

Biography of Bendik Gunnarsen Bondahl

read at the Service of Remembrance

held July 17, 2011 at his gravesite

in Concordia Lutheran Cemetery, rural Glyndon, Minnesota

Bendik Gunnarssen Bondahl was born in Telemark *Fylke* Norway on December 4, 1868, the son of Gunnar B. and Ashild Taraldlie. Bendik came to Minnesota at age 21 in 1890. He attended Concordia College in Moorhead from 1891-1892. Bondahl boarded with the Ed Braudwick family in Minneapolis while he attended the United Church Seminary from 1893-1900. After his ordination in 1901, he was called to serve a congregation in Racine, Wisconsin.

Pastor Bondahl became what we would now call an “opinion maker” even before he graduated from seminary. He served as editor of the publication *Seminarieret*, and wrote often and articulately about the important issues of the day in the Norwegian language newspapers in Madison, Wisconsin, Decorah, Iowa, Minneapolis, Minnesota and Fargo, North Dakota. He counted the much older Norwegian poet John Lie a good friend, and he developed strong relationships with many of the leaders of Norwegian-American community.

At the turn of the twentieth century there was a strong movement in the Norwegian immigrant community to organize and actively preserve the culture and traditions of the “old country.” When newspaper editor Rasmus Andersen and Reverend Henrik Voldal decided to introduce the notion of “*Det Norske Selskab*” or Norwegian Society to promote interest in Norwegian history, art, literature, and music, they sought out Bondahl’s support.

The organizational efforts were almost derailed by vicious arguments over the meaning of “good literature” (which some believed did not include Henrik Ibsen) and membership (some believed that only “good” Norwegians – that is, Norwegian Lutherans who were members of congregations in good standing - should be allowed to join). Bondahl spoke of the importance of the society’s intended mission, and urged people not to get bogged down in parochial disputes. By-laws were passed and, for his efforts, Bondahl was elected the first president of the Norwegian Society, an office he held until his death.

In 1904, Pastor Bondahl was called to Concordia, and he leaped at the chance to return to this large Telemark congregation in his home area. He filed his formal

petition for U.S. citizenship shortly after being installed as Concordia's pastor, and in due time, it was granted.

Beginning in 1899, immigrants from Norwegian communities had begun creating *bygdelager* as a way of preserving individual community traditions and dialects. The Society saw a role for itself as an umbrella organization that could provide a way for the groups to communicate and coordinate, and actively encouraged immigrants from specific locales to organize. In 1905, Rev. Bondahl began to actively lobby for the creation of such a group for Telemark. His efforts came to fruition in 1907, when Telelaget was organized in Fargo, North Dakota. As had been the case with the Norway Society, Pastor Bondahl was the natural choice to serve as Telelaget's first chairman.

Bendik Bondahl seemed to be blessed with enormous energy. Despite all of his work with Norwegian-American organizations, he remained dedicated to serving the needs of his congregation. He was also, by all accounts, attentive to his family. Pastor Bondahl arrived at Concordia with his wife Gudrun and their infant daughter, Agnes, who was born in 1903. Their son Olav was born in 1907.

As the saying goes, the candle that burns brightest seems to burn out twice as fast. Tragically, Pastor Bondahl succumbed to tuberculosis of the spine on August 8, 1908. His son Gunnar was not quite 3 months old. Pastor Bondahl himself was only 39.

Pastor Bondahl's funeral was the largest that had ever been held at Concordia Church. Mourners filled the church and spilled into the surrounding yard. Friends, colleagues, and leaders of the Norwegian-American community came from all over the upper Midwest and as far away as Chicago attended his funeral.

After his death, his wife Gudrun, who was trained as a nurse, moved the family to Moorhead. Sadly, because of her twelve-hour workdays and the tender youth of her children, her sons were sent to live with relatives – Gunnar in Minnesota and Olav in Montana. Agnes remained with her mother, although Gudrun's parents took on primary responsibility for their granddaughter.

As a teen-ager Agnes moved with her mother to Mandan, North Dakota and followed in her footsteps, becoming a nurse. Gunnar and Olav would not meet again until the early 1950's, and sadly, Olav was killed in an accident in 1954.

Gunnar married Alyce Villa in 1934, and served in World War II. He died in 1970. They had two children. Their son Gary died in 2004. We are pleased that his daughter Adonna has traveled from Washington state to be with us today.

The record of service to his faith and the Norwegian-American community during Bendik Bondahl's short life can only leave us wondering what he might have accomplished had he been given more time on this earth. Both Telelaget and Concordia were enriched by his presence and blessed to be part of his legacy. It seems only fitting that we join together to remember and honor him today.