

Cook Everist Concludes Her Far-Reaching Service at Wartburg

by: Evi Wusk

"Norma's service to Wartburg Theological Seminary has been marked by deep faithfulness, wisdom, and care for those around her. She is a gifted leader, scholar, and teacher, whose contributions are written in the pages of books and threaded through the hearts of so many of us who have had the privilege to call her teacher."

-President Louise N. Johnson

She's quick to note that she's not retiring. Norma Cook Everist, Distinguished Professor of Church Ministry, emerita, will conclude her 38 years of service at Wartburg Seminary this summer. Her work as a teaching theologian, prolific author, a pioneer in women's leadership, and a woman of global impact have made immeasurable contributions to church leadership and the mission of Christ.

"I think the reason I don't want to use the word 'retire' is because I've been retired before at the age of 25 when a church body said you can no longer be a deaconess as you have become a mother," Cook Everist said.

Throughout her tenure, issues of gender, power and social justice have played a part in how she has lived out her call. When she was the first deaconess to be ordained as a pastor, many thought it was a vertical rather than a horizontal move. "It was not to go up to higher things, but it was an important breakthrough that ministry could be based on gifts and not gender."

Cook Everist, was also the first woman to be elected to a tenure eligible position at a seminary of the American Lutheran Church, and subsequently the first woman tenured.

"Contrary to what people think about me, I don't feel like a pioneer," Cook Everist said. "I know I've broken barriers and together with many others we've been change agents within the church, within theological education. But in public school in Iowa, girls were encouraged to succeed and the church welcomed me and encouraged me. As a young adult, I started to meet barriers. I was attending an LCMS seminary: 800 men and two women. I remember I could write a sermon and receive an A, but I had to call it an inspirational address. Through my 57 years of public ministry I have

been ignored, trivialized, ridiculed and, yes, dismissed. I have many stories about that, but there also have been courageous people who have invited me to serve, such as to teach at Yale Divinity School after receiving my degree there."

As a "first" she was also then asked to serve on many task forces and committees, usually as the token woman. "I could have said no, but realized I needed to say "yes" and do the job well, often because people felt I was representing all women," Cook Everist said. "If a door was opened just a crack, I walked through and opened it wider for others to walk through, too."

In addition to her service nationally and internationally, she also made a large contribution through her work as editor of Wartburg's *The Persistent Voice*, a networking newsletter that began in 1990 that has since become a history of the women's movement, which now holds a globally-minded mission statement.

"By staying here in Dubuque, Iowa, my ministry has reached well beyond, to speaking opportunities, diaconal leadership, committee work and seminary teaching all over the world."

Her prolific writing has made an impact in the larger ecumenical church. As a writer and an editor, she has had 14 books published and written chapters in 17. She's written for the church and also for the public world, totaling over 150 articles, not counting 13 years of writing a column with her husband Burton for *The Lutheran Magazine* and her blog, "Conversations on the Church's Vocation in the Public World." She's also created educational resources and multimedia online resources. Her most recent book titles include *Transforming Leadership*, co-authored with



NORMA COOK EVERIST'S FINAL COURSE AT WARTBURG THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY, TEEM AND CERTIFICATE INTENSIVES, JUNE, 2017.

Craig Nesson (Fortress) and *Seventy Images of Grace in the Epistles that Make all the Difference in Daily Life* (Cascade).

"She's a great collaborator," said Nesson. "She knows how to attend to people in such a way that makes them work together better. She has a sense of the whole and trying to, on the fly, do asset building among the people with whom she works. She really tries to pull out the assets each person has that contribute to the whole. The number of people that have looked to her for guidance and solace and direction will never see the light of day because it's a personal relationship. With Norma each one feels like they get her undivided attention."

After all this writing, teaching and serving it might seem that Norma is concluding her service simply because she's tired, but she's done all this while being physically tired herself.

"I'm tired continuously because I live with chronic illness, Myalgic Encephalomyelitis. But the work energizes me. Wartburg has been an amazing place. I have lived with this disability for over 35 years. I have to rest

"Norma Cook Everist is and has been an inspiration to women and men of the ELCA, but especially to women discerning their call to ministry whether it was a call to Word and Service or to Word and Sacrament."
Deacon Terese TouVelle '15

about four hours a day, and therefore plan my work well ahead. I have to sit to preach and sit on a stool to teach. However, the Wartburg community is very caring. When worshipping in chapel, whoever happens to



I have no doubt that Norma will continue to answer God's call to servant leadership after her time at Wartburg is concluded, but I am grateful to have had the opportunity to learn from her, to hear her story, and experience the many ways in which she has been a pioneer and a champion of doing God's work in the church and in the world.

-Deacon Shannon Johnson, Class of 2015

be beside me when people stand up simply remains sitting with me. It's become a silent tradition, passed along through the years, the person just sits with me. As a professor with a disability, people give me respect and support. That says a lot about Wartburg. I also am so very thankful for the support of my husband, Burton, and of our three sons and their families."

Wartburg has grown through Cook Everist's work and service, but also through simply having her as a part of the community, being the exemplary woman she is.

"The way she's dealt with it (Myalgic Encephalomyelitis) has been extraordinary. It's been an occasion for others to be more aware of the needs of particular persons within the body

of Christ and to be body of Christ together with different needs that members bring to the whole," colleague Craig Nesson said.

But to picture Norma Cook Everist as a tired woman would not do justice her service or her spirit.

"I get new life when I walk with students or I see our graduates. To see the kind of ministry they are doing and how the spirit is breaking through in their ministry. I just rejoice and give thanks. It invigorates me and then I'm not tired at all. It just gives life."

"Through her wit and wisdom taught and encouraged us to be who God created us to be, to serve the world as Jesus Christ has called us to serve, and go empowered by the Holy Spirit."

-Deacon Anna Dykeman '14

NORMA COOK EVERIST WAS NAMED DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR OF CHURCH AND MINISTRY, EMERITA BY THE WARTBURG THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY BOARD OF DIRECTORS AT THEIR JUNE 2017 MEETING.