ANSCHAUUNGEN
By John E. Bauer, editor

CHARIS: The Journal

In his thoughtful treatise, The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship, George Marsden challenges Christian academicians to share the fruits of their scholarship from the distinctively Christian paradigm. He argues that in the same way secular scholars write from their own values-driven perspectives, Christians can and should share the influence of the Christian weltanschauung on their scholarly efforts. He builds a strong case that the objective, value-free lehrfreiheit assumed by the natural sciences is impossible in the humanities and social sciences for the very reason that the study of human conduct, interaction, and creativity is laden with value. The hypocrisy of the university is that it demands the rigor of empirical validation in all areas of research, but permits free reign to subjective and unvalidated belief systems such as feminism and multiculturalism.

While still academic dean at Wisconsin Lutheran College, I extended Marsden’s argument to my faculty by providing a copy of his book to every professor with the encouragement that they read and discuss it in their divisions. Actually, our efforts to better understand the role of scholarship by faculty at WLC have extended over several years. We have labored to establish criteria in each academic discipline that both define scholarship expectations and serve as a basis for evaluating scholarly efforts. What is emerging is a campus culture in which faculty increasingly view themselves not just as pedagogs (although there is certainly nothing wrong with that time tested concept of “teacher”) but as scholars whose principal duty is to teach. Implicit in such an understanding is the belief that an active scholarship life is essential to effective teaching.

Having now assumed new duties as the executive director of CHARIS, the institute of Wisconsin Lutheran College, I believe an essential component of my task is to build a bridge of service between the college quan college and the Church at large which is based on sound research and relevant scholarship. The answer to the question, “How can the college serve the Church?” seems to me to be based in part upon the expertise of the faculty and their efforts to use their knowledge and skills to address problems and issues facing the Church. Any measurement of how effectively we have answered that question will have to gauge the extent to which faculty have made public the fruits of their work. Ergo this first issue of CHARIS.

It is my desire to publish two issues each year. The primary emphasis will be on sharing the fruits of scholarship conducted by WLC faculty. The audience for this publication is the “educated lay person.” By this I mean the committed Christian layperson who loves his/her Savior, desires to see the Church remain faithful in doctrine and practice, and who is thoughtful, serious, and enjoys being challenged by what they read. I expect that many professional church workers will also find this journal of interest. However, consistent with the mission of the college and the institute, the editorial decision was made to identify its primary audience as the educated lay person.

The purpose of CHARIS, the publication, is to inform and promote dialog among readers. I hope and pray that its content will edify. In each issue you can expect to find articles, critiques, book reviews, and yes, even my editorial opinions. You may find occasional chapel sermons, literary and artistic contributions, and articles by invited guest authors. If sufficient interest is generated to provoke responses, we may include letters to the editor.

Heeding the challenge of Marsden, I intend to provide a journal which is unabashedly Christian in its perspective. With him I believe that there need not be any loss of academic integrity when speaking from the Christian frame of reference. In this first issue, articles have been chosen which illustrate this point. The introductory article by guest contributor Rolf Wegenke sets the tone by asserting that engagement in appropriate scholarship by Lutheran college professors is essential to the continued health and growth of the Church. Peter Fraser shares an excerpt from his recent book which explores how educated Christians might respond to the form and substance of contemporary film. Joyce Natzke describes her research into school culture as she investigated differences among Lutheran high schools. Mark Braun will relate lessons he learned from studying the history of the breakup of the Synodical Conference. Greg Schulz will share his reflections on what it means to become an affective Lutheran professor. His musings correspond to the timeless reprinted article by Martin Galstad entitled, “Temptations that Especially Confront the Orthodox.” In each case, the authors draw conclusions and applications from their research which are intended to give the
reader opportunity to think deeply about their implications for the Church.

I pray that you will keep this endeavor in your prayers. If you have helpful advice, friendly suggestions, or useful criticism, please write.

The Ties that Bind?

Several months ago I had occasion to attend a small gathering of ministers, a few teachers and two laymen to participate in discussions related to creativity in ministry. I am unaccustomed to attending any meeting of professionals where the preface to the conference includes assurances that the “proceedings will not be taped, no record of comments will be kept, and all ideas expressed will be held in confidence.” That such assurances were necessary among these professional church workers ostensibly gathered to share creative and innovative ideas for doing ministry, and for providing mutual support and encouragement, completely blew me away.

I was told that those who were invited were identified by the conference organizers as “forward-thinking” and “innovative.” It is not my purpose here to evaluate the merits of the ideas that were shared. In the brief amount of time we were together, only cursory discussions were held on the identified subjects of leadership, family ministry, worship, and outreach. But the somewhat frequent reminders among attendees that “you’re safe here,” and that “you can speak your mind; the walls don’t have ears,” led me to suspect that fear of doing things differently may be deeply ingrained among clergy to the extent that it may represent a major cultural force.

I shared these observations with a friend and colleague on the way back to Milwaukee. He gave me an insight that was at once startling and at the same time revealing. He posited for me the notion that the strength of a conservative, confessional church may also become one of its weaknesses. Conformity to group norms may help ensure doctrinal homogeneity, but may also lead to “group think” in matters of methodology. It can inhibit creativity and innovation, and often reward adherence to group expectations at the expense of individuality.

This got me wondering. If in fact such norms exist and can be identified, how are they created? What are the customs, rites, mores, and social norms that produce such conformity? How does socialization into the culture occur? And what components of this enculturation process contribute to the maintenance of such strong behavioral norms? I realize this vocabulary of the social scientist my sound alien to churchmen, but to others it provides a means for examining systems and organizational cultures and for constructing meaning from these phenomena.

Why worry about such things? Hypothesize with me for a moment. What if it can be shown that such norms of conformity do exist? And what if such norms also tend to suppress creativity and innovation? What if these cultural “ties that bind” have a stultifying effect and create an atmosphere of paranoia among clergy? Such knowledge, I should think, would help inform how the Church educates, socializes, enculturates and professionally develops its clergy.

I think most would agree that the future vitality of the Church, and this church in particular, is dependent upon the strength and leadership of the clergy. I hope, however, (and this gets to the heart of why CHARIS exists) that the application of intellectual gifts and abilities to problems and issues challenging the Church can be a noble and supportive undertaking. I am not trying to be the gadfly, nor is my motivation to subvert. I am all too aware of the temptation toward hubris to which many academics have succumbed and of hasty generalizations made from limited data.

My invitation is to serious discussion and research into this subject. I think it’s reasonable to expect that the church (and here I speak of “church” as the human organization) should continuously assess its effectiveness to make sure that human structures and processes don’t impede the work of the Holy Spirit. If some think me to be out of bounds, I’ll take the criticism. If any wish to respond with helpful advice, I would welcome it. But our shared love for the Gospel and our commitment to the evangelistic mission of the Church should also lead us in all humility to seek the best ways to do the work of the kingdom.

How WELS?

In a Sunday morning Bible class studying Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians, the issue of the anti-Christ was raised. The question was posed by the pastor: “How many Catholics do you think believe that the pope is infallible when speaking in his capacity as pope?” A similar question sought to probe the class’s perceptions about the extent to
which Lutherans actually believe that the pope is the anti-Christ. I guess the purpose of the exercise was to demonstrate that we should never make assumptions about a person’s religious beliefs based solely on which denominational peg they hang their hat on. The point was that Lutherans should not necessarily avoid all communication with those of other persuasions, but should always seek to speak the truth in love. A good point!

It occurred to me, however, that much the same thing could be said of those who carry the WELS label. Just how WELS is the average person in the pew? Every professional church worker would love to be able to say that every WELS member has a thorough understanding of the Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and can quote the Doctrinal Statements of the WELS. The reality they face every Sunday morning in worship and in Bible classes, however, is that there exists a wide range of understanding of and commitment to the doctrines of the Church.

It’s been almost 30 years since Merton Strommen, et al., published A Study of Generations. That two-year study of the beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors of 5,000 Lutherans between the ages of 15 and 65 demonstrated a tremendous diversity of belief. While there were certainly large numbers in agreement on most matters that could be identified as distinctively Lutheran understandings of the Bible, unanimity was far from a certain thing among Lutherans.

Some may take a measure of comfort from the fact that the study included those “other” Lutherans in the (now) ELCA and LCMS. They shouldn’t. Any random selection of individuals from a large population will yield a range of opinions on just about anything. The role of a researcher is to draw inferences from data which is distributed around some mean for every question asked.

The thought has occurred to me that it is naïve and dangerous to assume that, once we issue a doctrinal pronouncement, our members all immediately adhere to it. I hope that most reasonable people would agree. Notwithstanding the recent Northwest Lutheran Forward in Christ unscientific survey of WELS members to ascertain population demographics, no one seems to have ever sought to answer – at least not empirically to the extent of Generations– the fundamental question: “How WELS are we?”

Recent doctrinal controversies have settled around matters of church and ministry, church fellowship, and the role of women in the Church. Ethical/religious issues such as abortion, end-of-life decisions, homosexuality, and same sex marriages confront many of our members every day. Some Lutherans openly advocate the possibility of same sex unions (Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, January 16, 2000). Where do our members stand on these issues?

Is it important to have a more thorough knowledge of the beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors of WELS members? Could such knowledge give better understanding to the ministry of the Church? I would hope so. Does this require a replication of A Study of Generations with a random sampling of WELS members? I don’t know. Perhaps.

Many studies of our culture have yielded generalities about the attributes of Boomers, Gen X’ers, Milenials, and numerous other cohorts in our post-modern society. These are the folks who inhabit our WELS world. But the extent to which the cultural attributes ascribed to these cohorts influences the beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors of our WELS members has not been explored. Nor has the extent to which membership in a WELS church has helped to ameliorate the secular attitudes that characterize these generations. Isn’t it time to know just how WELS we are?

Leadership and Personality

The second issue of this journal, scheduled for publication in October of 2001, will be devoted to two topics which, while not new, have rarely been discussed in the context of the ministry of the Church. The first, leadership, has been of central concern at Wisconsin Lutheran College for the last couple of years. The college’s mission statement expresses the determination to “prepare students for lives of Christian leadership.” The second, personality, has been linked to leadership effectiveness in many studies conducted in the fields of business, education, psychology, and sociology.

Examining these two constructs in the context of ministry effectiveness, however, raises the discussion to a different level. Is effectiveness in ministry a function of the pastor’s personality? Is leadership a spiritual gift, a set of skills which can be learned and honed, or both? How do these variables relate to one another in various contexts such as church, school, and home? The articles of the next CHARIS will explore these questions.