

“Born in the church, Serving the church”
Edward F. Leonard, President, Bethany College
Central States Synod Assembly – June 3, 2011
Luke 24:13-16 (The Road to Emmaus)

“Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all the things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.”

In the brief time I have this afternoon, I would like to share with you an emerging re-imagining of what it means for Bethany to be a college of the church and what it means for the church to have a college. (For today's discussion by the church I mean the Central States Synod.) This is not yet a complete thought, by no means, but I share it with the hope that it may pique the curiosity of some of you to help me make it a complete thought and eventually a plan.

Let me frame this with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus having left Jerusalem for Emmaus. Along the way, they meet the resurrected Jesus, though they do not recognize him.

For me, Jerusalem represents the past, what and how it used to be. On the other hand, Emmaus represents the future to which God is calling us and the Road is where we are today in an unprecedented environment of discontinuous change.

For example, in our church setting, Jerusalem represents what some nostalgically call, "the good old days" ... you remember ... a relatively stable environment with predictable, incremental change; the pastor was found every where - *sola pastora*; North American churches were denomination-centric; the congregation existed to maintain the flock; and ministry revolved around hatching, matching, and dispatching. .

For Bethany, our Jerusalem as a college of the church was about 50 years ago when Bethany received 20% of its revenues from the church. The mission and ministry of Bethany and the mission and ministry of the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church were unquestionably intertwined. This year, however, Bethany received from congregations, synods, and churchwide about \$80,000. By contrast, that represents less than 1% of Bethany's total revenues. On the other hand, in this year's budget, Bethany College awarded slightly more than \$1.2 million in scholarships to our Lutheran students.

So as we walk the road to Emmaus, at what point does the hard question get asked, "Are we still a college of the church and does the church still have a college?"

Let me digress momentarily to explain that question in the context of public higher education. That is, a similar conversation is occurring in several states and at those states' flagship universities. For example, the University of Michigan receives less than 5% of its total revenues from the state of Michigan. Similarly, the University of Colorado receives less than 6%. In both states, and others like Ohio and Arizona, there are calls to admit the reality these are no longer publicly-supported universities and should in fact be privatized. This is a conversation centered on state money for higher education.

So, if it's all about money, then let's admit it and let our church-college relationship follow the path of other denominations. Bethany College can easily become historically Lutheran.

While I hear the voices to admit reality and move past being a college of the church, I'd prefer instead to believe our relationship is about more than money. I'd prefer to lead Bethany and our church partners into a conversation that discerns a new model where Bethany and the church re-imagine a shared mission and ministry. To that end, I'm part of an ELCA task force with six other ELCA college and university presidents who are committed to doing just that.

Put another way, instead of the church just putting a check in the offering plate, which had become the norm, I'd like to see a greater commitment. Please don't misunderstand me, we appreciate the financial gifts, but there must be more to our shared mission and ministry than money.

As a former stewardship chair, you may be familiar with the frequently used stewardship metaphor of an eggs & bacon breakfast: the chicken makes the contribution and the pig makes the commitment. At least as far back as I can see, the church has been the chicken making a contribution, and certainly some very nice contributions. But what Bethany needs, just like what each congregation needs from its members, is commitment.

To begin our discernment, let me start and share some possibilities for greater commitment that others have suggested. These are based on Bethany's gifts of intellectual capital and human capital.

- Bethany and the church could partner in global ministry through our companion synods – sending mission teams of alumni, students, faculty, and staff alongside church volunteers; or partner to provide scholarship support for students from those companion synods to study at Bethany.
- Or, we could partner in social ministry through Lutheran Social Services that might include internships or experience-based education for students.
- Or, we could work together in youth ministry to develop our middle school, high school, and college youth in missional leadership for a missional church.
- Or, we could partner with Lutheran Disaster Response to offer alternative spring breaks or fall breaks.
- Or, Bethany could provide staff and/or chaperone's for high school or middle school youth gatherings or even the ELCA's National Youth Gathering.
- Or, between the Synod, individual congregations, and Bethany, we could offer scholarships to students attending Bethany.
- Or, Bethany and the church could seize the evangelical opportunity presented by Bethany's 31% of students who self-identify as "no preference" in denominational affiliation.

The possibilities and opportunities are endless, if we are willing to make a commitment to the future together – to share the road to Emmaus.

In the end, like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, I don't think it's as important or really matters as much where we were or where we're going. What is absolutely important for the journey is that we meet Jesus – and recognize him – on the road.

For me, in the context of Bethany College as a college of the church, we are leaving behind the way it was – the church stewarded Bethany – and heading toward the future – Bethany stewards the church. However, only when we meet Jesus together on the road to our shared future will we finally know what that means.

Amen.