



Religious and Spiritual Life

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Gettysburg College Report to Synod Assemblies March 16, 2016

Blessed be God at all times, now, always, and forever!
 Grace, mercy and peace to you.

Last year I wrote to you (the supporting synods associated with Gettysburg College) regarding our shared commitment to “education and the spiritual formation of maturing young adults.” At that time mention was made of the continuing need to “foster habits of mind and heart that assist in making this world better and more just.” Toward that end, the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life assists the Gettysburg College community in exercising and contemplating life with God.

In recent years this work has become more and more difficult as fewer and fewer young people arrive at colleges and universities with a depth of spiritual formation. Each passing decade since the 1970’s has seen the number of students sharing Lutheran tradition and backgrounds shrink while the general climate for religious life in America sadly dawdles suffering threat from political extremism, segregation and bias, and life challenges in the modern world.

In an effort to address these concerns and build communities of faith and justice in an increasingly secularized environment we have given more attention in recent years to promoting Ecumenical and Interfaith dialogue, understanding and engagement. By using dialogues, focused small group discussion, lectures and the limited degree of diversity found to exist within this community we have tried to foster a climate of understanding that moves beyond tolerance to respect and appreciation. This work has been done – notwithstanding the need for students to increase knowledge of their own faith traditions and backgrounds – in an atmosphere where faith and life intersections are infrequently addressed and/or acknowledged.

As Chaplain of the College the work I engage in relates primarily to religious and spiritual apprehensions of reality. A chaplain functions primarily as a priest and pastor beyond the parameters of the usual ecclesial environment. In higher education, chaplains help members of the communities they serve to discover what their real and true religious convictions are. We do this by engaging in sacramental and ritual practices, through pastoral conversation and counsel, spiritual direction and prayer, through religious education and preaching. Our work while focused on students is not limited to students. We serve the whole of campus life – faculty, staff, parents of students, alumni of the institution and the community at large.

Hopefully, I also model for our students how a mature human being is able to more fully integrate the symbolic world of meaning known through prayer and spiritual practices with intellectual thought. Ours is a tradition that came into being within the context of a university, a center of learning. Martin Luther as a professor of Hebrew Scripture strove to interpret the Word of God in a manner that was faithful and intellectually responsible. His witness inspires the witness I share.

We live in a world where there is also great spiritual hunger, yet many feel burdened by life’s urgent demands for time and attention. In such a world, practices that feed hungry souls are rarely understood. We share with the synods of the ELCA a commitment to helping maturing young adults integrate faith and learning.

We hope that as you share with us in this our common mission you will encourage the young people in your congregations and communities to consider Gettysburg College! We'd love to welcome them to what may become for them their home away from home.

Blessings and peace!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph A. Donnella, II". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "D" and "I" at the end.

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