

## FEATURE STORY: THE NORDIC CHURCHES PROJECT

# Preserving Nordic Heritage Churches in the Midwest

By Emily Sajdak

Project Manager, Partners for Sacred Places



Trinity Lutheran Church and Midsummer Pole, Brevort, Michigan.  
Credit: Laurie Sommers

**T**rinity Lutheran Church sits just off the main highway in Brevort on the southern shore of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. This white clapboard church was founded by immigrants from the Åland Islands, a Swedish-speaking region of Finland. Its history is hinted at by an unassuming pole in the middle of the field next door. This is the “Midsummer Pole,” which serves as the focus of an annual Swedish tradition that celebrates the summer solstice. At Trinity, the festival is celebrated by decorating and raising the Midsummer Pole, singing a song in Swedish, and eating Swedish meatballs and rye bread among other foods and treats.

Trinity is one example of a Nordic heritage church participating in Partners’ *Preserving Nordic American Churches Project* (*Nordic Churches Project*). Thanks to the support of the Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies, this project is generating the first broad inventory of Nordic American churches in the Upper Midwest and is seeking to lift the profile of Nordic cultural heritage in North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. These churches have much to say about the cultural roots—and decorative arts—of 19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century immigrants from Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland, and Denmark.

The project has also worked closely with 17 Nordic American churches in the region, to increase their capacity and help them repair and restore their buildings and decorative arts. Each congregation or nonprofit owner participated in training led by Partners that was offered in Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin and Sioux City, Iowa last year, and was eligible for a matching grant to complete a small capital project.

Trinity Lutheran chose to fundraise toward restoration of its historic altar painting—created by Olof Grafström, a well-known Swedish immigrant artist. “It has been a dream of ours for years and years to have the painting restored,” says Pega Kennedy, a member of Trinity Lutheran’s congregation. The congregation has recently completed its fundraising efforts and is preparing to send the painting to Detroit for restoration. “The response has been overwhelming . . . we did a bake sale and a letter [campaign]” to raise the funds. “We have received over \$10,000, which is so amazing,” notes Kennedy.

Not all participating churches in the *Nordic Churches Project* are operated by active congregations. The Valley Grove Preservation Society (VGPS) maintains and operates two historic churches in Nerstrand, Minnesota that were established in the mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup> century by Norwegian settlers to the area. The stone church on site was built in the 1860s to serve as a place of worship and gathering for local farm families. By the mid-1890s, the congregation had outgrown the stone church and built a wooden church, which served the Norwegian-American community until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Gary Wagenbach, President of VGPS, cites participation in the *Nordic Churches Project* as a driving force behind the board’s capacity to undertake their capital project to restore and re-create historic light fixtures in the stone church. Relationships are building. “The preservation society is recognizing that there is capacity in the partnership and training resources that have been provided . . . I’m excited going forward to continue to address needs and opportunities, both the stone church in the short term and



The altar and painting at the Wood Church at Valley Grove. Credit: Joshua Castaño

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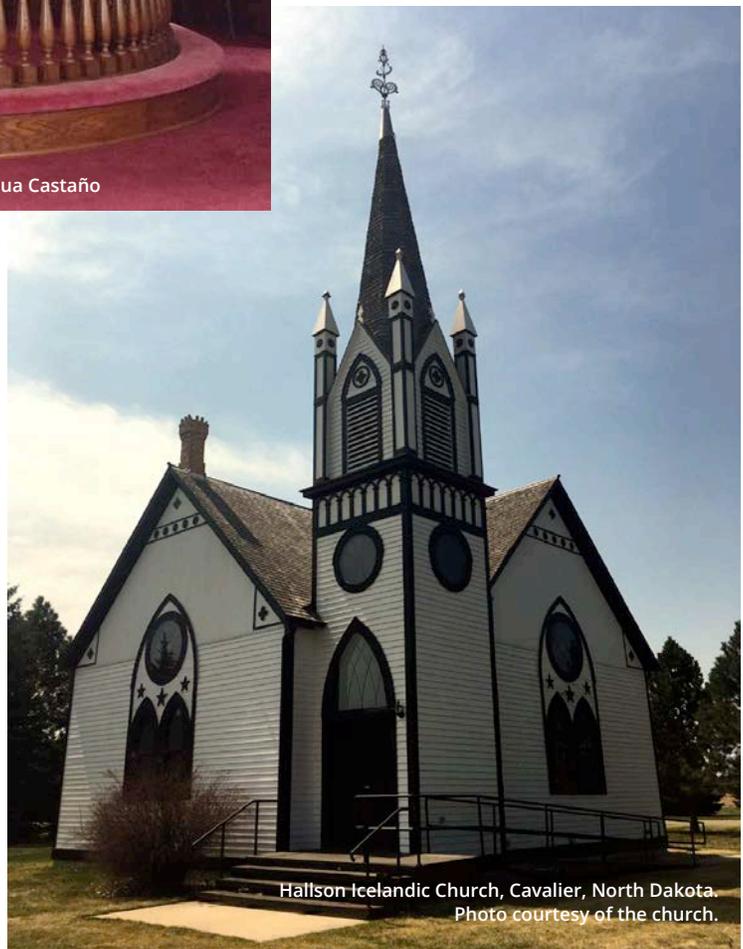
“ I would urge anyone – any organization, any group, any board— who reads this article to take a chance and apply for whatever may be available to restore their piece of history that’s important to them. Don’t hold back, don’t be afraid. It’s one of the best learning experiences you’ll probably have—it’ll benefit your people, culture, heritage, by preserving who you are.”

—Paul Berge  
Swedish Zion Church

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the land [the property borders a restored prairie] in the long term,” says Wagenbach.

Participation in the training sessions facilitated by Partners’ staff serves as an important opportunity for leadership at each of these churches to increase their knowledge of how best to tell their story and fundraise for their sacred place, but also to share success stories with each other. For example, the Vidalin Icelandic Lutheran Church Cemetery Association cares for a church building in Akra, North Dakota, initially built by the Icelandic Lutheran congregation in the late 1880s. When Vidalin was chosen to participate in the *Nordic Churches Project*, Carol Beard (one of the Cemetery Association’s board members) notes that the opportunity to participate was “wonderful and gave them funds to undertake major projects. . . it has afforded the luxury to have more money for [other] repairs,” as well. Beard and another member of the Cemetery Board attended the September 2018 training and told the story of how they were previously able to raise more than \$40,000 as part of a letter campaign to descendants of those buried in the cemetery.



Hallson Icelandic Church, Cavalier, North Dakota.  
Photo courtesy of the church.

## OUR SAVIOR'S LUTHERAN CHURCH:

# The Highest Point in Viborg, South Dakota

*At the 1911 dedication of Our Savior's Lutheran Church, a former pastor noted: "Beautiful lies the little church—the highest point in the city of Viborg, with its spire pointing men toward heaven. And inside it is homelike and warm, inviting the soul of man to worship." Since that day, the welcoming space has featured exceptional folk carvings and pulpit, altar, and altar paintings by master Danish immigrant artisan, Jes Smidt (1855-1942). Smidt became one of the most sought-after artisans in the growing Danish immigrant community, and Our Savior's has some of the best-preserved examples of his work.*

*The Nordic Churches Project has sought out churches like Our Savior's—historic, active congregations committed to preserving folk arts and ethnic traditions. Lifelong member Melanie Parsons was one of the church's leaders who participated in this project, and recently shared her perspectives on the experience with project manager Laurie Sommers.*

Laurie Sommers (LS): Can you speak about what you learned about the care of buildings and why it might be important to preserve a church like yours?

**Melanie Parsons (MP): If you look at a picture of our church from 1911 and one from 2019, it's going to be very much the same. That brings such comfort to people, to be able step into that building to see that the people still care about it, and that it's still home. That is such a gift that we can give.**

LS: How did you raise the required match for your restoration and repair grant?

**MP: We did a big rummage sale of used household goods. We found out there was a tremendous need**

**in the community for things we were collecting. We also had tremendous response from people who helped or donated. That became a way to get everybody fired up and to make everybody feel like they were part of something. We ended up making about \$2,500, but the laughing, joking, and comradery were priceless. The biggest financial success we had was the general appeal letter that we sent out to anyone who had a connection to Our Savior's.**

LS: You said previously that the training provided by Partners for Sacred Places helped you to identify the congregation's values and its value to the community. Can you share what those values are?

**MP: We have a "can do" attitude. We aren't that huge, but you don't have to be huge to impact the community. You can share what you have. We're a very giving congregation. Our people are constantly volunteering. Our value isn't measured by how much money we have in our bank account. Also, we have been place-keepers of so many of these Danish traditions. Had our church not retained these old traditions, we'd just be another small town in the Midwest. Our new Danish folk dance class is a part of that.**

LS: What was your lasting impression of the training you attended?



Altar and painting, "The Good Shepherd" by Jes Smidt, Our Savior's Lutheran Church, Viborg, South Dakota. Credit: Joshua Castaño

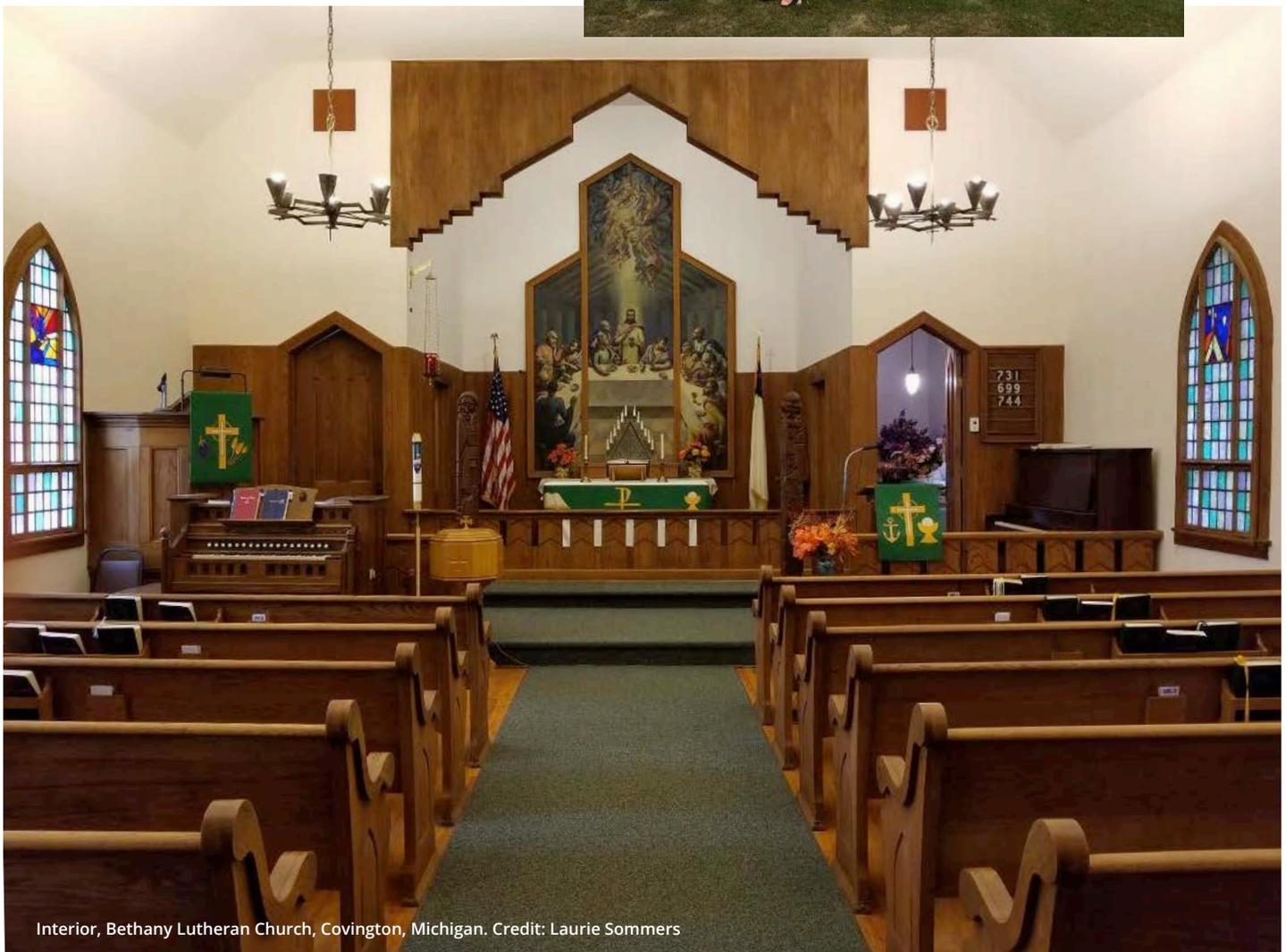
**MP: It was wonderful. We all came back with so much energy that it couldn't be overcome. We had confidence, we had tools, we could say why we needed to do these things. We also were impressed by the other groups that were there. One member of our group said, "I wish we would just make so much money in our fundraiser so we could donate to theirs." Because there are a lot of really good projects out there that all deserve to succeed.**

Another board president, Paul Berge of the Swedish Zion Preservation Society, heard the story of Vidalin's successful letter campaign at Partners' training program and was encouraged to undertake a similar fundraising effort for its stone church, located near Souris, North Dakota. Berge describes the training he attended as a critical step toward understanding its role in the surrounding community. Unlike some of the other churches in the cohort, Swedish Zion Lutheran Church stands alone in the fields—it has no city or town in its immediate vicinity.

“One of the things that excites me the most was the [asset mapping] exercise from the training session. We sat down with a blank piece of paper and listed all the gifts of our congregation or organization and the things that we could offer,” Berge says. “For us it's difficult. We don't have heating, plumbing, etcetera. We're more restricted than those that have more of a modern facility... [But] we have so much more to offer than indoor plumbing and electricity. We have history and this heritage, and that excites me as much or more than anything else— realizing what we do have to offer to the community and to outsiders.”



Old Trondhjem Church, Lonsdale, Minnesota.  
Credit: Laurie Sommers



Interior, Bethany Lutheran Church, Covington, Michigan. Credit: Laurie Sommers

In addition to relationships with Partners staff and other churches in the cohort, some of these churches have had an even broader impact on their neighboring communities. Zion Lutheran Church, founded by Swedish immigrants in Manistique, Michigan, has become a home for altar paintings from several Nordic heritage churches in the area.

When a former Norwegian Lutheran church in Manistique closed, the buyer—a Seventh Day Adventist congregation—offered the altar painting to Zion Lutheran. That 1893 painting—the first altar painting done by the important Norwegian-American artist August Klagstad (a former resident of Manistique)—now hangs in the foyer at Zion Lutheran. When Bethany Lutheran Church closed in nearby Isabella, Michigan, Zion Lutheran became home to a third altar painting by an unknown artist. In addition, Zion has its own altar painting—a Grafström, like the one at Trinity Lutheran. The altar paintings came to mind when Zion became part of the *Nordic Churches Project* and learned of the grant monies available. “We knew that we had historic paintings,” says Larry Peterson, a congregant at Zion Lutheran, “and our church was unique in that we had the very first Klagstad painting, and he grew up in this community. We thought this was a good opportunity to restore the [Klagstad and Grafström] paintings and get in touch with our history.” Trinity and Zion Lutheran have partnered with the same conservator, who will be in Manistique this summer to restore the Grafström painting on site. Peterson, the congregation, and the community of Manistique are excited to have the conservator there, so they can observe the restoration process.

The people at Zion Lutheran remain hopeful about the future. “[We are thinking] about how our church building is an



Interior, Old Trondhjem Church, Lonsdale, Minnesota. Credit: Joshua Castaño

asset not only to us but also to the community. The church building really reflects the history of the community . . . The training really helped us reflect on what we’ve been doing for the past 100 years,” explains Peterson.

Across the region and the cohort, these churches have been enthusiastic about what their participation in the *Nordic Churches Project* means for the future of their churches and their communities. “It was really eye-opening to see the response [to our letters]. People who have never set foot in the church made big donations,” remarks Kennedy. “The church has affected and impacted so many people.” ☛