Chapter Four

Challenges of the Graebner Years, 1927–1946

Selecting the second president for Concordia College was the primary task of the Board of Control during the 1926–1927 academic year. After lengthy deliberations, the Board extended its first call for president on February 24, 1927, to Pastor Carl J. Hoffmann of St. Luke's Lutheran Church in Chicago and later of Holy Cross Lutheran in Minneapolis. He declined the call, and when the Board reissued it, he returned the call a second time. On May 3, 1927, the Board extended its third presidential call to the Reverend Martin A. H. Graebner, professor of Greek and Latin at Concordia College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Professor Graebner visited St. Paul and discussed his call with the Board of Control. The candidate's concerns were satisfactorily answered and the final need was met by a resolution of the Board on May 31, 1927, requesting Synod to authorize the construction of a new home on campus for the president. The announcement that Professor Martin Graebner had accepted his call to become president of Concordia was met with the same kind of joy and thankfulness on campus that the St. Paul Pioneer Press was heralding following Charles A. Lindbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean at almost the same time.

The Graebner family moved to St. Paul on June 27, 1927, and the new president assumed his office on July 1, 1927. The construction of a new home for Concordia's presidents at 1245 Carroll had been approved, but since it could not be completed before December of 1928, the Graebner family lived off campus until then. Four days after the new term began, the Reverend Martin Graebner was installed as Concordia's second president on September 11, 1927, in a special service at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in St. Paul.
Enrollment continued to increase until the 1931 peak of 282 students was reached. The most critical need of this increasing student population was a larger dining area. This concern had been recognized previously since synod had already approved an enlarging and remodeling project for the dining hall in 1923. The synodical Board of Directors, however, rejected this renovation in favor of a new building instead. The 1926 St. Louis convention appropriated $124,000 for a dining hall, but when the bids were too high, plans were revised. After those delays were compounded by the unavailability of money from Synod, a new request for $145,000 was brought to the 1929 convention in River Forest, Illinois. The resolution was approved. Finally by April 1930, construction began. The work progressed so well that the dedication was held on November 9, 1930.

After the dedicatory service, the Concordia community soon realized that the new dining hall was much more than a dining area with modern food preparation equipment. The new building also contained a modern health center with hospital rooms, consultation room, medical office, and an apartment area for a resident nurse on the second floor. The ground floor housed the student book store and canteen along with the post office and facilities for the kitchen staff. Surprisingly, the total cost was $6,000 below the original appropriation.

Early in his administration President Graebner expressed a critical need for assistance in his office. Surprisingly, the college had operated without secretarial help since its beginning. Although repeated requests for funds to secure clerical help were denied, the increased amount of correspondence and academic records eventually convinced the Board to permit the addition of a secretary. For a minimum salary of 35 dollars a month, Lydia Dierks Caldwell was hired as Concordia's first secretary in 1930.

Mrs. Lydia Dierks Caldwell deserves a special niche in Concordia's history as an unsung heroine. During the Graebner presidency she efficiently managed the office of the president both in its response to student needs and also in its communication with the constituency of Concordia. She was personally concerned with the academic progress of each student and often served as a counselor and confidante to many. Following President Graebner's retirement, she applied the same Christian concern in serving in the office of
the registrar. In addition to being bookkeeper for the treasurer and
the students’ accounts, she taught a typing class in 1947. She took
courses as her schedule permitted and received her Associate in
Arts degree in 1955.

The impact Mrs. Lydia Caldwell had upon students is reflected
by their dedication of the 1955 Scribe to her “as a token of our
gratitude and esteem.” The inscription continued: “The blessings of
God take many courses, and it is through the life of this marvelous
woman that many of us have been encouraged to new heights.” Her
contributions to Concordia were accomplished, in part, because she
disregarded her own handicap of being paralyzed below the waist
from infantile paralysis at the age of seven and thereafter confined
to a wheelchair.

The decade of the 1930’s was the most precarious in the first
century of Concordia’s history. The Great Depression not only
slowed contributions to the synodical treasury, but it also curtailed
the enrollment of students at Concordia. In March 1932 all salaries
and other budget items were cut 10 percent by Synod. When in­
comes continued to decline, another 15 percent cut was made on
October 1, 1932. These financial cut backs were not restored until
February 1, 1942, a long and frequently painful decade.

While the nation’s faltering economy caused some enrollment
decline, the growing overabundance of ministerial candidates with­
out calls from the church was equally as discouraging. President
Graebner disagreed with those who suggested closing all synodical
schools for two years and urged the church to renew its faith in the
heavenly Father who was still in control of the world.

He further suggested that some curriculum additions could
make the schools more valuable to those not preparing for the
ministry. This might permit the colleges to satisfy some economic
needs and continue their operation while attempting to rebuild the
preministerial enrollment so there would not be a shortage of pas­
tors 10 years in the future. In spite of all efforts by President Graeb­
ner and the faculty, enrollment bottomed at 131 in 1941.

Concordia was able to overcome some of the financial problems
of the decade by imploring congregations in the constituent syn­
odical districts to make annual donations of home grown and
canned produce and other foodstuffs. Many congregations con tin­
ued their “food for Concordia” efforts well into the 1960’s.
Student participation in campus maintenance and refurbishing also eased some of the budget deficits. Students assisted in numerous ways from janitorial tasks to painting projects. The Board of Control authorized the president to require each student to complete a limited amount of volunteer work on campus. The last vestige of this practice, which lasted into the late 1950's, was the annual campus clean-up each spring when the students were dismissed from classes after the morning chapel service to wash all the windows, rake the grounds, and generally “beautify the campus.”

Amidst the challenges of the decade were some academic bright spots. In 1934 the high school department was accredited by the University of Minnesota with high commendation, and in the following year, the high school graduates participated in the commencement exercises and received diplomas for the first time. At the same 1935 graduation, non-ministerial junior college students with 60 semester hours of credit were graduated without meeting the preministerial requirement of 94 semester hours.

In 1937, after almost 20 years of curriculum study by synodical committees, major changes were made in the preministerial curriculum. In reducing the graduation requirement from 94 to 80 semester hours, the most significant changes were in the foreign language requirements. Hebrew was transferred from the junior college to the seminary curriculum, and the Latin requirement was reduced. Required speech and mathematics credits were eliminated and courses were added in social science and the humanities. This was the beginning of a broadening of the liberal arts which became prominent in the 1960's on the American scene.

With the many challenges that the synodical colleges and seminaries were facing at this time, the Missouri Synod established the Board for Higher Education in 1938 to serve an advisory-supervisory role in the operation of the synod's educational institutions. Although emphases have changed from time to time, the Board for Higher Education continues its dynamic role in higher education of the Missouri Synod.

The development of the radio produced ambivalent responses in the 1930's. The Board of Control had voted in June 1932 to prohibit all radios in students' rooms. But as one alumnus related: "Many a student would get up after bed check . . . drop an antenna out the window, and try to pick up something from a distance with
their own crystal sets... It was quite an experience to get the
Blackhawks Quartet from Des Moines, or was it Omaha?” However,
in 1935 the college was given an excellent radio which was used
for a music appreciation hour. The practice was discontinued after
one year, but this may have been the initial seed of an audio-visual
department at Concordia.

When the United States entered World War II in 1941, some of
the financial difficulties were beginning to ease. With the improve­
ment in synodical receipts, subsidies for the educational institutions
were being restored. The enrollment, however, had not shown the
same improvement.

A further threat to the predicted future shortage of pastors was
the 1940 passage by Congress of the Selective Training and Service
Act. Although divinity students were exempted from military service,
high school and junior college students were technically not yet
theological students. Upon appeal to Selective Service head Brig­
dier General Lewis B. Hershey, the ruling was made that students
would not be subject to the military draft if they submitted decla­
rations of intent to study for the ministry which were signed both
by the students and their parents. A variation of these Declarations
of Intent were used for approximately the next twenty years by
synodical colleges to define church vocation students in determin­
ing special fee structures for educational costs.

In 1943, an additional challenge to preministerial education was
the stipulation that if college vacations were longer than three weeks,
students would be subject to the draft. After consultation with Gen­
eral Hershey, synodical officials and the Board for Higher Education
formulated an accelerated preministerial program. The plan called
for dividing the school year into trimesters with a short vacation
after each term. Two trimesters would then equal one traditional
academic year.

President Graebner and the entire faculty were compelled to
make major adjustments in the curriculum with course restructuring
and calendar revisions so that the accelerated program could begin
in June 1944. This resulted in atypical graduation dates for three
accelerated classes on January 12, 1945; August 31, 1945; and January
24, 1947. When the war ended, the faculty voted to discontinue the
accelerated program and not have a summer session in 1946. Thus
the third class finished the first half of the sophomore year in June
1946, but they could not complete their program and graduate until January 1947. The faculty and students were equally appreciative when this special program ended.

As enrollment continued to increase during the war years, three needs were becoming more critical on the campus. The easiest need to meet was that of increased dormitory space. The South Dormitory, which had been unoccupied for some time, was remodeled in the spring of 1946 just in time to accommodate the anticipated 20 percent enrollment increase in September. This was the last capital expenditure project completed during the incumbency of President Graebner.

The second need of Concordia was that of an adequate library. By the 50th anniversary of Concordia, the library housed 19,000 volumes. Even though the overall quality and utility of the collection made this the best junior college library in the state, in the opinion of Dean Shumway of the University of Minnesota, there was very little work room and almost no space for expansion. Since 1936, the complete Concordia library occupied two rooms on the ground floor of Luther Hall. Previously, the faculty had a one-room library on the first floor adjacent to the entrance of the Main Classroom building, and the students also had a single library room on the ground floor of Luther Hall.

To help provide a new library building, the Minnesota District Convention in 1943 voted to conduct a golden anniversary jubilee fund drive for its construction. When Dr. Buenger died in September shortly after the convention, it was agreed to name the new building the Buenger Memorial Library. It seemed appropriate to give the first building on campus honoring a faculty member the name of the first president. Likewise, he was called the founding father of the library because he started to purchase books from a library fund which he began in 1893 by collecting one dollar from each student.

Architectural planning and fund-raising began almost immediately, but it still took almost eight years to complete the new library. President Graebner spent a major portion of the summer of 1945 soliciting funds for the Buenger Library. But post-war inflation greatly increased original cost estimates. Enthusiasm was consequently dampened, and contributions slowed to a trickle. Library progress became dormant, waiting to awaken and challenge the next president of Concordia.
The third need for a growing junior college and high school was a new physical education building with a full-size gymnasium that could also serve as a Lutheran Center. The 34-year-old gym was not only becoming obsolete, but it was inadequate for conventions or community organizations needing an auditorium. The faculty recommended, and the Board of Control supported, an overture to the 1945 Minnesota District Convention requesting a thank offering in the district as soon as the war was over to build a new physical education and Lutheran Center as a memorial to the men and women who served in World War II.

From the enthusiastic approval by the Minnesota District Convention on August 23, 1945, to support the construction of a new gymnasium-auditorium, and until the 1946 District convention assembled, major progress was made to convert the resolution to reality. District President Robert G. Heyne appointed a committee to prepare plans with financial estimates and to solicit funds. During the 1945–46 year, the name Lutheran Memorial Center was chosen for the new building, preliminary architectural plans were made, and a district-wide fund-raising campaign was initiated. Even though the fund was approaching $100,000 by the end of the first year, there were serious doubts whether the district could ever reach its goal of $360,000.

The most serious casualty of the Lutheran Memorial Center campaign was the resolution three years earlier to support the Buenger Library. Monies for a library were almost forgotten as extensive efforts were made over the next six years to fund the LMC. Many efforts were made to increase district approval and support for the campaign.

One interesting proposal was made by Pastor Willy Poehler of Trinity First Lutheran Church of Minneapolis in December 1945. He suggested that the proposed Twin City Lutheran High School should be established in connection with Concordia College as a way to get the support of the Lutheran High group for the LMC campaign. Although this idea was rejected, a generation later many still felt the visionary proposal of Pastor Poehler would have greatly benefited Lutheran secondary education in the metropolitan area. But in just six months the pastor from Minneapolis would receive the call of the church to assume a vital role in the completion of the Lutheran Memorial Center and the Buenger Memorial Library.
On March 6, 1946, President Martin Graebner announced his retirement from the presidency to the Board of Control. The Board accepted his decision, effective with the arrival of his successor. The Board also granted his request to return to the classroom as professor of Greek and Latin. In addition, the Board expected him to remain as principal of the high school department until the next president met the educational qualifications required for a state-accredited secondary school.

The 19 years of the Graebner presidency were marked with major challenges in enrollment, finances, and facilities. To remain a spiritual and academic leader of a college on the threshold of major expansion in spite of the intrusion of the Great Depression and the devastation of World War II was the singular achievement of President Martin Graebner.

Before the election of the next president, President Graebner suggested a faculty committee be appointed to recommend the age and personal characteristics desired in a new president, as well as a definition of his primary and secondary duties. The presidency had included dormitory supervisor, business manager, registrar, disciplinarian, and many other responsibilities which made the position less attractive. In addition, he felt the president’s salary should be more than 12½ percent above that of a professor. Many of these suggestions were followed. Clarifying the job expectations of the president became part of the procedure for calling future presidents.

However, the most time-consuming, psychologically demanding, and mentally exhausting responsibility of the president and the faculty, as garnered from the faculty minutes of meetings held during the 1930’s and 1940’s, is that of serving “in loco parentis.” The faculty took the responsibility of being “in place of parents” very seriously, especially in applying student life policies. Faculty meetings frequently included lengthy discussions of rules violations or requested absences from campus for music, forensic, or athletic activities. Special meetings were called to consider giving a student permission to take a final exam early to go home to help with farm work or to miss classes to attend a classmate’s funeral. Such special requests were not always granted. Meetings were also called to consider questionable classroom behavior. One rule stated: “Students will be suspended for one year for one absence from chapel without a satisfactory excuse.” Although the faculty was severely
criticized at times for being too legalistic and even confusing Law and Gospel, their motives were beyond reproach as they attempted to prepare the most competent future pastors for the church. The conflict between student conformity and student development was an omnipresent challenge in residential student life.

MARTIN A. H. GRAEBNER, 1879–1950

Martin Adolph Henry Graebner was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on September 22, 1879, where his father August Lawrence Graebner was a faculty member of the newly founded Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, presently located in Mequon, Wisconsin. After his father accepted a professorship in Church History at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis in 1887, Martin entered Holy Cross Lutheran School in south St. Louis where he finished his elementary education. He then completed the six-year curriculum at Concordia College in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1898. He graduated from Concordia Seminary in St. Louis in 1901.

Following his ordination in 1901, he served as a missionary in the Cushing, Oklahoma, area. In 1902, he was called to a congregation in Oklahoma City. In 1910, he expanded his ministry and became a professor of Greek at St. John’s College in Winfield, Kansas. After twelve years there, he accepted a similar position at Concordia College in Milwaukee. In 1927, after serving twenty-six years as
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pastor and professor, he accepted the call to become president of Concordia College, St. Paul, Minnesota. He retired from the presidency in 1946, but continued as professor of classical languages until 1950. He died shortly afterwards on November 13, 1950, the day before the death of his equally distinguished brother, Professor Theodore Graebner of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

In recognition of his contribution to the church as pastor, educator, and administrator, Concordia Seminary in St. Louis conferred the Doctor of Divinity degree upon him in 1942. His response was delivered in Latin.

He was admitted to the bar in Kansas in 1914, and established his legal credentials in Minnesota in 1931. While he purportedly said he studied law so he wouldn't give students bad advice, he used his professional legal status to serve the church as legal advisor in various capacities. In 1947 he spent time in Europe as director of Lutheran Relief and Rehabilitation, assisting in the distribution of $20,000,000.

He was the author of numerous articles for church publications, education journals, and theological magazines, including both devotional materials and homiletical studies. He was considered an engaging speaker and a dynamic orator. Many students remember him as a master chess player who simultaneously played a dozen students on as many chess boards, while also giving each instruction on improving his chess skills.

Dr. Graebner and his wife Anna nee Albers of Oklahoma City shared the president's new campus home with their children Paul, Robert, Martin, Ruth, Lawrence, and Herbert.