

Campus Ministry

This week we bring you a short essay on campus ministry by the Rev. Dr. Steven C. Kuhl, current president of the Crossings board. Steve wrote this essay as a statement of purpose in a recent application for a Campus Ministry position at a Lutheran-affiliated liberal arts college. As he explained by e-mail, he is passing the statement along to Thursday Theology readers in order to spark our thinking about “the important role and opportunity” for such colleges in “ministering to those twentysomethings who exist on a continuum from being deeply faith-filled to being ‘nones.’”

Steve knows a lot about the spiritual needs of college students, having spent six years teaching theology (specifically, a course called “Faith Development”) at Cardinal Stritch University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Of his college-aged students, he writes,

I’m convinced they are ready and open for a deep, spiritually oriented discussion of the meaning of life. But it takes creating a safe place—a trusting atmosphere—for that to happen. The classroom at a religiously affiliated college “forces” students into the topic as a required course. It is the job of the classroom teacher to transform what is “forced” into an “unexpected opportunity” for the students to explore their “ultimate concern,” the meaning of life, their worldly placement “together with all that exists,” to borrow a phrase from Luther’s Small Catechism first article explanation of the Creed. I think that the campus pastor has a very important role to play in this regard also, along with faculty and staff. I’d welcome the Crossings readership’s thoughts on this as well.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

A Statement on the Role of Campus Ministry in a Lutheran-Affiliated Liberal Arts College

The Rev. Dr. Steven C. Kuhl

In many ways, the overall goal of campus ministry at a Lutheran-affiliated liberal arts college is no different from the goal of ministry in any other context. It seeks to relate the gospel of Jesus Christ to the give-and-take of people's daily lives. What is distinctive about campus ministry is the particular context the minister works in or, better, the stage in life of the people amongst whom the minister works—namely, college students.

While it is true that no two people—including students—are alike, it is nonetheless generally true that all people—especially students—must pass through the same culturally and anthropologically defined stages of life. The typical student at a Lutheran-affiliated college is at that pivotal point in life of turning from adolescence to adulthood. That point in life is more than simply figuring out one's career path and acquiring the knowledge and skills to be economically successful. It is more also than finding that one person to share one's life with and raise a family. It is about beginning to understand what can only be described as "the meaning of life." Things like careers or finding a partner for life or raising a family, as wonderful as they are in themselves, get their richness only when they fit into a larger story called the meaning of life. That's because our lives are not a universe unto themselves. They are part of a larger story or plotline, and only as we have some understanding of that larger story, called the meaning of life, will our lives have meaning and purpose—or, as the Lutheran tradition describes it, vocation or calling.

Because the meaning of life is ultimately religious in nature and theological in substance, campus ministry becomes one of the most important activities on a Lutheran-affiliated liberal arts campus. Campus ministry does not attend simply to one piece of the student's development, but to the development of the person as a whole, as a person who lives his or her life as an integrated whole that includes the natural world, fellow human beings, and the God who calls it all into being. Campus ministry is about helping students to understand that they fit into the plotline of God's creation, that they are not exempt from the problem of alienation and brokenness that has befallen this creation and that they are included in God's promise in Christ Jesus to make all things new, in what Paul calls the "New Creation."

In general, the specific tasks of campus ministry at a Lutheran-affiliated college are many and the approaches taken can vary greatly depending on the times and circumstances. But there are some basic ingredients: lively worship rooted in Word and Sacrament; stimulating conversation around the Word of God and daily life; critical exploration of the Lutheran theological tradition and its history of updating its confessional-grounded response to meet the needs of the time; pastoral sensibility and support for the unique struggles and challenges faced by students, faculty, and staff in a modern college setting; regular engagement with the faculty and staff to provide an integrated experience of intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual formation for students; and an open atmosphere that invites ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and that welcomes diverse points of view into the conversation.

Exploring the connection between one's relationship with God and the meaning of life can be easily overlooked in the college student's program of study. But also, sometimes, the facts, truths, and values that a liberal arts education gives can

challenge and even contradict what students learned at home or in their local churches. For this reason and many others, campus ministry at a Lutheran-affiliated college has a vital pastoral and formational role to play in helping students integrate their liberal arts education with a deeper understanding of the Lutheran tradition that is mindful and informed about the ecumenical and interfaith context in which we live.