Essay #2: Three Pioneer Clergy Couples, by Wilfred F. Bunge

Three immigrant pastors from Norway figured most prominently in the founding and development of Luther College: Hermann Amberg Preus, Ulrich Vilhelm Koren, and Peter Laurentius Larsen. Of the three, only Preus was present for the organization of the Norwegian Synod of Lutheran congregations in 1853. He and his wife, Linka, answered a call to the Spring Prairie congregation in Wisconsin in 1851. Koren and his wife, Elisabeth, came to Washington Prairie in late 1853 in response to a call from the Paint Creek, Turkey River, and Little Iowa congregations. Larsen and his wife, Karen, arrived at the Rush River parish in Wisconsin in 1857.

These clergy couples were young, in their 20s, when they began their work in America. This was a first call for each pastor. They approached the work with the vigor of youth, serving their immediate parish, but traveling in a wide circuit, by horse or on foot, to attend to other emergent congregations as well. There are church records of those early years of Norwegian immigrant church life, minutes of meetings and newsletters. A more colorful record is in the diaries kept by Linka Preus (the first 13 years of her life in America) and Elisabeth Koren (departure in September 1853 from Hamburg through the first two years in America), and in Karen Larsen’s biography of her father, Laur. Larsen, published in 1936. Linka Preus also recorded in sketch books observations of family and church life in the Norwegian immigrant community. Karen Larsen’s biography provides dimension for the early years of Luther College. The three accounts together humanize the beginnings of the college.

Hermann Preus was elected president of the Norwegian Synod in 1862 and continued in that leadership position until his death in 1894. Since the Synod maintained close supervision of its college, Preus was a key leader for the college through its early years.

Vilhelm Koren, located near the college and a close confidant and adviser of President Larsen, had more influence on the shaping of the college than any other single person aside from Larsen. Several potential locations for the college (Decorah, La Crosse, Madison, Janesville) were discussed in meetings of the Norwegian Synod. Koren, however, took an option on a 32-acre site in Decorah prior to the meeting of the Synod in June 1861 at Luther Valley, Wisconsin, to decide how to proceed after the departure from St. Louis. That meeting resulted in decisions to begin their own college that fall, empower Koren to complete the purchase of the Decorah site, elect a building committee, and call Schmidt to share teaching duties with Larsen.