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Report on "Vocation for Life" Initiative

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Vocation for Life: A Report on a New Initiative for Alumni

In December, 2010 representatives from several ELCA-related colleges and universities gathered on the campus of Gustavus Adolphus College in Saint Peter, Minnesota to talk about strategies for engaging alumni and friends in the work being supported by the Lilly Endowment, Inc., through its Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV). In the midst of an old-fashioned Minnesota snowstorm, these leaders came up with the idea of “Vocation for Life”—a set of opportunities and resources that all the ELCA schools could make available to alumni to help them address vocational questions that arise after college and across the lifespan.

The primary objective of the project is to offer our graduates the gift of ongoing vocational exploration, through workshops available to alumni in locations throughout the country, regardless of which of our schools they attended. A second objective is to foster collaborative work among ELCA colleges and universities, as we seek to explore and lift up vocation as the unique hallmark of Lutheran Higher Education. In working together with our graduates, we hope to reach a clearer understanding of the distinctive gifts we bring to the world and the ways these gifts influence our common calling as Lutheran colleges and universities. Finally, connecting with alumni in this way not only helps them in their vocational journeys, but also helps us all to see that vocational exploration and discernment is a life-long activity.

Project leaders decided to develop several “pilot” events, each of which would be planned by local teams consisting of alumni and representatives from a minimum of three of the colleges involved in the project. The first Vocation for Life retreat, called “Explore Your Life’s Calling,” took place in Rochester, Minnesota in early November, 2011. The retreat was facilitated by Tom Morgan of Augsburg College, Chris Johnson of Gustavus Adolphus College, and Tom Schlotterback of Concordia College, Moorhead, utilizing the Circles of Trust approach developed by educator and author Parker J. Palmer and the Center for Courage and Renewal. It was an opportunity for participants to step with intention into a place apart, to pause from the frenetic pace of their regular days, and to explore in fresh ways the big questions of their lives—questions of identity, meaning, purpose, and calling.

The day was designed to nourish deep connection between “soul and role” and to renew participants’ capacity to live, work, and lead from a place of wholeness and authenticity. Participants

experienced the rare gifts of renewal, deep listening, and safe, courageous space to consider things that matter. They expressed appreciation for:

- “the time, space and permission to attend to questions that matter, to be held in a circle of people who were present enough to care for the depths, pains, and joys of my soul”
- “the experience of community as we learned from one another”
- “the sense that my value lies not in doing but in being the person God and my community call me to be”
- “a wonderful experience that has strengthened me for the journey ahead”

A second Vocation for Life workshop was presented to the Pacific Lutheran University alumni board by Lynn Hunnicutt and Samuel Torvend. This half-day retreat used Mary Catherine Bateson’s essay “Composing a Life Story” as the thread tying activities together. Participants received an introduction to the concept of vocation—both Luther’s understanding of the term (what vocation is) and current popular senses of the word (what vocation is not). They then participated in two exercises designed to help them think about the various callings they have discerned throughout their lives, and to use these insights to pay attention to their current vocation.

Recently, several members of the Vocation for Life planning team met at the Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference in Minneapolis. We have five events at various stages of planning, with a second day-long event on November 8 in Rochester, MN, and a longer retreat November 18-20 in Carefree, AZ. Other workshops in Eau Claire, WI; Fargo-Moorhead; Rockford, IL; and Portland, OR are being planned but have not yet been scheduled. For more information on Vocation for Life or any of these events, please feel free to contact Tom Schlotterback at Concordia College (tschlott@cord.edu), or the any of the three authors of this report.

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