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A Little About My Father, Peter D. Thomsen

by Kathy Thomsen

Peter D. Thomsen (1922 - 2015) was one of eighty-two students at Grand View College (GVC) in 1940. The students came from Danish immigrant communities all over the United States, including Chicago, Illinois; Seattle, Washington; Los Angeles, California; Kimballton, Iowa; Tyler, and Askov, Minnesota; Racine, Wisconsin; and in my father's case, Marinette, Michigan and Menominee, Wisconsin. He was a first generation American; his parents had immigrated to the United States from Langeland, Denmark shortly before he was born. His experiences in Danish Lutheran church communities around the country reflect many of the changes that came about as Danish Americans integrated into their local communities and tried to balance the competing demands of fidelity to their cultural heritage and fidelity to the Christian message of outreach and inclusion.

Nearly everyone in the student body and all but one faculty member were fluent in both Danish and English. The Danish folk school spirit was GVC's hallmark. This meant, among other things, that the president of GVC and his family lived with the students at the college. N. F. S. Grundtvig's philosophy was profoundly influential at GVC among both faculty and students. After evening devotions, which my father said never lasted more than ten minutes, the students would gather around the piano to sing from the old red song book containing 636 songs in Danish and another 80 in English. The students from Askov were apparently the stars, as they knew almost every song in the book. It was a big event when the first edition of the *World of Song* came out in December 1941. (This was the three-ring binder, a dark blue book with ten separate little books for different types of songs.) In 1958 the new green hardcover second edition *World of Song* came out, with some new translations of songs by S. D. Rodholm. The GVC sing-alongs were where S. D. tried out many of his translations to ensure they were indeed singable.

My father was a Grand View Seminary student from 1942-45, during which time his principal teachers were S. D. Rodholm, Johannes Knudsen, and Ernest Nielsen. S. D. was not only a teacher but a friend to both my parents. He officiated at their wedding at Luther Memorial

Church in January of 1945. My mother, Kirstine Thomsen (née Toft), was from Tyler, Minnesota. My father was ordained on September 8, 1946, and installed the same day as pastor of Our Savior's Danish Lutheran Church in Omaha, Nebraska. While English was the principal language of the services, he also held two Danish-language services each month. My mother led a Danish folk dance group that met at the church and gave exhibitions around the city.

During his pastoral career, my father shepherded several churches through the transition from being Danish-focused to becoming more ethnically and linguistically inclusive. In 1951 my father accepted a call to First Lutheran Church of Montcalm County, Michigan (near Greenville), one congregation consisting of five parishes. These five, geographically scattered Danish churches kept my father extremely busy. Several times throughout his ministry my father was called to serve a Danish congregation about to experience a transition. Such was the case in Greenville, Michigan. My father brought difficult questions to the church council: What is our purpose? Whom are we really here to serve? How are we going to reach prospective new members if we simply carry on in our comfortable, familiar ways? He pointed out that in four of the five churches, services were held two Sundays a month, and the time schedule kept rotating. How could this setup possibly be inviting to new people? Eventually a plan was made and approved to re-configure these congregations, and my father stayed for another three years in Greenville. He helped see these changes through before moving to Lester, Pennsylvania to attend graduate school. We lived in Lester, Pennsylvania in 1957-58 in an old commercial bakery while my father attended Mt. Airy Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia. He served St. John's Lutheran Church part-time for this year.

In 1958 he received a call from Trinity Lutheran in Chicago, Illinois, a Danish church on the northwest side of Chicago, which was also, as it turned out, on the brink of change. Having recently voted (before my father arrived) to become a neighborhood church, welcoming even those who weren't Danish, my father saw his role as helping Trinity's congregation put flesh on the bone of its new purpose statement. He enrolled in a seminar for pastors serving inner city churches. They met at Hull House, the settlement house made famous by Jane Addams. Prompted by questions raised in this seminar, my father convinced the church council to do a thorough neighborhood demographic study. Knowing, now in great detail, who their neighbors were,

Trinity began reaching out to those neighbors. They printed brochures and distributed them in the neighborhood. They started a morning coffee klatch, attended by a few single mothers, among others. A few men started a boy scout troop. They had a truly open door policy with regard to their neighbors.

All this activity took my father's time and energy, and he began hearing complaints about ignoring the long-time Danish members who lived far away from the church. An energetic, young parish worker, Joanne Chadwick, was hired. The church hosted weekend camps, Halloween parties, and joined several other Chicago churches in an Easter sunrise service. Jo Chadwick primarily served the new, neighborhood population while my father held things together administratively and tended primarily to the older Danes. The neighborhood began to change rapidly as many Spanish speaking people moved in. My father was energized and didn't feel his work at Trinity was finished, but he received a call from St. Peder's in Minneapolis, which he ultimately decided to accept.

In 1963 we moved to Minneapolis, where my father began serving St. Peder's Evangelical Lutheran Church, a Danish church previously served by Rev. Ottar Jorgensen. St. Peder's had recently built a new church in a growing neighborhood. Many members were of Danish heritage, but becoming a neighborhood church was an important part of its mission. My father was actively involved in social justice during these years. Supported by the members of St. Peder's, he attended the March on Washington in 1963 and heard Martin Luther King, Jr. deliver his "I Have a Dream" speech. These were the years of the civil rights movement and Viet Nam War, difficult times for the country, and for St. Peder's.

After nine years in Minneapolis my parents moved to Detroit, where my father began serving another congregation about to experience a major transition. St. Peter's Danish Lutheran Church of Detroit, Michigan had called its first non-Danish pastor prior to my father's arrival. That pastor had suggested the word "Danish" be removed from the name. In what was apparently a very spirited congregational meeting, the name change was not approved, and the pastor left shortly thereafter. In Detroit my father found yet another congregation needing to do some soul searching about its mission and make some serious decisions about its future. Danish members drove into the city from far away suburbs every Sunday. After the service an

elaborate Danish open-face sandwich lunch was served, after which everyone went back to the suburbs. The neighbors in the area had nothing to do with the church. The situation could not be solved easily. My father laid out what he saw the choices were, and did his best to help the congregation decide what it wanted to do.

In 1979 he accepted a call to the Danish church in Withee, Wisconsin, which was to be his last call before retirement. Just after arriving in Withee, my parents learned the church in Detroit had decided to merge with another congregation, one of the choices my father had explored with them. In Withee my parents were again in a rural setting, in what had once been a Danish community. They lived there for about six years, after which my father retired from the ministry.

These biographical details do not shed much light on the quality of life my parents led, or on the genuine human relationships they built throughout their lives. It is necessary to note one fact: every church that called my father was fortunate also to get my mother, who immigrated to the United States with her family from the island of Mors in Jutland in 1929. Both my parents were conversant in the Danish language, comfortable with Danish culture, and worked equally hard in complementary ways serving many different congregations.

My parents exhibited complete congruity between faith and life, between who they were, what they believed, and what they said and did. They never called attention to themselves. Grundtvigian ideas were integral to their way of living, but I don't remember them talking much about those ideas. The congregations they served, my brother, Peter, and I, and our respective families couldn't have been luckier than to have our lives touched and shaped by these two remarkable people.