

“Ecclesia Plantanda”

Emigrant Preacher Lars-Paul Esbjörn and The Beginnings of the Augustana Synod.

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“The greatest things come out of hidden places. Life is born in darkness. Here, it was a decision, taken from within the depths of a human soul, then carried out. It was a man, who saw God’s calling and followed it. It was no more or less. Then, something great began” Anna Forsell Söderblom, *En Amerikabok, Stockholm 1925*

INTRODUCTION

Lars-Paul Esbjörn...unpaid mill chaplain and friend of temperance in Oslättfors, Sweden, unpromoted devotionalist preacher and music teacher in Hille, and clergyman of the Swedish Lutheran State Church, out of grace with his archbishop because of his plans to emigrate. Despite all this, Lars Paul Esbjörn became a key figure in the transplanting of Swedish Lutheranism to North America, and partner in the founding of Sweden’s most remarkable creation abroad, the Augustana Synod.

He was born at Delsbo in Hälsingland, Sweden on 16 October 1808, and was orphaned at the age of seven. He was taken in by a 59-year-old domestic, Christina Enman, who had been a neighbor of his parents in Ede. She saw to his education, first in Hudiksvall, then at the liberal Gävle Gymnasium, and finally in Uppsala, where he was ordained in 1832. While still an Uppsala student, he became a teacher at Oslättfors, then accepted a call in 1832 to Östervåla in nearby Uppland. He soon returned to Oslättfors Mill in 1835 as chaplain and teacher at the new Hille elementary school

During his time in Hille, he was also the school’s and congregation’s music teacher, and became deeply interested in four part music. In 1843 he was working with dean Johan Dillner at Östervåla on a new edition of Syrén’s “Christeliga sångbok,” for the single-stringed psalmodikon. It was published in 1849, as Esbjörn and his party of 140 others left Gävle for America. His musical experience was the beginning of a rich musical tradition within the Augustana Synod and its schools.

Esbjörn’s first acquaintance with America probably came through his participation in the early Swedish temperance movement, brought largely from England and the United States. He founded temperance organizations in Hille and Oslättfors in 1838. This brought him into approving contact with temperance preachers like the Methodist George Scott from England, and Presbyterian Robert Baird from the United States. In August of 1840 Esbjörn was secretary to a major temperance meeting in Hudiksvall, where some 5,000 gathered to hear temperance preached by people like Scott and Baird. Baird doubtless preached far more than temperance in his presentations both during and after the gathering, including American religious freedom. Just three years later, Esbjörn wrote to his devotionalist friend and publisher P.A. Huldberg, saying “...

I take this opportunity to offer you the enclosed beautiful work, given me by Pastor Baird in 1840, which I did not have time to translate, but allowed a friend to do, and we now offer it for sale, ...The work is the best of its kind, and can serve to open the eyes of Swedish youth concerning the huge difference between the "freedom" of our great patriots, and that of the Americans...." Temperance activities in Gävleborg Province reached new heights between 1841 and 1843, just before perfectionist sect founder Erik Jansson began his preaching in the region.

Oslättfors mill was sold in 1844, after which Esbjörn experienced several setbacks. New owner, L.P. Löthman of Gävle was not a friend of temperance, and refused to pay Esbjörn's salary. Esbjörn took him to court successfully. He also came into conflict with the Hille Mission Society, which he himself had founded. He then sought new positions in the parishes of Loos, Vaxholm, Mo and Regnsjö between 1846 and 1848, but was unsuccessful because of opposition, motivated in part by his support of temperance and the pietistic "lay readers" movement.

The "great migration" began from Gävle in 1846, with the perfectionistic Erik Janssonist's flight from persecution. By 1847 the first "Amerika letters" from or about the Erik Janssonists began reaching Sweden, published in newspapers across eastern and northern Sweden. They brought great interest, and helped create the "dream of America" in the thousands that were soon to emigrate. America seemed to offer both economic opportunity and religious freedom, especially for the hungry or oppressed.

Esbjörn found opportunity for a new mission field in the flight of the Erik Janssonists, and one without the strict limitations of the State Church. On 30 November 1848 he wrote to the Swedish Mission Society about the need of emigrants to hear "The word of Jesus Christ," and especially those who had not found religious freedom in Sweden. The Society gave its support in a letter dated 13 April 1849. They offered 300 Riksdalers, equal to Esbjörn's entire annual wage as a mill chaplain..

But his emigration plans also required the permission of his Archbishop. C. Fr. af Wingård. The archbishop had apparently already heard of Esbjörn's plans, and suspected he was involved in emigrant recruitment. His first letter of 8 March 1849 was very negative. His second of 26 March 1849 was somewhat milder, but expressed the archbishop's concerns about emigration, and directly forbade Esbjörn from recruiting outside his own family. These letters show not only the archbishop's great personal doubts, but also express the church's fear of movements like the pietistic "readers" and sects like the Erik Janssonists. Both letters are found in Gunnar Westin's *Emigranterna och kyrkan*, Stockholm 1932.

Esbjörn's journey to America began shortly after midsummer 1849. His party of some 140 experienced even greater tragedies than those of which Archbishop af Wingård had warned. His first twin son died even before leaving Swedish waters. Epidemic sickness struck not only the 47 emigrants from Hille, but large numbers of the other 100 who were with Esbjörn aboard the bark Cobden. The party arrived in New York harbor on 23 September 1849, after 9 weeks at sea. Cholera and other illness followed them

inland. Esbjörn's second infant twin son died en route, and Esbjörn himself became ill, remaining in Chicago for two weeks' recovery, while the others in his party followed a former Erik Janssonist and immigrant agent, Capt. Pehr Wilhelm Wirström to the pioneer settlement of Andover, Illinois, where they were welcomed by earlier Swedish immigrants, like the Methodist preacher Jonas Hedström from Victoria, IL

After arriving Andover, Esbjörn wrote home in May 1850 to his friend and fellow temperance preacher Peter Wieselgren about his first impressions of the New Land . Hardly a year earlier, on 10 July 1849, Wieselgren had comforted and supported Esbjörn as his first twin son was buried outside Hälsingborg, Sweden.¹

¹ Esbjörn's letter to Peter Wieselgren, (quoted in Gunnar Westins *Emigranterna och kyrkan. Brev från och till svenskar i Amerika 1849-1852*, pp. 42-5) was dated North America, Andover, Henry County, Illinois (N. Lat. 41 degrees 15 minutes, W. Long. 73 degrees 30 minutes, 23 May 1850. Dear Brother! Grace, peace and blessing! I have, for a long time, often planned to write you, but there were always many obstacles, and time was short. I hope, however, that you have seen something from me in the *Stockholms Missionstidning* and also a letter to all my friends in *Norrlands Posten* published in Gefle. From that, you should be pleased to find that I was hurried in New York, had trouble en route, sickness in Chicago and many duties but little strength, after my arrival here. Despite this, my wife and I have often thought of you and the heartfelt love we received from You and Your friends, and wished we could once again meet you, and with joy see your face and shake your hand. Since this cannot now happen, I wish to at least send a few lines to express our heartfelt and thankful thoughts of you.

I am working here with preaching and pastoral care for the Swedes in Andover, Galesbourg (sic) (25 miles from here) and Rock Island (22 miles) on the Mississippi, and the Lord is helping me, and acts through His Word, to the revival and conversion of many. I have accepted the practice among the best religious faiths here of not accepting any into the congregation without so much change of heart that he *recognizes his misdeeds*, and has a living hunger for the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and thus my congregation here in Andover has only 28 persons, but more attend services. In Galesbourg (sic) I have not yet started any congregation, though I preach there every 14th day, because most of the Swedes there have been Janssonists, and their spiritual state is not as lamentable as when they were with Jansson. While they have left him, they are still filled with his false doctrine of sinless perfection. Thus, they find it more agreeable among the *Episcopal* Methodists, whose champion here in this area, J.J. Hedström, does everything to get them into his fellowship and cajole their spiritual vanity. He often preaches, as Jansson, that the *root of sin* must be torn out in this life, so that one becomes free of all sin, if one is to be blessed. Sins of weakness, he believes, cannot be found among the faithful. He is an entirely different man than Scott (who was a *Wesleyan* Methodist) and I cannot see in him much more than a worldly eagerness to get peoples' names on paper. His brother in New York seems to have more Christian seriousness in him, while somewhat afflicted perhaps by sectarian one-sidedness. Their brother, baker Hedström in Lyckeby (near Carlskrona, I believe) wishes to learn of his brothers' spiritual condition. Please do me the service of greeting and telling what I have done.

Here, there is much noise about slavery, which the southern states are very hot about preserving and expanding, and the Northern eager to oppose. The worst is, especially that *Christian* churches trade in this, and permit slave owners and slave traders to be members of their congregations, especially the Episcopal Methodists and Old School Presbyterians. Thus, many large numbers, congregations and Synods separated from them and organized their own synods, since they do not wish to be in Christian fellowship with people who sanction the holding of slaves as being permitted for a Christian. The sin of slavery here is, like drunkenness has been, a national sin, which has taken frightful root, and it requires great powers of Christian self-denial to uproot them. Many Christians express a hearty desire to enlighten their neighbors, but it goes slowly. I wish that Sweden would add a little fuel to this fire of love, and give the United States some return for (Rev. Robert) Baird's book. Thus I ask you, as an historian, to send me some historic proof that Slavery in Sweden disappeared immediately with Christianity, so that as it arrived, slavery left. I have spoken with one of the heroes of anti-slavery here about you, as the right man to give us such practical proof of slavery and Christianity being pure opposites, and he has asked me to request of you some little

His letter shows clearly that Esbjörn's first months in Illinois had been troublesome. His little congregation in Andover had grown from only 10 to 28 "born-again" souls, who lived under primitive conditions. Esbjörn's activities in Galesburg were made difficult by the many former Erik Janssonist perfectionists living there, along with like-minded perfectionistic Methodists. The letter also expressed Esbjörn's discomfort with the "national sin" of slavery and its support by many American church bodies. His friend Robert Baird is mentioned in the same paragraph as Esbjörn's admiration of American advances in the temperance movement, and the general state of American society.

piece which might be used as a newspaper article. Please do him and me and the suffering humanity this service of love – *and very soon*. If you find it difficult to write in English, I will translate it from our beloved mother tongue and let a native review the translation. But, remember this "word to the stumbling" will not wait long.

I have mentioned Erik Jansson. His colony at Bishop Hill is wretched, both in a spiritual and worldly sense. Perfectionism has declined to the point that the *brandy flask* and the *church nip* have regained their old place of honor, and a distillery is being built there. Business affairs are in disarray, and the society is in great debt. Doctors, especially, have treated them with hard hands during their many illnesses. The doctor who was there during the cholera epidemic of last summer took a number of horses and animals in payment. Jansson's gold false teeth, which he had made to replace his deformed, natural, swine-like teeth, and much more nonsense, have also cost them greatly. Now, the rewards of his action have begun. He was shot to death in the courthouse itself with two bullets on the 13th of this month, during a court session in Cambridge, 5 or 6 miles from here, by a Swede named John Root, a former Janssonist. The Janssonists had stolen his wife from him, and despite his having returned to Bishop Hill twice with a large following of Americans, he could not find either her or Jansson. Root who is generally regarded as a scoundrel, as was Jansson, was immediately arrested and will probably be sentenced to hang. It was remarkable that Jansson met his shameful death at the very place where he carried out his foremost injustices – in the courtroom. Frivolous suits, perjury and falsehoods etc., have been the accomplishments of his people at that place the last four years. There was no tumult nor revolt, rather the murder took place like that of Gustaf III.

Society is quite orderly and peaceful up here, and their morality and order is encouraging. I have, for almost nine months, not heard of a single illegitimate birth, with the exception of one Swedish in Rock Island, conceived during the sea voyage. While I can, from my farm, see the houses of 20 neighbors, there is no lock, nor any need for one, on any door of mine. Among the Americans here in the country, the use of brandy is seldom seen. The progress of temperance in this country is unbelievable. Yet, there is still much to do in the larger cities. Galesbourg (sic) is a university town (translator's note: actually Knox College), with 7 professors and 339 students, (of which 118 are female) in the College and Academy. I believe there are together about 1- to 2,000 citizens, and yet one must be well-known if one is to get brandy or strong wine in the city without a doctor's order. I found difficulty the first time I tried to buy communion wine there, until an Englishman who happened to be present mentioned that I was "the Swedish minister". From this, one can judge (the state of) temperance in American university towns. (translator's note: The two previous paragraphs about Erik Jansson, Bishop Hill, Rock Island and Galesburg were published in *Norrlands Posten* on 20 June 1850, as were other Esbjörn letters in the summer of 1850).

Please forward the contents to its address, and send me a longed-for letter from Sweden. Thousands of hearty greetings to your wife and children, the delightful Cecilia, friends Baron Rappe, Dean Ahnfelt, Dean Arrhén and *all the others* from your friend and brother. *L.P. Esbjörn*. P.S. Please also greet Fjellstedt. The love of our Lord Jesus be with all you you, all!

Esbjörn's Legacy in Swedish-America...The Augustana Synod and Augustana College.

During the following 14 years, Esbjörn struggled with pioneering conditions on the prairie, with other Swedish-American denominations, and personal poverty. But he succeeded in building a number of Lutheran congregations, first at Andover, Moline and Galesburg, while eventually creating a joint Swedish-Norwegian ministry, organized in 1860 as “den skandinaviska evangeliska lutherska Augustanasynoden i Norra Amerika.” It was founded with 36 Swedish- and 13 Norwegian congregations, and served those immigrant churches for fully 10 years. The Norwegians, concerned about national identity and some theological issues, left the synod during its a meeting in Andover, Illinois in 1870 He also worked hard for educational opportunity among Scandinavian-American youth, becoming involved first with the church-sponsored Illinois State University in Springfield, where he struggled with both its leadership which seemed willing to compromise on theological issues, and troublesome students, led by Robert Lincoln, son of Abraham Lincoln. After a series of disappointing confrontations with both President G.M. Reynolds, faculty members and American students, Esbjörn called a meeting of the 20 Scandinavian students, and they collectively decided to leave Springfield to the Yankees in March 1860.² The result was Augustana College, founded as a seminary under Esbjörn's leadership, with 10 Swedish and 10 Norwegian students.

² Rev. C.O. Hultgren, a seminary student at the time, delivered a delightful description of Esbjörn's early years in Andover, Robert Lincoln's mean-spirited pranks, and faculty tensions at Springfield, in notes to C.M. Esbjörn around 1907, now filed in the Augustana College Special Collections. He writes: “...In June 1854 Esbjörn and I went to Moline. My father had a pair of good horses, and I drove them. Esbjörn was happy, and in good humor. We soon came to a deep slough. The bridge was down, and the horses had to go on the side in soft mud. They came frightened and started to jump. Esbjörn was afraid, and jumped in(to) the slough, and sank up to his knees. We arrived safely on the other side. Esbjörn did not lose his patience. He said “we must thank God that no limbs were broken. The mire on my clothes will soon dry.” The heavens became cloudy and there was a heavy mist. I had never been in Moline, so Esbjörn had to show me the road...just the prairie. Three o'clock and no Rock River. Esbjörn said “we are in God's hands. Halt and let the horses graze for a while.” We sat on the grass. He started to sing Psalm 33. I sang too. He said I had a better voice than he. He said mine was natural. He said he could not sing until (after) he became a minister. In Norrland, the students went from estate to estate and sang for money, etc. “I hired a student and went with him. He sang many songs. He sang one over and over a good many times in those eight years, but I could not learn it. After my first sermon, my hostess asked me why I didn't sing the Mass. I said to her “I cannot sing.” She said I should buy me a “mellodium” (psalmodikon?). I got a few pieces of wood and made one. I learned to sing and play. I also taught music. Now, in God's Name, we shall continue our journey.” The fog was very thick, could not see two rods in front of you. There was not the sign of a house. I asked him where to go. He pointed that way, and said “the Lord, as in Israel's time, will show us the way.” As it was getting dark, we saw the Rock River. The long grass waived over the horse's head. Ten o'clock that evening, (we) crossed the Rock River into Moline. Mr. Peterson, the ferryman, asked us to stay that night, which we did. No services that night as was announced in Moline. We came to Moline on Saturday. Esbjörn preached and had communion on Sunday. The journey home was successful. He encouraged me to go to Springfield with him. We came to Springfield in the fall of 1857. Lindström (later Prof. at the College), Suneson, Halland, your mother and “little Connie” (Constantine Esbjörn?). Your father had left a few days before. He met us at the R.R. station. The students there at Springfield were full of pranks. Reynolds and the other Prof. seemed to encourage them. Robert Lincoln, son of the President, was at the head of pranks. One morning, we found the room where prayer was held, full of sweepings, manure, etc. That was quieted down. The students did not like the Latin professor. One night, they brought the skeleton of a horse to his door. When he opened the door the horse fell into his arms. Lincoln, Smith(Quincy) were at the head. It was considered “cute.” Esbjörn felt

Esbjörn, as we have seen, was a stubborn and sometimes difficult man, yet had the wisdom to encourage other promising young leaders within the new synod, like Tufve Hasselquist who came to Galesburg, Erland Carlson in Chicago, and Erik Norelius, whose U.S. studies Esbjörn encouraged, leading to Norelius' pioneering ministries in Minnesota, and a life-long friendship.

Tufve Hasselquist and Erland Carlson, viewing the westward shift of immigration, encouraged the move of Augustana to Paxton, Illinois, in 1863, over Esbjörn's strong objections who saw the move as land speculation. As immigration continued its westward march, Augustana moved again in 1875 to Rock Island, with both rail and water transportation and thriving young industries like John Deere. Esbjörn had worked for a Church and schools rooted firmly in the Augsburg Confession, while adapting to American life. His stubbornness led often to conflict with many churchmen, both inside and outside the Augustana Synod, as they all sought their own truths and the support of new members from among the growing immigrant community.

During his time in America, Esbjörn experienced many personal tragedies. His young twin sons died en route to America. His first wife, Amalia Maria Lovisa Gyllenbåga and their newborn daughter died at Andover in July, 1852. His second wife Helena Catharina Magnusson and her child died a year after their September 1852 marriage. He then married her 20-year-old sister Gustafva Albertina Magnusson, who eventually followed him home to Östervåla Sweden in 1863.³ Poverty also followed him over the Atlantic, and in Chicago he complained his first pay was only \$12.00.

Esbjörn's son Lt. Paul Vilhelm fell at Lexington, MO in 1861, while his younger son, Capt. Josef Osborn (born at Hille in 1843) survived the war to become a newspaperman, businessman, politician and the first conductor of the Augustana Choir.

bad. He said we should keep quiet about the whole thing. It was a disgrace to a Christian Lutheran Collee. The faculty enjoyed teasing Esbjörn and making him worry. He was needed to teach Latin, Greek, Math., etc. Esbjörn kept his mouth shut, and that made the faculty angry with the Swedes. Esbjörn helped Dr. Suseerati teach Greek. When he noticed he was under Esbjörn, he made life very unpleasant for Esbjörn. The books on Religion and Doctrine were Reformed. Esbjörn protested against them. Dr. Harkey would have liked Lutheran books. Dr. Reynolds said those books were better than Lutheran books. One evening, Esbjörn called us together and with tears in his eyes, said the whole school belonged on the Reformed side. He said so to Reynolds. Reynolds said "that was they way the people want me to do." Reformed or Lutheran, Reynolds said one was as good as the other. We went to Reynolds with Esbjörn. He called the faculty together. They said one man and a few students could not make them change. Esbjörn spoke to them so pleadingly, but they just made fun of him. We went to Esbjörn's house. Prayed over the matter. After the prayer, he asked us what to do. In one voice, we said we will leave. He said that was his idea, too. He shook our hands and said "God bless you. I am so happy. We will have another school." The school started in Chicago. We met him in the fall of 1860. He was very happy. He was the only teacher. He taught continually from nine to five, oftentimes till 6...."

³ Gustava later wrote "I had no love for such an old man (45 years old) and all the children my sister had died for, Oh, what should I do, being so much younger? Can one marry without love? I let myself be convinced out of pure mercy and compassion, and it went well." See Lilly Setterdahl, *A Pioneer Lutheran Ministry. L.P. Esbjörn and his Family in Andover, Illinois*. 1986, p. 34,

A prematurely aging Lars Paul Esbjörn made a fundraising trip to Sweden in 1862, despite his disappointment over Augustana's pending move from Chicago to Paxton. He hoped to not only win support for Augustana from the Swedish Crown, the Church of Sweden, and private donors, but was also looking for his own replacement as president of the Augustana Seminary. Its leadership had hoped to win a promising young theologian, Peter Paul Waldenström, but he rejected their offer, to eventually become a founder of the Swedish Mission Covenant Church.

During that 1862 trip, Esbjörn learned of a vacancy in his old Östervåla Parish, applied, and was accepted. After a short return trip to the United States, he resigned as seminary president, and gave his farewell sermon to his students on 22 June 1863 at First Norwegian Lutheran Church in Chicago. He returned home to Sweden on 7 July 1863, then began his ministry at his old parish of Östervåla that fall. His duties there involving school organization were as heavy as those in America, and were made more difficult by bad harvests during the 1860's. This led to continued economic problems and increased emigration to the United States.

Two years later, on 14 June 1865, Lars-Paul Esbjörn gave a detailed report on America's Swedish Lutheranism to the Church of Sweden's pastoral conference in Uppsala. His report can be seen as his mission testament. (see Gunnar Westin's *Brev från L.P. Esbjörn 1840-1850, Meddelanden och aktstycken, Kyrkohistorisk årskrift 1946* Stockholm 1946, p. 251). He states that it had been the Janssonist emigration and the following tide of Swedish immigrants that lay behind his decision to emigrate as a spiritual caregiver, with the special task of protecting those immigrants from heathendom and the influence of non-Lutheran churches and sects.

During his remaining seven years at Östervåla, he again became involved in mission development, while remaining in contact with his American friends within the new Augustana Synod, especially Eric Norelius and Tufve Hasselquist. He died at Östervåla on 2 July 1870.

After his death, his widow, Gustafva, returned to America with six of their children. and eventually married the widowed Augustana clergyman Andreas André in 1879, who himself died only two months later. Her adoptive son, Gustav André later became President of Augustana, as had her first husband Lars Paul. She died in 1925.

Their son Constantin Magnus, born at Princeton, IL in 1858, became an Augustana professor and clergyman. Carl Linus, born in Chicago in 1862, studied at Augustana, and was later its professor of modern languages. He remained at Augustana until 1938, dying accidentally. Daughter Maria Rediviva, born at Östervåla in 1864, later became the first woman delegate to an Augustana Synod conference of 1910. Daughter Hanna Dorothea, born 1866 at Östervåla, studied at Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas, and later became a church musician and organist at Augustana Lutheran Church in Denver. She died in 1939. Son Lars Paul Oscar was born at Östervåla shortly after his father's death, studied medicine, in part at Augustana College, became a doctor, but died prematurely in 1910.

Today, the Esbjörn legacy is still being written, by Augustana congregations now part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and by colleges like Augustana, Gustavus Adolphus, Bethany and others served by faculty trained at those institutions. His pietistic vision of a church built by "born again Christians" went through many changes, as it adapted to new American ways, while holding to basic Augsburg confessional truths. During Augustana Synod's 50th anniversary in 1910, it was noted that Augustana, as a "free church," had experiences of value to its "mother church" in Sweden, since "...she, in the near future, must begin to take care of herself, without State support, since a separation doubtless shall come." That event finally took place just a few years ago, in 2000, and has brought closer ties with the Church of Sweden's old friends like Augustana and the ELCA, and even with some old opponents like the Mission Covenant Church in Sweden, now in alter and pulpit fellowship with the Church of Sweden.

For More Reading:

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- Setterdahl, Lilly. *A Pioneer Lutheran Ministry. L.P. Esbjörn and His Family in Andover, Illinois*, Andover, 1986.
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