

Lutheran Campus Ministry at WVU
Report to the 2011 Synod Assemblies

The Lutheran Campus Ministry at WVU continues to be a word & sacrament centered ministry with a strong emphasis on the teaching of the faith as an aspect of the ministry of the word. In recent months, we have increased our prayer service offerings at the request of students. We are also restarting “The Program Formerly Known as Theology on Tap” and kicking off a Lenten film series on the Decalogue at the request of students. These student initiated activities are indicative of a little recognized dimension of collegiate religious life and spirituality. More on that later.

It should be noted, before I continue, that this past fall the Board of Directors of the Lutheran Campus Foundation at WVU generously extended a three month sabbatical to me. I worked through the first two weeks of the term and returned for the last two weeks of the term, critical weeks in the life of campus ministry. During that sabbatical, local Lutheran clergy and clergy members of the board covered the weekly masses. The many prayer offices were covered entirely by students. Administrative and programmatic functions were also covered by students while a team of local lay leaders stood ready to assist (though they were rarely needed). Pr. Bennett of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Morgantown, provided pastoral oversight throughout the sabbatical. The students deserve commendation for their much more than competent handling of a difficult assignment. The clergy and lay leaders deserve our thanks for rendering their service on an uncompensated volunteer basis. Pr. Bennett should be singled out for his many hours, and St. Paul Lutheran Church deserves our thanks because the sabbatical could not have worked without their cooperation.

For me, the blessing of the sabbatical was two-fold. First and foremost, it provided undisturbed time for research, thinking, and writing on sanctification, ecclesiology, and theological anthropology. Second and unexpectedly, I stumbled across the writings of Harvey Cox, which catalyzed some new thinking about the role and nature of campus ministry. For the students, the blessing was the opportunity to grow in leadership and ministry skills; they also benefited from hearing a panoply of voices from the pulpit and the altar. For the clergy and laity assisting, the blessing was the opportunity to enter into the life of the campus ministry, gaining greater insight in its work.

Of course, it was not all blessing. There was a degree of exhaustion in the eyes of the student leaders who shouldered the greatest burden. Connections with new students were not forged to the degree that we hope, and we lost touch with some peripheral students. Some small ground was lost in institutional connectedness. All these point to the critical role played by a professional staff person in the setting, especially in light of my observations and analysis presented in my report to the 2010 synod assemblies. We saw similar challenges emerge in the wake of Jerry Robbins’ retirement when the campus ministry had to function an entire spring semester without a professional staffer in place. At minimum the next two years will be years of rebuilding. Coasting is never an option in campus ministry. Remembering that a campus ministry has a 100% mortality rate over a quadrennium—imagine having every parishioner in a congregation die after four years of membership—one must constantly build new relationships simply to maintain the status quo.

Back to that “little recognized dimension of collegiate religious life and spirituality.” Let it be stated for the record that not all collegians are the same. While generational profiling can be helpful, we must remember that such profiling only describes the population within the first standard deviation. Furthermore, the first standard deviation is increasingly less defined as post-modernity becomes a popular consumer philosophy. While we might be able to say that the collegian likes music, we can hardly say what genre of music is liked because there is no common genre—this explains, in part, why attempts to find in an “updated” church music program the silver bullet to boost young adult and youth

worship attendance so often fail. Generational profiling has suggested that collegians are increasingly spiritual. This, from my own observations, is true, but this spirituality can manifest itself in forms as divergent as five point hyper-Calvinism and neo-paganism. We've had a good number of the former as active participants in the campus ministry, and we've had a few of the latter walk through the door (though modern versions of Gnosticism are much more common). The important point, however, is that most students, regardless of theological orientation, want to talk about it, want to ask questions, and want to get answers. Even the atheists are interested in theology. I'm not suggesting that they all share the same intensity of interest: for some, it is nothing more than the stray question which gets asked in the serendipitous moment; for others, it is a passion which exceeds that of more than a few seminarians and pastors I've known.

A few years ago, I conducted some focus groups with active adult Lutheran parishioners, asking about perceptions of campus ministry. The number one thing that these parishioners thought campus ministry did (or should do) was provide counseling services to students. Tied for number 2 were the providing of a safe haven and fellowship opportunities. Next on the list was the providing of service opportunities. A distant fifth was worship, and teaching of the faith (in terms of Bible study but not doctrine, ethics, or history) almost didn't make the list. How do those results compare with what I'm seeing on campus? It's not that I don't see the top five functions taking place in the campus ministry. They do, but I am struck that the top five functions are also served through non-campus ministry entities and structures. WVU has an excellent counseling center. WVU attempts to provide alternatives to the party scene and couch burning. WVU has aggressively expanded opportunities for service, offering course credit in many cases. What WVU cannot do is teach the faith (in more than an academic comparative religions manner), preach the word, administer the sacraments, forgive sins, and offer prayer. These are the marks of the church, after all; these are the mysteries which have been entrusted to the church and to no other human institution. Yet it is the unique ministry of the church which seems, in the consciousness of the church, to take a back seat to those ministries which are also provided by the kingdom on the left (and sometimes more effectively by the kingdom on the left).

Slightly more than one hundred years after the founding of the first Lutheran campus ministry, we should ask the question: what is campus ministry about? The collegian is at a point in his/her life when the hormone levels have dropped sufficiently to allow intelligent thought, when the reality of the existential crisis begins to hit home, and when there is the luxury of time for thought and conversation. Providence opens the mind and heart of the collegian to hear what only the church can say. It would be a shame if the church weren't on the campus to say what only the church can say. It would be equally a shame if the church were present on the campus but so preoccupied with fellowship, service, counseling, and providing a safe haven that it never got around to saying what only the church can say.

Some might lament the loss of social prominence on campus. I don't. It should be liberating to be what God has called us to be and not try to be what God has called the world to be. In discharging the unique ministry of the church, we have invested our energies in teaching and worship ministries. An ambitious worship schedule of a mass and six prayer offices each week requires an adequate dedicated facility in a convenient location. An educational ministry which can challenge collegians to grow intellectually in the faith requires a staffer with graduate level theological education. Furthermore, that staffer must have the luxury of time to spend with students in both formal and informal conversation.

There is an alternative. We can save a significant amount of money by abandoning our campus ministry centers and eliminating dedicated theologically trained staff, but what would be the cost in actual ministry? By necessity, campus ministry would begin to look like nothing more than youth group on steroids. They would become fellowship and service clubs where theology and worship would be lucky

accidents when not completely overshadowed by easily quantified programs disconnected from the authentic and unique ministry of the church. That would serve neither the collegian nor the church.

As always, should anyone have questions about the work of the Lutheran Campus Ministry at WVU, we are happy to provide our annual report to the ELCA and/or answer those questions directly.

The Rev. Matthew Lynn Riegel, Chaplain