

Augustana in the East

Maria Erling

Our Valedictory event is upon us, calling all of us to a time of gratitude and thanksgiving for the wonderful church and community that has formed us as Swedish Lutheran American citizens. We are not all the same, but we are grateful that we hail from a church that has fostered community and unity and a sense of mission out of our own diverse origins and experiences.

We have a theme to orient us, and it has to do with how Augustana had a special story to tell in the Eastern United States – the whole eastern seaboard, from Maine to Florida – had Augustana congregations. Not so many in the south, of course, since immigration to that region was not popular during the 19th century due to the social and economic consequences of slavery. That is also a story to tell, but today I will only mention it in the context of the vast reality of immigration to the United States and what it meant for us. Because our experience with immigration is extremely relevant to the world we live in today. And I want to talk about it in this message to you who are gathering because of how relevant our Augustana story remains as a model to guide us as we continue to participate in and contribute to our American society. In the Eastern states as well as in the Midwest, much of the Swedish American story is the same. Poverty is an important part of the immigration story for Swedish Americans. So is opportunity. Push and pull factors are studied by historians and sociologists. What pushed young people to decide to emigrate from Sweden? What pulled them to America? Family ties suffered; family ties were strengthened through immigration. But people made their choices and experienced loneliness, determination, loss, and success. There is no one pattern for Swedish immigration, but there is a common experience of being forced to adapt to a new culture and to make the

choices at every turn: what can I keep with me from the homeland, and what must I leave behind. Immigrants need to adapt, but they also need resilience in the new combative environment they faced. Spiritual resources were necessary for survival.

On my sister's shelf there is a token of this difficult process. My father passed on a little doll that belonged to my great grandmother Elisabeth, who immigrated to Madrid, Iowa with her parents in the 1860s. But she had left her doll behind in Sweden. It was a doll that showed the improvisation of a poor rural family. They used a wooden spindle for the body, painting it blue, and fastened a porcelain head upon it. My great grandmother came with her family from Lövånger, in northern Sweden. When she had to leave her doll behind with a boy cousin, he promised to keep careful charge of it, and he did. He passed it on to his descendants, who gave it to my father when he visited relatives in Sweden almost one hundred years later in the 1950s.

It is a precious thing for us to have a physical tie to our family. Here in this room there are different kinds of treasures that evoke strong feelings of belonging. We all have stories about the immigrant passage that are sometimes not more than a fleeting comment, or a fragment of a vision. Still, even these small tales are worth passing on to our children, and grandchildren, and great grandchildren. These personal, intimate family stories make us human, and they help us empathize with all the migrants and refugees in our world today. These emblems of leaving home and arriving in America exist at what historians call the 'granular level' and so many of them, by the 4th generation might seem quaint, and not so important, but I want you to know that these objects and stories and habits that we keep do have a power to unite us, and they give us a greater capacity for linking our Swedish American story to the stories of other peoples. When we tell our Scandinavian epics at this human level, we become one with all the peoples who have

ever suffered and strived for something better for their families. And the Augustana people have so many stories to strengthen them.

So another story, this time about my daughter who came with me to one of our gatherings, I think in Rock Island, when she was 10 years old. We sang a bedtime song to her every night in Swedish – *Gud som haver barnen kär* – and also a song from the Augustana hymnal, *Jesus Tender Shepherd hear me*, so that she knew it by heart. When we were enjoying our hymn sing, we sang *Jesus Tender Shepherd*, and my daughter looked up at me with surprise. Something she thought only belonged to her, and mom and dad, and her sister, was a song that a whole lot of people could sing. Our family habit connected her to a community. A church.

Childhood memories shape us in many ways and these gatherings help us recognize that we share so many things with people we didn't think we knew, who have also passed on the same practices to their children. So Augustana continues to strengthen us in our families. But also in our spirit for living in these days. Augustana people like to gather because they understand each other's sense of humor, the hymns remind them of their Luther League years, and the speakers know how to get them to their feet.

Not all Augustana congregations were the same. Augustana's diversity is an important element in its success as a church. If every part of the church was in lock step it would be impossible for creativity to flourish. So it has been our experience as a Swedish American immigrant community that there are many dimensions to our experience, but also many things that call us to a united purpose. In our own history it is clear that in Minnesota Swedish immigrants vied with Norwegians, which made Minnesota Swedes more pious; in New England and the rest of the Northeast, Augustana Lutherans were more urban and used to a bit more

religious and ethnic diversity. Mission Friend/Covenanters in New England were aligned with the Congregationalists, too, so that they experienced a social status boost that the Lutherans had to admire. At the same time the Northeastern Augustana churches liked their liturgy and expected their pastors to dress the part.

Eastern Augustana Lutherans did not feel separated from the rest of the Augustana synod. They were not isolated in their difference, but enriched the whole. That is a lesson for our time. Diversity is a gift.

How were Eastern Augustana Lutherans different from the rest? One important difference was that they entered into a society that had been built by others – older immigrants from Britain, France, Germany, Ireland, and the Netherlands, had established the economic and social conditions that Swedish immigrants had to accept. Of course there was the old Swedish colony on the Delaware that many Swedish Americans have lifted up, partly to say to American xenophobes in the 1930s that Swedes were also colonial Americans, and to stoke their ethnic pride. That was in the day when the DAR was important to American identity. There have been other times in our American history when politicians tried to make us afraid of immigrants. We need to remember that the Swedish Colony on the Delaware, with its large proportion of Finns, gives us an anchor in the longer American story, but we were in a little boat. It lasted for 14 years until it was overcome by the Dutch colonial powers, and Swedish American and Finnish settlers in the 17th century formed congregations that today are Episcopalian, for that was the way you worshipped in colonial times. The colonial authorities were the church authorities. Religious diversity could undermine political life, so settlers went along with what the authorities told them to do, even in religious matters.

Urban, Working Class Congregations

Midwestern Augustana settlement can be characterized as largely rural. Congregations were strongly connected to the farming economy. And the work of shaping an immigrant church community was a joint effort that included a strong role for the several Swedish American colleges in Minnesota, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, and Kansas. College presidents were leaders in Augustana's Midwestern strongholds, and they were well known in the congregations too, through the many newspapers, conferences, meetings, and speaking tours that they conducted. They had to raise money, of course, but they made every Augustana congregation in the Midwest aware of the important role that the college could play in their lives. And sons and daughters went to the colleges, and forged strong ties.

The Augustana congregations and their colleges in the Midwest stand out today as survivors in the educational landscape of the country, and have contributed to a flourishing of the arts in the Midwestern states, and also to a greater sense of civic responsibility in the governance of their states. The pattern for Eastern Augustana was different from the Midwest, in large part because there was only one Augustana college in the Eastern states, Upsala, in East Orange, New Jersey, and there were no other Scandinavian colleges in the Eastern States at all. No Norwegian, Danish, or Finnish school shared in the work of educating Scandinavians in Eastern states. The college landscape was already formed before Upsala was founded in 1893.

Augustana synod congregations in the East were fervent supporters of their college, but the congregational experience across the Northeast was as closely connected with the college culture as was true further west. Kim Eric-Williams has shown how the merger into the LCA in the early 1960s affected the support given by congregations to Upsala. With new synodical and

district boundaries, the traditional constituencies that had supported the college were cut off from a direct relationship. This spelled the end of Upsala, which succumbed to debt in the 1990s.

Upsala was an outpost, and it should be held in honor in this final valedictory event.

The Midwestern model of a strong college connected to the church has created a framework for looking at the Eastern Augustana experience and to find it wanting because the college in New Jersey did not measure up to Gustavus Adolphus, Augustana, Luther, or Bethany, in making its mark on the wider society. The pattern was different in the East because it was not centered on a college, but instead on systems and societies that gathered the lay people, men, women, and youth, into service for the church. The Eastern Lutheran Augustana people were formed by the Luther League, the Lutheran Student Association [especially for students at public colleges and Universities, and the Ivies], and by the Lutheran Layman's movement, and especially by the Women's Missionary Society of the Augustana Synod. These societies were important to the adult men and women of the congregations in New England, the Mid-Atlantic, and in the South because they had a direct relevance to their working lives, and because these groups forged important ties with their synod, and because Eastern Augustana congregations were able to use their connections in the East to good advantage. Eastern Augustana Lutherans were leaders thus became important representatives and leaders in the church's mission to serve their whole society.

Augustana Lutherans stayed connected with each other because of the accidents in their history that created congregations in Northwestern Pennsylvania and in New York. I discovered when I was researching *The Augustana Story* that this connectedness made a very big difference for Augustana's ability to reach out and serve their communities. You can read about this in the

history book, so I won't repeat all the details, but it is important to recognize that Augustana people were not disabled by ongoing doctrinal disputes as were Norwegians, Danes, and German Lutherans. It was a blessing to have one seminary, to have annual gatherings, and to share pastors across the country. To have one Luther League, to enjoy one liturgy, to experience one hymnal. All these things contributed to unity. But another element was the willingness Augustana men showed, before any of the other immigrant Lutheran men, to overcome their paternalism and facing down opposition, to support the petition of the Augustana women who wanted to organize their own Women's Missionary Society.

Eastern Lutheran women in Pennsylvania and Ohio, in the General Synod, to support overseas missionary work in India organized a Women's Missionary Society in the 1860s. Augustana women knew of the work done by General Synod women in Illinois, during the brief time that Hasselquist, Carlsson, Esbjörn, and Norelius were a part of the General Synod. Eva Carlsson organized a sewing circle to support missionary work at Immanuel Lutheran in Chicago, and Emmy Carlsson Ewald, a consummate organizer alongside Anna Swensson, fostered the network that evolved into a forceful Augustana Missionary society once their husbands, CA Swenson and Carl Ewald, pressed forward their urgent request in the synod meeting, where permission to organize came in 1892, in Lindsborg, Kansas. Once the women were organized, Augustana gained an infrastructure that mobilized congregations to learn about and serve the world outside their own neighborhoods.

Congregations in the Eastern United States had just begun to form when these actions in Kansas occurred. Upsala College started the very next year, in 1893, making Augustana the church that presented a meaningful response to the surge of new Swedish immigrants to the

Northeastern parts of the United States. They came to work in factories, and in private homes as serving girls. The immigrants may have been from the country in Sweden, but more and more also came from factory towns in Sweden. They were workers and serving girls who formed congregations, went to lodge meetings, sang in male choruses, put on plays, marched in parades, spouted off in ethnic newspapers, created sewing circles, held bake sales, and otherwise participated in a rich secular and religious social life. Augustana Lutherans enjoyed themselves, but they found ways to make a difference, for the good.

Jamestown, New York, Worcester, Massachusetts, Brooklyn, New York, New Britain Connecticut, Pittsburgh, PA, East Orange, NJ, in these and many other places throughout the eastern states flourishing Augustana congregations participated in a diverse society. Through congregations, working class women and men learned the attitudes and skills they needed to become productive members of their communities. Religious groups like Augustana congregations were not the only places where Swedish immigrants learned leadership skills. Especially in the Eastern United States, and in urban areas, a wide diversity of choices for entertainment and service made for a vibrant and competitive immigrant society.

The church, however, provided a much wider horizon for Augustana's men and women as they adjusted to their American future. And one of the most important partners for the Augustana Church were the strong Lutheran synods in the East, which in 1917 formed the United Lutheran Church in America. Augustana was asked to join them when the three groups that had split during and just after the Civil War at last came together again. Augustana however declined, believing that they still had a specific mission to perform for the still growing Swedish immigrant community. During the World War immigration was cut off, but it picked up again

during the 20s. Swedish was still a living language for Augustana, and especially so in the newer immigrant congregations in the East. So Augustana's leaders stayed separate from the ULCA merger.

But the Augustana women did not break their longstanding ties with Eastern Lutheran women leaders that they had formed through the Lutheran Women's Missionary movement. The ULCA's women were organized under the banner of the missionary movement, just as Augustana's women, but the Eastern Lutherans had a generation of experience to add to Augustana's. [The other Lutheran groups saw what Augustana and the Eastern Lutheran women accomplished, and beginning in 1903 started to encourage their women to organize missionary societies, until by 1939 even the Missouri Synod had granted permission to their women to organize.] The ULCA as the elder sister of this effort, fostered a diverse and impressive group of women who had become professional leaders, and some who broke the stained glass ceiling and worked professionally for the church in its executive offices. One of them, Mary Markley, had responsibilities to oversee the expanding scope of women's vocations, guiding the many women who attended the Lutheran colleges across the nation, recruiting and interviewing candidates for nursing and medical school, and for service in the mission field.

Mary Markley's position in the education department of the ULCA was responsible for a broad range of work that women performed for the church. The Women's Missionary Society movement birthed many endeavors beyond the foreign mission field. One of its most important consequences was the education of women at colleges, in congregations, in conferences, and the newspapers produced by and for women. Even organizing a group in a congregation resulted in gains for local women. They learned to speak, to raise and track money, to make program

choices, to write articles, and to run for office. Each of these tasks seem quite modest to us today; as modern women we are used to see a woman speaking to a public audience, and now even running for president. We could say, without stretching too far, that the concern of women for their sisters overseas led them to organize to support missionary work. Their preparation in congregations and colleges raised up a generation of capable leaders across the church. Theirs was an amazing accomplishment that contributed to the driving force alongside the work of the pastors and lay men that built the Augustana Church.

Such powerful work created a women's missionary society politics, too. I do not want you to think that the women were saints! Emmy Evald's grip on the leadership of the society made for some very tense moments. Matilda Peterson, the Mrs. Peter Peterson who took up the presidency after Mrs. Evald was finally ready to hand it over, wrote a confidential letter that you can learn a lot from, and so did Doris Spong. They wrote to Mary Markley, who kept these things in her files, and who knew that historians and the people of the church would need to know this history, too, to really know their church.

I want to give you an example of the kinds of experiences the church afforded young women, and how professional leadership for women was cultivated. This is a letter written by a young woman to Mary Markley after her attendance at a conference in St. Peter, Minnesota, at Gustavus Adolphus College in March, 1931. Esther Johnson was preparing for missionary service, but also coaching other young college 'girls' or women. The letter was written, of course, during the depression, and this young woman, Esther Johnson, hailed from Chicago. Mary Markley lived in Washington DC, [March 14, 1931]

Dear. Dr. Markley

I certainly have an apology to offer to you for not writing sooner and giving you a report on my findings at the fourth Christian Conference at St. Peter. The first breathing spell I have had since my return from the conference has been the past two days.

It was rather difficult to get an expression from the girls as to their reactions. The following are my findings, however:

- Many felt that you should have had at least four periods. They were just beginning to warm up, it seems, when it was over.*
- Several thought the group too large but realized that it could not be avoided in a conference of that size.*
- Others states that they received so much from you in their private conference.*
- Still others, and a very few, did not seem to be able to use the suggestions you offered but are the kind that must have someone decide their life's calling for them.*

On the whole, I believe, that all of them felt that they received much from you and what you gave can be applied to any calling and be of benefit in deciding whether or not that particular vocation is desirable for that particular individual. I personally fell that the subject could not have been handled in any better manner. I am using many of your suggestions in giving advice to girls who come to me.

You may recall that I asked your advice relative to giving talks during the months before I sail. I am so grateful to you for your advice. Next Wednesday I speak at a Women's Mission meeting, the middle of April to a group of girls and in May to a mixed group. I only wish, Dr. Markley, that I had your poise and your ability and I wouldn't hesitate, but shall make the best of it. I have read several books on Africa. Now I must get

my material assembled.

I am trying, during my leisure hours, to get the necessary equipment for my long stay abroad. It is a bigger task than I anticipated especially so since we have to furnish a home, and to do that when you are thousands of miles from that home and have no idea as to kind, size, etc., I must confess, it will be some experience.

I would so enjoy hearing from you if you ever have time. I do hope I will be able to see you again before I leave. I can't tell you how happy I was to make your acquaintance and may I take this means of thanking you so much for your kind words to me and your understanding advice. Esther C Johnsson,

This letter from Esther to Mary Markley tells us that, even though Lutheran unity lay far in the future, women relied on each other in the several churches to advance leadership preparation for the sake of the church. In the synod meetings, women did not speak or participate, and times when a young woman like Esther would actually hear a woman address a public gathering were few and far between. Women's missionary work was a special exception to this rule of exclusion. Because women were trying to reach other women in the non-Christian lands, it was necessary for women to be educated as professionals and to seek credentials, in order to follow their Christian calling.

The many Lutheran colleges in the Midwest thus provided an environment where young Lutheran women came in contact with an older generation of women who had organized and galvanized the women of the church in service to the missionary cause. In the Augustana circles the church based connections with the women of the United Lutheran Church were never completely severed, even after Augustana decided against joining the United Lutheran Church in

1918. These women had too much to lose, and they retained the important organizational network forged through their society work. Mary Markley, Mildred Winston, who worked to recruit young women for church wide vocations kept up the ties with Augustana women. Esther Johnsson responded and reminds us of the power of personal connection and how important it is to encourage young people in their vocations. In a practical way the women in our congregations, especially in the East, showed a desire for service that pushed their churches to do the hard work of ironing out doctrinal and theological differences. These women provide a standard of excellence for us today.

The church gathers and the world looks on. Do we give the people reason to think that we will also do something for them? Is what we do for us alone? Are we building walls around ourselves or bridges to each other? The true test of our Christian citizenship is whether the poor, the neglected, the marginalized, see us and feel from us a reason for hope. Mountain top experiences that we have at these gatherings are provided by the spirit so that we can be equipped, each of us in our families, congregations, neighborhoods, and friendship circles, to spread the energy to do more, hope more, serve more.

This weekend our presiding bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, urges us to begin to foster relationships with congregations and people of a different race or language. The AME churches who suffered the tragedy in Charleston, SC last year want us to make this anniversary the start of a season of building relationships beyond the walls of our own denomination or race. I am sure that Augustana's Eastern Lutheran congregations, and especially their women leaders have sent their spirit to us to urge us forward at this time.

Thank you for your attention. My love for Augustana runs so deep, and is such a

cherished part of who I am, thanks to the wonderful guidance of my father, who was an Augustana pastor. And in my congregation in St. Peter I learned from Augustana pastors, Millard Ahlstrom, Herbert Chilstrom, Dennis Johnson, and when I went to college in Rock Island, and then to New England the numbers of Augustana pastors I met kept growing. They already knew my family. The many, many Augustana pastors, women, families keep growing in number through the living network of story and memory kept in motion through these gatherings. As I write this, my father is dying, and the Augustana hymnal is our solace, as is also the ELW, and the Swedish Psalmbok, and Hemlandsånger, and so many other gifts God gives us in these times. As we give thanks for what Augustana has meant to us as a family, we are joyful also because what Augustana has given us, in the end, is what the Holy Spirit gives us: encouragement and a willing spirit. God be praised.