

HISTORY MINUTE

presented by Edward Spannaus

Fifth Sunday of Lent, March 22, 2015



March 25, 1786: Our First Church Constitution

On March 25, 1786, our congregation adopted its first constitution. This was during the pastorate of Rev. John Andrew Krug, who had studied at the University at Halle, and was also very close to Henry Muhlenberg. The constitution reflects both his pietist training, but also Muhlenberg's views on the differences between free churches in America, and the state churches in Europe.

It begins: "The Elders and Deacons (i.e. the church council) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Scharf Hill community of said [Loudoun] county today have determined and voted on the following articles which they think may best serve the church:"

The articles said:

1. If you want to become a member of this congregation, sign here.
2. Every member shall give a voluntary contribution, according to his income, to the preacher and the school officials, otherwise you won't be considered a member.
3. As far as building a church or a school house is concerned, every member shall contribute, according to his means, otherwise you won't be recognized as a member.
4. If you want to write something down for the preacher, hand it in by October 1, in a designated place. [remember, the pastor was only part-time, and was not here every week]
5. The names of old or young people who conduct themselves in a disorderly manner in the House of God, should be written down and given to the pastor, so that they will not be allowed to take communion, but will be sent away.
6. If you have something to say, write it down and write it down, or have someone write it down for you, so the officials don't have to run all over the place.

7. If you die, and your name isn't on a list of church members, you have no right to be buried in the churchyard, unless you pay 18 schillings.
8. If the church council wants to change or improve something, they should write it down.
9. These articles should be read every year in the church.

Now, there are a couple of things to note about these articles:

First, membership is voluntary, as are contributions, or offerings. This is not a state church, such as was the Anglican Church in Virginia and Maryland at that time, in which every landowner paid a tithe for the support of the church.

Second, everything was to be done in writing—a very important principle in a democratic form of governance, and a protection against arbitrary rules. (That also is essential for a democratic order in a republic; it's why the United States has a written constitution, and Britain does not.)

And third, Note the provisions for church discipline: disorderly conduct was punished by refusing communion.

This goes to a dispute that Muhlenberg had with the "Fathers at Halle" and in the Lutheran court in London. In Europe, church rules and discipline could be enforced by civil law. But, Muhlenberg realized that an independent church could not be built that way in America. "We are in a free country here," Muhlenberg wrote, "in religious matters each person has the freedom to do as he pleases There is no law pertaining to these things."

"In this free land, we have no other weapons ... than prayer, exhortation, and exclusion from the Lord's Supper." Muhlenberg told the Fathers in Europe that when the church elders wanted to bring someone before the secular authority, he would not allow it. He pointed to the difficulties this caused in Europe (he himself had been subject to this in the German territories), and said that this only weakened the church and its preaching authority. There had been at least one occasion where a man, named Shadrack Samuels, had given public offense during a service at The Trappe and was hauled off to court in Philadelphia and prosecuted; it caused the church considerable expense.

These three elements, reflected in our church constitution, were also critical for building the church in America as a free, independent of state sponsorship and state control.

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Notes

Preparation for holy communion was also treated differently in those days. At Muhlenberg's home church at The Trappe, it was a week-long process. Of course communion was only held once every three months—quarterly. Members were required to meet the pastor a week before the Lord's Supper was to be celebrated, where the pastor inquired as to the would-be communicants spiritual condition and his relations with his neighbors. During the preparatory service, congregants would gather around the altar. Anyone who had given public offense was asked to step forward and encouraged to repentance, and all those assembled were asked if they would forgive their brother who had erred. The rest were admonished not to think themselves better, but to think of their own sins, and watch over their own hearts. If anyone still harbored ill will toward another they would meet at the parsonage to forgive each other and be reconciled.

We know from the church records that here, the quarterly communion was generally a two- or three-day event, so it is most likely that a similar process of confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation was a prerequisite for partaking of Holy Communion here. It's something to think about.