

The Seminary Explores Podcast
The Formation, Work, and Hope of a Religious Educator
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Episode Description:

Paul Lutz reflects on his life as a religious educator in the church. He recounts his formal theological education at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (now United Lutheran Seminary) where he received his M.Div. and Boston College where he received his MA in Religious Education. Paul remembers those educators who influenced his interest in the field, including such scholars as A. Roger Gobbel, Mays Boys, and Tom Groome. He also describes his five years working at the churchwide offices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in Adult Formation. He wrote material and traveled. He gained a broader perspective of religious education throughout the ELCA and particularly the impact of culture on educational expressions in churches. Paul also reflects on the challenges for religious education in our churches and society with a special need for more resources to support congregations and increased pastoral support. Lastly, he offers suggestions for people considering a call to this area of ministry.

Transcript

00:00

United Lutheran Seminary presents the Seminary Explorers podcast: conversations on faith, art, people, politics, theology, life, and more, with voices from around the corner and around the globe.

Nelson S. 00:16

I am your host, Nelson Strobert. With me Today is Paul Lutz, retired pastor and religious educator. And today we will be talking about the formation, work, and challenges in religious education. Today, welcome to the seminary explorers, Paul.

Paul L. 00:42

Thank you, Nelson. It's great to be here. I'm looking forward to our conversation.

Nelson S. 00:46

Okay, so am I, and I'm going to get right into it and ask you point quite directly. How did your interest in Christian religious education begin?

Paul L. 00:57

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Wow. Okay, I'm going to have to go back in my memory for that one. I'm not really sure where it began, how it began. I'll give you a condensed version. So I think what was I grew up in the Roman Catholic tradition.

Nelson S. 01:16

Okay,

Paul L. 01:17

and I became Lutheran by going to a Lutheran church in my hometown of Manchester, Connecticut, and there was a pastor there who was a regular Joe, and I really liked that because he helped me identify or see myself as a possible pastor in the long run. Before him, my image of a pastor was Pastor Anderson, who was this clean cut, never you know a speck and nothing out of place. Stood tall, and everybody revered him. And I knew, I knew I was not that. And so, so when I met the Ron, I got to appreciate the other possibility of being pastors, and so then what happened was I decided to go to a seminary, and I ended up deciding to go to Gettysburg Seminary. It was more family friendly at that time than thinking about going to Philadelphia, and then when I got to seminary. I had classes with Eric Gritch and Robert Jensen and Adam Reidewer and A. Roger Gobbel. And although I came with an interest in counseling because I have an undergraduate degree in counseling, I actually left with an interest in finding out more about what it meant to be a religious educator, and so after that, I went on to fulfill and to find out more about that as a ministry possibility.

Nelson S. 02:50

Oh, okay. You mentioned two. You mentioned names of the faculty members at Gettysburg now United Lutheran Seminary, were there other religious religious educators who influenced

Paul L. 03:11

you? Yes, as it turns out, because I was able to go to Boston College and their Institute of Religious Education after I graduated from Gettysburg, and got then I got turned on about religious education as a field, as a discipline, and met and read people like John Westerhoff and Thomas Broome and

Nelson S. 03:34

Oh yeah,

Paul L. 03:35

Mary Boys and Marie Harris. The program brought in all these infamous and well-respected educators, and they taught them. They taught a weekend class, and so that got me more excited about the possibilities of of doing this and what it might mean for a parish pastor.

Nelson S. 03:54

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Oh, okay. Now, what motivated you to go on to Boston College for that?

Paul L. 04:00

I think because it was just being touched on at the Gettysburg Seminary. There's just so much to consider if you're interested in being a pastor,

Nelson S. 04:09

right?

Paul L. 04:10

That seminaries are almost, you know, not even capable of touching everything. It would take you, well, it would take you a career, right, or a

Nelson S. 04:19

lifetime, indeed, a

Paul L. 04:20

lifetime, and so Christian education really wasn't. I took all the Christian education classes you could take

Nelson S. 04:28

right

Paul L. 04:28

at at seminary and thought about that on my field experience and internship and all. But I really was more excited about what it might mean for me to do that, and so this this program was there at Boston. I was living in Lawrence, Massachusetts at the time.

Nelson S. 04:46

Okay.

Paul L. 04:46

So it was classes were close by, and they were Friday night and Saturdays, and so it just worked out really well to to do that.

Nelson S. 04:55

Oh, indeed. When you were in the parish after leaving the seminary. And theological education. Were you involved in religious education at that level immediately following your theological education?

Paul L. 05:11

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Well, yes. I got to my first call in New England and met with the assistant to the bishop and Scoop Oakland was his name, and he likes to involve. They like to involve the parish pastors in something beyond the parish, and and so he mentioned Christian education, or I told him in the midst of the conversation of my interest. And of course, the the seminary had the Senate. I'm sorry, had a committee, and I got involved with that. And then I learned that the region had a committee, and so I got involved with that. And so yes, so I got to expand my connections and my involvement with the faith formation activities after seminary, before I started taking the classes and and continued them while I was taking the classes.

Nelson S. 06:04

Oh, okay, okay, thank you. I I I'm going to follow up. I want to follow with another question, and that is, how did you find Christian education or religious education in the parishes that you served upon leaving seminary, what was going on in the parish?

Paul L. 06:28

Yeah, I think at that time and probably still this time, most people think of Christian education as four children and what happens on Sunday morning, and so there's a limited appreciation of what it is, and as a result of that, there's really, I have found not really a lot of support or interest in expanding that. And so the places where I went, places I served, which was like seven different congregations, I think.

Nelson S. 06:58

One

Paul L. 07:00

of my interests in each of those was to expand the notion of what faith formation was, to help people see that as something that impacts our life together beyond children and beyond Sunday morning. And so, the easy way to do that was to to get at adult education first, and then to think about committees and council and finance committee and social ministry committee and things that we do in terms of why do we do these things, how do we learn about

Nelson S. 07:37

them,

Paul L. 07:38

what's what's our tradition? So instead of just leaving people out there to help them think about these things in new and exciting ways and appreciate the support that they have from the Senate and from the ELCA.

Nelson S. 07:52

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Okay, and what I also hear you say is that the importance of the pastoral leadership in promoting religious education in the parish,

Paul L. 08:06

exactly, exactly, yeah. If the if the pastor doesn't doesn't see the connections, he really or she can't help the parishioners make those connections and can't help structure or set up a congregation that sees making disciples as what they're really called to do.

Nelson S. 08:25

Right. That

Paul L. 08:26

is it's interesting. That was when I went to Trinity Landsdale. That was the primary emphasis of my call was to help us become a lay-led congregation, as it were, help us see our discipleship as something that we mean to be about and to do it intentionally.

Nelson S. 08:47

Oh, okay, that's help. That's very helpful. But now, while you your interests and your experiences were in parish ministry, you also worked for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the ELCA, in its headquarters in Chicago. Could you share what your responsibilities were there and what motivated you to take that step in serving beyond the parish as a full time in full time Christian administration.

Paul L. 09:24

Certainly again through my involvement with the synod in the region I got to know some of the churchwide staff and involved in Christian education and so I heard about through them that there was a position available in adult faith development or adult faith formation, and so you know I I didn't didn't know if I was capable of doing that or wanted to do that, but nothing ventured, nothing gained, so I threw my name in the hat, as it were, and they gave me a call, and I went out there and interviewed. And it seemed like something really to get excited about for me because it was a chance to impact more than just the local congregation, or more than than just the region or the Senate. And so that's that's part of what got me excited, and that's what we did. We got I went out there, and it was part of the E team, as was called in those days, was education and evangelism team. And what we did is we worked on some churchwide initiatives. One was called the Call to Discipleship, which was really a faith-based, faith formation-based program for a whole congregation, and the idea was that the whole church, the whole ELCA, would get involved with its call to discipleship, and it focused on faith practices and how to see yourself as a as a disciple as opposed to just a member, and and to see yourself as remembering your baptism and clothing on your baptism, and what does it mean to be a Christian in the world? And so that was very exciting. I wrote a Bible study for that on study, which was one of the faith formation practices, and got to travel while I was there too. I in some in some places I called it my five-year continuing education, because I I learned a lot and I got

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to see parts of the church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America that I had never seen before, and got to represent our church in various places at various times as well, and that was kind of exciting. So that's yeah, that was part of it. I don't know if there's anything in particular about that that you'd like to follow up on.

Nelson S. 11:45

Well, you said that you learned a lot during that those those years. Could you expand on that? What you learned from that experience from those from that travel experience?

Paul L. 11:58

There's I what I first learned was that there's more variety to the LCA than I oh okay or that I experienced beforehand. Also, that there's the variety comes with different cultures and and different kind of community communities, and so there's not one approach to religious education that fits all places and all times, and that some congregations are more have more practice with and are more familiar with gathering and talking about the faith.

Nelson S. 12:31

Ah,

Paul L. 12:31

and so I, you know, there was some things about that that I had known because of my sheltered or my own experience as a as a white male, and so I was appreciative of having my perspective challenged and changed during all that time.

Nelson S. 12:50

Oh, okay. You you said that you worked at the headquarters for about five years. Yeah, After making the decision to return to the parish, how do you think your work in religious education at the parish level changed after having that broad experience in the churchwide office,

Paul L. 13:21

well, I guess to begin with, I knew of more resources and possibilities for lifting up faith formation in the in the congregation beyond the Sunday school model. So I I knew there there was support for congregations to do that. In fact, that's one of the things that I found frustrating was that there were some congregations that didn't participate in the call to discipleship. The other church-wide initiative that I really really like is the Book of Faith, which talks about different ways of approaching the Bible.

Nelson S. 13:57

Oh, that's right.

Paul L. 13:58

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And again, the many, many congregations, much to my dismay, hadn't been aware of that, and even the ones that had sort of went through the process, whatever the resource offered in terms of study and time, and then just quit. And so what I what I learned was that there was a need again for pastoral leadership and for other people to think of this as a ongoing kind of conversation, I didn't get to it. But there were there's two particular resources or shows that I would like to see us adults participate and talk about at some point. One was I threatened didn't happen to write a study guide to the show. What's it called? Okay, this is us. This is us. That's right. Oh, okay. Which which was a real popular show in when it first came out and. I I watched it and I thought you know this would be great to have people talk about this. It's about forgiveness and things that things that happen in people's life. But because it was so popular, it would I thought it would be easy then to get people together to talk about it. The other one now is the Chosen, which is still going strong, and to to get a study that would help people to focus on how does this support our approach to scripture? How how is it different? What what are they making up in terms of dialog and situation because those aren't in the Bible. Is that is that okay to do that? What does the Bible teach? What are the limits? You know, it would just be a whole wonderful conversation for people to have. I don't think we'd be in the political situation that we are now if we spent a little bit more time talking about the Bible and and what it means and how it really ought to be interpreted.

Nelson S. 16:03

Right. Oh, indeed, very much so. I agree with that. And with that, it follows, at least for me, is that religious education, the profession, has changed. There seems to be less faculty, full-time faculty in our seminaries and colleges. Less less departments of religious or Christian education in denominational offices across churches. And am I off base in at least seeing that as my perspective in the field now.

Paul L. 16:46

I think that's a right-on perspective. I think that's the reality. I don't know of any Lutheran seminary that has a dedicated department or professor that's involved solely with Christian education, and so that's that's a big loss. I'm not I'm not sure trying to regain that would be the way to go, though. I'm I'm thinking more of what can we do with people people and and and resources and groups and churchwide emphasis that exist now to to benefit from what we know about how people learn about about the faith, and so because I think the the day of having a soul division for congregational ministry, for example, with an education team. I don't know that those are going to come back, but the resources and the time to look at faith practices and do a study, those those resources and those conversations can still happen. So we have to look for them differently, and we have to think about ways of integrating that those resources and those perspectives into all that we do.

Nelson S. 18:11

Okay. With this, as you talk and we talk about the decline in the field, what do you think contributed to this decline?

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Paul L. 18:22

Yeah, that's the obvious thing that contributed to it was lack of resources. You know, as the funds to the church wide, the funds to congregations, most regions have disappeared headquarters at this point. As the funds lessened, people made decisions about what they thought was essential to the church, which which had been a focus on you know theology and sacraments and evangelism, and not Christian education, or and or they thought that everybody knew what Christian education was to teach things to your children, and so some of the gains that we had in terms of broadening the perspective of what faith formation across the the lifespan would look like and how we can be supportive of that, many of those things are just lost because they just they weren't they weren't maintained. They weren't encouraged as time went on, and so there isn't the same kind of interest now that that there had been. Now, why why that happened? You know, other than lack of funds, I don't I don't know. I'm not really sure.

Nelson S. 19:36

Something to to continue to think about and reflect on for sure, definitely, definitely. There, there are people. I'm sure there are young people out there, or not even young people, but older adults, adults who are thinking about the field and going into it. What recommendation? Would you suggest for young people who might be considering the call to this specialized ministry?

Paul L. 20:07

I would right where your vocation is. I would suggest people insert themselves into any disciple-making leadership activity, any way that you can experience how leaders, how Christians are disciples, are being made, encouraged, and fostered today in your setting to to do that, to get there, to be involved that way, and to find out what kind of academic resources are available too to do that to have your your own faith challenged and critiqued and expanded to help you grow as a Christian as well. That's kind of a brief response to that.

Nelson S. 20:55

I think that's that's helpful. I I like the your use of the word vocation, and and to and to see how that you know that call to do this work can enhance their their preparation and and their and their life Life story, indeed,

Paul L. 21:23

indeed, indeed. Yeah, I thought about it as a call. You know, it's not, it's not, but for me, it's always been part of what it meant to be a pastor in the church. It's not a separate call, as it were. And so, the sense of how to help educate in faith is what it means for pastors to be a pastor in the local congregation.

Nelson S. 21:46

Indeed, indeed. So I can't believe how our time has has run out, and I really appreciate appreciate your assessment of the field and and sharing your own story In the field,

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Paul L. 22:02

well, certainly it's been a pleasure to talk with you too. I hope this is helpful for others who might be listening to it. It's a it's an exciting time. It's a new time, and I don't think we can go back to old times. And so I'm looking forward to what God's calling us to, and what the future will look like in this area.

Nelson S. 22:20

Indeed, my conversation today has been with Pastor Paul Lutz, retired parish pastor and religious educator for the Seminary Explorers. This is Nelson Strobert. Goodbye.

22:37

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