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Mark Wilhelm

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Vocation and the Common Good



Our annual conferences on “the Vocation of a Lutheran College” are designed to explore the shared identity and mission of the colleges and universities related to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). As the standing title of the conference suggests, these conferences claim that the

concept of vocation offers the best lens for examining (and the best opportunity for invigorating) a shared identity and mission among our very diverse schools.

In my longer talk (forthcoming in *Intersections* Spring 2016), I offer an overview of how the leadership of the network of ELCA colleges and universities arrived at the conclusion that the theme of vocation should be our touchstone. I also focus on the particular wisdom about higher education embedded in the Lutheran intellectual tradition that “vocation” upholds. Despite many challenges, I remain optimistic that the Lutheran ideal of higher education and its vocation movement will find wide acceptance over time. Our generation has the chance to reclaim one of the great western educational traditions by remembering the ideal of education for vocation and the Lutheran notion of a non-sectarian, but authentically religious, higher education.

Lutheran colleges and universities are not defined by their support for an ethnic culture or by their adherence

to a check-list of institutional practices or markers, such as mandating minimal standards for the numbers of Lutheran students enrolled. Nor are they Lutheran schools because schooling provides a platform for promoting parochial Lutheran interests. Rather, our schools are Lutheran because they stand in a 500 year-old intellectual tradition that educates for vocation, an education of the whole person, prepared to contribute to the common good.

Educating for the Common Good

Providing education for vocation to all persons of good will, whatever their personal religious or non-religious convictions, is educational excellence in the Lutheran tradition. It is the vocation of a Lutheran college. Given our particular theme of the “Common Good” here, I want to reflect on how the Lutheran intellectual tradition and its concept of vocation are worth reclaiming and promoting because they undergird and sustain an educational commitment to prepare students to contribute to the common good.

I will mention only two insights from the Lutheran intellectual tradition by way of demonstrating how our concern for character education, citizenship, and the common good stem from the Lutheran roots of our schools and the concept of education for vocation. The first points toward a rationale for a commitment to the commons, that is, a sense of community and shared

Mark Wilhelm is Program Director of Schools, Congregational and Synodical Mission Unit, ELCA. These reflections concluded Mark’s opening address at the 2015 Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference. The full manuscript will be made available in *Intersections*, Spring, 2016.

well-being. The second aids our efforts to work toward the good by prohibiting any individual or group from claiming to definitively know the good.

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A Sense of the Commons

The Lutheran tradition’s commitment to a sense of the commons is rooted in a number of sources, but among them is the Lutheran doctrine of vocation’s insistence that all persons share a common walk of life. The Lutheran tradition teaches that people experience a variety of callings and that each person has multiple callings simultaneously, reflecting in the various aspects of their lives. The Lutheran doctrine of vocation also insists that this variety of callings does not indicate a division of persons into a variety of classes, hierarchies, or castes attendant to their vocations. The Lutheran tradition is adamant that understanding life in terms of vocation does not create difference of status. There may be many vocations, but these are all part of a single, common walk of life. To recall Luther’s German categories, we are called to various functions, activities, or offices (*Amt*), but according to Luther all are called to and are part of a single walk of life (*Stand*).

Humankind is seemingly at work endlessly to divide people into this or that category, class or station. The Lutheran doctrine of vocation stands behind the democratic and egalitarian impulse that in its ideal informs higher education in the Lutheran tradition. Education for vocation promotes a commitment to the commons. We all have our distinct and various roles to play, but we all share a common walk of life. We are all—to use a sports analogy—on the same team—the team called humanity.

Ambiguity and Humility

The Lutheran tradition asserts that no one has a monopoly on knowledge, including knowledge of the good. This is drawn within Lutheranism from the belief that a person of

faith has no epistemological advantage over non-believers about the workings of the world, and that knowledge of the world comes through God’s gift of reason which is accessible to all. It is through cooperative work and inquiry, driven from a Lutheran perspective by the concept of vocation, that we strive to know the good.

As part of its assertion that no one has a monopoly on knowledge, the Lutheran tradition also does not shy away from the complexities of human life, including our attempt to know the good. This conviction is expressed in the Lutheran theological affirmation of paradox as key to a wise understanding of life. One of the paradoxes of our existence is the paradoxical mix of good and evil that is difficult to sort. The Lutheran intellectual tradition asserts that ambiguity is integral to this life and that determining wise ethical practice is fraught with complexity. For example, how can it be that persons in their one-to-one relationships can be exceedingly moral and yet they can seemingly not overcome the immorality of the collective actions they take as members of society? Education for vocation should encourage students to not despair in the face of such complexity, nor should they be deterred from pursuing the common good even as they struggle to work out the paradox of good and evil in life.

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Conclusion

The continuing conversation about education for vocation is about the grand renewal of a 500 year-old vision that returns our community of schools to an educational ideal as the basis of our shared identity and mission. The remainder of this issue explores in more detail one implication of the concept of vocation: namely, that from the Lutheran heritage of our schools we share a commitment to prepare students to contribute to the common good.