



Oak Leaves

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U.V. Koren, the Citizen: Lincoln, Liberty, and the Lutheran Ethos

By Ryan C. MacPherson, Ph.D.

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Ryan MacPherson

Introduction

Dr. Ulrik Vilhelm Koren (1826-1910) was the seventh Norwegian Lutheran pastor to immigrate to America. The other six, including four of his former university classmates in Christiania, established the Norwe-

gian Evangelical Lutheran Church of America in 1853. Three weeks later, Pastor Koren and his wife Elsa Elisabeth arrived in Koshkonong, Wisconsin, to join their new synod and receive a call to the New Iowa (now Washington Prairie, Iowa) parish. Koren was to become the first Norwegian Lutheran pastor to serve west of the Mississippi River.

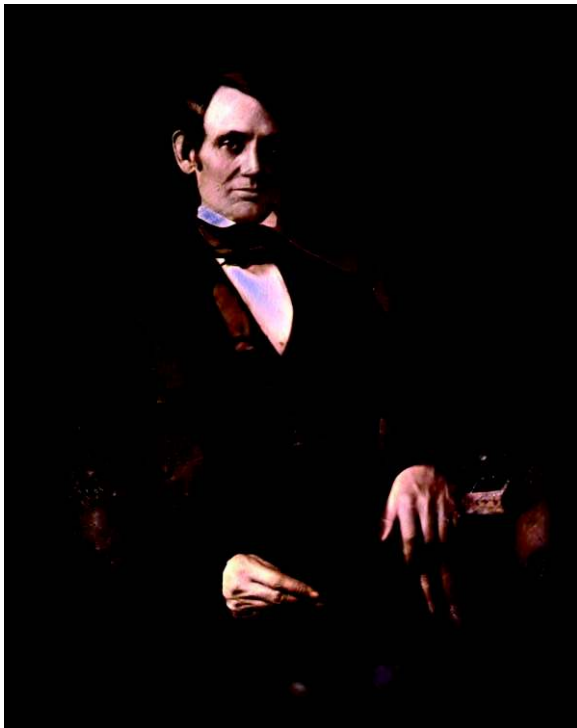
This paper surveys the life of Koren the citizen. First, we examine his reflections concerning Abraham Lincoln. Next, we consider his participation in the slavery debate. Finally, we situate his convictions within the context of his confessional Lutheran theology. Along the way, we will discover that Koren—a theologian known for his unwavering stance against doctrinal compromise—was no extremist; rather, he praised and practiced careful judgment, often leading to moderately expressed, but firmly held, social positions.

Koren's Admiration for Lincoln

On the ninety-second anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth—February 12, 1901—Dr. U. V. Koren delivered a lecture at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. Koren expressed the highest admiration for Lincoln. The traits that he identified in that great American president can of course be found in

the vast biographical literature that historians have amassed concerning Lincoln's life. Our present interest, however, focuses not so much upon Lincoln, but upon Koren's appreciation of Lincoln's character—a subject that reveals just as much about Koren as it does about Lincoln.

Koren began with the story of how he had learned, on Easter Monday, 1865, that Lincoln had been assassinated the preceding Friday—Good Friday. “I was appalled and deeply shaken ... Shall we see anarchy replace the bloody war?” Koren's unsettled disposition that fateful April had something to do with the immediate circumstances—the nation's deadliest war, just recently concluded; the nation's future course, so uncertain—but Koren also trembled to mourn the loss of America's greatest public figure. Lincoln's greatness, Koren maintained, came not from his prestige as president, but rather from the paradox embodied within his exemplary character—“so childlike, so noble, so practical, so unaffected, and unassuming, and yet so powerful in his strength ... [with a] genuineness that cannot be denied under any circumstances.”



It began with Lincoln's frontier childhood in a home that Koren called “utterly humble, so that we ourselves would hardly find a counterpart among our early [Norwegian immigrant] ‘pioneers’ or present newcomers.” That is not to say, however, that Lincoln was born into poverty—at least not as the social reformers of the early twentieth century would scorn poverty. Koren explained:

At the same time as they were poor in all kinds of possessions and had to make do with the simplest clothing (hides or linen-canvas) and forego all kinds of comforts, they were rich in their independence, full of hope in being able to advance themselves to a better position, full of confidence in being able to help themselves, as long as their health held out. If this should fail, then they knew that their neighbors would stand by them with the same ready-and-willing attitude that they themselves would show to them in similar circumstances. So there was no talk here about the kind of poor that wish for and take alms. They were typical western “pioneers.”

Certainly Lincoln's pioneer character showed no sign of moral impoverishment: His family “tolerated neither falseness nor cowardice. They submitted to law and justice.” Being thus raised, Lincoln earned the title “Honest Abe” for his “conscientious” integrity. Whether as a customer or a shopkeeper, he corrected any transaction error dutifully, immediately, and thoroughly—even if that meant “walk[ing] three miles in the evening to be rid of the unrighteous Mammon.” It was this “absolute spontaneous genuineness” that later qualified him to receive the

public's confidence as state and national officeholder.

The perfectionism underwriting his honesty in economic dealings also prompted him to exhibit diligence in intellectual pursuits. Lincoln could never “be satisfied with a superficial knowledge or survey. He did not leave a matter that occupied him until he had mastered it and understood both ‘why’ and ‘how.’ For that reason he was not quick to give his opinion, but when his mind was made up, then he recognized it and its consequences and could clearly present it to others with an amazingly logical strength.” Lincoln had learned primarily at his own initiative. He received only one year’s worth of formal schooling, spread out over nine years. “The teachers in those schools,” reflected Koren, “would hardly have been accepted as teachers at all in our days. The schoolhouses were just as primitive as the teachers: log-houses made of round logs with the bark still on, without floors and with windowpanes of paper smeared with fat.”

The books to which Lincoln privately devoted himself, on the other hand, were anything but primitive. William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* had been the standard reference for America’s founding generation. Lincoln also mastered the *Laws of the State of Indiana*, a volume including the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Northwest Land Ordinance, together with territorial and state laws for Indiana. More than a master of positive law, Lincoln trained himself as a prophet of natural law, committing much of the Bible to memory and quoting from it frequently.

Koren noted that Lincoln held an unwavering faith in God’s providential caretaking of human affairs, both personal and national. Lincoln had knelt in prayer before the Battle of Gettysburg. He famously stated, “The question that occupies me is not so much whether God is on my side as whether I

am on God’s side.” But Pastor Koren, ever the confessional Lutheran theologian, also readily acknowledged that “in all this we still find no definite Christian confession.” Three factors, however, left Koren convinced that Lincoln had genuine faith in God his Savior. First, Lincoln affirmed “the divine authority and inspiration of Scripture.” Second, those who knew Lincoln well attested to his “hope for a blessed eternity through Jesus Christ.” Finally, Koren concluded that no one could “bear the burden that was laid on his shoulders” were it not for faith in God.



Whether animated by a saving faith or not, Lincoln’s character impressed Koren beyond compare. In Lincoln’s life one finds a thorough implementation of the sage advice presented throughout the Book of Proverbs. One cannot help wondering, too, if Koren saw something of Lincoln in himself—or at least in his ideal image of the theologian. Lincoln had demonstrated that to speak and to act with integrity in public office requires self-discipline, patient scholarship, and, upon

thoroughly contemplating a matter, firm conviction. Are not these also the traits of a Godly minister, who humbly studies Scripture, and diligently lives out his divine calling, turning neither to the left nor to the right? Had Lincoln been a Lutheran pastor, rather than an American president, might not his reputation have eclipsed even that of U. V. Koren—indeed, also of C. F. W. Walther?

Koren's Cherishing of Liberty

“I had always admired Lincoln,” said Koren, “for I had always been an enemy of slavery. . . . I was happy about the abolition of slavery and rejoiced at the final victory.” Such a statement so consistently reflects the consensus of our own time that one easily passes by it without much notice. In the midst of the Civil War, however, the issue had not seemed so simple. Indeed, the Norwegian Synod's pastors adopted a resolution in 1861 that expressed a much more nuanced position, stopping short of condemning slavery outright: “Although according to the Word of God it is not in itself sin to have slaves, yet slavery is an evil and a punishment from God, and we condemn all the abuses and sins which are connected with it, just as we, when our call requires it and Christian charity and wisdom demand it, will work for its abolition.” Twenty-nine years later, Koren gave answer to those who would criticize the synod for its stalwart fidelity to the Scriptures in all matters of faith and practice:

As far as I know we were all anti-slavery men, and still they called us friends of slavery, yes, defenders of slavery as it existed here in America. . . . The fact is, as we see from the New Testament, that that there were Christians who had slaves, and that the apostles did not demand that they should be freed, but that they should treat them as brethren. The second

thing was that our opponents wanted to make outward liberty an absolute necessary blessing, thereby debasing that liberty with which Christ has made us free. We thank God because our country is freed from the curse of slavery and from the sins crying to heaven which resulted from it.

This passage requires further scrutiny, and an understanding of the historical situation, in order for us to discern what Koren was and was not claiming about slavery.

First, some remarks about the broad historical context. Abolitionism—the movement calling for an immediate emancipation of all slaves—represented a radical minority in antebellum America. Moderates—like Lincoln, who hoped to end slavery while also preserving the Union—viewed abolitionists with skepticism and even fear. John Brown's insurrection at Harpers Ferry in 1859 substantiated these concerns, as had his bloody attempts to secure vigilante justice in Kansas a few years earlier. For Lincoln, a stable civic order governed by the rule of law would lay the foundation for emancipation, expanding and preserving the liberties of everyone. The abolitionists, by contrast, sought liberty at the expense of order. They were suspicious of any form of hierarchy, regarding it as a threat to their increasingly egalitarian model for liberty. That is, they believed that human freedom required a leveling of not only the master-slave relationship, but also the relationships between bosses and laborers, husbands and wives, parents and children.

C. F. W. Walther's observations in the midst of the Civil War shed some light as to the concerns that moderates had about abolitionism and its philosophical source: radical egalitarianism. In the Missouri Synod's standard bearer, *Lerhe und Wehre* (Doctrine and Defense), Walther branded abolitionism “a *child* of unbelief and its unfolding, rational-

ism, deistic philanthropism, pantheism, materialism, atheism, and a brother of modern socialism, Jacobinism, and communism.” Walther correctly recognized that abolitionists claimed slavery was inherently sinful and that it should be abolished in all forms. He traced their conclusion back to the egalitarian proclivities of various isms that challenged social hierarchy. A German Lutheran, Walther held fast to a heritage of ordered liberty — of social hierarchy as outlined in the Table of Duties appended to Luther’s Small Catechism and expressed in the New Testament epistles. Husbands and wives, parents and children, and yes, even masters and servants, have distinct vocations. Each was to glorify God and serve his neighbor according to his proper station in life.

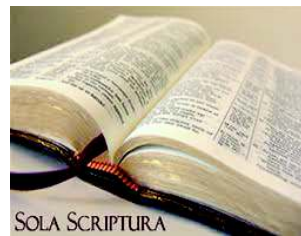
As compared to the Missouri Synod’s German Lutherans, many Norwegian Lutheran immigrants tended toward a pietistic individualism that made them more amenable to American egalitarianism. Pietism fueled several antebellum social reform movements to which Norwegian immigrants lent their support—including abolitionism, temperance, sabbatarianism, and, when coupled with egalitarianism, women’s suffrage. Koren, however, was a different breed of Norwegian. He carefully distinguished sanctification from justification, insisted that Christians are not bound by Sabbath regulations, and championed the doctrine of election as God’s objective grace in Christ, not God’s response to his divine foreknowledge of a person’s subjective faith. Just as Koren distinguished himself from pietism in these ways, so also he held to a more Missourian view of the slavery controversy.

Koren, together with Pastors Herman Aaberg Preus and Laurentius Larson, had articulated a general opposition to slavery while insisting that one cannot identify every particular instance of slaveholding as sinful. They derived both of these views from Holy Scripture, but the lay delegates at the 1861

convention were not persuaded. Led by Claus Lauritz Clausen, a fringe clergyman whose opinions were as strong as they were volatile, the laypeople endorsed a counter resolution. The debate continued on for eight years, with Clausen and several congregations ultimately leaving the synod for their conviction that slavery is always evil and that any participation in it necessarily is sinful.

Koren’s Lutheran Ethos

Koren’s views on the slavery debate reflect his Lutheran ethos. His commitment to the Reformation’s *sola scriptura* principle required that he speak neither more nor less than Scripture.



Since Scripture nowhere forbade slavery, but only regulated it by the law of love, neither could he join with the abolitionists,

who invoked a law of radical egalitarianism in place of genuine Christian charity. Koren championed true liberty, liberty as proclaimed in the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

This liberty manifests itself at several different levels. Most fundamentally, it is the liberty won by Christ that sets the sinner free from Satan’s bondage. Second, Christian liberty also sets people free from ceremonial pretensions to self-righteousness, such as the pietistic Sabbath traditions or temperance reform mentioned earlier. Moreover, the Christian church also has liberty from the state, according to the doctrine of the two kingdoms. This last point sheds further light on why Koren and his fellow clergyman did not enlist the power of the church for the emancipation of slaves.

The church, wrote Koren in 1899, is “a kingdom of grace, and the Christians as such, neither shall nor can be subject to the State.” Although Christians are citizens, and

the state may rightfully regulate congregations that violate civil law, the power of the state goes no further into the realm of the church, nor has Christ established the church to rule over civil affairs. “The Church should require of the State only that it not be hindered in its Christian activities.” If, therefore, the state regulates the Sabbath, the state may properly do so “for civic reasons,” not religious purposes, and Christians, in obeying such a law, do so “not for the sake of the third, but of the fourth commandment.” Here again we find Koren speaking of social policy not in absolute terms—either for or against Sabbath regulations—but rather in a nuanced, moderate fashion.

Conclusion

“Those who loved the truth,” wrote S. C. Ylvisaker at the centennial of the Norwegian Synod, “loved Dr. Koren, who so valiantly defended that truth; but those who loved error feared Dr. Koren, who so fearlessly made war upon that error.” Just as Ylvisaker admired Koren, so also Koren had admired Lincoln. Both Lincoln and Koren stood firm amid the turbulence of their times, one for the good of the state and the other for the good of the church. But standing firm is not in itself a noble task. One could, we must admit, be standing firm for the wrong cause. Sincerity, consistency, and perseverance must, therefore, become servants of truth if they are to deserve to be called virtues.

Koren teaches us that a strong commitment to truth does not always require one to hold an extreme position; indeed, sometimes a more moderate and nuanced view is appropriate—however poorly it may be understood by one’s contemporaries. We find Koren staking out such middle ground in the polarized debate concerning slavery. We find Koren doing so again when defining Christian liberty in contradistinction to the extremes of legalism and libertinism regarding the Sabbath. Koren the citizen, like Koren the theo-

logian, loved liberty, but did not idolize it; he admired Lincoln, but for praiseworthy reasons; he took up residence in America, but brought his Lutheran heritage with him. And his legacy remains ours—so long as we deem it worth preserving.❖



Snacks and conversation after each session at the ELS Historical Society Annual Meeting

ANOTHER SIGNIFICANT ANNIVERSARY

By Rev. Craig A. Ferkenstad



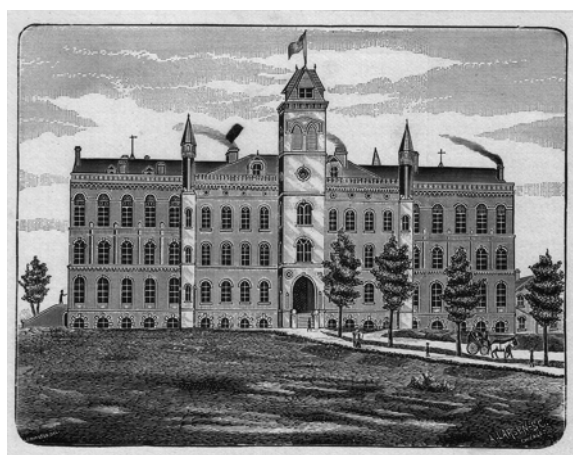
This year is a significant anniversary year because it is the centennial of the death of Pastor

Ulrik Vilhelm Koren. This year also marks another significant event associated with both Pastor Koren and the Norwegian Synod. In October 1860, exactly 150 years ago, Pastor Koren secured an option to purchase land in Decorah, Iowa for the construction of a college for the Norwegian Synod.

At the Synod meeting three years earlier (at Washington Prairie, Iowa where Koren was pastor) the Norwegian Synod voted to establish “its own Norwegian Lutheran institution of learning.” A fund was established with the goal of erecting the school. But in 1860, before any site had formally been selected, Pastor Koren secured thirty-two acres of property, near his home, for the college. The following year, the Synod concurred with his decision. “Supporters of the Decorah location argued that it was situated among flourishing congregations; building materials were readily available there; the city had a pleasant and healthful situation; it was west of the Mississippi and would be almost a central point amidst the growing Norwegian population; lastly, with the coming of the railroad, it would be easily accessible.”¹ Classes began in 1861, at a temporary location in Wisconsin. The Rev. Laurentius Larsen and the Rev. F. A. Schmidt served as the faculty for eleven stu-

dents. The following year, the school relocated to Decorah.

Luther College and Decorah, Iowa were not central geographic locations amidst the Norwegian population, but the action taken by Koren in 1860 did make them the center for the Norwegian Synod. In 1863, construction began on the main building. Koren served as the secretary of the building committee. As a member of the faculty, he also served as a temporary instructor of Norwegian, 1874-76. It was considered a special event when Koren came to the campus.



Luther College 1865

The dedication of the first building took place on October 14, 1865 and, following its destruction by fire, the dedication of the second building occurred on October 14-15, 1890. Those dates became so significant for the members of the Synod that they became known as “Founders’ Day” and, until recent years, many subsequent dedication services throughout the Synod were held near these anniversary dates.

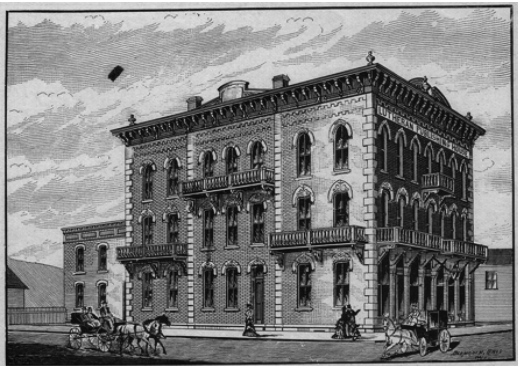
In several ways, Decorah became the center of the Synod. Luther College was the only education institution operated solely by the Synod until the establishment of Luther Seminary in 1876, and a teachers’ college in

Sioux Falls, South Dakota in 1889. The college continued under the direction of the Rev. Laur. Larsen who served as its president for

**Laur. Larsen funeral procession
on the Luther College campus 1915**



forty-one years. Larsen has been referred to as the “fourth father” of the Norwegian Synod along with U. V. Koren, H. A. Preus, and J. A. Ottesen. Pastor Ottesen retired to Decorah. The Norwegian Synod also established the Lutheran Publishing House in Decorah (today, this building houses Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum).



Lutheran Publishing House, Decorah, Iowa

As talk of the 1917 synodical merger began, the center of the minority also was found in Decorah as Prof. C. K. Preus, president of Luther College and the Rev. I. B. Torrison, pastor of First Lutheran Church, Decorah, became the acknowledged leaders of the minority.² The slogan of those who favored the merger was, “Let us break the Decorah ring!”³ C. K. Preus was married to a daughter of the Rev. O. J. Hjort from Paint Creek. I. B. Torrison was married to a daughter of U. V. Koren. One of the earlier faculty members

was the Rev. M. K. Bleken who had accepted a call to Saude, Iowa and in 1917 was elected as the secretary of the loosely-organized minority, but asked to be excused.⁴ All thirteen pastors, whose attendance was recorded at the 1918 convention of the ELS in Lime Creek, Iowa were graduates of Luther College.

Luther College historian, Knut Gjerset, wrote: “No one exercised a more active influence in providing means and equipment for the new school than Rev. [U.] V. Koren, the most astute and brilliant of the men who guided the Norwegian Lutheran Synod during the early years. In the many struggles for orthodox Lutheran doctrine waged in those times, no one quite equaled him in thorough scholarship, critical discernment, dialectic skill or resourceful leadership.... He frowned upon emotionalism, but clung with unswerving fidelity to the doctrine of the verbal inspiration of the Bible. The word *gegraptai* (It is written) engraved on the seal of the Synod was like a device emblazoned on his spiritual armor in every religious controversy. But although he was found in the forefront of every battle where purity of doctrine was at stake, he loved peace, and counted it his chief mission to do a pastor’s work of preaching the Gospel to his congregations.”⁵ During this centennial year of the death of U. V. Koren, we also recall another significant anniversary of his work 150 years ago, toward the establishment of Luther College.

¹ David T. Nelson, *Luther College, 1861-1961* (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1961) 46.
² Theodore Aaberg, *A City Set on a Hill* (Mankato, Minnesota: Board for Publications Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1968) 57-58.
³ Christian Anderson, in *Grace for Grace* (Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1943) 95.
⁴ Moldstad, J. A., “Lest We Forget,” *Lutheran Sentinel*, 26 (April 27, 1943) 115.
⁵ Luther College Faculty, *Luther College Through Sixty Years, 1861-1921* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1922) 383-84.

Oral History: Rudolph Honsey

Interviewed by Bethany student, Josiah Willitz, April 2010

Biographical Overview

Rudolph E. Honsey was born near Lake Mills, Iowa, on September 9, 1918, the same year the Evangelical Lutheran Synod was founded. He was the son of a farmer, Oliver Honsey, and his wife Nelsine. He was baptized (1918) and confirmed (1934) at Lime Creek Lutheran. He grew up in Lake Mills, attending Lime Creek Lutheran School and Lake Mills High School.

For his college education he went to Bethany Lutheran College, a college that he would devote most of his life to. He attended Bethany from 1938-1941, spending beyond the two-year mark in order to pick up more language courses. From Bethany, Honsey went on to Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri in 1941, graduating in 1944 with what is today equivalent to a Masters in Divinity. In his last year at seminary he served a vicarage at the Scarville and Center, Iowa congregations under Justin Peterson. After seminary, Honsey was offered a professor position at Bethany Lutheran College. He taught there from 1945 to 1962, attending Mankato State University and University of Chicago on the side to pick up some teaching and Archeology/Egyptian studies (respectively). In 1962, Honsey took a call to Harvard Street Lutheran Church (now Pinewood Lutheran) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Four years later he accepted a call back to Bethany. He taught foreign languages and religion there until 1996, when he retired. [The BLC web site says Honsey continued teaching part time until 1998.]

In 1950, Rudolph Honsey married Elizabeth Lillegard. They have shared a wonderful 60-year marriage and have been blessed with five children (Judith, Carole, Philip, Ellen, and Ralph). Rudolph and Elizabeth currently reside at Pathstone Crossing and Pathstone Living in Mankato.



The Parish Years

In relation to the rest of his life, Honsey's time in the parish was rather limited. The Cambridge, Massachusetts congregation he served was where his father-in-law had served, and where he and his wife got married. "People would call her (Elizabeth) the pastor's daughter, instead of the pastor's wife," Honsey chuckled. Rudolph and Elizabeth returned to Mankato toward the end of summer in 1966. In 1966 and 1967 he served vacancies in the congregations of Cottonwood and Tracy, Minnesota, while teaching at the college.

The Professor Years

Half of Rudolph Honsey's life has been spent serving as a professor at Bethany Lutheran College. Already fresh out of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,

Missouri, Honsey became a Bethany professor in 1945. In his time at Bethany between 1945 and 1962 he taught a wide variety of courses, from history to religion to foreign languages to psychology. He left Bethany in 1962 for the parish ministry only to return to Bethany in 1966.

Upon his return Honsey served at Bethany for another thirty years. He taught primarily courses in Hebrew, Latin, Norwegian, and Religion. While teaching he took on other projects. For nineteen to twenty years he led summer school courses in Hebrew. These courses went through the same amount of material in five to six weeks as a typical term course. From 1983 to 1993 he worked on contributing to “The People’s Bible” commentary on Job.

Bethany Lutheran College: Past, Present, and Future

Rudolph Honsey is quite literally as old as the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. His knowledge of the synod’s history spans a large period of time, and much could be said of that. However, having spent a majority of his synod work at Bethany Lutheran College, I find it appropriate to discuss his personal experience with the growth of Bethany.



Major changes to Bethany, as he knew it, really began to start in 1966 when he returned from the parish he served in Massachusetts. Renovations of the classrooms in “Old Main” took place. New paint jobs and other such changes were being made. This made many classrooms unavailable, even while school was in session. “We met everywhere except the classrooms,” Honsey said.

Honsey remembers the first official library on campus, which eventually was torn down and a newer building was put up to house the library. He has seen the college

grow from having only a main building and a gym to having multiple academic buildings, as well as multiple housing complexes. The newest addition to these will be Honsey Hall, named after Rudolph Honsey, which will open this summer.

Rudolph E. Honsey Hall houses the departments of communication, humanities, social and behavioral sciences, and religion. The Bethany Lutheran College Board of Regents unanimously approved naming the building in honor of retired Bethany professor Rudolph Honsey.



Honsey remarked on how highly he holds the student body of Bethany. He sees in the students at Bethany upstanding members of society. "When I've talked with other people in the community, they tell me that they know the Bethany students because they're so well behaved and well mannered," he says. He believes that Bethany is a place where students can truly learn to grow and flourish to the glory of God.

The Lutefisk Supper at BLC

Rudolph Honsey enjoys lutefisk very much. He and his wife enjoy it to the point that even though they are no longer able to make it to the BLC lutefisk supper, they have Bethany bring lutefisk to them. "It was always nice to see the faculty work together to make this fun event possible," says Honsey. [More change. This year "Norse Night" was held instead of the supper, ending with Norwegian snacks and a folk dance presentation in Honsey Hall.]

The Vietnam Era

Upon being asked about the effect of Vietnam and the protesting of the war at Bethany, Honsey talked of how he felt that Bethany was somehow separate from it. Honsey says, "Even though Bethany was within a large town, it managed to stay somehow apart from the rest of Mankato." Issues such as these didn't seem to play a big role in the everyday life on Bethany's campus.❖

Information Requested about Bethany 1911

Before the ELS owned Bethany Lutheran College, it had operated as a "ladies seminary," beginning in 1911. The June 18, 2011 ELS Historical Society meeting will include a centennial commemoration of the ladies college. If you are a relative of any of the students or faculty from 1911, or have photographs, artifacts, or stories to share, please contact Dr. Ryan C. MacPherson at 507-344-7787 or submit your comments at www.els-history.org/contact.

Thank You to the DeGarmeauxes

Newsletters are often labors of love by people working behind the scenes to make things happen. Editors plan, solicit articles, correct spelling and grammar, lay out articles with headlines, graphics, and pictures. The final hard copy invites the subscriber to pick it up and read it from cover to cover. Prof. Mark and Rebecca DeGarmeaux worked as editors of Oak Leaves for seven years until they passed the baton on. They deserve our recognition for a consistent and competent job well done. Thank you!

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