

The Birth of a Movement:

Bishop Schiotz remembers the early days of the LSAA

By Fredrik A. Schiotz

During the war, the Lutheran Brotherhood of America, an inter-synodical men's organization, sponsored recreation centers near training camps for the armed services. After the war, they tried to transfer the interest for the soldiers and sailors to the Lutheran students in institutions of higher learning. It seemed to the Brotherhood that the establishment of student centers near campuses where large numbers of Lutheran students were registered might be a proper project. But they decided to consult with the students. Accordingly, they invited Lutheran students from all parts of the United States to a conference at St. Paul's Church in Toledo, Ohio, May 9-11, 1922. Thirty-nine students from 26 campuses responded to the invitation.

These students knew what they wanted. Rather than student centers they chose an inter-synodical national fellowship of students which they would name the Lutheran Student Association of America. Officers were elected and were charged with the responsibility of calling a constituting convention. The president, C. Walter Young of Northwestern University, left in the early fall of 1922 for a teaching assignment in Japan. That left the responsibility for the organization of the constituting convention to the first vice president, Oswald C. Michelman, a student at the University of Michigan. Apart from the herculean task of correspondence carried on by Mr. Michelman, the constituting convention might never have been held.

Mr. Michelman summoned the other officers elected at Toledo for a convention program planning meeting in Chicago on January 13, 1923. The committee met at 413 North State Street in Room 1313, and with the help of an advisor, the Rev. Dr. C. P. Harry, a secretary of the Board of Education of the United Lutheran Church (whose birthday was January 13th) planned a convention to open on Friday, April 13, at Augustana College, Rock Island, IL. The superstition that surrounds Number 13 was ruthlessly thrust aside.

The St. Olaf College Student Senate had refused to send a delegate to Toledo in May, 1922; the excuse was that final exams were too close at hand. The college president, the Rev. Dr. L. W. Boe, felt the students had muffed an opportunity. A year later he did not entrust the decision making to the student senate. One afternoon in early spring of 1923 I met him on the steps of the Old Main. He stopped me to tell about an inter-synodical Lutheran student convention that was to be held at Augustana College. He concluded by saying, "Schiotz, you better go to Rock Island." Therewith he handed me the convention credentials letter. I hesitated for a moment. I had already participated in a Lutheran student convention a month earlier. This was a meeting of the Lutheran Student Union, an organization of students in the academies and colleges of the former Evangelical Lutheran Church. But when prexy spoke in the imperative mood it was difficult to object. In retrospect I would pinpoint the beginning of a lifelong interest in Lutheran unity and inter-synodical action to that long ago request of President Boe.

At Rock Island I was assigned to be a roommate with Bernhard Christensen of Augsburg College. Thus began a friendship that has lasted through the years. Bernhard carried a great Christ-given passion of social issues that would serve the needs of the dispossessed. That interest continued when he became president of Augsburg College and Seminary and has not abated to this day.

Seventy-four registered delegates were present from 41 campuses. Four days after the convention adjourned the Augustana College paper gave it a three column story declaring, "This first convention was an epoch making event; never before have so many Lutheran students from so many different institutions and representing so many different synods met." Harold Latta, a delegate from the University of Michigan reported, "The first convention of Lutheran students of America marked a new era in Lutheran history. . . . The dominating spirit . . . was to organize this continent that there (might) be a greater realization of the value of the Gospel of Jesus Christ." A French student, Marguerite Steinfeld, studying at Ohio State, declared, "I think I shall always remember the conference in Rock Island as one of my biggest experiences. . . . I liked above all the spirit of religion I found among those delegates, not only a meditating and passive spirit, but one that is active, seeks activity and bears fruit and acts joyfully, and is young and full of life. Perhaps of special interest to me was the atmosphere of internationality in the conference."

The convention business session elected me president of the newly born Lutheran Student Association of America. In addition to administrative tasks there was the responsibility for editing the quarterly student paper and organizing five out of six designated regional units. This meant returning to the campus to surrender my baseball suit and to step down from the college debating team. From today's distance, the checking in of a baseball suit seems a very small thing. But at the time it hurt to the point that tears could not be restrained. Forty-seven years later the St. Olaf athletes voted to give me an honorary baseball letter.

At the close of the school year 1923-24, regional conferences had been held in each of six regions: North Atlantic, Southeastern, Ohio Valley, Mississippi Valley, North Central and Southwestern. Twenty years later there were 13 regions, each holding one or more conferences annually.

The constitution adopted by the Rock Island convention made the LSAA an independent student organization. It allowed the election of a few non-student advisors but all decisions were in the hands of the students. Provision was made for national quadrennial conventions and a council of two student representatives from each region. The council was asked to meet annually to conduct association business.

The review of the first four quarterly issues of the *Big Inkwell*, the LSAA paper (later renamed *The American Lutheran Student*), reveals that students were the main contributors. Each issue carried news items from regional meetings and local campus LSA groups as well as feature articles. In the four issues there were 18 feature articles, 14 written by students and four by pastors and faculty. Four of the student contributors were people whose citizenship was outside the United States.

The Rock Island convention program, regional conference programs and articles in the Big Inkwell reflect a strong devotional emphasis with helps for Bible study that would be applicable to student life. Elvira Ward, a bacteriology student at Columbia University, called for Bible study that would speak to "our personal lives and to world problems." In this call she showed a strong concern for mission, poverty and war issues.

The interests of Elvira Ward became the concerns of many students. But the organized social outreach of the association was in support of the rehabilitation of destitute Lutherans in Europe. Some of the stories in the Big Inkwell make it clear that the suffering after World War I was severe and intensive. It wasn't long before the LSAA, in addition to an annual, scholarship program for a graduate student in India, developed a strong Lutheran Student Action program—somewhat comparable to the Lutheran World Action gifts of the churches.

When the Lutheran Brotherhood of America invited Lutheran students to Toledo for consultation in 1922, it was their intent to provide financial support for the program the students would identify. Late in 1923, they contributed \$750 and were instrumental in securing a gift of \$250 from Lutheran Brotherhood (the insurance firm). But this, plus the first year of student contributions, was not sufficient to balance the association's administrative expenses. The officers therefore launched an Easter Seal sale. This raised some money, but it did not put enough money in the treasury to finance the first meeting of the LSAA Council, scheduled to meet in Madison, Wisconsin in the summer of 1924.

I was working in Chicago that summer. In my correspondence with the president of the Lutheran Brotherhood of America for further assistance, he directed me to consult with a vice president whose office was in Chicago. This I did. The officer was sympathetic, but informed me that the enthusiasm that had accompanied the LBA work during the years had waned. Regretfully, he announced there was little likelihood of any more financial help. In this extremity, with the council meeting no more than four weeks away and the treasury lacking \$500 of the amount necessary to cover council expense, I wrote to Dr. Harry, an elected advisor of the LSAA, seeking his counsel. He answered by return mail advising that the meeting be cancelled.

Dr. Harry had been a staunch and warm friend of the association. It was therefore self-evident his counsel was not given lightly, yet a still small voice whispered that the advice should be ignored. As an officer, charged with specific responsibility by the Rock Island convention, it seemed as though organized effort that had been set in motion was danger of collapsing. I never doubted that it would be resurrected, but a new start would be at the of a time loss of one to four years.

In this setting I went to the home of a cousin be alone (the family was on vacation) for reflection and prayer. Out of that retreat came a strong impulse to write to a friend in my hometown inquiring whether he would co-sign a bank note with me the amount of \$500. His reply was an eloquent to graphic *yes*. Immediately, I wired Dr. Harry telling

him the council would meet. I wondered what reaction would be when I next would see him.

I joined Dr. Harry on the train from Chicago Madison. Our meeting became a revelation of truth that God's Spirit "works at both ends of a line." Dr. Harry told me that when he had written advice that the council meeting should be cancelled, he was suddenly seized with doubt. Had he done the right thing? The facts sustained his decision, but he could not dismiss an uneasy feeling about what he had done. He then paused to pray that if it pleased God that the council should meet, he should overrule advice that had been given. The two parts of respective stories having been told, we were ready to sing the doxology. Within three months after council meeting, the bank note was paid.

Before the election of new officers at the Madison meeting, considerable discussion took place about the appropriateness of graduate students serving officers. There seemed to be some fear that theology students might take the leadership away from undergraduates. And so this first council decided to consider only undergraduates for national office. Later, councils decided that any qualified fulltime Lutheran student would be eligible to hold office.

Joel Lakra, of the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church in India, was a guest at the first council meeting. He announced that during the same month that the Rock Island convention had met, a Lutheran Student Association of India had been organized. It was his suggestion that moved the LSAA to make an annual scholarship grant for a graduate student in India.

The following December 28-January 2, the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions held its quadrennial convention in Indianapolis, Ind. A number of active LSAers participated in the SVM. Officers of the association encouraged attendance at the convention. Out of approximately 6000 students at Indianapolis about 300 were Lutherans coming from 100 different institutions. Not long after the Indianapolis convention I was introduced to the word "unionism." A professor from a college in the former Evangelical Lutheran Church wrote to me labeling participation in the SVM convention as unionism and then he added: "Unionism is sin." He further charged that for a St. Olaf student to be active in the SVM was a violation of an official agreement made at the time of the church union in 1917.

Reference to this letter seems strange in this day of ecumenical outreach. The happy part of this episode was that 15 years later, the same professor showed a completely different point of view. How important that everyone "be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5c) in whatever stand he may take, and yet, always open to new insights that God may give us through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The second general convention of the LSAA was held at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, from Dec. 30, 1926 to Jan. 2, 1927. At this convention social issues were to the fore much more than had been true at Rock Island. Rajah Manikam of the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church in South India, who was studying for his Ph.D. degree at Columbia University, was one of the speakers. He was an angry young man at that time.

The publication of Miss Mayo's book, *Mother India*, had painted the life of India in very disagreeable colors. Rajah Manikam asked the question whether we would like him to go home and to describe American life in terms of our racial discrimination and lynching parties. Such probing questions and the student discussion groups—at conferences and on the local campuses—made many students aware that the Gospel had not been allowed to leaven our social relationships. Awareness of the implications of God's love in all human relationships arrived on the campus long before it was recognized in local congregations.

Toledo, Rock Island, and Madison exhaust the role of LSAA national conventions. From 1927 to 1936 the association functioned through regional conferences and the annual meeting of the council. The depression years were too severe to allow officers to plan a regular quadrennial convention. But in 1936, a small national Ashram was held at Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. This became the beginning of a series of very fruitful national assemblies for stimulating discussion and listening, for fellowship and renewal. I participated in 11 of the annual Ashrams but this story belongs to my post-student years.

In looking back to my student days in the LSAA, what a host of friends were made! So many of these students became leaders in one capacity or another in their respective churches. Three of the overseas students returned to their countries to serve the Lutheran Church: a bishop and president in two churches of India and a president and theological professor in the Church of Japan. The LSAA was a servant of the Holy Spirit in lifting sights above synodical boundaries—to the uttermost parts of the earth.

The author's association with Lutheran student work began in college, continued in one form or another in three parishes he served, and climaxed in seven years as executive secretary of the Student Service Commission of the American Lutheran Conference. He went on to become the president of the American Lutheran Church and of the Lutheran World Federation.

This article is reprinted from the *Lutheran Forum*, November, 1972, pp. 8-10.



Fredrik Schiotz (center left) and LSAA Council members at the 1924 meeting in Madison, WI.