

PROFILES: Quiet Person, Powerfully Loud Influence: Norris Magnuson (1932-2006)

by Sandra Oslund



Norris Alden Magnuson was born to George and Esther (Eliason) Magnuson on June 15, 1932, in Midale, Saskatchewan, Canada. His father was pastor of the Baptist General Conference (now Converge Worldwide) in Midale. Their family also lived in Youngstown, Ohio, and Davenport, Iowa, where his father pastored various churches.

Norris's life and career revolved around Bethel College and Seminary (now Bethel University). Norris graduated from Bethel College in 1954 and Bethel Seminary in 1958. In 1956 he married Beverly (Bev) Carlson, a 1957 graduate of Bethel College. Norris and Bev had four sons. All four sons graduated from Bethel College and three also graduated from Bethel Seminary.

Norris was working on a Master's degree in History at the University of Minnesota when he received a call from Carl Lundquist, then president of Bethel College and Seminary, inviting him to come to Bethel as a librarian. Thus, Norris began his 38-year career at Bethel in 1959 as Head of Technical Services and Cataloging, working alongside Librarian David Guston. While working full-time at Bethel,

Norris completed an MA in Library Science (1961) and a PhD in history (1968) from the University of Minnesota. He completed his PhD under the direction of noted evangelical historian Dr. Timothy Smith. His dissertation, "Salvation in the Slums: Evangelical Social Work, 1865-1920," was published by Scarecrow Press in 1977 as part of the ATLA Monograph Series.¹

Family was the most important thing to Norris and he seized every opportunity to spend time with his wife and children. While working on his doctoral dissertation, he received a grant for his research, which he used to buy a travel trailer so his wife and four young sons could join him on his summer research trips to the East Coast and the South. Norris would sometimes be called to preach in area churches, which included both a Sunday morning and a Sunday evening sermon. Choosing not to spend the entire day away from his family, he would travel home after the morning service and return to the church for the evening service. Throughout his years at Bethel, he happily welcomed drop-in visits to his office from his sons and, eventually, from his grandchildren.

In 1965, Bethel Seminary moved from its location on Snelling Avenue in St. Paul to the current campus in Arden Hills. The library building on the Snelling Avenue campus housed both the college and seminary collections, and Norris selected 26,000 volumes from these collections to move to the new seminary library location. During this period, he would work all day, go home for dinner, and spend some time with his family before returning to work to select books for the seminary collection.

In 1972, Norris became Director of the Carl H. Lundquist Library and a full professor at Bethel Seminary. He held these positions until his retirement in 1997. Norris also served as the Archivist for Bethel and the Baptist General Conference from 1993 to 1999.

The new seminary library flourished under Norris's leadership. By 1979, the year that the ATLA Conference met on the Bethel Seminary campus, the collection had reached 80,000 volumes.

¹ The book was reprinted in 1990 by Baker Book House, and again in 2004 by Wipf and Stock.

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Seminary library patrons over the years have marveled at the depth and breadth of Bethel's collection. How, with limited budgets, has the seminary library maintained quality holdings and received commendation from the American Theological Library Association? Part of the answer lies in old-fashioned generosity and Magnuson thriftiness.²

Thousands of volumes were contributed to the library by retiring pastors and seminary professors. In addition to these donations, Norris diligently searched used bookstores to build a collection that was deep and comprehensive. The library also received the Lundquist-Nelson collection of devotional books, the Klingberg Puritan collection, and the Skarstedt collection in evangelical pietism. Under his direction, an addition to the library was built in 1983, equipped with compact shelving, to accommodate the growing collection.

Around the same time that Norris made his move to the seminary library, the directors of several seminary libraries in the Twin Cities started to meet informally. In the mid-1960s a reciprocal borrowing program was established among Bethel Seminary, Luther Theological Seminary, Northwestern Lutheran Theological Seminary (later merged with Luther Theological Seminary), and United Theological Seminary. In 1967 the library directors from St. Paul Seminary (now the School of Divinity, University of St. Thomas) and St. John's University in Collegetown entered the cooperative program. In October 1968 the directors agreed to rotate the "chairmanship" of the group annually each academic year. The name Minnesota Theological Library Association (MTLA) was formally adopted on February 19, 1969.

Norris was known as a quiet, humble man, but a competitive spirit emerged when he was on the court playing racquetball, handball, or tennis. For many years, Norris was the reigning champion of the seminary racquetball and handball tournaments. He developed a network of "tennis buddies" that allowed him to play as often as he liked. His connection to one of these tennis buddies would move the library into a new world of technology.

Jerry Miller, President of Progressive Management Services (PMS), was one of Norris's tennis buddies, and they began discussing the creation of a Computer Output Microform (COM) catalog for the holdings of the five Twin Cities area seminaries when they were in the locker room. Norris's interest in having a single catalog came out of his experience doing research for his dissertation, when he had to visit each library and search its individual catalog holdings to find the material he needed. The MTLA libraries had enjoyed the benefits of cooperation for many years, but no benefit would be more concrete for library users than the first union list of periodicals created in 1972. The union list was edited in 1974 and incorporated into the Minnesota Union List of Serials (MULS).

The next step was to move to a computerized book catalog. After a year of preliminary work, the "Bethel Pilot Project" of retrospective catalog conversion started in April 1975. Student workers and library staff at Bethel continued the process of keying in the information until the summer of 1976. The computer programming and data processing was done by PMS. With the successful completion of the Bethel Pilot Project, MTLA submitted a grant proposal to the Bush Foundation to fund the retrospective conversion of the Luther Northwestern Seminary, St. Paul Seminary, and United Theological Seminary library collections. The Bush Foundation awarded a grant to MTLA in early 1977 and the computer-produced catalog was completed in 1979. While several other libraries had computer-generated catalogs at the time, relatively few consortia had converted their entire retrospective holdings. The original microfilm catalog evolved to a microfiche catalog in 1985 and then to Library Corporation's CD-ROM Intelligent Catalog in 1988.

In the midst of all this, Bethel Theological Seminary started an extension program at College Avenue Baptist Church in San Diego in 1977, and Norris supervised the formation and development of a new library there. He made many trips to San Diego to oversee this process. Under his direction, the staff at the Arden Hills campus processed, cataloged, and shipped approximately 7,000 volumes to the San Diego library. A consultant reviewed the holdings and services of the San Diego library in January 1980 and issued a generally positive report along with several recommendations for the new library. The holdings of the San Diego library were also accessible by a computer-produced catalog.³ When the San Diego library moved to a new building in 1990, its collection included more than 70,000 volumes.

² Diana L. Magnuson, "Celebrating the Service of an Extraordinary Bibliophile," *The Standard* (July 1997): 21.

³ Norris A. Magnuson, *Missionskolan: The History of an Immigrant Theological School; Bethel Theological Seminary 1871-1981* (St. Paul, MN: Bethel Theological Seminary, 1982), 110-111.

Norris's legacy continues to this day in the libraries he built and in his writings. When he retired in 1997, he left a library of 216,000 volumes on the St. Paul and San Diego campuses. In addition to *Salvation in the Slums*, his own writings included numerous articles as well as *How We Grew: Highlights of the First Hundred Years of the Baptist General Conference History*, *Missionskolan: The History of an Immigrant Theological School; Bethel Theological Seminary, 1871-1981*, "Proclaim the Good News": *Essays in Honor of Gordon G. Johnson (editor)*, and *American Evangelicalism: An Annotated Bibliography* written with faculty colleague Dr. William G. Travis.

Norris lived with Parkinson's disease for 21 years. In March 2004, Norris moved to Presbyterian Homes where he resided until his death on November 8, 2006, at the age of 74. He is remembered as a churchman, family man, librarian, visionary, and scholar. The impact of his life is best described by Bethel Seminary Dean Emeritus Gordon G. Johnson, who spoke at his memorial service:

As a professional he was beyond compare. His work as a librarian was the envy of other schools . . . In 1965 when the Seminary moved to the new campus, Norris chose to move with the seminary library. That was fortuitous for [the seminary] . . . You can readily understand the high respect we all had for Norris the athlete, Norris the scholar, Norris the spiritual leader and Norris the professional. Norris may have been a quiet person, but his influence was powerfully loud and full of impact.⁴

⁴My thanks to Bev Magnuson for her contributions; to Sue Ebbers, Director of the Library at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, for the history of the Minnesota Theological Library Association; and to Dr. Diana Magnuson, Director of the History Center at Bethel University, for access to the resources of the History Center.