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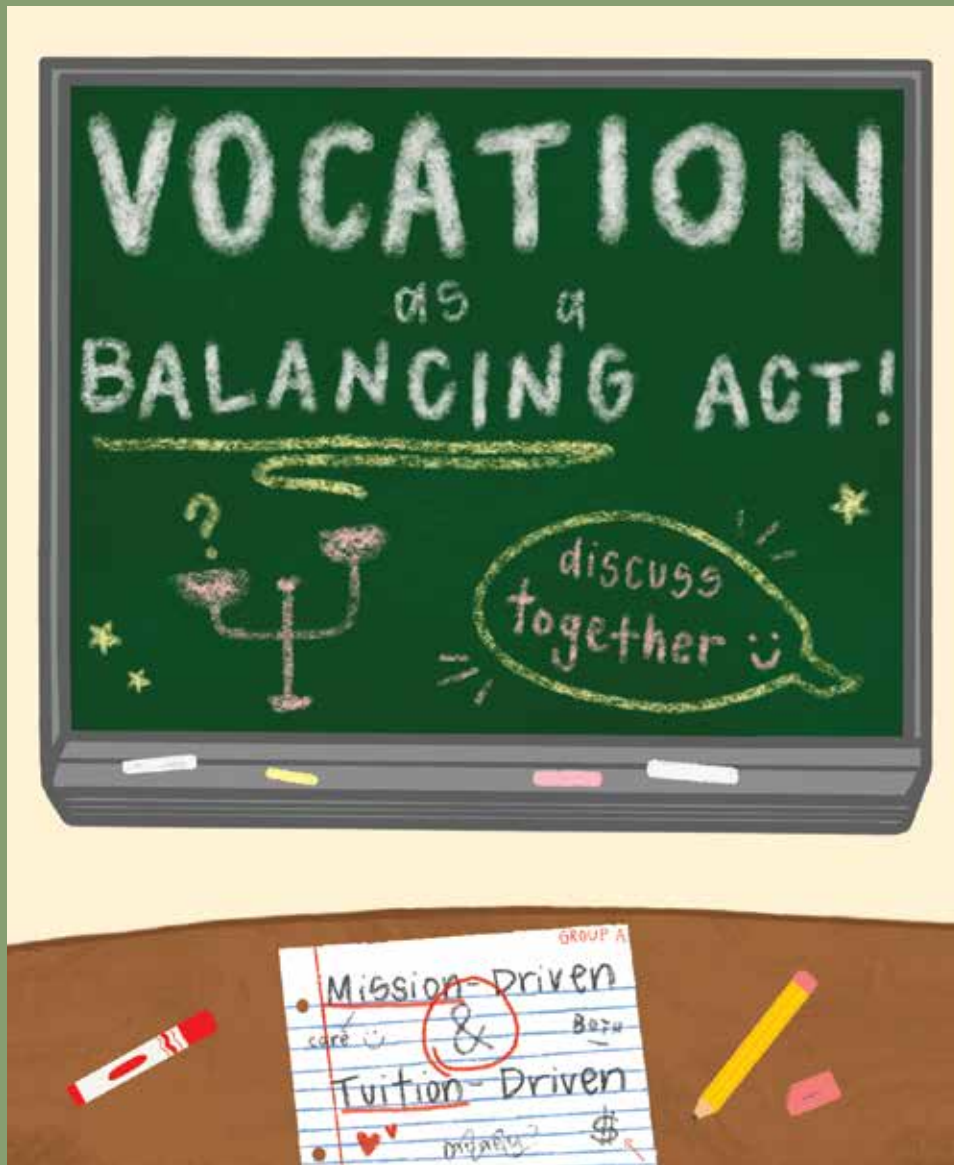
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Intersections

Faith, Learning, and the Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education



IN THIS ISSUE

Vocation as Balancing Act:
Mission-driven and Tuition-driven

Intersections is a publication by and largely for the academic communities of the twenty-eight institutions that comprise the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU). Each issue reflects on the **intersection** of faith, learning, and teaching within Lutheran higher education. Published by the NECU, **Intersections** extends and enhances discussions fostered by the annual Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference, together lifting up the vocation of Lutheran colleges and universities. It aims to raise the level of awareness among faculty, staff, and administration about the Lutheran heritage and church-relatedness of their institutions, especially as these **intersect** with contemporary challenges, opportunities, and initiatives. **Intersections** publishes pieces on vocation from perspectives in all areas of Higher Education at Lutheran colleges and universities, including students. We publish artwork, short reflections of 500-600 words, and features of 1500-2500 words. We're especially interested in the following: insight from your research, teaching, or advocacy; your perspective based on your campus/position/location; and student perspectives on any of the above.

On the cover:



Bre Freiberg is a Junior at California Lutheran University. She is double-majoring in Liberal Studies in Education and Psychology, and is excited to be an Elementary School teacher one day! Bre is also involved in various aspects of Cal Lutheran's campus, including working as a Student Leader for the Campus Ministry Department.

She is very passionate about nature and taking care of the planet, and she loves spending time discovering new landscapes and seeing wildlife, especially at National Parks! She loves expressing her creativity and curiosity through several artistic mediums including drawing, writing poetry, scrapbooking, and photography.

Submit your artwork for the cover of Fall 2025 *Intersections* "Vocation: Ethical Leadership" to the editor, Colleen Windham-Hughes: windhamh@callutheran.edu. We can accept high resolution files of photographs, digital art, paintings, drawings, sculpture, fiber or mixed media pieces.

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LAMONT ANTHONY WELLS

FROM THE PUBLISHER



The fundamental vocation of Lutheran higher education creates learning environments that value every person and enables their educational and vocational endeavors through empowerment and support. So *That All May Belong: Lutheran Roots for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ)*

explores the theological and institutional commitments to DEIJ within the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU). Theologically, these activities emerge from the belief that every person reflects God's image; anthropologically, systemic obstacles inhibit historically marginalized groups from fully benefiting from educational opportunities and community involvement.

NECU institutions employ the Lutheran concept of vocation to explain their dual mission to educate and to build inclusive communities where every person can succeed. This includes intentional removal of existing barriers and continual reform of institutional structures that provide equitable access and support to all academic community members. Lutheran higher education stands uniquely to elevate diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice beyond aspirational principles through deeply rooted commitments in our theological tradition.

Accompanying *So That All May Belong* are four pieces that demonstrate vocation as a societal responsibility rooted in justice and not solely an individual pursuit.

- Jason Mahn challenges the common view of vocation as mere personal satisfaction and presents a more intricate model of calling which requires responsibility and service toward others.

- Than Oo places importance on care and community while honoring the dignity of work to strengthen the Lutheran principle of recognizing all work as essential to the common good.
- Tracy Paschke-Johannes examines transitional spaces where multiple identities and religious backgrounds meet, highlighting the dedication of Lutheran higher education to creating inclusive and transformative educational settings.
- Kat Peters provides essential insights into both global and domestic mission work by demonstrating how structural boundaries and limitations can transform into opportunities for innovative solutions and acts of grace.

These works call on Lutheran higher education to progress from superficial efforts at inclusion to meaningful institutional change. The call for belonging reflects the Lutheran tradition of unending reform by pushing institutions to face their history and current. The pursuit of justice and inclusion serves as a tangible embodiment of Lutheran principles which uphold neighbor love, communal welfare and institutional reformation for the benefit of all.

My deepest gratitude and thanks goes to all contributors and specifically to the NECU leadership team behind the creation of *So That All May Belong...: Marcia Bunge, Robert Clay, Angie Hambrick, Altheia Richardson, Caryn Riswold, Deanna Thompson, and Colleen Windham-Hughes*. My aim for the content of this volume of *Intersections* is to function as a resource, guidance, and a challenge for NECU institutions to fully embrace their stated principles through campus environments that uphold dignity and respect while delivering transformative education to everyone.

Rev. Lamont Anthony Wells is the Executive Director, Network of ELCA (Lutheran) Colleges and Universities (NECU). As an international human rights activist, he focuses on enhancing and expanding access to education in equitable ways among global populations. Lamont.Wells@ELCA.org

FROM THE EDITOR

“It’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor.

Would you be mine? Could you be mine?

...I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you,

I’ve always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.

So let’s make the most of this beautiful day; since we’re together we might as well say,

Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won’t you be my neighbor?”¹

The lyrics of the theme song to *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* shaped my worldview and have served as a sort of walk-up song for my work in higher education. I resonate with the language of neighbor and the effort to find beauty and belonging in each neighbor and neighborhood. Mister Rogers seemed to know everyone in his neighborhood, and he was genuinely interested in them. He asked about their work and their lives, their hobbies and skills, what brought them joy and how they worked through difficulties they faced.

To me Fred Rogers’ show is an example—a living embodiment in televisual form—of a Lutheran understanding of vocation: to see dignity, beauty, and worth in each person you encounter; to offer your gifts generously, and with as much confidence, joy, and humility as you can muster; and to believe that the well-being of the neighborhood is intrinsically connected to the well-being of all of the neighbors.

Mister Rogers knew people my parents did not know and was willing to talk about experiences that adults often dismiss, either because they do not think children can handle it or because they think children should just get over it. In Mister Rogers I encountered an adult who was honest about the realities of death, sadness, anger, and fear. He also showed curiosity and wonder, which first required him to say something like, “I don’t

know; let’s find out together.”

Hopeful, humble, connected, and brave, Fred Rogers insisted that children need a place of belonging, where they can feel loved and practice loving others across all kinds of differences.

As I child I experienced a lot of firsts through *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*: my first tour through a factory, my first conversation about racism, my first explanation of the postal service, my first honest conversation about death, my first encounter with a child who used a wheelchair, my first interaction with a police officer, and many others. My mom did not like *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*; it moved too slowly for her. My dad liked the Land of Make-Believe, which was never my favorite. Both parents, however, witnessed my intense focus when Mister Rogers addressed the children, and they trusted his efforts to describe what it’s like to be human in the world.

Right now we are the ones who are trusted to describe what it’s like to be human in the world and to offer ourselves generously, with as much confidence, joy, and humility we can muster to the students we serve. It is our vocation to draw deeply on our values to offer our gifts in support collective flourishing.

Endnote

1. <https://misterrogers.org/videos/wont-you-be-my-neighbor/>



So That All May Belong: Lutheran Roots for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice

Introduction¹

Institutions that make up the Network of the ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU) share a common calling of “equipping graduates who are called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish.”² Although their mission statements vary, these institutions are committed to providing students of all backgrounds an excellent education and preparing them to use their unique strengths to contribute to the flourishing of people and our planet.

These commitments are rooted in educational reforms and a specific notion of calling or vocation promoted by Martin Luther in the 16th century. At a time when education was limited to the wealthy or to monks, nuns, and priests, Lutheran reformers claimed that all are called to use their unique gifts and strengths to love others, seek justice, and contribute to the common good. Thus, the various ways that people serve others, whether at home, work, or in civic life, are worthy callings. This simple but powerful concept of vocation led to a radical idea at the time: everyone should have access to education.

This concept of vocation informs NECU’s commitment not only to provide education for students of all backgrounds, but also to promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ). Doing so fosters belonging, honors the contributions of the diverse members of our campus communities, and aligns with the mission of NECU institutions. Furthermore, as we actively strive to cultivate campus communities where all feel a sense of belonging and DEIJ thrives, NECU

institutions are called to not only reject and address unjust or harmful institutional legacies and practices, but also to acknowledge where they have been active agents in the creation and maintenance of such legacies and practices. This call to acknowledge and redress harm is in line with the Lutheran spirit of reform and its commitment to justice.

One important way to strengthen DEIJ efforts is to emphasize how they are grounded in and supported by the missions and Lutheran roots of NECU institutions. Thus, this document highlights vital connections between NECU’s Lutheran roots and DEIJ efforts so that faculty, staff, students, administrators, and board members might better understand and more actively support this work. Understanding these connections can spur campus-wide support for DEIJ by dispelling a common misconception that DEIJ efforts and the Lutheran tradition are in conflict. Supporting DEIJ benefits all stakeholders because it fosters belonging, enriches community, and creates a vibrant educational environment where diverse backgrounds, ideas, perspectives, and experiences are integral to academic life.

Definitions, Connection to Lutheran Roots, and Calls to Action³

DIVERSITY

Definition: Diversity refers to the various backgrounds, lived experiences, values, and worldviews of individuals and communities that stem from differences in culture and

circumstance. This includes race, ethnicity, gender and gender expression, age, religion, nationality, language, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, political ideology, geographic region, and more. Diversity reflects the broad spectrum of human identity and experience, and it shapes how we understand the world and interact with one another.

Lutheran Roots: Lutheran theology affirms the goodness and diversity of creation and claims all persons are made in the image of God, thereby possessing equal dignity and worth. Furthermore, Lutheran theology claims that although human beings can know much about God and the world, the universe is complex, and human understanding is always limited. Recognizing creation's diversity and the limits of human knowledge, Lutheran theology embraces diversity and emphasizes the significance of wonder, academic freedom, intellectual humility, life-long learning, and building a world in which all people and our planet flourish.

Shaped by these notions, Lutheran higher education embraces diversity as a core value that enriches both the academic environment and the broader community. This commitment to diversity is not limited to demographic representation; it is about cultivating an environment where all voices are heard, respected, and valued. By engaging with diverse perspectives, Lutheran higher education helps individuals better understand the complex and dynamic world we live in and equips them with the skills to navigate and positively impact that world.

Call to Action: Diversity requires more than just acknowledgment—it demands action and commitment from all members of the community. To create a truly diverse and inclusive environment, each of us must play an active role in embracing difference and seeking out new perspectives. This work is ongoing and requires continuous learning, self-awareness, and a willingness to engage with others in meaningful ways.

We call on our Lutheran colleges and universities to:

- Focus on recruitment and retention: Work to recruit and retain people from diverse communities (students, faculty, staff and administration).

- Appreciate cultural wealth: Recognize and appreciate the richness that comes from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and identities. Intentionally engage with our own identities and experiences as well as those of people whose identities and experiences differ from our own.
- Challenge bias and discrimination: Educate ourselves about diverse communities and issues to more effectively take an active stance against behaviors, practices, and policies that marginalize or disadvantage individuals or groups.

By committing to these actions, we strengthen our community and ensure that diversity is not just something we tolerate but something we embrace as part of the goodness of creation. These actions also make possible ample opportunities to engage with individuals from diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

EQUITY

Definition: Equity is the active process of identifying and reducing or eliminating the structural barriers related to race, class, disability, gender, and other identities that limit access to, or prevent full participation in, our institutions and communal life. It requires understanding the root causes of disparities, identifying these barriers, and addressing the exclusion of historically marginalized groups within society. Equity is about ensuring that individuals and communities receive the specific resources and support they need to thrive, based on their unique circumstances.

Lutheran Roots: Lutheran theology affirms the dignity and worth of all persons and claims all are called to use their unique gifts and strengths to love and serve others. Lutheran tradition is therefore always reforming institutions and values various roles and responsibilities that contribute to the common good.

Lutheran colleges and universities seek to foster communities where every individual can succeed and contribute meaningfully. This requires recognizing that while everyone is of equal worth, not everyone starts from the same place or faces the same challenges. Equity goes beyond equality by acknowledging these differences and

working to remove barriers that prevent full participation, particularly for those from historically marginalized groups.

By providing targeted support and addressing barriers related to race, class, disability, gender, and other social identities, Lutheran institutions aim to create an environment where everyone can thrive and fully engage in academic and community life.

Call to Action: Equity requires active engagement from all members of the community. Achieving equity is an ongoing process that involves addressing both visible and invisible barriers to participation, particularly for those from historically underrepresented groups. It demands a commitment to understanding the unique challenges faced by different individuals and working collectively to create solutions that promote access and opportunity for all.

We call on our Lutheran colleges and universities to:

- Identify and address barriers: Examine the policies, practices, and structures within our institutions that may unintentionally disadvantage certain groups. Commit to actively working to reduce or eliminate these barriers.
- Provide targeted support: Recognize that different individuals and communities may need different forms of support to fully participate and succeed. Advocate for resources, support, and opportunities that are tailored to meet these specific needs.
- Foster accountability: Create mechanisms that hold our institutions and ourselves accountable for promoting equity. This includes regularly assessing the impact of policies and practices on marginalized groups and making adjustments when necessary.
- Promote equity through education and advocacy: Engage in ongoing learning about the root causes of disparities and advocate for initiatives that promote equity, both within our institutions and in the wider community.

By committing to these actions, we uphold the dignity of all persons and move closer to creating an equitable community where everyone, regardless of background or identity, can succeed. Equity is not just about fairness for individuals—it is about building a more inclusive and just society for all.

INCLUSION

Definition: Inclusion is the intentional act of embracing difference and creating environments where any individual or group is welcomed, respected, supported, valued, and given the opportunity to fully participate. Inclusion fosters a sense of belonging through centering and valuing the voices and perspectives of all individuals.

Lutheran Roots: Lutheran theology affirms that everyone is called to use their unique gifts and strengths to contribute to the common good. Building on their gifts, all people are free to pursue questions; seek truth, justice, and beauty; and share what they discover with others.

Inclusion is fundamental to the mission of Lutheran higher education: to cultivate individuals who are thoughtful, engaged, and compassionate citizens. It is about creating spaces where students, faculty, and staff from all backgrounds are valued and supported, allowing them to fully participate in academic, social, and civic life.

In this context, inclusion is not only about welcoming difference, but also about creating conditions where each person can contribute their unique perspectives and talents, enriching the entire community. By centering voices that have historically been marginalized, Lutheran institutions aim to foster environments where everyone is empowered to succeed. This inclusive approach ensures that the education provided prepares students not only for careers, but also for their roles as leaders in an increasingly diverse world.

Call to Action: Inclusion requires intentionality and action. Each member of the academic community—students, faculty, staff, and administration—has a role to play in fostering an inclusive environment. To fully live out the principles of inclusion, we must actively challenge behaviors and practices that exclude or marginalize individuals or groups.

We call on our Lutheran colleges and universities to:

- Engage in self-reflection: Consider how our own identities, actions, assumptions, and biases may impact others and work to build greater awareness and understanding.

- Create inclusive spaces: Work to ensure that everyone in the community feels welcomed and valued, regardless of their background or identity. This means being mindful of how spaces, both physical and social, can include or exclude certain groups.
- Foster dialogue and understanding: Encourage open conversations about diversity and inclusion and engage in respectful dialogue that promotes mutual understanding. Be willing to listen, learn, and grow from interactions with others whose experiences and perspectives may be different from your own.
- Advocate for inclusive policies and practices: Advocate for and support initiatives that promote full access and participation, particularly from under-represented groups.

By committing to these actions, we strengthen our community, affirm that all are called to use their unique gifts to serve the world, and ensure that our institutions remain places where everyone can belong, contribute, and succeed. Inclusion is a shared responsibility, and together, we can create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for all.

JUSTICE

Definition: Justice is the outcome of dismantling barriers to resources and opportunities for people who live in marginalized communities. Justice occurs when all individuals can live a full and dignified life, and all communities can thrive.

Lutheran Roots: In line with its affirmation of God’s good creation, the dignity of all persons, and its robust concept of vocation, Lutheran theology emphasizes the development of the whole person (mind, body, spirit), love of neighbor, and social and environmental justice. Relationships and institutions, though fallible, are necessary for promoting the well-being of individuals, families, communities, and the planet.

In the context of Lutheran higher education, justice is not an abstract concept, but a lived commitment to creating environments where fairness, equity, and compassion are at the core of community life. Lutheran values

align closely with justice by promoting the common good through service to others, care for the vulnerable, and environmental protection.

Lutheran higher education actively works to eliminate the barriers—whether social, economic, or structural—that prevent individuals and groups from accessing the full range of opportunities available. This ensures no one is unfairly disadvantaged by circumstances beyond their control.

Call to Action: Justice requires action. To realize a just and equitable community, we must commit to actively dismantling the barriers that exclude, marginalize, or disadvantage certain groups. This work is ongoing and demands continuous self-reflection, collaboration, and advocacy. Each member of the community has a role to play in promoting justice.

We call on our Lutheran colleges and universities to:

- Build solidarity: Stand alongside those who are fighting for social and environmental justice, and use our voices, influence, and resources to support efforts that dismantle inequities and create pathways for all people to thrive.
- Dismantle systemic and physical barriers: Identify and remedy institutional practices, policies, and structures that may unintentionally perpetuate inequality or exclusion, particularly for marginalized groups.
- Uplift marginalized voices: Actively listen to and amplify the perspectives of individuals and groups who have historically been excluded or oppressed. Recognize their experiences and contributions as essential to creating a more just community.
- Engage in service and advocacy: Support initiatives both on and off campus that work toward justice, from service to the neighbor to advocating for equitable policies.

By taking these steps, we move closer to the goal of justice and love of neighbor: a community where every person can live a full life, and where the structures that uphold inequity are transformed into systems that foster greater accessibility and collective flourishing.

Cultivating a Sense of Belonging through DEIJ

The intersection of DEIJ principles and Lutheran higher education creates a unique educational environment that promotes belonging and sets NECU institutions apart. Belonging is the extent to which people know and feel that they are valued, respected, included, and celebrated for their individual and unique contributions and identities. This is the outcome of DEIJ at work.

NECU institutions are called to offer a unique environment where students, faculty, and staff are not only included, but also celebrated, supported, and given the opportunity to thrive within a community grounded in faith and justice. This distinctive approach sets Lutheran institutions apart from other colleges and universities. These institutions can continue to differentiate themselves by offering an educational experience where belonging is not just a byproduct of DEIJ initiatives, but an integral part of the mission.

As these institutions look to the future, continued emphasis on belonging will further distinguish them as leaders in creating inclusive, supportive, and justice-driven educational environments that are intellectually rigorous and socially responsible, involving:

- Enhancing support for underrepresented groups, ensuring that all students, faculty, and staff have access to the resources they need to thrive academically, professionally, and personally.
- Expanding the definition of community, creating spaces where individuals from diverse backgrounds can engage with one another in meaningful ways.

- Deepening partnerships with local and global communities, reflecting the Lutheran commitment to service and global citizenship.
- Innovating our approaches to DEIJ work, grounded in the theological principles of grace, justice, and reconciliation, ensuring that belonging is not only inclusive but also spiritually and socially transformative.
- Allocating resources (human and financial) for accountability to outcomes that foster belonging for all members of the community.

Lutheran rootedness and commitments to diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice are in alignment with each other. Therefore, NECU institutions are called to foster opportunities for strategic connections and collaborations across departments and offices to facilitate this work. Together we must equip individuals not only with the knowledge but also with the tools to actively contribute to a more just, equitable, and inclusive society that fosters belonging for all.

Endnotes

1. A shortened version of this document also appears in this issue of *Intersections*.

2. *Rooted And Open: The Common Calling of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities*.

3. Definitions of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice in this document are adapted from the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE).

Scriptures That Inspire Work for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice

In this prolonged moment of unsettling for higher education, our work at NECU has been inspired and fortified by sacred texts that have formed us and continue to shape and sustain us. Below is a short list of biblical verses with which we intentionally worked in shaping *So That All May Belong: Lutheran Roots for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice*.

Undeniably, this is not a comprehensive list. Importantly, it may not yet include the sacred texts, poetry, or teaching that inspires you. Let us know what grounds and sustains you. We welcome conversation, and we are eager to publish more sources of inspiration and grounding from our colleagues in NECU.

Diversity is intentionally woven into creation and is good for human community

Genesis 1:27: “So God created humankind in God’s own image, in the image of God humans were created.”

This verse speaks to the inherent diversity in humanity, created intentionally by God. Each person reflects the image of God, and this diversity of gender, culture, and identity is a reflection of the Creator’s design.

1 Corinthians 12:12-14: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ... For the body does not consist of one member but of many.” See also *Romans 12* Paul’s analogy of the body highlights that diversity within a community is a source of strength, not division. Just as the human body is composed of different parts, all with unique roles, a community is stronger when it values the diverse contributions of its members.

Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

This verse emphasizes the spiritual equality of all people. Though human beings come from different backgrounds, in Christ, all are equally valued and welcomed. This connects to creating inclusive spaces that honor the inherent worth of every individual.

Equity manifests in concern for the specific needs of our communities

Proverbs 31:8-9: “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

This passage reflects the call to stand up for marginalized individuals and advocate for equity. It encourages identifying and addressing disparities, particularly for those who are unable to advocate for themselves, in line with equity’s goal of eliminating structural barriers.

Isaiah 1:17: “Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.”

Isaiah calls for actively seeking justice and supporting those who are marginalized or oppressed. This parallels equity’s focus on recognizing and addressing the systemic barriers that prevent full participation for historically under-represented groups.

2 Corinthians 8:13-14: “Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time, your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need.”

Paul emphasizes the concept of giving based on need, which aligns with equity’s goal of providing targeted support to individuals and communities according to their circumstances. It reflects the idea of sharing resources so that all can thrive.

Inclusion is a practice of making room for each and for all to belong

James 2:1-4: “My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism... Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”

James challenges the community to confront favoritism and discrimination, which aligns with the call to challenge bias and work for equity and inclusion. It encourages treating all people with dignity.

Ephesians 4:2-3: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

This passage calls for humility, patience, and love in community interactions, which is essential for fostering open, respectful dialogue. It encourages understanding and unity, even in the presence of differing perspectives and experiences.

Acts 4:34-35: “There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.”

This early Christian community demonstrates the practice of inclusive distribution of resources, ensuring that everyone’s needs are met. This models equity by recognizing that different individuals may require different levels of support in order to thrive.

Justice seeks flourishing and proceeds with mercy and compassion

Micah 6:8: “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

This foundational verse ties together the concepts of justice, mercy, and humility—key components of equity. It calls for an active commitment to justice, which includes addressing systemic barriers and ensuring fairness for all people.

Proverbs 31:8-9: “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

This proverb calls for advocating for those who are unable to advocate for themselves, a direct parallel to the justice work of dismantling barriers and advocating for fairness within Lutheran higher education.

Luke 4:18-19: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Jesus’ mission to bring good news to the poor and to set the oppressed free speaks directly to the idea of justice as creating conditions where all people, especially those in marginalized communities, can flourish. This verse aligns with the Lutheran focus on creating equitable, inclusive, and just opportunities for all.

So That All May Belong: Lutheran Roots for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice

NOTE: This is an abridged version of the complete document, which also appears in this issue.

Institutions that make up the Network of the ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU) share a common calling of “equipping graduates who are called and empowered to serve the neighbor so that all may flourish.”¹ Although their mission statements vary, these institutions are committed to providing students of all backgrounds an excellent education and preparing them to use their unique strengths to contribute to the flourishing of people and our planet.

These commitments are rooted in educational reforms and a specific notion of calling or vocation promoted by Martin Luther in the 16th century. At a time when education was limited to the wealthy or monks, nuns, and priests, Lutheran reformers claimed that all are called to use their unique gifts and strengths to love others, seek justice, and contribute to the common good. This concept of vocation informs NECU’s commitment not only to provide education for students of all backgrounds, but also to promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ²). Doing so fosters belonging, honors the contributions of the diverse members of our campus communities, and aligns with the mission of NECU institutions.

Furthermore, as we actively strive to cultivate campus communities where all feel a sense of belonging and DEIJ thrives, NECU institutions are called to reject unjust or harmful institutional legacies and practices and to address them. This call to acknowledge and redress

harm is in line with the Lutheran spirit of reform and its commitment to justice.

Lutheran Roots

Lutheran theology affirms the dignity and worth of all persons and claims all are called to use their unique gifts and strengths to love and serve others. Lutheran tradition is therefore always reforming institutions and values various roles and responsibilities that contribute to the common good. Building on their gifts, all people are free to pursue questions; seek truth, justice, and beauty; and share what they discover with others.

Although human beings can know much about God and the world, the universe is complex, and human understanding is always limited. Recognizing creation’s diversity and the limits of human knowledge, Lutheran theology embraces diversity and emphasizes the significance of wonder, academic freedom, intellectual humility, life-long learning, and building a world in which all people and our planet flourish.

In line with its affirmation of God’s good creation, the dignity of all persons, and its robust concept of vocation, Lutheran theology emphasizes the development of the whole person (mind, body, spirit), love of neighbor, and social and environmental justice. Relationships and institutions, though fallible, are necessary for promoting the well-being of individuals, families, communities, and the planet.

Shaped by these notions, Lutheran higher education embraces diversity as a core value that enriches both the academic environment and the broader community. This commitment to diversity is not limited to demographic representation; it is about cultivating an environment where all voices are heard, respected, and valued. By engaging with diverse perspectives, Lutheran higher education helps individuals better understand the complex and dynamic world we live in and equips them with the skills to navigate and positively impact that world.

We call on our Lutheran colleges and universities to:

- Focus on recruitment and retention: Work to recruit and retain people from diverse communities (students, faculty, staff and administration).
- Appreciate cultural wealth: Recognize and appreciate the richness that comes from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and identities and engage with people whose identities and experiences differ from our own.
- Engage in self-reflection and challenge bias: Consider how our own identities, actions, assumptions, and biases may impact others and work to build greater awareness and understanding.
- Provide targeted support: Recognize that different individuals and communities may need different forms of support to fully participate and succeed. Advocate for resources, support, and opportunities that are tailored to meet these specific needs.
- Foster accountability: Create mechanisms that hold our institutions and ourselves accountable for promoting equity. This includes regularly assessing the impact of policies and practices on marginalized groups and making adjustments when necessary.
- Create inclusive spaces: Work to ensure that everyone in the community feels welcomed and valued, regardless of their background or identity. This means being

mindful of how spaces, both physical and social, can include or exclude certain groups.

- Dismantle systemic and physical barriers: Identify and remedy institutional practices, policies, and structures that may unintentionally perpetuate inequality or exclusion, particularly for marginalized groups.
- Uplift marginalized voices: Actively listen to and amplify the perspectives of individuals and groups who have historically been excluded or oppressed. Recognize their experiences and contributions as essential to creating a more just community.
- Build solidarity: Stand alongside those who are fighting for social and environmental justice, and use our voices, influence, and resources to support efforts that dismantle inequities and create pathways for all people to thrive.
- Engage in service and advocacy: Support initiatives both on and off campus that work toward justice, from service to the neighbor to advocating for equitable policies.

NECU institutions are called to offer a unique environment where students, faculty, and staff are not only included, but also celebrated, supported, and given the opportunity to thrive within a community grounded in faith and justice. This distinctive approach sets Lutheran institutions apart from other colleges and universities. These institutions can continue to differentiate themselves by offering an educational experience where belonging is not just a byproduct of DEIJ initiatives, but an integral part of the mission.

Endnotes

1. *Rooted And Open: The Common Calling of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities.*

2. See National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education (NADOHE).

Vocation at Full Stretch: Reflections on *Follow Your Bliss and Other Lies about Calling* and its Use among College Students

Bonnie Miller-McLemore, emeritus professor of religion, psychology, and culture at Vanderbilt University, has written a book about calling *at full stretch*. As the title, *Follow Your Bliss and Other Lies about Calling*, suggests, Miller-McLemore first and foremost stretches the concept of calling beyond all the farm-style kitchen décor and boardroom posters featuring inspirational one-liners meant to keep us happy and productive; follow your bliss. Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life. Seize the day. Live with no regrets. For her, we are called not only to the work we love, the plans we make, and the opportunities we seize, but also to all the unchosen, unpaid, unexpected, and often painful circumstances, relationships, and obligations that interrupt our plan-making and summon us to respond.

The book also stretches the concept of calling past those years in early adulthood usually reserved for vocational discernment. Previously, Miller-McLemore participated in a study of vocation across the lifespan at the Collegeville Institute and edited (with Kathleen Calahan) the book, *Calling All Year's Good: Christian Vocation Across the Lifespan* (Eerdmans, 2017). In this latest book, she likewise addresses vocational

complexities that may not show up for a 20-year-old, but will be dealt with by most of us at one time or another.

In Miller-McLemore's terms, we must give up the overwrought, once-and-for-all understandings of vocation as "something ordained and special that we and only we are meant to do or something we're divinely given and compelled to follow."¹ That idea leads us "to think that we can (or must) find the *perfectly* fitting job, the *one-and-only special* life partner, the *ideally balanced* life, the *one-time summons* from God" (14). Such deluded expectations are not only untrue, they also "distort life's fuller, richer realities" (15). To live one's callings at full stretch entails learning to "live well with grief, lament, anger, frustration, fatigue, disappointment, sacrifice, vulnerability, limitations, closure, mortality and finitude" (14)—in short, all that one does not and would not choose, and yet that which also makes possible a life well lived. This "shadow side" or "dark side" of one's callings is not primarily an obstacle to



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be overcome, as some positive psychologists and other social scientific accounts of calling sometimes suggest. It is part of what makes life full, meaningful, and precious.

In short, Miller-McLemore claims that one must follow one's *blisters* as well as one's *bliss* (15). And she emphasizes the bodily nature of those blisters. They surface (sometimes literally) in moments of pregnancy, childbirth, and miscarriages, in making a living to feed hungry children, in aging, becoming dependent on others, and while facing death. To live one's calling at full stretch means that we live as creatures fully embodied. Our vocations not only include a life of the mind with its intentions and choices but also our lives as whole, vulnerable creatures who offer and receive care for one another.

"To live one's callings at full stretch entails learning to "live well with grief, lament, anger, frustration, fatigue, disappointment, sacrifice, vulnerability, limitations, closure, mortality and finitude" (14)—in short, all that one does not and would not choose, and yet that which also makes possible a life well lived."

Some blisters commonly surface early in life. College students know the need to make difficult decisions to pursue one major or career and not another, and the closed doors, second-guessing, and regret that inevitably follow. Learning to live with unexpected callings (say, the birth of a child with disabilities), or callings that need to be given up (for many, during the time of retirement) won't necessarily be at the top of mind for younger adults. Yet, Miller-McLemore makes it clear that life's "normal" course is never normative; people can experience the blisters alongside the bliss in any stage of life. So while she organizes the book beginning with callings familiar to young adults, moves to those common in middle age, and ends with those ordinarily experienced in the "third act," she notes that "these dilemmas cross boundaries, and in each case, people can experience the callings and their related hardships at any time in life" (12).

After receiving an early, signed copy of the book from the author (thank you, Bonnie!), I read it, learned from it, and quickly assigned it as required reading in my Fall 2024 course, "Christian Theology and Contemporary Social Issues." I shaped the third and final unit of that course around *Follow Your Bliss* and asked students to make "substantial use" of it in their final class paper. After sketching the broad contours of the book, I'll return to this course and my students' work with the book, testing its ability to connect with young persons who haven't yet had many of the experiences narrated so beautifully therein. I'll conclude with some words about what I have learned from reading and teaching this book about the need to think honestly about vocation among students needing to secure good jobs and within a college needing their tuition dollars.

From Decisions to Departures and Everything Between

The book's first two chapters on "missed callings" and "blocked callings" treat experiences familiar to traditional age college students. In the first, Miller-McLemore emphasizes an overlooked theme in Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken," namely, that we can and should look back on missed callings "*with a sigh*" (24). That is, we should allow ourselves to feel regret and grieve all the callings we couldn't answer, callings that were cut off by our own necessary decisions (to *de-cide* literally means to "cut off"). Still, "somewhere ages and ages hence" (Frost again), the path we did choose might show itself as I good, redeemable, and at any rate our own. Experiences named in the second chapter will be most familiar to minority students, women, and others who have been directed toward certain vocations for which they are "capable" and away from those "above" them. The trick here is to be able to distinguish the normal limits that characterize everyone's life (Chapter 1) from barriers unjustly imposed by privileged individuals or unjust social structures on the marginalized, which should be dismantled rather than accepted (Chapter 2).

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with callings typical of one's middle years. Whereas missed and blocked callings stem from the challenge of not being able to do as much as one wants, whether by natural limits or structural sin,

“conflicted callings” (Chapter 3) spring from the demand to do far too much. Any parent, but especially mothers, feel the precariousness of juggling the vocation of parenthood alongside paid work, care for aging adults, participation in church, fidelity to friends, and the need

“That is, we should allow ourselves to feel regret and grieve all the callings we couldn’t answer, callings that were cut off by our own necessary decisions.”

somehow to eat, shower, and maybe even poop in peace. As with blocked calling, Miller-McLemore here attends to the cultural and political systems that unequally distribute this hardship. Women have, often without other options, staffed the unpaid and undervalued “second shift” of cleaning, cooking, and caretaking—in fact, still 38 percent more of it than men, even when the woman is also the primary breadwinner (70-71). The goal, according to Miller-McLemore, is not to find an elusive “right balance,” which is next to impossible and often leads to exploitation and burnout. Rather, we must be honest about priorities, level patriarchal hierarchies, and become more comfortable with mediocrity in much of what we do.

Chapter 4, “Fractured Callings,” which takes its subtitle from the Apostle Paul: “I do not do the good I want,” stands out from the others in scope and tone. Miller-McLemore herself reflects on the difficulty of writing about, and even naming, failed or mistaken callings, which Christians have (perhaps misleadingly) labeled *sin*. To me, the challenge here relates to that of discerning between missed and blocked callings. “Fracture,” like *sin*, names the harm we enact, but also the brokenness affecting us before any decision on our part. Miller-McLemore writes about divorce and other painful breaks that people tragically choose *and* from which they suffer. She beckons readers (and herself) toward introspection, responsibility, and even confession (when appropriate), but does so without flattening fragility into fault and blaming those who are also victims. Most importantly and pastorally, she ends the chapter by witnessing to the healing,

forgiveness, learning, and grace that often follows from these more difficult moments in our lives.

Unexpected callings (Chapter 7) can interrupt and reconfigure any part of one’s life, but the author here focuses on those new, unexpected callings that emerge exactly because previous callings have been fulfilled so well. Strange but true: a life of responsibilities upheld and duties discharged gets you a lot more of the same. One will, almost by definition, never be done. Miller-McLemore writes of step-parenting as a “quintessential example” (119) of these expanding responsibilities of older adults.

The book ends, appropriately enough, with the callings we must “relinquish” at the end of our careers, our commitments, and our finite lives. Miller-McLemore here again calls for grief and room to lament. She notes, too, that our dominant culture is rather bad at letting go, especially with a vision of “the good life” that only tracks upward progress toward a *telos*, the goal pursued, never reckoning with the *terminus*, the final halt. Perhaps because relinquishing and lamenting is just so counter-cultural, the last chapter also feels the most Christian to me. She writes of the end of life as the time that many of us can stop counting the however-many habits of highly successful people, notice the transience and ultimate meaninglessness of much that we try to accomplish, accept grace and so become free to return to our fundamental calling to love God and the neighbor.

The short summary of the book above doesn’t do justice to Miller-McLemore’s reflective, personal, nuanced, and often funny voice throughout. The book brims with stories of people’s missed, blocked, conflicted, fractured, unexpected, and relinquished callings, and how they work their way through them. Some stories are taken from other books, but many are about the author or the people she knows and loves. I am somewhere in the middle third of a normal lifespan, and I relate to almost all of these accounts of the dark sides of calling, either because I have already experienced them, know people who have, or see them coming all too soon. (Even Miller-McLemore’s seemingly trite ponderings about how to relinquish an extensive academic library that she has built up over her career evokes some existential anxiety on my part. Does my life’s work finally matter? Will I even be able to *give away* my heavily annotated

three-in-one volume of Tillich's *Systematic Theology*?) But what about my students, most of whom are only now embarking on the second quarter of their lives? Can a book stretching vocation into the shadows and throughout the lifespan be meaningful and helpful to them?

Teaching and Learning from the Book

As I mentioned above, I chose to assign *Follow Your Bliss* as the central text of the final unit of a course that serves primarily sophomore students fulfilling their one "religion requirement." The first unit of that course paired a short book on sin and salvation, *Speaking of Sin*, by Barbara Brown Taylor, with recent theological cases for reforming our criminal justice system in order to move from retributive to restorative justice. In the second unit, students read Timothy Beal's *When Time is Short: Finding Our Way in the Anthropocene*, which proposes a realistic "creaturely theology" for a human species that perpetually denies death but might now be irreversibly headed toward our own extinction. While I didn't notice the resonance between these texts and themes when I made the syllabus, re-reading *Follow Your Bliss* alongside the students allowed me to hear echoes of Taylor in the ways Miller-McLemore writes about fractured callings, as well as Beal's call for "palliative hope" in Miller-McLemore's invitation to "cultivate hearts capable of living with indeterminacy, ambiguity, and conclusions" (29).

The prompt for the students' final project asked them to draw from texts and conversations over the course of the term, including a "Story Corps" interview² that they conducted with a family member or mentor about their religious/spiritual lives and vocations. Students were asked to convey their understanding of calling as a concept, and to grapple with their own past, present, and anticipated callings, making use of Miller-McLemore's book in the process. Having read and responded to their final essays, I have good evidence to conclude that this book on the whole of life's callings, and one that lifts up their shadow sides, is *especially* meaningful and helpful to young adults who too often assume (often with our help) that vocations are to be *planned* by looking immediately ahead rather than *borne* while attending to the whole of one's limited life.

Finding Language for Experiences

Not surprisingly, many of my students analyzed the idea of calling and made sense of their own vocations through Miller-McLemore's "missed" and "blocked" categories. One student wrote of loving math when she was young, but also feeling called to work with children. She described feeling physically ill when she had to decide on a major, and even after making a decision (for speech-language pathology), "there is still a pit in [her] stomach about not pursuing a degree in accounting." Miller-McLemore helped her understand that these feelings, however painful, are inevitable and normal. They come not because she made a *wrong* decision but because she made *a* decision, and so necessarily cut away other options. The student vows to acknowledge but not cling to regret, which will allow her "to live [her] life without such a large weight on [her] shoulders."

Another student admitted to struggling with decision-making even when it comes to things like deciding what to eat for dinner. When it comes to larger decisions, like her recent decision to transfer out of Augustana in order to save money by enrolling in a college while living at home, "the inner conflict intensifies." Indeed, the student finds the idea that any decision cuts away a multitude of possibilities "terrifying." About Miller-McLemore on missed callings, the student then wrote:

It was beneficial for me to hear how Miller-McLemore suggests we navigate these missed callings. She suggests that we must acknowledge the loss while also finding balance by holding onto hope. It's essential to accept the grief of lost possibilities, but also to recognize that "saying no to one way in life allows us to say yes to another" (quoting Miller McLemore 40).

I read these words at about the same time the student was handing in her dorm room keys. I think that her reflections on the pain and possibilities related to missed callings helped her make the move with the freedom that comes with accepting loss, or what Beal describes as palliative hope.³

The student transferring from Augustana also wrote about blocked callings. She was unable to continue her studies at Augustana because the rising costs of education (and life), coupled with the flattened wages of

her working-class family, impeded her pursuit of that path. Other students also used language from Chapter 2 to describe the hardships they faced. One student described his decision to go to college as a way through limits imposed by his family: “My relationship with my mother

“Miller-McLemore writes of callings that remain blocked throughout a person's life, but which the next generation can take up and live out in new and courageous ways (63). This student confirmed that her parents’ blocked callings have influenced her own, discussing both the pressure and the pride of being a first-generation college student.”

was particularly strained,” he wrote. “She wanted me to be something that I was not.” The student describes his first and most authentic vocation: “the calling to learn—a calling to take control of my life.” Other students wrote of the socio-political obstructions faced by their parents. One daughter of Mexican immigrants describes her father, the youngest child of eight, who dropped out of school at an early age. He was and is interested in art, music, and sports, and really talented at them, too (according to his proud daughter). However, the “narrow minded ideas of my grandparents [prevented him from] pursuing work outside of a ‘man’s job.’” Her mother, too, was “practically forced” to go to cosmetology school by societal and familial expectations; she never became the “great psychologist she once dreamed of.” Miller-McLemore writes of callings that remain blocked throughout a person's life, but which the next generation can take up and live out in new and courageous ways (63). This student confirmed that her parents’ blocked callings have influenced her own, discussing both the pressure and the pride of being a first-generation college student.

Conflicted callings were also commonly experienced by students, especially female students who resonated with Miller-McLemore’s descriptions. One student

described her callings as a student, daughter, older sister, athlete, employee, and volunteer, all of which “demand [her] time, attention, care, and energy” (Quoting Miller-McLemore 67). Another student finds herself conflicted about attention to schoolwork versus attention to family. Indeed, she writes matter-of-factly: “Currently, while I write this paper, my grandfather is in the hospital and although my parents have assured me that he is alright, a part of me feels like I am turning my back on my family because I am not there to support him.” She also takes heed of Miller-McLemore’s advice about prioritization and acceptance of limits: “I know that when I finish my work at school, I will be able to go and see my grandfather and support him through his recovery.”

Finding Experiences for Language

Some of the most remarkable stories told would not have come up without Miller-McLemore’s category of “unexpected” callings. A junior transfer student earlier had told me that she spent two years at a community college before coming to Augustana, but hadn’t disclosed the backstory, until the final paper:

My experience of an unexpected calling happened when my mom passed when I was in high school. I originally planned to go to a university right away after graduating from high school. However, I ended up staying home for the first two years and attending community college in order to help my dad and grandma who was living with us. I also got to heal from the passing of my mom with my family together rather than apart.

The student concluded this paragraph by saying that these events “sometimes make me feel behind my peers [at Augustana] because I haven’t had as much time to think and reflect on what I want to do or feel called to do with my life.” In my comments back to her, I wrote that I hoped Miller-McLemore’s book would help her to see that this painful unexpected calling is itself a powerful part of her vocation rather than a setback or obstacle that she must overcome.

The student who included “big sister” in her list of conflicting callings noted that when she interviewed her

father about his vocation, he never mentioned anything about unexpected callings. But, she writes, “the more I thought about it, I found one that affected our whole family.” She tells the story about her father’s sister, who had a baby about 12 years ago and could not care for the child after she relapsed into drug addiction. The student’s family fostered the child for four months and then adopted her. According to the student, “my family and I did not expect this, but we were called to take care of this child and give her the attention she deserves...She became a huge part of my life and I can’t imagine her not being my sister.”

“Beyond simply giving a name to the experience, the book enables students to include in their vocations all that they undergo and bear, and not only what they plan for and choose.”

While I don’t want to psychologize these students or guess at why they tell the stories they do, it is worth questioning whether 20-year-olds would have talked about the conflicts between being called to care for family and attention to oneself or one’s career, as many older women experience, or about the unexpected callings that follow the death of a parent or the birth of a child, as many older adults also experience, if it were not for Miller-McLemore’s description of callings in these terms. Without her descriptions of callings at full stretch—especially those that take full account of pregnancy, miscarriage, birth, (dis)ability, aging, and death and so fully honor our embodiment in the world, I’m not sure these experiences would register as important parts of the students’ called lives. Beyond simply giving a name to the experience, the book enables students to include in their vocations all that they *undergo* and *bear*, and not only what they *plan for* and *choose*. A “narrative” or “postliberal” theologian, one who believes that language not only names experience but also helps shape it, might add that *Follow Your Bliss* not only gives new *names* for these students’ experiences, but also actually enables them to experience these events as *callings*, and to live into them as such.

Football, Housework, and Evocations of “God’s Will”

“Relinquished callings,” common as they are at the end of one’s career or life, seem least relevant to my college students. Indeed, few of them wrote about learning to put down work and responsibilities that have hitherto shaped their lives. However, one football player, who sat in the back of the class with his teammates, waxed philosophical about the finite vocations of student-athletes. He wrote of his father’s paid vocation as a football coach and his own early desire to play sports and (at least as important) to be a part of a team. From age three, he retrieved the tee after kickoffs at high school football games and later took on the role of ball-boy. He notes that to an outsider, these early experiences may seem inconsequential; for him, though, they were a “way to do a service for those I considered to be as close as brothers.”

He then wonders whether playing football in college hasn’t taken away from his academics. Surprisingly, given that he calls teammates “brothers,” he doesn’t feel as though football “provides a service to my community.” But he plays, in part, “to make my father proud.” He cannot at this time “step away from a game that has shaped the man I am today.” Yet, notably, he does recognize that there will be an end and that it is coming soon:

Still, looking at my call to play football, I know at some point I will not be able to keep playing football and will have to relinquish that calling. . . . [The way Miller-McLemore] wrestles with what to do after her own retirement resonates with me. This makes me think about my future, in particular, two years from now when I’ll “retire” from playing football. I must think about what new callings will follow in place of this one, but I am unsure of what [they will be]. This shows how I have been struggling to come to terms with my limited life in football.

I think the last sentence would have been equally, perhaps more “existentially,” true even without the last two words, “in football.” If Miller-McLemore helps me to see just how consequential questions about what to do with my used books are, the student helps me to appreciate his vocation as an athlete, and how putting that down will be necessary and painful, but

may also help him to “find new opportunities to love God and neighbor” (151).

Interestingly, none of my students explicitly used Miller-McLemore’s category of “fractured callings” to describe their own or loved ones’ lives. This isn’t surprising, given the religious weight of brokenness and sin, coupled with the academic setting of our work. Still, one student who earlier visited me during office hours to discuss non-literalist interpretations of the Bible, which were new to her, wrote about her conservative Christian mother’s callings and, in so doing, negotiated the complex relations between personal choice, God’s will, and sinful social structures. The student’s mother told her during the Story Corps interview that she was “called to be a wife and mother [because] that’s what women were created [by God] to do” In the final paper, the student wonders whether her mother’s perceived calling was really from God, or whether it issued from sinful, patriarchal social structures that blocked her mom from pursuing other things. The student decided that she could not untangle the issue. Like her mother, she also feels called to “being a wife and mother” as well as “having a pottery studio in a shed out in the backyard.” The question for her is not, first of all, whether those callings come from God and/or a patriarchal social structure, but why such vocations are “often

“The question for her is not, first of all, whether those callings come from God and/or a patriarchal social structure, but why such vocations are ‘often overlooked and deemed less important in comparison to paid work.’”

overlooked and deemed less important in comparison to paid work.” Like Miller-McLemore, she recognized that religious language evoking God’s will can function as ideological justification or divine “sanction” (14) for systems that are unjust. And yet, also like Miller-McLemore, the student suggests that the alternative to such religious rationalizations is not to do away with religion, but to understand it as embodied, socially contextualized, fallible, and important.

Admittedly, simpler understandings of “higher callings” or “God’s will” were also common in these student papers. Despite Miller-McLemore’s robust theological language, the students interpreted the book as an endorsement of secular accounts of vocation, as with this comment from the student who wrote of her immigrant parents’ blocked calling:

Miller-McLemore’s portrayal of blocked callings shifted my understanding of calling in religious terms to more secular terms. I respect that some people believe God or a higher power controls their life but we can’t deny the other controlling or even determining external factors. Miller-McLemore highlights the social injustices or inequalities that lead to missed opportunities, mainly experienced by minorities.

Could attention to these “determining external factors” shift the student’s understanding of calling not (only) to more secular terms, but also to deeper and more nuanced—or even more Christian—understandings of God’s “will”?⁴ Even the student readying himself to give up football associated this with a nonreligious vocation, even though Miller-McLemore portrays relinquished callings in explicitly Christian terms. According to the student-athlete: “This coming to terms with limited time is what I think is the secular point of calling. This is very different from the religious point of calling, which is to better the world around us.”

These students join Miller-McLemore in recognizing the danger of religious rationalizations, but not the place of more nuanced and faithful religious discernment. By contrast, at least one student evoked God’s will as an endorsement of his aspirations. Having been unable to become a professional race car driver, he now “plan[s] on giving my children the opportunity to race, if I am wealthy enough, and if one or more [of them] share my passion.” The student “intended on financing” this dream deferred to his children by becoming an “investment banker, one of the highest paying jobs in all of finance.” He has since decided on accounting, a career that should “provide [him] with enough income to meet [his] aggressive saving/ investment goals.” He’s done well in his accounting classes, having “been gifted with high information retention and an innate ability to analyze everything,”

and so does “not doubt that these God-given skills were handed to [him] for a reason.” He also recently received an internship offer from Deloitte, “the top accounting firm in the world.” The student surmises that “seeing as how I got the internship, I like to believe this is what God is calling me to do.”

To be fair, the student also made a case for how CPAs are needed not only so that their kids can drive race cars, but also to ensure that financial systems remain in good keeping, which in turn helps maintain “the beauty, integrity, and orderliness of the world”—a good description of Lutheran understandings of calling as rooted in God’s creation.⁵ Still, in my comments back to the student, I asked him to consider times when what happens in our lives or in history does not straightforwardly point to the will of God, and when evocations of that will can function to justify decisions and ambitions that may or may not be good and just. I have also written in my own end-of-semester reflections about the need to carve more time to discuss the complex and subtle nature of divine callings the next time I teach this class and book.

Lies About Calling at Mission- and Tuition-Driven Colleges

As my reflections above indicate, I find this book incredibly helpful and thoughtful. Readers, including traditional college-age readers, are empowered to think of vocation in wide and deep ways. They are able to perceive the embodied, unplanned, and often painful dimensions of their lives as essential parts of their calling rather than distractions to be overlooked or obstacles to be overcome. They are thus able to *live vocationally*—with reflection, courage, and seasoned hope—throughout their limited lives.

To conclude these reflections, I want to note the value of this book for those working or learning at a Lutheran liberal arts college that is both mission-driven and tuition-driven. Too many of us at places like Augustana College continue to talk about vocation in ways that make it look unrelated to the real-world realities of today’s students. Linked with personal meaning, fulfillment, and a transcendent sense of purpose, vocation can sound like a luxury—something offered to white, upper-middle-class students of yesterday

but hardly available for the average college student today. Here, vocation is associated with the liberal arts, that with a “free life of the mind,” and each is distinguished from the realities and necessities of the real world. “First gen” and domestic students of color, who aim to survive college and obtain a measure of upward mobility, and international students, who often come to the U.S. to pursue careers in healthcare, engineering, or computer programming, can think of vocation (if they think of it at all) as something for “traditional” students. Educators concerned with access and retention of historically marginalized students often find Augustana’s commitment to “offering a challenging education that develops the qualities of mind, spirit and body necessary for students to discern their life’s calling of leadership and service”⁶ to be incongruous with, if not tone-deaf to, more pressing needs.⁷

“Too many of us at places like Augustana College continue to talk about vocation in ways that make it look unrelated to the real-world realities of today’s students. Linked with personal meaning, fulfillment, and a transcendent sense of purpose, vocation can sound like a luxury—something offered to white, upper-middle-class students of yesterday but hardly available for the average college student today.”

Miller-McLemore’s book, by contrast, emphasizes that callings are deeply grounded in lived experiences, and thus must “possess a materiality and practicality often overlooked in more theoretical treatments” (5). In light of this, the transfer student worrying whether to spend more time on her religion paper or visit her grandfather in the hospital, or the first gen student feeling both pride and pressure to take advantage of the opportunities from which her immigrant parents were blocked, and maybe even the student who decides to major in accounting so

that his kids can live out dreams that he could not—all these students are negotiating “deeply relational and communal callings” that are “shaped within and controlled by our intimate relationships and social contexts” (4). While most college classrooms don’t have Follow Your Bliss! posters hanging on classroom walls, educators do tell their own lies about calling. We (including me) have advised students to “major in whatever you want and you can worry about making a living later”—as though the campus bubble inoculates students from the worries of the “real world.”

But *Follow Your Bliss and Other Lies about Calling* cuts in the other direction as well. Too often, in honoring the lived realities of college students, we flatten the breadth and depth of bodily needs to the need to make money. In doing so, we conflate vocation with career. We assume that it is “undecided” students who should do some vocational discernment in order to decide on a career and major. Vocational discernment thereby can sometimes sound like it is a precursor to career readiness, a sort of remedial help for less ambitious students or those with commitment issues. When vocation is directly and exclusively linked to the choice of career (and choice of career with choice of major), we untruthfully overlook all the other realities that college students experience or for which they should be preparing, for example, the negotiation of the competing demands of work and parenting, or the decision whether to accept a promotion that moves you further from an aging parent. Miller-McLemore even includes this most real reality: “How does one die gracefully at the end of a life well lived?” (148).

Miller-McLemore rightfully attends to the need to earn a living. But she also extends “the real world” to include paid and unpaid vocations, some experienced now and others awaiting us, those we choose and those we can only bear as faithfully and gracefully as we can. She thus proves more realistic than even the most anxious parents interrogating their children about why they are majoring in classics. As such, the book can help colleges and universities close the gap between the idealistic language of their mission statements and the realities of shrinking middle-class and tuition-dependent institutions. That gap is best

closed not by striking a happy balance between traditional liberal arts and “practical” programs, as some “liberal-arts-plus” institutions attempt to do. It closes by including within the highest goals of higher education the formation of students capable of faithfully responding to their many callings—some planned, many others unexpected and difficult. We need to retain spaces on our campuses and in our curricula (for example, in a one required religion course!) where students and educators can reflect honestly about the bliss and blisters of their lives. This book is an invaluable resource toward that end.

Endnotes

1. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Follow Your Bliss and Other Lies About Calling* (Oxford UP, 2024), 14. Subsequent quotations from Miller-McLemore’s book will be given in parentheses.
2. I adapted this assignment from my colleague Mark Safstrom, who uses it in his own section of Augustana’s “Reasoned Examination of Faith” requirement. Our versions borrow questions and interview ideas from Story Corps, Inc. See <https://storycorps.org/participate/great-questions/>
3. Timothy Beal, *When Time is Short: Finding Our Way in the Anthropocene* (Beacon, 2022), 65-74.
4. While I need to think more about this, I wonder whether Miller-McLemore’s case that bodily experiences of loss and limit should deepen our understanding of calling (which has been too dependent on a person’s volition, plans, and decisions) shouldn’t also change the way we think about the “will of God” that people of faith try to discern and follow. Christians, at least, believe that “God’s will” cannot be faithfully discerned apart from the embodied life, death, and resurrection of the incarnate Jesus who lives according to and so reflects the will of God.
5. The student here references my chapter, “You: Radicalizing Life’s Calling,” in *Radical Lutherans / Lutheran Radicals*, ed. Jason A. Mahn (Cascade, 2017), 135-38.
6. Augustana’s Mission Statement. Available at: <https://www.augustana.edu/about-us/mission>
7. This paragraph draws from my chapter, “The Value(s) of Lutheran Liberal Arts in a Neoliberal Age,” in *Called to Reckon: Re-placing History and Reclaiming Mission at a Midwestern College*, ed. Jane E. Simonsen, forthcoming from Southern Illinois University Press.

How Mister Rogers' Neighborhood Reminds Us About Work



Mister Rogers' Neighborhood premiered nationally in the U.S. on February 19, 1968. Around a year later, Thiel College, a NECU institution, extended Fred McFeely Rogers his first honorary degree. Several other colleges and universities would later follow suit.

While most students beginning their higher education today were born after Fred Rogers' passing in 2003, they are familiar with his legacy—as confirmed by an enthusiastic showing of hands during a first-year seminar at Thiel where we discussed themes from the trailblazing series.

Though not explicitly religious in messaging, Fred Rogers incorporated faith-based values throughout his program: the iconic intro song, approach to sensitive subjects, and depiction of inclusive representation.

His appreciation for vocation is also evident during the show's frequent factory visits segments, or as he referred to them, "How people make things." From guitar stringing to tofu pressing, he regularly promoted different kinds of work we are called to.

The finale of Season 15's five-part arc "Mister Rogers Talks About Work" further highlights Fred Rogers' reflections on the subject. Originally airing in April 1984, the plot

"I like children to know that people can take pride in their work and that everyone's job is important." —Fred Rogers

follows residents in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe who learn they must divert their hard-earned funds for a swimming pool to repair a plumbing issue instead.

Special scenes throughout the episode also play relevant commentary on the dimensions and realities of "work":

- Mr. Rogers shares a rare glimpse of the WQED television studio with an on-camera introduction of the band and production crew. He explains the necessity of various roles, built from individual talents and interests, in creating his show.
- Beaver O'Day nearly breaks character laughing, as he's questioned whether people should ever take time to relax before their jobs are fully completed.
- There is a noticeable emphasis on how much things cost and the importance of properly compensating others for their services. Handyman Negri almost misplaces a payment for Patterson's Pipes. *What did you do with the check, Joe?*

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The Mister Fred M. Rogers Room is a collaboration space, located inside the James Pedas Communications Center at Thiel College, Greenville, Pennsylvania.

The storyline does have a happy conclusion. After the pipes are fixed, the nearby town of Westwood proposes a combination of funds with Make-Believe to create a shared pool conveniently situated between both locations.

“You know, it’s fun to pretend that things work out like that, isn’t it?” comments Mr. Rogers.

However, things can work out in real life like they do in the Neighborhood.

Many of us embrace the mission of strengthening our students and campus with already limited resources. We skillfully strategize and formulate the best plans, only to encounter obstacles from changing institutional priorities and needs.

The community of Make-Believe offers us a reminder that these challenges are an effective opportunity to practice creativity, perseverance, and optimism. To reframe, edit, and collaborate. We find other ways to achieve our goals, and the results turn out even better than expected.

As Fred Rogers famously said...

“Often when you think you’re at the end of something, you’re at the beginning of something else.” —*Fred Rogers*

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Ecotones of Faith



An Ecotone is a transitional area between two ecosystems, containing characteristics of both. Teeming with life, that is, mingling with other species from ecosystems different from their own, it is also a space where new plant and animal species are birthed. Often found where one body of

water meets another (think lagoons), you can find creatures adapted to salt water evolving to live in freshwater. It's an ecological wonder. It is also theologically rich; the space where our creator God continues to speak new life into being. A place where kairos moments are born and, if we're open, new experiences, life, and possibilities are revealed.

It is also a space we are living in as Church and Body today.

In John 6:31, the crowd tells Jesus "Our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness" and Jesus replies, "Very truly I tell you...it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world....I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never thirst."

When looking at the Greek tense, scripture tells us "manna" is not simply a story that resides in the faithful past of our forebears, but is an ongoing gift of God in the

present. God's liberating power is not confined to the past tense but is seen in the ever-present action of love. It is a life-giving power that originates in heaven and comes to us through Christ.

In ministry, it is common to hear a longing for the past—a time when things were "more stable" and when people "weren't so distracted." A time when the pews were full and the budget covered our vision. Those of us in ministry for less than 15 years have a gift—we've never seen or experienced times of stability in the Church. The world of our adult years has always been in flux. We have never known a time when there was harmony (perhaps fictional) between the Church and the world.

We were born in the ecotone.

"The world of our adult years has always been in flux. We have never known a time when there was harmony (perhaps fictional) between the Church and the world."

In the kingdom of God's ecotone, people are fed and nourished by manna from heaven...giving us new life here and now. Now, this takes us to a new ecosystem: a place where heaven and earth become one through the ONE. Ruach is breathing new life into being before our eyes...

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using our minds and bodies to speak the TRUTH. Ruach is creating kairos moments where we ourselves are evolving into something new. We have characteristics of what we once were, mixing with the beauty of God's creation, and seeing within ourselves that we are being made new.

Ministry of this era is unbound—we don't know what is to come, or how the Church will emerge. Life in the ecotones is all we have known. The previous freshwater ecosystem can't support the new life being formed in the salty water. Yet all that is to come isn't quite ready for the open ocean either. Something new is being nourished and emerging.

We aren't called to minister in the world of the past. We won't be equipped for the ministry that is to come in 50 years. Instead, we are empowered to nurture the ecotone that is RIGHT NOW. We can see the previous freshwater world that no longer exists, while also catching glimpses of the open ocean that will be.

So live into THIS ecotone. Live into the LIFE God is creating. Feast on the manna and water of life that flows from above. Know that you are called and equipped by God.

"We aren't called to minister in the world of the past. We won't be equipped for the ministry that is to come in 50 years. Instead, we are empowered to nurture the ecotone that is RIGHT NOW. We can see the previous freshwater world that no longer exists, while also catching glimpses of the open ocean that will be."

CALL **FOR** CONTRIBUTIONS

The theme for *Intersections* in Fall 2025, "Vocation: Ethical Leadership," is directly related to the summer conference for Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education. Join us in the conversation in Minneapolis on July 14-16.

Contributions are due September 1, 2025. If you would like to be in conversation about an idea that is brewing, please be in touch with the editor, Colleen Windham-Hughes: windhamh@callutheran.edu

KAT PETERS

Finding the Miracle in the Intersection of Mission and Limitations: Lessons from Latin America



Those of us who work with university students know that many of them struggle to find a balance between living into their values and ideals and finding a career and a life that will support them financially. Should I be an aerospace engineer, or should I find a way to bring potable water to Africa?

How do I live out my sociology degree—by working with former prisoners in their re-entry challenges, or by pursuing advanced degrees and a tenure-track teaching job?

This same search for balance is one that is plaguing the field of higher education as a whole: how do we as institutions of learning live into our values and mission, while also surviving financially? Do we need to sacrifice our ideals in order to pay the bills? If we prioritize our idealistic missions, do we automatically give up financial stability?

These are, at their core, vocational questions. Vocation—the crossroads between our mission and purpose and our real world opportunities, limitations, and challenges.

Our Lutheran institutions of higher learning are not unique in our struggle to understand the continuum

between fulfilling our missions while also capturing enough tuition and funding in order to survive. In times of social upheaval and change, many organizations, communities, and individuals grapple with how to move forward on important projects with uncertain levels of sustainability.

“This same search for balance is one that is plaguing the field of higher education as a whole: how do we as institutions of learning live into our values and mission, while also surviving financially? Do we need to sacrifice our ideals in order to pay the bills? If we prioritize our idealistic missions, do we automatically give up financial stability?”

When our institutions need to accept changes to structure, size, and academic offerings, our students may wonder if their education and co-curricular experiences are of the quality that they had been promised. I have

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heard from students about this precise question, even while I work with other students whose post-graduation plans are currently derailed due to uncertainty about federal civil service and nonprofit jobs.

“We may not have the money of K-Street, but we have good information that we can provide to members of Congress at the right time, to make real change.”

—A lesson learned from a Lutheran World Relief colleague

I have been thinking about how a few of my experiences with Lutheran nonprofits, as well as my time leading a study abroad program in Central America might have something to say to us in higher education as we navigate current challenges and as we counsel students to consider the balancing act that is purpose and real-world limitations.

Lately, as I have watched the news, I am reminded of the summer I spent in Washington, DC, interning at the public policy advocacy office of Lutheran World Relief (LWR). It was the summer of 2005, when the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA, which I had been told by communities in El Salvador and Nicaragua was going to be very harmful to them and their livelihoods) passed through Congress in an after-midnight vote after several members of Congress changed their votes due to strong-arming by the Bush administration. Plan Colombia, the main focus of LWR’s advocacy work at the time, was sending US weapons and Round-Up chemicals to disrupt coca production in marginalized farming communities, hurting Afro-Colombian Lutherans there.

The mission of LWR was to defend Lutheran communities from harm caused by U.S. policy in Latin America. The reality was that heavily funded interests could sway members of Congress, and LWR just didn’t have the budget to compete. However, Midwestern Lutherans in the *Sal y Luz* solidarity network, along with LWR staffers in Washington, used their voices to communicate the message of peace to strategic Congressional leaders. I remember an LWR colleague,

exiled from Colombia at that time, telling me as we walked briskly up Capitol Hill for a meeting of the Congressional Black Caucus, “We may not have the money of K-Street, but we have good information that we can provide to members of Congress at the right time, to make real change”. In fact, while I was in Washington, the now-late South Dakota Senator Tim Johnson (an ELCA Lutheran) proposed a change to Plan Colombia based on what he was hearing from Lutherans in his state.

The money that LWR did *not* have meant it needed to rely on regular people and their relationships of solidarity, which both reflected and built community in the Midwest and across the Americas.

It was that experience that taught me that fulfilling a big mission does not require exorbitant budgets, but rather dedicated, thoughtful people who respond to a call with listening and caring hearts, and strategic action. It was also an experience that convinced me that cross-cultural education and solidarity work are just as important as direct advocacy on Capitol Hill, a lesson that led me to work in study abroad in Central America at the Institute for Central American Development Studies (ICADS).

“It was that experience that taught me that fulfilling a big mission does not require exorbitant budgets, but rather dedicated, thoughtful people who respond to a call with listening and caring hearts, and strategic action.”

One more story, this time from the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica. This is where a small cooperative of rural women had received funding from the United Nations to build cabins for ecotourism which is a strategy formed worldwide to help address the decline in incomes from agriculture facing so many small farmers. At this particular farm, called El Yüe (named after a tree commonly found in the area), a study abroad student in economics gathered information on the various economic projects of the farm: organic banana production; a plant nursery; subsistence production of

pigs, chickens and vegetables; and now ecotourism (food, lodging, and tours). The students aimed to provide information to the organization on how they could be more efficient and more profitable at their ecotourism project: How they could increase income in order to fulfill their mission?

In my opinion, what the student found was groundbreaking. First, he concluded that the farm was not efficient

“He also found that the diversified economic activities of the farm sustained the organization through the volatile tourism high and low seasons, climate change impacts on banana plants, and other disruptions and crises.”

nor profitable in their ecotourism project. The cabins did not necessarily increase the farm’s overall income, but they *did* increase their stability, their community connections, and their ability to support local families. He found that time not spent on marketing the ecotourism project (a suggestion for improvement he was prepared to make) was actually spent doing community-building programs in the El Yüe library on literacy, self-esteem, recycling, and handicrafts. He also found that the diversified economic activities of the farm sustained the organization through the volatile tourism high and low seasons, climate change impacts on banana plants, and other disruptions and crises. The ecotourism project was treated like, and integrated into all of the other economic activities of the farm—one of many that contributed to the bigger economic and communal mission of the organization.

In my story above, did Lutheran World Relief achieve the repeal of Plan Colombia and raise enough money to feel relaxed and confident on Capitol Hill? No. Did they fulfill their mission to engage US Lutherans in advocacy in order to build solidarity networks and impact the lives of Colombians for the better? Yes.

Did the women at El Yüe achieve sustainable economic independence through transitioning from farming to ecotourism? No. Did they increase their economic stability

while also building community, educating visitors, and maintaining their tropical forest biodiversity and organic banana production? Yes.

Were these two organizations able to rest on their laurels, with mission accomplished? No. Were they able to keep up their good (and difficult) work, sustained with a purpose that brought them joy and a community that supported them? Yes.

The main lessons I take away from these two stories, which I think can inform our work in higher education both at the institutional level and the student-facing level, are threefold:

- There are unfair discrepancies in access to resources in the world, and many times those organizations that are working on education, peace, and well-being for the vulnerable are on the losing end of that discrepancy. This is a reality we must face, and one that we must work to change.
- A lack of resources does not mean the mission of such organizations is misguided (though missions can and should be continually evaluated), nor does it mean that the mission is unattainable. We know this, intellectually, but our fear of scarcity often causes us to forget.
- Creativity, grit, hard work, and strategic employment of the resources we do have can lead not only to the achievement of the mission, but can open up new understandings of the mission that make the purpose of our work more integrated, more communal, more life-giving, and more beautiful.

“A lack of resources does not mean the mission of such organizations is misguided (though missions can and should be continually evaluated), nor does it mean that the mission is unattainable. We know this, intellectually, but our fear of scarcity often causes us to forget.”

As Lutherans, we know that God’s salvific work did not happen in a place of wealth and luxury, but rather in a place of struggle and seeming defeat. We also confess as Lutheran Christians that we believe that God desires abundant life for all. My experiences in Washington, DC, and in Latin America have taught me that these two beliefs of ours are not at odds with each other, but rather their intersection is the miracle: in the places of struggle, lack of resources, and limitations, we find abundant,

creative, and beautiful life that gives us strength to go on.

What does this mean for our institutions of higher education and our work with students? I think it means that we don’t have to be afraid of limitations or uncertainty, and we don’t have to give up our mission in the face of a lack of resources. We can return to our mission, our purpose, our calling, and see how the creativity that our limitations call out of us leads us into something more life-giving than we could have imagined.

SAVE THE DATE

Vocation of Lutheran Higher Education Conference

Augsburg University, Minneapolis, Minnesota

July 14-16, 2025 | TOPIC: Ethical Leadership in a Changing World

The 2025 Vocation in Lutheran Higher Education Conference will explore the vital role of ethical leadership in shaping institutions, communities, and society. Hosted by the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities (NECU), this annual gathering brings together faculty, administrators, and thought leaders to engage in meaningful dialogue on how Lutheran higher education fosters a commitment to integrity, justice, and moral responsibility in leadership.

This year’s keynote speaker, Dr. Walter Fluker, a renowned scholar and leader in ethics and leadership studies, will challenge participants to consider how vocation and values-based leadership intersect in today’s complex world. His insights will provide a foundation for discussions on how NECU

institutions can cultivate ethical leaders who serve with wisdom, courage, and a deep sense of purpose.

The conference aligns with NECU’s mission of preparing students for lives of leadership and service through a theologically rooted understanding of vocation. Ethical leadership—grounded in Lutheran traditions of grace, justice, and community—ensures development of the character and discernment to lead in ways that promote the common good.

Join us as we explore how Lutheran higher education can equip the next generation of leaders to navigate ethical challenges with integrity and faith.

For more information and registration details, contact Grace.Robinson@elca.org

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