

# NEWS RELEASE



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## Merlis Belsher Heritage Centre Celebrates 70 Years

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – July 8, 2021

This week marks 70 years since the opening of the original Luther College gymnasium – now known as the Merlis Belsher Heritage Centre.

On July 7-8, 1951, there was a two-day event marking the occasion of the new gymnasium. On the evening of July 7, the Chapel Choir of Capital University in Columbus presented a concert, and the following evening they performed with the RCMP band. Close to 1500 people filled the new gym on July 8 for its dedication, a service led by Reverend Schuh, the President of the American Lutheran Church.

The message in the sermon from that day is still relevant today, 70 years later. “The new gymnasium at Luther is dedicated to the principle that higher education isn’t higher education unless it builds for character, not just education. Luther College is ... here to stay.”

Luther President Dr. Marc Jerry says, “Luther College is well-known for its many traditions that have spanned the decades. Many of them right here in this gym, the Merlis Belsher Heritage Centre,” “To call it ‘a gym’ isn’t quite accurate – it’s our theatre space, a chapel worship space and this year it was even a cafeteria to accommodate physical distancing during the pandemic. The gym remains the heart of the school.”

In 2014, the gymnasium was renamed in honor of philanthropist Merlis Belsher. Mr. Belsher graduated from Luther College in 1953 and was a lead donor in the College’s *A Time To Build* capital campaign with a gift of \$3 million. The campaign funded a major construction and renovation project that transformed the campus with the addition of new facilities and the rejuvenation of the historic buildings, including the original gymnasium.

President Jerry adds, “We look forward to the start of the 2021-2022 school year and welcoming our community back into the gym for chapel, the musical, the 70<sup>th</sup> L.I.T and much more.”

### **Did You Know?**

- The new gymnasium was designed for basketball, a sport advocated by churches looking for a healthy and relatively safe way for young people to get exercise during the winter months.
- The gym’s blueprints were based on some of the gyms Principal Rex Schneider had seen in Wisconsin.
- Luther’s new gym was exceptional in Western Canada because of its regulation-sized basketball court and wooden floor.
- The gym was built to also be an auditorium, theatre, chapel space and orchestra practice area.
- The gym was connected to the main building so that students didn’t have to walk outdoors in winter.

- The total cost of the new gymnasium was \$165,000 provided by the American Lutheran Church. Another \$15,000 was raised by alumni and the school for furnishings and equipment.
- The tradition of the Luther Invitational Tournament (L.I.T.) can be traced back to Luther College's Athletic Director John Chomay, who wanted to have a basketball tournament as a one-time promotional event to show off the new gymnasium, in the hopes it would attract more students to Luther College.

*Did You Know facts from 'The Luther College Story' history book by Richard Hordern*

*Attached:*

1. *Promotional photos of the current Merlis Belsher Heritage Centre*
2. *Excerpts of the yearbooks from 1950 and 1951*

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Luther College, established in 1913, is a two-campus educational institution in Regina, Saskatchewan that operates a historical independent high school accredited by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education and a post-secondary campus federated with the University of Regina.