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Kristen Glass Perez

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Moving Forward by Looking Back: Lutheran Vocation as Foundation for Interfaith Ministry

The majority of my professional career has been spent alongside young adults within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) in its various expressions, networks, and related institutions. The beginning of the cohort that I started working with is now at the end stages of the demographic. To say that I have been given much by this generation would be an understatement. My own “Generation X” sensibilities have been opened up, expanded, and embraced by this group of people who, through their generosity, have shown me what it means to be an accompanist rather than a composer and a conversation partner rather than a soliloquist. It should be no surprise, then, that most of what I have learned about interfaith understanding I have learned from accompanying college students as their pastor.

In the 2012-13 academic year, I began my call as co-chaplain at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. “Interfaith Understanding” was assigned to me as a part of my chaplaincy profile, and I looked forward to easing my way into learning more about this topic. It had been my plan to first research all that I could about the different religious traditions of students on our campus and then form a student interfaith council. I was going to think about it first, and then work on the people part. As often happens, it didn’t work out that way.

Learning from Students

The first week of classes (August 2012) was the week of the mass shooting at the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin. Before I could make any sort of plan to respond to this tragedy, I received what was maybe my first ever “invitation

to edit” a shared Google Document. Student leaders from various groups on campus immediately planned that we would hold a vigil service as a response to this shooting and, to my surprise, they knew what my role would be. As described in one of the case studies within *Engaging Others, Knowing Ourselves: A Lutheran Calling in a Multi-Religious World*, my colleague Rev. Richard Priggie had well prepared our students for planning and experiencing interfaith “worship” together. In clergy terminology, my role would be to “preside,” not preach, at the vigil.

Having never done this type of vigil before, I was nervous, but of course I said yes. Admittedly, the misguided question I wondered about was: “Do we have any Sikh Students on campus and how will I figure that out?” Without question, we would hold the vigil, no matter what, as we grieved as a



Rev. Kristen Glass Perez is Chaplain and Director of Vocational Exploration at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois. Previously, she served as the inaugural Director for Young Adult Ministry for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Most recently, she wrote the forward for the book *Major in Happiness; Debunking the College Major Fallacies* (2016, Business Experts Press).

community about this tragic hate crime. Yet I still worried about identifying Sikh students and/or making them feel uncomfortable. As it turns out, I need not have worried. Indeed, we did have Sikh students on our campus and student vigil leaders were swift and adept at inviting both secular and religious Sikh students who were willing to stand and share their stories at the vigil. Some, like me, were experiencing their first week on campus. In a very real way, it was my first “on the ground” experience with twenty-first century grassroots organizing and networking among college students. What then was my role as a campus chaplain to be?

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As Lutheran Christians well know, we cannot merely think our way into relationship, and I quickly learned that interfaith understanding was not just a topic. The Incarnation brings us into a full, robust and embodied relationship with all of creation. We also know, however, that we cannot be in relationship without doing some measure of careful thinking about who we are and how we are called into relationship with others. I didn’t have to worry about what my role would be at the vigil. The students mentored me into my role, which was to show up and “do life” alongside those in the community, whoever they might be. I had to think about what it would mean to “preside” in this community as it was, not as it used to be or might be in the future. From that moment on, interfaith understanding has been a journey of co-mentoring for me and for our campus. It would be an undue burden to place on our students to expect that they should teach us everything about the traditions from which they come. It also would be unjust not to dig deep into our own roots as Lutheran colleges and provide time, space, programs, and academic rigor through which to engage in these questions of identity.

Both Interfaith and Lutheran

Engaging Others, Knowing Ourselves brings deeply-rooted Lutheran theology and pedagogy to bear on its many different case studies and voices. The book offers a combination of practical tips, theological reflections, and historical analyses about interfaith understanding. In this way, it provides a helpful resource for multiple audiences. In a campus setting, it is appropriate for a faculty book discussion group, classroom text, or as a resource for work with students in co-curricular settings. For congregations, this book will provide an accessible entry point for conversations about interfaith understanding. I would even go so far as to suggest its appropriateness for use with confirmands as a helpful way to think about what it means to be Lutheran in today’s diverse world.

The book speaks with a clear and prophetic voice through the section entitled “Millennial Voices.” Rebecca Cardone, a California Lutheran graduate, describes the process of developing an interfaith student organization on campus. She writes: “We decidedly were not a club at all, to avoid drawing a distinction between members and others, or between students and stakeholders. The Interfaith Allies pointedly partnered with existing organizations and infiltrated them with intentionally interfaith angles from the ‘bottom up’” (166). As I read this section, I couldn’t help but imagine what it would look like if all parts of the ELCA leaned deeply into this beautiful description of what it means to be in community with our neighbors. What would a church without a distinction between “members” and “non-members” look like? A somewhat blurry vision, indeed.

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To help the church see more clearly, we might come to embrace interfaith understanding as a mode of praxis of the twenty-first century Lutheran college. ELCA colleges and universities are uniquely called and positioned to

help the church live into its relationship with a multi-faith world. Interfaith understanding is perhaps one of the greatest gifts that Lutheran higher education offers not only to our students, but to the church at large. It expands our mission to educate students for lives of leadership and service. It also helps articulate what a lived relationship looks like with our neighbors, both religious and non-religious. *Engaging Others, Knowing Ourselves* invites the reader into a framework of lived theology. I am convinced there is no other way to engage an interfaith world.

Interfaith Youth Core (IFC), the leading interfaith organization working nationally with college campuses, has identified nine leadership practices of a “vanguard interfaith campus.” They are: identity and mission,

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campus-wide strategy, public identity, respect and accommodations for religious identity, academic priority, staff and faculty competence and capacity, student leadership, campus-community partnerships, and assessment cycle (Patel, Baxter, and Silverman). There could be some value in connecting each of these leadership practices to a Lutheran theological understanding. In the same way that ELCA colleges and universities worked as a cohort group to develop and assess vocational exploration programs in the early and mid-2000s (see Owen), there would be great benefit in developing a common language within the ELCA context for how interfaith understanding is both an expression of vocation and a disposition that strengthens the church as a whole.

Lutheran colleges and universities might also draw on networks for vocational exploration such as the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE) as we seek to build similar networks around interfaith understanding. Such networking would make connections between the many areas our colleges have in common,

including academic disciplines, chaplaincy, student life, athletics, career development, and vocational exploration programs. By doing this, we would be able to link interfaith programming to key learning outcomes of each institution. An ELCA network that could articulate its interfaith position well would help all expressions of the church with its articulation of what it means to be Lutheran in a multi-religious world.

College Campus: A Global Community

Inspired by the statement from the Luther College community in Decorah, Iowa (“Luther”), Augustana College produced a statement in December, 2015 in support of the Muslim community on our campus and beyond. The statement was printed in large poster form and signed by hundreds of students, faculty, and staff; it was then presented to the two Muslim Communities in the Quad Cities. The statement reads:

As an Augustana College community that includes people of many different religious and non-religious identities, we the undersigned stand in support, solidarity and friendship with Muslims on our campus, in the Quad Cities, in the United States and in the world. We reject calls for discrimination, separation, hateful speech and violence based on religious belief. As articulated in The Five Faith Commitments of Augustana College, “Augustana commits to making our campus and the wider world a more livable place for all persons by loving and serving the neighbor and by acting against injustice and intolerance.” We are thus compelled to be a part of an interfaith movement because of our unique heritage, identity, and core values as a college rooted in the Lutheran expression of the Christian faith.

At Augustana and many other ELCA campuses, interfaith engagement takes place both through the academic curriculum and through robust student organizations such as Campus Ministries, Interfaith Understanding, Hillel, Muslim Student Association (MSA). This rich intersection between the curricular and co-curricular was reflected in a recent Symposium that included sessions on social justice from the perspectives of various religious traditions. Examples

of student-led sessions included “Tikkun Olam-A Jewish Take on Social Justice,” and “Interfaith Dialogue: Muslim Faith Stories.” The program also featured a keynote presentation by Bassam Tariq, a TED fellow and director of the acclaimed film, *These Birds Walk*.

These contributions from a religiously diverse campus and global community have enriched the experiences for students, faculty, and staff. They have also given hope to our community that we might live together as people who are friends always, not only during a time of tragedy. In a similar way, *Engaging Others, Knowing Ourselves* suggests that interfaith literacy and understanding are not only attainable but are also critical skills and dispositions for the whole church. In this book, I see a glimpse of what it would look like if the ELCA were known for its ability to prepare all people to live, work, serve, and play as friends and neighbors in a diverse and changing world.

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