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150 Years Later of Educating Servant Leaders

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150 Years Later of Educating Servant-Leaders

Commencement Comments of President Steven C. Bahls

Augustana College

May 23, 2010

Good afternoon. And welcome to Augustana College's 150th annual Commencement. On behalf of the faculty, staff and board of trustees, I am very pleased to congratulate the Augustana College Class of 2010.

This is a very special graduation at Augustana. You have the honor of being the 150th anniversary class. This college was founded in 1860, when pastors and delegates met in Jefferson Prairie, Wisconsin, to organize the Scandinavian Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Synod in North America and create its first school. Augustana's first location was in Chicago, just north of downtown near the intersection of LaSalle Street and Superior Street. After a couple of years, the college moved to Paxton, Illinois, and eventually to our current location.

The challenges faced by our country when President Esbjorn founded the college 150 years ago were unlike anything the young nation had thus far encountered. Though the immigrant Swedes were staunchly in favor of the abolition of slavery, they knew Abraham Lincoln's election would precipitate a crisis. Like most, they were aggrieved, but not surprised, when just four months after the first classes were held at Augustana, the first of the Southern states seceded.

What would motivate Augustana's first President, Lars Esbjorn, to establish a college on little more than hope and a prayer at a time when the country was falling apart? Was it foolhardy optimism? I believe it was courage, drawn from a deep and abiding faith. The primary mission of Augustana was to train servant-leaders: pastors and teachers who would minister to the needs of new immigrants from Sweden. The need to train servant leaders for the Swedish immigrant population was urgent in 1860 — it could not be postponed until the conclusion of what would become the Civil War.

Our founders were inspired by Martin Luther's views about what we now call servant leadership. As he wrote almost 500 years ago:

*If there is anything [good] in us it is not our own, it is a gift of God. . . . Thus my learning is not my own, it belongs to the unlearned and is the debt I owe to them. My wisdom belongs to the foolish, my power to the oppressed. . . . We must empty ourselves in order that the forms of a servant may be in us, because it is with all these qualities that we must stand before God and intervene on behalf of those who do not have them.**

Our first president, Lars Paul Esbjorn, was a servant leader. He left the comforts of his home country to serve the needs of an immigrant population. He did so at great cost, losing two of his children to illness during the journey to western Illinois, and later his wife to the cholera epidemic that decimated the community he was called to serve. But he continued to care for the sick, to shelter the dying, to build up the community. And he persevered.

Augustana has a long tradition of training servant leaders. Our graduation speaker, David Walton, is one of them. In coming to Augustana from Niles North High School, his journey certainly was not as monumental as

Esbjorn's, but I cannot say for certain it was any less revelatory. While at Augustana, Dr. Walton got to work with outstanding faculty members who pushed him not just in the sciences but in his study of literature, history and religion. He was a member of the track team, through which he likely learned that the journey is the destination... and other lessons that come to us through the pursuit of athletic excellence.

After his own Augustana commencement twelve years ago, Dr. Walton enrolled at Harvard Medical School. After his first year there, he was given the chance to go to Haiti with an unorthodox faculty member named Paul Farmer. Following that first exposure to Farmer's organization, Partners In Health, Walton wrote:

*I melted when I saw a mother and father smile with joy when their child was cured. I got goose bumps when I saw a patient with typhoid, who was bedridden a few days earlier, up and walking. I feel blessed to be able to work for Partners In Health and to have become involved in such important work.***

Two words from that account stand out for me: "joy" and "blessed." Like Lars Paul Esbjorn, David Walton has witnessed great pain and terrible hardship. But both of these servant leaders have found in such moments the ineffable grace of being where one is needed.

Graduates, each of you have the potential to be a servant leader. Just as servant leaders were urgently needed by our nation in 1860, they are urgently needed today.

Your work may not be as dramatic as that of Lars Paul Esbjorn or David Walton. But remember, being a servant leader requires the proper mindset. Servant-leaders first serve, then lead. Martin Luther was correct when he said that such leaders understand that education and knowledge are not of their own making, but gifts from God. And he is correct that such leaders empty themselves of all pretension in order to serve others.

I know that you will be servant leaders because of what you have done in your four years at Augustana. You have shown your commitment to service. Hundreds of you were involved in raising money for the Iowa Children's Hospital through Dance Marathon and for the American Cancer Society through Race for the Cure. Others volunteered for, the Student United Way, Habitat for Humanity, Student Hunger Drive and countless other organizations. You've generated support for earthquake relief in Haiti and for justice in Darfur. You served in literally hundreds of other ways that time will not permit me to mention. The volunteerism at Augustana this year was unprecedented in my seven years as president and I thank the Class of 2010 for setting the bar so high.

I've had the opportunity over the last several months to thank many of you for your volunteer service. In doing so, I've learned something from you. Many of you told me that you gained more from your volunteer service than you gave. You told me how you learned from the less fortunate and how tragedies in Haiti and the Sudan changed how you view your life and its meaning. When I hear of learning experiences like these, my heart fills with pride in our students — because I know you have discovered that serving others is more than feeling sorry for others. You have discovered that serving is your calling in life.

Because this is our sesquicentennial year, let me close with the words of our fourth president, Gustav Andreen. His words express my wish for you and for coming generations at Augustana College: "God has been with our forebears and with us their children. Surely He will also direct the footsteps of coming generations so they may walk upon His paths and accomplish His work."

Graduates, we are proud of your accomplishments. Use your Augustana education well as you navigate the winding path of life, and as you find new portals of discovery. On behalf of the faculty, it has been a pleasure to serve you. May God bless, keep and guide the footsteps of the Augustana College Class of 2010.

**The Theology of Martin Luther*, by Paul Althaus (Fortress, 1966) pp307-308.

 AUGUSTANA COLLEGE	Accounting	Communication Studies	Geography	Music	Pre-Optometry
	Africana Studies	Computer Science	Geology	Music Education	Pre-Pharmacy
	Anthropology	Creative Writing	German Studies	Music Performance	Pre-Physical Therapy
	Art	Economics	Greek	Neuroscience	Pre-Physician Assistant
	Art History	Elementary Education	Graphic Design	Non-Profit Leadership	Pre-Seminary
	Asian Studies	Engineering	History	Development	Pre-Veterinary Medicine
	Biochemistry	Engineering Physics	International Business	Philosophy	Psychology
	Biology	English (Literature)	Japanese	Physics	Religion
	Business Administration	English (Writing)	Landscape Architecture	Political Science	Scandinavian Studies
	Chemistry	Environmental Management	Latin	Pre-Dentistry	Secondary Education
	Chinese	& Forestry	Library and Information	Pre-Law	Sociology
	Classics	Environmental Studies	Science	Pre-Medicine	Sociology (Social Welfare)
	Communication Sciences	Ethics	Mathematics	Pre-Music Therapy	Spanish
	& Disorders	French	Multimedia Journalism	Pre-Nursing	Theatre
			& Mass Communication	Pre-Occupational Therapy	Women's & Gender Studies