

The Pillars of Swedish Heritage in Oregon—The Churches

The background...



The English Christian writer C.S. Lewis wrote this very beautiful , positive and enlightened statement about Christianity:

“I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else”.

This beautiful and hopeful Christian message stands, in many ways, in stark contrast to the immigrants situation in Sweden, in the beginning of the great emigration wave that started in late 1800, where it was illegal to engage in any private religious study outside of the State Church sponsorship. The ministers (präster) of the Church of Sweden were civil servants. Besides their religious duties these ministers (präster) kept the citizenship and tax records, and functioned as a local representative of government and “upper classes” power that was often used for their purposes. This state system was prone to abuse and stagnation and many Swedes, both clergy and laity, sought to reform and renew the church.

This was the religious background the Swedish immigrants had when they came to America. They were officially Lutherans, but many were unhappy with the State Church Christianity in Sweden and sought different forms of religious expressions were they could find happiness in their faith. Some found that other forms of Protestantism were more to their liking, and they formed Swedish Baptist and Swedish Methodist groups, which in turn exported these movements back to Sweden.



Difficult Goodbye



Farewell to Sweden
in Gothenburg

The stories...

David Wetzell, was leading the Christian Church, at Rodney Avenue in 1889, when he submitted a remarkable report to the Christian Standard newspaper.

“Portland, April 18, I made a discovery. I have found a church and preacher in the city of Portland set for the primitive faith.. Yesterday the minister of the Swedish Church came to parsonage accompanied by an interpreter to inquire why we called ourselves Disciples of Christ or Christians. We had not talked ten minutes until I discovered that I was talking to a most intelligent man, and Bro. Devold, a worthy collaborator of his. This Bro. Erickson has been preaching to his countrymen in this city for about a year, during which time he has taken the confessions of some 20, and now has a congregation of something more than that number.

They meet in a nice room which will seat probably a hundred, carpeted and well lighted.

In company with Bro. Hyström who preaches for our people on the east side, I went to their meeting last night, and Bro. Hyström spoke a few words to them in their own tongue (Swedish), and I made a short talk in English, and a more joyous little gathering I ever saw.

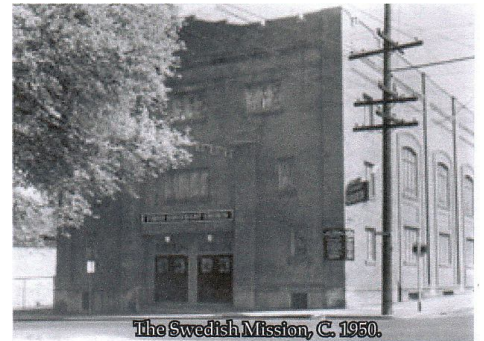
They didn't know that the American had a church of like faith in Portland.”



"I heard Bro. Erickson preach last night and while I could understand but little he said, I do not hesitate to pronounce him a fine preacher and a magnificent man. There are nearly 4,000 Scandinavians in the city of Portland and Bro. Erickson is the man to work among them. The larger percentage of them are poor people, which was the profile of most immigrants, but more intelligent and upright class of people cannot be found".

A Swedish historical source says the group was established in 1887 and a new Mission Church was built in 1912 at the corner of NW Glisan and 17th Avenue replacing the original mission church.

This is one of the early "Pillars of Swedish Heritage" built by the Swedish Churches in Portland, to support the spiritual needs of Swedish immigrants.



The Swedish Mission, C. 1950.

Building the community and places for worship...

The immigrants world was not an easy world to live in, no different from today perhaps, but they had to deal with lack of education and language skills that limited their possibilities to live a functional and happy life in American society. They struggle with the unknown, the homesickness for the familiarity of the land and community they left behind....

*Oh, dear native land,
to which I so often long and yearn.
This Nordic childhood home,
it is so beautiful in my mind.*

*Oh, little cabin, which meant so much to me,
when will I get to see you again?
As I walk here crying for myself,
you are such an innocent memory.*

*There is no other place on earth,
more beloved than one's childhood home.
Oh, how I long to return to the North,
yes, how gladly I would walk back home.*

From, *The Emigrant's Homesickness* (Samuel Magnus Hill/"Mellen bakker och bjerg invid havet" (between hills and mountains by the sea), Augustana College S. M. Hill Collection, Box 4, folder 4, and SRIO book "Swedish Oregon")

Belonging to a church played a significant role among Swedish immigrants for their development of contacts, relationships and to serve their spiritual needs as they were still a very religious people.

In news letters published in *Oregon Posten*, the Swedish weekly newspaper published in Portland, the items and reports concerning the churches that stand out with considerable prominence. One report relative to Colton Swedish Lutheran Church stated that, *"it is the Swedes who built up this community and it is the little church and the faithful congregation that has functioned as the unifying bond which has made accomplishments possible".*

Wherever a group of Swedes settled, small though it was, very shortly a church spire, or even several of them, would rise.

Building the Churches and Congregations...

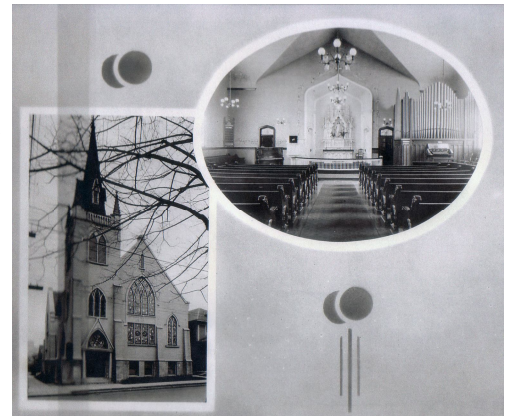
In 1840s and 1850s various Swedish American leaders began religious activities among their fellow immigrants. Notable denominations included: Episcopalian; Methodist; Baptist; and Lutherans. In 1851 the Swedish American Lutherans was organized as part of American Lutheran denomination, but they later broke away to form the independent Augustana Synod, the largest religious group in Swedish America. The growth of these groups was fueled by the waves of Swedish immigrants after 1865, and the denominations struggled to keep up with the demand for pastors and congregations.

The Augustana Synod practiced a Lutheranism influenced by Pietism. Other immigrants thought that Augustana was still too Lutheran, and sought a freer type of Christian organization that relied more heavily on Pietist traditions. This resulted in a break-up among various groups within Augustana and Lutherism, resulting in two other Swedish American denominations, the Swedish Mission Covenant Church (1885) and the Swedish Evangelical Free Church (1884). These two groups, along with the Lutherans, Methodists, and Baptists were the largest religious groups in the Swedish American community.

There are several prominent and active churches in Portland having Swedish roots:

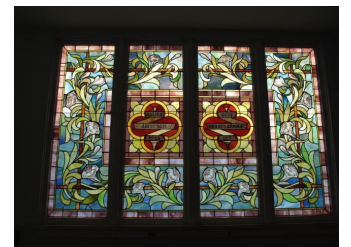
First Immanuel Lutheran Church.

Immanuel Lutheran's first sanctuary was erected in 1886, at Burnside and Tenth. In that sanctuary the Columbia Conference of the Augustana Lutheran Church was organized in 1893. Later during the Rev. Carl J. Reinhardt's pastorate (1904-1910), who succeeded the well-known Rev. J. W. Skans that died in 1904, the present sanctuary was built at southeast corner of NW Irving St. and NW 19th Avenue. and was dedicated in September 1905. The twentieth-century church in Gothic style features a tall-center spire. The sanctuary's stained glass windows represent a number of Christian symbols in memory of various former members of the congregation and include numerous Swedish inscriptions. The congregation now consisted of 500 members.



The church interior is designed in the "classical Lutheran austere" style with a beautiful altar piece that reminded the immigrants of the churches in the land they left behind.

Many stained glass windows have Swedish text in them, such as: First Immanuel Church continues to provide the Swedish community with Swedish holiday events such as ***Julotta*** which is a Swedish service held early on Christmas morning (*otta* is the time which is slightly before dawn). The ***Julotta*** service is held in the Swedish tongue, and is frequented by the Swedish community.



Window toward the West.



Altar piece

**Saliga
äro de, som
höra**

**Blessed
are they
who hear**

**Guds
ord och
gömma
det
God's Word
and
Observe it**



Temple Baptist Church.

The “mother” church of the Pacific Northwest’s Baptists, is Temple Baptist Church at 1319 NE Seventh. Baptists began meeting in 1875, but on January 1, 1884, the First Scandinavian Baptist Church of Portland was organized by Gustaf Liljeröth which came to be officially recognized as the founding of the First Scandinavian Baptist Church of Portland. Rev. Olaus Okerson, born in Norra Vram parish, Skåne, Sweden, is known as the early leader of Swedish Baptists in the Northwest.

Baptists in Sweden were at that time harassed by the state church clergy, molested by hoodlums, haunted and jailed by the civil authorities. Okerson was one of many Baptists who left for America in increasingly large numbers.

He was the Temple Church pastor in 1883-1884. He considered himself to be a founder of churches rather than a long-term pastor. He wrote, *"I believe that God has sent me here---and now I go out to break the ground in order that others may come after me to water and reap."* The sanctuary, built in Classical style and featuring external Ionic columns, was dedicated in 1927, and renovated in 1973. Even today as Temple Baptist Church, the Swedish roots are still very evident. Underneath the large sign above the steps to the front doors that announces “Temple Baptist Church”, as well as on the building cornerstone, is inscribed *"Swedish Baptist Temple."*



Temple Baptist Church 1927



Inside Temple Baptist Church 1927

Augustana Lutheran Church

Augustana, at 2710 NE 14th Avenue, was founded in 1906 as a Swedish Lutheran congregation of immigrants to the USA. It began as the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Augustana Congregation of Portland, Oregon. From its inception it has been an intentional part of the community surrounding it.

The first wooden church was built on the corner of NE Rodney and Stanton in 1906 and served the growing congregation until 1950 when the current brick building was built and dedicated. A 500-pound, 29-inch Peace Bell, built by the Verdin Company, was installed in the 58-year-old bell tower. In 2007 Augustana completed its centennial year and when the time capsule was unearthed there was a letter from 1906 which proudly declared that the women of Augustana had the same voting rights as the men on church affairs (even though women did not get the right to vote nationally until 1920).

Augustana has changed over the years, moving from all services and classes in Swedish to English only in 1932. Christian education for the young has been an ongoing effort of Augustana with Sunday School and Confirmation still offered, as well as continuing Adult Education which began in 1932.

The Swedish School of Portland, founded in 1996, is located at Augustana Church where they give classes in Swedish to children.



Church at
Rodney & Stanton



Church at 2710 NE 14th



Swedish Mission Church

Walking down NW Glisan Street at 17th offers few hints about the intriguing past of the Mission Theater. The building's straightforward, brick construction and fortress-like entryway make it appear more like an armory than a theater. The Mission Theater was not originally built as a theater, *but as a church!*

For over 40 years it was the religious and social center of Portland's humble and devout Swedish Mission Covenant congregation. This building, now listed in the National Register of Historic Places, was dedicated by the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant Church of Portland on February 18, 1912. The auditorium features a U-shaped balcony, its facade decorated with repeating motif of plaster rosettes.

The Swedish Mission constructed it to replace a more traditional wood-framed church (page 1) that stood here for a decade before. The congregation at the time numbering more than 200, had outgrown the limited space of the old wooden church. Given the strong devotion to their church work and indeed their church, why did the congregation abandon their spiritual center in 1954? The area had become more industrial, parking was next to impossible and concern developed for the safety of woman and children who walked to church alone. For their new site, the Church chose a spot at NE 45th and E Burnside.

The congregation sold the Tabernacle Church in 1953, and it has long serviced as a site for the Longshoremen, Local No. 8 Union, as a theater for "Heart Acting" performing troupe among others, and finally as McMenamins first Oregon theater/pub-*The Mission Theater*.



Portland Tabernacle Church ca 1930

"...and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?"

- Micah 6:8

This short story "Pillars of Swedish Heritage in Oregon-The Churches" is not meant to be complete story about local religions and their churches, rather an attempt to paint a picture of the wonderful support and comfort for the early Swedish immigrants!

Written by Leif Rosqvist, editor for New Sweden Cultural Heritage Society and SRIO newsletters in Portland, Oregon

References and Sources:

The book "*Oregon and dess svenska befolkning*", by Ernst Skarstedt, SRIO book "*Swedish Oregon*" and pictures from Swedish Society of Linnea. McMenamins booklet "*Mission Theater*"

Recommended reading:

SRIO book "*Swedish Oregon*" and "*Oregon Swedes of 1911*", booklet. Pietism—<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pietism>