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Wilhelm Loehe's Legacy in Undergraduate Education in the United States:  
Wartburg College as Exemplum

Many members of the International Loehe Society are more familiar with Wartburg Theological Seminary (located in Dubuque, Iowa) than with Wartburg College (located in Waverly, Iowa). Wartburg College is a four-year liberal arts college granting the Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Music, and Bachelor of Music Education degrees. Total enrollment is approximately 1700 students. The academic programs with the largest student enrollment are biology, business administration, journalism, elementary education, and psychology.

In the case of many Lutheran colleges and seminaries in the United States, the seminary was founded first and then a college was founded to prepare students for the seminary. In the case of the two Wartburgs, the situation is the reverse. In 1852, Wilhelm Loehe sent Georg Grossmann to Saginaw, Michigan, to establish a school for the preparation of teachers. Only when Grossmann and others broke with the Missouri Synod and moved to Iowa was it necessary to establish a new seminary for the preparation of pastors. The name "Wartburg" was first applied to this educational enterprise in 1857. While Wartburg Seminary dates its founding to the establishment of the Iowa Synod and its *Predigerseminar* in 1854, Wartburg College dates its founding to Grossmann's arrival in Michigan in 1852.

In this brief presentation I will identify several ways in which Wartburg College continues to demonstrate the influence of Wilhelm Loehe.

**1. The importance of context: Education must serve the needs of the community.**

Loehe's decision to train *Nothelfer* was a response to the needs of German Lutheran immigrants in North America. His establishment of the *Lutherischer Verein für weibliche Diakonie* was a response to the social needs of his time as well as the need to provide education and meaningful work for women. The establishment of hospitals, schools for children, and places to care for the mentally disabled were further responses to community needs. Christian Weber describes Loehe as "an alert contemporary."<sup>1</sup> Loehe was eager to learn and to understand what was going on in the world around him in order to shape a ministry that addressed the needs of his time.

The history of Wartburg College also demonstrates this careful attention – and response – to context. As the needs of the community changed, Wartburg College expanded its educational offerings to meet those needs. In 1854, Grossmann's school for preparing teachers expanded its

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Weber, "The Future of Loehe's Legacy," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 31, no. 2 (April 1, 2004): 101.

scope to include theological studies and also added a *Lateinschule* to provide preseminary education. Eventually, the preparatory program (called *das Collegium*) was separated from the theological seminary. In 1894, the college itself separated into two locations, with the preseminary program located in Clinton, Iowa, and a teacher training program located in Waverly. Wartburg in Waverly began accepting female students in 1896. New courses in business, music, and home economics were added, and some instruction was offered in English. By the 1920s, both Wartburg in Waverly and Wartburg in Clinton were moving in the direction of becoming comprehensive liberal arts colleges. The leadership of the Iowa Synod and of the newly formed (1930) American Lutheran Church decided it was not practical to support two similar institutions in Iowa, and the decision was made to merge the two schools. Wartburg College has been located permanently in Waverly since 1935.

While the location of Wartburg College has remained the same for over 75 years, the scope of its educational programs has continued to evolve in response to identified needs. The college still educates men (and now women) who will attend seminary to become pastors and church leaders. The college still educates future teachers. The college established one of the first Social Work programs in the state of Iowa. Wartburg is the only private college in Iowa to offer a Music Therapy program. Two recently added majors also demonstrate a commitment to educate for the needs of society: a major in Peace and Justice Studies and a major in Environmental Science.

## **2. Inner and Outer Mission: “The community” we are called to serve is not a single homogenous community, but an intersection of communities.**

Loeche believed that inner mission among the baptized and outer mission among the unbaptized belong together. Christian love expresses itself in love for the whole human family.<sup>2</sup> In North America, Loeche’s concern to provide pastoral leadership for German immigrants (inner mission) was accompanied by a concern for outreach to Native Americans (outer mission). His vision was that the life of the existing Christian community would be a witness to those outside it.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, in Michigan, colonies were founded in close proximity to tribal settlements.

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<sup>2</sup> See Erika Geiger, *The Life, Work, and Influence of Wilhelm Loeche, 1808-1872*, translated by Wolf Knappe (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010) 147, quoting GW 4:663, for Loeche’s image of concentric circles with Jesus at the center, then the churchly community, then the Christian community, then the whole human community. See also David Ratke, “The Church in Motion: Wilhelm Loeche, Mission, and the Church Today.” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 33, no. 2 (April 1, 2006):149: “The community that is the church is not limited to those who live in the same neighborhood and belong to the same congregation. Community does not refer to people of the same nation or the same ethnic or cultural background. Community, for Loeche, extends to all of humanity.”

<sup>3</sup> See John H. Tietjen, *The Ecclesiology of Wilhelm Loeche*, unpublished Master of Sacred Theology thesis (Union Theological Seminary, 1954): “Instead of sending out evangelists to convert the Indians, he followed the procedure of establishing a congregation in the neighborhood of an Indian tribe. The congregation itself would do the mission work among the Indians; and Loeche hoped that the witness of its faith and worship would be the prime means of mission appeal” (69-70). See also Frieder Ludwig, “Mission and Migration: Reflections on the Missionary Concept of Wilhelm Löhe,” *Word & World* 24, no. 2 (March 1, 2004): 157-164, especially page 163.

In Iowa, mission among indigenous peoples was conducted at more of a distance but still followed a model of community engagement. In 1858, Iowa Synod missionaries John Jakob Schmidt and Moritz Braeuninger asked a Crow chief “if they could travel along with the tribe and live as they lived. The next six weeks were spent traveling among the Crow in the Powder River valley, learning the language, becoming familiar with Crow culture, and engaging in theological conversation with Indian leaders.”<sup>4</sup> While this mission venture ended in tragedy a year and a half later, Nesson deems this period of journeying with the Crow “the most promising moment in th[e] entire enterprise” of mission to Native Americans.<sup>5</sup>

As an educational institution, Wartburg was founded to meet the needs of the German Lutheran immigrant community. Until the mid-twentieth century, German Lutheran pastors sent their German Lutheran youth to the German Lutheran college in Waverly for their education. Early attempts to attract students from the wider population were slow to bear fruit. Today, however, the student demographics of Wartburg College provide a context suitable for both inner and outer mission, serving Lutherans (not all German anymore!), other Christians, and students of other faiths or no faith at all.<sup>6</sup> Wartburg’s openness to those who do not share the faith of our founders is not a compromise of our Lutheran identity but a result of it.<sup>7</sup> As the college website states, “While we are unapologetic about our identity as a college of the church, we are equally vigorous in our efforts to welcome and include others. We recognize God’s image within every person.”<sup>8</sup>

All Wartburg College students, no matter their academic discipline, are required to take two “Faith and Reflection” courses. The first course is a required course in Bible, and the second course may be chosen from among other religion and philosophy courses. The purpose of this requirement is not to indoctrinate but to equip students with biblical, theological, and/or philosophical knowledge, as well as with the ability to think critically about the role of faith in their own lives, in the lives of others, and in the world today.

Chapel services are held five times a week. Attendance is not required, but no classes are scheduled during chapel time, so that anyone who wants to worship is able to do so. Bible studies and other activities provide opportunities for engaging the Christian message and

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<sup>4</sup>Craig L. Nesson, “Missionary Theology and Wartburg Theological Seminary.” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 31, no. 2 (April 1, 2004):89.; also Nesson, “Wilhelm Loehe’s Iowa Missionary Correspondence 1852-1872,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (June 1, 2010):146.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> The vast majority of Wartburg’s students self-identify as Christian. The following statistics are drawn from enrollment data in Fall semester 2013. 31.4% of students reporting a religious affiliation are Lutheran; 22% are Catholic; and 8% are Methodist. 1.5% of students identify themselves with a major world religion other than Christianity, and 5% report having no religious affiliation at all. Another 11% choose not answer the question about religious affiliation.

<sup>7</sup> As Weber says, “a church with a clear confession ... does not exclude tolerance. The opposite is true. It makes tolerance possible.” Weber, “The Future of Loehe’s Legacy,” 102.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.wartburg.edu/lutheran/>

thinking about its meaning for one's own life. As a residential college, part of our understanding of mission is to be faithfully present in community with others. The role of the Office of Spiritual Life and Campus Ministry is not to convert but to witness, through its words and actions. Just as missionaries Schmidt and Braeuninger journeyed together with the Crow, sharing their life for a time, Wartburg College campus pastors, faculty, and staff accompany young adults during a formative period of their lives, learning their language and culture, building relationships, and talking together about deep questions.

### **3. Open Questions: Education must remain open to new knowledge.**

As a college of the church, Wartburg continues Loehe's commitment to "open questions." In the controversy with the Missouri Synod, Loehe maintained that not all questions are settled by the Scriptures and the Confessions. In these areas, legitimate differences need not be church-dividing. One must remain open to the possibility of new insight and further development. A similar attitude necessarily characterizes an academic community. Human knowledge, even at its best, is provisional. New evidence and new insights require us to rethink what and how we teach. A Lutheran college, particularly one in the Loehe tradition, is ideally situated to embrace this openness without sacrificing its core commitments.

Loehe understood Lutheranism as occupying a mediating position between the extremes of the Roman Catholic tradition, on the one hand, and the Reformed tradition, on the other. Wartburg College and other schools committed to their Lutheran identity occupy a similar middle place in the landscape of American higher education. Of the approximately 900 religiously-affiliated colleges and universities in the United States, over 200 are members of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. Since *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, Pope John Paul II's 1990 Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities, U.S. Catholic institutions have been increasingly concerned about how the renewed requirement of fidelity to the magisterium may limit academic freedom on their campuses. Another 120 religiously-affiliated colleges belong to the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities, an "intentionally Christ-centered" organization whose member institutions agree to hire only Christians for all full-time faculty and administrative positions. For example, only Christians can be hired to teach mathematics or to direct the financial aid program at schools in the CCCU.

Wartburg College, however, maintains an openness – both to knowledge and to persons – that is free from externally-imposed control or internally-imposed conformity. According to the Faculty Handbook,

As a college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), Wartburg seeks candidates who have an appreciation and understanding for working within a church-related college. The College reserves the right to identify specific positions in the Religion Department or as Administrative Faculty for which religious preference is a consideration in appointment. All applicants for faculty positions shall demonstrate willingness to accept and support the mission and goals of the College.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Wartburg College Faculty Handbook, June 2013, Section 2.3, page 60.  
<http://www.wartburg.edu/facstaff/fachandbook.pdf>

What is this mission? “Wartburg College is dedicated to challenging and nurturing students for lives of leadership and service as a spirited expression of their faith and learning.”<sup>10</sup> For such a mission, confessional identity is appropriate in some positions but by no means all. There is no specifically Lutheran mathematics or Lutheran financial aid. Indeed, hiring “fellow travelers” who are not themselves Lutheran (or in some cases even Christian) but are willing to join in Wartburg’s mission as a college of the church seems faithful to Loehe’s hope for the impact that the Michigan colonies would have on their non-Christian neighbors.

Other points could also be developed in a longer paper. Both Loehe in his time and Wartburg College throughout its history have embraced the importance of an educational approach that provides both academic instruction and practical training. Both Loehe in his time and Wartburg College throughout its history have expressed the conviction that education must engage the whole person, in his or her physical, spiritual, and social circumstances. But I must conclude.

### **Conclusion: Education as diaconal ministry.**

Historically, Wartburg College is heir to the teachers seminary founded by Georg Grossmann in Saginaw in 1852. Spiritually, it is perhaps also appropriate to say that Wartburg College is heir to the Deaconess Institute established by Wilhelm Loehe in 1854. The common thread is education, and most specifically, education to be of service.

Loehe’s original vision for deaconess education was to educate young women who would then return to their home communities to serve. The formation of a set-apart community living together in Neuendettelsau was a later and somewhat reluctant development. Wartburg College functions more as Loehe had first envisioned. Young people come together for a time for education and formation and then are dispersed into the world – some back to their own home communities, others on to new communities. It is in that wide world – God’s wide world – that that these young people will live out their education in their vocations in the family, in the workplace, and in society.

For Loehe, “Mission is the church of God in motion.” Education is how a college of the church equips the people of God for motion.

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<sup>10</sup> Wartburg College Mission Statement.