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Roots and Shoots: Tending to Lutheran Higher Education

It was a joy to be part of the working group and writing team that helped compose *Rooted and Open* and that helped spark conversation among the Network presidents in June of 2017. At that gathering, I was asked to talk about that word “calling” and its Latin-derived alternate, “vocation.” Why do we talk so much about the *vocation* of a Lutheran college or university? Why is the subtitle of *Rooted and Open*, and the primary description of its contents, about NECU’s “common *calling*”? Why, according to the shortest encapsulation of what characterizes these 27 institutions, are our graduates first and foremost persons who are “*called* and empowered”?¹

I begin this essay by reviewing how and why education-for-vocation, that is, our common calling to educate students for their own multiple vocations, has become something of a leitmotif, a central organizing principle, for the diverse missions (or institutional vocations) of our 27 schools. Rehearsing and embracing this decades-old development depends on clearly distinguishing the identity of a Lutheran college or university from the religious affiliations of the people who populate it. I then come to terms with a second distinction that structures the whole of *Rooted and Open*—that between the educational priorities (strategic plans, campus-wide initiatives, etc.) of our schools and the Lutheran theological soil out of which such priorities grow. I’ll conclude by raising some friendly

critiques of Darrell Jodock’s central architectural metaphor of a bridge’s pillars and footings, especially in light of *Rooted and Open*’s own suggestive imagery.

Individual Lutherans and Institutional Vocations

As Mark Wilhelm describes, “education-for-vocation” or what he calls “the vocation movement” was not always front and center of discussions about what it means to be a Lutheran institution (Wilhelm 59-63). In fact, 50 or even 30 years ago, there was very little discussion about what it actually meant to be a Lutheran college or university. A Lutheran college or university was simply assumed to be a place where Lutheran students went to be educated by Lutheran faculty members, who in turn were overseen by a Lutheran provost and president. Now for some (including for some of our alumni) this period entailed a kind of golden age of Lutheran higher education. Certainly there was no debate or doubt about what it meant to be a Lutheran college or university—it was quite simply a campus that had a majority of individual Lutherans on it. But notice that the designation “Lutheran” can mean very



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little here. It marks the church membership or self-identity of *individuals on a campus*, but it tells us next to nothing about what the institution as a whole *is*, and, even less, about what it *does* and is called to *be*.

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All of this changes when, in the latter part of the twentieth century, Lutheran institutions diversified along with most every other mainline church-related college. I follow Peter Berger in saying “diversified” or “pluralized” rather than “secularized” because the latter assumes a *loss* of religious identity, which simply has not happened historically (Matthews 152-53). On our campuses, there certainly was a decrease in the percentage of *individuals* who identify as Lutheran. Our Lutheran students (at Augustana College, the percentage hovers somewhere in the low teens) now have classmates and professors who identify as Jews and Muslims and secular humanists and neo-pagans and as “nones” (that is, none of the above—those who identify with no particular religious tradition—which may in fact be another distinctive posture of faith²).

This rapid diversification of *individuals* on our campuses was worrisome for many. The first and understandable reaction of many Lutheran schools was to try to hold onto a certain percentage of Lutheran students or Lutheran faculty or Lutheran board members. As long as we didn’t fall below a certain threshold, we could assure ourselves that we were Lutheran. You can see how easily this strategy could backfire. Besides having to revise downward that percentage of select individuals who need to be Lutheran as demographics change, this strategy of marking the “Lutheranness” of an institution by way of the individuals populating it, when taken alone, *threatens to overlook and overshadow* the more meaningful and relevant ways that a college—as a college—can be

decidedly and effectively Lutheran. Couldn’t the college be Lutheran, couldn’t its mission be Lutheran, regardless of the religious affiliations of the individuals advancing that mission?

Taking all of this as a positive opportunity, some 30-some years ago our institutions began a serious and sustained conversation with one another about what “Lutheran” means when we are talking about the identity and mission of a *college*—what *it is* and *it does*. It is a long and ongoing conversation, but in recent years there has emerged something of a consensus around “education for vocation” as a helpful way to talk about our institutional identities and common calling.

I write here of our institutional Lutheran “missions” and “identities.” According to David Cunningham, Director of the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE), language of institutional *callings* or *vocations* may be more felicitous. He notes that the word *mission* (from the Latin *missio*) connotes a “sending.” An institution’s mission implies a push from behind—a trajectory

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established by those who founded the college or university, originally set its goal, and thus propel the rest of us toward it. Institutional vocation, by contrast, connotes a pull from and into the future. The discernment of an institution’s calling entails more than a recognition or recovery of its mission (but, I would add, certainly not less). It also entails listening to voices—Cunningham references the rising level of student protests in academic institutions over the last several years (264)—that can help pull the college or university into what it is yet to become. Discerning institutional vocation is an open-ended, dialectical process that attends to future possibilities in addition to present realities and past objectives (Cunningham 258-66).

Cultivating a Common Calling

As I have suggested above, “education-for-vocation” has slowly but surely become the primary way that we have come to name our individual institutional vocations, as well as the common calling of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU).

What is meant by “education-for-vocation”? At best, NECU institutions educate not exclusively or primarily to secure employment, to develop a “life of the mind,” or even for citizenship and to cultivate civil discourse and civic virtues, as important as each of these is. Lutheran institutions principally educate students so that they can discern the material and spiritual needs of other human and nonhuman creatures and then respond *with* committed service and *out of* a sense of gratitude. In the Christian tradition, such service is patterned after the life of Jesus, whose solidarity with a broken world brought salvation and healing to it.

Language of vocation is deeply rooted in Lutheran thought and practice. Before Martin Luther, only nuns, monks, and priests had vocations. For Luther, all persons are called to meaningful work—especially work that serves the common good and leads to the flourishing of another, whom Luther called “the neighbor.” Educating students so that they can discern their calling, their *needed* place in a *needful* world, is deeply Lutheran stuff.

At the same time, “calling” and “vocation” are not the exclusive property of Lutherans or even Christians. Rather, out of the depths of their own theological traditions, Lutheran colleges and universities educate Lutherans, other Christians, people from other religious traditions, and the nonaffiliated for lives of responsible, grateful service so that the world God created and redeems might also flourish. Neither do the faculty, staff, and administrators who educate for vocation need to be Lutheran. Indeed, some of the most intentional and effective educators advancing their institution’s callings hail from very different religious and nonreligious traditions. Perhaps not *personally* identifying with Lutheranism makes them more discerning and proactive as they link their own commitments to the calling of the college.

Those teaching and learning on our campuses live out their callings whenever they match their own passions

and capabilities—their sense of being gifted—with the real needs of the world. They teach and learn in order to respond, to be helpful, and to care. Lutheran colleges and universities live out *their* callings when they help form their students and educators for vocation. In short, *our* collective institutional vocation is to educate *for* vocation.

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Educational Fruits and Lutheran Roots

A quick examination of *Rooted and Open* reveals a three-part structure reflecting the central markings of Lutheran higher education and those who have become marked by it.³ Our common calling is to prepare our students to be “called and empowered—to serve the neighbor—so that all may flourish.” Less obvious is an important distinction *within* each of these three sections. Each begins with certain “educational priorities” shared by our institutions. Our schools are called to offer “an excellent education, rooted in the liberal arts, that engenders freedom of inquiry and prepares [our students] for meaningful work.” They all called to support students as they “discern their gifts and hone their skills so that they are able to contribute capably, confidently and courageously to the needs of a world that desperately needs them.” Finally, they are called toward the flourishing of the whole person and attention to the common good (NECU).

After each of these educational priorities is further unpacked, the document turns to the ways each is grounded theologically within the tradition of Lutheran thought and practice. Our calling to educational excellence and intellectual humility is grounded in Lutheran claims about the radical mystery of God and the “freedom of a Christian.” Our commitment to education for vocation, and to service, justice, and advocacy, is grounded theologically in God’s unmerited love and concern for all, which inspires those so graced to respond with gratitude and service

to and beside others. Our calling toward the common good and commitment to the whole person is grounded theologically in the incarnation of God, the holiness of the everyday, and in a bold hope for the salvation (from *salus*—the healing) of all creation.

In the present volume of *Intersections*, both Marty Stortz and Colleen Windham-Hughes unpack these three educational priorities and their theological roots more fully than I am able to do here. The point I want to make is that, just as the distinction between a Lutheran institutional mission (or vocation) and the religious identities of individuals advancing it allows for the inclusion of a diverse group of allies and advocates for that mission, so too this distinction between educational priorities and their theological groundings ensures that the priorities can be advanced by educators who do not personally ascribe to the theology.

Augustana's own articulation of what it means to be Lutheran also makes this distinction between educational priorities (or what we call our "faith commitments") and the particular theology that grounds them. The bulk of Augustana's *Five Faith Commitments* lists and exemplifies our commitments to interfaith engagement, social justice, spiritual exploration, the reasoned examination of faith, and vocational discernment. Christian language is used sparingly throughout these descriptions of our institutional commitments, Lutheran language even less so, and "Jesus" is not mentioned once (to the chagrin of a few who would want Augustana to be more confessionally Christian). And yet, the "Theological Context" that precedes the actual commitments ends with some rather robust theological claims:

Martin Luther believed that God is revealed in unlikely places — including a barn in Bethlehem and on a cross outside Jerusalem. Having learned to be surprised by this, members of Augustana enter into **interfaith engagement** with curiosity, anticipation, and wonder.

Luther understood Christian freedom to be comprised of both freedom *from* having to save oneself, as well as freedom *for* a life of service to neighbors in need. Augustana College is called to **social justice** out of a sense of liberation and gratitude.

Christians put worship of God at the center of their lives. Luther democratized worship, put the Bible in the hands of everyday Christians, and considered beautiful music to go hand in hand with prayer. Augustana commits to **spiritual exploration** out of these sensibilities.

As both pastor and professor, Luther called faith a "living, busy, and active thing." Out of this spirit and the Christian quest for "faith seeking understanding," Augustana commits to ongoing **reasoned examination** of faith.

Finally, the Lutheran reform movement understood God to call not only church leaders, but every person to work according to their giftedness and the world's needs. Out of this understanding, Augustana educates for vocation and supports **vocational discernment**. (Augustana College)

In the terms of Darrell Jodock, the "distinction between educational priorities and theological values is crucial if a college is to follow a third path" ("Diverse Society" 12). By not distinguishing its theological groundings from its educational priorities, more "sectarian" schools fail to incorporate into its mission those who do not ascribe to their particular religious tradition, while for more "secular" (or "non-sectarian") schools the educational priorities are only grounded in themselves, so to speak (12). By contrast, a third-path Lutheran college or university is both rooted and open precisely by distinguishing the particular Lutheran tradition that nourishes its priorities from the priorities themselves, which all are invited to nurture.

Tending to the Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education

No image has done more for sustaining conversation and commitment to Lutheran institutional vocation than that of Darrell Jodock's "third path" ("Vocation" 5-6). In his essay from this issue of *Intersections*, he couples that path analogy with a second metaphor from civil engineering—that of bridges and bridge-building ("Diverse Society" 11-12). Distinguishing the daily activities of students and educators from the long-term planning and priorities of

the college is like distinguishing the deck of a bridge from the pillars supporting it. And yet those educational pillars/priorities must in turn be distinguished from what secures them—the footings of the bridge, composed of a deeply anchored Lutheran theological tradition.

The analogy works well in imagining important distinctions. Still, I want to offer some appreciative critiques in order that the structural analogies not overshadow what *Rooted and Open* alternatively suggests—namely, that our institutions are more like well-rooted and widely branching plants than the products of human engineering. I have three interconnected reasons for my preference for analogies taken from botany and horticultural.

Growing in Two Directions

First, while bridges are built quite literally from the ground (or river bottom) up, most plants continue to grow downward while they also grow upward and outward. The deck-pillar-footings analogy suggests a one way column of dependence. The decking depends on the pillars and the pillars on the footing, but the reverse is not true.

By contrast, as a single organism, a healthy plant depends on conditions both above and below the ground. Plant and roots are interconnected; each grows along with the other. It would seem that a healthy Lutheran college or university is like that. Not only do roots sink deeply

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in Lutheran belief and practice nourish the institution’s educational priorities, which in turn sustain the daily work of students and their educators, but also new directions and developments of the college frequently necessitate a “re-rooting” of the tradition, a conscious re-conception and reemployment of “Lutheran,” a widening and deepening of

what that identity means, precisely so the contemporary initiatives can be grounded.

According to Wilhelm, this is exactly what happened when, 30-some years ago, education-for-vocation began to get “reclaimed” as a central tenet of Lutheran higher education (Wilhelm 63-66). The tradition’s understanding of vocation had to be retrieved and reconceived; our institutions had to grow downward, to deliberately name and nurture our Lutheran institutional identities, precisely in order to sustain schools that were quickly diversifying, growing outward.

The same is true of my college’s *Five Faith Commitments*. It was only in 2004, after the rapid religious pluralization of educators and students within Augustana, that the then new president, Steve Bahls, and the Board of Trustees articulated and affirmed Augustana’s faith commitments. And it wasn’t until 2014, when the *Five Faith Commitments* were updated and revised, that the above robust theological claims were added. While deep roots allow for wide branches and abundant fruit, the reverse is also true. The growing inclusivity of institutions also necessitates a constant re-rooting.

Identity and Inclusion

The second reason for preferring the plant metaphor is closely related. Recall the value of considering an institution’s vocation in addition to its mission and identity, according to Cunningham. Whereas an identity (from *idem* = to be the same) is by definition self-consistent, and a mission propels one from the past along a certain trajectory, an institution that is *radically open* to new constituents and new callings means that it can and should grow and change into the future. Indeed, to do so is to become what it is called to be.

I worry that Jodock’s engineering metaphor fails to capture this forward looking, open-ended process, especially given that Jodock himself has reservations about the perceived inflexibility of a college’s inherited “identity” (“Diverse Society” 15n2). While much of a bridge is engineered to sway in the wind, the footings are built not to move. Many consider the Lutheran “foundations” of an institution in much the same way. This assumption then suggests that increasing diversity and openness of an institution is in competition with the college’s

foundational identity and mission, which otherwise “anchor” it, preventing it from moving too far from the spot. By contrast, to consider the vocation of a college as naturally both rooted and open helps us take leave of forced tradeoffs between identity and inclusion. Jodock’s third path—as truly a third option and not some middle “balance” between sectarian rootedness and secular openness—is best supported with organic images that take diversity and distinctiveness as mutually constitutive.

Tending the Garden

Finally, plants better than bridges help imagine the necessary work of all educators as they tend to the institutional calling. To liken Lutheran theology to the footings of a bridge means that one can claim or point to or appreciate its foundational role. And yet, beyond major repair jobs (a major overhaul of mission statements? founding a new institution?), it is unclear how one nurtures the “Lutheranness” on a daily basis. Jodock explains why Lutheran footings matter; he urges us to “claim” them, to “give attention” to them, to “honor” them, and to “take them seriously” (“Diverse Society” 14-15). I agree with Jodock that doing so will connect us to the past and so help alleviate anxieties about the future.

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But if Lutheran colleges and universities are more like plants than like structures, the work of each of us gains some nuance and purpose. Domestic plants require tending. It is not enough to learn about and appreciate them; they must be planted, watered, pruned, picked, nurtured, and otherwise cultivated. What is more, our

daily work of nurturing another living organism can never be completely planned in advance and executed with maximal efficiency. (Large scale industrial agriculture has attempted this; the overuse of fossil fuels and the loss of topsoil and biodiversity is part of the result.) Rather, our care for the tradition is exactly that—a kind of care, a nurturing and tending rather than technique or procedure, one that often takes longer than we expect before we see the fruits of our labor, one that sometimes surprises us with flourishing beyond all expectations.⁴

Intersecting Root Systems

I leave you with a final image that points us again to the common calling of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities. One of my favorite places is a grove of young aspen trees that spans both sides of the foot trail that leads from Holden Village to Hart Lake in the Cascade Mountains. I learned in college that the world’s largest organism (or at least the heaviest) is a grove of quaking aspens found on the Colorado Plateau in south central Utah. Aspens only look like individual trees nestled closely together. The trees are actually shoots off the same root system. The whole grove is one organism.

The 27 NECU institutions are discrete organizations with their own distinctive identities, different ways of tending to their “Lutheranness,” and alternative lists of faith commitments. But I think it is also true that, digging deep below the surface, we would find interconnected roots if not a whole intricate root system sustaining the whole Network. *Rooted and Open* has it that “the world needs our graduates.” In order to faithfully and innovatively educate them to be called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish, we certainly need one another as well.

Endnotes

1. See “Network” below. According to *Rooted and Open*, the shortest expression for our common institutional vocation is to equip students to be “called and empowered—to serve the neighbor—so that all may flourish.”

2. See compelling musings by John Eggen about what he calls “the faithful nones” in this issue of *Intersections*.

3. See the reflections of Marty Stortz in this issue of *Intersections* regarding the “re-inscription” of *Rooted and Open’s* characteristics from marking our institutions to primarily marking the students (I would add, also educators) therein.

4. My understanding of vocation as fragile enterprises that require “passive dispositions” such as patient nurture owes much to the philosophical perspective of Martha Nussbaum. See Bill Moyers’s interview with Nussbaum as excerpted by Popova, below, as well my explicit reliance on Nussbaum in Mahn, “The Conflicts in Our Callings.”

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