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Marked by Lutheran Higher Education

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Marked by Lutheran Higher Education



My task here is to present a kind of operating manual to the document, *Rooted and Open*. To do that, I open and close with a story.

Years ago, I was on a plane from Boston back into the Bay Area. At the time, I traveled in Lutheran circles more familiar with theological education

than higher education. My seatmate had just visited his son, a freshman at a prestigious East Coast university. I asked how his son liked it, and the father said he wished his son had chosen a Jesuit institution for college. I asked why. Without missing a beat, he replied: "Because he would have learned: to always give back, to be a man for others, and to find God in all things." He knew his son would graduate with a ticket into the power elite, but he was dubious about the values that went along with that invitation. In contrast, he believed that a Jesuit institution clearly communicated its values to graduates. More than that, he was convinced that those values—always giving back, being a "man" for others, finding God in all things—were needed both in the workplace and in the world of the twenty-first century.

What are the distinctive values of a Lutheran higher education? How are those distinctive marks needed both in the workplace and the world today more than ever?

Marks of NECU and Our Students

In consultation with a larger working group of teaching theologians from the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU) institutions, those are the questions the writing team of *Rooted and Open* tried to address. As we thought and talked and argued together, we cultivated a stereoscopic vision: with one eye, looking for the deep roots of a lively theological tradition, with the other, looking at the challenges and opportunities of the present moment.

What are the distinctive values or "marks" of Lutheran higher education? Think of these common markings as being inscribed into the bodies and minds and hearts of our students, as well as the people who teach them, work with them, and administer the institutions that hold the network in place.

Identifying these marks is an effort always in process; it participates in the spirit of reform (*semper reformanda*) that characterizes this particular movement within Christianity. The late Tom Christenson came up with three "marks" of Lutheran higher education: giftedness, vocation, and that vaunted freedom *from* and freedom *for* (Christensen 72-80). I weighed in with five "charisms": *semper reformanda*, a spirit of critical inquiry that grows out of the notion of freedom, regarding the other as "neighbor," vocational discernment, and a concern for justice that draws on Luther's notion of the priesthood of

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all believers (Stortz 102-113). Darrell Jodock identifies six distinguishing “features”: giftedness, an engaged God, wisdom, epistemological humility, the value of community, and service and community leadership (Jodock 86-97). Though crafted for different times and contexts, notice the resonance in these three constellations of charisms/features/marks.

But what might the NECU institutions say together? And how might that common witness speak into the present moment?

Rooted and Open addresses a variety of audiences and on a number of different levels. Specifically, there is the “elevator speech” that telegraphs in broadly accessible and succinct language three distinctive gifts or charisms of Lutheran higher education. The longer version then elaborates the educational priorities these gifts nurture, again, in language that does not presume “Lutheran literacy.” Finally, there’s the full version, one that roots the educational priorities in the thick, rich language for which the Lutheran intellectual tradition is known.

An early draft identified three charisms of Lutheran higher education which marked the institutions themselves. These institutions delivered:

An excellent liberal arts education,
In service to the neighbor,
So that all may flourish.

Feedback from a wider faculty working group, as well as the NECU presidents, who reviewed the draft in January 2017, prompted the drafting team to inscribe the charisms. The charisms of Lutheran Higher Education marked people, not just institutions. Accordingly, the tone of the document moved from descriptive to aspirational, even promissory. Verbs rather than nouns detailed the change. The final draft promises that graduates, educators, and the institutions themselves would be:

Called and empowered
To serve the neighbor
So that all may flourish

The change is subtle but significant, a move from institutional character to personal identity. While it is possible to discern the marks of Lutheran higher education in the programs, initiatives, and other educational priorities of

each institution, these common markings find their proper place in the identities—on the bodies and minds and hearts—of its students, colleagues, and leaders.

Grounding Priorities Theologically

After articulating the marks in shortest form, the document then builds out each, first suggesting common educational priorities. Each of the institutions in the network inflect these priorities differently, depending on institutional history, student demographics, and contexts. These educational priorities could be affirmed by faculty and staff, students and administrators who may or may not be Lutheran, may or may not be Christian, may or may not even be “religious” at all. Finally, deep theological roots ground each of these priorities, and these are tended intentionally within the institution.

“Deep theological roots ground each of these priorities, and these are tended intentionally within the institution.”

In some institutions, an office of Mission and Identity may be tasked with this responsibility and privilege. In other institutions, the task may fall to campus ministry or a particular department. In still others, the work may be shared among various stake-holders of the university.

Called and Empowered

For example, the educational priorities that stem from a network marked by “an excellent liberal arts education” (as the former draft had it) can be elaborated in terms of a commitment to excellence, a grounding in the liberal arts, and a spirit of intellectual humility that values questions as much as their answers.

All of these educational priorities of an excellent liberal arts education are grounded theologically, first, in the radical mystery of a God whom the human intellect can never fully grasp, and, second, in a radical human freedom, which Luther described as “the freedom of a Christian,” a freedom from fundamentalisms of left and right and a freedom for critical inquiry.

To Serve the Neighbor

Service to the neighbor carries two educational priorities, which NECU institutions share. The first is a regard for the other as “neighbor,” which seems unremarkable until you realize how easily the other can be labeled “threat” or “stranger” or “enemy,” designations that divide. A second educational priority here is the commitment to justice and advocacy, which are the natural issue of a call (*vocare*) to speak out and speak up for (*ad + vocare*) the needs of those who cannot speak for themselves.

These educational priorities that help call our students to serve the neighbor are grounded theologically in the wild generosity of God, to which the only appropriate response is gratitude—and great joy.

So that All May Flourish

The third and final “mark” of Lutheran higher education—the flourishing of our students and their communities—directs educational priorities toward the flourishing of the whole person (body, mind, soul, and spirit) as well as the whole ‘hood or community, through the practices of radical hospitality and a hunger for diversity.

These educational priorities are grounded theologically in a God who became one of us, in order to better understand the human condition and infuse everyday life with divine mystery.

Concluding Reflections

Think of these marks—called and empowered, to serve the neighbor, so that all may flourish—as inscribed onto bodies like indelible tattoos. Our graduates are marked women and men. And people marked by Lutheran higher education are needed even and especially now.

I’ll close with a final story.

For a couple of years I participated as both a leader and a participant in the Ignatian Colleagues Program (ICP), a national program through the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (see “Association”). Its directors—a mixed group of Jesuit priests and laypeople—rightly realized that if the unique “marks” of Jesuit higher education were to survive, they couldn’t depend on leadership from Jesuits alone. The founders of ICP could already

see effective leadership exercised by faculty and administrators who were not Jesuit, maybe not even Catholic, possibly not even Christian, and even not religious at all.

But these potential institutional leaders were drawn to Jesuit education because of its marks, and they needed a way to articulate them to a variety of audiences and on a number of different levels.

“Our graduates are marked women and men. And people marked by Lutheran higher education are needed even and especially now.”

Rooted and Open is a way of articulating our own distinctive marks for all members of this Lutheran network. Needed now more than ever are these institutional charisms and the marks they leave on the people who teach and administer and learn on our campuses.

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