

Intersections

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Full issue

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SPRING 2023

Intersections

Faith, Learning, and the Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education



IN THIS ISSUE

Vocation [in] Disruption

Intersections is a publication by and largely for the academic communities of the twenty-seven institutions that comprise the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU). Each issue reflects on the **intersection** of faith, learning, and teaching within Lutheran higher education. It is published by the NECU, and has its home in the Presidential Center for Faith and Learning at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, the institutional sponsor of the publication. **Intersections** extends and enhances discussions fostered by the annual Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference, together lifting up the vocation of Lutheran colleges and universities. It aims to raise the level of awareness among faculty, staff, and administration about the Lutheran heritage and church-relatedness of their institutions, especially as these **intersect** with contemporary challenges, opportunities, and initiatives.

About the Cover



Joe Cibere created the cover art the following AI text prompt:

"A college student finding vocation amidst disruption, warm light, HQ, 4K, unreal engine, global illumination, detailed and intricate environment"

The image was created using an app named playgroundai.com, a free and open source for all to use.

Examples of text generation using artificial intelligence with the prompt of "Finding Vocation Amidst Disruption" using ChatGPT

One example of finding a vocation amidst disruption caused by AI could be retraining in a field that complements AI, such as digital ethics or human-centered AI design. These

fields address the social and ethical implications of AI and work towards creating technology that is fair, transparent, and empowering for all individuals. By acquiring skills in these areas, individuals can position themselves for careers that are not only relevant but also meaningful in the age of AI.

Artist's Statement

Joe Cibere is a signature member of the [National Watercolor Society](#) and his painting style demonstrates his love of nature and wilderness. His "abstract realism" paintings integrate strong design and balance with a sense of illusion and have appeared in *Watercolor Artist Magazine*, *Artists Magazine*, *Best of Acrylic*, *Splash 23*, and in the International Artists book *The Watercolor Sky and Cloud Techniques of 23 International Artists*.

CALL FOR ARTISTS: Submit your design for Fall 2023 "Vocation and the Flourishing of Educators."

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LAMONT ANTHONY WELLS

FROM THE PUBLISHER

Introduction and Invitation



Grace and peace be unto you each of you. I wanted to take a moment and introduce myself, I am Lamont Anthony Wells. I am ready and humbled to serve as the new executive director for the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities. I along with many of you have been committed to vocation and call

within higher education for over 25+ years of my life, having served most recently serving as the program director for ELCA Campus Ministry/ LuMin Network. I am blessed and honored to succeed the Rev. Dr. Mark Wilhelm, a pioneer in Lutheran higher education who has helped to bring unity and organized mission within the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU). It is my hope to build upon this firm foundation and lead NECU into an even more impactful season. Firmly believing that we do this together and not alone, I look forward to being challenged to find new strategies, pathways, and designs to achieve the historic mission of Lutheran Higher Education.

The flourishing of educators matters a lot to me. For the years I served as an administrator in campus ministry programs, I would often remind chaplains and campus religious leaders to become more inclusive in the populations they served by caring for the needs of staff, faculty, and other higher education professionals along with a key focus on students. Finding ways to show kindness and support for the entire higher education community must become an integral

part of a renewed strategy for mission and ministry within each institution. In fact, so that faculty, staff, and administrators, too, may flourish in these shifting and disruptive times, we must pay closer attention to the stresses and anxieties rapidly developing at every juncture within the education profession. Academic freedom of expression is under severe attack in the courts and political sectors, and is threatening flexibility, innovation, and creative license, all of which are tools used to make the learning environment more effective.

So what shall we say to these things? Well, this Spring issue of *Intersections* entitled “Vocation [in] Disruption” is a passionate response to the crises many of us face daily. Please spend quality time reading and reflecting on the powerful thoughts of each contributing author, and be inspired to become more understanding, supportive, and encouraging to educators and other higher education professionals in your local contexts. We have this treasure of Lutheran Higher Education that cannot be hidden by the crises we face. Let us not lose heart but grow more boldly and deeper in our faith as we teach through adversity and educate learners to be more loving and compassionate in the world.

I would also like to invite you to register and attend the 2023 Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference: “So that we (faculty, staff, and administration), too, may flourish” in Minneapolis, Minnesota at Augsburg University- July 10-12, 2023. Each year, we gather to explore the many unique roles we lead in higher edification. I pray for your resilience and continued strength to show up in the gifted ways that each of you have been called to share.

Rev. Lamont Anthony Wells (he, him, his) is the Executive Director of the Network of Evangelical ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU). Wells also serves as Strategic Advisor for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for Wartburg Theological Seminary, and is currently National President of the African Descent Lutheran Association (ADLA). Previously, he served as Program Director for Campus Ministry in the ELCA (LuMin). lamont.wells@elca.org

COLLEEN WINDHAM-HUGHES

FROM THE EDITOR

Vocation [in] Disruption

I don't always respond well when I'm disrupted. It's understandable, I suppose, since the word itself means "broken apart."

Even broken, we are called. Amidst disruption, there is still vocation.

Yet vocation looks different in disruption. And, for some of us, our vocation has been or has become disruptive—calling out systemic injustice and widespread harm.

This issue is devoted to all of you, living and working amidst disruptions of various kinds, searching for anchors of meaning and purpose in shifting circumstances. In these pieces I hope you find companionship in the rough places and strength for the journey.

We are trying new things at *Intersections*. In these pages you'll find:

- **contact information** for some of the contributors; consider reaching out in gratitude or curiosity;
- **a study guide** for *So That All May Flourish*, a new book on Lutheran Higher Education;
- **several pieces** (invited) on reproductive rights.

Working in the lineage of Lutheran Higher Education, we are invested in the question, "What does this mean?" Choose a piece to read and discuss with a colleague or student near you.

Survey Results

Thank you for your feedback to our Survey, published in the Fall issue.

- All respondents agree that twice per year is the right amount of engagement, though a few would welcome more
- Two-thirds of respondents access *Intersections* primarily online, while one-third access exclusively through print
- More than half of respondents have used *Intersections* on their campuses or are aware that it has been used
- All respondents report that *Intersections* connects them to the common calling of ELCA colleges and universities



We received several suggestions about what would be helpful for the future of *Intersections*. It's not too late to let us know what you think: complete this [survey](#) or email us at intersectionsneecu@gmail.com

Colleen Windham-Hughes, PhD, MDiv, was born into and ordained by the United Methodist Church, yet became Lutheran (ELCA) over time, due in part to over a decade at California Lutheran University, where she holds the Wilbert and Darlene Carlson Endowed Chair of Youth and Family Ministry and serves as associate dean of Interdisciplinary Programs and Community Outreach. windhamh@callutheran.edu

So That All May Flourish Study Guide

So That All May Flourish develops a central tenet of “**Rooted and Open**,” the vision document for the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU), which advances the following mission: “Called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish.”

Drawing together authors from across NECU campuses, the new volume provides a substantive and accessible introduction to the vocation, educational priorities, and theological foundations of Lutheran Higher Education. It is intended to spark conversations on campuses and across the network that are appreciative, critical, and constructive.

Using chapters on campus:

1. *Orientation programs* for faculty, staff, or board members.
2. *In class* with students!
3. *Workshops* on vocation and Lutheran Higher Education.
4. As a *resource for task forces* or committees that are working on specific challenges, such as: sustainability; diversity, equity, and inclusion; inter-religious understanding and cooperation; first generation students; or Indigenous relations and unceded lands.
5. *Professional development opportunities* for faculty, staff, and administrators that focus on vocation and the core values, strengths, and contemporary challenges of NECU institutions.

Part One digs deeply into some of the most central and abiding values, or “core commitments,” that characterize NECU institutions.

Chapter 1. In “Vocation and the Dynamics of Discernment,” Marcia J. Bunge introduces the robust concept of vocation that shapes the aims of NECU institutions. Bunge clarifies that vocation refers not just to paid professions and personal passions but rather to the many ways individuals are called to use their gifts and strengths to contribute to the common good. She also describes how and why NECU institutions offer plenty of opportunities for vocational discernment.

1. After reading this chapter, how do you understand the difference between some common notions of vocation, such as one’s job, career, or personal passion, and the more comprehensive concept of vocation that informs Lutheran higher education?
2. Bunge states that although discerning one’s callings includes knowing one’s strengths, vocation discernment

involves more than taking a StrengthsFinder test. What sources of vocational reflection mentioned in the chapter have been important in your own life or on your campus?

3. Even though the notion of vocation is rooted in the Lutheran theological tradition, NECU institutions find that it can be a powerful resource for people of diverse backgrounds and worldviews to reflect on their strengths, values, and sense of purpose. Whatever your worldview, would you agree?



Marcia J. Bunge, PhD, is Professor of Religion and the Drell and Adeline Bernhardson Distinguished Chair of Lutheran Studies at Gustavus Adolphus College (St. Peter, MN) and Extraordinary Research Professor at North-West University (South Africa).

Chapter 2. In “Freedom of Inquiry and Academic Excellence,” Samuel Torvend demonstrates how NECU commitments to academic freedom and educating citizens for thoughtful and principled leadership in the world have roots in the Lutheran Reformation. In line with these commitments, NECU institutions promote critical conversations between learning and faith, advance knowledge through research, and cultivate the countercultural aims of the liberal (“liberating”) arts.

1. Were you surprised to learn that ELCA-affiliated colleges and universities emphasize academic freedom, even though they are church-related institutions? What were your own assumptions about church-related colleges and universities?
2. Torvend writes of the liberal arts in terms of the *liberating* arts, a notion that “is at odds with the commonly held notion that education serves only the individual and the individual’s ‘success’ in the world” [41-42]. How are the liberal arts understood within your institution? How do they inform the counter-cultural pursuit to contribute to the common good?



Samuel Torvend, PhD, is the holder of the University Chair in Lutheran Studies emeritus and Director of External Relations in the Wild Hope Center for Vocation at Pacific Lutheran University (Tacoma, Wash.).

Chapter 3. Mindy Makant explores the central Christian calling toward loving the neighbor in her chapter, “Service, Justice, and Love of Neighbor.” Although justice and service are deeply intertwined in Lutheran theology, Makant recognizes that some forms of service can become paternalistic or self-serving. She articulates a full-bodied notion of service and highlights approaches to community engagement at Lutheran institutions that emphasize mutuality and strive toward justice.

1. Where have you seen community service get all too self-serving? Why is it prone to this?
2. How has your institution been able to structure community service or service learning in ways that lead to the flourishing and empowerment of both academic and civic communities?

3. What do you think of Cornel West’s oft-quoted mantra: “Justice is what love looks like in public?” (see Makant 45). How have you or your institution been able to bring together interpersonal love and service with the more structural and critical pursuit of justice?



Mindy Makant, ThD, is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Lenoir-Rhyne University (Hickory, NC) where she teaches theology and serves as the Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences).

Chapter 4. In “Why Religion Matters in a Diverse and Divisive Society,” Martha E. Stortz unpacks Lutheran higher education’s unique “faith-based” approach to the study of religion. She shows how an approach simultaneously honors religious practices and promotes the critical study of religions. An approach that is both appreciative and critical helps students develop the knowledge, skills, and sensibilities they need for living and working in a religiously diverse world, whatever their professional goals.

1. How do you see religious literacy, i.e., a working knowledge of the world’s religions, informing your own profession?
2. Can you think of an instance in which a better understanding of a religious tradition—even your own!—would have deepened your awareness of what was going on?



Martha Stortz was Christensen Professor of Religion and Vocation at Augsburg University from 2010-2020. Before then, she served as Professor of Historical Theology and Ethics at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary/The Graduate Theological Union from 1981-2010. stortz@augsborg.edu

Chapter 5. In “Educating Whole Persons for Wholeness,” Jason A. Mahn traces NECU’s commitments to holistic learning in mind, body, and spirit back to Luther’s “incarnational realism,” an understanding that resists separating mind from body and each from spirit, and so undergirds contemporary practices that lead to the flourishing of whole people within whole communities and ecosystems.

Although temptations toward disaggregated and transactional education abound, Lutheran colleges and universities have particular gifts for supporting holistic education. Mahn here lifts up his own campus, and that of Midland University, Grand View University, and Capital University as places that leverage these Lutheran gifts for the holistic well-being of today's diverse students.

1. Which offices on your campus best demonstrate commitment to the wholeness of students, staff, faculty, and administration?

2. What are the barriers to wholeness on your campus? How might the ideas in this chapter address those barriers?



Jason Mahn is a Professor of Religion and Director of the Presidential Center for Faith and Learning at Augustana College, Rock Island, IL. He served as editor of *Intersections* for the past decade and now chairs the planning committee of the Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education gathering.

Part 2 focuses on five distinctive emphases, or “signature strengths” for which Lutheran higher education is well known.

Chapter 6. Marit Trelstad in “Lutheran Values and Pedagogical Practices” finds among Lutheranism’s signature strengths the practices of reflective, self-critical, liberative teaching and learning, which she argues can be traced back to the ethos of Lutheranism as a whole. Practicing “critical appreciation,” students and educators at Lutheran institutions hold their deepest commitments as valuable while simultaneously subjecting them to analysis, critique, and study from multiple perspectives.

1. Trelstad names critical appreciation; the use of good questions; the dispositions of humility, vulnerability, and compassion; and shared power as four foundational pedagogical values that cut across our campuses. What would you add to this list? Where does the Lutheran tradition “show up” in the teaching and learning on your campus?
2. How have you or other good teachers you know “allow for students to challenge [your/their] own deepest values and convictions” (95)?



Marit A. Trelstad is the University Chair of Lutheran Studies and Professor of Constructive and Lutheran Theologies at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma.

Chapter 7. In “Disability Accommodations and Institutional Mission,” Courtney Wilder recounts how Christian churches and colleges have sometimes done more harm than good when it comes to the full inclusion and sense of belonging of people with disabilities. She argues that Lutheran higher education shares in these liabilities, but has assets too, including deep support of disabled students by drawing from the best of Lutheranism while also critiquing it, allowing it to develop in conversation with disability rights and other civil rights movements.

1. What do disability accommodations look like on your campus? Are there implicit or explicit ways that these accommodations stem from or dovetail with your institutional mission?
2. Are you surprised that Christians have sometimes done more harm than good when it comes to understanding and supporting people with disabilities? What makes Lutheran colleges and universities (as distinct from Lutheran and other churches) a promising resource for the full inclusion and belonging of all students and staff?



Courtney Wilder is Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Midland University in Fremont Nebraska, where she has taught for 15 years.

Chapter 8. In “Music, Vocation, and Transformation,” Anton E. Armstrong notes that excellence within music departments, choirs, and instrumental ensembles has marked Lutheran higher education from its inception. Far more than an co-curricular opportunity, music at NECU institutions is understood to be a powerful vehicle that can heal and renew the spirit, delight the heart and mind, create community, and deeply form—and transform—one’s own voice (*vox*) and one’s calling (*vocare*) toward cultivating peace and justice.

1. How and where do you see music being supported and enjoyed on your campus?
2. As you think about the power of music in your own life, what elements of Armstrong’s chapter struck a chord with you?



Anton E. Armstrong, DMA, is the Harry R. and Thora H. Tosdal Professor of Music and Choir Conductor at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota.

Chapter 9. Ann Milliken Pederson, in her chapter “In the Garden of Science and Religion,” emphasizes that Lutheran institutions reject “warfare” and “independence” models of the relationship between science and religion and, instead, affirm their interdependence. She shows how drawing on both disciplines generates big questions about humanity’s place in creation and strengthens our capacity to tackle contemporary challenges.

1. Pederson’s students are sometimes surprised to find that studying religion and studying science is not an either/or at Augustana University? With what assumptions about those two ways of thinking do students come to your campus? Which classes and experiences help them to deepen their understanding of faith, science, and the natural world?
2. What is humanity’s place among non-human creatures and whole ecosystems? How can we better learn to inhabit our place?

3. How do students and educators on your campus “learn to look” (147-48)?



Ann Milliken Pederson is a Professor of Religion and the Program Coordinator for Medical Humanities and Society at Augustana University. She also is an Adjunct Professor in the Section for Ethics and Humanities at the Sanford School of Medicine at the University of South Dakota.

Chapter 10. In “Environmental Studies and Sustainability,” James B. Martin-Schramm, highlights interwoven and “wicked” racial, economic, and environmental problems and indicates how signature environmental studies programs and campus sustainability initiatives on NECU campuses seek to address them. He connects these efforts to Lutheran long-term commitments and summons NECU schools to respond with wisdom and hope.

1. Of all the environmental studies programs and sustainability initiatives showcased in this chapter, which do you find most inspiring? What is your campus doing?
2. On pages 165-67, Schramm argues that certain Lutheran theological staples enable NECU institutions to meet the habitat destruction, pollution, and climate change with particular resources and dispositions. Do you agree? How does the Lutheran intellectual tradition show up in your campus’s response to environmental degradation?
3. Of the challenges that Martin-Schramm lists on pages 167-69, which are present on your campus and how might they be addressed



James (Jim) Martin-Schramm is Professor Emeritus of Religion at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. Jim also currently serves on the boards of the Winneshiek Energy District and Future Iowa Energy and is also the Chair of the City of Decorah Sustainability Commission.

Part 3, “Contemporary Callings,” addresses some of the most urgent, pressing issues in higher education. To use the botanical metaphor of “Rooted and Open,” this third part of the book moves from deep roots and solid branches to places of new growth, places that will bear good fruit only with careful tending.

Chapter 11. In “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in a White Supremacy Culture,” Caryn D. Riswold tackles the racism embedded in all historically white institutions. Drawing on critical race theory, she examines how predominantly white NECU institutions perpetuate structural racism. Riswold calls up central Lutheran theological principles that might offer these same schools a path toward greater self-scrutiny, equality, and justice.

1. As you read Riswold’s careful description of several elements of “white supremacy,” can you see any of these operating in your own school or place of work?
2. Though she is critical of the tradition, Riswold also mines it for insight it might offer into the present time of “racial reckoning.” Which of the elements of Lutheran theology did you find compelling—and useful for working toward racial justice?



Caryn D. Riswold is a Professor of Religion, and since 2018 has served as the Mike and Marge McCoy Family Distinguished Chair in Lutheran Heritage and Mission at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa. caryn.riswold@wartburg.edu

Chapter 12. In his chapter “The Tragedy of Racism,” Anthony Bateza uses Lutheran understandings of humanity’s “bondage to sin” to account for personal complicity in structural racism. Only by honestly coming to terms with systemic oppression can Lutheran institutions and the people within them hear and heed the call toward racial reckoning, and Bateza examines two schools that have made a robust response, St. Olaf College and Wagner College.

1. George Floyd’s murder activated long-overdue discussions of racial justice in all sectors of the public square. How did it impact you? The institutions and communities of which you are a part?

2. Bateza views these discussions of racial justice through the lenses of literary criticism and Lutheran theology. How do these lenses help you better understand what is going on?



Anthony Bateza is Associate Professor of Religion; Department Chair of Race, Ethnic, Gender and Sexuality Studies; and Director of Race and Ethnic Studies at St. Olaf College. bateza@stolaf.edu

Chapter 13. In her chapter, “Institutions on Unceded Indigenous and Former Slaveholding Lands,” Krista E. Hughes grapples with the historic legacy of white colonialism, slavery, and the wrongful seizure of indigenous land. She calls out Lutheran institutions for benefiting from and thus being complicit in these historic wrongs. Hughes summons the central Christian practice of repentance to redress these sins of the past, and she imagines what reparations, repatriations, and “rematriations” might look like today.

1. Does your institution or place of work acknowledge the history of the peoples who lived on and worked the land on which it is located? Do you know anything more about those histories beyond the simple acknowledgment? Stands?
2. How does that knowledge activate you or your institution to take action along the lines of the repentance Hughes describes?



Krista E. Hughes serves as Director of the Muller Center for Exploration & Engagement and Associate Professor of Religion at [Newberry College](#). She is also a facilitator for [Speaking Down Barriers](#) and co-founder of [White Women Reckoning](#). krista.hughes@newberry.edu

Chapter 14. In “Race, Climate, and Decolonizing Liberal Arts Education,” Vic Thasiah challenges the stated aims of liberal arts colleges themselves, critiquing them for ignoring climate justice, even as they address work, life, and democracy. Drawing on resources from the Lutheran theological tradition, Thasiah argues that only by pairing social justice with climate justice can Lutheran higher education serve the vulnerable human and nonhuman communities disproportionately affected by climate change.

1. To drive home Thasiah’s argument, can you identify a global and a local instance of climate change impacted a vulnerable human or non-human community? Think of the water issues in Flint MI or the monarch butterfly population or the historic floods in Pakistan.
2. How is your school or profession addressing the intersection between climate justice and social justice? Think of one example.



Vic Thasiah is a professor of religion and environmental studies at California Lutheran University. He is also the founder of the nonprofit environmental organization Runners for Public Lands, and serves on the board of directors of Los Padres ForestWatch. vthasiah@callutheran.edu

Chapter 15. Deanna A. Thompson writes the final chapter of the book, entitled “Vocation, Deep Sadness, and Hope in a Virtual Real World.” Building on insights gained amidst the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racial violence, Thompson suggests that people’s deep sadness, and not only their gladness, should be included in their vocational stories, and she recommends ways that digital technologies can be used to see and hold one another’s pain, bearing witness to healing love.

1. Thompson extends Frederick Buechner’s famous definition of vocation as “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” to include a person’s “deep sadnesses” as well. How has your own vocation or vocations been influenced by COVID-19, racial violence, or other tragedies and traumas?
2. How have you been able to use virtual technologies to become present to others who need you? How have others done the same for you? Are you convinced by Thompson’s claim that our “ecologies of vocation” can deepen with the use of virtual technologies?



Deanna A. Thompson, PhD, is Director of the Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community and Martin E. Marty Regents Chair of Religion and the Academy at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota.

BARBARA REUL

“Miracles are no longer required”— Life Writing as a Healing Tool



If in early 2020 someone had told me—a healthy, extroverted, middle-aged music historian with a sunny disposition and wicked sense of humor—that a global pandemic and a sudden medical diagnosis would disrupt my vocation as a busy university professor, I would have laughed out loud.

I will not forget Friday, March 13, 2020, because my work life would be turned upside down: “You have four days to move all your classes online.”

But that day pales against July 31, 2020, when I received a uterine cancer diagnosis out of the blue: “You will need surgery immediately, followed by chemotherapy and radiation treatments since the cancer has already spread,” my medical team informed me.

“God sure has a sense of humor,” I remember thinking.

Or was this some kind of sick joke, given that my life as I knew had just been put on hold for no apparent reason? And how could I be so ill, given that I felt full of energy?

“It’s not your fault,” said the three (breast) cancer survivor-friend-colleagues who quickly rallied around me. Random mutations were the single biggest factor in causing cancer, they pointed out—not a poor diet, or exposure to chemicals, or inherited genes. They also

assured me that I would not have to go through this ordeal by myself and predicted that the pandemic would likely be over by Christmas.

They were wrong on both counts.

“If in early 2020 someone had told me—a healthy, extroverted, middle-aged music historian with a sunny disposition and wicked sense of humor—that a global pandemic and a sudden medical diagnosis would disrupt my vocation as a busy university professor, I would have laughed out loud.”

As a non-partnered and soon to be immunocompromised individual, welcoming “visitors from away”—which was code for my family who lived thousands of miles away in Germany and elsewhere—was out of the question. As a result, I had to rely on my “family in town” to get me through surgery and seven months of cancer treatments while COVID-19 held the rest of the world in check.

A trusted neighbor who had lost her husband to cancer years ago immediately volunteered to be my “go-to, in-house person.” When I returned from hospital, a close friend and

Barbara Reul, PhD, is a cancer survivor from the Canadian prairies. Her busy life as a university professor was disrupted by the pandemic and a critical illness. She chronicles both in a memoir that was published open access in December 2021; a sequel is in the works. barbara.reul@uregina.ca

fellow academic interrupted her research sabbatical to look after me for a week. It was her idea that I keep a diary to document my health journey and enlist the help of “walking buddies” to get my strength back.

To that end, several members of my “work family” brought along their beloved pets for walks around the lake that is near my house. One of them, Winston, the Miniature Schnauzer, quickly turned into a therapy dog of sorts for his “favorite auntie” Barb.

Spending time with him (and the rest of my walking buddies) almost made me forget how much I missed being in the classroom and working on various research projects. At the same time, I felt sorry for my colleagues who struggled with reinventing themselves online (see their “[Stories from the Pandemic Podium](#)” in the Winter 2022 issue of *Impetus*, Luther College at the University of Regina’s online magazine).

As time went on, managing side effects became increasingly difficult. Severe fatigue, insomnia, hair loss, and weight gain (who knew?) wreaked havoc with my body and psyche. But it was “chemo brain”, a medically induced state of permanent brain fog, that made me wonder whether this was perhaps the tragic end to my very own “from rags to riches” tale.

It had begun in 1986, when a set of 18-year-old orphaned twins from Germany emigrated to the West coast of Canada to join family and build a new life. Mine had been a mostly stable ride with many blessings for which I—who would likely never have attended university, let alone become an academic if I had stayed back—was more than grateful.

A Special Task

Imagine my surprise when I was woken up in the middle of the night on February 23, 2021: my inner guidance system had an important message for me. For the record, the latter has contacted me, a woman of strong faith, in the form of a distinguished looking male with a top hat for many years. I consider him my very own “angel of intuition”, despite the lack of wings.

“Write down your cancer story,” he said with a serious tone.

Forty-five minutes later, I was staring at a Table of Contents for a book manuscript that provided an

autobiographical snapshot of sorts. This type of automatic or channeled writing did not really surprise my inner scholar who often benefits from it while carrying out research and preparing publications.

What was new, however, was the thought of “Dr. Barb” writing a non-academic book that focused on, of all things, herself!

In the past, I had excelled in shedding scholarly light on the lives and works of German court musicians from the distant past (who were all named Johann, of course). Inviting perfect strangers into my inner world, therefore, frightened me, or, more precisely, my inner child. She would have given anything to turn the clock back to when life was “normal.”

Instead, she watched “Zombie Barb” emerge after six rounds of chemotherapy and haunt me through 28 pelvic radiation therapy treatments (“Stock up on toilet paper!”).

Thankfully, the journal I had kept ever since my surgery and my—admittedly sometimes somewhat foggy—memory were the only primary sources I needed to consult during the three months that it took me to finish the first complete draft of my memoir.

Did I feel exhausted, drained, and weepy on most of my writing days? Yes, especially during the copy-editing stage which turned out to be a special type of authorial hell.

The thought that my recollections would make a welcome and valuable addition to a colleague’s English literature class on illness narratives energized me enough to keep going, however. Not only that: it also fueled my desire to make my memoir highly entertaining, laugh-out-loud funny.

After all, I had survived a killer “balcony scene” triggered by hot flashes from “chemo hell” instead of my very own Romeo. The latter would undoubtedly have enjoyed watching me strip down to my birthday suit before stepping outside and basking in the moonlight for several glorious minutes on a super-cold, but beautifully starry night.

I also figured that readers would want to know more about a piece of “pelvic homework” (for lack of a better term) that had been assigned to my new alter-ego, “Barb 2.0.” After treatments had ended, she would have to carry out an activity several times a week for an entire year (!) that involved a decidedly unattractive vaginal stretching device.

“You will need to begin on April 2, 2021,” my medical team emphasized.

“Good Heavens,” I replied after checking the calendar on my phone. “That’s Good Friday.”

Enough said.

An Unexpected Gift at a Perfect Time

Whenever someone asked me about my life priorities before my diagnosis, I would jokingly refer them to a cute German poem of unknown origin. Its speaker, in my mind, is an alluring mixture of Supergirl and Professor McGonagall. The poem reads as follows in English:

The impossible we attend to immediately.

Miracles take a little longer.

Upon request, witchcraft will be used.

In my case, it was the last line of the poem—an unwavering belief in a higher power and the loving support of my family, friends, and church community—that helped me navigate uncharted territory successfully.

The most unexpected gift, or “miracle” if you will, was the realization that writing about myself would help my body, mind, and soul heal on multiple levels.

To my great delight, [Perfect Timing: Recollections of Coping with Cancer During a Pandemic](#) was published in December 2021 as an open educational resource. My target audience were individuals who had previously been touched by a critical illness, including caregivers and friends of cancer survivors, as well as health professionals, and fellow members of the university community, to name but a few.

In March 2022, I visited the English literature class in which my brand-new memoir had been assigned as a required reading. From what I could tell, the decision to chronicle my—apparently never dull—health journey had made a favorable impression on the students and the instructor.

“Since writing the book and thinking more about it, how have the categories of impossible, miracles, and witchcraft, shifted—what are they now?” my colleague asked.

To my complete surprise, “Barb 2.0” provided the answer without hesitation.

I attend to the possible today.

Miracles are no longer required.

Witchcraft, that is prayers, are used daily to keep me going.

“You should have these three lines tattooed on your forehead or some other place of your anatomy that’s hard to miss,” my top-hatted guide promptly suggested, albeit only in my head.

I opted instead for writing a sequel. I figured that it would allow my inner wise woman/stand-up comedian to document what happened during the year of healing I spent near family who live on Vancouver Island off the West Coast of Canada.

The new book, *Right on Time: Healing from Cancer During a Pandemic*, has multiple “life echoes,” as I like to call them, woven into its narrative fabric. Specifically, I touch upon my childhood and teenage years in Bavaria, Germany, and my early formative years as a new immigrant to Canada. My cast of characters in the sequel include both familiar ones (if you have read *Perfect Timing*) and new, fascinating ones (if you have not), both real and imagined, top-hats and other accessories included. Some of these individuals (spoiler alert!) also experience a “karmic course correction” of their own alongside yours truly.

In hindsight, my two autobiographical efforts to date have taught me the same, unforgettable lesson. What appeared to be a disruption of my vocation as a university professor turned out to be something different altogether—a recent cancer survivor’s call to action, that is, to share her personal story with others.

To that end, I hope to see *Right on Time* through to publication in 2023 on the same open access platform as its predecessor. Given that my energy level has never been the same since my diagnosis, and I have made a (more or less) triumphant return to the campus I left in March 2020, it will likely take me longer than anticipated.

That is okay though. Miracles are no longer required in my world.

MARY CLARE TIEDE HOTTINGER

The Power of Ritual Action and George Floyd Square

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was killed by the Minneapolis police on the corner of 38th Street and Chicago Avenue. As Mr. Floyd was murdered on camera for the world to see, we were all reminded of the deep evil that is white supremacy. This evil remains alive and well in our systems today, built in to allow systemic violence to continuously operate as the status quo. But the world did not respond to this act of violence with passivity or indifference. People came together, in large numbers, to form communities united in the vision of a more just world. Witnessing the formation of these communities, and the spaces they created, reminded us of the power generated through collective action. In the days following the murder of George Floyd, the intersection of 38th and Chicago transformed into a central meeting spot for community members who gathered to grieve, memorialize, and share space with one another. There was a collective sense that this ground was now sacred, and this fight for life and justice a sacred fight. Despite the acts and efforts of law enforcement and politicians, the corner of 38th and Chicago, memorialized as George Floyd Square, remains separated from the rest of Chicago Avenue, made distinct by the use of blockades that restrict motor traffic or external disturbance. George Floyd Square became and remains sacred space because of the community that believes in a better world in such a deep and real way that they have no choice but to stand

together to work and construct a space in which that vision of the world could be possible.

Community is power, something I believe in the heart of my being. Still, we can lose sight of this power; when the grievances of the world and the rigid structures of our systems feel too strong we are discouraged by the lack of progress we may see and exhausted by what can feel like a never-ending battle against injustice. This is precisely why we cannot stand alone in the grief or trauma perpetrated against ourselves or our siblings in the world, left to our own spiral of despair. In community we are able to find connection and purpose. But how does this sense of unity become established in the face of cultural violence and destruction? Further, how does it move forward in ways so as to make new spaces that could be examples of an alternative vision for the world? One of the most powerful ways that we can join together in community and form deep intentional connections is through ritual action. George Floyd Square is an example of a place established as sacred (and set apart from the rest of the world), in which ritual action sometimes takes place as a way to envision and enact a vision of a better world. For example, the Square's physical uses are many:



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there are multiple clothing donation and pick-up locations, free groceries and book centers, a community garden, and a resource hub, just to name a few. Here, the community began gathering in acknowledgment of sacred space, and grew unified through ritual actions such as memorialization through art, protests for justice, or offering their siblings in humanity care, whether medical, spiritual, or simply loving.

What can we learn from George Floyd Square by examining the roles of sacred space and ritual action in forming and maintaining an active and ignited community? Ritual action and sacred space are two interconnected concepts that have played an important role in many religious and cultural traditions throughout history. Ritual is an act, or a series of repeated acts, that are set apart from others which work to represent and embody a set beliefs.¹ These actions may include prayer, meditation, chanting, dancing, or other forms of intentional repeated actions. Ritual can create a sense of community and belonging, as well as can inspire liberation. Ritual can also be utilized as a tool of control when used by a dominant power force to establish or maintain social control. Ritual is often practiced in particular locations that are often set apart from the rest of the world. This is often thought of as sacred space. Sacred space refers to a location or environment that is imbued with spiritual/cultural significance or power.² Sacred spaces can vary widely in look and environment, from something in a natural setting such as a mountaintop or a forest to human-made structures such as temples, shrines, or mosques. The creation and maintenance of sacred space often involves ritual actions such as purification, consecration, and offering; however, this relationship between ritual action and sacred space is not entirely unidirectional but often reciprocal, with each reinforcing and enhancing the other. For example, a sacred space may be created through the performance of ritual actions, and in turn, the presence of a sacred space may facilitate deeper and more meaningful ritual experiences. Additionally, the use of ritual actions within sacred space may serve to enhance the power and efficacy of those actions. Through these practices, individuals and communities can tap into a sense of transcendence and meaning that goes beyond the mundane aspects of daily life, and connect with something greater than themselves. This

sense of belonging to something bigger than oneself can often connect us to a greater community beyond what we may have thought ourselves to be a part of.

This being said, it is fair to say that one of the most powerful functions of rituals is their ability to create a sense of belonging and community. When people come together to participate in a ritual, they are united by a common purpose and experience. This shared experience can create a sense of connection and belonging that extends beyond the boundaries of the ritual itself and can become the foundation for a community to be effective in enacting real, deep change.

George Floyd Square in Minneapolis is a prime example of a sacred space in which ritual action occurs to enact social change. The square has been transformed into a sacred space through the use of ritual actions, including the laying of flowers, the lighting of candles, and the holding of vigils and protests. The site has become a place of pilgrimage for those seeking to honor and mourn Floyd's life, and engage in community movements for social justice. The square has also become a hub for cultural and political events, such as art installations, performances, and speeches. These events serve to strengthen the bonds of the community and empower people to take action. In this way, the square has become a space for transformation, where people can come together to grieve, heal, and work towards a better future. In these ways, George Floyd square in Minneapolis exemplifies the power of ritual action. Through the use of rituals, the square marks sacred space that holds deep meaning for the community. As a place of remembrance, mourning, and action, it has become a symbol of the ongoing struggle for justice and equality, despite attempts by the city to assert control and power over the space. The caretakers of the square and many other volunteers use ritualized actions to push back through the intentional maintenance of the space, fighting to protect it and uplift its sacredness so that it can remain a place that holds room for a powerful and radical community. There is a lot to learn from George Floyd Square. The Square is a visual representation of resilience and determination, and although complicated, it provides me with an immense sense of hope. It is not free from conflict, nowhere is, but it does not run away from that. Instead, the community learns from

it. It takes knowing the community to know what is really needed for the community, and here, through ritual action, the knowing and seeing of the community is real, which makes real action possible. I wonder what could be gained if we began to look for the rituals we encounter in our own communities, and considered their impacts on the way we see ourselves and the greater world around us. I think that by becoming more aware and alert to the rituals of our culture and the social function of them, we may notice the power of ritual, therefore becoming increasingly able

to utilize the potential within ritual to strengthen and unify community towards a real and tangible future in which peace and collective healing may be possible.

Endnotes

1. Bell Catherine M. 1992. *Ritual Theory Ritual Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press.
2. Douglas Mary. 1966. *Purity and Danger; an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York: Praeger.

• SAVE THE DATE •

Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference

Augsburg University, Minneapolis, Minnesota | July 10-12, 2023

Topic: *So That Faculty, Administrators, and Staff, Too, May Flourish*

The foundational document of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities has it that we are “called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish.” Echoing this central purpose, a new book by 15 educators at NECU institutions is entitled, *So That All May Flourish* (Fortress Press 2023). And yet, we all know—and many experience first-hand—the unprecedented degree of fatigue and burnout among educators these days, which is culminating in a “great resignation.” How do we educators care for ourselves and “neighbor” one another, even as we care for students experiencing their own stresses and anxieties? What Lutheran theological roots and institutional practices empower educators not simply to survive our overlapping crises, but to become fully alive—to flourish—in mind, body and spirit? The 2023 Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference will bring together faculty, staff, and administrators from the NECU community to envision, plan for, and partake in a community where all may flourish.

JESSICA EASTER

Be Like Jesus: Flip Some Tables



What are we to do in the face of the growing injustice in our world? Communities around the world are being ripped apart by natural disasters fueled by climate change as we with more privilege continue to consume and pollute at an unsustainable rate. In our own country, women are

being stripped of their bodily autonomy by overzealous lawmakers eager to use their idea of God to continue the subjugation of the female body. Black and brown people are still routinely being murdered by the police, those who claim to keep us all safe, and are enslaved in a cradle-to-prison pipeline designed to keep their bodies oppressed. Queer folk are assaulted by word and deed, whether as gay people told their queerness is “their cross to bear” or trans people assaulted on their walk home from work, simply as they try to exist as their fullest selves.

Mainstream efforts, such as those made in the Suffrage and Civil Rights movements, would guide us to work within the system; women gained the right to vote largely by working through their male counterparts, and black folks, under a media-promoted, deradicalized ideal of Martin Luther King Jr., are said to have persuaded their white counterparts to gain Civil Rights. Each of these examples is memorialized as completed within the system and is celebrated for starting successful movements in large part through their supplication to those who had power within

the system, men and white folks. These both were tremendous steps in the path toward justice, and ones that should not be overlooked; however, the horrendous maltreatment of and violence against the black and brown body, as well as the domination over the female body have not entirely faded into the background to leave a world absent of these forms of oppression. The problem remains in the presence of the systems themselves, systems born and bred to perpetuate harm against those marginalized and to keep those with privilege in power.

So we ask ourselves again, “What are we to do?” In order to address this question, I suggest we revisit how Jesus interacted with unjust systems. In Matthew 21:12-13, it is written:

“¹²Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. ¹³He said to them, ‘It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a den of robbers” (NRSVUE).

The moneychangers and the sellers of goods had formed their own system of oppression, one intended to exploit those who came to worship God and exclude those that couldn’t pay the exorbitant price. The priests of the temple, too, by allowing and gaining from the practice, partook in the creation of this system, profiting off of this exploitation. When Jesus sees this, *he flips the tables*. Jesus does not sit

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back and allow for this exploitation, *he flips the tables*. Jesus does not request the Priests, those with the power to stop the abuse but who chose to profit off of it instead, stop the practice, *he flips the tables*. Jesus does not bargain over the table, asking the moneychangers and the sellers to provide a more equitable service, *he flips the tables*. Jesus physically overturns the system.

We are called to follow Jesus, for whoever says, “I abide in him,” ought to walk in the same way as he walked” (1 John 2:6, NRSVUE). So, in following Jesus’s example, we also are called to flip tables, to disrupt systems, like those in the temple, that perpetuate injustice, but we are not called to do this work alone.

Often when faced with injustice, we as human beings are drawn into community with others to process, to find comfort, and, hopefully, to heal. It is also within these communities that we find the support and resources to drive the type of change that we are called to make, to be like Jesus and flip tables. To be in community with others, with shared values and ideas, even in the diversity of reasoning,

upbringing, and context in the world, gives us the strength to continue on even when it is hard. Further, it gives us the opportunity to take a break when we need to without losing any progress we may have made. Community in this way also makes the vision of a future in which all are seen, heard, and valued, not in spite of, but because of the color of their skin, the queerness of their bodies, the vastness of the image of God we see in the various shapes of human flesh, possible and within reach. Even if these examples are on a local scale, they give us ideas on how to best move forward creating a system that works for all and not just the few. And whether we see it or not, we all are limited by the continuance of systems that oppress any of God’s wonderful creation, even if we are those that are the most privileged by it. We get caught in these rigid binaries and static boxes, unable to express ourselves beyond these and live out our fullest lives. Equity and justice are not problems for those most explicitly marginalized by the lack of them, they are an everyone problem, and to be like Jesus, to flip tables, we need to make them *our* problem.

Necessary Disruptions: Centering Vocation in the Common Good



I've always loved Mary Oliver's poem "Wild Geese" because it points us repeatedly to the call of the world—"harsh and exciting"—and imagines the "family of things" in which we each have a place. Oliver's depiction of pilgrimage, repentance, and love alongside the expanse of landscapes

envisions our collective movements. It offers, I would suggest, a way to explore the links between individual and communal callings.

That vocation is best realized when serving the common good—acknowledging our interdependence—is the core argument of the forthcoming volume *Called Beyond Our Selves: Vocation and the Common Good* (Oxford University Press), the next volume in the series by NetVUE (Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education). The contributors probe the ways that "vocation" and "common" and "good" need to be disrupted and expanded, so that we might arrive at a wider sense of individual purpose and collective well-being.

The "harsh and exciting" aspects of the world capture in some ways what it means to account for the limitations and possibilities of the common good. We acknowledge

the ways that the concept of the common good has been used to create normative notions of "common" and "good" and have excluded and harmed many. We therefore use the language of a common good, the commons, goods, and the uncommon good, alongside the common good. We also use language such as the flourishing of all, the good life, collective well-being, and communal wellness. By examining the multiple sides of the common good—how it obstructs and how it encourages flourishing, what prevents its achievement and what fosters it—we can better consider what we might name as the world's hungers and needs in ways that become more complex and textured. Jeremiah Purdy emphasizes a shift away from a zero-sum understanding in such efforts, favoring instead "the creation of new kinds of solidarity, new ways to feel that your good life is part of my good life, and an injury to you is an injury to me."¹

Such disruption of the concept of the common good also invites a disruption of vocational paradigms, calling us to reckon with significant injustices and challenging realities as part of our vocations. As we work with students to explore individual purpose, we must put a greater emphasis on the place of call—spiritual, familial, ecological, social, or communal—examining what it means to be part of a shared place. Colleges and universities are uniquely situated to model what it means to be a common

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good place (as Robert J. Pampel argues in the volume), leveraging our various resources and cultivating opportunities which build capacities for contributing to collective well-being.

Moving towards a more radical and reformed imagining of the good life for all can help undergraduates live into vocations of advocacy as well as expanding one's circle of concern to include causes that are not our own and people we may never meet (Michelle Hayford and Jonathan Golden explore these concepts in the collection). Disruption can produce action in our vocations in meaningful and impactful ways. Vocational exploration in the context of the common good means not only thoughtful reflection but also steps towards breaking down structures that keep others and our environments from flourishing. Addressing institutional racism, climate change, gun violence, LGBTQ+ rights, and economic disparities are part of what it means to be called beyond our selves.

Inviting students into this work is a shift of narrative, a shift from the dominant narratives of success, careerism, and individual pursuit. It is instead an invitation into the narratives of mutuality and membership (as Christine Jeske argues). Shifting the narratives recognizes our interdependence in ways that help us see that such disruption can bring forth deeper connection. Thus, the volume attends to the ways that the uncommon, specifically the queering of vocation, can help dislocate normative notions of the common good to not only tolerate the uncommon, but celebrate and see it as necessary for our communal well-being (as explored by Geoffrey W. Bateman).

We wrote this volume over the course of a year marked by multiple pandemics. The volume's linking of vocation to trauma, burnout, and reaching across difference is palpable and intentional. The connection of vocation to sadness and making space for collective lament (argued by Deanna A. Thompson) insists on a recognition of individual and communal trauma as we consider the flourishing for all. The call to our campuses to consider how institutional mission reflects a commitment to the common good, specifically through engagement with diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (as explored by Monica M. Smith) further allows us to consider what flourishing for all means. As we prepare students to deal with burnout as they prepare for lives of serving the common good,

compassionate pedagogy can provide pathways to foster skills for the long-haul work of sustaining such vocational callings (detailed in Meghan Slining's chapter, which draws specifically from models of public health).

Furthermore, in this expanded vocational response to others, we suggest that sustained teaching of dialogue and deliberation can create pathways in fostering a common good (David Timmerman discusses these approaches). Disrupting tendencies towards polarized thinking about difficult topics is exactly the sort of vocational invitation to serve the common good that we aim for in the volume. These challenging vocational moments are part of the liminality of the call of the common good, part of this toggling between the world and the self that involves an untraveling so that rebuilding can happen for the benefit of all.

We also explore the importance of interpreting texts—including the historical, the literary, the cultural, and the sacred. The callings from history allow for significant disruptions of the ways we might tell the story of communal or individual calls. The engagement with public monuments (and their removal) alongside the complicated histories of our own institutional canons that might involve slave-owning pasts and indigenous land rights are important pieces of vocational discernment for the common good (Martin Holt Dotterweich and I explore these topics in separate chapters). The teaching of history and memory, along with reading for the common good, provide vital skills for students in their discernment.

Vocation as an obligation to another—the antithesis of individual freedom—can be fostered through the college experience. This is a disruption that challenges educators across all disciplines and programs (as discussed by Charles Mathewes). What if our institutions invited the community back into campus spaces and classrooms with regularity, allowing a more intentional learning together and from each other? What if we disrupted structures enough to feature vocational exploration as formation for all ages? At the beginning of each section of the volume, we offer questions like these for educators across campus to use in professional development settings, classrooms, retreats, and book groups. Here is a further sampling that might help prompt reflection on the ways we can explore vocation and the common good at our institutions:

- What reframing (disrupting) do educators need to do of the underlying culturally inflected narratives and structures that shape our understanding and experiences of vocation?
- Who is shaping the definitions and understandings of vocation and the common good? What barriers prevent representation in these spaces and conversations? What can we do to be more inclusive and equitable?
- How can our discussions of vocation challenge educators and students alike to think beyond themselves? How can the college or university think of the institutional call as a call to contribute to the world's needs, the common good?
- How does the notion of the common good change when we pay attention to difference and privilege?
- Where can we connect the college experience to the workplace and community for students so they can cultivate skills of advocacy and compassion for causes that are not their own?
- How can our practices and pedagogies cultivate sustainability in our vocations, so that we might repeatedly confront difficulty, suffering, and injustice?
- How would you describe the campus ecology—the connections between environment and participants—of your institution? What sort of formation does it offer students and educators?
- What do we gain by learning about the past that can help us understand our present purpose and responsibility to others? How can that help us look to the future?
- How do educators across campus encourage students to think about their obligations to others?

The volume's epilogue features an exploration of key features of the ecology of the common good—specifically the principles of “deep ecology,” the overlap between economy and ecology, the cultivation of a home place, and the role of community gardens and gardeners. The contributors illustrate the myriad relationships within ecosystems and communities throughout the volume, helping us see our connections in dwelling together.

When we prioritize the commons as the start of our consideration of what good looks like, we can significantly shift our vocational calls. Here, the common good is the heartbeat of vocational discernment, a disruption of old frameworks of the good life so to better integrate individual and communal concerns. Our common purpose in writing this volume is to call others into the work of vocational exploration that emphasizes the importance of collective well-being. Situating vocation within the context of the common good deserves our committed focus as we prepare students to embrace challenges and calls from their communities (David Mazko McCarthy opens the volume with this premise).

While centering vocation in the common good most surely involves confronting the “harsh” as well as the “exciting,” it is necessary for all of us to keep exploring the calls beyond self, considering the needs and hopes of others. This is a disruption that can prompt us to heed Oliver's invitation to not have to be “good” but instead dialogue about “despair,” responding to the world and each other as we find purpose in this shared life.

Endnotes

1. Jedediah Purdy, *This Land is Our Land: The Struggle for a New Commonwealth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 26.

LENA R. HANN

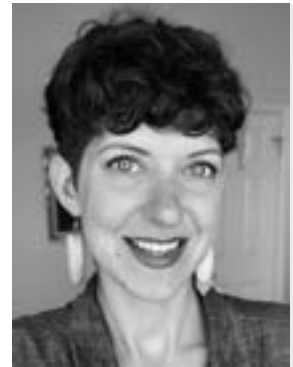
Where Disruption and Vocation Meet: One Path Toward Teaching Reproductive Justice in Challenging Times

I was 18 years old the first time I stepped foot in an abortion clinic. A first-year math major at a small liberal arts college in rural Iowa, I did not get into one of my required math courses and so decided, smugly, that I would enroll in an “easier” alternative: Introduction to Women’s Studies. I’d been raised Catholic in a tiny Illinois town, attending confession, mass, and Sunday school weekly for as long as I could remember. Imagine my surprise when the professor said that we’d take several field trips to area organizations as part of the course and then would pick one to volunteer with for the rest of the term. By the time the sign-up sheet got around to my seat in the back corner of the classroom, there was only one organization left to volunteer with: a feminist women’s health clinic that also provided abortions.

My first day as a volunteer began with stuffing envelopes around a large table with other volunteers of all ages and backgrounds. Conversation topics ranged from folks’ upbringings¹ to the university’s football schedule to one volunteer’s illegal abortion in the 1960s, provided by the Jane Collective. Everyone else seemed to know what the Jane Collective was, so I quietly checked out Laura Kaplan’s book, *The Story of Jane: The Legendary Underground Feminist Abortion Service* (1997), from the clinic’s library after my shift. I stayed up all night reading, simultaneously captivated by

the story and confused about why I’d never heard about the Jane Collective before. I went to my next shift with a palpable hunger for more information about women’s health, rights, abortion, birth control, and sex education—topics I’d never been invited to consider— and spent hours after each shift in the clinic’s library devouring all the information I could.

I do not remember much about the rest of the Introduction to Women’s Studies course, except that it was more challenging than I expected and when the term was over, I dropped the math major, declared women’s studies and sociology majors, and continued volunteering at the clinic. Six years and two degrees later, I had worked as a pregnancy options counselor, pre-abortion educator, abortion support/hand-holder, and laboratory technician at several clinics in Iowa and Illinois. With my Master of Public Health degree fresh in hand, I looked back and realized that my vocational trajectory had changed drastically, all because I did not get into one math class the first semester of my first year of college. That recognition became a key moment as I stepped into



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the next phase of my career; I had found my calling after a disruption challenged me to step outside my comfort zone and try something new and unexpected.

“With my Master of Public Health degree fresh in hand, I looked back and realized that my vocational trajectory had changed drastically, all because I did not get into one math class the first semester of my first year of college.”

Flash forward 15 years. After working in the sexual and reproductive health fields, returning to graduate school, and integrating abortion care into my research, I’m now an associate professor of public health at Augustana College. I teach mostly in the core public health curriculum but felt called to develop a Reproductive Justice immersive term course in January 2020 after several years of campus events facilitated confusion and misinformation about abortion and reproduction. Reproductive Justice (RJ) is a framework developed by Black activists and scholars in 1994 after decades of exclusion from the white-dominated reproductive rights and health fields. It is defined as “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities” (SisterSong, 2022). It does not focus solely on abortion and, like the ELCA Social Statement on Abortion (1991), demands discourse move beyond the reductive prochoice/prolife debate to examine systems of power and how the nuance of one’s lived experience shapes their reproductive choices.

I aimed to use the course as a disruption to the emotion-based campus activism around abortion and provide a structured space where students could examine the many issues of reproduction—abortion, adoption, birth, contraception, infertility, parenting, pregnancy, surrogacy, and sterilization—through the RJ lens. I drew from my own college experience and vocational journey to think about how I learned about abortion back when I knew nothing about it: from pregnant people, clinic workers, and first-person narratives. I utilized Augustana’s Five Faith Commitments (2015) to craft the course objectives, focusing on social

justice.² While I originally wanted the course to disrupt binary thinking about reproduction, external disruptions ended up shaping our class into an even more important place to process the intersection of rights, health, and justice.

I taught the first iteration of the RJ course in January 2020, and in several January and June terms since. The coronavirus was still a mystery illness in January 2020, and by June 2020 George Floyd’s murder sparked national mourning and outrage. The January 6th capitol attack occurred within the first few days of the 2021 term, and the most recent course in June 2022 saw the *Dobbs* decision overturn *Roe v. Wade* as we prepared for our final class meeting. We anticipated this outcome as a class, and discussed how much of the course content was suddenly out of date. We said our goodbyes only hours after the *Dobbs* decision became international news, and students scattered into the rest of their summer.

To plan for the June 2023 post-*Roe* version of my course, I reached out to past students and asked them to reflect on what it was like taking an RJ course during such challenging times, and what lessons they took with them. Many have graduated and gone into their various careers, while some are still students at Augustana. Three themes spanned their responses, including learning how to talk about complex topics, centering marginalized peoples’ experiences, and exploring the intersection of religion and reproductive justice.

Many students reported that this class was the first time they learned about reproductive topics in general, let alone discussed them with anyone else. G, a first year Geology major when he took the course in June 2022, shared,

“This course changed my perspective on how I talk about abortion, especially later abortions. I hadn’t given the language I used and how I dismissed the idea a second thought, and I think I’m better at being less judgmental and more accurate now.”

Similarly, E, a senior Communications Sciences and Disorders major when she took the course in January 2021 explained,

“My knowledge and understanding of reproductive justice, feminism, abortion, and related topics grew

exponentially because of this course. It granted me the ability to have informed and respectful conversations with peers and family, especially in this current political climate.”

The opportunity to think deeply about complex topics and discuss them with others helped students disrupt narrow understandings and foster more conversations. Many reported carrying this with them into graduate school, their careers, and community involvement, which is especially important when engaging with diverse colleagues and audiences.

In addition to talking about complex issues after the course, E described how the RJ framework helped her reflect on her activism:

“My perspective on feminism changed a lot. I learned about how white feminism is sometimes toxic to people of color and how I can do more to help all people with the ability to get pregnant and not just do things that look like they help everyone, but in reality only help white women.”

Meanwhile, G, who was in the course when *Roe* was overturned, connected the RJ theme of bodily autonomy to both abortion care and transgender health and rights:

“As a trans man who can get pregnant, I am concerned about the lack of consideration for trans people who can get pregnant. We face a lack of reproductive access, not only from being in an abortion desert³ or a state with an abortion ban, but from the fact that forcing a pregnancy in a place where abortion is banned effectively also forces someone to cease their medical transition to avoid being [legally] charged if the hormones affect the pregnancy.”

Both E and G captured the nuance necessary for understanding how lived experiences can shape reproductive choices, or lack thereof. These issues extend beyond the prochoice/prolife binary and invite a more reasoned examination of how faith can impact both knowledge about reproductive choices and how those choices are operationalized in real life. Students often shared

“These issues extend beyond the prochoice/prolife binary and invite a more reasoned examination of how faith can impact both knowledge about reproductive choices and how those choices are operationalized in real life.”

personal stories during class, including how their religious upbringings shaped previous knowledge about reproductive issues. They overwhelmingly appreciated the ability to bring faith and religion into the conversation when they otherwise might avoid talking about it in other contexts. M was a junior Psychology and Communication Studies major when she took the course in January 2021. She noticed religion more in the application of abortion restrictions than how it was discussed on campus:

“Something that stuck with me was realizing how many hospitals restrict abortion, even some without explicit religious affiliations. Augie being a religiously affiliated institution had less of an impact on my learning about abortion than the Quad Cities being an abortion desert.”

A, a senior Biology major when she took the course in 2020, echoed M:

“I don’t believe that religion and reproductive justice are mutually exclusive. Religiously rooted beliefs can align with viewpoints focused on reproductive justice, so taking this course at a religiously affiliated college didn’t present any personal challenges.”

Several students expressed feeling supported by the course’s commitment to nurturing their curiosity rather than prescribing religion as the only lens to explore controversial issues. I noticed this as well. Students from all faith and secular backgrounds engaged with each other and guest speakers in thoughtful ways, even when disagreeing. They saw social justice, one of Augustana’s five faith commitments, as a natural fit with the RJ

framework. Many reported feeling informed, empowered, and called to join social, racial, and reproductive justice causes during and after Augustana because of this course. It thus served its original purpose of disrupting campus conversations and unexpectedly grew to help students navigate other disruptions and become disruptors themselves.

I discovered my vocation amidst academic disruption more than 20 years ago; one missed course turned into a career-changing opportunity. For the past several years I have been responsible for guiding students through complex and often heavy content while they navigate disruptive social, political, and health events. Thankfully, teaching Reproductive Justice has not only helped me reflect on my vocational arc; it has also enabled students to use the disruptive nature of the early 2020s to deeply examine their personal convictions and professional goals. Whether discussing abortion care for trans people, questioning if parenting is a human right, or examining the intersection of racial justice and pregnancy outcomes, students are keenly aware that our course topics have real-life implications. As both an ELCA college that nurtures nuanced thinking and an institution located in an abortion desert, Augustana has been a unique setting for students—and me—to explore the changing shape of reproductive justice within and beyond the classroom. I look forward to checking in with these same students further down the road to see if the course had any lasting impact on their vocational journeys.

Endnotes

1. Interestingly, most of us grew up Catholic.
2. Details about my pedagogical approaches are discussed in Hann, 2023.
3. Abortion desert: “Cities with populations of over 100,000 where people must travel more than 100 miles to reach a clinic. This means people who need abortions may have to consider transportation, child care, time off work, and sometimes the money to stay overnight in a hotel when they seek out care” (ANSIRH, 2023). Augustana is in Rock Island, IL, part of the Greater Quad Cities region which has a population of over 450,000 people. The nearest abortion-providing clinic in Illinois is over 100 miles away. The nearest clinic geographically is 60 miles away in Iowa City, though Iowa has more restrictive abortion laws than Illinois and there is no reliable public transportation between Rock Island and Iowa City.

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CYNTHIA RICHARDS

The Duty to Teach and Restore Bodily Autonomy: Reflections from the Classroom

The recent Supreme Court decision *Dobbs v. Jackson* overturned *Roe v. Wade*, and in doing so, rendered mute an individual's knowledge of their bodily needs and forestalled their ability to act upon what is best for their health and well-being during pregnancy, planned or unplanned. Those decisions will now be the province of individual state legislatures, and the freedom to exercise responsibly one's personal judgment, informed by "support and counsel from family members, pastors, professionals, and confidants" as recommended by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), ceased to be protected by federal law. To use a well-known phrase, it stole from all our students, especially our female students, their bodily autonomy. This decision should be a call to action for all of us, but especially for college educators who believe that knowledge is power and that being able to make responsible decisions is central to what makes us human.

Yet this wake-up call should not mask the fact that full bodily autonomy, as it relates to self-knowledge and to unrestricted access to reproductive health care, has not been a reality for many of our students for quite some time. When we lose access to the complex, well-informed conversations that allow us both to make and then act on difficult choices, then we lose our autonomy, and our very selfhood.

As an English professor at a Lutheran-affiliated institution, I knew these conversations were important prior to this last year, but the *Dobbs* decision and a recent course I taught underscored for me their significance and how much my students have already lost.

Bodily autonomy has not been the norm for students at Wittenberg University, a Lutheran-affiliated Liberal Arts College in Ohio, for many years now. In April 2019, the Ohio State Legislature passed Senate Bill 23, otherwise known as the Heartbeat Bill, which bans abortion after a fetal heartbeat can be detected, usually around six weeks. What this law means in practice is that many women lose the opportunity to exercise their judgment, much less seek the support and counsel recommended by the ELCA, before they even know they are pregnant. Moreover, the law itself, by representing women as having a choice prior to six weeks, assumes a normative standard for menstruation that is inconsistent with the reality of women's periods, which can range from 21 to 45 days and, for individual women, can vary from month to



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month. The name of the bill is also misleading and medically inaccurate. It relies on the false assumption, one politically potent, that if there is a heartbeat, there must be a heart. Yet medically, what is heard at six weeks is not a heartbeat but rather electrical impulses that will eventually become a heart. In other words, the bill deliberately employs a well-known metaphor for what it means to be human—to have a heart—to simplify a complex medical and emotional reality. Currently, that bill is under temporary injunction as its impact on women’s civil liberties in Ohio is investigated, but its negative effect on female bodily autonomy has already occurred. The bill forestalls a complex conversation by offering up a simplistic metaphor: one that renders a woman with a heart heartless if she acts in her own best interest.

Currently, Ohio’s legislative docket includes another bill that would further simplify the conversation by defining life as beginning at conception. The passage of such legislation would erase the diversity of positions on this issue among religious faiths and would ignore established medical opinion. That such a restrictive bill could pass may seem alarmist, but the reality at my Lutheran-affiliated institution is that such policy already modifies the on-site health care our students can receive. In 2016, to maintain its on-campus health clinic, Wittenberg partnered, for economic reasons, with our largest area health care provider, one that ascribes to the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Services prohibiting any medication specifically intended to prevent pregnancy. In reaching this agreement, Wittenberg understood how this decision might impact students and sought a careful balance between the economic need for this partnership and its historic mission as a Lutheran institution. It would honor the ethical directives of its Health Services partner while working to provide access to contraceptives to students by other means. Students could procure condoms, for example, at various locations across campus and referrals for off-campus contraceptive services could be provided by our on-campus clinic. Students could even be prescribed hormonal birth control if they reported, or knew to report, painful menstrual cycles, as such medication did not explicitly violate our partner’s ethical directives. What Wittenberg couldn’t do, however, was advertise professional, medical consultation about a range of birth control options. These important conversations might still happen at our health clinic, through

coded language that reframed menstruation as a medical condition or through confidential exchanges, but Wittenberg could not officially assure students that these opportunities would be provided. Claiming agency over one’s body through openly seeking knowledge about reproductive health care options had to be outsourced to a different medical locale.

So, going into this academic year, I knew how tenuous claims of bodily autonomy were for my students, but I didn’t fully realize how much they had been eroded until I taught a course on Narrative Medicine this past fall. Narrative Medicine is a new discipline, one that uses the skills taught in English—close reading, reflective writing, critical analysis—to teach medical professionals to better understand both the stories of their patients as well as their own experiences with illness, death, and the rigors of a demanding profession. Studies show it improves medical care for patients and reduces burnout for providers. It does so largely by promoting self-knowledge and deeper awareness of what it means to be human. Part of the methodology is to examine metaphors of the body, and how the language used to describe physical conditions can impact cultural understandings. In 2020, when I taught the course, I created a unit that looked at the metaphors of pandemics; this year, given the Dobbs decision, I created one on the reproductive body. I also asked students to write and reflect on when they first realized they had a reproductive body, what that experience was like, and if they would have liked that experience to happen differently. The responses I received were not unexpected, but shocking, nonetheless. Only two in the class reported talking about their reproductive bodies with their parents. In fact, most actively hid knowledge that their bodies were changing from others, and for the women in the class, that change typically evoked shame. One student still did not mention menstruation around her mother but relied instead on references to menstrual products to share this information with her. Women, in general, experienced this recognition as a period of alienation, even betrayal. The emergence of breasts, visible to others through training bras or evidence of developmental growth, often initiated this disconnection. They found themselves and their bodies read one way by others—as sexually mature—while their own experience was the opposite. They became sexualized at a time when they knew little to nothing about their own bodies or desires.

Most remarkably, almost none of them had a way of talking about these feelings. Ohio has no state-mandated comprehensive, science-based sex education requirement. What it has instead, since 2009, is a mandate to teach about venereal disease, with an emphasis on abstinence as the best way to avoid it. Most of my students grew up in Ohio, and hence for many their first encounter with the reproductive body was to view it as vulnerable to disease. Their reproductive bodies became something to be afraid of, something gross or scary. These lessons were reinforced through pictures, and conversations about who they were, what they wanted, and how they could make good choices were not part of the lesson plan. Most of what they learned about sex came from talking with friends or researching via the internet. "Outsourcing" these important conversations had already been a reality for many of my students from an early age. Exercising bodily autonomy was at best an abstraction; the only option was to opt out.

Reading the materials assigned in class helped. What they found was that their experience was not unique. Those materials included a series of culturally important "first recognitions" of reproductive bodies—the Judeo-Christian creation story; Aristotle's "scientific" writings on gendered sexual differences; the creation scene from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), and Simone de Beauvoir's philosophical reframing of the female reproductive body in *The Second Sex* (1949). Alienation was the theme of these readings as well, especially for women: alienation from God manifesting as pain in labor in *Genesis*; Frankenstein's alienation from his creation once he realizes the fruits of his labor; and alienation from one's body as women's existential state in *The Second Sex*. Aristotle resonated most powerfully for the students in my class, as it was clear that his empirical methodology in *History of Animals* (332 BC) made the male reproductive body the normative one, and the female body one that must be policed. Reading such a dated text, it was easy for my students to see what was wrong with his logic, whereas, as adolescents, it had been so hard to decipher why they felt so bad about their bodies. Obviously, this list of "firsts" was far from comprehensive, but it was representative of both a shared cultural history and their own personal stories. Being able to openly talk about these texts and

share insights was liberating for them. We concluded this unit by meeting with a professionally trained sex educator who gave us a historical overview of sex education in the US and explained how she introduces the reproductive body and human sexuality to her students. When we reflected on her visit the following class, the relief in the room was tangible. They loved how direct she was, how without shame, how focused on simply explaining how things work. They found her knowledge, and the access she provided, healing. They also realized how politicized access to such knowledge has historically been and came to view their own narratives of alienation more compassionately.

Bodily autonomy only happens when we can talk openly about our reproductive bodies and when we understand all the options available to use. I learned this as well in college, the hard way. I too grew up in a state without comprehensive, science-based sex education and very little in my developmental trajectory was about knowing what I wanted and how to act on it. Not surprisingly, then, as a junior in college, I experienced an unplanned pregnancy. That pregnancy, in many ways, was a result of not knowing what I needed to know. Yet when faced with this unexpected crisis, I found for the first time, what I would call, bodily autonomy. The physician at my university health clinic laid out all my options without judgment or agenda. She only wanted to honor my wishes, and to help me understand my choices. Her supportive response allowed me to share my situation with friends and our university chaplain, and they too gave me space to make the decision that was right for me. Ironically, after deciding not to terminate the pregnancy, I had a miscarriage. I felt both relief and disappointment. My response to this outcome was as complex as the decision itself. What was not complicated was how important it was to have the space to talk about my decision and to understand all the options available to me, including abortion.

We have a moral duty, as educators, to create spaces where individuals can make complex decisions and where they can learn to make the decisions that are right for them. We have an obligation to fight for our students' bodily autonomy. Understanding their alienation from that reproductive agency and knowing how when and how it gets lost is where we must begin.

JENNY M. JAMES

Turning to a Reproductive Justice Framework for Inclusive Dialogue Across Differences



In the spring of 2022, I developed a special topics course on Reproductive Justice, which I offered as part of Pacific Lutheran University's online summer curriculum in the momentous month of June. It was a prescient choice, as half-way through our month-long

term our work together was dramatically punctuated by the June 24th *Dobbs v. Jackson* Supreme Court decision overturning the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling that had shaped reproductive healthcare in the U.S. for half a century. The *Dobbs* decision catapulted our country into a frighteningly uneven legal terrain—a balkanized landscape where fifty states have now either banned, vastly limited, or in some exceptional cases expanded access to reproductive care. In many ways the 2022 decision set in relief the inherent vulnerabilities of a liberal rights-based legal framework for protecting people's access to contraception, abortion and reproductive healthcare more broadly.

This article makes the case for the value of utilizing a reproductive justice framework, or RJ framework, for

teaching reproductive rights in the post-*Dobbs* era. By expanding the conversation to attend to not only reproductive self-determination but also the social structures that shape equitable distribution of life chances for fertile and pregnant people, parents and children, the use of a reproductive justice framework gives us tools to overhaul current conversations about abortion. As Loretta Ross and Ricki Solinger write: "At the heart of reproductive justice is this claim: all fertile persons and persons who reproduce and become parents require a safe and dignified context for these most fundamental human experiences."¹ The reproductive justice framework helps us understand reproductive life as a global human right—thereby opening a path for dialogue across differences of race, sexuality, gender identity and faith.

Often when the topics of abortion and contraception arise, dialogue grinds to a halt, both in public forums and private interpersonal conversations. This is in many ways because our contemporary conversation is constrained by a political binary of pro-life vs. pro-choice, a false dichotomy that silences the experiences of indigenous communities and communities of color and defuses the radical potential of reproductive social movement. Andrea Smith's 2005 article "Beyond Pro-Choice and Pro-Life:

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Women of Color and Reproductive Justice” articulates what is lost in the gaps of this dichotomy, stating “The pro-life versus pro-choice paradigm reifies and masks the structures of white supremacy and capitalism that undergird the reproductive choices that women make, and it also narrows the focus of our political goals to the question of criminalization of abortion.”² Here, Smith illuminates how the rhetoric and tactics inherent to the pro-choice vs. pro-life debate dangerously obscure the real harm that white supremacy, capitalism and the criminal justice system enact on black, brown and indigenous families and birthing people.

Interestingly, Smith’s critique of this political dichotomy echoes the call for inclusive dialogue made in the ECLA’s 1991 Social Statement on Abortion. Incorporating a similar critique, albeit from a very different position, the Statement’s authors write, in the section “Talking about our Differences,” that “A developing life in the womb does not have an absolute right to be born, nor does a pregnant woman have an absolute right to terminate a pregnancy. The concern for both the life of the woman and the developing life in her womb expresses a common commitment to life. This requires that we move beyond the usual ‘pro-life’ versus ‘pro-choice’ language in discussing abortion.”³ While this passage ostensibly lays the groundwork for an argument against a woman’s right to choose, the authors also paradoxically gesture towards an expansive vision of “life,” including a consideration of what counts as a liveable life, and how life chances are inequitably distributed. The 1991 Social Statement goes on to take a position against

“The pedagogical landscape of interdisciplinary teaching on reproduction, pregnancy and parenthood has changed dramatically since 1991, and this is especially true for ELCA colleges.”

abortion, with exceptions for maternal health, fetal abnormality and sexual assault; nevertheless, the attention to dialogue and diversity in its opening echoes the central tenets of reproductive justice. By tabling the polarizing

conversation of discerning the moral standing of fetal life and development, about which many individuals have mixed personal and political beliefs, the work of cultivating dialogues across differences of faith might allow us to come together across political divides to imagine a world where our social institutions adequately support and demonstrate a high, rather than “low regard” for the lives of indigenous peoples, people of color, and LGBTQIA+ people.⁴

The pedagogical landscape of interdisciplinary teaching on reproduction, pregnancy and parenthood has changed dramatically since 1991, and this is especially true for ELCA colleges and universities like Pacific Lutheran that have witnessed an increasingly diverse student population in terms of race and ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality and religious affiliation. A turn to a capacious model for discussing reproductive politics better serves our transformed student bodies—opening up new avenues for learning, personal discernment and community engagement. As RJ activists have known for decades, a right to terminate a pregnancy is only one facet of a larger movement that fights for all humans to have the right of bodily autonomy and kin-making. Ross and Solinger define reproductive justice according to four major principles:

“(1) the right not to have a child; (2) the right to have a child; and (3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments. In addition, reproductive justice demands sexual autonomy and gender freedom for every human being.”⁵

In my decade-long experience teaching reproductive justice units in gender studies courses, which led to my development of a 2022 stand-alone course, I have found that students are often energized by Ross and Solinger’s model, connecting in particular with the second and third principles; many students have never considered the political contexts of people’s individual paths to pregnancy and parenthood, nor are they knowledgeable about the long history of our white supremacist institutions foreclosing the reproductive freedoms of women of color. When designing units on reproductive justice, I foreground this history, incorporating a range of disciplinary perspectives on the intersections of race, ethnicity, reproduction and parenthood.

In my 2022 special topics course, content on the history of racism and reproduction included an array of oral, written, video and web-based sources that bridged the academic textual conversation with the digital world in which our students are immersed. An important early lesson focused on the history of forced sterilization, where students read excerpts from Dorothy Roberts' canonical study *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* alongside Elena Gutiérrez's research on the systemic forced sterilization of Mexican-American women in Los Angeles in the early 1970s. Gutiérrez illuminates the intersecting forms of oppression that led to an epidemic in involuntary surgical procedures, demonstrating how federal "anti-poverty" funds facilitated racist practices of prenatal and postpartum care at the Women's Hospital of the Los Angeles County Medical Center.⁶ We drew connections between these historical accounts and recent reporting on systemic forced hysterectomies occurring in carceral spaces, including the 2020 documentary *Belly of the Beast*, which chronicles abuses within the California Corrections Department, and journalistic accounts of the wave of forced hysterectomies that migrant birthing people recently experienced while imprisoned in the Irwin County Detention Center in Ocilla, Georgia.⁷ This history illuminates the racialized terms of reproductive self-determination and the painful unfreedom experienced within communities of color—a history that reveals that the heteropatriarchal demand to protect the life of the unborn is also a project to sustain and increase *white* life.

As white evangelical Christian women are burdened by a cultural injunction to reproduce, as documented in recent writings by author Merritt Tierce,⁸ black maternal and infant death rates remain devastatingly high. Since the early 2000s, feminist and anti-racist research in the fields of public health, obstetrics and gynecology has demonstrated the persistent racial disparities in the quality of care available for black and brown birthing people, including statistical data showing increased rates of unnecessary cesarean sections and inadequate labor pain management for black birth patients in particular.⁹ Today, the black/white gaps in the mortality of birthing people and birthing outcomes remain dramatic, including maternal and infant losses that were most often preventable, even after decades of hard-fought advancements in

medical care. Analyzing administrative data such as hospitalization records alongside income data in California, a recent January 2023 study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that black families are more likely to face infant loss in the first year of life than white families, regardless of income.¹⁰ These studies demonstrate that racism within reproductive healthcare is not a thing of the past, but rather an urgent contemporary reality that has moral and mortal consequences.

The transformative potential of a pedagogy rooted in the principles of reproductive justice resides not simply in the acquisition of knowledge from a multiplicity of sources, but also in the equitable application and dissemination of this knowledge to communities beyond the borders of higher education. In my course we designed a collaborative community-engaged final project that drew on an ethics of feminist praxis, an ethics grounded in respecting the evidence of experience that catalyzed the 1994 development of the RJ framework by 12 black feminists organizing at a Chicago pro-choice political conference, including MacArthur Fellow Loretta Ross. My students applied their learning to the development of a public-facing virtual map of reproductive and perinatal support resources for the Parkland, Washington community in which PLU resides. Parkland is an unincorporated suburb of Tacoma located in Pierce County, and statistically has a higher population of people of color than the county overall, as well as a higher rate of people living under the poverty line. Parkland also has a very diverse immigrant community with more than 40 languages spoken by students enrolled in the local public school system. After analyzing Parkland-specific census data alongside the county-by-county [Maternal Vulnerability Index](#), students discovered that pregnant and birthing people as well as new parents were particularly at risk for postpartum mental health challenges, among other vulnerabilities. To address this, we worked together to identify and map community-based resources that would be both helpful and easily accessed via public transportation, such as the [Parent Resilience Program](#), a culturally-matched peer-based mental health support network for new parents organized by Perinatal Support Washington.

My passion for teaching reproductive justice arises from my scholarly curiosity, my political commitments, and also my personal experiences as a white, queer gestational

parent. My partner and I were privileged to have access to quality care and experienced relatively few obstacles to determining our own queer reproductive paths. We had the financial means necessary to pursue assisted reproductive technologies in order to conceive, as well as to purchase donor sperm. And yet my experiences during pregnancy, labor and the perinatal period were not free from hardship, as most birthing people can attest. I had an early “missed” miscarriage in the spring of 2018, which required me to jump through a number of emotional and logistical hoops to self-advocate for a medically managed miscarriage through the oral administration of misoprostol, a medication now limited in almost half of states for its role in medical abortions. Sixteen months later, after a lengthy and painful postpartum healing process caused in part by a challenging delivery, I had become radicalized to the ways that our reproductive, birthing and postpartum healthcare systems undoubtedly fail to support the health and well-being of birthing people.

As the cited history of racist forms of inequity in care attests, my white queer maternal difficulties with pregnancy loss and postpartum medical complications are small when set against the larger forms of medical discrimination, malpractice, and substandard care that families of color endure—a healthcare system that is wounding parents and children rather than embracing them in the loving care needed for this sacred time of transition. I tell this story to remind readers that researching, writing about and teaching reproductive rights arise from our intellectual curiosity, our political commitments, and also our rich and complicated personal experiences. To do ethical work in the field of reproductive justice we must therefore stay grounded in an awareness of our own positionality, as well as in the forms of embodied memory and various wounds that we may carry.

In building inclusive community, co-learners in the reproductive justice classroom can draw on the feminist, queer and anti-racist values that foster heart-centered conversations about politics, faith, identity and power. Some of the pedagogical principles I’ve drawn on include:

- The creation of a welcoming space for story-telling and the sharing of personal experience as well as culturally-specific knowledges. As Loretta Ross and Vickie

Solinger write, “To embrace the vision of reproductive justice, one must embrace polyvocality—many voices telling their stories that together may be woven into a unified movement for human rights.”¹¹

- Incorporating a discussion of bodily autonomy as a way to link contemporary calls for equitable access to quality reproductive healthcare nationwide with concurrent battles to protect gender-affirming care for all people, regardless of income or state of residence. As Ross and Solinger remind us, “sexual autonomy and gender freedom for every human being” are foundational human rights at the core of reproductive justice.
- The incorporation of a variety of examples, case studies and texts that show the true diversity of human reproduction and family, including those that center experiences of BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ persons and families.
- The use of gender-inclusive language including the terms “birthing people” and “pregnant people” in course material and discussions as a means to foster an inclusive learning environment for all students regardless of gender identity.

The reproductive justice framework is essential to a feminist and anti-racist undergraduate curriculum as it uniquely illustrates the ways that social systems shape individual experiences and intersecting structures of power mark bodies, intimate relationships, and families. As students and faculty, we must remain mindful of the reality of social differences shaping our reproductive lives. In doing so, we can foster the skill of being present to each other when entering into difficult dialogues across differences—bearing witness to the complexities and contradictions that shape our individual reproductive journeys.

Endnotes

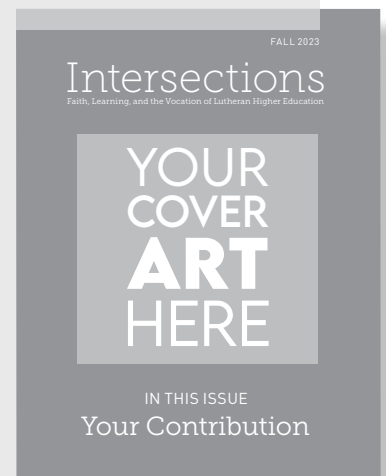
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Fall 2023 “Vocation and the Flourishing of Educators”*

We invite pieces on how educators,* broadly construed to mean all who work at colleges and universities, might care for ourselves and “neighbor” one another, even as we care for students experiencing their own stresses and anxieties. What Lutheran theological roots and institutional practices empower educators not simply to survive our overlapping crises, but to become fully alive—to flourish—in mind, body and spirit? Perspectives from all areas of Higher Education at Lutheran colleges and universities are welcome, including students. We publish both short reflections of 500-600 words and features of 1000-2500 words. Contributions are due **September 1, 2023**. If you would like to be in conversation about an idea that is brewing, please be in touch with the editor, Colleen Windham-Hughes: windhamh@callutheran.edu



A Reconsideration of the Political Approach to Abortion

Heralded as a critical milestone in the journey for women's rights, *Roe v. Wade* (1973) created a right to abortion by reinterpreting the Due Process Clause of the Constitution. It was a dramatic display of judicial intervention that reaffirmed the right to privacy and granted women the liberty to obtain an abortion before twenty-four weeks of pregnancy without intervention by the state (Congressional Record House Articles, 2020). *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992) also broadened women's rights by ruling that states could not reduce abortion rights if they placed an "undue burden" on women who seek abortions (Weingarten, 2016, p. 27). However, on June 24, 2022, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* (1973) through *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022), eliminating the constitutional right to abortion at the federal level. In the meantime, while the country faces a volatile political climate, there is still a bounty of shaming rhetoric regarding the right to abortion that has created a partisan divide between pro-life and pro-choice movements.

Politicians and lawmakers nationwide have continued to act in opposition to abortion. In the past, states such as North Dakota in March 2013 and Arkansas have passed laws prohibiting abortion once a fetal heartbeat is detected, which in most cases is only a week or two after most women become aware of their pregnancies (Weingarten, 2016). Most recently, between 2022 and 2023, states such as Tennessee and West Virginia have passed or amended laws

restricting abortions, imposing prison sentences should an individual "lie" to get an abortion and removing or establishing limited exemptions for rape or incest (e.g., SB 857 and SB 584) (Tennessee General Assembly legislation, n.d.; Campbell, 2023).

In opposition to the approach politicians and lawmakers enact to prohibit and limit abortion, I am suggesting a solution to instead rewrite the rhetoric and political approach to abortion that has become the staple of activist claims for the past few decades. Unlike pro-choice and pro-life activists who make their political goal either the criminalization or decriminalization of abortion, the proposed framework will advocate for abortion rights under the guise of tackling specific social factors and preventative measures to combat this undesired behavior. The problem is not abortion, but rather, it is a symptom of a broader range of issues that have been left disregarded by politicians and several activists.

Much of the discourse surrounding abortion is often based on moral judgments and beliefs that tend to produce shaming rhetoric that justify these legal measures. Oftentimes, many anti-abortion laws claim to be protecting "unborn children" or create the argument that if women



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understood that they were taking a human life, they would no longer be so inclined to receive an abortion. According to Weingarten, this particular approach patronizes women, but also engenders shame by suggesting that a “‘real’ woman would never be able to abort once she visibly or audibly witnessed the life inside of her” (2016, p. 27). In such rhetoric, the process of abortion creates unfair circumstances in which the burden of shame is placed solely on the woman and not those complicit in the decision of abortion or the unwanted pregnancy.

Likewise, arguments regarding restricting abortion are equally likely to include moral judgments which have their basis in religious influences. Woodrum & Davidson, for example, discuss how members of more conservative churches often lean towards more restrictive abortion laws, while those on the opposing end of the spectrum with liberal attitudes support nonrestrictive laws (1992). These are not the only factors contributing to whether or not an individual supports abortion, but Woodrum & Davidson argue that religious influence maintains a “powerful” and substantial effect on abortion attitudes (1992, p. 229). By this rhetoric, legislators and policymakers, whether intentionally or not, permit the intersection of Church and State, which according to our founding beliefs, should not occur in the government.

Ultimately, the divide between pro-life and pro-choice claims creates an atmosphere in which abortion is framed through the rhetoric of individual choice and is linked to the presence of shame. As such, these moral arguments regarding the sanctity of life remain the most powerful tools that activists in particular possess. However, once again, I would like to reiterate that abortion should not be the issue that legislators should tackle. Pro-life should not mean protecting the unborn fetus while in the womb and pro-choice should not only encompass the freedom of bodily autonomy. If protecting life and reproductive rights is truly the goal, then it would be crucial to reword the rhetoric surrounding abortion to include support and resources for the mother prior to and following birth.

As previously stated, both the pro-life and pro-choice positions often solely focus on the decision of whether or not a woman should be able to receive an abortion without acknowledging the economic, social, and political factors that press women into these distasteful situations in the first place. Reproductive health encompasses much more

than just the right to abortion. Reproductive rights allow women to experience greater socioeconomic well-being, overall health, relationship stability, and financial stability (Hess et al., 2015). As such, there are several recommendations that policymakers and legislators should consider when crafting reproductive laws.

First, there should be mandated sex education nationwide so that young adults and adolescents can make more informed decisions about their sexuality and intimate relations. Hess et al. (2015) reaffirm this notion by indicating that research on the use of sex education has been critical so that young men and women may make more thoughtful decisions about how they approach contraception, unwanted pregnancies, and STDs. If there were a fixed and appropriate curriculum that addresses sex education, many young men and women who engage in sexual relations from an early age might be more likely and willing to prevent unwanted outcomes, thus circumventing the need for abortions.

“First, there should be mandated sex education nationwide so that young adults and adolescents can make more informed decisions about their sexuality and intimate relations.”

Secondly, free contraception should be a staple when it comes to women’s reproductive health. To obtain birth control at a manageable price is a difficult feat for many women. For women making the federal minimum wage of \$7.25, the cost of birth control is equal to 51 hours of work (Hess et al., 2015). Of course, many challenges of price have been mitigated by the enactment of the Affordable Care Act, which has required many healthcare insurers to cover certain forms of contraception (Hess et al., 2015). Even so, this is not enough. Corporations may find loopholes, or may only cover certain forms of contraception that may not be compatible with women’s bodies. One woman may be able to only take a certain brand of pill, or may only be able to use an IUD due to adverse reactions to other forms of birth control. Likewise, free contraception is not solely an excuse to engage in sexual relations, as many may claim, but it also poses a safeguard for women

who may become victims of sexual violence, incest, or even a torn condom. Free contraception is not a luxury, but it is another preventative measure so that the prevalence of abortion decreases.

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One final recommendation is to create crisis pregnancy centers that articulate their position in favor of challenging the social, political, and economic barriers that women from multiple backgrounds may face. These centers could provide primary healthcare and pregnancy services, GED classes, child placement services, and literacy training, among other resources that may help women to become more prepared for parenthood or, more importantly, their ability to take family planning circumstances into their own hands. As author Andrew Smith (2005) put it, “We cannot encourage women to have babies and then continue their dependency on the system. We can’t leave them without the resources to care for their children and then say, ‘Praise the Lord, we saved a baby’”. In doing so, these programs and centers could serve as places of reproductive justice, education, and proper care for women to make informed decisions without the burden of the criminalization and decriminalization of abortion lingering over their heads.

There are several other recommendations to be made such as better foster care systems, mental health resources, welfare programs, and even legislation holding the men who are involved in the conception of the fetus responsible for child support. However, what these three recommendations hope to achieve is a pathway beyond the aforementioned rhetoric of abortion that brings with it the specter of shame and moral judgment. These recommendations would only serve to expand the scope of women’s reproductive rights while at the same time potentially preventing the result of abortion.

In today’s political discourse legislators and activists consistently perpetuate cycles of oppression against women and their reproductive rights without acknowledging the social roots and causes that may permit and force women to seek such services in the first place. The burden of shame

and choice should not solely rely on women. Governments and their capitalist structures are complicit in these decisions as is a lack of accountability on the male counterparts who take part in these sexual relations. Too many external factors are involved in these circumstances that it should not be acceptable to boil reproductive rights down to whether certain acts are criminalized or not.

When speaking of public health, it is not a moral conversation on abortion that is required, but rather a practical conversation that ensures both fetus and mother have access to exceptional and maintained reproductive healthcare. It acknowledges the flexibility and variability of conceptions and pregnancies, operating with the assumption that establishing one law cannot accurately nor justifiably apply to various conceptions and pregnancies. In the future, political legislation should provide the tools and resources to more completely encompass the safe practice and protection of reproductive rights.

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Take Heart: Is Neutrality Really What We Need Right Now?



I opened my email on a September morning to find an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* highlighting the ways that our post-Roe world is influencing our institutions, our teaching, and our mentoring of students. I was drawn in by the part of the headline that read, “A University Tells

Faculty to ‘Remain Neutral’ on Abortion Discussions in Class.” Learning about the ways that abortion legislation is impacting higher education in other states amplified very real fears and uncertainties present in our changing legislative and educational environments. As I processed the piece, my thoughts kept returning to one phrase—‘remain neutral.’ It was somehow disturbing. As I sat with it, I wondered, is neutrality really what we need right now? I understand that, legally, this may be the best advice that general counsel can give. But, what about pedagogically?

Neutrality is problematic for several reasons. It presupposes that the issue in question is about taking sides, it relies on a lack of investment or care, and it can be a barrier to critical engagement since neutral positions

are rarely as truly neutral or value-free as they purport to be. As an ethicist, I am concerned about the ways that remaining neutral can prevent the kind of deep, intentional, and careful engagement needed for addressing issues that so intimately affect our lives and the lives of others in our communities. Emphasizing neutrality seems like just another way to say this issue is too hot to touch and that we’d better just leave it alone.

The shared and distinctive values of Lutheran higher education, as expressed in the statement “Rooted and Open” combined with the approach taken by the ELCA in its 1991 Social Statement on Abortion (SSOA) call us to take heart and consider more fully how to create and maintain spaces for learning and growth. These spaces ought to be those where we and our students are challenged to think critically about our assumptions and to grow into a greater awareness of our lives in community and the ways we can work toward a common good. Urging neutrality threatens to stifle conversation precisely when we ought to be opening up more opportunities for collective reflection on how we preserve important social and moral goods like access to reproductive health care and respect for life. As we engage with our students and each other we don’t need neutrality. What we need is courage.

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Courage: Identifying and Responding to Fear

I've been teaching courses in sexual ethics for nearly 15 years. In that time, I've noticed that it has only become harder for students to talk about the ethics of abortion. A big reason for this is fear. In the polarized environment we are in, students expect conversations about abortion to be contentious, adversarial, and intractable. Many of them have only experienced engaging with this topic through the dualistic "pro-choice vs. pro-life" framework and they are often very anxious about entering into any kind of "debate" or conversation with those who have different views. These fears aren't easily dismissed. A polarized environment feeds insecurity, it suggests that one must choose a side and it can feel threatening to those who are unsure. Students are often afraid of being shamed or judged by their peers, and having little experience with civil and respectful dialogue, the threat of rejection is not imaginary. It often feels like a safer option to stay quiet or avoid having a view at all. Furthermore, when it looks like there are only two sides to choose from, those who have chosen a side may be afraid to examine it because important parts of their self-understanding may be closely tied to that position. The threat of losing oneself is very scary.

One of the strengths of the SSOA is that it makes room for ambivalence and disagreement while also sustaining a commitment to remaining in a community united by shared values. This shared commitment to affirming the goodness of life includes attention to the many factors that support flourishing more broadly such as access to education, a supportive community, and health and child care. In our Lutheran higher ed environments, we ought to be guided by a similar spirit. Grounded in our common calling to "intentionally pursue conversations about big questions" and to nurture and educate students who are "intellectually acute, humbly open to others, vocationally wise, and morally astute," we ought to be boldly confident in our commitment to holding space for courageous conversations about challenging political and ethical matters like abortion. It is unfortunate and frightening that our colleagues in different institutions may not have this freedom.

We have a responsibility to honor the courage it takes for our students to risk stepping into conversations about big questions in the first place. Encouraging students to wrestle with complex issues and to develop their own

perspectives can play an important role in boosting self-confidence as they are challenged to strengthen their own sense of agency in a world that will ask a lot of them. We can help them (and ourselves) to bolster their courage by challenging the dualistic framework and approaching this issue with greater nuance and care.

Courage: Taking Heart and Challenging Apathy

Courage is a virtue of the heart, it opposes neutrality in part because it relies on caring about something enough to face challenges. Courage boosts our spirit when we'd rather run away, it enables us to "take heart" and keep going. A neutral position can often mask an underlying apathy, a lack of interest or care. As we just explored, there are many uncomfortable and frightening obstacles to engaging in dialogue with others about abortion and reproductive rights. In my experience, student's commonly try to remain above the fray by assuming that this issue does not concern them. They may have their own privately held views or beliefs, and a sense for what choices they think they would make, and that is where they prefer to keep them. In some ways this can be a good thing if it creates space for being generally respectful of the different views and decisions that others may make. But the other side of this is that it releases them from having to care about the lives of others and from thinking about the role they play in shaping a society that can be more or less supportive of life and well-being.

"The values of Lutheran higher education directly challenge apathy. Students are called to be a "neighbor" and to serve and understand the needs of others in the pursuit of a common good."

The values of Lutheran higher education directly challenge apathy. Students are called to be a "neighbor" and to serve and understand the needs of others in the pursuit of a common good. We have a responsibility to

challenge ignorance and speak openly about the ways that laws and policies impact people's lives. We need more awareness of the ways that members of our communities are suffering so that we are better able to envision alternatives that can alleviate that suffering and promote flourishing.

Courage: Confronting and Breaking Silence

Conversations about the ethics and legal status of abortion are severely hampered by the power of taboo and the perpetuation of ignorance. Despite growing up in what seems like a sex-saturated cultural environment, my students still overwhelmingly agree that talking openly about sex and sexuality rarely happens. This is even more the case with abortion specifically. Over the past 15 years of teaching, I can recall only a handful of students who have any knowledge of what a decision about abortion or an abortion experience is like. Most of my students tend to assume that abortion is something that "other" people experience. Having little to no exposure to the experiences of real people making real choices in complex situations leaves them free to make all kinds of assumptions, often negative, about who chooses to have an abortion and why. Adopting a position of neutrality risks perpetuating the problem by failing to challenge this damaging status quo.

Having the courage to break the silence that persists when abortion is a taboo topic is essential for empowering our students to adopt a careful, compassionate, and nuanced understanding. Over the past few years more and more women have been sharing their experiences in order to break this silence. Listening to their stories is

transformative because it helps students to see and better understand all of the variables at play in each unique circumstance. It makes it clear that addressing abortion entails much more than determining the moral status of the fetus or defending an abstract legal right or determining who is right or wrong. It requires asking difficult questions about the society we are building and living in and the ways that our society either honors or fails to promote human dignity and flourishing.

Roe v. Wade is gone. Our current reality has opened up the political "flood gates" and we are now confronting a dizzying array of new legislative realities that will significantly impact the lives of ourselves, our students, and our communities. Our graduates need to feel confident in their preparation for this new and uncertain world. Neutrality will not get them there.

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CARYN D. RISWOLD and MARY J. STREUFERT

Views on Flourishing After the Age of Roe

During her opening remarks at the Radcliffe Institute's January 2023 conference on "The Age of Roe: The Past, Present, and Future of Abortion in America," Jane Kamensky, director of the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at Harvard, articulated a hope for everyone attending to come away with new knowledge and fresh framing. That accurately captured why we were there, a professor of religion at a Lutheran college and the director for gender justice and women's empowerment for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We heard from over two dozen speakers in a dizzying array of professions and disciplines who covered a wide ideological spectrum: historians, political scientists, lawyers, nurses, medical doctors, global health activists, scholars of religion, ethicists, community organizers, and sociologists. There were Christians, Jews, Muslims, atheists, women and nonbinary people, men, and queer people, people who rejoiced when *Roe v. Wade* was overturned last summer, and people who likened it to a re-enslavement of women and pregnant people.

New knowledge about an issue that is among the most fraught and conflicted in American public life. Fresh framing for an experience that is among the most personal and intimate in a person's life.

How will we collectively navigate a social, political, and religious landscape where access to reproductive health

care is more limited now than it has been in fifty years? When the Supreme Court issued its decision in the case of *Dobbs v. Jackson*, it effectively eliminated access to safe and legal abortion care services in about half of the States that are anything but United on this issue.

Now what?

And, what do our respective roles in the Lutheran church and in Lutheran higher education have to do with whatever it is that comes next?

Caryn:

What I heard from the range of speakers throughout the two-day conference affirmed the need to equip more people for complex thought and community engagement. This is one way to encapsulate a goal of Lutheran higher education, which *Rooted and Open* declares as producing graduates who are "called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish." Reading that statement



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through the frame of reproductive justice in a post-Dobbs world calls my attention to the nature of “flourishing.”

“The conference affirmed the need to equip more people for complex thought and community engagement.”

SisterSong defines reproductive justice as “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.” Importantly, it addresses “intersecting oppressions. Audre Lorde said, ‘There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.’”¹ In her panel remarks at the Radcliffe conference, Getty Israel, CEO of Sisters in Birth, described it as multifaceted, intersectional, and comprehensive. It requires attention to economic justice, racism, sexism, environmental justice, mass incarceration, violence, equity in health care, and many more things.

Additionally, University of California-Berkeley law professor Khiara Bridges reminded us that it has long been the case that black people obtain a disproportionate number of abortions in the United States. Rather than inaccurately frame it as some nefarious predatory plan, she noted that this results from a complex set of factors including disproportionate rates of poverty, unequal access to contraception, higher rates of intimate partner violence, and reproductive coercion.² With many states now rendering healthcare more inaccessible, we will continue to see infant and maternal mortality and morbidity rates worsen.

Placing this in the context of our current carceral state, where, despite the fact that white people engage in criminalized behavior at the same rates, black and brown people are five times more likely to end up in the criminal justice system,³ Bridges noted an additional risk. The need for abortion care services will not vanish. The *Dobbs* decision and many states’ individual decisions to criminalize abortion make it more likely that women and pregnant people will engage in behavior that has been criminalized, and again, more likely to be swept into the incarceration system.

None of this is what I would call “flourishing.”

For me, hope looks like people who are empowered to think in more complicated ways. Where there isn’t one right and one wrong answer. Where multiple types of knowledge are needed to solve complex problems. Where individuals are empowered to discern while embedded in communities. Where women are trusted.

Much of this is reflected in educational and missional goals found in Lutheran colleges and universities. Liberal arts education insists on skills and knowledge that broaden a person’s sense of the world and of themselves. Depth of education found in a variety of majors offered at NECU institutions strengthens preparation for professions like medicine, law, education, ministry, and a host of other things. Dedicated community engagement experiences bring students and campuses into relationship with and knowledge about their neighbor’s actual needs so that they might continue to grow as leaders in the communities that they will call home. Studying and living in communities where religion matters, where the Lutheran tradition is one of the roots that grounds this very work, is a powerful resource in this new era.

“For me, hope looks like people who are empowered to think in more complicated ways.”

The call is here. Our job is to empower.

Now, what resources does this particular Lutheran church have when it comes to thinking about this particular issue of Abortion?

Mary:

As Caryn shares, multiple speakers called for the critical need to understand the total picture of reproductive justice when advocating and legislating specifically on abortion. As Khiara Bridges said, as a society, we must “respond to the structures within which people exist.” Only one of the three people who spoke overtly as Christian offered a complex perspective because of their faith. MT Dávila, an ethicist at Merrimack College, appealed to other Christians to privilege suffering. A theology of the cross, she said, compels us as Christians to discern Christian moral language and ethics

through a deep understanding of patriarchy and racism and the effects of these sins in national history.

“Within national history, the social statement on *Abortion* offers a third way to approach reproductive justice and abortion specifically.”

This might seem like a task too big to begin now in Lutheran thinking and action. From my perspective, the hard work among Lutherans began just as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was forming. The 1991 ELCA Churchwide Assembly voted in favor of social teaching and policy on abortion in the form of a [social statement](#). In the current historical moment, no matter our views on abortion, I think this church can rely on the ELCA social statement on Abortion to remember, renew, and advance a complex religious approach to reproductive justice so that all may flourish.

Within national history, the social statement on *Abortion* offers a third way to approach reproductive justice and abortion specifically. “A developing life in the womb does not have an absolute right to be born, nor does a pregnant woman have an absolute right to terminate a pregnancy” (2). It not only lays out the kind of total social and personal picture Khiara Bridges, Getty Israel, and others advocated at the conference, it claims no labeled position for this church—neither “pro-choice” nor “pro-life.”

Instead, it calls for, among other things, healthcare, childcare, birth control, and equitable pay (8). And it explains this church’s position on access to abortion: it should not be easily accessible after a certain point in pregnancies and should not be treated like birth control, yet it should be safe, legal, and accessible (4; 9-10).

In addition, this ELCA social statement aligns with much of what we heard from legal scholars and women’s health advocates at this conference—that women and girls should be the ones to make decisions about pregnancies in the context of their own lives and relationships. (See 5-6.)

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America takes the analysis further through the social statement [Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action](#). It teaches that it is a Christian calling to foster social and religious beliefs, structures, and

habits to provide what people need to flourish and that do not discriminate or control people based on sex and gender.

At the heart of the questions of fostering justice and being critical thinkers, as Caryn points out, are real people. ELCA social teaching and policy gives moral guidance to a church body whose theology says governments are intended to serve people for flourishing. Just like our faith formation instructs individual persons to serve neighbors, so does a Lutheran understanding of justice compel us to serve neighbors through advocacy. What should happen in church and society to serve, as Getty Israel, who founded a health clinic in Mississippi to improve birth outcomes said, the big picture of reproductive justice *for all*?

Conclusion

Not only do institutions that are part of this Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities have their own common calling upon which to lean, we have church teaching and policy and a theological rootedness that empowers us to engage in advocacy work, support members of our communities, and model complex thinking for the learners who live among us. So when it comes to new knowledge and fresh framing, we are already grounded in the gifts of this tradition, freed and empowered to serve our neighbors.

So that all may truly flourish.

Endnotes

1. SisterSong Inc., “About Reproductive Justice.” Online: <https://www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice>. Accessed 2/2/23.

2. See Guttmacher Institute, “Abortion Rates by Race and Ethnicity” (2017). Online: <https://www.guttmacher.org/infographic/2017/abortion-rates-race-and-ethnicity>; See also the report from the Pew Research Center, “What the data says about abortion in the U.S.,” by Jeff Diamant and Besheer Mohamed. Online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2023/01/11/what-the-data-says-about-abortion-in-the-u-s-2/>

3. Ashley Nellis, “The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons,” *The Sentencing Project*. Online: <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/the-color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons-the-sentencing-project/>. Accessed 2/2/23.

Intersections

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