

## The Third Path: Gustavus Adolphus College and the Lutheran Tradition

by Darrell Jodock

The topic of the church-related character of a college has two dimensions. One is external; it has to do with the relationship between the college and the church, as it exists beyond the boundaries of the campus. The other is internal; it has to do with the core values of the institution, with how the church's tradition informs the college's sense of purpose and the way it carries out that purpose—in faculty and staff selection, in curriculum decisions, in classroom teaching, in other areas of student life, and so on. My focus here is the internal dimension.

Let me begin with a potential source of confusion. The relationship of Gustavus to the Lutheran tradition does not fit either of the two ready-made models found in our society.

One such model is the “sectarian” model. A sectarian institution prizes religious uniformity and tends to serve those with the same religious identity. It is firmly rooted in the tradition and sees itself as a kind of “religious enclave” in the midst of secular society, a place set apart to which one can retreat for instruction. There are easily identified differences between a sectarian institution and the surrounding culture. A sectarian school does not have to struggle very much to define its identity, because its patterns are familiar to anyone who has grown up in that denomination.

This model has its strengths. It can provide a place of nurture; it can suggest and model more radical forms of discipleship; but cooperation with the broader society is difficult. Also, it tends to give too much authority to a certain *way* of being Christian.

**The sectarian model is what many church members expect of the colleges related to the Lutheran church.** They expect them to be religious enclaves, where catechetical instruction is continued, where the faculty, the staff, and the student body are predominantly Lutheran, and where a uniform code of behavior is followed.

The second model is “non-sectarian.” It prizes inclusiveness. Instead of separating from the surrounding society, it seeks to serve all segments and to do so by mirroring that society. It avoids religious differences—by minimizing them. It too does not need to struggle very much to articulate its identity, because the pattern is being ironed out in the larger community and is therefore familiar. Instead of an enclave, the non-sectarian institution is a microcosm of the larger society.

There are strengths to this model as well. It can, for example, easily cooperate with a wide variety of other groups. Faculty, staff, and students can easily come and go—without big adjustments. But its self-definition is too superficial to nurture any particular sort of identity; instead it relies on individuals whose commitments have been nurtured elsewhere.

**The non-sectarian model is what many academics and many friends in the broader community expect of a college related to the Lutheran church.** Having been assured that the college is not like a Bob Jones University, they expect a pluralism that allows each subgroup to express itself. They expect the college's religious commitments to be so general and superficial as to be innocuous.

I would like to suggest that a Lutheran identity commits a college to a third path—one that is neither sectarian nor non-sectarian. Unlike the non-sectarian model, this third path takes a religious tradition very seriously and seeks to build its identity around it, exploring the riches of that tradition as part of its contribution to the community as a whole. But, unlike the sectarian model, it seeks to serve the whole community and in so doing is ready to work with people of other religious traditions—indeed, welcome them into its midst. The sectarian and the non-sectarian models avoid religious diversity, either by withdrawing from it or by minimizing and sidestepping it. The third model takes religious diversity seriously enough to engage and struggle with it, while at the same time remaining deeply committed to the importance of its own Lutheran tradition. Rather than an enclave or a microcosm, the third option is a well dug deep to provide something helpful for the entire community.

I am not sure that every denomination would want to support this third model, but the Lutheran tradition does. Why? Here are some reasons:

- because of its profound insight that the fundamental human reality is communal and relational. Its goal is not to foster ideological/religious purity but to foster quality relationships. For this task one needs both nourishment from a tradition and engagement with the larger society.
- because acknowledging reality to be communal and relational entails tolerating paradoxes and unresolved tensions. The sectarian and non-sectarian models resolve the tensions; the third model does not.
- because it recognizes that humane learning always occurs in a community of moral deliberation. The community is indispensable because the goal is wisdom, not just learning. Wisdom arises out of interaction with others in a rooted community.
- because of its basic ethical standard of service to others and to the community. The Lutheran ethic is simple: if a behavior serves one's neighbor and the community, it is good. But figuring out what actually does serve the neighbor and having the courage to do it—these are not at all easy. Here's where learning how to learn and learning how to debate are crucial.
- because it recognizes that service to others is nourished by awe and by gratitude to God and that these are in turn sustained by the gospel message to which the tradition itself bears witness.
- because it believes that learning contributes to a mature faith and does not threaten it.

The Lutheran tradition recognizes that whenever a college takes seriously the biblical teaching that every human is a creature of God, it cannot withdraw into non-sectarian empty tolerance (on the one hand) or sectarian tribalism (on the other). It must be

engaged *and* its engagements must be inclusive. Without rootedness, accommodation occurs, societal assumptions are not questioned, and people are not served (at least not on the deeper levels of their human need). Without engagement, isolation occurs, the church's formulation of the religious tradition is not questioned, and no one is challenged to investigate it very deeply. Again, people are not served—on the deeper levels of their human need. The Lutheran tradition summons a college to work out a “both . . . and,” *both* affirming the religious identity *and* engaging with today's world. The underlying conviction is that this tension is a productive one.

And, when one takes seriously the Lutheran insight that humans are not inherently good but that their goodness must be nourished at the font of God's generosity, then it cannot settle for a superficial link to its religious tradition. Instead of acting as an impediment to inclusiveness (as the non-sectarian model assumes), a deep commitment to the Lutheran tradition actually nourishes and sustains that inclusiveness.

If we are following neither the sectarian model nor the other default position of a non-sectarian model, and if our tradition commits us to a third model, then we have an interpreting job to do, both internally and externally. We cannot expect prospective faculty, staff, students, parents, donors, or board members to understand in advance.

But, if this third model is so difficult to uphold and to explain, then why bother? Why should a contemporary college adopt the third path?

1. My **first answer** is very basic and does not get us very far, but it is still worth saying: there is no down side. There is no evidence of which I am aware that Gustavus would be a better school if it ceased to be church-related. In fact, as the Hardwick~Day study<sup>1</sup> indicates, the evidence points in the opposite direction.

2. **Second answer:** The connection with the Lutheran tradition keeps alive a dynamic connection with the past and a hope for the future.

American society is a product of the Enlightenment, and from it we have received many beneficial things, such as freedom of religion and democracy. But from it we have also received a disregard of the past, which is often associated with ignorance, superstition, and repression. The Enlightenment thought it was giving us the future, but in the 20th century a mushroom-shaped cloud and an ecological crisis transformed the future from promise into threat.

Cut off from the past and faced with a threatening future, Americans are trapped in the present. This is a problem, because humans have to sense that things have been different in order to imagine the possibility of reform. But still worse, the present in which we are

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<sup>1</sup> A survey of alumni from both Lutheran and public colleges and universities commissioned by the Lutheran Educational Conference of North America (LECNA) in 1999 and conducted by Hardwick~Day, a higher education research and consulting firm based in Minneapolis. Selected survey findings were summarized in four consecutive issues of the *Gustavus Quarterly* in 2001.

thus trapped is so dominated by television and mass media, by mass merchandising and the breakdown of communities that only superficial answers are available in response to our basic human questions.

The Lutheran tradition is an avenue to the depth and richness of the past. It connects this academic community with the insights of a friar, priest, and university professor who understood human nature better than almost anyone else. And the Lutheran tradition connects this academic community with the wisdom of the Bible and the whole of the Christian tradition. Without providing us with formulas or ready-made answers, it gives us the resources with which to identify and face, ponder and resolve, our basic human questions. And it invites us not to limit our attention to its own insights but to bring it into dialogue with whatever other sources of depth may be available to us. The Lutheran tradition provides access to depth, and in our society, where the superficial and the contemporary vie so insistently for our attention, any access to depth is a gift.

Any humane tradition can connect us with the past, but this tradition does it in such a way as not to foster traditionalism. It directs our attention to the contemporary “living Word,” to a contemporary community of real flesh and blood human beings, and to an ethic that puts real people with real problems ahead of schemes for organizing or reforming society. The content of that living Word is primarily a promise, a promise that turns our eyes toward a gift-filled future. Just as this tradition opens up the past for us, so it opens up the future. A dynamic connection with the past and a hope for the future are a genuine contribution to contemporary society.

**3. Third answer.** The Lutheran tradition gives focus to academic inquiry because it nests it within a larger framework: service to the neighbor and to the community as a whole. By doing so, it encourages a sense of vocation.

Just so we are clear, “vocation” here does not refer to one’s occupation but to an overarching self-understanding that (a) sees oneself not as an isolated unit but “nested” into a larger community and (b) gives ethical priority to those behaviors that will benefit the community.

A sense of vocation is an antidote to two tendencies found in contemporary American society. The first tendency is toward individualism (disregarding one’s connections with others and seeing oneself as an isolated unit) and a concomitant careerism (seeing one’s work as an individual trajectory, disconnected from the communities in which one lives and works). The second is withdrawal from civic engagement.<sup>2</sup> In such a society, educating for vocation is an important contribution.

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<sup>2</sup> See Robert Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Capital,” *Journal of Democracy*, VI (January, 1995), pp. 65–78, and *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

4. **Fourth answer.** The Lutheran tradition, with its emphasis on undeserved grace, encourages a sense of wonder, awe, and gratitude. Not only are wonder, awe, and gratitude at the core of religion, they are also the heart of scientific inquiry, the fountain of music and art, the indispensable foundation of ecological awareness, and an essential underpinning for any humane ethic. On the one hand, wonder, awe, and gratitude inspire us to create, to explore, and to understand. On the other hand, they keep the results in perspective. They keep the results open to data, disciplines, and people beyond the boundaries of our own theories and our own understanding. If the boundaries are not kept open, ideas—even good ideas—have the unfortunate potential to enslave and to divide.

5. **Fifth answer.** Maintaining the link to the Lutheran tradition is crucial to the future of the contemporary church. Seminaries educate clergy, and that is important, but in an increasingly post-Christendom society<sup>3</sup>, clergy are no longer the spokespersons for the church. Laity need to serve that function. And where are laity to be educated? Where are they to explore the relationship between the faith and their daily life? There is no better resource for the education of laity than the church-related colleges.

My argument has been that the Lutheran tradition commits us to a church–college relationship that is neither sectarian nor non-sectarian. Such a third path is difficult to explain, but worthwhile because the relationship to the Lutheran tradition is so valuable. It has no downside, it keeps alive a dynamic connection with past and a hope for the future, it provides a larger framework of service and encourages vocation, it encourages a sense of wonder, awe, and gratitude, and it contributes something very important to the church.

*Darrell Jodock is the Drell and Adeline Bernhardson Distinguished Professor of Religion at Gustavus. He developed this essay from a presentation he made to the Gustavus Adolphus College Board of Trustees in October 2002.*

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<sup>3</sup> “Christendom” is a societal pattern granting a privileged place to Christianity. In Christendom, clergy have access to the community and commercial decision-makers and are recognized as public spokespersons for Christianity. In a “post-Christendom society,” churches are marginalized, and clergy are often perceived as speaking for themselves rather than for the church. In a post-Christendom society, no one religion has a privileged position.