One Job—Eight Careers

As my 30-year tenure at Bethel College comes to a close, it’s been one retirement party after another. And apparently the next issue of Bethel’s alumni magazine, Context, will have an article devoted to my Bethel sojourn, because Melanie Zuercher, Context co-editor, interviewed me in preparation for writing same. She provided me with a list of questions beforehand, one of which was the following: “How would you tell an 18-year-old why s/he should choose a liberal arts college education? And/or a liberal arts Mennonite college education (even if, maybe especially if, s/he is not Mennonite)?”

In answering the first part of that question, I found myself thinking again about Richard Valeriani. I don’t suppose many—if any—of you remember Richard Valeriani. He was a national correspondent for NBC Nightly News in the 1960s and ’70s. He was invited to be the banquet speaker at the Kansas Library Association annual meeting at the Broadview Hotel in Wichita back in the late ’70s or early ’80s, and I happened to be the emcee on that occasion.

During dinner, I asked him what advice he would give a 17–or 18–year–old who wanted his job. “Would you,” I inquired, “tell him or her to enroll in the best journalism school he or she could find?”

“Absolutely not,” Valeriani exclaimed. And then he added something like the following by way of clarification: “That would be a terrible career move. Graduates from specialized journalism programs—especially those that focus on non-print media—know all about camera angles, but they know almost nothing about anything else.

“You can’t send them out to report on a story, because they don’t understand the context. They don’t see the bigger picture. They can learn camera angles on the job—what they can’t learn on the job is that broad educational background that one gets in a liberal arts education.

“I’d tell the person to find a good liberal arts college and major in history or political science or literary studies. That’s the educational background you need to be a successful NBC Nightly News correspondent.”

If you assume that the average person changes careers (not jobs, careers) anywhere from three to seven times (I’ve seen both statistics) in their professional life, a liberal arts undergraduate education seems pretty much like a slam dunk to me. In fact, as I think about my 30 years working at Bethel College, I think I’ve flirted with about eight careers.

I started as a librarian, serving as director of libraries from 1984–92. During that time, I was granted a sabbatical to do research at the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel, Germany. So I was a researcher for six months. In 1992, President John Zehr moved me out of the library, creating a new position called “director of marketing and church relations.” Two more careers presented themselves. In 1996, I was appointed 1/3-time secretary of the Higher Education Council (HEC) of the General Conference Mennonite Church (GCMC), so “denominational officer” was part of my portfolio. And along the way as director of church relations, I embraced the career of choir tour planner. When the HEC position ended with the integration of the GCMC and the Mennonite Church in 2002, I became Bethel convocation coordinator and a Basic Issues of Faith and Life instructor in addition to my church relations role. And behold, “professor” became part of my list of careers. Finally, in 2008, I added “campus pastor” to the list.

I will not pretend that I performed well in each and every one of these (mini) careers. I can say with certainty, however, that my broad liberal arts education, while not specifically tailored for any one of these careers, was an invaluable asset in every one. Richard Valeriani knoweth whereof he speaketh.

But how about the second part of Melanie’s question, the “Mennonite” part? I’d begin that response by talking more generally about religious faith and spirituality. It seems to me that any “liberal arts” education that ignores religion and spiritual issues is embarrassingly incomplete. This is so much a part of the human experience that to omit it in the educational process is to provide a partial education at best. But how about the “Mennonite” thing—especially for potential students who are not Mennonite?

There is no such thing as generic Christianity. Christianity is an embodied, incarnated religious expression. Mennonite Christianity admittedly has some distinctive emphases and elements. These come through unmistakably in the four “ethics” in Bethel’s mission statement (e.g., Jesus as model as well as Messiah; an emphasis on free conviction; scholarship as intellectual stewardship; concern for the powerless as intrinsic to the Christian gospel; an emphasis on peacemaking...
and social justice; an insistence an integrated and holistic lifestyle), but those emphases are by no means exclusively Mennonite. They can be found in virtually all Christian denominations. They may be more or less prominent in a given denomination, but they are not exclusively Mennonite. So the Methodist or the Catholic or even the Muslim student’s education can be significantly enriched by exposure to those ideas and emphases.

I recently spoke with a staff member who is Methodist, and who has been at Bethel less than two years. Most of her previous higher education experience has been in state universities. She said, “Simply working at Bethel has had a profound impact on my Christian faith. That faith is a much more vital part of my identity than it has ever been before.”

Where your children or grandchildren choose to attend college can make a difference—a huge difference—in the kind of persons they become.

Well, that’s enough sermonizing. It’s been a wonderful 30 years. I am deeply grateful for all the words of encouragement, the prayers, the friendships formed along the way. Thanks, and please show the same kindness and support for my successor, Peter Goerzen, who will be fabulous!

New campus pastor brings both Bethel and wider church experience
by Melanie Zuercher

NORTH NEWTON, KAN.—One of the new faces in Bethel College’s Office of Student Life next year will be that of campus pastor Peter Goerzen, though he’s not new to Bethel.

Goerzen assumes the role, along with that of director of church relations, in July. He replaces Dale Schrag, who is retiring after 30 years at Bethel.

Goerzen will end his current position, as a pastor at Grace Hill Mennonite Church in rural Newton, where he has been since 2009.

Goerzen graduated from Bethel in 2007 with a degree in computer science. He worked as a software developer and system administrator at Excel Industries in Hesston from 2007-09.

When Goerzen’s wife, Katherine, started at Grace Hill as youth pastor in 2007, Goerzen “tagged along as a youth sponsor,” he said. In 2009, he became a co-pastor with Katherine. He was ordained in 2011.

As a Bethel student, Goerzen helped pioneer what was then a new ministry for Bethel, that of student chaplain, serving for two years. Part of his role as campus pastor will be to work with the student chaplains.

Goerzen has also studied at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, and the North Newton-based Great Plains Extension of AMBS. He has completed nearly all required hours for a Master of Divinity degree and plans to graduate in 2015.

Goerzen has been active in the wider Western District Conference of Mennonite Church USA (to which Bethel College relates closely) and in the local community.

He currently chairs WDC’s Task Force to End the Death Penalty and served on the Year of the Bible planning committee. Along with others at Grace Hill, he is a regular volunteer at the Harvey County Homeless Shelter where he has appreciated learning to know “people of many different life stories.”

Katherine and Peter Goerzen have also jointly led Bible study groups for Bethel students at various times over the past several years.

“As a table [discussion] leader for the annual WDC Assembly, I have delighted in hosting a sacred space that welcomes the sharing of diverse viewpoints,” Goerzen said. “As a delegate to Mennonite Church USA [biennial conventions], I have enjoyed both nurturing existing relationships across the country [and making] new connections.”

The Bethel church relations position presents a great opportunity to continue building these relationships and connections, he said.

He also noted that he has found “much joy in learning in college and seminary” and has appreciated his chances to teach “a range of classes and ages in the congregation. I would welcome the opportunity for both formal and informal teaching in the college setting.”

As campus pastor, Goerzen said he anticipates the “special joy of joining students at Bethel and walking with such inspiring people as they grow in the Spirit.

“It’s a true privilege to fill Dale Schrag’s position,” Goerzen added. “Dale has been a tremendous blessing to countless students and is a treasured gift to the church.

“When I was a student at Bethel, Dale encouraged me in discerning and following God’s calling my life. I am excited to encourage students in seeking and following God’s calling as well.”

Peter and Katherine Goerzen live in North Newton and are the parents of Sophia, 2, and Nathan, born May 1.