

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Swedish Baptist Church

Personal Experience

O. H. 995

ESTHER MAGNUSON

Interviewed

by

Rich Gustafson

on

April 30, 1979

MRS. ESTHER MAGNUSON

Esther Eliason was born on June 2, 1910 in Robsart, Saskatchewan, Canada. She attended and graduated from Wadena High School in Saskatchewan. In 1930, she began a two-year program at Teacher's College in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. She married Reverend George Magnuson, and was the mother to three children, Norris, age 47; Linden, age 44; and an adopted daughter, Bethel Humber, age 41. She has been a resident at various churches in the Baptist General Conference due to her relationship as a pastor's wife. Active in church work, various positions held include President of the Women's Missionary Society, and Sunday School teacher. She currently resides at 45 Romaine Ave., with her sister, Mrs. Donald Gustavson.

Previous to coming to Youngstown, she was a resident of Saskatchewan, Canada. Her husband was asked to become the pastor at the Swedish Baptist Church through the invitation of a former pastor, Reverend Nygren. They began their ministry in June of 1937, and terminated their work in 1944. Reverend Magnuson was responsible for the formal ties established with the Baptist General Conference, and was a central figure in the movement away from the American Baptist Conference and the development of their own foreign mission board.

Her son, Norris A. Magnuson, has written a history of the Baptist General Conference, and is currently employed at the Bethel Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Also, her sister Ruby Eliason, was one of the early missionaries sent by the Baptist General Conference. Further, her younger sister, Mrs. Donald Gustavson, has played a key role in the Sunday School program at

the church. Mrs. Magnuson engaged in a wide correspondence during her life, and her letters would be a useful source of information for the historian.

-Rich Gustafson

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INTERVIEWEE: ESTHER MAGNUSON
INTERVIEWER: Rich Gustafson
SUBJECT: Swedish Baptist Church
DATE: April 30, 1979

G: This is an interview with Mrs. Esther Magnuson for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, by Rich Gustafson, at 461 Annawan Lane, on April 30, 1979, at 10:30 a.m.

Okay, Mrs. Esther Magnuson, perhaps you could give us a short statement about when you were first confronted with coming to Evangel Baptist Church when your husband received a letter from Evangel. Maybe you could relate some experiences about when you were first contacted about having a pastor to Evangel.

M: Well, we were asked to come down here on the recommendation of Mr. Nygren, the former pastor. We were asked to come to the church. My husband never candidated. We came to the church new to the church, and they were new to us. We had lived in Saskatchewan, Canada, and it was my first trip to the United States. Since it was a long distance, we traveled by car until we got near the border, and then we took the train from _____, Saskatchewan down to St. Paul. Then we took a train from St. Paul, Minnesota to Youngstown. This was in June of 1937, and our boys were ages two and five at that time. It was long trip. One of things that was very new to me was coming to a large city. We arrived during the time when the guards were up. That is what they used to call them. They were up for our protection. Women and children were not al-

lowed downtown. It was a very difficult time during the war. There was a strike of some kind. It was a rather frightening experience, too.

We were very warmly welcomed at Evangel Baptist. There were several of the members there to greet us at the train, and we were tired and very happy to be at our journey's end. We moved to a house on Warren Court at the parsonage there. Since we had come from such a distance, we had very few possessions with us--no furniture whatsoever. We didn't know what to expect, but we weren't too worried. When we got to the parsonage, we found that it was almost fully furnished. There was beautiful new furniture in our bedroom, furniture for the children in their bedroom, and some used furniture in the living room. So, it was very comfortable and very nice. We really appreciated it. We got a good start there. I felt quite at home right away as far as the home was concerned. It was a little difficult getting used to the city and to the times. They were very difficult times because of the war.

G: Now, the pastor and you were here from 1937 to 1944. This was really one of the roughest times as far as the war period. Also, I would imagine quite a few of the men left from Evangel. Perhaps you can relate some experiences about the church as a result of some men being over in the war.

M: Yes, it was difficult in that way because so many of the young men did go away to the service. It was a difficult time for our families in the church to see the young men leave. It softened the hearts of many people. They were opened to the things of the war really because the times were difficult. We really missed these young men. We missed your father who had to go to the service. It was just a real adjustment to me. This was quite a few years ago; it was just a little hard to remember.

G: Yes . . . to remember everything.

M: It was a difficult time. People seemed to stick together. It made the church more conscious of the need of the Lord. It certainly increased the attendance at prayer meetings, because people realized the need of the Lord during those times thinking of their own boys overseas. Then, of course, this was still during the Depression time . . .

G: Right, yes.

M: . . . which was a little difficult, too.

- G: Maybe you could relate some experiences about the Fiftieth Anniversary which took place in 1940 during your stay at Evangel. Some special celebrations, I understood, took place in 1940. Maybe some reminiscences of this period come back to you.
- M: Yes, well, when they had the Fiftieth Anniversary of the church, that was a real highlight at that time. A lot of work was done to make the church more attractive, and the membership really rallied together at that time because it was a happy time. One of the former pastors was called back to the congregation at that time. I don't recall his name. I never met him previous to that time, and I have never met him since. I'm sure he has passed away by now, but it was a very good time. There were a lot of pictures taken. We just had real good attendance. It was a real good thing for the church, the Fiftieth Anniversary.
- G: Now what was the exact size of the membership at this period? How many people were attending, if you can remember?
- M: I have no definite figures, but I would imagine since the church was very small that if the church were full, it could seat probably 150 people. That would be the limit if we used the overflow room. The attendance, I would imagine, was under 100 usually.
- One thing that we started--that I won't say for sure if we started it--was Vacation Bible School. We would fill our own car with youngsters. There was one of the members, Anna Marie Martindale, who brought a load. Between the three of us--my husband, Anna Marie, and I--we ran a Vacation Bible School. It was staffed and everything.
- G: Single-handedly.
- M: There was no material available at that time, so we got our own material too. It really was very profitable because when you have the word of God and a little ingenuity, you can take care of things like that.
- G: Now, in January of 1938, the Swedish language was supplanted by English in the church?
- M: Yes.
- G: Now, do you remember if there were still quite a few that could only understand Swedish? Or, by this time, was English spoken by most of the members?
- M: There were no Swedish services while we were here except for the Women's Missionary Society. That was

all Swedish, which was interesting. There was one Swedish Bible class. The older people had. . . . The adult Bible class was in Swedish, and taught by one of the men in the church. My husband didn't preach Swedish while he was here, although he was fluent in Swedish.

G: He spoke Swedish?

M: He had preached Swedish for several years while we were still in Canada. He would preach Swedish for the morning services and then English in the evening. But here in Youngstown, we had only the English. Swedish was a second language at that time.

G: Now do you remember, at this time, the church was really moving towards the Middle East Baptist Conference? They really hadn't made any formal arrangements with the Middle East Baptist, although, at this time, they also held the annual meeting of the Baptist General Conference at Evangel during the pastor? Do you remember anything about this experience? Also, perhaps you could relate how Evangel was moving in the direction of affiliation with the Middle East Baptist Conference? Do you remember anything about this?

M: Yes, I do remember that there was quite a little bit of action. I wouldn't say controversy, but there was a little problem there of whether we should go with the American Baptist or the Conference Baptist. The conference Baptist was sending their missionaries out under the American Baptist Missionary Society at that time. There was a strong movement that was growing that we have our own foreign missionary society, and that we, as a church, should stick with the Baptist General Conference. There was a little controversy over that, but nothing serious. I don't remember that there was anything really serious. A few of the older members felt that we should go with the American Baptist. They felt that young people should go, and that the young people should be with them, but we weren't strong enough to have our own. That changed during the years. I won't say that I believe it was while we were here that the decision was made that we go with the. . .

G: Middle East Baptist.

M: . . . Middle East Baptist and the Baptist General Conference.

G: Now, do you remember, as far as its physical arrangements in the church, anything about remodeling of the church, the church basement, or anything that was done as far as to improve the physical structure of the

church? [Do you remember] anything of this nature about the people joining in order to help remodel and renovate some of the areas in the church?

M: We renovated the lower auditorium which was the fellowship hall. [It was] very small. There was work done so that it became quite attractive. The Sunday School all met together for their opening exercises as we call them. It was very difficult to get the people to fall in line with having departments. We tried it for a few Sundays, but the older people missed the little ones who sat in the front row so much that we had to shift back and have all department meeting for the opening exercises of the Sunday School. But there were progress needs there too. There were some new classes started, and I feel that we were headed in the right direction to help departmentalize the Sunday School, and make in into a church where more people would be more interested in coming.

G: Now, do you remember anything about how they raised money at this time as far as maybe ice cream socials or personal remembrances?

M: Very clearly. Something I never did like was raising money by having sales and selling wax paper, and so on and so forth. We always felt that the money, the tithes, should be given to the Lord. There was money raised in that way for a while. Of course, now there is nothing like that. We never have any projects for raising money. The money is definitely just given in tithes and offerings. But, during those days, people were very. . . . The money was very short. I have often thought that people gave of what they had, so that if the women could make things at home and sell them to someone, then it was their gift to the Lord. I thought of that. You have to do what you have to do. If you don't have any money. . . . Very few people had any more money than they needed just to keep up their homes and feed their families. So, looking at it that way, I have come to think that perhaps this wasn't such a bad thing at that time. But, in this generation, we just don't do that any more in our churches.

G: Perhaps you could give some recollection of when, during your stay, that the mortgage was burned on your parsonage, and that the mortgage was finally paid? Perhaps that was a happy experience. Maybe there was a celebration at the church. Could you recall?

M: I really don't remember much about that. I do remember the mortgage was paid. Probably then, the financial burden was much less, because I know that we were given small increases in salaries. That lightened our burden too.

We liked to have company. One way of the church growth was, I strongly believe, to try to keep in touch with any visitors that come. [We] tried to have every family in the church over at one time or another for a meal after the evening service. I feel that this was one of the ways that new people were reached. There were new people coming constantly when the church became less Swedish-oriented and more Americanized. We tried not to slight any of the older ones who preferred the Swedish. Unfortunately, my husband was fluent in Swedish, and I understood it--I could speak it a little bit, and that helped--but we were trying to reach out and get new people.

It might be of interest that during that time when money was so scarce, my husband would ask permission of the church to work part-time outside of the church. So he worked at the post office and made friends there just working part-time. Then, he carried mail for awhile. He made a lot of contacts just through delivering mail. It opened up new opportunities. He was meeting new people. It helped us financially. It was very difficult to be in a position of leadership and not have what you needed financially. Times were so hard for everyone then. It was difficult to entertain if you didn't have the money to buy the food and so on. So, this helped us considerably. It made a big difference to us that he had this extra money. It didn't really interfere with his church work, because he was very conscientious about visitation and taking care of all the things that needed to be done in the church.

G: Maybe you could talk a little bit about the services--how often they were held--the prayer meetings on Wednesdays, and what was the usual format. Maybe you could relate some of the people that sick out in your mind as being instrumental leaders in the church? Of course, I'm sure that there are quite a few that come to your mind, but perhaps you could. . . .

M: Well, I would like to say that your grandparents were some of the leaders in the church. We visited them at the Fred Johnson home a good bit. They were very supportive. One of the things that was really difficult, yet drew us together so much at the church was the fact that there were several who passed away during that short period of time. One of the first was your grandfather--Fred Johnson. Your mother came over to tell us about it. It shook up all of us. Then shortly after that, Sam (?Fortk?), one of the leaders in church, passed away. There were just so many in that short time that it really made everyone think about their life here on Earth and here after. It made a big difference. I will say that our fellowship became closer. It seemed like we felt we needed each other

and needed to be supportive of each other during that time. It was really difficult.

But, you asked about the church and what size services. Well, they were much better attended during that time in our great need because there was so much sorrow in the church. We met every Wednesday evening and then on Sunday morning and Sunday evening. Then the different groups, the youth groups, had meetings. They would meet after church Sunday night in different homes. Then the youth group grew. I remember one Wednesday night; my husband was concerned about the fact that there were so few young people at the mid-week service. So he decided that he was to change that. He asked at least ten young people to give their testimonies at the Wednesday night service. They were all there, and they gave their testimonies. Showing the interest of the young people in the church was really an inspiration to all who were present. It was really great.

G: Maybe you could also talk about the church now at this time. It was affiliated with the Trumbull Association, correct?

M: Yes.

G: Maybe you could relate and experience about this association. What were the reasons that drew Evangel out of this and towards the Middle East Baptist Conference? What were the reasons behind this? What was some of the contract that was made between this association and Evangel?

M: I can't say for sure what the deciding factor was. I do know that the fact that my husband was so much in favor of us going with the Middle East. The Baptist General Conference had a tremendous influence. He always went to the conferences and came back with the reports. I do feel that was one of the strong factors: being at the conference. Now that may be an overstatement, but I don't think so.

G: No. That is probably right. Now, I mentioned earlier that the annual meeting in June of 1942 was actually held at Evangel. Maybe you could talk about some of the people that were there from the Baptist General Conference that talked. Maybe you could talk about your recollections? I know this was quite some time ago, but maybe you could talk about that and any meeting that was held there, and if this a critical meeting to support this move.

M: I really couldn't say. I do not recollect attending any of the meetings, because I was at home with the

children a good bit. I do remember we had many conference speakers, and some of them may been at that time. One of the conference speakers, Eric (?Fickenburg?) who was a missionary, was just a tremendous man. He gave such a message and had such devotion to his work. He was one of our conference missionaries. We did try to have as many of our conference people in as we possible could from headquarters. But I really don't recollect anything about any meeting. I probably didn't attend the different sessions because of the children.

G: Now, do you remember much of correspondence with some of these men who were overseas in the service? Was there much contact with letters that were written perhaps from these men that related some of their experiences? Do you remember much of this?

M: Yes. I know that my husband kept up correspondence with the men in the service. They wrote back. They were happy to get the mail and wrote to him. I didn't have any part in that at all. We did keep in touch with them. It was a hard time for all of them. My own brother-in-law, Donald Gustavson, was in the service. It wasn't an easy time for him. I don't think any of our servicemen ever really related to us the things that they did go through during that time, because they wanted to forget them, if anything. There were some letters. This one letter that your father saved and gave us a copy of was written by my husband to him while he was in the service. We had moved to Davenport Island in 1944. Then, when all the men came back from the service, we made the trip back here too. He was the speaker at a banquet that was held in the Covenant Church in honor of the fellows who returned. I don't believe there were any who were taken from our church here in Youngstown. We were living in Davenport at the time. One of the men there was killed in the service, but none of the ones from Evangel.

An interesting thing was that we had such a good relationship with the Covenant Church right across the street from us. Every summer, the pastor of the Covenant Church would have a month vacation. While the pastor of the Covenant Church was on vacation, my husband took care of all the services for him. When we met together, I don't know how we could have done it. I don't remember how they could have all come over to our church. I just don't remember how we managed that, but we did work the services so that he served as the pastor of our congregation while the one pastor was on vacation. While we were away, the Covenant pastor took over at our church. The two congregations were very, very friendly. It was really a nice relationship. We got to know the members of the Covenant Church very well during the time their pastor was away. If there

were funerals or weddings, of course, my husband officiated. The same when we were gone. That was one of the things that I thought was very, very fine. You don't find that kind of cooperation between churches at all times.

G: No, that is true. Perhaps you could just sum up some personal reminiscences that you have of your stay at Evangel, and some of the friendships that you have formed. Maybe you could just talk generally about the experience that you had at the church.

M: Well, I am just so thankful that we were permitted to be at Evangel for those seven years. They were a growing and learning experience for me. We made many lasting friendships. After serving the churches in different places, and after we left here . . . Davenport Island and Seattle, Washington and Avon Lake, Ohio, I have come back here to Youngstown to live again as a member of the Evangel Baptist Church. I find some of the same people. Some of the people are still real active members of the church all these years later. That, to me, took a lot for the fellowship that we had in the Lord at Evangel. I just am so thankful that, at this present time, Reverend Richard Oldsen is pastor. He and his wife have been serving the church here for nine years. The church has grown. There is a wonderful fellowship and relationship between the members who were quite useful during the time that we were at the church and the many, many new people. It just has become definitely an English speaking church. There are a few people who still know the Swedish language, but very few. I am thankful for my own son who was only five years old when we came here. He was baptized and joined the church during that time that we were at Evangel originally. He is at this time a professor at Bethel Seminary, and the librarian of the seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Our other son, who was only two years old when we came to Evangel, is a pastor of Galilee Baptist Church in Circle Pines, Minnesota. That is just about ten miles from Bethel College and Seminary.

So I am really thankful for having the privilege of being a minister's wife. It has really been a wonderful experience for me. I have met some of the world's finest people, I think. We have had opportunities to entertain missionaries, ministers, and their families in our home. We have always practiced hospitality. We were the ones who gained from it, I do believe. They had a tremendous influence on our children. They just loved it when the visiting ministers and missionaries stayed at our house. I think it really influenced them. I am very, very thankful for each one. My daughter is very active in church work. She is married and living in Atlanta, Georgia where she

is serving as an organ assistant in a large Southern Baptist Church. So, all of my children are really in church work, and I am just really thankful for that. It has just been a real privilege to be active in the Lord's work. I try to stay that way now that I am a widow. I'm just real thankful for every opportunity . . . even for this opportunity of sharing something from the past with you. I'm so thankful for your parents and what they put into the church work even at this time.

I think that is all.

G: Okay. Thank you.

M: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW