

2020

Called to the Moment: A New Vocation for Lutheran Colleges

W. Kent Barnds

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Barnds, W. Kent (2020) "Called to the Moment: A New Vocation for Lutheran Colleges," *Intersections*: Vol. 2020 : No. 52 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2020/iss52/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Intersections* by an authorized editor of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

Called to the Moment: A New Vocation for Lutheran Colleges



Lutherans and Lutheran colleges talk about vocation and calling, often assigning almost mystical or magical qualities to the discernment thereof. When I hear this talk, I sometimes wonder if the discovery involves a voice like the one in *Field of Dreams*, or perhaps a lightning bolt. I

suppose that sometimes it does.

Many are familiar with Frederick Buechner's oft-cited description of vocation: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Working at a Lutheran college for the last 15 years, I've heard college presidents, faculty, and chaplains quote Buechner or come up with their own way of describing what is supposed to happen to an 18 to 22-year-old in college.

The 26 Lutheran colleges and universities have even united around a common mission related to vocation, as articulated in the statement, *Rooted and Open*. There, they summarize their collective work as follows:

Together, these educational communities train graduates who are called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish. This vocation is shared by diverse institutions. While the history of each institution propels it from behind, a shared calling also draws the institutions forward, pulling

them into a future that brings wholeness to the world. The Lutheran theological roots that these schools have inherited deepen their educational purpose, inform their educational commitments and anchor their educational priorities.

There is plenty of Biblical and scholarly work that reinforces this claim to vocation, and I consider it a great privilege to serve a Lutheran college and to raise my children in an ELCA congregation. But I do worry a bit about the often grandiose and erudite descriptions of calling and vocation, especially on college campuses.

I've been thinking about this since hearing a delightful sermon by Pastor Katy Warren, associate pastor at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa, where I am a member. Pastor Katy had the tough job of preaching a sermon through a mask, during a brief in-person, midday service of communion following the derecho (inland hurricane) that clobbered Iowa in August of 2020.

It had been quite a week—100 mile-per-hour winds, splintered trees, decimated crops, days without electricity and other services. Needless to say, we were not prepared and the damage was awful. I didn't envy Pastor Katy's assignment to make sense of it all.

She chose to read from 1 Peter 4: 8-11, which was an effective passage for the moment. Verse 10 stood out to me: "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others." Pastor Katy then shared stories of line workers from across the nation rushing to Iowa's

W. Kent Barnds is Executive Vice President of External Relations at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois.

rescue, neighbors with power setting up charging stations for those without, strangers with chainsaws helping those with downed trees, restaurants offering freezer space, and other acts of kindness and generosity.

“Were those line workers, neighbors, restaurant owners, and chainsaw-wielding neighbors thinking about meeting the world’s deep need with their deep gladness?”

Following the service, I found myself thinking about how the message related to my own life and the work of Lutheran colleges. Were those line workers, neighbors, restaurant owners, and chainsaw-wielding neighbors thinking about meeting the world’s deep need with their deep gladness? I suppose it’s possible, but I doubt it.

This spring, summer, and into the fall, I’ve witnessed something similar at Augustana College. So many of my amazing colleagues on campus have helped where and when they have been needed throughout the pandemic. People have stepped in and up to help—the athletic trainer-turned-telecounseling outreach coordinator; the counselor now an expert contract tracer; the Sports Information Director now coordinating campus-wide surveillance testing; the hesitant email user now an

expert in meeting virtually with all kinds of stakeholders. Seeing such responsiveness has made me wonder about the emphasis we place on calling. Perhaps there is more room to focus on the immediate needs of those around us, while also encouraging the discovery that accompanies vocational reflection.

I believe we should pair our important message about vocation and calling with the kinds of things we witness in the moment, such as the aftermath of the derecho here in Iowa and the campus’s response to the pandemic and changing needs.

Rather than asking college students to identify and follow their path in life, should we simply make a stronger case for responding to the moment? For just showing up, giving what you have, helping exactly where and when needed, no matter what your background?

“Should we simply make a stronger case for responding to the moment?”

We might call it “meeting immediate need with a deep willingness,” or simply, “called to the moment.” For liberal arts students educated as versatile, critical thinkers, it might be a natural impulse. I, for one, think making that case might be the true vocation of a Lutheran college.