

# How Augustana Seminary Shaped LSTC

Harold C. Skillrud

Without question, the most cherished institution in the Augustana Lutheran Church was Augustana Theological Seminary. A favorite mantra was, “As goes the seminary so goes the Church.”

Throughout its 102 year history the seminary played a major role in the life of the Augustana Church. Witness the fact that every time the Augustana Synod met for its annual Convention, seated at the very front of the assembly were all members of the theological faculty. These were the “theological experts,” a sort of Lutheran magisterium, who were called upon if there were ever a need to interpret a matter or give an opinion. Those of us who entered the Seminary during that era will well remember the fact that every one of those seminary professors was present for our Matriculation Exercises. Again, at the end of our four years of seminary, when the time came for our day-long series of examinations, which included academic, spiritual, and practical, every single member of the faculty was present for that review, the examination, and the eventual placement for our first Call. And finally, when we were ordained as a class, as was the practice in Augustana, and in our case that was in the Greek Amphitheatre in Griffith Park in Los Angeles, California, those same faculty members were present. They were all stationed around that extensive altar rail, because there were 80 of us ordained that year. They had a major role in the “laying on of hands.” I shall never forget that it was the hand of Dr. Paul Lindberg, along with my pastor father-in-law, that was placed on my head.

That was Augustana Theological Seminary. It had a very special place in the life of the church. As a separate institution its last school year was 1961-62.

Its successor, the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, officially came into being on September 4, 1962, when the Articles of Consolidation were signed by Charles F. Carpentier, Secretary of State of Illinois. Initially, there were four seminaries in the consolidation, including Augustana, that formed the new school. For five years following 1962, three of these merging seminaries continued to meet on the Maywood campus, while the former Augustana Seminary continued to use the Rock Island campus. Then in 1967, when the new buildings had been

completed at 1100 East 55<sup>th</sup> Street, in the heart of the University of Chicago campus, the first classes entered.

Yesterday noon I had the privilege of sitting at the noon meal with a retired pastor who had been a member of that senior class. I said to him, "How in the world did that transition go for you? You spent two years on the campus in Rock Island, one year on your internship, and then in that critical last year, you moved to Chicago to a new location, merging with students from other seminaries, and embarking upon your senior year." His response was very positive. "It was the most exciting, thrilling, meaningful year of my life." Now that's exactly what we had hoped would happen when the Lutheran School of Theology came into being. Many of you, I am sure, have visited that campus. If you have already celebrated the 50th anniversary of your ordination, you received a warm welcome from LSTC, as the Seminary hosted you for your 50th anniversary celebration. Some of you spent additional years of study at that place. It's a wonderful story, to see how LSTC has developed and continues to this time.

There's a lot of history that preceded that date in 1962 when LSTC was formed. Essential to its formation was the merger that formed the Lutheran Church in America that occurred that same year. You may remember that it was back in 1955, that the United Lutheran Church in America made a bold move. They invited every Lutheran body in the United States to come together to form one Lutheran church. Actually there were only three bodies that responded. Augustana was one of those, and that was just three months after the invitation was extended. Likewise, the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, (the Happy Danes) and the Suomi Synod, (the Finnish Lutherans) signed on. These four church bodies formed what was called the JCLU, the Joint Commission on Lutheran Unity. That commission created the recommendations that led to the eventual formation of the Lutheran Church in America.

A major task for that commission was the consideration of the appropriate number and location of theological seminaries. Many throughout the church felt there were too many seminaries for this church to support. However, loyalties everywhere were deep and profound, and very few constituencies were willing to consider any changes in their particular seminary. The decision that came forth from JCLU in 1957 was a major one. It recommended that theological seminaries be primarily supported by regional synods. This was to be a radical shift for

members of the Augustana tradition, which was accustomed to national support. Regional support of colleges and other institutions was seen as acceptable, but among Augustana constituents was a fear that seminaries would suffer by this decision.

Dr. Karl E. Mattson, then President of Augustana Seminary, with real insight and prophetic vision, saw what a problem regional support by synods was going to be for a seminary in Rock Island. He predicted that many students would no longer apply there when many other opportunities for theological study would be available in other parts of the country. He wisely acknowledged that enrollment would likely decline. How accurate he was! During the ten years that preceded 1962, the average size of the incoming class in Rock Island was 52. But, in the five years that followed the formation of the Lutheran Church in America, there was a drop of 44%. An average of only 25 students entered the seminary in Rock Island each year during that five-year period. The handwriting was on the wall. It became very clear to Dr. Mattson and to others early on, that Rock Island was not going to be the place to which every potential student in the LCA with an Augustana background was going to come. Consequently, a major decision had to be made.

Fortunately the leadership in the Maywood seminary came to the same conclusion. It was perfectly clear that two strong Lutheran seminaries in the state of Illinois, supported by four Midwestern synods, would be extremely competitive, and would probably jeopardize the entire enterprise. To the credit of Dr. Armin Weng, Maywood's President, he sent a letter, in 1958, to Dr. Mattson which essentially read, "Why don't we get together, and talk?" A positive response from Augustana came just one week later. Obviously there was an urgency that everybody recognized. So the two seminaries, together with the AELC and Suomi Synod seminaries that had already relocated to the Maywood campus, formed an inter-seminary committee, and began conversations.

Early on the conclusion was reached that the new seminary should not be located on either campus of Rock Island or Maywood. This provided the opportunity for a major impulse to arise out of Augustana. It was an educational ideal that early Swedish pioneers had brought to America. It must be acknowledged that Dr. G.

Everett Arden, Augustana's Professor of Church History, had kept this legacy alive before the Church. This educational ideal was that theological education take place on a university campus where theological students could be exposed to all areas of learning and thus be better prepared to minister in the name of Christ to all persons and all aspects of life. In Dr. Arden's book, *THE SCHOOL OF THE PROPHETS*, he pointed out that the founders of Augustana Seminary came from a land and a church that had provided theological education in a university context, thus training a ministry that would be relevant to the needs of the age as well as the needs of the church. The early Swedish pioneer pastors in America were university graduates as illustrated by the fact that the first five ordained Pastors who came from Sweden in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to serve in the American church were university trained people. Dr. Arden pointed out further:

“A statute adopted by the Swedish Parliament in 1831 had provided that every theological student, prior to presenting himself for ministerial examination before the diocese in which he will serve, must furnish to that diocese an affidavit certifying that he has been matriculated in the university by the theological faculty and has been examined in all the required courses and has been approved as possessing such competence in dogmatics, moral theology, introduction, symbolics, exegesis, church history and pastoral theology, that he can be admitted to candidacy for the ministerial examinations by the diocese.” (1)

Now, in our day and age we may not think it so strange that rigorous academic training is required, but when one goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, especially during the frontier era here in America, there were many clergy functioning with very little formal education. Among many protestant denominations there was such an eagerness to establish congregations that many ministers were permitted to function with more zeal than knowledge. Not so in the Augustana Lutheran Church. Our forebears, having been university trained in Sweden, insisted that a similar academic practice be continued in America. Admittedly, in the light of necessity, there were some lay people who had limited training and were still set apart for ministry, but they were the exception rather than the rule. This exceptional practice was phased out as soon as possible.

In the light of this emphasis on the educational idea it was not strange that the Augustana representatives, joined with others, in pressing for a decision to locate the new seminary on the campus of a recognized university.

Parallel to what the inter-seminary committee was proposing, Dr. Conrad Bergendoff, the newly appointed theological education director for the LCA, made a thorough survey and study of the place of the seminaries in the Church. As the former President of Augustana College, which had attempted to inculcate this educational ideal on a smaller scale through the existence of Augustana College and Theological Seminary prior to the 1948 separation, he included this educational ideal in his initial report and recommendations to the first convention of the LCA when it met in Pittsburgh in 1963. He recommended that every theological seminary in the Lutheran Church in America should relocate to a university campus. The understanding was that students, set in the heart of an academic environment where they would be exposed not only to theological training but to all other academic disciplines and areas of life as well, would greatly enhance their preparation for ministry and make them well-rounded, trained pastors. Delegates to that convention, who were former members of the Augustana Lutheran Church, welcomed his recommendations. Others were not so sure.

Therefore, it was out of the heart of Augustana's educational ideal that the LSTC proposal was made. I do not mean to imply that others did not also support it, but the dynamic incentive that fostered it came out of Augustana. Leading the charge in this decision making process was President Karl E. Mattson who observed:

“As the Lutheran Church more and more enters into the maelstrom of modern life, it will need pastors who can face modern America with power. America must be addressed in the name of Jesus Christ if we are to keep and to adapt our Christian heritage. Where can a young man (this precedes the ordination of women) be trained so that he becomes such a man? The answer came easily. The best place for such training is a university environment since it is here that the various movements and tendencies which shape the future meet and engage in such dialogue if he is to speak

forcefully to modern America. Insights such as these elicited the decision to locate in a university setting.” (2)

This educational ideal, fostered by Augustana’s founders, and so clearly enunciated by Drs. Mattson, Bergendoff and Arden, informed the decision by LSTC founders to locate the new seminary on a university campus. The University of Chicago was chosen as the logical place. As it developed, Chicago was the only location where that ideal was implemented in the LCA. Indeed, it is true that the Philadelphia Seminary gave some thought to this possibility, and even launched a fund appeal to support it, but it all eventually came to naught, and the money was spent on the original campus.

There were several efforts to include more seminaries in these plans. Dr. Robert Marshall, highly respected President of the LCA, called together a committee to study theological education in the Northeast, with the hope that some sort of cooperation between Philadelphia and Gettysburg could be created. I served on that committee and was saddened by the lack of willingness to achieve some common ministry similar to the creation of LSTC. Nor was there much enthusiasm here in the Midwest for a further inclusive expression involving Northwestern Seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota, or Hamma Divinity School in Springfield, Ohio, despite LSTC’s efforts to involve them. To their credit, both of these seminaries did ultimately merge to form Luther-Northwestern in St. Paul, Minnesota, and Trinity Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. A fifth LCA seminary did join LSTC, by action of the Lutheran Church in America Convention’s vote on June 27, 1966, when Central Seminary of Fremont, Nebraska, merged with LSTC, just in time to have its faculty and students participate in the first school year in Chicago.

When you broach the question, “How did Augustana shape LSTC?” there are many answers to that question. My good colleague, Dr. Theodore Swanson, stated in his lecture the quality of theological scholarship that certainly was a strong factor. But, primarily, I would submit, was the educational ideal which burned brightly over the 102 year history that was Augustana. We can thank our early founders who brought this accent from their native Sweden and transmitted it onto the new soil of America. We can thank Augustana’s leaders throughout the decades that clung to this ideal. We can thank the committees that

formulated the merger plans and pushed for their implementation. Above all, we can thank God for blessing this school and the ministry its graduates have contributed throughout the world. We now look to Dr. Nieman and his colleagues as we entrust to them the mission of the future in seeking to serve Jesus Christ and the world through this very special seminary, the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

(1) LSTC: DECADE OF DECISION, 1969, Harold C. Skillrud, p. 10

(2) Ibid., p. 73