

The Other Luther Seminary in Minnesota

SPOTLIGHTING AN UNDERTOLD LUTHERAN HISTORY

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When one thinks about Luther Seminary in Minnesota, what may come to mind is the institution that has long been located on the west side of St. Paul, on Como Avenue near the Minnesota State Fairgrounds and the University of Minnesota St. Paul campus. This Luther Seminary arose from the various Norwegian American Lutheran seminaries that joined together after the 1917 merger that formed the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America.

But Minnesota also once had another Luther Seminary, one that was eventually situated on the east side of St. Paul, near Phalen Park. Part of the Joint Synod of Ohio, a German Lutheran ethnic denomination that expanded into a national organization in the nineteenth century, this “practical” seminary was initially located in Afton, Minnesota, in 1884, before being moved to St. Paul in 1893. This seminary served the growing districts of the Ohio Synod in Wisconsin, Minnesota, the Dakotas, and western Canada, and at times during its history produced more pastors than the synod’s flagship seminary in Columbus, Ohio. Sometimes referred to as St. Paul Luther Seminary, this institution served the Ohio Synod for

50 years, until its closure during the 1930s due to the Great Depression and the consolidation of theological education that came with the formation of the American Lutheran Church (1930–60). This article will

give a brief history and description of St. Paul Luther Seminary and its role in the growth of the Ohio Synod in the upper midwestern region by providing German-speaking pastors to its congregations.



*German Practical Seminary,
Afton, Minnesota, main building*

THE OHIO SYNOD EXPANDS TO MINNESOTA

By the early 1880s, the leaders of the Ohio Synod and its seminary in Columbus wanted to strengthen the quality of instruction by requiring students to earn a bachelor of arts degree and the ability to work in classical and biblical languages. This program became known as the “theoretical” seminary. The difficulty with this Old World focus, laudable as it might have been, was that not enough students were able to meet the standards, which caused a severe shortage of pastors. The seminary enrollment in Columbus actually dropped during the 1880s. So to produce more pastors, especially for German-speaking congregations, the synod’s leaders decided in 1882 that alongside the existing theoretical seminary in Columbus they would create a “practical” department, which would concentrate on quickly training German-speaking students to be pastors.¹

Toward this end, in 1884 the new practical department was separated from the seminary in Columbus and relocated to better serve the rapid growth of the Ohio Synod in the Upper Midwest and Canada, due to an influx of German immigrants to the west and northwest of Ohio. The leadership in Columbus chose Afton, Minnesota. They purchased a vacant academy building for \$2,000, and two professors and six students from Columbus were joined at this new location by several more local students from the area.

The course of study at Afton’s practical seminary consisted of a three-year preparatory program called the “proseminary,” followed by two years in the seminary proper. The proseminary was basically an academy—a high school equivalent—that consisted of a broad course of study. In addition to theology, coursework

included Greek and Latin, English, US history, arithmetic, geography, and German and English composition. Young men might attend the proseminary without going on to seminary. With the exception of courses in English grammar and literature, the seminary program was completely theological, preparing candidates for the ordained ministry on a practical level—without the classical languages. For both programs, the theological instruction was completely in German, but some of the other subjects, especially in the proseminary, were already being taught in English.

The 1892 catalog of the institution reveals the seminary’s state of affairs in those early years. With a limited number of faculty, the courses were taught in a rotation of two years. Students had no elective classes and took all their courses together with the rest of their peers. The catalog informed the reader:

Young men who do not intend to prepare for the ministry can receive a good general education in our Proseminary. The tuition for this department is \$20.00 a year. No tuition is charged theological students. Board, including room, is \$60.00 a year.²

In a later retrospective printed in the 1918 school yearbook, an anonymous author (seemingly well acquainted with the institution) reflected on the early history:

Those first years were strenuous and yet pleasant: strenuous, not only because of a nimiety of work, but also because of the sorry lack of funds; for the professors were at one time compelled to wait seven months for their meager salaries, and the students were required to manage with \$43.00 a year for board.

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Nevertheless, the author recalls that the days were “pleasant” because of the rural location in Afton, with the St. Croix River on one side and towering bluffs on the other.³

It seems clear that this school was like so many other church schools at the time: a struggling, underfinanced institution run on a shoestring with several underpaid and overworked instructors and a small student body, all living together in a single building. The Ohio Synod could not or did not want to allot financial resources to a struggling institution far away from its center in Ohio, and the local Minnesota congregations helped out only occasionally, often by donating livestock and produce for the students’ board.

By 1892, the conditions at Afton had become problematic. With 57 students between the seminary and proseminary, the initial building was woefully inadequate, and several additional houses had to be rented to accommodate the burgeoning number of students. Certainly, a small village such as Afton would not have had much in the way of additional housing. Furthermore, people complained that the rail connections to Afton were totally inadequate, and that the rural setting, while charming, was simply not able to support the growing institution. Consequently, both the officials in Afton and the leaders of the Ohio Synod in Columbus began to consider other locations for the seminary.

AN EVOLVING INSTITUTION

In 1893, officials settled on a five-acre site for the institution in northeastern St. Paul near Lake Phalen. Construction on a building for the seminary was completed over the summer, and the new facility was dedicated in September. Despite having successfully opened the new location, however, the leaders of the institution faced an immediate and dire crisis. In 1893 the country was in the midst of a major financial depression, and the building contractor went bankrupt, leaving many of the subcontractors unpaid. These subcontractors held the institution accountable for the contractor's scores of bills still outstanding on the building.

As a result, the initial construction estimate of about \$15,000 ballooned to \$23,400, and that was only after several creditors were induced to lower their demands. The financial panic of 1893 meant that it was nearly impossible to borrow the funds to pay off the building, and for a while it was feared that the seminary's building and grounds would be lost to the creditors. In a campaign to save the institution, administrators succeeded in raising sufficient funds and credit to allow it to stay open. Still, the seminary remained (as it had often been) on shaky financial ground for several years.⁴

Increasingly this newly located institution became known as St. Paul Luther Seminary, or Luther Seminary at Phalen Park. The trouble was that since 1876 another Luther Seminary already existed in the Hamline area of St. Paul; this was the seminary of the Norwegian Synod. As St. Paul Luther—especially the proseminary program—grew, administrators eyed opportunities to expand the facilities. In 1911, they purchased an additional 10 acres adjacent to the campus for \$10,000 and raised \$30,000 through



Luther Seminary, Phalen Park, main building

a capital campaign to build a new lecture hall and auditorium. Other buildings on campus included a house for the president and another for the dean. In the 1920s, other dormitories and classroom buildings were added, and plans were made for further expansion. Sometime prior to 1918 the proseminary program was reorganized as a formal college program of six years, essentially covering all of the high school grades plus the first two years of college work.⁵

Until the entry of the United States into World War I in 1917, German was the primary language both for instruction at the seminary and for religious activity in many of the congregations served by the seminary. The wave of anti-German and xenophobic sentiments that ensued during the war, and the cessation of immigration during and after it, meant that the use of German went into dramatic decline after 1917. By the 1930s, German was almost never spoken among the congregations of the Ohio Synod.

St. Paul Luther Seminary experienced a similar shift in the language it used. By World War I, many of the subjects in the college section of the institution were taught in English, although theological studies and German literature were still in German. In 1918, one observer noted that the seminary had been founded

as a German institution. . . .

Today, as a matter of necessity, instruction is given in both languages, although the greatest stress is still laid upon the German. The classical languages are still taught and translated into German, whilst some subjects are now also given in English in the Seminary.

But just a few years later, reflecting the rapid language transition in the Ohio Synod's congregations, the bulk of the instruction transitioned to English. For those in the seminary, the ability to preach and teach in English was primary, although fluency

in German was considered an added bonus. For those in the college and preparatory schools, English was the only future, and students (and their parents) insisted on instruction in English as a requisite for success.⁶

STUDENT BODY AND STUDENT LIFE

During the seminary's initial decades in the late nineteenth century, members of the student body included a sizable number from Germany, especially from the various German mission schools. This trend faded in the early twentieth century, with an increasing number of students from Ohio Synod congregations in the Upper Midwest and from the prairie provinces of Canada. As the institution developed beyond its origins as a German practical seminary, it grew into an American educational institution. An article in the 1918 yearbook entitled "A Brief Retrospect" explained:

In the beginning, most of our students came from Germany, especially from Hermannsburg, some from Pastor Voelter in Wuertenburg. They brought a thorough preliminary training with them. . . . Today most of our students [come] from our own congregations soon after confirmation.⁷

In 1891, of the 30 students registered in the seminary program, half were from Germany. By 1918, of the 19 students in the seminary, four were from Germany, seven from Canada, and one from Australia. However, Canadian and US students combined made up the vast majority. Many of these students came from the Twin Cities area, including several

Luther Seminary, students enjoying watermelon

Norwegian American students who had to learn German to complete their course of instruction. In 1931, the institution's president, William F. Schmidt, felt it necessary to rebut the criticism that there were "too many Scandinavians in this German school."⁸

As might be expected, the students from Germany felt at least some culture shock when they realized what a call to an American congregation might look like. During the early years at Afton, students were obliged to cut and split wood for their own use and for heating the classrooms—an hour an evening, despite the weather. A chronicler related:

One student of a German "gymnasium," however, who had just recently arrived, regarded such labor as somewhat beneath his dignity, until the "housefather" comforted him with the fact that as an American pastor he should have to clean out the horse and cow stable, and that, therefore,

cutting wood would be only good practical training for such menial duties.⁹

Student life before the First World War was typical for such a small, religious educational institution. The students were all men, divided between the seminary and the proseminary (later, college program), and generally lived in a single building, in Afton, and later St. Paul. Their lives and educations were closely supervised by the faculty and by a "housefather," who lived in the building with the students. Besides functioning as a dormitory, the main building also contained classrooms, a library, faculty offices, and dining facilities.

As was common for late nineteenth-century educational institutions, the students organized a "boarding club" for their meals, for which the students paid into a communal fund and engaged a cook to provide meals for them. The meals were described as filling but unimaginative, and heavy on the starches.



A photo of students in the basement of the building shows them cutting and packing cabbage in barrels to provide sauerkraut for the winter. No doubt local congregations provided produce and other foodstuffs for the students, but they had to assist in the processing of these donations.

Students organized an array of religious, literary, and athletic societies for themselves, the activities of which were carefully chronicled

in the school's yearbook, the *Luther Echo*, and in a student newspaper. These groups included two literary societies: the Hans Sach Verein for German literature, and the Chi Alpha Phi society for English literature. For musical endeavors, students could choose from a glee club, a chorus, an orchestra, and a concert band. Some of these groups performed in local Lutheran congregations throughout the year. Students also participated

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in sports, fielding teams in football, baseball, basketball, and hockey, which played regional collegiate opponents in Minnesota and Wisconsin. For religious activities, students could join the Ernst Missionary Society, named after the longtime president of the institution, Henry Ernst. In addition, the seminary students were often active in local congregations over the weekends, assisting in pastoral work. Considering that in 1918 there were only 87 students across the academic programs, these students must have been busy keeping up with all these activities.



REVISIONING THE SCHOOL'S EDUCATIONAL FOCUS

Throughout its history, St. Paul Luther Seminary endured the precarious nature of an underfunded institution. Its financial struggles were exacerbated by challenges from other sections of the Ohio Synod, especially from the faculty and supporters of the seminary in Columbus, Ohio. With limited synodical funds to apply to theological education, the partisans of the Columbus school saw other schools within the synod as a threat to their funding. Proponents of St. Paul Luther Seminary were often quick to point out that the school was a success, and that in certain years this seminary actually graduated



TOP: *Luther Seminary, students making sauerkraut* BOTTOM: *Luther Seminary, baseball team, 1914*

more pastors than did the seminary in Columbus, as synodical historian C. V. Sheatsley noted in 1919. He went on to say that the Ohio Synod had 100 congregations in its Minnesota District and 60 in Canada, most of which were supplied by pastors from St. Paul Luther Seminary.¹⁰

As noted previously, during the 1920s St. Paul Luther Seminary's leaders transitioned the school away from its German roots to be an American institution, with instruction primarily in English. A number of factors influenced this transition. The future of the seminary was constantly in doubt for reasons of finances and denominational politics. Further, the academy's proseminary program had been developed to rectify the educational deficiencies of students coming from American public schools, but as the twentieth century progressed the educational improvements of the public high school system, especially in rural areas, meant that preparatory programs such as St. Paul Luther's were becoming superfluous. The school's leaders saw a clear need for significant changes to the institution's course of study or it would not survive. A statement in the catalog from 1931 explained that, "with the passing of the pioneer conditions, it became clear to the Church that Luther Seminary was in a position to make the advantages of a Christian education available to the youth of the Church in general."¹¹

Certainly, a market existed for such an education, but the programs at St. Paul Luther would have to be adjusted to attract and retain a different kind of student, one interested in a general Christian education without a pre-seminary focus. The seminary program remained, but in the 1920s the faculty reorganized the academy and collegiate programs, forming them into a four-year junior college that served students from the ages

Enrollment at St. Paul–Luther College, Before and After Reorganization

<i>Before Reorganization</i>					
	Total	Seminary	College	Academy	Conservatory
1922–23	103	30	20	45	8
1923–24	98	26	23	44	5
<i>After Reorganization</i>					
	Total	Seminary	College	Academy	Conservatory
1926–27	187	34	28	42	94
1928–29	196	33	60	51	78
1931–32	148	23	93	7	25

of 15 to 20, which was accomplished by dropping the ninth grade of the academy. Further changes included the addition of a conservatory of music in 1924 and a very small upper-division collegiate course in religious education and philosophy in 1928, which led a few students to attaining a bachelor of science degree.

To make the new institution attractive to students, St. Paul Luther sought and achieved the accreditation of its junior college program. This status enabled students who studied at St. Paul Luther to transfer their collegiate credits (from their last two years of study) to the University of Minnesota, counting as the first two years leading to a bachelor of arts degree. The new Conservatory of Music was similarly accredited, as was the short-lived Department of Secretarial Training that operated in cooperation with a local business college.

These last two department offerings also marked an important change in the nature of the school: in 1927 St. Paul Luther became coeducational. Women had been admitted to the Conservatory of Music from its beginnings in 1924, and they represented the majority of students in that program. In 1927, the first women were admitted into the junior college program, and they soon became a

significant part of this program, too. These women joined the community with eagerness. In addition to participating in the campus's musical and theatrical offerings, they also formed their own clubs, including the Women's Glee Club, the Women's Self-Governance Association, and the Girls' Missionary Society. While women had no options to participate in intercollegiate athletics, they did form their own Women's Athletic Association.

With all these changes, the institution was granted a new charter in 1927 and a new name, St. Paul–Luther College. Overall, the reorganization seemed to have produced some positive results, at least in the short run. Enrollment grew, as shown in the chart above.

The freshman class of the junior college in 1926–27 included four women out of a total of 16 students. The college's total enrollment peaked in 1928–29. Thereafter, the financial toll of the Great Depression precipitated an ominous decline in student numbers that would soon trigger the institution's demise. By the academic year 1932–33, now without the seminary students, the number of students in the collegiate program was 109, out of which 33 were women. Only eight first-year students enrolled that year.¹²



Luther College, Women's Glee Club, 1930

FINAL YEARS

A major economic depression was not the only death knell for St. Paul–Luther College. The school also was facing the forces of denominational politics and mergers. Conservative midwestern German Lutherans in the Ohio, Iowa, Buffalo (New York), and Texas Synods—none of which were limited to the states in their synodical names—had been talking about a denominational merger for some time. In the 1920s negotiations became serious. Doctrinal disputes threatened to derail them for a while, but by 1930 these four groups were ready to merge into a new Lutheran denomination, the American Lutheran Church (1930–60).

The two big players in this merger were the Ohio and Iowa Synods. Their leaders did not think it was feasible to maintain the small seminary program in St. Paul, which only numbered about 20–35 students a year. As a consequence of the 1930 merger, these leaders decided that the Ohio Synod seminary program in St. Paul would be transferred to the Iowa Synod seminary in Dubuque, Iowa (Wartburg Seminary). In normal economic

times, perhaps St. Paul–Luther College could have weathered this loss of its seminary program, but these were not normal times.

St. Paul–Luther College was not going to go down without a fight, however. In 1927, the college had gotten a new and dynamic president, William Frederick Schmidt, who had been a missionary in India and a professor of Bible at Spokane (Washington) College. Schmidt was a younger man (probably in his late thirties at the time), and he had ambitious plans for the school. Its transformation into a junior college was his idea, and he promoted this change energetically. In a report to the board of directors of St. Paul–Luther College in November 1931, Schmidt forcefully defended his vision for the school.

May I say that this program, which you approved and which received the approval of the Board of Education of the Church, did not originate in some hasty and impromptu thinking? It was not a desperate effort designed to save St. Paul–Luther College. Rather it was formulated in the belief that the traditional college curriculum

One wonders whether the alumni of St. Paul–Luther College ever transferred their affections to the college in Iowa or came to claim it as their own.



to which we were adhering demanded a thorough re-shaping, if the students were actually to receive an enriched educational experience.

It is obvious from this report that Schmidt had been receiving criticisms of his new plans. A good portion of his 25-page report is spent refuting these criticisms. But beyond being defensive, Schmidt laid out not only a thoughtful and expansive vision for the school, but also a master plan for the reorganization of educational institutions in the new American Lutheran Church.¹³

Unfortunately, the Great Depression marked a time of retrenchment rather than visionary expansion. In 1931 the American Lutheran Church had too many educational institutions and, like St. Paul–Luther College, most of them were small, struggling, and underfunded. The newly merged denomination did not have the money to sustain these schools. An institution such as St. Paul–Luther College, with only 100 students, was probably not going to survive the Depression no matter how visionary its new program was.

In 1934, attendees of the annual convention of the American Lutheran Church voted for a further consolidation of educational institutions. Although Schmidt had been able to stave off earlier attempts to end his dreams for St. Paul–Luther College, this time the consolidation included folding the school's assets and students into Wartburg College in

Waverly, Iowa, thus ending St. Paul–Luther College’s 50-year history. A number of students and four faculty members made the transition to Iowa, where the newly merged schools constituted a new institution, with a new board of directors and a new president. In deference to the larger of the two schools, the name of Wartburg College was retained.

Supporters of St. Paul–Luther College tried to reverse the move at the church conventions in 1934 and 1935 but were not successful. The historian of Wartburg College noted that “the

disappointment and grief of St. Paul alumni approached the proportions of heartbreak.” One wonders whether the alumni of St. Paul–Luther College ever transferred their affections to the college in Iowa or came to claim it as their own.¹⁴

St. Paul–Luther College lost its seminary program to Wartburg Seminary in 1932, and the collegiate program was transferred to Wartburg College several years later, marking the demise of an educational institution that had survived in Minnesota for 50 years, first in

Afton, and then in St. Paul. The question arises, then, of the impact of the school. It was never a very big institution, and at its height in the mid-1920s it never exceeded 200 students at a time. But perhaps the legacy of the school can be measured by the many Lutheran congregations in the Upper Midwest and Canada that were founded or served by over 100 Lutheran pastors who graduated from St. Paul–Luther College, and by the substantial number of young Lutheran women and men who received their education there. □

Notes

This work could not have been completed without the help of a number of archivists and librarians at the following institutions: Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Elk Grove Village, IL; Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, IA; Trinity Seminary, Columbus, OH; Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN; St. Paul (MN) Public Library; Afton Historical Society, Afton, MN.

1. Donald L. Huber, *Educating Lutheran Pastors in Ohio, 1830–1980: A History of Trinity Lutheran Seminary and Its Predecessors*, *Studies in American Religion* 33 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 126n26. For Capital University and the wider context, see Richard W. Solberg, *Lutheran Higher Education in North America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), ch. 5.

2. “Officers and Students of the German Practical Theological Seminary of Afton, Minn.,”

Annual Catalogue of the Educational Institutions of the Evangelical Luth. Joint Synod of Ohio and Other States (1892), 45–52.

3. “A Brief Retrospect,” *Luther Echo*, 1918 (St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, 1918), 15.

4. “A Brief Retrospect,” 16.

5. C. V. Sheatsley, *History of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Ohio and Other States* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1929), 208.

6. “A Brief Retrospect,” 16.

7. “A Brief Retrospect,” 16.

8. Janice Quick, “Luther Seminary at Phalen Park, 1918,” *Minnesota Genealogical Journal* 43 (Mar. 2010): 4291–94; “A Brief Retrospect,” 16; W. F. Schmidt, “President’s Report to Board of Trustees of St. Paul–Luther College,” Nov. 1931, p. 9, Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Elk Grove Village, IL.

9. “A Brief Retrospect,” 15.

10. Sheatsley, *History*, 208.

11. Sheatsley, *History*, 208.

12. Statistics taken from the annual catalog of the institution.

13. Schmidt, “President’s Report,” p. 2.

14. Schmidt, “President’s Report,” p. 79. One is reminded of the purported saying by Daniel Webster concerning Dartmouth College: “It is, Sir, as I have said, a small college, and yet, there are those who love it.”

Photograph on p. 266 courtesy of Wartburg Theological Seminary; all other photos courtesy of the Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

For further reading:

Mark Granquist, *Lutherans in America: A New History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015)

Donald L. Huber, *Educating Lutheran Pastors in Ohio, 1830–1980: A History of Trinity Lutheran Seminary and Its Predecessors*, *Studies in American Religion* 33 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989)

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