



Texts in Context

Faith and Spiritual Practice among College Students: Social Inquiry and Biblical Imagination

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Engaging young adults in worship has become a challenge for colleges, universities, and congregations. A few seek out traditional liturgical services; a few frequent services designed around their genres of music. Most “twenty somethings” vote with their feet.

As with many congregations and church-related colleges and universities across the United States, chapel attendance at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, has significantly declined over the last decades. In the past, daily chapel, once mandatory at the college, gathered over a thousand students, faculty, and staff for worship. Today, not more than fifty to sixty students, faculty, and staff regularly assemble for chapel.

As chapel attendance has declined at Concordia, alternative forms and times of worship have emerged. Some of these alternative forms and times of worship are understood to complement daily chapel; others are viewed as competitors to and a critique of chapel worship. The combined total of attendance at these diverse worship opportunities at the college represents but a small fraction of the student body. Most students at Concordia have joined other young adults around the United States, choosing not to attend worship.

Rather than focusing primarily on “technical fixes” to declining chapel attendance at a church college, inquiry and curiosity are widening the conversations and assisting larger portions of the community to come to more deeply understand realities. With such shared inquiry, new avenues of thought are being opened and new imagination generated.

THE PRESENTING ISSUE AND WORKING QUESTIONS

Given Concordia's understanding that worship is integral to the college's mission and given its conviction that the spirit and content of the college's identity lie in Lutheran traditions of the Christian faith and its practice—a mission firmly held by the college's president—the decline in worship attendance has generated larger concerns among many college “stakeholders” (faculty, staff, students, administrators, board members, and parents)—a concern regarding the state of the faith of its students and the faithfulness and effectiveness of the college's teaching of faith and practice of campus ministry. This led to the president's calling for significant attention being given to the decline during the 2013–2014 academic year. A facilitator was engaged to join members of the Campus Ministry team to guide the resulting study and redevelopment of worship at Concordia.

The Campus Ministry team and the facilitator initiated the study and redevelopment of worship on campus by convening two conversations in which students, faculty members, staff, and administrators were invited to reflect on the occasion, history, and purpose of the proposed study and development. While none of the students, faculty members, staff, and administrators challenged the decision to take up an in-depth study of worship, both consultation groups questioned whether focusing just on worship as evidence of faith expression was expansive enough. They advised looking more broadly at the faith practices, including exploration of student spirituality.

Following the two initial conversations, the members of the Campus Ministry team and the facilitator determined to expand the horizon of the study and redevelopment of worship to include exploration of other faith and spiritual practices. Thus the presenting questions of the project became: “What is the state of worship, faith, and spiritual practices among students at Concordia?” and “How might Concordia more faithfully and effectively enrich these student worship, faith, and spiritual practices?”

A BEGINNING FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY AND REDEVELOPMENT

Concordia College is not the first institution of higher learning to investigate questions of faith and spiritual practices. In fact, students and faculty at the college had participated a few years earlier in one of the largest studies of religion and spirituality among college students in the United States. The 2003–2007 study received responses from over 112,000 students and faculty from 236 colleges and universities. The UCLA study, conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) housed at the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, according to its principal investigators,

is based in part on the realization that the relative amount of attention that colleges and universities devote to the “exterior” and “interior” aspects of students' development has gotten out of balance...we have increasingly come to

neglect the student's inner development—the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, spirituality and self-understanding.¹

The multi-year study of undergraduate students was undertaken to better understand how college students conceive of religion and spirituality and how colleges can better facilitate spiritual development. The study aimed to address six questions regarding religion and spirituality:

- How many students are actively searching and curious about spiritual issues such as the meaning of life and work?
- How do students view themselves in terms of spirituality and related qualities such as compassion, generosity, optimism, and kindness?
- What spiritual religious practices (e.g., rituals, prayer/meditation, service to others) are students most/least attracted to?
- How do spiritual/religious practices affect students' academic and personal development?
- What is the connection between traditional religious practices and spiritual development?
- What in the undergraduate experience facilitates or hinders students' spiritual/religious quest?²

Given the focus and nature of the HERI study and Concordia's student and faculty participation, it seemed right to the Campus Ministry team and facilitator to utilize the work of UCLA as the framework for considering the expanded presenting questions for the Worship, Faith, and Spiritual Practice project at Concordia. Most importantly, the HERI study's framework assisted the Campus Ministry team and project facilitator in developing early agreement on the definition of key concepts in the presenting questions. Shared definitions of those key concepts were important to constructing the project's survey and launching its interviews, observations, and focus groups. Those key concepts and the initial definitions became:

- Worship—an act or acts of religious devotion; ceremonies, prayers, or other religious forms; participation in religious rites;
- Faith—confidence or trust in a person, idea, or deity, including strong belief in someone or something; and/or a system of religious beliefs and/or practices;
- Spiritual—relating to the “spirit” of a person; a representation of the sacredness of life; an expression of a search for the meaning and purpose of life;
- Spirituality—quest for life's meaning, purpose, and resiliency;
- Religion—an organized collection of beliefs, narratives, symbols, or rites ex-

¹*The Spiritual Life of College Students: A National Study of College Students' Search for Meaning and Purpose*, Higher Education Research Institute, at http://spirituality.ucla.edu/docs/reports/Spiritual_Life_College_Students_Full_Report.pdf (accessed April 29, 2014) 2.

²*Ibid.*, 4–5.

plaining and expressing the meaning of life; a system of beliefs, behaviors and structures regarding life with a god or gods;

- Religiousness—religious commitment and religious engagement;
- Faith and/or religious and spiritual practices—actions undertaken to develop or give expression to one’s deepest meanings and/or relationship with God; “walking a path” or living a journey of faith.

While the Campus Ministry team (and eventually the task force that guided the project) and the project facilitator understood that these definitions might change during the course of the inquiry, the ULCA study provided shared understandings as a foundation from which to begin the Concordia project design, investigation, and interpretation.

A THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY AND REDEVELOPMENT

As a college affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Concordia has strong, long-standing, vital roots and identity in Lutheran tradition. Therefore, it was important to put the definitions drawn largely from the HERI study into conversation with the theological commitments of Concordia’s own tradition. Its leadership places high value on such resources of faith as scripture and its interpretation; the sacraments and their administration and implications for ministry; the mutual conversation and consolation of God’s people; discipleship; justification and vocation; the deep and expansive utilization of liturgy, music, and hymnody in worship; and the importance of a disciplined and reflective faith and life as a goal of a liberal arts college, among other resources.

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Given these theological commitments, it became important to the study and redevelopment project’s leadership that these resources of the faith would everywhere be in dialogue with the empirical investigation of practices as well as with the interpretation of the study’s findings. Consequently, the definition of key concepts developed within the framework of the UCLA study, once brought into dialogue with the resources of faith in Lutheran tradition, were significantly refined and enriched. They now became

- Worship—an act or acts of religious devotion; ceremonies, prayers, or other religious forms; participation in religious rites. Most specifically as a college of the Lutheran tradition, this activity is centered in the community gathered around word and sacrament and communal prayer and song.
- Faith—confidence or trust in a person, idea, or deity, including strong belief

in someone or something; and/or a system of religious beliefs and/or practices. Most specifically as a college of the Lutheran tradition, faith is knowledge, assent, and trust engendered by the Holy Spirit through word and sacrament.

- Spiritual—relating to the “spirit” of a person; a representation of the sacredness of life; an expression of a search for the meaning and purpose of life.
- Spirituality—quest for life’s meaning, purpose, and resiliency.
- Religion—an organized collection of beliefs, narratives, symbols, and rites explaining and expressing the meaning of life; a system of beliefs, behaviors and structures regarding life with a god or gods.
- Religiousness—religious commitment and religious engagement.
- Faith and/or religious and spiritual practices—actions undertaken to develop or give expression to one’s deepest meanings and/or relationship with God. Most specifically, as a college of the Lutheran tradition, confidence in having been justified with God and living a journey of faith; faith practice focuses in participation in the rich dynamics of word and sacrament in worship and the exercise of one’s call/vocation in daily life.

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From the outset, the project leadership team was committed to an ongoing dialogue of tradition with the research design, emerging data and its interpretation, and the redevelopment of practice. Scripture and its “message” were expected to shape investigative activity and the analysis and interpretation of data. Investigative activity and its interpretation were expected to shape the interpretation of scripture and the rest of Lutheran tradition, and both were expected to shape and redevelop practice, which was in turn expected to shape the interpretation of scripture and the gathering and interpretation of data. This interactive, dynamic process was intentionally woven into the research design as an attempt to faithfully and imaginatively engage scripture and social enquiry in a way that might produce surprising and discontinuous results.

SOCIAL RESEARCH AND LUTHERAN TRADITION IN THE PRACTICE OF MINISTRY

Believing the current shifts in worship, faith, and spiritual practices are evidence of large and deep cultural dynamics, the Worship, Faith, and Spiritual Practice project at Concordia intentionally designed interdisciplinary dialogue into the study. Elements from four theoretical streams are primary influences in the study: practical theology, grounded theory, appreciative inquiry, and models of leading change.

Practical theology

From the unique dynamics of practical theological methodology come three perspectives of interactive reflection: a hermeneutical perspective, a strategic perspective, and an empirical perspective. In *Practical Theology*, Gerben Heitink uses prayer as an illustration of these dynamics:

People find it difficult to pray. What is the problem? Through a hermeneutical approach...the practical theologian attempts to describe the tension between tradition and experience...with a view to arriving at a deeper understanding of the problem....through the empirical circle...knowledge that has been acquired can now be utilized in improving the action strategies in a particular domain of meditative action, for example, prayer as a part of...the liturgy.³

In this project, Lutheran theological commitments and traditions, as cited earlier, have become crucial “texts” in the hermeneutical dialogue.

Grounded theory

From grounded theory comes the fundamental commitment to first ask: “What’s going on?” regarding a particular practice or field of endeavor; secondly to ask: “What is the main intention of the participants, how are they addressing those intentions?” In grounded theory, as multiple methods of data gathering are utilized, the researchers and those whose behaviors are being studied engage in four movements of data analysis:

1. coding: identifying key points around which the data can be clustered
2. concept development: collecting items of similar content that group the data
3. categorization: bringing together groups of similar concepts that generate a theory
4. theory construction: drawing similar groups of concepts into systematic relationship to one another in such a way that it explains or enhances the subject of the research.⁴

Appreciative inquiry

Appreciative inquiry is a strength-based research method that draws upon an organization’s existing or potential strengths as a way of understanding the subject being studied and motivating and guiding the leadership of an organization to enhance particular activities.

Based upon the underlying convictions of appreciative inquiry, the Worship, Faith, and Spiritual Practice project draws and works from these five principles:

1. the constructionist principle, which holds that what is believed to be true determines what is to be done and that thought and action emerge from relationships;

³Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 166.

⁴Barney G. Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, 1999) 92–95.

2. the simultaneity principle, which holds that inquiry into human systems changes them and changes the things people think and talk about; what they discover and learn are implicit in the questions asked;
3. the poetic principle, which holds that the life of an organization or its sub-systems is expressed in the stories participants tell each other day to day; thus, the “story” of an organization is constantly being re-authored;
4. the anticipatory principle, which holds that what human beings do or an organization does are being guided by its view of the future;
5. the positive principle, which holds that sustainable change needs strong relational bonds and hopefulness.⁵

Models for leading change

Theories and models for leading change have emerged in many sectors of organizational research and development. John Kotter has pioneered the study of failure and success in major change efforts in organizations. From his research, Kotter has developed a holistic approach to leading change that greatly increases the likelihood of significant innovations taking root and contributing constructively to the ongoing mission of an organization.

In its design and process, constructed with goals of change, of redevelopment, the Worship, Faith, and Spiritual Practice project has borrowed heavily from Kotter’s Eight-Stage Process for Leading Change:

- Step 1: Establish a sense of urgency; help others see the need for change.
- Step 2: Create a guiding coalition; assemble a group with enough power to lead the change effort.
- Step 3: Develop a change vision; together formulate a future story.
- Step 4: Communicate the vision for buy-in; make sure key leaders and many persons in the organization know or value the emerging future story.
- Step 5: Empower broad-based action; remove obstacles; encourage risk-taking and nontraditional ideas and actions.
- Step 6: Generate short-term wins; plan for achievements that are visible; reward participants in the achievements.
- Step 7: Don’t let up; use increased visibility to expand changes throughout the systems and personnel of the organization.
- Step 8: Incorporate changes into the culture; articulate connections between the new behaviors and organization effectiveness.⁶

These four theories or “disciplines” enable the researchers and developers to bring into ongoing conversation “lines of inquiry” that, when in dialogue with one another, open the imagination of the practitioner in looking at “texts,” such as scrip-

⁵G. R. Bushe and T. Pitman, “The Appreciative Process: A Method for Transformational Change,” *OD Practitioner* 23/3 (1991) 1–4.

⁶John Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996) 21.

ture, and hold the practitioner's interpretations and actions accountable to reality testing while also being open to the movement of the Spirit.

WORSHIP, FAITH, AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICE AT CONCORDIA COLLEGE

So what does an investigative, interpretive, and enrichment study focused on "What is the state of worship, faith, and spiritual practice among students at Concordia College?" and "How might Concordia more faithfully and effectively enrich student worship, faith and spiritual practice?" look like?

The first stage of the project would focus on investigation, data interpretation, and "imagination enrichment." This phase would require four months of work and occur during spring semester 2014. The second stage of the project would focus on continuing data interpretation and continuing imagination enrichment, with primary emphasis on piloting and integrating innovation across student worship, faith, and spiritual practice. This second stage will begin in the summer of 2014 and continue through the 2014–2015 academic year.

A task force was formed to guide the project. The task force, all drawn from the Concordia community, included representative persons with strong capacities for reflection, imagination, and influence. Among the task force members were three students, two members of the Campus Ministry team, two religion faculty members, and a faculty member at-large.

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Five work groups drawn from the Concordia community were formed to carry out the project's tasks. The faculty, staff, and students on these work groups were appointed by the guiding task force on the basis of their known expertise and capacities to get work accomplished. The five work groups are survey development and quantitative data analysis; focus group interviews and qualitative data analysis; best practices inquiry; communication strategies and digital potentials; and "stewards" of the "texts" of Lutheran tradition. The project facilitator, the Campus Ministry team, and the chair of the task force serve as a "servant administrative" work group handling the mundane but nevertheless crucial details.

A presentation of the project to the board of regents, a presentation that included inviting them to provide their understandings of student worship, faith, and spiritual practice, resulted in significant board buy-in, including extensive board interest and a fifty-thousand-dollar gift to support the study.

SOCIAL INQUIRY AND BIBLICAL IMAGINATION IN MINISTRY: EARLY OBSERVATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES FOR "TRANSFERABILITY"

While the project is only halfway through its first phase, significant, unsolic-

ited and untested comments, statements, and observations have emerged. From those involved in the leadership of the project and others on campus comments such as the following have been heard and noted:

“We started focusing on a specific practice; we are now exploring a culture of habits.”

“We began searching for a solution to a problem; we are now following our curiosity into a universe of possibilities.”

“We have lived and worked in ‘silos’; we are now engaged in mutual conversation and shared discernment.”

“How does a Lutheran college of the ELCA respond to the faith and spiritual needs or practices of Muslim students or secularist students while asserting its own Trinitarian confessions?”

“How do we make sense of all these relationships and activities that students see as expressions of their faith...their spirituality?”

From these comments as well as the attitudes of those at work on tasks, the sense of collegiality, and the celebration of discoveries made, many on campus have observed that the values, structure, and activities of the project have already influenced the “culture” of worship, faith, and spiritual practice on campus. At the very least, a conversation regarding worship, faith, and spiritual practices has emerged across the campus. Leaders within academic departments, student services, and student government are interested in and supportive of the project’s questions; many students and faculty have expressed their hopes for what might come out of the study and redevelopment efforts. There is good momentum to carry the project into its current, arduous data gathering and interpretation efforts.

Already a turn is being experienced. Rather than focusing primarily on “technical fixes” to declining chapel attendance, inquiry and curiosity are widening the conversations and assisting larger portions of the community to come to more deeply understand current realities. As shared inquiry occurs, new avenues of thought are being opened and new imagination generated. Frustration is giving way to hope, and problem is becoming opportunity.

While this project is taking place on a college campus, such a social inquiry weaving elements from practical theological theory, grounded theory, appreciative inquiry, and leading change might very well be designed into such a study and redevelopment effort in a congregation, synod, or other faith-based institutions. The principles undergirding the design of this project are most certainly transferable. While the stakeholders would be different in each case, they most certainly can be identified, drawn into the inquiry, and unleashed to exercise their capacities, including their imaginative work with scripture and other elements of Christian tradition.

While it is hoped that experimentation will continue in worship, chapel is now understood as but one element in a “culture” of faith and spiritual under-

standings and practices. The goal is no longer simply increasing chapel attendance; the goal has become nurturing the faith and spiritual lives of young adults. The project will enable the leadership of the college to address the larger universe of faith and spiritual understandings and practice. This will not be a quick fix and the early signs of hope do not guarantee substantial and long-term cultural change. But expanded vision and new practices are being implemented that evoke imagination and are drawing a larger constituency into the conversation.

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I look forward to the expanding influence of the Worship, Faith, and Spiritual Practice project on the campus at Concordia. I am excited by the potential impact such an approach to ministry could exert in the worship, faith, and spiritual practices of other colleges and universities! I think there will be much learned here that is transferable to congregations and other faith-based institutions. ⊕

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