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PAUL J. DOVRE

The Lutheran Calling in Education: Context and Prospect

SINCE ITS FOUNDING, and following the practices of its predecessor church bodies, the ELCA has prepared and adopted social statements on a variety of critical issues from the environment to the economy. Following in this tradition, in 2001 the ELCA commissioned the preparation of a social statement on education. The purpose of the statement will be to inform public policy advocacy and provide counsel to the church, its institutions, congregations, and members.

With the goal of producing, reviewing, and adopting a social statement at the Churchwide Assembly in 2006, the Task Force charged with preparation of the statement produced a study document in 2004 and a draft social statement in 2006. In this essay I will undertake three tasks: first, to focus on the current social context and its consequences as a way of identifying some of the issues that the social statement seeks to address; then I will spend a bit of time reflecting on why it is that Lutherans care about such matters; finally, I will consider some of the prospects and possibilities available to us in addressing the critical issues. Given the nature of my assignment, this will be more an annotated listing of issues, elements, and resources than a substantive philosophical argument.

Social Context and Consequences

I begin with consideration of young people. In a review of *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual lives of American Teenagers*, Sandra Scofield notes that while 84 percent of teenagers say that they believe in God and 50 percent say that faith

is extremely important to them, a minority of them regularly practice their faith and they have no idea what their parents' religious values are about. And while the seriously committed "tend to show compassion for others in volunteer activities, do well in school, maintain good family relationships and avoid drugs and sex" they do not seem able "to tie their sense of moral directives to the teachings of a historical church or orthodoxy that underlies their faith." The result, says Scofield, is that "religion gets interpreted with a template that comes straight from the general culture, with its emphasis on individualism" (3).

In the April 15, 2005 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Thomas Bartlett reports on the Higher Education Research Institute's study on spirituality in higher education. Among other things, the study's authors concluded that "most college freshmen believe in God, but fewer than half follow religious teachings in their daily lives. A majority of first-year students (69 percent) say their beliefs provide guidance, but many (48 percent) describe themselves as 'doubting,' 'seeking' or 'conflicted'" (A1). A related study coming out of UCLA found that the percentage of students who frequently attend religious services shrank from 52 percent of incoming freshman to 29 percent of juniors (Bonderud and Fleischer 2). According to Roland Martinson's research, there is among the young great interest in spirituality but little interest in knowledge of the faith and the tradition. Too many of the young find the tradition trivial and unengaging, and so their spirituality and morality are shaped by the popular culture.

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Meanwhile in the mainline denominations, education and worship get short shrift in comparison to other religious traditions. In a national study of 549 randomly selected and diverse congregations, Nancy T. Ammerman found that “the religious groups that spend the least organizational energy on the core tasks of worship and religious education are the mainline Protestant ones” (8). Small wonder that the mainline churches struggle for loyalty, for an evangelical strategy, for an effective educational pedagogy, for a youth strategy and for leaders and teachers of competence and vision for the work of Christ’s mission in church and society.

And the family map features too much brokenness and multi-tasking, too many absent parents and proxy parents, and too little attention to faith and character formation. In Christian families, the vows that parents make regarding the spiritual formation of their children are often neglected or delegated to congregations whose educational programs are short on time and leadership.

The next dimension of our context that I will examine is our schools. Folks are not happy that our schools do not measure up to the performance of schools in other nations. People are unhappy that too many students fail, that there is too much violence, that character formation is being slighted, that school lunch programs do not feature nutritious foods, that there is too much or too little or the wrong kind of attention to sex education, and that special education is receiving either too much or too little of school resources. The public cries for accountability and improvement, and the government responds with No Child Left Behind and a bushel of money that some say is not enough and others say is misdirected. Special interest groups, in increasing numbers, pursue agendas in behalf of prayer or intelligent design or the teaching of religion.

Teachers are increasingly restive under multiple roles and mandates about teaching to tests. Educational leaders wonder how to maintain morale and how to attract teachers of good quality in adequate numbers.

And while schools continue to be resegregated in the cities, schools in rural areas fight to sustain viability. And the unequal distribution of wealth results in an unequal distribution of financial resources for schools, so equal access to quality education is not the reality, political rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding. And surely it’s not all about money...but yet it is about money.

A third element of this review of context is our communities. Robert Bellah and his colleagues did the fundamental diagnostic work two decades ago and Robert Putnam verified their underlying theses one decade ago. These theses are familiar: individualism trumps community, feeling good trumps being good, and self-satisfaction trumps altruism. And civility is a

rarer commodity than we would wish. Politicians on the left and right are so focused on their respective power bases that their capacity to identify and pursue the common good is increasingly problematic. So the rhetoric is hotter, the tactics less responsible, and all of it is justified according to a Machiavellian calculus.

- We seem increasingly to believe that dollars spent in behalf of the common good would be better spent for the individual good. And, of course, misdirected public expenditures are a reality and governmental reform is a continuing necessity. But the animus to public spending runs deeper than that, so we cut taxes, resist new ones, and refer those that we do pass to public referendum wherever possible.
- The economy is viewed globally and experienced individually. The mantra is that outsourcing is going to create new opportunities for those who are displaced and cheaper, better products for all. And while our employment rates remain high, polls tell us that the poor and the middle class are anxious and uncertain about their place in the new global economic order.
- Since 9/11 we have experienced a war without lines or borders and a world in which uncertainty and anxiety often transform hospitality into hostility in the case of those who are viewed as different because of color, creed, or culture.
- The realities of diversity in our communities are met with celebration and welcome on the one hand and with fear and exclusion on the other. And the reality of pluralism and multiculturalism is met with relativism, or critical tolerance, or an anxious and sometimes angry fundamentalism. As if this isn’t enough to disrupt the human community, advances in science create crises for both patients and practitioners.

The final destination in this environmental scan is higher education. Our society is clear that education, and higher education in particular, is the key to the economic well-being of our citizens and our nation-state. To that end, we have commodified higher education in the sense that the ultimate measure of its effectiveness is its capacity to fuel the economic engine. To the despair of Lutherans, vocation is equated with career, and education for citizenship is thus marginalized.

Since there is a strong argument that higher education possesses the keys to the economic well-being of our nation and the economic equity of its citizens, access to education is a high priority. But as costs have escalated, public support and family capacity have not kept pace. Demographers are warning us that if we do not address the educational quality issues in K-12 and

the access issues in higher education, our new Americans and our poorer Americans will not be able to matriculate, and the workforce needs of a high-tech society will not be met.

In the wake of modernism, post-modernism, and deconstruction, higher education is a place where soul questions are often either ruled out of order or treated as matters primarily of subjective interest. Our post-Weberian narrowing of the vocation of a scholar as detailed in Mark Schwehn's *Exiles in Eden* is part of this matter, as is the fact/value split documented by Douglas Sloan and some misconstrual of the doctrine of the separation of church and state. This narrowing of academic vision had a significant and continuing impact in both public and religious higher education according to both Robert Benne and George M. Marsden. Adding to the stress in the case of religious colleges, including Lutheran colleges, is the declining capacity of the sponsoring church bodies and the consequent rearranging of denominational priorities at the expense of higher education. And so scholars, both young and old, quest for vocations that will, in the words of Gail Godwin, "keep making more of you" (31). For all of these reasons, life in the academy in a post-modern, post-Christian, and pluralistic society may be an experience of exile.

Why Lutherans Care

But why is this Lutheran Church—to which we are connected either as members of the communion or members of a Lutheran academic community—concerned enough about our context and its consequences to commission this ambitious and sometimes arduous study process? Here are at least some of the reasons:

- Because God created us as beloved creatures, in the image of God, with capacity to know and understand God and the world.
- Because we marvel at and claim our God-given capacities "to communicate, reason, explore new realities, discover meaning and truth, create art, technology and complex societies, enjoy beauty, and discern what is right and good" (Task Force on Education 2006: 6.14-18).
- Because God calls us into the vocation of service and responsibility toward our neighbor and in our communities: religious communities built around faith and grace (the heavenly kingdom) and secular communities built around laws and the common good (the earthly kingdom).
- Because historically we have been concerned about education in the faith. One recalls Luther's injunction to families regarding such matters. We are reminded of

his energy and leadership in establishing schools so that children and adults would possess the skills necessary to read and interpret the Word. We remember Luther's preparation of educational materials including the Large and Small Catechisms.

- Because Lutherans have been concerned about, and respectful of, human reason and secular knowledge—recognizing them as God's good gifts, gifts that contribute to knowledge of the faith and gifts that are essential to our vocations in the world.
- Because Lutherans are committed to civic righteousness (Augsburg Confession, Article XVI) or to the common good if you will. Luther exemplified this conviction in his own life. One thinks of his commitment to the establishment of the common schools, to the university, to social welfare, to new governance arrangements, to new social institutions and new laws (Witte). To be sure, Luther's judgment in these matters, as in the case of the Peasants' Revolt, was not unerring, but his concern for civic righteousness, consistent with his formulation on the two kingdoms, was clear.
- Because we are a people of hope: freed from the oppressions of "Context and Consequences" by the blood of the Cross, we are able to respond to God's call to nurture the young, to care for creation, to love the neighbor. And God has given us both experience and resources with which to build meaningful vocations in our lives individually and in the lives of our families, congregations, communities, colleges and universities.
- And finally, we are encouraged to address our calling in education by the signs that we see around us, including educational reform in schools, a vast expansion in congregational schools, educational innovation in our colleges and universities, a renewal of mission in higher education, and revitalized youth ministries. And there are leaders with vision and expertise who are passionate about the Lutheran calling in education.

Prospects and Possibilities

Given the looming issues and the resolve to address our calling in education, what are the prospects and possibilities? As a foreword to this discussion, let me pause a moment. In good Lutheran tradition, our theologizing and thinking about vocation is grounded in Word and sacrament. The Word provides grounding, counsel and revelation as we seek to discern the will

of God for our time and in our station. So let me frame these remarks with these words from Romans. Paul writes:

Do not be conformed to this world but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:2)

I believe that the Lutheran calling in education is about transformation. And I think it is about renewing our minds by acquiring new knowledge, by wrestling with the paradox and ambiguity of the current circumstances in education, and by developing and testing new strategies and insights. And it is about discerning the will of God in these matters: a process fed by prayer, faithful study, and honest conversation. In that spirit, I submit some grist for the renewing of our minds—for we have significant resources with which to pursue our calling in education.

In assessing our prospects and possibilities, we begin with the legacies: the biblical legacy, the confessional legacy, the theological legacy, and the pedagogical legacy. I have already illustrated the biblical legacy. Now let us consider the confessional legacy.

- Earlier I noted references to the first article of the Apostles Creed. This article affirms our creation in the image of God, the gift of knowledge, and the call to steward God's creation.
- The second article acknowledges the fallenness of creation, the reality of sin, of evil, of the sorts of inequities and injustices identified in the study document.
- But it also establishes the gospel, the transforming capacity of Christ that allows us to transcend our brokenness, to transform life and the world. This is an exercise of the Christian freedom that Luther celebrated.
- The second article is also an account of the gospel, this good news that motivates us to serve God, to love the neighbor, and to engage in the sometimes arduous tasks of being in community.
- And it is in the third article that we acknowledge the work of the Holy Spirit in calling us to faith and into community. It is the Holy Spirit that produces in us and in our communities such fruits as love, joy, peace, and kindness.
- And alongside the Apostles Creed stand the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Augsburg Confession, and the Book of Concord—all documents that seek to articulate the faith and its implications. Taken together, they constitute a rich legacy.

Companion to the legacies of Word and the confessions stands our theological legacy. Luther did not produce a systematic body of theological writings. What we have are his sermons, lectures, prayers, occasional letters, and his Table Talk. Luther was always engaging scripture and reason and people around central questions of life and issues of the community. From this work we deduce a series of theological insights. For example,

- His insights about vocation are central to the enterprise of this annual conference. Luther's understanding was and is distinctive. For Luther vocation is motivated by gratitude for the Good News. It is inclusive of all careers. We are, said Luther, a "priesthood of all believers," so whether cow herder or castle dweller, priest or plumber, teacher or tool maker—all careers provide places of service to the neighbor, places to glorify God in the doing of good work. Further, in Luther's view our vocation is comprehensive of all dimensions of our lives—family, community, church, and career. Luther saw vocation in incarnational terms: in our lives of service to the neighbor we who are finite creatures bare the infinite love of God.
- Luther's teaching about the two kingdoms is another element of his legacy. It provides refreshing insights about our call to work with others in behalf of justice in a world of many faiths and cultures, and it affirms the place of secular knowledge and human reason. "For Lutherans the knowledge given in faith and the knowledge given through human reason are distinct, and both are gifts of God; the two belong together, the one challenging and strengthening the other" (Task Force on Education 2004: 65-66). And his helpful distinctions between law and gospel provide insights about the error of misplaced piety, the necessity of good laws for our temporal existences, and the freedom of the Christian.

Now we move to Luther's pedagogical legacy.

- First of all, this man was committed to learning and to the free, unfettered search for truth. He exemplified St. Anselm's dictum that "faith seeks understanding." It was intellectual inquiry fed by religious anxiety that led Luther to his breakthrough reading of Romans on the nature of salvation. It was Luther's commitment to the laity, the priesthood of all believers, that led him to champion a universal education that would give people of both sexes and all ages direct access to knowledge. He advocated for instruction in both divine and human wisdom (Lotz 9). It was his respect for human curiosity that led him to write the catechism with its recurrent

question, “What does this mean?” And it was his commitment to learning in church and world that led Luther and Melancthon to spearhead a reformation of the curriculum at Wittenberg University.

- The reformation of the curriculum reflected another feature of Luther’s pedagogical legacy—his commitment to education in the liberal arts. Luther thought it necessary and appropriate that those who would provide leadership in church and society should be acquainted with history, science, philosophy, and language in order to discover the truth of God’s word and the best course of action in the church and community.
- And we also celebrate Luther’s commitment to excellence in all things. He was alleged by some to have said, “A good cobbler makes good shoes, not poor shoes with little crosses on them.” Whether he said it or not, he viewed piety as an unacceptable excuse for mediocrity. And no doubt he subscribed to the Apostle Paul’s admonitions about running the good race with perseverance.
- Luther’s commitment to the dialectic, to the engagement of faith and life, and to moral deliberation about faith and the common good is another aspect of his legacy. He exemplified it in his writing and speaking, he demonstrated it in his Table Talk that addressed both the ordinary and extraordinary experiences of life, and he advocated for the dialectic in the reconstitution of the curriculum of Wittenberg around a more rhetorical, dialogical model of engaged learning.
- A final piece of Luther’s pedagogical legacy was his sense of contingency. It is expressed in a number of ways, including the famous *simul eustus et peccator* formulation, the confession that we are both righteous and sinner. We also see it in Luther’s view on the limits of reason. Luther viewed reason as the “most important and the highest in rank among all things and, in comparison with other things of this life, the best and something divine” (*LW* 34: 137). But he was leery of Erasmus and others who thought they could rationalize divine grace and revelation, and he was sensitive to the ways in which persons who were simultaneously saint and sinner could corrupt reason. The sense of contingency is also evident in Luther’s preference for the paradoxical, the reality of the sometimes irresolvable tension among alternative ways of understanding and negotiating reality. This sense of contingency leads to a sense of intellectual humility.

Let me move beyond the legacy to another set of observations on the prospects and possibilities for the Lutheran calling in education. A particular sign of encouragement is the renewal of the apostolic paradigm in the church. The work of Loren Meade and also Stanley Hauerwas and William B. Willimon a decade and a half ago described the stagnation of ministry and mission in many churches. They were, in a word, focused on self-preservation and unseen and distant mission activities. But in the fifteen years since the publication of these books, we have seen remarkable movement in many congregations. We see, in particular, a focus on equipping the laity for their ministries in daily life. We see the preparation of pastors for apostolic ministry in a post-Christian world where Christian beliefs and values are not shared by the culture. We see focus on small group ministries that address social needs and spiritual development. We see lively and engaged forms of worship, education, and youth ministry.

Another reason for optimism is the renaissance of Christian colleges. The post-modern consciousness and the secular angst among many of us led to some deep reflection about religious identity and mission on many of our campuses. The result is, in many cases, a revitalized community evidenced by lively conversation about faith and learning and about vocation. New curricular and pedagogical models are surfacing with a powerful assist from the Lilly Endowment. Scholars like Schwehn, Benne, Bunge, Simmons, Christenson, Jodock, and Lagerquist (among others) have provided excellent material for the renewing of our minds and our campuses and our programs. This annual conference, the Lutheran Academy of Scholars, and the publication *Intersections* further testify to the reality of this renaissance. And furthermore, we know that Lutheran colleges and universities make a difference. The data gathered by the Lutheran Educational Conference of North America in its multiyear research program indicates that our institutions excel in educational outcomes related to faith development, the integration of faith and learning, in opportunities for discussion of faith issues, and in levels of participation in the life of a church following graduation.

And we hasten to include on our list of encouraging news items the reform movements in public K-12 education. Upset with the experience of their students and the performance of schools, parents, politicians, and philanthropists are developing alternative formats and platforms. Consequently, vouchers, charter schools, and home schools are now part of our vocabulary. And that doesn’t begin to describe the myriad innovations occurring in many schools where teachers and administrators are showing very creative leadership.

I mentioned earlier the response of Lutheran congregations to the educational needs of their members and their neighborhoods.

Our study document reports that one in five ELCA congregations is sponsoring some sort of educational venture, reaching 225,000 students and engaging 20,000 teachers, administrators and staff members. Between 1999 and 2004, an average of fifty school or early childhood centers were opened every year. (Task Force on Education 2004:44) This ministry is, in all likelihood, our church's most effective venture in reaching an increasingly multicultural population.

Finally, the prospects for our calling in education are enhanced by the quest for values, for virtue, and for meaning that we see exhibited in our society. One thinks of the popularity of books like Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* or the "Ethics and" movement exemplified at the Hoover Institution where Fortune magazine senior writer Marc Gunther led a seminar on "Compassionate Capitalism" and authored several books and essays on related subjects ("Media Fellow"). Or one could cite the growing number of independent Bible study groups that are springing up across the country and across denominational lines.

This set of reflections on the context and prospect for the Lutheran calling in education is necessarily incomplete. These are some of the issues as I see them and the resources available to us as we seek to shape our calling. I leave it to you to fill in the empty spaces and then make the connections between our resources and our challenges. Indeed, these days together will provide a hospitable environment and a highly competent community in which to do just that.

This may or may not be a *kairos* time but it is, I submit, a time of significant opportunity for people committed to the kind of holism in education to which our colleges, universities, and church have a historic commitment.

Luther did not conform to the religious ideologies and practices of his place and time, nor did he conform to the civic practices and ideologies of Saxony. He was transformed by the gospel as it was revealed to him in his studies, in his conversation with others, in the writings of St. Paul, and in the work of the Holy Spirit. In the vocation that followed, he became an agent of transformation in church and society.

It happened in the time of Saul who became the apostle Paul. It happened in the time of Luther who became a reformer in the church, the schools, and society. So why not now? That's what the Lutheran calling in education is all about—transformation. So be it. Amen, so be it.

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