Professor Armin Schuetze

Armin W. Schuetze (1917-2020)

Seminary President (1978-1985)

By Joel D. Otto

Armin William Schuetze has seen and experienced profound changes during his life – in the world, in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), and at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. He grew up during the “Roaring Twenties” and received his ministerial education during the Great Depression. His ministry spanned World War II, the Cold War, and the fall of the Iron Curtain. The first quarter century of his ministry took place against the backdrop of the debate with the Missouri Synod. His service at the seminary saw WELS go into all 50 states and around the world. His seven years as president saw changes on the faculty and the campus. Yet, through all of these changes, some that affected him in very personal ways, he remained a steadying influence, a clear communicator of the truth of God’s Word, and a model of evangelical decorum.

Schuetze was born on April 25, 1917, in the parsonage of St. Peter Lutheran Church in the township of Ellsworth, Minnesota, 12 miles north of Hutchinson, the youngest of six children. As a pastor’s son, he was given a Christian education first at home and church by his father, then away from home when he was sent to New Ulm for his high school years in 1929. He graduated in 1933 and headed for Watertown to continue his training for the pastoral ministry at Northwestern College, graduating in 1937. During his years at the seminary, he was privileged to sit at the feet of August Pieper, J. P. Meyer, and Dr. Paul Peters. When he graduated in 1940, there was only one parish call and several tutor calls available. He was assigned to serve as a tutor at Michigan Lutheran Seminary (MLS).

After one year of serving at MLS, he received a call to serve a congregation in Timber Lake, South Dakota, with and a preaching station in Isabel. This soon grew to four congregations when American Lutheran Church (ALC) congregations in Isabel, Athboy, and Trail City joined the Wisconsin Synod. While at the seminary, Armin met a young woman named Esther Waidelich from the Milwaukee suburb of Shorewood. They were married in 1941, shortly after he was installed at Timber Lake. The Lord blessed their marriage with seven children: Virginia (John Wiederhold), Elizabeth (William Gabb), Barbara (Carl Otto), Frederick (Delores), Kristine (Charles Learman), Katherine (Lawrence Lotito), and John (Joan). The family has grown to include 28 grandchildren and 50 great-grandchildren. Esther was truly a model pastor’s wife and helpmeet for Armin during his ministry and retirement, even serving as his secretary when he was the seminary president. The Lord called her home to heaven in 2006 after nearly 65 years of marriage. In September, 2007, the Lord united Armin in marriage with Kay Jaeger, and they continue to live in Watertown.

After two years in South Dakota, Schuetze accepted the call to serve at Calvary, Thiensville, Wisconsin, just down the hill from the seminary. His ministry at Calvary was quite different from South Dakota; less traveling, but more teaching. Numerous seminary professors were members at Calvary, and he grew especially close to Professor Edmund Reim, who served as his mentor in many ways.

In January 1948, change came in both location and type of ministry. The family moved to Mobridge, South Dakota, and Pastor Schuetze became Professor Schuetze at Northwestern Lutheran Academy (NLA). He taught German, his native tongue; religion; American history; music; English; and a course on government. His eight years at NLA were a time of growing enrollments and new buildings. In addition, he frequently served vacancies in the Dakotas.

During those years, he also became involved in the intersynodical debates. He wrote one of the pamphlets responding to the Common Confession. He was a voting delegate to the 1955 Synod Convention, serving on the floor committee that recommended a suspension of fellowship with the Missouri Synod. He was one of seven floor committee members on record expressing disagreement with the delay in terminating fellowship. While he personally disagreed with the decision, he accepted the synod’s decision to delay, recognizing that it takes time for an entire synod to come to the same realization.

Change came to Schuetze’s ministry again in the summer of 1956. He received and accepted a call to open a new mission on the southwest side of Milwaukee, where the mission board had already purchased land and was constructing a chapel. The postwar building boom was in full swing, and Divine Peace Lutheran Church was well-positioned to serve the new neighborhoods. Within two years, the congregation had over 100 communicants. Over the years, he had taken up woodworking as a hobby. His carving of the Pelican in Her Piety still adorns the altar at Divine Peace.

At the 1957 Synod Convention, Pastor Schuetze presented the convention essay entitled, “Motivation.” At this convention the delegates decided again to delay a decision on terminating fellowship with the Missouri Synod. More and more called workers were protesting this decision, including Armin’s brother, Waldemar, and two of his uncles. In time, his uncle, Paul Albrecht, would become the first president of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. His brother would lead a split of St. Peter Lutheran Church in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. Already at this convention, President Reim publicly terminated his fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod and was later released from his call at the seminary.

In the spring of 1958, Schuetze was faced with another profound change in his ministry when he received a call to serve at the seminary and fill the vacancy left by Reim’s departure. It was a difficult decision. Some of his relatives who disagreed with the synod’s position discouraged him from accepting. His wife’s family were members of Missouri Synod congregations, further contributing to some tension in relationships with his in-laws. Finally, he would be replacing his mentor, but a letter from Reim served to encourage him to accept the call. While he was called to teach dogmatics and pastoral theology, initially he taught Augsburg Confession, Formula of Concord, and early church history. He never did teach dogmatics, but he continued to serve in the church history and pastoral theology departments. These many changes and a wide variety of ministry experiences prepared him for his service as a seminary professor.

In the early years of his seminary service, Schuetze was involved in events leading up to the break with the LCMS and its aftermath. Besides attending numerous meetings, he authored a regular column for The Northwestern Lutheran, entitled “A Lantern to Our Footsteps.” Among other questions, this column addressed many practical issues regarding fellowship. A number of the columns were reprinted by Northwestern Publishing House (NPH) under the title “Timely Topics.” He was also an important part of the committee that produced a key pamphlet entitled, “Fellowship Then and Now.” In the late 1960s, he was on the committee that produced “This We Believe,” serving as the principal author. He served as an essayist at various conferences and conventions. A number of these essays were published in the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly. A doctrinally sound yet evangelical spirit and tone is evident in these writings, something which characterized Schuetze in the classroom as well. Students frequently described him as a friendly, humble teacher.

With experience on the seminary faculty came more responsibilities. When Dr. Peters retired in 1966, Schuetze became the managing editor of the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, a position he held for 12 years. He served as the chairman of the library building committee. In 1973, he collaborated with Professor Irwin Habeck to write The Shepherd Under Christ, a pastoral theology textbook used into the first decade of the twenty-first century. His son, John, currently a professor at the seminary, is authoring its replacement. In addition, he served several pastoral vacancies in the Milwaukee area.

When Carl Lawrenz stepped down from serving as president in 1978, Schuetze accepted the call as his replacement—yet another change in his ministry focus. Lawrenz’s presidency had seen rapid growth in the student body and faculty. Several building projects were carried out to meet this new growth: a new library, dining hall, and expansion to the dormitory, as well as numerous new faculty homes. President Schuetze’s seven year tenure saw the peak enrollment of the seminary student body. The 1970s and early 1980s were the time of rapid home mission expansion in the synod. However, by the mid-1980s, there was a surplus of graduates. President Schuetze was the first seminary president since the Great Depression to inform graduates that they had no assignment.

The growth of mission work in the synod, both home and world, led the seminary to see the need for a more intensive mission and evangelism emphasis in its curriculum and faculty. With his home mission experience in South Dakota and Milwaukee, Schuetze saw the need for this important focus. Already in 1978, Ernst Wendland was added to the faculty. He arrived with numerous years of experience in Africa. In 1984, David Valleskey accepted a call to the seminary to teach courses on evangelism, bringing years of experience at a growing congregation in San Jose, California, to the classroom. Since so many graduates were receiving assignments to mission fields, it only made sense to have experienced missionaries on the faculty.

President Schuetze’s tenure saw one important change to the campus, the auditorium, completed in 1985. Until the construction of the auditorium, there was no building on campus for large gatherings. The Seminary Chorus held major concerts at neighboring congregations, usually Calvary, Thiensville. Assignment Day services were held in the chapel or at Calvary. Graduation was held outdoors in the center courtyard. Inclement weather would force the crowds to Calvary. The only facility on campus for physical exercise was the small gymnasium below the chapel. The new auditorium became a welcome addition, providing a multipurpose space for large gatherings and student athletics. Anyone who has attended a Christmas concert, Assignment Day service, or graduation can appreciate the need for such a building.

When Schuetze resigned from the office of president after the 1984-85 school year, he remained on the faculty for another five years. During the 1986-87 school year, he was given a sabbatical to write The Counseling Shepherd, co-authored by Fred Matzke. This book has continued to serve as a resource book for the course in pastoral counseling. For many years, Schuetze taught the pastoral epistles. That experience was put to use when he authored the 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus for the People’s Bible series in 1991.

He remained active during his many years of retirement, serving a vacancy in Vermont, spending three months at the WELS mission in Siberia, and writing several books. He contributed the first volume of NPH’s People’s Bible Teachings series entitled, Church-Mission-Ministry. An earlier volume on the life of Luther intended for use in Sunday schools was rewritten and republished. His most ambitious project was a history of the Synodical Conference. Completed in 2000, The Synodical Conference: Ecumenical Endeavor is a major contribution to the history of the Lutheran church in America. He also wrote several essays and articles for various synod publications. He died on May 27, 2020.

While Armin Schuetze saw and experienced great changes in the world, in our nation, in WELS and at the seminary, he was a steadying influence for the many students who sat at his feet during his 32 years on campus. He provided clear and evangelical instruction for the church-at-large. He served his synod, the seminary, and his Lord as a true man of God and faithful teacher of his Word. At a family gathering celebrating his 95th birthday, he told his family that his greatest joy was that he was a baptized child of God, as were all of his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. His emphasis on that comforting and unchanging truth – the certainty of forgiveness and life because we have been baptized into Christ – is perhaps the most enduring and significant legacy and influence of Armin Schuetze.

For Further Reading

Paul Nitz, “Double Installation at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary,” Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly 75, no. 4 (October 1978): 306.

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Armin W. Schuetze, The People’s Bible: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991).

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https://welshistoricalinstitute.org/histories/personal/seminary-presidents/1978-schuetze/