

How Augustana Began

By John Johansen, Ph.D. (English)

The year 2010-11 will mark the centenary of what we now call the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta. Originally, and for decades, known as Camrose Lutheran College (CLC), the first steps in the institution's establishment took place in the summer of 1910. At that time representatives from 25 Lutheran congregations met to found the Alberta Norwegian Lutheran College Association. The initiative came from the United Norwegian Lutheran Church in the U.S., who sent J. P. Tandberg to facilitate the process.

Central Alberta had been a destination for Norwegian immigrants from the American Midwest as well as directly from Norway since about 1890 and peaking around 1905. In taking steps to provide this community with secondary education, the Lutherans in the U.S. extended to Canada a process well-established among them south of the border in places where (as was common) the public system provided only primary education.

The college began its first academic year in the fall of 1911 and moved into its own building – now Old Main, or Founders' Hall – in October 1912. Tandberg served as the college's first president from 1911 to 1913. The government's act of incorporation (*An Act to Incorporate the Alberta Norwegian Lutheran College Association*, 25 March 1913) gave the association leave to "hereafter establish a school or schools where students may obtain a liberal education in the arts and sciences." It is clear, however, that the founders of CLC were primarily interested in preserving Norwegian language and culture and in strengthening Christian belief.

The first of these goals is expressed clearly in an open letter dated March 30, 1912 to Norwegian Lutherans (in western Canada one supposes) from J. R. Lavik, pastor at Camrose's Moland Lutheran Church and later CLC's second president. He argues at length (less than seven years after Norwegian independence from Sweden) that, while as a people they want to "carry out their duties as faithful [Canadian] citizens," they need also to preserve the "treasure" of "Norwegian-ness" which they have inherited by making sure their children are instructed in the Norwegian language, history, and culture.

As to the second goal, Vincent Eriksson (1) suggests that the ultimate motivation for founding CLC was "concern among mission leaders about the lack of trained religious personnel and educational service to congregations" among the new Norwegian settlers on the Canadian prairies. An article in *The Camrose Canadian* from March 12, 1912 reports that, at the official opening of CLC, Lavik "dwelt strongly on the religious convictions of the Norwegian people which led to the establishment of a school where Christian principles might be instilled in the hearts of the young" (Loken 148). Lavik's 1914 open letter also expresses the necessity of a religious school to protect Lutheran children from "the sects" and "freethinking." Evenson (75) quotes an undated article of Lavik's that describes CLC as "indispensable" to the "church's work" "among the Norwegian people of Alberta."

The earliest Bulletin – that is, Calendar – of CLC, datable from 1912, describes the "general aim and purpose of" the school as being "to give young men and women a higher education based on the

Christian faith as taught in our Evangelical Lutheran Church, and to foster, encourage, and guard the Christian life of its students” (3). This general statement emerges from an argument on the preceding page, that only an institution which (unlike public schools, in a country with “religious liberty”) can teach “the truths of the HEART of God as revealed though Jesus Christ” and “the life-giving and life sustaining powers of a personal acceptance of the Holy Spirit “ is able to “teach the loftiest truths, appeal to the highest motives, and judge conduct by perfect standards” and so keep students “from degenerating into selfish materialism” or “heartless utilitarianism” (CLC Bulletin, 2). Accordingly, CLC required all students to attend “devotional exercises” and all Lutheran students to “take the religious instruction prescribed in their course.” Non-Lutheran students “showing a good moral character” were permitted to graduate without taking religious instruction so long as they “attend[ed] services in the church to which they belong[ed].”

The 1910 meeting included 8 of its 25 representatives from congregations of what was called the Haugean Synod because they followed the teachings of the Norwegian revivalist lay preacher, and gadfly of the established Lutheran Church in Norway, Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771 - 1824). Haugean Lutherans have in retrospect been popularly portrayed as particularly narrow-minded and pietistic. Theologically conservative they certainly were. But Chester Ronning, president of CLC from 1927 to 1942 (and later a famed Canadian diplomat) took a more nuanced view. Ronning’s 1942 M.A. thesis – an account of the founding and history of CLC – distinguished between Haugean Lutherans and pietists. The Haugeans, he says (quoting and translating from a Norwegian church historian) were “thoroughly practical, industrious people with a passion for work” that was itself almost impious (19, n.2). Ronning furthermore describes the Haugean movement in Norway as “most closely related” (18) to the movement for establishing folk high-schools in nineteenth century Denmark.

This movement was begun by N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783 - 1872) – and is still active in Scandinavia today – to provide general education for everyone. The “Grundtvigian principle,” as Ronning calls it (30) – there is no clear reference to Grundtvig or folk high-schools in any of the earliest documents of CLC with which I am familiar -- was based on Grundtvig’s premise that “[p]rofessors and learned folk obviously must be few, but educated useful citizens, we must all be” (17). Ronning summarizes the principle as follows: “worthwhile culture only develops without rigid control or supervision, true educational advance comes from the people below rather than from a governing body” (30). Elsewhere, Ronning quotes with approval a summary of this principle that says “worthwhile culture . . . must develop out of the life of the people” (24). Ronning takes growth and development of the whole person as following from Grundtvig’s principle and describes it as the “fundamental axiom” (32) and “central theme” (34) of CLC, without any reference to preserving Norwegian identity or strengthening Christian belief. The emphases on “personal wholeness” and on an aspiration “to educate the whole person” in Augustana’s current statement of identity and mission clearly echo Ronning’s sentiments.

The idea of CLC’s evolution into a undergraduate liberal arts and sciences college was first mooted during the late 1930s, while Ronning was president. Because, among other things, of the breakout of World War II, this idea did not bear fruit until first-year university courses were offered in 1959. Second-year courses came ten years later, and full degree-granting status was attained in 1984, both during the then still visionary presidency of K. Glen Johnson. When Johnson in 1985 said “in every generation the

College must be built," he is unlikely to have envisioned Augustana as it exists today. Yet the sentiment points to the necessary and natural development of CLC, which Ronning – re-visioning and, indeed, secularizing the original conception of CLC – suggested had its roots not so much in a desire to preserve culture, language, and religion, as in Scandinavian subaltern movements for popular and general education.

Augustana's current self-description, in its statement of identity and mission, may indeed draw broadly from "its pioneer legacy" in foregrounding the importance of wholeness, leadership as service, and cooperation. But these values bear little resemblance to those explicitly stated by its founders. Rather, that self-description has a greater affinity, as I have already suggested, for the values enunciated by Chester Ronning. For example, the Grundtvigian emphases on the necessity of producing "educated useful citizens" and the popular roots of "true educational advance" seem to me reflected in the residential, experiential, and interdisciplinary nature of an Augustana education and in its invitation to students to be full participants, not strangers or spectators, or merely narrow specialists, in its educational mission. What today's Augustana *does* share with its founders is an ethical foundation: as an institution of the liberal arts seeking to produce graduates "engage[d with] life" and "committed to the betterment of [the] world," it recognizes a need -- maybe felt even more intensely now than then -- to steer students well clear of (as CLC's first calendar says) both "selfish materialism" and "heartless utilitarianism."

Works Cited

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