



New Directions for Campus Ministry

Grand View University as a Case Study

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Recent surveys indicate that “Millennials” (younger Americans born 1982–2004) are less engaged in faith practices than earlier generations.¹ Some Millennials live “without God.” To do ministry with twenty-somethings today calls for new, creative ventures. These are exciting and challenging times to do ministry on a church-related college campus. As a contribution towards discussion about the effectiveness of outreach strategies among Millennials, we will present and evaluate some campus ministry initiatives at Grand View University, an ELCA liberal arts college, begun over the last five years. Grand View University (GVU) is rooted in the Grundtvigian or “happy Danish” tradition. In contrast to nineteenth-century Scandinavian Pietism, GVU’s founders followed the teaching of the Danish historian, mythologist, pastor, and educator N. F. S. Grundtvig, who valued “enlightenment,” meaning a critical awareness of an individual’s agency or contribution within his or her culture, as much as conversion to Christian faith.²

¹David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011) 19–35.

²Aarhus University Press is publishing an English translation of Grundtvig’s most important writings. To date, see N. F. S. Grundtvig, *The School for Life: On Education for the People*, trans. Edward Broadbridge, ed. Clay Warren and Uffe Jonas (Aarhus: University Press, 2011) and *Living Wellsprings: The Hymns, Songs, and Poems of N. F. S. Grundtvig*, trans. Edward Broadbridge (Aarhus: University Press, 2015).

Ministry with young adults, the current Millennials, is never easy, but with initiative it can yield results. Here is the experience of one campus ministry program, at Grand View College in Des Moines, Iowa, which has developed an expansive outreach program to the students and the community that it serves.

While today the number of GVU students connected to the original founders is miniscule, the educational ideals of Grundtvig are not completely lost to the current, more secular, faculty.

GVU currently has just under 2,000 students, about half residential and half commuter, representing significant ethnic, social, economic, and religious diversity. Approximately 10 percent of the students self-identify as Lutheran, 20 percent as Roman Catholic, 20 percent as various Protestant groups, but approximately half of the student body does not report as observing any religious tradition. GVU increasingly welcomes students of Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu traditions. Even so, this religious diversity has created opportunities for outreach for those involved with campus ministry.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

For over fifty years from its founding in 1896, GVU had no specified campus pastor because this role could be done by the several faculty members who were ordained Lutheran pastors. Until the late 1970s, Grand View was a two-year college and a seminary for training clergy for the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church (later the American Evangelical Lutheran Church), which even at its height never numbered more than 23,000 baptized members. The church regarded Grand View as a center for cultivating its heritage. In keeping with Grundtvigianism, Grand View not only valued “enlightenment,” but also folk dancing and singing, practices designed to enhance life. For over half of GVU’s history there was no chapel service other than Sunday morning worship at Luther Memorial Church, the Danish-American congregation adjacent to the campus. Instead, students took turns each evening leading devotions, which was followed by coffee and dessert.

As Danish-Americans were absorbed into wider American culture, by the mid-1950s Grand View increasingly served students of many backgrounds, especially first-generation college students. This trend solidified after the merger creating the Lutheran Church in America (1962), which led to Grand View Seminary becoming enfolded into the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. By the 1970s, the college added a position of campus pastor, but the outreach of the campus pastor was inhibited for decades by the fact that most Grand View students were no longer residential but commuters who led busy lives and had little time for extra-curricular activities, such as campus ministry.

By the early 1990s, few students participated in campus ministry opportunities. The Grand View administration, however, was seeking to counter this trend. Time was set aside for a voluntary chapel service on Tuesday mornings. The campus pastor sought greater input from faculty to go public with how their spirituality impacted their teaching and scholarship. The theology department, led by both Mark Mattes and Ken Sundet Jones, unapologetically identified itself as Lutheran. The department believed that honoring religious diversity on campus would not be served well if it simply became more generic, offering a “religious studies” cur-

riculum. Instead, the department believed that diverse, even critical, views about faith would best be served if it practiced love of the neighbor, the ethical hallmark of the Lutheran tradition. The underlying assumption was that for Christians “tolerance” sets too low a benchmark since it merely prohibits aggression toward those with whom one disagrees. No doubt tolerance is better than outright violence, but love is even better than tolerance for serving diversity on campus. Love asks where and how others should be welcomed and embraced. Interfaith dialogue is genuine when it begins from *faith* and not some imaginary neutral turf. We discovered that even if students do not share the same faith stance with the theology department, most students welcome the fact that it is up-front in its faith stance, since it does not impose faith as a litmus test on others. We discovered that students like to know where their teachers stand, provided these teachers make the classroom open for students’ own views to be expressed.

Early in the this century, campus ministry was partnered with Luther Memorial Church, a congregation adjacent to the campus. Luther Memorial serves as the anchor for ministry on campus. While some congregations sponsor student congregations, GVU’s campus pastor is the only position within ELCA campus ministries where the campus pastor is also the senior pastor of a congregation. This partnership has blessed both campus ministry and the congregation. Additionally, the student body began to grow when numerous programs, particularly sports, were added. The student population grew to its current level of 2,000 students (half residential, half commuter), with an increasing percentage of residential students. A vital campus ministry has been made possible by increasing the number of residential students, as well as the willingness of Luther Memorial Church to reach out to them. The result is that once-a-week chapel attendance has gone up, as has involvement in Bible studies, service learning trips, and Sunday-morning worship. The current campus pastor, Russell Lackey, was called in 2012 precisely to encourage these trends. Having grown a congregation from about thirty to over three hundred in average attendance in the secular environment of Orange County, California, and having reached out to various ethnic backgrounds, especially Vietnamese and Hispanics, Lackey could translate his outreach skills from a congregational to a university context. He quickly partnered with the theology department, the music department, Student Life, and Luther Memorial Church to reach out to all students, both residential and commuter.

A CHALLENGING CONTEXT

When Lackey arrived, campus ministry had been eclipsed by an outside fundamentalist group, “Campus Fellowship” (CF), affiliated with the Great Commission Network. A high-pressure religious group, CF was aggressive in targeting ungrounded freshmen, newly arrived from small-town high schools, or others insecure about their place in college. CF offers a mentoring program that encourages full disclosure of all moral or spiritual lapses with a designated mentor. Due to the

mentoring system CF offered, shaped into a kind of pyramid with local Great Commission Network leaders at the top, along with its contemporary praise worship and a pipeline to its local congregation, CF created a tightly bound, highly loyal rapport among those who chose to affiliate with it. Many of the students it sought, however, were not from unchurched or secular backgrounds but were usually nominal, lapsed, or nonpracticing Roman Catholics or mainline Protestants. Meanwhile, those students participating in campus ministry programs were attracted to a “safe” place for their needs, and campus ministry never reached the more adventurous, courageous, or brave students who felt alienated from it.

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Like a good parish pastor, the new campus pastor set out to get to know the student body. He ate in the cafeteria with students, and met individually with them. In meeting with students beyond the small circle of those in leadership in campus ministry, he learned that many were not aware of weekly chapel services. When it was time for campus leaders to sign up to be involved on the campus ministry team, he hoped at least seven students would sign up. Instead, only two students stepped forward. In the long run, the silver lining was that Lackey was able to pick his own ministry team. Seeking an inclusive representation of the student body, he brought aboard students from significant majors, such as nursing, or activities such as music and athletics. In addition to faith in Christ, resilience in mental, social, and physical health were specified as important criteria for effective team leaders.

EXPERIMENTING WITH CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP

One of Lackey’s initiatives was to start a contemporary worship experience. In the spring of 2012 he established “Mosaic,” a Wednesday evening worship service with a student-led band, and twenty- to thirty-minute Bible teachings. He wanted to create a worship experience characterized by the energy of young Evangelicals but also decisively grounded in Lutheran theology. Additionally, Mosaic sponsored informal fellowship around snacks after the worship. To help lead this initiative he hired a recent Wartburg College graduate to be the Director of Student Ministries. She was a religion major, was adept in music, close in age to GV’s residential students, and had a rich background in Lutheran camping ministry. In spite of her dedicated outreach, Mosaic never attained its goal of serving 200 participants; seldom did it get more than 50. Even on Wednesday evenings Mosaic competed with other activities such as sports and residential meetings.

In fall 2015, in an effort to increase attendance, Mosaic was moved to Sunday nights. If anything, attendance fell with this move. Currently it has found a place on Thursday mornings at eleven, the same time as regular chapel on Tuesdays. Between forty and fifty students, both residential and commuter, attend. It continues to be served by a student-led band and contemporary praise songs, but preaching and teaching is not limited to the campus pastor and thus includes staff, faculty, and student speakers. Those who participate appreciate the fact it is “relaxed” in its worship style and that it is student-led.

SURPRISING ASCENDANCY OF THE TRIED AND TRUE

Offering contemporary worship at GV has been challenging. The Tuesday-morning chapel with traditional hymns, however, has dramatically taken off. In 2012, chapel had at most twenty students, faculty members, or staff attending. This was already significantly higher than the approximately four or five who attended chapel in the 1990s. Tuesday chapel centers on a scripture-based message and traditional hymns from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. It is held in Luther Memorial Church, built in 1917 and furnished with traditional Scandinavian Lutheran appointments. Chapel preaching either follows the lectionary or is thematic. It emphasizes God’s mercy to sinners, particularly to “the lost, the last, the least, and the little,”³ but also challenges students to serve God and their neighbors in their daily walk. Music is accompanied by a piano without multimedia enhancement. GVVU Choir members regularly support congregational singing at chapel as a mini-choir. Students assist this worship through reading the lessons, ringing the steeple bell, assisting with Communion, and ushering. Attendance over the last five years has grown from approximately twenty per service to ninety.

Attendance at chapel is helped by the fact that several coaches attend chapel themselves and urge their athletes to attend. Likewise, Student Life staff members support chapel and attend regularly. Additionally, many of the student ministry leaders are deeply connected on campus with other venues in student life, such as student government, athletic teams, theater, choir, or band. Many ELCA-related students attend, and welcome those for whom chapel is a new, even foreign, experience.

Through surveys and interviews, the campus ministry team has learned that students like the consistent rhythm and familiarity of chapel. The predictability of two hymns, a Christ-centered, unabashedly didactic sermon giving them something on which to reflect, the prayers that connect the congregation to a wider community, and the benediction provide stability for many students who experience so much flux in relationships, academic success, and athletic or musical opportunities. Occasionally there are “themed” chapels: Global Chapel (during Global Vision Week in the fall), Vocation Chapel (which focuses on one’s sense of

³Robert Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 205.

calling in life, held during the spring), Christmas Chapel (singing Christmas carols), Easter Echo (which repeats the Luther Memorial Church Easter service), and All Saint's Chapel (remembering the faithful departed). The campus pastor is very sensitive to explain the format of worship to seekers during the worship so that they are not left adrift. Campus ministry is aware that visitors and seekers *want* to know what they are doing. When students have been polled with the question, "Would it be better to move chapel out of Luther Memorial?" (with its traditional Scandinavian accessories of wood carvings, stained glass, and a model ship), they have consistently affirmed staying put. Most students like the otherworldly uniqueness of the sanctuary, claiming that it gives them a "peaceful" feeling.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF CATECHESIS

Campus ministry does not shy away from a didactic or catechetical component in preaching. Many students, including those coming from church backgrounds, have a fragmented faith. While they have bits and pieces of basic Christian vocabulary like "salvation," "Trinity," or "Jesus Christ," they seldom know how these words fit into the grammar or inner logic of faith. For instance, one student asked, "Is John 3:16 a.m. or p.m.?" Repeatedly, students have expressed appreciation that campus ministry explains basic Christian teachings and walks through entire books of the Bible. The current Director of Student Ministries mentors disciples in faith, seeking to produce stronger lay leaders within their congregations as well as raise up future pastors.

For decades, nary a student was to be found at Luther Memorial Church on Sunday mornings. Over the last four years that has changed. Within that span, attendance at Luther Memorial has increased from about thirty worshipers on average to around eighty. Not only do more students attend chapel, but more people from the neighborhood, which for the better part of a century has been working-class and increasingly distanced from church. In other words, attendance at Luther Memorial has gone against neighborhood trends, in spite of the fact that the congregation's roots are quite "sectarian" when compared with the neighborhood, which has many residents of limited means, recent immigrants, and people of color. Interest in Luther Memorial from both the neighborhood and residential students has not been due to contemporary worship. The congregation basically worships with a traditional liturgy, though in an informal way, one which explains parts of the service foreign to non-Lutherans or seekers.

Student participation in Sunday worship has expanded since they are regu-

larly requested to share special music, either individually or as the University Choir or Band. In particular, ELCA-related students are now more active on Sunday mornings, assisting in reading the lessons and distributing communion. This greater involvement of students as well as interest from the neighborhood has been embraced by the older Danish-American members. The older members actively encourage students to fellowship with them during coffee hour. During Lent, the weekly soup supper and special Lenten service has increased over the last four years from about fifteen participants to about fifty.

MINISTRY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD AND WITH OTHER TRADITIONS

Campus ministry has engaged students in outreach to the neighborhood. With “Viking Kids Club” (named after the college’s mascot) it has partnered with Cattell Elementary School, located about a block and a half away from campus. It services families who have some of the lowest incomes in the Des Moines metropolitan area. This Wednesday-afternoon program for Cattell children involves them in games, crafts, and lessons, including a Christian message. It was first launched in 2013, but due to balancing a number of ministry possibilities, it was on hiatus for two years. In 2015, Luther Memorial and campus ministry received an ELCA grant to relaunch this outreach. Twelve GVV students from campus ministry presently serve seventy Cattell elementary school children of many ethnicities and religions. Not only is it valuable for GVV students to serve the neighborhood but it is also enriching for neighborhood children to be mentored by college students, gain greater literacy and social skills, build a relationship with a possible future college option, and be exposed to faith traditions.

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Led by the Minister of Care and Outreach for Luther Memorial, campus ministry offers an opportunity for six to twelve students to grow in peer-ministry skills each semester. It employs resources from Peer Ministry Leadership.⁴ In at least ten sessions and a retreat, students learn the value of prayer with one another, and grow in faith formation, community building, discipleship, and ministry in the world students actually inhabit. It has become a feeder for its students to become leaders for Viking Kids Club. Peer ministry decentralizes campus ministry’s mission for students who would never participate in official activities or chapel.

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⁴This program was developed by Lyle Griner at Peer Ministry Leadership; see www.peerministry.org (accessed December 16, 2016).

Christian Athletes. These groups presently function under the umbrella of campus ministry. Since they no longer operate autonomously on campus, they have become more student-led and less outsider-led. The rationale for these groups coming under the orbit of campus ministry was precisely to maintain the principle that campus ministry wants students, and not outsiders, doing ministry at GVU.

OTHER OUTREACH INITIATIVES

Campus ministry has started several other ways to reach out. Weekly, it sponsors “Rant to Me” in the middle of the student center, where the campus pastor is available for an hour on Thursday mornings for anyone to confidentially complain or discuss any matter bothering them, whether about faith, politics, or interpersonal relations. Generally, the campus pastor visits with no more than four students, faculty members, or staff members in this hour. However, it typically generates about a dozen emails allowing members of the campus community to get something off their chests. Once a semester, “emergency communion” (originally developed decades ago by the late Herb Brokering at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota) is offered in the student center. Those who wish to receive communion may have the opportunity to confess their sins and receive absolution. Once this was available, one faculty member who had been absent from church for a decade found herself eager to receive the Lord’s Supper, which strengthened and comforted her at that moment, a particularly difficult time in her life. On Ash Wednesday, individual confession and the imposition of ashes is offered, not just at Luther Memorial Church, but quite publicly in the student center. Once a year, “Tea for Non-Christians” is offered for any non-Christian member of the GVU community, which gives them an opportunity to process their thinking about faith matters in an environment where they will not be discredited for their lack of church commitment.

There are other initiatives as well. Twice a year campus ministry sponsors “Drinks and Hymns,” where both a local craft beer and root beer are served. At this popular event (always over 100 in attendance, made up of students, Luther Memorial members, and members from other nearby ELCA congregations), two local musicians on guitar and piano lead the singing of hymns out of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* in the Luther Memorial undercroft. While all ages are invited (and all ages come), students must show ID proving that they are at least twenty-one in order to receive a stamp that allows them to drink beer. For ninety minutes, students and church members sing old standbys and learn a few new songs.

Campus ministry sponsors student-led Bible studies, whether through Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Viking Catholics, Campus Fellowship, or Campus Ministry, each one of which normally has between 12 and 15 students attending. Campus ministry also sponsors students to do mission trips. These trips have included witness and work in Chicago and Kansas City. Likewise, several students in late 2015 attended the Urbana Student Missions Conference (where 18,000 stu-

dents from 80 different countries were present). Campus ministry would prefer a Lutheran event instead of Urbana, but unfortunately one does not exist. Urbana is crosscultural for most GVV students, since the majority of those who attend are Asian, with Caucasians as the minority. Finally, Campus Ministry and the Theology and Philosophy Department received a Lilly Grant in summer 2016 in order to establish "Nexus," a youth theology institute that addresses pastoral formation prior to entering college. The Nexus program will be able to host up to 150 high school-age students each summer for theological education, biblical learning, inquiry into vocation, and service learning.

Campus ministry, along with the GVV theology department, welcomes students desiring baptism to receive catechesis and be baptized. Recently, two such baptisms included a two-time national champion wrestler and another student who is now studying for the ministry at Luther Seminary. This partnering between campus ministry and the theology department is possible because both are committed to the view that we live in a "post-secular" world where matters of faith need not be discredited in order to create a nonreligious public space. Instead, we believe all people bring some kind of faith perspective to the public square and that the truth claims of these various perspectives are open to enquiry, even debate. Such an awareness does not undermine critical thinking but instead enhances it since we are all asked to state and defend the criteria for the truth claims made about ultimate matters.

Campus ministry is no "Field of Dreams" where, "if you plan it, they will come." Campus ministry staff do not sit in their offices and wait for students to stop by for a visit. Campus ministry is something quite foreign for the majority of young Millennials. They will not show up at a church office simply because it exists or attend a program because it's been scheduled. If the goal is to welcome Millennials to attend worship, then they need to be invited, given something at worship they find meaningful for their lives, and be hospitably welcomed and mentored there. Many students we serve are plagued by insecurities. For instance, a student may object, "I don't know who I'd sit with" at chapel or she may "doubt its worth" and see "no obvious payoff." So students ask, "Why should I go?" If one wants to do outreach with them, one had better be prepared to respond congenially to such concerns and questions. Interestingly, offering a contemporary worship experience was no magic bullet that guaranteed involvement.

GVV campus ministry does not give a lot of time to service learning ventures. Today's students are already oversaturated with service opportunities. Likewise, internships, which are required of all majors at GVV, complicate service projects since only so much can be accomplished any given year.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

At its most basic level, we have learned that in spite of anxieties about Millennials' involvement (or lack thereof) in church, God's church exists and is ac-

tive. The Holy Spirit is working in the lives of students, faculty, and staff whether or not either we or they are aware. Likewise, the Holy Spirit is not involved in resuscitating corpses. We can no longer look to earlier models, whether in the conventional '50s or socially-charged '60s, but instead we must experimentally build new paradigms. Surprisingly, in the process, we have found the “tried-and-true,” such as the chapel service and catechesis, to be most helpful and desired by young people and nonchurched people in general. For that very reason, we seek to ground our ministry in truth. Truth matters because we deal with a resurrected Lord. As Lutherans, we highlight grace. For many young people who have exorbitant aspirations begun with AP courses and reinforced through athletic traveling teams grace has been a crucial and decisive way to help them find security and stability in life.

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We have also learned that because truth matters, turf matters. That is, we do not apologize for our faith nor do we anticipate that a more generic, less confessional approach to faith will be more relevant. On the contrary, we forthrightly, though respectfully, engage religious and cultural differences and let the cards fall as they will. Ultimately ministry is in God's hands, not ours. Finally, we have learned that today's college students are more resilient than what some think. For us, ministry is a “safe place,” not because students will not have their most cherished values challenged, but instead because when they are challenged they will be permitted a voice, provided they are respectful. We have found that students admire risk, boldness, and authenticity. That stance helps them gain what Jesus called “ears to hear.” Hence, as the Augsburg Confession, Article V, says, when the gospel and sacraments are present, the Spirit creates faith when and where God pleases.⁵ ⊕

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⁵*The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 40.