

From Birth to Ten Years: *the history of an endowment*

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F. Melius Christiansen

1996: An inspired beginning

In the fall of 1996, ACDA of Minnesota's annual fall convention was held on the campus of St. Olaf College in Northfield, designed to honor the legacy of F. Melius Christiansen (1871-1955), founder of the St. Olaf Choir and "father" of a *cappella* choral singing in the United States. Titled "F. Melius Christiansen: The Man, the Legacy," the convention celebrated the 125th anniversary of Christiansen's birth and the contributions to the choral art made by this Norwegian immigrant during his tenure at St. Olaf College. The closing concert was billed as a "once in a lifetime" event of grand proportion. Gathered for the first time were choirs, each with a Christiansen-inspired choral heritage, from five Midwestern colleges with ties to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The convention's closing concert was open to the public and an audience of over 7,500 people heard choirs from Augsburg College, Concordia College - Moorhead, Gustavus Adolphus College, Luther College, and St. Olaf College. Each choir performed individually under the direction of their respective conductors and as a massed choir under

the direction of Kenneth Jennings, St. Olaf College professor emeritus and conductor of the St. Olaf Choir from 1953 to 1990. A new tradition was born.

Following that first anniversary concert, ACDA of Minnesota found itself in possession of monetary largesse from grateful concert-goers and sponsors. These contributions were set aside by the executive board to establish an endowment fund with F. Melius Christiansen as its namesake. In creating the F. Melius Christiansen Endowment Fund, ACDA of Minnesota sought to honor and sustain Christiansen's legacy, and the board set a lofty goal for the endowment of \$500,000.

The board busied itself envisioning ways to spend the interest from the fund to guarantee a "vibrant future for exemplary choral music" in the land of 10,000 lakes. They settled on a scholarship and grant program for the continuing education and training of Minnesota choral directors. Additionally, the board voted to ensure the stability of the state organization by funding a new position of a part-time executive secretary. Lastly, the board appointed a group of retired choral directors to serve as the endowment committee responsible for managing endowment-related matters.

Initial investment interest from the funds allowed only partial fulfillment of the committee's goals. Nevertheless, Minnesota's leaders made a leap of faith in January, 1997 and initiated the F. Melius Christiansen Young Conductor Grant program which offered ten grants to attend Minnesota's annual Summer Dialogue conference. The endowment committee also partially funded the position of executive secretary for two years. ACDA of Minnesota would never be the same.

Steady growth and remarkable gifts

Over the next decade a steady stream of donations from individual, foundation, and corporate donors helped the endowment grow. In its first five years the endowment funded thirty-nine grants to attend Summer Dialogue, seven grants to attend divisional or national ACDA conventions, and awarded \$4,500 in graduate scholarships to Minnesota ACDA members.

The F. Melius Christiansen Endowment Fund is indebted to ACDA members and supporters of choral music whose faithful giving has been, and continues to be, essential to the endowment's ability to invest in the choral life of Minnesota. In its first ten years the endowment received notable gifts from members and friends. Several retired state members have also made commitments to the endowment in their wills.

While individual donations are the lifeblood of the endowment, two remarkable gifts stand out in the endowment's history. In August, 2002 the Sixth World Symposium on Choral Music (WSCM-6) was held in Minneapolis. Chaired by Minnesota ACDA member Philip Brunelle, the board of directors for WSCM-6 created the International Choral Festival (ICF), a series of public concerts in Minneapolis and St. Paul featuring each of the international choirs that performed for registrants of the symposium. In a gesture of goodwill and thanks for ACDA members' assistance, Brunelle presented the endowment with a check for \$90,000 representing the proceeds from the ICF. This singular donation generated great excitement about the endowment's future prospects.

Fast forward four years and the

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endowment committee’s well-laid plans for a second grand concert ten years after the first have come to fruition. The F. Melius Christiansen 135th Anniversary Concert on November 19, 2006 at Orchestra Hall, Minneapolis, brought together the choirs of Augsburg College, Concordia College – Moorhead, Concordia University – St. Paul, Gustavus Adolphus College, and St. Olaf College. Once again the massed choirs concluded the concert, which was offered twice in one day, by singing F. Melius Christiansen’s beloved arrangement of “Beautiful Savior” under the direction of Kenneth Jennings.

At the 2006 anniversary concerts a one-of-a-kind \$100,000 matching gift to the endowment from the Minnesotan-owned Wenger Foundation was announced. In response to this major gift, the endowment committee has redoubled its efforts to reach the original goal of \$500,000. Endowment committee members are working diligently to raise \$100,000 by December 31, 2007 to meet the Wenger Foundation’s challenge. Though much work remains, the committee has faith in the choral community of Minnesota and high hopes that donations will continue through the end of 2007 to meet the match. The tireless efforts and dedication of the endowment committee members has made it possible for ACDA of Minnesota to provide for the “vibrant future for exemplary choral music” that all choral professionals desire. They are

owed a debt of gratitude that can never be fully repaid. Original FMC Endowment Fund committee members Roger Tenney, Curtis Hansen, Murrae Freng, and Geneva Eschweiler retired in 2007 and were honored for many years of service. They joined fellow retired committee member Katharine Doepke. A. B. “Bud” Engen, an original committee member, died in 2006. Continuing the work of the endowment are Steve Boehlke, Paul Brandvik, David Docter, Richard Edstrom, Laretta Graetz, Charles Hellie, Wayne Kivell, Diana Leland, Howard Lerohl, Carl Lipke, Larry McCaghy, Robert Mix, and Mike Wolsted. The advisory committee for the FMC Endowment Fund includes Anton Armstrong, Philip Brunelle, Libby Larsen, Stephen Paulus, Jeffrey Van, and Dale Warland. Coordinator for the 2006 anniversary concerts was Bruce Becker and assistant coordinator was Diana J. Leland. ■