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Point / Counterpoint: What It Means to be a "College of the Church"

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ROBERT BENNE AND THOMAS CHRISTENSON

Point / Counterpoint: What It Means to be a “College of the Church”

KLEINHANS: Good morning. Welcome to this morning’s Point / Counterpoint discussion of what it means to be a college of the church.

We are pleased to have with us for this conversation Dr. Robert Benne and Dr. Thomas Christenson, each of whom has published a book on this important theme. Dr. Benne is a graduate of Midland Lutheran College in Fremont, Nebraska, and now serves as Professor of Religion and Director of the Center for Religion and Society at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia. Dr. Christenson is a graduate of Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, and now serves as Professor of Philosophy at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio. I’ll not go into more biographical detail, since you’ve come to hear them speak and not to hear me introduce them.

The conversation will be moderated by Wartburg College Pastor Larry Trachte, who is a graduate of Wartburg College. For those who keep track of such things, five of the twenty-eight colleges and universities of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are embodied by the three individuals sharing our stage this morning. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Robert Benne, Dr. Tom Christenson, and Pastor Larry Trachte.

TRACHTE: Dr. Benne and Dr. Christenson, when I assign a term paper to students in my class, I always ask them to choose a topic for which they have considerable passion or interest. It makes for a lot

more interesting term paper. Clearly, each of you has had a long-standing interest in our colleges of the church and Christian higher education. “Why have you cared?” is the first question I would pose to you, and why should we care about the colleges of the church?

BENNE: We just did a tour of the college and I think I can speak for both of us. We were very, very impressed with your physical plant and the many programs you have. It looks like a prosperous and flourishing college and I think you ought to be proud to be at this college. Even discounting the propaganda element with student guides, it was a great accounting of the college, so it was a good experience.

Well, why have I been interested in this topic? Let me step back for just a moment and say that almost all private education schools in America were founded by churches, and the churches were interested in several things. Colleges for their kids: they wanted their children to be able to go off and be educated. They particularly wanted those colleges to produce an educated clergy, and almost all of them did; but they also wanted those colleges to express the ethos, the way of life of the religious tradition, and they also wanted those colleges to express and pass on the intellectual claims of their particular religious tradition, which meant Bible, but it also meant theology and ethics, so that their religious tradition would be expressed and be publicly relevant, perhaps pervasively relevant, in the life of these colleges.

ROBERT BENNE is Professor of Religion and Director of the Center for Religion and Society at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia. THOMAS CHRISTENSON is Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Center for Faith and Learning at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio. KATHRYN KLEINHANS is Professor of Religion and Chair of the Religion and Philosophy Department and LARRY TRACHTE the chaplain at Wartburg College, Wartburg, Iowa. The conversation took place at Wartburg College on September 30, 2008.

I went to a college in Nebraska which had many of those characteristics. We were ninety percent Lutheran at that time. There was required chapel every day, which is not a good idea, and many other elements: an emphasis on vocation, an emphasis on service, a great deal of support for young developing Christians and those headed off to the ministry, and courses that were pretty good in terms of the Christian content, but could have been a lot better along those lines. In that era, most all the faculty had Master's degrees, if that, and so the intellectual content wasn't quite as challenging as perhaps the other dimensions of the college. But at any rate, you knew you were at a Lutheran college: it was friendly, there was the intellectual component, there was the ethos, the way of life, and many other elements that I can't go into in detail.

Well, I spent a hiatus of twenty-five years away from Christian higher education. I went to graduate school at the University of Chicago, at which I was trained that Christianity has intellectual claims that should engage secular claims of learning and that part of the Christian task was to try to engage all these secular fields of learning—psychology, sociology, and so on—and in order for Christians to be whole persons, that is, to be able to make sense of life from the Christian point of view. I learned that at graduate school.

I taught for seventeen—eighteen years at a theological seminary in Chicago, a Lutheran seminary, and then was invited to teach at Roanoke College in Virginia. Wow, what a wakeup call. It was not the kind of college that I went to in Nebraska. [I had] so much shock and indignation about it, that got me involved in thinking about Christian higher education because I pondered what in the world happened? When I got to Roanoke College, Christianity was no longer welcome at the college. Any talk of reconnecting or making a stronger connection with the Christian heritage was looked at skeptically and suspiciously. A candidate for the dean was voted out; several faculty told me he was “too Lutheran.” And the *in loco parentis* (you know what that is, where the college takes the role of the parents), that was very heavy at Midland College—how you should live, having to do with sexual ethics, but it also had to do with drinking, it had to do with service and a whole bunch of things—that had been completely relaxed, and Roanoke College got on *Playboy's* list of top party schools in the late '70s.

TRACHTE: After you came?

BENNE: No, no, no, but the bombed-out character of student life was already there. Not only was there hostility to the Christian ethos and not only was there very little Christian intellectual content left (they had done away with the religious requirements in the curriculum), but student life was subversive of almost every

value that you wanted to prize in Christian higher education. So it was quite a wakeup call and I began studying what in the world happened to all these colleges that were founded by the church. There's a huge secularization process that took place with almost all those colleges, but some have not been secularized in such a dramatic fashion. Wartburg I don't think has. Just getting a sense of this college, faith plays an important role, and ethos, and the number of students that are from the Lutheran tradition and other Christian traditions, and in a kind of intellectual component of the life here. So this is quite different from Roanoke. I want to end finally by saying Roanoke has not continued that trajectory downward. We've really done a lot of things to reconnect with Christian heritage and it has become a much better school, good enough to be able to get a Phi Beta Kappa chapter last year. So anyway, that's a long introduction about why I'm interested.

TRACHTE: Thank you Dr. Benne. Dr. Christenson, what about you?

CHRISTENSON: Well, as Dr. Kleinhans said, I'm a graduate of Concordia College up in Moorhead, Minnesota. People up there say that it's not the end of world, but you can see it from there. That was an interesting experience. I think while I was in college, it never occurred to me to ask the question, “What does it mean that this is a Lutheran college?” but I think if somebody had asked that question, we would have said, “Well, it means we don't do this and we don't do that and we don't do...” You know, there's all these kinds of things that we didn't do that distinguished us, including dancing, which I think was a terrible loss. I am still angry at my alma mater for not getting me to learn how to tango.

When I went off to graduate school and taught at some other institutions after getting my PhD, I went back to teach at Concordia and then the question came up again, “What does it mean that this a Lutheran college?” I decided fairly early on that I wasn't happy with those sort of negative answers. It isn't sufficient just to say, “Well, we don't do this and we don't do that and we don't do this other thing.” What do we do that makes us a Lutheran college? And so I started thinking about that.

About twenty years ago I moved to Capital University, which is in Columbus, Ohio. It's an urban campus in the middle of a big city, the capital of Ohio. Ohio State, of course, is the big institution across town. When I got there, the first thing I noticed is how different this place was from the Lutheran college that I had come from. A very, very different kind of place. First of all, most of the students were not Lutheran. The majority of the students, the largest body of students at Capital University, are Catholic and a fairly small percentage is Lutheran, and exactly the same thing could be said about faculty and staff, etc.

And so the question is, “What does it mean to say that that’s a Lutheran institution?” And some people there would even say, “Well, we’re sort of an historically Lutheran institution, that is, we were founded by Lutherans and we were Lutheran for a long time, but we’re not Lutheran anymore. That’s in our past, it’s in our history, but it’s not in the present tense and certainly not in the future tense.”

I started thinking about that and whether that was necessarily so, and I guess what occurred to me was that in order to think about this question about Lutheran identity, you need to make a big distinction. There are two different models, I would say, in thinking about this question. One is the model that I would call the “for us/by us” model. Most of our institutions were founded by Lutherans for Lutherans for the advancement of Lutheranism. I think that’s a model that still works for some of our colleges. It certainly is a model that works for our seminaries, but I would argue that it isn’t the model that works very well for a whole lot of these institutions that are connected to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It isn’t a model that would work for Capital University.

So then the question is, “Well, what would be a better model? How should we think about this?” I have picked up on Luther’s idea of vocation. Before Luther, people thought about vocation as basically a calling to a religious life, that is, becoming a monk or a nun, leading the “religious” life. Luther uses this term vocation to apply to the work that everybody does that serves the needs of their fellow humans, that serves the needs of the community. So he talks about the milkmaid milking cows as having a vocation. He talks about parents tending the needs of the children having that vocation. He talks about the person who cleans the streets or the mayor of the town or anybody who does anything that serves a need as doing God’s work, God’s service. He uses the word *Gottesdienst*, a good German term, which is also the term that’s used to talk about the worship service. He says, “If people realized that what they do in doing their ordinary everyday work is *Gottesdienst*, is the service of God, they would dance for joy.” So Luther came with this message, that ordinary everyday tasks done in love and in service of the needs of fellow humans is vocation. It’s a calling from God.

So how does that idea apply then to the work of education? How might that shape our thinking about what it is that colleges and universities might do? I guess I’ve come to think about Lutheran colleges in that way. We are called to serve the needs of the world through education. And so I think what ought to characterize institutions of this sort, and my own, is the persistent and pervasive asking of what are called vocational questions. What are the deep needs of the world? How can we help to meet them? That is, what gifts and limitations do we

bring to this whole process? Who is my neighbor that I ought to be serving their needs? I think in a global society that has changed, but I think those questions, if we ask them over and over again, and if the asking of them influences the way we teach and what we teach and how we think about the programs that we have on our campuses, it ends up making a difference to the identity and mission of the institution, and that’s sort of where my interest, my life story I guess, has moved me—to the point of a kind of passion for what I think Lutheran colleges and universities can be.

TRACHTE: So in a way, Dr. Christenson, you’re redefining what a college of the church has meant for you, and I guess in that context, I’d ask both of you ... Even the terminology is ambiguous. From our German Lutheran background, we talk about being “a college of the church.” But I noticed, Dr. Benne, you talk about “Christian colleges” in your book and sometimes we say “church-related.” Where does each of you come down with that? Is there a term that better appropriates what we as a college of the church or Christian Lutheran higher education are about?

BENNE: Well, I like the language of the “college of the church.” I think that’s good language. “Church-related college” is a little bit weaker, I think, and I use “Christian college” as the shorthand way of talking about institutions. I don’t believe that colleges can be pervasively Christian and fully Christian, so it’s more of a shorthand way of denominating things, but I would like to use language that indicates that there’s a living relationship, a lively relationship between the living religious heritage and the work of the college, so that that living religious heritage is publicly relevant on several levels. I agree with Tom about service, and the language of Wartburg College is very, very much service oriented. We got that on the tour and that seems to be a major motif. The problem I have is that without the larger underpinnings of the idea of vocation and without, say, the kind of expansive Christian intellectual tradition, it seems that service can soon become secularized itself, so that every major public university I know of talks about service very much like you talked about it: what are the needs of the world and how can we address them? It seems to me that if there’s not something more that is passed on ... That’s a very important thing to be passed on, but that would be kind of civic humanism. Luther endorsed civic humanism; I’m all for that. But it seems to me that there is an ethos, a way of life that has to do with worship, that has to do with the way we live together, community, but there’s also an intellectual tradition that has to be passed on and without that intellectual tradition, it seems to me vocation loses its texture and thickness. It’s important that

the Bible be taught, it's important that Lutheran theology, that heritage, be taught. It's more important that Christian theology be taught and Christian ethics, and places where there's a Lutheran distinctive about that ought to be taught. So I get a little bit nervous if it's just service talk because I see it in every other institution, and there seems to be something more that has to be transmitted in colleges of the church.

TRACHTE: The basis or the foundation of service is what you're getting at?

BENNE: Foundation of vocation and, of course, in vocation, you can talk about it secularly, but if you talk about it from a Christian point of view, there's a divine element in it, that is, what's God's call? It's not only what I want to do, what the world's need is, but God has a role for me to play—roles, plural, as husband, father, grandfather, as a worker, as a citizen, as a member of the church—and so there's a transcendent dimension involved in vocation that has to be accentuated in some fashion, it seems to me, in a college of the church.

TRACHTE: Tom, responses?

CHRISTENSON: Well, a lot of what Bob said I would agree with. I think that one of the dangers, one of the temptations, that we have as colleges is to become generic, that is, simply to say we offer the same courses that other places offer, we offer the same programs, the same activities, all that sort of thing. You can take your course here and credit it over there and move them back and forth. In the state of Ohio now that's getting to be a very big political thing, being able to transfer courses from any institution to any institution, and so as a consequence, you get tempted to do very generic things, generic professors teaching generic courses for generic degrees. I think if you go in that direction, it spells disaster for colleges like ours because the only thing that you have to offer in a marketplace like that is selling cheap. You end up trying to compete with the educational Walmarts of the world. There are such places. I mean, there are places that offer degrees and offer them cheaply and offer them in a certain minimal kind of way. I know that sometimes that's a temptation for all of us, but I think it's a temptation we have to resist because I think that if we lose our identity as an institution—and that identity is not just sort of frosting that you put on the cake, but a difference in the way we think about what we're learning, what we're teaching, how we're relating to each other as a community—then we have lost something very, very essential.

BENNE: I want to tack onto that. Another great temptation of some Lutheran colleges is to aim for the secular elite private

liberal arts college, and to lose their soul or lose their identity as a college of the church. We've had that happen in Lutheranism too. Usually those colleges are prosperous and elite, but they lose their soul on their way up, as it were. And another great temptation, as you suggested, is when you're not quite as hotsy-totsy to just genericize and use the same rhetoric that every other college uses. I mean, so many colleges say, "Well, we've got a small student to faculty ratio, everybody knows your name, we're all cozy here." I mean, every college talks that way. I think the Lutheran colleges have a great heritage that will make them [distinctive] Roanoke used to use the motto "The margin of difference." I think that's nice language, and certainly the service element is one [when it includes] the full rationale for service.

TRACHTE: I think you're both really now coming to one of the pivotal points that I want to ask you to flesh out a bit more. Is education done differently at these colleges? You're suggesting, Tom, that it should be. I don't know how you would do Lutheran math, for example. How is education done differently? In the sciences, should we teach intelligent design as well as evolution? In psychology, is there a particular view of the human? Would each of you address that?

CHRISTENSON: I'd be happy to. I'm not going to use the example of math, though, because I did not do well in math as an undergraduate and I haven't studied it since. Capital has a law school. We have a law program, a J.D., at Capital University, and it's a very good law school, too, I would add. But there's an interesting question: What difference does it make to the way in which law is taught at Capital University over getting a law degree somewhere else? I want to go back to this idea about vocation again and vocational questions.

Let me tell a little story. A few years ago, my wife and I wanted to set up a trust for our children, to have our will redone and get a trust written, and so we hired an attorney to do this. He wrote this document. Now, both my wife and I have PhDs, so we're not either one of us dummies, but we could not understand this thing. We read it and could not make any sense of it. And so I took it to one of my colleagues at the university who was on the law faculty and I said, "What we wanted to do was to have a document that basically said this. Does this say that?" And he said, "No, but for \$900 I'll rewrite it for you." OK, well, that's a homely story, but I think that the law profession has become so, how should I say, focused inward on itself in terms of language, in terms of processes. Then the question is, does it serve well the needs of those who come to it in the greatest need? If you are a needy person who comes to the court, will you be served well? Are law professions set up in such a way to serve

those needs well? And I would say in many cases, they're not. They're set up to serve the needs of lawyers well, not the needs of ordinary people. I don't think my wife and I were served well by the attorney that we hired.

Now you might raise exactly that same question about something like our healthcare system. I think our healthcare system serves some needs, but it does serve well the needs of those who come to it in the greatest need? Hmm. That's not so easy.

How about our education system? Does our public education system serve well the needs of those who come to it in the greatest need? Well, the point I'm making is that since we have degrees that we offer in education and in pre-med and nursing and in law, and all those sorts of things, if you ask those kinds of questions, if you say, "Well, what we're doing here ought to serve the needs of the world, ought to serve the needs of our neighbors," then you have to ask, "Well, what are those needs and how might we train lawyers, medical professionals, teachers, superintendents, principals, to serve those needs well?" I think you end up changing how you do things. I think you end up asking a different set of questions. I think you end up reading perhaps a different set of authors. You start asking some very critical things about the whole program, and as a consequence, the curriculum gets changed, pedagogy gets changed, the experience of the students gets changed. So that's not the math example, but I think it is three examples of places where it ends up making a difference.

TRACHTE: Let me ask you to clarify. What you're saying then is that from your perspective, [the difference in how we do education at a college of the church] involves having a broader vision. It's not just what I want to do with my life, with my gifts, with my degree. It's always holding myself in tension, or Lutherans would say in dialectic, with the world and the other, the neighbor, and also understanding the transcendent, that somehow God is in the middle of all this.

CHRISTENSON: I think that's right. I mean, that's the experience a lot of students have if they go on a service semester someplace or a service learning kind of thing. They'll encounter somebody. I remember a student coming back from a service learning project that she did and said, "I never realized how many children out there are being raised by their grandparents." She said, "I was thinking about being a social worker. Now I'm convinced that that's what I want to do, and I want to focus my attention on this particular kind of problem." I thought, "Wow! That's amazing." Well, that student is going to leave the institution not just with a job, but with a calling, and I think that's a difference. It's a qualitative difference in the outcome.

TRACHTE: Both in and out of the classroom.

CHRISTENSON: Yeah, I think that's right.

TRACHTE: Dr. Benne?

BENNE: Well, I think you've given a deep moral dimension to what Lutheran education should be about, and I fully agree with that. I would add an intellectual dimension that would change what a classroom is also about. Let me tack on to [the conversation about] law schools. Although we don't have a law school (most liberal arts colleges don't), I spent a year at Valparaiso University. At Valparaiso University they have a law school. There would not only be the moral dimension of doing *pro bono* work that was emphasized by the school (some students go there because there is this moral commitment, so likewise at Notre Dame law school). There would also be at a Christian law school, using Christian or church-related law school as shorthand, a connection of the law with its moral basis, [particularly with] its moral basis in sometimes religious grounding. You have new Catholic law schools popping up all over the country, as well as evangelical law schools. Why is that? It's because in secular America, the study of law has become highly positivistic, in which there's no moral basis for the law whatever. It's whatever reasonable people decide and I happen to be the reasonable person. So there's a very powerful intellectual task in the law of reconnecting it with its moral basis, sometimes viewed as natural law, but also with its theological and religious grounding. Law in the West was founded on Christian theology and Christian morality being expressed in law. Now we've completely separated those and it seems to me that the Christian perspective would be to try to make those connections again.

Now what about a liberal arts college? First of all, it ought to be quality liberal arts education. Luther had a great saying, that a Christian cobbler makes good shoes, not poor shoes with little crosses on them. So we ought to be about quality education. First of all that's our calling, to do what the worldly activity is and do it well. But there are other dimensions, too. In the classroom, while there might not be Christian math, I believe that if you push any field to its macrocosmic level or its microcosmic level, theological questions come up. It would be interesting for math professors to wonder and ponder and share that wondering and pondering with students about the mathematical order that's in the world and what is its source. It's a wondrous, magnificent thing, and we wouldn't be afraid to talk about some of those things. In the controversy of intelligent design versus evolution, I believe in evolution, but intelligent design

people are saying, “Well, isn’t there some purpose for the whole evolutionary process? Doesn’t it look like there’s some formal guidance system?” Now they kind of look foolish now because they are not the science of the day, but they’re raising questions about the formal and final cause of science, which was once in Western science but now leached out. So there will be all sorts of interesting questions of religion and science that come up, religion and math, particularly things having to do with the humanities. The psychologists at Roanoke College teach students that humans are totally determined either internally by their biological makeup—they’re hard-wired—or they’re totally determined socially, and we in the religion department teach that we’re created in the image of God and free. Whoa! What do students do with that? Compartmentalize their minds? Disbelieve one or the other? I’m surrounded by other fellow faculty who lost their faith in graduate school because they never asked those questions and were bowled over by secular claims. So I think a church-related college ought to be pondering those sorts of questions that each field has within it that are addressed by the Christian intellectual tradition. Not that the Christian intellectual tradition trumps anything, but there’s critical engagement. So I think there’s a lot of lively stuff ... literature, all sorts of probings of the human condition, and one can reflect upon that from a Christian point of view.

A couple of things I remember from my Midland College undergraduate days long, long ago. We had a dear old professor who taught geology and astronomy, and he took us into his little tiny old planetarium, and you’d sit back and he’d splash the heavens on the ceiling and he’d say, “The glory of God.” Now that was pretty potent, but he also taught me that you could believe in geological evolution and biological evolution and be a Christian, and that meant puzzling out for himself how you can do that. Now those are the kinds of things that make a classroom different, I think, at a church-related college. It doesn’t mean we give up teaching the normal science of the day or the normal knowledge of the day. We have to do that and do it well, but we ask these further questions from a Christian point of view.

TRACHTE: You both seem to be saying that education is not just about finding the right answer. It’s about asking the right questions and bringing those questions into some kind of dialogue with the world, with life, with the challenges that the world is facing.

BENNE: As well as the Christian heritage, moral and intellectual.

TRACHTE: So that law isn’t just finding how I can best serve my client by using the law in their favor, but asking the moral

questions of what’s right and how do we determine what’s right. Let me ask you this then, on behalf of our students who are here today. Doesn’t this put a lot more pressure on students? Are we expecting more of students who attend a college of the church like Wartburg? Are we demanding more of them? Or should I as a Lutheran professor just operate by grace and give all A’s?

CHRISTENSON: I think that a Lutheran college is a demanding place, but in a very good sense of the word, a place of high expectations where hard questions get asked and you’re expected to take things seriously. And as a consequence of those hard questions, interesting conversations take place, dialogues take place, sessions in which you really wrestle with things. When I think about my undergraduate years, I think about all the good discussions I had with fellow classmates, all the arguments that we had over and over again. You know, we were sure that we were right and the other person didn’t know beans, and we learned a lot from those arguments, we learned a lot from that process of dialogue. I think that [there are educational settings] where nobody raises the questions, nobody takes it seriously, you’re not expected to have to answer them, etc. I think that a Lutheran college ought to be a place where those questions are taken very, very seriously. So it’s demanding in that sense, and I think it’s demanding of faculty in the same way. You may not have an answer for the question, but I think that it’s a question you take seriously, and that’s part of what I think makes teaching in places like this interesting. It has another dimension to it.

TRACHTE: Let me pursue that. We talk about professors professing something. Is it important that professors have a faith or somehow profess a particular value as a teacher or is it simply raising all the questions and encouraging students to make their own mind up?

CHRISTENSON: Well, I can think of models of teachers who sort of fit both of those descriptions. I think that they both have been very important models, for me at least, so I’m not sure there is a model that I want to say, “This is the way it ought to be done. Everybody ought to do this.” I think that you end up professing something even through the kinds of questions that you ask and through the way in which you approach them, confront them, the way in which you respond to the questions that your students ask. The way in which you treat faculty that you disagree with and the kind of dialogue you’re able to have, that’s a professing of something and it creates a community of a certain kind and that is a value that gets, I think, communicated to people. So I’m not sure it’s an either/or kind of thing.

TRACHTE: So both/and—some faculty may go one way, some the other, some are devil’s advocates?

CHRISTENSON: I think it’s important to have a variety of points of view, a variety of styles, a variety of different experiences. I think you end up with a better education because of it.

BENNE: One of the rhetorical flourishes that colleges of the church often use is that we educate the whole person and so in that sense it is more demanding. We’re really trying to reach a lot of dimensions of life and help people integrate those dimensions of life, which takes a lot of time, so it is very challenging, I believe. Now in order to teach whole students, or address the lives of whole students, you need whole faculty and that’s where I think you begin running against the stream in higher education, because the ethos of higher education today dictates that you can only ask sheer questions of competence of a faculty person. You’re not even supposed to ask these larger questions, moral questions, what they think of the philosophy of the school, all of these sorts of things. At least the tendency is just to talk about disciplinary competence.

TRACHTE: Competence narrowly defined within my discipline...

BENNE: That’s right. But how can you teach whole students without whole faculty? So I think we start looking for a different kind of faculty person. Part of that might be to find ways to go second miles with students, and that gets back into the moral dimension of things that I think is very important. First of all, I think, no, we shouldn’t be lax in our grading or loose in the way we grade. Competence is competence and we’re accountable for that professionally, but I would guess that at Christian colleges or Lutheran colleges or colleges of the church that you’re searching for faculty who really have a pastoral passion—compassion—for students. That doesn’t mean being permissive, but that means going the second mile in a lot of ways with students. When they’re having personal problems, you don’t blow them off. You’re not just looking at them as a student, you’re looking at them as a person. I know many good stories we could tell about going the second mile in a way that I think is extremely important for our colleges.

TRACHTE: In medicine, it’s often said that one should get back to practicing the art of medicine and caring for persons, not dealing with diseases alone. You’re saying that in education a faculty person needs to be concerned or care about the student they’re teaching as well as the knowledge they’re imparting.

BENNE: Right. I think because we’re small and we’re liberal arts, we do that a lot better than major universities where you have

classes of four hundred and you hardly ever get to see the top flight professors. I mean, I really think there’s a great advantage to that.

CHRISTENSON: I think that one of the temptations—it’s an academic temptation, not just for Lutheran faculty at Lutheran colleges—the academic temptation is to think of education as production specialists. What are you doing when you’re learning? What are you doing when you’re getting an undergraduate degree? Well, you’re becoming a specialist in something. One of the first questions people ask you when you arrive on campus is, “What’s your major?” And if you don’t know the answer to that question, you feel sort of stupid and you think, “Well, I better come up with an answer right away because everybody expects me to have one.” And then eventually you know what your major is, you know what you’re going to do, you know what your career plans are, you know you’re going to go to graduate school and become even a greater specialist there. I think in the process of doing that, it’s possible to lose some of our humanity, that is, that we become smaller people because of this focus on specialization. You talk only to other people in your field; you talk to people in your division. The sort of conversations that you would have with people simply because you are human, it seems to me, become harder to have. I remember one faculty member that I served on a committee with. ... We were talking about something and an ethical issue came up and he said, “Well, you’ll have to excuse me from this discussion because ethics is not my specialty,” and I thought, “You can’t do that! You address ethical questions because you are human, not because you’re some sort of specialist.” I think I would say exactly the same thing about political questions. We address political questions because we are human, not because we are majors in political science or majors in government or something like this. And so part of education in an institution like this that takes that whole person idea seriously is that you get a specialization, but you also practice your humanity, practice connecting to all of the dimensions that there are in life. I think that if we can do that, then we’ve really got something important to offer.

BENNE: Right. The Lutheran college insists on liberal arts education so that you have a broad exposure to many different human inquiries. It’s an exercise in what you can call Christian humanism at the best. I believe there’s not only that moral dimension but the intellectual dimension that when it really works well, the colleges produce students who are different. There’s been a good deal of research done on that, and that’s very heartening, that we in fact do have an effect on students.

TRACHTE: Let me continue this conversation. When you talk about values, you talk about a caring community. When you ask

the vast majority of our Wartburg College students, “Why did you come to Wartburg,” they will say something about friendliness or acceptance or the smallness or warmth, the caring community. I think that that raises some interesting questions in terms of the moral life. You said that at Concordia it was defined in some ways by the “don’t.” When I was a student at Wartburg in the dinosaur era, we had just started dancing and we said the reason why we hadn’t inter-visitation before was that sex might lead to dancing and dancing was worse.

CHRISTENSON: That’s right, that’s my upbringing.

BENNE: We were liberated at Midland.

TRACHTE: So what is there about our life in community? Are we professing certain values? Are we teaching certain values by the way in which we live in a residential community like Wartburg College, where you have to have a roommate, you have to have a floor, and you encounter all kinds of people who in many ways probably do not share your own values or the values at least that you grew up with, and you have to examine that. Any comments on how you create community in the middle of this present secular age?

CHRISTENSON: I think a very important part of learning in a college or university ought to be a kind of induction into a community of discourse, whether you’re doing it in a department or in a major or in the college as a whole. What does it mean to be part of a community of discourse? What does it mean to carry on a debate, say, in psychology about different theories? What does it mean to carry on a debate in physics about different models of galactic clustering? I mean, here you get people who are talking about these things, arguing about these things, making arguments, hearing other people’s arguments, critiquing other people’s arguments. When you learn how to do that, you will have been inducted into a community of discourse, and it seems to me that’s one of the very valuable things about a college or university experience. You should have had that. You should have been doing that. And then the question is, “Well, what kind of community is that? What do we show people about how we disagree, how we give reasons, how we listen to reasons, what we expect of each other?” I think that atmosphere is what I would call community. And so it doesn’t mean that you all agree with each other. Community doesn’t mean that you all agree with each other, for heaven’s sake. It doesn’t even mean that you all like each other. But it means how you communicate even when you’re disagreeing. How do you communicate even when you are arguing with each other or when you’re representing different points of view? That’s an important lesson, and it’s one that our

culture doesn’t do very well. I often ask students, “Well, where have you heard significant ethical discussions before you came to college?” And you get ... silence. I say, “Well, in school?” “No.” “At home, at the dinner table?” “No, it was one of the things we weren’t supposed to talk about.” “In church?” “No.” “Well, where then?” Well, they haven’t. And so to have a place where questions like that can be asked and pursued in a rigorous kind of way is, I think, an important experience, and so if your college provides that for you, then I think you’ve got something extremely valuable.

BENNE: I guess I have a fairly narrow definition of community, and I don’t think community emerges very much in a population this large. That is, there are flashes of it around tragedies or great celebrations and so on, but mostly I think college is about friendships. It’s amazing what friendships are gained then, and if you’re lucky, some of those friendships might have discourse in them. The most precious memories I have of my years at Midland College were meeting other students who were interested in talking about these things far into the night. My memory of being at Midland College was of being always tired because we’d talk late at night and my mind would get going and I couldn’t go to sleep, plus I played four sports, so I was tired at the end of the day and tired during the day, but those are precious memories, and the circle of friends that engaged in that are lifelong friends. And now there’ll be other kinds of circles. They won’t always be the kind of intellectual discourse, but there are other kinds of circles of friendship, but those are extremely important. We talked in these late-night bull sessions about religious issues, religious questions, and that should be part of it, a grace note in the life of Wartburg College, those kind of conversations that go on late at night. We’ve talked briefly about how cell phones may destroy that.

TRACHTE: We were talking about that earlier this morning, the challenge of an age of community when instead of talking to each other, students are on the phone talking to their high school friends or their parents. We’re running toward the end of our time, but let me ask one other question that seems to me to be a significant debate or clash at a place like Wartburg. We have long been committed to diversity on our campus. We have students from forty countries. We have a significant minority population, [primarily] African American, unfortunately not as many Hispanic students as we’d like. But at the same time, we sometimes talk about a “critical mass” of Lutherans. We have fewer Lutherans certainly than when the three of us were in college at our Lutheran colleges. How does one have a significant number of Lutherans and yet affirm, on the other hand, a significant diversity on the campus, both of which it seems to me are important. I don’t know how the two of you approach that.

BENNE: Well, I don't think that's contradictory at all. I think students of all sorts are attracted to an ethos and a tradition of a college and if you do that tradition and ethos well—sponsored, say, by the Lutherans and carried on by a critical minority of Lutherans, it becomes a very attractive thing, and you invite everybody to the banquet. You have a certain kind of ware, a certain kind of tradition that you're presenting, and if it's attractive, people will come. And generally if it's attractive and rich, they won't want to change that. That is, they know there's a living tradition at work there, for service, for the arts, for choral music, that's at a place like Wartburg and if you come from another country or ethnic or racial group that's not typically Lutheran, you can enjoy those things and endorse them. And so I don't think there's a necessary contradiction to them, but there has to be some sort of minority, intense minority, of people who bear that publicly, that tradition that sponsors the college and that we think is precious, so that it continues to be publicly relevant and lays out this panoply of goods that is attractive to a lot of different people, and then we invite people into that. I don't really think there's a contradiction.

CHRISTENSON: I agree with Bob about that. I think that it's not easy for us to learn this, but it's ever so important to come to see difference as a gift and not as a problem. I think that our institutions are ever so much richer for the diversity of students, and not only racial diversity, ethnic diversity, religious diversity, all of these kinds of things. You really get a much richer community that way, and that's what we want to have. I think that in some ways it's sort of like a banquet. Bob, you used this metaphor of somebody giving a dinner and inviting people to the table, and I think that ...

TRACHTE: Someone did that even in the Bible I think.

BENNE: Some refused to come, as you remember.

CHRISTENSON: That may be the metaphor that's used, that's right. And then you don't object if the meal has a particular ethnic identity to it.

BENNE: You like it, you know.

CHRISTENSON: It's like, "Oh, we're having Italian tonight. OK, that's alright." Or I suppose, "We're having Lutheran tonight."

TRACHTE: We're really about out of time, but let me ask each of you in summary, what do you see for the future? Are we going

to continue down the secular road? Are we rediscovering our identity as colleges of the church? How do you see into your crystal ball of what's happening, what's going to happen?

CHRISTENSON: Well, I can give some examples of institutions that I think were very tempted by the elite model of higher education that have now started taking their Lutheran identity much more seriously, and I think that's good. It's fun to see when an institution sort of wakes up to what gifts they had and that they didn't realize that they had them. Sort of like, "Oh, wow! I didn't notice that this was worth something." Sometimes it's somebody else who points that out to you. So it's nice when you see institutions doing that. I think there are a number of places that have that in mind, that are now taking seriously the question of their Lutheran identity. One of the consequences of my writing the book, *Gift and Task*, is that I've been invited to a lot of places who obviously were interested in pursuing this question, "What does it mean when you're a Lutheran college?" and I think that's a good sign, that question being raised.

BENNE: On the other example of not going after the elite model, but the generic model, people are realizing that just being a generic college is not enough and so they sometimes reclaim their Lutheran heritage on those grounds. I'm a little bit dubious about whether this banquet can go on in the sense that it takes a great deal of courage on the part of a college to be clear about its mission and hire for mission, and that means hiring some people who will carry on the tradition, not necessarily all of them being Lutherans, but enough Lutherans to carry on that tradition, enough supporters who like the banquet that's being offered, and I believe that it takes great courage to hire along those lines. The easier path is just to hire for competency, disciplinary competency. I'm not sure that our Lutheran colleges over the long-run will have the courage to say what their mission is with that faith dimension in it, which is ethos as well as the intellectual tradition, and hire for it. I just wonder whether we've got the courage to do that.

TRACHTE: Any final comments?

CHRISTENSON: We've said everything.

BENNE: We've said everything.

TRACHTE: Thank you.