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MARK WILHELM

From the Publisher



I never expected to grow up and become a church and higher education bureaucrat! When I revisited the encouragement received from faculty during my seminary years, resulting in a decision to enter a doctoral program in my mid-thirties, I envisioned joining the faculty at a wonderful Lutheran

college or university after defending my dissertation. That did not happen. Nonetheless, I am grateful for the unanticipated opportunities that put me on an unexpected path to becoming the founding executive director for the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities.

Gratitude is rising up in me these days as I anticipate my retirement next winter. As many readers of *Intersections* will have heard, I announced at NECU's annual meeting in early January 2022 that I will retire on January 31, 2023. Much time remains before next January, and many tasks are yet to be completed. Even so, I have already begun to reflect on my experience with NECU, and those reflections have sparked gratitude within me. I am deeply and profoundly grateful for the privilege of serving our association and for the opportunity to meet many—but not nearly enough—of the thousands of gifted people at NECU member institutions.

NECU's growth in its collective understanding of the vocation of Lutheran higher education has been the most gratifying development during my time as executive director. Articulating a vision for Lutheran higher education in twenty-first-century North America was identified as a core purpose for NECU when it was established in 2015. That vision was expressed in our 2018 statement, *Rooted and*

Open: The Common Calling of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities. The journal *Intersections* has promoted conversation about this vision, and NECU's summer conferences on the Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education have annually explored various aspects of the Lutheran vision for higher education.

Before I reach retirement, my hope is that we will make additional progress on articulating and claiming how a common vocation to embody a shared vision for Lutheran higher education is expressed in diverse and distinctive ways by NECU's 27 member colleges and universities in the United States and Canada. The first sentence of a new mission statement for NECU (adopted at last January's annual meeting) names this issue. The sentence reads, "The Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities articulates a vision for Lutheran higher education in North America that finds expression in the rich and diverse missions of its member institutions." The first goal of NECU's 2022-2025 strategic plan directs our association to "deepen the understanding of the rich diversity of Lutheran identity at NECU institutions."

We will explore this topic at the 2022 Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference, next July 18-20. (Please see information on page 20 of this issue.) Good work toward addressing the issue is also underway at three NECU member institutions through their NetVUE "institutional saga" grants, in the diverse ways vocational reflection is carried out on our campuses, and through other distinctive practices.

With gratitude for the work done and for the work to come, I thank God for my time with NECU even as I thank NECU for giving me the chance to serve our community of higher education.

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