

Lutheran Campus Ministry Research Project

Site Interviews Report

Jacob Sorenson, PhD
Roland Martinson, STD

**Lutheran Campus Ministry Study Phase Two Report:
Site Visits and Stakeholder Interviews**
(Summary Outline)

There were Visits on Six Campuses

1. Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR
2. University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ
3. University of Texas, Austin, TX
4. University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC
5. Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
6. University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, WI

There were Interviews with Six Stakeholders on Each Campus

1. Female student
2. Male student
3. Campus minister
4. Campus ministry board or church council member
5. University staff or faculty person
6. Area pastor in ELCA congregation

Interview Analysis Themes and Topics

Introduction.....	4
Campus Ministry Addresses Critical Challenges	5
The Student Experience	5
Students and Technology	7
Academia, Religion, and Spirituality	7
Lutheran Campus Ministry is Deeply, Expansively Welcoming.....	9
Hospitality in a Divisive World	9
Radical Acceptance and Safety	10
Disagreements, Questions and Constructive Dialogue.....	11
Community Meals and Conversation	12
Campus Ministry is Making a Real Difference.....	12
Campus Ministry Leadership Strength.....	13
Attention to Context	14
Engaging, Student-Led Ministry.....	14
Connection to Congregational Ministries.....	15
An Ecology of Faith Formation.....	16
Campus and Community Outreach	17
More than Student Ministries	17

Campus Ministry is Vulnerable.....	18
Finances	18
Decline and Diminishment of the Lutheran Network	19
Board Roles and Engagement	20
Overdependence on the Campus Pastor.....	21
Student Involvement and Campus Perception of Christianity	21
Campus Ministry Has Even Greater Potential	22
Student Spiritual Hunger.....	22
Collaboration with Congregations	23
Expanding Funding Sources.....	24
Integrated and Attentive Virtual Ministry.....	24
Rethinking Church and Engaging a New Generation	25
Reflections and Next Steps	26

Promising Areas for Generative Attention:

1. Emerging student consciousness and lifestyles
2. Transformative campus ministry relationships and practices
3. Campus ministry leadership models
4. Partnerships with other faiths and congregations
5. Campus ministry's place in the life of the university
6. Strengthening campus ministry boards

Lutheran Campus Ministry Research Project

Site Interviews Report

Jacob Sorenson, PhD and Roland Martinson, STD

Introduction

The Lutheran Campus Ministry Research Project set out to identify and explore: What are the characteristics and practices of faithful, effective, and sustainable Lutheran campus and young adult ministry, given the real-life sensibilities of students, ongoing changes in higher education, and current cultural realities? After an extensive literature review, researchers proceeded to semi-structured interviews of key stakeholders at six diverse ministry sites across the country, each affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

The six sites were all large universities selected to represent different regions of the country and varying student enrollments: Oregon State University in the Pacific Northwest (30,000 students), University of Arizona - Tucson in the Southwest (40,000 students), University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire in the Midwest (10,000 students), University of Texas - Austin in the South (80,000 students), Syracuse University in the Northeast (21,000 students), and University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill in the South Atlantic (29,000 students). The sites represented diverse campus ministry models, with some ministries housed in Lutheran centers (Oregon State and UT-Austin), others in ecumenical or interfaith centers (Syracuse and University of Arizona), and still others in Lutheran congregations (UNC-Chapel Hill and UW-Eau Claire).

Researchers conducted six in-person interviews at each of the sites in February 2017. The six interviews at each site included two students (one female and one male), the campus minister, a ministry board or council member, a university staff or faculty person, and a Lutheran pastor serving a congregation in the immediate area. The demographic breakdown of interviewees was slightly male (59%) and predominantly white (89%). Students tended to be upper and middle class persons, and non-student interviewees tended to be over 50.

The research finds campus ministries experiencing significant changes and challenges, even as they remain engaged, effective, and filled with potential to impact the lives of individual students and their universities as well as offer important strategic insights to the ministry of the larger church. Five major themes emerged from the data and frame this report.

Campus Ministry Addresses Critical Challenges

It was abundantly clear that these six expressions of Lutheran campus ministry were deeply embedded in their contexts and were engaging the challenging realities of college life. Many interviewees indicated that campus ministry in their context was fulfilling specific needs for individuals, the university, and the community. The challenging realities in the university environment were multi-faceted. Students and those who worked with them faced intersecting pressures from many dimensions of life, only some of which were identified in the interviews; there is clearly more of student life to be investigated.

The Student Experience

“They are in a sort of purgatory time of life,” one campus pastor said of the students on campus, “neither adolescent nor adult in their profession or vocation.” This feeling of *being in between* is one of the key characteristics of emerging adulthood identified by Jeffrey Arnett in his seminal work, and the theme came up repeatedly in the interviews.¹ The students expressed feelings of being unsettled and in a transitory stage of life in which few things were reliably constant, aside from a persistent search for identity. One young man characterized this feeling as “a looming feeling of not being able to completely relax.” Many of the students had moved across the country to attend college, and one international student shared the struggles of moving from another continent. A student at Oregon State reflected on her experience of college life, “I think the struggle right now is being comfortable in uncertainty, which I don't think I was prepared for when I came here four years ago.” She went on to describe her feelings in the first weeks of college as “chaos everywhere” but that she settled in when she finally accepted, “That’s just what college feels like.” Students at multiple sites described settling into this sort of disequilibrium of uncertainty and chaos. As a student at UNC-Chapel Hill put it, “I am comfortably uncomfortable.”

A large part of feeling in between was the understanding among students that they were maturing, gaining independence, and constructing the identities that would define them throughout their lives. They were constructing identities around career, romantic relationships, and religion/spirituality, and they identified campus ministry as one resource that was helpful in

¹ Jeffrey Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*. (New York: Oxford, 2004), 8.

these endeavors. One student who was raised Lutheran found college to be “an opportunity to think through my faith and agree or disagree with it” on her own terms. The distance from home and their families of origin (either physical or psychological) allowed them space to explore questions of identity. One student came to the realization of the enormity of being away from home and taking responsibility for herself when she was alone on her first night at college, broke a light bulb, and realized that she did not have a broom: “I felt very alone.” An area pastor in Arizona characterized the student experience of college, “Everything is up for grabs because they are away from their parents, they are away from their home church, they are away from everything normal, and they are trying to figure out themselves and trying to be independent.”

In the midst of these looming feelings of uncertainty, ongoing discomfort, and search for identity, students were facing the intense pressures of schoolwork, relationships, financial stress, and pressure to succeed. “Students are stressed a lot,” a UT-Austin student explained. “They get bogged down. [They get] a rough test or a bad test score, and they don’t know how to deal with it.” One student interviewed was in the midst of packing her belongings to move across the country for graduate school (still uncertain where she would live), and another student was dealing with the grief of breaking up with his long-time girlfriend just days before the interview. One student spoke of losing his mother to a rare illness early in his college years. More than half of those interviewed shared stories of difficulties with roommates. Several students, most of the university personnel, and most of the campus ministry staff cited significant increases and episodes of depression or other mental illness. Two of the students described experiencing extended periods of emotional distress and even thoughts of self-harm, indicating that their connections with campus ministry helped get them through these trying times.

Each student had a unique story of personal struggle and trying to find balance or some method of coping during the incredibly tumultuous years of college. “I’m trying to sum up my whole experience,” a UNC-Chapel Hill student explained, “but if I could put it in one word, I’d say *busy*.” A student across the country at Oregon State agreed: “I think you forget in your first couple of weeks to sleep and how to eat and how to do all these things because there’s so many things going on.” Many of the students were working one or more jobs during the school year in order to pay for school, and one student had to leave school for a full semester in order to make enough money to pay tuition. Amidst all of these stressors was the pressure for high achievement, measured by good grades, multiple majors/minors, and coveted internships. A

campus pastor described one of the goals of his ministry as “suspending the idolatry of success.” Students, ministry professionals, and especially the university staff members interviewed were in agreement that students needed positive resources and trusted support networks to walk alongside them during this time of uncertainty and stress. While more needs to be learned of the nuance and scope of these students’ uncertainty and stress, it is clear that campus ministries are addressing this need for many of the students.

Students and Technology

The challenging, increasing role of mobile technology in the lives of young people surfaced in multiple interviews at all six sites. Interestingly, the students themselves generally did not bring up technology or social media unless directly asked, indicating that their near constant use of technology was simply taken for granted. A UNC-Chapel Hill student, when pressed, reflected that she did not use mobile technology as much as many of her peers, though she went on to say that her use of social media “kind of keeps me attached to my device.” Other students, when asked, spoke of their constant attention to their devices adding to their stress.

The professionals working with students, on the other hand, regularly brought up technology as one of the major challenges in their work with college students. When campus ministers and board members were asked to reflect on what they could do more effectively, the most common response was related to a better social media presence or becoming more technologically savvy. Thus, there was a divide in the interview data based on age cohorts. It barely occurred to the students that use of social media or mobile technology was an acquired skill or problematic, indicating their status as digital natives, while the other interviewees, who were almost all over forty, consistently described their feelings of inadequacy in using these media. “We would love for a bigger social media presence – I think students would respond to that,” one board member reflected, adding that it was hard for them because, “We tend to be older. I’m the youngest person and I’m nearly forty, so I’m not going to be the social media guru.” The patterns and trends evident in these interviews regarding student consciousness and lifestyles call for deeper investigation.

Academia, Religion, and Spirituality

It was evident in the interviews that religion and academia were maintaining an uneasy relationship, though campus ministers and university staff members indicated that spirituality

was earning increased attention as an important aspect of student wellbeing. One long-serving campus minister explained the transition he has seen in his decades of ministry, “When I arrived, the university administration was very hands-off with religious practitioners. They just didn’t want anything to do with that. Church and state had to have a real clear wall of separation. As administrations have changed and since [the terrorist attacks on] 9/11, the university has been much more friendly and welcoming and even expressed a need for our participation.”

The relationship between religion and academia varied among campuses and specific departments, with one staff member at Arizona explicitly stating that the humanities were open to discussions about spirituality but the hard sciences wanted a clear separation. This was an interesting perception that had clear exceptions, since several of the students most involved in campus ministry at Arizona were science majors. There were efforts at UNC-Chapel Hill to incorporate spiritual needs of students into considerations at an institutional level, while UT-Austin distanced themselves from religious groups, allowing them to operate on the periphery but avoiding direct contact.

These very different institutional realities necessitated different approaches in campus ministry. Some campus ministers enjoyed name recognition and trusted partnership (including referrals) with university staff members in counseling services or student affairs, and several were invited to teach classes or lead discussions in the classroom about faith. The campus pastor at Syracuse, for example, supervises capstone classes, through which she connects students to faith-based organizations; fifteen public health students recently received academic credit for augmenting the curriculum of an intergenerational ESL class for refugee parents and toddlers. On another campus, a university staff member said of the campus minister, “I trust [him] well enough to know that if I send a student over, he’s going to welcome that student in all the right ways that I would hope for that tentative, maybe anxious, student.”

The uneasy relationship between religion and academia was also present in the lives of students and their peer groups. There was evidence of widespread distrust of organized religion, particularly Christianity. An area pastor in Oregon explained, “It can sometimes become very challenging to even say one is a Christian on campus because of preconceptions of what a Christian is and how a Christian acts.” Spirituality was generally regarded positively, but there was a certain level of wariness about specific religions. Others simply expressed the reality of

increased secularity. A student at Syracuse described her sorority sisters as “less religious than she is,” explaining, “They can’t understand my involvement in Lutheran Campus Ministry.” The interviewees were quick to distinguish Lutheran campus ministry from what they saw as the prevailing cultural notions of Christianity, specifically that it was over-institutionalized, judgmental, and divisive. At least one interviewee at each of the six sites described the presence of Evangelical Christian groups on campus in negative terms, and they expressed concerns that all campus ministries were associated with the proselytizing and reportedly judgmental style of groups like InterVarsity and Campus Crusade for Christ. In that setting, a key strategy of Lutheran Campus Ministries is to offer an alternative to these groups’ perceived exclusivity.

Lutheran Campus Ministry is Deeply, Expansively Welcoming

The characteristic of Lutheran campus ministry that interviewees identified and described most consistently and expansively was that it is welcoming. *Welcoming* was the most frequently used word when interviewees were asked to characterize campus ministry in three words or less, followed closely by related words, such as *community*, *acceptance*, *caring*, *diversity*, *loving*, and *safe*. The message was proclaimed boldly on the wall of Luther House at Oregon State: “All guests should be welcomed as Christ,” and multiple interviewees referred to this statement as a guiding principle. Students consistently spoke of feeling *safe* and *accepted* at campus ministry gatherings, and leaders expressed this theme as an essential element of their ministries. It became clear that providing an open and welcoming environment was one of the primary expressions of their theological commitments – an “embodiment of the Gospel,” as one campus minister put it.

Hospitality in a Divisive World

It was evident that the theme of welcome was an intentional counter-narrative to an unwelcoming or even hostile world. The divisiveness and hostility of the world were associated with many of the hot-button political issues, especially anti-immigration rhetoric common in the 2016 presidential campaign, laws targeting transgender people, and discrimination against same gender couples. There was a strong sense among interviewees that Evangelicals had co-opted the Christian narrative. Their responses echo the findings of David Kinnaman of Barna Group, who found that emerging adults often regard Christians as intolerant of other religions, anti-science,

anti-homosexual, and anti-doubt.² A student at Arizona explained, “We are being seen as the religion who doesn’t like Muslims or doesn’t like homosexuals or doesn’t like people who aren’t cis – if they’re trans or whatever. And it’s like, that’s not what Christianity is. God loves all.”

One campus minister characterized a sizeable part of her ministry as, “Undoing bad theology, especially in relation to the LGBTQ+ community.” The counter-narrative of welcome and inclusion has become the primary public identity of many Lutheran campus ministries. They show up at places that religious skeptics would not expect Christians to appear, like National Coming Out Day at UW-Eau Claire and public events with the *Hillel* Jewish group at Arizona. Students said that their peers expressed surprise that Christians would be supportive of these groups. Intentional welcoming of and advocacy for members of the LGBTQ+ community seemed to be particularly important markers of Lutheran campus ministry at these sites across the country.

Students and ministry leaders made efforts to reach out to ecumenical and interfaith communities, efforts that were reflected in their worship spaces. The ministry at UW-Eau Claire shared space with the Roman Catholic ministry, UT-Austin with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, and Syracuse with ministries representing multiple faith traditions. These ministries also became places of ethnic and racial inclusion, particularly at Syracuse, where nearly a quarter of the student body was made up of international students. In short, Lutheran Campus Ministries were described as places where diversity is embraced, inclusion is a priority, and all are welcome. A student at UT-Austin summed up the purpose of campus ministry, “To be a location, a ministry for college students of any nationality, race, and just all kinds of people, for them to come and freely worship so that people can know that they are welcome.”

Radical Acceptance and Safety

It was evident that welcome and hospitality were more important than teaching doctrine or theology per se. One campus pastor elaborated, “Welcome and hospitality are what our theology looks like in practice.” Another explained, “We provide an open space, a safe place for people to gather, and when they are ready to go deeper and ask the spiritual questions that are important to them or seek teaching of the church around a particular issue or have need for some

² David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 92-93.

personal pastoral conversation, then the opportunity has been created.” The students described their personal experiences of feeling welcomed and accepted. “From the moment that I stepped into Luther House, I felt comfortable and accepted and like people wanted to get to know me for me,” said a student at Oregon State. A student at UNC-Chapel Hill explained, “Campus ministry has been a place where I feel like I can come, and I can be safe, and I can wrestle with life’s problems. And it’s a community that I know that no matter what’s going on out there, they’re still going to be here for me and also for other people.”

Others described their relationship with campus ministry in familial terms, such as a student at Arizona, “I feel like they are an extension of my family. There is someone that I know I can trust and there’s someone I can go to, and I think that I’m someone they can go to.” These descriptions of radical acceptance and feelings of safety were prevalent at all six sites, and they far outweighed the accounts of spiritual growth or theological education. However, the mantra of welcome and acceptance took on theological significance for at least some of the students. A student at UW-Eau Claire explained why the theme of welcome was so important to a Christian community, “There should not be a ‘terms and conditions may apply’ to God’s love.”

Disagreements, Questions, and Constructive Dialogue

Part of being a welcoming and accepting community meant that disagreement was okay and even encouraged. Multiple stakeholders contrasted this characteristic with the disrespectful and violent rhetoric common during and immediately following the 2016 presidential campaign. They sought to create spaces where people with different opinions could engage in constructive dialogue, usually in connection with a meal. A student described a *Table Talk* session at Luther House, in which the topic was the inauguration of President Trump, “I was surprised and happy about the cohesive and respectful conversation we had. Different people brought up completely different viewpoints, you know: ‘I’m excited,’ ‘I’m terrified,’ but the fact that we were all still there talking about it, I appreciated that.” A student at Syracuse said he appreciated the acceptance of diverse views, “You can come with your views without being judged.”

An area pastor described the conversations he observed at Arizona, where the campus pastor had been intentional about engaging controversial topics and issues of science and religion, “Lutheran Campus Ministry becomes that place, that protective place...to allow kids to explore, challenge, and ask the unanswerable questions.” It was this atmosphere of openness and

inquiry that engaged a young science student and led to his deep involvement in the ministry, which he described as transformative. These ministry sites were safe places to express opinions, to express religious doubts, and to hear the viewpoints of others about social topics or faith.

Community Meals and Conversation

No other programmatic element (not even worship) was more commonly attested across all of the sites than the sharing of community meals. Providing food was one of the key ways that campus ministries offered hospitality to students and made them feel welcome. Every site offered a meal to students at least weekly. These meals were connected to a worship service at three of the sites and connected to a time of open conversation, discussion, or Christian education at the other three. It was common practice for members of local congregations to provide these meals for center-based ministries, and other sites offered meals at Lutheran churches. These became opportunities for inter-generational interaction, provided a home-cooked alternative to the regular college fare, and relieved a financial burden for some of the students who attended. The meals also provided a non-threatening setting for guests to engage with the community, since there was no requirement to stay for worship or discussion.

“Food always helps,” one campus minister said half-jokingly when asked how to engage college students. Several students indicated that these meals were their primary point of engagement with the ministries, and others said they were more comfortable inviting friends when there was food involved. One student explained, “I think that it’s really important because you look at a lot of biblical situations where it happened over a meal or it happened with food. I think that really sets the stage because if you fill someone up, then I think a lot of other barriers start to come down.”

Campus Ministry is Making a Real Difference

“Campus ministry literally saved my life,” he concluded quietly. “Literally?” the researcher pressed. “Literally,” he confirmed, describing conversations and intervention from the campus minister and supporting students that brought him out of the depths of despair. Another student at a different site shared the struggles of losing a parent during college and being involved with what he described as an emotionally and spiritually unhealthy romantic relationship. “I was kind of lost,” he reflected, “but in the last two years, I’ve not only found myself again; I’ve been more proud of myself and just who I am and accepted that.” He went on

to describe the support of the campus ministry community as the catalyst for his recovery. “They didn’t go away,” he said, describing how the community affirmed him and welcomed him back to group gatherings after a long absence. “People have got to hear that, and to know that you’re valued by other people was huge.” Still another student described switching majors and altering his life course as a result of an experience he had on an international trip with Lutheran campus ministry and subsequent conversations with the campus pastor. A faculty member at UW-Eau Claire was not involved in campus ministries as a student, but his involvement over the past several years in the worship life of the congregationally based campus ministry has had a tremendous impact on his personal faith and that of his family.

These are real-life examples of how Lutheran campus ministries have proven transformative in the lives of particular individuals, and they provide clear evidence for the benefits, even necessity, of these ministries. The transformational narratives may be exceptional, but there were examples at all six sites, and there were other clear signs of the ministries’ effectiveness. The effectiveness of campus ministry at these six sites was closely related to strong leadership, attention to context, student-led ministry programs, and connection to congregational ministries. The faithful effectiveness evident in campus ministry provides entrees into promising further investigation and ministry development.

Campus Ministry Leadership Strength

No other factor had more influence on the style and effectiveness of the ministries than the person of the campus minister. Four of the campus ministers had been in their positions for at least ten years, and their influence was clear across all aspects of the ministry. Pastor Jim’s highly relational and collaborative leadership style influenced the sense of community among those at Luther House, as well as the partnership felt among area congregations and the staff at Oregon State. Pastor Gail’s commitment to social justice, solidified in her background as a Catholic lay minister, heavily influenced the ministries at Syracuse that are known for reaching out to the poor and immigrant communities. Pastor Ron’s interest in cross-cultural, international, and inter-faith experiences, along with his passion for thought-provoking inquiry, have led to the engagement of deep thinkers at Arizona and shaped the program’s connections with the Turkish community and international trips. Pastor Mark’s style of empowerment has led to strong student-directed programs at UNC-Chapel Hill, and his personal connections have guided spring break trip destinations. Pastor Brad at UT-Austin and Pastor Lori at UW-Eau Claire were both

less than a year into their calls, but participants described how their particular leadership styles were already beginning to shape the ministries. The board members saw their role, in large part, as supporting the campus minister. One board member said they want the campus pastor “to feel empowered to make the changes to programming or start new programs as they see fit.”

Attention to Context

As important as the campus minister’s particular leadership style and commitments were, the ministries were only effective to the extent that they attended to particular contextual realities. Pastor Mark’s style of leading “from the back seat of the bus,” as one interviewee put it, was incredibly effective, in part, because the students at the prestigious UNC-Chapel Hill were predominantly high achievers who had leadership experience prior to college. Involving students in leadership was an important component at all of the sites, but the others were unable to sustain the level of student leadership evident at Chapel Hill. This was attributable to both leadership style and contextual realities. In the case of Syracuse, Pastor Gail’s leadership style fit particularly well with the contextual realities. She was able to engage students in outreach efforts to the poor and immigrant communities not only because she was passionate about these ministries but also because Syracuse had a particularly high poverty rate and large immigrant population. A board member explained the results of this contextual approach, “[Community members] see the campus minister not as the Lutheran chaplain, but the person who is involved with Step Ministry or ESL [English as a Second Language].”

Engaging, Student-Led Ministry

Specific programs were important to the effectiveness of the ministries. The most ubiquitous were the small group gatherings around meals and conversation topics. These regular gatherings were typically small and informal, with twenty or fewer participants, and they formed the core of the campus ministries’ participants and leaders. These gatherings frequently used creative, engaging program models. At Arizona, for example, the group was commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, presenting Lutheran theology in a format inspired by the popular TED Talks. Overnight retreats, service/learning trips and cross cultural immersions often enhanced the engagement of these core groups of students, leading to greater connections and increased involvement. Service and outreach activities were especially key components. The students expressed appreciation of not only the chance to think through and contemplate their faith but also to put their faith into action. As one Arizona student put it, “I like to give back to

my community, so any volunteering opportunity that we have, I will definitely take it.” The specific ministry outreach programs varied widely among the sites, since they were the ministry aspects in which the students were given the most agency. When a student came forward with a specific cause, often the campus minister and others in the ministry came alongside them in support for the advocacy or service.

Campus ministers were intentional about engaging student leadership and empowering these students for ministry. Those designated as peer ministers at Syracuse, for instance, received special preparation and training to be leaders of the ministry programs and mentors to fellow students. Some sites had elected officers and others had appointed student leaders, but they all included students in key aspects of decision-making.

Connection to Congregational Ministries

Another important component in the effectiveness of the campus ministries was the degree to which they were connected to congregational ministries. The two sites embedded in congregational ministries enjoyed the most natural connections, but the center-based sites also found creative ways to engage with congregations. Area pastors came in as guest presenters, and area congregations hosted meal nights for students. Luther House did not host a weekly worship service in order that students might attend worship at a local congregation. These ministry programs in partnership with congregations met with varying success, since some students preferred age-specific ministry settings, while others wanted inter-generational worship and interaction. Most sites tried to find a balance.

One of the most powerful and clearly effective models was the adopt-a-student program at UNC-Chapel Hill. Each student involved in the ministry had the opportunity to be *adopted* by a family in the congregation. One congregation member described his family’s relationship with a student, “We adopted her as a freshman, and we haven’t let her go.” She was regularly at the house for dinner and went on family outings during her time in college, and they gave her a key to the house. They have continued the relationship for eight years and are looking forward to her upcoming wedding. The students also spoke highly of this program and the importance of having strong connections to the congregation. Knowing that their adoptive family would be there was one motivation they cited for attending weekly worship. One said, “Since we’re connected to a church, we see a lot of adults living out their faith all the time, which is awesome, quite frankly,

to be able to come in on Sunday and see that.” The congregation also had a program connecting students with church members who worked in their field of study in order to build relationships and consider how faith is incorporated into diverse vocations and daily life. A council member shared a moving story about a student who shared his life of ongoing faith in spite of rejections from various medical schools. Members of the congregation intervened to connect him with an internship that opened the doors for his entrance into medical school.

An Ecology of Faith Formation

The campus ministers, area pastors, and board members were keenly aware that they were not operating in a vacuum but rather that campus ministries were part of a much larger ecology of faith formation. This reality was clear in each student’s personal story. Eight of the twelve students interviewed were cradle Lutherans, with their faith stories typically including Sunday school, vacation Bible school, confirmation, and summer camp. Five of the students spent their summers working at Lutheran camps, and one student was planning to spend a year with Lutheran Volunteer Corps after graduation. Several students reported arriving on campus and actively looking for the Lutheran campus ministry. Two interviewees at different sites referred to this phenomenon as the *Lutheran pipeline*. Participation in campus ministry offered, for these students, continuity and grounding to their faith experience. One explained, “The things that I did in my home church are things that we do here and are things that we do in Lutheran churches that I go to on the weekends at camp. So that’s nice. I like the consistency there.”

Many of these students noted appreciation for traditional worship elements like familiar liturgy and sacraments. An important role of Lutheran Campus Ministries was providing these Lutheran young people, albeit fewer and fewer, a place to continue being Lutheran, and an essential element of this was not only being together but also connecting them with local congregations. These students were clearly in the minority among their peers on campus, though the data suggest that they were the largest group engaged in campus ministries.

The other four students had very different faith stories that did not include lifelong attachment to Lutheranism. None of them reported conversion to Christianity in college but rather a period of spiritual searching that led them away from other faith traditions (including Evangelical Christianity, Catholicism, and a traditional tribal religion). Their engagement in campus ministry allowed them opportunities to explore their faith in the context of a safe,

welcoming community. A student at Syracuse spoke of being “religiously in limbo” and appreciative of having the space “to figure out what to actually believe.”

Campus and Community Outreach

It is clear that these campus ministries have proven effective in the communal settings of relational ministry and even transformative in the lives of certain individuals, but there are other important aspects to their effectiveness that are much more difficult to address and measure. Pastor Brad holds *office hours* in the middle of campus at the sprawling UT-Austin each week. Most students simply pass by, but he regularly has students stop to ask questions, bring up a topic for conversation, or because they are in need of prayer. Most of these students do not subsequently engage in the weekly ministry gatherings, and he realizes that most of them “will never grace the door of a Lutheran church,” but they are beginning to refer to him as their pastor. His goal is to become, in his words, “a part of the campus furniture” so that he will be seen as a *trusted presence* on campus. A large portion of his ministry remains engaging with those who grew up Lutheran and came to campus seeking out the Lutheran Campus Ministry (the “innies,” as he calls them), but he is also engaging with those on the outskirts of religion (the “outies”), though the effects are more difficult to measure.

Pastor Gail at Syracuse identified the dual role of her ministry. She spoke of half her job as being a sort of “chaplain” to the Lutheran students on campus, but she is also very intentional about empowering students for outreach ministries in the community that have clear impacts on the poor and marginalized. She involves these students in service work related to their field of study or personal interests, usually through an area congregation or non-governmental organization. Lutheran Campus Ministry was the only Christian organization present at National Coming Out Day at UW-Eau Claire, and this witness may have affected the perception of Christianity for some of those gathered. It is difficult to measure the impacts of these outreach ministries. At the very least, it can be stated that the effects of Lutheran Campus Ministries extend well beyond the core group of participants in the typical weekly small group gatherings.

More than Student Ministries

The clearest impacts revealed in the interviews were directly related to the student experience, but these ministries extended to other arenas, as well. Impacts extended from the students to area congregations, local service organizations, service trip destinations, cross

cultural immersions and other ministries that the students experienced or supported. The campus ministers also saw their roles as participating in key conversations or partnerships within the campus communities. Their presence as public figures on the university campuses allowed them to minister directly to campus staff and faculty members. They also participated in conversations about ethics and served as a public witness to the role of religion in academia. One campus minister explained, “It is important for campus ministry to have a witness in the academic world so that it can contribute to that conversation that just needs to go on between the church and the academy.” In addition to providing a Lutheran voice to conversations around ethics and academia, the presence of these campus ministries offered contributions to ecumenical and interfaith dialogues. Several of the campus ministers described their participation in interfaith councils that provided points of contact among different religious groups. It is difficult to measure the impacts of interfaith or ecumenical conversations, gaining voice in academic or university policy groups, and publicly advocating for the rights of the marginalized, but these are key examples that indicate the value of campus ministry extends well beyond students. More investigation is clearly needed to better understand the impact and possibilities here.

Campus Ministry is Vulnerable

“If I had a chance to talk to Mother Church, I would say, ‘Wake up and pay attention! At times, you give us the impression that we’re not doing the work that you think is necessary.’” This pastor sounded a familiar tone that was voiced in numerous interviews at multiple sites. Campus ministries were vulnerable for multiple reasons, including finances, systemic shifts in the ecclesial bodies and higher education, lack of board development, overdependence on the campus pastor, and difficulty engaging students.

Finances

Interviewees described seeing the financial support of campus ministries from synods and the ELCA church-wide organization slowly dwindle over the past decade. Some were resigned to the financial cuts as necessary steps for struggling institutions, while others were more resentful, noting that they felt a general devaluing of their ministries among denominational leaders and fellow clergy. Board members and campus ministers recounted sober discussions at meetings about financial difficulties and ways to keep the ministries funded. Most sites had resorted to extensive fundraising efforts. Board members took a share of this responsibility, but the bulk of

fundraising fell on the shoulders of the campus ministers, who were not trained as development directors and were already stretched in their ministry duties. Grant writing has helped fund the ministries at many of the sites, though several ministers described the frustrations of being turned down for grants and the reality that grants were more likely to fund special programs than the daily expenses related to personnel and buildings. One board member said about the increased need to solicit funds, “We could spend that energy doing programming for students, but instead we spend it on fundraising because we have to.” Campus ministers travelled to area congregations to promote campus ministry and solicit funds. They held elaborate fundraisers, such as the annual beer and cheese festival at Oregon State. A new building project at UT-Austin put the ministry in financial debt with the promise of paying off in the long term, since the rent for the building is expected to provide finances for the ministry. Sites that did not own a building, such as Syracuse, have become dependent on a handful of generous congregations. An area pastor put it bluntly, “Our congregation supports campus ministry. That is the only way it exists.” Financial stress was one of the most serious vulnerabilities facing campus ministry.

Decline and Diminishment of the Lutheran Network

Financial cuts at the synod and denominational level were also symptomatic of larger changes within the network of Lutheran organizations. Many of the pastors, board members, and campus ministers recalled the way that the Lutheran network functioned in the past. One area pastor described a young man who was active in his congregation in high school over a decade before, “I was hoping that when he went to college, he wouldn’t get screwed up, and he ended up going to [college] and got hooked up with Lutheran Campus Ministry, so literally he was in the pipeline, and now he is in his second call [as a pastor].” This story portrays the young person being buffered from secular and Evangelical forces by remaining in a continuous network of Lutheran ministries. Others recalled the days when they received the names of incoming Lutheran freshmen from area pastors and even from the university. Lutheran Campus Ministries were, according to these accounts, venues for those who grew up Lutheran to continue their Lutheran journey through the college years. They were part of a Lutheran network that included congregations, colleges, seminaries, summer camps, and other Lutheran institutions that were mutually reinforcing and adequately funded for Lutherans by Lutherans. This network is in serious decline. One pastor explained, “There is a smaller and smaller pipeline of students coming in Lutheran,” going on to suggest that the pipeline was “clogged” because there were

fewer youth coming out of Lutheran congregations. Some interviewees were hopeful that the Lutheran network would recognize the error of not adequately supporting campus ministries and commit more resources in spite of financial decline.

Others were critical of the focus on the Lutheran network. One student, who did not grow up Lutheran, described campus ministries as “self-centered... like, we take care of our own.” He went on to say, “Outreach is not very effective, but we are really effective with our own people.” A board member echoed this sentiment, “We are most effective with those who walk in the door, those who come to us... Maybe we need to do things outside our comfort zone.” These are sharp critiques for ministries that emphasize inclusion and ecumenical cooperation. Fewer Lutheran students and less financial support necessitate creative adaptations and new ministry models that have resulted in some of the vibrant ministry examples detailed in the present report. Whether or not diminishment of the Lutheran network leads to new life for Lutheran campus ministry remains to be seen, but there are hopeful signs amidst the challenges.

Board Roles and Engagement

The chair of one campus ministry declared, “There was a time when money from congregations and synods moved up the system and came back down to campus ministry, and everyone thought campus ministry was taken care of. No more. Now, campus ministries have to go it on their own, and boards have to step up to the table.” This board chair was summarizing the experiences, worries, and pressures many boards were navigating. A board member at Syracuse, whose congregation was actively engaged in campus ministry and with university students, said, “Campus ministries are going to have to go it on our own and depend on, rely on, and count on other congregations in the general area to be more supportive. We’ve got to get other congregations to make campus ministry a priority in their giving.” These efforts will likely require stronger, expanded board commitment and participation.

The concerns of board representatives not only focused on funding; they also included recruiting students (especially Lutheran students from home congregations), the wellbeing of the campus pastors, and leadership transitions. Clearly passionate about the ministry, a board member at UT-Austin said regarding the purpose of the board and its *Circle of Friends*, “We need to see that the campus minister doesn’t burn out. Campus ministry is an extension of the local congregation. We need to see that campus ministry is not leaving it up to the campus

minister.” Some board members and campus ministers indicated the need for boards to be stronger and consistent because of the constant turnover of students and the need for continuity in the campus minister transitions. Nevertheless, while boards were frequently identified as needing to have new and stronger roles in campus ministry’s effectiveness and sustainability, both board members and campus pastors worried about boards having the know-how and energy to make the necessary changes.

Overdependence on the Campus Pastor

Current effective campus ministries seem highly dependent on the person of the campus minister, which makes sense given the high turnover of students. Interviewees described how past leadership transitions precipitated periods of tumult and uncertainty. The impending retirement of one campus minister left some interviewees summing up the ministry using the words *vulnerable* and *precarious*. An area pastor at one site assessed the future of campus ministry, “It cannot be staff pastor focused.”

The vulnerability of pastor-centered ministry was evident not only in the challenges of leadership transition but also in the simple numeric limitations of a highly relational, one person focused ministry model. One person could develop only a limited number of the deep personal relationships evident in the transformative narratives uncovered in this project. There was certainly vibrant, effective ministry taking place, but the size and scope appeared limited in many cases by the relational capacity of the campus minister and, in some cases, the commitment of a core group of student ministers. “We have a great group of people,” one student noted, “but we are smaller than a lot of other religious organizations.” The strengthening of the roles of student peer ministers, board members, and other volunteers were cited as possible ways to better share the leadership workload.

Student Involvement and Campus Perception of Christianity

Without a steady stream of names of incoming Lutherans, campus ministries were having difficulty attracting new students or even letting students know that they were there. The problem was often described as an oversaturation of student clubs and opportunities for involvement. “We live in a bog,” one university staff member explained, “There are lots of organizations, and their effectiveness depends on availability and shelf-life.” The story was similar on every campus: hundreds of student organizations vying for involvement of students

who were already incredibly busy and over-committed. Combined with this problem was the simple reality of college as a transient community, where even the most dedicated student leaders were only present for a few years. This added to the importance of engaging new students. One campus minister explained that students determined early in their college careers which two or three organizations they would join, “If I don’t connect in the first week or two, they have made their decision.” He concluded, “So you try to make the ministry look attractive.”

Portraying their ministry as attractive seemed to be a problem for Lutheran Campus Ministry participants, in part, because they did not want to be associated with campus Evangelical groups; thus, many hesitated to invite their peers for fear of being seen as pushy about religion. “It’s kind of awkward to invite people to church,” one student explained. Another student described an additional blow to the ministry’s attractiveness, “I think there’s kind of this viewpoint that it’s a stuffy religion, for lack of a better word. I think a lot of people that hear *Lutheranism* think of a bunch of old, retired white people, you know, to be blunt about it.” Differentiation from Evangelicals on the one hand and avoidance of the stuffy traditionalist stereotype on the other left Lutheran Campus Ministries a narrow point of entry.

Campus Ministry Has Even Greater Potential

“The majority of students have not grown up in a faith tradition,” one campus minister said. “We cannot assume that people will come, and that changes the way we think about being church. We can’t just stay in this building...we have to go out into the university and interact with people.” There were clear signs of current effectiveness on these campus ministry sites in the midst of their vulnerability, but there were also glimpses of tremendous potential.

Student Spiritual Hunger

“They seem to be hungry,” a university staff member said in reference to the spirituality of the current age cohort of students. The increased openness of university administration and staff members to the role of spirituality offers great potential for partnerships, and this was demonstrated at multiple sites in which university staff referred students to the campus minister or the campus minister was invited to teach about religion or inclusion in the classroom. This shift also indicates an understanding that, though college students are less likely to be involved with organized religion, they remain spiritually hungry.

In addition to the general spiritual hunger evident on the university campuses, there were some students who wanted to dig deeply into theological and biblical material. It was curious in the interviews that the students used more explicit faith language than the leaders. The programmatic emphasis on welcome had clear strengths, and this emphasis was clearly grounded in theological commitments, but there was potential for deeper theological reflection and more explicitly religious language with at least some of the students. Strategic planning might help imagine how to expand beyond a single intimate group to engage cohorts of students at different points in their faith journey, from those searching for a religious identity to those who want to strengthen their Christian discipleship. A congregation member at UW-Eau Claire envisioned the ministry as a *library*, where students could find basic resources that introduced them to the faith and others could find more advanced tomes.

University campuses are enormous mission fields, as several of the students pointed out, adding their wonderment that ministries would settle for a group of twenty out of many thousands. One student pointed out in frustration that their site only worked with about fifteen people regularly, adding, “We are just not reaching enough students.” A few students, and even one campus minister, spoke of liking the intimacy of the small group, wondering if it would be a good thing to get much larger. An Oregon State student said of the size of Luther House, “That means we don’t have the freedom to do some activities that require a bigger cohort to do, and it also means that we can do things in a smaller, more personal way.” The potential for growth and greater impact were clear, but they would require significant changes in resources, expectations, and strategies.

Collaboration with Congregations

One of the most promising possibilities for campus ministry partnerships evident in the interview data was increased engagement with congregational ministries. The inter-generational interaction within the congregation proved highly effective at UNC-Chapel Hill, along with more limited inter-generational programs at other sites. There is potential to expand these connections, with the benefits including increased engagement of young adults in congregational ministries, leading to them sharing their gifts with the congregations, receiving cross-generational support for their personal faith journey, and recognizing the importance of connection to a faith community. “I don’t understand churches who live across the street from a university campus

and aren't doing campus ministry," one campus minister lamented. "It's win-win. It's frustrating when I see that happen. Who's against college students being in church?"

Part of the problem seemed lack of knowledge on the part of congregational ministers, who were unaware of the type of ministry going on or the potential avenues of partnership. One area pastor, whose church was barely two miles from campus, had a benign attitude toward the local campus ministry, reasoning that they probably did important work but indicating that it was the responsibility of the campus minister to get the word out and seek partnership. Another explained, "You're not going to bring congregations to campus ministry. You've got to bring campus ministry to congregations." The campus ministries at Syracuse offered multiple examples of engaging student gifts with congregational ministries, including audiology students running a hearing clinic in a local congregation, public relations students developing a congregational website, information students installing wireless access for a church, and architect students drawing plans for church property use. There were indications from several sites that simply telling the campus ministry story and getting student participants in front of congregations could lead to increased partnership and creative ideas for collaboration.

Expanding Funding Sources

Discussions of the persistent financial difficulties also revealed potential funding sources. Fundraisers, soliciting congregations, grant writing, and parking cars at college sporting events helped keep the ministries afloat, but appeared unsustainable long-term. The rapid transitions in funding over the past decade have led to more scrambling than planning. "It would be nice to have board members who are really good fundraisers," one campus minister lamented. "That hasn't worked out." There was clear need and opportunity for board development and strategic planning at many of the sites. In addition, it was evident that the alumni network might be more fully tapped. Some sites reported successful efforts at engaging alumni in programs and long-term giving, but these were all based on the ongoing relationships of alumni with the specific person of the campus minister. There was little evidence of systematic efforts to track and correspond with alumni.

Integrated and Attentive Virtual Ministry

The Internet and social media are offering new possibilities for ministry connections, though these campus ministries were only beginning to extensively utilize them. One campus

pastor candidly expressed concern of the potential dangers of social media and skepticism about their value to engage community, but most were exploring ways to incorporate new technology. Interviewees described the challenges of letting students know of their presence on campus. They lamented that congregational ministers did not give names of Lutheran students coming to campus. They recounted the difficulties of having the many face-to-face discussions needed to promote campus ministries among pastors and congregations. Many of these challenges could be further addressed with improved online presence. There is potential via online media to efficiently track and communicate with alumni, share the names and contact information of incoming Lutheran students, spread the stories of campus ministry's effectiveness to potential donors, get student voices and faces in more Sunday morning worship spaces, and have more powerful voices in the campus communities. These initiatives would take coordinated efforts, strategic planning, special funding, and personnel resources beyond the campus ministers. They would also require a degree of willingness to embrace the new technology being used so heavily by younger age cohorts.

Rethinking Church and Engaging a New Generation

“We are a *ministry*, we are not really a church,” one student said reflectively. “I mean, we have service and stuff, but we are so *open*.” This young man hit on one of the greatest potentials for Lutheran Campus Ministries: an opportunity to reclaim or reform the depth and breadth of the Christian narrative, Christian identity, and ecclesiology. For him, the word “open” did not apply to the word “church.” His experience in campus ministry was causing him to rethink his ecclesiology. At UT-Austin, leaders were actively exploring what it might look like to be church without a building, even as they were completing a five million dollar building project.

There was clearly more at stake in these ministries than simply helping young university students navigate the choppy waters of emerging adulthood with some semblance of faith intact. These ministries have a prophetic quality that can challenge the church and offer insight into where Christ is leading. One pastor called them “part of the listening ear of the church for this generation of folks.” They operate at the cutting edge of theological and societal change within some of the largest mission fields in the country. They offer a public counter-narrative to the bigotry and exclusivity that many people associate with Christianity, instead emphasizing God's love for all, inclusion, and welcome.

Reflections and Next Steps

This exploratory study has revealed many of the questions, challenges, stories of transformation, vulnerabilities, and potential of Lutheran Campus Ministries. This important step might well be followed by both further investigation and strategic thinking at the local and national levels. Deeper investigation is necessary. Clear action steps are needed to find a way forward during these times of transition. From the early discoveries of these interviews, at least six areas present concerns and potential for more investigation and promising development:

- 1) Understanding, engaging and accompanying emerging student consciousness and lifestyles, especially addressing the greatly increasing student stress levels;
- 2) Enriching and expanding current transformative campus ministry relationships and practices;
- 3) Exploring and experimenting with campus ministry leadership models, especially regarding the roles of the campus pastor, pastoral leadership transitions, peer ministry and boards;
- 4) Tapping more fully the great potential of partnerships with other faith groups and proximate, area, and regional congregations;
- 5) Revisiting, in each setting, the relationships of religion, faith and spirituality in academia, along with campus ministry's place in the life of the university; and
- 6) Recasting and strengthening campus ministry boards, especially in the areas of advancement, and most especially fundraising.

The interviews are one phase of a multi-stage investigative project. Subsequent and ongoing research might well confirm, refine or disclaim the findings of this study. This project's next phase, a national survey of Lutheran campus ministry participants, currently underway, can offer a clearer picture of the motivations for involvement, wishes for ministry offerings, extent of the impacts, and insights into campus ministry's place within the larger ecology of faith formation and the university. Findings from that survey have the potential to delve more deeply into campus ministry's effectiveness and limitations, as well as offer further directions for future ministry initiatives.

Lutheran Campus Ministry in early 2017 is in transition and facing identity and strategic challenges that have revealed its vulnerability on many campuses, even as practitioners continue

their ministries in creative and effective ways. These ministries have potential to thrive, but strategic planning and support are needed that will likely call for careful discernment and risk-taking changes.

From what has been learned in these interviews, building on existing strength, effective campus ministry will continue to include well-prepared leadership, deep attention to context, creative student-led ministry programs, connection to congregational ministries, stronger boards, and new sources of funding. Moreover, these ministries offer vibrant and vital contributions to the church, even if the immediate benefits are not always apparent. Said one pastor impassionedly, “Pay attention that you help, not just to fund this well, but to really *embrace* it as a really worthy work that actually may not pay off by providing more people in the pews who are going to pay the bills, but who are being equipped to serve a world that desperately needs light and salt and leaven.”