



## NEW SCANDINAVIA LUTHERAN CHURCH NEWSLETTER 2023

*'O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book!  
O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever!*  
Job 19:23-24

God's blessings to you.

Many of you know that I like history, especially church history. It may or may not surprise you to know that in one of my seminary history classes, I found myself reading more than the required materials for assignments (which is a big deal for someone with dyslexia). One book had me hooked. It was a journal written by possibly the most important Lutheran that lived in the United States, Henry Melchior Muhlenberg. (*The Notebook of a Colonial Clergyman*)

Never heard of him? I'm not surprised. I hadn't either until I entered seminary. But once you hear about him and read all that was written down in a journal, you may wonder why you haven't heard of him before almost like his story is a secret that no one talks about.

Henry was born in Germany in 1711. He was heavily influenced by theologians and pastors in his area. With their help he started a school that later became an orphanage. Only a few years into his ministry, he was encouraged to make the trip "across the pond" to help a group of Lutherans in Pennsylvania. This group needed a pastor to guide them, as the Lutherans were led by lay leaders. It was Henry that brought about the first Lutheran synod in the United States. It was Henry that put together a liturgy/worship service that became the standard for all the Lutheran gatherings. It was Henry who compiled songs for a printed hymnal. But he wasn't done there.

He saw the need for Lutheran churches to be "planted" and that the American Lutheran churches needed to have their own identity and not be imitations of the European church familiar to many. At one point he was seen as a bishop (without the title) of 80 churches in Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey. But that isn't the end of it.

Muhlenberg's journals tell of his encounters in those northern states but also include the time he spent in others states between there and Florida. The journals include stories of the home baptisms, weddings, funerals, and various gatherings. Then he would get on his horse and ride for a day or two until he came to another community. He would stop, find a place to stay, and then connect with people to find out who needed baptisms, weddings, or funerals and not leave the community until all was done. He wrote about house after house and the ministry that took place there. He ministered

to people of many denominations including the Scandinavian Lutherans, Reformed, Presbyterians, and many others. But what struck me most was the toll it took on him physically but never stopped him. He rode between homes, communities, and across the countryside no matter the weather. He wrote about getting sick because of days spent riding in the rain and the cold. He writes about riding into winter storms. And through it all, he writes about the encouragement he received from all those he encountered and the push by the Holy Spirit to continue in his call.

I am thinking about all of this because in the list of church commemorations this month is October 7<sup>th</sup>- the date of Henry Muhlenberg's death. I think about the legacy of this man who most of us have never heard of but was vital in bringing forth the church we are today. In the book of Job, Job writes, *'O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book!'* Just like Job, I don't think Henry Muhlenberg understood the importance of his writings and how many benefited by his words and experiences. I don't know why he wrote his journals, but I think I know why they were published: Because being the hands and feet of Christ isn't easy. Many put in long hours with little recognition because that is what God has called them to do and be. We too are called to be the hands and feet of Christ but have a little easier go at it as we are able to stay within our communities and drive our car from place to place- keeping ourselves warm and dry.

As I read Muhlenberg's journal entries, I think about how vastly different church looks today vs what it looked like 250 years ago. I try to imagine what the church will look like in 250 years and though most of us will be forgotten, I wonder how our stories will affect the church as people look back, reading journals of today (probably in the form of a "blog") and see how God is working in and through us all.

In a Living Lutheran article from October 2018, Peter Vethanayagamony writes "When Muhlenberg died in 1587 he left behind a church that was both demonstrably Lutheran and American. He certainly deserves to be called the founder of North American Lutheranism."

So what are we leaving behind for the church of tomorrow? What will be written down in our book?

God's peace be with you always.

*Pastor Sara*