

Remembering Edgar Carlson

Pastor, teacher, theologian, college president,
educator, father, grandfather, and friend.

Joanna Carlson Swanson
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Joanna Carlson Swanson graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College, earned her Master's Degrees in Physiology from Iowa State University (1968) and in Systematic Theology (1992) from Luther Seminary. She served as an Associate in Ministry at Normandale Lutheran Church in Edina, Minnesota. Married to Jack Swanson, she is mother of three and grandmother to seven.

While to the church, the college, and community he had a number of titles and positions, to us he was Dad. It is the way I prefer to refer to him here.

We'll start at the beginning – on the rural farm in Wisconsin with immigrant parents and six siblings. He walked to country school, later becoming the first son to attend high school and the first to go on to college. He arrived at Gustavus in 1926, matured, and graduated with honors in 1930. Coached by Professor Evan Anderson, he became a champion debater, winning, along with Wilton Bergstrand, the National Pi Kappa Delta Debate Championship. Far more important to us than the debate championship, was winning the heart of our mother, Ebba Edquist, who graduated one year later. Three years of seminary followed at Augustana, and he received his first call to a fledgling congregation in Minneapolis – Mount Olivet. The struggles and challenges of the depression marked that period. While serving Mount Olivet, Dad began graduate studies at the University of Minnesota and five years later, returned to Gustavus Adolphus College as a professor of Christianity.

The Augustana Synod encouraged their young leaders. Dad wrote, spoke, and published on a variety of religious and biblical topics and to a number of audiences.

In the late 30's, the country was divided for or against isolationism and the conflict on the continent fermented by Hitler. The synod maintained its historic position affirming pacifism. Dad wrote passionately in defense of pacifism, advised conscientious objectors, and was a leader in the Augustana Lutheran Fellowship of Reconciliation. With the attack on Pearl Harbor, the national resolve moved towards war. During the war, the synod took the lead in calling for a just and lasting peace and eventual reconstruction of a war torn world. Writing in 1943 in 'The Lutheran Outlook', Dad addressed the church as one who 'could help bring about the opportunity for a lasting peace by aiding in the creating of an international consciousness'.¹

Dad remained at Gustavus until 1942, then left to join the faculty at Augustana Seminary as associate professor of English Bible and History of Doctrine. He intended to make that a long term commitment. Added professional opportunities in the future were possible.

¹

1. Roger Pettenger, The Peace Movement of the Augustana Lutheran Church, p215.

During his second year at the seminary, he was approached by Minnesota Conference President, Emil Swenson, to consider returning to Gustavus as president. Although not pursuing the position, Dad was open to being considered. The possibility of his leaving the seminary was met with mixed reviews. Dr. P. O. Bersell, the synod president, was disappointed that his name had been placed in nomination, as he preferred that Dad become the seminary dean. Some pastors appear to have agreed with Dr. Bersell. Eighty four seminary students petitioned him to remain there. There was a little concern over his pacifist record, and college alumni were more familiar with other candidates. But by spring, the Gustavus Board placed his name in front of the conference and he was approved. His agreement with the board allowed him to continue his theological work as teacher and pastor so that he could continue to preach, write, and lecture. He considered it essential that a college president should seek to incarnate in his own person the kind of education for which the institution stands, both as to spiritual and academic attitudes and interests.²

Graduate work at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago led to his doctoral degree in 1944. His area of expertise was the field of Swedish theological research. Sufficiently proficient in Swedish as the language of his parents, he acquired the vocabulary to translate and interpret the works of Billing, Bring, Söderblom, Aulen, and Nygren. He brought the Swedish interpretation of Luther's theology to the American theological scene for Lutheran and non-Lutheran pastors, theologians, and leaders. This emphasis continued to influence his thought and writing and a brief review is helpful in understanding his subsequent work.

'The Reinterpretation of Luther' and Swedish Theological Motifs

Swedish theological research addressed motifs or themes in Luther's theology. It began at the beginning of the 20th Century with Billing and Söderblom and continued through the research and writing done by Aulen, Nygren, Bring, and Wingren. They found themes overlooked or under appreciated by other theologians and Luther scholars. Their primary interest was to discover and clarify the unique and distinctive character of Christianity. Luther's insights provided one of the principal sources for this investigation.³ Known as motif research, it included new or fresh interpretations of atonement, revelation, sin, church, vocation, and ecumenism. Much of this was in contrast to the theology anchored in German Luther studies as well as the theology in America. Introducing and interpreting these themes for an American audience became the basis for his doctoral dissertation and later for the book, The Reinterpretation of Luther, published in 1948.

The foundational motif, as described by Nygren, focused on the nature of God's love, defined as *agape*. This divine love is spontaneous and is by its nature given to overflow towards others. It makes no distinction between persons, nor is it tied to human worth. It is found in God's love in Christ for a sinful world. This divine love stoops to man's level (rather than insisting that humans rise to a more favorable level) and creates fellowship with sinners on the basis of forgiveness. God's power is the power of love and it is shown

2. Edgar Carlson, *Reminiscences for the Family*, p. 152.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
in Christ's life, death, and resurrection.⁴

To the Swedish theologians, sin was not disobedience, but self-centeredness. It was this absorption with self that constitutes the rebellion against God that the devil is intent to promote. Humans transcend their egocentricity only when they accept forgiveness. Rather than disobeying God, it is one's nature to place oneself first. Throughout Dad's religious writings, one sees this egocentric nature as the root of difficulty for individuals, church, family, and society.⁵

Archbishop Nathan Söderblom did much of the pioneering research in the area of revelation. Revelation was not to be considered an intellectual accomplishment, nor tied to certain times in history. Rather it is the divine activity where God does something for man and in man. It is God's personal confrontation with the individual.⁶ It is the nature of revelation to create faith. It is the creative source of the Church.⁷ God's ongoing activity is the continuation of what God did in Christ.

If you recall Luther's explanations regarding baptism and the Lord's Supper, you remember the questions regarding benefits. Luther listed them as 'Forgiveness of sin, redeems from death and the devil', and eternal salvation'. In the 3rd Petition of the Lord's Prayer, 'the devil, the world, and our own flesh' are identified as operating against God's will. For Luther, the devil is the hostile force that seeks to undo God's work of grace in the human heart. The devil's purpose is to destroy faith and create unbelief, to divorce the sense of guilt from faith's confidence in forgiveness, and persuade the sinner that God is hostile to him.⁸ The battleground between God and the devil is the human personality.⁹

Atonement theories address the question of how humans are made right with God. The one presented by the Swedish theologians is known as the Classic Theory and traces back to third century church theologians. It can be summarized like this:

'Through Jesus Christ, God entered human history and engaged the forces of evil in decisive combat. The important thing about the suffering of Christ is that it was the full revelation of God who suffered. In the death of Christ, God defeats the devil and releases man from the bondage into which his sinful rebellion brought him. God's nature is love and the atonement is an act of love. Through the atonement, God brings about fellowship with humans on the basis of His grace.'¹⁰

4. Edgar M. Carlson, *Reinterpretation of Luther*, p. 89

5. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

6. *Ibid.*, p.120.

7. *Ibid.*, p.185.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

10. Ibid., p.58.

Throughout these writings, one sees the motif of conflict and then victory through Christ's atoning deed over hostile powers. When we look later at a few writings from the Classic Christian Faith, we'll see examples of God's love, forgiveness, and defeat of evil powers.

This discipline also had an expanded view of the nature of the Church. The Gospel creates the church.¹¹ Its core element is neither congregation nor leadership, but God's Word. The church is as universal as the gospel that creates it.¹² No boundaries can be drawn around it, but it is not invisible.¹³ The church is holy because of the Gospel. The church becomes visible through the preaching of Word and administration of the sacraments. The institutional church becomes the visible organ.¹⁴ While other models had played a prominent role in American Lutheranism, this had implications for creative and broader interaction.

God's Love and Ethics

The understanding of agape love enabled the Swedish theologians to build their base for ethics. Religion deals with fellowship between God and man, while ethics concerns fellowship between individuals. Faith is putting oneself at the disposal of God so that God's love can flow out to others.¹⁵ Because God's love is unmotivated and spontaneous, humanity need not consider service to the neighbor as a way of earning God's love. The believer's love towards others is to be as unconditional as God's love toward the believer.¹⁶ One is to be a Christ to the neighbor. We are the instruments through which God's love functions in the world. Love flows down from God through us to the neighbor. Although humans are sinners apart from forgiveness, they can still do socially useful acts. They can serve the neighbor for the neighbor's sake.¹⁷

Swedish theology focused on creation and law, particularly the first use of the law. God created orders or perhaps we'd say categories so that community could function. These orders or stations God willed into existence. It was described as the way God arranged or ordered society. These orders testify to an enduring relationship between God and the world which is rooted in creation and not destroyed by sin.¹⁸ The classical description of orders included marriage and family, political state, economic society and the church. These orders constituted the channels in which Christian love flows out to others.¹⁹ Since each order has a function in society, it is entitled to the conditions that enable it to function properly.²⁰ (This concept

11. Ibid., p.129

12. Ibid., p.134

13. Ibid., p.139

14. Ibid., p. 35

15. Ibid., p. 214

16. Ibid., p. 224

17. Ibid., p. 92

18. Ibid., p. 209

19. Ibid., p. 99

20. Ibid., p. 99

reappears as a given in society thirty years later as Dad builds a case for the church related private college.) God acts through the orders to minister to the needs of others.²¹ One's calling could be described as serving God through doing well one's daily responsibilities. This view of society formed the framework for subsequent books and lectures.

In an earlier era, particularly under the influence of pietism, the church had been less willing to address the nature of government or its responsibilities. Luther's doctrine of the Two Kingdoms had been interpreted as separating the role of the government from the Gospel and the church. The Swedish theologians challenged that and laid out a detailed rationale for the church to speak boldly about the responsibilities of the state to her citizens. The church would no longer be passive in relationship to the state and the life of the community. The role of the church in addressing the basic needs of humanity became one of Dad's reoccurring themes. It appeared again as part of the discussion at Evanston and in his address to the Lutheran World Federation Assembly

(These relational concepts were developed in Sweden in the late 30's and early 40's and Dad researched this during and shortly after World War II. This is presented here in 1948, after the end of World War II, but during the rise of communism. In America, the changes in desegregation and the civil rights movement in society and government were still at least a decade in the future.)

Dad's writings endorsed a more ecumenical view of the church, articulated a strong doctrine of creation and vocation, and an insightful view on the created orders. This bold and innovative thinking led to his involvement with the Commission of Twenty Five, the Lutheran World Federation, and subsequent Theological Commissions.

Other Theological Work

Dad's expertise in Swedish theology gave him many opportunities to speak and interpret these developments. Summer school courses, pastoral conferences for both Lutheran Church in America and American Lutheran Church, and church wide committees were added venues.

The Lutheran World Federation invited him in 1950 to be one of four Americans to participate, along with representatives of European churches, in post-war reconciliation conferences. He prepared papers and attended conferences. When the Lutheran World Federation met in 1957 in Minneapolis, Dad was one of five keynote speakers to the full assembly. His address was titled 'Free for Service to the World'. Included in that was both a challenge and a criticism of the American churches for their treatment of blacks and the reticence of the churches to address segregation. Later, in the mid 60's, he worked on the seven member Theological Commission of the Lutheran World Federation, attending meetings in Pullach, Germany; Leipzig, East Germany; Borås, Sweden; Mosche, Tanzania; and Evian, France.²²

21. Ibid., p. 100

22. Carlson, *Reminiscences for the Family*. p.176.

The World Council of Churches invited him, also in 1950, to be involved as one of 25 theologians to prepare a statement on the role of the church in the post-war world. This 'Commission of Twenty Five' did preparatory work for the second assembly of the World Council meeting in Evanston, Illinois. He was one of seven from the United States and the only Lutheran. His subsequent book, *The Church and the Public Conscience*, developed out of those discussions.

The Church and the Public Conscience

Dad described the challenging relationship between church and society. Frequently the role of the church in relation to political, economic, and social systems was that of the critic: defining limits, holding it in check or denouncing its abuses. In this book he proposed to give the church a positive, rather than critical, role in its relationship to society.²³

In Luther's concept of society's created orders, all the orders are on the side of God and are part of God's aggression against the devil. God works through both the spiritual and secular realms. In the spiritual God acts through His Word and all activity and authority are on God's side. God also acts in the secular realm, through human instruments and institutions and in relationship with people.²⁴

God loves because of God's nature, not because of human worth or characteristics. We are to be the channels through which this love flows. But there is an intentional way that this love is to be distributed. The Biblical ethic states that those who have proportionately lesser worth according to any standards have proportionately greater claim upon our love and service. Luther emphasized that God can only be served by serving one's neighbor. We serve God and fulfill the law of love when we do an honest day's work.²⁵

Luther's description of the dual responsibilities of humans is found here in more contemporary language:

"Every man stands in a twofold relationship toward this total environment. On the one hand, he stands directly under God, wholly dependent upon him and wholly responsible to him. ... On the other hand, he stands in a relationship of responsibility and authority toward his fellowmen. Here he acts as an instrument of God in conferring good upon his fellows and is acted upon by others as instruments of God in conferring blessing upon him."²⁶

Responsibilities were also placed on church and government. "It is the church that is the instrument through which men can be brought into fellowship with God. Because the church's spiritual mission is to bring men into fellowship, social problems such as peace,

23. Edgar M. Carlson, *The Church and the Public Conscience*. Muhlenberg Press.1956. Reprinted by Greenwood Press, a division of Congressional Information Service, Inc. Westport, Connecticut. p.xi.

24. Ibid., p.30

25. Ibid., p. 25

26. Ibid., p. 32

27. Ibid., p. 66

justice, health, hunger, and honesty must become part of its own spiritual mission.²⁷ The church can not be content to be limited to those concerns that an indifferent state would consider religious. The church is tied to all the social structures through the law.

The state has responsibilities toward the spiritual regime that are quite different from the separation of church and state. The state has a positive role to play in providing the context in which the gospel can be effectively proclaimed. The state stands at the top of the social organism and is responsible for the proper functioning of all the others. Its function is to preserve order and its divine function is as a guardian of justice.²⁸

The church has responsibilities towards the state as well. The church is the custodian of both the law and gospel. The Law is the law of love. Only the church knows this law. If love is the law of life, then the church must proclaim that law to the state, home, school, and economic society in ways that are meaningful.²⁹ The church must also guard against deception and insist that all relevant information is available to citizens and lawmakers.³⁰

A second responsibility that the church has towards the state is to make clear to the state that it is subject to the sovereign who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Dad distinguishes between the functions given to the state in the created order and demands placed upon the state by its citizens. He also clarified that the relation between the church and the state is based on the church's responsibilities under the law, not the gospel.³¹

The public conscience rests ultimately upon the law which is inherent in the order of creation. But the conscience is creatively and dynamically affected through the operation of the gospel, for the gospel is the fulfillment of law.³²

Finally there are words about stewardship. In the giving of one's means for the needs of others, practical considerations seem to have an obvious place. One is not expected to be indifferent to the use to which his means are put. The Christian ethic calls for practical wisdom. We are called upon to do good for others and the more good we can do the more fully we are obeying the commandment to love. The productivity of our gift may well be a Christian consideration in the giving of it.³³ God prompts men to the most efficient and productive use of the means which he has placed in their hands for the benefit of mankind.

He completes the book with a discussion of Christian hope taken from the Evanston Assembly. He poses the question, 'Can the Christian have a comparable certainty that his

28. Ibid., p. 67

29. Ibid., p. 70

30. Ibid., p. 73

31. Ibid., p. 70

32. Ibid., p. 81

33. Ibid., p. 94

work in the world is of eternal significance?’ He answers his question this way:

“The risen and living Christ who is our hope is also our source of confidence that we can give ourselves to the fulfillment of his law in every sphere of life and know that our obedience will not be futile. It is not necessary to know that we shall succeed in the effort in which we are engaged, but if we are working at that which God wants done in the world, we may know that we are on the side that will win in the end. ... It is our assignment to bring as much of mankind and of history as we can to share in that triumph.”³⁴

(In the climate of the 50’s when culture was presumed to be Christian, positive statements could be made about state and church that sounded appropriate in that time period. It was an era before the rise of individualism over against community and the common good.)

The Classic Christian Faith

Daily college chapel provided Dad with his pulpit. A series of sermons based on Luther’s Small Catechism formed the framework for The Classic Christian Faith. Considered one of the finest interpretations of the catechism, it became a highly regarded work. It was first published in 1959 and reissued in 1978. Copies can still be bought and sold through the Internet! Here are excerpts:

The First Commandment

“We say about these Ten Commandments that they are the ‘Law of God’. By this we mean that they are written into the very structure of the world which he created. They define obligations that are inherent in being His creatures. It may be possible to conceive of a world which would run equally well without respect for life or property or purity or reputation, but it would not be this world. The Ten Commandments define the obligation which is laid upon us by the very fact that we exist as persons in this kind of world. They define the obligations which we must assume if we are to become persons.”

“Who are the rival gods whom we may enthrone above Him? ...I think the real rival to the throne room which belongs to God is not any of these things which we seek for ourselves or by which we seek to extend our control over the world. The real rival of God is our self... Self-centeredness will corrupt every virtue, it will pervert every good intent, it will set us over against God whose will is the law of our lives and of the universe about us.”³⁵

The Apostles’ Creed: ‘I Believe’

“I want to say two things about faith before we begin to talk about Him in whom we believe. The first is that faith is not a lower kind of knowledge. Faith is not an uncertain attitude, a kind of surmise that something may be true. ...The writer to the Hebrews says, ‘Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.’ It is assurance and it is conviction. When the Christian says, ‘I believe in God’, he is making the most confident affirmation of which he is capable.”³⁶

34. Ibid., p. 104

35. Edgar M. Carlson, Classic Christian Faith, p17-18

36. Ibid., p. 52

'The Third Day He Rose Again from the Dead'

“He to whom men had done their worst when they nailed Him to the tree had done His best for men. He came back to claim unworthy disciples as His own, without a word of rebuke or censure. He gave them a gospel of forgiveness to be preached to all the world – to priest and scribe...friend and foe. The God who was incarnate in Jesus Christ is love. The incontrovertible proof of it is the death and resurrection of our Lord. It is this absolute and unconditioned love of God which could take all the evil that there is in the world into itself and bear it in place of those who should have borne it - it is this that is the good news. ... There is nothing that God can do for men which He did not do for them when He bore their sins in His body on the tree.”³⁷

The Lord's Prayer: 'Amen'

This final word, 'Amen' is our own personal contribution and endorsement. It is our 'signature'. By its use we claim the whole of the Lord's Prayer as our own..... When we place the Amen of our lips at the end of this prayer, we are saying that we intend to put our lives behind its every petition. It is almost as though we made a vow, before God and our fellow men, to live as we have prayer. ...It is not the sign that we have finished the prayer; it is the commitment that it will stay with us as our guiding light. We will indeed look for the answer, but we will also work as we have prayed.³⁸

Gustavus Years

Dad's years from 1944-1968 were marked by his dual roles in theology and higher education. Gustavus grew in a number of ways. The campus landscape changed with the addition of the Bernadotte Library in 1950, construction of many of the dormitories, temporary buildings erected to meet the expanding student enrollment but have now disappeared (the Classroom Annex, Art Barn and Little Theater), Vikner Language Building, Food Service, and the Student Union.³⁹

Christ Chapel, so long in planning, and a gift from the Minnesota and Red River Valley Conferences of the Augustana synod, was dedicated in the Centennial year 1962. Placed in the center, it was to be the spiritual heart of the campus. With its completion, chapel attendance changed from required to voluntary. By virtue of its size and prominence, it changed not only the landscape on campus, but could also leave an imprint on all students. Each school day the chapel bell calls the academic community to worship. Special services like Christmas in Christ Chapel, the Homecoming memorial service, Farewell and Beginnings for incoming students mark significant moments for the Gustavus family.⁴⁰

The Nobel Hall of Science, opened in 1963, provided the science department with good facilities while establishing a lasting link between the college and the Nobel Foundation. Honoring Alfred Nobel, its dedication brought 26 Nobel laureates to campus.⁴¹

37. Ibid., p. 52

38. Ibid., p. 158

39. Doniver Lund, Gustavus Adolphus College 'Celebrating 125 Years', p.74

40. Ibid., p. 77

41 Ibid., p. 88

Curriculum and programs also expanded. Gustavus adopted the 4-1-4 curriculum in 1963. Enrollment grew dramatically, faculty grew both in number and expertise, and the college moved into a strong position for the future.⁴²

Scope and perspective grew as well. Using her Swedish roots as an expression of uniqueness and strength, the library became an American tribute to Count Folke Bernadotte, a victim of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict. The concept of the Nobel Conferences originated during the dedicatory events for Nobel Hall, the Nobel Foundation endorsed them the following year, and Gustavus continues to benefit each year from the conversations of outstanding leaders on a wide range of topics. Plans for the Schaefer Fine Arts Building with the Bjorling concert hall were underway when he left.⁴³

In the early 60's Dad encouraged the recruitment and inclusion of African American students from high schools in the Deep South. When addressing the LWF in 1957, he criticized churches for their lack of leadership in addressing segregation, poverty, and treatment of the blacks. Following the introduction of the new curriculum, plans developed to recruit a considerable number of black students. Admissions counselors built relationships with high school counselors. The college arranged funding and other services to assist the students while studying at Gustavus. In the next 20 years, 142 blacks graduated and more attended. In a recently completed Master's Thesis, William Hustwit credited Dad with the form, direction, encouragement, and money to successfully recruit black students years before integration was well established in other private and public colleges.⁴⁴

My sense or recollection of Dad's relationship to the Gustavus family, including but not limited to the students, was one of deep affection, great confidence in the education process, and hope that the Gustavus experience would serve the Gustavus community well. He was not only theologian and educator, but he encouraged students and attended their activities. Plays, concerts, athletic events, entertaining in their home, and even fraternity and sorority banquets were just a few of the activities he shared with students.

Here is an excerpt that tells a lot about Dad's sense of ministry to college students, (found on the Internet as a chapel talk from the early 50's). It is titled 'Education for Life' and was written in response to a father's note that a student who had been drafted had died following a lengthy imprisonment during the Korean conflict.

'I wonder what would be practical and functional and realistic for a man about to spend 864 days in a prison compound and then the rest of his life in a hospital. ... Most of all I have been wondering whether we gave him the kind of an understanding of life, the sort of values and convictions that would enable a young man to make sense out of it all. Were the foundations of his life secure enough to carry the weight of disappointment and frustration? Was his faith big enough to take imprisonment and sickness and even death in stride? Did he

42 Ibid., p.78

43. William Hustwit. A Different Kind of Civil Rights Work, p.74.

44. Ibid. pp. 23-35.

understand the simple Gospel of divine love and forgiveness and the sure hope of life eternal so that the encroaching shadow held no terror for him?You (students) sit now where he sat. I hope you're getting what he needed most, because it's your greatest need too.'⁴⁵

Dad returned to Gustavus in 1983 to give lectures and chapel talks on the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth. Former Chaplain Richard Elvee described his leadership this way:

'Edgar, it seems to me, is a quiet man. He is a pensive and thoughtful man, gifted with the ability to speak and to write a very clear but rich prose. He is a theologian and churchman whose example has encouraged many of us to be committed Christian scholars. He is a man of tradition and yet every time an issue arose, he was as modern as today. He is committed to fundamental Christian ideas and yet taken with what is coming down the road. He was determined to identify what was continuous in the Christian tradition, what was classic, and yet he was willing to experience the changes that were coming along, the dynamics of the history of our time.'⁴⁶

One of the questions asked about Dad by contemporary theologians is what his contributions to religion would or could have become had he remained at a seminary. That becomes one of the hypothetical questions that elude a concrete answer. In communication with Dr. Bersell in 1944, he wrote 'If my chief contribution to the church is to be in the field of theological training, I will want it to be as large a contribution as possible'.⁴⁷

One answer would be to note his contributions to theology while serving as college president. Included in that list would be his work with Faith and Order Division of the WCC, his meetings with LWF to prepare a statement on the role of the church in the post-war world, his preparation for the 3rd Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Evanston in 1954, and the keynote address in 1957 at the Lutheran World Federation gathering in Minneapolis. Publication of The Reinterpretation of Luther, The Church and the Public Conscience, and The Classic Christian Faith, were outstanding theological works. From 1965-70 he served as a member of the Theological Commission of the LWF. He also served in leadership roles on the Executive Committee of the LCA.

From another perspective, his leadership at Gustavus placed him in a position where he influenced the spiritual and intellectual development of thousands of college students through regular chapel talks, speeches, writings and other less formal ways of influence. He consistently articulated the law of love that addresses the neighbors' needs as a worthy line of work and life's investment. Graduates left committed to service long before service and vocation became institutionalized. His audience was not only theological, but also young adults in the mainstream of society and who carried with them the Christian message.

When the measure is taken of his contributions to theology, we need to include his impact on students, graduates, and their families who were influenced by what he said and did; and the

45. Edgar M. Carlson, 'Education for Life' Chapel Talk. [http\www.gac.edu](http://www.gac.edu) home page.

46. Edgar M. Carlson, Luther and the College: Five Great Ideas, p.iii,iv.

47. Edgar M. Carlson, Reminiscences for the Family, p155.

affect on congregations that provided students and benefited by graduates formed by the church college. On the one hand he served and led the college community, and on the other he worked with theologians and church leaders with whom he shared ideas and probed the role of the church in contemporary life. For him, it was a rich balance and he was a fortunate man to contribute and excel in both areas.

If you pose the question of why he made the choice he did, I think it was rooted in his sense of calling. To be sought without seeking the position, to never question your choice, to sense that God gave you the resources needed all sound like the vocabulary of the call.

When one reads his understanding of the church related college, one hears the tightly knit argument that an education where truth is pursued surrounded by the Gospel is the best one could wish for the church's young adults, (as well as for his three children, all Gustavus graduates.)

His vision for church related colleges

As his tenure and seniority lengthened, he was asked to give an astute analysis of the relationship between the church and education, the mission of the church related college, the student and the state. He wrote in Church Sponsored Higher Education and the Lutheran Church in America (1967) that “if one regards creation as God’s on-going work, including the present state of the development of society, it appears incontestable that the school is a necessary structure for the functioning of man and society. The distinctive function of the school is its concern for truth as such and for the development of one’s capacity to discern and use the truth. All the other orders have a stake in education.– the economy, the state for educated citizens, and the church so that leaders can represent the Christian interpretation of life in the world.”⁴⁸ He continued a detailed explanation of why the church needs the colleges, how the church benefits from being a part of higher education, challenges for the state to support the student regardless of where they attend, and for the church to recommit to the church related college.⁴⁹

In 1968, Dad left Gustavus to continue working on behalf of all 16 four year private colleges in the state. He founded and developed the Minnesota Private College Council. Under his leadership the Council became the statutory representative of private higher education in Minnesota. A Research Foundation was established to conduct research and administer grants for the benefit of the private colleges, and the Minnesota Private College Fund offered corporate support for all the colleges. In these later years in higher education, he became the public voice for all the private colleges in Minnesota. Working with his vision, the colleges addressed the public with a common voice and a shared vision. Quoting their current Executive Director, Dr. David Laird, Dad “saw that both the individual and society benefited by expanding educational opportunity to those in need of financial assistance. He was a

48. Edgar M. Carlson, Church Sponsored Higher Education, pp.34-35.

49. Ibid., p.34

constant advocate for educational quality and for equality of opportunity. His respectful, but insistent advocacy of financial aid for college students helped build the foundation of federal, state, and institutional programs which have continued to help students.”⁵⁰

He campaigned intensely for adequate financial aid for students. With his keen, analytical mind, he built a persuasive case with supporting facts and surveys for state financial support going to students, regardless of the school they would be attending. In the areas of health care and welfare, aid went directly to qualified recipients and they choose the vendors. He advocated the same arrangement for education. He maintained that the money distributed to education would help more people if it was distributing according to need rather than directed to institutions.⁵¹ When he left the Minnesota Private College Council in 1975, the Council created the Edgar M. Carlson Award for Distinguished Service to Higher Education.

He served briefly as director for the ‘National Representation Project’ of the Association of American Colleges. In that project he addressed the national situation for private colleges and proposed a new national representative body limited to private institutions. This resulted in the formation of the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities.

His last major work, The Future of Church-Related Higher Education, addressed key issues challenging church-related colleges. Published in 1977, he covered a range of crucial concerns. He analyzed and compared the strengths of the church related private college to private colleges without church connections. Differences between public universities, vocational, technical schools, and the private colleges were examined. Other topics ranged from academic freedom, to faculty commitment to goals and values, rationale for financial aid, diversity and conformity, and relationships between church and church related college were. His understanding of the church related college was that it must consciously embrace purposes and goals that include personal fulfillment and social adequacy as well as academic excellence.⁵²

In the years when others enjoyed fewer responsibilities, Dad met new challenges. He was Director of the National Representative Project for the Association of American Colleges for one year. He was asked to join the staff at Luther/Northwestern Seminary as Dean of Students followed by several years as Visiting Professor of Systematic Theology. (1976 – 1979). He returned for one year to the Minnesota Private College Council. Hamline University turned to him to be Interim President in 1981-82. He served congregations as interim pastor. Interspersed were interesting jaunts to Europe, Africa, and Asia and time for family and friends.

50. David Laird, Personal letter.

51. Edgar M. Carlson, Church Sponsored Higher Education, p54-55.

52. Edgar M. Carlson, The Future of Church-Related Higher Education

We can't tell Dad's story without mentioning our mother, Ebba Edquist Carlson. They met while in college, she taught high school biology until their marriage following his call to Mount Olivet. She was supportive of him and of us, gracious, caring, kind, interested in others, and a wonderful wife and mother. She was a remarkable hostess and loved having people in their home. She excelled in all things related to family: children and grandchildren were my parents' delight. They complimented each other well.

Here is Dad's conclusion to his family history – a fitting way to end.

*There is no way of summarizing so rich a life as Ebba and I had together. I can only say thanks to all who have made it rich in opportunities and at least acceptable in achievement.*⁵³

53. Carlson, Reminiscences, p178.

Writings and Publications

Books

The Reinterpretation of Luther 1947

The Church and The Public Conscience 1956

The Classic Christian Faith 1959

Church Sponsored Higher Education and the Lutheran Church in America 1967

The Future of Church-Related Higher Education 1977.

Articles and Reports, a partial listing:

- ‘The Prophetic Interpretation of History’. *Augustana Quarterly*: VolXVIII, October 1939. p322-332.
- ‘*The Open Book*’ p.19-28 from Voices through the Open Door: Presentations for the Augustana Luther League February 1939
- ‘Christ-Given Liberty’ Ashram Study Booklet for the Lutheran Student Association of America based on Martin Luther’s ‘Freedom of a Christian’ 1939
- ‘The Cross and Our Freedom’, From Throne to Cross: 5 Lenten Sermons. Augustana Book Concern: p143-176, 1940.
- ‘The Interpretation of Luther in Modern Swedish Theology’. *Augustana Quarterly*: July 1944. Reprinted in the University of Chicago publication in 1944
- ‘Luther’s Conception of Government’. Church History: Vol XV, No 4, December 1946
- ‘A Lutheran Philosophy of Education’ *Journal of the Association of Lutheran College Faculties*, p 7-9. Twelfth Annual Conference, 1948.
- ‘Gustaf Aulen and the Atonement’. Seminarian, p 33 –37. Concordia Theological Seminary, St. Louis MO., 1956.
- ‘Free for Service in the World’ Lutheran World: Publication of the Lutheran World Federation, Dec 1957.. Also in ‘Messages of the Third Assembly’ The Lutheran World Federation, The Proceedings of the Third Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, and *Lutheran Health and Welfare Annual*, 1960, p 8-27.
- ‘Christian Conscience and the Law’. *Colloquy on Law and Theology*. p175-195. Papers presented at Valparaiso University: October, 1960. The Lutheran Academy for Scholarship. St. Louis, MO
- ‘The Sermon as Encounter’ The Seminary Review. *Lutheran School of Theology*: 1963 p.1.-12
- ‘The Doctrine of the Ministry in the Confessions’ p.118-131. *Lutheran Quarterly*: May, 1963. Reprinted in *Lutheran Quarterly* in 1993.
- ‘The Church in Education’ p.194-212 in Theology in the Life of the Church edited by Robert Bertram. Fortress Press. 1963.
- Introduction and edited the 1965 edition of Nathan Soderblom’s The Nature of Revelation.
- ‘The Two Realms and the Modern World’. *Lutheran World*: Publication of the Lutheran World Federation Vol XII, No 4 1965. Originally given in Leipzig.
- Report of the Commission on ‘The Nature and Mission of the Congregation’. 1967
- ‘Jesus’ Teaching and Society’ A working Paper of the Commission on Theology of the Lutheran World Federation. Published in *Lutheran World*; Publication of the Lutheran World Federation Vol XV, 1968
- A Report and Appraisal’ from the LWF’s Commission on Theology. *Lutheran World*, 1969 ‘The Theology Commission Meeting’. Also in *Lutherische Rundschau* (German)
- ‘Public Policy and Church Related Higher Education: A Document for Study and Discussion’. For The Lutheran Committee on Public Policy and Church Related Higher Education. Dec 1971
- Translated Credo by Gustaf Wingren from Swedish into English in 1981.
- “Uncommon Means for the Common Task’. Lutheran Educational Conference of North America.

- ‘The Carlson Report’ for the Association of American Colleges. 1975
- “Institutional Mission and Identity in Lutheran Higher Education”. 1979
- Church and College: A Vital Partnership. National Congress on Church related Colleges and Universities. 1980.

Honors and awards

Royal Order of the North Star from King Gustaf VI Adolph 1956
 Commander in the Order of the North Star by the King of Sweden 1963
 Guest to the Nobel Awards Ceremonies 1963

Distinguished Alumni Citation in Theology Gustavus 1957
 Greater Gustavus Award for distinguished contributions to Gustavus 1959

Honored by Pi Kappa Delta, national speech fraternity, as one of 50 of its most distinguished.
 Appointed one of 83 to North Star Research Institute
 Chairman of the Health Manpower Study Commission for the Upper Midwest
 Chairman of the Commission on the Nature and Mission of the Congregation
 President of the Foundation for Luther Research 1965
 Commission on the Humanities. Witnessed signing of the Humanities Bill at the White House 1965.
 Awarded St Teresa’s ‘Teresa of Avila Award’ for outstanding service to the state, community, church and higher education. 1965
 Honorary degrees from Augustana College, Augustana Seminary, Rock Island, and St. John’s University, Collegeville, MN

Edgar M. Carlson Teaching Award, given by Gustavus, goes to outstanding faculty member.
 Edgar M. Carlson Award for Distinguished Service to Higher Education, given by Minnesota Private College Council.
 Edgar M. Carlson Nursing Scholarship at Mount Olivet Careview Home.

Carlson Administration Building at Gustavus named for him in 1974.

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Reprinted by Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981.
- _____ *Church Sponsored Higher Education and the Lutheran Church in America* 1967. A Study Document Prepared for the Board of College Education and Church Vocations. New York: 1967.
- _____ *The Classic Christian Faith: Chapel Meditations Based on Luther's Small Catechism*. Rock Island, Ill: Augustana Press, 1959.
- _____ 'Education for Life' (Chapel Talk). www.gac.edu home page.
- _____ 'Free for Service in the World'. *Proceedings of the 3rd Assembly of Lutheran World Federation*. Minneapolis, Minnesota, U.S.A: August 15-25, 1957.
- _____ *The Future of Church Related Higher Education*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1977.
- _____ *Luther and the College: Five Great Ideas. A series of chapel talks*. Introduction by Chaplain Richard Elvee. Printed by Gustavus Adolphus College: 1983.
- _____ *Reinterpretation of Luther*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1948.
- _____ *Reminiscences for the Family*. Privately printed. 1990
- Gustavus Quarterly. May, 1968.
- Gustavus Quarterly. Summer, 1992.
- William Hustwit. *A Different Kind of Civil Rights Work: The Gustavus Adolphus College Black Recruitment Program*. A thesis presented for the Master of Arts Degree. University of Mississippi. 2004.
- Dr. David Laird, Executive Director of Minnesota Private College Council. Press release from Minnesota Private College Council. April, 1992.
- Pettenger, Roger Wesley. *The Peace Movement of the Augustana Lutheran Church as a Catalyst in the Americanization Process*. Washington State University: 1987.

Summary

Edgar M. Carlson contribution to the church took varied forms. As a teacher and theologian, he led students, lay leaders and pastors to a richer understanding of doctrine, vocation and service, and church and society. As a master of the written and spoken word, he brought Swedish theology to an American audience in The Reinterpretation of Luther and addressed the role of the church in the public sphere in The Church and the Public Conscience. In The Classic Christian Faith, he framed a series of chapel talks for college students around Luther's five parts of The Small Catechism.

During his years as president of Gustavus (1944-1968), the college grew in students, faculty, facilities, academic standing, development, and influence. His vision for the college was bold and broad. The completion of Christ Chapel, reinforcing ties with Sweden through the Bernadotte and Nobel connections, the black student recruitment program, and the close ties with the vast Gustavus family must have made those great years.

Finally, he worked to advance church related private colleges on the state level through creating the Minnesota Private College Council. Subsequent writings, especially The Future of Church Related Higher Education, addressed challenges and proposed strategies to assist colleges in retaining their unique position and contribution to American higher education