

WAYNE L. MILLER

SEVENTH PRESIDENT OF BETHANY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY – 1989-1992

Although relatively short in years, Wayne Miller's presidency at Bethany Seminary was a case of the right person being in the right place at the right time.

As William Kostlevy wrote in *Bethany Theological Seminary: A Centennial History*, "The close of the 1980s brought to a head a crisis that had been gathering for many decades, the financial viability of the seminary."¹ He notes that in addition to unsustainably borrowing from its endowment to balance budgets, the Seminary was facing economic forces of high inflation and unfavorable returns on investment. By the time Warren Groff retired from the presidency in 1989, explorations that had begun some fifteen years prior about alternate uses of Bethany's Oak Brook, Illinois, property or even relocating the Seminary had become imperative.

Wayne Miller, a 1954 graduate of Bethany and former pastor, was "a seasoned Brethren educator" who had served the faculties of four Brethren colleges. But it was his recent successes at a small California university that captured Bethany's attention. As president of Woodbury University, Wayne had led a response to the school's financial crisis with a relocation from downtown Los Angeles to Burbank. During Bethany's as yet unsuccessful presidential search, Wayne's name came to the board through the Seminary's personal contacts in the Los Angeles area.

Then-trustee Lowell Flory recalls Wayne's interview with the Executive Committee in a Chicago hotel, conversation grinding to a halt when planes landing at O'Hare flew overhead. "What Wayne brought to the mix was that he could legitimately say with confidence, 'Bankrupt? Have to move a campus? I think we can do it here.' That injected a considerable measure of hope into the Bethany ethos when we needed it. I think his coming to us was the tipping point for our hunkering down with the belief that we could do this."

Newly retired, Wayne wasn't looking for more administrative opportunities. But he and the Bethany board came to an understanding that he could offer the Seminary what it needed most for the short term, and he accepted the call to the presidency in 1989 for a period of two to four years. With full disclosure about the dire need to take advantage of the valuable Oak Brook property, Wayne helped guide the Seminary community into a new paradigm for theological education at Bethany, carefully considering the options that were open to them. The decision to sell and relocate was made by 1991.

That year, following the recommendation of a Site Selection Committee, the board negotiated a new partnership with Earlham School of Religion in Richmond, Indiana. And Wayne, sensing that his mission had been accomplished, concluded his time at Bethany at the end of the 1991-92 year. Navigating the process for a physical move was one thing. Under Wayne's leadership, the Bethany community had also begun preparing operationally and psychologically: closing the DMin program and some auxiliary enterprises, completing a capital campaign feasibility study, anticipating a large turnover in human resources, envisioning a restructured curriculum, and preparing current students to complete their educational goals unhindered.

The Bethany community accomplished a lot in three years. But Wayne also recognized longer-term realities that Bethany faced—in fact, still does—such as growing student debt, balancing the roles of graduate study and certificate programs in ministry preparation, and the need to help students prepare for ministries other than pastoral. In 1990 he was asked how Bethany could serve the Church of the Brethren in questions about mission and identity. "We are not going to find an easy answer. . . . How do we prepare people to function in the reality of uncertainty? We Brethren will be led back to our heritage in answering that question in the years ahead. . . . It's a process we face, not a simple problem and solution exercise."

Perhaps it is the resolve to live into uncertainty, the courage to meet challenge with foresight and creativity, which best define the legacy Wayne Miller left to Bethany Seminary.

1. *(Bethany Theological Seminary and the Brethren Journal Association: 2005), 173.*
2. Kermon Thomasson, "Bethany and the Brethren," *Messenger (April 1990): 19.*