

Telling Heartland Histories: Rural Iowa Protestant Congregations in the Mid-Twentieth Century

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THE MEMBERS of the First Reformed Church in Hull, Iowa, commemorated their 75th anniversary in 1960. For the occasion, the congregation published an extensive anniversary book that included many photos and a lengthy narrative history. The compilers hoped that the “history and achievement which is recorded here may register a new inspiration in us for that which lies ahead . . . [to] carry on the work which was so nobly begun . . . [and] be loyal to the ‘faith of our fathers.’” It began with the story of Dutch immigrants moving from Pella, Iowa, to Sioux County, where they “wrestled with the sod that had laid untouched through the centuries of time.” The extraordinarily detailed account retold the efforts to organize as a congregation, acquire the services of a pastor, and construct a building in the 1880s and 1890s. The history also highlighted each pastorate and the progress marked by various “milestones,” such as the installation of electric lights, the beginning of a young people’s society, and the construction of a new building in 1940. Throughout the telling of this history, the writers not only chose what events to recount but also regularly editorialized to instruct readers about the importance of the past. For instance, they stated that “through all the vicissitudes . . . their faith remained constant and fixed in the Lord.” At the conclusion of the history, the authors opined, “We live in a very complex and difficult world. . . . Taxation has reached an all time high; farm prices are constantly fluctuating while labor

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demands are constantly increasing. We live in a mechanized and push-button world. . . . It is our prayer that as a Congregation we may together be faithful to the trust which He has imposed upon us."¹ While the authors wrote about the past, they had their eyes clearly focused on the present.

This congregational commemorative history, and others like it, reveal much about how rural Iowans understood themselves and their place in the United States in the middle of the twentieth century. Commemorative histories were often written during congregational anniversary commemorations. Usually celebrated on important anniversaries such as centennials, they involved the whole congregation in a time of reflecting on the past, working together

1. "75th Anniversary," First Reformed Church, Hull (1960), available at Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, MI (hereafter cited as JAH).

in the present, and looking forward to the future.² The stories these histories included both reflected and constructed an identity their authors hoped would help maintain their treasured way of life.

The many changes in rural Iowa from the 1940s to the 1960s provided the context as congregations wrote their commemorative histories. Rural Protestant congregation members worried about threats they saw locally and globally. Farmers in that era sought out labor-saving chemical and mechanical technology because of reduced labor availability. As farmers were able to cultivate more land and raise more livestock, the size of farms grew. The choices farmers made, with the support of farm policy, altered the social and physical landscape of Iowa.³ That resulted in higher production but lower prices, so farm income dropped compared to income in the United States in general.⁴ At the same time, rural Iowans' expectations changed as radio and television brought mass culture to Iowa's farms and villages. Automobiles connected them more quickly to larger population centers. Patterns of daily life changed slowly but noticeably. People moved out of rural areas, changing the demographics permanently.⁵ At the same time, Cold War rhetoric about America as a "Christian nation" encouraged rural Iowans to think of themselves as being on the right side of history and embodying freedom and success for the American way.⁶

2. In the course of my work I have analyzed more than 800 congregational histories from nine different archives. Many of them are outside the scope of this article, but more than 200 are directly relevant for this article.

3. J. L. Anderson, *Industrializing the Corn Belt: Agriculture, Technology, and Environment, 1945–1972* (De Kalb, IL, 2009), 8. The migration from rural to urban areas resulted in a smaller percentage of the population living on farms. For specific numbers, see David Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore, 1995), 244–48. For a good general overview of conditions in the Midwest after World War II, see J. L. Anderson, ed., *The Rural Midwest since World War II* (De Kalb, IL, 2014).

4. Dorothy Schwieder, "Cooperative Extension and Rural Iowa: Agricultural Adjustment in the 1950s," *Annals of Iowa* 51 (1992), 604–5.

5. Robert Wuthnow, *Remaking the Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s* (Princeton, NJ, 2011).

6. Kevin Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York, 2015); Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle Against Communism in the Early Cold War* (New York, 2011).

All of these changes buffeted a beloved way of life that seemed to be under attack from all sides. Institutions had to make changes to adjust to these new realities. Shrinking memberships, or the perception of such reductions, required congregations to be more diligent in maintaining the members who remained. At the national level, church mergers, often negotiated at the denominational or synodical level, left the people in the pews to deal with the reality of changing names and alignments.⁷ Rural schools consolidated as fewer students enrolled and larger schools offered more opportunities.⁸ Rural political power slipped away in reapportionment fights.⁹

As a response to worries about the future of rural institutions, rural Iowans told stories that emphasized how hard work and faith had guided the members of the congregation. Telling these stories about a seemingly simpler, more honest, and more faithful past was a way to deal with the changes. Rural Iowans stressed the hard work and sacrifices of their pioneering forebears to encourage themselves to continue to work hard and sacrifice to be successful. What it meant to be heartland people was shaped in this crucible of change.¹⁰

Congregational anniversary histories offer unique insight into the cultural and religious reaction to these changes. Writing the historical narrative and publishing a book with photographs was a selective process that reflected important beliefs of the people

7. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faiths since World War II* (Princeton, NJ, 1988), 35–53. For some Lutheran denominations, the merger movement helped create the American Lutheran Church in 1960 and the Lutheran Church in America in 1962. Broader efforts included the National Council of Churches, which was formally organized in 1950, and an effort through the Consultation on Christian Union between 1960 and 1970, when ten major denominations worked toward “reunion.” See Mark Granquist, “‘The Sociological Factor Is Not to be Underestimated’: Swedes, Norwegians, and American Lutheran Merger Negotiations, 1920–1960,” in *Norwegians and Swedes in the United States: Friends and Neighbors*, ed. Philip J. Anderson and Dag Blanck (St. Paul, MN, 2012), 156–57; and Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT, 2004), 1083.

8. Dorothy Schwieder, *Iowa: The Middle Land* (Iowa City, 1996), 291–93; Andrew Gulliford, *America’s Country Schools* (Washington, DC, 1984), 44–45.

9. Schwieder, *Iowa*, 297–301.

10. Dorothy Schwieder, “Iowa: The Middle Land,” in *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States*, ed. James H. Madison (Bloomington, IN, 1990), 278.

doing the commemorating, as the writers and compilers often noted. These histories tell much about the general feeling of the intended audience and how it saw itself. Commemorations of all sorts were a common occurrence. They were directed at the local audience who could nod along with the depiction of themselves being presented. In this, they created a usable past that reflected what they thought was important to remember as they navigated the changing times.¹¹

Rural Iowans told their collective story and found their identity largely in churches.¹² The little white church was an iconic image of rural Iowa (and the Midwest more generally), and churches served as the center of rural communities.¹³ Robert Swierenga, in a presidential address to the Agricultural History Society, asserted that, particularly for immigrant communities in the rural Midwest, “the church was the major unifying force, drawing the newcomers together in a protective cocoon and providing a feeling of security.”¹⁴ Churches were not only the

11. On the use of church anniversary books to understand what people valued, see Jane Marie Pederson, *Between Memory and Reality: Family and Community in Rural Wisconsin, 1870–1970* (Madison, WI, 1992), 128–33. Otherwise, little has been written about how churches and other institutions commemorated their past through anniversary celebrations. There is, however, a large and growing scholarship on commemorations and memory that includes some now classic works, such as Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, 1992); Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” *Representations* 26 (1986), 7–14; and Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York, 1983). For examples of studies about commemorations among immigrant groups, see April Schultz, *Ethnicity on Parade: Inventing the Norwegian American through Celebration* (Amherst, MA, 1994); Orm Øverland, *Immigrant Minds, American Identities: Making the United States Home, 1870–1930* (Urbana and Champaign, IL, 2000); and Michael Douma, *How Dutch Americans Stayed Dutch: An Historical Perspective on Ethnic Identities* (Amsterdam, 2014). On the religious dimension of remembering the past, see Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *The Spiritual Practice of Remembering* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2013).

12. For one case study of this phenomenon, see Carol K. Coburn, *Life at Four Corners: Religion, Gender, and Education in a German-Lutheran Community, 1868–1945* (Lawrence, KS, 1992).

13. Cornelia Butler Flora and Jan L. Flora, “Midwestern Rural Communities in the Post-WWII Era to 2000,” in *The Rural Midwest since World War II*, ed. J. L. Anderson (De Kalb, IL, 2014), 104.

14. Robert P. Swierenga, “The Little White Church: Religion in Rural America,” *Agricultural History* 71 (1997), 415–41. See also Philip Barlow and Becky Cantonwine, “Introduction: Not Oz,” in *Religion and Public Life in the Midwest: America’s*

most important social institution in rural communities, but they also played a role in the cultural understanding of people in the pews. The meaning-making function of the church went beyond just private faith to include how to interpret and see the world.¹⁵ Helping make sense of the world happened in many ways within the church — and the shared experience of a commemoration provided a time to step back and tell the story of the congregation. These rural congregations stood at the heart of the social and cultural patterns for rural Iowans. Churches, then — and their commemorations, which detail implicit beliefs — are a critical place to examine how rural Iowans of the time thought about themselves and the changes taking place all around them.

Much scholarship on the “heartland” moniker overlooks how common people identified themselves. Recent scholarship has pointed out how writers and intellectuals viewed the Midwest.¹⁶ Their ideas about the Midwest were largely based on how *they* saw the people most closely identified with the heartland. But what did the people in the heartland think about themselves? How did they construct their own stories about what it meant to be from the heartland? Examining the stories they told about themselves from the 1940s to the 1960s helps explain the historical

Common Denominator? ed. Philip Barlow and Mark Silk (Walnut Creek, CA, 2004). On the failure to examine religion in American history, see Jon Butler, “Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History,” *Journal of American History* 90 (2004), 1357–78.

15. The idea of lived religion helps us understand how churches shaped people’s ideas about the world. See Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950* (New Haven, CT, 1985); and David Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, NJ, 1997).

16. The focus on intellectuals’ and writers’ definitions of the Midwest as heartland includes, among others, Jon K. Lauck, *From Warm Center to Ragged Edge: The Erosion of Midwestern Literary and Historical Regionalism, 1920–1965* (Iowa City, 2017); William Barillas, *The Midwestern Pastoral: Place and Landscape in Literature of the American Heartland* (Athens, OH, 2006); Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray, eds., *The Identity of the American Midwest: Essays on Regional History* (Bloomington, IN, 2001); Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington, IN, 1990); and James Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence, KS, 1989). See also Rhys H. Williams, “Religion and Place in the Midwest: Urban, Rural, and Suburban Forms of Religious Expression,” in *Religion and Public Life in the Midwest: America’s Common Denominator?* ed. Philip Barlow and Mark Silk (Walnut Creek, CA, 2004).

development of a rural consciousness.¹⁷ These stories recounted the hard work and faith that had created the heartland. Rural Iowans believed these characteristics needed to continue in order for the region to remain the heartland.

THE HISTORY OF RURAL IOWA is filled with stories of the sacrifices and hard work required to till the soil and raise livestock. However, developments after World War II changed the rewards structure. Physical labor and personal sacrifices no longer seemed to ensure survival, let alone success. Standing still, or using old methods, could leave farmers behind. Since the first settlers had started farming, farmers had continually made choices about how to adjust their operations to survive and thrive. In order to maintain their farms in the 1950s and 1960s, farmers adjusted to the use of machines and chemicals. Such choices required them to act more as business people than pastoralists. Iowa farmers took on more capital-intensive methods of industrial farming. Hard work now meant using not only strong muscles but also a keen mind. Sacrifice did not mean deprivation to live on the farm and physical struggle to be successful but now meant being in debt to pay for technology.¹⁸

At the same time, rural Iowans were nostalgic for an earlier vision of rural life of Iowa. Their sense of loss of a more pastoral rural life that rewarded hard work and sacrifice helps explain how people in rural Iowa told their history. Those who stayed on the farm tried to maintain an idealized rural life they associated with the heartland. Farm women joined organizations that sought to keep a more pastoral way of life as the ideal even as industrial agriculture brought them a standard of living closer to that of their city cousins.¹⁹ Rural Iowans still valued the hard work and sacrifice associated with a bygone rural lifestyle in the heartland.

17. The idea of rural consciousness is developed by Katherine J. Cramer in *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago, 2016). While Cramer does an excellent job of explaining contemporary rural consciousness, she misses both the historical and the religious dimensions.

18. Anderson, *Industrializing the Corn Belt*, 3–9.

19. Jenny Barker Devine, *On Behalf of the Family Farm: Iowa Farm Women's Activism since 1945* (Iowa City, 2013). On nostalgia in the Midwest, see Wuthnow, *Remaking the Heartland*, 57–91.

As rural Iowans wrote congregational histories, they emphasized the hard work and sacrifices of the pioneers, reinforcing the nostalgic view of the past.

Rural Iowans in Protestant congregations generally started telling their history by recounting the arrival of hard-working pioneer settlers from Europe or other parts of the United States.²⁰ Dutch congregations often started with the broader story of Dutch immigration to the Midwest.²¹ Some Swedish congregations, such as Swede Valley Lutheran Church in Ogden, named specific places in Sweden as the origin of their pioneers; some, like Elfsborg Lutheran Church, even took their name from the place the members had come from in Sweden.²² Our Savior's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Calamus was originally called Kvindherred Lutheran Church—a name, the history helpfully pointed out, that was “taken from their home church and home location of the greater majority of those who came here” in Norway.²³ Other churches with a Norwegian background mentioned early settlers moving from Norwegian settlements in Wisconsin or Illinois.²⁴ Many Missouri Synod Lutheran congregations mentioned the German migration that formed the base of their denomination and local congregation.

20. Robert C. Ostergren, “The Immigrant Church as a Symbol of Community and Place in the Upper Midwest,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 1 (1981), 225; Jon Gjerde, *Minds of the West: Ethnocultural Evolution in the Rural Middle West, 1830–1917* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), 14–18; Martin E. Marty, “Ethnicity: The Skeleton of Religion in America,” *Church History* 41 (1972), 5–21; Harry S. Stout, “Ethnicity: The Vital Center of Religion in America,” *Ethnicity* 2 (1975), 207; Timothy L. Smith, “Religion and Ethnicity in America,” *American Historical Review* 83 (1978), 1155–85.

21. See, for instance, “Seventy-Fifth Anniversary,” Peoria Christian Reformed Church, Peoria (1969), available at Heritage Hall, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI (hereafter cited as Heritage Hall).

22. “Because of Christ,” Swede Valley Lutheran Church, Ogden (1968); “Seventy-fifth Anniversary,” Elfsborg Lutheran Church, Pocahontas County (1948), both available at Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center, Augustana College, Rock Island, IL (hereafter cited as Swenson).

23. “One Hundredth Anniversary,” Our Savior's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Calamus (1961), available at the Archives of the Norwegian-American Historical Association at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota (hereafter cited as NAHA).

24. “Centennial,” St. Petri Lutheran Church, Story City (1957), available at Luther College Archives, Decorah (hereafter cited as Luther); “Seventy-fifth Anniversary,” Trinity Lutheran Church, Ellsworth (1950), NAHA.

These settlers had come for opportunity that rewarded hard work. Settlers had transplanted their values from their previous location to the heartland, where those values were rewarded. The history of the Norway and Marion Lutheran congregations in Clayton County noted how "our fathers had come to better their economic conditions. . . . Many were almost penniless when they came. . . . [They] had brought with them little from Norway except a determination to grow and worship God as they pleased." Another history noted, "Our early pioneers had come to better their conditions. They had come from Norway with a determination to make this their adopted country and to build for themselves homes they could call their own and to worship God according to the dictates of their own conscience. . . . It took fortitude and faith in God for our pioneers to leave their folks and native land. . . . Many were almost penniless when they arrived." Rural Iowans told their history to emphasize that their hard-working ancestors who settled in Iowa had been rewarded with success. Their nostalgia for their pioneering ancestors' work habits and values showed their belief that hard work should be rewarded.²⁵

Framed against the realities of capital-intensive and industrializing agriculture in the 1950s and 1960s, rural Iowans' praise for these pioneering farmers who overcame often harsh conditions expressed their identity as hard-working heartland people themselves who needed to overcome obstacles and hardships. In their congregational histories, the pioneering settlers encountered a landscape that accepted the imprint of hard work. Boyden First Reformed Church's history recounted how the "Hollanders" replaced "the first settlers who had moved on or who could not stand the rigors of the pioneer life."²⁶ The Calmar Lutheran Church dedicated its book to "those sturdy, God fearing men and women who endured hardships as they cleared the land, broke the sod, carved out from the wilderness home for themselves, built churches and established businesses." At least two

25. "One-Hundredth Anniversary," Norway-Marion Lutheran Churches, Clayton County (1951), Luther; "Centennial Anniversary," East Clermont Norwegian Lutheran Church, Clermont (1951), NAHA.

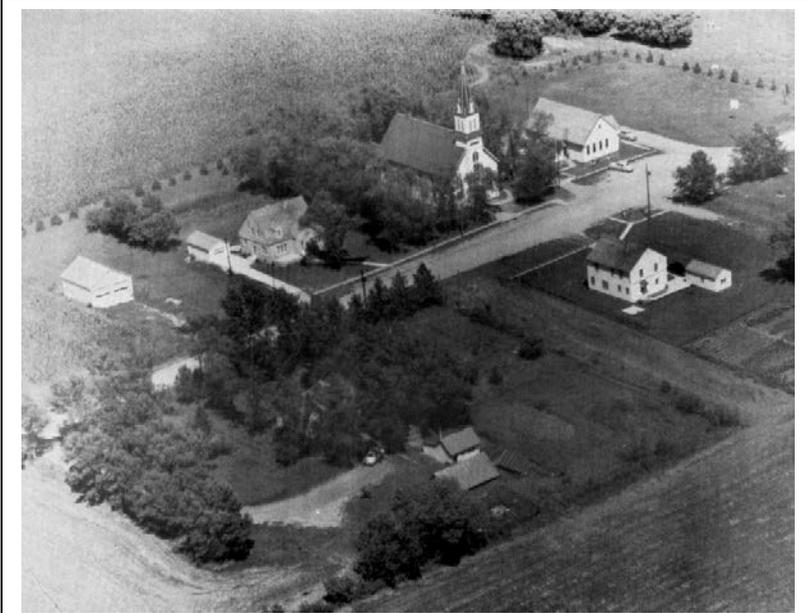
26. "75th Anniversary," First Reformed Church, Boyden (1963), JAH.

other churches used the same phrase to describe their founders.²⁷ The history writers of Our Savior's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Calamus reminded their readers that the early Norwegian pioneers faced the demanding "rigors of getting settled in a new land, the building of a home and the tilling of new ground." Dayton's Trinity Lutheran Church observed that the early settlers "conquered the swamps, grasshopper plagues, prairie fires, scarcity of money and they left their marks in what we see today." St. John's Lutheran Church of Madrid noted that "no one can realize the hardships endured and the sacrifices made by these early settlers. . . . In the spring they broke ground with picks and spades." One history nicely summarized this theme: "All honor to these pioneers, the men and women, who together labored and struggled to clear the land and lay the foundation for the Christian Congregation." By emphasizing how their ancestors overcame harsh conditions and obstacles, rural Iowans built an identity as people who could overcome their own obstacles. The obstacles might no longer be wilderness or breaking new ground, but low commodity prices and high production costs were just as formidable.²⁸

Remembering farming pioneers who had made the land productive was a kind of self-help narrative at a time of changing farming methods. The histories harkened to a time when the land was more fertile and farmers did not use commercial fertilizer. This downplayed the reality of the way they had treated the land and the commercial need for ever higher yields. Commemoration histories mentioned how "good the land was" and how early pioneers found "cheap and fertile land." The pastoral ideal of good land caused the writers to romanticize the land they used for

27. "One Hundredth Anniversary," Calmar Lutheran Church, Calmar (1953), available at Vesterheim: The National Norwegian-American Museum and Heritage Center, Decorah (hereafter cited as Vesterheim); "One Hundredth Anniversary," Springfield Lutheran Church, Springfield (1953), Vesterheim; "One Hundredth Anniversary," St. John's Lutheran Church, Locust (1961), available at State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa (hereafter cited as SHSI).

28. "One Hundredth Anniversary," Our Savior's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Calamus (1961), NAHA; "Centennial Anniversary," Trinity Lutheran Church, Dayton (1962), SHSI; "100th Anniversary," St. John's Lutheran Church, Madrid (1959), Swenson; "One Hundredth Anniversary," Big Canoe Lutheran Church, Big Canoe (1953), Luther.



Birdseye views of church properties and the surrounding landscape demonstrated the connection to the land for rural congregations, as in this image from Alta's St. John's Lutheran Church diamond anniversary booklet (1955). Image courtesy of Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis, Missouri.

farming production. As the Swede Valley Lutheran Church reminded its history readers, "The countryside to most Swedish immigrants was heaven to them, for the hands of God were most eminent revealing the beauty overlooking the acres each direction from where our church now stands." According to the First Augustana Evangelical Church of New Sweden, "The virgin soil of Iowa rewarded their labors with rich harvests." Glenwood Lutheran Church's history highlighted the "cheap and fertile land" that the "brave men and women" found in northeast Iowa. The Evangelical United Brethren Church in Cranston boasted about how pioneers had found Iowa, with its "fine climate, rich prairie land, fine streams abounding in fish, and abundance of game," an excellent place to succeed. Spencer's First Congregational Church history recorded that a group of settlers found in northwest Iowa along the Sioux River "a rich dark colored, alluvial loam, extending in depth from two to eight feet." With adequate

subsoil, this ground “would resist drought or excessive rainfall. . . . These brave, sturdy people built their log cabins to withstand the cold – and the Indians.” According to the history writers, the rich, uncultivated, and vacant land had provided the resources needed to be successful.²⁹

Of course, the land had not been vacant, but only a few histories mentioned how the land had become available for their settler ancestors. Some histories written by rural Iowans noted the presence of Native Americans as another hurdle their pioneering ancestors had overcome. St. John’s Lutheran Church in Madrid stated, “No one can realize the hardships endured and the sacrifices made by these early settlers. Wild Indians roamed about in search of plunder.” Adair St. John’s Lutheran Church grouped Native Americans with dangerous animals; the history included a list of dangerous animals and noted how “sometimes the Indians added interest and excitement to the routine of the day.” Estherville Lutheran Church’s 1961 narrative referred to the interactions with Native Americans by noting the 1857 “troubles.”³⁰

The dismissal of Native Americans as original land users is evidence of the framework that viewed the land as empty and needing cultivation (fitting into a longer history of European colonization in North America). Native Americans were generally not presented as possessors of the lands who had been dispossessed by the government and settlers. Only rarely did writers implicitly reveal that others controlled the land before the settlers. The history of Silver Lake Lutheran Church mentioned how the immigrants were the “first white men to tread the ground in that area,” implying that other, non-white people had trod there. The Big Canoe Lutheran Church related that “pioneer settlers . . . from Norway in those days carved out homes for themselves on land

29. “Because of Christ,” Swede Valley Lutheran Church, Ogden (1968), Swenson; “History,” First Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church, New Sweden (1948), SHSI; “One Hundredth Anniversary,” Glenwood Lutheran Church, Winneshiek and Allamakee Counties (1953), Luther; “Centennial,” Evangelical United Brethren Church, Cranston (1954), SHSI; “Dedicated to the Glory of God,” First Congregational Church, Spencer (1955), SHSI.

30. “100th Anniversary,” St. John’s Lutheran Church, Madrid (1959), Swenson; “History,” St. John’s Lutheran Church, Adair (1950), available at Concordia Historical Institute, St. Louis, MO (hereafter cited as CHI); “100 Years,” Estherville Lutheran Church, Estherville (1961), Luther.

that had been occupied solely by Indians before them.”³¹ Overcoming hardships, including the presence of Native Americans, provided the kind of story that resonated with those reading the histories. It affirmed their sense that they were the rightful heirs of the rich land because they had cultivated it into production and continued to do so, even in the face of agricultural change.

AS CONGREGATIONS wrote and read these heartland stories, underlying the themes of hard work and good land was a nostalgia for what they considered simpler, more wholesome times. The Norway-Marion Lutheran Churches in Clayton County in 1951 noted how “agriculture and machinery were very simple” for the pioneers. First Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church of New Sweden stated, “Family life was very simple, and home ‘sloyd’ was still looked upon with respect . . . just as they did in Sweden in the good old days.”³²

The nostalgia also came through in how overcoming hardships could be looked at longingly. One history noted that “despite the hardships of prairie fires and bitter cold on the wind-swept plain, where there were few trees for firewood, the settlers persevered and established a way of life which they found enjoyable and satisfying.” The same history editorialized that although much had changed since the time of pioneers, “it is debatable whether or not people are happier now than they were in the pioneer days of our community.” Immanuel Lutheran Church of Spirit Lake noted that at least the fishing was easy as “life was lived rather leisurely in those days.”³³ This nostalgic view “cleaned up” the past to serve the purposes of the present. Clearly,

31. “Centennial,” Silver Lake Lutheran Church, Silver Lake (1958), NAHA; “One Hundredth Anniversary,” Big Canoe Lutheran Church, Big Canoe (1953), Luther.

32. “One-Hundredth Anniversary,” Norway-Marion Lutheran Churches, Clayton County (1951), Luther; “History,” First Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church, New Sweden (1948), SHSL. *Sloyd* could be roughly translated as “woodworking” or more broadly as “handicraft.” June E. Eyestone, “The Influence of Swedish Sloyd and Its Interpreters on American Art Education,” *Studies in Art Education* 34 (1992), 28–38.

33. “100 Years,” Immanuel Lutheran Church, Clarinda (1969), CHI; “Diamond Jubilee,” Immanuel Lutheran Church, Spirit Lake (1953), CHI.

the congregations in rural Iowa felt that the past was a time of close community ties that many felt was fading in the modern world.

This longing for the old days of close communities included praising earlier generations' devotion to the church. This reflected at least partly the fear people in rural churches had of losing their way of life. The fear of the decline of rural Iowa institutions was based on both a reality and a perception. The number of schools dropped dramatically as consolidation swept through education. There was a sense that rural communities were losing an important social and identity-forming institution.³⁴ At the same time, church members feared changes to their congregations. The reality of changing demographics, mobility, and denominational affiliations all contributed to a sense of foreboding; there was a perception that Christianity was under attack. As sociologist Robert Wuthnow states, "Religious discourse was filled with prophecies of doom."³⁵ This sense of worry about the future of congregations can be seen in the way their stories were written. Wanting to maintain their institutions in the face of a changing world, they used the model of previous generations as inspiration.

Institutions such as schools and churches had played an important role in the social relationships of people in rural communities, and many feared that those institutions, and the relationships with people they embodied, might be changed indelibly. Many histories commended the efforts of early generations as they overcame hardships and obstacles through sacrifice and faith to start churches. The writers worried that people were now less committed to the church than their ancestors were. As the history of Germantown's St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church plainly put it, "In all our present day moving, do we always think of the church?" Boyden's First Reformed Church reflected, "We are amazed at the accomplishments of that small group of dedicated men and women in such a short period of time. Their prayers, sacrifices and hard work, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, resulted in a firmly established Church." Some pined for how

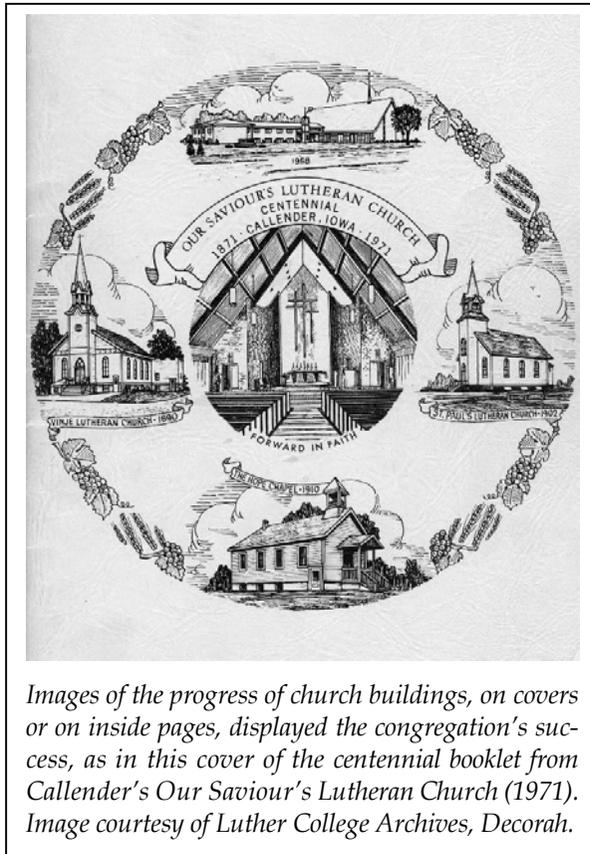
34. Schwieder, *Iowa*, 291-93; David R. Reynolds, *There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa* (Iowa City, 1999); idem, "The Making of Buck Creek: Country Life Reform, Religion, and Rural School Consolidation," *Annals of Iowa* 58 (1999), 351-87.

35. Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, 39.

earlier members had given so generously to congregational efforts. Many church history writers pointed to the pioneers as models to emulate. For instance, Hesper Lutheran Church noted that "with far less material possessions and in much humbler circumstances, these rugged folk built a beautiful and substantial house of worship." Trinity Lutheran Church of Ellsworth told its readers they needed to "pay tribute to the pioneer fathers and mothers because they were willing to sacrifice to build this house of worship." The history of the First Baptist Church in Corydon recounted that "many sacrifices made possible the erection of the first church structure" in 1871. The 1954 history of the First Congregational Church of Decorah noted that "in spite of hard times, the church was completed . . . free from debt" in 1861. The intent was clear: readers should acknowledge that the current challenges might be real and significant, but early generations had overcome greater trials with dedication and sacrifice.³⁶

BUILDING PROJECTS took center stage in the retelling of the faithful efforts of previous generations. History writers equated the physical progress of buildings with the success of the congregation. In most histories, the first church meetings took place in some kind of temporary, shared location. While some meetings took place in the house of one of the founders, most shared space in town halls, courthouses, or other churches. The most common shared meeting place was the local schoolhouse. The history writers often pointed out that these early meetings during pioneer days required cooperation among various social institutions. St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Craig noted, "Since every beginning is hard and no funds were available for building a church at this time, the faithful families grasped the opportunity to have church services in Eastman schoolhouse." Ireton First Christian Reformed Church remembered how "the Mayor of Ireton had willingly granted the use of the Hall for this purpose."

36. "Anniversary Booklet," St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church, Germantown (1963), CHI; "75th Anniversary," First Reformed Church, Boyden (1963), JAH; "1865-1965," Hesper Lutheran Church, Hesper (1965), Luther; "Seventy-fifth Anniversary," Trinity Lutheran Church, Ellsworth (1950), NAHA; "Centennial Anniversary," First Baptist Church, Corydon (1954), SHSI; "One Hundredth Anniversary," First Congregational Church, Decorah (1954), SHSI.



Images of the progress of church buildings, on covers or on inside pages, displayed the congregation's success, as in this cover of the centennial booklet from Callender's Our Saviour's Lutheran Church (1971). Image courtesy of Luther College Archives, Decorah.

The Peoria Christian Reformed Church benefited from meeting originally in the township hall. The emphasis history writers placed on shared meeting space, at least at the beginning, demonstrated the kind of community spirit rural Iowans sensed they were losing as their churches struggled to maintain themselves.³⁷

Each subsequent building project marked more sacrifice and success. The histories generally recount congregations going from meeting in temporary locations to constructing impressive

37. "40th Anniversary," St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Craig (1951), SHSI; "50th Anniversary," Ireton Christian Reformed Church, Ireton (1958), Heritage Hall; "Seventy-Fifth Anniversary," Peoria Christian Reformed Church, Peoria (1969), Heritage Hall.



OUR FIRST CHURCH



OUR FIRST PARSONAGE



OUR SECOND CHURCH



OUR SECOND PARSONAGE



OUR THIRD PARSONAGE

Images of the progress of church buildings, on covers or on inside pages, displayed the congregation's success, as in this page of photos from Albert City's Our Savior's Evangelical Lutheran Church Dedication Album (1956). Image courtesy of Swenson Swedish Immigration Research Center, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

Edifices, all with sacrifice. Boone's St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church told the story of how "members of the congregation were poor and many of them in strained circumstances, so that it took a great deal of faith and trust in God to undertake the building of a new church edifice." Many congregations started with a simple wood-framed structure before success and growth necessitated a more substantial building. One history book noted that "the history of our church has been one of continuous improvement as far as our church building is concerned." The books meticulously recounted details about each structure, sometimes recording the cost of the buildings. Photographs of the buildings offered evidence of physical success. Sometimes this was graphically illustrated on the book's cover. Church histories often boasted of their structures, as in the Ogden Immanuel Lutheran Church's claim that "the Ogden community and Immanuel congregation felt proud of the achievement." This emphasis on physical structures showed the congregation how earlier generations had worked communally to overcome obstacles.³⁸

The way earlier generations had worked together became the model for current readers. The First Baptist Church of Corydon observed, "In reviewing the past one hundred years we see a steady advancement. Though at times it took the faithful few to keep the church going, many difficulties and trials have been overcome, both financial and spiritual, and we have had many periods of rich fellowship dispelling the gloom of discouragement." Another church history emphasized how earlier generations "gave of their money, but better still they gladly gave their services, whether it was to clean up the church . . . or if it be to go to some neighbor's home to help them."³⁹

Not only was congregational community valorized, but so, too, were communal efforts between small, rural congregations. They often shared pastors in joint parish relationships that allowed

38. "A Century of Progress," St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Boone (1968), CHI; "Centennial Anniversary," Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Lansing (1967), Luther; "50th Anniversary," Immanuel Lutheran Church, Ogden (1964), Swenson.

39. "Centennial Anniversary," First Baptist Church, Corydon, Iowa (1954), SHSI; "100 Years," Estherville Lutheran Church, Estherville (1961), Luther.

for regular preaching and sacraments.⁴⁰ Reminding readers of these arrangements made those early pioneers seem more communal and willing to try new things for the faith.⁴¹ This could also mean helping a neighboring congregation when disaster struck. According to the Calmar Lutheran Church history, when recounting rebuilding after a fire in 1887 with the help of other congregations, "This shows the spirit of the pioneers to help one another when help was needed."⁴² This nostalgia for earlier communal ties demonstrated a fear of losing the communal ties that came with strong institutions.

Histories of rural Iowa congregations focused on the hard work and sacrifices required to start farming, build churches, and maintain them. The people who had settled and developed the land, built the churches, and sustained them valued their "little white church" as foundational to their lives. These stories were meant to inspire the present generation to stay strong and faithful as changes swept rural Iowa. The commemorations played off the nostalgia of those sitting in the pews for a previous era of hard-working and committed members and reinforced the important role of churches even as earlier communal patterns slipped away. As the Springbrook SS. Peter and Paul Catholic Church history succinctly stated, they were celebrating "the progress and development of our family farms, rural parishes, schools, [and] communities."⁴³ By celebrating past success, the present members of the congregation were encouraged to continue the values their ancestors had exhibited. This created an image of the heartland filled with people who worked hard, not only to make the land productive, but also to build institutions that created the heart of their way of life.

40. See, for example, "One Hundredth Anniversary," Big Canoe Lutheran Church, Big Canoe (1953), Luther; and "75th Anniversary," First Reformed Church, Hull (1960), JAH.

41. See "One Hundredth Anniversary," Our Savior's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Calamus (1961), NAHA; and "Seventy-Fifth Anniversary," Deer Creek Evangelical Lutheran Church, Carpenter (1952), NAHA.

42. "One Hundredth Anniversary," Calmar Lutheran Church, Calmar (1953), Vesterheim.

43. "A Century of Dedicated Service," SS. Peter and Paul Catholic Church, Springbrook (1964), SHSI.

RURAL IOWANS in the middle of the twentieth century attributed their characteristics of hard work and sacrifice to their faith. As they dealt with the challenges and changes all around them, they leaned on their faith to make sense of the world. They told stories about their past that emphasized the faith of earlier generations during times of struggle. Congregational histories described the strong faith pioneers needed to overcome the hardships they faced to settle the land and to start churches. These faith-filled histories were meant to inspire the present generation to prioritize *their* faith. History writers regularly editorialized about the importance of faith in a way that was descriptive of the faith of the church generally but also prescriptive to encourage the present generation to be just as faithful. The writers encouraged the current generation to continue in the faith. In writing and reading these histories, rural Iowans defined faith as foundational to their life. A strong Christian faith was a main component for how people in rural Iowa thought of themselves as heartland people. Rural Iowans in the middle of the twentieth century situated faith at the center of their lives. As they told the history of their faithful ancestors, congregants saw the life they aspired to. These stories reflected and inspired the current people in the pews.

Often, different sections of the church anniversary books boldly told their readers how to think about faith. The history writers of the Peterson St. John's United Church of Christ laid out their purpose thus: "First, it is a reminder of the faith of our fathers, which, amidst the trying times of early pioneer days founded our church and loyally supported it. . . . Secondly, we wish on this Anniversary to look forward with courage and faith to a yet more fruitful future." Later, the same history writers looked to the future with hope as they called the church to "meet the changing pattern of society with open minds, thankful for the past, pressing on to whatever we are challenged to do in the future, not being afraid to try new ideas and experiments." Calls on current readers to stay faithful could be very direct. Boyden's First Reformed Church reminded readers to "never take lightly the responsibilities that are ours, nor fail to remember that we are heirs of seventy-five years of labor, love, sacrifice and a firm belief that the Scriptures are the true, revealed Word of God." The weight of a faithful history came through many of the narratives.

There was a need to be more faithful in the turbulent years they were living through in the heartland.⁴⁴

The dedications and forewords in many of the congregational commemoration books clearly laid out the books' goal. Many congregational histories had a stated goal of honoring the faith of their founders as a way of recognizing the importance of faith as the basis for the characteristics of heartland people. In the descriptions of the church founders, writers set the framework for the histories that followed. The Meriden Oakdale Evangelical Free Church in 1967 dedicated its efforts to the "highly esteemed pioneers of our church whose labor of love and zeal for Christ merit our gratitude." The Forest City Immanuel Lutheran Church dedicated its commemoration "to the pioneers who down through the years bravely applied their faith as they built . . . a Christian community." Peterson's St. John's United Church of Christ dedicated its commemoration "to those of yesterday, our forebears who desired that their worship and service to God may be continued in this new land to which they had come." St. John's Lutheran Church of Madrid stated that its goal was to "preserve some of the heritage which was [started by the founders]." The faith of the founders needed to be emulated, according to these history writers.⁴⁵

The histories emphasize specific aspects of the forebears' faith that needed to be emulated. Rural Iowans read about the faith that motivated earlier generations to be active in their congregations. Founders had shaped their lives according to the patterns of church life. According to the 1959 history of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Stratford, the early settlers had "a need of God and of a spiritual life [that] was manifested in the lives of many of these pioneers from the very first. The family altar was never

44. "Seventy-Fifth Anniversary," St. John's United Church of Christ, Peterson (1963), available at the Archives at Eden Theological Seminary, Webster Grove, MO (hereafter cited as Eden); "75th Anniversary," First Reformed Church, Boyden (1963), JAH.

45. "Behold the Works of the Lord," Oakdale Evangelical Free Church, Meriden (1967), Swenson; "75th Anniversary," Immanuel Lutheran Church, Forest City (1955), NAHA; "Seventy-Fifth Anniversary," St. John's United Church of Christ, Peterson (1963), Eden; "100th Anniversary," St. John's Lutheran Church, Madrid (1959), Swenson.

omitted in their homes and church holidays were religiously observed." Swede Valley Lutheran Church in Ogden remembered its faithful forebears who "brought with them their Bibles and devotional books which meant 'daily bread' to them." St. Olaf Lutheran Church of Belmond's history states that "almost one-hundred percent Norwegian settlement had come from Christian, church-minded homes in Norway and they continued family devotions here in America."⁴⁶

Many histories pointed out that it was difficult to attend worship services because it often required traveling long distances. Yet those obstacles, according to one history book, "did not keep them from going to church services. . . . Some would walk many miles or drive a team of oxen." Attending multiple services regularly was seen as particularly important in showing the faithfulness of earlier generations. For instance, the First Congregational Church of Eagle Grove noted that in the early 1900s "regular services were held morning and evening every Sunday in the year . . . and there was a regular prayer meeting each week with 'good attendance.'" The people of Grinnell's First Congregational Church read in their history how the founders had "inherited the granite faith and tradition of the Pilgrim Fathers. . . . Sunday morning and the Thursday evening prayer meetings were reportedly 'generally attended.'" First Presbyterian Church of Mechanicsville recounted in 1955 how "the Sunday evening worship service and the Wednesday evening prayer meeting were a vital part of the spiritual life of the church and its members." Both of these services had been discontinued in the 1930s. The writers implicitly compared the early meeting schedule to the current one, which included only one Sunday morning service. These kinds of stories about forebears reflected an identity that made faith a central part of life in the heartland.⁴⁷

46. "Centennial Anniversary," Evangelical Lutheran Church, Stratford (1959), Swenson; "Because of Christ," Swede Valley Lutheran Church, Ogden (1968), Swenson; "75th Anniversary," St. Olaf Lutheran Church, Belmond (1963), NAHA.

47. "Centennial Anniversary," Evangelical Lutheran Church, Stratford (1959), Swenson; "75 Years of Kingdom Building," First Congregational Church, Eagle Grove (1956), SHSI; "Centennial Booklet," First Congregational Church, Grinnell (1955), SHSI; "Centennial," First Presbyterian Church, Mechanicsville (1955), SHSI.



Edward, Otto and Nicolai Selness, Charter Members

Spiritually, they were at first served by itinerant pastors who preached and provided the ministries of the church on their visits to the humble homes of these stalwart folks. These tasks included baptizing, examination of the young who had been taught in the homes, performing marriages, administering the Lord's Supper and conducting committal services for those who had been buried since the last visit.



John Losen, Børre Olsen, Ole Rolfshus, Charter Members

Anniversary booklets regularly included pages with photos of charter members or their names. This page is from the Hesper Lutheran Church Anniversary booklet (1965). Image courtesy of Luther College Archives, Decorah.

In times of hardships, faith could be an aid for the founders and subsequent generations. Peoria Christian Reformed Church remembered the 1890s as a time of particular struggle, with droughts and poor harvests, but “in this distressing period the people did not forget that all things are in the hand of their covenant God and therefore on various occasions prayer meetings were held beseeching the Lord to send rain.” Boyden First Reformed Church’s writers reminded their readers that in the face of hardships after World War I, “the church, like everything else, was hard pressed to carry on her work. However, the indomitable faith and trust in God’s grace . . . never faltered.” The founders’ faith was presented as an example to follow. Rural Iowans were to be inspired by these forebears as people of faith.⁴⁸

Authors often emphasized the continuity in the faith of the congregation. The history writers of the Oakdale Evangelical Free Church in Meriden were “thankful for regular attendance by our people at the church services. This trait has been instilled from one generation to the next and we are following this tradition.” The College Spring United Methodist Church history noted that “families have grown up and taken their place in the life of the church and in the world” because of the foundation set by earlier generations. First Congregational Church in Decorah acknowledged that “we today might have a heritage to carry on through the years” because of the church’s founders. The faith of the past could be connected to the strength of the present church. Deer Creek Evangelical Lutheran Church noted that “church attendance is very good and the congregation is in a flourishing condition” because of the foundation laid in earlier times. Another congregation noted how “both young and old are loyal to the church of their fathers and are ever willing to contribute to its many needs.” The claim of faithfulness pervades the histories of rural Iowa congregations. The history writers called on rural Iowans to stay faithful in challenging times just as their ancestors had stayed faithful.⁴⁹

48. “Seventy-Fifth Anniversary,” Peoria Christian Reformed Church, Peoria (1969), Heritage Hall; “Centennial Anniversary,” Stratford Evangelical Lutheran Church, Stratford (1959), Swenson; “75th Anniversary,” First Reformed Church, Boyden (1963), JAH.

49. “Behold the Works of the Lord,” Oakdale Evangelical Free Church, Meriden (1967), Swenson; “Centennial,” United Methodist Church, College Spring (1970),

For a congregation to remain faithful at times required disciplining members. That could be seen as a measure of unfaithfulness, but retelling that part of the history of congregations demonstrated the hard work and sacrifice needed to remain faithful. For instance, the First Congregational Church of Green Mountain noted in its 1957 history that "in the early years of the church, several members were excommunicated. . . . If any member failed to attend regularly, or live according to the covenant of the church, a committee was appointed to call on such a member to try to get that member to amend his or her ways." A large section of the history of the First Presbyterian Church of Mechanicsville detailed disciplinary actions taken by the leadership. These sections of the histories showed rural Iowans that faith mattered and that holding people to community and theological standards sometimes required difficult choices.⁵⁰

The faithfulness that earlier generations demonstrated did not preclude differences. These variances were related in such a way as to show the commitment to faith of those who defended orthodoxy. Emphasizing distinctive theological positions helped demonstrate the importance of remaining faithful to a particular theological tradition in a time of challenging demographic and economic conditions. Remaining faithful to the faith handed down from the founders meant maintaining the theological lines that marked the boundaries of the theological tradition. The histories often equated coming from Europe with having a strong theological tradition. Albert City's Our Savior's Lutheran Church history describes how the settlers "had come from Sweden with their Bibles, their hymnbooks, and strong faith in God." The writers observed that the first settlers "did not forsake their faith and doctrine but they remained faithful." Similarly, St. Olaf Lutheran Church of Bode noted that "it has been said that one of the many typical traits of a Norwegian-American was his intense loyalty to the Lutheran Church. . . . The pioneers who started here kept

SHSI; "One Hundredth Anniversary," First Congregational Church, Decorah (1954); "Seventy-Fifth Anniversary," Deer Creek Evangelical Lutheran Church, Carpenter (1952), NAHA; "Centennial Anniversary," East Clermont Norwegian Lutheran Church, Clermont (1951), NAHA.

50. "A Historical Account," First Congregational Church, Green Mountain (1957), SHSI; "Centennial," First Presbyterian Church, Mechanicsville (1955), SHSI.

their faith steadfast from the childhood training in their homes in Norway.”⁵¹

It is understandable that churches with Norwegian roots noted these things, since many also wrote about theological tensions in the 1880s. The telling of that story — a story of competing denominations that reunited in 1917 — reflected a serious desire to not only relate what happened and explain the reality of two Norwegian Lutheran churches in one town (as in Decorah), but also to demonstrate the importance of theological discussions within the Norwegian congregations of the past. Congregations seemed to be worried about losing their orthodoxy in the present. Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, part of the Missouri-Synod Lutheran denomination, told its history readers about the importance of remembering how the past had been faithful to an older tradition because “in a generation when changing creeds are popular, Zion still seeks to hold and confess the Word of God in its truth and purity and to administer the Sacraments accordingly.”⁵² The theological traditions brought to rural Iowa, often by European immigrants, needed to be maintained in order to keep congregations strong.

Some congregations emphasized the role of revival in their beginnings and throughout their history. The Kalona Methodist Church’s history stated that the church had started after a revival. Another church remembered how the first immigrant settlers included “many who had come to know Jesus Christ as their Savior through the mighty revival that had swept across their native land — Sweden. These children of the revival carried their zeal with them to the new country.” Sigourney First Methodist Church recalled a revival meeting in 1915 when “more than 228 people were numbered among the converts, many of whom became outstanding leaders in the local church.” By emphasizing their particular history, these congregations hoped that current readers would continue being faithful to their particular tradition.⁵³

51. “Dedication Album,” Our Savior’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, Albert City (1956), Swenson; “Celebrating Our 100th Anniversary,” St. Olaf Lutheran Church, Bode (1970), Luther.

52. “75th Anniversary,” Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, Atlantic (1952), CHI.

53. “History,” Methodist Church, Kalona, Iowa (1962), SHSI; “Centennial Celebration,” Pilot Mound and Swede Bend Covenant Churches, Swede Bend (1968), SHSI; “100 Years,” First Methodist Church, Sigourney (1950), SHSI.

Other rural Iowa congregations specifically emphasized being open to a variety of theological traditions. For instance, the history of the First Congregational Church of Osage noted that "several different faiths were represented among the early settlers. . . . Because of the freedom of [the Congregational] form of organization and government, its steadfast faith, its pioneering spirit, its vision and worldwide outlook, it seemed to be the logical church to turn to in this time of uncertainty."⁵⁴

Rural Iowans found inspiration from the faithfulness of their forebears. Their faithfulness served as inspiration for current pastors and their flocks. Pastors often received high praise for their devotion to preaching and meeting the needs of the scattered pioneers. For instance, the history of the Methodist Church in Lohrville described "Rev. S. M. Davis walking from Gowrie to Lohrville regularly in the winter of '83 and on one occasion he walked through a blinding blizzard in order that he might hold church services as planned." The commitment to leading services placed the pastor in high regard. St. John's Lutheran Church in Marengo retold the story of how its early pastor had preached in the morning in one location and in the afternoon at another. Early pastors' sacrifices also included having inadequate provisions and sleeping arrangements. Pilot Mound and Swede Bend Covenant Churches recalled Rev. Bjorks' efforts among the pioneers as he "travelled on horseback. . . . He often had to carry his own food supply as his parishioners were poor. Many an evening he had to creep up a stepladder into the attic of a prairie home in order to sleep." The history of First Lutheran Church of Decorah remembered its first minister as having accepted the hardships and sacrifice of the frontier and the "rigors of the climate."⁵⁵

Some history books were dedicated to the pastors. One dedication remembered pastors "whose labors we have been privileged to enter." Traveling missionary pastors who started churches could be singled out for special commendation. Many Norwegian

54. "100 Years of Congregationalism," First Congregational Church, Osage (1958), SHSI.

55. "Fiftieth Anniversary," Methodist Church, Lohrville, Iowa (1961), SHSI; "75 Years of God's Grace," St. John's Lutheran Church, Marengo (1960), SHSI; "Centennial Celebration," Pilot Mound and Swede Bend Covenant Churches, Swede Bend (1968), SHSI; "One Hundredth Anniversary," First Lutheran Church, Decorah (1963), Vesterheim.

Lutheran churches in northeast Iowa included pictures of Nils Brandt and the efforts he made to start churches.⁵⁶ These pastors' faith served as an example for their parishioners in the past and in the present. The commitment of pioneering pastors provided useful inspiration for churches struggling in the present time. By highlighting their sacrifices, the history writers hoped that current readers might be inspired to make similar choices to place the church at the center of their lives, no matter the obstacles.

The goal of inspiring current congregations found its way into congregational anniversary books in other ways as well. Many sections, such as dedications, forewords, pastor's messages, and conclusions, encouraged current congregants to be faithful to the congregation. The history writers wanted rural Iowans to be inspired by the past—to recognize the ways God had worked through history. Hesper Lutheran Church ended its historical narrative in 1965 by reminding readers what "the Lord of the Harvest permitted these forefathers to accomplish for His glory." Another history called on those reading the history to "find inspiration in the lives of the early pioneers of this congregation. God enabled them to break new ground, plant trees, and overcome difficulties through faith and hard work." Crane Creek Lutheran Church's history in 1967 noted that the goal of the history was to "acknowledge the activity of God in the lives of those He has named His children and in the life of one of His congregations. . . . What is here recorded is not what men have done, but what God has done with men." So even as things changed, God was still with the people. The Methodist Church at Crawfordsville reminded readers that despite struggles and setbacks, the church "has survived and grown in spite of it all, in testimony to the Power of God." Many congregations, particularly among Dutch Reformed, referenced 1 Samuel 7:12 ("Hitherto hath the Lord helped us") as an important Bible verse in their commemorations. Albert City Evangelical Free Church used that verse in 1969 to highlight the posture of faith and give credit to God for success.⁵⁷

56. "Seventy-fifth Anniversary," Trinity Lutheran Church, Ellsworth (1950), NAHA; "One Hundredth Anniversary," Old East and Old West Paint Creek Lutheran Churches, Allamakee County (1952), Luther.

57. "1865-1965," Hesper Lutheran Church, Hesper (1965), Luther; "100 Years," Immanuel Lutheran Church, Clarinda (1969), CHI; "Centennial," Crane Creek

These heartland stories emphasized how God had always been at work – and, by implication, if Christians remained strong in their faith now, they, too, would experience God’s blessings. The history of United Methodist Church of College Spring editorialized, “We realize the enormous struggle that Christ’s church has made in each decade. But we would not continue to look back, but forward and hopefully, trusting that as He has guided us in the past, so will He guide us in the future.” The writers often said things like, “We realized that it is for us to take up the standard and in the strength which God alone can supply go forward to greater victories in the future.” One church connected its success to the past when the history writers reminded their readers, “Today we reap the harvest of their [pioneers’] sacrifices in both the material and spiritual realm.” One foreword called on readers to “be moved to serve the Lord in His vineyard with ever greater zeal and faithfulness until he Himself calls a halt to our labors. In these years of unrest and turmoil . . . we must be awake to our opportunities and sound forth . . . the message of redeeming grace.” One church reflected, “The fact that the membership has not changed appreciably over the last thirty years when rural areas are declining is certainly something to thank God for . . . and our good people who are still able to drive a few extra miles to church.” Further, congregants of the heartland framed their story around being blessed by God. In their understanding of themselves and their history, God was at work in the heartland, rewarding faithfulness with blessings. The Denison Zion Lutheran Church history observed that the congregation wanted to recount “the great blessings which God has showered upon this congregation.”⁵⁸

Lutheran Church, Chickasaw County (1957), SHSI; “One Hundred and Twenty Fifth Anniversary,” Methodist Church, Crawfordsville (1962), SHSI; “Seventy-fifth Anniversary,” Evangelical Free Church, Albert City (1969), Swenson.

58. “The Centennial Anniversary,” United Methodist Church, College Spring (1970), SHSI; “One Hundredth Anniversary,” Calmar Lutheran Church, Calmar (1953), Vesterheim; “One Hundredth Anniversary,” Glenwood Lutheran Church, Winneshiek and Allamakee Counties (1953), Luther; “The Centennial Anniversary,” United Methodist Church, College Spring (1970), SHSI; “Seventy-fifth Anniversary,” St. John’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, Charter Oak (1956), CHI; “Anniversary Booklet,” St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church, Germantown (1963), CHI; “1872–1947,” Zion Lutheran Church, Denison (1947), CHI.

Some churches placed their present very much in the foreground of the church history they were writing. The history writers acknowledged that the congregation needed to recognize changes in rural Iowa and asserted that its faith still mattered. St. John's Lutheran Church in Homestead noted how World War II had "brought a change" as "St. John's has suffered many losses of young people . . . because of the trend of leaving the farms." The Pilot Mound and Swede Bend Covenant Churches noted in 1968 that "many young people have left our small country church and have used their talents they developed in earlier years to serve God effectively in many places." The writers of the history hoped that "we may find new ways of pioneering the gospel in an age of rockets and unrest, but an age that still needs an eternal Savior and God." St. Olaf Lutheran Church of Belmond noted, "We are living in a day of H-bombs and orbital flights, but also a day of bold and daring sin. We know that there is increased knowledge of science and philosophies, but we also find modernism in theology and new orthodoxies that are not orthodox." Tripoli St. Peter's Evangelical and Reformed Church called on its members to take up the challenge "which is set amid the perplexities of a changing order and face to face with a great new task."⁵⁹

Congregational anniversary histories reflected a foundational belief about how church members understood the proper place of the church and faith in life. Most rural Iowans saw the church and faith as integral to a strong and resilient heartland life. The writers of these narratives recognized the selective nature of the historical narrative. Making the past relevant in rural Iowa during the era after World War II was intentional. For instance, the Stratford Evangelical Lutheran Church history writers wrote that they had included "only the most interesting highlights in the growth of the congregation." Another history included the admission that it had omitted parts of the story because there was

59. "A Century of Grace," Saint John's Lutheran Church, Homestead (1964), SHSI; "Centennial Celebration," Pilot Mound and Swede Bend Covenant Churches, Swede Bend (1968), SHSI; "75th Anniversary," St. Olaf Lutheran Church, Belmond (1963), NAHA; "Diamond Jubilee," St. Peter's Evangelical and Reformed Church, Tripoli (1955), Eden.

not enough room.⁶⁰ The emphasis on hard work and faith rarely left room for failure or setbacks. These histories mostly overlooked conflict or troubles in the congregations. They rarely mentioned the role women played in the process of building congregations. None placed women as central characters—not even giving pastors' wives the role of secondary characters. A few might mention the role of women, usually when the Ladies' Aid Society started, but always after the all-male church leadership group had received top billing. These heartland stories provide a vision of the heartland as a place of hard work and faith rewarded while overlooking aspects of conquest, failure, and exclusion.

RURAL IOWANS in Protestant congregations after World War II told their own stories about being heartland people. Being rural people meant believing that they were the very heart of being American. Their way of life and how they understood the world continued to define their matrix for what the United States should look like. They experienced life in small towns and farming communities where they were starting to feel marginalized as the broader society changed around them. These stories, then, show us how people in the pews constructed a story that they saw as the "heart" of a national story. They shaped their story to make sure it fit their needs as their institutions and way of life strained under economic and demographic pressures. They told their own stories and fit them within larger frameworks of being American. The people in the pews appropriated and built their own identity. And these made-in-the-heartland stories became the basis for narratives about how the world should work.

The emphasis on hard work and faith was part of a larger discursive body. Larger local history narratives via mass media and education played a role in these heartland stories, yet the importance of the church in the community had a significant place in telling the history. Rural Iowans attended churches. Their world was infused with the belief that God had blessed their

60. "Centennial Anniversary," Evangelical Lutheran Church, Stratford (1959), Swenson; "Diamond Jubilee: 75th Anniversary," Fulton Lutheran Church, Roelyn (1952), NAHA.

hard work and faith. Christian faith formed the heart of the community and the heart of the heartland. Thus, paying attention to the heartland's own interpretations of its history is necessary for those who seek to understand its mindset. Rural Iowa Protestants saw themselves as heartland people who epitomized the success and freedom possible in America in a time of Cold War tensions. As expressed in these commemorative histories with these themes, rural Iowans showed their commitment to these principles.

Understanding the historical process of rural Iowans' identity formation in a time of upheaval provides a model for understanding how people used the past and their faith to make sense of the world. This seems particularly pertinent for understanding rural Iowa in the twenty-first century.⁶¹ Closely studying the stories of rural Iowa churches in the middle of the twentieth century reveals the context for how they told their heartland stories. If the church really was the heart of the community's identity and social world, then how the churches told stories matters.⁶² Understanding how *heartland* functions on the ground, in the people who lived there, beyond the national rhetoric, requires explaining the way people made sense of their world. And this is why understanding churches is so important: more than just a social institution, they are a lens through which people view their world. This meaning making can be glimpsed in church commemorations as people told stories about themselves for themselves. By looking at what *heartland* meant for the people who lived out an identity as rural Iowans, we get a fuller story of postwar America. When we add that to the recent understanding of rural consciousness, it helps explain the way people react to challenges. People in rural Iowa have been telling "deep stories" about the world during times of change. The sanitized versions of these stories about how they were the "good" folks who worked hard, built institutions, and had faith to be successful defined for them who were the winners and losers in the world. They saw – and perhaps often still see – their past as the best way to live.

61. See Frank Tobias Higbie, "Heartland: The Politics of a Regional Signifier," *Middle West Review* 1 (2014), 81-90; and Doug Kiel, "Untaming the Mild Frontier: In Search of New Midwestern Histories," *Middle West Review* 1 (2014), 9-38.

62. Lyz Lenz, "The Death of the Midwestern Church," *Pacific Standard*, 1/22/2016, <https://psmag.com/social-justice/the-death-of-the-midwestern-church>.