The Lutheran Church in America on July 4, 1776

By Edward C. Fredrich

[This material was originally presented as a lecture to Doctor Martin Luther College students on November 14, 1975, at New Ulm, Minnesota.]

In the date in the title, July 4, 1776, there is a magic, a mystique, almost a melody for us Americans, born and bred to the fair and far horizons of this free land and nurtured by its fruited plains. We hear July 4, 1776, and we think of a bell proclaiming liberty throughout the land. We easily dream the patriot's dream that sees beyond the years. We write in a bold if imaginary scrawl one more signature on the Declaration of Independence, our own name. For the support of the Declaration we are ready to pledge anew to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.

When we add to that date the assigned title and make it "The Lutheran Church in America on July 4, 1776," unfortunately something of a letdown inevitably sets in. You and I would all agree that when we inject in the general Bicentennial observance the religious element, when we think of the Revolutionary happening especially in the light of what happened to the church, our own Lutheran Church, then we should have intensified interest and should have raised the relevancy rating. We all know that freedom of the soul is higher than anything the Declaration of Independence promises. But yet we react much less to "The Lutheran Church in America on July 4, 1776," than to "July 4, 1776."

Why is this? It is the plain old knowledge factor, or rather, lack of knowledge factor. July 4 connotes the bell and the parchment, the bridge at Concord and the signal light in the old church tower, all of them sharp impressions, vivid symbols.

But "The Lutheran Church in America on July 4, 1776," connotes little more than one big blur. If any detail emerges, it is the image of a preacher named something like Muehlhaeuser, or maybe Muhlenberg, doing a dignified, inconclusive patriot-pastor version of the strip tease in a Lutheran pulpit, pulling off the clergy robe to reveal a colonel's uniform. The only trouble with that detail is that that wasn't the way it actually was.

It is therefore a useful effort to get a little better picture of the Lutheran Church at the time of the Revolution, so that the Bicentennial will be that much more meaningful for us and will not pass by that element in the national life and in our own lives we regard most highly.

The hope is that an enlarged and in-focus picture of the Revolutionary Lutheran Church can be provided by utilizing these pages to present that Church in three sketches, viewing it from three different angles, setting it off in three separate profiles. The three profiles, if you will, are:

I. The Person and Place Profile
II. The Organizational and Confessional Profile
III. The War and Post-War Profile

I. Person and Place Profile

Here the picture of necessity must remain fuzzy and blurred. How many Lutherans were there in the colonies on the eve of the Revolution? Nobody really knows. And there is a variety of reasons why we don't know.

For one thing, are we talking about emigrants from Lutheran lands or only about those Lutherans gathered into congregations? Of the 110,000 Germans in Pennsylvania in 1775, no doubt 75,000 came from Lutheran lands and were nominally Lutheran, but only a small fraction of them had been gathered in the 100 or so Pennsylvania Lutheran congregations over which Heinrich Muhlenberg exercised control. Some 11,000–12,000 Lutherans were involved, served by some two dozen pastors.

No other colony had as many Lutherans as Pennsylvania. It is doubtful if all the others put together could equal Pennsylvania's strength in members. In all there must have been between 15,000–20,000 members of Lutheran congregations in the colonies in 1776. Lack of statistics prevents one from making anything else but rough estimates. In all there were about 230 congregations.

It should be remembered too that in the course of the Revolution and in its immediate aftermath there were large losses in Lutheran membership. There were some war casualties and more backsliders who drifted from the church for one reason or another. There were also some instances of wholesale removal from the colonies to Canada of congregations that were either royalist in their thinking, or just plain war weary.

The big bulk of colonial Lutherans were Germans. This was especially true of Pennsylvania, where most of the Lutherans were to be found. There are, however, some notable and numerous exceptions to this general rule.

In New Jersey and Delaware were the oldest Lutheran parishes, the Swedish congregations that traced their origins back to the 1630's. After over a century in the new land, the Swedes on and around the Delaware were using the English language more and more, and that is one reason the Mother Church in Sweden lost interest and let the English-speaking Swedish Lutherans drift into the Episcopal camp.

In New York, originally New Amsterdam, was a sizeable number of Dutch Lutherans. In fact, the oldest Lutheran congregation in continuous existence is the combined St. Matthew's, New York, and Albany, parish organized by the Dutch Lutherans in 1649. In 1771 the last Lutheran service in the Dutch language was held in New York.

A New York Lutheran pastor at the turn of the 18th century reports that in addition to Germans and Dutch he had as members "Swedes, Danes, Norwegians, Poles, Lithuanians, Transylvanians and other nationalities." This Pastor Falckner, if he were alive and present, would wonder why there should be observed in 1975 in Minnesota, and a few other states, a 150th anniversary of Norwegian immigration to the United States. Falckner would insist that a New York tricentennial of this event would be more appropriate.

There are records in New York also of black members of Lutheran congregations. Most were freedmen, but some were slaves. When the latter were admitted to membership, they had to give an extra pledge that they would not use their Christian profession to break their ties of obedience to their masters.

Like most colonial churches, the Lutheran Church looked upon it as its obligation and privilege to evangelize the Indians. Thus there were numerous Lutheran Indians or Indian Lutherans. This was especially true in Pennsylvania, where very good Indian relations prevailed, due to men like the skilled Indian agent, Conrad Weiser, a Lutheran and father-in-law of Henry Muhlenberg. In New York Pastor Sommer could count up 84 Indians that he himself had baptized.

But don't color the ethnic profile too red or too black. Color it mostly German.

Write off all of New England as far as the location of Lutheran congregations is concerned, with one exception. Halfway up the coast of what is now the state of Maine at Waldboro there was a pocket of Lutheranism in alien country. Some Yankee city slickers and real estate salesmen duped some 40 families of Germans to settle up there and try farming. Six years later in 1746 Indians raided the settlement, burnt it to the ground, and dragged the survivors off to Canada. Soon the cycle repeated itself: Yankee agents, duped Germans, raiding Indians, captivity in Canada. But the stubborn surviving Germans hung on. They made a go of things physically; spiritually they were shepherdless. In 1774 they called the wandering eccentric New York pastor, Pastor J. C. Hartwick. He visited the place but did not stay permanently.

There must have been some Lutherans in the four New England colonies but not enough of them in any one place to form a congregation. The feeling was mutual on both sides that the Congregationalist establishment in most of New England was no place for Lutherans. If Lutherans had to be in an area with an established church, they preferred it to be Anglican. Religiously free Rhode Island was a possibility, but it was too small to provide the farmlands the German Lutherans were seeking.

By 1750 New York had about 25 congregations along the Hudson and Mohawk valleys. New Jersey had about 20. At the time of the Revolutionary War, Maryland and Virginia each had about 10 Lutheran churches,

Delaware and South Carolina not that many. In North Carolina there were a few Lutheran congregations in the old Mecklenburg County area, watched over by the Hanover Consistory.

In Georgia was the famed Ebenezer Colony of the Salzburger Lutherans, up river about 25 miles from Savannah on the Savannah. In Salzburg Roman edicts banishing Lutherans from the area were issued in 1588, in 1613, in 1685, and in 1731. The 1731 edict brought in a 10 year period over a thousand Salzburgers to the newly established buffer colony of Georgia. Here the pious Salzburger Lutherans thought they could live out a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. They succeeded for 40 years, but then the Revolution caught up with them. A little later we will refer to them again when attention turns to the havoc and devastation brought upon the Lutheran Church in the Revolutionary War.

II. Organizational and Confessional Profile

So far as organizational or synodical structure, as we know it, is concerned, we will have to center attention on Pennsylvania, where Muhlenberg had put together in 1748 a Ministerium that was still functioning at the time of the Declaration of Independence. In 1776 it was the only colonial synod, or ministerium, in existence.

A word of explanation is immediately in place. There was an effort in 1773 to get the New York pastors together in a group or ministerium, but no permanent organization developed. Some records speak about a New York Ministerium of 1735, but that is a reference to an ad hoc, one-shot gathering of pastors called together by Wm. Berkenmeyer of Loonenburg (today's Athens) in order to discipline a certain Pastor Wolf of New Jersey. This Wolf, incidentally, dots the pages of Colonial Lutheran Church History on frequent occasions, always in an unsavory setting. He must have been the king of misfits in that group of Colonial Lutheran pastors that had more than its share of misfits. In any event, Berkenmeyer's 1735 gathering did not lead to any sort of subsequent meetings on a regular basis.

Any discussion of synodical organization among Colonial Lutherans must therefore revolve around the Pennsylvania Ministerium and its founder, Heinrich Melchior Muhlenberg.

When the old triple parish of Gloria Dei in Philadelphia and the churches at the Trappe, today's Providence, and Falckner's Swamp, today's New Hanover, suffered an extended vacancy about 1740, a pastoral call was sent to Lutheran authorities in London and simultaneously to Francke, the son, director of the famed Pietist Halle Mission establishment. Muhlenberg at that time happened to pass through Halle to get some of his own money to subsidize the poor parish he was serving, and the call to the triple parish was given him by Francke. This call was no summons to easy street, but neither was the post Muhlenberg was then filling. He accepted, travelling via London where he stopped long enough to get acquainted with the authorities and to purchase an Anglican gown. By the time he got to his new parish he found no less than three other men with staked-out claims. One was an ex-druggist with the imposing first name of Empiricus attached to the less imposing last name of Schmid. Another was the superannuated Valentine Kraft. These were easily disposed of. The third was the formidable Count Zinsendorf, author of *Jesu, geh voran*, our Hymn 410, sponsor of the Moravians, but posing as a Lutheran pastor in Philadelphia under the name of Tuernstein. Within four weeks the energetic Muhlenberg gained possession of the triple parish by appealing to the validity of his call sent out by the parish, delivered to him by Francke, and sealed by the London authorities.

Within six years, in the summer of 1748, Muhlenberg was ready to put together the first and only synod-type organization the Lutheran Church in America was to have until after the Revolutionary War. He called it the Pennsylvania Ministerium, since pastors played the predominant role. Yet it should be noted that congregations and laymen had their part to play. At the constituent meeting, in fact, one of the sessions was set aside for hearing lay representatives report on what their pastors were doing. Interesting possibilities are suggested if that old custom could be revived for our synod conventions today.

In 1748 the Pennsylvania Ministerium was small, consisting of four regular and one advisory Swedish and one advisory German pastor, the latter being the ubiquitous J. C. Hartwick, whom last we mentioned in connection with a visit to the lonely Maine congregation. Invitations to the Pennsylvania Ministerium's

constituent convention had been sent out on a selected basis. Only such were asked to come who could meet four requirements: 1) they did not dare be anti-Pietist, 2) they had to be interested in a uniform liturgy, 3) they had to have legitimate calls, and 4) they had to be under the supervision of some sort of consistory. As far as congregations go, ten of a possible seventy sent representatives and an eleventh, York, sent a letter regretting its absence.

We are supposed to be talking about Lutheranism in America on July 4, 1776, and are dwelling on August 26, 1748. There is a reason. August Graebner calls the latter date the most important day in the history of the Lutheran Church in America in the 18th century. Furthermore, it is to be noted that the synodical organization founded in 1748 was still operative, the only one of its kind, in 1776.

Ministerium meetings lapsed from 1755–1759, the time when the French and Indian Wars were running riot in the backwoods of Pennsylvania. There was, however, a strong revival in 1760, and from then on the annual meetings are a part of the natural order of things. It may be argued that the Ministerium had in its membership less than half the Lutheran pastors in the colonies and that it did not even have a constitution until 1778 or bother to get it printed until 1781.

All this granted, the fact remains that the only type of synodical organization the colonies had was Muhlenberg's Ministerium, also called United Pastors, Preacher's Conference, the United Reverent Ministerium, and so on. It provided some semblance of order and reliability during the turbulent periods before and after the Revolution. It was, humanly speaking, the Ministerium that enables us to change the original Muhlenberg motto in 1742 of *Ecclesia Plantanda*, "The church must be planted" in the year 1776, when he began to seek release from some of his many labors, to *Ecclesia Plantata*, "The church has been planted."

One point more about organization can be mentioned. It was mentioned that Muhlenberg invited into the Ministerium only those pastors who had a legitimate call and were under some sort of supervision that a consistory in the old country exercised. This is characteristic of most of the colonial church arrangements. Hanover, for example, made itself responsible for the few pastors in North Carolina. Muhlenberg himself stayed in close touch with Francke and Halle. Berkenmeyer had been sent by the Lutheran Consistory in Amsterdam.

Obviously such contacts were very loose ones involving the church in the Mother Country directly usually only when men or monies had to be supplied. In this matter, 1776 is a key date. In the nature of things European controls and contacts just had to decrease and eventually disappear when the resort to arms became real and earnest. The outstanding instance of this sort is the influence of the Lutheran organization in London that was a strong factor from Queen Anne's day on. That London connection, of course, was among the first war casualties.

The fact that by 1776 an organized, recognizable Lutheran Church had been planted in America prompts the question: Just what kind of Lutheranism was it that was planted? Therefore it is in place to attempt to sketch the confessional profile that prevailed in Colonial Lutheranism as the Revolution began. To put it briefly and bluntly, it wasn't our brand of Lutheranism.

Pennsylvania Lutheranism dominated the Colonial Lutheran scene, Muhlenberg dominated Pennsylvania Lutheranism, and Muhlenberg was at heart a Halle Pietist. Given this inclination, his operation on the frontier scene, where cooperation with the neighbor so often seemed the sensible and even mandatory policy, tended to be one that did not see that unity of faith is the Bible's own prerequisite for joint church worship and church work.

Examples of that attitude abound. There is close cooperation with the Anglican clergy on numerous occasions. When George Whitefield, the Anglican-Methodist evangelist, came to Philadelphia, Muhlenberg had him address a class of children and allowed him to orate from his pulpit at a special worship service.

It must be remembered that there were other shadings of Lutheranism. No doubt many colonial Lutheran pastors were more unionistic than Muhlenberg. A Pietistic training that tended to tone down doctrinal differences in the interest of carrying out the great mission, the frontier lacks and pressures, the inadequate training of many of the pastors all served to promote a unionistic kind of Lutheranism.

There is also the other, the brighter, side of the picture. It will be recalled that Muhlenberg did not invite into the Ministerium those who looked down on Pietists. There were such pastors on the Colonial Lutheran

Church scene. In 1776 Paul Henkel, of the family that can count well over 100 pastors among the members of the clan, was well on the way to becoming an ordained pastor. He would stand for confessional Lutheranism as he helped found the Tennessee and Ohio Synods and as he set up that great publishing enterprise at New Market that eventually brought out an English edition of the Book of Concord. To the north of Muhlenberg geographically, but far to his right theologically and confessionally, stood William Berkenmeyer of Loonenburg. He came from Hamburg, and was a staunch anti-Pietist to begin with. He always viewed Muhlenberg's labors with what appears to be a jaundiced eye. Yet when there was an extended vacancy in Loonenberg in 1774, it was to Muhlenberg the church council turned for help in obtaining a Lutheran pastor who could preach in Dutch.

All in all, however, the balanced picture would be that the prevailing tendency in Colonial Lutheranism at the eve of the Revolution was less confessional and more Pietistic, more inclined to let doctrinal demarcations and denominational boundaries become blurred and indistinct. That threatens worse things to come. When the strains of the war and of the post-war era exerted their pressures and when at the same time the errors of rationalism were making the scene, American Lutheranism, weakened to begin with by the Pietistic tendency, fell farther and farther from the confessions. But that is getting dangerously beyond our date, 1776.

So that an authentic picture of American Lutheranism in 1776 is presented a congregational profile needs to be drawn. This profile will obviously have to consist of broad and sweeping lines.

In 1776 the average Lutheran congregation was on the small side, numbering considerably less than 100 people. So small a number of comparatively poor people could easily have some difficulties in meeting even the smallest salary budget.

In 1776 the average Lutheran congregation had facilities that seldom rose above the bare necessity of four walls and a roof. Log cabin churches were no rarity, and the dedication of a stone church was an occasion.

In 1776 the average Lutheran congregation, despite the poverty and the small size, was generally willing to provide a school of some sort and a teacher if possible. This was, of course, in days when there was as yet no system of public schools in the colonies where Lutherans were to be found. Unless the congregation provided the school, there would be no schooling except through a private tutor the average colonist could not afford.

Parochial school mindedness is certainly indicated by the agenda of the first synod meeting in America. The very first morning session, with lay representatives participating, considered three topics: the work of the pastors, the uniform liturgy, and the report on the schools. Berkenmeyer in Loonenburg never got his school going properly. He worked hard and long at the planning and preparation. Just when the venture was ready to begin, the teacher-elect chose to father an illegitimate child and selected as his partner the daughter of the member who had made the heaviest pledge for school support The Loonenburg school venture ended abruptly and stayed dead for a long time.

The average colonial Lutheran congregation in 1776 was probably suffering from a vacancy. Pastor supply was the big problem. In the middle third of the 1700's the number of congregations and the number of Lutherans that wanted to be gathered into congregations was increasing rapidly. But the supply of pastors was not, because Europe was not able to send that many more men and because there were no theological training schools for Lutherans in this land. The first such school was not founded until almost the turn of the century. This was Hartwick Seminary, named after J. C. Hartwick, the pastor we met in Maine and in Philadelphia. In his will he left the $16,000 he had picked up in his meandering for a school to train missionaries to the Indians. Most of the money went for lawsuits because Hartwick chose to make Jesus Christ the chief beneficiary in his will. That pious stipulation set theological training in America back almost two decades.

If not vacant, the average Lutheran congregation in 1776 might be served by an apprentice-type learner working under the supervision of an experienced neighbor or by a licensed man not yet ordained but farther along the way in training for the Lutheran clergy. Perhaps the unsuspecting vacant congregation would be invaded and imposed upon by a fly-by-night frontier operator who could trade his religious denomination to suit any group he encountered as easily as he could the horse that brought him there. This could happen, you will recall, even in Philadelphia in the vacancy around 1740 before Muhlenberg came.

These are a few of the characteristics of the average Colonial Lutheran congregation in 1776, considered apart from the war situation. In the next section attention is given to that matter specifically.

III. War and Post-War Profile

What did the Lutherans in the colonies think about the outbreak of hostilities between colonists and crown? How did they act and react in the Revolutionary War? Were their attitudes and actions what those of devout Lutherans should be? These are some of the more important questions to be answered.

On balance the Lutheran colonists in these matters appear to resemble the whole of the colonists quite closely. There were some, no one can say for sure how many, loyalists or royalists, siding with King George and disavowing the Revolution. There were some, again one cannot say with exactness how many, who went all out for the Revolution from start to finish. There were more, many more, who were in between those two extremes. These were the people who abhorred war and personally would not have fostered it but who reckoned with the prevailing situation. If possible they tried to avoid involvement; if necessary they would participate as the situation required.

A few instances of Lutheran royalist sentiment can be cited. One of the Salzburger clergy, Pastor Triebner, was pro-Bristish in the extreme. Although deposed earlier in an intracongregational conflict with a fellow pastor, he managed to regain control of the congregation when his opponent died in 1777. Then he forced the Ebenezer congregation that strongly favored independence to swear allegiance to the English crown. When the Revolutionary forces gained control, Triebner was imprisoned. After the war he went to England. There are instances on record of several groups of Lutherans who used post-war resettlement of royalist colonials as a means of getting out of this land and into Canada.

Instances of outstanding effort in the Revolutionary cause on the part of Lutherans are numerous. Best known is the switch of Peter Muhlenberg from Lutheran pastor at Woodstock, Virginia, to the colonel of the Eighth Virginia Regiment Incidentally, he doffed his clergy robe very likely with decorum in his sacristy, not in the pulpit as the picture has it, nor in the narthex as some records suggest By the end of the war this friend of George Washington had reached the rank of Major-General. His brother, Frederick, who at first rebuked Peter for deserting the ministry, also left the ministry in the Revolutionary cause, becoming a leading political figure. He listened to the Declaration read and was a member of the Continental Congress.

A Salzburg Lutheran, John Adam Treutlen, became Georgia’s first governor, and the Salzburgers organized three companies for military service.

There were instances of whole regiments, such as Virginia’s Eighth under Peter Muhlenberg, that were almost entirely composed of Lutherans. The German Fusiliers, a noted fighting unit, came entirely from the Lutheran congregation at Charleston, South Carolina.

An interesting war episode is the brief tour of duty as chaplain that Lutheran Pastor Christian Streit served in the early period of the war before he became pastor at Charleston.

A very interesting and perhaps more typical Revolutionary role was played by the patriarch of the Lutheran Church, Henry Muhlenberg. He never became what could be called an ardent patriot; rather he seems to have had great difficulty in reaching a decision for or against the Revolutionary struggle. It may be well to examine his views and acts more closely, since he mirrors the conflict and dilemma that many Lutherans and others found themselves engulfed in.

There were several good reasons for Muhlenberg not to embrace the Revolutionary cause wholeheartedly. For one thing, there was the Romans 13 passage to consider, and Muhlenberg always tried to follow where Scripture led. For another, there were strong ties to London and to the Lutheran authorities there, dating back to his trip from the Old World to the New. He was also from Hanover, thus a subject of George III by birth also.

Another factor was Muhlenberg’s pastoral concern for the evils to body and soul that resort to arms could not but bring to all concerned, including the many Lutherans and Lutheran congregations he had served and grown to love.

Finally, Muhlenberg was concerned about keeping the church in church affairs and out of civil affairs. This concern is strongly voiced in Muhlenberg's own written accounts of events of the day. On one occasion in July 1775 a Continental Congress delegate approached Muhlenberg with the request that he with other clergymen circularize the German colonists to the effect that the patriot cause should be supported by all because England's course threatened liberty. Muhlenberg tells us he replied:

> Dear Sir, as far as I know, all the intelligent members of our Lutheran congregations are faithful subjects of His Royal Majesty, our sovereign. It is not proper for a clergyman to prepare such a statement as you demand. Besides, it is customary to publish political matters in the newspapers.

On January 1, 1776, Muhlenberg purchased a house in Providence, or Trappe, and he soon moved there to avoid the fight over Philadelphia that everybody knew was sure to come. He thus began a semiretirement that lasted until his death in 1787. But he did not escape the war in his Providence home. It was near a place that would soon become an unforgettable name in American history, Valley Forge. The church building was frequently forced to serve military needs. In contacts with Hessian prisoners Muhlenberg learned that these Hessians had been told by British officers that the colonists were cannibals and must therefore be exterminated. Muhlenberg must have thought to himself, "See! That is just what I've always felt is wrong about war."

Although he frequently raised to himself the question whether Romans 13 pointed the accusing finger at the Revolution, Muhlenberg never felt that he should openly side with the British. Rather, he urged, the church and its pastors should stay neutral. No one can say which side will win and when the war is over the church should be in a position of being able to help pick up the pieces, the spiritual pieces, on good terms with victors and vanquished. Are such views of Muhlenberg sound? It is of course easy in the abstract and from the standpoint of pure theory to claim there was a rebellion against a higher power, and consequently there was a wrong and Muhlenberg should have spoken against it. No doubt, Muhlenberg would have disciplined Sam Adams for some of his pre-1775 actions if he had been his pastor. Once the hostilities got under way, however, and an army gathered around Boston, and a congress issued a declaration, the question arose whether this new enterprise might not now be the power to give obedience to.

Muhlenberg's July 4, 1776, Journal entry is worth quoting:

> Today the Continental Congress openly declared the united provinces of North America to be free and independent states. This has caused some thoughtful and far-seeing *melancholici* to be down in the mouth; on the other hand, it has caused some sanguine *miopes* to exult and shout with joy. *In fide videbitus cuius toni*. This remains as a comfort to believers. There is One who sits at the rudder, who has the plans of the whole before Him, to whom all power in heaven and on earth is given, and who has never yet made a mistake in His government. He it is who neither sleeps nor slumbers, and who has asked His people to pray: "Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done."

It should also be remembered that even earlier than Bunker Hill and the Declaration there were legal and constitutional questions about the rights and powers of Englishmen over against their king. It is certain that after Bunker Hill and the Declaration there were serious questions as to where the power was that had to be obeyed.

It is possible to see how Lutherans in 1776 could divide over the issue, although they had basically the same religious convictions. It is certainly possible to understand why Muhlenberg sought to maintain a neutral stance and equally possible to avoid condemning him either as an unfaithful pastor or as an unpatriotic citizen. It is not possible to see how 200 years later some want to use the teacher's podium to denounce the Revolutionary cause lock, stock, and barrel and turn the whole Bicentennial observance into a recitation of *Pater, pecavi* and *Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa!* Perhaps there is a lesson for such in the one and only reference to the Revolution to be found in the minutes of the Pennsylvania Ministerium that met annually

throughout the war. That one reference reads: “It was decided how prayers should be offered for the government, and several cases of conscience were also discussed.”

By 1776 the armies were in the field, and battles were being fought. What was happening then and would happen for a half dozen years to come adds up to much difficulty and devastation for the Lutheran Church in the land struggling for its freedom.

There are different ways to sketch this tragic picture. One can point to New York, an early major battle ground, and say that there were only nine serviceable churches left by the end of the conflict.

It might be well to insert the caution that this does not necessarily reflect on the British armies. In war time they may deliberately burn a White House, but not churches. The problem was that the churches—large or small, brick or log—were usually built at crossroads, and that was the place at which armed forces met. Gettysburg bears eloquent testimony to this fact of military life. Then also, churches—large or small, brick or wood—usually offered better shelter and rallying points than other buildings in the area and automatically become prizes to be fought over. Finally, in and after a battle no other building offers more off-the-ground lying-down space per square foot for the wounded than does a church with pews. The inevitable result is that churches are rendered unserviceable by either or both sides, intentionally or not.

In Virginia more than three-fourths of the churches are supposed to have been destroyed. The Ebenezer area in Georgia, as was previously said, was hard hit and really never recovered. In Zion Church in Philadelphia, which served as a military hospital during the 1777–1778 occupation of the city, all the adequate furnishings were destroyed. They could not be replaced until 1782. Whoever attended church there in the four-year interval and wanted to sit through the sermon had to actually bring his own chair to church.

There were also less visible evidences of war’s devastation. The vacancy problem increased as few replacements could be found, while many pastors went off, or fell victim, to the war. A few congregations split over the loyalty and obedience issue. The prolonged absence of the father and the older brother because of military service was a factor in seriously undermining child training, that would surface especially in the post-war era.

This last thought suggests automatically a consideration of the post-war scene. In it there are good and bad features.

In the good category, first and foremost place belongs to the natural end to the old ties to Europe. The Lutheran Church had to learn to stand on its own two feet. It had to get on with that major task of finding a supply of pastors through the establishment of schools for providing the professional training of pastors and teachers.

Another major good result of the Revolution was the opportunity to develop new patterns of church-state relations and religious freedom. Make no mistake about it, 1776 did not end all inequality in religion. State establishment did not die until 1833. In Virginia, however, the few Lutherans could join the struggle for separation of church and state that began in 1779 and was consummated in 1786. This whole development was especially beneficial to Lutherans who had no establishments and consequently had everything to gain and nothing to lose.

There were great post-war problems. Much had to be rebuilt with little money. There was a decline in morality and religious conviction, noticeable especially in the rising generation. There was unrest in the churches. Some of this was because of dissatisfaction over the royalist sentiment of the Anglican establishment in the South. Much more of it was traceable to the increasing inroads of the rationalistic spirit that found such easy access to those of the Pietistic tendency. The Lutheran Church would get farther and farther from the Confessions before there would be a turn for the better.

Among the Swedes the post-war era would be one during which there would be a regrettable turn from Lutheranism to Episcopalianism, simply because the mother church in Europe ceased supplying the clergy.

To close this post-war profile with a light and cheerful line, let the attention turn to the West of those days but that we today call the Midwest, the Heartland. The peace treaty gave to the new nation the West it had not won in the war. In 1776 in Pennsylvania a young boy, John Stauch, was nearing confirmation age, receiving from his devout mother that religious training he especially would cherish later on. Sometime later, perhaps in

1799 or in 1800, he would cross over the mountains and move into the valley beyond with the gospel, the first recorded instance of a Lutheran pastor operating in the Heartland. The Midwest would then serve as the cradle for a newborn Lutheran confessionalism. This was not fully accomplished in Ohio. The gospel also had to move a little farther West into states like Wisconsin and into some across the Mississippi like Missouri and Minnesota. But that is a long way in miles and years from Philadelphia in 1776.