

B. J. MUUS AND VALLEY GROVE

Sunday, September 16, 2012

Among the many Norwegian immigrants under the pastoral care of Pastor Bernt Julius Muus in the 1870s was a poor family named Kildahl living in a sod hut near the present Urland Church. One of the Kildahl boys, Harold, about nine years old at the time, recalled how Pastor Muus, despite his obligations in serving many congregations, found time to make visits to their home. Writing about it many years later, Harold recalled, “He cheered us up, administered communion, read the gospel, led us in hymns, and spoke the prayers. He was never in a hurry, everyone was important in his eyes, and his very presence seemed a benediction. He knew all our names, stroked our heads, and had a kind word for everyone. A selfless man, he was an outstanding pioneer pastor.” (HBK, Westward, 33).

B. J. Muus came from Norway in the fall of 1859 to serve the Norwegians in Goodhue County as pastor of the Holden church, but soon extended his ministry to some 28 far-flung preaching places or communities. He was both a local pastor and a missionary pastor, an educator, bishop, and leading churchman. St. Olaf professor Carl Mellby wrote of Muus’s work as an itinerant pastor: “As a traveling missionary, covering a large part of Minnesota and parts of adjoining states, he came into intimate contact with all kinds of people, learned to know their needs and capacities, lived with them in their sod huts and log cabins and won their respect and confidence as few other men have done.” (Mellby, St. Olaf through Fifty Years, 82).

These are both valid descriptions of Muus, a kind and sensitive pastor, and a tireless traveling missionary. He was that and more, a complex person with strengths and flaws, and an interesting personality. They like to tell of Muus dictating to each farmer he knew in Goodhue county the amount of money he was

expected to give to St. Olaf's School, depending on the number of acres he owned. But Muus also knew the discouragements of a parish pastor. He wrote to a fellow pastor in 1860, "Many come to listen to me, and many also drink themselves drunk and get into fights, so the fruit of sin is obvious, but the fruits of faith are of the microscopic sort." Reflecting on his early years, he felt that his preaching made no impact. He wrote, "It seemed to me I was preaching in such a way, so I thought, that every person either must be ashamed before God and repent, or that they must drive me out of the settlement." But neither happened. People expected to get a verbal thrashing from the pastor. They shook it off, chatted with their friends, and had a clear conscience before they had gone half a mile down the road toward home. (BJM book, 117).

It's true that in time Muus gained a reputation as a strong, authoritarian leader, but he didn't always get his way. When the folks at Dale were getting ready to build their church in the early 1870s, they had a congregational meeting to discuss the materials to be used. Pastor Muus recommended stone. Could he have been thinking of Valley Grove in 1862? He said that wooden buildings cannot stand up against the prairie winds, and are always in need of repair, but a stone church will last for generations. When the vote was taken, 44 voted for a wooden church and 3 opposed! (BJM book, 133)

Preceding the story of Muus and Valley Grove, we should be reminded that pastoral work in this area was done before Muus came to Holden in 1859. Pastor Nils O. Brandt, later associated with Luther College, was the first Lutheran pastor to minister in these parts. He came in 1855. Pastor H. A. Stub was the one who organized the Holden congregation in 1856; have in mind that the Holden-Goodhue settlement included the Norwegians from Zumbrota to the east and Valley Grove in the west. I also want to bring in the name of the Reverend Laur. Larsen, later the president of Luther College, who was conducting services in this

area in the summer of 1868. It was Pastor Larsen, not Muus, who presided at the baptism of some 100 children, 33 of them, we are told, under an oak tree near the site of the future Valley Grove church on June 18, 1858.

Muus preached his first sermon in the Holden area on November 6, 1859, at the Ole Huset farm not too far from the site of the Holden parsonage. He was soon at Valley Grove. On November 13, 1859, Pastor Muus held a worship service with Infant Baptism at the Jan Hansen home in *Tyske Grove* (German Grove). Two weeks later, November 27th, Muus conducted a worship service with Infant Baptism at the Eilif Trulsen home in German or Valley Grove.

In other words, Pastor Muus was at work doing ministry in the Valley Grove vicinity within the very first month of his arriving at Holden. We can think of Holden as a sprawling congregation, its members living in scattered farms for miles around. It built a church in 1861 that in its day was considered large, and in 1862 the Norwegian Synod held a meeting there. In addition to admitting Holden to the Synod, the assembly decided to divide Holden into four sub-units, and Valley Grove (then called *Tyske Grove*) was one of the four. The others were 1. Zumbrota; 2. Holden itself, then called *Oestre Sogn* [Eastern parish]; and 3. Valders, or Vang. This year Vang is observing its 150th anniversary, counting 1862 as its founding date.

Work began on the limestone church here at Valley Grove that same year, 1862. B. J. Muus continued to serve Valley Grove as its pastor until it officially became a separate parish in 1866 and N. A. Quammen became its pastor. The dedication of the stone church took place October 18, 1868. The dedication address was given by Pastor Nils O. Brandt. Pastor Muus could not be present, being in Red Wing that Sunday, but he sent a greeting that reads in part, “God help you to be built up more and more on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, to free yourselves from the devil’s seduction by false doctrine or other

ungodliness, and to grant you one day to enter your Father's great house above! God bless you and your pastor!"

"Your pastor," to whom Muus refers, was Nils A. Quammen, another remarkable pioneer minister. Quammen originally aspired to be a doctor, and served his parishioners with his medical skills. In 1893, at the age of 54, he received the M. D. from the Minnesota State Board of Medical Examiners. In the 1870s, when Muus's fellow pastors were cool toward the project of starting a school in Northfield, Quammen stood by him and raised money in the several congregations he served. He was the first pastor of the Norwegian Lutheran congregation in Northfield, now known as St. John's. It should also be said about Quammen that in 1865, the year before he became the pastor at Valley Grove, Muus installed him as the pastor in Christiania, north of Northfield, Fox Lake, seven miles north of Faribault, North Waseca, and Le Sueur River!

Now a few words about the 1862 Valley Grove church. The stone church is 55 feet in length, 35 feet in width, and 20 feet in height. The altar was on the east wall. As you know, the pulpit was to the right of the chancel as one faces the front of the church, and now the restored gallery along the west wall extends around both sides to approximately the middle of the interior. The cost of the building in 1862 was \$1200. We are all immensely impressed at the restoration of this lovely church that has been done by the Valley Grove Preservation Society. Of the many persons who have contributed to this project (the two churches and the entire site), I especially want to recognize with thanks the timely leadership by John and Bobbie Maakestad in the early stage of preserving this beautiful place. Be sure to read Bobbie's account in the Summer 2012 issue of the *Valley Grove News*. It was my privilege to join Bobbie and her family in scattering John's ashes out here on the evening of August 8th. We remember John, and all he did for Valley Grove.

On the front page of the *Valley Grove News* is a piece written by Todd Lein, president of the Society, that has the very appropriate heading, “Renewing our Roots.” Exactly. We come together to renew our roots. I mentioned earlier that a neighboring church, Vang, is also marking an anniversary this year. It had a special anniversary worship service a few weeks back. One of the visiting former pastors was Curt Schneider, who was pastor when Vang observed its 125th in 1987 and for which he prepared a valuable anniversary book. I would like to read a couple of sentences from his discussion of Pastor Muus’s pioneer labors.

“His efforts enabled stability and uncompromising spiritual direction to Norwegian people in a strange culture and initially harsh environment. As the sole institution that spoke their language, knew their customs and cared for their welfare, the church with its pastors became a cohesive force for building community.” (Vang Anniversary Book, 5)

The church as a cohesive force for building community. That is what we celebrate here at Valley Grove. The Norwegian Lutheran settlers and their pastors had a profound intuition for building for the future, and we need to appreciate how they did it. The key factor was that pastors such as B. J. Muus, Laur. Larsen, H. A. Stub, and N. A. Quammen did the essential work of *establishing congregations*. It was not enough to travel about and preach here and there. You have to build something that will *last*. So they had the wisdom to gather a core of people to form a congregation, and that meant doing some gritty, unglamorous work and staying at it. It meant to write a constitution, have the children baptized, record their names, start a confirmation class, agree on the time and place of the next worship service, tell the neighbors, arrange for regular visits by a pastor, call a permanent pastor, raise money, keep records, build a church, pay for it, and face the future as a community of faith, sustained by the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Much of what they did was tedious, and conditions were not always easy. But the faithful work of parishioners and pastors bore fruit. Consider again the front page of the recent *Valley Grove News*. The most conspicuous item in the picture is the Valley Grove stone church. But there are two photo insets next to the great picture of the stone church; they are of B. J. Muus and someone named Quie, a pastor and a public figure. As part of his wide-ranging pastoral ministry, Pastor Muus was a key figure in establishing the Valley Grove congregation, and Al Quie's ancestors were members of this church. Al himself attended Valley Grove as a child. As a pastor mindful of the educational needs of the Norwegian immigrants, and with the help of generous support from members of Valley Grove church, Muus founded St. Olaf College and Al Quie is a graduate of that college. This is the same Albert Quie, we are reminded, who served as Governor of Minnesota from 1979 to 1983.

Not everyone has to get to the Governor's mansion, but we're certainly proud that one of our guys did. What we all have in common are the values and the blessings that fire our imaginations and fill our hopes. These two churches are no longer used for regular worship, but they continue to symbolize community and to speak eloquently of God, faith, the continuity of the generations, the beauty of the environment, and our common hopes for the future. Thanks to the many who have loved and preserved this historic site, we are inspired to affirm and celebrate the realities still at work in such simple but powerful actions as-- Renewing our Roots. Treasuring Valley Grove Church. Worshiping God. Helping the Neighbor. Building Community. Honoring Beauty. Embracing the Future. Serving the World that God made and redeemed.

Joseph M. Shaw

