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The Archbishop and Augustana

By JOHN E. NORTON

In 1890, a 24-year-old student of theology at the University of Uppsala, Nathan Söderblom, spent his first summer away from work on the family farm at Bjuråker Parsonage/Norra Dellen, Hälsingland. He journeyed instead to North America to participate in an international Christian student meeting at Northfield, Massachusetts, summer home of evangelist Dwight L. Moody. While there, he, and some 500 other students, heard Moody and his good and famous friend, revival song-writer Ira Sankey, plus Augustana Seminary theology professor Revere Franklin Weidner. Weidner was introduced by Moody as “representing some 60 to 70 million Lutheran people.” Söderblom also attended traditional Swedish-language Sunday services in New Haven, Connecticut, most likely at Bethesda Evangelical Lutheran Church, one of 11 Augustana Synod congregations already active in Connecticut. It was probably his first contact with the immigrant Swedish church in America. That event marked the beginning of a life-long interest in Swedish-America, its churches, and its future.

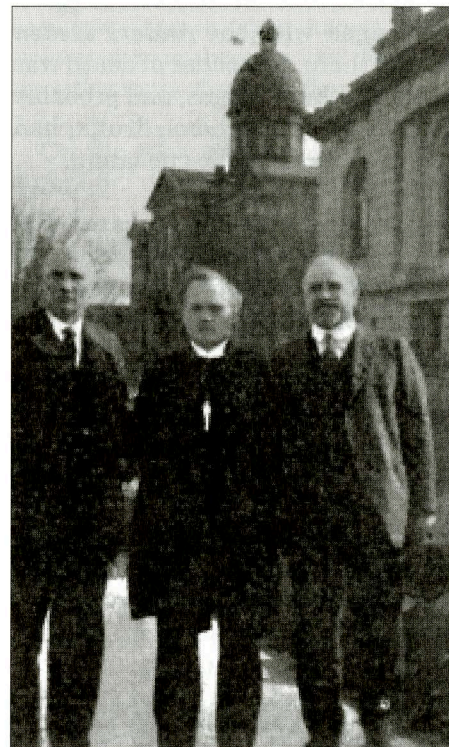
Back to Sweden

Unlike his younger brother Svante, who later immigrated to North America to become a U.S. Army officer, Nathan returned home to studies at Uppsala, and was ordained in 1893. He continued graduate work in France, serving the Swedish congregation in Paris, and as Swedish seamen’s chaplain in Calais and Dunkerque from 1894 to 1901. He

was awarded a doctorate at the University of Paris in 1901, then named professor of theology at his alma mater, Uppsala University, where he served until 1914. He was also appointed professor of religious history at Leipzig University 1912-14. In 1914 he was elected Archbishop of Sweden, based not only on his distinguished academic reputation, but his ecumenical interests, including path-breaking negotiations with the Anglican Church, begun in 1909. His election as Archbishop came despite sometimes-controversial social activism. He later became internationally-known for his great Stockholm ecumenical conference of 1925, “Life and Work,” considered by many as the first major church-wide gathering since the Reformation. In 1931, the last year of his life, he gave a series of Gifford lectures at the University of Edinburgh on “The Living God,” published in 1933, and perhaps his most enduring contribution to religious scholarship.

Contacts with Augustana

His contact with leaders of the Augustana Synod began as early as 1897. He met Rev. Dr. Lars G. Abrahamson, editor of the Synod’s weekly newspaper *Augustana*, at an 1897 conference in Stockholm, where Söderblom presented a paper on “Religion and Social Development.” In 1916, preparing for celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the Augustana Synod extended an unsuccessful invitation to Arch-



From left: Lars G. Abrahamson, Nathan Söderblom, and Gustav Andreen (from *En amerikabok*, by Anna Söderblom).

bishop Söderblom for a trip to America, delayed by new responsibilities and WW I. But in the spring of 1923, the Archbishop indicated that he could come to the United States that fall to help Augustana College and the Augustana Synod celebrate dedication of the new seminary complex in Rock Island. Both Synod and College were quick to respond with a formal invitation to the Archbishop, his wife Anna, and son Johan. Abrahamson, by virtue of his earlier experience in arranging three U.S. visits by Bishop von Scheele, was chosen by the Synod to arrange that tour, which he did in cooperation

with The American-Scandinavian Foundation and the Federal Council.

The nationwide trip was an enormous success for both the Archbishop and the Synod, which Söderblom considered the spiritual sister of the Church of Sweden. It resulted in his book *Från Uppsala till Rock Island*, and another, written from his wife Anna's point-of-view, *En Amerikabok* (1925).

Archbishop Söderblom saw his visit to "Swedish America" as an opportunity to satisfy a life-long curiosity as to why and where those Swedish emigrants had gone, and to learn what they had accomplished in their new homeland, especially in the development, works, and faith of the Augustana Synod.

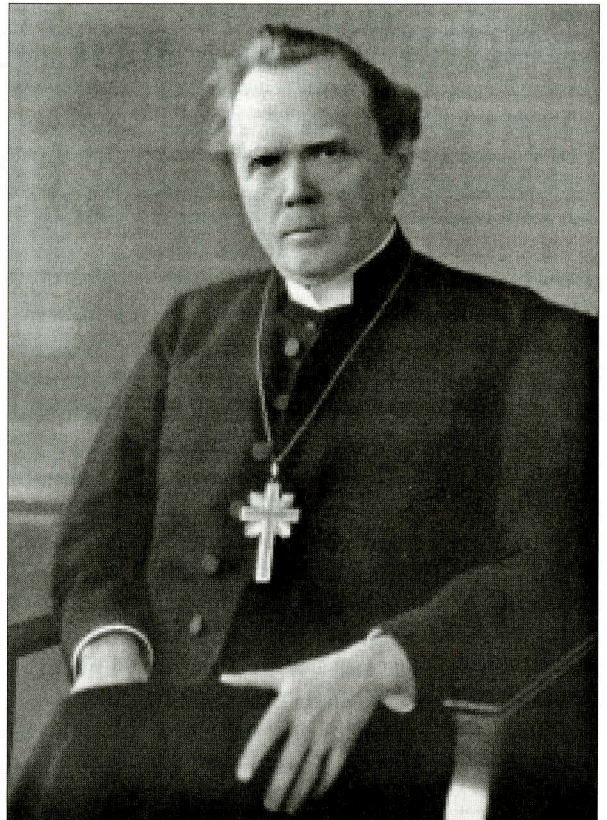
Söderblom's thoughts on the immigrants

In his "Farewell Greeting to Friends in the Augustana Synod," a speech delivered on 7 December 1923 at Bethlehem Church in Brooklyn, NY, he asked: "Where did they go? That question has been with me since my youth. There were stories about their departure. They sold their belongings. They got money one way or another for their trip. Their relatives in that great land out there helped them. So they left. Others were infected.... There were tears at parting. I have seen them at the railway stations. Their blue eyes saw into a dim distance, where fantasy had painted pictures, made up of perhaps excessively optimistic depictions from friends and relatives over there, and from what newspapers and school geography lessons had told them. Many took to emigration as the last resort, when it seemed hopeless for them at home. But Sweden wondered and sorrowed. Wasn't it their best red blood flowing out far away, over land and sea? To what purpose?... Is Sweden doomed to give away much of its best strength during the years when they can do their greatest service, paying back something of what their homes, schools, church, parish, and home-

land have devoted to their upbringing? I came over to answer those kinds of questions.... No one at home could give me answers." He gave his own response by saying: "... We at home can share joy, with and about you, now that we know where you've gone. We can be deeply glad that we are together in the very heart of Sweden and Swedish-America. I mean in Christ's church and congregation, which, on both sides of the Atlantic, at home in Sweden, and at home in America, is being built up in common trust and with each other's help."

Swedish-American Lutherans and their church leaders saw his visit as a clear sign that their immigrant church had "come of age," and that they could count on future contact with their spiritual roots in the Church of Sweden. Their feelings were summarized in the following published letters.

After Archbishop Söderblom's death in 1931, four Augustana clergymen were asked to provide testimonials, along with those of 38 other prominent Swedes, for inclusion in a memorial book, *Hågkomster och livsinytryck till minnet av Nathan Söderblom*, edited by Sven Thulin, and published in 1934. Augustana contributors included Dr. Lars G. Abrahamson, editor of *Augustana* (and planner of Archbishop Söderblom's 1923 tour), Augustana College President Dr. Gustav Albert Andreen, Seminary President Dr. Conrad Bergendoff, and Dr. Gustaf A. Brandelle, President of the Augustana Synod. Only one, Lars G. Abrahamson, was a native-born Swede. Other Swedish-Americans included in the edition were Söderblom's younger brother Svante, a retired U.S. Army officer, and Prof. David Nyvall, former President of North Park College in Chicago. Each



brought their own view of Söderblom, and his importance to Swedish-America and its church institutions. Those letters still make fascinating reading, with some subjects, like the historic episcopate, still being widely debated between and among Lutherans and Episcopalians.

The letters of Dr. Andreen and tour manager Lars Abrahamson are especially enlightening, because of their broad treatment of Augustana's relations with the Archbishop and the Church of Sweden. That of Dr. Bergendoff, while shorter, touches on the Archbishop's involvement in that young clergyman's doctoral studies and with the formation of Bergendoff's view of the church (a view which played an important role in the later development of the Augustana Synod). Dr. Brandelle's deals more closely with Nathan Söderblom's participation in, and remarks at, the dedicatory program at Augustana in 1923.

[Ed.'s note: The first of these four testimonials follows here, by Dr. Gustaf Andreen, president of Augustana College 1901–1935, see next page. The other testimonials will follow in upcoming issues of SAG.]