“God in the Quad,”
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In my undergraduate studies at the University of Alberta, I minored in philosophy.

To quote comedian Steve Martin, I learned just enough to screw me up for the rest of my life!

For instance, I came across the musings of George Berkeley on reality. What is really real? How do we know it’s real and not an illusion?

His answer: we can only know that, say, a tree in the university’s Quad is real because we perceive it. But then the question, what happens when we’re not there to perceive it? Is it still there?

This is serious stuff folks! Oil prices have plummeted. Think of the economic impact to our lumber industry if whole forests of timber disappeared when we look the other way!

Berkeley’s solution was that the tree remains because always perceived, in the infinite mind of God.

His loophole was mocked in a limerick (cf. Ronald Knox) from which this talk gets its title:

There was young man who said, ‘God
Must think it exceedingly odd
If he finds that this tree
Continues to be
When there’s no one about in the Quad.’

REPLY

Dear Sir:
Your astonishment’s odd:
I am always about in the Quad.
And that’s why the tree
Will continue to be,
Since observed by

Yours faithfully,
GOD. (1)

God is in the Quad. But I don’t believe that because of some limerick. I believe it from my experience.
Post-secondary education for me was soul enlarging, the whole of it, great teaching, my studies, and what I learned outside them. I took to heart this wise advice, ‘Don’t let the classroom get in the way of your education’.

So I took up the invitation from a girlfriend into the community gathered by Lutheran Campus Ministry. The experience was transformative! The liturgy proclaimed a radical forgiveness that liberated my guilt-ridden, cracked Mennonite conscience. And at the table of God’s grace, I received food for which my soul hungered, and the strength needed for what turned out to be a meandering academic journey. A poster from that time announced, “What other meal can sustain you for a week?” Indeed. All of this culminated in my baptism by then Campus Pastor, Stephen Larson, in what is now the SUB Alumni Room—back then it was a multi-purpose room that smelled of beer from socials the night before! Fittingly. As the saying goes, ‘Calvin liked his wine, Luther liked his beer’.

I was on the U of A track team at that time. A national class cross country runner, among the top juniors in the country, the winner in 1976 of the university’s trophy for Outstanding Cross Country Runner. I had Olympic dreams, but I was prone to injury. After placing 7th in the National Collegiate Country Championships, I was finished. I fell into a deep depression. By graduation, I had lost the girlfriend, no fault of hers. Yet the Lutheran ‘schtick’ stuck, and through that faith and community, through you, I’ve found healing and been sustained and educated, equipped, called and empowered.

God is in the Quad, I believe. The challenge is this: are we in the Quad with God?

I’m grateful to celebrate with you an answering by our church over 60 years of presence at the University of Alberta, and now NAIT, through Lutheran Campus Ministry!

Thank you, friends, for your prayers and the gifts of your hands and hearts that have sustained this ministry!

But what by being in the Quad does campus ministry contribute uniquely to the calling of the church? And to the calling of the university?

I want to reflect on this contribution under three rubrics. Campus ministry is about:
Being believers;
Being fools;
Being unapologetic.

Campus ministry is about being believers.

Believers in what? God? The Trinity? Original Sin? Christ’s redeeming work? The Lutheran Confessions? The complete works of Martin Luther? His irreverent jokes? (I won’t even go there, but if you want to, you can look up Table Talk catalogued conveniently in the Rutherford Library!). No, these are already part of our tradition. What campus ministry calls the church to believe in most emphatically is the world!
Because that is what universities exist to explore, the world. This is a sacred calling that universities exercise. Because it is God’s world that students and faculty seek to understand. The University of Alberta’s motto is *quaecumque vera,* whatsoever things are true, a quotation from Paul’s letter to the Phillippians (4:8). If we believe that all truth is rooted in God’s activity in creation, whether the truth unlocked in DNA or the truth about our human condition revealed by Shakespeare, then those who pursue whatsoever things are true are on a mission from God!

I recall lectures way back in 1988 by James Scherer, distinguished teacher of church history, then, at Lutheran Theological Seminary, University of Chicago (2). The church, he said, doesn’t exist for itself, to duplicate itself, to perpetuate itself, to maintain itself. The only reason for the church’s existence is mission, as an instrument of God’s mission. And the focus of this mission? The world. God so loves the world. This world-centric mission is confirmed in the Son whom God sends. And what does Jesus undergo at the beginning of his ministry? The same baptism that we undergo. To wash away sins? No, says theologian Christopher Durasingh, but as a “solidarity plunge” (3), identifying God’s mission through him as for the sake of the world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, pastor and theologian martyred at the end of the Second World War, testifies movingly in his *Letters and Papers from Prison* to a God whose movement is always toward this world, not away from it. So Jesus calls us to pray, ‘Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

The church is catching up to this understanding when we define ourselves as ‘missional.’ From this self-understanding, Scherer challenges the church to consider its walls not as barriers, but more like membranes, giving definition, yes, but allowing the world in, and letting the church out, just as Jesus describes himself as a gate that allows his sheep in to the sheepfold, and out to find pasture. This is a metaphor for campus ministry, its office not a holy hideout, but a sacred springboard! Because the One we trust and follow is not afraid of the world, of being overcome by it, but forges ahead to herald the reign of God that is righting injustice and mending what is broken. Much is broken in the world represented by the university. But it’s also true that, as the Desiderata puts it, “with all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world.” It’s God’s world. Campus ministry calls us to believe in the world.

Here’s a story of how that calling unfolded for one student. With university education a once black and white view of reality gives way to grey. The foundations are shaken. Faith is challenged by new questions. It needs to grow or atrophy. This was the necessity of a bright physics student who came to live at the student centre. In the engagement of faith and learning in our discussions, you could see him blossom. At our weekly residence meetings, he shared what he had received from the ‘Lutheran’ way of articulating and living the gospel. “You see God in all of life,” he said, “not just parts of it.” “And in your understanding of God’s grace, there is room to risk questions.” He grew up in a tradition that compartmentalized God. God is over here, in our church’s beliefs, not so much over there, at the university. Science, in particular, its theory of evolution, is the enemy of the Bible.
But Lutherans begin from a different premise, from a sacramental view of reality that is our catholic heritage. God is not localized in the sacraments; rather the elements of water, wine and bread that promise God’s grace serve as ‘windows’ (4) into the sacred in all the elements of life. “The world is charged with the grandeur of God,” writes the poet and monk, Gerard Manley Hopkins. And the Psalmist extols, ‘Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to the heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there’ (Ps 139:7-8). Nothing of this world is alien to God. The incarnation of God in Jesus underlines this conviction, breaking apart the compartments we have made separating divine and human, and giving us grace to risk our questions.

World engagement has happened over the years owing to something visionary, a student centre (to which I’ve referred) in close proximity to the campus. The first was purchased in 1956 by pioneering Campus Pastor, Don Voigts, as a home for his family and a “home away from home”—his vision for campus ministry—for students who flocked there nightly for evening vespers. For the down payment, so Winnie Voigts, his widow, told me, he used the car he and Rev. L. E. Reyelts drove up in from the states as a chattel mortgage! The location of the centre shifted in 1968 after the university had expropriated the original to make way for the construction of the Housing Union Building (HUB). At this new location, it became the home of a Covenant Christian Community, the members gathering for weekly worship and opening their doors for a weekly co-op supper and program hosted by the Lutheran Student Movement. That intentional community continues in its third incarnation, Martin Luther House, acquired in 2007. Tuesday suppers continue to be hosted by LSM though now students in a more recent expression of ecumenism worship together with Anglican peers at St. George’s Anglican Church on Sunday evenings. It’s also a place where people actually eat dinner together. How radical is that? Pretty radical these days! A resident recalls how the most profound dimension for him of community living was simply this, the checking in; the ‘how was your day?’; the conversations that happened over meals. Basic. Organic. And ministry. It’s not random that Jesus invites us to gather around a supper in memory of him—or as theologians have pointed out, to re-member him, to bring together the members that form his body, to support one another. With a report conducted at the University of Alberta by Dr. Robin Everall, Dean of Students, highlighting the prevalence of depression, suicidal thoughts and loneliness, this kind of basic, organic ministry is vital.

Campus ministry assists students in moving out—literally, away from home—into the big, wide world through its student centres. This includes sharing in the household chores and maintenance. Pretty mundane stuff, you’d think? But an education in itself it seems. A couple of stories. I receive a call around midnight from a resident at Martin Luther House. There’s no heat in the house. I rush over. Sure enough, the place is frigid. I look at the thermostat. Then lift the plastic lid revealing a lever, two words next to it, “Off” and “Heat.” With no less than a mechanical engineering student looking over my shoulder in amazement, I switch the lever to “Heat.” You can hear the furnace fire up.

Another evening, after my regular weekly meeting as chaplain with the residents at the old Lutheran Student Centre, I’m told the dryer isn’t working. That’s weird, I’m thinking,
I just had someone in for regular maintenance—it’s a gas dryer, and I wanted to make sure it was clean and wasn’t a fire hazard. I look below, where the pilot light and manifold are, they’re all lit up. I put my hand in the dryer. Sure enough, no heat. With the five residents gathered around, I stare at the dryer. Then I notice the lint screen, and I wonder. I pull on it. But it won’t release. I pull again harder. Does’t budge. Finally, putting my foot against the side, I reef on the thing with all my force, it dislodges, and I fall into the residents. They gaze in wonder. What’s that? What was inside was so compressed that you could have used it for a felt boot! A lesson, admittedly a humble one, in ‘world’ affairs. We now incorporate such things into an Orientation meeting—though this doesn’t guarantee no surprises! I won’t tell you about the toilet. It’s part of believing in the world.

Campus ministry is nothing if not about being fools!

St. Paul writes that we are fools for Christ’s sake (1 Cor 4:10). We profess faith in the wackiest thing, the resurrection of the body! And to many in the academy that regresses your brain to the child-mind that defends belief in the tooth fairy and the Easter bunny! At least if you mused about the immortality of the soul you could rank yourself with Plato. But no, we don’t stop there. It gets worse. We believe in the resurrection as God’s stamp of approval on the One raised—that is, that what Jesus said and did in his body, his upside down values, his way of servant-love even to his crucifixion on a cross, that this was all a revealing of God’s modus operandi. Here is how Jesus in Mark’s gospel sums up the implications: “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10: 43-45). Not exactly a prescription for what some televangelists call ‘victorious Christian living’. Nor is it a prescription for happiness according to a society predicated on clambering to the top. It gets still worse. “Blessed are you who are poor” (Lk 6:20f), he said. It’s not the poor we bless, but the rich. “Blessed are you who are hungry now”? Huh? It’s the indulgent we reward. “Blessed are you who weep now”? Foolishness!

Campus ministry is about being fools in a ‘contested space’. This was underlined for me, yet again, when my Christian Reformed colleague and I decided a few years ago to take Ash Wednesday outside, following a movement beginning in the American Episcopal Church called “Ashes to Go.” Too busy with your classes to attend a local church for the imposition of ashes beginning the season of Lent? These ashes are brought to you! Kind of a ‘drive-by’ ashes. We parked ourselves just outside the Students’ Union Building. About thirty students, faculty and staff stopped by to receive ashes in the sign of the cross and a prayer. But none perhaps more memorable than what looked like a ‘boomer’ who asked, “What’s this all about?” Great! A seeker! Or so I thought. My colleague explained, “It’s a reminder of our morality, a sign of repentance, to mark the beginning of Lent, where the focus is on what it means to be baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection, dying to sin, rising to life lived toward God” (okay, maybe I’m taking license with what he said spontaneously—which was good!). And the seeker, or so we assumed, replied, “People are actually stopping by for that?” “Yeah,” Rick replied, “quite a few”—well, perhaps a bit of a stretch. “Well,” said our inquirer, “that’s a crock
of BLEEP!” And then, over his shoulder, “I’d wish you good luck, but I hope your religion will die!” Foolishness!

But then this . . . a gay man, the “Be My Bitch” button on his jacket with the photo of a man, enough to give that away, even without ‘gaydar’. With what joy he came to us, this one whom you might have thought full of qualms about the church. With what reverence he received the sign of the cross. To the wise, foolishness. To those foolish enough to receive it the power and the wisdom of God (cf. 1 Cor 1:18-31).

More stories of being fools:

I receive a call from the President of the Students’ Union. Will I conduct a funeral? Of course, I’m a pastor. For whom? Accessibility. Killed by rising tuition. I walk into a media circus. The next day, collared, I lead Students’ Union Executive members as pallbearers, who set down the coffin of their deceased friend in front of the Administration Building for dramatic effect. Friends relate that they hear me praying that morning on CBC, that student worthiness be based on aptitude and interest rather than the depth of your wallet. Daniel Erlander, former chaplain at Pacific Lutheran University, has said that the purpose of campus ministry is ‘to undermine the seriousness of the university’. Yikes!

From spectacle to the solemn.

University administration calls. “There’s been a shooting at HUB.” I arrive on campus to find that the whole of HUB—residence to over five hundred students at the time—has been sealed off as a crime scene. Chaplains gather with university staff to respond to the crisis at Lister Hall, where the HUB residents are directed for safe lodging, food and counselling. The safety we take for granted is shattered by the shootings that leave three security guards dead and another critically injured. I walk upstairs a day later to pray for that violated space and ask for what is needed by those who live and work here. Chaplains representing different faiths, necessarily because this touches students and staff from all over the world, come together for a service, well, we don’t call it that, we call it Reclaiming the Space. From the foolishness of faith comes the language and ritual needed to name and process the sense of dislocation and grief. To feel able to re-inhabit, to live and work in, a space that was, no other word, desecrated. Campus ministry is about being fools for the sake of the world Christ came to redeem from its brokenness.

Sometimes, and this is hardest, the calling is to be fools to the very church that calls you.

“Which parish do you serve?” I’m asked. “The University of Alberta.” “No, I mean which congregation do you belong to?” “50,000 students, faculty and staff.” “Huh?” It’s a hard sell. Unlike ‘real’ ministry inside church walls. Out of sight. A ‘frill’. I recall how, just after I was called as Lutheran Chaplain to the University of Alberta in Edmonton in 1991, our synod had to deal with a financial shortfall. A rumour reached me of musings to deal with the deficit by selling the Lutheran Student Centre.
Before any official pronouncement, we, the local council, LSM, and I, went into high gear with a public campaign to renew the student centre with a renovation. Since we had no time to raise the income needed, we took out student loans—that is, loans from students! A council member, a designer and renovator by profession, donated the blueprints. LSM members volunteered their skills and labour. By the time that we invited synod office to cut the ribbon officially opening a renovated kitchen for student outreach suppers, not another peep was heard regarding the sale of the house! The centre, by the way, might have sold for around $100,000. The value of Martin Luther House when we purchased it in 2007? Closer to a million dollars! More importantly, legendary among its alumni for a unique way of doing church that harks back to the first Christians and their house churches. What fools we were! But worth it? You bet! Campus ministry is about being fools.

(Tell hot tub story?)

Campus ministry is about being unapologetic.

Let me explain. Bob Pearson, a granddaddy of campus ministry, blessed be his memory, told the story of how he was asked when called as chaplain to UBC in the sixties, “How do you justify what you do?” You know, it was the sixties, so experimental models of campus ministry included things like, ‘loitering with intent’! His reply? “I don’t. I do it because I am justified.” He wasn’t just being a ‘smarty’ pants. He was affirming that he and you and I have the audacity to do what we do, without apology, because we are justified by the only measure that counts, by the grace of God given in Christ that has captured our faith. God knows how that justification has power to liberate us, to free us from our enslavement to so many other measures—in academia, the Bell curve, ‘publish or perish’, results based research—that judge us and find us wanting. This is the gift that faith offers in a context driven by your next achievement, what the Reformers called ‘works righteousness’, an atmosphere that has you always looking over your shoulder. Liberation is the gift of our faith. We don’t always honour that faith.

Some years back I bumped into a gifted student of music whom I hadn’t seen in awhile, a composer of fine liturgical music at one point. Not usually this bold, I asked whether he was still going to church. He nodded his head negatively. I asked “Why not?” His reply: “Why would I go to a place where there’s always a question mark over my head?” He happens to be gay. “Why go there,” he said, “when I’m not only welcome but affirmed for what I have to offer elsewhere?” How sad! I became a member of this church because the Jesus preached here, the supper served here, erased the question mark over my head. A Lutheran theologian notes that for the reformers, “justification (by grace through) faith,” is the doctrine by which this church stands or falls (5). God forbid that we attach conditions to what is God’s achievement, not ours.

God liberates by erasing question marks. Though any stand regarding human sexuality may be seen as divisive, that is why we took pains to extend a special welcome to those marginalized on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender expression. And we joined a roster of communities to enable those seeking welcome to find us. “Be sinners, and sin
boldly,” Martin Luther said. When it comes to living in this world, there are ethical
dilemmas requiring that we make and stand by our decisions. We take the risk even in
the face of our uncertainty, as Luther went on, because we trust in Christ more boldly still.
While I understood that there would be controversy, I did not anticipate the effect of the
backlash. I suffer from clinical depression, which I’ve managed throughout my life, but
the stress became unmanageable. I have to say it almost broke my faith with the church.

Then an intervention: I was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer, and statistically,
given a year to eighteen months to survive, with treatment. The flood of prayers, cards,
gestures of kindness in the wake of my illness completely overwhelmed me and
continues to buoy me up. I call this an ‘intervention’ because of something
unanticipated: my faith in the church was restored. Jesus said, “By this everyone will
know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” That love was always
there, but it took a crisis for me to experience it. This church is my extended family,
whether dying from or, now, living with cancer.

Campus ministry has been that for many. An extended family. Look at its legacy, the
fruits in the people ministered to and with. They salt and leaven the ranks of lay and
clergy leadership. This is not something, as if it needs stating, for which we need to
apologize. Campus ministry is about being unapologetic.

God is in the Quad. And tonight we celebrate 60 years of church presence responding to
the calling to be in the Quad with God.
Being believers . . . in the world, it’s God’s world.
Being fools . . . for Christ’s sake.
Being unapologetic . . . not seeking but ministering out of the gift of our justification.
References:


(4) A metaphor owing to Dr. Franz Volker Greifenhagen, Dean, Religious Studies, Luther College, Regina.