

intersections

Fall 2008



in this issue

Lutheran Conversations

Purpose Statement

| This publication is by and largely for the academic communities of the twenty-eight colleges and universities of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It is published by the Vocation and Education unit of the ELCA. The publication has its home at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois, which has generously offered leadership and physical and financial support as an institutional sponsor for the publication.

The ELCA has frequently sponsored conferences for faculty and administrators that have addressed the church-college/university partnership. The ELCA has sponsored an annual Vocation of the Lutheran College Conference. The primary purpose of *Intersections* is to enhance and continue such dialogue. It will do so by:

- Lifting up the vocation of Lutheran colleges and universities
- Encouraging thoughtful dialogue about the partnership of colleges and universities with the church
- Offering a forum for concerns and interests of faculty at the intersection of faith, learning, and teaching
- Raising for debate issues about institutional missions, goals, objectives, and learning priorities
- Encouraging critical and productive discussion on our campuses of issues focal to the life of the church
- Serving as a bulletin board for communications among institutions and faculties
- Publishing papers presented at conferences sponsored by the ELCA and its institutions
- Raising the level of awareness among faculty about the Lutheran heritage and connectedness of their institutions, realizing a sense of being part of a larger family with common interests and concerns.

From the Publisher

| Through the years, I have donned many roles and titles: son, husband, student, employee, father, pastor, and others. My new role and title as Director for Colleges and Universities for the churchwide organization of the ELCA brings with it a new role and title I never expected to carry: publisher. Nonetheless, I am delighted that the Vocation and Education unit sponsors and publishes this journal of conversation about the “intersection” of faith, learning and teaching in Lutheran higher education. With this issue of *Intersections*, I am pleased to assume the duties of publisher and to continue Vocation and Education’s sponsorship of the journal.

Let me introduce myself. I became Director for Colleges and Universities as of August 1, 2008, although I have been with the churchwide organization since December 2000. I will continue serving as Associate Executive Director of the Vocation and Education unit, with responsibility for leading the unit’s working group for Educational Partnerships and Institutions. This group is a team of fifteen persons who staff churchwide ministries in theological education and seminaries, lifelong learning/continuing education, schools (primary and secondary) and early childhood education, “first call” theological education, *Lutheran Partners*, theology and daily life ministry, the Book of Faith Initiative, and of course, colleges and universities, which is the portfolio I directly carry along with my colleague, Marilyn Olson. I serve in these capacities under Call as a pastor of this church. My academic field is American Church History. Before coming to the churchwide offices, I served for ten years at Auburn Theological Seminary, as Associate Director of its Center for the Study of Theological Education.

It is with thanks for the good work of Dr. Arne Selby that I begin my relationship to *Intersections*. This journal prospered during Arne’s tenure as Director for Colleges and Universities. He developed *Intersections* into the important voice it has become for Lutheran higher education.

This issue looks at a theme dear to Arne: the aims and purposes of Lutheran higher education. The Rev. Mark Hanson, presiding bishop of the ELCA, offers reflections on the core mission of higher education related to the ELCA. Two pieces included in this issue are from Wartburg College’s fall 2008 campus conversation about the college’s mission as a college that takes faith seriously. First, my essay attempts to discuss the implications for being a church-related college of several key shifts in the relationship between religion and culture in America in recent decades. This essay was first presented as a lecture at Wartburg in September 2008. Later that fall, the college convened a dialogue between Dr. Robert Benne of Roanoke College and Dr. Thomas Christenson of Capital University about what it means to be a college of the church (see p. 12). A sermon by Luke Lambert III of Wartburg College, preached in the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, in 2006 on Jesus’ desire to “save our minds,” rounds out our conversation in this issue of *Intersections*.

MARK WILHELM | Director for Colleges and Universities

intersections

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From the Editor

Lutheran conversations—that’s the theme for this issue. The most obvious connection to the contents is centered on the enlightening conversation between Robert Benne and Tom Christenson that is included in this issue. This exchange, and the preceding comments of Mark Wilhelm, are part of a larger Lutheran conversation that is happening at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa this year as they again ask themselves the question “what does it mean to be a ‘college of the church’?” This question is particularly important as they search for new leadership, but it is important to all of us as we go about our work as Lutheran colleges. What does that mean in real life? Benne and Christenson add their voices to the conversation. Those who might have expected sparks to fly between these two strong voices might well be surprised at the large area of commonality which they share. These commonalities are surely part of what defines a Lutheran college or university, as does the fact that we have strong opinions about such issues.

Mark Wilhelm also spoke at Wartburg College. He aids our conversation by placing what we are about in a broader historical and social context. Again, this is (or should be) a characteristic of good Lutheran conversation. Lutherans believe that we are called into conversation with the world, not simply to some otherworldly experience. Wilhelm points out the tension that exists between the rampant individualism of today’s society and the fact that we live in communities, not the least of which is the common life formed by our colleges and universities. He also raises the question of how our colleges will move beyond the sometimes insular places they were in the past into a world

of religious options. For some this world may be a fearful place. As Lake Lambert reminds us in his sermon *Saving Minds*, Lutherans know that this need not be the case. We can be confident of this world and our place in it.

A great place to engage in these ongoing Lutheran conversations is at the annual Lutheran Academy of Scholars seminar that is held at Harvard University in the summer. This is unique time to engage deeply in conversations about what it means to be Lutheran in this world, along side others who are asking the same questions. I urge you to take a look at the notice of this year’s gathering on p 23, and to consider your own participation. This seminar is supported by your college and by the ELCA. There is a stipend and the promise of a fruitful and engaging time.

It should be also noted that Mark Wilhelm has taken over the role of Associate Executive Director for Educational Partnerships and Institutions and Director for Colleges and Universities Vocation and Education, ELCA. Part of this position is to support such things as the Lutheran Academy of Scholars, and also to act as publisher of this journal. You can read his “inaugural” comments on page two of this issue. Mark Wilhelm’s “boss,” bishop Mark Hanson, also contributes his thoughts on the nature of Lutheran colleges in a short piece reprinted from *THE LUTHERAN*.

ROBERT D. HAAK | The Augustana Center for Vocational Reflection, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois

LUTHERAN ACADEMY OF SCHOLARS

Harvard University, Cambridge • July 12–25, 2009

VOCATION OF A LUTHERAN COLLEGE CONFERENCE

Augsburg College, Minneapolis • July 30–August 1, 2009

Colleges Lead Way: Curiosity, Faith, Discernment, Mission are Key

When Martin Luther wrote the Small Catechism, he taught parents to teach their children to ask questions. After quoting the content of our faith—the creed, the commandments and the Lord’s Prayer—he taught us to ask, “What does this mean?” As a result, Lutherans believe that faith seeks understanding and that reason—even when infected by sin—does not stand in opposition to it.

When I visit the colleges and universities of the ELCA, students ask questions. They engage my mind and renew my spirit. Along with inspired administrators and faculty, they lead the way as the colleges of this church reach out in mission for the sake of the world. The colleges of this church:

Nurture unquenchable curiosity: In this culture, lives are too busy and possessions too plentiful. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if Lutherans were known for our unquenchable curiosity? Luther’s unquenchable curiosity about the meaning of faith for our lives permeated his vocation and mission.

This curiosity has become a critical part of the vocation of our colleges: to plant deep within students a lifelong unquenchable curiosity about God and the centrality of faith, curiosity about themselves, about the vastness of the cosmos and the intricacies of DNA; curiosity about the richness of history, the beauty of the arts, and the complexities of science, math and economics. These colleges believe religion has a contribution to make as we engage life’s large questions. May our colleges encourage such curiosity throughout the denomination.

Nourish faith formation and exploration: Even in a time of fear, when we are distrustful of others and possessive of what we have, faith frees us to be engaged in the world. The colleges seek to nourish faith through campus ministry. In religion classes, faith is stretched and challenged as students explore the Bible and are exposed to the religious beliefs and practices of others. As communities of faith formation and exploration, our colleges

are places where students not only explore and share their faith but also hear the faith stories of others. May they be communities of faith formation, exploration and lively conversations.

Model moral deliberation: Many are weary of this society’s contentious and polarized debates. Colleges can be beacons of hope as students return from experiences abroad or service projects in the U.S. As they do, they remind us that we must live globally, think critically, act locally, work collaboratively and live faithfully.

Colleges can be centers that teach us the art of public moral deliberation: creating safe spaces for people to gather; establishing rules for respectful engagement; and seeking solutions for difficult questions. In such contexts, colleges provide both the expertise of resource people and the capacity to bring people together to engage in moral deliberation. May our colleges lead us to become such communities of discernment for the sake of the world.

Prepare students for engagement in the world: One of the gifts Lutherans bring to the church, to higher education and to the world is the Lutheran understanding of vocation. ELCA colleges provide opportunities for students to explore the many contexts and relationships into which God calls us to be engaged for the sake of the world. Students report deep appreciation for the encouragement by our colleges to discern their gifts and passions. May our colleges be communities of preparation for our varied callings in families and neighborhoods, in congregations, as citizens of nations and the world, and as stewards of the environment.

The colleges and universities of this church have a vocation to call us to stand outside ourselves so we might be engaged together, reaching out in mission for the sake of the world. I am grateful to God for these schools and their unquenchable curiosity, faith, moral discernment and engagement in mission.

MARK WILHELM

Even Lutheranism Can Be Cool Now: Changes in Religion and American Culture

How many among you applied to four or more colleges?

Applying to multiple colleges became a standard practice by the 1990s. When I was a teenager in the late 60s, most college applicants applied to one or two colleges (as did I) because prospective students did not shop for a college or—to put it more positively—did not have a large universe of colleges open to them. Prospective students for the most part applied to “their” colleges, that is, the school or schools their community expected them to attend.

Although seemingly unrelated to a shift in the role of religion in American culture, this change in college application practices is in fact an example of one of the chief markers of the changing role of religion in the United States: the proliferation of religious options and an openness to consider those options.

When Wartburg College was organized, when Harvard College was organized, when nearly all colleges in the United States were organized, most were either formally or informally organized to benefit a particular religious group. (In the case of Wartburg: German Lutherans.) Even most publically sponsored institutions of higher education were organized or at least functioned to benefit middle class Protestants of what came to be called the Protestant establishment. At one time much of so-called secular higher education in the United States served as an extension of public primary and secondary schools, as part of the *de facto* parochial school system for Protestants.

Now it is important to note that nearly all colleges were always technically open to all people, but it is also clear that schools served certain religiously defined constituencies. It was the rare

person who was brave enough to attempt to cross the barrier and attend a college outside of his or her tradition. A person did not apply to many schools. You went where you belonged, as I did in 1969. Doing so was part of the practice of religion and the way religion and education inter-related. Colleges functioned in culturally accepted, religiously defined patterns. They served their own and people kept to their own. Once upon a time in America, religion functioned in a closed and parochial way. And higher education, which had its origins in American religious practices, operated in a closed, parochial way.

All of this has changed in the last few decades, with religion and religious institutions functioning in a much more open and ecumenical way, and the change therefore came to higher education as well. The pace of this change has picked-up radically during your lifetime.

A number of factors have converged in recent decades to proliferate religious options and generate an openness among people—no matter what their background—to consider those options, including the option of considering a college not from your religious background. The fact that most of you applied to many schools instead of restricting yourself to a school that was the school for your religious group or heritage—and the fact that the religious background of a school (including Wartburg’s) may in-and-of-itself have played little or no role in your decision to apply to those schools—is a marker of a huge and significant shift in religion in American culture.

But I’m getting ahead of myself.

MARK WILHELM is the new *Publisher of Intersections and the Associate Executive Director for Educational Partnerships and Institutions and Director for Colleges and Universities Vocation and Education, ELCA*. This talk was presented at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa on September 16, 2008.

I do first want to thank you for welcoming me to visit Wartburg and share some reflections about recent changes in religion and American culture. It's one of my favorite topics: I love to think about this theme. (Yes, I'm certifiably weird; I can put you in touch with both of my sons who will verify its truth!) But seriously, this is important stuff because religion plays an important role in American society. If you are going to be an educated person who understands and contributes to American society, you need to know about and understand the public role of religion in American culture, both for those of you who practice and those who do not practice religion personally. Religion remains a culturally significant force in America because religion provides the conscience for America and at its best provides the platform and opportunities for public debate and moral deliberation.

So it's great to spend a bit of the morning with you, thinking about changes in this culturally significant reality. Our time together is sponsored by the Faith Task Force, and my understanding is that you are being asked to assess the implications of my talk for the role of religion at Wartburg. That is, you are to try to derive from my discussion of changes in religion and American culture the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that the points I'm about to make imply for Wartburg. Let me apologize in advance for probably not making your job an easy one because you will have to do the analysis on your own—no clues will be offered.

But to help you out a little, let me tell you that I will focus on two themes in my presentation this morning. First, I will talk about two major changes in the role of religion in American culture. Then, I will mention a few implications of these two points for the ongoing public role played by religion in the United States.

Two Major Changes

Here are the two major changes I want to discuss. The first is a change in the rhetoric about religion, that is, a change in how we talk in a culturally significant way about religion. American Christians have always honored the individual, but our rhetoric—the way we talk about religion—has always emphasized the communal and institutional nature of religion. We talk about congregations and their roles in communities. But in recent decades Americans have increasingly adopted a rhetoric of individualism in talking about religion, in which organized and institutional religion has no part. The second change I will discuss is a substantive change in the practices of religion that I started to talk about earlier, namely, the proliferation of religious options and an openness by Americans to consider those options. But first, the rhetoric.

In recent decades, we have seen a turn toward favoring the individual over the collective in American culture. Labor unions have fallen into disfavor and government is described as a problem not a solution. A few years ago, the Bush administration wrongly believed that a commitment to individualism was currently so dominant that it could successfully implement a plan to privatize Social Security, that quintessential symbol and practice of collective action for the common good. The plan to privatize Social Security failed and in the wake of hurricane Katrina, the Enron debacle, and now the meltdown of the retail mortgage industry and our financial markets, the nation shows signs of moving toward an affirmation of the importance of collective action be it through a restored FEMA or a renewal of banking and financial industry regulation.

“The first is a change in the rhetoric about religion.”

This turn toward the individual is not unusual in America. We tend to go through cycles of emphasizing the individual instead of the collective in American life. And as just mentioned, we now seem to be experiencing a return to the collective (such as a renewed emphasis on banking regulation) because of the excesses created by an over-emphasis on “everyone for themselves.” But the tide seems to have turned more permanently to the individual in religious rhetoric. Individualism has grown into a dominant rhetoric in recent decades, and to many it feels as if we have largely lost the capacity to describe religion as a communal, public practice. The emblematic slogan “spiritual but not religious” exemplifies this change in popular rhetoric about religion. To adopt this expression is to adopt the turn from the collective to the individual in religious rhetoric. Spirituality labels faith that is individual, not collective, freed from religion with its communal or group or institutional commitments. By rhetorically emphasizing the individual in religion, we downplay the importance of the communal aspect of religion, even if we still belong to a congregation or practice other communal aspect of religion. Our rhetoric says that all of that is extra and not of central importance. This is the dangerous outcome of a rhetorical privileging of the individual in religion. The rhetoric can keep us from finding the right interplay between our religious life as both individual and communal.

The most famous example of the turn toward religious individualism expressed as “being spiritual but not religious” comes

from a time before this rhetoric became widespread. In the course of a large research project in the 1970s led by the sociologist Robert Bellah, a woman was interviewed who described her religious practice as extremely individualistic. Bellah wrote:

One person we interviewed has actually named her religion (she calls it her faith) after herself....Sheila Larson is a young nurse who has received a good deal of therapy and who describes her faith as "Sheilaism." "I believe in god. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. (But) My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." (221)

The publication of Sheila's story marked the shift a generation ago toward individualism in American religious rhetoric that has now become dominant.

It is important to note that American religion has always honored the individual. Every person—the importance of the individual—has always mattered in the United States, including in our religious practices. It is also true that, from the beginning of our nation, religious leaders have worried that the rights of the individual would win out over the common good. As early as the colonial period, Jonathan Edwards (he was a prominent eighteenth-century minister; you may know about him from reading his "Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God" in a high school American literature class) complained that the new Americans in his settlement in Massachusetts showed no respect for their communal religious commitments. He couldn't get his young adults to conform to the rules of their New England town and congregation.

But even though individualism and personal freedom have always played a central role in American culture and religion and still do, our public and common rhetoric about religion—the words we use—have always equally emphasized the collective and communal aspects of religion and religious practice. Americans have never privileged individualism with our language, our rhetoric until recently. The emphasis on and debate about individualism is nothing new in American religion, but the dominance of rhetoric about individualism *is* new.

Individualism matters in religion as well as other aspects of life, but our individualism is for the sake of the group, the community. It is through groups and the common good that our individual good is sustained and our individual freedom finds meaning and fulfillment.

Nonetheless, at this point in our history, the way we talk about religion in the United States—our religious rhetoric—is more strongly shaped by individualism than in previous times. Our public rhetoric about the proper role of religion in

American culture is skewed toward individualism, and this compromises our capacity to function at our best as a society. More about that later.

Let's move to the second of the major changes: proliferation of options in religion and an openness to consider these options.

I will mention four of the many factors that have conspired to create this change: 1) democratization of authority; 2) the simultaneous ending and beginning of ethnicity; 3) the success of ecumenism; and 4) the information revolution.

Democratization of authority

By "democratization of authority," I mean that we have entered a time when typically "everyone has a say" in organizations, including religious organizations.

Here's an example. In the 1990s, I interviewed political, business, and community leaders in Atlanta to learn their opinions about the role of religious leaders in public life. My interviewees agreed that religious leaders were largely absent from public life, to the detriment of Atlanta and that region of the country.

"Second of the major changes: Proliferation of options."

Almost to a person, however, they also agreed that they could easily excuse religious leaders from sharing the task of public, community leadership. Why? Their answer was the democratization of authority. These business executives, university presidents, and politicians believed that most congregations no longer gave their pastors the authority to lead. Authority was now equally shared by all members, which required pastors to spend all their time sustaining consensus and seeking permissions, leaving no time for work outside the congregation in public matters.

One implication of the democratization of authority is that we all believe we can explore and decide things for ourselves without reference to another authority, without checking in with anyone to find out if our decisions complement or complicate the collective life of our community. For better or worse, the change in our exercise of authority means more people can claim the authority to explore more options, including more options in the practice of religion. The democratization of authority is the foundation upon which rests the proliferation of options in religion we have experienced and a willingness among Americans to consider those options.

The end and beginning of ethnicity

In recent decades, we have experienced huge demographic shifts that reflect both the ending and beginning of ethnicity in America.

Changed realities in the communities related to Wartburg College are a good example of what I mean by the “ending of ethnicity.” Until recent decades, German ethnicity and religion, especially for German Lutherans, still defined people in this part of the country. They were Germans, not mainstream Americans, and places like Wartburg College were created as ethnic institutions, separated from the American mainstream. The same was true for other Lutheran communities of German American heritage and Americans who had emigrated from Scandinavian countries.

But this is no more. Americans of German and Scandinavian background have fully entered American life. Among the chief evidences:

- The nation has become the neighborhood. German and Scandinavian Americans once “stuck to their own,” living in separate communities and building their own institutions. But persons of German and Scandinavian background now feel at home living anywhere in the nation and are at home in all American institutions.
- These persons have a low birthrate like mainstream America. It was once commonplace for Lutheran households to be composed of four or more children. Now Lutheran households have the typical, American mainstream two or fewer children.
- Because the nation is our neighborhood, the Lutheran community has joined mainstream America in a process of regionalizing our population, and the parallel de-populating of certain areas.

All of these factors have an impact on our lives, and especially our institutions. (For example, with the Lutheran birthrate collapsing, is it surprising that there are fewer children in Lutheran Sunday schools or fewer Lutheran young persons enrolled at Lutheran colleges?) The significance of these factors for this presentation, however, is that they are marks of the “end of ethnicity” for the German (and Scandinavian) American communities. These communities, of which Wartburg is a part, are now fully engaged with mainstream American culture and with that, they have engaged many more options in life, including educational options (exemplified by Lutheran kids applying to many colleges, not just “their own”).

The flip side of this is the rise of a new ethnicity in America, brought about by a new wave of immigration. Since 1965, when the United States re-opened its doors to new immigrants from the entire globe (after largely closing them in the 1920s), American has experienced a new diversity owing to large

populations from backgrounds outside of Europe. This new ethnicity creates many tensions. Most prominent are the tensions over undocumented immigrants. Nonetheless, from restaurant offerings to the experience of formerly exotic religions now just around the corner, many native born Americans are engaging and are increasingly open to considering new options. Owing to the new ethnicity, Americans are open to engaging other cultures and religions in a way inconceivable just a few decades ago.

Success of ecumenism

In early 1960s, my parents refused to allow my older brother to date Patty Wilson. Why? She was Roman Catholic. Since dating could possibly lead to a long-term relationship and marriage, their dating relationship had to be stopped before “things became serious.” It was self-evident to my parents that a “mixed marriage” of a Roman Catholic and a Lutheran would only lead to divisiveness and heart-ache, because the religious practices were incompatible.

From the perspective of the early twenty-first century, this viewpoint is hard to understand. It is hard to understand in part because of the most successful movement within Christianity during the twentieth century—ecumenism. The ecumenical movement sought to convince Christians in all the churches that more united them than divided them. And although many leaders of that movement bemoan their failure to institutionally unify the Christian community into a single church, the popular success of the ecumenical movement is undeniable. Today nearly all Christians in the United States assume that the differences among the churches are practical differences, not substantive, and that Christians do in fact, share a common religion whatever their denominational tradition. There are many implications of this change, but for our purpose I want to point out that the success of ecumenism is another factor that has opened up more options in our lives, as persons feel free to explore Christian traditions outside their own, including doing so by dating a person from another tradition, like my brother could not. We have more options today in the religious marketplace, and we are more willing to engage them, because of the ecumenical movement’s success.

The information revolution

We all know that we have moved into a culture of 24/7 communication and mass access to information. Librarians (now “information specialists”) no longer know what a library collection should purchase because the explosion of available information has shattered traditional standards. Faculty in colleges often find it hard to keep up with publications in their area of expertise because of the breadth of information being produced. The democratization of authority I discussed earlier has become

more of a reality because easy access to information by googling any topic allow everyone, including students, to learn without depending upon an expert to provide the information. At Wartburg and in the rest of higher education, colleges and universities are becoming places where faculty and students explore subjects together in our curricula, with faculty acting more as guides and coaches than dispensers of information.

As with the other themes I have presented, the information revolution holds many implications for our lives, but today my concern is to highlight that this change is another source of the expansion of options in our lives.

Implications for Our Life Together

Having said all of this, what are the implications of these two major changes—the rise of a rhetorical emphasis on individualism and the expansion of opportunity—for religion and American culture.

First, despite my comments, it would be wrong to overstate any of the changes. As an example of this point, let me share a quote from a book I read not long ago that discussed the explosion of information:

Books have become so numerous, and the announcement of a new publication an event so common, that unless an author can promise something entirely new, either in the matter of his publication, or in its arrangement, he is considered as making an unreasonable demand on the public if he expect his book to be read. (Hopkins 5)

The information explosion makes people feel this way. As I said a earlier in this talk, libraries hardly know what they should catalogue and the internet has aggressively expanded our access to information. But the quote I just read is the opening line in the author's preface for Josiah Hopkins' *The Christian Instructor* published in 1825. My point is that every generation feels overwhelmed by information. Ours is truly a revolution in the availability of information and for the first time in history, the management and conveying of information is a primary vehicle for running our economy, but the basic issue is nothing new. As we reflect on these changes, we cannot overemphasize their significance. They are important factors in thinking about religion and American culture, but there is more continuity than change in the relationship of religion and culture in the United States.

Second, the rise of the rhetoric of individualism challenges but has not yet signaled the demise of religion as a public reality. Americans have always debated the best relationship between individual choice in religion and the public nature of religion. And the rise of the rhetoric of individualism has made this debate even more complex. But agreement remains in America that when

we say religion is a private matter of individual choice, we mean that religion is not governmental. It is not public in that sense. It is part of "the private sectors" of our society. Nonetheless these so-called private sectors have very public functions, and religion and religious institutions still play a very important public role in American culture. You saw this most recently when Wartburg and Lutheran-related social service agencies led the effort to address the flooding this year. Individualism matters—the freedom and glory of each person is recognized and valued in America, including in American religion. But our individualism is for the sake of the community. It is through our individual participation in the common good that our individual good is sustained, our individual freedom finds meaning and fulfillment, and our lives as religious people flourish.

The wisest relationship between individualism and community in religious practice is not found by claiming one or the other (the individual or the community) is more important. The wisest relationship is found by thinking of you and your community as being in constant dialogue, with each "side of the equation" holding each other responsible for good work. (Scholars call this reality "dialectic.") The rise of a rhetoric of individualism could result in privileging individualism to the point that Americans will lose their commitment to the communal and public reality of religion. That has not yet happened. Until now, the rise of the rhetoric of individualism has provided the opportunity to justify a greater openness of options, without denying the public, communal side of religious reality. This generation needs to work to ensure that the rhetoric of religious individualism does not degenerate into the demise of religion and a public reality.

Third, engaging these changes is not easy. As options expand through encountering new and different religions, new and different cultures, the conventional and "easy" answers to religion that were created when Lutherans were part of a homogenous and closed ethnic community will not work any more. For example, it was always easy to oppose the ordination of women as pastors when our religious communities were closed and we only talked to ourselves. But when a community is opened to a new context in which women do serve as clergy, and the opposition now is to Pastor Laura, not to women in the ministry in general, the opposition is much more difficult to sustain. The easy answers or beliefs about others, such as Christians of other traditions and persons who practice other religions, cannot be simply invoked now that our "world" is truly the world, not just our parochial communities. The changes in religion and American culture will require thought, patience and hard work.

Fourth, to help ensure that religion does not degenerate into crass individualism, creating a culture that assigns no public role

to religion, educational institutions in the United States should take steps to reinforce the public reality of religion. The rise of the rhetoric of religious individualism could lead to a retreat from the belief that religion counts for our common life. The rhetoric of individualism already makes it difficult to talk about religion having a public role, and this difficulty is further exacerbated as we focus on religion as an individual reality, losing public knowledge about religion and getting out of practice of publicly discussing religion and public life.

Higher education should, therefore, support Stephen Prothero's proposal for a core religious literacy requirement in higher education. In his book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't*. He writes, "My goal is to help citizens participate fully in social, political, and economic life in a nation and a world in which religion counts." (15)

Core literacy in religion for Prothero is a civic need, not a religious or ethical one. He is not interested in promoting religious belief and practice. Since I believe he attends a Lutheran church in the Boston area, I suspect he is not opposed to higher education helping students think about the actual practice of religion. But the central point of his book, and my recommendation to you, is that at a minimum, higher education should ensure all students have a minimum knowledge of religion because it is an important public reality. Lutheran-related higher education should insist that, despite the rhetoric of religious individualism, one cannot be an educated person unless basic knowledge of religion is part of who you are.

Fifth, in the wake of the new diversity of options in religion, it is also time to reclaim the wisdom and value in our respective religious traditions. For Wartburg, this means that it will best fulfill its educational mission if it publicly emphasizes its own religious heritage as a platform from which to host reflection upon and study of many religions. An institution convenes a conversations about religious options and diversity best by taking a position in the conversation, not by being an uninterested, independent broker. When I was a student at St. Olaf College, there were voices urging the college to abandon its stance as a Lutheran institution in favor of taking a disinterested position toward religion, in the name of serving better the growing array of religions represented by persons on campus. Instead of offering a generic chaplaincy, the college responded by claiming its religious heritage so that it could take a place in the conversation. Diversity and options are taken more seriously in higher education when a college has skin in the game. Church-related higher education will best help America live into our new age of religious options by claiming instead of setting aside their institutional positions in America's rainbow of religions.

As Wartburg does this, it will even discover that Lutheranism has become cool in this new era of American religious options and diversity. My sociologist of religion friends tell me that it is the only Christian brand to increase in name recognition in recent decades.

This started about twenty years ago with the old sitcom, *Cheers*, in which the Woody Harrelson character announcing that he and his fiancé had broken up over irreconcilable differences. He was LC-MS and she was ELCA. Lutherans around the country roared, and they were astonished that internal Lutheran rhetoric found a voice in popular culture. (By the way, this is another example of American Lutheranism entering mainstream American life.) Then there was the 2004 movie, *Raising Helen*, starring Kate Hudson and John Corbett in which a self-absorbed Manhattan fashionista, whose life changes radically when she has to take over as guardian of her sister's children and move to Queens, meets the new man in her life, and that new man is a Lutheran pastor! But the principal reason for increased brand recognition for Lutheranism over the past thirty years is the public radio program, *A Prairie Home Companion* (<<http://prariehome.publicradio.org>>). The host of that program, Garrison Keillor, has single handedly caused Americans to know about the Lutherans.

Maybe this does not mean Lutheranism is cool, but many voices in religion itself urge that the Lutheran tradition claim its heritage and take its place at the table of American religion. For example, Mark Noll, a major scholar out of the conservative evangelical community, has long called upon Lutheranism to share more publically from the wisdom of its tradition. A college place like Wartburg, with its institution firmly planted in the tradition called Lutheranism, has an important contribution to make toward the wise navigation of the current changes in religion and American culture.

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ROBERT BENNE AND THOMAS CHRISTENSON

Point / Counterpoint: What It Means to be a “College of the Church”

KLEINHANS: Good morning. Welcome to this morning’s Point / Counterpoint discussion of what it means to be a college of the church.

We are pleased to have with us for this conversation Dr. Robert Benne and Dr. Thomas Christenson, each of whom has published a book on this important theme. Dr. Benne is a graduate of Midland Lutheran College in Fremont, Nebraska, and now serves as Professor of Religion and Director of the Center for Religion and Society at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia. Dr. Christenson is a graduate of Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, and now serves as Professor of Philosophy at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio. I’ll not go into more biographical detail, since you’ve come to hear them speak and not to hear me introduce them.

The conversation will be moderated by Wartburg College Pastor Larry Trachte, who is a graduate of Wartburg College. For those who keep track of such things, five of the twenty-eight colleges and universities of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America are embodied by the three individuals sharing our stage this morning. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Robert Benne, Dr. Tom Christenson, and Pastor Larry Trachte.

TRACHTE: Dr. Benne and Dr. Christenson, when I assign a term paper to students in my class, I always ask them to choose a topic for which they have considerable passion or interest. It makes for a lot

more interesting term paper. Clearly, each of you has had a long-standing interest in our colleges of the church and Christian higher education. “Why have you cared?” is the first question I would pose to you, and why should we care about the colleges of the church?

BENNE: We just did a tour of the college and I think I can speak for both of us. We were very, very impressed with your physical plant and the many programs you have. It looks like a prosperous and flourishing college and I think you ought to be proud to be at this college. Even discounting the propaganda element with student guides, it was a great accounting of the college, so it was a good experience.

Well, why have I been interested in this topic? Let me step back for just a moment and say that almost all private education schools in America were founded by churches, and the churches were interested in several things. Colleges for their kids: they wanted their children to be able to go off and be educated. They particularly wanted those colleges to produce an educated clergy, and almost all of them did; but they also wanted those colleges to express the ethos, the way of life of the religious tradition, and they also wanted those colleges to express and pass on the intellectual claims of their particular religious tradition, which meant Bible, but it also meant theology and ethics, so that their religious tradition would be expressed and be publicly relevant, perhaps pervasively relevant, in the life of these colleges.

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I went to a college in Nebraska which had many of those characteristics. We were ninety percent Lutheran at that time. There was required chapel every day, which is not a good idea, and many other elements: an emphasis on vocation, an emphasis on service, a great deal of support for young developing Christians and those headed off to the ministry, and courses that were pretty good in terms of the Christian content, but could have been a lot better along those lines. In that era, most all the faculty had Master's degrees, if that, and so the intellectual content wasn't quite as challenging as perhaps the other dimensions of the college. But at any rate, you knew you were at a Lutheran college: it was friendly, there was the intellectual component, there was the ethos, the way of life, and many other elements that I can't go into in detail.

Well, I spent a hiatus of twenty-five years away from Christian higher education. I went to graduate school at the University of Chicago, at which I was trained that Christianity has intellectual claims that should engage secular claims of learning and that part of the Christian task was to try to engage all these secular fields of learning—psychology, sociology, and so on—and in order for Christians to be whole persons, that is, to be able to make sense of life from the Christian point of view. I learned that at graduate school.

I taught for seventeen—eighteen years at a theological seminary in Chicago, a Lutheran seminary, and then was invited to teach at Roanoke College in Virginia. Wow, what a wakeup call. It was not the kind of college that I went to in Nebraska. [I had] so much shock and indignation about it, that got me involved in thinking about Christian higher education because I pondered what in the world happened? When I got to Roanoke College, Christianity was no longer welcome at the college. Any talk of reconnecting or making a stronger connection with the Christian heritage was looked at skeptically and suspiciously. A candidate for the dean was voted out; several faculty told me he was “too Lutheran.” And the *in loco parentis* (you know what that is, where the college takes the role of the parents), that was very heavy at Midland College—how you should live, having to do with sexual ethics, but it also had to do with drinking, it had to do with service and a whole bunch of things—that had been completely relaxed, and Roanoke College got on *Playboy's* list of top party schools in the late '70s.

TRACHTE: After you came?

BENNE: No, no, no, but the bombed-out character of student life was already there. Not only was there hostility to the Christian ethos and not only was there very little Christian intellectual content left (they had done away with the religious requirements in the curriculum), but student life was subversive of almost every

value that you wanted to prize in Christian higher education. So it was quite a wakeup call and I began studying what in the world happened to all these colleges that were founded by the church. There's a huge secularization process that took place with almost all those colleges, but some have not been secularized in such a dramatic fashion. Wartburg I don't think has. Just getting a sense of this college, faith plays an important role, and ethos, and the number of students that are from the Lutheran tradition and other Christian traditions, and in a kind of intellectual component of the life here. So this is quite different from Roanoke. I want to end finally by saying Roanoke has not continued that trajectory downward. We've really done a lot of things to reconnect with Christian heritage and it has become a much better school, good enough to be able to get a Phi Beta Kappa chapter last year. So anyway, that's a long introduction about why I'm interested.

TRACHTE: Thank you Dr. Benne. Dr. Christenson, what about you?

CHRISTENSON: Well, as Dr. Kleinhans said, I'm a graduate of Concordia College up in Moorhead, Minnesota. People up there say that it's not the end of world, but you can see it from there. That was an interesting experience. I think while I was in college, it never occurred to me to ask the question, “What does it mean that this is a Lutheran college?” but I think if somebody had asked that question, we would have said, “Well, it means we don't do this and we don't do that and we don't do...” You know, there's all these kinds of things that we didn't do that distinguished us, including dancing, which I think was a terrible loss. I am still angry at my alma mater for not getting me to learn how to tango.

When I went off to graduate school and taught at some other institutions after getting my PhD, I went back to teach at Concordia and then the question came up again, “What does it mean that this a Lutheran college?” I decided fairly early on that I wasn't happy with those sort of negative answers. It isn't sufficient just to say, “Well, we don't do this and we don't do that and we don't do this other thing.” What do we do that makes us a Lutheran college? And so I started thinking about that.

About twenty years ago I moved to Capital University, which is in Columbus, Ohio. It's an urban campus in the middle of a big city, the capital of Ohio. Ohio State, of course, is the big institution across town. When I got there, the first thing I noticed is how different this place was from the Lutheran college that I had come from. A very, very different kind of place. First of all, most of the students were not Lutheran. The majority of the students, the largest body of students at Capital University, are Catholic and a fairly small percentage is Lutheran, and exactly the same thing could be said about faculty and staff, etc.

And so the question is, “What does it mean to say that that’s a Lutheran institution?” And some people there would even say, “Well, we’re sort of an historically Lutheran institution, that is, we were founded by Lutherans and we were Lutheran for a long time, but we’re not Lutheran anymore. That’s in our past, it’s in our history, but it’s not in the present tense and certainly not in the future tense.”

I started thinking about that and whether that was necessarily so, and I guess what occurred to me was that in order to think about this question about Lutheran identity, you need to make a big distinction. There are two different models, I would say, in thinking about this question. One is the model that I would call the “for us/by us” model. Most of our institutions were founded by Lutherans for Lutherans for the advancement of Lutheranism. I think that’s a model that still works for some of our colleges. It certainly is a model that works for our seminaries, but I would argue that it isn’t the model that works very well for a whole lot of these institutions that are connected to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It isn’t a model that would work for Capital University.

So then the question is, “Well, what would be a better model? How should we think about this?” I have picked up on Luther’s idea of vocation. Before Luther, people thought about vocation as basically a calling to a religious life, that is, becoming a monk or a nun, leading the “religious” life. Luther uses this term vocation to apply to the work that everybody does that serves the needs of their fellow humans, that serves the needs of the community. So he talks about the milkmaid milking cows as having a vocation. He talks about parents tending the needs of the children having that vocation. He talks about the person who cleans the streets or the mayor of the town or anybody who does anything that serves a need as doing God’s work, God’s service. He uses the word *Gottesdienst*, a good German term, which is also the term that’s used to talk about the worship service. He says, “If people realized that what they do in doing their ordinary everyday work is *Gottesdienst*, is the service of God, they would dance for joy.” So Luther came with this message, that ordinary everyday tasks done in love and in service of the needs of fellow humans is vocation. It’s a calling from God.

So how does that idea apply then to the work of education? How might that shape our thinking about what it is that colleges and universities might do? I guess I’ve come to think about Lutheran colleges in that way. We are called to serve the needs of the world through education. And so I think what ought to characterize institutions of this sort, and my own, is the persistent and pervasive asking of what are called vocational questions. What are the deep needs of the world? How can we help to meet them? That is, what gifts and limitations do we

bring to this whole process? Who is my neighbor that I ought to be serving their needs? I think in a global society that has changed, but I think those questions, if we ask them over and over again, and if the asking of them influences the way we teach and what we teach and how we think about the programs that we have on our campuses, it ends up making a difference to the identity and mission of the institution, and that’s sort of where my interest, my life story I guess, has moved me—to the point of a kind of passion for what I think Lutheran colleges and universities can be.

TRACHTE: So in a way, Dr. Christenson, you’re redefining what a college of the church has meant for you, and I guess in that context, I’d ask both of you ... Even the terminology is ambiguous. From our German Lutheran background, we talk about being “a college of the church.” But I noticed, Dr. Benne, you talk about “Christian colleges” in your book and sometimes we say “church-related.” Where does each of you come down with that? Is there a term that better appropriates what we as a college of the church or Christian Lutheran higher education are about?

BENNE: Well, I like the language of the “college of the church.” I think that’s good language. “Church-related college” is a little bit weaker, I think, and I use “Christian college” as the shorthand way of talking about institutions. I don’t believe that colleges can be pervasively Christian and fully Christian, so it’s more of a shorthand way of denominating things, but I would like to use language that indicates that there’s a living relationship, a lively relationship between the living religious heritage and the work of the college, so that that living religious heritage is publicly relevant on several levels. I agree with Tom about service, and the language of Wartburg College is very, very much service oriented. We got that on the tour and that seems to be a major motif. The problem I have is that without the larger underpinnings of the idea of vocation and without, say, the kind of expansive Christian intellectual tradition, it seems that service can soon become secularized itself, so that every major public university I know of talks about service very much like you talked about it: what are the needs of the world and how can we address them? It seems to me that if there’s not something more that is passed on ... That’s a very important thing to be passed on, but that would be kind of civic humanism. Luther endorsed civic humanism; I’m all for that. But it seems to me that there is an ethos, a way of life that has to do with worship, that has to do with the way we live together, community, but there’s also an intellectual tradition that has to be passed on and without that intellectual tradition, it seems to me vocation loses its texture and thickness. It’s important that

the Bible be taught, it's important that Lutheran theology, that heritage, be taught. It's more important that Christian theology be taught and Christian ethics, and places where there's a Lutheran distinctive about that ought to be taught. So I get a little bit nervous if it's just service talk because I see it in every other institution, and there seems to be something more that has to be transmitted in colleges of the church.

TRACHTE: The basis or the foundation of service is what you're getting at?

BENNE: Foundation of vocation and, of course, in vocation, you can talk about it secularly, but if you talk about it from a Christian point of view, there's a divine element in it, that is, what's God's call? It's not only what I want to do, what the world's need is, but God has a role for me to play—roles, plural, as husband, father, grandfather, as a worker, as a citizen, as a member of the church—and so there's a transcendent dimension involved in vocation that has to be accentuated in some fashion, it seems to me, in a college of the church.

TRACHTE: Tom, responses?

CHRISTENSON: Well, a lot of what Bob said I would agree with. I think that one of the dangers, one of the temptations, that we have as colleges is to become generic, that is, simply to say we offer the same courses that other places offer, we offer the same programs, the same activities, all that sort of thing. You can take your course here and credit it over there and move them back and forth. In the state of Ohio now that's getting to be a very big political thing, being able to transfer courses from any institution to any institution, and so as a consequence, you get tempted to do very generic things, generic professors teaching generic courses for generic degrees. I think if you go in that direction, it spells disaster for colleges like ours because the only thing that you have to offer in a marketplace like that is selling cheap. You end up trying to compete with the educational Walmarts of the world. There are such places. I mean, there are places that offer degrees and offer them cheaply and offer them in a certain minimal kind of way. I know that sometimes that's a temptation for all of us, but I think it's a temptation we have to resist because I think that if we lose our identity as an institution—and that identity is not just sort of frosting that you put on the cake, but a difference in the way we think about what we're learning, what we're teaching, how we're relating to each other as a community—then we have lost something very, very essential.

BENNE: I want to tack onto that. Another great temptation of some Lutheran colleges is to aim for the secular elite private

liberal arts college, and to lose their soul or lose their identity as a college of the church. We've had that happen in Lutheranism too. Usually those colleges are prosperous and elite, but they lose their soul on their way up, as it were. And another great temptation, as you suggested, is when you're not quite as hotsy-totsy to just genericize and use the same rhetoric that every other college uses. I mean, so many colleges say, "Well, we've got a small student to faculty ratio, everybody knows your name, we're all cozy here." I mean, every college talks that way. I think the Lutheran colleges have a great heritage that will make them [distinctive] Roanoke used to use the motto "The margin of difference." I think that's nice language, and certainly the service element is one [when it includes] the full rationale for service.

TRACHTE: I think you're both really now coming to one of the pivotal points that I want to ask you to flesh out a bit more. Is education done differently at these colleges? You're suggesting, Tom, that it should be. I don't know how you would do Lutheran math, for example. How is education done differently? In the sciences, should we teach intelligent design as well as evolution? In psychology, is there a particular view of the human? Would each of you address that?

CHRISTENSON: I'd be happy to. I'm not going to use the example of math, though, because I did not do well in math as an undergraduate and I haven't studied it since. Capital has a law school. We have a law program, a J.D., at Capital University, and it's a very good law school, too, I would add. But there's an interesting question: What difference does it make to the way in which law is taught at Capital University over getting a law degree somewhere else? I want to go back to this idea about vocation again and vocational questions.

Let me tell a little story. A few years ago, my wife and I wanted to set up a trust for our children, to have our will redone and get a trust written, and so we hired an attorney to do this. He wrote this document. Now, both my wife and I have PhDs, so we're not either one of us dummies, but we could not understand this thing. We read it and could not make any sense of it. And so I took it to one of my colleagues at the university who was on the law faculty and I said, "What we wanted to do was to have a document that basically said this. Does this say that?" And he said, "No, but for \$900 I'll rewrite it for you." OK, well, that's a homely story, but I think that the law profession has become so, how should I say, focused inward on itself in terms of language, in terms of processes. Then the question is, does it serve well the needs of those who come to it in the greatest need? If you are a needy person who comes to the court, will you be served well? Are law professions set up in such a way to serve

those needs well? And I would say in many cases, they're not. They're set up to serve the needs of lawyers well, not the needs of ordinary people. I don't think my wife and I were served well by the attorney that we hired.

Now you might raise exactly that same question about something like our healthcare system. I think our healthcare system serves some needs, but it does serve well the needs of those who come to it in the greatest need? Hmm. That's not so easy.

How about our education system? Does our public education system serve well the needs of those who come to it in the greatest need? Well, the point I'm making is that since we have degrees that we offer in education and in pre-med and nursing and in law, and all those sorts of things, if you ask those kinds of questions, if you say, "Well, what we're doing here ought to serve the needs of the world, ought to serve the needs of our neighbors," then you have to ask, "Well, what are those needs and how might we train lawyers, medical professionals, teachers, superintendents, principals, to serve those needs well?" I think you end up changing how you do things. I think you end up asking a different set of questions. I think you end up reading perhaps a different set of authors. You start asking some very critical things about the whole program, and as a consequence, the curriculum gets changed, pedagogy gets changed, the experience of the students gets changed. So that's not the math example, but I think it is three examples of places where it ends up making a difference.

TRACHTE: Let me ask you to clarify. What you're saying then is that from your perspective, [the difference in how we do education at a college of the church] involves having a broader vision. It's not just what I want to do with my life, with my gifts, with my degree. It's always holding myself in tension, or Lutherans would say in dialectic, with the world and the other, the neighbor, and also understanding the transcendent, that somehow God is in the middle of all this.

CHRISTENSON: I think that's right. I mean, that's the experience a lot of students have if they go on a service semester someplace or a service learning kind of thing. They'll encounter somebody. I remember a student coming back from a service learning project that she did and said, "I never realized how many children out there are being raised by their grandparents." She said, "I was thinking about being a social worker. Now I'm convinced that that's what I want to do, and I want to focus my attention on this particular kind of problem." I thought, "Wow! That's amazing." Well, that student is going to leave the institution not just with a job, but with a calling, and I think that's a difference. It's a qualitative difference in the outcome.

TRACHTE: Both in and out of the classroom.

CHRISTENSON: Yeah, I think that's right.

TRACHTE: Dr. Benne?

BENNE: Well, I think you've given a deep moral dimension to what Lutheran education should be about, and I fully agree with that. I would add an intellectual dimension that would change what a classroom is also about. Let me tack on to [the conversation about] law schools. Although we don't have a law school (most liberal arts colleges don't), I spent a year at Valparaiso University. At Valparaiso University they have a law school. There would not only be the moral dimension of doing *pro bono* work that was emphasized by the school (some students go there because there is this moral commitment, so likewise at Notre Dame law school). There would also be at a Christian law school, using Christian or church-related law school as shorthand, a connection of the law with its moral basis, [particularly with] its moral basis in sometimes religious grounding. You have new Catholic law schools popping up all over the country, as well as evangelical law schools. Why is that? It's because in secular America, the study of law has become highly positivistic, in which there's no moral basis for the law whatever. It's whatever reasonable people decide and I happen to be the reasonable person. So there's a very powerful intellectual task in the law of reconnecting it with its moral basis, sometimes viewed as natural law, but also with its theological and religious grounding. Law in the West was founded on Christian theology and Christian morality being expressed in law. Now we've completely separated those and it seems to me that the Christian perspective would be to try to make those connections again.

Now what about a liberal arts college? First of all, it ought to be quality liberal arts education. Luther had a great saying, that a Christian cobbler makes good shoes, not poor shoes with little crosses on them. So we ought to be about quality education. First of all that's our calling, to do what the worldly activity is and do it well. But there are other dimensions, too. In the classroom, while there might not be Christian math, I believe that if you push any field to its macrocosmic level or its microcosmic level, theological questions come up. It would be interesting for math professors to wonder and ponder and share that wondering and pondering with students about the mathematical order that's in the world and what is its source. It's a wondrous, magnificent thing, and we wouldn't be afraid to talk about some of those things. In the controversy of intelligent design versus evolution, I believe in evolution, but intelligent design

people are saying, “Well, isn’t there some purpose for the whole evolutionary process? Doesn’t it look like there’s some formal guidance system?” Now they kind of look foolish now because they are not the science of the day, but they’re raising questions about the formal and final cause of science, which was once in Western science but now leached out. So there will be all sorts of interesting questions of religion and science that come up, religion and math, particularly things having to do with the humanities. The psychologists at Roanoke College teach students that humans are totally determined either internally by their biological makeup—they’re hard-wired—or they’re totally determined socially, and we in the religion department teach that we’re created in the image of God and free. Whoa! What do students do with that? Compartmentalize their minds? Disbelieve one or the other? I’m surrounded by other fellow faculty who lost their faith in graduate school because they never asked those questions and were bowled over by secular claims. So I think a church-related college ought to be pondering those sorts of questions that each field has within it that are addressed by the Christian intellectual tradition. Not that the Christian intellectual tradition trumps anything, but there’s critical engagement. So I think there’s a lot of lively stuff ... literature, all sorts of probings of the human condition, and one can reflect upon that from a Christian point of view.

A couple of things I remember from my Midland College undergraduate days long, long ago. We had a dear old professor who taught geology and astronomy, and he took us into his little tiny old planetarium, and you’d sit back and he’d splash the heavens on the ceiling and he’d say, “The glory of God.” Now that was pretty potent, but he also taught me that you could believe in geological evolution and biological evolution and be a Christian, and that meant puzzling out for himself how you can do that. Now those are the kinds of things that make a classroom different, I think, at a church-related college. It doesn’t mean we give up teaching the normal science of the day or the normal knowledge of the day. We have to do that and do it well, but we ask these further questions from a Christian point of view.

TRACHTE: You both seem to be saying that education is not just about finding the right answer. It’s about asking the right questions and bringing those questions into some kind of dialogue with the world, with life, with the challenges that the world is facing.

BENNE: As well as the Christian heritage, moral and intellectual.

TRACHTE: So that law isn’t just finding how I can best serve my client by using the law in their favor, but asking the moral

questions of what’s right and how do we determine what’s right. Let me ask you this then, on behalf of our students who are here today. Doesn’t this put a lot more pressure on students? Are we expecting more of students who attend a college of the church like Wartburg? Are we demanding more of them? Or should I as a Lutheran professor just operate by grace and give all A’s?

CHRISTENSON: I think that a Lutheran college is a demanding place, but in a very good sense of the word, a place of high expectations where hard questions get asked and you’re expected to take things seriously. And as a consequence of those hard questions, interesting conversations take place, dialogues take place, sessions in which you really wrestle with things. When I think about my undergraduate years, I think about all the good discussions I had with fellow classmates, all the arguments that we had over and over again. You know, we were sure that we were right and the other person didn’t know beans, and we learned a lot from those arguments, we learned a lot from that process of dialogue. I think that [there are educational settings] where nobody raises the questions, nobody takes it seriously, you’re not expected to have to answer them, etc. I think that a Lutheran college ought to be a place where those questions are taken very, very seriously. So it’s demanding in that sense, and I think it’s demanding of faculty in the same way. You may not have an answer for the question, but I think that it’s a question you take seriously, and that’s part of what I think makes teaching in places like this interesting. It has another dimension to it.

TRACHTE: Let me pursue that. We talk about professors professing something. Is it important that professors have a faith or somehow profess a particular value as a teacher or is it simply raising all the questions and encouraging students to make their own mind up?

CHRISTENSON: Well, I can think of models of teachers who sort of fit both of those descriptions. I think that they both have been very important models, for me at least, so I’m not sure there is a model that I want to say, “This is the way it ought to be done. Everybody ought to do this.” I think that you end up professing something even through the kinds of questions that you ask and through the way in which you approach them, confront them, the way in which you respond to the questions that your students ask. The way in which you treat faculty that you disagree with and the kind of dialogue you’re able to have, that’s a professing of something and it creates a community of a certain kind and that is a value that gets, I think, communicated to people. So I’m not sure it’s an either/or kind of thing.

TRACHTE: So both/and—some faculty may go one way, some the other, some are devil’s advocates?

CHRISTENSON: I think it’s important to have a variety of points of view, a variety of styles, a variety of different experiences. I think you end up with a better education because of it.

BENNE: One of the rhetorical flourishes that colleges of the church often use is that we educate the whole person and so in that sense it is more demanding. We’re really trying to reach a lot of dimensions of life and help people integrate those dimensions of life, which takes a lot of time, so it is very challenging, I believe. Now in order to teach whole students, or address the lives of whole students, you need whole faculty and that’s where I think you begin running against the stream in higher education, because the ethos of higher education today dictates that you can only ask sheer questions of competence of a faculty person. You’re not even supposed to ask these larger questions, moral questions, what they think of the philosophy of the school, all of these sorts of things. At least the tendency is just to talk about disciplinary competence.

TRACHTE: Competence narrowly defined within my discipline...

BENNE: That’s right. But how can you teach whole students without whole faculty? So I think we start looking for a different kind of faculty person. Part of that might be to find ways to go second miles with students, and that gets back into the moral dimension of things that I think is very important. First of all, I think, no, we shouldn’t be lax in our grading or loose in the way we grade. Competence is competence and we’re accountable for that professionally, but I would guess that at Christian colleges or Lutheran colleges or colleges of the church that you’re searching for faculty who really have a pastoral passion—compassion—for students. That doesn’t mean being permissive, but that means going the second mile in a lot of ways with students. When they’re having personal problems, you don’t blow them off. You’re not just looking at them as a student, you’re looking at them as a person. I know many good stories we could tell about going the second mile in a way that I think is extremely important for our colleges.

TRACHTE: In medicine, it’s often said that one should get back to practicing the art of medicine and caring for persons, not dealing with diseases alone. You’re saying that in education a faculty person needs to be concerned or care about the student they’re teaching as well as the knowledge they’re imparting.

BENNE: Right. I think because we’re small and we’re liberal arts, we do that a lot better than major universities where you have

classes of four hundred and you hardly ever get to see the top flight professors. I mean, I really think there’s a great advantage to that.

CHRISTENSON: I think that one of the temptations—it’s an academic temptation, not just for Lutheran faculty at Lutheran colleges—the academic temptation is to think of education as production specialists. What are you doing when you’re learning? What are you doing when you’re getting an undergraduate degree? Well, you’re becoming a specialist in something. One of the first questions people ask you when you arrive on campus is, “What’s your major?” And if you don’t know the answer to that question, you feel sort of stupid and you think, “Well, I better come up with an answer right away because everybody expects me to have one.” And then eventually you know what your major is, you know what you’re going to do, you know what your career plans are, you know you’re going to go to graduate school and become even a greater specialist there. I think in the process of doing that, it’s possible to lose some of our humanity, that is, that we become smaller people because of this focus on specialization. You talk only to other people in your field; you talk to people in your division. The sort of conversations that you would have with people simply because you are human, it seems to me, become harder to have. I remember one faculty member that I served on a committee with. ... We were talking about something and an ethical issue came up and he said, “Well, you’ll have to excuse me from this discussion because ethics is not my specialty,” and I thought, “You can’t do that! You address ethical questions because you are human, not because you’re some sort of specialist.” I think I would say exactly the same thing about political questions. We address political questions because we are human, not because we are majors in political science or majors in government or something like this. And so part of education in an institution like this that takes that whole person idea seriously is that you get a specialization, but you also practice your humanity, practice connecting to all of the dimensions that there are in life. I think that if we can do that, then we’ve really got something important to offer.

BENNE: Right. The Lutheran college insists on liberal arts education so that you have a broad exposure to many different human inquiries. It’s an exercise in what you can call Christian humanism at the best. I believe there’s not only that moral dimension but the intellectual dimension that when it really works well, the colleges produce students who are different. There’s been a good deal of research done on that, and that’s very heartening, that we in fact do have an effect on students.

TRACHTE: Let me continue this conversation. When you talk about values, you talk about a caring community. When you ask

the vast majority of our Wartburg College students, “Why did you come to Wartburg,” they will say something about friendliness or acceptance or the smallness or warmth, the caring community. I think that that raises some interesting questions in terms of the moral life. You said that at Concordia it was defined in some ways by the “don’t.” When I was a student at Wartburg in the dinosaur era, we had just started dancing and we said the reason why we hadn’t inter-visitation before was that sex might lead to dancing and dancing was worse.

CHRISTENSON: That’s right, that’s my upbringing.

BENNE: We were liberated at Midland.

TRACHTE: So what is there about our life in community? Are we professing certain values? Are we teaching certain values by the way in which we live in a residential community like Wartburg College, where you have to have a roommate, you have to have a floor, and you encounter all kinds of people who in many ways probably do not share your own values or the values at least that you grew up with, and you have to examine that. Any comments on how you create community in the middle of this present secular age?

CHRISTENSON: I think a very important part of learning in a college or university ought to be a kind of induction into a community of discourse, whether you’re doing it in a department or in a major or in the college as a whole. What does it mean to be part of a community of discourse? What does it mean to carry on a debate, say, in psychology about different theories? What does it mean to carry on a debate in physics about different models of galactic clustering? I mean, here you get people who are talking about these things, arguing about these things, making arguments, hearing other people’s arguments, critiquing other people’s arguments. When you learn how to do that, you will have been inducted into a community of discourse, and it seems to me that’s one of the very valuable things about a college or university experience. You should have had that. You should have been doing that. And then the question is, “Well, what kind of community is that? What do we show people about how we disagree, how we give reasons, how we listen to reasons, what we expect of each other?” I think that atmosphere is what I would call community. And so it doesn’t mean that you all agree with each other. Community doesn’t mean that you all agree with each other, for heaven’s sake. It doesn’t even mean that you all like each other. But it means how you communicate even when you’re disagreeing. How do you communicate even when you are arguing with each other or when you’re representing different points of view? That’s an important lesson, and it’s one that our

culture doesn’t do very well. I often ask students, “Well, where have you heard significant ethical discussions before you came to college?” And you get ... silence. I say, “Well, in school?” “No.” “At home, at the dinner table?” “No, it was one of the things we weren’t supposed to talk about.” “In church?” “No.” “Well, where then?” Well, they haven’t. And so to have a place where questions like that can be asked and pursued in a rigorous kind of way is, I think, an important experience, and so if your college provides that for you, then I think you’ve got something extremely valuable.

BENNE: I guess I have a fairly narrow definition of community, and I don’t think community emerges very much in a population this large. That is, there are flashes of it around tragedies or great celebrations and so on, but mostly I think college is about friendships. It’s amazing what friendships are gained then, and if you’re lucky, some of those friendships might have discourse in them. The most precious memories I have of my years at Midland College were meeting other students who were interested in talking about these things far into the night. My memory of being at Midland College was of being always tired because we’d talk late at night and my mind would get going and I couldn’t go to sleep, plus I played four sports, so I was tired at the end of the day and tired during the day, but those are precious memories, and the circle of friends that engaged in that are lifelong friends. And now there’ll be other kinds of circles. They won’t always be the kind of intellectual discourse, but there are other kinds of circles of friendship, but those are extremely important. We talked in these late-night bull sessions about religious issues, religious questions, and that should be part of it, a grace note in the life of Wartburg College, those kind of conversations that go on late at night. We’ve talked briefly about how cell phones may destroy that.

TRACHTE: We were talking about that earlier this morning, the challenge of an age of community when instead of talking to each other, students are on the phone talking to their high school friends or their parents. We’re running toward the end of our time, but let me ask one other question that seems to me to be a significant debate or clash at a place like Wartburg. We have long been committed to diversity on our campus. We have students from forty countries. We have a significant minority population, [primarily] African American, unfortunately not as many Hispanic students as we’d like. But at the same time, we sometimes talk about a “critical mass” of Lutherans. We have fewer Lutherans certainly than when the three of us were in college at our Lutheran colleges. How does one have a significant number of Lutherans and yet affirm, on the other hand, a significant diversity on the campus, both of which it seems to me are important. I don’t know how the two of you approach that.

BENNE: Well, I don't think that's contradictory at all. I think students of all sorts are attracted to an ethos and a tradition of a college and if you do that tradition and ethos well—sponsored, say, by the Lutherans and carried on by a critical minority of Lutherans, it becomes a very attractive thing, and you invite everybody to the banquet. You have a certain kind of ware, a certain kind of tradition that you're presenting, and if it's attractive, people will come. And generally if it's attractive and rich, they won't want to change that. That is, they know there's a living tradition at work there, for service, for the arts, for choral music, that's at a place like Wartburg and if you come from another country or ethnic or racial group that's not typically Lutheran, you can enjoy those things and endorse them. And so I don't think there's a necessary contradiction to them, but there has to be some sort of minority, intense minority, of people who bear that publicly, that tradition that sponsors the college and that we think is precious, so that it continues to be publicly relevant and lays out this panoply of goods that is attractive to a lot of different people, and then we invite people into that. I don't really think there's a contradiction.

CHRISTENSON: I agree with Bob about that. I think that it's not easy for us to learn this, but it's ever so important to come to see difference as a gift and not as a problem. I think that our institutions are ever so much richer for the diversity of students, and not only racial diversity, ethnic diversity, religious diversity, all of these kinds of things. You really get a much richer community that way, and that's what we want to have. I think that in some ways it's sort of like a banquet. Bob, you used this metaphor of somebody giving a dinner and inviting people to the table, and I think that ...

TRACHTE: Someone did that even in the Bible I think.

BENNE: Some refused to come, as you remember.

CHRISTENSON: That may be the metaphor that's used, that's right. And then you don't object if the meal has a particular ethnic identity to it.

BENNE: You like it, you know.

CHRISTENSON: It's like, "Oh, we're having Italian tonight. OK, that's alright." Or I suppose, "We're having Lutheran tonight."

TRACHTE: We're really about out of time, but let me ask each of you in summary, what do you see for the future? Are we going

to continue down the secular road? Are we rediscovering our identity as colleges of the church? How do you see into your crystal ball of what's happening, what's going to happen?

CHRISTENSON: Well, I can give some examples of institutions that I think were very tempted by the elite model of higher education that have now started taking their Lutheran identity much more seriously, and I think that's good. It's fun to see when an institution sort of wakes up to what gifts they had and that they didn't realize that they had them. Sort of like, "Oh, wow! I didn't notice that this was worth something." Sometimes it's somebody else who points that out to you. So it's nice when you see institutions doing that. I think there are a number of places that have that in mind, that are now taking seriously the question of their Lutheran identity. One of the consequences of my writing the book, *Gift and Task*, is that I've been invited to a lot of places who obviously were interested in pursuing this question, "What does it mean when you're a Lutheran college?" and I think that's a good sign, that question being raised.

BENNE: On the other example of not going after the elite model, but the generic model, people are realizing that just being a generic college is not enough and so they sometimes reclaim their Lutheran heritage on those grounds. I'm a little bit dubious about whether this banquet can go on in the sense that it takes a great deal of courage on the part of a college to be clear about its mission and hire for mission, and that means hiring some people who will carry on the tradition, not necessarily all of them being Lutherans, but enough Lutherans to carry on that tradition, enough supporters who like the banquet that's being offered, and I believe that it takes great courage to hire along those lines. The easier path is just to hire for competency, disciplinary competency. I'm not sure that our Lutheran colleges over the long-run will have the courage to say what their mission is with that faith dimension in it, which is ethos as well as the intellectual tradition, and hire for it. I just wonder whether we've got the courage to do that.

TRACHTE: Any final comments?

CHRISTENSON: We've said everything.

BENNE: We've said everything.

TRACHTE: Thank you.

Saving Minds

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I want to begin my remarks today with this statement: Jesus Christ wants to save your mind. Please let me say it again. Jesus Christ wants to save your mind.

This statement would not sound strange at all if the direct object was soul instead of mind. We expect to hear sermons about how Jesus is saving our soul. But saving your mind sounds strange. At best it sounds like the old TV ads for the United Negro College Fund—you know, a mind is a terrible thing to waste.

But it should not surprise us that God cares about our minds. We know that God created our minds. Even more, Christianity has from its beginning rejected divisions of the human self. We have rejected dualism between the body and spirit. We have rejected the dualism of body and mind. And we have rejected the dualism of mind and spirit. As human beings we are one as God is one.

The problem is that our mind, along with our body and spirit, are in rebellion against God. Our mind is a source of our alienation from God. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it is a much more serious source of our alienation from God than our body or spirit. So, as a part of my remarks today, I want to talk about sins of the mind so that we can understand what it means to say that Jesus is saving our minds.

The first area of sin is coveting. I begin with this one because Luther's catechism names two types of coveting—coveting our neighbor's spouse and coveting our neighbor's property. I contend that coveting is almost exclusively a sin of the mind. We imagine what it might be like to have a boat like our neighbors. We see a beautiful movie star and wonder what it might be like to have her or him as our lover. We walk through the mall sometimes for the sole purpose of window shopping. And what is window shopping other than a socially acceptable way to describe coveting? I would go so far as to say that baseball is not our national pastime, but it is instead coveting. Coveting is a way of life in our culture.

Materialism is still another way to describe coveting. We want more and more stuff, and we keep collecting more of it. We build bigger and bigger houses to store our stuff, and we even need to rent storage facilities to hold all the stuff we can't fit in our houses.

Martin Luther's words from the Large Catechism are instructive here. He writes,

This last commandment, then, is addressed not to those whom the world considers wicked rogues, but precisely to the most upright—to people who wish to be commended as honest and virtuous because they have not offended against the preceding commandments. (405)

Yes, Luther tells us that coveting is our sin—we who are upright, responsible, good citizens. Sins of the mind are great because they protect our virtue in the eyes of the world, but they are still sins. And we stand condemned.

The second sin of the mind I want to discuss is simply mental laziness. Yes, sloth is a sin. But I want to focus on mental sloth. As college educators, we all see this a lot, but I'm also a sinner too. I can be lazy in my thinking as much as anyone. Let me describe two forms of mental sloth.

The first is the rigid refusal to think. This is the refusal to consider other options. It is the inability to imagine possibilities other than what you already know, think, or believe. It is the refusal to investigate, to read, or to wonder.

One clear expression of this is those who refuse to even consider the possibility of evolution. At Wartburg College we have students who tell professors that they cannot possibly study evolution because they are Christians. There is a fear that somehow knowledge will threaten faith. I sometimes tell students that Jesus did tell his disciples to have the faith of little children, but he didn't tell them to have the minds of little children.

LAKE LAMBERT III is Professor of Religion and Board of Regents Chair in Ethics at Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa. This sermon was preached in the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, on July 24, 2006 during a service for the participants in Wartburg College's faculty and staff development seminar, "Wartburg's Heritage and Our Work as Educators." Cf. *Intersections* 26 (Fall 2007): 19-23.
Texts: 1 Kings 3:3-12; Romans 12:1-2; Matthew 10:16.

There may be good reasons to question evolution, but they need to be just that—good reasons, not knee-jerk defensiveness. As Christians, it is our responsibility to understand what we question. In the spirit of Christian love, we should be able to understand and clearly explain even an idea that we despise or think is flat-out wrong.

The second form of laziness is a mindless relativism. In many cases, relativism is open to a variety of options and is the opposite of absolutism. But it becomes a form of mental laziness when a person refuses to make up his or her mind. Yes, there are many issues in our world today that are very complicated and that have answers that are so numerous they seem endless. But at some point we have to decide. To live responsibly in the world demands it. At a certain point, I must vote. At a certain point, I must speak my convictions and act on them in humility, knowing that I could be wrong. Still, I must act.

The paradox here is that mental sloth takes two opposing forms—an unwillingness to consider other options and an unwillingness to make a decision. But paradox should not surprise us as Christians because as Christians we seek to know and understand many paradoxes of faith. We believe in a God who is three yet one. Our savior Jesus Christ is incomprehensibly both fully God and fully man. As a college, we embrace many dialectical relationships in our mission documents, including nurture and challenge, leadership and service, Midwest yet global. And we also speak of the paradoxical complexity and necessity of relating faith and learning. In the spirit of Martin Luther himself, we do not shy away from knowing everything that can be known or even asking questions that seem threatening to faith or downright sacrilegious.

The bottom line of all sins of the mind is that they come back to fear. Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon—above whose tombs I preach—realized that fear, not knowledge, is the enemy of faith. We fear that what we have may not be good enough, so we covet something or someone else. We fear that certain types of knowledge may threaten our faith or our worldview, so we close off our minds to new and different ideas. We fear that making a decision may anger someone or some group, or it may challenge our faith in an all-loving God, so we stop thinking.

In the short gospel lesson just read from Matthew, Jesus said to his disciples, “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

In the midst of the civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon on this brief text. It was entitled “A Tough Mind and a Tender Heart.” We have first-year students at Wartburg read this sermon every year, and I want to read a short excerpt to you today. King asks,

Who doubts that toughness of mind is one of man’s greatest needs? Rarely do we find men who willingly engage in hard, solid thinking. There is almost a universal quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions. Nothing pains some people more than having to think...We do not have to look far to detect the danger of soft mindedness. Dictators, capitalizing on soft mindedness, have led men to acts of barbarity and terror that are unthinkable in civilized society... There is little hope for us until we become tough minded enough to break loose from the shackles of prejudice, half truth, and down-right ignorance. The shape of the world today does not permit us the luxury of soft mindedness. A nation or a civilization that continues to produce soft minded men purchases its own spiritual death on an installment plan. (233)

King’s words apply to us today. The sins of our minds make us guilty before God and they alienate us from our neighbor, causing and facilitating injustice in the world. We sometimes confess that we have sinned in thought as well as deed. We have sinned because we have not thought rightly and we have sinned because we have not thought at all. And our world is suffering for it.

But Jesus Christ wants to save your mind. And Jesus Christ *is* saving your mind. Paul tells us in Romans 6 that in baptism Christians have been united in Christ’s life, death and resurrection. And it is by the power of baptism that God is overcoming fear with faith and destroying mental sloth with mental activity. Later in Romans, Paul describes the renewal of the mind—the transformation that is being made possible “so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:2). Through Jesus Christ, God is making available to us the possibility of wisdom.

Solomon realized the great importance of wisdom in his own calling. He knew that as king of Israel, the most important thing he needed for a good job was wisdom. He could have asked for power, riches, or the death of his enemies. But instead he asked for wisdom so that he could do his work with justice and fairness. It is a gift that all people need in their vocational responsibilities.

You see, it is one thing to have knowledge and another to know what to do with it. You can learn all there is to know about genetics, car repair, English literature or farming, but that still does not mean that you know what you should do with that knowledge—or even what you should do with your life in general. It is a particular problem in our society that we confuse technique and technical knowledge with wisdom. Wisdom is the moral and faithful sense of what to do with our knowledge. It allows us to distinguish being a good chemist at Auschwitz from being a good chemist for a maker of life-saving drugs. It

allows us to farm not simply for the greatest productivity but also for the greatest care of the land. It allows us to use our skill in accounting to provide accurate reports of income, assets and expenses as opposed to clever tricks with the numbers like accountants at Enron. The grace of God, expressed in wisdom, is what allows us to use our knowledge and expertise in the service of others and not for our exclusive, personal gain.

Wisdom is not easy. It cannot be written down in a notebook, filed away in a drawer, entered in a PDA, or memorized for a test. Wisdom occurs when faith puts knowledge into action. It demands a questioning that is critical and rigorous; and it calls for an attentiveness to the world and all its complexity. Knowledge changes and becomes obsolete, but wisdom endures.

Life is not easy for the wise. Wise people recognize all the complexity and all the ambiguity in the world. They see the suffering, the beneficial and the selfish uses of power and knowledge, the irony of life, and the tragedy. Faith is active. It is active in love and when joined with knowledge it becomes wisdom. For Christians then, knowledge will never be a simple matter of technique. It will always require a question of intent or purpose. To be a Christian is to use your mind. To be a Christian, saved by grace, is to think and be wise.

But the life of wisdom is not all terror or duty. There is joy as well because those who are truly wise have hope. Ultimately, wisdom is not possible without hope. By hope I do not mean a shallow optimism that asserts everything will get better, will make sense, or will be easy. There are plenty of preachers, hucksters, and books out there who are preaching a false gospel of positive think-

ing and a “don’t worry, be happy” theology. Optimism is for the foolish—not the wise. Optimism seeks an easy way out because it does not care to see complexity and ambiguity. When Jesus preached, some people came to him with optimism. These were the ones he rebuked for clinging to Abraham, Moses and the law. Others, however, came in expectation, looking for the Kingdom of God, and they found hope. They were engaged in the world and sought to understand their responsibilities to their neighbors. They came in repentance. Hope empowers such wisdom. It is what enables us to stare into the abyss of ambiguity, doubt, fear, and complexity and then to walk in with our eyes wide open. It allows us to laugh and make merry in spite of it all.

This wonderful profession of education that we all share is full of hope. We have hope for our students and their futures, and we have the beauty of a new start every fall where hope is alive, and we are full of expectation and anticipation for what we want to do in the new year and what the new year will bring.

As we gather in worship this day, hope surrounds us. By the power of his life, death and resurrection, Jesus Christ is saving your mind. In loving response, may we use our minds to Christ’s glory and for service in our many places of vocation.

In Christ’s name, Amen.

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