs and help put those to work serving and guiding ordinary people in their everyday lives. The ELCA expects its bishops to be servant leaders, attending to Word of God for the sake of the life and work of our institutional part of the whole Church. Most often I nurture the connectedness of the church—the connectedness of people to the Bible and Lutheran teaching, of congregation to congregation, of congregation to larger church, of congregations to service and educational institutions, of those institutions to each other, of people called to serve with people in need, and so on. I call myself, “Harness Boy,” because it’s my job as bishop to help keep the connections in good working order, for the sake of the church’s central purposes. “Network Administrator” would be a more modern nickname for one who does this work.

I’ll talk today from that perspective—as a servant leader who is expected to nurture the connections that help the church do the work to which its called. It’s my job to be interested in results, the bottom line, where the rubber hits the road—or whatever cliche you prefer. As a bishop, I want to know how the colleges of the ELCA do and can serve the mission of this church.

I must insert a couple oral footnotes. My thinking on church colleges has been shaped by many experiences and by the ideas of many others. The shaping started early. My parents graduated from two of our colleges and we visited those campuses often when I was young. Dad’s several terms on a board of regents gave us other contacts. I graduated from Waldorf and St. Olaf. Our two daughters are graduates of a Lutheran college. Christa was way over on the humanities end of things and Maren on the science end—and both speak highly of their education—and we are grateful. I’ve served now for eight years on the board of Gustavus Adolphus and had the concomitant challenge and privilege of preaching each year for the celebration of newly tenured faculty. And, of course, in my work with pastors, lay leaders and three hundred congregations I meet graduates of our colleges, I see needs and occasionally I hear complaints.

My reflections have been guided by many people, most recently two thinkers have been especially helpful to me: Prof. Darrell Jodock now at Gustavus and long at Muhlenberg, and Mark Edwards, till recently president of St. Olaf. Along with many others they have done excellent practical and theoretical work on the strong foundation in Lutheran tradition for liberal arts education. I strongly commend to you the insights of Mark and Darrell. In the printed copy of this talk I give the bibliographic reference for one good essay by each. 1 Mark also has a book forthcoming.

MY PREMATURE TITLE

Have you ever had to submit a title for a talk or paper before you had time to work much on the project? You know how it goes. The mail brings the second or third pointed reminder from the conference organizer. You realize something must be sent. Of course, you had some ideas when you accepted the invitation, and you have been mulling things over while traveling and during boring presentations at other conferences. So, you venture a title, e-mail it as requested—and then proceed to write a talk that takes a different direction!

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Just so, your printed schedule offers a title for a talk I might have given, but won’t. Those four snazzy nouns — fealty, insouciance, ingenuity and focus were supposed to outline the paper, instead they will serve as an introduction to my convictions on the subject.

**Fealty:** Fealty is a word with medieval flavor, but it simply means faithfulness. If I’d just written “faithfulness,” you would have recognized it as a churchy word and would have assumed you already knew my point. I do want to keep you listening—so, fealty. I believe that each college of this church should demonstrate fealty to that college’s stated mission. And, I believe that mission should reflect and be compatible with Christian understandings of life and learning. More on mission, mission statements and marketing later.

**Ingenuity:** Ingenuity points to my conviction that Lutheran colleges should be seeking creative and effective ways to take what is and link it to the needs of people. Our colleges should be places where the treasures of truth are opened and shared in fresh and productive ways, ways that liberate people. I have in mind not only those programs which fit under a traditional understanding of the liberal arts but also all other things our colleges and universities may decide to do. They should be characterized by ingenuity, creatively helping people do good.

**Insouciance:** “Freedom” might have been a better quality to name here, but it has the same disadvantage as “faithfulness.” It’s too familiar. Further, insouciance implies an element of grace, gaiety, humor, lightness. Think of it as the incredible lightness of being Lutheran. We’ll talk about gravity too, but every college works at that. I expect Lutheran colleges to reflect the joy of the gospel, an open future. Do you have sacred cows? Make hamburgers. It’s a Lutheran thing to do.

**Focus:** This one is simple. The work of a Lutheran college is to prepare students for service in the world, to prepare them for their vocations. Students are the point, students for the world.

Take that as an overview. I want to make some more complex points and I need eight categories to do it.

**Marks of a Lutheran College—What Should We Be Able to Observe?**

What are the marks of a Lutheran college? What should I, as a churchman, be able to observe in our colleges if I take the time to know them well? I do not use the following elements as *distinguishing* marks because most or all would be found, *mutatis mutandis*, in other liberal arts colleges. Here are the eight:

- intentional Lutheran identity
- significant Lutheran presence
- Christian faith at the table
- freedom of inquiry
- coaching toward vocation
- gravity and grace
- nurtured community
- excellence by its own standards

Though the first two include the word Lutheran and are different from the six that follow, I do not intend this list to be in any priority order. Rather, I will argue, that our colleges should deserve a bold checkmark for each item on this list.

**Mark One: Intentional Lutheran Identity**

This first mark gets the mission questions on the table and keeps them there. Our colleges should publically identify themselves as Lutheran. This can be done in a variety of ways. Pacific Lutheran, Texas Lutheran and California Lutheran Universities and Midland Lutheran College have the term right out front—in their names. Luther College does the same—though one might worry whether people know the difference between Martin Luther and Martin Luther King.
of St. Olaf, Gustavus Adolphus, Muhlenberg, Wartburg, Wittenberg and Augsburg require even more sophisticated historical knowledge to get the connection. (I am not optimistic. In my high school years I once road the train through Northfield. A young woman across from me pointed to the buildings of Carleton College and told her seat mate, “That’s St. Olaf’s, it’s a Catholic girls school.” I figured she was wrong on so many points I didn’t even try to correct her.) And then there are the two Augustana’s and Concordia. I fear that relatively few insiders and hardly any outsiders would hear those names and quickly think “Lutheran.”

To establish clear Lutheran identity, mission statements play a critical role. How does the college intentionally fit together its academic mission and its Lutheran connections? I examined the mission statements of our twenty-eight colleges. Colleges apparently have widely varying ideas of what a mission statement is and how long it should be. Some bear the rough marks of committee work and need polishing. Nevertheless, the survey was revealing. I paid attention to whether and how the church was mentioned in each mission statement. Here is a summary (Table One):

**Table One: Religious Terms Used in ELCA College Mission Statements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Term</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Evangelical Lutheran Church in America”</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Lutheran”</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Christian,” or “church”</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Judeo-Christian”</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“faith,” “spiritual,” or “religious”</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no reference</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The mission statements have equally diverse ways to explain (or obscure) the nature of the connection between the college and the church. I tabulated the formulations in the seventeen that used the term Lutheran alone or in the phrase Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. (Table Two)

**Table Two: Nature of Link in Those that Include “Lutheran” or “ELCA”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formulation</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“college of the ELCA,” etc</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“related to, “affiliated with,” “partnership with,” etc</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“education shall be in harmony with the Christian faith as taught by the ELCA.” “intends to model…the Lutheran understanding of life,”</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Lutheran heritage of free inquiry”</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“rooted in,” “heritage,” etc</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Lutheran institution,” use of “Lutheran” only in the school name</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To summarize: almost half the mission statements do not include either “Lutheran” or “Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.” Of the seventeen that do, six leave the term “Lutheran” un-explicated or use it as a reference to the past, with or without implications for the present. Eight mission statements use affiliation terms without further definition. Three make some kind of explicit connection between the mission of the college and Lutheran faith. In my opinion, only the eleven mission statements that fall into the latter two categories are adequate to establish an intentional, working Lutheran identity.

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I serve on a college board and am not naive about the political challenge of altering a college mission statement. (I think I'll skip the faculty meeting that discusses this matter.) However, I think the effort would be worth making for most of our colleges. My reason is simple, if the Lutheran connection is not an explicit part of the mission statement, then I suspect it will not be taken seriously, will not be widely discussed and debated, and will not be a significant factor in hiring administrators and faculty or in tenure and promotion decisions. I do not think a mission statement needs to spell out the nature of the relationship between the college and Lutheranism. Of the models we have, I incline toward those that simply assert potential by using the preposition “of” or such terms as “affiliation” or “partnership.” Such terms, I think will encourage discussion and reflection and to allow change and growth.

Mission statements are vital for internal identity. Marketing is similarly important for making the Lutheran link a matter of public importance. I checked a few of our college web sites. As are mission statements, web sites are diverse. Some have the Lutheran connection front and center on the home page. On others, it is virtually impossible (excuse the pun) to find any reference to the college’s church connection. I wonder about the glitzy printed material that is sent out to prospective students. Is the Lutheran connection prominently mentioned? Have some colleges, or their marketing people, concluded that the Lutheran connection is a disadvantage to be kept a secret? Others seem to treat it as an asset. Why the difference? I argue that the connection is real, ought to be evident, and can be an asset. I contend that those who work with the college’s public identity should aim to make it so.

Other interesting places to check on public identity are the notices of faculty positions and presidential searches. I argue for explicit assertion of the Lutheran affiliation in both places. The assertion should be followed directly with some of the arguments that make the affiliation an asset—a commitment to free inquiry, attention to vocation, concern for community discourse, etc—and by a welcome to all applicants who can embrace the college’s mission.

What would an internal and external communication audit show about your college’s intentional Lutheran identity? I think the ELCA expects it to be clear. This identity will be most beneficial when it is wrestled with and given concrete shape. That will not happen if the Lutheran link is kept secret.

**MARK TWO: SIGNIFICANT LUTHERAN PRESENCE**

Lutheranism understands itself to be a reforming movement within the whole church. Though key insights and normative teachings are seen as essential, Lutherans do not define church by doctrines or allegiances. The church is present where God is allowed to speak in human words and through the church’s ritual meal and washing, Holy Communion and Baptism, which unite the community. Lutherans understand the church to be about relationships, about people. A Lutheran college will demonstrate a mission and ideas which could be called Lutheran, but there must also be a human presence to Lutheranism. Thus, in addition to having a public Lutheran identity, the ELCA expects to find a significant Lutheran presence on its college campuses. Several things are part of that presence:

*Worship and witness* that fit within (and stretch) the broad Lutheran tradition — We do not want our colleges to see themselves fundamentally as agents of conversion or indoctrination, but our colleges must be places where members of the college community can count on hearing Lutheran proclamation of the gospel and where they can readily join gatherings to express faith through worship in Lutheran modes. Proclamation and worship should be well done by Lutheran standards. Those standards include the conviction that worship and proclamation should be open and welcoming.

*Academic study of religion*, including Lutheranism – The academic curriculum should direct all students to consideration of religion, including Lutheran theology and history. Some understanding of the Christian tradition is an expectation for graduates. No student should graduate without encountering discussions of the Lutheran reasons for sponsoring liberal arts colleges and universities.

*Campus presentations and dialogs that often include, but not in a privileged role, ELCA members* who are in servant leadership roles outside the college.

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Lutheran chaplain(s) or campus pastor(s) – These pastors should be members of the clergy or lay rosters of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and reflect its statement of faith. It may often be appropriate to have chaplains of other denominations and faiths as well.

Administrators, faculty, students, and board members who self-consciously identify as Lutherans and hold a Lutheran view of higher education

Administrators, faculty, students, and board members who, though not Lutheran and perhaps not Christian, hold or come to hold a view of higher education closely compatible with Lutheran views and emphases

These last two expectations are complicated and difficult to define and put into practice, of course. I would not argue for Lutheran quotas, but I do think that each facet of the college community needs a significant number of Lutherans—not for logical or theological reasons but for practical ones—to help keep going the human conversation that the church expects.

Specifically, I think our colleges should regularly seek Lutheran presidents. The academic dean should fit into one of these two categories—be a Lutheran or hold compatible views. Such advocates for Lutheran understandings should be present in most if not all departments. (Were I wealthy, I would endow a few chairs for Lutherans in the sciences and economics.) Boards should have a preponderance of Lutherans in numbers and in influence. The conversation requires such personally invested participants.

Eschewing quotas, how would one achieve a significant Lutheran presence among administrators, faculty and students? Key factors, I think, are mission clarity, public identity, the assumption that mission will shape criteria for admission and for hiring, the assumption that mission will shape planning and strategies. Endowed professorships, research grants, targeted scholarships, and care in the selection of student admissions hosts can also be helpful.

I believe that the church expects each of its colleges to work continually at the questions of maintaining a strong Lutheran presence.

The first mark I cited was about intentional identity—mission. The second mark was about the presence of people with particular kinds of concerns and commitments. The six marks are qualities and activities this church expects to find at its colleges.

Mark Three: Christian Faith at Every Table

This mark can be stated much more briefly than the previous two, but it is broad and complex enough to stand as one way to summarize the task of a Lutheran college. Christian faith must always have a place at the table, every table. It should be an assumption at an ELCA college that insights and questions spawned by Christian faith can be welcomed in all discussions and forums.

Lutherans assert that all reality is within God’s concern. However, Luther made an important distinction between two spheres of that concern. These are often called the two kingdoms, the two realms, or the left and right hand of God. The realm of the right is the religious, humanity’s individual and collective trusting relationship with God. Here Scripture and Christian teaching are normative and have direct impact. The realm of the left includes the structures of governance and morals but also knowledge of people and the world in which we live. Here Christians can claim no special insight or privileged access to knowledge. Nor do Lutherans claim that they have any unique right to determine answers and outcomes on the basis of their faith. Even the institutional shape of the church is a matter of the left for Lutherans.

According to Luther’s insights, all areas of academic study are matters of the left hand realm. Faith does not dictate content, method or conclusions for the academic life of Lutheran colleges. Lutherans do not believe that there is such a thing as Lutheran biology, Lutheran economics or Lutheran history. There is history of Lutherans and Lutheran theology, of course,
but Lutherans do not claim there is one particular way to do history—or theology or philosophy or chemistry or any other subject. Substitute “Christian” in each of those statements, and we still hold them true. There is no unique Christian content or method for physics, or business, or Russian literature.

Thus, this third mark of a Lutheran college is not an assertion about subject matter or approach. Rather, the church expects the questions and concerns of faith to be welcome in the college conversations about all matters. These questions and concerns will fit into the conversation in ways appropriate to the topic at hand.

**MARK FOUR: FREEDOM OF INQUIRY**

This mark is the necessary partner of the previous one, even its corollary. The two-realms approach means also that Lutheran colleges will value the liberal arts, the liberating arts. All matters are within the concern of God. Therefore our colleges will encourage active pursuit of any question or area of useful knowledge. Our colleges should be characterized by freedom of inquiry and its particular form, academic freedom. Martin Luther taught that the human has no freedom to create a relationship with God, but he taught with equal conviction that each person has full freedom and responsibility to make decisions for daily life, including communal decisions. Our colleges will seek faculty, curricula and programs to enable their students to think and learn free from constraining use of doctrine, history, group identity or other matters.

Freedom of inquiry is not merely freedom from various constraints. A moment ago I said that our colleges, “...encourage active pursuit of any question or area of useful knowledge.” The usefulness of knowledge is determined by its impact on others. Consider Luther’s oft-quoted words, “A Christian is perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Note, this expectation is not a prior constraint on study, but it is an expectation that the outcome of the whole endeavor will be the good of all. It is freedom for service.

The freedom sought and offered is not a disconnected autonomy. A Lutheran college community has many aspects but the central one will always be the endeavor of learning together, learning that truth is a shared reality. This means learning to discuss, to challenge, to change, to accept differences.

Lutherans understand that the world is a great gift and that it cannot be fully comprehended by any of us, nor is anyone wise enough to determine some questions or areas of study to be out of bounds. Our colleges should celebrate questions and teach people to think. This can only happen when community members are allowed freedom of inquiry and are urged to wrestle with the challenges of such freedom and the possibility of beneficial results.

**MARK FIVE: COACHING TOWARD VOCATION**

A commitment to vocation could have been included with the prior discussion of freedom from and freedom for, but it has more prominence in a Lutheran approach to higher education and deserves to be treated separately. Nearly all the ELCA colleges speak of service in their mission statements. There is a commendable consistency in this focus. Often the language is explicitly about service and references to service in the world are frequent. Surprisingly and regrettably, the traditional Lutheran term of *vocation* or *calling* is rarely used. I suspect that these terms will become more common in our college vocabulary, thanks to the generosity of the Lilly Endowment in handing out millions of dollars to support attention to vocation. The specific term is helpful because it implies service and direction but also places the summons outside the self. For the church, of course, the call comes from God. I am happy to defend and encourage that traditional Lutheran use on our campuses. However, I also think the concept of vocation translates well into non-religious categories. Even if our students do not have or want religious faith as a centering element in their lives, our colleges should intend that they be drawn out of themselves and toward the world. The language of vocation is useful here.

Let me tell you a story that is part of my family history and thus of my identity. When my dad was a senior at Augustana, Sioux Falls, he went to see his advisor, Professor Stanley Olsen of the philosophy and religion department. Dad told Professor Olsen he wanted to talk about going to seminary after college, as his older brother had done. At some point in the conversation, Dr. Olsen suspected that Dad had reservations about seminary and asked, “What would you really like to do?”
Dad said, “I’d like to go back and farm with my dad.” Olsen’s wise response was, “God needs Christian farmers too.” I grew up with that story. It shaped my thinking about work. Not until I got to seminary did I discover that the story had a Lutheran name—vocation.

Our colleges need to be engaged in helping students discern where their gifts and joys meet the world’s needs. We should promise college applicants that this will be part of the conversation in their years on campus. We need to encourage faculty, staff and administration to reflect on the callings of their own lives and do so openly.

Under this heading of vocational coaching, I would include and encourage the programs by which our colleges send students into inner cities, onto reservations, and around the world. We should not be surprised that Lutheran colleges rank disproportionately high in percentage studying abroad. Exposure to the world one doesn’t know is vital for vocational clarity. I would advocate for strong requirements in foreign language and culture study also.

**MARK SIX: GRAVITY AND GRACE**

I find this mark hard to label and describe, but think it no less important for being elusive. I used “insouciance” to make the point originally. There must be freedom at a Lutheran college to look hard at the weighty questions of human existence. Students must be invited to passionate involvement in ideas and actions. And, on the other hand, the freedom must also allow people to laugh at their own pretensions, to rise from their falls, and to realize that learning is far too important to be taken as a somber matter. Community members need to experience the grace and joy of being accepted without condition.

Our colleges should nurture wonder and awe at what is, convictions about the value and worth of learning, and humility before the complexity and mystery of reality. The realities we call sin and saintliness must be faced and studied. Both evil and redemption are fit objects for study at a Lutheran college.

**MARK SEVEN: NURTURED COMMUNITY**

Lutheran colleges will conspicuously care about the quality of human community on campus. (I think they will also care about the community that links graduates back to the campus, and not only to make alumni feel good and generous. But, my point here is about campus community.) It is no coincidence that our colleges are mostly residential. We want to give students a full-spectrum experience of life together. Our colleges work hard to offer the same to any non-resident students. The colleges will nurture and insist on mutual respect. They will cultivate diversity and its appreciation. Shared involvement in academics, sports, the arts, religion, work, service and leisure is basic to Lutheran higher education.

Our colleges will make deliberate efforts to involve faculty, administrators and staff with students in community. Professors will be expected to know and value their students. Students will be expected to respect and appreciate faculty and to know and value those who serve them as custodians and other support staff. Character formation is a college goal, pursued though the college and larger communities.

The boundaries of the college community will be porous. Links will be forged intentionally with the local community and the global community. Attention to the whole person and the whole world will not be cliches.

**MARK EIGHT: EXCELLENCE BY ITS OWN STANDARDS**

The final mark the ELCA seeks in its colleges is an appropriate excellence. The church looks for excellence according to the criteria above, criteria based on the college’s mission. When evaluating or setting goals, it is easy to forget the mission and borrow standards from elsewhere. For example, for a Lutheran college, competitive admissions data, *per se*, are not a criterion for excellence. For a Lutheran college, faculty publications and levels of student research, *per se*, are not criteria for excellence. Any of these may be important secondary criteria, but the church expects its colleges to measure according to stated mission and, as I have already said, it expects that mission to reflect and be compatible with Christian convictions.

Those eight marks seem to me to be essential for a college of this church.
The ELCA’s Expectations of Itself as a Church with Colleges

Fair is fair. Having talked long about the church’s expectations of its colleges. I will conclude with brief comments about the reverse—what should the colleges expect from the ELCA?

First, I think the ELCA should be seen as a commissioner of colleges. We send our colleges into the world with a mission, a purpose congruent with the church’s own mission. The church sees the mission of the colleges as part of its own mission. Thus an ELCA college should expect the church to fulfill its own mission. The church should expect mutual conversation with each college about that college’s mission. When mission statements are formulated, the college should expect the ELCA to participate in the conversation, following whatever constitutional covenants each college has established for such matters.

Second, the ELCA should function in ways that allow each of its commissioned colleges to be both independent and closely related. The college is not the church. I think of the image of the parent who nurtures children in order that they may become independent adults and who yet hopes and intends that parent and mature child will remain bound together in ways that are important and beneficial for both parties.

Third, an ELCA college should expect the church to allow it freedom to adventure in learning. To push the family imagery, the church should expect that its colleges will be something like perpetual teenagers—adventurous, pushing the edges, always having some contingency in their respect for the commissioning church. The church should welcome such testing, even as it holds its collective breath about particular uses of freedom.

Fourth, the ELCA should expect to be a supporter and advocate for its colleges in many ways. Budgeted funds from the church should grow and not continue their decline. The church should likely do more to help the colleges encourage special gifts from individual members and congregations. We need to sustain our partnership for student recruitment. Since the ELCA wants to facilitate the presence of Lutherans on our faculties, it should offer support for talented Lutheran grads who could seek terminal degrees and strengthen the pool of faculty candidates. The ELCA should defend its colleges when they are criticized for things which are integral to their mission. For example, the church should defend academic freedom, even when the content of such freedom is troubling to church leaders or members.

Fifth, the ELCA should seek to exercise good stewardship of the graduates of our colleges and those who work there. The church is a beneficiary and ought to use those benefits wisely. Faculty contribute ideas and passion in many areas that concern the church. Graduates take on servant leader roles in congregations and the larger church. Colleges and their graduates critique and challenge the church and help keep it on track. These gifts should be acknowledged and put to work.

Sixth and finally, the colleges should expect the church to be true to its own mission, to adhere to its convictions, to be engaged in internal and external conversation about those convictions, and to be able to change convictions and practices when mission requires change. In that sense, the colleges should expect the church to be Lutheran.

I believe that the ELCA colleges and the ELCA as a whole have had and will have a mutually beneficial relationship. The work and image of the ELCA are enhanced when its colleges do their work well. The colleges will be more attractive and effective when their church demonstrates its love of learning and respect for education.


Stanley Olson is the director of the Division for Ministry of the ELCA and former Bishop of the Southwest Minnesota Synod.