



God's Song in a Strange Land: Early Lutheran Pastors in San Francisco

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In the twelve years following the 1848 discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill, the population of California mushroomed from some 26,000 to more than 375,000. Fortune seekers rushed to the Pacific Coast, not just from the United States but from all over the world. This incredible migration was unlike the settlement of any other American territory. Predominantly male, often violent and lawless, with a "get rich quick" attitude, early California was a tough place to preach the gospel.

Preachers did come along with the fortune seekers, though they were rather like twigs washed along in a mighty flood. By 1852, Richard Henry Dana could claim there were thirty-seven churches in San Francisco alone, representing a spectrum of Christianity that extended from Roman Catholic to Unitarian. But the salubrious California climate often led to remarkable transformations in preachers of the old-time religion. Dana told of encountering a man he had known as a "strict and formal deacon" of the Congregational Church in New England. The man, he reported, was still a deacon—"but externally, what a change! Gone was the downcast eye, the bated breath, the solemn, non-natural voice, the watchful gait, stepping as if he felt responsible for the balance of the moral universe! He walked with a

Early California was a tough place to preach the gospel. But ministers came, including Lutheran ones. Their stories present a fascinating picture of the problems and challenges of those who would establish Lutheranism in the Golden State—then and now.

stride, an uplifted open countenance, his face covered with beard, whiskers and mustache, his voice strong and natural, and, in short, he put off the New England deacon and became a human being.”¹

It was a strange land indeed to early Lutheran missionaries and pastors in San Francisco, who were also, every one of them, human beings. There was quite a parade of them—some straitlaced and proper, others quite imbued with the spirit of the times, still others well-meaning but ineffectual. The stories of these early pastors give a remarkable view of life in early California and of the missionary challenges of nineteenth-century Lutheranism. They may also help us see that the challenges of our own century are not so unique.

MOOSHAK: FLAWED PIONEER

By most accounts, the earliest Lutheran pastor to arrive in California was Friederich Mooshake, founder of what is today St. Mark’s Lutheran Church in San Francisco. Mooshake’s ministry has sometimes been romanticized by later Lutherans who have wanted to see in this pioneer a man of vision and adventure. The truth is more ambiguous.

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Born in Braunschweig, Germany, in 1813, Mooshake passed his theological examinations at the University of Göttingen. University records tell of an episode in which Mooshake and some friends were disciplined for unruly behavior with a young woman. Despite this incident, Mooshake was licensed to preach, though he does not appear to have been ordained in Germany. About 1847, however, he left abruptly for America. The Mooshake family tradition in Germany recalls that Friederich learned the authorities were about to arrest him for his pro-democratic political activity, and that shortly after his departure the police indeed had come looking for him.²

Upon arrival in the United States, Mooshake contacted Lutheran officials and was licensed by the New York Ministerium in 1847, but again there is no evidence of ordination. The following year, the president of the ministerium reported that he believed Mooshake still to be in the city of New York, “though I have received no official information as to his labors.” The ministerium then proceeded to revoke his license and strike his name for failure to comply with the requirements of a licentiate.³

¹Richard Henry Dana Jr., *Two Years before the Mast* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1911) 465–467.

²Walter E. Bock, “Pastor Friedrich Mooshake, A German Pioneer in California, 1813–1869” (unpublished paper based on Bock’s translation of Mooshake’s autobiographical notes, n.d.).

³*Minutes of the Fifty-third Annual Session of the Evangelical Lutheran Ministerium of New York and Adjacent States* (Baltimore: Publication Room of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1848) 6, 23.

It has been said that Mooshake arrived in San Francisco in October 1849, and St. Mark's claims that date for its founding. No contemporaneous records have been found, however, that place him in San Francisco before 1853, when an article in a Congregational Church newspaper, *The Pacific*, reported that divine worship was to be led the following Sunday in German by "the Rev. Mr. Mooshak," who, the writer explained, "is lately from the Theological School in Gottingen, Germany, and from our little acquaintance with him, appears to be a man of ability, energy and Christian zeal."⁴

Whenever Mooshake may have arrived, the 1853 article implies that he was just beginning his German services, and it seems unlikely there was any formal congregation prior to that. Possibly Mooshake, like many other erstwhile preachers in the old West, had come seeking his fortune, and when it didn't materialize as quickly as he had anticipated, decided that preaching might be an easier alternative. An 1856 directory of churches listed both the "German Evangelical Church" meeting at First Baptist Church, with Rev. F. Mooshake as pastor, and a German service at First Presbyterian Church, also naming Mooshake as pastor. *Colville's Directory* of the same year refers to the "German Evangelical Lutheran Church," pastored by Mooshake, meeting in a building on Sutter Street erected in 1855, which it calls "the first German Protestant Church built on the Pacific coast."⁵

Of course, a paid directory advertisement does not a congregation make! When the "First German Evangelical Lutheran Church" was officially founded in May 1859, it was meeting at the Greenwich Street Church of Christ (soon to be purchased by the Lutherans). Whether this was the same congregation mentioned in the 1856 directory is hard to say, but Mooshake was the pastor who signed the constitution. Things did not flourish under his leadership, however, and the congregation, such as it was, grew a little antsy. Tensions escalated, and in June 1860 Mooshake was unceremoniously dismissed. The records of the congregation list specific charges against the pastor: financial irregularities and alleged untruthfulness to the church council, but also complaints about drunkenness, "total incapacity as a preacher," and, perhaps most intriguing of all, "immoral explanation of love of neighbor in confirmation instruction."⁶

So Mooshake the pioneer was out of a job. That did not stop him from using his ministerial credentials, however. City directories through the 1860s list him as pastor of a German Evangelical Lutheran Church, meeting sometimes on Sunday afternoons at a Methodist church building, sometimes at Mooshake's residence. It is doubtful that this was actually a viable congregation. Abraham Myers wrote to the *Lutheran Observer* in 1868, describing the Lutheran congregations in San Fran-

⁴The October 1849 claim is made in a brief notice of Mooshake's church in *Colville's 1856 San Francisco Directory: Volume 1, for the Year Commencing October, 1856*, collated and published by Samuel Colville (San Francisco: Commercial Steam Presses, Monson, Valentine & Co., 1856) 154. Mooshake's obituary in the *Alta Californian*, December 2, 1869, also claims that he arrived in California in 1849. See *The Pacific*, 24 June 1853.

⁵*San Francisco Business Directory for the Year Commencing January 1, 1856* (San Francisco: Baggett, Joseph & Co., 1856) 66; *Colville's 1856 Directory*, 154.

⁶Greenwich Street Church Minutes Book of the Trustees, Protokoll Buch bis November 4, 1861, Minutes of 11 June 1860 (Archives of St. Mark's Lutheran Church, San Francisco).

cisco: “The oldest among these,” he reported, “is Mosacher’s. But few attend. He has no Synodical connection, and probably never has had in this country. His principal forte lies in *Baptisms and Marriages*.” Mooshake remained in San Francisco until his death in 1869.⁷

BUEHLER: MISSIONARY PASTOR

Mooshake’s successor as pastor of the First German Evangelical Lutheran Church was cut from very different cloth. Jacob M. Buehler was a twenty-three-year-old graduate of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis when he was sent to San Francisco by the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. An anonymous California correspondent (later revealed to be Mrs. Elizabeth Schrieber) had written to synod president C. F. W. Walther in 1859: “Conditions appear dismal here for Christians, and especially for Lutherans....I must wonder why the church which considers itself the true church...does not in the name of her true Shepherd seek out the lost in California. The lost coin cannot seek itself, nor the sheep find its shepherd when it cannot hear his voice.” This plea made a deep impression on Walther. He commissioned young Buehler, who arrived in San Francisco in the fall of 1860.⁸

Buehler’s frequent letters back to St. Louis provide a fascinating commentary on religious life in early San Francisco, where, he noted, one finds “many churches but little religion.” Mooshake’s church, “the one so-called Lutheran congregation,” numbered only about twenty members. “The influential members of this congregation are either freethinkers or outright rationalists,” he reported. “It is very much a question as to whether any of them know their Savior at all.”⁹

His remarks notwithstanding, Buehler shortly accepted the invitation to become the pastor of the church recently vacated by Mooshake. Attendance grew, but Buehler’s strongly confessional preaching was not popular among the “freethinkers and rationalists.” Allegations against the pastor were made in the German newspapers. The congregation split in 1863. Buehler and his followers moved to a new location and ultimately incorporated as St. Mark’s; others stayed behind and called a Pastor F. Hansen, whom Buehler considered a “rationalist.” Indeed, a newspaper notice placed by the Greenwich Street remnant and reprinted (with satirical comment!) in *Der Lutheraner* made it quite clear that those who had refused to follow Buehler were relieved to have a more “enlightened” preacher. Even Abraham Myers, whose theological sentiments were considerably more liberal than Buehler’s, dismissed Hansen’s sermons as “good *moral* lectures.”¹⁰

⁷*Lutheran Observer*, 1 July 1868.

⁸*Der Lutheraner*, 13 December 1859. Buehler’s life has been chronicled very often, and more is known about him than any of the other early San Francisco pastors. See, e.g., Karl H. Wynken, “Jacob Matthias Buehler: Pioneer Missouri Synod Pastor on the West Coast,” *Essays and Reports of the Lutheran Historical Conference* 12 (1988) 146–179.

⁹*Der Lutheraner*, 4 October 1860.

¹⁰*Der Lutheraner*, 1 October 1864; *Lutheran Observer*, 24 July 1868. Buehler mentions the allegations against him in the press in a letter to *Der Lutheraner* published 4 October 1860. Unfortunately, except for scattered issues, the San Francisco German papers of the period have been lost.

A few years later, negotiations were held to reunite the two congregations. Many thought this a splendid idea; they would keep both pastors, who would preach on alternate Sundays, so that people would have their pick. Buehler's lack of enthusiasm for such a compromise led to the breakdown of the talks. But in 1866, Buehler took an extended leave to travel to Europe and the eastern United States. When he returned, he found more dissension. About half of the members of St. Mark's had signed a petition to state the policy of the church on certain matters. They wanted "no tampering with [Lutheran] truths," they claimed, but desired only that "human tenets and principles...be met with the utmost tolerance." Furthermore, they demanded that the pastor "restrict his activities exclusively to the care of souls" and not "antagonize other sects and congregations." Finally, they insisted that they remain an independent congregation, with "no relationship whatever with the Synod in St. Louis."¹¹

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Confronted with this document, Buehler strenuously objected. It was out of order, he insisted, because it was considered at a meeting in absence of the pastor; but more to the point, the congregation had no authority to tell the pastor what he could and could not preach. Several signers retracted their signatures. But a few months later, when Buehler refused to co-officiate with the Masonic lodge at the funeral of a member, the congregation's leaders demanded that he agree to take part in such funerals in the future. Buehler refused, and resigned.¹²

The pastor was not without supporters, however, and at their insistence he promptly convened a meeting that resulted in the founding of St. Paulus Lutheran Church. This congregation would be the "mother church" of the Missouri Synod on the Pacific Coast (though it is today an ELCA congregation). Buehler stayed as pastor until his death in 1901. He not only enjoyed a successful and productive ministry in the congregation, but was instrumental in the growth of the Missouri Synod in California. He also reached beyond his own synodical affiliation. Norwegian Lutheran missionary Christian Hvistendahl reported that Buehler "took me into his house as a brother...and arranged for us to hold services, without rent, in his church building." Even those who found Buehler's confessionalism unpalatable regarded him with great respect—he was possessed of "strong magnetism and loving nature," wrote a General Synod-affiliated laywoman, as well as "native execu-

¹¹Richard T. Du Brau, *The Romance of Lutheranism in California* (Oakland, CA[?], 1959) 25.

¹²On the social and political power of Freemasonry in San Francisco, see Tony Fels, "The 'Non-Evangelical Alliance': Freemasonry in Gilded-Age San Francisco," in *Religion and Society in the American West: Historical Essays*, ed. Carl Guarneri and David Alvarez (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987) 221–254.

tive ability.” By any reckoning, he was the most successful of the early San Francisco Lutheran pastors.¹³

THE PASTORS MYERS: PROMOTERS

A third pastor has not been as widely remembered as Mooshake or Buehler, but his ministry, along with that of his nephew and namesake, is of some significance to the development of Lutheranism in California. Abraham H. Myers was an American-born Lutheran pastor associated with the General Synod. He was captured by the missionary vision and set his eyes toward the Pacific Coast, but he was discouraged by his own church’s apparent inability to meet the challenge of bringing the gospel to the West. In 1852 he wrote to F. W. Porter of the American Sunday School Union, seeking an appointment as agent for that interdenominational agency. “My first intention,” he explained, “was to visit [the Pacific Coast] as a Missionary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Owing to the want, however, of an efficient Missionary Society, I have had up to this time to encounter many difficulties, and much embarrassment, which have more than once awakened in my mind the inquiry, ‘May not the Great Head of the Church design that I should enter the field under other auspices?’” After some negotiation, the ASSU agreed to sponsor Myers as their man in San Francisco, and he arrived there in July 1852.¹⁴

His regular reports to his sponsoring board make for fascinating reading. One is first of all struck by his complaints about his health. The sea voyage via Panama was rough on him, and it seems he never quite fully recovered, finding the pioneer conditions and perhaps the climate not conducive to his own physical well-being. There were also continual concerns about money—references to the very high cost of living in San Francisco, with detailed reports on what he must pay for rent, food, and other necessities of life. The work itself was discouraging. He visited many congregations and pastors, but found little support for his cause. Some pastors were reluctant to allow him to solicit their people for support, no doubt believing their own parochial concerns were a hard enough sell. He found rival Sunday School agencies competing for funds. Despite these problems, there were many opportunities to preach, and he beat the drum for the temperance cause as well as for Sunday Schools.¹⁵

But Myers decided after just a few months that he must give it up. “In coming to the Coast,” he wrote, “I sacrificed in part a nice home, lost my library...amount-

¹³Hvistendahl is quoted in Kenneth Bjork, “Hvistendahl’s Mission to San Francisco, 1870–75,” *Norwegian-American Studies and Records* 16 (1950) 10; Nellie Blessing-Eyster, “Manuscript Historical Souvenir of Pioneer English Lutheranism in California, 1853–1893” (unpublished manuscript in the library of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, PA, 1893) 17.

¹⁴A. H. Myers to F. W. Porter, 19 April 1851, in *The American Sunday School Union Papers, 1817–1915* (microfilmed by Microfilming Corporation of America).

¹⁵A. H. Myers correspondence, in *The American Sunday School Union Papers*. Interestingly, there is no mention of any Lutheran contacts, which adds to the suspicion that Mooshake may not actually have been actively preaching yet; one would think that, even given the possible language barrier, Myers would have paid a courtesy call on a fellow Lutheran pastor.

ing to at least 600\$, and last but not least have lost my health. Still I am not in despair....The will of the Lord be done.” Less than ten months after he arrived, he resigned his post. Myers did not then leave California, however, but settled in Alameda County, across the bay from San Francisco, where he became a very successful horticulturist. He was joined for a time by his nephew, a theological student also named Abraham Myers, and the two of them traveled throughout California, delivering fruit trees and preaching whenever they had the opportunity. The younger Myers soon returned to Ohio to resume his studies, but he took the initiative to appear before the General Synod’s Home Missionary Society in 1857. He reported that California Lutherans were “sighing and praying for pastors of the church of their fathers.” While the society was very interested in a mission to California, nothing was accomplished; minutes for the 1859 meeting noted that “the Committee have not found any man, who was willing to go [to California], perfectly qualified, in their judgment, for that field.” That continued to be the line for some years.¹⁶

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The elder Myers was persistent, however, and the younger man began missionary work himself, without sponsorship from the church. A letter to the *Lutheran Observer* reported, “On Sabbath, the 18th of September, 1860, Rev. A. H. Myers commenced holding English Lutheran services in Tucker’s Academy of Music, the finest hall in [San Francisco], which the proprietor gave him the use of for three months gratuitously.” Myers continued to preach for several weeks, and then in January 1861 formally organized the “English Evangelical Lutheran Church” with thirty-one members. The correspondent concluded by pleading that “br. Myers must have aid and sympathy in this great and important work....Much is due br. Myers for his self-denial and sacrifice in this new enterprise. I hope and trust that the church in the east will be able and willing to render him some assistance.”¹⁷

But the fledgling congregation did not last. Myers left about 1862, intending to serve as a chaplain in the Union army, but in 1863 accepted a call to Ashland, Ohio. The Home Missionary Society, though interested in the congregation, still had not found “any one adapted to that important field, who was willing to undertake the Mission.” Left without a pastor, the congregation disbanded. The younger Myers, who was now a resident of Oregon, visited San Francisco and sent a report

¹⁶Blessing-Eyster, “Manuscript,” 11; *Proceedings of the Eighteenth Convention of the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States* (Gettysburg: Henry C. Neinstedt, 1857) 56; *Lutheran Observer*, 29 May 1857; *Proceedings of the Nineteenth Convention of the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States* (Gettysburg: Henry C. Neinstedt, 1859) 81.

¹⁷*Lutheran Observer*, 3 May 1861.

to the *Lutheran Observer*. There were four German Lutheran congregations, he reported, as well as some Scandinavian work. But English-speaking Lutherans “are entirely unsupplied.” While some of them attend the German services (though unable to understand the language), others “have abandoned their church entirely, having lost all love for a mother, who has so forgotten her children.”¹⁸

Myers’s chiding was of no avail. It would be another fifteen years before Lutherans in the East would support a missionary pastor in San Francisco—and even then, the support would come, not from the Board of Home Missions, but from the Woman’s Home and Foreign Missionary Society. Established in 1881, that society quickly showed an interest in the West, and in 1886 commissioned the Rev. O. C. Miller as missionary to San Francisco. Miller at last organized a congregation that survived. Unfortunately, neither Pastor Myers lived to see this development, uncle and nephew having died in 1872 and 1885, respectively.

AN EVALUATION

The careers of these pastors illustrate both the successes and the failures of Lutheran home missionary work in early California. The field, though “white for the harvest,” was very rough. Funds were limited, as home mission officials repeatedly told Myers, and volunteers were scarce. Often the work was left to those who were able to support themselves. Some of these, like the two Myerses, were dedicated pastors with a real sense of mission, willing to earn their living in secular jobs while seeking opportunities to preach. Others were more problematic. Mooshake, we must conclude, was a troubled man, independent and free-spirited, but chafing at authority and undisciplined in his personal habits. These were not uncommon traits in early California, but they were also not a recipe for productive ministry.

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The Myerses and Buehler were more successful, though in different ways. While neither Myers ever established a lasting congregation in California, both deserve credit for keeping the cause of the West before the church. In 1872 the *Observer* reported a recent visit to their offices by A. Myers (probably the nephew), who, the editor remarked, “serves as a sort of Lutheran bishop of the Pacific. He has explored a wide range of territory, and secured lots for Lutheran churches in a number of important localities.” These English Lutheran pastors thus planted seeds that would eventually grow and prosper.¹⁹

¹⁸*Proceedings of the Twenty-first Convention of the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States* (Gettysburg: Henry C. Neinstedt, 1864) 81; *Lutheran Observer*, 24 July 1868.

¹⁹*Lutheran Observer*, 15 March 1872.

In Buehler, we see the clearest accomplishment. His commitment to his field, combined with his substantial pastoral gifts, provided stability at St. Paulus in a time when many congregations were tumultuous and short-lived. From that base of operations, many additional congregations were established, despite the fact that in many respects Buehler's confessional preaching went against the cultural grain of pioneer California.

Of course money, commitment, and the quality of leadership are recurring themes in the story of the church's mission. In the twenty-first century, too, the challenges are daunting. Success is not guaranteed, and results are sometimes mixed and seldom immediate. Yet we can be encouraged by remembering those who braved danger, disappointment, and opposition in early California, and who laid a foundation on which subsequent generations would build. ⊕

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