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Vocational Leadership



The 2014 Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference explored one aspect of a Lutheran approach to higher education, an aspect with no agreed-upon name. I propose that we call this educational value “vocational leadership.” It is “vocational” because it seeks to benefit the neighbor

and the community. It is “leadership” because it inspires and invites others to participate in that service, usually because the project takes more than two hands. And I propose that fostering vocational leadership in its faculty members, staff members, and students is a priority for a Lutheran college. Persons with a variety of religious commitments can endorse and support this endeavor, but it is institutionally anchored in the Lutheran concept of vocation. This anchoring stabilizes the college’s commitment to vocational leadership, enriches its meaning, and gives the concept a distinctive coloring. Members of the college community can understand and appreciate this anchoring without themselves becoming Lutheran.

Understanding a Lutheran College

Before I discuss vocational leadership, allow me to describe the larger framework within which it is situated. The religious identity of a Lutheran college has three

elements: activities (classes, dormitory life, athletics, theater, choir, the dining service, etc), educational values (which inform policies and decisions), and anchoring theological principles. I will begin by using two images to help discern the relationship among these three.

First, we can think of the college as a large bridge held up by concrete pillars. All the activities occur on its expansive deck. Students usually spend four years moving across the bridge. The deck is held up by pillars (that is, by shared educational values), and the pillars are in turn anchored by footings (that is, Lutheran theological principles). The distinction between pillars and footings, or between educational values and theological principles, is crucial for what I want to say. The educational values include, for example, the practice of radical hospitality (or creating a safe place to learn by practicing generous interpersonal relations), opening the door to a deeper freedom, inspiring a robust sense of vocation (understood in its broader or ethical sense), fostering vocational leadership, cultivating wisdom, fostering a sense of agency, pursuing excellence for the sake of the wider community, valuing music and the arts, recognizing the role of mystery, practicing epistemological humility (or caution about claims to know), valuing civil discourse, and welcoming interreligious dialogue. We will not be able to explain or explore these educational values here; I list them simply as examples of what I identify as educational values. Similarly I will not explain or explore the theological principles that anchor those educational values, but

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here are some examples: the centrality of the gospel (that is, the good news of God’s remarkable generosity); a down-to-earth, active image of God working in and through humans; a “theology of the cross” (a principle quite specific to this tradition) that recognizes the limits of what we can know about God and is ready to live with unanswered questions while at the same time pursuing knowledge; an understanding of vocation as a religious call; a sacramental sense of the presence of God amid the ordinary; a profound sense of “freedom from” and “freedom for” as a consequence of experiencing God’s generosity; and a relational, communal, and paradoxical understanding of Christianity.

The second image is of a third path. Some colleges are sectarian. They follow a path that expects religious uniformity. They are an enclave, religiously rooted but not inclusive. Other colleges are non-sectarian and so follow a second path. They have severed their ties with a religious tradition and are a microcosm of American society, inclusive but not religiously rooted. A Lutheran college follows a third path as it seeks to be both rooted and inclusive—rooted and anchored in an open and intelligent version of Lutheran principles and inclusive in the sense of welcoming into its midst persons of other religious traditions for dialogue and mutual learning and in the sense of serving the wider community, not just the church that sponsors it. If we return to the image of a bridge, the non-sectarian college has no functioning religious footings, while the sectarian college collapses its footings and principles so that its theological teachings directly affect what happens on the deck. A college that follows the third path makes a distinction between educational values and theological principles (between pillars and footings) in order that it can be both rooted and inclusive.

While we are still discussing the larger framework for vocational leadership, let us add a word about the footing that anchors it: the theological principle of vocation as a religious call. (Note that I am here discussing the footing, not the shared educational value.) In the religious arena vocation is motivated by gratitude for the gifts received from a generous God. It assumes that God cares about the wellbeing of others. And it calls individuals to serve the community in all areas of their lives. As the Scriptures are understood in this tradition, they invite believers to

imagine ways to benefit the community without serving as a detailed rule book. Believers have freedom to decide how to serve. For Luther, the exercise of this freedom needs to be guided by wisdom. Such wisdom is an understanding of people and communities—how they function and what they need in order to experience wholeness. He thinks we learn wisdom by examining human societies in the past to see what went right and what went wrong (Luther 368-69) and by examining the history of the people of God.

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Wisdom benefits from increased knowledge, but it is more than knowledge. It is a kind of art—the art of knowing what a community needs, the art of knowing how much change is possible without creating a backlash, the art of knowing how to value people and at the same time adjust for their failures, the art of being present with people and empowering them without controlling them, and the art of knowing how to inspire people to do what is right and just. Wisdom is what guides the decision-making of free persons as they serve their neighbors and the community. An essential ingredient is the capacity to listen—to make sure that we understand the specific needs of this particular group of neighbors at this particular time. As we listen, we stand beside our neighbor rather than assuming a position of superior insight, thinking we know in advance what the neighbor needs. Whenever possible, vocation thus involves a “doing with” more than a “doing for.”

This theological principle anchors at least two educational values. The first is fostering a robust sense of vocation. When understood as an educational principle, vocation means seeing the self as nested in a larger community (indeed, an ever large community, from family to neighborhood to city, to state, to humanity, to the earth as a whole) and regarding service to that community to be

the highest ethical principle. By “robust,” I mean a sense of vocation deep enough not only to support but also to challenge our occupations, not only to support but also to challenge our political involvements, not only to support but to challenge our parenting, and so forth. Ethical humanists, Muslims, Jews, Christians, and others can adopt this educational value. The second educational value is central to the present essay: fostering vocational leadership.

Twelve Facets of Vocational Leadership

Let me try to unpack this concept. My procedure will be to turn the concept this way and that and identify twelve facets of vocational leadership. They will appear in the form of a list, but they are all part of the same concept. Because vocational leadership applies to our own role in our college and because the mission of the college is to equip students to become vocational leaders in society as a whole, I will apply the concept both to the college and the wider community.

“Leadership’ often refers to the role of ‘designated leaders’—to persons elected or appointed to chair a committee, to persons with titles such as supervisor, director, dean, provost, vice president, president, and the like. But, any person, any member of a community, including a designated leader, can be a vocational leader.”

First facet: If vocation is about *what I do*, then vocational leadership involves *inspiring, inviting, and organizing others* to serve the neighbor and the community. Vocational leaders undertake tasks that require the cooperation and involvement of others. Note that in a Lutheran college both vocation and vocational leadership are less from the inside out than from the outside in. They are relational concepts, not forms of expressive individualism. They are not so much about following one’s passions or one’s own

interests (though these may come into play) as they are about responding to the deep needs of those around us and allowing those needs to shape our ethical priorities.

Second facet: Vocational leadership uses the word “leadership” differently from the way it is normally used. For example, “leadership” often refers to the role of “designated leaders”—to persons elected or appointed to chair a committee, to persons with titles such as supervisor, director, dean, provost, vice president, president, and the like. But, any person, any member of a community, including a designated leader, can be a vocational leader. To cite a second example, “leadership” is sometimes equated with “command and control.” The leader decides, the leader speaks, and others obey. But, vocational leadership is not about “command and control.” Still another example: “leadership” is often associated with certain personality traits, so that charismatic individuals are considered to be “born leaders.” Leadership is then what some people have and others lack. But a person does not need to be “charismatic” in order to be a vocational leader. Vocational leadership is open to anyone from anywhere in the social system.

Third facet: The goal of vocational leadership is creative, beneficial change. Its effectiveness has to do with what gets accomplished and whether it benefits the larger whole. The focus is more on results than on the status or attributes of any of the persons involved.

Fourth facet: In contradistinction to a sense of helplessness or victimization, vocational leadership involves a sense of agency—an expectation that I can make a difference, even if I am not in a position to solve the whole problem. Thus, vocational leadership has a paradoxical understanding of power. It is more about empowering than about accumulating power, but it does not avoid utilizing non-coercive forms of power. Everyone has some sort of power (being educated is one form, as is community respect, charisma, wealth, a healthy support system, etc.), and vocational leadership can use all these forms of distributed power for the sake of the neighbor and the community.

Fifth facet: Vocational leadership involves what Ronald Heifetz calls “moving to the balcony”—that is, stepping back to view the whole in order to help decide what kind of change is beneficial. Heifetz says, “Imagine you are on a dance floor, swept up in the dance, an active participant

in a complex scene. There are some things about the dance that you will only know by actually dancing. But if you move to the balcony for a while, you can see things that you can never discover on the dance floor—the larger pattern of interactions of which you are a part. You can gain perspective and can make new choices” (qtd by Parks 50). Or, if we want to return to my image of the college, vocational leadership involves getting off the deck of the bridge where we carry out our day-to-day job and stepping back to see the whole—to observe the larger pattern of interactions of which our work is a part and to understand the pillars and footings that support the identity and mission of the college. Not only does a person need to see the whole, one needs to imagine what the whole could become so that it would serve its purpose even more fully than it currently does.

Simon Sinek has a Ted Talk in which he draws three circles. The inner circle is “why.” The next circle is “how,” and the outer circle is “what.” His argument is that people are not persuaded by technical details about the “what.” In order to persuade, one needs to move from the “why” outward (Sinek). If he is correct, then an essential part of going to the balcony or stepping back to see the bridge is identifying the purpose of it all. Why does this college do what it does? What values and principles are at work? And how could these values and principles be more perfectly embedded in the “how” and the “what” of this college?

Sixth facet: Vocational leadership values a person’s colleagues enough not to manipulate. It works best when it can draw on relationships of trust. Here another educational value of a Lutheran college comes into play—namely that generous interpersonal relations create a safe place within which challenging deliberations can take place, genuine education can occur, and creative, beneficial changes can be undertaken.

Seventh facet: Vocational leadership involves a variety of tasks. Sometimes an individual does only one and supports colleagues as they undertake the others. Sometimes an individual does more than one. The following gives some idea of the variety:

The first task is listening. This is crucial if a person is to serve. But it is surprising how often this step is skipped—especially when dealing with people on the other side of a social, political, ethnic, or religious boundary. (In a college

setting, one such social boundary is often between the faculty and the administrative staff.)

Another task is identifying the need—identifying as clearly as possible the underlying problem that deserves attention. This sometimes requires more careful consideration than we would expect. How a need is described can make a good deal of difference in what comes next. For example, back in the 1960s the John Birch Society identified the problem as the infiltration of Communists into American churches and other institutions. Not only was this almost entirely inaccurate, but it had the effect of fostering suspicions and dividing communities, and thus weakening American society rather than fulfilling its original purpose of strengthening it. A faulty description led to a faulty proposal, which in turn led to results that were counterproductive.

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Given our current political environment, it probably is worth adding that vocational leadership should focus its attention on specific people and not merely implement an ideology. Competing ideologies polarize and paralyze. So long as vocational leaders pay attention to specific people and specific needs, different outlooks and social philosophies tend not to get in the way of constructive cooperation. In fact, they can contribute to a deeper perception of the multiple aspects of what is under discussion.

Another task is to inform others in the community about the need and to invite them to care about it. We should not underestimate the power of “naming.” All of us are capable of ignoring needs in our community and in fact do so quite regularly. We can, as John Steinbeck says, “know a thing and still not believe it” (399). To name a need is to bring it into the light. The vocational leader persuades others in the community that the problem exists and that it needs attention.

Another task is to imagine alternative ways to respond to the identified need and, usually in consultation with others, decide what plan is the most likely to be of benefit. This too often requires careful work, because the proposal should take into account the interests of others in the community. The closer it can come to a “win-win,” the more stable its results will be. That is, if the proposal benefits one group at the expense of another, the long-term consequences can threaten or undermine whatever has been accomplished. (We see this in Iraq where the Prime Minister has taken steps to benefit the Shi’ite portion of the population at the expense of the Sunnis and Kurds. The results have not been good.) Here as elsewhere, collaboration is important. The person formulating the proposal benefits from trying it out with other stakeholders and listening carefully to their response.

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Perhaps we should add one more comment about this task of formulating a proposal. We Americans have a tendency to think that a need is merely a problem to be fixed. This assumes that the problem can be isolated, but we live in social systems where everything is connected to the system as a whole. The shockingly high numbers of mass incarceration of non-violent offenders in the United States serves as an example. Un-awareness, vindictiveness, poverty, race, sentencing laws, economics—all these and more need to be addressed in order to adequately address the complex problem. Deciding what sort of proposal will be of the greatest benefit is not easy, but it is a crucial step.

Yet another task is to marshal support for the proposal. This may mean seeking a commitment of time and energy. It may mean seeking financial backing.

Another task is to serve as a spokesperson for the project, explaining it to those who do not participate in its implementation.

Finally, another task is to organize those who work on the project, designing strategies, defining tasks, training participants, and dealing with unforeseen difficulties.

Eighth facet: Vocational leadership involves keeping one’s eye on the goal of providing help. Without this, things may easily go astray. Personality conflicts may become an impediment. Or the project may degenerate into “us” vs. “them”—“we” being the enlightened champions of right and “they” being its recalcitrant enemies. In systems theory, a leader whose attention is focused on the goal is said to exhibit a “non-anxious presence,” which avoids being caught up in the fears and reactions that the proposed changes may arouse (see Steinke 31-45). This does not mean ignoring the fears nor adopting a bull-headed determination to succeed no matter what, but it does mean a persistent yet flexible focus on the defined need and the importance of helping meet that need. Another way to name this aspect of vocational leadership is the importance of avoiding the “hidden issues” which may get in the way. Throughout any process of getting something accomplished, one or more “hidden issues” are usually at work. These are factors that operate “under the table” while the project is “on the table.” Pre-existing rivalries may be a hidden issue. Or, because, as someone has said, most people do not fear change but instead fear loss, the fear of loss may be a hidden issue. Concern about who gets credit may be a hidden issue. The list is very long. These hidden issues need to be acknowledged and confronted so that attention can return to the main task rather than being diverted in confusing ways.

Ninth facet: Vocational leadership involves risk. None of us is wise enough to anticipate exactly what will happen as we work with others to serve the community. The effort may fail. Or, even if it succeeds, the effort may have unexpected negative consequences. No one can provide a set of instructions for exactly how to solve the problem.

Closely related but not quite the same, vocational leadership also involves admitting failures—both personal failures and failures having to do with the proposed project—in such a way as to be able to learn from them. We have already emphasized the role of wisdom. Such wisdom comes from acting and reflecting. It comes from acknowledging failures rather than denying them or blaming them on someone else. Wisdom enhances vocational leadership.

Tenth facet: Vocational leadership often involves helping a designated leader do his or her job. Perhaps we could say it involves being a good follower—an engaged, constructive follower. This may mean voicing support for a proposal that is likely to help the college or the neighborhood, even it does not benefit me. Or it may mean helping the designated leader understand what is going wrong and recommending changes in how a proposal is being advanced. The temptation is to take a different route and practice what a friend of mine calls “magical thinking”—that is, expecting the designated leader to be able single-handedly to improve things and then becoming so profoundly disappointed when this does not happen as to blame that person and become either a disengaged complainer or an outright opponent.

“Vocational leadership often involves helping a designated leader do his or her job.”

Eleventh facet: Faculty and staff do not arrive at our colleges with training in vocational leadership. A faculty member, for example, typically has just escaped from graduate school, where he or she navigated a highly structured, very individualized program. The new faculty member likely has been encouraged to think about a career as an individualized project. Seldom has that person had much experience with vocational leadership or been encouraged to think about it. Nor do faculty members easily understand the way communities operate or discern the role they each are currently playing in the dynamics of their college community. Going to the balcony to understand the college as a whole does not come naturally. Unfortunately, falling into turf wars is much easier. Similarly, staff members often come from work environments in which they have experienced a “command and control” style of management. They have not been encouraged to see themselves as vocational leaders. Once hired, few opportunities are provided to help them understand how a college community works. All of this suggests that fostering vocational leadership needs some attention among the faculty and staff on our college campuses, so that the college can function better and

students can be equipped for vocational leadership in the communities and workplaces where they will live and work.

Twelfth facet: Students likewise do not typically arrive at our colleges with training in vocational leadership. Yes, they may have been the captain of a football team or president of the student council, but this often involved fulfilling specified tasks rather than identifying problems and solutions or going up to the balcony. Just as medical schools teach by mentoring students as they practice medicine, so we need to find ways to mentor students in vocational leadership.

Vocational Leadership and Martin Luther

Let me try to build my case for vocational leadership in another way, by discussing Martin Luther. Most of us know the story of his religious struggles and the years of study and reflection that transpired before he found a breakthrough, discerning God’s generosity and God’s active role vis-à-vis humans. Less well known is his vocational leadership. The Reformation would never have started had he not been concerned about the effects of indulgences on the lives of his parishioners and others. It was concern about the wellbeing of the community that prompted him to draft the 95 Theses and call for a debate regarding the proper role of indulgences. The 95 Theses sought to name the problem and suggest a solution. The goal was to return to a more limited understanding of their role and to disconnect them from the fund-raising efforts of Leo X. The debates he proposed were a way of enlisting support from the ecclesiastical, theological, and academic community. His eye was on the whole, not just his parish or his university.

Similarly, Luther could have considered it beyond his responsibility as a theologian to worry about elementary education, but he nonetheless wrote an open letter to the city councils throughout Germany, urging them to provide schools for young men and young women at public expense. He recognized a need and tried to organize support for the project. Similarly again, he could have been content with the accepted idea that society needed beggars in order for others to give alms, but he imagined an alternative, a society without beggars, and worked with others to organize community chests that would provide

support to the elderly, to orphans, and to others who would otherwise be forced to beg. In each of these instances and others he was exercising vocational leadership of the sort that I have been trying to describe. He had no “designated authority” that placed schools and begging in his portfolio of occupational responsibilities. Sensing a need, he “moved out” into areas that affected the society as a whole.

The Importance of Vocational Leadership

Why is vocational leadership important? Let me provide three answers, in ascending order of importance:

One answer is that communal leadership is part of the DNA of the Lutheran tradition. It is the logical extension of the priesthood of all believers and a religious sense of vocation. As already noted, it was practiced already by Luther himself. It is no accident that Lutherans in the United States (though only 3 percent of the population) are known for their network of social service agencies—a network larger than any other in the country. Lutherans expect God to work behind the scenes and to work through humans and other creatures to foster wholeness and justice and peace. God’s work is to mend the world, and the way God does this is by calling humans to serve the neighbor—through vocation and through vocational leadership.

A second answer is that *our colleges* need people who are practiced at vocational leadership. A college is

a learning community in which most of the significant creativity comes from the bottom up rather than from the top down. Vocational leadership is an antidote to individualism and careerism and to a “silo mentality” among departments that undermine the strength of a college community and its ability to respond creatively to the contemporary challenges higher education is facing.

“Vocational leadership is an antidote to individualism and careerism and to a ‘silo mentality’ among departments that undermine the strength of a college community.”

A third, more significant answer is that *our society* needs people who are practiced at vocational leadership. In his article “Bowling Alone” and the book by the same name, Robert Putnam has tracked the way civil engagement has declined over the last sixty years. Concomitant with that decline has been a decline in trust and a decline in our social capital. Our society needs people who are both engaged and prepared to provide the kind of leadership we have been discussing. Educating vocational leaders is a crucial part of the vocation of a Lutheran college.

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