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Guest Editorial

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Guest Editorial

As many of us can attest to, there is a lot of “buzz” about interfaith engagement on our campuses. As we reflect on the themes and questions of “What does it mean to be interfaith?,” we can’t help but hear the questions of “What does it mean to be a Lutheran College” echoed in the same question.

Two anecdotes as further background: First: two years ago, we attended a conference on Interfaith Engagement on college campuses. In one session, we heard a powerful personal story from a Sikh student also attending the conference. With bold pride, he explained to us how the Jesuit values of his university enabled him to be welcomed, accepted, and invited to fully participate as a Sikh on his own campus. This conference began a thought process for us: What would it sound like to hear a non-Lutheran or non-Christian student articulate with bold confidence the Lutheran identity of his or her college as a foundation for a thriving, welcoming, and religiously diverse community? What story could we collectively share as a group of ELCA colleges that might be surprising to “outside” observers?

A second anecdote: A new faculty member visiting campus before moving to Rock Island met with us. As excited as she was to be on campus, she shared that she had “Googled” the definition of a Lutheran, a Lutheran College and other items she had read about on the college website. As a non-Christian, she was happy and surprised to learn of and be invited to think about the role of interfaith initiatives on the Augustana campus. She also did not know what a college chaplain was and was very interested to learn about the role of a chaplain. She said, “I wondered if these things I read about only concerned the history of the college and had nothing to do with the present or the future.”

We imagine there are many similar experiences among our 26 ELCA colleges and universities. In response to a growing movement of interfaith initiatives on campuses such as the White House sponsored *President’s Interfaith and*

Community Service Campus Challenge, it seemed there could be a unique opportunity for the colleges and universities of the ELCA to bring students, faculty, staff and chaplains together to explore the central question of *why* a Lutheran College is *compelled* to be a part of an interfaith movement *because* of our unique heritage, identity, and core values.

At the invitation of Augustana president Steve Bahls, we began exploring the design of such a conference with the various constituent groups above. In June of 2014, Augustana College in Rock Island hosted the first Interfaith Understanding Conference for ELCA Colleges and Universities. Grounded in the question, “What does it mean to be Interfaith at a Lutheran College?,” presidents, students, faculty and chaplains from 17 of the 26 colleges and universities gathered as cohort groups. Participants not only engaged in dialogue, but also in planning for and implementing these types of interfaith partnerships on campus. Throughout the conference we heard from excellent scholars, students, faculty, and chaplains of various religious and non-religious identities as well as from ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton and other community partners in this work.

We are grateful for the many people who helped make the conference possible, including Mark Wilhelm and Kathryn Lohre from the ELCA Churchwide Organization, President Steve Bahls of Augustana College, the conference planning team, staff of Interfaith Youth Core and the Pluralism Project at Harvard University, and all of the attendees who offered their full participation in the conference. Many of the reflections, including the keynote addresses by Jason Mahn, Eboo Patel, and Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, are captured in the pages of this journal. But perhaps what stands out the most for us in the months since the conference is how this kind of conference was a living, breathing example of the praxis of what it means to be a part of a Lutheran college in the twenty-first century.

Kristen Glass Perez and **Richard Priggie** are the campus chaplains at Augustana College (Rock Island). Along with a planning committee representing various ELCA colleges and universities, they organized the first Interfaith Understanding Conference for ELCA Colleges and Universities, June 1-3, 2014, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.