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## Response to Mark Wilhelm: Adopting the Framework of 'Because' and 'Therefore'

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RESPONSE TO MARK WILHELM:

# Adopting the Framework of 'Because' and 'Therefore'

I am grateful to Mark Wilhelm for his valedictory remarks and for his challenge to all of us who care deeply about Lutheran higher education to address issues around the diversity of expressions of our Lutheran roots, as well as our urgent work around diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice.

My personal background is relevant to our efforts at Augsburg to embrace our Lutheran heritage: I am a cradle Lutheran, the eldest child of Lutheran pastor, a Luther College grad, and I wrote a dissertation with Martin Marty—and I am the only person at Augsburg who must be a Lutheran!

When I arrived at Augsburg in 2006 after more than 20 years working in non-sectarian institutions, I realized that my experience as someone who needed to translate my faith into concepts and practices that didn't assume a common faith tradition would be valuable in an institution that too often assumed that everyone understood what it meant to be a Lutheran college. It came more and more to be about "translation."

This was more urgently necessary because Augsburg's student body was going through a remarkable transformation. In the fall of 2006, our student body included about 18% BIPOC students in the entering class. Over the next 16 years, that number has grown to where this fall's entering class will be almost 70% BIPOC.

And given that Augsburg's history was shaped by Northern European pioneers, Lutheran traditions, and a primarily Western liberal arts academic tradition—pretty much as "white" as it comes, we had work to do—and that is the work we have done as a community over these past several years.

Confessing our "white privilege," we set off to seek to understand how the threads of our Lutheran Christian roots could respond to the lived experiences of our diverse student body. We adopted an institutional vocational statement: "We believe we are called to serve our neighbor," capturing the links between faith, learning, and service that are at the heart of our Lutheran tradition (shaped as it was by a university professor named Martin Luther), but which also allows us to speak authentically to the diverse expressions of faith, learning, and service that characterize our diverse students, faculty, and neighbors.

We then adopted a simple framework for translating the tenets of our Lutheran theological and intellectual tradition into institutional programs, policies, and practices. We said that "because" of this particular faith claim, "therefore" this



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institutional response. Because and therefore became our guiding mantra. A few concrete examples:

- *Because* we believe that only God is all-knowing, *therefore* we are called to an epistemological humility that seeks to discern all of the ways in which God is at work in the world. The creation two years ago of our Critical Race and Ethnic Studies program was an effort to say that the liberal arts in the 21st century need to allow students to explore their own lived experiences and traditions (just as I did 45 years ago at Luther College, reading Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth!*)
- *Because* we believe that we have been saved and redeemed through Jesus Christ, *therefore* we are called to freely serve our neighbors. Our robust anchor institution and community engagement initiatives, prioritized in our strategic plan, allow us to engage in mutuality with our neighbors to build healthier, more just neighborhood and communities.

- *Because* we believe that all of God's diverse creation is good, *therefore* we are called to embrace diversity and otherness, to learn from each other and to build healthy communities. This is the claim that undergirds (among other efforts) our interfaith initiatives, which are premised on the idea that religious pluralism is a force for good in the world. Our "Interfaith at Augsburg: An Institute to Promote Interfaith Learning and Leadership", and the recent appointment of Najeeba Syeed to the El Hibri Chair and Executive Director of the Institute will only serve to amplify our campus efforts to ever broader audiences.

And so on...I hope you see the ways in which we at Augsburg have embraced our Lutheran roots—addressing them through both appreciative inquiry and with a critical lens focused on reconciliation—and translated them into the daily work we do together in this university. I urge all of you to consider your own "because, therefore" statements that help you make sense of particular Lutheran roots and implications for your college or university.