

# THE BETHANY COLLEGE SAGA

## Introduction

The Old Norse word “saga” is defined as, “the recounting of historical and legendary events.” Expanding on that word, in the early 1970’s, sociologist Burton Clark, in describing three colleges, defined organizational saga as, “what the organization has been and what it is today – and hence by extension what it will be tomorrow.”<sup>1</sup>

Like most new presidents, I spent my first year learning about Bethany College from two sources. First, I listened to alumni, students, faculty, staff, friends, parents, Lutherans, and community leaders. Second, I read documents and books about the College, especially Emory Lindquist’s *Bethany in Kansas: The history of a college* and *Smoky Valley People: A history of Lindsborg, Kansas*.

From that listening and learning, I am now motivated to weave together my interpretation of Bethany’s saga as a preface and foundation for what Bethany will be tomorrow.

## Framing the Saga

I would humbly suggest that four themes frame Bethany’s saga. What follows is my attempt to explain each as I understand each one’s role. As a conclusion, I will attempt to weave them together with my interpretation of what they have in common and by extension how they inform what Bethany will be tomorrow.

**Augustana.** The first theme of Bethany’s saga is its Swedish Lutheran, or Augustana, heritage. As is common knowledge, Bethany College was born in the sacristy of Bethany Lutheran Church, a member church of the Augustana Synod (later known as the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church), which was formed in 1860. My extrapolation of the values of the Augustana Synod<sup>2</sup>, and the formative values of Bethany College, are:

- (1) “the wider church:” strong sense of the broader church through shared purpose and networks
- (2) ecumenism: belonging to a wider fellowship of Christians around the world
- (3) mission and outreach: church with a role in the world
- (4) commitment to youth as a program ‘for the church’
- (5) educational and social ministries

The values of the Augustana heritage live on in Bethany today as they inform our college life and many of our curricular and co-curricular programs:

- “the wider college:” strong sense of community through our shared purpose, heritage, and networks
- Chapel worship three times a week and ten campus ministry organizations
- Bethany (Freshmen) Seminar topics on heritage, spirituality, and networks
- Pearson Scholar for Swedish Studies
- College’s Value of *Hospitality*
- College’s Value of *Servant Leadership*
- “Statement on Inclusiveness and Diversity”
- Advocacy Team (Oxfam, Bread for World, RESULTS, Fair Trade)
- Alternative Spring Break Trips
- SOAR (students organized for active response) – service volunteers

This heritage and its importance was underscored during the listening sessions that I held during the fall 2007 as the number one and number two answers, by far, to the question, “What about Bethany College should be preserved?” were Lutheran heritage and Swedish heritage, respectively<sup>4</sup>. Together, they are our Augustana heritage.

**Academics.** The theme of academics, as it shapes Bethany's saga, is first and foremost centered on Bethany's faculty. No matter when you attended Bethany, virtually every alumnus/a holds one or more professors close to the heart. The closeness of our professors to our students, the approachability and accessibility of our faculty, and the care and concern expressed by faculty toward students all shape the academic theme of Bethany's saga. Bethany's faculty have always put teaching first, over research, and that has always meant putting students first.

This was highlighted during the listening sessions in the fall 2007 as the top two answers to the question, "What are Bethany College's strengths?" were faculty and academic programs<sup>4</sup>. Phrases to describe both as Bethany's strengths included: "core of extremely dedicated faculty;" "faculty who care and challenge;" "quality of faculty, especially one-on-one." Interestingly, in a follow-up question, when asked which academic programs are Bethany's strengths, nine different programs were cited. Interesting in that the broad perception of academic excellence at Bethany does not reside in two or three programs, but rather spread across campus<sup>4</sup>.

Additionally, during the future forums in the spring 2008 the top answer to the question, "Begin the conversation with a Bethany College story about something you value – something you want to expand and extend into the future," all centered on stories of professors and, specifically, the close relationships with faculty and faculty going over and beyond<sup>5</sup>.

Beyond personal relationships with faculty, over the last 25 years, Bethany's saga in the area of academics has been shaped by two remarkable endowed funds. The first, the Johnson Lecture Series, which was created by Lucy Johnson and the late Charles D. Johnson, began as a project during the College's centennial in 1981. From the beginning, the Johnson Lecture Series has provided the campus community and the public with both thought-provoking and intellectually stimulating speakers representing a breadth of subjects. Over the last 25 years, lecturers have included journalist Juan Williams, astronaut James Lovell, Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel, documentary filmmaker Ken Burns, humorist Garrison Keillor, and author / historian James Bradley.

The second is the Pearson Distinguished Professorship in Swedish Studies, established by a generous gift from the late Gerald "Bud" Pearson. This endowed visiting professorship helps the College discover ways in which present-day Swedish culture and experience can illuminate and strengthen life in the United States. Ten prominent Swedish citizens have taken residence for a semester since 1999: art curator and historian Dr. Beate Sydhoff; journalist Dr. Arne Ruth; poet and novelist Ylva Eggehorn; theologian Dr. Krister Stendahl; anthropologist Dr. Brita Stendahl; environmentalist Jimmie Sjoblom; the late Eskil Hemberg; the Rev. Dr. Kjell Ove Nilsson; international opera star Håkan Hagegård; and expert in interfaith dialogue the Rev. Dr. Hans Ucko.

These all certainly align academics as a theme that shapes Bethany's saga.

**Art & Music.** Emory Lindquist stated it best, "The achievement in music and art has identified Bethany College as a unique and distinctive collegiate institution with great cultural resources"<sup>3</sup>.

On March 28, 1882, just six months after the College's founding, the College performed, for the first time, Handel's *Messiah*. The tradition of the Bethany College Oratorio Society, and its campus and community members, continues today.

The Oratorio Society has sung the *Messiah* so long and so well that some people do not realize that the society has had an extensive repertoire across the years. *The Creation* by Haydn, *Stabat Mater*, *Elijah*, and *Hymn of Praise* by Mendelssohn, *Messe Solenne* by Gounod, *Requiem Mass in C minor* by Cherubini, *Christmas Oratorio* and *Sleepers, Wake* by Bach, and *Pilgrims of the Prairie*, a cantata by Carl Busch, have been presented on various occasions<sup>3</sup>.

But, more importantly, to support that tradition is the College's continued commitment to music, both choral and instrumental, through the Bethany College Choir, chapel choir, Bethany Symphony Orchestra, Bethany Band, Blue Dozen, and Jazz band, to name just a few.

Even before the arrival of Birger Sandzen to teach art in 1899, art in the Bethany curriculum can be traced to the 1890-91 academic year. An art exhibit was held at commencement in 1892 and President Carl Swensson was enthusiastic about the new department<sup>3</sup>. Prior to Sandzen, Swensson recruited, first, well-known artist Olaf Grafstrom to teach art from 1893-1897, then Carl Lotave from 1897-1899. The art theme was well-established before Sandzen's arrival and was only solidified during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>.

In 1957, art and music merged around the annual *Messiah* performance as the Birger Sandzen Memorial Gallery has hosted the Messiah Festival Spring Exhibition annually since<sup>3</sup>.

The recognition of the role of art historically and currently came in 1973 when Mrs. Mary Mingenback established an endowment for the first distinguished professorship at Bethany in art. The current curriculum in art provides a wide selection of courses in drawing, painting, printmaking, ceramics, sculpture, photography, and art education, art administration, and art history<sup>3</sup>.

The contribution of art and music to Bethany's saga was referenced during the listening sessions in the fall 2007 as the Messiah Festival, our reputation for the fine and performing arts, our fine arts tradition, and our emphasis on cultural and performing arts were high on the list of answers to the questions, "What about Bethany College should be preserved?" and "What are Bethany College's strengths?"<sup>4</sup>.

**Athletics.** Bethany College played its first football game in October 1893, but was discontinued between 1894-1901. In 1902, Benjamin "Bennie" Owen was hired as coach to all sports and chemistry professor. Bennie Owen's three years produced the greatest record of victories and attracted national attention. During Owen's three years, the "Terrible Swedes" – as the team became known – was 22-2-2 and compiled 796 points to their opponents 34 points. In 1903 and 1904, Bethany College defeated the University of Oklahoma, who hired Owen away following the 1904 season. In 1902, the cheer "Rockar Stockar" was first introduced<sup>3</sup>.

Benny Owen established a tradition of winning that continued through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, culminating with the 28 year coaching career of NAIA Hall of Fame member Ted Kessinger, 1976-2004, and his record of 219-57-1, including an NAIA national playoff semifinal appearance in 1979 and two quarterfinal appearances in 1988 and 1998. And into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as 2003 NAIA Coach of the Year Clair Oleen's men's basketball team played for the national championship in 2003.

Success in athletics is equally shared by both men and women since women's athletics gained renewed interest in the early 1970's under the leadership of Joyce Pigge. The women's basketball team has appeared in the national tournament six times and made the Elite Eight in 1995.

Bethany's commitment to athletic excellence contributes significantly to Bethany's saga and continues today. Since the formation of the Kansas Collegiate Athletic Conference in 1928, Bethany has won 140 conference championships in 15 varsity sports and in 2007-8 Bethany finished 47<sup>th</sup> in the US Sports Academy Director's Cup.

The contribution of athletics to Bethany's saga was reinforced during the fall 2007 listening sessions as athletics, and its tradition and success, were high on the list of answers to the question, "What are Bethany College's strengths?"<sup>4</sup>.

### **The Bethany Saga**

As one reviews and considers the four themes of Bethany's saga, I would suggest that the genetic code that runs through all four is Bethany's ability to soar: with 90+% admission rates for graduates to medical and law school; with the longest continually running performance of the *Messiah* in North America; and with more athletic conference championships than any other current or former member of the KCAC.

Binding the genetic code is Bethany's strong sense of community, which we inherited from our Augustana heritage and lives on in the broader Bethany family of alumni, students, faculty, and staff. Certainly cliché, but nonetheless true, that sense of community represents "the wind beneath our wings" allowing Bethany to soar and to soar higher than its own expectations.

At various points in Bethany's history, Bethany has exceeded its own expectations and the expectations of others by soaring to new heights. Unfortunately, while soaring is not foreign to the Bethany community, recently, it is not a recurring event. Bethany's future, however, must be to soar frequently and to new heights – excellence, or greatness, must become a recurring destination.

For me, Bethany's saga and future are inspired by our mark, the dove in flight. When it was first adopted in 1968 as the College's new symbol, its creator, alumnus Harold "Cotton" Smith, Jr., described the design as "a symbol of soaring and learning."<sup>3</sup>

And so, let me humbly conclude that, as we strive toward and seek out our common future, we should settle on nothing less than to soar to that future. Bethany's saga, simply and succinctly, is Bethany's vision for its future:

Bethany College will soar ... bigger, better, stronger ...

Respectfully submitted,

Edward F. Leonard III, President  
October 27, 2008

If you are aware of errors or omissions, please refer them to me at [president@bethanylb.edu](mailto:president@bethanylb.edu).

### **References**

<sup>1</sup> Clark, Burton R. (1970). *The Distinctive College: Antioch, Reed and Swarthmore*. Chicago: Aldine.

<sup>2</sup> Erling, Marla & Granquist, Mark. (2008). *The Augustana Story: Shaping Lutheran Identity in North America*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress.

<sup>3</sup> Lindquist, Emory. (1975). *Bethany in Kansas: The history of a college*. Lindsborg, KS: Bethany College Publications.

<sup>4</sup> Listening Sessions Data from the fall semester 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Future Forum Data from the winter / spring 2008.