The Center for Faith and Life
By Wilfred F. Bunge

Through most of its history Luther College had neither a building designed as a chapel nor an auditorium designed primarily for performance. Early on the chapel was a designated room in Main. In 1876 the Norwegian Synod shared with the Lutheran congregation of Decorah the cost of building what is now First Lutheran Church, viewing it as the “temple” of the Synod and the college church, as well as a place of worship for local Norwegian Lutherans. Daily worship services on campus continued in Main until 1926, when the completion of Preus Gymnasium provided space for worship. The Gymnasium also served as a general purpose auditorium. Prior to 1926 the Grand Theater in downtown Decorah accommodated concerts, Händel’s Messiah, for example.

When Preus Gymnasium burned in 1961, planning turned quickly to its replacement with two buildings, a field house and a building with the dual function of auditorium and chapel. The insurance settlement for Preus Gym covered the field house, but fund-raising for the second building continued through the 1960s and early 1970s. Design projections wavered between emphasis on worship and on performing arts. Was it to be a chapel/auditorium or an auditorium/chapel?

By 1972 it was clear that the new building was to be an auditorium/chapel. Donald Gray, local architect, worked closely with a college committee on the design. Financing proved to be especially challenging because of rapid inflation in the 1970s—construction costs increasing as much as 1% per month. In early 1975, when design and financing were still in progress, construction began. Blackhawk of Waterloo agreed to work with the architect on planning as construction proceeded and to do the building on a cost-plus basis with a guaranteed maximum cost. On completion in 1977, the all-inclusive cost of the project was $4 million, a major challenge at the time, but a bargain in retrospect.

The building has been a genuine center for the college, the gathering place for all-college functions and the public face of the college for visitors. In 34 years of use the hall has accommodated a wide variety of worship and performance occasions. Worship leaders and musicians have been especially creative in exploiting the possibilities the space provides for shaping programs. A rich variety of guest lecturers, concerts, and other center stage performances have enlarged the world of students and visitors alike. The Minnesota Symphony and the Guthrie Theater have played there; Elie Wiesel has lectured there; four times Garrison Keillor broadcast the Prairie Home Companion from there early in his career, and he returns in September with a one-man show in the Center Stage Series. The CFL is a wondrous gathering place, the crowning design achievement of Decorah’s own architect, Donald L. Gray.