

Lutheran Missiology and Campus Ministry

Rev. John T. Pless

Campus Pastor, University Lutheran Chapel, Minneapolis, MN

It is often observed that the North American university campuses form one of the church's most crucial and challenging mission fields. Increasing numbers of international students with their families as well as a domestic population that has little or no knowledge of the Christian faith invite the church to enter into the academic arena with a clear proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has a long and rich history of campus ministry dating back to the 1920's when campus ministries were established at the University of Wisconsin, Purdue, and the University of Minnesota. While most Protestant denominations organized student clubs or religious centers on campus, the LCMS intentionally planted campus chapels that were centered in the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. Missouri Synod Lutherans were committed to building and staffing chapels that would serve to nurture the faith of our own students while engaging in missionary outreach to the unchurched.

While campus ministry is an expensive undertaking, it is an investment that confessional Lutherans cannot afford to pass by. In the not too distant past, campus ministry in the LCMS was often identified with campus pastors who espoused the theology of Seminex and uncritically embraced ecumenical and activist agendas. In the late 1960's and into the early 1980's a fair number of LCMS campus ministries were conducted cooperatively with the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America. A pan-Lutheran student organization, Lutheran Student Movement, replaced the Synod's Gamma Delta. Joint campus ministry conferences were sponsored on a national and regional level. As it became clear that the church bodies that now comprise the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the LCMS were embarked on "divergent courses," the Missouri Synod began to examine its approach to campus ministry. As joint campus ministries were gradually phased out and a new generation of younger campus pastors came to serve the church, campus ministry claimed a new identity in the LCMS.

At the present time LCMS campus ministry seeks both to guard and guide the faith of our own Lutheran students while at the same time carry the good news of Christ to those who live without Him. As with other missionary enterprises in the Synod, there is a temptation in campus ministry to latch on to mission paradigms shaped more by the culture of American Evangelicalism than by the ethos of confessional Lutheranism. There are pressures for Lutheran campus ministry to conform itself to the patterns of the popular para-church groups that are dominant on campus these days. Rather than take on the characteristics of the meta-church movement with its cell groups, confessional Lutheran campus ministry and its missionary vitality is anchored in the means of grace, Christ's own instruments for growing and sustaining His church. The life and mission of campus ministry is centered in the Divine Service. This means that campus ministry ought to be marked by confessional fidelity, liturgical integrity, and catechetical clarity for the sake of the mission to seek and save the lost on the university campus.

Confessional fidelity is absolutely essential in the postmodern atmosphere of the contemporary university. Like Athens of old, the university is not an irreligious place. At the University of Minnesota, for example, there are more than sixty identifiable religious groups ranging from established denominational campus ministries to the devotees of Wicca. In the past, the truth claims of Christianity have been debated and denied in classrooms and other campus settings. Now the most objectionable feature of Christianity does not seem to be its claims regarding the historicity of the biblical narrative but the claim of particularity. The

religious climate on campus will tolerate the personal testimony to individual spiritual experience as long as that testimony does not become a confession of the exclusive nature of Christianity.

Against this backdrop, confessional Lutheran campus ministry confesses and proclaims a message with specific Christological and salvific content. We cannot abandon the name of the One who alone is the way, the truth, and the life. We will not abandon the full-bodied truth of the incarnation and the atonement, of law and gospel, of the specificity of the forgiveness of sins actually given and bestowed in Word and Sacrament in order to be acceptable to the pluralistic campus culture.

Liturgical integrity is a necessary corollary of confessional fidelity. Lutheran liturgy is shaped and formed by the means of grace that stand at its center. The liturgy guards the catholicity of the church on campus as it serves as a shield against momentary trends that would render the church irrelevant in the name of relevancy. Every aspect of our life and mission flows from the gifts Jesus bestows on us in the preaching of His Word and the giving out of His body and blood in the holy supper. From this lively and life-giving center, the Gospel is carried out to those who do not know Christ or are in doubt or confusion because of the perversion or mishandling of His Word. Gathered in the name of the Triune God, the church in the university is nourished and sustained with the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation given in sermon and sacrament. While genuine evangelism is generated from the Divine Service and leads the evangelized back to font, pulpit, and altar, the liturgy itself is not an evangelistic tool. That is, campus ministry ought not let those who know the least about the Christian faith dictate the shape and substance of the liturgical assembly.

As the Word of God has free course, others are drawn into the Divine service by catechesis and Holy Baptism. Catechesis is the necessary link between liturgy and evangelism on campus. Catechetical clarity is essential for campus ministry. With the large influx of international students as well as increasing numbers of otherwise educated Americans who know little of nothing of the story line of the Bible or of the doctrinal content of the Christian Faith, the campus minister must be a catechist. Here Lutherans are particularly well equipped as we have the Small Catechism as a guide into the heart of the biblical narrative, Jesus Christ crucified and risen for the salvation of the world. Structured around the distinction between law and gospel and centered in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Catechism provides its user with a summary of Christian doctrine as well as a pattern for understanding the Christian life shaped by faith and love. There is no substitute for careful catechesis. As many of the students with whom we work have a hard time discerning the difference between superstition and faith, the campus pastor may not make any short cuts when it comes to catechesis.

Confessional fidelity, liturgical integrity, and catechetical clarity are essential for the church in any setting but they are especially acute for our mission on campus where the acids of unbelief are so potent and corrosive. A campus ministry marked by confessional fidelity, liturgical integrity, and catechetical clarity need not be afraid of engaging the university as a mission field. Such a campus ministry will be secure at its very center, confident of the identity that is ours in Christ, and able to move into the university with an invitation to life in the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

© Rev. John T. Pless. Used by permission.