Address Given at the Assembly of the Pennsylvania Lutheran Network, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, March 18, 2002

By Darrell Jodock
Gustavus Adolphus College

Thank you for inviting me to be with you today and giving me this opportunity to speak. It is fun to return to Pennsylvania. After 21 years here, my attachments remain deep. In addition, I applaud what this gathering is trying to do, and I am happy to be a part of it.

I bring you back a little gift from one of those shy people from Minnesota, Garrison Keillor, who did not grow up as a Lutheran but has joined its ranks. Allow me to quote from "why Lutherans love to sing."

"I have made fun," he says, "of Lutherans for years—who wouldn't, if you lived in Minnesota? But I have also sung with Lutherans and that is one of the main joys of life, along with hot baths and fresh sweet corn. We make fun of Lutherans for their blandness, their excessive calm, their fear of giving offense, their constant guilt that burns like a pilot light, their lack of speed and also for their secret fondness for macaroni and cheese. But nobody sings like them. If you ask an audience in New York City, a relatively 'Lutheranless' place, to sing along on the chorus of 'Michael Row the Boat Ashore,' they will look daggers at you as if you had asked them to strip to their underwear. But if you do this among Lutherans, they'll smile and row that boat ashore and up on the beach and down the road! And Lutherans are bred from childhood to sing in four-part harmony. It's a talent that comes from sitting on the lap of someone singing alto or tenor or bass and hearing the harmonic intervals by putting your little head against that person's rib cage. It's natural for Lutherans to sing in harmony. We're too modest to be soloists, too worldly to sing in unison. And when you're singing in the key of C and you slide into the A7th and D7th chords, all two hundred of you, it's an emotionally fulfilling moment. I once sang the bass line of 'Children of the Heavenly Father' in a room with about three thousand Lutherans in it, and when we finished, we all had tears in our eyes, partly from the promise that God will not forsake us, partly from the proximity of all those lovely voices. By our joining in harmony, we somehow promise that we will not forsake each other. I do believe this: people who love to sing in four-part harmony are the sort of people you call up when you're in deep distress. If you're dying, they'll comfort you. If you're lonely, they'll talk to you. If you're hungry, they'll give you tuna salad!"

The question I'd like to address today is this: Why should Lutheran social ministries and Lutheran colleges seek to remain Lutheran? [I apologize in advance to those who are here from Lutheran seminaries and other ministries, because the issues may be slightly different for you than for institutions of social ministry and colleges, but I hope there is enough overlap to make some of what I say relevant.] When I say, "remain Lutheran," I do not mean this in some nostalgic sense of carrying on what this identity

meant in the past. That would *not* be Lutheran, as I understand the term. What I mean is a self-conscious, vigorous appropriation of the deepest and best insights of that tradition. I mean a reflective, self-critical appropriation, one that digs to the roots of what it means to be Lutheran and thinks anew about ways to embody that tradition with integrity in our time and place.

So, to repeat, Why should Lutheran social ministries and colleges seek to remain Lutheran?

The answer is by no means obvious. Our society provides no ready-made models for what I have in mind when I say “remain Lutheran.”

One of my college philosophy professors would sometimes go to the blackboard and write "G.O.S." It was an abbreviation for “Gross Over-Simplification.” If you allow me a "G.O.S.," I think we can safely say that our society offers two competing models for institutions related to a church tradition.

The first model is “sectarian.” A sectarian institution prizes religious uniformity, and tends to serve those with the same religious identity. It is firmly rooted in a tradition and can easily locate its differences from the surrounding culture. It sees itself as a kind of “religious enclave” in the midst of a secular society, a place set apart to which one can retreat for nourishment or instruction. It often does not need to struggle very much to articulate its identity, in part because it can rely on the socialization of those who are in that religious community (the patterns are so familiar that they do not need to be spoken) and in part because a number of symbolic behaviors usually separate it from the surrounding society ("we don’t dance," or "we don’t eat meat," or "we don’t go around without heads covered," or whatever). There are strengths to the sectarian model, as I came to see when I got to know the Amish here in Pennsylvania. The sectarian model can, for example, provide a place of nurture for members of the group. It can suggest a more radical form of discipleship. But the isolation fostered by this model makes cooperation with the broader society difficult. And it tends to give too much authority to certain *ways* of being Christian. The *marks* of the group's identity too easily *become* its identity.

The second model is “non-sectarian.” A non-sectarian institution prizes inclusiveness. In its lexicon, "diversity" is a good word. Instead of separation from the surrounding society, it seeks to serve all segments and to do so by making itself a mirror of that society. It avoids religious differences by minimizing them and seeking some self-definition on which all can agree. It does not need to struggle very much to articulate its identity, in part because the pattern is being ironed out in the larger community and in part because it can rely on the socialization of those who are in that larger community (the patterns are so familiar that they do not need to be spoken). Instead of a religious enclave, the non-sectarian institution is a microcosm of the larger society. There are also strengths to the non-sectarian model. It can cooperate easily with a wide variety of groups. But it does not itself nurture identity; instead it relies on individuals whose faith

commitments have been nurtured elsewhere. If one allows the term to be used in a neutral way, one could call it "parasitic." And its self-definition is too superficial to nourish the kind of commitment the mission of the institution needs. A non-sectarian identity is a cut-flower existence, lacking roots to keep it alive in the face of adversity.

I would like to suggest that seeking to preserve Lutheran identity commits an organization to a third path—one that is neither sectarian nor non-sectarian. Our society offers no ready-made models for an organization to follow when it pursues this third path. The result, inevitably, is a greater struggle for clarity, a greater reason to articulate its mission, and a greater need to be intentional about working out that identity.

Unlike the non-sectarian model, this third path takes a religious tradition very seriously and seeks to build its identity around it. It explores 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. The sectarian model avoids religious diversity by withdrawing from it. The non-sectarian model avoids encountering religious diversity by minimizing and sidestepping it. This third model takes religious diversity seriously enough to engage it and struggle with it, while at the same time remaining deeply committed to the importance of its own distinctive religious tradition. Rather than an enclave or a microcosm, it is a wellspring that provides for the whole community.

Now, I am not sure that every denomination would want to support this third model, but the Lutheran tradition does, in part because of its readiness to live with paradoxes and unresolved tensions and in part because of its ethic of service. At stake here is a tension between rootedness and engagement with the world. Without rootedness the result is accommodation. And that leaves contemporary societal assumptions uncritiqued. Without engagement the result is isolation. And isolation leaves one's formulation of the religious tradition uncritiqued. The Lutheran tradition summons its institutions to work out a "both … and," both affirming its religious identity and engaging with today's world. The underlying conviction is that this tension is a productive one, better able to generate insights that distinguish what is humane in society and in religion from what is not. There was a time in our past when we emphasized the engagement side of the tension. Lutherans were looked upon and saw themselves as ethnic (Pennsylvania Dutch or Slovak or Swedish or whatever) and wanted desperately to join the mainstream of American society. But that is no longer the case. We are "in," but once "in," we see more clearly the defects of that society. The emphasis now needs to fall on the other side of the tension, on maintaining our heritage so that we have something worthwhile to contribute to that society.

Having characterized what I have in mind as a “third path” for which our society provides no ready-made models, we are now drawn back to the question. If this “third path” is more difficult to articulate and embody, why bother? Why *should* Lutheran social ministries and Lutheran colleges seek to remain Lutheran?

I am going to answer in seven ways, but each of these answers is but one aspect of a complex cluster. The separations may be a little artificial, because the seven points are, to one degree or another, overlapping and interlocking.

1. My first answer is that in our society providing access to depth is a gift. American society is a product of the Enlightenment, and from it we have received many beneficial things—a commitment to freedom of the press, freedom of religion, democracy, and the like. But from the Enlightenment we also inherited some things of more ambiguous value, including a disregard of the past. Heirs of the Enlightenment associate the past with ignorance, superstition, and repression. Instead of looking back, heirs of the Enlightenment recommend that citizens look to the present, to science, to one's experience, and to one's own ingenuity to create something "new and improved." The Enlightenment thought it was giving us the future, but in the twentieth century a mushroom-shaped cloud and an ecological crisis intervened to transform the future from promise into threat. Having disregarded the past and facing a threatening future, Americans are trapped in the present. This is a problem in itself, because we 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 thus trapped is so dominated by television and mass media, by mass merchandizing and the breakdown of communities that only superficial answers are available in response to our basic human questions. A person in a hospital needs something more than superficial answers. A son or daughter and a parent coping with that parent's reduced physical and mental capacities needs something more than superficial answers. A family in crisis needs something more than superficial answers. A young person seeking education (I mean education and not just training) and setting the course for his or her life needs something more than superficial answers. Whatever else one says about the Lutheran tradition, it is an avenue to the depth and richness of the past. It is an avenue to the insights of a monk, priest, and university professor who understood human nature better than almost anyone else. His understanding of human freedom and the subtlety of its many different levels, for example, never fails to astonish me--in marked contrast to the naivete of our American fixation on choice, as if it were all that freedom is. And the Lutheran tradition is an avenue to the wisdom of the Bible and the whole of the Christian tradition. Without providing us with formulas or ready-made solutions, it gives us the resources with which to identify and face, ponder and resolve, our basic human questions. Moreover, it urges us to be cautious even about its own insights and not make them into ideologies. It invites us to see through them to the quality of relationships that are the real stuff of life—relationships with God, with each other, and with the world around us. 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 first reason to remain Lutheran is to offer our society access to the depth of human insight that is available from a particular, though not isolated, tradition that is rich in insight.

2. The second reason to remain Lutheran is that the Lutheran tradition generates and nourishes a sense of vocation. Allow me first to clarify what I mean by vocation. I do not mean "occupation." While I was at Muhlenberg, a rabbi, speaking to an audience of students and faculty, told about a recent move that he and his family had made. One of the men employed by the moving company was extraordinarily helpful, courteous, and cheerful—so much so that the rabbi's curiosity was aroused and he asked the workman about it. The latter replied (in words to this effect), "Moving is a stressful time for any family. I am a Christian, and my vocation is to try to make it easier for them." His *occupation* was moving furniture; his *vocation* was helping people cope with the stress of moving. So, as used here, vocation refers to an overarching self-understanding which (a) sees itself not as an isolated unit but "nested" into a larger community and (b) gives ethical priority to those behaviors that will benefit the community.

For Luther every human being apart from grace is "curved in" upon oneself. That person may work hard to succeed, may do good for others, and even strive to please God, but apart from grace all of these efforts are ultimately in service to the self. The good news of God's unconditional acceptance breaks open this self. Like sunshine uncurling a tiny bean plant that has just poked through the ground, so the good news uncurls the self and opens it to those around. The effect of the good news then is to give us the freedom to listen to and serve those around us. The effect of the good news is a calling, a vocation, to notice, indeed to focus our full attention on, our neighbors. Vocation is a freedom *from* enslavement to self and a freedom *for* our neighbors and our community.

Why is this sense of vocation important? There are at least three answers.

The first is what it does for workers ("workers" here includes CEO's and dishwashers, Presidents and security guards, supervisors and those supervised, professors and janitors—everyone associated with the institution). At Gustavus, we have been having some discussions with various segments of the campus community. Cafeteria workers are excited about the concept of vocation. They say, "we are teachers too," because they work closely with work-study students to teach responsibility and consideration for their co-workers. Since the staff started introducing the housekeepers in the dormitories to the student residents, things have gotten easier for the housekeepers, because housekeepers and dormitory residents see each other as persons. How a campus security officer treats a student breaking the rules will have a big affect on whether that student learns anything from the experience. Security officers have a vocation too. A sense of vocation re-focuses our work on people rather than tasks. Because modern society tends to make people into commodities, focusing on people is in itself a significant contribution. Paradoxically a sense of vocation both gives meaning to our work and also frees us from trying to find *all* our meaning in our work. There is a certain grimness that comes with having our identities tied up with every success and every failure. A sense of vocation frees from that grimness. No matter what the type of institution, if it is staffed with people who have a sense of vocation, it will be better equipped to carry out its mission and benefit the larger community.

But a sense of vocation does not just apply to work; it applies to all of life. Hence, if a sense of vocation is cultivated by an institution, another benefit is that those who work there or study there or recover there carry it with them into other areas of life. They serve their neighbors on the block, they serve their neighbors across town, they become engaged in the community, and they become community leaders, in the sense of working for justice and against anything that demeans or destroys human life. At some moments in the past, this may not have been such a crucial contribution, but we now stand at the end of a thirty- to forty-year period of decline in civic engagement. I have in mind here the work of Robert Putnam, as reported in his 1995 article and book published in 2000, both entitled "Bowling Alone."[1] Putnam's argument is that "secondary communities" (that is, any group with regular face-to-face meetings) contribute to "social capital." Secondary communities generate the trust and community understanding necessary for a neighborhood to sort out and implement its response to a problem or a crisis. But, for a variety of reasons, Americans have been withdrawing from secondary communities. For example: participation in PTA groups, down from 12 million to 7 million; participation in the Boy Scouts, down 26% from 1970 to 1993; participation in the Red Cross, down 61% in the same period; participation in the League of Women Voters, down 42% from 1969 to 1993; participation in fraternal organizations such as the Elks, Lions, Jaycees, etc, all down; labor unions (social activities in the labor halls are important here), participation down by more than half since the 1950s; religious organizations, participation down by $1/6^{th}$ (by his estimate). Most telling of all, those individuals who reported they had attended any meeting dealing with town or school affairs in the last year fell by more than a third between 1973 and 1993. The only groups where participation has increased are therapeutic groups and groups such as the AARP where people join but never meet, neither of which qualify in Putnam's view as "secondary communities." Putnam goes on to test his thesis by examining studies of the degree to which people trust other humans and public institutions. In 1960 58% of Americans said most people could be trusted; by 1993 only 37% did. In 1966, only 30% said they "trust in the government in Washington" only "some of the time" or "almost never"; by 1992 that number had more than doubled to 66%. If Putnam is right, the fabric of our democracy has been seriously weakened by the decline in social capital. In any case, given the level of civic disengagement in our society, persons with a sense of vocation are going to be a gift not only to the institutions where they work but also to the larger community in which they live.

[The Lilly Endowment, impressed by considerations very similar to those cited by Putnam, began to wonder where the neighborhood leaders of the next generation would come from. They have turned to liberal arts colleges, asking them to seek ways to cultivate a sense of vocation among their students and offering them generous grants to do so. Among the Lutheran colleges, Valparaiso and Gustavus Adolphus were in the first twenty to receive grants; Augsburg, Concordia, and Luther were in the second group, and

[1] Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social 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).

Augustana (Rock Island), Pacific Lutheran University, St. Olaf, and Wartburg remain in the running for the third and final round.]

But vocation does not just apply to individuals. The college or the social ministry institution related to the Lutheran tradition also has a vocation. It too is called to a self-understanding which sees itself not as an isolated unit but "nested" into the larger community. For its institutional behavior, as well as the behavior of those who serve within it, the ethical priority is what will benefit the community. Why is this important? One of the twentieth-century Christian thinkers, a pastor in the Evangelical and Reformed Church who drew heavily on Lutheran themes, was Reinhold Niebuhr. (One of my seminary professors proudly displayed a letter from him which began "as one Lutheran to another"!) In one of his early books, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*,[2] Niebuhr argues that not only are human beings "curved in" upon themselves, but institutions also tend to become self-serving. Self-aggrandizement and self-perpetuation become priorities, and when that happens the institutions themselves get in the way of the service they are to provide. A clear sense of the vocation of the institution is one way to counteract this tendency.

Just as an individual sense of vocation is out of step with an individualistic, consumerist society amid which people are pulling out of secondary communities, so an institutional sense of vocation is out of step with a corporate culture that focuses on the bottom line, and it is out of step with those fickle philanthropists and their pet projects who divert attention by generously rewarding some kinds of institutional behavior but withdrawing their support from others. As the President of a Lutheran college outside of PA said at a conference last summer, we have to be very careful which donors we are ready to get into bed with,[3] because they can either understand and support that vocation or draw the institution away from it. An institutional sense of vocation keeps the focus on its mission to benefit people in the larger community in some specific way--whether adoption, or elder care, or education, or whatever.

The Lutheran tradition generates and nourishes a sense of vocation, both in individuals and in institutions.

3. The third reason to remain Lutheran is that this tradition is a little cautious about having the answers. Such caution is another aspect of its fondness for paradox and its readiness to live with ambiguity. To someone outside this tradition, such caution may sometimes look as if it springs from excessive timidity or from intellectual laziness, but it does not. Genuine listening is hard work. Figuring out what will actually benefit those around us takes the most rigorous thinking, the most careful gathering of information, and the most painstaking of assessments. At issue is not intellectual laziness. At issue instead is the status of the results. How far do they go? Those who have studied the

---

[2] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932).

[3] An informal remark by Baird Tipton, President of Wittenberg University, during the ELCA Conference on "The Vocation of a Lutheran College," August 2-5, 2001.

rescuers, who during the Holocaust risked their own lives to help out one of the victims, have discovered that many of the rescuers had been exposed to the same anti-Semitic ideas as those who stood by and did nothing. But the rescuers looked beyond the anti-Semitism to see a human being in need. They also differed from the by-standers in that they had a sense of their own agency—that their actions could make a difference, no matter how small. The Lutheran fondness for paradox and its readiness to live with ambiguity grows out of a profound sense that the fundamental reality is not ideas and programs but people. What matters is whether the quality of this person's relationships and the quality of his/her life have benefited. Just as we need scaffolding to build houses, so we need structures and programs to serve people, but the structures and the programs are not themselves the measure of anything. They have value to the degree they permit and encourage what is important.

Our neighbors in the various Reformed churches have a rich heritage of their own. But it is different in one way. It has prized "godly laws." So Presbyterians have usually been over-represented in the halls of congress. By contrast Lutherans have usually been under-represented there. But as 3% of the population they operate, I am told, 25% of the not-for-profit nursing homes in the country. They have created the largest social service network on the nation. Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service recently reported it had settled more refugees than any other agency or country in the world, save one, the U.S. government. Lutheran World Relief has pioneered ways to work with indigenous groups so that it can have relief supplies on the way to earthquake victims in El Salvador within hours rather than days or weeks. There is something about not having all the answers that has enabled Lutherans to put their energy into medical care, education, and social service.

Now, I have to be careful here. I am not claiming that one idea is as good as another, nor am I claiming that ideas are unimportant. Ideas can mean the difference between life and death. It was, after all, a faulty set of supposedly scientific ideas (racial theory), that led to the intentional, systematic destruction of eleven million non-combatants by the Nazis. It was an idea (collectivization) that prompted Stalin to starve out three million Ukrainian peasants in the 1930s. It was an idea (that the land belonged to the European nations who "discovered" it and the immigrants who claimed it) that caused the destruction of so many Native Americans. The point is not that ideas are unimportant. The point is that ideas always serve some end. And the crucial consideration is whether we are willing to allow ideas to be critiqued by that larger purpose. If so, then the result will also include the flexibility we need to carry out the vocation of serving the larger community.

The Lutheran tradition is cautious about having all the answers, yet dedicated to careful planning and careful thinking about what really benefits others.

4. The fourth reason to remain Lutheran is that it acknowledges the dark side of life but does not allow that dark side to have the last word. Douglas John Hall is a contemporary Christian thinker whose ideas have been deeply influenced by Luther. He

has argued that American society is “officially optimistic.”[4] An “officially optimistic” society denies or ignores problems, accusing those who call attention to them of "negative thinking." It ignores the tragic. What John Steinbeck said in one of his novels regarding the arrival of houses of ill repute on the frontier applies to many sorts of American behavior: he said, "It is one of the triumphs of the human that he can know a thing and still not believe it."[5] Given the millions of years that it took God to make oil, it does not take a rocket scientist to know that, at the current rate, sooner or later we will run out of oil. Yet we all go on as if there will be no end—blithely optimistic that some technological breakthrough will solve the problem for us. One million acres of farmland per year are being lost to urban sprawl--unnecessarily, as cities grow by 4% but expand by 60%, often paving over the best farmland (where it is also easiest to build). Someday we will wish we had access to that land to feed the growing population of the world. As an "officially optimistic" society, we ignore the problem and thereby ignore the plight of those who will be affected—blithely optimistic that something will solve the problem for us. We create a society that refuses to protect its children and then puzzle over Columbine High. We refuse to abide by the same international rules we insist that other countries follow and then call unpatriotic those who question the wisdom of this policy. Douglas John Hall points out that hope is different from optimism.[6] Hope does not deny the darkness; it acknowledges the worst problems or difficulties and looks straight at them, calls them by their proper name, and then dares to hope in someone who will bring us through the darkness. One of Luther’s profound insights was that God is most unambiguously present in precisely those places where one would least expect to find God—in the darkness, in the cross, amid human suffering, in the midst of failure. The good news is not that God will fix those things. The good news is that God is present, co-experiencing the pain. The good news is that pain, though real, is not the last word. By recognizing God's presence amid the darkness rather than fleeing from it, we find hope for some genuinely new possibility, the outlines of which we barely see.

The Lutheran tradition acknowledges the dark side of life without granting it the last word.

5. The fifth reason is closely related to the last. The Lutheran tradition emphasizes a view of God active in the world. Most Americans tend to see God standing above the things that happen. One version of this common perception sees God pretty much in control, micromanaging the world, causing some particular things to happen and allowing other particular things to occur. Those who hold this view tend to see God having a “plan for their lives”; they try to discern that plan and conform themselves to it, often expecting to be rewarded if they get it right. Or another version of the same exalted

---

[4] Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976).

[5] John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (New York: Bantam, 1952), p. 399.

[6] One example of a place where he employs the *distinction is in Douglas John Hall, God and Human Suffering*: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross (Minneapolis, Augsburg, 1986), pp. 21-22.

God is one who does very little, a Deist God who sets up the rules and lets humans decide whether to follow them or not. When either of these versions looks at tragedies or encounters things that do not seem to fit with an all-powerful and all-loving God, its partisans get confused and experience a God-forsaken world. But the portrait of God in the Lutheran tradition is much more down-to-earth. God is not "up there" but present under every rustling leaf. God is involved in every conflict, getting bloodied and dirtied in the fray. God is at work in, with, and under events that occur--events which God himself does not cause and does not endorse. Rather than a God-forsaken world, this tradition sees a world permeated by God's presence, but a presence that often does not fit with our preconceptions of what is appropriate for the divine. Moreover, such a God has so tied Godself to human agency that humans are always involved as co-creators in whatever happens. They are either bringing the good gifts of God to others or they are keeping those good gifts from them.

This insight has at least two benefits. The first is that God is present whether we acknowledge that presence or not. This takes an enormous burden off of our shoulders. I do not need to bring God into the hospital room; I need only acknowledge the presence that is already there. And "presence" is no small thing. In the end our worst horror is to be alone, I mean utterly alone. The second benefit is that it undergirds vocation, for any action done in service to another is ultimately meaningful. It is part of God's down-to-earth activity in the world. And it is the source of our own sense of agency--that sense of agency that distinguished and still distinguishes rescuers from bystanders.

The Lutheran tradition sees God active in the world, and this sustains our sense of vocation.

6. The sixth reason to remain Lutheran is that it offers us a sense of humor--that is, it calls us to take things seriously but no *too* seriously. I said at the beginning that the good news of God's readiness to restore the God-human relationship is unconditioned. There are no prerequisites. If God takes the initiative and saves even the ungodly, then we humans have no control over God's generosity—whether toward us or toward others. And if we have no control, we can take no credit. The result is that we cannot take ourselves too seriously, or our morality too seriously, or even our theology too seriously. All of these are important but not ultimate. To recognize this non-ultimacy is what I mean by a sense of humor. The same Luther, who was willing to stand before the Emperor and the assembled Princes of Germany to say "I cannot and will not recant," could also laugh at himself. Among his last words, he called himself a "beggar still"; he did not want his followers to be named after him, as if he were all that important; and when given credit for the Reformation, the once responded that he deserved none at all, because while he and his friend Philip sat drinking good Wittenberg beer, the Word of God had done it all. Although he valued the Bible very highly, he could playfully suggest that the epistle of James be removed from the canon and replaced by the *Loci Communes* of his colleague Melanchthon. Luther was comfortable with all sorts of critical questions, ready to say that Moses was not the author of the Pentateuch, even though it carried the title "The Books of Moses," ready to acknowledge the individuality of the biblical authors

and uneven value of their writings. For Luther, not even the Bible, which he prized so dearly, was to be taken *too* seriously. It was not exempt from inquiry and criticism.

Why is this sense of humor important? Because it allows for and encourages a freedom of inquiry, not for its own sake but for the sake of the larger community. An institution related to the Roman Catholic Church may get nervous if criticism gets too close to the teaching authority of that Church. A Baptist institution may get nervous if one criticizes the Bible or congregational autonomy, but there is no issue in a Lutheran institution that is off-limits for criticism. Any idea, any program, any realm of human life, including politics, science, business, and even religion, can be critiqued.

Contemporary Americans are very sensitive to authority—overly so, one could argue. In this setting, the main reason *not* to preserve a religious tradition has often been discomfort with the authority of a church. For non-Lutherans, church authorities may indeed be a problem. But "remaining Lutheran" carries with it no such stipulation. Remaining Lutheran has to do with affirming a tradition and staying rooted in it, not subsuming oneself under the humans in the church who may on occasion take themselves too seriously. In fact the source of authority in the Lutheran tradition is not at all tied to a specific person or structure. It arises in the intersection of Word and community. It grows out of a "happening." Authority emerges as the living, present Word of God interacts with the living, present community of faith. Authority is discovered by people gathered together in awe and gratitude, because it is a kind of relationship, which recognizes the claim of the other. Authority is communal; it emerges in a community broken open by the presence of God, in a community set free for radical, courageous action in behalf of others. The kind of community we are describing values what is important, but without losing its sense of humor. Whatever fits with the interaction of the living, present Word of God interacting with this living, present community has authority, but always the authority befitting a servant.

So a sense of humor recognizes an odd kind of authority--one that is relational, communal, service-oriented, and open to criticism. Authority is lodged in a vision of what the promises of God might accomplish, not a person or a structure.

The Lutheran tradition nourishes a sense of humor.

7. The seventh reason for remaining Lutheran is that it does not close us off to cooperation with people in other religions. A sense of humor is one key ingredient in this openness. But there is another principle at work as well. The Lutheran tradition distinguishes between two different sorts of activities in which God is engaged. One activity is a saving activity—that is, God is taking the initiative to welcome people back into relationship with Godself. To do this, God shows mercy, God forgives, God showers God's grace on the undeserving. The second is an ordering and sustaining activity. Here God works through all the secular authorities of the world to seek justice and to maintain the conditions necessary for life itself. Wanton killing, stealing, and the like undermine the possibility of life. Whoever and whatever contributes to justice, whoever and

whatever contributes to this kind of order is doing something important. There is no impediment to honoring those contributions and cooperating with all persons, groups, and programs that do something constructive. [Of course, the readiness of a Lutheran institution to cooperate will always be influenced by a biblical sense of what contributes to justice. Hence it will be far easier to cooperate with other Christians and with Jews than with those groups or persons whose ideas of what is needed are different.]

But there is a different dimension to cooperating with people in other religions that also needs to be addressed. I have said that the fundamental Lutheran insight is that God has taken the initiative and made us his children, without any preconditions. If so, then we are not in control of that grace. We can neither assume that everyone who carries the name of another religion is right with God nor that everyone who carries the name of that religion is out of touch with God. Instead of relying on either generality, we have to seek conversation and dialogue with specific persons and groups and to do so within the context of mutual respect. In other words, as a people not in control of God's grace, as a people dedicated to the *shalom* of the whole world, we have an incentive to seek mutual understanding, recognizing that we may have something to learn as well as something to teach. In a post-9/11 world, Christians have a great deal at stake in the degree to which Muslims around the world correctly understand the fundamental commitment to peace that is at the heart of their religion, and Muslims have a great deal at stake in the degree to which Christians in the West understand that American imperialism and Christianity are not the same thing. Christians need to stand ready to learn something about meditation from Buddhists, and Buddhists may have something to learn about social justice from Christians. My guess is that, when understood deeply and sensitively, when their differences are acknowledged and not covered up by empty platitudes, the religions of the world will still turn out to have more in common with each other than they do with those who think religion in unimportant or with those bin Ladens and those Hitlers and those General Custers who appeal to religion for other purposes. In any case, interfaith cooperation is a consequence of remaining Lutheran, of affirming a tradition that does not see itself in control of either God or society.

I have offered several interlocking answers to the question, why should a Lutheran institution of social ministry or a Lutheran college remain Lutheran—because it puts people in touch with depth, because it generates and nourishes a sense of vocation, because it is cautious about knowing the answers, encouraging us instead to live with paradox and ambiguity, because it acknowledges the dark side of life without losing hope, because it sees God active in the world, because it has a sense of humor, and because it does not close us off to cooperation with people in other religions. What these all come down to is this. A college or agency of social ministry should remain Lutheran because it enables that institution to be more profoundly what it is called to be, more profoundly serving the elderly, more profoundly serving the ill, more profoundly a liberal arts college. Rather than detracting from that identity, the Lutheran tradition supports, nourishes and deepens it. And, if we are to serve people--especially people who live in a cut-flower society, those roots are not just helpful and not just nice options for some individuals; they are *crucial* for the organizations of which we are a part.