



Lessons on Vocation and Location: The Saga of Augsburg College as Urban Settlement

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In 1871, a small band of Norwegian settlers from Trinity Lutheran Congregation in the still tiny village of Minneapolis invited the remnant of a theological seminary in Marshall, Wisconsin, to come north to be an outpost for preparing preachers and teachers for the Lutheran immigrants of Minnesota. It was a humble beginning that has unfolded as an institutional saga with significant implications. Little did they dream, those intrepid pioneers, that almost 150 years later, Augsburg College would be a thriving small university, educating students of diverse backgrounds and equipping them to live out their vocations around the world. Little did they dream, those faithful few, that this institution that they helped survive its early years against all odds would be an anchor in its urban neighborhood and an international model for linking education, community-building, and service to neighbor.

I want to use the example of Augsburg College's evolution as a community of learning and faith to suggest that all communities of faith might find important resources for their lives by paying attention to the intersections of vocation and location. It is in those intersections, I will argue, that we discern how best to be God's

For almost 150 years, Augsburg College has been a resident of the city of Minneapolis, increasingly identifying with its diverse community, seeking ways to serve God and neighbors in its urban neighborhood. For Augsburg, location has informed vocation and vocation has sought to impact its location.

people and do God's work in the midst of our diverse and often turbulent world. On the cusp of its 150th anniversary, Augsburg College lives out its saga as a college dedicated to the liberal arts, grounded in its Lutheran faith, and shaped by its distinctive location in the midst of an immigrant urban neighborhood. It is a saga that has been tested again and again throughout the college's history, but as I will detail in this essay, it is a saga that abides because it is infused into the identity and character of the institution. *It is the saga of an urban settlement, exemplifying the inextricable links between education, faith, place, and service to and with the neighbor.*

THE IDEA OF A SAGA

What is a saga? My understanding of the concept of saga comes from research done by Burton Clark on what it is that creates a distinctive character and identity for colleges and universities.¹ A saga is more than a story—all of us have stories. A saga is more of a mythology, a sense of history and purpose and direction told in vocabulary and narrative that accounts for a community's DNA—its essence, even. A saga abides in the sort of people, programs, and values that define an institution.

Clark contends that not every institution has a saga. Sometimes that is a function of not being true to founding values; at other times it can be occasioned by a change of location or core mission. Still other institutions have not found a way to link their pasts, presents, and futures in a coherent narrative. Augsburg College's saga runs deep in the culture and meaning of our work together. An exploration of Augsburg's history surfaces several themes that are central to our saga: an immigrant sensibility shaped in an urban neighborhood, freedom through faith to ask tough questions and engage otherness, a moral commitment to access to quality education for all, and the vocational aspiration to be neighbor to and with each other.² These themes inform Augsburg's identity as an urban settlement.

COLLEGES AS TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY URBAN SETTLEMENTS

What is an urban settlement? The settlement house tradition, birthed in the east end of London in the late nineteenth century by Oxford-educated young people, sought to model how taking up residence in the midst of immigrant neighborhoods, engaging neighbors in exploring how best to respond to the realities of their lives, and then working alongside each other to make the neighborhood safer, cleaner, and more just, could help solve urban problems and ultimately shape public policy.³

In other words, "settling" in a neighborhood, becoming neighbor, was seen

¹Burton R. Clark, "The Organizational Saga in Higher Education," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 17/2 (1972) 178–184.

²Augsburg College, "The Promise of Augsburg College," 2008, at <http://vimeo.com/79100160> (accessed January 27, 2014).

³For the history of Toynbee Hall, the first settlement house, see www.toynbeehall.org.uk/our-history (accessed January 27, 2014).

as the most effective way to ensure healthier and more vibrant urban communities. This was in contrast to the idea of “experts” coming into a neighborhood to offer and impose their solutions. The well-educated settlement residents certainly had expertise to offer, but it was offered in the context of neighborhood-wide engagement and participation. The lessons learned from these neighborhood efforts then became the impetus for social policies that would shape urban life for decades to come.

In the United States, the settlement house tradition took root initially in New York and then Chicago, where Jane Addams and her colleagues founded Hull House in 1889 on the near west side and sought to transform a troubled immigrant neighborhood. Their work at Hull House—including educational programs, community centers, libraries, music schools and theaters, sanitation efforts, child labor practices, and honoring cultural heritages—illustrated the wide range of efforts pursued in response to the needs of neighbors and the neighborhood.⁴

The settlement house tradition thrived in the United States well into the mid-twentieth century, at which point its influence on social welfare policy became its downfall. The role of governments in responding to urban challenges changed the policy and funding infrastructure and left settlement houses needing to heed rules imposed from outside the neighborhood instead of being able to respond as the neighborhood saw fit. The few settlement houses from this original tradition surviving today often struggle to honor the underlying tenets of the tradition as they rely on government and philanthropic support that limits their flexibility in responding to needs.

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On the other hand, the tenets of the settlement tradition took root in other forms in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. As Ira Harkavy and John Puckett argued in 1994, the idea of applied sociology that the early settlement leaders wrote about and practiced offers a moral and pragmatic framework for colleges and universities to “function as perennial, deeply rooted settlements, providing illuminated space for their communities as they conduct their mission of producing and transmitting knowledge to advance human welfare and to develop theories that have broad utility and application.”⁵ Harkavy’s own work in developing a plan

⁴Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (New York: MacMillan, 1910).

⁵Ira Harkavy and John L. Puckett, “Lessons from Hull House for the Contemporary Urban University,” *Social Service Review* 68/3 (1994) 51.

for the University of Pennsylvania's work in its west Philadelphia neighborhood is a leading example of the university as urban settlement. The plan linked the well-being of the neighborhood to the university's academic mission, which included the founding of a community school, economic development efforts, and wide-ranging links between students and neighbors.

For Augsburg, the concept of the urban settlement offers a framework for interpreting the identity and character of the college as it has unfolded over the past 145 years. Settled in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis—one of the most diverse neighborhoods between Chicago and Los Angeles—Augsburg seeks to live out its mission to educate students as “informed citizens, thoughtful stewards, critical thinkers and responsible leaders” by engaging its neighbors and neighborhood in mutually beneficial ways. The array of programs that link education, health and wellness, economic well-being, social justice, and citizen participation is dizzying. For example, when Augsburg received President Obama's national award for community engagement in 2010, the citation noted that the Augsburg community had provided more than 225,000 hours of volunteer service in the previous year. An impressive number certainly, and simply one marker in understanding Augsburg as urban settlement. Augsburg's work in the neighborhood is central to its identity as a college of the Lutheran church in the heart of the city. And we have come to articulate our institutional vocation in this summary fashion: “We believe we are called to serve our neighbor.” In that way, we name our commitment to the inextricable links between faith, education, place, and service to and with neighbors.

IT'S ALL ABOUT MISSION: THE CITY AS CLASSROOM

The power of this vocational statement for Augsburg's saga as urban settlement has not always been embraced by the college. Though location and place are central to the college's identity, it is not sufficient to explain the integrative power of the college's character. For that purpose, it is critical that place be understood through the lens of Augsburg's academic mission and work. This integrated view of place and mission required a new way of imagining the college's core work of educating students.

As Augsburg expanded its academic programs in the mid-twentieth century and more students enrolled, the institution touted the benefits of life in the city, including cultural resources, opportunities for work experiences, and so forth. But clear links between urban life and curriculum, for example, were not apparent as the college entered the 1960s.

Then enters an unlikely champion for a different vision of Augsburg's mission and identity. Dr. Joel Torstenson, a 1940 graduate of Augsburg College, originally came to the college from his hometown in rural Minnesota. Joining the Augsburg faculty in 1942, Torstenson, a social scientist, began systematically expanding the college's academic programs in the social sciences and social work.

This certainly brought students and faculty into contact with urban life and realities, but that contact remained limited to particular departments until Torstenson returned from a sabbatical in 1966, transformed in his thinking about the promise of “The Liberal Arts College in the Modern Metropolis.”⁶

In an address to the Augsburg faculty in 1967, Torstenson argued that his decision to study the role of colleges in the modern metropolis was influenced by the emerging reality that cities are a dominant community reality in society, that Augsburg was uniquely situated to develop an educational program responsive to this emerging reality about cities, and that Augsburg had much to learn from what other urban higher education institutions had done to integrate their locations into an academic program.⁷

This momentous address included a myriad of practical recommendations for Augsburg to embrace its urban context as a “laboratory for liberal learning and research.”⁸ From the most simple and pragmatic, such as hiring faculty who have a particular interest in urban issues, to curricular innovations such as a “Metro-Urban Studies” program, to encouraging staff and faculty to live in the surrounding neighborhoods, to engaging with community advisors and partners, Torstenson’s twenty-four-page address reads like a map to Augsburg fully embracing its location as classroom and context for a distinctive academic vision.

It’s not enough to say we are in this place; we must be able to say with conviction, we are of this place. It is about infusing all we say and do with this mission-based embrace of the place God has called us to in the world.

This, then, represents the critical “hinge” in Augsburg’s saga, as the college integrated urban location and academic mission in ways that infused the commitment to the city into everything the college said and did. Carl Chrislock, on the occasion of the college’s centennial in 1969, suggests that this was a response to an academic revolution underway in the mid-twentieth century and focused on new ways of learning about humans and society.⁹ Augsburg President Oscar Anderson, writing during that centennial year, claims that the city is an “unlimited laboratory [where] students and their teachers, through work-study programs, now have the opportunity to observe first-hand what textbooks have implied from afar.”¹⁰ While some institutions, Anderson continues, might choose to retreat behind ivied walls, “Augsburg chooses to be of the city.”¹¹ The lessons from Augsburg’s saga for other

⁶Joel Torstenson, “The Liberal Arts College in the Modern Metropolis” (unpublished manuscript, 1967).

⁷Ibid., 1.

⁸Ibid., 13, 15.

⁹Carl Chrislock, *From Fjord to Freeway* (Minneapolis: Augsburg College, 1969) 235.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

communities of faith are grounded in the theological and practical work of integrating mission and location. It's not enough to say we are *in* this place; we must be able to say with conviction, we are *of* this place. It is about infusing all we say and do with this mission-based embrace of the place God has called us to in the world.

THE NEED TO CHOOSE

All of this said, the evolution of Augsburg's saga as urban settlement has not been without its tensions. For the purposes of this essay on institutional identity, I think it is critical to show how the power of an institution's saga is perhaps most apparent as it negotiates the challenges to identity and character.

On this point, I have learned much from the poet and essayist Wendell Berry, who (commenting on the work of his teacher, Wallace Stegner) suggests that there are two competing ideas in the American psyche.¹² On the one hand, we are defined by the idea of the "boomer," those who come to a place seeking wealth and success and who use up the resources of that place before moving on to the next opportunity. On the other hand, there also are those in our midst who are "stickers" or "nesters," who come to stay in a place, to make it better, to replenish and grow its resources.

As Berry argues, this tension between boomers and stickers is a central aspect of the American experience. He writes, "Having chosen one way, we are never free of the opposite way. . . . Such choices are not clean-cut and final, as when we choose one of two forks in the road, but they involve us in tension, in tendency. We must keep on choosing."¹³

I would suggest that this tension between the boomer and sticker in all of us is a critical aspect of Augsburg's saga, a tension that has taken form in a variety of concrete decisions and actions over the past century and a half, and where the need to choose posited significant challenges to the college's identity and character.

For the sake of illustration, I offer two historical moments when the Augsburg community needed to choose and thereby either embrace or squander its saga as urban settlement.

Place matters: the lure of Augsburg Park

The city can be a frightening place and certainly the early decades of Augsburg Theological Seminary (the original name of the institution) offered its members a firsthand view of a rapidly growing and changing urban context—not without its challenges for a modest educational institution serving particular purposes and audiences.

Initially surrounded in its Cedar-Riverside neighborhood by immigrant Scandinavians, Augsburg found itself in the early twentieth century more and

¹²Wendell Berry, "The Obligation of Care," *Sierra* 80/5 (1995) 62–67.

¹³*Ibid.*, 63.

more isolated from its founding community as they migrated out of the city. Though the college's early leaders took public stands against "undesirable isolationist tendencies among Norwegian-Americans"¹⁴—stands that informed the college's commitments to public education and serving the neighbor—ultimately the relationship between Augsburg and the city began to fray.

While embracing civic responsibility as part of its faith heritage, Augsburg fought against the worldly taverns and dance clubs that began to spring up around its campus. The growing urbanization of the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood led Augsburg to embrace withdrawal and separatism.

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By the early 1900s, this concern about the city and its detrimental influence on students and the institution led Augsburg leaders to convey a deep unhappiness with their location in the city. At the same time, "an impulse to move the school out of Minneapolis—either to a suburban site or an even greater distance away—also developed."¹⁵ Many reasons were cited, including "industrial smoke, commercial invasion of the campus neighborhood, and prospective residential blight in adjacent areas,"¹⁶ but perhaps most troubling was a 1922 publication noting that the original Scandinavian residents of the neighborhood had been replaced "by a more or less undesirable class of people of varied race and color."¹⁷

This unfortunate stance set the stage for a group of Augsburg boosters to undertake what became known as the Augsburg Park project, which envisioned a pastoral site for the school in suburban Richfield. A tract of land was purchased, a campus plan was developed, and fundraising efforts were undertaken. Though the allure of the Augsburg Park project remained alive until 1949, it was essentially undermined by the Great Depression of the 1930s, which left investors without the resources to complete the proposed plan.

And so, in a roundabout way, Augsburg chose to stay in the city. As Augsburg's centennial historian Carl Chrislock comments, "Augsburg Park was an unfortunate venture in several respects. Not only did it ultimately fail, but it also fostered the dream of a suburban campus separated from the grim realities of the inner city, a vision obscuring Augsburg's potentialities as an urban institution."¹⁸ That said, the failure of the project—the choice to stay, if you will—also became

¹⁴Chrislock, *From Fjord to Freeway*, 121.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 150.

the impetus for change, for challenging Augsburg to look forward instead of backward as an institution. The emergence of the college program and subsequent enrollment growth, the acquisition of facilities, and a more intentional exploration of what it meant to be connected to city life and resources, all served as the foundation for the modern Augsburg College.

Place matters is the lesson of this choice. Though not without its deep tensions, the decision to stay in the city and settle in its neighborhood is a critical piece of the Augsburg saga. The challenge for all communities of faith is to explore how place matters, and whether and how a community's place—its location and networks of support and influence—is an obstacle or a bridge to faithful ministry and service.

Vocation and location: the neighborhood God intended for us

The remarkable fact is that some fifty years later, this embrace of place and the academic revolution that accompanied it at Augsburg has taken full form, infusing our institutional saga with a range of academic and public programs that embrace the city as our classroom. And so we continue to choose to be of the city each and every day, but even now this choice can be fraught with tension.

On a chilly September evening in 2008, a young Augsburg student, a Somali-American, was murdered outside a community center in our Cedar-Riverside neighborhood—gunned down as he left his work-study assignment tutoring neighborhood children.

It was a horrendous time for the neighborhood and the college. Our Somali-American neighbors were terrified by the killing, which only reminded them of what they thought they had escaped in fleeing their troubled homeland. Relations were frayed between neighbors and city officials as witnesses to the shooting were too frightened to come forward. The family of the victim struggled to comprehend how this terrible crime could go unsolved.¹⁹

The college community was equally traumatized. A young, promising life was taken in a senseless shooting. Parents called, worried that the neighborhood was too dangerous for their children to stay in school. Relationships with neighbors were strained as students and faculty understandably pulled back from service commitments in the wake of the shooting.

This incident was personal for me as I led a mourning community in the midst of an anxious and frightened neighborhood. Someone broke one of God's commandments and we lived in the aftermath. It was in that moment that it became so clear to me that God does not give us commandments primarily to convict the sinner—we all get that, we're broken, we don't live up to the rules, we struggle to hold it all together. God gives us commandments so that we might know the sort of lives God intends for us to live together.

In his explanation of the fifth commandment, "You shall not murder," Mar-

¹⁹Though suspects were identified in the shooting, witnesses were unwilling to testify, and no one has ever been convicted.

tin Luther suggests a broader meaning when he says that this means that “we are to fear and love God so that we do not hurt our neighbor in any way.”²⁰ Simple and yet so remarkably helpful. To kill someone is about much more than the sinful act of murder—the law covers the murderer—it is about our neighbors and our neighborhood. It is about the pain and fear and injustice. It also is about the compassion and consolation and remembering. It is about God in our midst, keeping us strong even when we don’t believe we can go on because we are sad and desperate and frightened. The commandments are about a loving God with us.

At a neighborhood meeting the week of the shooting to address safety concerns in the aftermath, we all experienced firsthand the wrenching emotional impact of the shooting on our lives together. Though we intended to talk about security cameras and safety patrols, instead we listened to urgent longing for community. When an Imam (a Muslim religious leader) stood to speak, his first words were “God is good,” and though we were a room of people of very different faith traditions, we could whisper, “Yes, God is good, and this is not what our God wants for us.” In that spirit, our community came together to rededicate itself to the well-being of our neighbors—yes, to more security cameras and personnel, but even more urgently to finding common purpose in the health, safety, and well-being of our neighbors and neighborhood. I think that is what Martin Luther meant as he explained the commandment!

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In a more contemporary comment on commandments, journalist and former war correspondent Chris Hedges writes that “The commandments hold community together. It is community that gives our lives, even in pain and grief, a healing solidarity.... The commandments call us to reject and defy powerful forces that can rule our lives and to live instead for others... [The commandments] lead us to love, the essence of life.”²¹ Hedges makes the critical point that the commandments *call* us out of ourselves and into the community of God’s good and faithful people, into the world, and into God’s reign in creation.

In a very real sense, then, the shooting death of our student could be seen as a challenge to our institutional vocation, to our saga as a college. We send dozens of students out into our city neighborhood every day to learn and serve. If the streets are dangerous, how can we responsibly continue to put our students in harm’s way? Let’s pull them back into the safety of our campus and go on about our busi-

²⁰Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 5.

²¹Chris Hedges, *Losing Moses on the Freeway: The 10 Commandments in America* (New York: Free Press, 2005) 7.

ness. I think we all recognize the allure of that sort of response to a vocational challenge—that is what the world would have us do.

But we chose to stay, to be neighbor, to embrace the gift of God’s word in our midst and the commandments that offer us a vision of life with our neighbors, a call to defy and reject the forces that rule our lives, the command to love each other. And that is the foundation upon which our vocation is understood and practiced.

OUR ONGOING VOCATIONAL JOURNEY

As with any vocational journey, Augsburg has not reached a destination where its work as urban settlement is done. Instead we continue to imagine new ways in which God is calling us to the work that is known at the intersections of vocation and location, of mission and place. Of particular note in this unfolding journey is an embracing of the college’s broader role in what we call “public work,” positioning the work of the college community in the context of claims for social justice and community building.

Martin Luther’s theological concept of the “priesthood of all believers” undergirds an institutional commitment to civic agency and democratic institutions, challenging the disempowerment that often characterizes traditional service-delivery models. Instead, we work alongside our neighbors in reciprocal and mutually beneficial ways, doing the “public” or “political” work that contributes to the collective agency of the neighborhood and community.²²

This public work is probably best exemplified by Augsburg’s current leadership role in the so-called “anchor institution” movement in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. Augsburg is among almost two dozen colleges, universities, and health care institutions located along a new light rail line linking Minneapolis and Saint Paul that have come together with neighborhood groups and civic leaders to understand how our self-interests as institutions can combine to create shared value for the neighborhoods along the rail line. The anchor institution movement²³ embraces this idea of shared value as a realistic understanding of how institutions can collaborate to serve broader public needs. Among our joint work as anchors of our neighborhoods are shared purchasing programs; supporting local businesses; workforce development initiatives, aimed at meeting the employment needs of institutions and residents along the rail line; place-making efforts, focused on ensuring safer and more livable neighborhoods; and community-based research projects, involving students and faculty in applied research that addresses social justice concerns and strengthens neighborhood services. The anchor institution movement may be a helpful framework for all communities of

²²See, for example, Harry Boyte, “Reinventing Citizenship as Public Work: Civic Learning for the Working World,” in *Higher Education Exchange 2013* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2013) 14–27.

²³For more information about the anchor institution movement, see <http://www.funderscollaborative.org/anchors> (accessed January 27, 2014).

faith to understand and practice the links between vocation and location in a variety of settings.

As a college of the church in the city, Augsburg stays. We accompany and settle alongside our neighbors. God has called us to be here in Cedar-Riverside, the urban neighborhood where we have been with our immigrant neighbors for almost 145 years. God has called us to educate students here who are skilled and reflective and committed to service. God has called us to be neighbor here, to do acts of mercy and to make this a place of hospitality and mutual respect. God has called us to be faithful here, to learn from those who are different from us even as we are firm and confident in our belief that God is good.

I wonder where God calls you to be and what God calls you to do. What is the saga of your faith community? Place matters. So does linking place with mission and work. And so does the abiding call to vigilance and intentionality about what God is doing in our midst and what God intends for God's good and faithful people, wherever we are located. ⊕

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