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FALL 2017

# Intersections

Faith, Learning, and the Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education



IN THIS ISSUE

Reforming Church and Academy:  
500 Years and Counting

**Intersections** is a publication by and largely for the academic communities of the twenty-seven institutions that comprise the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU). Each issue reflects on the **intersection** of faith, learning, and teaching within Lutheran higher education. It is published by the NECU, and has its home in the Presidential Center for Faith and Learning at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, the institutional sponsor of the publication. **Intersections** extends and enhances discussions fostered by the annual Vocation of the Lutheran College Conference, together lifting up the vocation of Lutheran colleges and universities. It aims to raise the level of awareness among faculty, staff, and administration about the Lutheran heritage and church-relatedness of their institutions, especially as these **intersect** with contemporary challenges, opportunities, and initiatives.

## About the Cover and Artist

**Diego B. Lasansky**

*Martin Luther, 2014*

Collage, pencil, and ink on paper, 36"x 32"

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[www.diegolasansky.com](http://www.diegolasansky.com)

This image of Martin Luther was created in the mediums of drawing and collage, with pencil and ink on paper. It considers the figurative and formal elements of a portrait of Martin Luther prior to him assuming the identity or persona of Junker Jörg as he went into hiding.

## Intersections

Number 46 Fall 2017

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# From the Publisher



When the ELCA's churchwide organization and the institutions of higher education related to the ELCA agreed to establish the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU), the presidents and church leaders did not have in mind the 2017 commemoration of the five-hundredth anniversary

of the Lutheran Reformation. The topic of Lutheran identity in higher education did receive focused attention in the formation of NECU and that attention has continued during our initial two years of operation. But NECU did not take up this work because the five-hundredth anniversary year was pending. Interest among the presidents caused us to focus attention on the topic of Lutheran identity.

A survey of the presidents taken in the years leading up to the establishment of NECU revealed their hope that the new association could help them explain the Lutheran identity of their schools. This topic was the only one that all the presidents agreed was a priority for NECU among an array of activities historically offered by the churchwide organization for ELCA colleges and universities. In a time when all ELCA schools are no longer populated mostly by Lutherans, the presidents wanted assistance in personally understanding and professionally articulating to their diverse constituencies Lutheran identity in higher

education. They knew their schools had been founded by the Lutheran church and remained formally part of it. But what did it mean for schools to be Lutheran in the twenty-first century? Now that most schools were no longer connected to the Lutheran church through personal and cultural ties, why and how were they Lutheran?

A faculty working group spent the last academic year developing a short document that responded to those questions. NECU presidents gathered in June 2017 at the Lutheran Center in Chicago to review a draft of "Rooted and Open: Our Common Institutional Calling." A revised document, edited in light of comments made during the June meeting, will be presented to the January 2018 annual meeting of NECU.

The document describes Lutheran higher education as an institutional commitment that is held in common by NECU institutions but not dependent on the personal religious commitments of those at NECU institutions. The shared commitment is to certain educational practices and outcomes derived from Lutheran intellectual and educational traditions. Those traditions developed in the wake of what we now call the Lutheran Reformation. NECU's work on Lutheran identity may not have arisen because we wanted a project appropriate to the five-hundredth anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, but I cannot think of a better way to commemorate the anniversary of that movement.

**Mark Wilhelm** is the Executive Director of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities.

# From the Editor

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther famously offered for debate 95 pithy protests against the sale of plenary indulgences, publicly posting the theses (at least by legend) to the door of Wittenberg's Castle Church. The history of offering indulgences goes back to the Crusades. Christian soldiers marching into battle were extended an indulgence, literally a "leniency" or "generosity," that would free them from making full satisfaction for sins incurred in battle. By the sixteenth century, however, indulgences became extracted from the sacrament of penance altogether. Also, one could now buy them to offset penance owed in purgatory as well as on earth. What is more, the indulgence was made transferable—you could use it for yourself or apply it to a loved one. Finally, the indulgences were now considered "plenary," that is, able to forgive the *entire* debt of the soul. Having become purchasable, extractable, transferable, and a damn good deal, the indulgences hawked throughout Germany quickly became a hot commodity.

Many assume that Luther critiqued these practices of the church for demanding too much of its parishioners, for confusing simple faith and trust with arduous "works righteousness." While this side of the critique is true, Luther frames the 95 Theses by showing how the commodification of indulgences curtail *not only* God's grace, *but also* human striving; it makes *both* into quantifiable goods that can be exchanged, transferred, or withdrawn. The first thesis announces that "when our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Matt 4:17, translated in the vulgate as "do penance"], he willed *the entire life of believers* to be one of repentance." Uncoupling Christ's command from a codified system of exchange demands a whole life of turning around.

Luther here critiques any closed economy of salvation that presumes to balance countable human works against a treasury of God's graces. Such spiritual book-keeping errs not in valuing human efforts or God's grace too

highly or too little, but in the very assumption that they can be measured. Such accountings offer false security—the security of assumed objectivity, of faith as eternal life insurance.

Fast-forward 500 years and we still find more than a little spiritual bartering and moral book-keeping. Just last week, awaiting a diagnosis from doctors about my son's acute leg pain, I found myself half-consciously bartering with God: "If only you'll heal him, I'll..." Perhaps many of us fall back into deal-making with God and score-keeping with spouses, colleagues, and students. Our American meritocracy—where at least the privileged presume to get what they deserve—denies the giftedness of life no less than sixteenth-century church practices. Might we still embody the freedom that comes when we cease to keep score? Might we work *from* a sense of being gifted and graced rather than trying to earn recognition, embark on careers, and otherwise make something of ourselves? Or more institutionally, might not Lutheran colleges and universities remain or become places where the gifts of employees, students, and the organization itself are recognized and used *as gifts*, rather than resources or even human "capital"?

By the time of this publication, there will have been countless celebrations of the 500 year anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation in churches around the world. Certainly colleges have celebrated and commemorated as well, but their approach to the Reformation anniversary also includes careful assessment and creative re-appropriation of this 500 year-old tradition. The essays that follow will spark and sustain that consideration. Please be in touch about how you might continue it.



**Jason Mahn** is an Associate Professor of Religion and Director of the Presidential Center for Faith and Learning at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

KATHRYN A. KLEINHANS

# Why Martin Luther and the Reformation Matter 500 Years Later

Each year, the entering class at Wartburg College is asked to read a book over the summer. In 2017, the common reading was *Martin Luther: A Very Short Introduction*, by Scott Hendrix. The following article is adapted from an address given to the entering class on September 13, 2017.



In 1997, *Life* magazine published “The 100 people who made the millennium.” This lengthy article profiled “The top 100 people—including athletes, physicians, inventors, philosophers, writers, and others—who helped influence the history of the world during the last millennium.”

First on the list: Thomas Edison, inventor of the electric light bulb.

Coming in second: Christopher Columbus.

And third on the list of the 100 most influential people who lived between the years 1000 and 2000 of the common era: Martin Luther.

Each year, I tell students in my Lutheran Heritage course that we don’t study Martin Luther and the Reformation only because Wartburg is a college of the Lutheran church, but also because Martin Luther has world-historical significance. Martin Luther, monk and university professor, stood up against the two most powerful institutions in the world of his day, the Roman Church and the Holy Roman Empire, and lived to tell about it.

**Kathryn Kleinhans** holds the Mike and Marge McCoy Family Distinguished Chair in Lutheran Heritage and Mission at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa.

Yet in many ways Martin Luther was not unlike some of our students. He was a first generation college student. He was a son who struggled with the tension between living his own life and pleasing his parents. He was someone who began a major field of study only to realize within the first couple of months of school that it was not for him.

“Third on the list of the 100 most influential people who lived between the years 1000 and 2000 of the common era: Martin Luther.”

Martin’s father, Hans, was in the mining industry. Over time, he worked himself up from labor to management. Like many other upwardly mobile parents, Hans had even greater aspirations for his son. He sent young Martin to Latin schools in preparation for university studies, in a time when a university education was not anywhere near as common as it is today (nor, for that matter, was an elementary education). After university, Martin would continue on to law school.

Just a short time into his legal studies, Martin left the university and joined a monastery. He progressed well in monastic life, just as he had progressed well in school. He was given leadership responsibilities in the Augustinian order, and was eventually sent to earn a doctoral degree and to become a teacher.

Through his study of the Bible, Luther came to a new insight: God doesn't require us to do enough good works to work our way up to heaven. Instead, God comes down to earth, to us, in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus loved us enough to die for us, and for his sake, our sins are forgiven.

This insight is what led to Luther's posting of his 95 Theses against indulgences on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. His theses were an invitation to debate, and the proposed subject of the debate was that God's grace could not be earned or purchased. It was, and is, a gift. As Luther expressed it several years later while writing in seclusion at the Wartburg Castle, "The chief article and foundation of the gospel is that before you take Christ as an example, you accept and recognize him as a gift, as a present that God has given you and that is your own" ("A Brief Instruction" 119).

## Why have Luther and the Reformation had such an Enduring Impact?

Just imagine: a sixteenth-century reform movement started in the small university town of Wittenberg, in the territory of Electoral Saxony, now spans the globe, with over 76 million Lutheran Christians in the world. Imagine: there are approximately 6.5 million Lutheran Christians in the United States, the majority of whom are of German or Scandinavian descent. Yet there are also almost 8 million Lutheran Christians in Ethiopia alone—and over 6 million more in Tanzania. In fact, over 20 million of the world's 76 million Lutherans live in Africa. Who'd have imagined such a thing 500 years ago?

The sixteenth century was a perfect storm of factors making the world ripe for reformation. Luther lived in a time of tremendous cultural, political, and social change. He witnessed the growth of cities, along with the rise of a middle class. He benefitted from technological innovations, most notably the movable-type printing press. Luther lived in a time of expanded global awareness,

marked not least by Christopher Columbus's arrival in the "New World" in 1492. Apocalyptic expectations were strong; many religious people expected that the end of the world was imminent.

We too live in a time of tremendous cultural, political, and social change. Many refer to this period as postmodernity, but while different scholars make different claims about exactly what that means, perhaps we can agree that postmodernity means at least this: We know that things have changed, and are changing, and we're not quite sure what to make of that yet.

For this reason, Luther can serve as a valuable resource for today. Luther was a truly contextual theologian, addressing specific issues in his own place and time. He spoke and wrote in response to the situations that presented themselves: the abuses within the medieval Catholic church, the Peasants War and the Turkish threat, the excesses of other reformers, a barber's request for advice on how to pray, a soldier's request for career counseling, and of course the many, many classroom lectures and sermons. His tireless engagement with the issues of his day is a model for us. This Lutheran commitment to applying insights and commitments in changing contexts is, I think, precisely why Lutheranism is thriving in places like Africa and Asia.

## Areas of Lasting Impact

I'd like to explore with you several specific areas in which Luther and the Reformation made a significant impact in the sixteenth century and which continue to be influential in our day.

### **Vocation**

The first is Luther's understanding of *vocation*. The word "vocation" simply means "calling." Before the Reformation, "vocation" was a technical term limited to religious professionals, who were considered to have a special calling from God. Luther expanded the understanding of vocation to include all people, insisting that all work done responsibly for the sake of others is a calling. Everyone, regardless of job, social status, gender, age, etc., is called by God. In fact, Luther taught that we all have multiple callings. He did not limit the language of vocation to work, as such, but included



the other areas of life in which we have roles and responsibilities, such as family and community. As times change, and throughout our individual lives, our roles and responsibilities change, but the bottom line remains that God calls us to serve our neighbors.

For Luther, this understanding of vocation was not just something for Christians. Luther believed that God created all people to work together and to care for each other. In part, he was inspired by the parable of the Good Samaritan, told by Jesus to answer the question, “Who is my neighbor?” In the parable, it is a religious outsider who cares for the victim in need. Luther challenged the human tendency to make divisions between “us” and “them,” writing: “Now our neighbor is any human being, especially one who needs our help, as Christ interprets it in Luke 10:30–37. Even one who has done me some sort of injury or harm has not shed his humanity on that account or stopped being flesh and blood, a creature of God very much like me; in other words, he does not stop being my neighbor” (*Lectures* 58).

### **Education**

Another area in which Luther and the Reformation made a significant impact is *education*. Within the church, Luther’s commitment to education took the form of translating the Bible into the language of the common people and writing hymns and catechisms to teach the basics of the faith. The commitment to education extended beyond the church, however.

Luther and his fellow reformers were committed to universal education, for boys and for girls, regardless of social class. One reason for this was to equip everyone to read the Bible for her- or himself. Another reason for education is directly related to Luther’s understanding of vocation. Since the community is one of the areas in which one is called to be of service to neighbors, education is necessary to be prepared to respond to the changing needs of society. According to Luther, “A city’s best and greatest welfare, safety, and strength consist in its having many able, learned, wise, honorable, and well-educated citizens.” (“To the Councilmen” 356). He added:

This one consideration alone would be sufficient to justify the establishment everywhere of the very

best schools for both boys and girls, namely, that in order to maintain its temporal estate outwardly the world must have good and capable men and women... Now such men must come from our boys, and such women from our girls. Therefore, it is a matter of properly educating and training our boys and girls to that end. (368)

(Note that the gender-inclusive language is Luther’s own.)

Luther was practical and realistic in his support of education. He wrote to civic leaders encouraging them to establish and maintain schools. Recognizing that some families chose not to send their children to school because they felt it was more important for the boys to work to help support the family, Luther also wrote to parents encouraging them to keep their children in school. He described the education of young people as one of the best long-term investments someone can make. Ever the pragmatist, he also encouraged both the government and those with financial means to provide scholarships for students in need.

### **Social Service**

Another area in which Luther and the Reformation made a significant impact is *social service*. Luther’s advocacy in social matters was a response to the dismantling of late medieval church structures and practices. Luther’s emphasis on grace as a free gift of God led to a decrease in alms-giving, since people no longer saw giving to the poor as a good work that might earn them favor with God. By the mid-1520s, Luther and his colleagues noticed that people were falling through the cracks and that something needed to be done about it.

Luther assisted in the development of a “common chest” to care for those in the community who had fallen on hard times. Specific guidelines were developed for the collection and distribution of funds for the common chest. The chests themselves were fitted with three or four locks, each lock with a different key, each key held by a different public official. A chest could only be unlocked by the agreement of all responsible parties, which was a safeguard against theft and corruption.

As Lutheranism spread throughout Europe and the world, wherever Lutherans went, they not only preached the Gospel and translated the scriptures, but also built

schools and provided institutions of human care. In the United States, for example, Lutheran Services in America (LSA) is an umbrella organization comprised of more than 300 health and human services organizations associated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America or the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. Different member organizations of LSA provide a range of social services, including senior services, health care, services to children and families, disability services, economic empowerment, and housing and community development. While founded and supported by Lutherans, these social ministry organizations serve anyone in need, regardless of age, race, culture, or religious affiliation. Overseas, Lutherans are involved in building hospitals and clinics, digging wells to provide clean water, combatting malaria and HIV/AIDS, supporting microenterprise, and much more.

The twin strands of education and social service are hallmarks of the Lutheran presence throughout the world, and doubtless also a factor in the spread and growth of Lutheranism.

### **Repentance**

So far, I have focused on positive aspects of Luther and the Reformation, but there is another side of the coin, too. There were, of course, literal negative images of Luther produced as anti-Reformation propaganda. One well-known sixteenth-century image portrays Luther as a seven-headed monster while another shows the devil playing Luther's head like a musical instrument.

Unfortunately, the most lasting negative images are of Luther's own making. Luther did not always live up to his own best insights. The same theologian who wrote that every human being, even one who has done me harm, is my neighbor, also wrote crude and even violent words directed to those with whom he disagreed. This prompts a deep self-searching question for those who follow in Luther's footsteps today: How are we responsible for the consequences of our words and our actions, even when those consequences happen long afterwards? Luther's vicious treatise, *On the Jews and Their Lies*, is not only studied by scholars examining the past. An inexpensive paperback edition is available from Amazon, with enthusiastic ratings from contemporary proponents of antisemitism. A recent post on Facebook suggested that perhaps the removal of

statues of Confederate war heroes because of their racism should be followed by the removal of statues of Martin Luther, too, because of his anti-Jewish writings.

Most contemporary Lutheran bodies have rejected Luther's vitriol, but perhaps this has not been done frequently and publicly enough. Contemporary Lutheranism is not defined by a repristination of all things Luther. Consequently, recent observances of the Reformation anniversary have highlighted themes of confession and active repentance for the harms done by Luther's words and by Luther's followers. This is fitting, given that the first of Luther's 95 theses calls believers to whole lives of repentance.

### **The Future**

In this year of recognizing the five-hundredth anniversary of Luther's posting of the 95 Theses, it's important to be clear that the Reformation is not only about the past but also about the future.

An important shift in recent years is that Lutherans and Catholics no longer see each other as adversaries. For the four hundred and ninety-ninth anniversary of the

"When the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) held its assembly in May 2017, the location was not Wittenberg, Germany, but Windhoek, Namibia."

95 theses, Pope Francis participated in a worship service with Lutheran church leaders in the Lutheran cathedral in Lund, Sweden, in recognition of our growing partnership as fellow Christians. In many local communities, Lutherans and Catholics are also holding joint worship services in recognition of the Reformation anniversary.

When the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), a communion of churches representing over 74 million members in 98 countries, held its assembly in May 2017, the location was not Wittenberg, Germany, but Windhoek, Namibia. Rather than meeting in the place where the Reformation began 500 years ago, the assembly was held

in Africa in recognition that the center of Lutheranism in the world today is shifting. As another expression of the LWF's commitment to the future, the preacher at the closing worship service of the Assembly was selected through an international preaching contest, open only to Lutheran pastors under the age of 35. (The preacher selected, the Rev. Lydia Posselt, is a Wartburg College alumna '07, as well as an alumna of Luther Seminary '11.)

The overarching theme of the Lutheran World Federation's observance of the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation is "Liberated by God's Grace." The three subthemes are "Salvation—Not for Sale," "Human Beings—Not for Sale," and "Creation—Not for Sale." The repeated "Not for sale" is, at the simplest level, an expression of Luther's insight that God's grace is a free gift. It is also a strong challenge to a world that seeks to commodify almost everything and that determines value according to the bottom line. Human beings, created in the image of God, are "not for sale," whether in the obvious form of slavery and human trafficking or the more subtle practices of valuing people according to their financial assets, providing unlivable wages without fundamental benefits, or holding women and girls to unrealistic physical standards. The creation itself is also "not for sale," since God placed the first humans on the earth with the charge to be good stewards of what God had made, not to exploit its natural resources for their own benefit.

In a world where Christianity is often associated with moralism and judgmentalism, these LWF themes are a statement not only about the relevance of the Lutheran Christian vision but about its ongoing commitment to justice and to the common good.

I spent much of my summer this year in Wittenberg, Germany, participating in what was called the Reformation World Exhibition. Because Wittenberg is in the part of Germany that was under communist control for over 40 years following WWII, less than 20 percent of the population today identify as Christian. The thrust of the Reformation World Exhibition was not to celebrate the past but to emphasize the need for reformation as an ongoing task in our world today. Lectures and activities addressed sustainability, ecumenism and interfaith

relationships, migration, gender equity, and other vital issues—emphases that undercut common stereotypes of the irrelevance of Christianity.

The motto of the World Expedition was: "Reformation means 'Questioning the world as it is!'" Lutheran churches and institutions today would do well to claim that motto, living reform forward into the next 500 years. The Reformation World Exhibition in Wittenberg posed piercing questions about what in our own lives might need reforming. Large colorful banners throughout the town asked:

"Do I have my smartphone in hand, or does it have me?"

With an image of planet earth, "Is the boat too full or the heart too empty?"

"Shouldn't we rather open our hearts instead of closing our borders?"

A Bread for the World advertisement at the train station boldly proclaimed: "Love your neighbor. The same, wherever the neighbor comes from."

In a display of Reformation-themed messages from communities throughout Germany, the banner from the city of Eisenach, home of the Wartburg Castle, read: "From the Wartburg to the world."

This is our hope for our students, that they, too, will journey out from our ELCA colleges and universities to the world, and that the world will never be the same!

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# Celebrating the Reformation: The Lutheran Foundation of a Called Life

This year marks the five-hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's protest against the sale of indulgences. Luther was not only about objecting to the sale of salvation, he was also concerned to build a new platform for how to think about what it means to be a human being living before God and neighbor. The Lutheran tradition is grounded in something I have termed the "called life." This means that all of life is lived within the framework of vocation or the idea that we are continuously summoned by God to love creation and our neighbors. The origin of this concept is found in the Bible and given further definition by Martin Luther. I begin this essay by looking briefly at how vocation came to be shaped by the monastic tradition. I then proceed to show how Luther's rediscovery of justification by faith alone challenges this tradition and gives it a distinctly new shape. Finally, I describe what vocation means for our lives today as well as for Lutheran higher education in the twenty-first century.

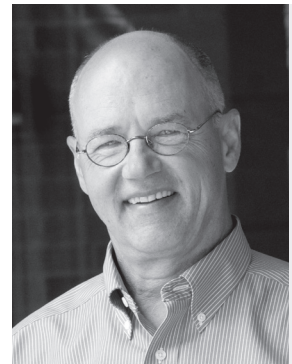
## The Monastic Impulse

In some obvious ways, it was not difficult to be a Christian in the first few centuries of the church's existence. The Roman Empire attempted to consolidate and unify its vast holdings of lands and peoples by enforcing a common religion centered on the divinity of the emperor. Some

Christians resisted this, claiming only Jesus was Lord. This often led to trouble, persecution, and even martyrdom. In other words, the idea of suffering for the sake of Christ was not some abstract ideal but a lived reality. Christians paid fines, lost jobs, sacrificed status, and even gave their lives for their faith.

By the beginning of the fourth century, the number of people professing faith had expanded significantly. Whether the cause was political expediency or an actual revelation, the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 312 which led to the faith becoming legal. Later in the century it would become the only legal religion in the Roman Empire, thus laying the seeds in the west for what would eventually become known as "Christendom."

Now Christians were faced with a new problem: what does it mean to be a Christian in a culture where Christianity is now the norm? As a result, the movement known as monasticism gained momentum. While monks and nuns had been present in small numbers since the first century, interest began to increase in a radical form of life devoted exclusively to God. The theology behind monasticism was given definition by the church father, Eusebius:



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Two ways of life were given by the Lord to his Church. The one is above nature, and beyond common living; it admits not marriage, child-bearing, property or the possession of wealth...like celestial beings, these gaze down upon human life, performing a duty of priesthood to almighty God for the whole race...and a more humble, human way prompts men to join in pure nuptials, and to produce children, to undertake government, to give orders to soldiers fighting for right; it allows them to have minds for farming, trade and other secular interests as well as for religion. (Brown 205)

“Above all, it was monks, nuns, and priests who had *vocations*. They had been placed on a special path to salvation.”

In the western church, it was Benedict of Nursia (480-543) who provided the monastic framework that would be followed by the many orders that developed in the middle ages. His Rule, or list of obligations for monks and nuns, mandated vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. And it should be pointed out that the communities shaped by this ethos were remarkable places in many ways. They served as schools, hospitals, orphanages, and places of refuge. But, above all, it was monks, nuns, and priests who had *vocations*. They had been placed on a special path to salvation. The rest of humanity was left behind to take care of life on earth. As the church became more powerful in the middle ages, this understanding of monasticism went virtually unchallenged until the sixteenth century, the time of the Protestant reformation.

## The Challenge of Martin Luther

Martin Luther was born in 1483 in the city of Eisleben in Saxony in northern Germany. Neither of Luther's parents had vocations at the time of his birth. His father, Hans, was a copper miner and he eventually became quite successful as the owner and operator of several mines. His mother,

Margaret, managed a household, keeping track of the family, and she was also responsible for growing crops and tending to chickens and livestock. In the understanding of the church of the day, they were both members of the “lower level” of society that tended to earthly matters. The spiritual realm was the business of the three monasteries in the town.

As a young man, Luther did not have a vocation either. He was a good student, and as he progressed in his education he carried the hopes of the family. By the age of twenty-two he earned a master's degree and now faced a decision to study for the three professions open to him: law, divinity, or medicine. Luther opted for law, probably in order to please his father. As a lawyer, he could earn a good income and perhaps even be hired as an advisor by one of the princely courts in the region.

Then came a great interruption. As he relates the story later in his life, not long after he began his legal studies he was walking home and was caught in a frightening thunder storm. Trembling, he got down on his knees and prayed to St. Anne, the patron saint of miners. He vowed in his prayer that if he were spared from the storm he would become a monk. Luther survived the thunder and lightning and, since he had made a vow, changed his life's path and entered a strict monastery in the city of Erfurt, also in the region of Saxony. Most notably, he did not even inform his parents of his change of plans. This wounded his father severely and caused a breach in their relationship that took years to heal.

(I often pause at this point in Luther's story when working with students or congregations. Like Luther, we often imagine our lives on some sort of path with the future, both short and long range, mapped out. And as we know, these paths are often interrupted. Sometimes these intrusions are dramatic and involve a death, serious injury or illness, or the loss of a job. In other cases, the interruption may stem from a new idea or an alternative way of looking at life. But it is important to pay attention to these “breaks” in life's narrative. They can become significant opportunities to think about our own sense of calling and the direction we are headed.)

After his first year in the monastery, Luther took his final vows. It was stressed to him by his superiors that “not he who begins but he who perseveres will be saved.”

And as time went on this phrase began to fill Luther with fear. Though he applied himself to the monastic disciplines with all the diligence he could muster, his conscience became increasingly troubled. He worshipped seven times a day. He regularly confessed his sins. He fasted for lengthy periods. But he found no peace. It should be noted that there was no shortage of grace in Luther's life. He received Holy Communion and heard words of absolution from his spiritual advisor. But he also believed that "he had to do his part" in order to be acceptable to a holy God. Eventually he became haunted by the idea that he was not among God's chosen. Should death come (and death was no stranger to people in that time), he was convinced that he would be engulfed by a fearsome eternal fire.

"But all of these 'gods' will eventually let us down. Beauty gives way to age. There is always someone smarter. Our wealth is haunted by fears of losing it."

Luther's eventual liberation came from a source outside of himself. While in the monastery, he continued to be recognized as a good student. He was selected to study the Bible and encouraged to become a teacher of Holy Scripture (he received his doctorate in 1512). It was while meditating on the Bible and especially Paul's letter to the Romans that he gradually came to a new understanding of God. He began to realize that his attempt to make himself worthy of God's love was a fruitless and even faithless task. God doesn't love people because they eventually make themselves lovable with the help of grace. Rather, God's love is for the unlovable. On the cross, Christ took upon himself all sin, and that included Luther's sin as well. And if Luther's sin was on Christ, then that meant it was no longer on him. If it was no longer on him, then he was free of sin. In other words, he was righteous because of Christ and not because he earned or deserved it. The new basis for his life was trust (faith) in Christ and not some watery combination of grace and good works.

(Some say that Luther's experience is so remote from modern life. After all, most of us don't normally fear God's

judgment or worry very often about hell. But are we really different? We also have our "gods" and they can be very demanding and merciless. For many of us our core identity revolves around things like looks, intelligence, income, status, or our "perfect" family. But all of these "gods" will eventually let us down. Beauty gives way to age. There is always someone smarter. Our wealth is haunted by fears of losing it. And most families harbor plenty of secrets that undermine any sense of perfection. As the song says, we look for love in all the wrong places. The truth is that we lead lives darkened by fear and anxiety. Is that so different from Luther?)

## Vocation

So, in a great irony, Luther enters the monastic life in pursuit of the only vocation approved by the church of his day. He ends up rejecting the monk's life as a true calling but in turn receives a genuine vocation as a preacher, teacher, spouse, and citizen. As he put it in a letter to his father (they had finally reconciled after fifteen years) in 1520:

My vow was not worth a fig...in short, it was taken in accordance with human doctrines and the superstition of hypocrites, none of which God has commanded. But behold how much good that God (whose mercies are without number and whose wisdom is without end) has made to come out of all these errors and sins ("Letter" 332-33).

Long after he married and had a family, Luther marveled at how his life unfolded:

I am the son of a peasant...and the grandson and the great grandson. My father wanted to make me into burgomaster (mayor). He went to Mansfeld and became a miner. I became a baccalaureate (college graduate) and a master (graduate school). Then I became a monk and put off the brown beret. My father didn't like it, and then I got into the pope's hair and married an apostate nun. Who could have read that in the stars? (Bainton 231)

So, what was Luther’s new understanding of vocation? He reasoned as follows: If God no longer needs our good works—in any sense—in order to save us, then good works must be solely for this life. That theological conviction opens the window to a new understanding of vocation. There is no longer a separate realm, closer to God, that a person attains by living out vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Now, according to Luther, everyone has a vocation and not just the monk, nun, and priest.

“If God no longer needs our good works—in any sense—in order to save us, then good works must be solely for this life.”

For Luther, there were three separate realms or spheres where callings were lived out. The first was the realm of the church. It was deeply grounded in the gracious Word found in the crucified and risen Christ. In this community, one heard and tasted the good news that God loves sinners. This love then flows out from the gathering of believers to the world and the other two realms of vocation, the domestic and civil realms. A believer was called to be a parent, spouse, and child in the home. She was also called to the world of work as a manager of the household or as a midwife. And, finally, a called life encompassed the civic realm where one looked after the common good. In other words, for Luther, vocation was always relevant. As God was active in creation, upholding and sustaining humanity, so were God’s “masks” (those living out their callings) constantly at work (labor, parenting, governing) in love and service of their neighbors.

## The Called Life

Our next task is to translate Luther’s insights for a twenty-first century audience. The core idea stands: God has freed us in Christ to love our neighbors. But we can also update Luther somewhat while remaining faithful to his fundamental convictions. I often use a graphic that includes the following concepts:



The words aligned vertically indicate the various spheres into which we are called in life. Notice there is overlap with Luther’s own vocational realms. But I have added “self” and “friends” as well. As for the former, we are both called to mind ourselves and take care of ourselves. In other words, we need to be careful that our body and its appetites do not lead us down a path of sensuality. We also need to watch what we eat, get proper exercise and rest, etc. In both the “minding” and “caring” of the body the goal is not our self-fulfillment but rather a health or wellness required to serve the neighbor.

While Luther doesn’t name friendship explicitly in his own understanding of calling, it is clear from his own life that he benefited greatly from the company of people he trusted and respected. His famous “Table Talks” are testimony to the influence of a large circle of colleagues on his thinking. In fact, in recent Luther scholarship there is a tendency to not just focus on Luther alone but rather on the “Wittenberg movement.” This new accent takes into account that Luther’s remarkable accomplishments often were dependent upon close collaboration of gifted colleagues (Arand et al).

Returning to our illustration, the horizontal terms reflect the qualities or characteristics of a calling. As mentioned, vocation is a present-tense word. You are never without one and therefore it is always relevant. Further, a sense of calling is often ordinary. This reflects a reaction against some who define vocation in a heroic way. This way of thinking suggests that a “real” calling involves something dramatic or spectacular. Of course, that might be the case, but most callings are fairly ordinary and even mundane.

It might mean being patient with a roommate or visiting an aging parent. Not the stuff of headlines, but vocation is governed by the need of the neighbor or community and not necessarily by the publicity it generates.

It follows from the ordinariness of vocation that it also might mean a significant struggle. In *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther stresses the need to bear the burdens of the neighbor. He envisions a love that actually participates in the suffering of the one in need (or the community in need) (“Freedom” 88). We should not be surprised that suffering is a close companion of living out a calling. Of course, we have to be careful here. Many have been told to remain in a calling and suffer because that is God’s will. (Think of the abused spouse or the poor laborer.) But the calling is to work to *alleviate* suffering and not rationalize it. Suffering in and of itself has no merit, but when done in love of a neighbor it might be corollary of a called life.

“Attempts to domesticate vocation by identifying it with ‘bliss’ or ‘passion’ more likely have middle class comfort in mind and not the call of a first-century Jew who ended up on a cross.”

Finally, a quality of the called life is a concern for justice. The called life receives its shape from Jesus of Nazareth, the one who crossed lines, offended the powerful, and reached out to the marginalized. Hence vocation is inextricably linked with sensitivity to the outsider and the forgotten. People caught up in a sense of calling ask the awkward questions and demand accountability from those in power. Attempts to domesticate vocation by identifying it with “bliss” or “passion” more likely have middle class comfort in mind and not the call of a first-century Jew who ended up on a cross.

## Implications for Lutheran Colleges

I argue that the best way for Lutheran colleges and universities to embrace their identity is to affirm and embrace a robust sense of vocation. This is a topic that could easily

stretch to several volumes. But let me at least highlight some of the essential qualities of such a school.

First, a college or university with a calling sees its students as made in the image of God. They might not see themselves that way, of course—some might even be offended by such a designation—but there is a great temptation for educational institutions to look upon students in an instrumental way, that is, as a means to another end. For example, I have heard language that designates students as “customers.” Well, customers are always right. The customer needs to be satisfied. The customer comes first. Is this the relationship we are seeking with our students? Aren’t we called to question and correct our students? Don’t we have an obligation to steer them on paths that look beyond goals of self-satisfaction to the common good? Recovery of students as ones made in the image of God opens up a new paradigm for the relationship between the school and the student, one that is rich with meaning, grounded in our tradition, and based in a sense of care for the student as a *human being with ultimate value* and not as a number on an account sheet or a client to be catered to.

Second, a college or university with a calling enlists the entire community to help students discern their vocation, particularly in the sphere of work. Many come with cultural-infused individualism that needs to be challenged. This is not about ignoring the individual but rather about questioning a mindset that sees the wants and needs of the individual as primary. As such, it involves a shift of questions. Instead of asking “How much money will I make?” or “Can I get promoted rapidly?” the new questions are more likely to reflect a self that has been “dislocated” from its position at the center of the universe. As students are exposed to different ideas, people, and experiences they begin to ask discernment questions like this: What are the needs of my community? How do my gifts fit in with those needs? How can we work together to solve this problem?

This is not to suggest that the only valid vocations in the world of labor are those that involve working with poor and marginalized people. We want people to go into banking or marketing with a strong sense of vocation. There is no room for bias against business majors and the suspicion that such folks are really greedier than those headed to service professions. As communities centered in vocation,



we are simply saying that a life centered on the self is limited, short-sighted and harmful to the common good. That truth applies to all areas of vocation: family, work, citizen, and faith-community member.

“A college or university with a calling makes room for faith and its convictions and questions.”

Finally, a college or university with a calling makes room for faith and its convictions and questions. As schools of the church we cannot be silent about God. We affirm that God is at work in all sectors of our institutions (through God’s human “masks”) whether we recognize it or not. With a deep sense of humility, we will admit that faith or religion often gets in the way of serving the neighbor. Sometimes religious people employ God or faith to simply support their own agendas. We also recognize that many without faith often have a strong sense of calling and we should applaud such people in our midst, recognizing that we have the same goal of enriching the common good and that we have much to learn from their perspectives. The idea of vocation being proposed here is not for Lutherans only nor is it only for Christians. Voices outside the Christian tradition are a welcome and necessary part of the conversation.

But we must not take the “safe” path and relegate matters of faith to the private realm. A consumer-dominated culture such as ours would prefer this, of course. A relativized faith or gauzy sense of spirituality undercuts conviction and makes people more vulnerable to market forces bent on self-worship. But our Lutheran and collective sense of calling pushes back against these trends and insists on a place for faith at the table of higher education. It is messy, of course, and it doesn’t consist of trying to “Christianize” all knowledge as some schools from more conservative traditions attempt to do, but we do aspire to make vocation a part of the teaching and conversational horizon of all faculty and staff. It includes a wrestling with the theological dimensions of vocation as might happen in religion courses. This sensibility extends to the financial aid officer who goes beyond the call of duty to help a student

find outside resources to finance his education. It also embraces the biology teacher who takes time to share her own sense of calling or the accounting class that wrestles with a case study about what a firm is called to do when tempted to cross ethical lines.

## Closing Thoughts

As we return to the theme of the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, we need to remember that the reverberations of Luther’s revolution are still felt in our day. One of the great gifts of this tradition is the way it extended a sense of calling from the narrow realm of the monk, nun and priest to the world of the teacher, mother, farmer, citizen, student, and child. Rightly understood,

“Vocation has the power to change us and challenge our temptation to either cynicism or sloth.”

vocation has the power to transform the way we see our students and our commitments to them in the classrooms, labs, offices, and neighborhoods of our schools. Moreover, vocation has the power to change us and challenge our temptation to either cynicism or sloth. As members of Lutheran institutions, we are invited to cultivate the called life in all its dimensions as a vibrant and compelling alternative in the world of higher education.

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LEA F. SCHWEITZ

# Reforming Our Visions of City Nature

Let Me Tell You a Story...

One of the stories my family tells is about my mother as a young girl on a family outing.<sup>1</sup> The only thing I know about this outing is that my mom was bitten by a Canada goose (*Branta canadensis*). Technically, since geese don't have teeth, the story may be slightly exaggerated. In defense of the goose, it is likely that there were goslings nearby, and they were simply trying to protect them. However, my mom's encounter left an impression. Although there are no physical scars, the impact has been mythic in scope because it has served as a warning for two generations: Do not get too close to a Canada goose!

Both my older son and I had learned this lesson at my mother's knee. It echoed in our collective memory as my younger son skipped curiously into an approaching flock of Canada geese.

We were at the Peggy Notebaert nature museum on Chicago's north side. On this particular August day, it was hot—as in, 100-degree heat index hot. And this was the day that the battery of the car died in the parking lot of the Peggy Notebaert nature museum.

My younger son and I were there to pick up my older son from nature camp. We chose this camp because it gives its campers an all-access pass to the great north lawn, the North Pond nature sanctuary, and the award-winning nature museum. The lawn, pond, and museum are part of Lincoln Park, an expanse of more than 1200 acres of green space in an expensive real estate market on the city's north side. Along with the lakefront, Lincoln Park

is a showcase for the vision of Chicago as "*Urbs in Horto*"—"City in a Garden."

The campers had spent the day running on the lawn, meeting snakes and turtles, and digging holes. When we arrived at the museum, we expected some tales about these adventures before the talk turned to baseball and our camper dove his nose into a book for the drive home. Instead, the kids were buckled into a sweltering car, as two separate sets of kind neighbor-strangers tried to get us jump-started.

To no avail.

Sweaty kids poured out of the car to find some refuge in the shade under the leafy oak trees and whatever cooler Lake Michigan breezes could be found. They wanted to kick off their sandals and run in the grass, but ubiquitous goose poop prevented it.

This is the scene. I am negotiating the dead battery, the connection with the tow truck driver, overheated kids, and my own rising anxiety. This is when my younger son wanders wide eyed toward the flock of Canada geese. Because my older son knows my mom's childhood story, he believes his brother is headed toward certain death.

I think we have a little more time, but that moment of decision is visceral. I remember standing beside the parking lot in between the prickly, shrubby roses as this



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moment of decision stretched out before me. Do I rush in and swoop him out of the approaching flock? Or, do I let him explore a little longer?

It's in this stretched-out moment of time that I realize how little I know about these birds. I have no idea what the real risks are in this situation. Will they really bite? If they do, I mean, what kind of damage are we talking about? Do they have diseases? If they do, can they be passed on to humans? Faced with this chasm of unknowing, I simply call: "Please stay close."

"What are the stories that we want to tell—and tell our children—about nature in the city?"

Once all the children and car seats and I were buckled into an air-conditioned car with a ridiculously kind and patient Uber driver, I recognized how much of that drama was enacted because of the story I had learned about my mom being bitten by a goose. In that moment, a new moment of decision emerged.

What are the stories that we want to tell—and tell our children—about nature in the city? How will our family retell this story of our encounter with Canada geese at North Pond? How do we keep our kids and ourselves safe enough and yet cultivate the curiosity that roots them deeply into a place that is infinitely wondrous, but often invisible? These questions apply acutely in the city, and they extend into rural and suburban communities alike.

## Theological Context

How can the stories we tell about the city open up both to the nature we find there and to the God who finds us there? These questions participate in the long theological history that claims that the Book of Nature can be read alongside the Book of Scripture as God's self-revelation to us. This is sometimes called the "two books metaphor" in Christian theological history. It claims that both the Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature can be read by faithful Christians. It affirms that both Scripture and Nature can teach us about the God confessed, taught, and preached in the scriptures. It recognizes that both the

Book of Scripture and the Book of Nature are authored by the same Creator God.

Lutherans have a long history of swimming in this theological stream. We will see two examples in the following sections. The first comes from a late sixteenth-century German Lutheran pastor. The second comes from the writings of Philip Melancthon. Neither approach is sufficient. Yet, they attest to the importance of theologically robust, empirically grounded visions of nature in the Lutheran heritage. Grounded in this heritage, we can tell new stories about urban nature that inspire connection to creation and the Creator in the city.

## First Reading: Moral of the Story

Kathleen Crowther surveys some writings from Reformation-era German Lutheran pastors. Although they are lesser known today, they were widely read in their own time (Crowther 21). In these authors, she finds evidence of a Lutheran reading of the Book of Nature. One example is Konrad Rosbach, born in 1535, a German Lutheran pastor near Frankfurt.

In his text, *Paradise Garden*, published in 1588, he describes the flowering herb, Devil's Bite. The description includes biological features: e.g., it blooms in May and should be gathered then. It includes medicinal uses: Rosbach claims it can be used against poison and plague, and to heal sores (Crowther 29-30). Then, finally, in an allegorical reading, Rosbach gives the spiritual meaning. The root of Devil's Bite seems to have been bitten off just as humans are cut off from the grace of God. And yet, the same little plant also reminds of the promise of Christ because it is a healing herb. Rosbach reads the natural history of plants and animals to teach a lesson.

They echo of the more familiar genre of Aesop's fables. In these fables, natural objects (usually animals) are used to teach a lesson. Consider the surprise ending of a race where the constancy of the tortoise wins over the raw speed of the hare. The moral of the story? "Slow and steady wins the race."

It's like Rosbach's reading of the Book of Nature: "Even a small flowering herb points to Christ." The moral of Rosbach's story is that God's promise extends to sinners; Devil's Bite is both poison and cure just as we are saint and

sinner. And, yet, because of God's promise of salvation in Christ, poison and sinner shall find a remedy and a savior. Rosbach, unlike the fables, adds biological, medical, and natural history to the telling of the tale, but in both cases the story is meant to teach a lesson.

In Rosbach's context, the theological lesson isn't the only thing he wishes to convey. The message is simultaneously a work of polemics. When Rosbach instrumentalizes the little herb, Devil's Bite, for his moral reading of the

"Rosbach's reading of the Book of Nature:  
'Even a small flowering herb points to Christ.'"

Book of Nature, he simultaneously, and not so subtly in the Reformation context, employs nature to distinguish itself from Reformed and Catholic alternatives. The Book of Nature is read as being distinctly Lutheran. Consider how effective this might be as a polemical strategy: according to Rosbach, even Nature confirms that the Lutherans got it right.

This way of reading the Book of Nature could be applied to the Canada geese. In the 1950s, this species was nearly wiped out in North America. Overhunting and declining habitats and waterways brought the number of geese dangerously close to extinction. Canada geese nearly went the way of the Passenger Pigeon, which marked the centenary of its extinction in 2014. In contrast, as a conversation status, Canada geese are in the category of least concern.

The moral of the story? From the impossible and improbable, God brings new life. Canada geese have been restored—abundantly to North America. They could be read as a reminder that in God, even death can be overcome. In the face of extinction, life abundant remains possible through God's promise of salvation in Christ.

If you're like my students, this reading is utterly unpersuasive. Rather than being spiritually edifying or theologically formative, it raises suspicions about the inappropriate co-opting of nature to do the work of polemics. The situation has shifted from a polemical need to distinguish oneself from other Protestants and Catholics to being able to live well together on an increasingly urban planet. These "moral of the story" style readings don't help

with this. Are there other ways to read the Book of Nature that can ignite our spiritual imaginations to make meaningful lives in our urban homes?

## Second Reading: Laying Down the Law

A second reading is not sufficient either, but it highlights the Lutheran legacy of yoking emerging scientific developments and theology. Philip Melanchthon, like the Lutheran pastors that came after him, read the Book of Nature as expressing distinctively Lutheran themes. Given his formative place in the development of the Lutheran Confessions, this is not surprising. However, unlike the moral reading of the Book of Nature described above, Melanchthon read the Book of Nature to "lay down the Law." Whereas authors like Rosbach took up individual natural objects to teach a theological or spiritual lesson, Melanchthon drew on advances in anatomy and astronomy in order to reveal both the providential presence of the Creator God in humans and humanity's fallenness.

In Melanchthon's *Commentarius de anima*, human anatomy as described by Galen (130-200 CE) and updated by Vesal (1514-1564) helps explain the human condition after the Fall. For Melanchthon, contemporary anatomy and physiology have a role in describing the human condition as both disordered and yet situated in a providentially organized creation, which is dependent on divine grace (Kusukawa 60). One does not get the good news of the Gospel from reading the Book of Nature alone, but reading the Book of Nature was essential (Helm 61). Sachiko Kusukawa describes Melanchthon's contributions as nothing short of a transformation of natural philosophy, one that incorporates anatomy—and also some astronomy—as necessary aspects of the theological formation. In Melanchthon's hands, a distinctly Lutheran kind of natural philosophy emerges as a way to read the Book of Nature (Kusukawa 114).

What does any of this have to do with the North Pond Canada geese in the opening story? In the style of Melanchthon, we might take up, for example, urban ecology or population genetics to read the Book of Nature as a story of ecological complexity and adaptation. These emerging ecological sciences could be marshaled to reveal a complex, connected world that is increasingly crafted

by humans and not surprisingly—oh, so, fallen. With this lens, the opening story about the Canada goose reveals the mirror of the law. This isn't a story that ends with species being saved from the brink of extinction, as in the first "moral of the story" reading. No, when humans are at the helm without the grace of God, what you get is overpopulation and crap on your shoes. Instead of a creature of God, geese are pests. Like anatomy in the hands of Melanchthon, ecology could be used to read the story as laying down the law and thus grounding a theological anthropology of justification by grace through faith alone.

"If not through teaching moral lessons or laying down the Law, how can the Lutheran gift of robust readings of the Book of Nature be re-gifted for an urban planet?"

My attempts to tell the story of our Canada goose encounter through the lens of these two Reformation strategies was an attempt to make Rosbach's and Melanchthon's approach more familiar and plausible. It sets a course for unfolding the gift of Lutheran natural history. If not through teaching moral lessons or laying down the Law, how can the Lutheran gift of robust readings of the Book of Nature be re-gifted for an urban planet?

## Reading Glasses

Let's stay with our "Book of Nature" metaphor. In order to read a book, one needs the right tools for the job. One needs to know the alphabet, phonics, grammar, idioms, and some sensory means of access to the words: eyes or ears or touch. In addition, some of us need additional assistance—like reading glasses. In this section, I will argue that Lutheran sacramental theology provides a helpful lens to see the Book of Nature. Lutheran theology is like a pair of glasses for reading the Book of Nature.

Time-lapse photography gives a clear example of what I'm after. Take, for instance, Louie Schwartzberg's National Geographic film, *Mysteries of the Unseen World*. Schwartzberg uses technology to see aspects of the

natural world that escape our notice. For him, film operates as reading glasses for the Book of Nature. Because humans are mid-sized creatures in a universe that is bigger, smaller, faster, and slower than us, we simply do not have access to parts of the universe without some technology such as film. By using film, aspects of nature open up to us. It is not as though the filming created the aspect—it simply revealed it. This is the sense I intend for Lutheran theology as reading glasses that reveals aspects of the Book of Nature to us.

Paul Santmire's spiritual practice of praying the Trinity Prayer has a similar function. Santmire regularly prays: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Come Holy Spirit, Come and Reign." His practice of praying this prayer has molded his "Lutheran-colored reading glasses," and it changes what and how he sees—especially, for instance, when he takes to his field with his scythe. He writes:

It's not simply a matter of going out to the field to "commune with nature." When I arrive in the backfield with my scythe, the eyes of my faith have already been opened by the use of the Trinity Prayer, so that I can then see more readily what is given me to see. The Trinity Prayer is for me, in this spiritual sense, before nature... The Trinity Prayer gives me the insight that allows me to see with new eyes. (Santmire 31)

The Trinity prayer is "before nature" as a pair of reading glasses for Santmire; film is "before nature" as a pair of "reading glasses" for Schwartzberg. For me, the sacramental principle that the finite is capable of the infinite is "before nature." It's the theological principle that functions like a pair of reading glasses to make visible the often invisible Book of Nature in the city.

Martin Luther had a spirituality of everyday things. One of the theological centers of Lutheran theology is the sacramental principle that the finite is capable of the infinite. In the Reformation, this claim was hotly contested.

The issue is the status of the bread and wine in the sacrament of communion and how Christ is present. Reformation debates pitted Zwingli and his followers against Luther and his. The former claimed that Christ was present

“For me, the sacramental principle that the finite is capable of the infinite is the theological principle that functions like a pair of reading glasses to make visible the often invisible Book of Nature in the city.”

in the memory of Christ’s redemptive works; the latter claimed that Christ was really and truly present in, with, and under the bread and the wine. In other words, for Zwingli, “*finitum non capax infiniti*.” The finite is not capable of the infinite. The bread and wine of communion have a symbolic function. They point to the redemptive work of Christ, but Christ is not truly present in the bread and wine. They remind us of our forgiveness through Christ. Christ is present in our remembrance of his sacrifice, but Christ is not truly present.

In contrast, Luther claimed, “*finitum capax infiniti*.” The finite is capable of the infinite. What does this mean? In Luther’s Small Catechism, the Sacrament of the Altar is described as follows: “It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and drink” (Luther 362). Understood as such, Luther claimed that life, salvation, and the forgiveness of sins are given to those who believe the promise that bread and wine were “given for you.” This is possible because God keeps the promise to be really and truly present in the bread and wine of communion.

When I talk with folks about this urban nature project, the idea that the finite can hold the infinite gets traction in the conversation even where a translation to sacramental language does not. Everyday connections to the sacred are grounded in God’s promises that it is possible for the sacred to be present in, with, and under ordinary, everyday things like bread and wine and water. As a place to start conversations about nature in the city, a spirituality of everyday things resonates. There is space to bring a gift of Lutheran sacramental theology as reading glasses for other city dwellers to see and name the infinite when it shows up in these unexpected places. It grounds the hope that the sacred can be surprisingly present—even in things like Canada geese.

Take care here. The claim is not that geese are sacraments like the bread and wine of communion. It is rather the claim that nature is sacramental, like music, for instance. Music, while not a sacrament, is sacramental insofar as it is a finite thing capable of the infinite (Hendel 432). It can carry spiritual messages, work as a catechetical resource, and sing, “*Soli Deo Gloria!*”

An everyday, sacramental spirituality is an aspect of the Reformation legacy that can help reform our visions of nature so that the Book of Nature can be read in the city. But, the proof, finally, is in the stories these reading glasses allow us to tell. When I read the Book of Urban Nature, it is not only with unearned privileges that I have as a heterosexual, upper-middle class, white woman. I also go in with the eyes and ears of a Lutheran. One of the things that this Lutheran lens has given me is the practice of meeting the world and the creatures in it—human and non-human—with an unshakable sense that there is always something more going on than what is immediately presented: the finite is always capable of the infinite.

These “reading glasses” created the space for that visceral moment of pause as my son ran toward the geese. I didn’t simply rush in to save my son from the geese because I read that scene through glasses that keep me open to the possibility that something more might be there—just beyond what I can readily see. It’s a practice of staying open to the many stories of the Book of Urban Nature, and of finally being moved to act once they’ve been recognized.

### Third Reading: #FlocktheSystem with #Hope and #FaithActiveinLove

Our story of the geese on North Pond didn’t end after the Uber ride on that hot August day. Not long after our run-in with the geese, I was back at North Pond, sitting on a bench under a burr oak tree. The whole reason I was at the pond that day was because of the goose encounter with my kids. In that visceral pause and the realization that I knew nothing about these geese-creatures of God, I did a little research trying to figure out the ecology of this place. One of the things I learned was that North Pond—despite being home to all these birds and prairie plants

and turtles and snakes, and probably coyotes—was only four feet deep, and potable city water was being used to keep it at that level. The pond was over 130 years old and aging quickly.

We need stories like these infused with the infinity principle to see the nature of our cities and to build hope-filled visions of vital cities for the future. Stories are ways to build a flock; the right stories can #FlocktheSystem with #Hope and #FaithActiveinLove. That's why this theological educator/scholar is now blogging at [www.wildsparrows.com](http://www.wildsparrows.com). It's one more way to try to read the Book of Urban Nature and share its stories. It's Lutheran natural history for an urban planet.

Just in case this all smacks of a little too much Walden Pond romanticism, let me say in closing that these glasses are to be worn in places that are much worse off than North Pond. Take, for instance, Hegewisch Marsh. It's another urban wetland, but instead of being next to preserved ponds, a zoo, a treasured urban park, and a nature museum, this one is situated in the industrial corridor of Southeast Chicago's steel industry—or what's left of it. A discontinued landfill, an active railway, and a Ford Automotive Plant surround Hegewisch Marsh. The Marsh itself has been resuscitated from the landfill runoff, contaminated soils, and past use as a recreation area for all-terrain vehicles. It is home to an array of birds and turtles and frogs but it doesn't fit the story of pristine wilderness. The vernal ponds where the frogs live were cut into the land by those recreational vehicles. The sounds of the wind and the birds are punctuated by the noise of trains, cars, industrial horns, and air traffic. It would be easy to write off these chapters of the Book of Urban Nature, but the possibility of the infinite is here too.

Nature in the city needs a chorus of voices telling its stories, asking questions such as: How has this space been crafted? From whom was it taken? What stories haven't been told about it? With Lutheran natural history reading glasses we can tell stories that describe the place as it is, and at the same time, open up to the sacred that may lie hidden within. If this is right, then the conclusion of this essay is an invitation to join the flock and tell these stories. The last words are not "The End" but rather the

start of your own story of nature. If you're not sure where to start, let me suggest an opening that usually works at our house. It begins, "Let me tell you a story..."

## End Notes

1. I had the pleasure of presenting a version of this lecture at the Lilly Fellows Program National Conference at Augsburg College on October 15, 2016. Thanks to the participants for thoughtful questions. Thanks also to the University of Chicago Enhancing Life Project and the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago for support to pursue this research. For more essays like this, please join the mailing list at [www.wildsparrows.com](http://www.wildsparrows.com), and watch for the monograph in progress.

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MARTHA E. STORTZ

## Both Priest and Beggar: Luther among the Poor

One Thursday night a few years back, the Christensen Scholars of Augsburg College went on pilgrimage to the rare books room at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota.<sup>1</sup> At the entrance is a glass-enclosed case holding a copy of Luther's death mask, along with casts taken of his hands. Even in death Luther's right hand clutches an invisible quill or stylus. A prolific writer, Luther's hand simply grew around his craft: it froze with arthritis and over-use in a locked, crabbed position. The left hand, in contrast, rests free, open and unbent.

Those masks, one of Luther's face, the others of his hands, are the horizon for this talk. For the words that allegedly came out of Luther's mouth just before his face set in death confounded the people gathered around his deathbed, no less than they confound us today. He observed before dying: "We are all beggars."

Now the gathered mourners were there not simply to accompany Luther on this, his last earthly journey, but also—and perhaps even mostly—to see how the Reformer would die. If he died in agony and regret, it would bode ill for the whole movement of reform. But if he died in peace and equanimity, the movement would have some divine sanction. Imagine the pressure!

Luther exits his earthly home with this cryptic remark on his lips: "We are all beggars."

Now, it must not be forgotten: this came from a man who in his prime had written quite viciously against

beggars—and Luther knew how to load acid into that stylus. In 1510, Luther penned a preface to the ever-popular "Book of Vagabonds," the *Liber Vagatorum*, where he complained about being fooled by "vagabonds and blabbermouths." Later, Luther's reforms toppled the medieval economy of salvation, to which beggars were essential. Beggars afforded an important opportunity for doing a "good work" that might earn anyone who ministered to them a few points on their divine report card. As far as Luther was concerned, beggars played not so much on people's sympathy, but on their fear of hell and longing for redemption. He had little good to say about them.

But now, in his last breaths, to say: "We are all beggars." Was this some kind of deathbed conversion? What could he possibly mean?

It's worth noting what Luther did not say. He did not leave people with the observation he'd often made: "we are all saints and sinners." Nor did he say what he'd so often written in that clenched, crabbed hand: "We are all priests...." For Luther had also written long and hard about "the priesthood of all believers." No, in his dying moments, he did not leave people with a blanket ordination, which



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would have been appropriate. He left us with what seems like a blanket curse: “we are all beggars.”

We’ll never know what Luther’s intent was—but I want to suggest that maybe being a beggar is the other side of being a priest, just as being a saint is the other side of being a sinner. In Luther’s profoundly dialectical mind, not only are we both saint and sinner, *simul justus et peccator*, but also both priest and beggar, *simul sacerdos et pauper*. Priest and beggar: two sides of a human reality. What does this mean?

In his *New American Blues: A Journey Through Poverty to Democracy*, a thick analysis of the third world in this country, journalist Earl Shorris observes: “Martin Luther practically invented the idea of welfare” (Shorris 205). Luther’s reforms may have toppled a medieval economy of salvation, but that was only for the “haves.” For the “have nots,” it meant they suddenly didn’t eat. The medieval church, precisely through its priests, had long played a crucial role in poor relief. Priests dispensed alms; at great tables outside cathedrals, priests gathered food and other goods for the poor; through countless masses, priests amassed funds and then disseminated them to those in need. Dismantling the Roman Church meant eliminating services on which the disadvantaged depended. What would take their place? More insistently, *who* would take their place?

“Priest and beggar: two sides of a human reality. What does this mean?”

Whether he anticipated it or not, Luther created a welfare crisis of enormous proportions. He came up with an interesting solution: he authorized a transfer of responsibility for poor relief from churches to local communities: the towns, the villages, the cities that increasingly comprised a public square. But the language he used to authorize that transfer was the language of “priesthood of all believers.”

“Priesthood of all believers:” we in the Lutheran tribe are too used to using this language to affirm individual vocation and to confirm a latent anti-clericalism, anti-hierarchicalism; we too easily ignore Luther’s original call

to civic engagement. Behind the language of the universal “priesthood of all believers” is the call to care for the poor.

“Behind the language of the universal ‘priesthood of all believers’ is the call to care for the poor.”

Writing to the German nobility in 1520, Luther extends to the princes the title “priests,” and it is precisely in that context that he charges them with the task of caring for the poor. “No one,” Luther writes, “ought to go begging among Christians....Every town and village should know and be acquainted with its poor.” This is what the priest would have known; this is what the priest would have done.

Not only princes are priests. When citizens of the town of Leisnig wrote to Luther for counsel on how they might care for the poor in their midst, Luther reminds them of the common calling as “priests.” With that call comes a civic responsibility: care for the poor. Because they are priests, all citizens should contribute to a common chest, which is then managed by an overseer whose duty it is “to know all the poor and inform the city council...of what they need.” This is what a priest would have known; this is what a priest would have done.

I recall a conversation with a Syrian Orthodox Catholic businessman whom I met several years ago. With emphatic certainty, he spoke of his own village priest. That man knew the poor; that man knew what they needed. “That’s just what a priest does,” he shrugged, as if stating the obvious.

If we’re all priests, that’s just what we all do as well. Caring for the poor is part of our civic responsibility. That’s one side of the equation: priests.

But what about the other: we are also all beggars. What could Luther possibly have meant? He didn’t get much chance to elaborate this side of the equation.

Maybe, in dying, he realized how quickly fortunes turn. “Haves” could morph overnight into “have nots.” After all, Luther had never referred to the poor as “out there;” they were always “among us.” Indeed, they could at any moment “be us.” Was he worried about Katie, his wife, and their children? Would they all be suddenly beggars,

themselves dependent on the mercy of other priests exercising their calling?

Maybe, in dying, he suddenly realized the limits of his own provisional attempts to create a working welfare system—and the dangers of paternalism and patronization lurking behind “serving the neighbor.” Service alone would never ask the systemic question of justice: why are these particular neighbors so consistently having this particular need?

Maybe, in dying, Luther saw that he could never beg with that right hand, clenched forever around an invisible stylus. And in that, he was like so many other “haves” whose hands clutched forever what they held dear. They were possessed by their possessions, unable to reach out to anyone for anything.

“Maybe, in dying, he suddenly realized the limits of his own provisional attempts to create a working welfare system—and the dangers of paternalism and patronization lurking behind ‘serving the neighbor.’”

Or did Luther, in dying, understand with sudden insight how far his own solution was from the example of Jesus,

who was himself more beggar than priest. Again and again, he’s called a “friend of tax collectors and sinners,” and according to the *Miss Manners of the Ancient World*, you were friends with the people you ate and drank with—and the people you ate and drank with were your friends. “Sinner” in that society meant “poor,” those who could not pay their taxes to the religious authorities. With this simple gesture of table fellowship, Jesus moved welfare from giving food to the poor to eating and drinking with them. Jesus *became* one of them.

I like to think the latter was the case, and that, in dying, Luther rather realized the power of the beggar, whose hand is not clenched around anything, but open, always open—and free to reach out for the hand of the neighbor.

Priest and beggar, beggar and priest: this is Luther’s last insight into civic engagement.

## Endnotes

1. I delivered a version of this essay on November 20, 2013 as a Heritage Day Series chapel talk.

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GEORGE CONNELL

# In the Beginning of the Reformation Was the Word



For the opening chapel talk during Concordia College's Fall Symposium on the Reformation, past, present, and future, I was given the daunting assignment to say something about the Reformation in hindsight. What happened? Where has it taken us? When I received this request, I

instinctively looked for a dodge, a way out. There is a widely told story of a conversation between Henry Kissinger and China's Zhou Enlai during Nixon's trip to China in 1972. When asked about his assessment of the French Revolution, Zhou replied evasively, "Too early to say." It turns out that Zhou had misunderstood the question as about the Paris uprisings of 1968, just a few years prior. Nonetheless, the anecdote has come to stand for the Chinese ability to take a long view, regarding the two centuries since the French Revolution of 1789 as too brief to reveal what that historical convulsion really means.

If two centuries is too short of time to say what the French Revolution means, I'm tempted to plead the same excuse as a way out of my charge to say something about the Reformation. The Reformation was clearly an earthquake of global proportions. It shattered the unity of Western Christianity, plunging Europe into long periods of religious warfare. It challenged the division of society

into religious and lay, propelling the West into an ongoing process of secularization. By calling the Magisterium, the doctrinal authority, of the Catholic Church into question, it plunged us into a crisis of uncertainty with which we still live. So, what the Reformation means is still up for grabs, the game is still afoot, the curtain hasn't yet closed.

"At its heart, the Reformation is about words."

As tempting as that evasion is, I accepted the invitation to give the chapel talk (and write this essay), and so it's on me to take a stab at it. What can we say about the Reformation, even as its "long tail" continues to unfold? Our reading for the chapel homily began: "In the beginning was the Word..." (John 1:1). John opens his gospel with this powerful declaration that language, speech, word is cosmically basic, central, fundamental. Not only is the Word with God, Word *is* God. It is who God is. John then tells us that Word is also what God *does*. Echoing the opening chapters of Genesis in which God *speaks* the world into existence, John writes, "All things came into being through him [the Word]" (John 1:3). Thus John opens his Gospel, his account of the Good News of Jesus Christ, by naming Christ as *logos*, as Word.

While John speaks cosmically, I propose to appropriate those same words to frame the Reformation. At its heart,

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the Reformation is about words. It is about Word capital W—the Word of God—the saving power of the Gospel message of forgiveness, reconciliation and redemption. But it is also very much about words—lower case w—about language in all its multifarious, powerful, dangerous grandeur.

I was among a group of Concordia faculty and staff who travelled to Germany this past May to visit Luther sites, and the experiences of that trip still loom large as I try to take stock of the Reformation. What strikes me as I look back over the places we visited is that most are tied together by the thread of language. Our first bleary, jetlagged day was spent in Mainz, visiting the Guttenberg Museum and learning about the development of the printing press. Before Luther, other reformers, such as Jan Hus, had challenged the religious establishment, but without a means to spread their ideas widely, their protests (and their lives) were easily snuffed out. The Reformation and the printed page are, as it were, conjoined twins, born together and profoundly connected, joined at the hip. To paraphrase John, in the Reformation's beginning is the printed word.

From Mainz, we went on to Marburg, one of the great German university towns, and most days of our trip centered on one German university town or another: Leipzig, Halle, Erfurt (where Luther himself studied), and, of course, Wittenberg, the university where Luther taught and birthplace of the Reformation. We should never forget that the Reformation emerged out of a university setting. These distinctive enclaves of learning—of reading, writing, speaking and debating, that is, of intensive exchanges of words—developed in the Middle Ages, but were undergoing fundamental transformation in the years leading up to the Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, and the other reformers. After centuries of scholasticism and an exclusive use of church Latin, the rise of humanism ignited a desire to read ancient texts in their original languages—the Latin of the heyday of Roman literature, the Greek not only of the New Testament but also of Greek literature and philosophy, the Hebrew of the Hebrew Bible. Luther's Reformation message of salvation by grace and faith developed out of his ongoing struggles to teach the Bible to his students at Wittenberg. He insisted on close, careful engagement with original texts on readings that probed for hidden treasures within ancient writings. So, in Luther we see vividly a

reverent, even awed attitude toward the power of language to contain, to preserve, to convey messages of indescribable importance. As institutions of higher learning, the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities stand in that university tradition as it was inflected by humanism. The start of the school year reminds us of this, not only by our dressing up in medieval academic garb for the opening convocation, but even more by students heading to the bookstore to pick up their books—language magically materialized—around which our educational programs revolve. Our colleges and universities, like the institutions out of which the Reformation emerged, are fundamentally places of language, places where words are the currency of exchange.

“Our colleges and universities, like the institutions out of which the Reformation emerged, are fundamentally places of language, places where words are the currency of exchange.”

Colleges are also places of debate and dispute, where words challenge other words in a struggle of ideas. At Marburg, we stood in a room in the prince's castle where the Marburg Colloquy took place, a debate between Lutherans on the one hand and Calvinists on the other. With so much shared, there was great incentive for the main factions of the Reformation to join together, to make common cause against existential threats. While they agreed on 20 out of 21 shared principles, disagreement over one principle—the proper understanding of the Eucharist—kept the two wings of the Reformation apart. Here we see another way in which the Reformation is deeply about words: the reformers were confessional. They insisted on sharp, clear formulations of what they believed, and they took those formulations deeply seriously. These confessions guided theological reflection as well as the faith-formation of believers. Again, language, here language as confession, is at the core of Reformation faith.

From Marburg, on to the Wartburg. After his defiant clash with the Catholic hierarchy at Worms, Luther was

whisked away to Wartburg for safe keeping by Phillip of Hesse. While there, undercover as Junker George, Luther translated the New Testament into German in just a few months, an accomplishment that left me dumbfounded as I stood in the room where he pulled off this feat. Reformation faith puts the biblical text at the center of faith—*sola scriptura*—and so Luther worked mightily to make that text available to all believers. This room is the site of one of the most colorful stories about Luther, namely, that one night there he hurled his ink well at the devil. Our guide told us that caretakers of the Wartburg long refreshed an ink stain on the wall for the edification of visitors. But I prefer to read the story figuratively rather than literally. It was by translating the Bible, which was then printed with ink, that Luther attacked the devil.

After the Wartburg, on to Bach sites, Eisenach, and later Leipzig. Bach embodies the crucial musical dimension of the Reformation tradition. Holy words joined to powerful music and sung in congregational worship takes language to a whole new level, and we were lucky to experience that transcendent combination a number of times during our trip.

“To stand in the very church where Luther rose service after service to proclaim the Word of God was to stand at ground zero of the Reformation.”

And finally to Wittenberg itself, birthplace of the Reformation. Wittenberg, a small, rather peripheral town, no longer home to a university, nonetheless resonates with the powerful words uttered here. As a university, it was where Luther worked his way as a teacher toward his retrieval of the gospel message. It is the town where Luther composed and released his 95 theses, a short text whose consequences are still unfolding. And above all, it is the town where Luther preached. While he purportedly nailed his theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Luther preached in the city church. The Reformation elevated preaching, the service of the word, to centrality in worship, so to stand in the very church

where Luther rose service after service to proclaim the Word of God was to stand at ground zero of the Reformation. While at Wittenberg, I also visited Luther’s home, the former monastery, but later the home of the monk notoriously married to the nun, Katy. What drew me most in Luther’s home was the dining room where Luther ate with students, spending hours in lively conversation. Those talks are recorded in *Table Talk*, and my favorite Luther is the Luther of *Table Talk*. This is the earthy, sometimes even obscene, and frequently humorous Luther whose deep humanistic learning is joined to a very down to earth sensibility of his very ordinary upbringing. As we read the frank, good-humored, exchanges of Luther and his students, we see language at its best, as the medium that binds us together.

The chapel theme at Concordia College this semester is “seeking community.” Without words, without language, there is no human community. How fitting: Luther saw worship as comprising two main elements: word and sacrament, proclaiming the gospel message in the presence of the communion table. In similar manner, he joined word and shared meal around his own table.

In closing, I’ll note that the Reformation shows us the power of the word, but also its dangers. The image of Luther standing up to the church hierarchy at Worms, declaring “Here I stand, I can do no other,” is the iconic moment of the Reformation. It embodies word standing up to power, meaning standing up to might, reason standing up to force. John Lewis will soon visit our campus. The story of the American civil rights movement is a similar story of moral courage in the face of overwhelming institutional power. Through expressive words, their speeches, and expressive actions, such as the Selma March, they changed the course of history just as Luther’s expressive words and actions changed history. But words also wound. As we read Luther’s painful words about the Jews and about the peasants’ uprising, we are chastened to remember that words can do just as much damage as they can do good.

And so, we can say of the Reformation that, in its beginning was the word. Word is also the Reformation’s legacy to us as well as its imperative to us. Perhaps that imperative is nowhere more succinctly expressed than Ephesians 4:15: “Speak the truth in love.”

# Luther's Sutra: An Indian, Subaltern (Dalit) Perspective

Lutheranism, which started in early sixteenth-century Europe, made its way to the small mud hut of my grandparents in a remote village of India, in the early twentieth century. My grandparents lived as daily wage laborers, and were completely illiterate. Lutheranism transformed their lives, and thus transformed mine.

"Justification by grace alone, faith alone, scripture alone, and Christ alone!" That is something of Luther's *sutra*—the Sanskrit term for the "thread" or "string" of a whole way of life, captured in aphoristic form. Why does Luther's *sutra*—grace alone, faith alone, scripture alone, Christ alone—matter after 500 years and to those on different corners of our earth?

## The Sutra in Luther's Life

Church has always been about transformation and reformation. What do I mean by that? It is essential for faith communities in every generation and in different parts of the world to ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the church's renewal. Now, 500 years after the start of the Lutheran church, we are wondering what this reformation means. Is the Lutheran Reformation an *event* or is it an ongoing theological *movement*? Martin Luther's 95 Theses of 1517 may mark a reformation event, but the church is dynamic, and reformation and renewal is an ongoing

process. Another question that needs to be asked is whether the ongoing reformation is taking place in the right direction. We need to revisit this reforming movement again and again in order to continue to speak truth to power, and thus to carry forward the legacy of Luther. He stood for what he believed was the truth, and so led a liberation movement against oppressive traditions that denied access to scriptures and truth.

Luther's *sutra* summarizes the gist of what the reformation movement was, and is, all about. It is about justification—or how a person is made "right" with God. What the medieval church proclaimed about justification differed dramatically from what Luther discovered from



"We need to revisit this reforming movement again and again in order to continue to speak truth to power, and thus to carry forward the legacy of Luther."

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scripture. Searching for justification through the means that the church offered, Luther not only experienced the lack of justification, but was filled with fear for the wrath of God. Being a monk, he tried everything that the church claimed would bring justification, and he was extraordinarily successful as a monk. You name it, he did it—all in the quest to be righteous or justified in God’s eyes. Later, by reconsidering scriptural proclamations such as, “justification by faith” (Rom 1:17), Luther unlocked a door that transformed his life and the life of the church at large.

“Many of us may no longer take Luther’s sutra—justification by grace alone, faith alone, scripture alone, and Christ alone—as a matter of life and death. Does it still matter after 500 years?”

That a person is justified by God’s unmerited grace through faith—and not by the person’s own works—was the most important teaching that Luther found in the scriptures. It stood in stark contrast to what he had been taught. The selling of indulgences easily led to abuse. They signaled a misinterpretation of the scriptures; indeed, these imperialistic and hierarchical practices controlled access to the scriptures and to grace itself. By critiquing the sale of indulgences, in fact, by critiquing the entire system that controlled access to God’s Word and God’s grace, Martin Luther opened a door that brought light and enlightenment first to Western culture and church and then to the rest of the world.

Fast-forward to our globally interconnected, post-modern context. Many of us may no longer take Luther’s sutra—justification by grace alone, faith alone, scripture alone, and Christ alone—as a matter of life and death. Does it still matter after 500 years? Are we far too “advanced” that it no longer matters? Or does it have implications for us in other ways?

## The Sutra in Rural India

Certainly Lutheranism and Luther’s sutra has touched my life. They touched the lives of my grandparents, who

belonged to a community that was designated as outcasts, treated as untouchables, and called *chandals* (disgusting people). Such designations attribute eternal impurity to whole communities and bar access to redemption based on one’s birth.

According to the *Manu Smriti* or *Laws of Manu* (the popular social and religious law for the land of India), the “dwellings [of the untouchables] should be outside of the village; they must use discarded bowls, and dogs and donkeys shall be their wealth. Their clothing should be the clothes of the dead, and their food should be in broken dishes” (*Laws of Manu* 10:51-52). Until today, untouchables, those who self-identify as “Dalits,” have lived mostly in the outskirts of Indian villages, especially in rural India. However, by education, migration, and upgraded economic status, Dalits are now able to buy or rent space in mainstream places, and the Indian Constitution ensures equal rights to all the citizens. Yet discrimination, even within this contemporary context, happens in subtle ways.

My grandparents—Dalits in India—converted to Lutheran Christianity. After their conversion, another door to education opened, but then my grandparents had to make a hard choice: whether or not to let their daughter, their first born, go to a boarding school in a nearby town. It was unheard of. They had to make this choice in isolation, as none of the other villagers were willing to send their daughters. The bold choice of my grandparents was critical again to my own transformation. Their daughter, my mother, completed her high school diploma, trained as a teacher and served as an elementary school teacher for nearly 35 years. She was the only woman from her village and her generation to be educated.

There was another door that was critical, yet again. My father was a shepherd boy until he was eleven years old. He went along with his father since he was six, and at age ten he was given the responsibility as a shepherd of the flock that belonged to their Dalit village. There were some others who went to the boarding school, and he listened to the tales of school and education from other friends. His desire to be educated and to participate in sports (being gifted by athletic instincts) led him to a bold act of resistance. One fine day, he left the flock in the fields, ran ten miles to a nearby town, and made his way to speak to the principal of a boarding school. He

was ridiculed for his image of shepherd boy, shamed for his age, for his desire to begin his schooling at the age of eleven. But his relentless efforts also helped him go to school. Soon he became popular through sports and surpassed many obstacles. It was critical that my father opened this door to pave the way to my life that is today. He graduated from high school, and trained and served as a teacher for nearly 30 years.

With the same spirit and strength that he ran away with as an eleven year old boy, my father soon assumed some leadership roles in his teaching career. He stood by what he believed was truth, and was unafraid to speak truth to power against people who discriminated some of the Dalit teachers. As a result, my parents were transferred to a punishment area on an island, where most people were fishermen folk. Submitting to the order, my parents moved to the island, where they were the only educated adults. They became the people who practiced first aid, ran the school (two teachers teaching the entire elementary school consisting of 200 students!), and motivated the parents to send their children to school. They established a relationship with the people of this island, but paid the price of losing two children, each under the age of one, due to the remoteness of the village that made medical help inaccessible. All that they know is that both children cried through the night, but they are not sure why they passed.

I was born, along with my five other siblings, in a hut, with no medical assistance, except for my grandaunt, who is completely illiterate, and a group of a few other women in the village. It is by grace alone that I am still alive, as I could have been struck by any number of deadly diseases. My parent's education, their teaching careers, their economic upgrade to the lower middle-class stage (according to Indian standards) helped open one door at a time to transcend my life in many ways, and to break through the barriers of many obstacles. I stand here today giving voice to and interpreting the experience with complete privilege as an educated woman, living in the western world, shaped by the consciousness of subaltern people, in my case, by the Dalits. My voice is a reminder of my privilege. My lens is informed by my own life experiences, sharpened by educational tools, and cleansed by a critical consciousness.

## Subaltern Women

"Can the subaltern speak?" Writing from a Dalit woman's perspective, Gayatri Spivak's question has been widely cited and used in contextual, post-colonial, feminist, literary, and biblical studies.<sup>1</sup> This question is unsettling to me, both as a subaltern woman, on the one hand, and as a person who has "voice," on the other hand. By definition and by its rhetoric, subaltern cannot speak, because they are often treated as noisy beings, and thus they are suppressed as people with no voice.

The question, "can the subaltern speak?" almost comes as an irrelevant question in the Dalit context, because they are often seen as louder than other women of caste, as in Indian culture it is shameful for women to be loud and to be heard in public. Thus, from a certain perspective and level, all women from India are socially and culturally expected to be subaltern. In such a culture, when one asks whether the subaltern can speak, it comes across as unwarranted rhetoric in a context in which to be subaltern is an honorable state for a woman. However, the shameless Dalit women are not afraid of being shamed, since they don't carry "honor" by their outcaste status to guard themselves against being shamed in the first place. They are subaltern because they are *not heard*—not because they cannot speak. They are often disregarded as clumsy and noisy by the dominant patriarchal caste culture.

## The Sutra in Scripture

Subaltern people receive grace, and they have faith but do not have tools to read scriptures and understand high church doctrines or traditions. They are justified in Christ because justification does not require knowledge of scriptures. It does not require one to be a particular color, creed, race or religion—contrary to what was told to my ancestors. Lutheranism approached them with good news that they are children of God.

In popular understandings of justification, facing the righteous God means entering into the Kingdom of God, or rather, to eternal life. Here I would like to provide a lens from a subaltern perspective to one of the parables that explains the Kingdom of God in different terms. What does it mean when a subaltern person looks at the text? Do they bring a different view, a different vision?



The parable of the vineyard and the laborers begins with Jesus's statement: "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard" (Matt 20:1). Even though Jesus explains some of his parables, this parable goes without explanation, thus calling readers to come to their own understandings and interpretations.

According to the parable, the owner of the vineyard hires workers and promises to pay them a denarius for a full day's work. Without any further negotiations, the laborers begin their work, evidently accepting that the deal is fair. About the third hour, the owner goes out, sees the people who are jobless, and invites them to work in his vineyard. He tells them, "'you also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went" (v. 4). Here again there is evidence of trust between the owner and the laborers. Interestingly, the owner goes out again two more times and invites even more workers to work for him in the vineyard.

But the owner doesn't stop; the day is almost over, yet he goes out again and finds some *others* standing around. The owner does not just invite them this time but asks them a question, seemingly a genuine question: "Why are you standing here idle all day?" (v. 6) The answer is rather surprising. They tell him, "because no one has hired us" (v. 7). The story makes a shift at this point. The landowner's question conveys prejudgment, as if the laborers were lazy and did not look for work, standing idle all day. Although the potential workers are taken aback with that question, they tell him that no one has hired them, including the landowner himself.

A subaltern perspective asks deeper questions at this point: What makes them stand there all day long? Why were they denied an opportunity to work? What factors could cause their invisibility? They lost a day of work, not because they were lazy, but because they didn't find someone to hire them to work. They were simply deprived of earning their daily bread. They were unemployed even though there is potential work. Only when they tell him no one has hired them does the landowner invite them to work and join the other laborers.

My memory of listening to the interpretation of this parable—from Sunday school, from pulpits, and from general readings—is registered around the landowner's generosity and magnanimity, which then called for

submission to a model of power-disparity that exists even in the Kingdom of God. My memory matches historical interpretations, which applauded God the King for his generosity, who offers an alternative kingdom model.

"The landowner unmistakably asks those who can't find work a famously judgmental question."

The landowner in the parable exhibits an alternative model of kingship. The landowner continues to invite the laborers who are in need of work. My interpretation here is best kept in tension with the fact that kingdom imagery often leads to injustice. While it does seem unfair at the outset, the landowner, who represents God, ensures fairness and justice through an act of reconciliation. The workers who are hired at first are the people who are privileged and are able to grab an opportunity for work and earn their livelihood. Compared to these workers, the ones who did not find work until later are faced with factors that leave them somewhat marginalized in the society. People who are marginalized have to make extra efforts to be able to find work and make a living. The final group of people called into the fields are the downtrodden, marginalized, invisible and subaltern people, who are often misunderstood and misjudged for their misfortunes and thus re-victimized as judged. The landowner unmistakably asks those who can't find work a famously judgmental question: "Why are you standing here idle all day?" Although the landowner who represents God enters the dialogue with stereotypical presumption, upon hearing their answer, he quickly responds with appropriate action, inviting them to the work.

"Grace for all is a subaltern perspective."

The landowner in the story offers an alternative model for perceiving God's this-worldly justice. Not only is he willing to hire them in the last hour, he also offers fairness to the people who were denied an opportunity to work by

paying them one denarius. Equivalent wages is his act of reconciliation. Earlier, the landowner must have somehow ignored the potential workers even though he was in a position to hire them. There are factors that made the last-hired laborers invisible. The landowner takes responsibility for their lack of opportunity, if not for intentionally denying them an opportunity to work. He compensates them with an act of reconciliation and thus ensures equity, fairness, and justice.

In the end all the workers were justified in the kingdom of God. They were all made equal. Grace for all is a subaltern perspective. Those who feel deserving of the place in the Kingdom of God will resist grace, because it makes them equal to the so-called undeserving. And yet,

the God of this Kingdom and this justice does not rest until all are in, which is what Lutheranism also proclaims.

## Endnotes

1. Since the focus and scope of this essay is not to discuss the question that Spivak asks, I can only here note its existence and importance among a number of scholarly fields.

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# Reforming Lutheran Higher Education: Ecclesiological Reflection and Theological Leadership



The colleges and universities of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) were founded to educate church leaders to serve ethnically-specific populations within the context of Christendom. Identity, mission, and outcomes were clearly defined by the narrowness of that focus. At the

time, there was no perceived need for institutions to reflect theologically on their identity or mission, as nearly everyone came from the same Lutheran and/or Protestant tradition.

Today the context has shifted dramatically. Lutherans are still the largest group on many campuses, but they are joined by followers of many other world religions and the religiously-unaffiliated. This has generated a new awareness of the importance of interfaith relationships and understanding. It has also brought to light an underlying confusion about the identity of our institutions. We can no longer rely on a “critical mass” of Lutherans for our identity, so what will be the foundation?

Over the past several years I’ve been researching the ways ELCA schools communicate their religious

identity and mission, as well as the perceptions of these espoused values among members of the campus community. If I had to sum up the results of my research in one word it would be: confusion. There seems to be a pervasive sense of uncertainty about the identity and mission of ELCA schools that transcends geography and piety. There are many reasons for this predicament that cannot be addressed in this article. The primary issue that I want to focus on is the lack of a developed theology (thinking about God) and ecclesiology (thinking about church) for ELCA colleges and universities.

## Enlightenment, Postmodernity, and Institutional Self-Knowledge

Ecclesiology is the study of the nature of the church and how it relates to the world. At first glance, it may not seem particularly relevant to discussions about the identity of our institutions because ELCA colleges and universities are not congregations. Although we may not be churches in the typical congregational sense, according to the ELCA constitution we are part of *the* church, and “an essential part of God’s mission in the world” (“Constitutions” 58).

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Based on my experience as an administrator in various roles at ELCA schools, it seems that ecclesiological and theological reflection is an underutilized resource in understanding and communicating our identity. This is not an indictment of the leadership at ELCA colleges but rather a symptom of several cultural shifts.

“It is difficult to maintain theology and ecclesiology as a part of identity in any setting because we live in a post-Christian age in which faith has been relegated to the private world of individual choice.”

It is difficult to maintain theology and ecclesiology as a part of identity in any setting because we live in a post-Christian age in which faith has been relegated to the private world of individual choice (Ammerman and Farnsley 356; Peterson 30; Van Gelder, “Hermeneutics” 137). That’s not to say that religious faith or spirituality have disappeared. While there has been a decline in overall religious participation among young people, it’s unlikely that the United States will become a secular culture. If the current rate of attrition among young adults persists into older adulthood (and we don’t know whether it will), it would take several centuries before the United States becomes as secularized as Western Europe—a development that is considered unlikely (Putnam and Campbell 76).

Even if North America does not follow the same secularization pattern as Western Europe, there is no question that the way we view faith has changed. This changing worldview began shortly after the Reformation. Through a process of what Charles Tayloe calls *excarnation*, religious ideas and God’s activity were gradually pushed to the margins of life. With this move from an *enchanted* universe to a closed system of universal, natural laws, God became unnecessary for public life (Taylor 613). This development reached its zenith during the period of the Enlightenment, and most academic disciplines are based on enlightenment era principles.

The marginalization of faith during the enlightenment period is evidenced by theological developments based on

a rationalistic cosmology that left little room for God or transcendence. In John Morrison’s words, “The accepted view (during the enlightenment) was that the universe was a closed system, and that everything in the world was subject to the natural laws of cause and effect” (Morrison 260–61). These views have been expressed by both theological progressives and conservatives in at least three different ways.

The first is the idea that religious faith is exclusively a means of developing “moral fiber” or political change (Bosch 278). Whether that is traditional “family values” or the Social Gospel, moral transformation within the finite world has become the primary arena for religious activity.

The second is the reduction of the Gospel to a means of personal salvation and escape from the world (Bosch 71). This mainly has been expressed from conservative Christians—in its most extreme form as premillennialism—and sees escape from the “closed universe” of the enlightenment to be the sole or primary objective of Christianity (203). Theologians of all perspectives have begun to question this kind of theological reductionism as anti-biblical and dubious toward mission.

The third theological development is deism, the concept that God is like a great clockmaker who winds up the world and then steps back and allows it to operate on its own. Deism has remained a persistent theological force and something of the standard assumption of youth and their parents in this country. Indeed, according to the National Study on Youth and Religion, American teenagers readily exhibit all three enlightenment developments insofar as they confuse historic Christianity with “moralistic therapeutic deism” (Smith and Snell 154–56).

And yet, with the triumph of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism there are signs that the enlightenment’s hermeneutic hegemony is weakening and that deism is mutating. Rather than pure deism, most people subscribe to a theological *bricolage* in which God is an active agent in the world when *therapeutic intervention* is needed, but otherwise may be absent (Wuthnow 15). This may not seem much different than pure enlightenment deism, but the mere fact that people are acknowledging that God is at least sometimes active in the world is a marked departure from the past. This idea of God as an active subject in the world is essential to authentic Christian witness (Peterson 49, 88).

The enlightenment worldview has also been challenged epistemologically by the rise of postmodernism. As we begin to realize the highly contextual nature of observation, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain that anyone can be a purely objective observer. Is it really possible for anyone to interpret reality without being affected by their gender, sexual orientation, or socio-economic identity? Why should religious beliefs be treated any differently than other hermeneutical lenses?

“This idea of God as an active subject in the world is essential to authentic Christian witness.”

Postmodernism’s premise that all knowledge is subjectively conditioned has opened up a new opportunity for theology. As Craig Van Gelder writes,

In contrast to the Enlightenment’s scientific worldview, which relied on an epistemology that assumed the natural explanation of all phenomena, a hermeneutical perspective no longer requires that the God hypothesis be cancelled out a priori... Interestingly in a hermeneutically-shaped, post-modern context, faith claims regarding the leading of God’s Spirit in a Christian community have taken on a renewed viability. (Van Gelder, “Method” 49)

Lutheran colleges and universities are sometimes accused of being disconnected from their theological roots. I would argue that this may be true, but not necessarily for the reasons people think. It’s not that the Lutheran theological tradition is ignored on campus, but rather that it is interpreted through the lens of enlightenment rationality. Theology and the college’s religious heritage are treated as one among many objective sources of influence in institutional self-understanding. The idea that God may somehow be an active subject in the process of discerning religious identity and mission in a post-Christian age is simply not on the radar.

## The Who of Churches and Colleges

The “identity crisis” of ELCA colleges and universities parallels that of Christian churches. The Christian church, too, is struggling to come to grips with a changing cultural context in which it no longer occupies a place of prominence within the culture [Bosch 373]. Christianity was the dominant cultural force during the period of Christendom and the surrounding culture reinforced its values. There was little need to deal with ecclesiological issues such as the identity of the church because we assumed that there was a common understanding. In a post-Christian age, we must learn to “hold our assumptions lightly” because we cannot be sure that a common understanding of fundamental theological issues like the nature of the church actually exists [Zscheile 5]. Cheryl Peterson explains,

There is a deeper and more basic issue that must be explored, one that has to do with the church’s theological identity, that is, *what it means to be the church*. It is my thesis that the church today is facing an *identity crisis*. It is not simply that the church is culturally irrelevant or inauthentic; these are symptoms of the underlying issue, which is that *we don’t know who we are as the church...Who is the church?* This is a theological question that calls for a theological answer. [Peterson 4]

This identity crisis is exacerbated by the fact that ecclesiology (the study of the *nature* of the church) has tended to be undervalued by Protestant denomina-

“American churches have tended to be more pragmatic when it comes to ecclesiology, holding to an ecclesiological theory-in-use that views the church as a ‘voluntary association.’”

tions [13]. American churches have tended to be more pragmatic when it comes to ecclesiology, holding to an ecclesiological theory-in-use that views the church as a

“voluntary association” (Peterson 35; Argyris 1). Voluntary associations do not have an ontological, spiritual, or theological identity—they are merely organizations of individuals who choose to come together around a common purpose, in this case, around religious faith (Peterson 27). Consequentially the American church has tended to view ecclesiology in functional and organizational terms—what the church *does*—rather than probe deeper theological issues like identity—what the church *is* (Van Gelder, *Essence* 23).

In a similar way, part of the reason that God is not considered an active subject in the life of ELCA colleges and universities is due to lack of reflection on the “who” of Lutheran colleges, by which I mean a lack of theological leadership. At one time, many executive leaders at Lutheran colleges and universities were clergy or theologically trained lay people. In response to rising levels of complexity in the higher education market, leadership has become more specialized.

“Both the church and church-related colleges must always begin with their identity or essence before they proceed to organizational issues.”

There are many good things about this shift to hiring leaders with expertise in the higher education sector. There are also downsides. Today very few executive leaders have theological training. By no means are they incapable of theological reflection, but they may feel as if they don’t have the necessary skills to introduce theological reflection into their deliberations, or lead the community in sustained theological dialogue.

Failure to consider the theological aspects of leadership is thus an issue for ELCA colleges and congregations. Secular models for organizational leadership are helpful but incomplete without theological reflection. Both the church and church-related colleges must always begin with their identity or essence before they proceed to organizational issues. The identity of each begins with understanding who God is and what God is doing. In other words, organizational

leadership at ELCA institutions that value their religious identity must have a different starting point than at secular schools. Many Catholic schools and several Lutheran schools (California Lutheran University is one example) have acknowledged the importance of theological reflection by adding executive level staff who are paying attention to the institution’s identity and mission.

Unfortunately, the ELCA’s statements about colleges and universities focus almost entirely on organizational and functional concerns. The ELCA constitution concentrates on the ways in which the colleges and universities relate to the churchwide organizational structure. There is only one paragraph that even comes close to an ecclesiological statement: “The relationship of this church to its colleges and universities shall be guided by policies fostering educational institutions dedicated to the Lutheran tradition wherein such institutions are an essential part of God’s mission in the world” (Constitutions 58). The rest of the document focus on what the colleges and universities *do* rather than *who* they are.

Perhaps this is understandable given that governing documents are not necessarily intended to be theological documents. And yet, this functional approach to ecclesiology is consistent in other ELCA documents. None of the other documents I could find included substantive theological conversation about the most basic of matters—*how* the colleges and universities of the ELCA are related to the broader Church, and *who* God is calling colleges and universities to be. While these are all admirable and important statements, there is little evidence that God is an active subject at work within ELCA colleges and universities.

In order to clarify our religious identity and mission, it is imperative that we begin with basic ecclesiological questions such as: What is the nature of the church? How does it affect the identity and mission of ELCA colleges and universities in a post-Christian world?

## The Trinity as Foundation

This essay is a call to develop an ecclesiology that encompasses ELCA colleges and universities and that is actually incorporated into the life of our institutions. There will undoubtedly be disagreement about whether

“Without an articulated ecclesiology it is hard to imagine how our institutions will live into these new realities while still being grounded in a religious identity.”

this is an appropriate endeavor for ELCA schools, particularly in light of the realities of religious pluralism and our discomfort with the idea of God as an active subject.

I understand these concerns, however, without an articulated ecclesiology it is hard to imagine how our institutions will live into these new realities while still being grounded in a religious identity. I believe that our institutions can learn from the work of organizations such as Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) which brings together recent college graduates from many different religious traditions to serve and work together. One of the things I most respect about IFYC is their belief that we needn't check our religious identities at the door when interacting with those from other faith traditions. In this way IFYC is able to pursue both interfaith cooperation without marginalizing or genericizing religious identity. The question that IFYC asks participants to consider is: “How do the values of my religious tradition speak to this value or issue?” (Brown 98).

Perhaps it would be wise for ELCA colleges and universities to ask similar questions. What within the Lutheran tradition speaks to the identity of our schools? How does our Lutheran ecclesiological identity speak to religious diversity? Why does our ecclesiological identity reject attempts to coerce theological uniformity? How does it allow us to see people of all faith traditions as full partners in our mission?

Understandably, ELCA colleges and universities have often appealed to Luther when addressing questions of identity. While there is a place in the conversation for Luther, we also must acknowledge that his work is a product of Christendom and may not be particularly helpful in addressing our ecclesiological identity at the present time:

In a post Christendom era the questions being asked by the church, and of the church, are quite different than in the Reformation. People are no longer asking “where do I find the true Church?” but rather “why the church?” or “why should I bother?” This requires a new understanding of the church's identity that takes present contextual realities seriously. (Peterson 54)

If we ask ourselves the question, “How does our ecclesiological identity speak to a pluralistic, post-Christian culture?,” we may realize that Luther is not an ideal starting point. I would argue that a Trinitarian approach is more helpful, especially when the classical Western notion of the Trinity, which focuses on its oneness, is paired with the Eastern understanding of Trinity that begins with its threeness.

“If we ask ourselves the question, ‘How does our ecclesiological identity speak to a pluralistic, post-Christian culture?’ we may realize that Luther is not an ideal starting point.”

Many metaphors have been used to describe the eastern view of the relationship within the Trinity—a divine dance, circulation around the neighborhood, whirl, rotation, and even the passing around of a jug of a wine (Moltmann, “Perichoresis,” 111–25; compare Rohr). Regardless of the metaphors employed they all point to a deep mutuality and divine flow known by the term *perichoresis*.

Jürgen Moltmann describes *perichoresis* by claiming that “the three divine Persons have everything in common, except for their personal characteristics. So, the Trinity corresponds to a community in which people are defined through their relations with one another and in their significance for one another, not in opposition to one another, in terms of power and possession” (Moltmann, *Trinity* 198). He further argues that *perichoresis* “links together in a brilliant way the Threeness and the unity (of God), without reducing the Threeness to the unity, or dissolving the unity in the Threeness” (Ibid 175).

What difference does all this make for reflecting on the church-related identity of ELCA colleges and universities in a way that takes seriously our contextual realities? According to Craig Van Gelder, ecclesiology begins not with the nature of the church, but rather with the nature of God. The church is a community created by the Spirit and its identity reflects God's own identity. If God's nature is perichoretic, then that means that the nature of the church is also perichoretic and our relationships are meant to mirror the perichoretic nature of God. That means that the church and its colleges and universities can be places where identity (oneness) need not exist in opposition to diversity (threeness). The perichoretic nature of the Trinity seems to be an ideal ecclesiological foundation for our colleges and universities in a pluralistic world. It holds together both unity and diversity without diminishing either.

## Concluding Thoughts

There is much more that could be said about the need for ELCA colleges and universities to engage in ecclesiological reflection. This article is intended to begin this conversation by offering some insight into how we have gotten to where we are, and some possible ways forward. As we continue to commemorate the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, I hope that inspired theological leadership will seek what God may be doing to reform Lutheran higher education for its important work in the world.

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Muhlenberg College ALLENTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA

Newberry College NEWBERRY, SOUTH CAROLINA  
Pacific Lutheran University TACOMA, WASHINGTON  
Roanoke College SALEM, VIRGINIA  
St. Olaf College NORTHFIELD, MINNESOTA  
Susquehanna University SELINGROVE, PENNSYLVANIA  
Texas Lutheran University SEGUIN, TEXAS  
Thiel College GREENVILLE, PENNSYLVANIA  
Wagner College STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK  
Wartburg College WAVERLY, IOWA  
Wittenberg University SPRINGFIELD, OHIO



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