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Distinctive Lutheran Contributions to the Conversation about Vocation



Martin Luther has long been credited—and rightly so—with expanding the narrow, ecclesial understanding of vocation associated with the medieval Catholic church into a broader view of vocation as God’s call for all people within the context of their daily lives and responsibilities.

For Luther, the human vocation, or calling, included not just one’s work but one’s roles within the areas of family life, religious life, and civic life. Luther’s understanding of vocation is so significant that theologian Jürgen Moltmann identifies vocation as “the third great insight of the Lutheran Reformation,” after Word and sacrament (186). But, to ask the perennial Lutheran question, what does this mean? Or, to speak more colloquially, so what?

Over the years, the breadth of Luther’s understanding of vocation was diminished. Later theologians, particularly in Reformed traditions (those coming out of the Calvinist tradition), equated vocation primarily with productive work, thus excluding other major areas of human life from the category of vocation. Some interpreted the “particular calling” of the individual as an expression of the more “general calling” to faith in Christ, thus limiting vocation to Christians. By the twentieth century, the concept of vocation had become largely secularized, with the term “vocational”

designating work that required technical training in contrast with the professions, which required genuine education.

Reviving Vocation

In recent years, two things have helped shape the conversation about vocation in the United States. The first is the widely quoted description of vocation penned by Presbyterian pastor and author Frederick Buechner: “the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” (119).

The second is Lilly Endowment’s Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation (PTEV). Over the course of a decade, Lilly Endowment Inc. gave grants totaling over \$218 million to 88 private, church-related colleges and universities. Lilly Endowment did not attempt to promote a uniform understanding of vocation. Rather, it encouraged each institution to define and explore vocation within its own context, informed by its own theological and historical identity.

The good news resulting from these two things is a noticeable resurgence of a rich language of vocation. However, much of the conversation about vocation has been shaped by a somewhat generalized emphasis on finding meaning and purpose in one’s work. This is valuable, to be sure. But a recovery of the distinctive characteristics of the deeper Lutheran understanding of vocation has much to offer—and not just for Lutherans!

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What are those distinctive characteristics? For Luther:

1. All human work is equally valued, not only specifically religious work.
2. The purpose of human work is not primarily to please God but to serve the neighbor.
3. All of us have multiple vocations—over a lifetime, of course, but also within multiple dimensions of human life at the same time.
4. The call to live faithfully in service of the neighbor is not limited to Christians but is part of God’s intent for the whole creation.

Following the conclusion of the vocation grants made directly to colleges and universities, Lilly Endowment provided financial support to the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) for the establishment of an entity called NetVUE, the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate

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Education. NetVUE’s purpose is to *continue* the conversation about vocation in undergraduate education and to *expand* the conversation well beyond those institutions that had received Lilly PTEV grants.

In 2013, NetVUE launched a Scholarly Resources Project in order to develop and publish resources related specifically to vocation in undergraduate education. A series of three books is envisioned, with the first volume exploring the theology and practice of vocation and higher education in general, the second volume focusing on vocation in the disciplines, including pre-professional areas of study, and

the third volume focusing on vocation from an interfaith perspective. For each volume, scholars were invited into a yearlong project of study, conversation, and writing.

I was privileged to be a participant in the first round of the NetVUE Scholarly Resources Project, which resulted in the publication of *At This Time and In This Place: Vocation and Higher Education*, edited by David S. Cunningham. The process was both intentional and intense. The 13 participants met together on three separate occasions over the span of a year. Prior to our first meeting, we were asked to read three books on vocation. We discussed themes and questions arising from what we had read and from our own work. By the end of the week, we had sketched the outline of a book, detailing the contribution each of us thought we could make. Six months later, we met to discuss rough drafts. After another six months, we met to discuss revised drafts. We asked questions that helped each other clarify our writing, and we identified connections among the themes of the various chapters. The book is organized in four parts: Part One: Vocation in the Current Cultural Context; Part Two: The Contours of Vocation; Part Three: Vocation and Virtue; and Part Four: Vocational Discernment Beyond the Classroom.

I was pleased by the invitation from Jason Mahn, *Intersections* editor, to call your attention to *At This Time and In This Place* and to commend its use in our colleges and universities. As a whole, the book explores vocation both theologically and practically, engaging the perspectives and responsibilities of both faculty and staff in institutions of higher education. It flows well when read as a whole, but individual chapters can also be lifted up for fruitful conversation among specific constituents.

Scholarship on Vocation through a Lutheran Lens

My own chapter, “Places of Responsibility: Educating for Multiple Callings in Multiple Communities,” draws on Martin Luther and on Dietrich Bonhoeffer to develop some distinctive Lutheran emphases for the conversation about vocation in the context of higher education. Far from summarizing my chapter or the book as a whole, I here highlight several themes from my chapter and point to other chapters that illustrate or develop these themes.

Creation and Universality

One of the distinctive elements of Luther's understanding of vocation is that he grounds it in the doctrine of creation rather than the doctrine of redemption, as is more typical in other theological traditions. It is certainly the case that faith can strengthen and guide Christians in living out their various callings in life. Among Lutherans, this is often described as one's baptismal vocation. Yet for Luther, our callings within the dimensions of family, economic, and civic life are part of God's creative design. Humans operate within God's multi-faceted creation as God's stewards, working in and through the created world for the benefit of others. For Luther, this is simply part of how God has created the world to work, and thus it applies to all human creatures, regardless of whether they recognize God as the source of this calling.

"Regardless of the labels our students espouse or eschew, the broad Lutheran understanding of vocation is a way of engaging all of our students with questions of meaning and purpose in life."

This Lutheran understanding of vocation within the context of creaturely existence offers our colleges, universities, and campus ministries an important base from which to reach out to students of other religions or students with no religion at all. We can state without hesitation that all people have callings, not only Christians. All people are called to lives of responsible service within the realms of family, economic, and civic life.

While most of our ELCA colleges and universities were founded to educate members of the founding religious and/or ethnic community, today our campuses are characterized by a wide diversity of students. We have students of all faiths and none. Among the "nones," there are students who are actively asking religious and spiritual questions apart from any organized religious community as well as those who dismiss religious and spiritual concerns as irrelevant.

Regardless of the labels our students espouse or eschew, the broad Lutheran understanding of vocation

is a way of engaging all of our students with questions of meaning and purpose in life. As our students choose majors and prepare for future occupations or professions, we have an opening to talk about what author Sharon Daloz Parks has termed "big questions, worthy dreams." The notion of vocation as how we steward life on our shared planetary home is a way of challenging our students to locate meaning and purpose outside themselves and their immediate environs.

Several chapters in *At This Time and In This Place* explore the structure of call narratives in ways that can open up vocational discernment with young adults apart from a shared religious belief. In "Stories of Call: From Dramatic Phenomena to Changed Lives," Charles Pinches of the University of Scranton identifies common characteristics of call experiences. Too often we focus on the dramatic or even supernatural aspects of call narratives. Pinches helpfully redirects our attention to characteristics of the call experience that can be cultivated in our students and ourselves—characteristics like attentiveness and responsiveness.

In "'Who's There?': The Dramatic Role of the 'Caller' in Vocational Discernment," David Cunningham of Hope College explores the logic that a call implies a caller. Using examples from theater, he explores call as an enacted conversation. Regardless of whether one identifies the caller as God, the existence of a dialogical relationship between called and caller serves to locate the call outside the individual self alone.

In "Vocation and Story: Narrating Self and World," Doug Henry of Baylor University examines the themes of some of the literary and cinematic narratives of our day (e.g., George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* and J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*). Such epics offer framing narratives within which young people can locate the micronarratives of their own lives. But what values do these narratives espouse? Do they convey worldviews dominated by optimism or cynicism? Do they reward self-interest or foster community? How do we, as educators, help our students navigate among these competing narratives?

The creation stories of the major world religions were first told and recorded to help communities make sense of their existence from a larger perspective. Even students who reject the notion of a god tell stories to make sense

of their lives. An understanding of vocation rooted in our common human identity and shared human responsibility can be a resource to help our students tell better stories.

The Given-ness of Multiple Callings

My chapter title signals another distinctive aspect of the Lutheran understanding of vocation: the insistence that we all have multiple callings, not just over the course of a lifetime. We have multiple callings—multiple “places of responsibility”—because we participate simultaneously in multiple communities.

Buechner’s popular description of vocation as “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” is rich, but it carries the implication that vocational discernment is about finding one’s personal “sweet spot.” It can also foster a perspective that one stands somehow outside of vocation until one identifies and takes up one’s calling.

While Luther affirmed human freedom to make choices within the framework of our earthly lives and relationships, much about his understanding of vocation in his own context was simply a given. For Luther, all people have callings within the areas of family/household,

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religious community, and civil society. (Later Lutherans distinguished the workplace as a fourth area, although Luther himself understood economic work as part of one’s household responsibilities.)

In the realm of family, I may choose whether and whom to marry and whether to have children. However, my relationships as daughter, granddaughter, and sister are simply given—and existed long before I was aware of them. Having chosen to marry, my relationships as daughter-in-law and sister-in-law came as givens with my choice of spouse. At issue is not whether I am called

to these relationships but how I live faithfully within these callings, even (and especially when) they conflict. How do I love the neighbors who are given to me within these family relationships? Luther’s understanding of vocation in service of neighbor reminds me that I am called to do so for their own sake, regardless of whether it contributes to “my deep gladness.”

This recognition of the given-ness of our vocations within our individual contexts calls our attention to vocation as a present reality, not a future one. This emphasis is particularly important for the work we do as educators. Much of the marketing of higher education, in tune with the consumer expectations of students and their parents, focuses on the future: What does a college or university education prepare you to do? What kinds of jobs does a particular course of study open for you? As real as those future callings will one day be for our students, many of us challenge our students to recognize and embrace the reality that one of their primary vocations here and now is the vocation of student. Education is more than a means to an economic end.

The Lutheran recognition of the simultaneity of multiple callings is also a challenge to educators. If we take seriously our own call to educate “the whole student,” we are challenged to recognize that our students’ callings outside the classroom also have value. Many students struggle between the demands of school and family. In my experience, this is particularly so for first-generation college students. Much as we rightly call our students to take seriously their present calling as students, we need to recognize that their legitimate callings as son or daughter, sibling, etc. do not cease for the years they are enrolled in college or university. Insisting that academic coursework trumps all other obligations is neither helpful nor likely to be effective.

The developmental task for our students is to learn how to negotiate these overlapping and conflicting responsibilities in new ways as their life circumstances change. As educators committed to a broad understanding of vocation, we have the opportunity to support them in this work.

Several chapters in *At This Time and In This Place* engage the competing claims of the multiple communities to which our students belong. In “Commitment and Community: The Virtue of Loyalty and Vocational Discernment,”

Hannah Schell of Monmouth College draws on American philosopher Josiah Royce's understanding of loyalty as a virtue. Using Greek life as one example, Schell explores the tensions that can arise between loyalty to self and loyalty to community. She also addresses the challenge of helping students reflect critically on those groups or causes that may not be worthy of their loyalty.

In "Rituals, Contests, and Images: Vocational Discernment beyond the Classroom," Quincy Brown, former Vice President for Spiritual Life and Church Relations at LaGrange College, also considers co-curricular activities as a locus for vocational exploration. Studies have shown that student athletes are less likely than other students to have participated in distinct vocational discernment programs. Brown looks at athletic participation itself as an arena within which values can be formed and mentoring communities can be developed and strengthened. He does not shy away from naming problems such as alcohol abuse. Instead of washing our hands of campus "bad boys" and their behavior, he challenges us to offer our students an alternative vision of a good and meaningful life.

Recognizing the legitimacy of the multiple callings that our students are negotiating should also heighten our appreciation for the role of non-faculty educators in the process of vocational discernment. Student life personnel, coaches, counselors, and student employment supervisors also influence how well our students navigate the challenges of their college years. We fulfill our own callings as educators more faithfully and serve our students more effectively when we collaborate across the line separating faculty and staff.

Simultaneously Called and Constrained

In other writing on the Lutheran understanding of vocation, I explored what some colleagues have described as "the dark side" of vocation (see Kleinhans). When all of our roles and responsibilities are seen as divinely authorized callings, the opportunities for failure and guilt are compounded. From a theological perspective, we need to acknowledge the damage that sin inflicts on and in our vocations and to recognize the judgment of the law.

In "Vocational Discernment: A Pedagogy of Humanization," Caryn Riswold of Illinois College (the other Lutheran contributor to the volume) names the challenge

that dehumanizing systems of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism pose to vocation and to our work as educators. The call to steward God's creation and to serve our neighbors is mightily hindered by the realities of structural sinfulness, which defends privilege at the expense of the other. Teaching our students to name and work towards dismantling these systems of oppression is challenging; our students value independence and choice so highly that they resist the claim that they are captive participants in systems outside their control.

Bill Cavanaugh of DePaul University also takes up the challenge of constraints in a chapter titled: "Actually, You Can't Be Anything You Want (And It's a Good Thing, Too)." Cavanaugh argues that engaging matters of vocation well can be an importance corrective to the consumer-driven "tyranny of choice."

An Invitation

I have tried here to provide readers of *Intersections* with a tasting menu. It is my hope that this has whetted your appetite to read and discuss the volume with your colleagues. While vocation is currently experiencing a resurgence in the discourse of higher education, the distinctive Lutheran understanding of vocation in which our institutions are rooted has much to offer the conversation. Join in!

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