

A Pioneer in Northwest America 1841-1858
The Memoirs of Gustaf Unonius

VOLUME TWO

Chapter II

RELIGIOUS AND ECCLESIASTICAL CONDITIONS—CALL TO THE
MINISTRY—THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA—
MOTIVES FOR ENTERING THE PROTESTANT EPISCOPAL
CHURCH—DISAGREEMENTS ON CHURCH MATTERS

THE growth of the settlement wrought a change in my vocation which I could hardly have anticipated when I emigrated to America. The home devotions which we had observed from the very beginning were continued, and when the settlers who came after us learned of these they began to gather in our cottage, generally on Sunday afternoons, when either our friend Petterson or myself would read a sermon to them. After a while these services were held now in one place and now in another, and by tacit understanding it fell to my lot to officiate as far as I, a layman, was able. Mr. Breck¹ and the other missionaries at Nashotah assisted us when requested by performing purely clerical functions, on which occasions I generally also had to serve as interpreter.

In spite of all this, I did not have the faintest notion that I was to become a minister. Finally, however, several of the Swedish and Norwegian settlers suggested it. They foresaw that at least the older country people would never learn enough of the language of the land to be truly edified by a service conducted in English, and though they appreciated and acknowledged with gratitude the ministerial services rendered them by the missionaries they naturally preferred to have services conducted in a language they all understood. In addition, it was necessary not to leave the young people without regular religious training.

It was not easy for me to come to a decision. Did I feel a genuine inward call to enter an office to whose sacred duties and responsibilities I had up to that time given no thought? With my changeable, mercurial, and perhaps too youthful spirit, was I truly fitted for the serious and responsible life of a clergyman? To be sure, I had known many who had chosen the ministry as one might choose any other trade or profession—mainly with a view to making a living and achieving financial security—and had such a proposal been made to me earlier in life it is very likely that such

¹ James Lloyd Breck (1818-76), American Episcopal clergyman and missionary. See Vol. I, Chapter 16, note 8.

considerations might have determined my own course of action. Even now I could not entirely ignore them. Many worries arose out of my life as a farmer; but I might surely consider the worst to be over and done with, since I might hope that the land, of which I was getting more and more under cultivation, would thereafter supply our needs, while my prospective income as a minister must at best be expected to be small and uncertain. Most of the Scandinavian settlers—I might almost say all of them—were poor and had to battle the hardships and privations of the lean early years; hence they would for some time be virtually unable to contribute anything to the support of a minister. Even if the undertaking was supported by some missionary society, the aid would in any case be very inconsiderable and quite inadequate for the support of a family. To be both farmer and minister was out of the question: either the farm or the flock would suffer by such divided interests.

But leaving all these things aside, there were other and far more serious and important considerations than those of economy that made it necessary to give the matter serious thought. The office of minister being, like everything pertaining to ecclesiastical matters, entirely separated from the state, free and independent of the laws and institutions of the country, appeared here in an entirely different light. Here I noted that the clergyman was a clergyman and nothing else; the ministerial calling was what its name suggested and not a wheel in the political organization of the state. I had also seen that ministers in this country must give themselves wholly to their calling. They must forsake home and all else for the sake of the Lord and His gospel, without questioning what their reward might be. Far be it from me to insinuate that only in America do we find a clergy that thus conceives their calling. I have no desire to cast any reflection on the clergymen of my homeland. But without making any comparison, it is my belief that the social position of the minister in America, his field of labor, and the way in which he carries on his work are of such a nature that the responsibility and importance of his work and the perfect self-sacrifice it demands became more alive to me and caused me to weigh its duties more seriously, and more searchingly ask my heart the question, Who is able to do this work? This was a problem which only I could solve.

On the other hand I thought of the immigrants who had established settlements, not only around Pine Lake but in other places, which were no doubt destined to continue to grow. Separated from all the religious controls and influences which had from their childhood been a means of awakening and maintaining life in God and fellowship with their Savior, they were here like sheep lost in the wilderness without a shepherd. Their very emigration to America is in itself evidence of the fact that love of the things of this world had got the upper hand in their lives. As a rule, their emigration is exclusively motivated by hope for material gain, and so if the settlers living

in the wilderness are left to themselves to work entirely for the things that perish, without a reviving force, there is danger that the good seed that was once sown in the field of their hearts might be completely choked and become like the seed that fell among the thorns. I already saw evidence that several of the Scandinavian immigrants in being released from the bonds of the state church considered themselves released not only from the teachings in which they had been reared but also from religion itself. As they cut off their membership in the church it seemed that every connection as member of the Church of God into which they had been received through baptism had also been cut off. That was especially the case with many of those who were half-educated or a trifle better than that.

Whatever may be said about the state church as an institution and about its measures of compulsion, it perhaps creates a spirit of unbelief greater than would otherwise be the case, but it also curbs unbelief to some degree. Where there is a state church godlessness hides itself under a cloak of culture, and shows, if nothing more, at least certain respect for an outward order; where greater freedom prevails (as in America), some consider it a prerogative and almost a duty to appear indifferent. This is not generally true of real Americans, but rather of those immigrants who have been reared and trained under the guidance of an established church. Consider, for instance, that in Chicago, among thirty-five thousand Germans, most of them Protestants, according to a statement by one of their own ministers, only five thousand claim membership in any religious denomination. The greater part of the other six sevenths are professedly anti-Christian, and as such are formed into regularly organized bodies. On Sundays, instead of religious services, they have public gatherings at which they preach against Him who bought them with His blood, and at which they appear in an openly sacrilegious manner as enemies of the cross of Christ. At one of those Sunday gatherings held in a large hall controlled by the city authorities which had been opened for their use, they almost came to real blows at times because two speakers, both of them anti-Christian, began to dispute with each other about whether there was a God or not. That question divided the congregation into two parties, each under its own leader, who attacked each other publicly. In justice to the city authorities it should be said that because of such scenes the Germans were denied further use of the hall.

Thus far there was reason to hope that the Scandinavian settlers at Pine Lake and elsewhere would never go to such extremes, but the infection was in the body and there was no telling how far it would spread. Further, there were the heresies of the sectarians who would certainly not be long in beginning to sow their tares, in one form or another, among the many to whom faith and conviction were only old, well-worn habits—reeds that were easily swayed by any doctrinal wind.

That any religious leaders would ever come here from Sweden seemed extremely doubtful. Had I believed that they would, it is very likely that my decision would have been different. But as I earnestly weighed all these circumstances and examined my own heart, did I have the right to reject the proposal that had been made to me? There arose within me a question whether this might not be the will of a higher power to which, in spite of all my unworthiness, I ought to make answer, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth."

I frankly informed the immigrants in the settlement of my views. If I was to be their minister it would be only on condition that the office be delivered to me in a proper way, as was the custom in the church of our homeland, and that I be ordained by a bishop in the Episcopal church; I proposed that we join that church as the most closely related to all the religious groups represented among us. By such an affiliation we might hope to order our religious affairs in the most satisfactory way.

All the Norwegians agreed, but some of the Swedes opposed it for a reason that was on the face of it most worthy of respect: they did not wish to forsake the church to which they had belonged and the confession they had accepted. The rest of us believed, however, that in joining the Episcopal church we were not guilty of lapsing from either the church or the confession. We believed instead that a greater or rather a real backsliding would thereby be averted. Future developments also proved that most of those who said they could not agree with the decision of the others owing to their attachment to the Lutheran doctrine—an attachment which I have every reason to believe was pretended rather than real—attached themselves to denominations completely foreign to our confession, or lapsed into complete spiritual indifference. Even after Swedish ministers had come to America, many of these Swedes failed to have their children baptized, and themselves became total strangers to the table of the Lord. Membership in the Episcopal church had at least this in its favor: most of those who did not place themselves outside all church connections afterwards, when they were supplied with ministers from Sweden, joined the Lutheran churches except in cases where, because of convictions based on serious deliberation, they preferred to maintain their membership in the Episcopal church. In spite of the fact that the services now as before were carried on mainly in accordance with the ritual of the Swedish church, they were no longer attended by those who were unable to agree to affiliation with the Episcopal church. Discord and disunion arose in our small community, a feeling that also made itself felt in matters of lesser importance. There was a time when I was doubtful as to what course I ought to pursue.

Eventually, however, a Scandinavian church was organized at Pine Lake and, after some time, another, consisting only of Norwegians, named

St. Olaf's Church, at Ashipun River, a few miles from the place where Mr. Gasmann had built his sawmill and where most of the Norwegians who had arrived that summer had made their homes. Both of these churches applied in writing to the Bishop of Wisconsin, asking to be admitted into the Protestant Episcopal church and recognizing his jurisdiction. At the same time they requested that when they had thus been admitted they might use the ritual and prayers that the church in their country had adopted and prescribed. To these requests, after I had translated them into English and submitted them to the church authorities, no objection was offered. The Protestant Episcopal church regarded us as members of a sister church to whom it was duty-bound to extend its care and nurture, but without seeking to force or persuade us to enter into a union. The step was entirely voluntary on our part. At our request, the missionaries which Providence had placed in our neighborhood had up to that time assisted us at ministerial functions, help which they did not feel that they ought to refuse us; but they had gone no further until we ourselves approached them and the church body with which they were connected.

The churches also requested that I might receive training at the theological seminary which had been founded at Nashotah, where several students had already been enrolled; and that, after I had taken the prescribed course, I might be ordained by the bishop as their minister. In the meantime I was to conduct services every Sunday at the settlements of Pine Lake and Ashipun, and in addition give the children some instruction in the catechism. Praying for the Lord's grace and blessing on the new calling which had so wondrously been opened to me, I went, though not without fear and trembling, to enter upon it.

Carl² and I agreed that we should keep the farm we had begun to cultivate, hoping that it might continue to be the common home for both of us, though I would not be able to give much time to its care. Since we had reason to suspect that the canal land would soon revert to the government and thus have to be paid for, for which we were still lacking the means, Carl decided, in order to earn at least a part of the money required for that purpose, to go to New Orleans where he had heard that work was easy to get and better paid than elsewhere. Björkander³ accompanied him. After we had

² Carl Gustaf Groth (1819-79). See Vol. I, Chapter I, note 20.

³ Sven Gabriel Björkander (1819-79), Born in Ekby, Västergötland, he had enrolled at the University of Lund in 1841. Presumably he departed for America soon thereafter. In 1850 he was living in Koshkonong, Wisconsin, and owned real estate valued at \$1,000. For further information about him see Angie Kumlien Main, "Thure Kumlien, Koshkonong Naturalist" in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, September and December, 1943, and March, 1944, pp. 26, 28, 204, and 325. Mrs. Main errs in saying that Björkander arrived aboard the *Swea*

harvested our crops and sowed a few acres to wheat they went away; a few months later, at the beginning of the new year, I left my wife and child alone with Christine⁴ in our small cottage, and became, though rather advanced in age, once again a student.

August 16, 1843. He is not listed on that vessel's manifest. (Carl Sjöström, *Vestgöta nation i Lund 1683-1910* [Lund, 1911], p. 176; *New York Port Passenger Manifests*).

⁴ Christina Henrikdotter Södergren, born in Livonia, ca. 1810 (Söderby Carl's Parish Records, *Uppsala Landsarkiv*). See Vol. I, Chapter I, pp. 12-13.