

Of Religion

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Both of our parents were Laestadians from late adolescence. There were two main branches of Laestadianism: the western branch and the eastern, which was more stringent and more evangelical. The villages along the lower Torne River belonged generally to the eastern branch.

Laestadianism was a reform movement in the State (Lutheran) Church; that is, children were baptized and confirmed by the ordained Lutheran minister, marriage and ordination occurred in the church, and of course, burials took place in the church.

In addition to the worship services in church, prayer meetings were held in villages with lay preachers. These prayer meetings (*Seurat*), were held in homes. In the villages there were usually ordinary peasants who felt called to spread God's word to their fellow men. In our village there were two lay preachers.

These local lay preachers were often invited to speak, but the Christian families in the village were free to invite preachers from elsewhere also. It often happened that preachers were invited from Finland, because of the common language. It also happened that ordained ministers who were Laestadians, were invited to preach at prayer meetings. I do not remember that there ever was a Swedish-speaking minister, however.

What happened then at these meetings?

If our parents wanted to arrange a meeting where one or both of our local lay preachers would preach, it was easy. If they were free, they were happy to do so. Then Mother sent a note with us to school and asked the teacher to tell everyone when the meeting would take place.

We dragged trestles into the large kitchen and set boards on the trestles to serve as benches. There were also some chairs, of course, for the old people who had pain in their backs. It was important for the prayer meeting to begin at a time when the women had finished their evening milking, so they could attend.

When people began to drop in, they would greet each other by laying a hand on the friend's shoulder and saying, "God's peace." Gradually each participant got a plain cup of coffee as they sat on the bench. The old folks drank their coffee holding a sugar cube between their front teeth and filtering the coffee through it.

When coffee was drunk and talk died down, the preacher sat on the couch at the front with the large family Bible on the table. When Preacher A was there, he chose the hymn because he had a voice like the noise of thunder. We often sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." I would have welcomed any other choice. I remember that the tailor's wife often had to lead the singing. She had a beautiful singing voice.

When the hymn had been sung, the preacher opened the Bible to a text that he had chosen, read it out, and began to expound on the text. Often it was a verse we had heard before, but the sermon always stressed that you should walk the narrow road. The Devil was always on the lookout and might be hated, but man is weak and can easily fall into sin. But sin could be undone and you could be forgiven; you would not continue to sin, and grace was sure to come.

Sometimes it happened that someone was deeply moved as the sermon went on, wept and prayed all to certify that his sins were forgiven. All replied in chorus, "In the name of Jesus and by His blood, all your sins are forgiven." Often the person continued to loudly thank and

praise the Lord Jesus.

It could also be that while a few more became imbued with the Spirit and began to thank God and sometimes their speech could be inarticulate. Such "outbreaks " were called *liikutuksia* - movements. The sermon went on and the meeting closed with the Lord's Prayer, the blessing and a final hymn.

When preachers were invited, it was often by letter. They could have long preaching tours, especially in winter, with the visits arranged in the geographically appropriate regions.

Often when we had prayer meeting two nights in a row in the same farm, the preacher was living with us for a while. We had it pretty crowded, but it happened. The food would be a little extra good and it was laid on a white cloth in the house. Then also a couple of our parents' friends would be invited to dinner. I remember the conversations at the dinner table almost exclusively focused on religious matters.

Preachers were paid by taking collections. Later they formed the Christian village organizations called Peace Associations. When someone died you could give a gift to the Peace Association. The money raised that way went to the salaries of preachers.

Every summer, the general assemblies were held in the village. A large meeting lasted about three days. A large tent was erected, usually near the church. These tents were mostly filled with preaching all day, allowing breaks for meals and coffee breaks. Collections were organized by the sale of food and coffee. For those who had no accommodation, there were opportunities to stay temporarily in a school for example.

For such a large meeting there would be many preachers invited, both Finnish and Swedish, both laymen and ordained ministers. All sermons were translated into Swedish and Finnish. Each general meeting ended in the church with communion. Not everyone could fit in the church but there were speakers in the tent. Communion lasted very long. There could be very large numbers of people in the congregation.

These large meetings were the summer's big event. There were often buses that drove visitors to the meeting. Certainly it was not just the religious needs that were satisfied. People got to meet relatives, friends and acquaintances on the bright and often hot summer days. Meetings were held the week after midsummer, probably for practical reasons. Around July 10 began the hay- making, and then we had no time.