



2012

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P. Gøtke

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Recommended Citation

Gøtke, P. (2012) "The Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," *The Bridge*: Vol. 35 : No. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge/vol35/iss1/10>

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The Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

by

P. Gøtke

(Translated by Lise Kildegaard)

I do not propose to write here a complete history of the Danish Church as it was established in America—the full story of the Danish Church in America has yet to arrive at its conclusion. Instead, I offer here a brief overview of the work of the church among the immigrants to the United States, drawing the attention of the readers of this book to particular points.

For almost fifty years, the Church has been at work among the Danish-Lutheran men and women. The men who began these efforts could hardly have predicted everything that has been accomplished in this time span. They acted because they feared or they believed the Danish immigrants were becoming so Americanized that the Danish Church life would be replaced with English. Furthermore, the Danish Church had been swept up by national feeling, and these men were driven by love of their homeland. They didn't just theorize about (Rasmus) Rask's words; they put them into practice: "A man owes everything he can accomplish to his fatherland, not the least when he is under a new sky." So the work was taken up: we preached the old (although forever young) gospel of God's birth among men; we assembled the children of Danish parents into Danish schools under the shelter of the congregation; we gathered around the memories from home, as Danish men and women who understood that our true Fatherland is unknown on earth. We gathered around everything we received from our fathers, our heritage and legacy. That's what I know about our Society, in whose service I have spent 25 years.

Some might ask: have we achieved everything we set out to do? And I will answer: we can never actually accomplish everything we can think of, because we continue to set new goals for ourselves. But certainly much more has been accomplished than most people think—much more than even we ourselves can readily imagine or know. I offer this declaration: from sea to sea, from the Atlantic to

the Pacific oceans, from Montana to Texas, Danish Lutheran congregations can be found with churches and parsonages, all built and paid for by working folks, in towns and out in the country. Naturally, in terms of economics, everything has improved in the last thirty years. The working people have prospered—in America, people get paid—and this has also benefited the Church. Many old churches have been replaced with new and improved facilities, and small churches in town and country have been replaced by bigger and better ones. No other Danish society in America owns more property than the church folk. This clearly shows the significance of the work of the church, which has advanced through the sacrifice of the people. These sacrifices are always a measure of the people's gratitude. Not only the buildings, but the salaries of the ministers and the teachers, and the maintenance of the property—all these temporal benefits are provided, not by the Church, but by the people, because of their love for the mission.

Around 1870, confident men of faith began a unified and comprehensive plan of work among the Danish countrymen. Of these men, A. Dan in Chicago and R. Andersen in New York, are still alive and still working, while A.S. Nielsen recently passed away in Withee, Wis. The goal of these men was to unify the people. If the many different viewpoints on many matters were overlooked, they believed, the people might come to understand that what unified them was more important than what divided them. And, seeing the conditions these immigrants were facing, as a little people in a large and foreign land, it seemed from the Church's perspective that they, ideally, should unify and not divide. There was however a split: those men who could only feel at home among the pure Inner Mission congregations stepped out and formed their own society.

As the oldest Danish Church organization in America, the Danish Church today stands with welcome and greeting for everyone who feels at home there. Many find a church home, and they know it is good to be there. In our day, it's all about the numbers. "How big is the child?" is the question, and not just in the nursery; no, one hears that question everywhere. If anyone asks me, I will say what I know: we must count in thousands the men and women whom the Danish Church has met in life's gladness and sorrow. How did it happen that the Danish immigrants in America have remained faithful to

their homeland and their home church, as indeed so many have? The answer to that riddle certainly lies in the fact that the Church has shared in these people's happiness and sorrow and has given them comfort in life and death.

The foundation stone to the Danish Church in America was laid the 9th of September 1872 in Neenah, Wisconsin, where the Church Mission Society was established. Two years later, in a meeting in Racine, the name was changed to The Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which in daily speech was shortened to The Danish Church.

I will not speak here of the Danish Church's development year by year, but I shall share some numbers that show the growth and progress in that elapsed time. The Danish Church includes 94 congregations (not counting the single congregations, see "Tabulated Overview") and 15 mission congregations which are served by 62 ministers. The number of church buildings is 76, and their combined value approaches \$259,000. At this time, the organization includes 54 parsonages; the value of these approaches \$159,000, and furthermore, there are 27 school buildings and assembly halls for a combined value of \$41,400.

Right from the start, The Danish Church has understood the importance of schools for children. These schools help the next generation develop both a Christian identity and a national/folk consciousness.

Children's schools were started in the year immediately after the Society's formation. Today there are 3 Danish-American full time schools, in West Denmark, Wisconsin, Danebod, Minnesota, and Askov, Minn, 53 vacation schools, 40 Saturday schools and 54 Sunday schools. Altogether, these schools enroll 4935 children. The desire of young adults for education and development is met by the Society's Folk Schools in Nysted, Neb., Danebod, Tyler Minn., and Solvang, Calif. Education at these Folk Schools is patterned after the Folk Schools in Denmark, and the schools are headed by men who have a deep understanding and a profound love of learning.

A special position is occupied by Grand View College in Des Moines, the capital of Iowa, which was founded in 1895. With the financial support of Danish Church members from all parts of America, it has grown year by year. Grand View College offers a

general education, and it also offers training for men who wish to become ministers in The Danish Church in America. Within the limits that the American conditions impose, this latter group receives a theological education, which resembles what ministers in the Church of Denmark receive. The general education is offered in both the Danish and the English languages. The school educates teachers (men and women) for Danish elementary schools, and one of their programs prepares students to work in the public schools, after an entrance exam. Another program is particularly designed for those who wish to go into the business world. Gymnastics, handicrafts, painting, and the like are also included in the curriculum. The 4 schools named here are attended each year by about 300 students.

The Danish Church maintains 3 children's homes: one in Chicago, one in Tyler, Minnesota, and one in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. The children's home in Chicago was established by the now deceased Pastor A. S. Nielsen in 1884. The home now holds 38 children. The value of the building and its furnishings is about \$25,000. The orphanage in Perth Amboy was established in 1908 at the cost of about \$5000. It was originally designed to hold 12 children, but now it houses 15. In Tyler, the orphanage was opened in 1909. There are 22 children in the home, which is worth about \$8000. These three children's homes are maintained by donations from the Society's congregations.

The Danish Church is considering building an old people's home in the near future. The final decision has not yet been made, but it will be determined by the time this article is read.

The Danish Church publishes "Kirkelig Samler" ("Church Collection"), a weekly paper dedicated to Christian enlightenment and building upon the ground of faith. It was begun in 1872 and is the oldest Danish Lutheran Church newspaper in America. The current editor is Pastor H. C. Strandskov, Askov Minn.

The Danish Church has directly participated in founding communities in Tyler, Minn, and Diamond Lake, Minn. indirectly, the Society has promoted and helped to grow most of the communities where The Danish Church has churches and ministers. The Danish Church's work extends, as one can see, into many areas. However all are branches from the same common stem, and all

reach toward the same goal.

The Church Society is managed by an administration that consists of Chairman, Reverend K. C. Bodholt, Racine Wis; Secretary Reverend A. Faber, Newell, Ia; Treasurer Manufacturer-Businessman J. S. Faaborg, Clinton Ia; and two members, M. Holst and Chr. Hermansen. These men meet as necessary for administrative business. Besides that, there is a yearly meeting for the congregations' ministers and delegates, sort of a church parliament. At this yearly meeting, final decisions are reached in accordance with the Society's constitution, whose key provisions cannot be overruled. This yearly meeting is held in different places, but most often in the Midwest. It is attended by large numbers—last year about 300 in Des Moines, Iowa. Such a meeting lasts a week.

Just one Sunday in a Danish Church in America, and every conscious churchgoer will forget there are still strangers out in the streets and highways. Everything is familiar and home-like, especially out in the country or in the little towns. The church bells ring, and God's servants come forth, just as they do in Denmark, as circumstances allow. Many times, I have heard newly arrived Danes say after a service: "I thought I was home again." Anyone who has ever been homeless, in one way or another, knows what that means. The success of the children's schools and the Sunday Schools is best shown by the fact that, year after year, children of different generations are confirmed in Danish. I am convinced that, as long as love survives for Father's and Mother's homeland or country, the land where grandparents came from, the Danish language will live. And as long as people can receive blessings from Danish ministers, the Danish Church will continue its work.

Soon the bells in the steeple of my church here in Clinton, Iowa will ring the sun down. Here N. F. S. Grundtvig's son, F. L. Grundtvig, worked for 17 years. The bells remind the neighboring farmers that the working day is over, and—God willing—a new day will dawn tomorrow. The day will come, I hope, when we are all released from our labors. All of us who work in the Danish Church will join those who have already been called home. The bells will ring out over our dust, and all exile will be ended.

God protect and keep the Danish people, at home and abroad, and God bless the Danish Church among the people.