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Finding Sanctuary: How Danish American Churches Helped Immigrants Navigate Life in Uncharted Waters

By Krister Strandskov and Russell Lackey

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The summer before graduating from Grand View University, I set out on a journey throughout the Midwest and California to photograph Danish American churches.¹ My purpose in visiting these churches was to discover what stories their architecture told. I wondered what tied them together as well as what made each unique. I also hoped to learn more about my own Danish American heritage by visiting the very places many of my relatives worshiped and even pastored. Here is what I learned.

I did not have to search hard to see the most visible connection with each congregation, namely: a ship hanging in the nave of the sanctuary. This makes sense because such ships have a long tradition in Denmark. In fact, the Latin word for ship is navis, the same word for nave. But there was more to these ships than simply a long tradition: these ships served as a powerful metaphor for the arduous journey these early immigrants faced.

Many hear immigration stories and think of adventure and opportunity in this new world. This was a popular narrative shared in that day. The reality was more challenging. One immigrant, Niels Poulsen Dahl, wrote a letter to his family that read, “It is not EASY to adjust to a foreign country, and NO more than back in Denmark is everyone successful here” (January 12, 1885).² Stories of pickpockets, crooked business deals, and long hours in the factory were a hard reality for these immigrants. The difficulties of assimilation and marginalization caused many to either return to Denmark or move to rural Danish American communities.

The hanging ship, which symbolized their journey in uncharted waters, also served as a powerful reminder that these immigrants were no longer on the ship that carried them from the old country. In other words, they had to assimilate. Visiting these churches, I noticed the outside of each church was different. Upon further reflection, I realized that the exterior of these churches were similar to the exteriors
of churches in their area. Thus, churches were built with brick in areas where other churches were built with brick. In regions where plaster was used, these churches used plaster. This makes sense because these immigrants needed to fit in with the surrounding culture. They were no longer Danes, they were becoming Danish Americans.

Though the exteriors were different, depending on location, the interiors were similar. These sanctuaries were built in the Lutheran style with raised pulpits, the altar front and center, and a communion rail for kneeling. One common feature in many of these sanctuaries were smaller replica sculptures of Bertel Thorvaldsen's (1789-1844) masterworks. Thorvaldsen was commissioned to produce sculptures for Vor Frue Kirke, the National Cathedral of Denmark, after it was destroyed by the British navy in 1807 and rebuilt in a neoclassical style. His Christus sculpture is his most famous work and has been replicated hundreds of times—copies stand in places as different as Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland and Temple Square in Salt Lake City, Utah. Thorvaldsen is a source of pride for Danes and it is little wonder that replicas of his Christian sculptures would be in their sanctuaries.

Adding to the homogeneity of the churches I visited was the fact many of the altars, pulpits, and communion rails were the work of the same accomplished woodworker, Jes Smidt. Smidt came to America as a young man and based much of his church woodwork on the altar and pulpit of his childhood church in Tyrstrup, Denmark. In fact, in a letter printed in Dannevirke on January 16, 1939, Smidt wrote, “As a boy I often sat and admired the altar and pulpit in my church, but did not dream at that time that in my old age I should manage to copy it.... I believe I have made altars and pulpits that bear comparison with the one in Tyrstrup.”

Jes Smidt’s altar paintings were also meaningful. The one in Luther Memorial Church in Des Moines, Iowa shows the Samaritan woman at the well asking Jesus for living water. The altar at Dannebrog, Nebraska features Jesus as the Good Shepherd caring for his sheep. The most vivid is the one in Askov, Minnesota that depicts a young David protecting the sheep by killing a wolf. Might these paintings speak directly to the situation of these immigrants? Did they hope to find living water in a foreign land? Did they need a shepherd to carry them? Were there wolves seeking to devour them? I don’t know. But what I do know is that these furnishings inspired many worshippers. In a
letter celebrating Smidt’s seventieth birthday, one person wrote: “Dear Jes Smidt, Thanks for developing and using your God-given talents in a large way to beautify our church so we can take pleasure and have our spirits lifted. Long after you and I are taken home, your beautiful work will speak its language to the coming generations.”

This mention of language causes me to highlight an often overlooked feature in these sanctuaries, namely: the Bible verses written in Danish that were either painted on or carved into the wood. These words helped to tie parishioners’ worship together with their mother or ancestral tongue. As Alfred Nielsen explains, “The services were always in the Danish language. These farmers loved to sing the old, majestic Danish hymns. Both words and music were part of the great heritage they brought with them to the New World.” Inspired by N. F. S. Grundtvig, these churches understood the power of the “living word.” As Grundtvig’s hymn, “Built on a Rock,” says:

Through all the passing year, O Lord
grant that, when church bells are ringing,
many may come to hear your Word,
who here this promise is bringing;
“I know my own, my own know me;
you, not the world, my face shall see;
My peace I leave with you. Amen.”

Reflecting on my journey, I find myself thinking about these early Danish Americans and how their churches functioned as sanctuaries. In a new land, the church was a safe place where they could get help to navigate life in a foreign country as well as a connection back to home. They could sing familiar hymns and hear sermons in their native tongue. They could gather to share struggles and to pray for God’s deliverance. In the sanctuary, they could look around and see a statue, a carving, or a ship suspended in the air and take solace knowing that they were together in the ship of faith traveling to their eternal home.

This makes me think about today’s immigrants who are seeking sanctuary in new lands. They, too, face the effects of assimilation and marginalization. They, too, desperately need communities of support.
Unfortunately, many have been turned into political fodder. I want better for these immigrants, especially in this country. I want to heed the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s words: “We may have all come on different ships, but we’re in the same boat now.”

Endnotes

1 The Arnold N. Bodtker grant I received from the Danish American Heritage Society allowed me to visit Danish American churches in the following locations: Fresno, CA; San Francisco, CA; Solvang, CA, and Yorba Linda, CA; Des Moines, IA; Dannebrog, NE; Askov, MN; Tyler, MN; Minneapolis, MN; West Denmark, WI.

2 Frederick Hale, Danes in North America (University of Washington Press, 1984), 193-94. This quote was translated into English by John Mark Nielsen.

3 One exception was the church at West Denmark, which burned down after being hit by lightning and was rebuilt in 1938. The original church had looked more American, while the second church was constructed in the old Danish country church style. It could be that the stability of the community contributed to the choice.

4 Edwin Smidt Pedersen, Jes Smidt: Immigrant Woodcarver (Self-Published, 2011), 27.

5 Ibid., 40.


Ship, Emanuel Danish Lutheran Evangelical Church, known as the Danish Church—Yorba Linda, CA
Pulpit, Emanuel Lutheran Church - Yorba Linda, CA
After Communion, Emanuel Lutheran Church – Yorba Linda, CA

Communion Chalices, Emanuel Lutheran Church – Yorba Linda, CA
Pulpit Carving, Emanuel Lutheran Church – Yorba Linda, CA
Altar, St. Francis Lutheran Church, San Francisco, CA
Thorvaldsen’s Christus, St. Francis Lutheran Church - San Francisco, CA
Thorvaldsen’s Baptismal Font, St. Francis Lutheran Church, San Francisco, CA
Altar Painting, St. Francis Lutheran Church – San Francisco, CA
Sanctuary, St. Francis Lutheran Church – San Francisco, CA

Ship, Bethania Lutheran Church – Solvang, CA
Ship, Bethania Lutheran Church – Solvang, CA
Pulpit Carving, Bethania Lutheran Church – Solvang, CA
Pulpit, Bethania Lutheran Church – Solvang, CA
Church Exterior, Bethania Lutheran Church – Solvang, CA
Thorvaldsen’s *Christus*, St. Peder’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, MN
Pulpit Carving, Bethlehem Lutheran Church – Askov, MN
Altar, Bethlehem Lutheran Church – Askov, MN
Pulpit, Bethlehem Lutheran Church – Askov, MN
Organ Stops, Bethlehem Lutheran Church – Askov, MN

Ship, West Denmark Lutheran Church – Luck, WI
Church Exterior, West Denmark Lutheran Church – Luck, WI
Pulpit Carving, Luther Memorial Church - Des Moines, IA
Pulpit, Luther Memorial Church - Des Moines, IA
Hvø som drikker af det Vønd, som jeg vil give ham, skal til evig Tid ikke tørste.
Communion Chalices, Luther Memorial Church – Des Moines, IA
Pews, Luther Memorial Church – Des Moines, IA
Corner Stone, Luther Memorial Church – Des Moines, IA