

Wrestling with the Mission Mantle: Matthias Wahlstrom, Failed Missionary to the Comanche, and the Relation between the Augustana Synod and the Covenant Church

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The Augustana Synod meeting in June 1879 convened in Chicago, Illinois, where lively religious factions contended within the Swedish-American community. Augustana claimed the Lutheran mantle, but retained in many ways the fervency of the Swedish revival. To the pious, however, the mantle of conservative Lutheranism was a heavy burden. Even though Swedish citizens learned the faith through Luther's catechism and the traditional forms of the Church of Sweden, orthodoxy felt at times like a spiritual strait-jacket. In America, and especially in the booming metropolis of Chicago, Swedish churches courted immigrants who often wanted something new. When Augustana's ministers and delegates came to Chicago, their college and seminary in Rock Island boasted its orthodoxy, but the synod also embarked on a missionary initiative to the Comanche. It was a bold gambit to show that from their outpost in Rock Island they could claim both a foothold in the west *and* a central role in the piously demanding Swedish religious environment.¹

Augustana's first twenty-five years followed an itinerant path, moving its school from Springfield to Paxton, then to Rock Island, and becoming more orthodox, traditional, and formal in teaching and practice. In 1860 professor Esbjörn and most of his students abruptly left Springfield, where a strained partnership with the American Lutheran General Synod had ended in recrimination. Chicago provided a temporary home, while financial pressures pushed them into speculative ventures in land holding and colony building in Paxton,

Illinois. This failed, too, while cultural and ethnic factors figured in the more cordial parting in 1870 with Norwegian colleagues. The synod decided to move its school again, to Rock Island.²

A more painful separation was underway at the 1879 convention. At this meeting the ministers expelled Johan Gustav Princell from the ministerium for teaching Waldenström's views on the atonement. Princell was not a solitary figure, but part of a wider circle of Mission Friends, who drew the obvious conclusion that Augustana's stamp of approval would require severing ties with the Mission Friend movement in Sweden. A separate church body would eventually form in 1885, the Evangelical Mission Covenant, but the formalities did not constitute a clean break. The Covenant inscribed not a few Lutherans and Augustana harbored plenty of Mission Friends.

This essay will explore these tangled alliances and the ambivalence over orthodoxy within the Augustana Synod by introducing another aspect of the story: the yet unexamined missionary initiative to the Comanche. When the synod commissioned its first missionary, they were sending one of their finest candidates—one of four in the ordination class that for the first time had both a college and theological degree—Matthias Wahlstrom. The venture was idealistic and unsustainable; Wahlstrom was fearful and unprepared. Predictably, he did not succeed. He stayed only a few months on the job, and interrupted that stay with several side trips to congregations in Colorado and to Lindsborg, Kansas. He finally suffered a physical and what could also be surmised as an emotional collapse. The synod said little about this failed venture and did not send another missionary to the Comanche. Matthias Wahlstrom helped Augustana claim the mission mantle for a time, but not for the sake of the Comanche. They were interested primarily in what mission meant to the Swedes.

WHAT DID MISSION MEAN?

Matthias Wahlstrom began keeping a journal on the night before his ordination.³ His entry that night gives insight into the ambivalence he felt, as well as the tensions between Mission Friends and the churchly Augustana contingent in the Swedish-American religious community. Youthful, idealistic, romantic, and passionate, Wahlstrom

was an improbable choice as a missionary. He had also been approached for what the synod called “school work.” This meant a professorship at the college in Minnesota, Gustavus Adolphus. The fact that he chose to be the first missionary, however reluctantly, reveals that the venture into the missionary field was not an eccentric idea. It had in fact not only been discussed and studied for some time by the synod’s mission committee, but also among students and in mission meetings held throughout the synod.⁴ The synod’s mission committee was responsible for both types of mission—devotional meetings to revive piety (inner or home mission) as well as the more customary idea of mission work among the heathen (outer mission)—and, in fact, had been looking for ways to use funds given specifically to the synod for “outer” or “foreign” missions. The American Indians were determined to be foreign enough for the committee.

The committee’s ambition to push the synod to be all that a Swedish-American church should be—doctrinally sound, mission oriented, and engaged in the civilizing task of the frontier—could be realized at the Chicago meeting with the dramatic sending of a missionary. Wahlstrom’s commissioning would communicate the synod’s mission *bona fides* beyond the limited Lutheran network into the wider spiritual circles of the free-minded Swedish Pietists. This might provide some damage control, too, during a time of increasing tension over the unpleasant results of the synod’s doctrinal and disciplinary actions.

One problem was apparent right away, at least to Wahlstrom. Missionary fervor does not stand out in his journal. Furthermore, he did not know the first thing about being a missionary. In fact, he must have been quite ambivalent about this call. It could be that he knew a bit of what he was getting into, or had heard some pretty nasty stories about Indians. Emigrating in 1854 to the Minnesota frontier with his parents when he was only three, Matthias attended St. Ansgar Academy in East Union for his confirmation studies, where his pastor, Andrew Jackson, headed the preparatory school that later became Gustavus Adolphus College. Jackson had arrived in Minnesota in 1861, just in time to be present for the tragedy now known as the Dakota War of 1862. At the time, the Sioux Indian Uprising or massacre seared the memories of the first settlers.⁵

Minnesota's Swedish community developed a distinct and fervent piety that even received its own name: the Minnesota *Ande*, or Spirit.⁶ Others who defined this region's Swedish religious style were Peter Carlson, influenced by the revival in his home province, Småland, and P. A. Cederstam, pastor in St. Peter, as well as Eric Norelius, pastor in Vasa, Minnesota. Norelius was well known for his promotion of Lutheran orthodoxy, but others in Minnesota promoted "mission" both as a way of planting, strengthening, and expanding congregations in the many settlements, and also to mean spiritual and evangelical work, the preaching and teaching that would lead individuals to come to faith, and to develop their faith lives. This latter use of the term *mission* functioned much the same way that the language of mission had been used within the Swedish revival. On farms and in cities and towns of North America, mission meetings were used to awaken believers and create a fellowship of the pious. The word *mission* itself was ambiguous, however, because it not only meant the mission that would spark a revival in the personal life of the believer, but it also meant mission to the heathen, to the world far away from the Christian homeland.

The ambiguity of the term *mission* was important to the success of the revival in Sweden. Restrictive church laws kept lay people from meeting freely for devotional or other purposes. "Mission meetings" provided cover for the revival movement—especially in specific areas like Sundsvall and around Uppsala—where mission meetings were legal even during the period of the restrictive conventicle law.⁷ Revival spread in the Swedish parishes despite opposition from authorities, and this subversive aspect of the mission meeting gave the movement some buzz, some excitement. Mission society newspapers promoted foreign mission as a sign of the times, and of revival. As a plus, it registered resistance to authority. New revival/mission songs as movement songs spread through the travels of troubadours like Ahnfelt and others who trained at mission schools. The revival was not tame, nor was it very cohesive. Mission meant a lot of things.

Swedish immigrants who formed congregations in the United States did not forget earlier ties to these mission societies, and sent money to support missionary work. Conservative Lutherans directed their money to the Leipzig Society, but congregations sent money

also to other fields. Dozens of Augustana's early pastors had moreover been trained at mission institutes, rather than through the university course of study.⁸ Augustana's ministerium was well stocked with pastors who had been students at two schools—the Ahlberg mission school, and the Fjellstedt School in Uppsala, with its very strong ties to Leipzig—before coming to America and finishing their education at Paxton, or in Rock Island. Including the two classes on either side of Wahlstrom, there were eight men who had studied first at Swedish mission schools before entering Augustana's school.⁹

The synod meeting in 1879 began with a meeting of the ministerium, giving time for examining the new candidates for ordination and also for taking up matters of discipline. One of these was the final decision about Johan Gustaf Princell, a pastor in New York who had been suspended the previous October. Princell's troubles began when he excluded some prominent members from communion, triggering a series of inquiries that involved synod leaders, which then revealed Princell's novel views on the doctrine of the atonement, leading to the suspension.¹⁰ At the Princeton, Illinois, meeting in 1878 Princell had been subject to an examination, and he had submitted, after delay, a written statement. An examining committee found it wanting. A suspension had been granted with the hope that Princell would use this opportunity to examine and then retract his Waldenströmian views, but a year later, in 1879, Princell was on his way to Sweden. His wife Josephine described this moment in their lives with the observation that her husband never regretted leaving behind the whole idea of a synod.¹¹ The congregation in Lowell, Massachusetts, where Princell went after his suspension, learned to be suspicious of the whole notion of a synod. John Mellander, sent by Augustana authorities to restore Lutheran order, recorded that members of the congregation saw joining the synod as a kind of human or worldly trap. They refused to have their names written in any human book, and said "there is sin enough [*synd nog*], without us joining a synod."¹²

"There does not seem to be much unity in the Synod meeting," Wahlstrom wrote in his daybook after his own examination by the ministerium. As was his custom, Wahlstrom began each day with a motto. For the ordination day, this appeared: "Lord, if your face does not go before us do not let us come from this room."¹³ The

daybook then recorded sermons and biblical talks, which seemed to excite him very much, that filled many sessions of the synod. The book, however, also revealed Wahlstrom's hesitations and doubts. His fiancé, Selma, was introduced to the ministerium, and her presence calmed him considerably. The ordination day arrived—an "important day in my life"—and the day proceeded with several Bible talks and then the service. Wahlstrom's eyes teared up at the moment of his ordination. All this excitement would seem typical for a young man. But then Wahlstrom made notations about his activities that evening, and a reader can see either that he is reluctant to be closely tied to leaders in the synod or that he is so anxious about his missionary call that he needs bucking up from a prayer meeting.

After the usual congratulations following the service, Wahlstrom received an invitation to dinner from C. A. Ewald, the pastor of Chicago's Immanuel Church, but he declined. Wahlstrom had an uncle who lived in Chicago, who was also active in the mission house there. This gave Wahlstrom some entry into the local religious scene and a place to rest. With his two uncles Wahlstrom instead went to Dwight L. Moody's church, where there was good song and a good sermon on Matthew 7:23: "And then I will declare to them, I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers." Going to Moody's church and listening to the famous revivalist certainly promised an exciting evening for any pious visitor to Chicago, but Wahlstrom's decision to accompany two uncles to this service seemed also to indicate his preference for evangelical and revival-styled worship over the opportunity to build support for his venture westward to the Comanche.

A clue to Wahlstrom's motives comes from the next jotting in his day book. After attending Moody's church, Wahlstrom made his way to the North Side mission house. Wahlstrom had a full evening of revival, for the mission house was the gathering place for the mission circle that had formed at Immanuel earlier in the history of the congregation, which gradually became a separate society.¹⁴ Thus, Wahlstrom aligned himself with the faction that had separated from Immanuel Church earlier in 1870. The lines between Augustana members and Mission Friends were not yet so sharply drawn when a newly ordained Augustana man felt comfortable spending so much time in mission circles on his big day.

Wahlstrom's refusal of a direct and personal invitation from Carl A. Evald in order to attend Moody's service, and later the meeting in the Swedish mission house, tells us something about the importance of mission meetings to Wahlstrom's sense of call. Evald was pastor of the host church for the synod meeting and the leader of the Chicago Augustana community, and he would seem to be an attractive contact to have, especially since Wahlstrom would soon need financial and other support for his missionary work. A large and influential congregation like Immanuel would help him considerably with funding, connections, and sustained support. Augustana's Women's Missionary Society would later grow out of the women's work of that congregation, which was already a place of fervent missionary interest. This ministry was, however, conducted in a more programmatic and formal mode. The mission meeting was more free and spontaneous; it provided the type of heartfelt spiritual support Wahlstrom needed at this vulnerable moment. These meetings were not official, but they were clearly structured with a particular pattern and purpose that resulted in a peculiar, refreshing social and spiritual bonding. Karl Olsson's description of the mission meeting in *By One Spirit* corresponds with the notes Wahlstrom left in his diary. Olsson proposed that this form that emerged within the Mission Friend circles of the Augustana Synod at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Chicago, in 1869, in effect was the nascent foundation of the Mission Covenant. The mission meetings that Wahlstrom attended both in Chicago and later as he made preparations for missionary work near his home in Minnesota, and then during his western trips, were times of strengthening and bonding, and conform to the practices that, according to Olsson, resulted in the formation of the Covenant in 1885.¹⁵

Mission meetings are mentioned often during the early months of Wahlstrom's call to be a missionary, and his new practice of keeping a daily record of his prayer and work initiated also his very regular attendance at such meetings. After he came home from these gatherings, whether they were in Lutheran churches or other venues that he does not always make clear, he always wrote that he felt relieved, or lifted up, or comforted by the experience. The aid he received from others at the meetings gave him the spiritual and emotional support he craved.

MISSIONARY SPIRIT IN THE SYNOD AND INDIANS

Augustana leaders made a concerted effort to send their new missionary to his calling with spiritual encouragement and support. The synod's call to Wahlstrom developed also after several years of striving by one pastor in particular, Johannes (John) Telleen, to promote a more genuine missionary spirit in the Augustana Synod.¹⁶ The missions committee had been founded as early as 1868, but for the most part this committee conducted the work of home mission, gathering Swedish settlers to form congregations. While this home mission work remained the larger task, the missions committee also reflected the missionary enthusiasm abounding more broadly within Protestantism, and could in this way undergo a kind of assimilation into American religious activism.

In 1874 the mission committee held its first discussion of missionary work among the North American Indian tribes. Eric Norelius from Minnesota had just become president of the synod, and his leadership brought new energy to the committee. To get started, they determined to write to the superintendent of Indian affairs in St. Louis, Thomas H. Harvey, to enquire about work among the Indians in Indian Territory—a region that had once included portions of what is now Kansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri—so it is not entirely clear where the Augustana committee may have had an interest in working. It could have been in Kansas, because Olof Olsson, the professor of theology at the seminary, had previously been a pioneer pastor there, and he was asked to investigate this possibility. The committee especially wished to know whether it would be possible for the Augustana Synod to take up work with the Delaware Indians, the same tribe that the Swedish Colony had encountered in the seventeenth century, and for whom Johan Campanius had translated Luther's catechism. To contact this tribe again could have been an idea straight out of the romantic notions of Olof Olsson too, but there were also good practical reasons for doing mission work with this group of tribes. The Delaware were part of a larger group of Algonquin-speaking tribes, and many had come to the Indian Territory in the early part of the nineteenth century. They had formed

permanent settlements, experienced success in farming, and had created more sophisticated political structures. Their county, or section of Kansas, was also relatively near the areas of the state that Swedish settlers were occupying.¹⁷

Venturing into this very dynamic and complex terrain soon showed the committee how impossible it would be to pick a tribe for missionary service. They learned, in the language of the department of Indian Affairs, that Methodists already “had this field” and the Delaware Indians now living in Indian Territory—the location was not given—were too far away from the one personal missionary contact they already had. It is unknown who this contact was, as no name was given in the minutes. In any case, the committee would now need to make a decision about beginning work with a tribe that had not yet been contacted, or claimed by any other religious group. This would mean starting in a sense from scratch, rather than to work with Indians who had to some extent already begun the process of assimilating to white, farming culture. This also meant that any missionary the committee recruited would need to learn a new language, and the Lutheran catechism prepared by one of the Swedish priests in the Delaware Colony for use with the Lenni Lenape people, composed in 1676, would not be of any relevance for the committee’s new initiative. The difficulties also mounted for this initiative in the interim because, as the scribe of the mission committee noted, “of unrest in the Southern States.”¹⁸

While these hurdles stood in the way of an immediate entry into Indian Territory with the Lutheran gospel during the decade of the 1870s, which was incidentally also the time when the synod undertook to move the seminary to Rock Island and build facilities there, the committee set about the work of increasing the mission spirit in the synod and thereby creating a stream of spiritual enthusiasm that would prompt interest and income that could be devoted to mission work. Different approaches emerged: mission meetings were held regularly in districts and conferences, mission-related articles had been produced for the newspaper *Augustana och Hemlandet*, and two recognizance trips had been taken by the indefatigable mission promoter, Johannes Telleen, who briefly left his congregation in Des Moines to canvas the mission possibilities for the synod. Two exten-

sive reports sent in to the central board of mission included detailed information that he had obtained through his interviews in Indian Territory. He shared information about what was necessary to apply for federal funds to set up a mission station, and gave information about the complications of negotiating with the tribes, as well as the crowded nature of the field. He reported that Presbyterians, Quakers, and Methodists had pretty much taken up most of the work, and there were very few tribes without missionaries. Telleen's reports made it seem like it was possible to enter this field, but he was unable himself to consider the call offered to him by the committee. Still he pressed the synod to look hard for another candidate, even if the chances for Lutherans to enter the field were narrowing.

It is fair to say that for all his enthusiasm for the cause, Telleen informed the committee about other difficulties, too. Missionaries were not welcome with a tribe, unless the missionary promised not to disturb the regular functioning of the community. And worse, missionaries were especially despised by many of the white settlers in Indian Territory. On one of his trips, Telleen had narrowly escaped being killed by an irate hotel owner, who did not want any pious ministers around upsetting his more natural, and saloon-based, business plan. Telleen wrote a vivid account of his escapades, including his harrowing rescue by the wife of the innkeeper. She warned Telleen to use his bedstead to block the doors against her violent husband, but to get out of town early the next morning. She could only protect him for one night.¹⁹

Stories of danger, near death, and crowded religious conditions did not dissuade the Augustana mission committee, which got so far as to discuss whether a missionary should sport a beard or shave, in order to be more culturally sensitive to the tribes. Telleen returned to his congregation in Des Moines, but he continued to promote missions for the Augustana Synod. He and another member of the committee traveled to Washington, D.C., to ask the Department of Indian Affairs for an official assignment as missionary to a tribe. When they arrived in the capitol they gave their money to an intermediary who promised to get them an audience, but who instead ran off with their funds. This encounter perhaps dampened Telleen's enthusiasm and factored in his own refusal of the call in 1877 to

become a missionary that year. Bypassing the federal government did not seem to be such a problem to the synod. It knew of other, more informal paths into missionary work, and was persuaded that some kind of path would open up. The next thing it did was to find someone else, and Matthias Wahlstrom, 1879 graduate, agreed to try to find a way.

WAHLSTROM SETS OUT

Wahlstrom went first to Minnesota, where he married Selma, and together they attended more mission meetings. Especially with Selma by his side, Wahlstrom wrote that he felt secure. During this preparatory period he must have had meetings with almost every pastor, catechist, and lay preacher in the Minnesota Conference.²⁰ They were certainly closely involved in coaching him and helping make necessary preparations. Much of what Wahlstrom recorded had to do with his calling as a minister. He noted the biblical texts others preached on, and also those he was using to prepare his own sermons. His day book makes clear that there were many services in addition to Sunday mornings; he was traveling around to different districts and participating and preaching at numerous mission meetings. But he also noted more ordinary pursuits, especially his enjoyment of coming home after a meeting, and for several days he was sick, probably because he worked for two days straight, presumably farm work, in the middle of July. Matthias and Selma Wahlstrom traveled south on 5 August, leaving home on the same day as the burial of his grandfather, to Rock Island, where Matthias noted "strange feelings as I tread the old familiar ground." This time in Rock Island brought the young couple into the homes of several pastors, including a visit to the mission society meeting, and then a reception at the home of the Augustana patriarch Tufve Nilsson Hasselquist, where *all* the members of the faculty attended to bless the missionary going into the field.²¹ It took several more days before Wahlstrom came to Lindsborg, Kansas, where it was arranged that Selma would stay with friends while Matthias began his missionary career further west.

In Lindsborg, Selma and Matthias Wahlstrom stayed with friend and classmate Carl A. and Thelma Swensson. Swensson was or-

dained with Matthias and had just begun his call as pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church, and he would soon begin work in founding Bethany College. This call to do what the synod called “school work” had also been presented to Wahlstrom as one of his options. Matthias wrestled with the decision he had made to become a missionary instead of a “school man” many times in his day book. It was no doubt difficult to head out alone into Indian Territory while Selma, Carl, and so many fervent countrymen were engaged in productive work and fellowship establishing a school. After two weeks of settling Selma into her new home, Wahlstrom wrote a letter from Lindsborg to the president of the synod, Eric Norelius, with several thoughts about instructions and questions he had received from Rock Island. He explained that he had received so many instructions and thoughts that it had become confusing, and he felt that it would be difficult to relay his travel plans. Furthermore, he felt poorly prepared for making these kinds of plans without experience, and was not this situation itself against the synod’s wishes?²² His extensive consultation with other pastors, friends, and classmates must also have caused concern for Norelius, for Wahlstrom felt it necessary to state that he knew that his primary instructions were to come from the central committee, and not from well-meaning, even if well-informed, people.²³

Wahlstrom’s ambivalence about taking up missionary activities seems evident from the fact that, in addition to writing a lot about whether he was really suited for the work, aside from an early trip in September to see the possibilities, which scared him, it then took him almost a year, until May 1880, before he actually got to a station where he could conceivably do missionary work. He did not hide his difficulties from the committee that had commissioned him, which sent him letters and even telegrams to press him forward, but shared his worries in letters written to the central board, and to other friends, where he also revealed practical and emotional difficulties he experienced as he set about organizing himself for travel into Indian Territory.

What seemed to unsettle him, in particular, was the actual sight of Indians. When he made his first foray into Indian Territory in September, about a hundred Ute Indians traveled alongside the train Wahlstrom took into Anadarko, in Indian Territory, Oklahoma. “Oh Lord,” he wrote upon seeing the Indians on 9 September 1880, “I am

not capable of anything among them.” Four pages later, ominously noting that the agent at White River with his family had been killed, and as he tried to settle into a room at a rough boarding house, he asked, “Are you shutting the door for us, Lord?”²⁴

Several days and then weeks passed with similar notations that indicate real ambivalence, even fear attending the idea of mission to the Indians. He read in the newspaper that Utes (maybe those who he had seen alongside the train on their pack animals?) were responsible for the attack on the agent and his family. So Wahlstrom wrote about his prayers, guilt, self-recrimination, questions, and loneliness. At the boarding house in Anadarko his roommate, a German, became the object of evangelical attention, receiving tracts written in both German and English. This helped Wahlstrom feel that he was at least doing something for the cause, but the lack of privacy there was coupled with his sense that, even among so many single men, he was profoundly isolated and alone. Pining especially for mail from Selma, he often went off alone for hours to a nearby hill and prayed, thought, wrote, and was sick.²⁵

MISSION MEETINGS AND MISSIONARY RESOLVE

“My conscience is accusing me for my selfish avoidance of the mission call, and I feel miserable here,” he wrote on 14 October 1880, while noting also that he had a bad cough, slept all afternoon, had not heard from Kansas, or received any telegrams from John Telleen—and that it was raining. He closes that day’s record with lines from a revival song: “*Ack, när ska jordens alla strider sluta? Dock tyst, du har ej många haft ännu!*” (Oh, when shall struggles of the world be ended? Still, you have not yet so many suffered!)²⁶ These lines provided the kind of spiritual comfort to Wahlstrom that he experienced also when he attended mission meetings, but these circles of support did not exist on his frontier. He wrote in shock about the conversations at the dinner table with fellow boarders, who boasted of sexual encounters with Mexican girls or misused God’s name over and over again. There was a mission challenge right in front of him, but even that kind of work was beyond Wahlstrom’s capability. The truth was that he depended on the fellowship of Mission Friends,

evangelically minded Lutherans, or at least other Swedish believers in order to function. Everyone that he met was described by their difference from his own tribe. He described his attempted conversations to witness with a man (Welsh), his German roommate, a Mexican, wild or otherwise, who drove the cart, and so on. He did find some to talk with—a Presbyterian, a soldier, and a clerk did pray with him and discuss Scripture, but the resolutions of the young could be fleeting, he noted as well.

Perhaps recognizing the unsteady resolve in their missionary, and with winter approaching with no settled mission station presenting itself, Eric Norelius sent Wahlstrom a telegram that he received on 15 October 1880 stating, “If you have not found good opening, tell Mr. W to go to Fort Sill, by way of Wichita and Caldwell.”²⁷ This cheered our missionary, Wahlstrom, who then began to plan a trip away from Anadarko. Another possibility had emerged, a congregational mission in Denver. Noting, however, that “the central board seems really to be serious about this mission call,” he recognized that Denver was a compromise, a way out because of his own weakness. Using money sent to him on the same day, he then bought a ticket to Lindsborg, since it was just as close to go to Lindsborg as it was to go to Denver. This seemed to him a sign of God’s will.²⁸

Wahlstrom’s diary reveals his recognition that he was failing in this call as a missionary. The next several weeks were spent with Selma, but he did not experience the relief and peace he expected. Instead, he wrote about his nagging sense that he felt half welcome within the Lindsborg Swedish community. The time he spent in Kansas seemed not to afford much time for recorded introspection, since the diary’s pages become almost routine in recording the sermons, services, and visits that filled the couple’s time. On 9 November Wahlstrom wrote, “I should be in Denver now.”²⁹ The schedule he kept the next week gives us a clue as to why he delayed: there was a three-day mission meeting in the offing in nearby New Gottland, Kansas.

In Kansas’s Swedish community there was a resource available to him that he could not find on the frontier. He could go to mission meetings. Selma and Matthias enjoyed their time together with other Mission Friends, with hospitality provided in homes for participants who came from as far away as Illinois. The preachers at the meeting

were Augustana men or would soon take up studies at the college and seminary, but there were other names of preachers in the meeting schedule that Wahlstrom attended that never appeared on Augustana lists. Whether they were lay participants or became leaders in other churches cannot be determined from the sources we have. But it is also true that the pious were not separated in Lindsborg—yet.

The mission meeting ended and they went back to Lindsborg, where another week passed before Wahlstrom left for the work in Denver. On the day of departure, while others were arriving in the piously cosmopolitan world circling around Carl Aaron Swensson, Wahlstrom felt sick and got on the train.³⁰ Arriving in Denver, with the far more congenial work of organizing a Swedish congregation in front of him, Wahlstrom still could not shake a feeling of gloom. Self-doubt, combined with conflicts with the Free Masons, had undermined his nerve. “My conscience or an evil heart is beating a thunderous beat because I was so dumb and refused the call to the school,” he wrote on 24 November.³¹ Being in Lindsborg had shown him a world that could have been his in St. Peter, Minnesota. So he wrote to Telleen and to Norelius and shared these and other doubts. In Denver, Wahlstrom remained well connected with news from Rock Island through such letters but also through the synod’s newspaper *Augustana och Hemlandet*. He noted in his diary, for instance, hearing the news about Anders Andreen’s suicide, which Hasselquist had written about in the newspaper, and which could not have improved Wahlstrom’s outlook. This back and forth continued throughout the winter, into the spring, and past Easter, with still no movement further into the mission field and to the Comanche. This he did finally interpret as an urging from God. But the necessity for these repeated promptings made it clear that his heart was not in it.

When Wahlstrom did finally respond to his official call to be a missionary to the Indians, it was already after Easter, almost the end of April. He had been waiting for final instructions from the mission committee, and to give them in person Johannes Telleen was sent to accompany him on this expedition into Indian Territory. They evidently sensed that Wahlstrom was not quite able to find an opening, to get set to do this mission work on his own. Telleen could, at least, also assess Wahlstrom’s own ability and spirit for the work.

THE IMPOSSIBLE IDEA OF A SWEDISH MISSIONARY AMONG THE
COMANCHE

Wahlstrom wrote letters to and received instructions from the synod officials who were responsible for funding his missionary ventures. He was not obligated in any way to the federal government; that venture to Washington, D.C., by the committee delegates had ended in failure. So to approach an Indian tribe, Wahlstrom would need to discover another way by negotiating for a portion of the “field” another church body had acquired through government contract, or perhaps going directly to a tribe and requesting their permission to receive a missionary in their midst. Wahlstrom’s frequent notations about whether this or that decision was God’s will, and his readiness to interpret many things as a sign of God’s will—the distance to Lindsborg, his own feelings, new information about an Indian attack, etc.—show that Augustana’s mission committee was itself unclear about how to give this young missionary adequate instructions for his task. Traveling with Telleen to Anadarko, Indian Territory, however, did give Wahlstrom the opportunity to talk about what kind of approach he should make to the local authorities or area experts in order to gain access to a tribe. His diary indicates that he also wrestled with the usefulness of missionary or evangelical methods, and in doing so had begun to internalize views he heard around him from other white people—teachers, agents, soldiers—on the frontier. While waiting several days for someone to make connections for him, and reading a novel about Luther in Rome, he wrote on 5 May whether God might have some other way, a kind of loophole, to save “the people that we don’t know.”³² On the train he had gotten into an argument with another passenger regarding the claims of science. On the frontier he was not meeting many other believers who would provide the spiritual support he was used to. He began to have new thoughts about his challenge.

Wahlstrom held his first talk in Indian Territory on a Sunday evening, 9 May, to the personnel at the station, Anadarko. In his day book he noted that soldiers, officers, a doctor, an agent, and a school teacher attended. Afterwards he recorded something he probably heard from these men: “the only way to civilize the Indian is to

Christianize them.” His account of that meeting ended with his own prayerful plea: “Be with me, Lord Jesus!”³³ These reflections about how he would approach the task of mission work were certainly not unique. Wahlstrom’s own jottings were but an echo of the popular views about the Indian that were everywhere present in American culture, and not only on the frontier. These views, however, had not circulated in the mission meeting culture more familiar to Wahlstrom’s committee, or in the circle of his spiritual friends and family.

Outside of the agency there was a small hill where Wahlstrom frequently went to be alone. He could well have been in the same mental state of loneliness and anxiety that he had experienced before. Sometimes he spent a whole afternoon there; it was probably where he wrote his letters, and certainly where he was reflecting on his call. But through these connections he finally had the chance to meet a Comanche, an older man named Pahbo, who was at least willing to talk to him. Since Wahlstrom could not speak directly to him, however, this was made possible through an interpreter, a young black boy with the interesting name John Brown.

Even with this opening, Wahlstrom’s encounter with Pahbo does not result in the breakthrough he had been hoping for, or perhaps dreading. He spends time with other white people at the agency, going fishing, and no doubt discussing his errand. After visiting a school that other missionaries had opened for the Cheyenne, he wrote about a new plan for the mission to Eric Norelius, where he noted the prevailing expert opinion that success with schools depended on separating the children from their parents, and also that he was not afraid of this work. But the plan was filled with complications. Apparently, the teacher at the school, who was also a brother-in-law to the Indian agent, was unwilling to continue the work for the pay that the government was providing. If the Augustana missions committee wanted to put in a lower bid, then they could have the school work. This could be a good way to introduce their mission to the community. But this would also cause complications with the other white people, especially the friendly agent, who for the time being was the only real contact that the Augustana missionary had in the territory.³⁴ And the more important negotiations had to be with the Comanche, of course, for they would have to accept him as a

missionary among them for the school work actually to be a success.

Wahlstrom seemed finally to be getting somewhere; at last he had a plan. After a few more meetings with the Pahbo, however, the diary records a significant complication. Pahbo is very ill. During one visit Wahlstrom heard the "horrific sound of the wailing of the Indian women in the village."³⁵ They were on a death watch, while Wahlstrom felt growing discomfort. A day later he was told that Pahbo no longer wanted to entertain his visits, as Wahlstrom made him uncomfortable. This sent Wahlstrom into a spiral; he speculated about God's possible plans to rescue the heathen. They should not be damned when they were innocent of the knowledge of God. He noted, "I will leave it to God, to work as he will, because he is just and merciful."³⁶ Soon after this plea another opening for the mission appeared. The Comanche elders agreed to hold a council to determine whether they would accept him as a missionary. Wahlstrom was afraid of making the trip out to their camp alone and got an acquaintance, a man named Clark, to come with him. The two of them also were uneasy and thought about bringing a schoolboy along with them as an interpreter, but the distances were too long. In the end they went out on their own. The process involved a long wait in the rain.

Wahlstrom rode out to the village again the next day, where the Comanche had slaughtered some oxen, and were in the process of making this momentous decision in a customary, proper way. While Wahlstrom waited, it continued to rain all day. Still no decision, and Wahlstrom went back to his quarters stopping also, strangely, to buy some arrows. Finally, an answer came the next day from Horseback, the chief, delivered by White Wolf to the missionary in waiting. "Since the white man can't stop sinning against the Great Spirit [killing all the Buffalo] the Comanche don't care to have any of the White Man's wisdom." Wahlstrom took this as a sign, which it clearly was, that he was not to be a missionary to this tribe. He noted, "Have you closed the door, Lord?"³⁷ The following days in May were filled with questions and fear. "Do you care about the Indian missionary, Lord?" followed by several lines describing the terrible sounds of the Indian drums and shouts. A child had died.³⁸

The refusal, with fear and doubt attending, marked the end of the Augustana mission to the Comanches.

REPORTING FAILURE

Wahlstrom headed back to Lindsborg, traveling by horse, cart, and then train, arriving on 16 June. His friend C. A. Swensson took him home, just in time to meet with his committee, which had also traveled to Lindsborg. The synod was meeting in Lindsborg that year; perhaps the original plan was to look in on the mission venture, but the interested synod would have to be satisfied instead with a report from the missionary. This, however, was very brief and did not get recorded in the official minutes of the ministerium's meeting. Wahlstrom gave an oral report, but collapsed after that. On 30 June his condition worsened, and for the next two weeks he drifted in and out of consciousness, under a doctor's care, until he revived on 13 July. At this point there was a turning, a resolution, which in his own words showed how intensely the missionary had been wrestling with God's call: "I laid down my call to the Indian mission and in my inner self said yes! to the call to St. Peter."³⁹ By the end of August he was on his way to his work as a professor. The very next year he was called as the president of the college. He had no doubt shown during that year that he would not crack under the strain of teaching young Minnesotans.

Wahlstrom's experience at his ordination and his brief career as a missionary to the Indians illustrate how the ideas and experience of revival and mission were understood within the Augustana Synod during the early years of the church, when the issues that would further split Mission Friends from Augustana Lutherans were still a shared discourse. Wahlstrom served for twenty-three years as president of the college in St. Peter. Mission enthusiasm did not disappear within Augustana circles, but work with Indians was not resumed. From Wahlstrom's diary we learn why. He was not well prepared for the work, he did not have sufficient financial support, and he did not have a community around him to give him a social environment where his wife Selma could be comfortable. In fact, he had so little training that the whole experiment seems somehow foolhardy, as if the synod had come upon the idea in the enthusiasm of a mission meeting. In reality, these impulses depended on a circle of pious supporters to confirm and strengthen the work of young students like Matthias Wahlstrom, who measured every low moment of his days

spent alone, brooding, against the heightened standard of mission meeting zeal.

Augustana kept the story of Wahlstrom's failure as a missionary quiet. Several years later, the synod issued a publication filled with stories about the various ministries and accomplishments of its brief history, including biographical descriptions of all the ministers and reports from all the committees. The 1893 *Jubel Album* included an article on the synods' foreign mission work, and also included information about work with the Indians. Johannes Telleen told the story of his earlier visits to Indian Territory in 1877, and included a few words about Wahlstrom:

We regret most highly that we cannot give a depiction of Prof. Wahlstrom's work among the Indians. No missionary has ever gone out who took their call any more seriously than he did, and it was surely his intent to spend his life for the salvation of the Indian. And we can be certain that he did not leave this path for any but the most binding reasons.⁴⁰

Telleen noted that Wahlstrom's health was bad, and that repeated attempts made through the government to request "their own tribe" failed. When there was no official contract with the government, the work invested would be lost as soon as another group, or another policy, or another missionary with the right connections came along. These practicalities had been spelled out to the synod's missions committee from the start, but Telleen was the one who in the end had to be dissuaded. It was probably the best outcome when Wahlstrom answered the call to be an educator. "A school man who combines capability in his field with a firm character, an inner fear of God, a trustworthy love of the church body, and a burning zeal to offer himself for the betterment of the youth, is a great gift of God to the congregations," Telleen concluded.⁴¹

Telleen's verdict on Wahlstrom's choice to become an educator spells out the choice that faced Augustana as the conflict between Mission Friends and Lutherans in the Swedish community deepened. Wahlstrom's missionary zeal came out of the mission meeting phenomenon that was an active part of the Augustana experience in the

1870s. With this failure on the missionary field, perhaps some of the excitement and sense of limitless possibility that moved through these meetings in Chicago and in Kansas also faded. Wahlstrom's failure was not only his own personal disappointment. The mission meeting supported and steeled him to answer the call. When he returned to Lindsborg and took up the work of a "school man," his energy and talent went into teaching and administration, the institutional work that built the denomination. Mission meetings continued in Kansas, Illinois, and also in Minnesota. The synod revised its constitution to provide for their regular occurrence in conferences and districts. Mission meetings became institutionalized to serve the purposes of the developing denomination, and were not places where pious impulses could result in the kind of risk-taking that consumed a year of Wahlstrom's young life, and nearly consumed his spirit.

Augustana's mission work in India, China, and Africa emerged a generation later, after a new missionary fervor arose at the colleges among students. Wahlstrom's ambivalence and confusion about mission contributed to a wiser and more sustainable course. The college and seminary had developed enough by that time to give the topic and initiative the kind of study and attention it deserved. The Augustana Synod also had better connections with the missionary movement. All those institutional developments mattered in the end for Augustana's mission. The same formal developments, however, made the free, spiritual relationships that sustained young preachers like Wahlstrom so much harder to maintain.

ENDNOTES

1. Of nine candidates who would be ordained, three had achieved the baccalaureate degree at the synod's college, two later became college presidents—at Bethany in Lindsborg, Kansas, and Gustavus Adolphus in Minnesota.

2. The decision to move from Paxton to Rock Island was unpopular because it was not far enough west or north for the center of Norwegian settlement in Minnesota, Iowa, and the Dakotas.

3. Matthias Wahlstrom, "Day Book," ELCA archives. There are a series of these day books that Wahlstrom kept throughout a long career, first as a missionary, then as a college professor and president, and finally as an administrator at Augustana Hospital in Chicago. Other items in his collection include corre-

spondence, addresses, and speeches to graduating classes at the college, at the nursing school in Chicago, and at the seminary in Rock Island.

4. *Protokoll-bok för Augustana-Synodens Missions Kommite*, Mission Archives, Day Missions Library, Yale Divinity School, passim. These minutes were discovered in 2003 by Paul Stuerenberg, librarian at the Yale Divinity School, and advertised on an internet site. He shared a copy of them with the author.

5. Wahlstrom's classmate described the pattern of piety that resulted from the influence of this pastor as a combination of Christian determination and a free, evangelical outlook on life. "Matthias Wahlstrom," in *Korsbanere* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1924), 161.

6. This is discussed more fully in Bernhard Erling, "Eric Norelius and Minnesota Anden, or the 'Minnesota Spirit,'" *Swedish-American Historical Quarterly* 51 (2000): 52-77.

7. Bengt Sundkler, *Svenska Missionssällskapet 1835-1876. Missionstankens genombrott och tidigare historia i Sverige* (Uppsala: Akademisk Avhandling, 1937), 111, 123, 135ff., 220ff., 285.

8. Cf. Maria Erling and Mark Granquist, *The Augustana Story* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), chap. 5.

9. Attended Fjellstedt's School: Nils Nordling '77, Anders Ostlin, '77, Carl Johan Scheleen '77, Gustaf Oscar Gustafson, Peter Johan Sanden, Ahlberg, ord. '78, John Ernest Nystrom, '79, Michael Ulrik Norberg '80, Ahlberg, Anders Palmstrom '77, John Torell '77, Erik J. Werner '80. Entries from Conrad Bergendoff, *The Augustana Ministerium: A Study of the Careers of the 2,504 Pastors of the Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Synod/Church 1850-1962* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Historical Society, 1980).

10. Karl A. Olsson, *By One Spirit* (Chicago Covenant Press, 1962), contains a sympathetic account (246f.).

11. Josephine Princell, J. G. *Princells Levnadsminnen* (Chicago: J. V. Martensons Trykeri, 1916), 90.

12. Maria Erling, *Crafting an Urban Piety: New England's Swedish Immigrants and their Religious Culture, 1880-1915*, unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Harvard Divinity School, 1995, 122f.

13. Wahlstrom, "Day Book," 2.

14. Olsson, *By One Spirit*, 199ff., discusses the development of the mission house at the Immanuel congregation in Chicago, where Erland Carlsson was pastor, as a separately incorporated institution as early as 1870. It is perhaps this Mission Friend congregation that Wahlstrom attended since he used the name "mission house" for the place. Princell did not maintain ecclesial relationships with Mission Friends after their institutional formation in 1885. He retained a free church/mission identity in separately organized congregations.

15. *Ibid.*, 214ff.

16. Telleen's initiatives in promoting mission in the Augustana Synod are mentioned briefly in George Hall, *The Augustana Missionary Spirit* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Historical Society Publications, 1984), 58, 152f.

17. More on this earlier removed tribe and the complex social dynamics among the displaced Native American Peoples in Kansas and Oklahoma is in Stephen Warren, *The Shawnees and Their Neighbors, 1795-1870* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 72f.

18. *Protokoll-bok*, 145-55.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Wahlstrom, "Day Book," 12-17.

21. *Ibid.*, 17, emphasis in the original.

22. Wahlstrom to Norelius, 27 Aug 1879 (2), from the private collection of Helene Leaf, copy to Maria Erling.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Wahlstrom, "Day Book," 34, 37.

25. *Ibid.*, 33-44, where this misery and mounting anxiety is recounted.

26. *Ibid.*, 44.

27. *Ibid.*, 46.

28. *Ibid.*, 47.

29. *Ibid.*, 52.

30. *Ibid.*, 62.

31. *Ibid.*, 65.

32. *Ibid.*, 102.

33. *Ibid.*, 106.

34. Wahlstrom to Norelius, 11 May 1880, letter in private collection of Helene Leaf.

35. Wahlstrom, "Day Book," 118.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, 126.

38. *Ibid.*, 128.

39. *Ibid.*, 141.

40. C. A. Swensson and L. G. Abrahamson, *Jubel-Album tillegnat Augustana Synoden* (Chicago, 1893), 201.

41. *Ibid.*