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From the Editor

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From the Editor

The articles in this issue were presented at the Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference in the summer of 2010. (This year's conference will be held on July 30th–August 1st. The theme will be “A Calling to Embrace Creation: Lutheran Higher Education, Sustainability, and Stewardship.” Save the dates!) The theme of the conference that summer dealt with how our campuses respond to religious diversity.

There was a time, not so long ago, when religious diversity on our campuses revolved around which branch of the Lutheran tree one identified with—usually connected in some deep way with a cultural tradition of the founders of the college. The Swedish Lutherans of Augustana, the Danish Lutherans of Dana, the Norwegians of Well, you understand. I remember coming to Augustana (RI) to teach in the religion department at a time when I was considered to be “the token German.” This was a sort of diversity, but hardly the same phenomena that the colleges face today.

In recent times we have been faced with student bodies—and faculties—that often do not identify themselves as Lutheran. The range of faith identifications today covers the wide range of religious diversity that occurs within American culture. At some institutions, “none” is the most predominant religious affiliation. For some time, Lutheran colleges and universities have addressed their relation to Judaism and Jewish students and faculty. At some places, such as Muhlenberg College, this conversation has produced dramatic results. An ever increasing number of our students identify themselves with Islam. How do we as Lutheran colleges and universities understand this changing landscape?

Today it would be unusual, to say the least, if anyone on a college campus spoke out against diversity of any kind. The experience on many campuses, however, is that while diversity is espoused, little is done to encourage and support diversity. Too often this is seen as the work of an individual or small group of people who take this on as their cause. Any time the issue comes up, the response is “well, that's the responsibility of X.” The result is that often not much progress is made on these issues.

I would argue that diversity is important on our campuses. But I would also argue that assent to that proposition is not

sufficient. Diversity is not an end in itself. It is important because of the work that it can do toward the end of educating our students well. How do we understand the role of diversity in this project for which we all exist? Is there a difference in our understanding of the need for diversity based on the Lutheran tradition from which we grow?

Darrell Jodock, in his article in this issue, argues that our theological tradition leads us to a “third path” in relation to religious diversity. He finds this “third path” on the Lutheran value of giftedness. I would suggest that this theological base could be expanded to include Lutheran understandings of the work of the Holy Spirit and the Incarnation. Lutherans believe that the Spirit of Christ speaks not only in the past but continues to speak even today. And we believe that the Spirit of Christ is not under our control but speaks as the Spirit wills. Our job as Lutheran Christians is to be attentive to that voice wherever it may be heard. And we know that the place of the Spirit is not limited to where we look. Often the Spirit speaks important words through the ones that we perceive as “the other.” It is because of this that diversity (religious and of all types) is crucially important on our campuses. Those voices of “the other” may be the Spirit of Christ speaking to us in this day. If we do not listen, or are not able to because we have somehow dismissed “the other,” we may well miss the most important words we are called to hear.

So our job as institutions of Lutheran higher education is to create places where the voice of “the other” is heard and valued. Again, this is not for diversity's sake itself, but because of our theological understanding of how God interacts with this world.

Tonight in Wallenberg Hall at Augustana College in Rock Island, on September 9, 2011, Dr. Omid Safi spoke of fear and love in our world. Those who were able heard in his words the voice of God. It is true that not all in the audience could hear those words. But in this place, at a Lutheran college gathering, the voice of “the other” was heard, and the best of religious diversity was experienced. This is what we are about as Lutheran colleges and universities.

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