

The Legacy of Lars Paul Esbjörn in Lutheran Higher Education

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As Augustana College prepares to celebrate its Sesquicentennial in 2010, I have been reflecting on what our founder, the Rev. Lars Paul Esbjörn, would think of the many changes that have taken place at Augustana College. Would he believe that the college has been faithful to its mission, as it changed to meet the changing and complex needs of new generations? Or, would he believe that Augustana College has compromised its original mission by adapting too quickly to a changing America?

I recently had the privilege of accompanying the Augustana Choir to the Uppsala Diocese of the Church of Sweden. It was in this diocese that Esbjörn, who was also the founder of the Augustana Synod, served both before and after his sojourn to America. The Augustana Choir sang in the churches of two of his parishes, Östervåla (where his ordained ministry began in 1832 and where he would return in 1863), and Hille (where he'd served prior to his departure in 1849). Members of the Augustana Alumni Association joined the choir for much of its tour. Esbjörn's church in the mill town of Oslättfors was too small for a choir concert, but was large enough for a worship service without the choir. Concerts in each of the churches were packed, given the fine reputation that the Augustana Choir enjoys as a result of past concert tours.

The choir also sang at Uppsala Cathedral, which is the largest church in Scandinavia. It was at the University of Uppsala that Lars Paul Esbjörn studied theology. He would have been proud of the outstanding concert given at the cathedral, 180 years after he studied there.

It was likewise at the University of Uppsala that the fifth president of Augustana College, Conrad Bergendoff, would receive an honorary doctorate in 1938, in part for his work as personal secretary to Nathan Söderblom, the Archbishop of Sweden, leading up to the Stockholm Conference of 1925. Söderblom won a Nobel Prize in 1930 for his work on church unity and ecumenism, and the work accomplished in Uppsala surely influenced Dr. Bergendoff's views as to the importance of ecumenism.

It was a fascinating experience to walk on the path of those Swedish pioneers, like Esbjörn, in Sweden. Did they know the hardship they would endure as pioneers in their trip to the new world, which took place during 1849? The hardship of these pioneers is well documented, including the difficult journey by sea to the United States and the suffering (including the deaths of Esbjörn's twin sons) they encountered throughout their journey.

After about ten years in the United States, Esbjörn and other church leaders determined to form an alliance of churches. In 1860 they created the "Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Synod in North America." At the same time, Augustana College and Theological Seminary was founded in Chicago to educate future members of the clergy. Lars Paul Esbjörn was the first president of the college.

As part of the trip to Sweden, I was invited to make a few comments at a ceremony in Gävle, at the site from which the Swedish emigrants left for the United States. The harbor had been moved to another location and the area was being rejuvenated as a housing development. As you might imagine, it was moving for me, as the seventh successor to President Esbjörn, to stand where he and

40 others from Hille departed for the United States. The question most on my mind was this: what if Lars Paul Esbjörn could come back today and visit Augustana College and its progeny? Would he be pleased or disappointed by the manner in which the college has developed?

If he could only return to Augustana for a day, he might be shocked and perhaps disappointed. If he could visit Augustana for a ten-week term, I believe that his shock and disbelief would turn to pride in what those who followed him had accomplished.

If he were here only one day, he would have many questions. Is it true there are more women than men? There were no women at Augustana College for its first 20 years. Is it true that Roman Catholics outnumber Lutherans? Is it true that the great-great-great grandchildren of American Slaves are at the college? Is it true that dancing is not only permitted, but that the college now has five different dance clubs, including a Swing Dance Club and an Irish dance club? Do students really study in such exotic locations as Africa, China, India and South America? Can it really be true that one of the campus chaplains is a Catholic nun? And he might think that we aren't serious when we tell him that the college recently added a Muslim student advisor and a Jewish student advisor.

But if he could stay with the college for a ten-week term, I think he might change his mind. I think that he would see the traditions of his Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Synod alive and well.

I'd like to focus on three observations he might make if he could come back today.

First, he would recognize that the traditions and faith of the Swedish immigrants continue today at Augustana. He would certainly recognize the values of the immigrants in the Five Faith Commitments of Augustana College.¹ Those five faith commitments – recognized by Bishop Mark Hanson as a thoughtful and important statement of a Lutheran college's connection to the church – recognize the five core values of the Augustana Lutheran Church.²

The first value we recognize is the commitment to personal piety and life-shaping spirituality, by offering a host of programs so that every student has the opportunity to develop spiritually. The second value, consistent with the Augustana Synod's views on faith and reason, is that we encourage our campus community to wrestle with ways in which faith and reason challenge and enrich each other. The third value recognizes that all human efforts are aspects of our understanding of vocation, so the college has a number of programs to help students discern their callings. Fourth, recognizing the Augustana Synod's views on ecumenism, Augustana College, through its programs and practices, celebrates God's regard for the worth of all individuals. Fifth and finally, consistent with the Augustana Synod's commitment to social consciousness, world missions and servant leadership, Augustana College is deliberate in creating a campus community that seeks justice, loves mercy and acts with love and humility.

As a second observation, Esbjörn would be pleased that Augustana College and its progeny have grown and continued to prosper, just as the church grew and prospered during his time. He would recognize that prosperity is a relative term. Our colleges are prosperous in that students continue to grow in mind, spirit and body, often in positive ways that our founders could not have imagined. But financially, our colleges don't really prosper. Upsala College in New Jersey failed for financial

¹ See http://www.augustanaheritage.org/five_faith_commitments.pdf

² See https://archive.elca.org/bishop/messages/m_070301.html

reasons. Another faces significant and immediate financial challenges. Our Augustana-rooted colleges have small endowments compared to other colleges of similar quality. Endowments are small at our colleges because it was long believed that the church was the only endowment our colleges needed, effectively protecting them against hard financial times. This has proven not to be the case, of course. Annual financial support from the church is slight – for Augustana, less than \$1 of every \$2000 is supplied by the church. As a result, just as the future of our colleges was uncertain during Esbjörn's time, we still endure financial uncertainties. Though I expect that each of our colleges will be around 50 years from now, I wonder: with their weak endowments, how strong will they be? Will there be sufficient scholarship funding to admit students from poor and middle-class families? Will we be able to pay professors sufficiently to attract and retain an outstanding faculty? Will colleges like Augustana be able to maintain their historic buildings, built by Swedish pioneers, considering the cost of renovating a building like Old Main now approaches \$18 million?

During Esbjörn's time and for the years thereafter, the colleges beat the odds thanks to the contributions of the church's parishioners. For decades, church members have contributed to their alma maters, often sacrificially, both in annual funding and through will commitments. I believe that this generosity will continue, allowing our Augustana Synod colleges to become more and more effective in their shared mission of helping students grow in mind, spirit and body.

Finally, he would recognize that the Augustana colleges have weathered changing times surprisingly well. He would be proud that the colleges have changed to meet the needs of a changing society. I don't believe that he would be one of those who fret about whether there are too few great, great grandchildren of Swedish immigrants or whether there are too many Roman Catholics at our colleges. How wouldn't fret about the number of Swedish majors or whether we honor Swedish traditions in exactly the right way. Instead, he would look at the bigger, and more important, picture. He would be pleased that our colleges are meeting students in their faith journeys where they are, as opposed to where we might otherwise wish them to be. He wouldn't be an advocate of mandatory chapel, I believe, because he recognizes that mandatory chapel is not the most effective way for us to encourage spiritual formation within this generation.

If anything, Esbjörn was adaptable and pragmatic. Esbjörn was no stranger to changing times. Immigration to the United States was due, in large part, to changing times in Sweden. There was insufficient land to support the growing population. Esbjörn, himself, lost his job as pastor of a church and chaplain of a mill-town and was unemployed. When he arrived in the United States there were many disappointments and his plans changed frequently. What did not change was his determination to provide faith-filled lives to the immigrants in this new world.

If Esbjörn were concerned with the greater independence of our Augustana Synod colleges from the hierarchy of the church, he would feel much better if he compared our institutions with his own alma mater, Uppsala University. Once a part of the church, Swedish universities seem to have effectively divorced themselves from the Church of Sweden. When I visited Uppsala, it was attributed as being necessary to respond to the changing times – today only 2% of the members of the church of Sweden are active in the church. Esbjörn would be pleased that each of our Augustana Synod colleges cherishes its relationship with the church. Instead of abandoning the relationship, our colleges have recognized that it is a living relationship – one that adds dimension and depth to our mission of helping students of all faiths prepare for lives of leadership and service.

And though I don't think he would fret about it, he would be pleased that our colleges are looking for more contemporary connections with Sweden. Recognizing those students of Swedish descent are now third, fourth or fifth generation Americans – he would be pleased that we still value Sankta Lucia and smörgåsbords, but would be even more pleased that our colleges admit students from Sweden, send students to Sweden and learn what we can from Swedish practices in business, environmental stewardship and social welfare.

So as I stood, two weeks ago, at the foot of Lars Paul Esbjörn's grave in Östervåla, I imagined our conversation. Esbjörn and his fellow Swedish pioneers are deserving of great thanks for the impact they have had on America, on Lutheranism and on our Augustana Synod college. Through his efforts, the lives of tens of thousands of Augustana College graduates have been transformed through growth in mind, spirit and body. Yes, many things have changed at your college, but we have worked to be faithful to the values you brought to us.

Let me conclude by also thanking you, the members of the Augustana Heritage Association. You kept the torch lit by Esbjörn burning brightly. And you advanced it. The Augustana Lutheran Church and its colleges changed under your leadership to meet the needs of a changing country. And we continue to do so today. Though we have a long way to go, you have encouraged us; you have prayed for us, you have helped us build our endowments. For that, on behalf of the students at our Augustana Synod Colleges, I give you profound thanks.