Living to Serve
How one American pastor found our church – and stayed for 72 years.

On March 30, 2010 the Rev. Dr. George Evenson celebrated his 99th birthday. He and Wayne Gretzky have something in common … they’ve both accomplished great things with that number.

George Oliver Evenson (right) was born in a farmhouse near Lake Preston, South Dakota in 1911, the eldest in a family of eight children. In 1914 the family moved to a farm near Sinai, S.D. His parents, teachers turned farmers, encouraged him to excel in all he did. So, he became very good at his daily farm chores, milking cows, and his school studies! Eventually, however, Sinai had no further education to offer. One fall after the harvest

At the Synod Convention in June, Rev. Dr. George Evenson will be honoured for 72 years of service.
was finished, his father drove him 65 miles to Augustana College in Sioux Falls, and George settled into residence and the life of a college student (photo right).

Trouble, however, was not far away. The stock market crashed in 1929, and times grew tough for his family. They could help with tuition fees for only one year, so George went to work part-time at a grocery store to put himself through college. Following in his parent’s footsteps, he became a teacher. But something was stirring inside.

“I felt I had three choices,” he said. “I liked the farm, I had been a teacher, and at my college graduation I had been awarded the Luther League Scholarship for the seminary – it was $50. I was 23 years old and hadn’t yet made my decision.”

That summer of 1934 he was working at the college doing odd repair jobs for 40 cents an hour. He had sent out a few applications for teaching jobs, but hadn’t received a response. Then, one day the Chairman of the Education Department came to him with a letter containing an invitation to apply to Huron High School. “Well,” said George, “when they send you an invitation to apply, you know you will be accepted. I told him, ‘But I’m going to seminary this fall!’ ”

He completed his Bachelor of Divinity at Luther Seminary, St. Paul in 1938 at age 27 and married his sweetheart, Marguerite, whom he had met a few years earlier. That fateful summer George was helping out on a farm belonging to family friends, when their daughter, Ruth, brought lunch to the field. “There was a stranger with her,” said George, his eyes twinkling. “A nurse from Minneapolis, and we were introduced.” The rest, as they say, is history.

In 1938, when presented with a call to serve a parish,
“no” was not an option. That is why, on July 1, 1938, George and his bride entered Canada as Landed Immigrants and made the trip to Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan in a 1936 Chev that cost $465.00. George laughs. “I told the Lord that I would go where He wanted me to, but I never mentioned Canada!” It worked out well, however, both for Canada and for George and Marguerite. He served Central Lutheran Church, a congregation of about 150 people, together with four other congregations up to 80 miles away for two years. And he did it for $125 per month and no mileage reimbursement.

Over time the Rev. Dr. Evenson alternated between preaching and teaching. He spent twelve years at the Saskatchewan Lutheran Bible Institute in Outlook and then moved to Edmonton to serve at Central Lutheran Church until 1954. From there he went to teach for a year at Camrose Lutheran College, then back to Saskatchewan to the Lutheran Theological Seminary until 1974. Alberta beckoned once again, and this time he stayed, ministering to Mt. Olivet Lutheran Church in Sherwood Park until 1980 and then to the Canadian Bible Institute in Camrose until 1985. Camrose has been his home ever since.

If you wondered if the Evenson’s found the time to have a family, they did – two sons, Leonard and Tom, and a daughter, Lois. His dear Marguerite died on March 29, 1987.

His life is full and has expanded to include grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Until just a few years ago, he served as supply pastor, and did hospital visitation.

His hope for us is that along with the “love” of God, we do not forget to place emphasis on the “holiness” of God. We are, after all, saved by grace through Jesus Christ. George continues to follow his motto: Live dependent on God; live simply; live to serve.

By Colleen McGinnis, Synod Editor

All black and white photos provided by Rev. Dr. George Evenson