The Dynamic Leadership of President Farwell
By Wilfred F. Bunge

Elwin and Helen Farwell came to Luther on the cusp of its second century, ready to awaken a larger vision of the college. There had been significant accomplishments in the years leading up to the centennial in 1961: new buildings (Valders Hall of Science and Centennial Union), a growing enrollment, and a rich program of guest lecturers and artists. However, there was a shadow side to the centennial year as well: controversial departure of most of the faculty in religion; loss of Preus Gymnasium by fire on November 2, 1961; retirement of President Ylvisaker due to Parkinson’s disease; and the presidency declined by two candidates.

The choice of Elwin Farwell—one Norwegian immigrant background, a Lutheran come lately (though an ordained Lutheran pastor), an undergraduate major in animal husbandry (but a doctorate in higher education administration plus experience as academic dean at California Lutheran College)—seemed unlikely for Luther College, though strongly supported by the faculty. The choice turned out to be exactly the right choice. The energy and can-do spirit was there from the time the Farwells arrived on a cold February day of 1963.

The early 1960s were a heady period for colleges and universities, and President Farwell saw to that Luther shared this boom. By the fall of 1964 the college had a new mission statement, a new calendar, and a huge increase in enrollment. Farwell borrowed a slogan from the space program as his signature motto, “All Systems Go!”

The 19 years of Farwell’s presidency were years of building the campus—dormitories, field house, library, auditorium/chapel, and music building—and attention to diversity and equal opportunity at the college. It was a time of heightened ecumenical activity in the church, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Feminist Movement. Farwell arranged a faculty exchange in religion between Luther and St. John’s University in Minnesota, encouraged the recruitment of African-American students, and appointed a Committee on the Status of Women at the college. The number of Catholic students at Luther soon reached several hundred; African-American students peaked at 84 in 1971; and there was attention to the representation of women in the faculty, the women’s viewpoint in the curriculum, and opportunities for competitive athletic participation for women students.

Helen and Elwin Farwell were a team in fostering a spirit of community at the college and with the citizens of Decorah. When they retired in 1981, Luther College had not lost its distinctiveness, but it was larger in many respects than it had been before. The award of a Phi Beta Kappa chapter to the college the following year was an external signal of the quality achieved in those 19 years.