

## Consensus

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Volume 44  
Issue 2 *Canadian Lutheran History:*  
*Remembering Today, for the Sake of Tomorrow*

Article 12

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7-25-2023

### Remembering Lutheran Campus Ministry For the Sake of the Gospel

Stephen Larson

Kenneth C. Kuhn

Karen Kuhnert

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#### Recommended Citation

Larson, Stephen; Kuhn, Kenneth C.; and Kuhnert, Karen (2023) "Remembering Lutheran Campus Ministry For the Sake of the Gospel," *Consensus*: Vol. 44: Iss. 2, Article 12.

DOI: 10.51644/SKIZ4651

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol44/iss2/12>

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## Remembering Lutheran Campus Ministry For the Sake of the Gospel

### WEBINAR II

Stephen Larson, Kenneth C. Kuhn, Karen Kuhnert\*

*Stephen Larson*

It's my privilege to introduce the theme of Remembering Lutheran Campus Ministry—For the Sake of the Gospel.<sup>1</sup> We've noticed that it was back in 1956 that the Canadian Lutheran Council appointed Pastor Don Voigts as the first Lutheran university chaplain in western Canada for all of western Canada.<sup>2</sup> And then, in 1957, Pastor John Vedell was appointed to serve as Lutheran Chaplain for the entire eastern section of Canada. Over the next several decades, Lutheran Campus Ministry served college and university campuses from coast to coast to—well, I'm not sure if there were contact campus pastors on that third coast—but they had extended it to a national dimension.

One of the subgroups of our project is Campus Ministry, and so Karen Kuhnert, who is not only a stellar historian but a stellar tech person, has helped us to record interviews with former campus pastors, students, and others to develop an oral history of Lutheran Campus Ministry. From those interviews that she has recorded and produced, Karen has developed a video to share with us today.

You will meet in this video John Vedell, that first Eastern Regional Secretary for Lutheran Campus Ministry. You'll meet Phoebe Voigts, who will share memories of her father, Don Voigts, and the Voigts family as pioneers of Lutheran Campus Ministry in Canada. You'll meet Walter Goos, Paul Bosch, Ken Kuhn,<sup>3</sup> David Pfrimmer, former chaplains who share some of their stories.

You will meet H. Paul Schmidt, who shares the story of his commissioning as a fresh graduate from Concordia Seminary in Saint Louis to a half-time call as chaplain at the University of Calgary and half-time as a mission developer in Calgary. We think in the mid-60s that at his commissioning he became the first Lutheran chaplain called by all three of the Lutheran churches in Canada: the Missouri Synod, ELCC, and LCA. Some of our interviews began with each of the participants introducing themselves, and so you'll get a sample of a couple of those introductions through this video that Karen has created.

There are segments in this video that we are grateful to Richard Reimer and the University of Alberta Campus Ministry Council for sharing (see Afterward). These excerpts are from their 65th anniversary video that they prepared in 2021. And from those images from last year's video, you will see a mosaic of some of the Lutheran Campus Ministry–Edmonton and Lutheran Student Movement (LSM) participants.

And you will conclude with meeting the current campus chaplain, Richard Reimer, who has served Lutheran Campus Ministry–Edmonton for half of those 65 years of Campus Ministry—an amazing record.

One of our interviews was with Lois and Susan Johnson, in which we asked them to think about their “life in a Lutheran student center” in both London and Vancouver. In the course of that interview, Susan shared with us the memory of being the National President

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\* See the Foreword of this issue of *Consensus* for biographical information.

of the Lutheran Student Movement in Canada back in 1980 when there was the first ever LSM Canada–LSM USA Joint Conference held in Winnipeg. The theme of that conference was “Our Sacramental Journey,” a good description of what campus ministry had become. She reminded us that she crafted a theme song for that conference entitled “Gonna Take A Sacramental Journey,” and magically, Karen was able to snip off a little bit of that song to introduce the video and to reprise it here and there throughout the video. Enjoy.

## Remembering Lutheran Campus Ministry—For the Sake of the Gospel

The following is a transcript of the video<sup>4</sup>

[https://youtu.be/mcna\\_jp3iEM?si=0vvd87TTR-mc9MI2](https://youtu.be/mcna_jp3iEM?si=0vvd87TTR-mc9MI2)

*Steve Larson*

So, John Vedell, what a delight it has been to meet you and to get to know you. You are, I would have to say, you are the most unique former campus pastor that we are interviewing, because you are the living link that we found; you’re like that missing skull in Kenya that they found! That missing link between Don Voigts, who was the first full-time Lutheran chaplain and in Canada. He died in 1976, but he was your colleague counterpart in the western part of this country while you were initiating Campus Ministry in the eastern part. Your first call was to the Kenora area.

*John Vedell*

I had a two-church parish, one out in the bush, one in town. And I enjoyed those two years that I was there so much.

*Steve Larson*

I seem to recall you had a reconnection with the student worker you met in Duluth, and invited them up to Canada for a retreat or a meeting of some kind, and that you then wrote up an article about it.

*John Vedell*

I got in touch with Bonnie, and suggested that I could organize a retreat in the outskirts of Kenora on the outskirts of Lac Lulu, better known as Lac Lu. And she gathered some students who came for the retreat. And it went well. Soon after, I wrote an article for the *Lutheran Companion* about the retreat through pictures. I got a call from Otto Olson who, based on that—remarkably—asked if I was interested in becoming the Eastern Regional Secretary for campus work, student work. That came out of the blue, but I thought about it and said, “OK, give it a try. More adventure.”

*Steve Larson*

So Eastern Regional Secretary for Campus Ministry covering a territory from Thunder Bay to St. John’s, Newfoundland. That’s quite a geographical area to cover! But you started out in Toronto. What was that like to initiate that Campus Ministry on the University of Toronto campus?

*John Vedell*

In Kenora, a woman, a young woman who had lived in Toronto, gave me the address and the name of the owner of a very nice old brown stone house on Bedford Rd. So, I set up my one room apartment (it was fairly large) to be a meeting room and I (you can’t do it now

according to Steve) but I got a list of Lutheran students and began contacting Lutheran students and forming a small group. Then we graduated to meeting in Hart House.

*John Vedell*

(Referring to Don Voigts) He was always well organized. My God, when we were doing the Lutheran Student Foundation meetings, he had outlines and ideas—structures—and I said “OK, sounds good to me.” Yeah, Don was a colleague, and a friend. And we, well, attended conferences. I remember one in Chester, Nova Scotia. And after the session we would go down to the bar and have a beer. And when he was in Montreal once, we went downtown to see a movie. And it was—Easy Rider. I wanted a motorcycle.

*Phoebe Voigts*

Hello. My name is Phoebe Voigts. And I am happy to share these memories of Lutheran Campus Ministry in Edmonton on behalf of the family of Don and Winifred Voigts. As many of you will know, 65 years ago my father, Don Voigts, became the first Lutheran campus pastor at the University of Alberta, which also made him the first Protestant campus pastor in Canada.

For our family, it all started in 1956 when my father was serving as chaplain at Luther College and as pastor of Christ Lutheran in Regina.

As family *lore* tells it, he came home one day to tell my mom that the church was beginning a ministry to Lutheran students and colleges and universities in Canada, and they wanted him to become the first campus pastor at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. I don't know to what extent he was part of bringing about this church decision, but I expect he was very involved because to Don Voigts, the dream that Lutheran ministry should be offered to university students who were away from home was part of his DNA. In that same conversation with my mom, or rather a bit later, it became clear that an individual had mortgaged or sold pretty well everything we owned (which was not much at the time) in order to acquire a large house near the university, at that time, right around where The Hub is now. It was to be the “Lutheran Student Center: a home away from home for Lutheran students.” It was also going to be a home for our family. This was, I think, the first clue for my mom that what was publicly and formally recognized as a ministry by Campus Pastor Don Voigts was in practice a team ministry which they took on together and with kids in tow—a family project, you might say.

The center of the ministry would be worship. As it turned out, the university library closed every evening at 9:30 PM. Thus, evening Vespers were scheduled every weeknight at 10:00 PM in the living room of our home. And it was well attended, with students filling our living room and spread across the floor and standing along the walls.

Let me ask you: can you imagine welcoming up to 50 university students in your home every night at 10:00 PM? Hungry university students? Lonely university students? Excited about their work and eager to talk university students?

As kids, Fridays were the best days. We were not allowed to stay up for Vespers during most school days, but we could on Fridays. This meant not only joining the worship, but also having free reign of the spread of drinks and cookies which were always available. The cookies, of course, were the results of my father's trips every Sunday to congregations throughout the province where he would preach and be a one-person promo ad for Lutheran Campus Ministry. He was inviting congregations to join in this important work—including

by sending cookies to the Lutheran Student Center and to the students who gathered there every night.

*Walter Goos*

On campus, we would have events weekly through the Joint Chaplaincy, some very significant events (reflecting on times at the University of Saskatchewan). I remember one series it was “Jesus Christ. Why believe?” And that was the title. And in that particular series we had John Montgomery, who was a professor at Vancouver somewhere [UBC? Simon Fraser?...]. I think you’d know him, Ken, possibly. And Bob Bader, who was a professor at St. Andrew’s. And they debated the issue on campus—for all people. And we had around, we had around 200–300 people at those sessions, and debating issues. So it was really quite good.

Oh yeah, Marion, my wife, just reminded me, we had some pretty important people come to another type of session. We had another session on “Cultural Change and the Church.” Yes, “Cultural Change and the Church.” I remember one of the people was Dick Gregory, and I hosted him that time, and he was interesting character. He was speaking about the cultural and racial issues in the United States and how it affected the church. We had Buffy Sainte-Marie, she was speaking about music and the expression of faith. And we also had Rene Levesque who spoke about the need for Canadian minorities to be able to have a voice. And then we had another Aboriginal leader from Sioux Ste. Marie [Art Solomon?], but I just don’t remember his name. He also was very informative. And all that again was open to all, to all bodies in the university, including professors and students. We had good reception for those kinds of events. There are a number of those over the year.

Oh, I should mention another thing that we did internally which was really quite significant. Every Lent our Vespers services, for one week during Holy Week, we would emphasize one way of expression. In one year, I think it was 1964 or 1965, we had one person named Annie Lau, and during that week she interpreted Handel’s Messiah through dance. And then another year we had Thea Backdorf—from New Brunswick? Lunenburg? Somewhere down there. She was an artist. Don Voigts actually set that one up. She was a resident artist for the week and went from campus to campus. And then another year we had Carl Shutte who was another artist who would again emphasize what the Scripture of the day was in the painting that he made. So that was another way to bring up faith and life together.

*John Vedell*

That’s the next part of my story. In Toronto, the Missouri Synod congregation on University had a beautiful church, I recall. And the campus chaplain Fred Gum, G.U.M., I believe. And we discussed doing things together—“No, no dice” so we didn’t do very much collaboration. And I got to thinking, naively perhaps, that it didn’t make much sense for churches, for church in general, to be devoting all those resources to one place when Fred already had a good program going. So I applied over, and I, having had quite a bit of autonomy, decided to go to London and focus on the University of Western Ontario.

*Paul Bosch*

*Word, World and Sacrament*, if I recall correctly, was the title of a very early work; they finally published it as a book. There were, I think, three or four speeches at a student conference shortly after I became a Campus Minister, it was like 1962 or 1963, something like that. The author was William Clebsch, an Anglican priest, who again turned my

perceptions upside down; he was terrific. This was in the summer that Marilyn Monroe died. And he said, “Marilyn Monroe did not commit suicide.” He said, “What happened was a nice little girl from Ohio by the name of Norma Jean Baker was murdered by Marilyn Monroe.” And he used that as a metaphor of religion and faith. He said, “faith is always at the point of being murdered by its religious expression, and ain’t it a shame. Does it have to be that way?”

I would say, there are four things that make up religion: “Creed, Code, Cult, and Constitution.” *Creed*, that’s your belief; your doctrines, your dogmas, your value system. What is it that you value? *Code*, that’s your code of conduct, your ethical system, the way you put what you believe to action. *Cult*, that’s a word from religious studies, and it means how you ritualize. And *Constitution*, how do you give it political shape? Do you have bishops? Do you have presidents? And I’ll say only partly in jest, that Jesus says, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there you will find me”—and there you will also find a president, a secretary, and a treasurer. I mean that is simply the way humans arrange themselves. Now creed, code, cult, and constitution. Each one of those four things can murder faith. And that’s terrible! It does not have to be that way! And I think our job as pastors is to see to it that it doesn’t happen. We are to see to it that our creed, our value system, is transparent to faith; that our ethic is transparent to faith; and our cult, really our rituals, our ceremonies, are transparent to faith; even our political system.

*John Vedell*

We go way back, don’t we Ken?

*Ken Kuhn*

I think you entered the ministry in the 50s; I didn’t enter until the 60s—we were about ten years different.

*John Vedell*

You were active with the origins of the Lutheran Student Movement in Canada (LSMC)?

*Ken Kuhn*

Yes, I was a student at UBC when you started in Campus Ministry, and I was a little bit on the negotiations to develop *from* the Lutheran Student Association of America (LSAA) to the Lutheran Student Movement in Canada. And I edited the first national magazine. [During John Vedell interview in August, 2021].

*Ken Kuhn*

Hello, my name is Pastor Ken Kuhn. I was involved as a student in campus ministry at the University of British Columbia. Then, after a time, as a parish pastor in Calgary. In fact, H. Paul Schmidt and I overlapped there. And I was called to the University of Alberta—Edmonton, where I served as a Campus Minister for about nine years.

*Steve Larson*

Hello, I’m Stephen Larson and I’m also pleased to be a part of this interview with H. Paul Schmidt as our paths cross again, Paul, after some decades. I’ve been involved in Campus Ministry since grade one, when I lived in the Lutheran Student Center at the Oregon State University in Corvallis, where my father was serving as Campus Pastor. And years later, I served as the Campus Chaplain at the University of Alberta in Edmonton.

I blame Campus Ministry for keeping me in the church. It helped me at significant points in my life's faith journey, and I am deeply grateful to Campus Ministry and those who have been a part of Campus Ministry.

*H. Paul Schmidt*

And then they placed me in Southern Illinois University as the chaplain there, a student chaplain I guess I would be at that stage. But when I arrived in Carbondale, Illinois, the resident pastor there, who was to be my supervisor, informed me that the town of Carbondale had 13,000 people, the university had 13,000 students—he would take “the town” and I would take “the gown.” And so, I had a delightful year there.

I started a Lutheran student group loosely connected with Gamma Delta [fraternity], though we had almost nothing to do with that. I had Bible classes, counseling, I brought together 30 to 40 students that would meet regularly, I organized a motorcycle club by the way—in the basement of the building that the District had purchased. The campus didn't allow cars within two miles, so motorcycles were all over.

And then I went back, graduated from the seminary, and still wasn't convinced that I wanted to go into ministry. Of course, my image was basically parish ministry. One evening in our evening devotions, one of the lowly first-year students at the seminary (you know, I was a fourth-year student, and he was a first-year student), he just went through the Biblical examples of people who gave a lot of excuses about not answering the call from God. And then he said, “What are our excuses? Amen. Let's go!” And that night I kind of said, “OK, God. Maybe 8 to 10 years, then we'll re-evaluate it.”

*H. Paul Schmidt*

My call was half-time in the Campus Ministry [responding to inquiry about his installation in Calgary]. At that time there had been some agreement within the Lutherans in Canada, and so when I was then installed as Campus Chaplain and as Missionary-at-large it took place in Mount Calvary Lutheran Church downtown Calgary, right in the center of the city. Pastor Alfred Meyer was the pastor there. He was also the District president, the ABC District (Alberta British Columbia District) President of Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. And the evening of my Installation there were very few people at the church. Pastor Don Olsen from Hope Lutheran Church in Calgary (LCA) was preaching the sermon. Pastor Alfred Meyer shared with me before the service, he said he was uncomfortable having an LCA pastor preach in his pulpit there at Mount Calvary, but because the District Council had the agreement among Lutherans he was going to honor that—and so we proceeded with my commissioning with Don Olsen participating, preaching the sermon and participating with other people that I hardly knew, (likely someone from the ELCC at that time). And then, I was sponsored by all Lutherans. I think I may have been the first Lutheran chaplain in all of North America who was sponsored by all of the three main Lutheran groups at that time.

*David Pfrimmer*

He was a very interesting guy, Don Voigts [David Pfrimmer speaking to Don Sjoberg]. I remember I did my internship in Campus Ministry, and it was one of the great traumas of my internship that Don had to get to the airport, and as you know Halifax the airport is about half an hour away, and I don't know what happened but he was a bit late and I was a bit, you know, slow on getting through the city—and we just made it! I remember him literally doing the 100-yard dash to the gate to get his plane. But he was a very, very wonderful guy. He came twice to visit us and visit the Campus Ministry. And I was hearing, to be honest, from

among the other chaplains that were full-time (and not interns there) that Lutheran Campus Ministry was highly respected across the country because of the work Don Voigts did.

*Emma Berg:*

Hi, I'm Emma and I was a member of the Lutheran Student Movement for five years.

*Tom Lieren:*

Hi, I'm Tom Kieren and I served on the Lutheran Campus Ministry—Edmonton (LCME) Council for several terms while I was a professor at the University of Alberta.

*Dianne Kieren:*

Hi, I'm Dr. Dianne Kieran. We were associated, both my husband and I, at the University of Alberta when we were professors. And we're probably some of the oldies on this mosaic because we started working with LCME in the 70s and continued through the 90s.

*Chris Nissan:*

Hi, I'm Chris Nissan and I was president of the Lutheran Student Movement in 1999, and I later served on the LCM Council in the early 2000s.

*Janet Storch:*

My name is Janet Storch, formerly Janet Hennig, when I was a student nurse at the University of Alberta between the years of 1958 to 63.

*Andrea Wilhelm:*

Hi, my name is Andrea Wilhelm and I served on the Council of the Lutheran Campus Ministry Edmonton from 2013 to 2019.

*Kari and Dennis Heist:*

Hi, we're Kari and Dennis Heist, LSM alumni from 1991 to 1999. Yes, we still came after we were married and had our first child. Yay for Campus Ministry! Yay for Campus Ministry, indeed.

## **Afterword: With Thanksgiving for the Life and Life's Work of Richard Reimer**

This [Campus Ministry at the University of Alberta] would never be what it is without a great company of witnesses, like it says in Hebrews (surrounded by so great a cloud). And part of that was something that was developed even before I even became a campus pastor. And that was the Friends of Campus Ministry. The Friends are gathered each year at an annual banquet, and these are individuals in the church who especially support and seek to uphold Campus Ministry as vital to the church. And they put their money where their mouth is, and where their prayers are. So that's one component—I inherited a community of Friends, and I made it a part of my ministry to foster that community of friendship. - Richard Reimer, Oral History Interview, July 2022

If you know Richard Reimer—and after more than thirty years in ministry in North America and an active ministry of presence and accompaniment at a major Canadian university, many people do—you will know that it is in keeping with Pastor Richard's essence to shine the light of appreciation to land everywhere but upon himself. To be a Friend of Campus Ministry—Edmonton, and a friend of Richard Reimer, is a precious thing.



In our Oral History interviews with Richard, he expressed his appreciations and admirations generously. He thanked the person who first brought him to Campus Ministry as a student, and Stephen Larson, his pastor who baptized him. He thanked the Friends of Campus Ministry for their steadfastness in times of challenges, and their skill and dedication to advance the work of the Student House and the programs. He thanked Friends who established legacies and possibilities through their own thanksgivings, such as the people who “gave life” to the Augustana Lutheran Church Continuing Ministry Fund and Bev Boren who “gave away her death” blessing all sorts of organizations and ministries including Campus Ministry Edmonton, and NAIT, and MacEwan University. Richard thanked the Synodical Leadership for their wisdom to support the growth of the Ministry to Satellite Campuses. And with quiet but heartfelt pride he thanked his colleagues of more than thirty years, particularly those animating across Alberta in this era of expansion when Campus Ministry in so many provinces has closed for business. And so too, Richard thanked the students—three decades of coming and going, developing and growing, students. There were more thanksgivings, of course, most notably Richard’s appreciations for his wife and colleague Dana Rayment, whose creativity and capacity he so clearly admires. You get the point. Here is what we know as co-workers in the Gospel alongside Richard: no one has accomplished the kind of legacy that exists today under his considerable care by happenstance. Something particularly special has happened yet again on the U of A Campus, and it is undeniable that Richard is at the heart of it.

In Lutheran theology there is a famous painting of Martin Luther in the pulpit preaching to the crowd of his community, and Luther is pointing to Jesus, who is on the cross, with arms stretched wide at the focal point—at the very heart—of what’s happening. More than anyone else in our interview, Richard thanked *this* God for life-saving grace, for forgiveness, and soul nourishment. Richard thanked God for the blessings of his life and his life’s work. In honour of Richard’s thirty-second year in Campus Ministry, we give thanks to God at the centre for holding Richard Reimer close to God’s own heart that we might know the life and life’s work of Pastor Richard, a Friends’ friend in good times and through struggle. Amen

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Introduction to the “Remembering Lutheran Campus Ministry” Video shown in Webinar II was crafted by Stephen Larson. The video Storyline was developed by Stephen Larson and Karen Kuhnert. Karen Kuhnert produced and edited the Video. Beginning in July of 2021, Stephen Larson, Ken Kuhn, and Karen Kuhnert have been active in conducting Oral History interviews on Campus Ministry and the Lutheran Student Movement via Zoom. They have also been gathering scholarly writings, stories, and photos which can be found on the Project website at: <https://canadianlutheranhistory.ca/campus-min%2F1sm>. Contributions are welcome.

The Oral History interviews can be found as posted at: <https://www.youtube.com/@canadianlutheranhistory>

<sup>2</sup> See the tribute to Don Voigts, Donald W. Johnson, "A Tribute to Donald H. Voigts, 1924–1976," *Consensus*, 5, no.2, Article 1, 1979, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol5/iss2/1>. Voigts was the first Protestant campus pastor in Canada, with his beginning at the University of Alberta in 1956. Following the Appendix, readers will find an Afterword of Thanksgiving in Appreciation for the Life’s Work of Richard Reimer. Richard Reimer began his Campus Ministry at the University of Alberta in Edmonton in 1991. We suspect he is the longest serving Campus Pastor in North American history. See also Kenneth C. Kuhn, "The Lutheran Student Movement in Canada: a Brief History and Analysis," *Consensus*, 5, no. 2, Article 3, 1979, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol5/iss2/3>. Carl Onofrio, "The Mission of the Church in the University in the 1970's," *Consensus*, 5, no. 2, Article 2, 1979,

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<https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol5/iss2/2>. Norman J. Threinen, "The Churches, the Councils and Campus Ministry," *Consensus*, 5, no. 2, Article 4, 1979, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol5/iss2/4>.

Harold Remus, "On Being a Campus Chaplain at the Beginning of a New Millennium," *Consensus*, 26, no. 1, Article 14, 2000, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol26/iss1/14>.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Dr. Kenneth C. Kuhn is a retired ELCIC pastor and sociologist living in Winnipeg. As an undergraduate at the University of British Columbia, 1957–61, Ken was an early leader in the Lutheran student movements. He was the first editor of the Lutheran Student Movement in Canada magazine *Nimbus*. Ken wrote an article about the early history of the Lutheran Student Movement in Canada ("The Lutheran Student Movement in Canada: a Brief History and Analysis," *Consensus*, 5, no. 2, Article 3, 1979, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol5/iss2/3>). While studying at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC Maywood campus) he also edited *Frontiers*, a publication of the Lutheran Student Association of America. In his final year of seminary, Ken joined the march into Montgomery, Alabama on the final day of the historic Selma Civil Rights March (see <https://www.cbc.ca/1.3004547>). Ken served Lutheran congregations in Alberta and British Columbia, and as the campus pastor at the University of Alberta. He studied sociology there and taught as a sessional lecturer at Concordia University, Edmonton; the University of Alberta; and the University of Winnipeg. He served in the national ELCIC office as the Executive Director of the Division for Church and Society, and Director of the Millennium Study of Pastoral Leadership Needs. He completed his pastoral service as a chaplain in the Correctional Service of Canada.

<sup>4</sup> This Transcript is from a video presentation called "Remembering Lutheran Campus Ministry—For the Sake of the Gospel" presented as part of Webinar II (November 15, 2022) in the Webinar Series hosted by the Remembering Today for the Church of Tomorrow Project in partnership with Martin Luther University College and Lutheran Theological Seminary. The video was made from Oral History interviews that can be found at: [https://youtu.be/mcna\\_jp3iEM?si=0vvd87TTR-mc9MI2](https://youtu.be/mcna_jp3iEM?si=0vvd87TTR-mc9MI2). Clips have been used with permission from the 65th Anniversary Video Celebration of Lutheran Campus Ministry—Edmonton: <https://youtu.be/k3czG-FqzIE>.