

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Swedish Baptist Church Project

Parishioner Experience

O. H. 659

AGNES NYGREN

Interviewed

by

Rich Gustafson

on

June 1, 1979

AGNES NYGREN

Agnes Johnston was born in Eleanora, Pennsylvania on July 16, 1893. After the death of her father, she accompanied her mother to live in Youngstown. Through the efforts of Reverend Westerb~~u~~rg, she was converted and was first approached about attending the Swedish Baptist Church. She met Louis Nygren at this church and eventually married him in this church. She only attended one year of high school and worked at various odd jobs before becoming a housekeeper as a result of her marriage to Louis Nygren. Mr. and Mrs. Nygren have both been active members in the church throughout their lives, working at various posts in the church. Mrs. Nygren has been an active member in such organizations as the Women's Missionary Society, Baptist Young People's Union, and child evangelism. Of any member living in the church at present perhaps none have been as dedicated to the ministry of the church as Mrs. Nygren. She was one of the first to minister to the inmates and juvenile offenders at the County Home, contributing much of her time to this work. Her life has centered around the church and she has remained a faithful member throughout her life.

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INTERVIEWEE: AGNES NYGREN

INTERVIEWER: Rich Gustafson

SUBJECT: Baptist Young People's Union, Baptist General Conference, social activities, fund raising, various ministers

DATE: June 1, 1979

G: This is an interview with Mrs. Agnes Nygren for the Youngstown State Oral History Program, at 1952 Weston Avenue, Youngstown, on June 1, 1979, at 7:00 p.m.

Perhaps you could give me a short background sketch of your life and your involvement with the church, a short history of your life.

N: Well, the first that I really remember was when I was elected vice-president of the Young People's Group of the church. Louis Nygren, who later became my husband, was the president. Of course, we would go to visit different organizations and go into homes. Often they would be trying to raise money for different organizations; they were selling tickets. I can remember how Louis would take tickets and then give some out to different ones, hoping that they would sell them. He would get the money to take back to the folks where they were raising the money. But I know many times that Lily paid most of those bills because he didn't get the money; he wouldn't go around and collect like he should have. Then after we were married, I was president of the Missionary Circle. Later on, I was president of the Ladies Aide. I had a Sunday School class and I sang in the choir. Of course, I was baptized. That was the year before by Pastor Westerburg. He came down from Pennsylvania, and we had meetings there. That was when I was saved.

One thing I thought was very wonderful about Pastor Peterson was how very considerate he was. I know my mother was a widow when we came here, and he would come

up to the home and see if there was anything he could help us with. We didn't have a regular furnace. We just had coal stoves. I remember Pastor Peterson coming up to see if there was anything he could do. Mother said that the house was so cold. He said, "Well, is there anything I can do? Maybe I could go look at the furnace." He went down there and said that we had to shake all those ashes away. Pastor Peterson fixed that furnace in such a wonderful way that we had good heat from then on. We always liked him too as a pastor; he was very considerate in every way through sickness or trouble.

We didn't have very many automobiles in those days. To begin with we used to go on the streetcar from Earle Avenue down to church. I remember when we got our first automobile. Well, my brother Arthur had the automobile, and then he was called into the service. I'll never forget it. We were going to go home from church, and he said that he wanted to take a girl home. He was friends with some girl, but he was going to leave for the service and they wanted to be alone, you know. He asked Louis to drive the car home. Imagine, Louis had never driven a car. He showed him and told him what to do. He kept the old car in low all the way home. When we were halfway home, my two sisters said, "Oh, we want out of here." He put the brakes on and they got out. We had all been at church, all eight of us. We never missed any church services; all of the family was there. I don't know, there was just something wonderful about it, a wonderful Christian fellowship.

G: Maybe you could tell me some things about the Young People's Group. You mentioned that you were the vice-president and Louis was the president. Do you recall some of the activities that the young people did?

N: Yes. Every Sunday afternoon at 5:00 we had Young People's meeting. Then we would always have refreshments after the meeting. We stayed right there so that we would be there for the evening service. They were all very faithful. We were strict. Well, we were born again and had to live up to the teachings of the Bible. I also remember when we used to have the gatherings in which your father, as a very active man, was on the committees. I remember at least once every summer we would go to Dean's farm and have a corn roast. We brought different casseroles. I remember so well the very last meeting that your dad was at and how he would go to the church and get the chairs and dishes and put them in the cars and take them out there.

I can also remember how my sister Elizabeth was very active in the meetings too. She always put Christ and the spiritual things first. She also had her class. I remember when she

was taken to the hospital. When she came past the church-- I was in the ambulance with her--she looked up and said, "Oh, how I love that place." She really loved the Lord, and that was very, very sincere. But she was also very active in the church.

I can remember so well when my brother Herbert stood on the platform. Each week they had different ones up here leading. I remember when he had to sing that song, "Love Lifted Me, When Nothing Else Could Help, Love Lifted Me." Also I can remember so well because my brothers all had good voices, Carl, Arthur, and Herbert. I remember Carl standing up there singing this song and leading it, "I'm So Glad That Jesus Loved Me." I thought that was funny for the young people. I thought that was something. If there is only one song I can sing, "When in the beauty I see my great King, this shall my song for eternity be, oh what a wonder that Jesus loved me." I remember my brother Arthur had an orchestra down there. There were quite a few paid violins and different instruments.

- G: Maybe you could tell something about some of the social activities of the church, some of the ways that they raised money at the church.
- N: Yes. We used to have a lot of dinners. Fifty cents a meal; they could eat all they wanted. We used to work down there.

I was asked to give a talk about raising the money. I wish I had had it written down. I prayed about it. I didn't know what I should say, but when I was through, Pastor Peterson said, "Agnes, that was wonderful. Who helped you write that?" I said, "I just prayed about it. God gave me the words that He wanted me to say."

I remember when we had Sunday school. We had such a little room. In the winter it was good because we sometimes had the class sit around the furnace, because we didn't have enough space. Oh, yes, the same with our Sunday school. We would have classes all through the big building. We would have to try to talk low in the different classes.

About raising money, the Ladies Aide was really the main one that raised the money for that.

We used to go down when it was time to clean the church; we scrubbed the church and washed the windows. All in all, it was, I think, happy times, many, many wonderful memories.

- G: Could you tell us about the church's camping activities before Camp Burton?
- N: I helped to cook there. That was out not far from Jamestown.

I wish I could remember the name. Yes, we were there several summers. I always helped to work in the kitchen. That was back in 1950. There was Amy Peterson and myself and Gertrude Lynn and Mrs. John Peterson on the committee. I can't think of any more, but I do know that we had wonderful meals. We all would prepare plenty of food because we never knew how many of the parents were coming to get the children and bring them home. It seemed to me that they gave us \$1 a piece for their dinner then when they would come. Those were happy days, joyful days because we enjoyed . . . We loved the Lord; we loved the work; and we loved to see the young people come. That I remember well, but it is hard to put it into words without sitting down and thinking things out you know.

G: Do you remember anything about the annual conferences that the church held? I think at the fortieth anniversary we held the convention at the church. Do you remember any of the conventions that were held, or some of the conventions that you went to?

N: We used to go to all of the conventions, yes. Our family used to go to the conventions all the time. I can remember mother saying, "It is too bad that more people don't go because we learn so much when we come." We learned about the needs and the mission work and everything. It makes a difference when you go to hear about all these reports.

G: You mentioned earlier that you were active in the Women's Missionary Society at the church.

N: Yes, I was president for a while.

G: Could you describe some of the events of that society itself and perhaps some of the things that the Women's Missionary Society did?

N: I remember we used to have get-togethers and have singers and speakers. Different members took part just like we do here. We always had good attendance. We used to raise money sometimes because, you know, it was during the Depression. We had rummage sales sometimes. People would donate anything that they had that they felt they could give. If it would be useful to somebody else, they would buy it. That was how we got good money. We had bake sales and box socials sometimes. Yes, there were quite a few things that we did, but it was so long that it is hard for me to remember.

G: Could you describe what it was like to live during the Depression at the church and maybe some of the things that the church did to provide for those that were members of it?

N: We used to try to get clothing to different people and food

if we knew that they were in need. We were always willing to help and to share. We knew that they needed help in any way whether it was to help if there was a sickness or whatever it was. No one in those days felt that you had to go hire for anything because we just volunteered and went. The first Sunday of every month, we went to the County Home to take the gospel out to the people there and then down to visit the jail with a lot of the young people from the Struthers church too. That would be two or three Sunday afternoons a month. Also, I went down to the TB Hospital. Years back we had a TB Hospital. On Thursday morning from 10:00 until 12:00 I would go with some of the ladies, some of my friends, to visit those people. We would write letters of correspondence for the sick if they had a message that they would want us to take to some of their families. We would do that whether it was from the County Home or the TB Hospital or the prison. Any time they would say, "Would you get in contact with one of my friends?" I did a lot of missionary work that way. That was while I was down there at the church.

We started our first cradle roll work. We didn't have the room like we have in the church over there because we didn't have any space for that. When there was a new baby, I would visit the homes. Mrs. John Peterson helped part of the time and sometimes it was Mrs. Robert Peterson. Those two worked with me. If one couldn't go with me, the other one would go. What we did then was go to the home when there was a new baby. We would visit them and put them on the enrollment. We had the cradle roll certificate, you know, like cradle honor roll that we had on the wall. Then we always gave them a nice certificate that the baby was enrolled in the Swedish Baptist Church. The pastor signed his name to it. For their first and second birthday we would send them a card. So that was my work with the cradle roll department. Now a lot of this nobody seemed to know much about it, only if it was if someone had a baby and we went there. We would always have to visit the home that way; that was visitation.

I know when I was Sunday school teacher that I made many, many contacts visiting the homes where there was sickness and sorrow and the same, like when I went to the prison.

I had gone out to Chicago to enter the missionary training school. My dad was down there for it. He was the one that was going to pay to keep me in the school. I was one of seven children and I was next to the oldest. My mother couldn't support me then, so I came home. Then when I got to learn so much about going to prison, to visit prisons . . . the students did that. There was no one in our church that was with me. The first time I went to prison to visit I went all alone. I praised the Lord that I was able to do

it. I have always loved that kind of missionary work.

G: Could you maybe tell some of your personal recollections of some of the ministers that were at the church when you were a member? You mentioned briefly Reverend Peterson; maybe you could start with him and continue on from some of these ministers?

N: Westerberg was the first one that we knew. He was the missionary from the Swedish Baptist Church here in Youngstown, and he traveled. He is the one who came in contact with our family down in Pennsylvania. I knew Pastor Westerberg very well because he lived in our home while he would come to visit. The preachers would visit in our home. They would come on Saturday. That was the last train that would come in; there would be one train to get on from Pennsylvania on Sunday. Then they would go home on Monday. Pastor Peterson was a very wonderful pastor. The we had Pastor Bellstrum and Pastor David Nygren. He was in between. He came after Pastor Peterson. No, the one after Peterson was Vicklyn. Then it was, I think, David Nygren and then Bellstrum. Then for a while we had a Pastor Anton . . . I can't think of his name. I remember Mrs. Allbrigg; she was the oldest living member of our church. Pastor Colman, I don't remember this man at all. Orlandin, he came on occasion. Wicklyn and Coleman and Orlandin, Nygren, Andrew Peterson . . . that is what I was trying to think of. Pastor Magnusan came after David Nygren was there.

G: Maybe you could describe something of the junior choir or some of the youth programs?

N: I sang in the choir. Mr. Lynnberg, you know, was our choir leader. We had a wonderful time with him. I don't know much more about that, but we always took part. I mean we always had shared that in all the meetings.

G: Now you mentioned earlier that you were a member of the Covenant Church. Now do you remember was there much contact between the different Swedish churches?

N: Oh, yes, there was. There was a lot of wonderful Christian fellowship there. The pastors didn't have a system in those days. So if the Covenant pastor was away and there would be something special that they needed a pastor, they would call on our pastor. If our pastor was away, we would call on the Covenant pastor. Also I know that the Ladies Aide from the Bethel-Lutheran Church used to come. The three churches used to be very close in contact. There was really a wonderful fellowship there.

G: Could you tell something about your experiences when the church was still speaking only Swedish at the early time?

Can you remember some of the occurrences of the Swedish families that were immigrating over and that were coming into the church, maybe how the church helped these different types of individuals that came from across the seas?

- N: I know how different ones went together and gave furniture and whatever they could. We went and cleaned the buildings that rented the place for them to go into; we got it all cleaned up and fixed up.
- G: Now this may be a bit difficult, but if you were describing the inside of the church on Woodland Avenue as you walked up the steps and were depicting this scene to somebody, could you describe what the church looked like inside, the congregation, the auditorium, the rooms, the different things?
- N: We came up the front steps and came into quite a large hall, if you call it that.
- G: This entrance.
- N: Yes, the entrance then. There is a doorway into the room straight ahead of you. That is where we would have our prayer meetings and side meetings. We had classrooms and that. If we went to the right, there was a door. Then there was a row of seats right as you came in there. There were two rows and then a big aisle on both sides. We had the platform in front of us. We had an organ and a piano, and the pulpit was in the middle of the platform. Then we had the baptistery. For a while we had it--it seems to me--right off the platform. The people had to get up and open up doors. They had the two rows at the back. Then there was some trouble, and they had to take them out because it was on somebody else's property; it extended out. Then they had to make the baptistery right there right with the platform. We had to have steps put in there and the bathtub. I don't know how big it was but it was big enough to baptize the people. I know that. That was it. I remember there was even a family from the Covenant Church that wanted to be baptized, and they came over. Their pastor baptized them. I guess it was all right.
- G: Do you remember anything about the different renovations of the church, the way that they tried to improve maybe the downstairs, the things that they did to make the appearance of the church, to improve the appearance? Do you remember any of these events of the church, try to make the basement, the cellar, improve the cellar, and these types of things?
- N: I think that they tried because we did use the basement a lot. That was where we had our dinners we sold to raise money. They were always trying to paint it up and fix it up and do

whatever they could. There was always a great interest taken in trying to improve it.

G: Could you maybe describe what a typical Sunday was for you? The Sundays were pretty much centered around the church.

N: Yes.

G: Could you maybe describe what was a typical Sunday for you at the Swedish Baptist Church?

N: I remember that first we would have Sunday school. There was one thing that I never forgot. We had an orphanage that we used to call Penny March. Our classes were just like we have here; they have the different teachers for the different grades. Then after Sunday school we would have church service. The service was just like here; we used to have the music, the singing and that. Then there were evening services again in the evening. In the afternoon at 5:00 we had the Young People's. Then at 7:30 we had the church service because we always had refreshments on Sunday afternoon. From 5:00 until 6:00 we would have the meeting. We had our coffee and sandwiches; we were all served something so that they could stay for church. It seemed to me that it was 7:30 or 8:00, but I can't remember. I think it was 7:30 that it started. So that was a typical Sunday, the ordinary one, you know. Of course, for all the holidays and that, we would always have little programs.

G: Little programs?

N: Yes. There is something that I remember. The Swedes used to have Mid-summer. I remember how we used to go out into the woods and get a lot of branches off trees and bring them in and decorate the church and have it all filled with leaves and flowers and all fixed up. It was a real happy occasion. Mid-summer Fest they called it.

G: Could you talk about some other celebrations like July Fourth, the picnics?

N: Oh, yes, we used to have wonderful times. We would go out to the park. Sometimes we had a great, big tent that we would put up because often it would rain. But then later on we got the pavilion so we could go there. One Fourth of July we got an awful storm. We went to a lot; we went to different homes then together to enjoy the rest of the Fourth of July. There are many happy times that we had down in the park later on when we got the pavilion and we could just rent it and have it.

G: Are there any particular individuals that stick out in your

mind as being important leaders in the church or important board members, types of people that in your mind did good service to the church. Anybody in particular that comes to your mind?

N: Well, no, I will tell you they were all willing to help whenever they could. There would be different circumstances and some would be more ready to go than others. It just seemed that we were all willing. We would be elected at different times as president or to hold an office. Naturally, when anything special would come up you would feel your responsibility there as a leader. I thought there was a wonderful fellowship; they all started working together when they could. I remember one thing that when there was sickness in the home . . . like my mother had a stroke. I remember that Pastor Bellstrum said, "I think we should have a Swedish meeting over at the Nygren home so that she could be in on the meeting," because mother stayed with us. You know, on a Sunday afternoon, fifty people came. They stood on the stairway and wherever. It was a nice summer day. They were willing to go out into the homes to make things pleasant for the shut-ins. They did a lot of that. A lot of that was done in my day, sick people and shut-ins. So we praise the Lord for that.

G: That is for sure. Could you tell me about the revival meetings that the church would always hold, some of the speakers and what these meetings were like?

N: I did want to say that we did have the old-fashioned revival meetings. We saw many souls saved. There were many different pastors that came from Pittsburgh and from . . . All our pastors too would have the old-fashioned treatment. When you came to the altar, you were saved. That was all I wanted to say.

G: Do you remember anything about Billy Sunday when he was in Youngstown? Are there any memories that you have of that?

N: Well, yes, I heard about him. He had been here before we came. He was down at the theater where Ole's had his market. Yes, I remember him. He was there. We saw many souls saved there too. I did hear that when they had it in the tent, they had straw on the floor. That was the first time, but that was before I came to Youngstown. He had his big tent right down on Market Street Bridge.

G: Thank you.