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Lutheran Campus Ministry, Morris's first student organization

Summary: LCM is one of many organizations celebrating Morris's 50th birthday during Homecoming 2010 Groupie Reunions.

(October 4, 2010)-Lutheran Campus Ministries (LCM), arguably, was the first student organization at the University of Minnesota, Morris. It began as an idea even before the University opened its doors in fall 1960. Originating in a community energized yet apprehensive about the “new college on the prairie horizon,” LCM is celebrating its 50th birthday along with UMM.

James “Jim” Olson, professor emeritus of chemistry, one of Morris’s 13 original faculty members, and Rollen “Rollie” Halvorson, Morris’s first Lutheran campus pastor, were there on UMM’s opening day. They recently returned to campus to share recollections of the origins and evolution of LCM as well their memories of UMM’s first years. Both stressed the newness of the experience and the possibilities realized by motivated individuals who embraced the freedom to “make it up as you go along.” Both men agreed that there was “a lot of excitement and enthusiasm for this whole project” locally and statewide, even as they understood that at the time Morris was only “a two-year experiment.”

What are your earliest memories of the campus and students? How did the campus prepare for the students’ arrival? How did the students respond?

Halvorson: The Lutheran Student Foundation of Minnesota (Foundation) was excited about having a presence on the new campus. Osgood Magnuson, the executive director, had been the state’s 4-H director and was acquainted with the area. He worked through the Foundation and Luther Seminary to appoint an intern, a third-year seminary student, as campus pastor for the first year.

I was that intern. My first task was to get to know the students. Besides hanging out at the campus coffee shop, which was a nice post for a coffee drinking intern, I also took a course in sociology. Being on campus in these ways I became familiar to and with many of the students. There were only a few hundred of them then, making the job simple but also complex, as “intern” was then a new and untested concept. The school allowed us to gather in classrooms on campus as we got started by forming a Lutheran Student Association (LSA) group.

Olson: One has to understand that there were only 200 plus students at the time, almost all freshmen, and many of them commuted from home. We did not yet have the kind of culture or climate of inquiry and curiosity, dialogue, discussion, and questioning found at colleges. On Sundays, not many students stayed on campus, but a number of those who did came to First Lutheran for worship because it was the church closest to campus and shared the campus pastor/intern.

What was the role of the community and First Lutheran in forming LCM?

Halvorson: Lutherans have always been involved in the engagement of faith with knowledge. So when it was announced that there would be a University of Minnesota college in Morris, the pastors at First, Peace, and Bethany Lutheran

churches (the latter two of which later merged into Faith Lutheran), and other pastors and churches nearby began to consider how there could be a Lutheran campus ministry.

First Lutheran was the largest of the local congregations and the closest geographically, so it played a pivotal role. Working together, Pastor Lowell Larson and Magnuson helped arrange for a third-year seminary student, me at the time, to be shared by First Lutheran and the campus.

Where was LCM's first campus location? Describe the atmosphere of those early days.

Halvorson: Rodney A. Briggs, Morris's first dean and provost, was adamant that students have an informal meeting place. This is how Louie's Lower Level, still located in the lower level of the Student Center, became the first unofficial home of LCM. But it didn't take long to realize that LCM needed a "home base." A steering committee of wonderfully interested pastors and lay people was formed to determine the best course of action. Since there was no central source of funds to draw from, raising money became a priority. It fell to me to make the rounds of area churches and any other group that would have me to convince them of the value of faith and learning and try and gain their backing.

Olson: It's important to remember that in the early days the University was still considered an experiment, and we were inventing traditions as we went along. Rollie and I and our wives used to get together and compare notes. At least 10 interns served before there was a permanent campus pastor. The interns served in their third year of seminary and then returned to finish their training. This constant starting over caused even more breaks in tradition and a delayed sense of permanence.

LCM's first home was a house on Fourth Street. The second floor was remodeled as living quarters for the campus pastor—Roland Severson at the time—and the downstairs used for LCM activities. This wasn't such a great arrangement, because it forced the intern to be always on duty.

I became a member of the church council at First Lutheran when I returned to teaching after finishing graduate school in 1967. Another three years passed before Christus House was purchased. Convincing Norwegians concerned about what would happen if the Foundation stopped supporting LCM to buy real estate was a tough sell. So a corporation was formed to buy back the house for \$1 if support was ever withdrawn.

Halvorson: The UMM administration, Dean Briggs, Herb Croom, and others, were always supportive and generous with our student group. One of the biggest projects was Spiritual Emphasis Convocation, which perked things up mid-year. All students and faculty were invited. That first year, Pastor Paul Hanson from Willmar spoke in the auditorium, and then conducted a forum on the issues of faith and science.

Who were some of the outstanding LCM student leaders?

Olson: Fifty years ago, the students were fresh from high school with little background so creating LCM was a matter of establishing fellowship and identification among the students and building the organization before developing leaders.

Halvorson: Some that do leap to mind are John Gilbert '64 and Bob Gandrud '65. Gilbert became the CEO of Aid Association for Lutherans and Gandrud became the CEO of Lutheran Brotherhood. David Hedine of Glenwood was the first president of our LSA group.

Talk about early area supporters and other leaders.

Halvorson: Pastor Cliff Grindland, then at First Lutheran, was always a leader in the local efforts. Harold Kvale, a steering committee member and fundraiser, endowed a fund that still supports LCM. Anne and Jim Eidsvold continue a long family tradition of support for Morris, remaining active in LCM and through scholarship endowments.

What was the relationship between LCM and other campus organizations?

Olson: Back then not many other campus organizations existed, except the Saddle Club, with whom we got along great, and KUMM may have been in its earliest stages. Most of the early organizations were formed along [academic] discipline lines. As the only organized ministry on campus, LCM took pains to connect with others. First Lutheran established Homecoming Sunday on Homecoming weekend, showing how to start a tradition on a fledgling campus that didn't yet have anyone to come home.

What challenges have you had in your years of involvement with LCM-Morris? What gave you the most satisfaction? The greatest frustrations?

Halvorson: LCM has been there as a source of strength for students during campus tragedies such as the Virginia Tech [Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia] shootings in 2007. LCM students have responded to natural disasters, converging from all over to work in areas battered by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and continuous projects in the region.

What are some of the hot button issues LCM has helped students wrestle with in the last 50 years?

Halvorson: The nomination and election of John F. Kennedy as the first Roman Catholic president had people wondering how things might change. Like everywhere else, the threat of Communism and nuclear confrontation occupied people's thoughts. People who suspected that there were many Communists lurking in places like colleges and universities caused some tension on campus and once verbally attacked a biology professor at a convocation, accusing him of being a Communist. Our group processed this in follow-up discussions. The ordination of women became an issue about 30 years ago back then the notion [at LCM] didn't cause a ripple.

Olson: When the musical Hair was booked to play in the old gymnasium it raised a big row in town. But Briggs decided in about 30 microseconds to allow the show to go on. He didn't want to open serious gaps in the town/gown divide, but he also didn't want to compromise.

Address changes over time you've observed in students, the University, and LCM.

Halvorson: In its early years, LCM was a group that was led for students now it must keep up with the students. Today's students come from more varied backgrounds, and they bring with them a greater breadth of ideas and experiences. LCM's role is to develop initiatives and channel their energies.

What advice would you give to today's students?

Olson: Be proud of your environment. The mandate to "do a few things well" has kept Morris on the map. You have the advantage of a small campus but receive a diploma from the University of Minnesota, an institution of worldwide renown.

Through personal and academic discovery, the University of Minnesota, Morris provides opportunities for students to grow intellectually, engage in community, experience environmental stewardship and celebrate diversity. A renewable and sustainable educational experience, Morris prepares graduates for careers, for advanced degrees, for lifelong learning, for work world flexibility in the future, and for global citizenship. Learn more about Morris at morris.umn.edu or call 888-866-3382.