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MARTIN LUTHER, VOCATION, AND CHURCH COLLEGES: NURTURING FUTURE LEADERS FOR CHURCH AND COMMUNITY

Richard W. Rouse

Did you know that thirteen of sixteen newly elected bishops in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America received their undergraduate degree from a Lutheran college or university? Did you know that two of the sixteen are from the PLU class of 1971! Others coming from ELCA schools include graduates of Augustana (Sioux Falls), Concordia (Moorhead), Gettysburg, Gustavus Adolphus, Luther, Newberry, and St. Olaf. 75% of those who make up the new Conference of Bishops (or 49 out of 65) will be products of our Lutheran schools.¹ These kinds of numbers are not confined to bishops or pastors. Many leaders in business, in government, in the medical field, in education, and in community service are likewise products of a church related college or university.

Educating for Lives of Service

The basis premise of my lecture is this: Our *ELCA colleges and universities are training grounds of future leaders for our church and community*. Why do I say that? Because of the principles of Lutheran higher education upon which our learning enterprise is based. One of those is Luther's doctrine of vocation which was the inspiration for PLU's motto "educating for lives of service, inquiry, leadership, and care". A place like Pacific Lutheran University is unique because we are not just about the business of educating students to receive a degree or providing them with skills to be successful in their future occupations, but we are also preparing them to live meaningful lives that will be filled with purpose. Our church colleges offer a value-added education that enriches mind, body, and spirit. Our genuine hope is that the graduates of our schools will leave our institutions with a greater sense of service and a belief that they can and will make a difference in their community and in the world. And many have and are doing so today.

One of the major contributions of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century was Luther's doctrine of the **Priesthood of All Believers**. Building on imagery found in first Peter, chapter two, Luther believed that all Christians—not just those who were ordained or belonged to holy orders--were called in their baptism to be priests. This meant that all believers were to share the good news of Jesus Christ and to be "little Christs" to their neighbor. For Luther, a person's primary vocation (or calling) as a

Christian was to serve God and neighbor in all arenas of life—at home, at work, at school, at church, or in the community. Every Christian, then, was to live out their faith in daily life using their particular gifts and talents in service to God and others.

Martin Luther sought to reform a whole medieval class system that elevated some jobs or stations above others. In his 1521 writing, *On Monastic Vows*, Luther rejected the notion that priests and monks held a superior vocational status. In a society that believed those who chose religious orders were somehow more holy or closer to God, Luther argued that butchers or bakers were also blessed with a holy calling—sing the tools of their trade to serve the neighbor in need. He once made the scandalous claim that a washer woman and a bishop were of equal status before God as long as both were faithful to their calling to serve Christ and others in their daily life and work. Hence Luther's comment: "if everyone served his or her neighbor, then the whole world would be filled with divine service."²

Luther also sought to distinguish between **vocation** (one's calling to serve) and **station** (the place where one lives out one's calling). Luther believed that each station (e.g. teacher, politician, banker) was established by God to serve the needs of human beings in society. Each station is equally necessary for human life and as such each had the potential of being a place for divine service. Luther broke with the tradition that one is born into a particular station or was destined to remain there for life. His writings suggest that advancement to any station must be possible for those who obtain the proper education and training. Reflecting on the reformer's influence on changing societal norms, Hans Schwarz concludes "Luther's teaching on vocation is still able in our own day to help counter the individualistic and self-centered striving for one's own advantage, and to allow us to rediscover the fact that our work is meant to serve the common good."³

(Let me illustrate this further with a short video clip from a new drama called "Holy Odors" written by Pastor John Trump. It is about Luther's teaching on vocation and features theater students from Pacific Lutheran University where the play premiered this past February. To set the stage: a co-ed is in the university library studying for a class on Martin Luther. She falls asleep and suddenly a

figure from the past appears and begins to talk with her.)

Paths Unknown: Developing Vocations of High School and College Youth

This past year, several of our institutions collaborated on a major project called "*Paths Unknown: Where is God Leading Me?*" Focusing on the theme of vocation and discernment, the program was billed as an innovative way to help Lutheran high school and college age youth explore their future using the latest in web-based and interactive video technology.

Five educational institutions in the Western Mission Cluster agreed to partner together in this project. Staff from California Lutheran University, Luther Seminary, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Pacific Lutheran University, and Trinity Lutheran College were joined by representatives from the ELCA Division for Ministry, the Faith and Life Forum, and Fishers Net. Together we formed a project team to develop the format, content, and delivery system that would enable us to share resources on vocation and discernment with youth across the Western half of the United States.

The team agreed on several hoped for outcomes:

To help youth understand Luther's concept of vocation and make connection between their baptism and call to ministry in daily life.

To assist them in discerning God's plan for their life and ministry.

To make them aware of the need and opportunity for full time church related service.

To recruit youth for our church colleges (that integrate faith and values with learning).

To recruit youth for seminary and the ordained ministry.

Multiple delivery systems were considered to be imperative because of the scope of the project. A dedicated web site was developed by FALF board member Boyce Lawton of Wofford College; and continues to be available as a resource that is maintained by the Faith and Life Forum. The address is: godleading.com. The web site was designed to contain a variety of resources for youth workers and/or individual youth and adults such as a) a list of books and films on the topic of discernment and call; b)

an introductory piece about Martin Luther and his theology of vocation; c) a self-graded quiz on the topic of vocation; d) a spiritual gifts inventory; and e) a sample course outline for using these web-based materials for a class, workshop, or retreat.

An online virtual forum was held in January and February 2001 as a way to introduce youth to the topic of vocation, discernment, and call. Participants were asked to log on to the web site at least three times a week when new items for discussion were posted including articles by author Alan Briskin, by Rolland Martinson and Mary Hess of Luther Seminary and by Jane Strohl of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. Every Wednesday night an open chat room was provided so that individuals could discuss issues in real time with each other. In addition, several threaded discussions were offered by way of bulletin boards on the web site. These were places where people could post a question or a comment; others could come and see what had been posted and respond if they chose to. Participating in the online forum were over three hundred persons from forty states and Canada and Mexico.

Virtual Forum Thesis Statement:

Every Christian has a ministry! According to First Peter 2:9-10, all followers of Jesus—you and me!—are gifted and called to share the good news of God's love in all arenas of life. That means we are challenged to live out our faith in daily life—at home, at school, at work, or wherever we find ourselves. In baptism, we are called to use our gifts in service to God and others. Some are called to provide leadership in the church (such as a pastor or lay worker) while others serve in the wider community. But all are gifted and all are called. Join us in discovering how God is calling you to use your gifts!

Youth in Washington, Minnesota, and California (locations of sponsoring schools) were also given the opportunity to participate in a one day interactive video workshop. The workshops included small group discussion and discernment, a panel of youth and adults who shared their vocation journey, a newly written play by FALF board member Pastor John Trump on the topic of Christian vocation called "Holy Odors", a "live" hook up with seminary professors who spoke on the topic of discernment and call, and a renewal of baptism service. Those who attended gave the conference high marks. Among the responses of the participants were these comments:

"The panel discussion and small groups were really

helpful, and the play was great.”

“It was helpful knowing there are others like me.”

“It brought me closer to God and cleared up a lot of things that were questioned.”

“It was a reminder of how grace has played a huge role in my life.”

“It was great to talk with future pastors and seminary professors about the Christian’s daily life and ministry.”

A follow-up to the Paths Unknown project is planned including updating the web site with additional resources and developing an online course that will include archival video streaming of some of the presentations from the one day workshops. We are working with several ELCA divisions to explore the possibility of developing two tracks—one for youth and one for adults. If your college or university would like to be included as a sponsor of the course as well as have a hotlink from our web site to your schools web site, please let me know. We are looking for new partners and I believe we can all benefit as well as have a greater impact on the youth we serve if we choose to work together.

Conclusion: Colleges That Make a Difference

What are we doing on our campuses to identify, mentor, and nurture future leaders for church and community? Some of your schools are currently participating in the Lily Foundation vocation and leadership initiative. Some are finding ways to engage faculty, staff, and students in conversation around key principles of Lutheran higher education such as vocation. There is much being done, there is much left to do. We are left with this challenge. How can we help all of our faculty and staff at our respective schools recognize and claim **this important mission of instilling in our youth a sense of vocation?** How can we assist them in developing a sense of their

calling to use their gifts to serve others and to make a difference in our world?

The *Reclaiming Lutheran Student Project* has already made a significant contribution to our self-understanding as church-related institutions. It has confirmed that our Lutheran colleges do indeed make a difference in the lives of our students. Commissioned by the Lutheran Educational Conference of North America (LECNA) in 1999, a national survey was conducted of the parents and alumni of both Lutheran and public flagship colleges and universities. Results of the research gave strong evidence of the claims that our Lutheran colleges make in these areas:

A commitment to good teaching and a personalized learning experience. Compared with students at flagship public institutions, students at PU and other Lutheran schools were more likely to attend small classes and have a majority of their classes taught by professors.

A strong sense of community and the value of involvement beyond the classroom. Again, a greater number of our students had a sense of community on campus and were also encouraged to live lives of service in the wider community.

The integration of faith and values into the college experience. Overwhelmingly students at a Lutheran college or university discovered opportunities to explore matters of faith and values compared with only a small minority of students at public flagship schools. Students at our church colleges developed moral principles to guide their actions and a majority are now active in church and religious activities.

It would seem now more than ever the colleges of the church are needed to prepare men and women for leadership in a new century of mission.

Richard Rouse is the Executive Director for Church Relations and Continuing Theological Education at Pacific Lutheran University.

¹ Source: Report by Arne Selbyg, ELCA Division for Higher Education and Schools (June 28, 2001).

² Martin Luther, sermon on Matthew 22:34, *Predigten des Jahres 1532*, WA 36, 340.12f.

³ Hans Schwarz, *True Faith in the True God: An Introduction to Luther’s Life and Thought* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1996), p. 140.