Social Change in the 1960s and early 1970s

By Mary Hull Mohr

Across the United States in the 1960s and the early 1970s the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and a new understanding of the role of women in society awakened college students to become activists. At Luther, student reactions resulted in demonstrations, sit-ins, and teach-ins, as well as lively debate.

The draft of young men of college age brought home in a very real way the costs of war to students. Two events capture the way in which students reacted during the late 1960s. On October 15, 1969, a group of students declared Moratorium Day, and 800 students, faculty, and community members marched from the campus to the Courthouse, passing the Post Office on the way to allow participants to send messages to members of congress. Later that day a service was held in the Methodist church to pray for peace. On the morning of May 5, 1970, a row of crosses on the library lawn, representing the Iowa deaths in the Vietnam War, greeted students and faculty. A special chapel service, teach-in, and rally took the place of classes for a number of students.

The Civil Rights Movement was a major part of the conversation. The increased enrollment of African/American students (which President Farwell encouraged) began a dialogue about civil rights and widened the experience of many white students. (Unfortunately, so did some incidents of racism.) Five black students organized the Black Student Union in 1968, and a Black Cultural Center opened in April of 1969. With the support of faculty, courses were soon offered in Black Studies. A Black Studies (now Africana Studies) department was established in 1970. A number of African/American activists, e.g., Julian Bond, came to campus during those years to lecture on important national concerns.

Major changes for women also occurred in the 1960s and early 1970s. Women demonstrated against their dorm hours, and men and women both pushed for intervisitation. The first course in women’s studies was taught in the English department in 1969. By the mid-1970s, the sociology, political science, and history departments, as well as the English department, were teaching women’s study courses. An Association of Women Students (AWS), created in the early 1970s, organized panels on the roles of women, and female students began to explore a new awareness of their place in society. President Farwell formed a Status of Women Committee in 1973.

Tense exchanges and some regrettable events resulting from differing opinions surfaced during these years, but the period resulted in positive changes in attitudes and important curricular development. By the mid-1970s, significant transformation had taken place at Luther.