

Cross of Christ Chronicles

Kvindeforening or Ladies Aid – Part 1 – Origins (*Continued from June, 2017 Parish Visitor*)

When we were young we heard about circles. In the 1960s our mothers worked on their lessons in the *Scope* magazine so they'd be ready when it came time to dress up and "go to circle." For many years before the ALCW the W.M.F. (Women's Missionary Federation) had what they called "Mission Circles." Prior to that many of the first women's groups focused on mission work, both in America and in third world countries, and early on they engaged in sewing projects to raise money in support of a foreign missionary and his work, among other things.

Basically, every Lutheran Ladies Aid had "Sewing Circles" at some time in their past history, but very few people are aware of their origins at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa during the time just after the completion of our Stone Church in 1866. We ourselves did not become aware of this little-known bit of Norwegian-Lutheran Church history until attending a lecture several years ago, and since this is the section on *origins* now is the time to share it with you. We find the following excerpt describes the circumstances quite well:

"Only one campus building (at Luther) bears the name of a woman, Diderikke Brandt Hall, built as a dormitory for women. This honor is a testament to the remarkable contribution to the college by the wife of (Rev.) Nils Brandt. ...they first came to Decorah in 1865, (and) upon completion of Campus House in 1867, they moved there.... Diderikke fits the mold of the traditional pastor's wife, a role fully as important as that of the pastor husband. She grew up in a pastor's family in Norway, so she had the benefit of that experience. She was mother and counselor to the students, and, in general, the hostess of the college community.... Along with the ladies of the parish, she continued to mend the clothes of students, and she herself made clergy ruffs (ruffed collars) and other needlework to sell and raise money for needy students." —*Transformed by the Journey, 150 Years of Luther College in Word and Image* by Wilfred F. Bunge, et al. (2011) p. 33.

In most church histories nothing is mentioned about the charitable efforts of the women before the advent of an organized *kvindeforening*, so I was quite surprised and very pleased to see the following reference in the Big Canoe Lutheran Church 125th Anniversary History Book (1978) p. 28:

"The first organization in the nature of a Ladies Aid society was a "*syforening*," (sewing society) started by Mrs. Hans A. Stub, in 1868 or 1869. (Her husband was Rev. H.A. Stub, Sr., 1865-1892.) At that time there were many needy students at Luther College and Mrs. Stub took their clothes home to be mended.

"The pile of clothing became larger than she could take care of, besides managing her own large, hospitable household. So a society was organized to help with this mending. They met at the homes once a month or oftener. Lunch was served by the hostess. After Mrs. Stub became ill and was unable to carry on the leadership, the interest lagged and the work gradually died out."

Think of what the efforts of these wonderfully dedicated women meant to the many students, especially those away from home for the first time, scared and often penniless. And we

must remember that Luther was also a preparatory school at that time, so many of them were only in their mid-teens.

The lines of communication were limited and rather slow-paced during the pioneer period, but the Norwegian-Lutheran clergy and their wives were a fairly small group who kept in touch with each other out of necessity, for various reasons. In an organized religion no one pastor stands alone, and the activities of their wives were known as well. In this case you have seen how quickly word spread concerning the needs of the Luther students. The same held true for many of the pursuits and purposes of the Norwegian-Lutheran Church in the Upper Midwest.

Truth be told the Big Canoe Church was only 13 miles from Decorah, so word only had to travel within the county, and a case could be made that even without the influences of those initial efforts the prevalent network of sewing circles would have naturally developed anyway. However, it can't be denied that those dedicated women very early on set a commendable and altruistic example. (*Continued on page 7*)

(*Continued from page 5*) Just as the accomplishments of the women in the church largely remain in the shadows, so too has the importance of the role played by the *prestefru* (pastor's wife), especially in those early years of the Norwegian-Lutheran Church in America.

The Norwegian Americans were quite a homogenous group in many ways, especially through the first several generations. They assimilated quickly and rather easily to life in America while holding dearly many aspects of their Norwegian heritage as long as they could. Food traditions and their church life have been preserved the longest and are still in evidence in most Norwegian-American communities.

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P.S. – In an afterword on origins, historians and museum people set great store by *provenance*, and for good reasons, historically, sociologically and anthropologically. It is beneficial to the understanding and interpretation of any given artifact to trace its history, including those who have owned it and the context in which it was used over the years, all the way back to the person who made the object if possible.

The same can be said about searching for and evaluating the origins of customs and traditions, languages, music, folk tales, artistic styles and techniques, social mores, religion, government, etc. Of course this also applies to all the things in the Archives Collection and to all aspects of the history of our churches. (You can see why this would keep a person busy.)

N.B. – We will continue chronicling the story of our Ladies Aids in “Part 2 – Organization.”