
Mark Swanson Joins LSTC Faculty

by Jan Boden

The Rev. Dr. Mark Swanson joins the LSTC faculty July 1, 2006 as the first Harold S. Vogelaar Professor of Christian-Muslim Studies and Interfaith Relations. Most recently he served as associate professor of Christian History and Islamic studies and director of the Islamic Studies Program at Luther Seminary. Swanson taught for 14 years at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, Egypt, and holds a doctorate from the Pontifical Institute of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Rome.

Mark Swanson is really coming back to LSTC, not coming for the first time. His father served briefly on the faculty when Mark was a child. He remembers running down the long hallways. In late April, Mark and Rosanne Swanson came to campus in anticipation of their summer move to Chicago. They talked about their lives, their journeys and the scholarly expertise that bring them back to LSTC.

From Gettysburg to Cairo

Swanson's undergraduate degree is in chemistry. He went to Gettysburg Seminary "for a year to read theology and get it out of my system," he said. It took more than a year, and as he faced the prospect of internship, he decided to search for a site outside the United States.

"My parents were missionaries. They spent nine years in Jamaica and then 15 years in India, so I spent much of my growing-up years outside of the United States," Swanson explained. "I ended up in Cairo with Harold Vogelaar. I knew nothing of Egypt, Arabic or Islam before I went. I had a wonderful year. When it was done, I contacted the Lutheran Church in America Department of World Mission and asked if they ever sent people to Egypt. It turns out they did, so I made plans to return to Egypt when I graduated from seminary."

Swanson returned to Gettysburg Seminary to complete his final year and met Rosanne, a first year M.Div. student who had just come to seminary after spending two years teaching in Korea.

"By the time I asked her to marry me, I was already set to return to Egypt," he said.

"And before we could get married, we had to get permission from the Mission Board," Rosanne added. She endured a battery of psychological tests during her mid-



dler year at Gettysburg, while Mark was in Egypt. They received the Mission Board's permission three weeks before the wedding took place.

"We planned to get married the summer after Rosanne's middler year," Swanson said. "But in those days there were problems with mail service. This was before the advent of email. Even phone calls were expensive and difficult. My father, who was in India at the time, suggested that we get married in Egypt in December. My parents would come to the wedding and they wanted to be sure that someone from Rosanne's family would be there, too."

They followed his father's advice and were married in the Coptic Orthodox Church in Cairo on the Coptic Orthodox Christmas Eve, January 6, 1982. After Rosanne finished her middler year at Gettysburg she came to Cairo and did her internship with Harold Vogelaar. Mark returned to the U.S. during Rosanne's final year at Gettysburg. He spent the year earning a master's degree in religious studies (Islamic studies) from Hartford Seminary.

In 1984, a few months after Rosanne's graduation, they returned to Cairo with their infant son, Karl. Their two daughters, Hannah and Rebekah, were born and baptized there. Mark taught in Arabic at the international, interdenominational Evangelical Theological Seminary. Rosanne became the first (and perhaps the only) woman ordained to Christian ministry in Egypt and served an English-language congregation in Cairo.

While teaching, Mark Swanson, became, as he describes it, a "jack of all trades." He was trained and hired to teach Islamic studies, but in 1984 Christian-Muslim relations were tense in Egypt. The seminary decided that it would be better not to have a foreigner teach Islamic studies. Mark taught New Testament, Greek and the history of Middle Eastern Christianity instead. It was the latter that led him into a new area of study.

Continuing the centuries-old dialog

All the textbooks Swanson used to teach Middle Eastern church history were in English, even though he conducted his classes in Arabic. He searched for texts in Arabic and learned that Christians living in the Middle East had been writing in Arabic since the 8th century. What was even better was that the texts were easy to read and addressed many of the same issues his students faced.

"There were volumes of writings that were understudied," Swanson said. "I photocopied pages from these ancient texts and handed them out to my students, who were able to read them. One of the texts that a student read aloud in class talked about responding to questions about faith. The student looked up and said, 'I had someone ask me that question three days ago.' These texts are very alive. They are a living heritage of the faith."

"One of the fun things about teaching in Egypt – and I taught Presbyterian Christians – was that I could tell my students that they were a 'bridge' people. They had one foot in the Reformation of the 16th century and the other foot deep in the soil of the Middle East. It was their ancestors who wrote the texts we studied and who had been engaged in a dialogue with Islam."

Swanson read all he could of the texts and sought out people who knew about the Arabic writings. He took a three-year leave from teaching and went to Rome to study them in-depth at the Vatican and other libraries.

Talking about the centuries-old dialogue between Christianity and Islam, Swanson said, "It's important to engage people of other faiths, otherwise we live in a kind of 'Christian ghetto,' speaking only the language of Zion. That's just not the world we live in. People of other faiths ask us very pointed questions. Over the centuries, the Christian church has evaded these questions. What if we face those questions head-on? Christians need to be in dialogue out of our faith and out of our traditions.

"Dialogue is not a matter of compromise, of negating who you are. Real dialogue can only take place between

people who know who they are – who are rooted in their own traditions."

Swanson is excited about LSTC's Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice and the inaugural conference being held here in September. "It's a major conference with excellent speakers," he said.

The Swansons have deep ties not only with Harold Vogelaar, but with other members of the LSTC community whom they knew in Cairo. Michael Shelley, visiting professor of world religions, and Ken Johnson, director of international student affairs, were close friends in Egypt.

Being the Harold S. Vogelaar Professor of Christian-Muslim Studies and Interfaith Relations will be a daily reminder to Swanson of Vogelaar's approach to interfaith dialogue. "Harold has been a model for me in his willingness to take time to reach out to somebody in friendship. We all get pretty busy – too busy – to the point where it takes time away from forming personal relationships. Being the Harold S. Vogelaar Professor will remind me that I need to remember to do this. I'm delighted that Harold is being honored in this way."

Only Mark and Rosanne will live in Chicago. Rebekah will begin her freshman year at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. Their son, Karl will remain in St. Paul, Minn., and daughter, Hannah, will continue studies at St. Olaf.

Rosanne Swanson will also be teaching at LSTC in the fall, in pastoral care and counseling. She will concentrate on finishing her dissertation to complete a Ph.D. in pastoral care and counseling at Luther Seminary and seek a part-time call in a Metropolitan Chicago Synod congregation.

Mark Swanson will be installed as the Harold S. Vogelaar Professor of Christian-Muslim Studies and Interfaith Relations at LSTC's fall convocation. The donors of the endowed position, Gerald A. and Karen A. Kolschowsky, will be recognized and celebrated at the Gala Inauguration of a Center of Christian-Muslim Engagement for Peace and Justice on September 21 at LSTC.



Rosanne, Rebekah, and Mark Swanson