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Encomium for Dr. Bruce Hartung

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Encomium for Rev. Dr. Bruce Hartung

Over the last nine years, Dr. Bruce Hartung has been a gift of our heavenly Father for me personally, my immediate family, and my church family. At various times, he has been for me a teacher, counselor, pastor, father figure, colleague, and friend.

I've got to tell you, especially because I'm writing a tribute to a man that values "communities of authentic encounter," that I hold paradoxical emotions in tension at Bruce's retirement from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. On one side rests sadness and a bit of fear (or in Bruce's language, anxiety) because I don't know how his retirement will affect our "walking together" in an immediate sense. Nonetheless, the other side bubbles over with joy and appreciation for my beloved brother in the Lord as we celebrate his service at Concordia Seminary and beyond. It is my joy and honor to reflect on how Bruce has challenged me, walked alongside me, and loved me.

Bruce has challenged me, and all of his students at Concordia Seminary, and I will use his own words to describe what I believe to be the impetus for this challenge: "Don't keep everything inside. Get your emotional reactions from the inside to the outside. In baptism, we are brought into a new relationship with God and into new relationships with each other. God has put us together for mutual support. Use it!"¹

My first extended encounter with Bruce occurred while a second-year student here in the Concordia Seminary community. Our initial conversation was required as part of the coursework for one of Bruce's elective classes, Pastoral Care and the Human Experience. Bruce challenged any overly idealized notions of pastoral ministry when he assigned books like *Trauma and Evil*, *Healers—Harmed and Harmful*, and *Clergy Killers*. Uniquely, Bruce also asked students to meet with him for an extended conversation as requirement for the course. Bruce oozed authenticity as we sat across from one another at the now familiar round table in his office. He challenged me even in that first meeting. As I remember it, toward the end of our sixty-minute conversation he confessed that he was surprised that I was not as aloof and disinterested a student as his initial impression of me. *Thank you, Bruce, for your authenticity!*

My ensuing journey with Bruce has not only been filled with utility, but also surprising beauty. Bruce encouraged and maybe to some extent, pushed me, a left-brained, analytical type, to begin to peer into the aspects of my life that would have otherwise gone unnoticed or uninspected. While formerly I may have predominantly rationalized the bulk of situations and emotions in my life, Bruce encouraged and equipped me to wrestle, to consider, and to process. I'm not certain how to say it more eloquently, but he has ministered to me and affirmed me as a whole human being—head and heart, body and soul.

In this spirit, Bruce has embodied and personified incarnational ministry as he has walked alongside me and other professional church workers in the body of Christ. Again, I'm going to use Bruce's own words here:

It has taken a lot of work to identify what I feel and actually think. It has taken even more work to share with others some of my experiences. In the process, I have begun to understand that all human beings have a deep need for authentic connection. Isn't this authentic connection the very nature of the Christian community? We grow as people in the context of relationship with others. As others engage with me at the deeper levels of my being, I am touched, moved, and, by God's grace, grow.²

If Bruce had only walked alongside me during my formative time as a student at Concordia Seminary I would still hold a debt of gratitude; however, what is more wonderful, remarkable, and valuable for me is that Bruce has continued to walk alongside me during my first six years as a parish pastor. He has ministered to me during what feels like waves of personal and professional trial and struggle.

In the reality of journeying together as the church, St. Paul exhorts Christians in Ephesians 5, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 5:1–2 ESV). Interwoven in the resulting intimacy of consecrated challenge and walking alongside me is Bruce's love for me, for the church, and for Christ Jesus.

I am a living testimony to how Bruce has not only educated, or shaped, but also supported and loved a church worker in both word and deed. In short, I would not be the parish pastor that I am today without Bruce Hartung. Equally important, no, more important, I would not be the husband, father, son, and child of God that I am today without Bruce's influence on my life.

Although I've been asked to share this essay, I know that I am not alone in sharing this sentiment regarding Bruce: Thank you dear brother in Christ for challenging me, walking alongside me, and loving me!

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Endnotes

¹ Bruce Hartung, *Holding Up the Prophet's Hand: Supporting Church Workers* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 50.

² *Ibid.*, 80.