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CHANGES

W. Robert Sorensen

Structure is important. I realize those words land with a bureaucratic “clank” on many ears, but the obvious fact is no community—including a church or a college—can be without it. It is certainly true that where there is no vision, people perish. It is also equally true that without adequate structure, no community can flourish. How an organization is structured tells us a great deal about what it values and how it functions.

Therefore, when an organization restructures, it is worth our attention. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is in the midst of such a process and will recommend a new structure for the Division for Higher Education and Schools (DHES). I have been asked to comment about what the Division was like at the beginning and what the recommended change might mean for the church and for the colleges and universities that carry the church’s name.

Colleges and universities have always been a vital part of the Lutheran community. From the beginning of Luther’s reform, three movements can be identified. The first was a movement of reform in the University itself. Note this is not saying it was a 16th century Reformation that occurred in the new and modest setting of Wittenberg University, but rather a renewal of universities. They gained greater intellectual freedom from Luther’s reform, without which, in turn, that reform could not have moved forward. The second movement changed the life and structure of the church, an attempt to renew the church so that it more clearly reflected the centrality of the Gospel which Luther’s scholarship had uncovered. What distinguished Luther’s Reformation from earlier reforms was that those efforts focused essentially on reforming the life of the church. Luther first centered on the thought and theology of the church, a rediscovery of the radical grace of the Gospel and then, from that understanding, sought to shape in new ways the life and structure of the church. And finally, as time went on, there developed a third movement, Pietism, that wished to deepen the spiritual life of the individual.

To change the imagery a bit and place the Lutheran Reformation upon the stage, we can view it in three interrelated scenes: first the University; then the Church; and finally the individual’s spiritual life. When Lutheranism came to this country, the same three emphases came with it. But interestingly, in exactly the opposite order.¹

This heritage helps us understand why education has played such a significant role in the life of the Lutheran Church. When the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was formed, it gave expression to this reality in several ways. One of the most important was through its churchwide structure, which has the primary task of helping the church carry out its national and international work. Only six Divisions were used to focus these efforts, and one of the six was the Division for Higher Education and Schools, named originally, more simply but less accurately, the Division for Education. Some readers will know the Division has three departments with directors and small staffs for Colleges and Universities, 28 across the country; Campus Ministry, some 200 ministries primarily at state institutions, but also including such campuses as Harvard, Yale and Stanford; and Schools, over 2000 early childhood centers, elementary and secondary schools.

Thus the world’s second largest Lutheran church, as it began, gave high visibility to the place of education in the life of this church. It was structured so that educational issues would always be in the mix of churchwide discussions and planning, and that the church would always have a voice in the many areas of college and university life engaged by the Division. It also meant the ELCA could enter, through the Division, into international areas of educational concerns, about which I will say more later. The Division, therefore, signaled a central place for higher education and schools in the heritage and life of this church and was an important symbol of that reality. This is a fact, I would argue, as important as the Division’s work.

But what would hold the work of a Division together that went, as Bishop Steve Bowman once aptly said, from ABC’s to PhD’s? The cohesiveness began with a definition from the late Joseph Sittler. He spoke of education as movement into a larger world. It was a definition well made for the Division, applicable to an early childhood center or to a college. This is what learning is and does for those fortunate enough to participate in it. And, when done well, it takes place at all ages, within every discipline, and continues for a lifetime.

Within the Division we also understood this larger world to be comprised of two levels of reality, the realm of nature engaged through our senses and the realm of the Spirit, within and around the natural, that can and does

break into our experience. Those familiar with the work of Houston Smith will recognize this view of the world with two dimensions of reality as that which he calls the "primordial tradition," a universal view found within every culture throughout time.² In the Christian tradition out of which our colleges have come, it resonates with what Jesus called the Kingdom of God. The vast majority of people, according to Smith, experience reality in this two dimensional way. Readers of this essay will also recognize it as a view essentially rejected by the Enlightenment, which gradually narrowed its understanding and investigation primarily to the natural order. Much of great value has been accomplished because of it. This narrower view of reality is also found in most of higher education today, but its inadequacy is increasingly called into question, especially in theoretical physics, although the critique is by no means confined to that discipline. The Division sided with the critics.

So the Division, with its work in colleges, universities, campus ministries, elementary and secondary schools and early childhood centers cohered around an understanding of education as movement into a larger world. From this center, the Division carried out its work by developing various programs that sought to advance three main goals.

To name one of the goals, we wanted to help strengthen educational excellence in our colleges and universities. We used the academy's definition of excellence in terms of faculty degrees from quality institutions, publications, and especially competence as classroom teachers. A second goal for our programs was to assist the colleges and universities in bringing the Christian theological heritage into academic settings. I sometimes liked to say to the more secular faculty or administrators on our campuses that the colleges of which they were a part would not exist if it were not for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Jaws dropped. I meant nothing esoteric by such a statement but simply the fact that without the reality it pointed to, there would be no Christian church, nor that part of it called Lutheran and therefore no people who founded the institutions we now have. But not only heritage gave reason for our colleges and universities to explore theological issues. Such reflection in classrooms and experiences of worship in chapels deepen the learning life of the campus. And thirdly, we wanted the work we did to enhance community on our campuses, glaringly lacking in far too much of higher education today.

The Division therefore centered its work on tasks that would enhance excellence, deepen theological reflection in academic settings, and enrich our schools as

communities of faith and learning. I am convinced such efforts strengthen our campuses as places able to "probe both the deep places of the human mind and the deep longings of the human spirit," to quote a phrase from a speech the late Ernest Boyer once used to praise the colleges and universities of the ELCA. It is unfortunately clear such places are not easily found in higher education today. We worked to help our colleges and universities provide this rare and rich experience to those who were a part of them. If this were done, then the more traditional task of an educational structure in a churchwide office, to help educate the next generation of leaders for church and society, would be enhanced. And students would be moved into a larger world.

This was the center of the Division's efforts. We wanted it reflected in our work with boards, administrators, faculty, and students. It also stands behind the effort to promote an understanding of vocation in our schools, the faculty conferences on the Vocation of a Lutheran College, the Lutheran Academy of Scholars, the publication of this journal, and the establishment of the Conrad Bergendoff Series of publications on faith and learning in higher education, which to this point includes two books: Ernest L. Simmons, *Lutheran Higher Education: An Introduction for Faculty* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993); and Tom Christenson, *The Gift and Task of Lutheran Higher Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004).

As I indicated earlier, there was also a strong international dimension to DHES. A part of it can be seen in the program to educate in our colleges and universities one hundred Namibian students, an effort well-known and respected. It produced a cadre of young leaders to help their nation break free from the shackles of Apartheid. There is ongoing work, centered in New Delhi, with colleges in India and other areas of the Near East. And there is the present effort of the Division's department for schools to strengthen elementary schools in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Palestine. We also helped establish and lead conferences in developing countries, using international settings such as Bethlehem University and Jerusalem, at which educational leaders from developing nations participated with educational leaders from the Vatican and other church bodies. All of this, and much more, was done with competent staff and board members, many of whom I had the pleasure of working with for thirteen years. I think it is a fair evaluation to say the work was done effectively for both the colleges and the church.

And now we are in a process to transition the Division for Higher Education and Schools into the much larger and

more broadly focused Division for Vocation and Education. It will be a Division that merges much of the work of the Division for Ministry with that of DHES. Since I am no longer connected to the Division for Higher Education and Schools and have not been since my retirement in 2000, I am less aware of the significance of this proposal than others. I understand that after some initial mistakes the process has moved forward more effectively and will likely be adopted. The work of the Division with colleges and universities, campus ministries, and schools will be brought together with the ELCA's eight seminaries, various forms of youth ministry, as well as with other areas of ministry. Those who support the transition think it could create a web of connections that might be helpful to the colleges and universities—perhaps, for example, in the area of recruiting.

My concern is twofold: will the new structure signal to both those within and outside the ELCA the core significance of education in the heritage and life of this church; and, secondly, can it carry forward the effectiveness and scope of DHES' work with the colleges

and universities (as well as with campus ministries and schools)? I am more hopeful about the second concern—the ongoing work. I am less certain about the first. In the twentieth century, the relationship between churches and their colleges has frequently collapsed, a story familiar to all of us. The ELCA has been regarded by many in higher education and in other church bodies as a church where the relationship is healthy. This has been the result of a great deal of concern and effort in a network of relationships involving many people, and a very important core of those relationships has been maintained and developed through DHES. Will the new structure be able to give these relationships the same attention, or will they become obscured because of the larger focus of the new Division for Vocation and Education? I know the leadership of the ELCA and the college and university presidents do not wish this into the amazing and changing vitality of the educational environment where exciting and important ideas are flying around. You are a significant sign of this church's heritage and involvement in this creative process. Whoever you may be, God bless you, the Division you will lead, the colleges and universities, and the church from which they came.

Rev. W. Robert Sorensen is former executive director of the Division for Higher Education and Schools.

Endnotes

¹ The distinguished Yale historian, Professor Emeritus Jaroslav Pelikan, has used similar terminology in speaking of the Reformation, citing first a university phase, then a period of orthodoxy, and finally Pietism. Pelikan's views are noted in a speech by Donald Hetzler delivered to a Campus Ministry gathering in May of 2003.

² Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976.