

Leading Lights of Augustana:

A Personal Valedictory

Gerald Christianson

The envelope, please. And the nominees are . . . Wait! That's the wrong program. This is not about winners. It's about leading lights in our lives and highlights in our history.

So let me set the tone with a personal nomination that fills both categories. Her name was not submitted by anyone. I am surprised, shocked. How could we miss **Ma Sac**, Ms. Sacrison, the seminary housemother in the 50's and 60's? Who else saved the seminary buildings from the devastation of a tornado by urging us students to open our windows to let it pass through? Who saved the seminary, and all of Rock Island, from a massive power failure by blowing the dust out of the electrical cords? Who else can match this record? For many of us, she was a highlight: a loving person who tried to bring dignity and order to seminary life--sometimes even with success--and generally accepted our good-natured attempts at humor with kindness and patience.

On this night we celebrate, say farewell, and offer benediction. So let's get a handle on the adventure before us. In the interests of complete self-disclosure, I am a son of Norwegian parents, adopted by Augustana from childhood, who has tried to remain incognito all these years, only now to be compelled to share a very personal list of leading lights. It's a no-win proposition: 50 per cent of you may be offended by the ones I choose; the other 50 per cent by those I don't. My first inclination was to name all the nominees only to realize that there are simply too many and, thanks to Ann Kohler, her booklet of bios does the job. Beyond this, we have the histories of Mark Granquist, Maria Erling, and the venerable G. Everett Arden, as well as the collections edited by Arland Hultgren, Hartland Gifford, and Vance Eckstrom. Few denominations of our size have left such a thorough record for posterity.

In contrast to Ma Sac, I have a serious nomination that will be my theme this evening. It is simply, and seriously, this: **the leading light** of our long and distinguished history is **you**. You have provided each other with an experience in corporate love and unity encompassing a keen

diversity of agenda and angles of vision. You have carried on the ministry, nourished the tradition and embodied the spirit of Augustana well beyond expectations of any group of our size or history--54 years since the formation of the LCA.

How could this happen? Dean Gerhard Krodel was fond of saying that God does not call us to be successful, only to be faithful. We cannot measure faith, we cannot take spiritual temperatures, but we still can ask how we lived out our days as justified sinners. So who are we, we Augustanians? What are our characteristics? And as the scientist would say, what of all these is the keystone species?

Esprit de Corps. We were, and are small in number. In 1960, the year of my ordination, we were roughly 1,200 congregations with 423,000 confirmed members--a fraction of the North American Christians--but large enough to form a critical mass. This is the first ingredient of our esprit.

The second is that we acculturated—that is, Americanized--more quickly than many another foreign language group. We often named our kids Jerry and Carol rather than Sven and Inga (too bad). We gave up most of our cherished customs: “Lutefisk, lefsa, fatigmand, and sill” (as the Gustavus fight song intoned them; but, come to think of it, they are more Norwegian than Swedish!). We kept only the Santa Lucia festivals and smorgasbords (morphed into the hot dish, punch, and cookies).

In all this adaptation, we retained one important element: our multifaceted religious heritage, founded on a common engagement with the Bible and the Catechism which we learned in worship, catechism class, Sunday School, Bible camp, and Luther League. Since we were small in number, we knew or knew *about* nearly everyone. A significant instance was the Augustana youth program with its national gatherings that drew young adults from around the country. The program was led—in fact, shaped—by the charismatic **Wilton Bergstrand** and it influenced a whole generation, including most of us here.

As we coalesced around Augustana Lutheranism we developed a remarkable, (dare I say) spiritual esprit de corps. This, I think, is our keystone. It gave us our identity. What followed in

our history (and follows in this presentation) constitutes our concrete characteristics and our contributions to church and society, as well as our desire to keep their memory going with regular gatherings like this.

First, Piety and Confessions. At least since Arden, historians have discerned that these two combined to make up the center of our identity. It all began with our founders, but not Esbjörn and Hasselquist, important as they are. We, including we historians often forget that history is not determined only by the “great men” complex. Tonight we salute those immigrant Swedes in New Sweden, Iowa, who in 1848, without benefit of bishop or synod, elected a humble shoemaker as their pastor. But we should not overstate this. **Magnus Fredrik Hokanson** was a trained lay preacher who, when he spoke at prayer meetings so impressed the others that they asked him to be their pastor in a newly-formed congregation.

Hokanson had doubts about his right to act as a minister. He tried to resign but the congregation insisted. Both parties demonstrated pretty good Lutheran theology. God instituted the ministry, according to the Augsburg Confession, but no one should serve who does not receive a regular call. To his credit, when Esbjörn came to New Sweden, he strengthened the confidence of both pastor and church.

Lars Paul Esbjörn! The name means polar bear--cold, rugged, and a loner, hardly huggable--but what an enormous talent for vision. In his Swedish parish a choir or a thing called the psalmodicon, a one-stringed instrument, troubled him; and, of course, there was no question about temperance. If he took the Myers-Briggs today, he'd be an “I” for introvert. To Eric Norelius, Esbjörn was “timid and sensitive.” Yet, because of his vision and compulsion to succeed he was forced to be an “E,” an extrovert in public. In short, a big-time case of stress. But if we're correct, this helps explain why, in the midst of religious chaos in America, he suddenly missed both the Swedish form of Pietism and the orderly world of the state Church.

It is hard to substantiate, but one episode captures a critical moment in Esbjörn's journey and ours. He and his group had just landed in New York City after being confined for weeks on a sailing ship—cramped living spaces, disease (one son died of cholera even before leaving; another on the water journey to Chicago), not to mention the food and sanitary conditions—

when Olof Hedstrom of the Bethel Ship mission approached him with a lucrative offer. He could arrange financial aid to get the immigrants established in their new home . . . provided that Esbjörn become a Methodist.

Esbjörn wavered. The Methodists in Sweden impressed him, but American Methodists were not the same. He turned down the offer. Despite the risks, he and the group headed for Chicago without the extra financial support. Esbjörn the Pietist, once suspicious of the state church, had rediscovered that he was a confessional Lutheran after all. The group landed in Andover and, as they say, the rest is history. In the end, Esbjörn's goals are still ours: heart-felt piety, confessional identity, an educated ministry, and ecumenical openness.

Second, Openness to Others. When someone learned that you were Swedish Lutheran, as I frequently was, you were probably asked, “So you have bishops in apostolic succession?” In fact, Sweden can boast an unbroken continuum as genuine as any, thanks to Ole and Larry Peterson (known to scholarship as Olavus and Laurentius Petri) and their king Gustaf I Adolph. But I had to remind those who asked that we proudly traced our ministerial heritage to an Iowa shoemaker.

With a healthy sense of confessional identity, Augustanians also had a deep respect for bishops from Sweden, especially after Nathan Söderblom visited us, and eventually the ELCA would introduce the office. In the meantime, as one of my friends once asked, did any bishop act with any more authority than **O. V. Anderson** and the many other synod presidents who were democratically elected and genuinely respected, like Carl Segerhammer in California, Otto Olson in Canada, Reuben Swanson in Nebraska?

Instead of apostolic succession, what sets Augustana apart from other immigrant churches was its openness to the world, at least to certain crucial parts of it—dancing, drinking, gambling, and politics aside—and within a very few generations after the pioneers arrived. So for all the important leaders in our history, from Esbjörn and Hasselquist to Malvin Lundeen, I hope you will understand why I have chosen **Gustaf Alfred Brandelle** as illustrative because at a critical time in Augustana and American history (the beginning of the 20th century), he reached out to the world. He traveled tirelessly. He attended international conferences. He chaired Lutheran

meetings everywhere. With Brandelle, Augustana arrived as a force on the international scene. He gave this rural and small-town, pious, immigrant church a vision of the wider world and opened the door to invigorating currents of change.

Brandelle was an ardent admirer of **Nathan Söderblom**, and despite the strong objections of opponents like Samuel Miller, president of the Lutheran Bible Institute, welcomed the archbishop to the United States in 1923. Söderblom, Brandelle said, gave the church an inheritance that is both evangelical and catholic. Apart from any partisan connotations this phrase may have today, Brandelle endorsed evangelical catholicity over a century ago, and gave it a Söderblomian interpretation: we are both catholic in substance and protestant in principle (to paraphrase Paul Tillich).

Together with new horizons in historical theology and biblical criticism which were already beginning to appear, Augustana was better prepared to respond to the ravages of World War II, become a linchpin in a major inter-Lutheran merger; affirm the ordination of women (after we joined the LCA), and in the ELCA acknowledge that our doors are open to gays and lesbians.

Third, Bible and Professors. Following Söderblom's sojourn in the U.S., a young pastor and blossoming historian, **Conrad Bergendoff**, became his secretary and not long after brought the Söderblomian vision to Augustana Seminary. It may be hard to remember now that in the early 20th century both Missouri and the ELC, led by their presidents, endorsed creationism and inerrancy.

What historians call the "turn" in the 1930's (if the term "revolution" is too strong) began when a handful of new professors, led by A. D. Mattson and Eric Wahlstrom, arrived at the seminary with a "Lundensian" approach to history and theology. This approach originated in the University of Lund between the two world wars and was led by **Gustaf Aulén**, once a Söderblom student at Uppsala. Aulén and the Lundensians stressed a vigorous renewal of Luther studies, and a constructive response to the critiques of modern society.

In America the challenges came, on the one hand, in the form of evolution and the new

science, and on the other, the need to find the right English term for the inspiration of the Bible, something more pliable and faithful than inerrancy. There was no question about the Bible's authority, but could it be subject to higher criticism where leading themes such as love, peace, justice emerge as interpretative principles?

Swedish Pietism, in one sense, had an advantage: what mattered is not so much the letter of the law, but how the spirit, the gospel of justification spoke to one's heart. Whether they knew it or not, they echoed Luther's insistence that the Bible is the cradle in which the baby Jesus is laid. Translations of Aulén and the Lundensians by Arden and Wahlstrom helped guide our way through a contentious debate that was driving many other Protestants deeper into fundamentalism.

A remarkable coincidence of stars reaped the harvest of these trends in the next generation when the three leading American historians of theology were all Augustinians. In 1973 **Sidney Ahlstrom** received the [National Book Award](#) for *A Religious History of the American People*, the first modern survey of theology in America. Better known to most in our Synod as an educator, **Edgar Carlson** contributed *The Swedish Reinterpretation of Luther* which introduced American students and scholars to the Lundensian approach to the historic Luther and their unflinchingly honest, but warm-hearted approach to the Bible.

George Lindbeck is an exception to our rule that we celebrate only those who have joined the church triumphant. Lindbeck, the son of Augustana missionaries in China and Korea, first gained attention as a "delegate observer" to the [Second Vatican Council](#) and since then has played a leading role in the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, published in 1984, is one of the key works in the formation of [postliberal theology](#). Yet, he identifies with a Lutheran perspective that assumes an ecumenically "evangelical catholic" outlook that aims for "reconciliation without capitulation."

From these three we have learned that the foundation of ecumenism and a welcoming life-style is to know who we are--to have an identity--and then with confidence meet and talk with the other.

Fourth, Hymnal and Liturgy. “All right, Professor Christianson,” I hear you saying. “Enough of this stuff about presidents and professors and those sorts of people; what about us?” You have a point, so let me empathize. One of my colleagues maintains that Christians learn their faith from hymns and liturgy more than they do from sermons or the Catechism. Who could disagree when before 1959 our minister intoned “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts.” We were kids then and we knew God meant business.

If we think back a moment, we may be surprised to remember that the black hymnal of 1925 had a remarkably long shelf-life right up to the formation of the LCA. The red *Service Book and Hymnal* that replaced it included the beautiful Swedish-sounding music of Setting Two, the distinct contribution of the gifted **Regina Fryxell**. Nevertheless, we Augustanians were accustomed to strong stuff and the *SBH* was exhilarating . . . at the time.

Beyond this, what can we say now? We thought he was behind the times, but **A. D. Mattson** put his finger on something. He read the Introit in the *SBH* that prayed that we might be saved from the horn of the unicorn. For all the years he had lived in Rock Island, he declared, he had never seen a unicorn. Well, some clever students brought a goat to campus, tied a plunger on its head and called in the press. A. D. took it all in good humor, but we should have seen his point: he held no truck with anything in-authentic.

In some ways the *SBH* was outmoded from its birth. Rather than modern liturgical renewal, it reflected the 19th century Oxford Movement, including its language and insistence that only the pastor pray the Lord’s Prayer. We got tied up in other knots. We contended mightily between high church and low church, whether to face the altar or the people, whether to wear academic gowns or surplice and collar—not to mention the sign of the cross, kneeling, and wine or grape juice.

We began to see things differently when in the 80’s the *Lutheran Book of Worship* emerged with modern language, lay participation, fresh musical settings and plentiful American hymns. But this was only the tip of a very big iceberg. Below the surface was what I regard as one of the most significant and lasting contributions of our generation: frequent communion within a tradition of Word and Sacrament. May it endure and with it the practice of lively gospel

preaching.

Fifth, Mission. Augustanians made equally great strides outside of worship in service to the community. It took numerous forms, including pastoral care, global mission, activism, and institutions for the sick and needy.

Pastoral Care. Augustana Seminary was ahead of its time with the installation of an internship program in the early 30's but much slower with Clinical Pastoral Education, now one of the pillars of modern seminary education. **Granger Westberg** had to set out on his own. I happened to live in his home for a time when he drew national attention because he held positions in both the Medical and Divinity Schools at the University of Chicago.

Despite having reached what seemed the summit of his career, he was still a restless, creative spirit, always searching for a new horizon, a new way of serving. In the coming years he fulfilled his dreams in a number of ways, culminating in the creation of wholistic health centers and the parish nurse program. Martin Marty, then a new professor in the Divinity School recalls how a medical doctor once asked Granger, "What are you actually doing here? We're a med school." Westberg replied, "Let's see. Everything I do is based on two books, the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. Almost every page talks about people being healed of sickness, leprosy, demonic possession, and other diseases—even guilt. Monks, priests, and nuns have always been at the side of the wounded with healing work. They started the first hospitals. And modern ministers are continuing the practice." Granger paused a moment, then added: "Now, doctor, tell me, what are you doing here?"

Even if he had never done any of these things, Westberg deserves our thanks simply because of one brief, straight-forward, and deeply touching sermon that found its way into print as "Good Grief." To paraphrase more famous words: seldom have so many been helped so much by so few words.

Global Mission. Small as we were, Augustana sent a steady stream of hearty and dedicated men and women abroad and the Lutheran churches of Tanzania, among others, remain grateful for their contributions, not least for accepting the inevitable demand for self-autonomy around mid-century. **David Vikner**, for example, was himself a son of missionaries, born in

China, and grew up amidst civil war, invasion and revolution. He returned after seminary in 1946 and became engaged in organizing a national association of Christian students, but in 1949 his efforts went down when Mao's flag went up. Still a young man, Vikner turned his attention and expertise to whipping another missionary field into shape: the LCA Department of Global Missions.

Social Action. Some of our most vivid recollections and finest achievements are here, especially if we broaden our perspective to include several categories. First, however, we need to acknowledge a colorful source. **A. D. Mattson** was a huge presence and a memorable character. "The universe is not a fortuitous clash of atoms," he intoned, reflecting his Yale University education. "The congregation is the fullness of the church," he declared reflecting his Pietist upbringing. "Without the kingdom of God there is no gospel," he announced, demonstrating the influence of Walter Rauschenbusch and his book, *The Social Gospel*.

During his 34 years at the Seminary, A. D. taught more than 1100 future pastors who listened as the Good Samaritan "crossed to the other side," without benefit of clergy, and as Amos summoned us to "let justice roll down like waters." His classes could be dull as he plodded through one of his books but when he rocked back on his chair--he rarely stood--or leaned forward with pointed finger to drive home the centrality of "the po of God," we listened because we knew that he walked the walk, stood in line with protesting unionists, supported peace efforts, and endorsed candidates despite a caution (or was it censure) from Synod President Malvin Lundeen.

Social Statements. Along with the lasting legend to inspire us, A. D. left another permanent legacy: the Augustana Synod Social Statements (1937-62) which carefully balanced ethics, theology, and contemporary life. They affirmed collective bargaining, equal rights for minorities (six years before Brown vs. the Board of Education), non-violent resistance in the civil rights struggle, an end to private manufacture of armaments, exemption for conscientious objectors from military service, and opposition to capital punishment. From this foundation we went out, clergy and lay alike, to serve in two wide areas of social mission, activism and social service.

Activism. Some followed Mattson's example directly and involved themselves in civil

disobedience or hands-on ministry to the downtrodden. I learned first-hand about **Bernard Spong** in Gary, Indiana where he led ministers and other citizens in protest against a corrupt city government. We tried with much less success again in the early '60s. It took the Justice Department under Robert Kennedy to convict the mayor of tax evasion. There's a lesson here.

The unassuming **Merle Carlson** nevertheless earned the title "Shepherd of the Street" for a courageous form of servanthood carried out in the degraded neighborhoods of Minneapolis. On the other hand, who could miss the presence of **Ruth Youngdahl Nelson** (or any of the members of her distinguished brothers, including a governor, a noted dean of a school of social service, and a pastor of the largest Lutheran church)? At Augustana Church in Washington, D.C. she and her husband Clarence integrated one of the first mainline churches, helped establish halfway houses, led anti-nuclear efforts, and joined in the 1963 March on Washington.

It must have been something grand to see her on the picket line, or something formidable when she made her case with those in positions of power, fulfilling the impression that a small boy formed when this gracious, but compelling lady served in Duluth. Ah, there were giants in the earth in those days.

A more long-term influence on the Synod, however, was **Emmy Carlsson Evald**. The handsome portrait of the younger, but dignified and determined Emmy gives only a hint that at Rockford College, Illinois, she was a classmate with Jane Addams of Hull House fame. In 1926 Emmy wrote, "Remember that the work of our society is carried out by, thru, and for women," a conviction she put into practice by founding the Women's Missionary Society and guiding it for decades. Her successor, **Doris Hedeem Spong**, was also her equal in determination. The wife of Gary's Bernard Spong, she not only led the Society into the LCA but campaigned tirelessly, sometimes frustratingly against the resistance of members of her own gender, for the ordination of women.

Social Service. Without detracting from these courageous rebels, we Augustanians made an even bigger impact with a third type of social action--the care and nurture of the sick and needy. We may not have known it, but we were going back beyond A. D. Mattson and Sweden to the Great Awakening in Germany, to Theodor Fliedner of Kaiserswerth and his American disciple, William Passavant, to build mighty institutions and then establish an order of

deaconesses to staff them. By 1960 we had 10 hospitals, 14 homes for the aged, and 10 homes for children, and in addition supported 42 inter-Lutheran health and welfare institutions.

It's almost an insult to pass over the hundreds who led and served and gave their lives in this ministry, but out of all these, let's tip our hats to **Eric Fogelstrom**, the hard-swearing, but non-drinking sailor who, like another seaman--John Newton, the author of "Amazing Grace"--experienced a dramatic change in his life. Fogelstrom came to serve the [Swedish population in Omaha](#) in 1879 and within eleven years opened Immanuel Hospital, succeeded by a children's home, a home for the aged, and a nursing school. In the steps of Fliedner and Passavant, he instituted a women's ministry with the Immanuel Deaconess Home. If I may indulge in a rhetorical question, how many of us have not been treated in a Lutheran-affiliated hospital, adopted a child, sponsored an immigrant family, or settled your parents (or yourselves) in a Lutheran village?

Guides and Inspirations. I've saved the best for the last. This is by far the largest category of persons whom we nominated. They speak volumes. They were the heart and soul of the Synod. Not just founders, leaders, professors, and bishops, these guides and inspirations were persons--named and unnamed--who helped us, listened to us, shaped us, lent us a hand, gave us direction and reason to go on--a Sunday School teacher, confirmation pastor, friend or counselor—these embody all the characteristics that made us Augustana.

What endures? In this admittedly unapologetic valedictory to and for the Heritage Association, there are plentiful expressions of how we tried to live and work and serve in this world as justified people of God, but even as we salute those who have gone before, **you** remain the leading lights of Augustana.

We—if I may say we—continue to be vigorously interested in the issues that kept arising in the life of Jesus, and keep emerging in ours. We continue to be challenged because our lord raised questions in ways that remain fresh, such as ecumenicity and pluralism, poverty and riches, power and reconciliation, community-building and individuality, tolerance and authority; and, oh yes, lest we forget, life and death.

We share a taste for high-spirited banquets, encourage teachers and students, engage in

mission, and applaud achievement wherever and whenever it appears. We rejoice in spirituality, hymn singing, prayer and remembrance, and ecumenical liturgies of Word and Sacrament. Finally, we are grateful that the Society has successfully negotiated the transition from the Augustana years—not an easy task and one that many small denominations never achieve with satisfaction.

So let this be our benediction: Whether server or lawyer, mechanic or mathematician, church administrator or street preacher, we remain forever intrigued with the wonders of the gospel that keep mystifying us, especially the experience of a very large God who, incarnate in humble human form, jostles us out of our parochialism, compels us to disclose ourselves, and leap across our finitudes to embrace the other.

Somewhere, for all our craziness and self-congratulation, I hear Lars Paul Esbjörn add a hearty **Amen**.