

Bricks and Mortar and More 11/2010

The Church Building

By Dr. Wayne G. Marty

From the very beginning Westmar (Western Union) College was a "church related" college. In the year of 1900, the eight year old Le Mars Normal School for the training of teachers had just been purchased by the United Evangelical church and was renamed Western Union College because all the other colleges of the denomination were east of the Mississippi River, and the purchase was a cooperative effort by the Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska and Dakota conferences of that church. Le Mars was now home to a "church related" college.



At that time the United Evangelical church was primarily serving the German immigrants of our nation and the Emmanuel United Evangelical church in Le Mars was, informally, called the German Evangelical church. When this new college opened, an English service was organized to serve these young English speaking college students and they met separately at the Elks Lodge in downtown Le Mars. Two years later (1902) this new English speaking group had their own building known as the Washington Street Chapel. By 1911, the Washington Street Chapel was abandoned and these two language fragments were at least meeting in the same building but separate services were conducted in English and German. It is interesting that during this same time the Methodist church denomination in Le Mars, which was primarily serving the English speaking people of our nation, organized a German Methodist church to serve the many German immigrants in the Le Mars area.



In 1921, a larger building was needed and the new Hildreth Memorial Evangelical church building was built on 6th St., six blocks north of the campus, the site of the abandoned Washington Street Chapel. With the socially conservative church position of no smoking, no alcohol, no dancing and no card playing, church activities were common dating events. A parade of hand holding couples were part of the many students making the six block walk to Hildreth Memorial for the Sunday morning services and other church events of the week. Dr. Danner's College Sunday School Class on Sunday morning was held in the sanctuary of the church and often had attendance exceeding 100 students.



The Class of 1953 was the last Westmar Class to graduate from Hildreth and a few months later the building was judged to be unsafe for occupancy. The building was only 32 years old. For two years the Hildreth church services were held in the Chapel on the upper floor of Thoren Hall. During this time the new Calvary Evangelical United Brethren Church was constructed adjacent to campus and the 6 block walk to church became a short three blocks across campus. Much volunteer help was used by the contractor and it included many Westmar students. They carried stone, wheeled concrete, did general cleanup and performed "go-fer" duties, thus making a significant contribution to the new College Church. The May 1955 Class had their graduation program in the new church.

A new bell was donated by Pauline Adler in Memory of her husband Christian Adler when the Emmanuel church was built in 1898. (These are relatives of Rudy Adler who many Westmar Students will remember as the owner and operator of Adler's Sporting Goods store in Le Mars) That bell was then moved to the Hildreth

church in 1921, and then to the Calvary church in 1955 where it still rings today in the church, which because of various mergers, is now named the United Methodist Church of Le Mars.

"Chapel" was both an activity and a location, during much of the Westmar history. The upper floor auditorium in Thoren Hall, although used for many dramatic productions and other events, was usually referred to as the Chapel. Attendance at Chapel services was required for all students during many of the Westmar years. Eva (Gabel) Brown (Class of 1938) remembers the required attendance at the daily chapel except on Wednesdays when time was provided for the very active YMCA and YWCA organization meetings. I recall the mid-morning chapel, with required attendance, three times a week while I was a Westmar student during the early 50's. There was assigned alphabetical seating and I can still picture Prof. Ida Marshall walking up and down the aisles checking attendance with Prof. Frank Jewett always at the organ. When I returned as a Faculty member in 1959, the required chapel on Tuesday and Assembly on Thursday was meeting in the "new" Calvary church that was now located adjacent to the campus. In the late 60's, with the rapidly growing student body, students were required to attend only one chapel service per week. It was on Wednesday and even the new Calvary church could not seat the entire student body so there was Chapel A before lunch and Chapel B after lunch. Attendance was checked by students signing their chapel program and dropping it in a box by the door. Forgeries were not uncommon and attendance was not always enthusiastic and willing. Faculty members were invited and encouraged to be occasional chapel speakers. I recall accepting that challenge a few times. At least once I knew that immediately after the chapel time I was giving a Microbiology exam, so I put a few questions about the chapel presentation on the Micro exam. That probably was not fair!

By the 70's chapel attendance was no longer required but was one of the options for meeting General Education requirements. One of the unfortunate results of the loss of the required chapel or assembly attendance was the loss of a student body group feeling. There was no longer any regular gathering of the entire student body for common sharing. This missing element of the Westmar experience became clear to me during some of the last gatherings as Westmar was closing in 1997. When invited to sing the, "Oh! Westmar College" (The Alma Mater), I heard some students say that they had never heard that song before. So, the words, "Oh! Westmar College, Thou art always and ever the same," are probably not literally true.

Those various "College Church" buildings were locations for significant personal events in the lives of the Westmar students. There were dates and weddings and other life changing commitments. There were funerals including the memorial service for Stan Short, the Westmar football player who died following a game injury in 1956. There were the many "Christmas at Westmar" concerts. There were many graduation ceremonies. The "college church" was indeed a part of the college life for many Westmar students.