

The Lasting Harvest of Luther College and Academy
Carl Hansen
President Emeritus, Midland University

Allow me to begin with a personal word. When it was time to begin thinking about college in the early 1950s I only considered three possible colleges, not because my mail box was flooded (as they are for today's prospective college students with an endless collection of glossy view-books touting the attributes of their college or university) but for very personal reasons. Option 1: the School of Engineering at the University of Colorado (my dad's choice, since he wanted me to become an Electrical Engineer—not a pastor, which he considered a dead end job where I would starve to death; obviously that is one time he was wrong). Option 2: Harvard, the choice of a mentor at East High in Denver who assured me scholarship aid from the Harvard Club would cover the cost. And Option 3: Bethany College in Kansas which was consistently endorsed by our congregation as “our” church college (the congregation, after all, had been founded in 1908 by a “missionary to the Swedes in Denver” sent by the Kansas Conference of the Augustana Church).

I don't remember even hearing there was also a place in Nebraska called “Luther” that I could consider. But once I enrolled at Bethany I began to learn about Luther College and Academy from classmates who had come to Bethany after two years at Luther in order to complete a baccalaureate degree and from L. Dale Lund, who was president of Bethany for several of my years there (and later my predecessor in the presidency of Midland.)

Although they told me about a city called “Wahoo,” I never visited it until many years later after it had become famous as the “home office” of the David Letterman Show. By the way, it is my understanding that Letterman chose Wahoo as his “home office” after intense lobbying and a degree of bribery that included, among other things, the promise of being inducted as an Admiral into the “Great Navy of Nebraska,” free checkups at the Wahoo Medical Center, a '76 Ford Pinto with a sofa attached to its hood, and a wall clock made of cow-pies.

But in all fairness, Midland never popped up on my radar screen either, until I was also the Director of Church Relations at Bethany College and had occasion to attend a conference here in Fremont. Driving into Fremont for that meeting, I had no way of knowing that my next visit here would be to interview as a candidate for the presidency of Midland Lutheran College, which I assumed in the fall of 1981.

In that first year as president, I became immersed in what was the preparations already underway for the Centennial Celebration of the college that would occur two years later in 1983. As you no doubt know, Midland traces its roots to three previous institutions: the “original” Midland founded in 1887 in Atchison, Kansas, by the General Synod which later merged into the United Lutheran Church in America. In 1919, the college moved to Fremont to occupy this campus which had been started by Fremont Normal College in 1884, but closed its doors during

World War I. The third institution which we are remembering as part of our AHA gathering, was Luther College and Academy, founded in 1883. As the oldest of the three institutions, its founding date was the one which led to the Centennial Celebration in 1983.

I soon embarked on a quick learning curve as plans for the Centennial progressed: learning not only about Luther and the Academy but also about Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Wahoo, where we hoped to have a worship service when the Centennial Year was to begin. Part of that learning included awareness that, although Midland College had added the name “Lutheran” in honor of Luther in Wahoo in the early 1960s, many of those who had an understandably deep love for Luther College and Academy did not “jump for joy” when they heard of or thought about this college some 20 miles north of Wahoo.

For nearly 80 years, Luther had been providing education for high school and college-age students. Through those years, Luther was nearly closed several times due to insufficient funding and heavy indebtedness—once in the 1890s when drought and depression decreased enrollment and financial support, and again during the World War I years, when male students went to war instead of college, and as Public Colleges and Universities provided competition for private college throughout the US.

In the 1950s the possibility of closure came again, this time as American Lutherans began to explore the possibility of mergers that would lead to the formation of the Lutheran Church in America and the American Lutheran Church. It was apparent that these mergers would create changes not only for the colleges of the merging bodies, but a change in the conferences and synods within them.

The Augustana Synod at that time had five institutions of higher learning; four four-year colleges—Augustana, Bethany, Gustavus Adolphus, and Upsala—plus one Academy and two-year college, Luther in Wahoo.

The Augustana Synod commissioned a study of the strengths and weaknesses of its five schools in the light of impending church merger, and out of that came what was known as the Gould Wickey Report. Proposals in this report were to lead eventually to the closure of Luther and its merger with Midland College, to create Midland Lutheran College in 1962.

Whether the United Lutheran Church, as one of the merging bodies, had a similar study is not clear. But what seems to be quite clear is that neither Luther nor Midland proposed merging with one another at that time. Although only twenty miles apart, they each had their own traditions, history, and culture, and neither institution seemed interested in a “marriage proposal” to one another.

When the Wickey Report was completed, it contained two proposals that totally changed this picture: (1) That Luther College and Academy be discontinued by 1960. (2) That the Luther Board be authorized to initiate discussions with the Midland Board to explore the feasibility of merging the two institutions.

The initial response by Luther and the Nebraska Synod of Augustana to these recommendations was to begin the merger discussions but to postpone closing Luther until 1962 in the event that the LCA merger did not take place, and also to see if enough funds could be raised to continue Luther as a separate institution.

As the discussions proceeded, there was discussion of a merger that would allow both schools to remain in place in Wahoo and Fremont under a joint administration, as well as expansion of programs at Midland to allow for as many tenured faculty at Luther to move there as possible. In the end, financial realities led to the proposal from the Nebraska Conference that the two institutions be merged into one, effective September 1, 1962, creating Midland Lutheran College, located in Fremont, Nebraska.

This was difficult to accept on the part of Luther faculty, students, alumni, and friends and by the Wahoo community itself. The word “merger” comes from the Latin word “mergere” which means “to plunge.” Among its cognates are “combine, blend, fuse, amalgamate, unite, join, mix, consolidate, mingle, converge, coalesce, melt into, meld, be swallowed up by.” Whatever word is used, it is clear that a merger of two institutions is almost always a difficult event, for it is not unusual that one of the partners may cease to exist. Since that seems to be how many individuals perceived the merger of Luther into Midland, it is no wonder that this decision was met with sadness, disappointment, and anger.

For the City of Wahoo, the closing of Luther meant the loss of an institution with significant financial and social impact on the community. For Luther’s students, faculty, and staff it meant a severe disruption. And for many loyal alumni and friends of Luther, no matter what name was given to the new institution, Midland Lutheran College could never fully be “their college.”

Some twenty years after the decision was made to close Luther and effect a merger with Midland, when the Centennial Committee began to explore involvement of Luther alumni and residents of Wahoo, they were not sure how well they would be received, and some of the people in Wahoo wondered what on earth Midland wanted now two decades later.

Thankfully the Centennial Committee was met with grace and openness, and the Centennial began with a wonderful service of Worship and Thanksgiving at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, setting the stage for a year-long series of events that took place in the months that followed.

So what was “merged” into Midland beyond adding “Lutheran” to the name in the early 1960s? For one, the transcripts and records of Luther Alumni were now housed on the Midland campus. For another, many of the books from Luther were added to the library at Midland, which was named “Luther Library” in honor of Luther College and Academy. A number of physical objects were moved from the Luther Campus and placed outside Luther Library, including a sundial and a large boulder. Several years later, the iconic “Luther Arch” was dismantled stone

by stone in Wahoo and then rebuilt as part of a commemorative plaza in front of the library. A beautiful painting by Birger Sandzen was placed in Luther Library and later moved to the President's Office in the Anderson Complex when it was completed in the 1980s. At least one Luther professor, V.E. Johnson joined the Midland Faculty. Together with his wife, Aina, they became the houseparents of Midland's Gunderson Hall dormitory when it was constructed in 1966. Several current Luther students accepted the invitation to visit the Midland Campus in the spring of 1962, and a number of them transferred to Midland to complete their college degrees.

A few years after the Centennial still another venture was created to keep alive the memory of Luther College and Academy when Midland began "Luther Fest" in the early 1980s, which from its inception concluded with a worship service and luncheon at Bethlehem Lutheran Church. The idea for Luther Fest was born, not in Nebraska, but in Minnesota! For a number of years, Midland had hosted alumni gatherings in Minneapolis, inviting both Midland and Luther alumni to a single event. In view of the fact that the number of Luther alumni in the Twin Cities far exceeded the number of Midland alumni, a decision was one year to hold two separate alumni gatherings: one for Midland alumni and a second one for Luther alumni.

The result of holding two events was that a greater number of Luther alumni came to "their" gathering than had been the case in earlier years, when the event included alumni from both institutions. In reviewing this Luther gathering, where alumni obviously enjoyed sharing memories of their Wahoo days, it was decided that it was time to initiate an event to which Luther alumni across the country could come to renew their ties with one another.

Named "Luther Fest," it would be scheduled near the Swedish celebration of "Mid-Summer." Alumni were invited for presentations about Luther College and Academy, and for recognition of outstanding alumni as well as families with a history of involvement with Luther.

We, at Midland, had rather modest hopes for the first gathering; if at least fifty people attended, we would declare it a "success." When nearly three hundred alumni registered, a tradition was born. Since the first Luther Fest was held, gatherings have continued on alternate years, providing Luther alumni the opportunity to share memories and conversation, join in song, worship, and a traditional Swedish dinner, with a culminating service of worship and lunch in Wahoo.

Over the years, Midland has also recognized a number of Luther graduates with honorary degrees as part of its commencement ceremonies in May. Pastors and missionaries familiar to members of the AHA include: Reuben Swanson, Theodore E. Johnson, Roy E. Benson, Reuben Ariel Lundeen, Carl Waldemar Larson, Floyd E. Lauersen, and Alan J. Gottneid. Educators including Alan Seagren, Verner E. Johnson, Aina Abrahamson, and L. Dale Lund, who was president of Midland in the 1970s.

Luther alumni have not only attended Luther Fest gatherings, but also have responded with generous financial response to the request of Dr. Bud Benson and Eugene Dahlgren to

create the Luther Heritage Fund at Midland. This Fund of more than \$2 Million in gifts and pledges is now part of the Midland Endowment, providing annual scholarships given in memory of Luther College and Academy.

Luther College and Academy is no longer physically present on the hill in Wahoo; but it lives on in a number of ways on this campus and above all in the lives of its many alumni across our nation and across our world. It has been said that a college or university is not simply the campus, nor its various buildings, nor its students and faculty at any one time. It consists of all who enter and go forth from its halls, who have been touched by its influence and who carry on its spirit.

J. Iverne Dowie, in his book *Prairie Grass Dividing*, provides a glimpse of the earliest days of Luther, from its founding by Augustana Synod churches in 1883 through the next two decades, when twice financial crises threatened to close its doors. The doors remained open and for the next six decades Luther played a significant role in Lutheran higher education as one of five colleges founded by the Augustana Synod, weathering two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the Korean Conflict. Dowie includes only a brief mention of Luther between the 1890s and 1959 when his book was published, noting in the Epilogue: “If the dissemination of the gospel and the preparation of a better life through the acquisition of knowledge represented the true progress of Luther, statistics may suggest to what extent the school fulfilled its destiny. During 50 years (1883-1933) 85 Luther students entered the ministry; 312 became teachers. Ministers and teachers are but a portion of the total harvest of the school. Students have gone forth from its classrooms into many walks of life. The Swedish pioneers planted, sometimes in sacrifice and poverty, the seed. The harvest, small in comparison with great institutions of learning, has not been insignificant to the Swedes in Nebraska and to the Augustana Church in its general missionary program.” (pp.208-209)

This “harvest” did not end in 1933. Graduates of Luther College and Academy continued to “go forth from its classrooms into many walks of life” for the next three decades, continuing to make significant contributions to American society and the church. This evening, I have asked three graduates of Luther who are part of this harvest, to share personal memories of how Luther and its faculty and staff shaped and influenced their faith, their vocation, and their life.

(Reflections from Marilyn Langemeier, Mary Lindell, and Dr. Lynn Johnson)

Tonight, Midland continues its efforts in providing ways in which the name, spirit, and contributions of Luther College and Academy may be remembered through the creation of the Luther College of the Liberal Arts at the heart of Midland University’s academic program, perpetuating Luther’s tradition of preparing graduates for life, leadership, and service, enriched by the values of the liberal arts and the Christian faith, and ensuring that it will continue into the future.

It is my pleasure to introduce the Rev. Dr. William C. Nelsen, University Minister for Advancement and Church Relations, Midland University, to share comments regarding this new

venture in learning followed by a Service of Celebration and Blessing on the Luther Heritage Fund and Luther College of the Liberal Arts.