



# Oak Leaves

Newsletter of the ELS Historical Society

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## “I move we take over the school.”

*A History of Bethany Lutheran College*

By Prof. Erling T. Teigen

“*I move we take over the school.*” The motion stands in English, alone in a sea of Norwegian—the language in which the synod conducted most of its business in 1927.

“The school.” That was Bethany Lutheran College, conducted since 1911 as Bethany Ladies’ College—a school for the Marys and Marthas of the Synodical Conference churches, mostly Missouri and Wisconsin Synods, but a few from the little Norwegian Synod.

Things had started in 1909. The visionary F. W. Winter, pastor of Immanuel Lutheran



Church, was filled with ideas, and he got them built: Immanuel Hospital, converted from the older Tourtelotte Hospital on the north side, and then a school for Immanuel. All were made from the same soft, Mankato-

produced brick—Bethany too, and in it, generations of BLC students have carved their initials.

Winter and his committee envisioned their school becoming the Lutheran Smith or Vasser of the Middle West. It was a vision, but the going was rough.

It started with some uncertainty. The building wasn’t finished for the 1911-1912 school year, and so the girls were housed in private homes and met for classes and music lessons in various places. And when they did move into the building, not all was finished. The paint and varnish wouldn’t be applied, in many places until 1933, when S. C. Ylvisaker organized the “Paint and Varnish club”, which later became the women’s Auxiliary.



The Great War came, and there were hard times. The school’s constituency was mostly German, and they kept their heads down, even in this supposedly Scandinavian State of Minnesota, where the Germans have always been the largest ethnic group. The war ended, but the hard times didn’t. Enrollment never measured up to expectations. Buildings planned, one of which already had a foundation, were never built. The growth simply wasn’t there.

The school had soul; there was



spirit in the students and in the backers. But by 1925 the spirit could not overcome the challenges. So the school was on the auction block.

The word got around. One story is that a student, Anne Gullixson, called her father, Pastor George A. Gullixson: the school was for sale, and there were nuns here counting the silverware. Maybe so, maybe not. Not only were the School Sisters interested. So was the Wisconsin Synod.

But the little Norwegian Synod folks were very interested. They too had some visions; but they had little means. They had lost the school dear to their hearts, Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. They knew that as a church, they had everything that counted—the unconditioned gospel. But they needed something for a focal point for the organization. They wanted to train their young people and they wanted to provide pastors for their congregations. They had a heritage that believed not just in training church workers, but in fostering the spirit of higher education among the people of the congregations. They valued the arts, the humanities, and the sciences, not only as useful, but as worthwhile in themselves as gifts from God.

A Norwegian Synod pastor, Holden Olsen, became president of the crippled institution in 1925, and was instrumental in transferring the school to the Norwegian Synod. Olsen had served Our Savior's in Madison, Wisconsin from 1906 to 1922, and after a short time out of the ministry, was called to Bethany. Without his presence on campus, it is doubtful that Bethany would have come to the little Norwegian Synod.

The Synod had little means—no rich farmers or businessmen. But they tried anyway. The Synod wasn't ready to do it. Even in its small size, it moved like a huge beast. Norwegians need to think about things for a while. But some in the synod were on fire for the school; they organized an association, the Bethany Lutheran College Association, and July 1926, they assumed ownership of the

school, and kept it alive for its final year as a girls school, with a high school and a college department, teaching music, commercial, home economics, and other things necessary for a young lady at that time.

But in June 1927, came the momentous meeting. The meeting was held where the Synod had been organized nine years before, Lime Creek, near Lake Mills, Iowa. Many in the synod were timid—too much risk; tempting God; how can we think of such a thing? they asked. But Gullixson jumped up at the meeting. ***“I move we take over the school.”*** More debate, and it passed. So now they owned it; what would they do with it?



The new school year opened in September. Now there were boys—one of the first Synodical Conference coeducational colleges. And in December, they organized a Norwegian Synod congregation on the campus: Bethany Lutheran Church, later to be called Mt. Olive. Holden Olsen stayed on as president for another two years, and then the college musician, Walter Buszin became acting president. Buszin's contribution to the college rests in the choral music tradition he established for the college through his founding of the Bethany Choir, a tradition which has maintained a focal position at the college.

In 1921, a young Ph. D.—they weren't very common then—had joined the Synod: Sigurd Ylvisaker. Like all the others, he was a Luther College and Luther Seminary graduate. He had studied in Leipzig, written a still-respected dissertation on the Assyrian and Babylonian languages, and was poised for a brilliant career at Luther College—maybe even one day at the Seminary. But when his church, the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America (the merger church from which the

Little Norwegian Synod had separated, and later called ELC) joined the National Lutheran Council, Sig Ylvisaker resigned, and turned to the Little Synod. He was called to teach at Concordia–St. Paul, along with his friend who also resigned from Luther, Oswald Overn. But then there was a vacancy at a vital church in the synod, Our Savior’s in Madison, Wisconsin, so he turned his back on the academic life, and went there. He wasn’t watching out for his career. He was a servant of the Word, and of God’s people.

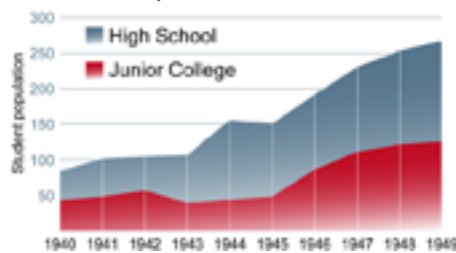


But he recognized the importance of Christian higher education, and he was one of the organizers of the Bethany Lutheran College Association—the men who risked much to secure the school for the synod.

The Association called him to be president of the institution. And he again bowed to the will of God’s people, and accepted. He and the faculty lived from hand to mouth; 1931 and 1932 stand out as bad among the years of a very bad decade. Only the heroic fundraising efforts of Synod pastors, like Norman A. Madson and others kept the college afloat. In 1930, there were 67 students, only 15 of them in the Junior College department. It didn’t rise to 67 again until 1935. But in 1940, there were 85 students, 44 of them in Junior College.

There were 104 in 1941, spurting to 156 in 1944.

And there was a high in 1949 of 268, with 126 in the Junior College. Returning GIs helped to swell the numbers.



In those years, Bethany began to emerge as a daring leader in education. A young professor Paul Zimmerman and Ylvisaker devised a program decades ahead of the times—the four year junior college, with students in the junior and senior years of high school permitted to take college courses. It was a great idea, but it failed—though the idea came into its own over 30 years later with the post enrollment option program in many states.

In 1946, the seminary was added as a department of the college with its own Dean. Norman A. Madson was the first Dean, followed by Milton Otto. The two institutions were separated in 1975, with the seminary building on Division Street added in 1977.

Ylvisaker retired in 1950. The end of his tenure wasn’t smooth. In those days, the synod convention elected the college president every four years, and that was enough to eat a hole in the stomach of any college president. Bjarne W. Teigen became president. It was not a comfortable time for the college. The owner of the college was the Norwegian Synod; but the constituency was what it had always been—Norwegian, Missouri, and Wisconsin. Through the 1940s it was stormy in the Synodical Conference, and it grew darker and darker in the early 1950s. The enrollment bubble of the late 40s popped, and the growth stopped. Missouri folks weren’t sending their children to Bethany so much anymore—just a few heroes, who recognized the problems—Pastors Art Drevlow, Arnold Kuster, and many like them; and laymen, like Arthur Abel in Iowa. In 1955, when the Norwegian Synod severed fellowship with Missouri, the enrollment dropped to 172. Only the heroic effort of synod people to get their young people to Bethany saved the school. After that the enrollment began to rise—with an increasing representation from Wisconsin, and the continued support of many faithful Missouri Synod pastors and lay people. The growth of the student body resumed, so that by 1967, the enrollment was up to 316 (240 in the junior

college). The college department was growing and the high school was shrinking.

Until 1959, there were no buildings erected on campus. The only construction was in the 1930s, when the foundation of the never-built conservatory was de-constructed. Except for the President's house. After the president lived for some years with his family in "the Apartment" (now the rear part of the bookstore and admissions) the Board of Trustees and the Board of Regents in 1935 proposed to build a home for the president on campus—at a cost of \$6,000. It was authorized by the synod. The final bid was \$6,500, and individuals contributed additional funds, "in order that certain features might be added," says the Synod Report. There was some grumbling that this \$6,500-plus house was a little much, maybe too extravagant.

In 1959, a new gymnasium-auditorium was built—just in time to host a championship basketball team. That year, the Bethany Vikings, coached by Dwain Mintz, won second place in the National Junior College basketball championship. There was much celebrating on campus, and even a parade downtown.

As growth continued, attention turned to additional dormitory space and a new library. For decades, the college had been accredited by the University of Minnesota. "Doc Y" had cultivated good friendships there, from which the school benefited. But by the end of the 1960s, that arrangement could no longer continue. And so, under the leadership of Bjarne Teigen, and several talented young faculty members, the college turned to North Central Accreditation Association to strengthen its credentials, and by 1970, received Candidate Status.

That same year, "B. W." [Teigen] retired. During the 1950s, the synod rules were changed so that the president of the college and seminary (in one person) was elected to serve at the pleasure of the board. Ray Branstad became the president. Under Branstad, the accreditation status was solidified, and the college had bona fide academic credentials. In

1970, after the high school had been closed for two years, the junior college enrollment had leveled out at 216, and remained stagnant, during a period when the national economy also stagnated. Then enrollment rose to 310 by 1979, but didn't reach that number again for several years.

Yet during the 1970s, the college developed—young instructors earned masters degrees, and there was an occasional Ph. D. on campus. The academic departments were strengthened, and the curriculum was sharply tuned to serve students who would transfer to the universities.

In 1977, Raymond Branstad resigned as President, and was followed by Acting presidents Theodore Aaberg and then Norman Holte. Holte was elected President in 1978, and served until 1982. Under Holte's administration, the college was reaccredited in 1979, receiving the first of its ten-year accreditations, the maximum possible. Holte also led the College to a financially stable position on which it would be possible to develop — in ways not yet foreseen.

Marvin Meyer, who had been a faculty member since 1960 was elected President in 1982, and will serve until the end of 2002, becoming Bethany's third twenty-year president. During his administration, the campus and physical plant have developed, and the college has become a baccalaureate-granting institution.

A surge of new development began in 1984. In 1982, while doing some research, a couple of faculty members noticed that 1984 would mark the centennial of the birth of Dr. Ylvisaker. They talked about a festschrift for the event, but that grew into a festival celebration and a book, and great interest was sparked in gathering funds for a building in memory of Dr. Ylvisaker, the Ylvisaker Fine Arts Center. A significant contribution came from alumnus, Marvin Schwan, and that developed into support for other buildings. The college engaged in significant gathering of funds for buildings and endowment. A new fitness cen-

ter was added in 1994, a chapel in 1996, a new library in 1998, and a new dormitory, fittingly called Gullixson Hall in 1999. Along with all this, the buildings and grounds were improved, and older buildings were named—Old Main, Anderson Hall, Luther Hall, Teigen Hall, Larson Hall.

But the expansion of the physical space was driven by another vision. It became clear that private, residential junior colleges were a vanishing breed. Bethany was the last remaining of that species in Minnesota.

It was not the sort of a decision for which everyone immediately joined the bandwagon. The faculty came along reluctantly. But in 1996, the decision was made that the college had to begin to develop as a B. A. granting institution, a four-year college — slowly, over a period of 20 years. So under the leadership of President Meyer, the faculty has spent thousands of hours in curriculum development, with spirited, earnest debate, developing the first majors—Liberal Arts and Communication. They were followed soon by Music, Church Music, Business, and yet others are on the drawing board.



The first B. A. graduates walked across the stage in May, 2001, 32 of them, followed by 24 in 2002.

In 2002, the college looks back on 75 years—75 plus the 16 of Bethany Ladies College—91 years. There have been moments of terror—financial especially—when the only way out was God’s providential care of his people. Often, that the patient would survive

was highly doubtful. But survive it did, not because of the strength of its supporters, not because of the strength of its faculty, staff, administration, or the synod. It survived just because of the strength of its Lord, whose “strength is made perfect in weakness.”

It is an institution which stands for academic excellence. It believes the confession of the First Article—“*I believe that God has made me and all creatures, that he has given me my body and soul, eyes and ears, my reason and all my senses, and still preserves them.*” It believes that, and lives that in its education in the liberal arts. But it confesses also the Second Article, “*He has redeemed me...not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood, and with his innocent sufferings and death, in order that I might be his own, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.*”



*Soli Deo Gloria  
To God Alone Be the Glory*

*Erling Teigen has been professor at Bethany Lutheran College since 1977. He teaches Religious Studies, Philosophy, and Logic. This article was written as the narrative for a slide presentation at the Bethany Lutheran College 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary banquet.*

Send us your ideas, articles, and suggestions for **Oak Leaves**. We welcome information and articles on church anniversaries, and articles of Synodical and local significance.

**Annual Meeting and Trip to Koshkonong — June 13-14, 2003. Watch for details!**

In the next issue: Church anniversaries



## How Parkland Acquired an Army Chapel

By the Rev. Theodore Gullixson

One day in 1947, an LCA pastor came over to the pastor and asked, “Gullixson, how in the world did you get this chapel? I had the officers of my synod, the Senators and House members in Washington, D.C. put the pressure on the chief of chaplains and it did no good.” Pastor Gullixson just replied that the chapel was called a “Memorial Chapel” in memory of a member. It paid to read the fine print. How did they get an army chapel?

Originally, the Parkland congregation worshiped in a beautiful brick-faced church, constructed when the Rev. Bjug Harstad was the pastor, 1893-1928. In 1934 the church and parsonage were lost to the congregation through unforeseen circumstances. For some fourteen years, the members worshiped in the chapel on the ground floor of its school building in Brookdale, a half mile away. At that time, Parkland Lutheran was the only ELS congregation on the west coast of the United States.



*The Rev. Bjug Harstad*

On August 11, 1940, Candidate Walther C. Gullixson was ordained and installed as pastor of Parkland Lutheran Church. Two years later, the United States became involved in World War Two. Pastor Gullixson served the synod’s servicemen as a chaplain, which meant he had access to Ft. Lewis. He also visited servicemen at McChord Air Force Base

near Parkland, at the Naval base in Bremerton, and at an airbase near Seattle.

In 1946, after the war was over and many servicemen had returned home, Pastor Gullixson noticed a sign posted on one of the Ft. Lewis army chapels. The notice stated that the building was declared a surplus chapel and it could be purchased from the government through an application process in which certain conditions had to be met. Those conditions were in fine print.

The pastor called a special congregational meeting to discuss this new opportunity. At the meeting, the voters decided to apply for the chapel and have it moved to Parkland. The voters also decided that if they were awarded the chapel, it would be called “Memorial Chapel: in honor of Lt. Robert Bensen, U.S.A.F., who was killed in action during the recent war.” This decision may have been the main reason why the U. S. Army awarded the chapel to the congregation in July of 1947.



*Parkland Lutheran Church interior, 1948*

Long before moving day, Pastor Gullixson had carefully laid out a route on the back roads from the base to its present location, along the busy Pacific Highway, which is the major route to Mt. Rainier National Park. The land for the church was donated by Oliver Harstad, a son of Bjug Harstad.

The large building (36 feet by 84 feet) was raised on wheels and set on two flatbed trailers. The two trucks, side by side, slowly moved it some fifteen miles. Along the way, arrangements were made for light and telephone wires to be removed for its passage along the back roads and streets.



*It took 2 trucks to move the chapel.*

Meanwhile, the Parkland members had been busy laying a cement foundation for their new building. After the chapel was put on the foundation, the members under the leadership of Mel Petersen, a contractor and member, built an addition to the back of the chapel to provide a pastor's office, study, boiler room, and lavatories downstairs, and a meeting room and kitchen in the addition upstairs. Then they covered the structure with brick. A company was discontinuing its brick line and sold the brick they had left to the church for cost. A lighted cross replaced the cupola which had been on the army chapel.



*Parkland Lutheran Church, exterior, 1948*

The congregation had a special dedication service on March 14, 1948. Then synod president and son of Bjug Harstad, the Rev. Adolph Harstad, and the Rev. Norman A. Madson were present and took part in the service.



*O. B. Harstad, Pastor Walther C. Gullixson, Mel Pedersen, and Henry Schmidtke at the dedication*

Years later, the Christian Day School building in Brookdale was sold and a large addition was built next to the church for the school. Today, Parkland Lutheran Church and School is a thriving congregation with three pastors and ten Christian Day School teachers.

*Theodore Gullixson, son of Rev. W. C. Gullixson, is pastor of Forest and Zion Lutheran Churches in Forest City and Thompson, Iowa.*



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ELS Historical Society  
6 Browns Court  
Mankato, MN 56001

**Annual Meeting and  
Trip to  
Koshkonong!**  
**June 13-14, 2003**  
Watch for details  
in coming issues!

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