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FLORENCE D. AMAMOTO

# Diversity and Dialogue: Twenty Years and Counting

The 20 years since I gave my presentation “Diversity and Dialogue” at the Vocation of a Lutheran College conference that was printed in the first edition of *Intersections*<sup>1</sup> has been, to use Charles Dickens’ opening line in *A Tale of Two Cities*: “the best of times and the worst of times.” Although I will be discussing the situation at my own college, in the current financial and demographic conditions, I suspect all of our ELCA colleges and universities face similar if not identical challenges. While each college’s challenges and solutions will be unique, growing as they do from an institution’s history, I hope this article can spark thought and dialogue about diversity and identity precisely because I continue to believe that church-related, and particularly ELCA, colleges have an important part to play in our increasingly diverse and divided society and globalized world.

## A Changing Demographic, a Changing Mission?

When I wrote my presentation 20 years ago, I felt I needed to make a case for diversity. Having been privileged to attend the first Vocation of a Lutheran College conference before being asked to talk at the third conference, which focused on diversity, I had learned that ELCA schools on the East and West coasts had long grappled with the conflict between diversity and identity, but Upper Midwest colleges like Gustavus had been sheltered by

demographics, with our large Scandinavian and German Lutheran populations. In the mid-1990s when I wrote the original piece, Gustavus was about 70 percent Lutheran and the 6-8 percent figure for diversity in our brochures, I had discovered, was the result of adding the numbers of international students to students of color. Also, a good number of those students of color were Minnesota-raised Korean adoptees, as Minnesota Lutheran churches had helped facilitate these adoptions in the 1970s.

I suspect I no longer need to advocate for recruiting students of color. At Gustavus, our diversity figure now is in the teens, which is still low compared to our coastal sister schools, but it matches the racial and ethnic diversity percentages in Minnesota. We have also been recruiting more students of color from other states, and recent years have seen a substantial increase in the number of international students. Students now hail from the burgeoning communities of Somalis, Hmong, and Tibetans in the Twin Cities and from places like California, Nigeria, and Honduras, as well as from the long-time exchanges with Japan and Sweden. The current administration has made increasing these figures a priority for our admission office.



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This has, in large part, been driven by demographics. Small liberal arts colleges like Gustavus are tuition dependent and the number of white college-age students is decreasing even in Minnesota. Such demographics have made attracting larger numbers of students of color and first generation students imperative. However, I continue to think that maintaining our Lutheran heritage is important. In the 1990s, much of the thinking about this issue was in terms of threshold numbers of Lutherans to maintain our Lutheran identity (see Mark Wilhelm's essay in the present issue). A recent alternative has been to re-see our founding mission not in its most particular form (i.e. as serving Swedish Lutherans) but in a more general form as serving an immigrant population.

"We need to foster both multicultural competence (and appreciation) *and* moral development in our students."

I would like to argue that it is precisely our Lutheranism that could allow us to reconcile these two seemingly conflicting desiderata. Lutheran theology emphasizes free intellectual inquiry and the importance of dialogue. It is this latter emphasis that also underlines the importance of diversity. Different backgrounds, experiences, and cultures enrich the conversation and give us a more nuanced and layered understanding of the world. An education for the twenty-first century *must* prepare our students to operate comfortably and knowledgeably in our more diverse, globally-linked world. But our world is also faced with issues that are immense and complex, like domestic and global inequality and climate change, that cannot be solved quickly and will be more likely to be addressed by people with a global vision and moral grounding, something church-related colleges are particularly well positioned to provide. We need to foster both multicultural competence (and appreciation) *and* moral development in our students.

If we do increase our percentage of students of color, international students, and first generation students, we also must provide the services needed for them to

thrive. In the early 1990s, the then president of Gustavus Adolphus College appointed a director of diversity. This one position has gradually grown into our Diversity Center, with a Director and Assistant Director, and offices and a meeting space in the student union. For the last ten years we have had a weekly meditation session led by a local Sri Lankan Buddhist monk and have recently established an interfaith space on campus as a result of student initiatives. We have also added a multilingual specialist to our student support staff to work with our ELL students.

Although we provide support services, we are not always as proactive as we should be as many of our students of color and first generation students are loathe to ask for help, too shy or too respectful. Faculty need to be educated not just about implicit bias but also about cultural differences that might hinder students from benefiting from all we offer. Also, we often talk about how much diversity enriches our majority students' learning but ignore the personal hardships many students of color experience. Numbers should be sufficient enough that students feel they have a community where they can relax, feel comfortable and understood, and can have a social life. The college has been good about supporting student organizations like the various culture clubs and the international students club, which provide such a community and leadership opportunities as well as educational experiences for the whole campus. Students flock to Africa Night and the Hmong New Year celebration to learn about the cultures and especially to enjoy the food; we simply need to continue to aspire to move them to real multicultural competence. In like manner, the college should think harder about student needs, for instance, by providing more services for international or out-of-state students who cannot go home during breaks. These students are enriching all of our students' educational experience, often at some personal cost; we need to support them.

## Faculty Diversity and Identity

Although in the 1990s I felt I needed to argue for the importance of diversity, today I feel the greater threat is to our college's Lutheran identity and sense of vocation. This threat is coming from both a more diverse faculty and from immense financial pressures, which I will discuss in the next section.

“Although worship may strengthen one’s faith, real faith to me is shown in how one acts in the world. Perhaps the most salient characteristic of our culture is its diversity. As W.E.B. DuBois prophetically foresaw, this has been the major problem of the 20th century. Religiously affiliated colleges allow us to address questions of diversity in a way that goes beyond the easy appreciation of exotic music and food to ask the harder questions: Who is my brother? How shall I treat my neighbor?”

Florence Amamoto  
“Diversity and Dialogue” (1996)

Now don’t get me wrong. Today, the faculty at Gustavus is much more diverse and our course offerings are concomitantly richer than in 1996, and I think that is a very good thing. Although in the early 1990s, search committees contained a “diversity representative” to ensure attention was paid to diversity in hiring, some concerned Board of Trustees members also raised the issue of “ethos”—which felt like code for “we need to make sure we are hiring enough Lutherans.” And at one of those early Vocation conferences, the idea of a host-guest model was introduced—which bothered me immensely. Although the argument was that one cannot be a host without having a guest so both are equally important, it still felt like non-Lutherans like me were being told we were outsiders, despite the fact that we were dedicating our lives and careers to Gustavus, whole-heartedly identified with its values, and were being asked to speak and recruit for it. Perhaps I was more sensitive to this because I appreciated Gustavus’ sense of community and inclusiveness after having moved to Gustavus from a Catholic college, where, despite its famous Benedictine hospitality, I knew I would always be an outsider. Fortunately, these ideas did not gain much traction at Gustavus. Gustavus has long had a tradition of inclusion, an attitude re-enforced by its most important president Edgar Carlson. When Christ Chapel was built in the 1960s, he instructed its first chaplain Richard Elvee, that it was to be modeled after the Swedish folk church, that is, it was to be the chapel of the community

rather than narrowly sectarian. The idea of “fit” in hiring may still come up but it is in relation to our being a small liberal arts college in rural Minnesota. Today I think the bigger issue is not the number of non-Lutheran faculty, but the large (and increasing) number of faculty with little knowledge about Gustavus’ Swedish Lutheran heritage.

At the time I wrote my earlier article for *Intersections*, there were many opportunities to intersect with Gustavus’ church-relatedness. Gustavus boasted a robust chapel program under the leadership of its by then locally legendary chaplain Richard Elvee, a charismatic and thought-provoking campus leader. The newly added First-term Seminars for all beginning students were required to involve consideration of questions of values; eventually, we added a director of community service programs. Sparked by initiatives like the start of these Vocation of Lutheran Colleges conferences and the Rhodes Consultation of Church-related Colleges and supported by the administration throughout the 1990s, interested faculty from across the campus regularly organized talks, panels, discussions, and retreats on Gustavus’ Swedish Lutheran heritage, questions of the vocation of church-related colleges, and the meaning of liberal arts education, which were well attended. These efforts were given a boost when in the late 1990s, the Lilly Foundation asked for proposals from church-related colleges to support the theological exploration of vocation at those colleges. Gustavus was among the first group of colleges to receive a Lilly grant and (unusual at the time) used the grant to found a Center for Vocational Reflection. Drawing on Luther’s broad definition of vocation, which includes all aspects of one’s life and on Gustavus’

“Support for the college’s church-related identity is fragile.”

inclusive sense of community and tradition of service, the Center supported a wide range of programs for students, faculty, and staff as it sought to foster an atmosphere where *everyone* would be encouraged to ask the “big questions” about their life purpose—and the college’s.

As I noted in 1996, support for the college’s church-related identity, however, is fragile, and time has only underlined that fact. The chaplain’s office has undergone

several major turnovers since Elvee's retirement, the most recent involving both chaplains being replaced at the same time, thus disrupting any kind of continuity in the chaplain's office. The new chaplains have worked hard to repair the breaches produced by the manner of their hiring and other administrative actions, but this remains a work in progress. Although the college continues its commitment to having daily chapel, with an increasingly diverse student body and faculty, it is not surprising that attendance has shrunk. The Center for Vocational Reflection has disappeared, as have many of the programs it supported. Tellingly, the only regularly scheduled retreats are now writing retreats to help faculty work on articles and books. A session on Gustavus' heritage is still included in first-year faculty orientation offerings; however, attendance at this session is voluntary. There has been an intentional effort to recruit new faculty to attend the annual ELCA Vocations of a Lutheran College conference, but again attendance is voluntary and—what may be the biggest problem—in competition with the numerous pressures faced by faculty.

Those pressures are many and intense. At least at Gustavus, the last 20 years have seen an increasing emphasis on and expectations of publication for tenure and promotion. There has been a roughly 80 percent turnover in the faculty and the new generation of faculty is more likely to live in the Twin Cities (and thus have an hour-plus commute) and to have small children. They are likely to demand more work-life balance (not a bad thing) and thus less likely to attend what they see as "extra" activities without the promise of some compensation. This is especially true because of the increasing busyness of the faculty due to a shrinking faculty size and continued commitment to shared governance. All of this has led to a decreased sense of community and perhaps identity with the college. Small wonder the newer faculty members have not seen learning about the college's history and heritage a priority.

To help remedy this lack of knowledge, our Distinguished Endowed Chair in Lutheran Studies, Marcia Bunge, recruited a stable of Gustavus faculty to write short articles for a soon to be published booklet to introduce new faculty, administrators, staff, and students to our Swedish Lutheran heritage and the way it is manifest at Gustavus today. Faculty orientation is important in part because it helps faculty understand how the mission of the college—its

"We are at a critical juncture in our history. Financial pressures are acute and the pressure toward secularization tremendous and subtle, fueled as it is by valid concerns for excellence and marketability. But if my students...are any indication, what they value most about their education is that these schools are genuinely concerned with the growth of the whole person and actually nurture the intellect, the emotions, and the spirit. The faculty are academically challenging but personally accessible and supportive. I believe that the kind of education of the whole person offered by church-affiliated colleges and universities has an important part to play in our world—and that it is marketable."

Florence Amamoto  
"Diversity and Dialogue" (1996)

emphasis on a combination of academic excellence, values exploration, service, and community—grows out of its Lutheran heritage as much as its liberal arts orientation. It also counteracts stereotypes they might have about church-related colleges and affirms Gustavus' inclusiveness, reassuring them that they indeed are a valued and integral part of the institution no matter their background. I would hope that it would also encourage them to reflect on bigger issues of meaning and purpose both for themselves and with their students.

On a brighter note, not only is our faculty more diverse now than it was 20 years ago, but the last five years in particular have seen an increased interest in diverse religions and spiritual practices. Gustavus has long had a Buddhism specialist, but last year the Religion Department received one of the few tenure track lines to add an Islamist. More classes are adding meditation and mindfulness practices in response to increased interest on the part of both faculty and students. As noted earlier Gustavus now has an interfaith space on campus and supports a weekly meditation session led by a Buddhist monk, and a more contemporary student-led worship service has been added to the daily chapel

weekly schedule. One of our current chaplains lived in South Africa for a number of years and brings an interest in global and diversity issues, especially in relation to economic and social justice considerations, as well as an interest in teaching, continuing the crossover between the chaplain's office and the academic program. Now, a few years after the demise of the Center for Vocational Reflection, the other chaplain has been given the task of beginning to investigate devising a program to integrate more vocational reflection into the advising program.

All these initiatives are to the good—but more needs to be done. I am concerned with the decrease in opportunities for faculty to learn about our campus inclusion and practice of Lutheranism and to discuss our vocation as a church-related college. In an increasingly competitive market, inspiring and inspiring our faculty and being able to articulate our mission and its distinctiveness are only becoming more important.

## Money and Mission

Like most colleges in America, Gustavus is dealing with financial issues. In the last five years or so, faculty retirements have accelerated, encouraged by early retirement programs and buyout packages to help fill financial shortfalls. Many of these positions have not been filled or have been filled with temporary part-timers. As noted earlier, with increased publication expectations and tasks like faculty governance and advising parceled out among fewer and fewer tenured and tenure-track faculty, it is not surprising that church-college retreats and other events that allow us to reflect on the value of church-related higher education can easily look like unnecessary extras to administrators and faculty alike. This is especially true when continued financial exigencies lead not just to reductions in the number of faculty but also threats to majors, programs, and departments.

These financial problems are real and not likely to go away soon. In such a cost-cutting environment, it is easy to look first at numbers: which departments have small numbers of majors? Which departments give better (or worse) “bang

for the buck”? How can we best utilize our resources? These are reasonable questions. I would like to argue, however, that this re-evaluation needs to be done with vision as well as statistics. We will never be able to compete with the large research universities or even the much better endowed liberal arts colleges in many areas. If we cut the programs, both academic and co-curricular, that make us distinctive—programs that emphasize service, community, values, and academic excellence that come out of our Lutheran heritage—we will be losing some of the reasons students decide to attend church-related colleges like ours. At the same time, although the millennial generation is large, the number of students in our tradition demographic is shrinking. ELCA colleges need to think about how to best attract and best serve this new, more multicultural generation.

I still believe that church-related colleges and particularly ELCA colleges and universities have a real value in the twenty-first century. The problems I identified in my article 20 years ago have only intensified—the growing gap between haves and have nots has become a chasm; the effects of global warming are becoming more serious; tensions in race relations echo the 1960s; and our political system is polarized and paralyzed. Leaders with moral compasses as well as a wide-ranging understanding of society and the world are needed more than ever. My experience of today's students is that they are much more comfortable with diversity than preceding generations, but they are also searching for that moral compass; they want to make the world a better place. There is no better place for nurturing such students, for producing such leaders, than our Lutheran colleges and universities.

## Endnote

1. “Diversity and Dialogue” (see below) was published in the first edition of *Intersections*. The sidebar quotations are taken from that original essay.

## Work Cited

Amamoto, Florence. “Diversity and Dialogue.” *Intersections* 1 (Summer 1996): 20-22.