

# A Brief History of Wisconsin Lutheran College

By Mark Braun

---

*In 2004, WLC applied for and received a 10-year extension of its accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. The final report of the self-study committee combined the efforts of a wide range of professors, staff members, and administrators of the College. Dr. Braun served as general editor of the report and authored this opening brief history of WLC. It has been revised slightly and updated for publication. The final section, "Into the Future," was added for this article.*

---

Wisconsin Lutheran College is affiliated and in doctrinal agreement with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), a conservative Lutheran church body with congregations, elementary schools, Lutheran high schools, and parachurch agencies located throughout the United States, as well as foreign mission stations on every continent. Most WELS members, however, live in the upper Midwest, more than half of them in the state of Wisconsin. The WELS in its present form came into being through an alignment of smaller Lutheran synods in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Nebraska during World War I.

From its beginning, the WELS has had a strong tradition of maintaining its own colleges to provide pastors to serve its congregations and teachers for its parish elementary schools. Its secondary school system of colleges and a seminary to provide those pastors and teachers included Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Mequon, Wisconsin, founded in 1863; Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin, in 1865; Dr. Martin Luther College in New Ulm, Minnesota, in 1884; and Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Michigan, in 1905. Northwestern College and Dr. Martin Luther College were amalgamated to form a single new college, Martin Luther College, on the New Ulm campus in 1995.

All of the previously mentioned colleges and seminaries (as well as presently maintained preparatory high schools in Watertown, Wisconsin and Saginaw, Michigan and previously maintained preparatory high schools in New Ulm, Minnesota and Mobridge, South Dakota) were founded by their respective synods and maintained by the combined synod throughout their histories. At all of these "synod schools," church body administrators determine policies, call teachers, and institute curriculum.

## **Not a "Synod School"**

By contrast, Wisconsin Lutheran College was founded more recently through an initiative led by concerned Wisconsin Synod clergy and lay members in the Milwaukee area. Although affiliated with the parent church body, Wisconsin Lutheran has never been owned and operated by the Synod and is not properly regarded as a "synod school." The purpose of Wisconsin Lutheran College has not been to prepare pastors and teachers for WELS parishes but to provide a liberal arts education for the Synod's lay members. Wisconsin Lutheran raises its own operating funds, calls its own faculty members, and directs its own policies through its Board of Regents.

In fact, the impetus to begin a Lutheran liberal arts college in Milwaukee arose partly in opposition to the Synod's 1969 convention resolution to close a two-year synodical college, Milwaukee Lutheran Teachers' College, which served as a junior college to feed Dr. Martin Luther College in New Ulm. (For a time, MLTC was called Wisconsin Lutheran College, a source of confusion to college historians.) In addition, the movement to establish the College came as a reaction to perceived theological liberalism arising in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod during the 1960s, particularly as it was believed to exist at Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, Indiana. Similar to Wisconsin Lutheran, Valparaiso regards itself as a Lutheran university of Missouri Synod heritage but is not a part of the Concordia University system. It has no legal affiliation with any church body.

## Brief History of WLC

Wisconsin Lutheran opened its doors in 1973 as a junior college to a student body of 16 freshmen and one sophomore, utilizing classroom facilities at Wisconsin Lutheran High School and borrowing teachers primarily from that school. Most significantly, the College began with no money. Pastor Robert Krause, Wisconsin Lutheran High School principal, served as provisional president of the fledgling college until 1975, when Dr. Gary Greenfield accepted the call to be the first full-time president of WLC.

After housing its administrative offices, student life center, and dormitory rooms in a single family home across the street from the high school for four years, the College purchased an 8.5-acre campus located less than a half mile away, on West Bluemound Road. Constructed in 1929 as the House of Good Shepherd, this campus provided residence halls, classrooms, and office space to accommodate 29 students and a full-time faculty of five. In 1982, the College purchased the 60,000 volume library of Milton College, a small liberal arts college midway between Milwaukee and Madison that had recently closed. In 1985, the College acquired and installed science laboratory furnishings secured from the University of Wisconsin center system school in Medford.

In 1984, Wisconsin Lutheran's Board of Regents approved a plan to expand the curriculum to offer baccalaureate degrees in 11 majors, and the College embarked on its first capital campaign with a goal of three million dollars. With North Central Association approval, the first juniors were admitted in 1985, and the first four-year baccalaureate degrees were awarded to a class of 10 graduates in 1987. The Board also approved a master plan for campus expansion. Subsequent acquisition of additional properties adjoining the original Good Shepherd campus and in the nearby community has increased College holdings to its present size of approximately 52 acres.

Upon completion of an initial three million dollar funding campaign, the College launched its next capital campaign in 1987 with a goal of nine million dollars. Concurrently, the College embarked on an aggressive building program, which continues into the present and has resulted in the remodeling or new construction of more than 90 percent of its facilities and a complete reconfiguration of its campus.

In 1988, the 3 million dollar Marvin M. Schwan Library was dedicated. Four years later, a 6.5 million dollar recreation complex was completed. In 1996, the 9.1 million dollar Center for Arts and Performance was dedicated. A greatly expanded campus center, including dining facilities and student union, incorporated as an addition to the original building purchased from Good Shepherd, was dedicated in 1998. Twin residence halls, accommodating 250-300 students and built at a cost of 14.7 million dollars, were dedicated in 2000. In 2004, the 17.2 million dollar Science Hall was dedicated.

In addition, 31 acres of land purchased by the College from Milwaukee County has been reconfigured as an athletic complex, with construction of a football stadium, soccer game and practice fields, and softball and baseball fields, with additional room for tennis courts. By the 2006-07 school year, all athletic fields were fully operational.

The growth at Wisconsin Lutheran College, of course, cannot be measured purely in terms of campus expansion and completed construction projects. In the three decades since 1977, student enrollment has grown to 741 students, and full-time teaching faculty has increased to 56. In 1977, the purchase price for the House of Good Shepherd was \$750,000; President Greenfield remarked in 2002 that the College now spent that much in its normal operational expenses *every nine days*.

### **The Valpo of the Wisconsin Synod?**

The parallels between Wisconsin Lutheran College and Valparaiso University go beyond their lack of designation as “synod schools” in their respective church bodies. In a 1988 article in *The American Scholar* entitled “Athens and Jerusalem in Indiana” (Volume 57, Summer 1988, pp. 353-68), James Neuchterlein detailed the history and development of Valparaiso, drawing upon his own experiences as an undergraduate in the 1950s, followed by his return as a professor in the 1980s. His article stands in many ways as both instructive guide and cautionary tale for WLC. Indeed, with the change of a few names, dates, and events, Neuchterlein’s article could well be describing the course of Wisconsin Lutheran.

What Neuchterlein wrote about Valparaiso’s dynamic leader O.P. Kretzmann could equally be said about Gary Greenfield: During his tenure the College “came to see itself not simply as a sanctuary from the larger American cultural scene but as itself a distinctive cultural force with the potential for making its presence felt in the wider world.” Dr. Greenfield’s repeated encouragements to students and faculty to “dream big dreams,” and his desire to make the College a place that equips “servant leaders” for their congregations and communities, provides evidence of that vision.

Like 1950s Valparaiso, the student body of Wisconsin Lutheran contains a high percentage of young men and women who are first-generation college students or whose families pursued higher education almost exclusively in WELS schools for the single purpose of preparing for the public ministry of the church. Its student body remains predominantly WELS and more than 80 percent Lutheran. Many parents who send their sons and daughters to WLC may have little interest in a traditional liberal arts education and even less appreciation for its value. Instead, they may prefer Wisconsin Lutheran primarily for its conservative Christian environment—safer for their children’s faith than the state university system or those once denominationally affiliated Christian colleges that long ago abandoned their theological moorings—where their sons and daughters will acquire adequate vocational preparation, receive dependable moral and religious training, and perhaps find religiously and socially compatible spouses.

### **Tensions Within the Church Body**

From the start, the relationship between Wisconsin Lutheran and its parent church body has been tenuous, even contentious. Friends and alumni of the previous incarnation of WLC (Milwaukee Lutheran Teachers’ College) still remember their alma mater as “Chicken Little,” a nickname that evokes the affection students felt for its cozy, supportive environment. But the nickname also recalls a time when a college named Wisconsin Lutheran offered little to fear from “synod schools” and their supporters. This Wisconsin Lutheran College, though it remains a very small liberal arts college, is no longer a “Chicken Little” in the WELS.

Some WELS pastors and members remain convinced that every student who attends WLC and every dollar contributed to it is a student or a dollar lost to the Synod or the synodical school system. WLC has come under criticism from Synod members for various reasons: the growing percentage of non-WELS and non-Lutheran students on campus; the use of an interview process to generate call lists for faculty and staff positions; the presence of women in called faculty and key administrative positions; the number of faculty members who, while they are WELS members, have not come through the synodical school system and are thus perceived to be less grounded in the Synod’s doctrinal position and less entrenched in its culture; the decision to host convocation speakers from non-WELS or non-Lutheran denominations; the acquisition of financial support from individuals and corporations outside the WELS; the suspected liberal leanings of some of its professors; and a perceived attitude of hubris because of its impressive campus buildings, aggressive programming, attractive promotional literature, and bold administrative procedures.

## Brief History of WLC

In a telling comment about 1950s Valparaiso, Neuchterlein wrote that most of its students and faculty “kept a critical if affectionate distance from the more retrograde attitudes” of the Missouri Synod. “Indeed,” he recalled, “we imagined ourselves, with a certain touch of superiority, as the generation that would lead the Missouri Synod kicking and screaming into a necessary encounter with the modern world.”

Similar expressions of synodical misgivings have also been heard occasionally at Wisconsin Lutheran. Although such remarks usually seem to be made in a tongue-in-cheek way, they betray an uneasiness that can still surface between church body and college. Many within and beyond the Synod support and even admire Wisconsin Lutheran, but critical letters and phone calls draw more immediate attention.

Wisconsin Lutheran College has become an adolescent institution. During adolescence, children’s physical growth is most rapid and readily apparent, while maturation and internal growth come later and more slowly. With campus construction largely completed and a student population surpassing even the most optimistic goals of two decades ago, the College still needs internal growth of many kinds: improved development of faculty members, strengthened support systems for students with special needs, expansion and improvement of curricular offerings, continued growth in technology, and others.

Also common to adolescence is a crisis of identity. College leaders continue to affirm the goals and mission statement of the College, that it strives to become and remain an outstanding liberal arts college of the Wisconsin Synod. Yet questions arise concerning the Lutheran identity of the College, its ongoing relationship with the WELS, and the service it will provide for a student body expected to contain a higher percentage of non-WELS, non-Lutheran, and even non-Christian students.

In the space of two academic years, the College experienced a significant change in leadership. After 28 years as its only full-time president, Dr. Greenfield retired in 2003. Dr. John Bauer, who served for more than two decades as Academic Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs, shifted his full attention to CHARIS in 2003, and has since left the College. Paul Knueppel, Student Affairs Dean and Vice President of Student Life since 1987, retired at the end of the 2004-05 school year. Dr. Timothy Kriewall became the new President in 2003. Dr. John Kolander became Vice President for Academic Affairs in 2004. Dr. Dennis Miller became Vice President for Student Life in 2005.

In addition, a host of key people who contributed significantly to the development of Wisconsin Lutheran have moved on. Vicki Hartig, Vice President of Public Relations, has taken a similar position with the “Time of Grace” radio and television ministry. Dr. Clarence Jenkins, Professor of English and Vice President of Development, now works for the Milwaukee YMCA. Prof. Roger Fleming has retired from the Registrar’s office, though he still coaches golf and teaches a section of Greek. Lisa Adamski Sorenson, a familiar face in Admissions and the Campus Center, moved with her husband to Montana.

### **Into the Future**

After more than two decades away, James Neuchterlein returned to his alma mater in the early 1980s. The changes at Valparaiso were readily apparent.

The university’s student body, more than 80 percent Lutheran in the 1950s, had declined to about half Lutheran in the 1980s. The loss in Lutheran representation was filled by students from various Christian denominations, predominantly Roman Catholics. Ironically, while the student population grew more religiously diverse, it had become less so ethnically and racially. Valparaiso is located 50

## Brief History of WLC

miles from Chicago and only 30 miles from Gary, Indiana, yet it drew fewer African American students in the 1980s than it had at mid-century.

Wisconsin Lutheran has experienced a similar though less dramatic demographic change. From over 90 percent in the 1980s, the student population of WLC today stands at about 2/3 WELS members. Despite growth in total enrollment and a rising percentage of students from other Christian denominations, there has not been a corresponding increase in African American, Hispanic, Asian, or international students.

Free campus efforts seek to celebrate and increase campus diversity, but they are (in this writer's view) somewhat ill-defined and appear to have been imported from secular institutions without consideration of the unique environment and mission of Wisconsin Lutheran.

Any concern for greater campus diversity must be qualified and addressed within the makeup and mission of the College. As long as Wisconsin Lutheran retains its affiliation with the WELS, it can be expected to reflect the racial and ethnic mix of the church body, which is predominantly of white Germanic and northern European background. The intensity of Wisconsin Lutheran's academic program was raised by design during the previous decade. Unless minority student support continues to be improved, the College is not likely to recruit many such students. Competition for academically well-prepared minority students is intense, and other colleges and universities may offer them a more attractive alternative.

Does WLC need to maintain a "critical mass" of WELS students in order to preserve its theological heritage? If so, what would that be? 60 percent WELS? 50 percent WELS? Lower?

Traditional wisdom has suggested that more crucial to sustaining WLC's doctrinal foundation is the theological affiliation of its faculty.

Even in the late 1950s, the faculty of Valparaiso was only about 50 percent Lutheran. The university has "no officially declared policy" concerning the theological affiliation of its professors. It "imposes no test on faculty, either for Lutheranism in particular or Christianity in general." In practice, however, Neuchterlein noted that the university "appears to operate on the principle that promising Lutheran academics should be assiduously sought out and, other things being equal, given preference."

Faculty members are expected to be "sympathetic with the Christian intellectual tradition," but nowhere was it spelled out what that tradition was or what sympathy with it would entail. No one would propose—at least publicly—that Valparaiso shed its religious identity entirely, but Neuchterlein sensed "more sympathy" for the view that the university should "concern itself less with its Lutheran tradition and more with ecumenical openness."

Although "still by anyone's standards a Lutheran institution," Valparaiso was less so in the 1980s than it had been in the 1950s. If the university hoped to remain a Lutheran community, Neuchterlein concluded that it would need to continue to have people on campus who held such concerns dear and "to whom insistence on scholarly excellence does not preclude loyalty to Christian faith in the Lutheran tradition."

In the history of religious higher education, such "driftings" toward non-denominational Christianity have typically resulted in the increased secularization of once strongly denominational colleges. A recent publication, James Burtchaell's *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches*, has documented such changes that have occurred in the colleges of many church bodies.

## Brief History of WLC

The “religious test” for faculty members at WLC is clear: One must be a member of the WELS or the Evangelical Lutheran Synod in order to receive a call to the College. I remember being asked by a seminary student at a public gathering years ago whether that was indeed the College policy. When I answered “Yes,” the student (apparently unconvinced) asked whether WLC faculty members had all been “confirmed Lutheran as children,” or something to that effect—a requirement well beyond that of his own church body or seminary.

There seems little likelihood that Wisconsin Lutheran would be attracted to a more “ecumenically minded” version of Christianity, if only because “ecumenical” in the minds of most WELS people is synonymous with “liberal,” and we don’t want that. More attractive may be a shift from a clearly confessional Lutheran identity to a more “Evangelical,” less denominationally particular Christian stance. The comment heard with increasing frequency on campus—“We should be less *Lutheran* and more *Christian*”—at very least begs elaboration. Such a comment is not unique to WLC, of course, but is being heard in the hallways and classrooms of many congregations.

Lutheranism has always taught that the marks of the church are the true preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. It is also true, of course, that “they will know we are Christians by our love.” Whether by design or by drift, if Wisconsin Lutheran were to become a generically Christian college, identifiable more by its friendliness and its servant mindset than its doctrinal position, the vision of its founders will have been accommodated to market demands.

On academic matters, Valparaiso faculty members of the 1980s had far better credentials and were more widely published than their 1950s counterparts. “A few of my colleagues are among the national leaders in their fields,” Neuchterlein wrote, while “many more, especially the younger ones, lead active and productive scholarly lives.”

But with increased academic competence came a change in expectations for faculty members. Once expected primarily to be good teachers and good university (and church) citizens, faculty members in the 1980s discovered that unless they had been sufficiently published they could not count on being promoted very readily.

Valparaiso’s faculty had become “more professionalized and more diverse.” Neuchterlein observed a growing tendency among faculty members to show greater loyalty to their specific disciplines than to the academic institution at which they did their work. “Conditioned by graduate training to aspire single-mindedly to intellectual excellence,” he wrote, “they resist suggestions by university administrators that in academic matters like hiring of new faculty, anything other than scholarly promise should come into play.” Questions regarding their commitment to the mission of the school seemed to them “at best parochial and irrelevant, at worst a betrayal of the academic calling.”

Into the late 1980s, faculty members called to Wisconsin Lutheran were primarily products of the synodical school system, with previous service as pastors and teachers in the WELS. Few had terminal degrees, and their calls remained provisional until they completed appropriate doctoral programs. Beginning in the 1990s, the College has attracted young, career academics with Ph.D.s from prestigious graduate programs such as MIT, Cornell, Syracuse, Columbia, and Northwestern in Evanston. They have arrived on campus more familiar with the larger academic community and more skilled in pursuing research grants.

Commendably, younger faculty have also arrived with a high regard for the mission of Wisconsin Lutheran. Some may have declined more lucrative teaching positions elsewhere because they wanted to serve here. It will remain a challenge to locate faculty candidates who are members of the WELS, devoted to the mission of WLC, yet possessing the necessary academic credentials.

## Brief History of WLC

“The question that remains,” Neuchterlein concluded about Valparaiso, “is whether the university’s improvement in quality has come at the expense of its distinctive identity and purpose.”

Those who care about Wisconsin Lutheran College must always ask the same question.