

11-1-2005

Pulpits of the past: a record of closed Lutheran churches in Saskatchewan--up to 2003

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Recommended Citation

Reinhardt, Clifford (2005) "Pulpits of the past: a record of closed Lutheran churches in Saskatchewan--up to 2003," *Consensus*: Vol. 30 : Iss. 2 , Article 18.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol30/iss2/18>

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Clinton writes in a very engaging style rather than the ponderous meanderings of many other professional historians. Her solid expertise in the field of antebellum slavery provides the foundation for this fine biography. Clinton creates a solid background within the political and social culture of the times that allows the elusive Tubman to come alive. Above all, she uses other material, both written and oral, to recover the words and action of this larger than life conductor of the Underground Railroad and army officer during the Civil War. We come to know Tubman as courageous and resourceful, as a militant for full freedom and equality for blacks and women and as a powerful charismatic prophet and mystic at the very heart of the Christian tradition. Combined with this overall social background and the reconstruction of Tubman's personal journey is a superb and detailed reconstruction of the networks that fed Tubman materially and spiritually, including the well-known historical figures Frederick Douglass, Gerrit Smith, William Seward, John Brown, Susan B. Anthony and Sojourner Truth.

Thanks go to Dr. Catherine Clinton for a solid and inspirational biography of a most seminal figure in the history of American and Christian liberation.

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Pulpits of the Past: A Record of Closed Lutheran Churches in Saskatchewan – up to 2003

Lois Knudson Munholland
Strasbourg, SK: Three West Two South Books, 2004
296 pages, \$30.00 Softcover

Unlike most of the books in my library, *Pulpits of the Past* has no immediate bearing upon Biblical research, theology, or the practice of ministry. Yet, when looking for some intriguing distraction from routine, I find myself drawn to it time and again. There is something about these chronicles of congregational life – and institutional death – that holds my fascination. It might be the pathos suggested by the necessarily brief summaries of those Prairie congregations, or the

poignant glimpses of pioneer life. Or maybe I find this book so compelling because there's some Saskatchewan dirt under the fingernails of this British Columbia boy.

Rev. Lois Knudson Munholland, a Saskatchewan-born pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, has organized her book into two sections. The first (and by far the larger of the two) documents congregations, while the second covers preaching points. In each section, the entries are presented in alphabetical order by the name of the village, town, or city with which the congregation or preaching point was associated. Because my knowledge of Saskatchewan's geography is somewhat sketchy, I find this arrangement a little frustrating. I have to pull out maps in order to get a clearer idea of the specific location. Even then I may remain in the dark when congregations are identified by district names that do not appear on typical road maps. However, I acknowledge that Knudson Munholland had to find some way to organize a tremendous amount of information, and the scheme she settled on is probably the best.

It is also to her credit that she documents congregations of every Lutheran body that was ever represented in Saskatchewan. (Some of those exist still today, while others have become part of larger national church bodies through mergers.) All of this is presented in a paradigmatic way that enhances the value of the book as a reference work. Munholland also includes appendices in which she identifies major sources (she names minor or local sources in connection with their respective entries).

A compendium of institutional history could make for very dry reading, but the author manages to maintain the reader's interest. One will certainly find information of a more statistical nature – like dates, sums of money, lists of pastors, number of baptisms, etc. – but one is also treated to anecdotal tidbits that reflect the nature of life in rural communities and small congregations.

For example, Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Percival, was organized in 1897 by the dauntless Pastor Svante Udden of the Minnesota Conference of the Augustana Synod. (188) This congregation of Swedish immigrants resolved to have its own facility fashioned after “the church in Stockholm.” This was accomplished by pledged volunteer labour, but apparently people did not always follow through on their commitments, for “it was decided that if anyone failed to do his pledged work, he would be fined \$1 for each summer day he

missed, and \$0.50 for each winter day.” Nevertheless, within two years the building was ready for use, serving the congregation until 1947 when it became structurally unsafe. The congregation struggled for another 10 years before disbanding.

Christ Lutheran Church (Ohio Synod) of South Earl Grey, on the other hand, was short lived. (76) Organized in 1908, it disbanded 2-1/2 years later, with its members then joining St. John’s Lutheran in Fairy Hill. Still, in its short life, the institution provided faithful ministry, including baptisms, confirmations, marriages, and funerals.

The meagerness of pioneer life is poignantly depicted by the story of St. Olaf Lutheran Church (at first Lutheran Free Church and later Norwegian Lutheran Church of America), Govan. (91) At first the fledgling congregation planned to build a sod facility, but then expanded its vision to a wood-frame structure when a canvass of the district indicated sufficient support. In 1959, the building was destroyed by a tornado and was never rebuilt. By that time, St. Olaf’s congregation had ceased to exist.

While the stories for some of the institutions are reasonably complete and satisfying, in other cases I found myself yearning for more information. No doubt, this unevenness is due to the varying quality of Knudson Munholland’s sources. But even where no apparent reasons are given, one can safely infer familiar dynamics for the founding and dissolution of these institutions. Somehow it seems fitting that so many of the stories conclude with a commitment by the remnants of the congregations to tend their cemeteries, even though buildings and institutions have disappeared.

As the teaser on the outside back cover indicates, *Pulpits of the Past* documents the rise and fall of more than 700 communities of Lutherans in the province of Saskatchewan. I wish Knudson Munholland had commented on this staggering figure, but nowhere does she reflect on the facts. (I can guess at some factors: the homestead policies of the Canadian government and the Canadian Pacific Railway; the necessity of a church for each localized community in the pioneering era; ethnic and ecclesiastical parochialism; the double devastations of drought and economic depression; and the gradual depopulation of a vast countryside that was arguably over-populated initially and has since been dehumanized by farm technology and international markets.) Likewise, I found some of the entries disappointingly terse, but I suspect that this is due to incomplete records rather than any authorial lapses.

Despite some shortcomings, *Pulpits of the Past* is a remarkable record of Lutheranism in Saskatchewan. It is impressive for its sheer scope and attention to detail, and it serves as a witness to the faith – and foibles – of a courageous pioneering society. I recommend it to anyone who wishes to gain deeper understanding of the church in western Canada.

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Preaching God's Compassion

Leroy H. Aden and Robert G. Hughes
Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002
176 pages, \$20.26 Softcover

Preachers preparing sermons for moments of pastoral import will find in the pages of this book helpful guides for the journey. Why do I say “guides”? Guides are needed to take us beyond the beaten path to venture something new: a sermon that speaks to needs that arise out of sync with the calendars we normally live by. Aden and Hughes help us attend to matters we all know: even in the great fifty days of Easter, people can experience profound loss or grief; even in Christmas (perhaps especially so), people fail; even on sunny September Tuesdays of “ordinary time”, extraordinary death and terror can hem our hearers about with fear. The authors help us to speak in such moments when a departure from the prescribed calendars may just be called for. They are not the norm. Yet, as pastors know all too well, they are the interruptions we call “ministry.”

What makes these two guides so interesting is their differing specialties. Hughes is a homiletician and an able preacher. Aden taught pastoral theology with him at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. By combining their skills, they multiply the benefits to their readers. Too often, theological disciplines talk past each other as if the pastor who offered care on Monday to Saturday was almost a different person from the one who preached on Sunday. By showing