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Why the Chaplaincy Matters

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Why the Chaplaincy Matters | Augustana College

Why the Chaplaincy Matters to Institutional Mission and Strategic Goals: The Changing Role of the Chaplaincy at Church-Related Colleges of Mainline Protestant Denominations Steve Bahls, *president, Augustana College (Illinois)*, presented at the NetVUE Chaplaincy Conference on March 28, 2014.

For nearly 100 years, students at Augustana College were required to go to chapel every day. They were also required to attend worship on Sunday and report which church they had attended. The Augustana Lutheran Church, a Swedish-American denomination established in 1860 at the same time as the college, prohibited students from dancing on campus and going to the theater. In the early days, the church also provided the lion's share of the funding needed to maintain the college and construct new buildings.

Times have changed. Augustana now has more Catholics than Lutherans, and its student body includes Jews, Muslims, Hindus and a large number with no religious connections at all. Its denomination no longer provides more than nominal financial support. Like many colleges associated with mainline Protestant denominations, Augustana is deliberately examining how changes in its students and in the denomination with which it is affiliated impact campus ministry.

Located in Rock Island, Illinois, Augustana College is one of the 26 colleges affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Its mission statement connects it to the Lutheran expression of higher education:

Augustana College, rooted in the liberal arts and sciences and a Lutheran expression of the Christian faith, is committed to offering a challenging education that develops qualities of mind, spirit and body necessary for a rewarding life of leadership and service in a diverse and changing world.

Augustana is not owned by the ELCA, but instead has a self-perpetuating board of trustees. The bishop of the Northern Illinois Synod is a trustee, along with one trustee designated by the churchwide office of the ELCA.

Augustana has a campus ministry staff of five. The college has two co-chaplains, with the senior co-chaplain being a member of the president's cabinet. Our senior co-chaplain also teaches a class in our religion department. In addition to a full-time office coordinator and a full-time minister of music (who also teaches in our music department), the college has a part-time coordinator of Catholic Ministries. In addition to these five core members of the staff, Augustana has a part-time Jewish student advisor and a part-time Muslim student advisor.

The changes Augustana is experiencing in this area are no different than other colleges:

- The number of Lutheran students has decreased in the last 60 years from over half of the students to about 10%. Roman Catholic students account for over 30% of our student population. The fastest growing religious affiliation of students is "no preference."
- The changes in the composition of the faculty and staff reflect the decreasing number of Lutheran students. Though the school does not formally track the religious affiliation of faculty, there are clearly far fewer Lutheran faculty members than 60 years ago.

- The college's constitution has been amended over the years to reduce the number of board members required to be Lutherans from a majority to 30%. The number of pastors serving on the board has decreased to only a handful. Those pastors on the board are no longer primarily "monitors of Lutheranism" but are accomplished clergy who fully engage themselves in every aspect of the board and on every committee.
- Monetary support from the ELCA has diminished over the past fifty years from over 20 percent of our total budget to nearly zero. Staff support from the Churchwide Office of the ELCA has been reduced over the last 10 years from several full-time employees to a single .5 FTE.
- For most of Augustana's first 150 years, presidents were pastors or had formal theological training. I am the first president appointed who, at the time of appointment, was not Lutheran and only the second without formal theological education. I am now a member of an ELCA church.
- The number of students participating in organized religious activities, particularly formal services, has decreased noticeably over the past 25 years.

Because of these changes, over the past 60 years, the College has transitioned from a college "by Lutherans and for Lutherans" to a church-related college making the "gift of Lutheran higher education" available in an increasingly ecumenical and interfaith way.

Augustana, like many colleges, has struggled with the issue of what it means to be a church-related college. Roald Tweet, professor emeritus of English and former holder of Augustana's Conrad Bergendoff Chair in the Humanities, has written and spoken about how Augustana "lives with a hyphen," by nature of being "church-related." Part of "living with a hyphen," Dr. Tweet argues, is struggling with the disparate elements of our identity and the ambiguity in their relationship. He writes:

Does the phrase (church-related) imply that Augustana is trying to distance itself from close ties to the church, or does it imply that the College is trying to hold on to that relationship? Grammar texts are no help. One says the hyphen implies separation, another that it unites. ¹

Part of "living with a hyphen" is to understand that the relationship is respectful of our history and is at the same time dynamic. Ten years ago, I asked Campus Ministries to engage the Augustana community in a discussion about what it means for the college to be associated with the ELCA.

The Campus Ministry Committee developed a document called **Five Faith Commitments**, which explored how the heritage of the Augustana Lutheran Church and its relationship with its colleges might inform today's relationship. In the end, the College explored five primary values of the Church and related those values to its continuing commitment to the church. Those values are:

1. Encouragement of personal piety and life-shaping spirituality,
2. Commitment to higher education as a place where faith and reason challenge and enhance each other
3. Understanding that all human efforts are aspects of the understanding of vocation

4. Commitment to ecumenism and to embracing the value of all persons
5. Commitment to social consciousness, world missions and servant leadership.

Each of these values is reflected in the [Five Faith Commitments](#), a document that has served Augustana well for the past ten years, not least in its importance as a foundational element of the college's strategic planning.

Colleges are well advised to ask how "living with a hyphen" impacts the chaplaincy. At Augustana, there are four important ways "living with a hyphen" have shaped campus ministries and our chaplains:

- The office of chaplain is more central than ever in connecting the campus with the mission of the college.
- Colleges and universities should look for new ways to integrate the work of the chaplaincy with the life of the college, including career advising.
- Colleges and universities should meet students where they are — through ecumenical and interfaith outreach.
- Colleges within a denomination should take the leading role maintaining ties with their denomination, instead of leaving it to the church body.

Chaplains are central in stewarding and representing the DNA of the institution.

Michael Cartwright, Dean of Ecumenical and Interfaith Programs at the University of Indianapolis, in his paper, "Key Questions to Ask about Strengthening Campus Chaplaincy," created a Venn diagram showing four circles: the academic commons, Christian commons, student affairs commons and interfaith commons. All four intersect at the Campus Chaplaincy. For many of us, chaplaincies are at the centers of our mission; as such, they steward the DNA of our colleges. It is sometimes argued that the most important steward of the DNA of a college is the president. But given that the average tenure of college presidents is, today, only seven years, many chaplains serve longer than presidents and, hence, have a special responsibility not only to steward the DNA, but orient new presidents to understand and cherish the institution's DNA.

What does it mean to have the responsibility for stewarding and representing the DNA of a college?

1. The office of the chaplain should be represented at the senior level of the institution, typically with the head chaplain as a member of the president's cabinet, and should have an important presence with the institution's board.
2. Chaplains should be the storytellers of the college — specifically how the history of the college, and those who made that history, provide meaning and illustration to the college's church-related mission today.
3. Chaplains should have a central role at pivotal times during the school year (opening convocation, first faculty meeting, board retreats, and commencement) as well during times that challenge or stress the college community.
4. Chaplains should be "educators-in-chief" of faculty and staff about what "church-relatedness" means and the role they each can play in advancing the church relationship for the benefit of the students.

5. The chaplain should be a pastor to the president, serving as a sounding board and advisor as the president makes difficult decisions in a manner consistent with the values of the institution.

Colleges should look for bold new ways to integrate chaplains into the life of the institution.

Given that participation in the traditional venues for campus ministries is down at many colleges, it's important to have multiple points of entry for students to think about spiritual development and character formation. But it's not enough to provide multiple entry points only for the motivated. It's important to devise ways that almost all students can have a meaningful contact with the campus chaplain.

At Augustana College, we have moved one of our campus chaplains to our CORE (Careers, Opportunities, Research and Exploration) Center. The CORE center is physically located in the heart of our campus, separate from the other offices of campus ministry. This chaplain serves as advisor to students, faculty and staff on vocational reflection. Vocational reflection at Augustana entails students asking **who** they are before they ask **what** they want to do. As Frederick Buechner noted, "God's calling is found at that place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger."

For most Augustana students, finding their vocational calling is more than a mere intellectual exercise. It is a spiritual inquiry. It requires deep reflection about one's self and how that self relates to the world and those in it. There is no person better able to assist with that reflection than our co-chaplain. And in doing so, she and her staff will touch nearly every student at Augustana, with many of them engaging the deepest spiritual reflections of their lives.

Colleges and universities should meet students where they are - through ecumenical and interfaith outreach.

Many our campuses have made important commitments to interfaith understanding. Some wonder whether doing so is a pragmatic response to our changing student bodies. Perhaps. But more importantly, at Augustana, we are interfaith because we are Lutheran. It is important that campus chaplains are clear about the fact that interfaith understanding and outreach are more than a feel-good "I'm OK, you're OK" approach. It's important to make it clear to all why interfaith understanding is crucial to a contemporary view of church-related higher education.

Kristen Johnston Largen, a professor at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, in her new book, "Finding God among Our Neighbors: An Interfaith Systematic Theology," describes three reasons why Christians should value interconnectedness with those of other faiths:

1. It's important for Christians to engage those from other faiths "for the sake of the neighbor, whom Christians are called both to refrain from bearing false witness against, and even more, to love."
2. God's self-revelation is universal and "Christian theology can and should expect to learn something about God in the course of 'engagement with other faiths.'"
3. One's own faith is "stretched and challenged, but at the same time deepened and strengthened" through engagement with other faiths.

Colleges within denominations should take the leading role maintaining ties with their denomination's

expressions of higher education.

For many mainline Protestant colleges, it's unrealistic to think that church-wide organizations will provide the support they once provided. Most of these denominations are experiencing considerable financial pressure from declining membership and simply do not have the resources to maintain historic patterns of support to their colleges. Not only are these denominations cutting back on direct financial assistance, they are also cutting back on organizational assistance. Denominations that once provided in-depth orientation to new trustees, new presidents and new faculty are now more "hit and miss" in doing so.

Compounding the problem of a diminishing commitment of both human and financial resources is that an increasing percentage of pastors have not attended church-related colleges. Because of this, many college presidents feel that pastors and their congregations are less likely to aggressively encourage students to give serious consideration to attending church-related colleges.

Many colleges are at a point in their history akin to a parent sending their children from their childhood homes to their own independent homes. Many of us are being gently (albeit sometimes unintentionally) pushed from the nest. As such, just as it's up to college freshmen to redefine their relationship with their parents, it's up to church-related college to define their relationship with their parent denominations. Doing so requires church-related colleges, individually and collectively, to wrestle with the hyphen.

What questions must we ask as we seek to (re)define our church-relatedness?

- How does each individual college view its church-relatedness? Is it possible that conversations within the college might produce a written statement as to church relatedness, similar to Augustana's **Five Faith Commitments**?
- Collectively, churches within denominations should discuss what common denominational ties continue to unite them. Is it possible for colleges to engage leading theologians, religion faculty and chaplains in discussing their collective church-relatedness? Could they produce a statement describing their commitments as church-related institutions and commend it for consideration and further discussion at each college?
- Might colleges, by collective actions of their presidents and chaplains, assume some of the responsibility for maintaining church ties that were once provided by the denomination? Collectively, are the denomination's colleges and universities able to organize themselves to provide new trustee orientation, new faculty orientation, and programs to train future college leaders? Might colleges themselves rotate responsibility for hosting conferences relating to important missional topics such as vocational reflection, interfaith understanding and conscientious citizenship? This is the direction that ELCA colleges are heading, and it looks promising.

Admittedly, times of financial leanness - both for denominations and colleges - can put significant stress on the hyphen in church-relatedness. During these times, the role of the chaplain becomes more important than at any time in the last fifty years in leading our colleges forward. A thoughtful chaplain working with the president can help the college both go out on a limb to harvest new fruit for our changing student body, but to also tend to the health of our denominational roots.



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