

LCC – A CONTINUING MIRACLE

A presentation to ICOMB, the Association of Mennonite Brethren Institutions of Higher Education globally. The purpose was to present and explain the creation and continuing role of LCCIU.

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Canadian Mennonite University

Presentation to ICOMB (International Committee of Mennonite Brethren)

LCC should not really exist.

There is no founding or sponsoring constituency, no official relationship with any church or agency, it is profoundly Christian but carries no label.

LCC has survived 20 years where most educational institutions founded after the end of Communism in the former Soviet Union have failed or had serious difficulty.

LCC is accredited inside Lithuania and the EU – yet today it would be impossible to achieve that accreditation.

More than 1000 volunteers from the West have come without expense to the University to offer their teaching talents – and hundreds more to build and serve in other ways.

The University has students from over 20 countries – countries which are under extreme political and economic stress.

LCC has a modern campus with all new buildings and has always operated in the black.

LCC was founded without a survey, study, Commission or even a planning document. We believe it was genuinely the product of many different people being open to the opportunities that God provided and acting without asking too many questions.

Even our location in Lithuania is a historical accident – Lithuania did not exist as a country when LCC started – the border surrounded and defined us later.

LCC is the product of an entrepreneurial moment – but do not for a moment believe that there is an absence of astute, committed and talented people who have taken this moment of opportunity and shaped something beautiful and effective.

Anecdotes sometimes define the larger reality...

- We were challenged on arrival in Lithuania by senior Catholic officials and accused of being a sect, specifically Mennonite. I asked the Bishop that even if we came as Mennonites – why would that be a problem? His colleague responded in perfect English - “If there were too many Anabaptists (not Mennonite but the Reformation terminology and implying pacifism) then who would fight the Russians?”

- We were invited to the Lithuanian Parliament when it was still in rebellion and surrounded by sandbags. A group of Lithuanian scholars stated that they expected to become independent and become a democracy – their question was – “Is Religious Freedom essential in a Democracy?” We debated the question and they ended with a welcome. We have essentially re-lived the Reformation.
- President Landsbergis of Lithuania met me in Davos, Switzerland to ask about the College and its initial controversy. He asked – “Is LCC a College or a Mission”? We had both just heard the Bishop of Milan speak on the subject – “Your Vocation is your Mission” and I was able to use that to inform my answer.
- Landsbergis suggested we relocate to the Port City of Klaipeda with its Protestant heritage to reduce the controversy. On arrival the Chairman of the City Council began the meeting with a story. “In the 1540’s two Protestant scholars came to the old City of Memel to start a University and were turned away by the authorities. They walked a hundred km down the coast and founded the famous University of Koenigsberg – we will not miss our second chance to have a University – you are welcome.”

These stories are important because they give LCC a unique history and purpose. LCC is a political statement shaped like a University – specifically a Christian University in the rich liberal arts tradition.

Marlene Wall and many others spend their days and nights dreaming, thinking and working to meet the many academic and other requirements of students and authorities. I spend more time thinking about how LCC can live up to its revolutionary beginnings and make an impact on people, on society and on the church. Together we build the Kingdom of God.

Why has LCC succeeded? In the first year a senior Mennonite administrator wrote to me and stated: “Art, you do not just run around the world and start Universities. Who will provide support for the school in 20 years?” I wrote back: “If you can assure me that the founders of Mennonite or other institutions could answer that question the day they started I will also answer the question.” I have yet to receive a reply. LCC must remain flexible, creative and always adjust to the rapidly changing nature of its political, economic, social and religious environment.

LCC is unique in many ways – also unique in the possibilities it offers to our religious and social institutions. We frequently take people out of a safe social experience and send them to a totally different and challenging environment and hope they make the transition. Allow me to make a suggestion and challenge to Mission Boards and agencies.

Each year LCC receives 200 new students, most of whom will graduate in 4 years with a Business major flavored with curriculum and social experience based on Christian and related values. Some will graduate in English or Psychology or Theology. Many arrive and hopefully more depart with a strong Christian commitment. They come from places like Belarus, Kazakhstan, Albania and more. Imagine if an agency would come to LCC early in the first year and interview and select a few students that it would commit to work with, support and mentor during their years of College with the expectation that

they would work with the agency on graduation. The agency could provide a partial scholarship, summer internships and other supplemental training and experience.

Consider the profile of a recent grad of LCC. She was born Muslim in Uzbekistan, studied and graduated in a Soviet University and during that period became a Christian. In her late twenties she came to LCC and graduated with a degree in Theology. She then received a scholarship to Brandeis University in Boston – a Jewish institution and graduated last spring with a Masters in Conflict Resolution and will achieve a Ph.D. She speaks flawless Uzbek, Russian and English. The possibilities of such a person are radically different from your standard applicant and can literally change the face of an agency.

LCC grads are known for the values they have absorbed while at LCC. We are known as “the ethical school” among Western European Universities. They bring their own tradition and language – but after years in this unique environment they have developed a capacity to deal with confidence across cultural lines – specifically Western culture and become very attractive to employers. If these graduates also carry values and ethics shaped by their experience in a Christian environment they become the yeast to shape the broken societies from where they come.

Not all grads of LCC will return directly to their home countries – but if you graduate from Lithuania you are much more likely to remain in that part of the world than if they would graduate from a College in North America. We are all about shaping and changing societies through the changed lives of our graduates.

LCC is not a mission in the traditional sense but a Mission in the sense implied by the question of President Lansbergis. Nevertheless there exist a cluster of churches today in Lithuania that are significantly influenced by LCC. Most of their pastors are grads of LCC and there are many linkages. LCC also plays an important role in linking and supporting all of the religious traditions in Lithuania and we hope increasingly in the region. LCC is not your traditional mission agency but it can play an important role in building the church and the Kingdom of God.

LCC is a political idea shaped like a University and the output of LCC is hopefully ambassadors of Christ and change agents in society in the shape of wonderful young people known as our graduates.