

“Well done, good and faithful servant!”

An interview recalling the life and ministry of Reverend Carleton Toppe



Prof. Carleton Toppe

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If the statement is true that you are what you read, then one could learn a great deal about Reverend Carleton Toppe simply by looking at the books he regularly keeps on his desk. His office is now upstairs in his home in Watertown where he and his wife Violet are enjoying their retirement. On the right side of his desk between two book ends stand a Bible, an English dictionary, and a thesaurus. One would not think anything unusual about having those three reference books sitting on the corner of one's desk. However, when you review the ministry of Professor Toppe you recognize the important role each of those three books played in his service to God and his church. The Lord used this gifted man as a parish pastor, a Lutheran elementary instructor, a preparatory school professor, a college professor, a college administrator, an author, an editor of religious publications as well as a columnist for a religious periodical. Throughout the years Carleton Toppe wisely used ~~The~~ Bible in teaching, preaching, evangelizing, and writing for God's people. He also used it for gaining wisdom and guidance himself through out his life and ministry. Professor Toppe's command of the English language was also a gift from God that he used wisely. Through the years his thesaurus and English dictionary served their purpose well. Toppe confesses he still searches today for a "better word" to express his thoughts accurately. His writings and addresses reflect that fact.

The following is an oral history of Reverend Toppe. All the information in this paper was gathered in personal interviews that I conducted with him. Any other information which was not gathered during the interviews will be documented in the footnotes.

Carleton Toppe was born in Waterloo, Wisconsin May 3, 1914 to Otto and Emma Toppe. He was their first child of four and was the only boy. Carleton grew up on a dairy

farm that his father owned and farmed with another hired man. He remembers speaking mostly in German as a youngster before attending a one room public school for three years. Early in life, Toppe took a keen interest in reading. He read anything he could get his hands on, from the newspaper, farm magazine, Northwestern Lutheran, to the Sears and Roebuck catalogue. In that one room school, he remembers listening as the teacher gave the older children spelling lessons. He would take the tests with the older students and score better than they would from time to time. His teacher was pleased with this young scholar's progress and advanced him ahead a grade twice. This meant that in three years of public school Toppe completed grades one through five. Looking back he was not so sure that teacher did him any favor by advancing him ~~ahead~~ so quickly. He remembers being physically and socially behind the members of his classes later on.

He remembers well that one room school out in the country. He also remembers that it did not have a very big library. It was about a mile from his farm to the public school and about a mile and 1/4 to the church. He remembers that walk to school during various seasons of the year was sometimes challenging. In the winter there was snow. In the fall and spring there was rain. The worst conditions for walking was probably early spring with melting snow and mud.

Pastor Hening, the pastor of the Toppe family's church in Waterloo was very dedicated to starting a Lutheran Elementary School. He was so dedicated that for several years before the congregation called a teacher Hening himself taught the entire grade school. Carleton attended that school for grades six through eight. It was Pastor Hening and his wife who then convinced Otto and Emma Toppe to send their oldest child and only boy to Northwestern Prep.

Looking back, Professor Toppe says that must have been a tough decision for his parents to make. Having hired workers around to help was a luxury. Allowing your oldest son to leave home when he could be used for help on the farm was quite a sacrifice to make.

Carleton entered high school at the age of 12 years and 3 months. He described himself as a rather shy young man in high school. Since he was quite a bit younger than the other students he remembers still wearing knee hi pants or knickers and standing out from the other students. Recalling this memory brought a grin to his face as he remembers that another youngster named Arnold Lehmann, two years behind him, also wore similar trousers. When Toppe's parents purchased long trousers for him the following year Carleton was finally relieved of any further embarrassment.

One of his clearest memories was his excitement over the huge library at Northwestern. He had always been starved for books to read and now had a huge selection to choose from. He described himself as an irresponsible reader at times, not always finishing a book. He would sometimes have as many as ten books checked out at a time between the school library and the Watertown Public library. He would read from each of them until they were due back on the library shelf.

Entertainment in prep, as Toppe remembers, was going downtown to get ice cream. He had a friend who's father was a mortician and financed his son generously with money to spend on entertainment. The two would go down and order ice cream sundaes.

The dorms were set up differently back then too. He remembers living in a room with another prep and two college students. The college students were sort of like tutors and big brothers. He remembers his older roommates introducing him to more difficult

reading like Thomas Hardy books and quizzing him about word meanings and so forth.

Toppe spoke favorably of his college roommates. He was somewhat appreciative ^{of} for them taking an interest in his reading habits as a young high schooler.

I was interested in hearing some humorous stories of pranks or incidents in the dorm from Toppe's prep days. When I asked the question however, he replied with a grin, "Remember, I was two years younger and a retiring type of person, so I don't recall any pranks that I perpetrated as a leader."

I asked if there were any professors that influenced him as a student. Toppe recalled being impressed by Prof. Kiessling's courses in English and American history.

Prof. Paul G. Eickmann who was the father of the current college professor Paul

Eickmann, also stood out in Toppe's memory for his science and chemistry courses.

Although he only sat in his class for only one year, Prof. Schumann was a well respected professor according to Toppe. He also told the story of a run in, so to speak, with his prep history and religion teacher Prof. Sauer. Toppe had ear infections through^out his high school days and on occasion had difficulties hearing in class. Toppe remembers suffering Sauer's wrath when he thought that Carleton wasn't paying close enough attention in the lectures. Toppe never explained to Sauer about his hearing problems and instead quietly accepted his professors sharp encouragement. Toppe still spoke favorably of Prof. Sauer and referred to him as a gifted teacher. Carleton remembers some of the Profs. from the prep department were also teaching in the college department. This was not always the best situation since the Prof. would sometimes talk over the heads of preps and would at other times speak down to college students.

Since Carleton spent so much of his time reading and doing school work, I wondered if he ever regretted not participating in sports in high school or college. "I wouldn't say it's regret," he responded. "I would simply say as a sixteen year old boy completing his high school years, I wasn't ready to go out for football. My age and my lack of experience kept me from really being interested. I did play some football after I got to the Sem when we played Northwestern every year. They must have been really scraping the bottom to have me play," Toppe said with a smile.

Toppe's real preference was for books and reading. He was involved with the Black and Red in College. Not only did he regularly contribute articles but he also served as editor and chief. He also had a keen interest in nature and the outdoors. At the end of his sophomore year of college he and a classmate by the name of Bussewitz went on hikes and nature walks. That interest really occupied any extra time he had his junior and senior years of college. He remembers one time when he and Bussewitz hiked over forty one miles on a Saturday. They broke the old record of forty miles and arrived back in the dorm after midnight.

Other interests that he had in college include a group of 6 to 8 juniors and seniors that read plays together. They called their group the Kit Kat Club. Apparently in the 1920's before the depression many interesting plays were written and produced. It was a popular form of entertainment then. This was just a spontaneous club organized by guys who took an interest in literature and enjoyed reading and discussing it together. Another group that Prof. Toppe remembers being involved in was the Lambda Alpha Delta society. It was a group of 5 or so in the dorm who decided to write their own magazine. It was by no means an official group. They would publish just five copies or so written on various topics. Each

one would take turns publishing and editing the magazine. Although it was just for fun, Toppe feels this was of great value in practicing his composition skills.

All these clubs and literary ^{interests} enthusiast made me wonder if the students in Toppe's college days were more scholarly than they are today. Toppe laughed and said that as a whole that was not the case. The interest that a few had in literature was something that other students had no use for. There were some back then who like today are more interested ⁱⁿ other things like sports. He felt it was more a matter of the attitudes of individual classes. Some smaller classes who had a few influential and scholarly types helped foster an appreciation for literature and the arts among the whole class. Whereas other classes may as a whole find enjoyment in other pursuits like athletics or music.

Through out prep and college, Toppe doesn't remember being absolutely sure he wanted to be a pastor. He did not speak of any major doubts that he had about the ministry either though. He referred to himself as just going along with the stream. His love for the school he was attending and his friendships with fellow classmates kept him from pursuing other fields. Like other students his thoughts were on the possibility of being either a pastor or a teacher. In no way did he feel he was forced to pursue the public ministry to please his parents.

Toppe decided to attend the seminary in Mequon. He referred to his seminary years as enjoyable. He remembers his two most influential professors being Pieper and Meyer. August Pieper was in his mid to late seventies when Toppe attended the Seminary. His wife had passed away and he needed someone to drive his car for him because of his age. Toppe and another student served as Pieper's chauffeur. They drove him to various events and get together and got to know him in a more personal way than others who only

saw him in the classroom. Toppe described Pieper as dramatic, intense, sharp, involved in controversy, (the Protestant Controversy) and above all well respected. His classes were inspiring and enjoyable. Toppe also spoke favorably of Meyer and referred to him as, conscientious, anxious about doing things well, and systematic. Another professor who had an influence on Toppe was Prof. Zich. A cousin of Carleton's father, Prof. Zich influenced Toppe most with editorials in the Northwestern Lutheran. Toppe liked his style and subject matter and to a certain degree used Prof. Zich as a model for his command of the English language.

There was no such thing as a vicar year at that time so after three years of seminary classes, Toppe and his classmates were eligible for an assignment. Unfortunately because of the slow recovering economy after the depression, the synod was only able to place one of the twenty-six graduates into a congregation immediately following graduation. The others within a few weeks were placed in Lutheran Elementary Schools to teach as well as help the pastor of the congregation with his duties. This was the arrangement Toppe was called to for two years. He was assigned to First German of Manitowoc. He remembers teaching three fourths of the day and then canvassing in the evening. He would preach one Sunday a month in English and German. This was somewhat of a challenge for a young Sem grad. He was glad that he had plenty of time to prepare for those sermons. Toppe was grateful for the experience he gained those first two years of his ministry at Manitowoc. He described them as similar to our vicar training today. An interesting thing happened during his two years in Manitowoc though. Toppe met his future wife, Violet Pleuss.

The two continued to correspond with each other even after Toppe accepted the call to serve a dual parish near Bloomer, Wisconsin. In 1941 they were married at First

German Lutheran of Manitowoc. They lived in Bloomer until 1943 when Toppe accepted the call to Elmwood and Ellsworth Wisconsin. During their years in the parish ministry the Toppes were blessed with four children, Marilyn, Frederick, Lois, and Carla. Carleton recalls the family trips that they used to take during the summer to various national parks and scenic areas of our country as well as to historically significant places. It is obvious that the whole family enjoyed these vacations because Toppe says that all his children's families still do quite a bit of traveling today.

In 1948 Toppe was called back to his Alma Mater to teach Latin and English. While at Northwestern he studied at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and earned his Master's degree in English Literature. On July 1, 1959 he succeeded Professor E. E. Kowalke as President of Northwestern College where he served until his retirement in 1987. Before becoming president he served as faculty registrar. In addition to these duties he has contributed regularly to the Northwestern Lutheran and has written a book on the history of Northwestern College.

I asked Prof. Toppe which he enjoyed more, the parish or the teaching ministry. He responded, "I was very content with teaching. I began teaching those fifth graders at First German and then taught seventh grade, and then came to NPS and taught ninth and tenth graders, and eventually taught college. It gives one joy to see young people learn and profit from what you're doing. You don't always see progress in the parish. You are also more constructed as a teacher. You have a definite schedule and you fit into a program. In the parish you are more on your own. That is one of the rewards of teaching, the camaraderie. You learn from each other. You share experiences and can get assistance when your experience is not the happiest one."

I wondered which he preferred at Northwestern, the teaching or administration duties. Toppe said, "I really don't take much credit for administration. I really felt the most comfortable when I was surrounded by a faculty who really served as a cabinet you might say. Your control of the situation was largely the case of selecting the proper faculty members to serve by appointment. You could pretty well tell what's going to come out of the committee. If people are basically on your side it's not a case of hostile relations. I wouldn't feel that overly satisfied with my record as an administrator, though I feel that some good things did happen in those twenty seven years. Unpleasant memories were having to deal with the protests of the late 1950's and also late 1960's as well as the unpleasant part of Northwestern students picking up attitudes. Even if it wasn't spelled out, you could tell they weren't with you. Certain students mildly resisted. The close working relationships with the deans helped a great deal though."

Toppe had the feeling all along that the faculty was in one world and the students were in another. He said that to a certain degree, that never really changed that much through the years either. There was also a difference in the student faculty relations in the forties to the sixties. In the negative attitudes students had, the faculty had to realize that relations should be more cordial and ^{cooperative} cooperated. In the past fifteen years the faculty student relations have improved greatly according to Toppe. Much of the success of that fact, I think, goes to the faculty and President Toppe. It was their patience and evangelical attitude which kept the door of friendship open after the air of the rebellious age lifted.

When asked how he was spending his retirement Toppe responded as he reached for his Greek New Testament, "I feel that the kind of education I had allows me in a devotional way, to translate. I set a goal for myself, maybe fifty verses or so in a week and

I concentrate on the language." He has also been editing various books for Northwestern Publishing house including Franzmann's New Testament Commentary.

On his career as editorial writer for the Northwestern Lutheran, I asked Toppe, "Why do you think it is that your writing comes across so pointed and strong but in reality and in person you appear to be rather soft spoken and reserved?"

Toppe responded after taking a moment to think about the question. "I was a rather shy, embarrassed, young lad. I wasn't going to assert myself. I recall the tertia class gathering at the end of the school year. We didn't have graduation as such, just a banquet at the Washington Hotel. I was asked to get up and say a few words and I just couldn't do it. Prof. Kiessling somehow covered for me. If you don't have that kind of confidence in your communication ability, that gets to be like a wall. You feel you're not able to speak as well as others. It took quite awhile before I realized I could be serving in the ministry in spite of what I considered to be my major handicap. When you're working with the written word you can file it away and edit that. That is not a commendable way of speaking though. I generally felt that there has got to be a better word than the one I'm thinking of."

Now that Toppe is retired, one of the things he missed about not being a full time worker was the deadlines and assignment dates he had to make during his ministry. Now it seems to take longer to accomplish tasks. He also misses being apart of the academic family at Northwestern. He still enjoys going back to chat with the faculty as they move in and out of the office during a morning break. He misses the good humor and cordial greetings he would get every day when he was President.

Over all Toppe is thankful that the Lord allowed him to serve at Northwestern so many years. He feels the positives outweigh the negatives when it comes to the goals he

hoped to accomplish during his presidency. His changes in the curriculum which allowed for more electives and more time for research work on the students part was something Toppe worked hard to establish. The physical plant of the school had a complete face lift during his presidency as well. He attributed the success of those building projects to the fine work done by faculty committees through the construction years. Although it was done more on the basis of necessity, Toppe was pleased with the work which was done for Northwest to become nationally accredited.

I asked Prof. Toppe, "What advice would you give to a Seminary graduate just beginning his ministry?"

He smiled and said, "One thing I think you should say is, 'Thank you Lord!' If you have had the opportunity, the family background, parental assistance to begin the program and reach the point where you are. Your attitude should not necessarily be a grand program of the way you're going to run this congregation. It is not good to have too much confidence in oneself. One of the rewards of working in the ministry is sharing the experience of your colleagues. It makes it much easier to make judgments in situations after you have talked it over with a neighbor and compared attitudes toward the work you're doing. When the Lord places you in a position he doesn't leave you independent or helpless. In the midst of problems you have your trust in His leadership and His guidance which you ask for and discuss with your most influential friends and colleagues. Today this is so much more organized than in my ministry. There is tremendous help through the board for Parish Services."

When interviewing Professor Carleton Toppe I could not help but think to myself that sitting across from me was a living example of what Jesus talked about in his parable

of the talents. *Mat 25:16 The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. Mat 25:19 "After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. Mat 25:20 The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.'* *Mat 25:21 "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'*

Professor Toppe is a man who has been blessed by God with many gifts and abilities. He has used those gifts with humility and faithfulness through out his ministry. His ministry in one way or another has touched the lives of most of the pastors of our Synod through his service at NWC. His editorials in the Northwestern Lutheran have touched and guided all who have read them. I think it is fitting then to conclude with the remarks of some of the people of our grateful synod as they were recorded on the occasion of Carleton Toppe's retirement in 1987.

President Toppe's association with the Northwestern Lutheran through the years has been intimate and productive. On May 26, 1957, ~~He~~ he first appeared as lead editorialist of the magazine, a position he still holds. It is one of the best kept secrets in the land of religious publications that President Toppe is an outstanding editorialist. His topics are as fresh as NBC's version of today's news. His literary style is classic and his words precise and uncluttered. From the first to the last word, his editorials are a seamless robe from which an editor- pressed for space - has difficulty extracting even a thread. Above all, each editorial is informed by Scripture, before which the editorialist obviously stands in reverent obedience, unimpressed by the results of the latest Gallop poll.¹

James P. Schaefer

“One or another of his junior colleagues may occasionally call Carleton Toppe “Chief,” but our president has always approached members of the faculty as brothers. He has taught us by example the meaning of “colleague” and one of the

¹ *The Black and Red*, Northwestern College, Vol. 90, February 1987 pg. 240

historic senses of "college": a society of scholars, or friends of learning, incorporated for study and instruction.

There are other more visible memorials to his presidency, but I remember best the intercessions which open the grading meetings at the end of every semester. Those thoughtfully composed prayers for students and teachers, for the synod and its ministry, characterize the man and his service to Northwestern College.

About all our tributes to his ministry President Toppe would make the request that he expressed at an anniversary celebration a few years ago: 'Lay them at the foot of the cross.'"²

Paul E. Eickmann

"My acquaintance with Professor Toppe falls into four distinct phases: as a student in his classes going back as far as 1950; as a tutor for two years at NWC; as a colleague on the faculty from 1962 to 1975; and for the past few years as a fellow member of the Board for Worker Training. In all of those associations I have admired the man for his God-given ability accurately to assess situations clearly and concisely to express himself on how best to address the problems, and resolutely to set upon a course of action to solve those problems. He has worked with a quiet humility that may at times have left us unaware of the greatness of what he was teaching us or sharing with us, but more than we may realize, he has had a profound effect on all/who were privileged to be his students and co-workers. As one of those, I would like to say thank you, God bless you in your retirement, and may your work live on in those whom you have helped to prepare for service in the Savior's kingdom."³

Armin J. Panning

"To provide a preaching and teaching ministry qualified to proclaim the Word of God faithfully, effectively, universally in accord with the Lutheran Confessions.' This is one of the primary objectives of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in carrying out its continuing purpose of 'Serving all people in God's world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures,'

One of the strengths of our Synod, also in maintaining our confessional integrity, is its Worker Training system. Many church bodies would gladly exchange their program of worker training for ours.

And when you think of servants of the church whom the Lord used to keep our Worker Training system strong, the name of Carleton Toppe comes to mind rather quickly. His long and distinguished career as a classroom teacher, as a college president and as a valued member of the Board for Worker Training are a matter of public record.

For his significant contribution in this vital area of the church's life, I want to express the thanks of a grateful Synod."⁴

Carl H. Mischke

² Ibid. pg. 238

³ Ibid. pg. 240

⁴ Ibid. pg. 237