No narrative of nineteenth-century North American church life would be quite complete without honorable mention of a battered old brig in New York harbor. For years she sailed no further than her hawser. Yet her impact spanned oceans and frontier prairies.

The extent of that impact justifies an attempt to provide a comprehensive study of this amazing maritime mission, incorporating into it some significant results of recent research. It seems appropriate that such a project should be presented in 1977, at the hundredth anniversary of the death of the first great leader of the venture. For reasons which will become apparent, it also seems appropriate that that endeavor should be launched by a Lutheran.

It all began with a tract, dropped on the breast of a sleeping sailor in a New York hospital. The incident is typical of the wealth of drama surrounding the saga of a ship whose name was to become a household word on both sides of the Atlantic. Peter Bergner (1797-1866) was, as a result of linguistic prowess acquired in younger years, generally known as “Polyglot Peter.” A native of Sweden, he commenced studies at the University of Upsala with a view to entering the (Lutheran) ministry. Eventually, however, he followed the call of the sea. Then, after having advanced to the position of mate, he decided to “swallow the anchor” and seek his fortune in the New World. Arriving in
New York in 1832, he found employment on the waterfront. But the erstwhile student of theology sensed he lacked peace of soul. And like his apostolic namesake, also a seafarer, he had to be thrice humbled before life could begin anew. On three successive occasions he broke his leg. Drinking to excess had, on his own admission, played a significant part. Racked by remorse, he had fallen asleep in his hospital bed, when one day Captain Gelston came by. Roland Gelston (Methodist pioneer of temperance sailors' homes for the American Seamen's Friend Society) was making his regular rounds of hospitalized seamen. Not wishing to disturb the sleeping Swede, he simply left a tract with him. The title, Conversation with an Infidel, caught Peter Bergner's eye as soon as he awoke. And the contents hit home.

Note on Sources: Understandably, the Bethel Ship John Wesley has figured in a long list of literary works through the years. Such sources, including standard Methodist histories, show certain discrepancies in their treatment of the origin of the enterprise. Recent research provides the opportunity for some correction and supplementation, especially in so far as the Bethelship Mission relates to the rise of seamen's missions in general. However, owing to the fragmentary nature of primary source materials in the latter field, reference must (for reasons of space) be made to detailed documentation in a dissertation on the history of early seamen's missions, being prepared for publication by the Author, and sponsored by the Norwegian Research Council for Science and the Humanities (see Forskningsnytt, Oslo 1972, No. 3, pp. 38-41). For the foregoing study, the author is indebted to the following for valuable help in locating relevant source materials: The Norwegian-American Historical Association (Northfield, Minn.), the American-Swedish Historical Foundation (Philadelphia, Pa.), the Norwegian-Danish Methodist Historical Society (Evanston, Ill.), the United Methodist Missionary Library (New York, N. Y.), Dr. Henry C. Whyman (United Methodist City Society, New York, N. Y.), John Olsen and Harriet Terdal (Historians, Bethelship Norwegian United Methodist Church, Brooklyn, N. Y.), Dr. Kenneth E. Rowe (Methodist Librarian, Drew University, Madison, N. J.), Rolf Erickson (Librarian, Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill.), Al Caldwell (Assistant Librarian, Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Ill.).

He was roundly converted. Or, as he himself put it in his forthright, seaman-like way: "The Lord could not break my heart until I had thrice broken my leg...." ²

On his discharge from hospital, the genuineness of Bergner’s experience proved itself in a life-long commitment to sharing the Gospel of Christ with his fellowmen, especially, like Paul, with “kinsmen according to the flesh.” He obtained permission to hold religious meetings for seafaring Scandinavians on board a German vessel, moored at Pier 11, North River. A homily of Martin Luther (read by Bergner), hearty hymn-singing and extempore prayer in true Methodist tradition, would make up the main ingredients. The first of these meetings (counting five participants, Bergner himself and four seamen) is

² In Reid, 430-431, Bergner is portrayed in far less complimentary light than later in Gracey, 180-181. The authenticity of Reid’s account is confirmed in Missionary Advocate (New York), May 1846:13. Captain Gelston’s boarding-house activities are frequently referred to in contemporary issues of The Sailor’s Magazine (New York).

3. Reid, 430-431. Gracey, 180-181. Victor Witting, Minnen fraan mitt lif (Worcester, Mass., 1902), 147-148. Lawson, 83. Odd Hagen, Preludes to Methodism in Northern Europe (Oslo, 1961), 46. It has so far proved impossible to verify the claim that Bergner began Scandinavian seamen’s services in New York. (Sources available to the Author do not establish the precise date of the first of his services.) However, it is certain that the Rev. J. W. C. Dietrichson, the Norwegian-educated frontier pastor of subsequent fame, conducted two services for New York Scandinavians, one of them on a Swedish ship in port, on his arrival in that city in the summer of 1844. E. C. Nelson & E. L. Fevold, The Lutheran Church among Norwegian-Americans (Minneapolis, 1960), I, 99. E. C. Nelson (Ed.), A Pioneer Churchman (New York, 1973), 50-51. From various sources, it is also known that two Scandinavian seamen, Swedish-born Fredrik Olaus Nilsson (or “Nelson”), and Norwegian-born Ole Helland, both to become zealous ministers of the Gospel, engaged in Christian literature distribution on the New York waterfront shortly after their conversion there, in 1835 and 1836 respectively; it is quite conceivable that they gathered their seafaring countrymen for a simple form of service as early as the late 1830’s.
claimed to have been the earliest specifically Scandinavian seamen's service in New York. At all events, from this modest start attendance rapidly rose.³

There were good reasons for this. Pier 11, at the foot of Carlisle and Rector Streets (near what is now the World Trade Center on the west side of Lower Manhattan), was in those days the principal focal-point of foreign shipping in the port of New York. As usual, surrounding streets sprouted a sordid assortment of sailortown vice. Among some two to three thousand seamen constantly congregating around the area, were a considerable proportion of Scandinavians, many of them Swedes (their country being at the time involved in a flourishing iron-export trade with the United States).⁴

Overwhelmed by the degree of response to his lone ministry, Bergner sought help and counsel in nearby Mulberry Street, at the office of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Little could he then foresee the far-reaching consequences of that visit. The secretary there, Dr. David Terry, fired with enthusiasm over the prospects he pictured, told Bergner to contact at once a circuit-riding fellow countryman in the Catskills, and followed up with a letter himself, where he warmly urged him to come and take charge of a mission so manifestly of God. The Swedish circuit-rider saw matters differently. But Bergner battled on, continuing to correspond, while refusing to give up his post at Pier 11.⁵

Meanwhile, more immediate success was registered in securing a suitable station. After severe setbacks stemming from the depression of 1837, the early 1840's were witnessing a nation-wide resurgence of religious activity in general, spurred by mounting denominational consciousness. This was not least evident in the so-called "Seamen's Cause." In the port of New

⁴. W. P. Strickland, History of the Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church (Cincinnati, 1850), 64-65. Witting, 146. Carl Thunström, Olof Gustaf Hedström (Stockholm, 1935), 31. See also the first two annual reports of the Protestant Episcopal Church Missionary Society for Seamen (New York, 1845 and 1846).

York, where the nondenominational Mariners' Church in Roosevelt Street had been virtually alone in the field since 1820, no less than four denominationally oriented seamen's churches had been established in 1843-44.\(^6\)

Of particular relevance to the subject of this article is the fourth of these new ventures. Contrary to some assumptions, the concept of a "Floating Chapel," as adopted by the New York "Wesleyan Methodists" in the fall of 1844, was by no means new at that time. The Episcopalians had nine months previously consecrated a vessel until then unique in the world — a magnificent Gothic church, complete with spire, constructed on a deck spanning two adjacent hulls. The Wesleyans, on the other hand, were content to follow the more unassuming method long since launched by British seamen's mission societies, that of remodeling an old hulk. More revolutionary was the sitting of the new station. Whilst all other stations had so far been located only on the East River side of Manhattan, it was to the credit of the Wesleyans that the need was recognized for a seafarers' haven on the Hudson. (Owing largely to the lack of a comprehensive history of seamen's missions, standard histories dealing with the subject of this article have hitherto overlooked both the general background of mounting public interest in seamen's missions as such, and also the crucial contribution in this particular case of those missionary-minded Wesleyans.)\(^7\)

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6. The Baptist Mariners' Church (corner Catherine and Cherry Streets) was organized December 4, 1843, although activities began in 1841. The Episcopal Floating Church of Our Saviour (foot of Pike Street, East River) was consecrated February 20, 1844. The Mariners' Methodist Episcopal Church (corner Clinton and Cherry Streets) was dedicated October 31, 1844. And the Wesleyan Floating Chapel (Pier 11, North River) was officially opened November 21, 1844. See "Note on Sources."

7. The first of such transformed British hulks, introducing a whole series through the 1820's, was The Ark (the former 379-ton H. M. Sloop Speedy) dedicated by the Port of London Society for Promoting Religion among Merchant Seamen, May 4, 1818. Port of London Society, Minutes, May 5, 1818. Exhaustive research has confirmed that this was, in fact, the earliest specific seamen's church in the world. A little known account of the Wesleyan Methodists' initiative on the Hudson waterfront is found in J. Greenleaf, A History of the Churches ... in the City of New York (New York, 1846), 317-320. The statement in Gracey, 181, that it was the Protestant Episcopalians who owned the old hulk at Pier 11, North River, is erroneous. Otherwise, Gracey is as uninformative as Reid on earlier seamen's mission endeavors. See also Wade C. Barclay, Widening Horizons, 1845-95, vol. III of "History of Methodist Missions" (New York, 1957), 271-273.
A contemporary source records how a Wesleyan layman, while walking along the wharves of the Hudson, hit upon the Henry Leeds, a condemned brig "about to be knocked to pieces." He caught the vision of a floating chapel for the west side, discussed it with some of his brethren of the faith, and founded with them the New York Wesleyan Bethel Association, "to provide seamen (in general) with religious instruction... and to advance among them the temperance reformation." (The word "Bethel" had by then been in use over a quarter of a century, as an international by-word for evangelical endeavor among seamen.) This Association purchased the hulk, and fitted it up after the English fashion, with plain and commodious seats sufficient to accommodate five or six hundred persons. It was opened for divine worship by a sermon and appropriate religious exercises on Thursday, the 21st ult. [i.e. November 1844], and called by the name of the celebrated founder of Methodism - John Wesley. The whole expense of this establishment is about two thousand dollars...  

At Pier 11, North River, the very place where Bergner began his own ministry, the Wesleyans maintained their Manhattan mission to seafarers through the winter of 1844-45. Meanwhile, Dr. Terry managed to enlist the aid of the so-called "Asbury Society" (a zealous group of Methodists, banded together in 1842 from various parts of the Metropolis in what today would have been termed a church extension program, "to increase the number of Methodist Episcopal churches in the city of New York.") It is known that Bergner continued his Scandinavian shipboard services altogether nine months. Available sources do not indicate to what extent he may have made use of

8. Quoted from the December 1844 issue of The Sailor's Magazine (New York), 1844-45: 122; see also ibid., 379, and 1852-53:373. Methodist historians have hitherto taken it for granted that it was the subsequent purchasers (The Asbury Society) who gave the ship her new name. See, for example, Reid, 432, Gracey, 182, Barclay, 272, Emory S. Bucke (Ed.), The History of American Methodism (New York and Nashville, 1964), III, 82. The name BethelShip had long since become a generic term for any merchant vessel whose captain would hoist the BethelFlag as a signal for ship's devotions, or simply in profession of his personal faith. E.g.: The Sailor's Magazine (New York), 1843-44: 103-108.
the *John Wesley* at this point. But what could better have served the plan of a Scandinavian seamen's mission in the port of New York of that day than exactly this strategically situated floating chapel? At least, so thought Dr. Terry. And it speaks highly of the generosity of spirit of those New York Wesleyans that, after only half a year, just as their own innovative ministry was gathering momentum, they agreed to transfer the vessel without profit to a church body from whom they had shortly before seceded. (The purchase reportedly took place in May 1845; it was made "in the name of the Asbury Society," acting on behalf of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, with Dr. Terry as "chief promotor of the enterprise.")

Just as he had entertained no doubts about the best available station, Dr. Terry was completely convinced as to who would be the ideal captain in command, however evasive he had hitherto seemed. What made that circuit-riding Swede appear so eminently qualified for the task?

Olof Gustaf Hedström (or Hedstrom, as his name came to be spelt) was, like the vast majority of his seafaring and emigrant countrymen, of humble background. Born May 11, 1803, in Smaaland, South Sweden, he was only twelve when his father, an army corporal, bound him apprentice to a local tailor. However, his yearning for the ocean, and a chance to discover

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9. The February 1845 issue of *The Sailor's Magazine*, 1844-45: 164, writing about this "only bethel on the west side of the city," makes the following significant statement: "In the morning the service is conducted in the Swedish language." If this were only on an experimental basis, it must have proved encouraging. At all events, a contemporary, well-known seamen's mission pioneer records the fact that the Wesleyan Methodists were "making arrangements to engage a Swedish preacher," prior to the transfer. Greenleaf, 319-320; cf. 297, 301. See also Andersen, 25. S. A. Seaman, *Annals of New York Methodism* (New York, 1892), 332, 398. The Asbury Society continues still, as the United Methodist City Society.

10. The so-called "Wesleyan Methodist Church of America" was organized in 1843, primarily in protest against slavery and episcopacy. It is now known simply as the "Wesleyan Church," after a 1968 merger with the "Pilgrim Holiness Church." Frank S. Mead, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States* (Nashville, Tenn., 1970), 219.

new horizons, led him in 1825 to ship out from Carlsbrona with the naval frigate *Af Chapman.*

Soon the 22-year old Hedstrom found himself inadvertently involved in an international political drama. His ship proved to be one of a number of old naval vessels which the Swedish monarch had secretly agreed to sell to certain South American colonies struggling for independence from Spain (at that time formally an ally of Sweden). The ship duly arrived at her destination, Cartagena in Columbia. But the plan was discovered. Indignant protests by both Spain and Russia forced Sweden to redirect the frigate, together with another similar vessel, to New York, where towards the close of 1826 they were sold by auction. Hedstrom was paid off and took lodgings in a sailor boarding-house, fully intending — like his shipmates — to make use of his repatriation money for a favorable passage home. However, his first night ashore in New York's notorious sailortown was destined to have fateful implications. He awoke to find he had been robbed of both his money and clothes. To obtain the bare necessities of life, he saw no alternative but to resort to his original trade as a tailor. In this very personal way, Hedstrom was to reap involuntary yet (for later life) invaluable lessons, both as an exploited seaman and as an impoverished immigrant.  

12. For biographical data on Hedstrom, historians have hitherto relied heavily on facts contained in a memorial address delivered by the Rev. H. Olson at the unveiling of the Hedstrom monument in Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, October 17, 1886. The address is quoted in Swedish in E. Norelius, *De svenska luterska församlingarnas och svenskarne historie i Amerika* (Rock Island, Ill., 1890), I, 16-23. An English translation appeared in *Christian Advocate* (New York), June 23, 1887. Cf. Witting, 136-138. Thünström, 9-11. Lawson, 63-64. Hedstrom must have made a highly favorable impression on the commander of the frigate, since he made him his secretary.

13. Witting, 137-139. Thunström, 10-12.
The young Swede soon found he was making out well in what he later termed “the things that belong to this world.” So well, that he decided to stay. Then, in 1829, life began anew. In that year he married Caroline Pinckley, the cousin of his employer. She, a loyal Methodist, brought him to her church in Willet Street, whereupon he soon became “soundly and gloriously converted.”

From then on, he was filled with an ardor for souls which never left him. And like Andrew of old, who first sought out his own brother, to lead him to the Lord, Hedstrom sensed an overpowering concern to share his new-found faith with family and friends in the Old Country. In 1833, he did in fact make the journey for that sole purpose (thus providing a pattern to be followed by scores of his own seafaring converts in years to come). On his return, he rapidly rose to become “Circuit-Preacher” in the Catskill area of the New York Conference.

Hedstrom’s English was far from perfect. But he persevered, and the power of his preaching was such that many who came to scoff remained to pray. In fact, so immersed did he become in his circuit ministry that by 1844, when approached by Bergner and Terry about a ministry on board that floating chapel, Hedstrom gave as one of his reasons for refusing that he could now hardly utter more than the Lord’s Prayer in his mother tongue! Besides, he considered the project itself virtually hopeless. Resorting to imagery from his tailoring past, he repeatedly replied: “It is as dark as a pocket...”

However, Terry refused to take no for an answer. Together with Bergner, he laid a pious plot to waylay the stubborn circuit-rider the next time he was due in town. And true enough, when

14. Norelius, 16-17. After being “pierced by the sword of the Spirit” during a sermon by Dr. J. Phoebus, Hedstrom is stated to have suffered “deep anguish of soul,” till finally, “after several hours of hard struggle alone at night in a lumber-yard,” he found peace with God. Witting, 139-140.
16. Norelius, 17. Witting, 141-149. Thunström, 33. It seems, nevertheless, that Hedstrom could, in 1841, conceive of responding to a plea by the Rev. George Scott for partnership in promoting revival in Sweden. Lawson, 79-82. It is interesting to speculate whether the Bethelship saga would ever have been written had that controversial Methodist minister in Stockholm not been forced to quit Sweden the following year.
Hedstrom arrived at the Forsyth Street Methodist Episcopal Church for the annual meeting of the New York Conference, May 14, 1845, Dr. Terry was on the look-out, next to the church door. No sooner had the unsuspecting Swede begun mounting the steps when he was seized and escorted straight to the home of Peter Bergner (who lived just by the John Wesley). Here Hedstrom and Bergner exchanged a few words. "Then," so runs the record, "all knelt down, and prayed and wept." Hedstrom had to acknowledge that this must, after all, be of the Lord. At the close of the Conference, among the first appointments read was: "North River Mission, O. G. Hedstrom." 17

In an article written a year later, Hedstrom recollects having "entered upon his labors on sabbath morning, the 25th of May (1845)." This is the date cited by Methodist historians as the day of the opening service on the "Bethel Ship" (the name by which the newly acquired ship was generally known). 18 However, an article carrying the date Sunday, June 8, 1845, in the Christian Advocate and Journal, only a few days after the event, clearly states:

Rev. O. G. Hedstrom having been appointed to this mission for the benefit of seamen and others at the late session of the New York Conference, this day entered upon his work on board the Bethel Ship John Wesley, between Rector and Carlisle Streets. The morning service was conducted in the Swedish language, and the afternoon and evening services in English. A Sunday School was opened with twenty children and three teachers but these teachers were first obliged to find the children to teach. 19

In his first Quarterly Report, written only about three months afterwards, Hedstrom himself refers to June as the month in which he began his labors on board the Bethel Ship. 20

At all events, there exists no doubt that, once launched, the Bethelship Mission (as it was later called) proved a resounding


18. Missionary Advocate (New York), August 1846:36. Although sources are not always orthographically consistent, this study follows as far as possible the usage: "Bethel Ship" as substantive, "Bethelship" as epithet.


success. This was true not least of its outreach to Scandinavian seamen, whom the mission was primarily intended to serve. Their numbers had yet to reach their peak. But by contemporary American advocates of seamen's missions they were regarded as remarkably receptive:

The Swedes, Danes and Norwegians are an interesting class of sailors; ... so educated, as generally to respect the institutions of Christianity: but while they are religiously inclined, they are ignorant of the nature and necessity of regeneration. Under the American exhibition of the gospel, they are quick to see and feel this want; and among no class of seamen, has evangelical preaching produced quicker and more happy results.

However, Hedstrom found it impossible to ignore the plight of local residents. By 1845, most of the local churches had already moved uptown. For many among the cosmopolitan, generally impoverished masses milling around the Bethel Ship, this became "their" church. Here were "persons from almost every European nation." Since so many of them understood only German, Hedstrom obtained the help of "missionaries" to lead a Sunday afternoon service in that language, prior to providing his own two services in English. A congregation was formally established July 7, 1845 (called "The First North River Bethel Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church"). A "class" (including several seamen and their relatives) was organized and met during the week on the Bethel Ship; at their meetings, dramatic conversions became a familiar feature. Temperance meetings were considered of great importance; within a year, some 400 had been "induced to sign the pledge."

21. Hedstrom reported on average arrival of 1,200 Scandinavian seamen annually at the time of the commencement of his Bethelship ministry. The Sailor's Magazine (New York) 1845-46:368. This corresponds with his statement in Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 28th Annual Report (New York, 1847), 97, cited also in Strickland, 65. His subsequent statement in the same Society's 32nd Annual Report, 1851:62, that in 1850 as many as "twelve thousand seamen" visited New York on Nordic ships has been repeated by subsequent historians as factual (e.g. Reid, 437). However, A. N. Rygg, The Norwegian Seamen's Church (New York, 1948), 16, 22 cites statistics showing that only by the peak years of the late 1870's had anywhere near this figure been reached.


Though commenced as a seamen's mission, with doors open to the local community, the Bethel Ship soon found its most numerous field of mission among Scandinavian immigrants. To the pioneers of the project, it was a clear case of providence, that such a strategically situated mission should be established so briefly before immigration from Scandinavia began on a new and massive scale. Apart from the isolated case of the settlement of New Sweden on the Delaware from 1638, organized Swedish immigration was inaugurated in 1846 by the Jansonists (a group of harassed religious utopians, who went on to found a short-lived communitarian colony at Bishop Hill, Illinois). Although general immigration from Norway began two decades earlier, with the arrival of the sloop *Restauration* in 1825, it was nearer mid-century before the waves of successors really reached impressive proportions.  

For Scandinavian immigrants who survived the harsh hazards of an Atlantic crossing, New York — with all its host of waterfront sharpers and swindlers — became the principal port of entry. As they poured in by the thousands, set adrift from ties of home and church, they found a haven in the Bethel Ship, securely moored in their midst. Here many a dazed and destitute immigrant family spent their first night in the New World. They left with a feeling of life-long indebtedness to the man who had befriended them in their hour of need, and to the faith he stood for. Not only the underprivileged would benefit by Hedstrom's ministrations. (The far-famed Swedish soprano, Jenny Lind, who took New York by storm in 1850, came to consider him her personal spiritual counselor.) But in general it was seafarers and immigrants who claimed most of his time and energy.

Whenever a Scandinavian ship anchored up, Hedstrom would row out, clamber on board, welcome captain, crew and passengers, distribute Scripture and tracts, invite to the Bethel Ship, and deliver, there and then, a brief exhortation in the following vein:


25. From 1846 to 1876, a total of 194,411 Scandinavian immigrants arrived in New York, according to official statistics (116,665 from Sweden, 44,772 from Norway, and 32,974 from Denmark). Gracey, 179.

Dear countrymen! You have come here to become citizens of the great American Republic. Now this country, the best in the world, is founded on the Bible. So you won't be able to become worthy citizens here unless you read the Bible, and make it your rule of life. Promise, therefore, to read this book, and put it into practice, and I shall give each family a copy, in the name of the American Bible Society!  

From the various reports of Pastor Hedstrom in action emerges the image of one for whom the salvation of his fellowmen was indeed the one thing needful, but for whom the social implications of the Gospel were inseparable. Here Hedstrom's powerful constitution served him in good stead; incessantly he sought out his migratory flock, on shipboard, in hospitals, retreats, wherever and in whatever condition he found them. As the need arose, their ever friendly factotum would fulfill the functions of employment agency, post office, interpreter, missing persons bureau, and travel agency.  

In this last capacity, this latter-day Good Samaritan became a major influence in shaping the pattern of Swedish mid-century immigration. On Olof Hedstrom's return voyage to America in 1833, his younger brother Jonas (who accompanied him) experienced conversion and went on to become the leading pioneer of Swedish-American Methodism in the Midwest. Understandably, many Swedish families followed Olof's advice and gladly made for those parts of Illinois where Jonas and his colleagues had founded congregations. Numerous Norwegians did likewise. Thus began what were to be known as the Scan-
After twelve years of ceaseless service, the original Bethel Ship became so "unseaworthy" that, to keep her afloat, some had to pump while others prayed! However, a spirited appeal by Hedstrom resulted in a replacement. The bark *Carrier Pigeon* was purchased, remodeled, and on May 12, 1857, dedicated as a new, substantially improved *Bethel Ship John Wesley II*.  

The new church ship witnessed the same stirring scenes as the old. But in the course of events, she was destined to have closer ties with *Norwegians* than her predecessor. It was more than mere coincidence that the same year the second Methodist Bethel Ship was commissioned in New York harbor, the first Methodist church built in Northern Europe was opened in Norway.  

The key figure in this connection was another seafaring Peter. Ole Peter Petersen (the correct form of his frequently misspelt name) was born in Fredrikstad, Norway, in 1822. A seaman's orphan at four, he felt drawn to the Lutheran ministry as an adolescent. Finding this financially unfeasible, he, like Bergner before him, took to sea. Later, he transferred to American ships and came into contact with various seamen's
missions on the East Coast. In New York, he attended the Bethel Ship and heard Pastor Hedstrom. At length, his long spiritual quest bore fruit. On March 2, 1846, whilst out at sea during the captain's watch, as he himself records, "I found Jesus the Saviour of my soul." Ashore again, in Boston, his faith was fortified by Father Taylor (the renowned sailor-preacher, by many considered the greatest of all time). The following year, he joined the Bethelship congregation. 31

A letter relating his experience to his fiancee back in Norway was shared with others and became the means of stirring a revival. In 1849, Petersen sailed back to his native land, not only to marry, but — like Hedstrom before him — to bring his testimony to family and friends. On his return the following year, "Holy Peter" (as he was called by his shipmates) went back to coastal seafaring. But Hedstrom needed help. Peter Bergner had already proved himself indispensable as Bethel Ship colporteur (a post he filled faithfully for twelve years). Meanwhile, the number of Norwegian crews and immigrants arriving in New York kept mounting. In response to renewed, urgent appeals, the modest Petersen finally agreed to give up the sea, and in December 1850 accepted the call to serve

31. Reid, 437-450. Lawson, 146-147. E. Bernhardt & A. Hardy (Ed.), Metodiskirkken i Norge 100 aar (Oslo, 1956), 13-23. Andersen, 27-29, 184-186. The standard biography is Carl F. Eltzholtz, Livsbilleder af Pastor O. P. Petersen (Chicago, 1903), abbreviated by A. Hardy in his O. P. Petersen (Oslo, 1953). See especially Eltzholtz, 1-21. He quotes Petersen as having said: "I was neither awakened nor found peace with God under his [Hedstrom's] guidance. Later he was of great blessing to me" (21). This is significant in the light of contradictory statements by other historians. Eltzholtz, 21-37 and Andersen, 28-29 describe Petersen's search for the Methodist goal of "full sanctification," which he relates he received one morning while moored in Mobile, January 28, 1849. Sources for further details on the life and work of O. P. Petersen are available at: (1) The Archives of the United Methodist Church at Lake Junaluska, N. C. (Information communicated by Professor Peder Borgen, Trondheim University, Norway, following research there in 1976.) (2) Metodisme-historisk Selskap, Centralkirken, Oslo, Norway. (Professor Arne Hassing, in his dissertation, op.cit., 389, refers to two handwritten manuscripts there by Petersen: Short and Imperfect Sketches of My Experiences and Labor and Nogle Erindringer om mine Oplevelser og Religious erfaringer.)
as Hedstrom's assistant. 32

The following year, Petersen was appointed a Local Preacher and transferred to the Iowa Conference, where he laid the foundation for the future "Norwegian-Danish Conference." However, by 1853, the need for pastoral leadership had become acute among those converted during his 1849-50 visit to Norway. After being ordained as an elder, he was called by his bishop "to raise up a people for God" in his native land. Here he labored for six eventful years (1853-59), in the face of both official harassment and a popular ignorance which identified Methodism with Mormonism. (Both were of foreign origin, and both began with "M"!) As a result, he richly deserves the designation "Father of Norwegian Methodism." (The first Methodist congregation in Norway was founded in Sarpsborg in 1856; its church was ready the following year.) 33

On his return to America, Petersen found his friend Hedstrom overworked and ill with ship fever, and was called to relieve him as captain of the Bethel Ship. In this capacity, he continued to lead the mission with zeal and evident success from 1860 to 1863. His captaincy, coinciding with the outbreak of the Civil War, was marked by a sharp increase in Norwegian ship arrivals. 34 When Hedstrom returned to the bridge in 1863, he secured the assistance until 1867 of the Norwegian-born Rev. Ole Helland, former seamen's mission colporteur from the late 1830's. He, too, obtained wide rapport with Norwegian seamen, who continued arriving in New York in large numbers. 35

Not all Scandinavian immigrants entering New York in the mid-nineteenth century pushed on to the fertile Mississippi

32. Eltzoltz, 38-91.
33. Ibid., 92-204.
34. Ibid., 205-210. Andersen, 184-186.
See also Note 3.
Valley and beyond. Some stayed. Among them, those who became members of the Bethelship congregation settled more and more frequently in Brooklyn. Till 1866, the ship still served as joint sanctuary. From then on, however, Brooklyn members sought more practical meeting-places.36

The Swedes were the first to “go ashore.” Helped by Helland in the transition phase, they built and dedicated a church in Pacific Street, Brooklyn, in 1868. This soon proved too small, and a new one was erected in nearby Dean Street, dedicated in 1872. Both acquisitions were made in the name of the original First North River Bethel Society. In 1883, the name of the society was officially changed to the Immanuel Swedish Methodist Episcopal Church. The present church (since 1966 known as Immanuel and First Spanish Methodist Church) is, therefore, a direct descendant of the original Bethel Ship.37

Meanwhile, the Norwegians remained on board, and eventually took over the ship. On May 3, 1874, a congregation which soon came to be known as the Bethelship Norwegian Methodist Episcopal Church was organized by Pastor Petersen, together with a group of Norwegian Brooklyn-domiciled Bethelship members, who had called him from Chicago for that purpose.38 The Norwegian immigrant “colony” in Brooklyn was growing rapidly. Many of them had a seafaring background. Norwegian shipping was making gigantic progress. At this point, more than ten times as many Norwegian ships as Swedish and Danish together were arriving annually in the harbor. (From about 100 in 1870, Norwegian ship arrivals increased to a record of over 1,100 in 1879.) For Hedstrom it was hard to take

36. Liljegren, 342. Witting, 495-497. Lawson, 109-113. Apparently weekly class meetings were held in Brooklyn before 1866, too.
37. Ibid. See also: Immanuel Swedish Methodist Church, One Hundredth Anniversary (New York, 1945), 20-22. Andersen, 186. A leading authority on the Swedish side of the Bethelship enterprise is Henry C. Whyman, author of The Conflict and Adjustment of Two Religious Cultures, the Swedish and the American, as Found in the Swede’s Relation to American Methodism (Ph.D. Thesis, New York University, 1937).
38. Eltzoltz, 247-252. The original name of the congregation was recorded in the Church Register at that time as “Den Norske Biskoppelige Metodistmission,” i.e. The Norwegian Methodist Episcopal Mission. Bethelskib Norske Metodistmenighet, Bethelskib Kirkens Femti Aars Jubilaum (New York, 1924), 21-22. The name Bethelship Norwegian Methodist Episcopal Church was recognized by order of the Supreme Court, Kings County, New York, September 12, 1881. Register's Records, Kings County.
farewell after thirty years on the bridge. However, he was now past seventy, and his retirement in 1875 opened the way for the removal of the Bethel Ship to Brooklyn in 1876. Transferred to the new Norwegian congregation under the charge of Pastor Petersen, she was moored at the foot of Harrison Street, and henceforth known as the *Scandinavian Bethel Ship*. 39

Here, together with his Brooklyn colleagues, Petersen persevered, upholding the old church ship's proud traditions from Pier 11, until he was again transferred to the Midwest in 1878. Meanwhile, in 1877, Hedstrom died. 40 He was thereby spared seeing the final scenes of the Bethelship drama. By 1879, her hull was leaking so badly that, like her predecessor, the vessel was in danger of sinking during services. That year, therefore, her Norwegian congregation felt forced to sell her for what little they could get for her. 41

Before the close of 1879, however, the Bethelship Norwegians acquired a sanctuary ashore, the former *Mariners' Methodist Episcopal Church*, on the southwest corner of Van Brunt and President Streets, Brooklyn. This structure proving inadequate, a new church was built three years later on the same site. 42 Here Pastor Petersen returned to serve a second term, 1888-91, before finally leaving the Norwegian side of the


40. After settling on the shores of the Atlantic, at Cape May, N. J., Hedstrom died during a Conference journey to New York, May 5, 1877. A monument marks his grave in Lot No. 22483, Section 203, in the southernmost corner of Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, near the intersection of Fort Hamilton Parkway and 37th Street. The cemetery archives refer to the cause of death as "Nephritis."

41. The proceeds ($800) went to the Brooklyn-based Norwegian Methodist Episcopal Mission. Incredibly enough, the old hulk survived another eleven years, as a chapel for Erie Canal boatmen, moored off 15th Street, Jersey City, N. J. She was finally sold by auction for $295.15, including "altar, bell, pew, and the old Bethel flag." *New York Tribune*, October 31, 1890:12. Seaman, 398. Bethelskib Norske Metodistmenighet, 8, 23. Lawson, 124-125. Andersen, 187.

Bethelship legacy to succeeding generations.43

During her first century of life, 1874-1974, the Norwegian descendant of the original Bethel Ship has, like her Swedish sister-congregation in Dean Street, witnessed radical change. The title has changed. The official name is now "Bethelship Norwegian United Methodist Church." The location has changed. In 1892 the congregation moved to 295-297 Carroll Street, and in 1934 to its present address on the corner of 4th Avenue and 56th Street, Bay Ridge. Its ministry to seamen has changed. Although for long a major concern of the congregation, this outreach has in recent years been left to the impressively equipped Norwegian Seamen's Church in First Place.44 Finally, its ministry to immigrants has changed. Since World War II, the influx of Norwegian immigrants has dwindled to a virtual standstill. Instead, during the last decade, the Bethelship Church has been able to provide a hospitable haven for increasing numbers of immigrants from India.45

43. At the time of his death, December 20, 1901, O. P. Petersen was - despite his 79 years of age - actively involved in establishing a second Norwegian Methodist congregation, this time in South Brooklyn. His work here paved the way for the founding in 1909 of the Sunset Park Norwegian Methodist Episcopal Church. Pastor Petersen is buried at Forest Home Cemetery in Milwaukee (where he was at one time District Superintendent). Eltzoltz, 326-352. Bethelskip Norske Metodistmenighet, 24-25, 31. Norwegian-Danish Conference, 63, 145. Andersen, 195-196.

44. From the earliest meetings of the Norwegian Brooklyn Methodists, individual members would invite their seafaring fellow-countrymen to their meetings and their homes. A direct mission to seamen was reorganized in 1904, and based first in a reading-room at 57 Rapelye Street (1905). From 1913, it was housed in former St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church in Sullivan Street, where a seamen's home was opened. This Bethelship Seamen's Branch was in 1917 transferred to the YMCA. In 1923, the work was revived through a so-called Central Mission at 119 First Place. Finally, in response to special needs during World War II, the house adjoining the Church on 56th Street was bought and temporarily transformed into a seamen's home and reading room. Bethelskip Norske Methodistmenighet, 14-19, 22. Andersen, 189. Bethelship Norwegian Methodist Church, 90th Jubilee (New York, 1964), 8-9.

45. Many years since, the Bethelship Church sent support to Methodist Missions in India. Native Methodist Christians from the State of Gujarat (north of Bombay), themselves a fruit of those missions, heard of the Bethelship work and contacted the congregation on emigrating to America. By 1968, the Indian influx had increased to the point where an Indian Chapel could become an integral part of the congregation. The Indian element is today recognized as a providential source of renewal in the life of the Bethelship Church. Bethelship Norwegian United Methodist Church, 100th Anniversary (New York, 1974), 16-19. Harriet Terdal, "Bethelskip Norske Metodistkirke feirer 100 aars jubileum 3. mai" in Nordisk Tidende, April 18, 1974:1, 4, 9.
One thing which has not changed is the name "Bethelship". This is understandable. Never in the entire sweep of Nordic emigrant history has there ever been anything quite like the Bethelship venture. And nowhere can be found more evident vindication of that oft-repeated contention of pioneer advocates of seamen's missions, that seamen committed to Christ would make the world's most effective missionaries. Familiarly called the *Old Cradle* by those converted on board her, the Bethel Ship became the spiritual birthplace of hundreds upon hundreds of Nordic "sons of the ocean." Captivated by a missionary vision which was consciously cultivated by their "captain," many of them followed his example, and — by a process of re-migration — brought their new faith back to their fatherland. It is a historical fact that it was primarily such sailors who introduced methodism into the Nordic nations. (Bishop Odd Hagen's history devotes an entire chapter to their role under the heading: "The Sailors Are Coming!") It is also a historical fact that sailors converted on the decks of the old Bethel Ship, who followed the immigrants West, played a vital role in the founding of Scandinavian-American Methodism. Small wonder that Hedstrom, when thinking of all the preachers sent forth from the Bethel Ship through the years, would fondly refer to her as his "Theological Seminary."

Inevitably, posterity has — in assessing the immense impact of the Bethel Ship — occasionally gone overboard, lapsing into what Arlow Andersen calls "ecclesiastical spread-eagleism." Nevertheless, the results of the Bethelship Mission remain remarkable. An indication of its astonishing effectiveness was the reaction of those who regarded it as a rival.

For the first two decades of its waterborne career, the Bethelship Mission virtually enjoyed a denominational

46. For a study in Norwegian of this *missiological motive*, see Roald Kverndal, "Møtet mellom sjøfolk og ikke-kristne folkeslag som motiv for de eldste sjømannmisjonsbestrebelsene" in *Norsk Tidsskrift for Misjon* (Oslo) 1969:220-235.
48. Hagen, 45-57.
49. This is borne out by all standard histories of Scandinavian-American Methodism.
51. Andersen, 188-189.
monopoly. Nordic seamen and immigrants, themselves of Lutheran State Church background, found no Lutheran welcome on their arrival in New York. Not till the early 1860’s were there serious signs of stirring, at least among Scandinavian Lutheran bodies emerging on the American side of the ocean. One of their periodicals, commenting on the difficulties in the way of obtaining a Lutheran foothold among Scandinavian immigrants in New York, admitted the cause quite candidly: “The Methodists have taken care of them while the Lutherans were sleeping.”

Mounting Lutheran consternation over the superlative success of the “heretical” Bethelship Mission finally prompted the founding of two Scandinavian Lutheran churches in the great port-city. The Swedish element in the Augustana Synod (organized in 1860) sponsored the establishment of the Gustavus Adolphus Lutheran Church in 1865. The Norwegian Synod (dating back to 1853) undertook the founding of Our Saviour’s Lutheran Church in 1866. One could not, as a leading Lutheran churchman saw it, be a silent spectator to the “spiritual self-ruination” of one’s fellow-countrymen.

It was the same, militantly ecclesiological motive, seeking resolute, paternalistic protection against “proselytism” by Bethelship Methodists, that swayed the newly-founded, national-church Norwegian Seamen’s Mission, at its 1867 General Convention, to vote an annual grant-in-aid for a part-time seamen’s ministry by the Rev. Ole Juul of Our Saviour’s.

And just as the Norwegian Synod appealed to the Norwegian Seamen’s Mission, so too the Augustana Synod turned to the Evangelical National Missionary Society, of Stockholm, Sweden, the result being the arrival in 1873 of the Swedish seamen’s chaplain Per Johan Sward (destined eventually to become

52. The Missionary Society’s 43rd Annual Report, 1862:77.
53. The Rev. H. A. Preus, quoted in Luthersk Kirketidende (Christiania), 1867:118-123.
54. Bud og Hilsen (Bergen), November 1865:13; January 1867:23-24; September 1867:15-19; cf. 1879:11-12. This temporary expedient was succeeded by the establishment in 1878 of an independent Norwegian Seamen’s Mission station in New York, and the purchase in 1879 of a strategically situated church at 111 Pioneer Street, Brooklyn, thus coinciding with the abandonment that same year of the old Bethel Ship in Harrison Street. Rygg, 1945:15-19.
President of the Augustana Synod).\textsuperscript{55} Such was the genesis of Nordic \textit{Lutheran} seamen’s missions in New York.

For orthodox churchmen in native Northern Europe, it was doubly difficult to accept the Methodist Bethelship Mission in New York. Here, to them, was a blatant symbol of both the \textit{unpatriotism} of emigration, and the \textit{disloyalty} of dissent.

For all that, both Bethel Ships kept their course undeterred. Not least of their fascinating achievements remains their role in the founding of the \textit{first Nordic Seamen’s Mission Society} in the world, nearly a quarter-century before the establishment of the four present-day national societies.\textsuperscript{56} In the spread of Methodism both in Northern Europe and North America, the New York Bethelship Mission played a pivotal part. But perhaps the most far-reaching result of this unique maritime enterprise was to be its indirect \textit{reinvigoration of Nordic nationally oriented Lutheranism}, both in its privileged home environment, and in its exposed “free church” status in the New World.\textsuperscript{57}

The Rev. George Scott, dynamic Methodist herald of revival in nineteenth-century Northern Europe, insisted, in spite of personal persecution, that the Lutheran Church needed no new

\textsuperscript{55} In addition to this seamen’s ministry, Swärd organized in 1874 the Bethlehem Church in Brooklyn, an outgrowth of the Gustavus Adolphus Church in Manhattan. O. N. Olsen, \textit{Biographical Sketches of Augustana Leaders} (Rock Island, Ill., 1955), 17-22. During the last quarter of the 19th century, Swedish ship arrivals in New York declined drastically. Swedish-language seamen’s ministry in New York has only recently been revived by the Church of Sweden Seamen’s Mission.

\textsuperscript{56} Seamen’s missions were organized in voluntary affiliation with the national churches of Norway, Denmark and Sweden, in 1864, 1867 and 1869, respectively. Finland followed in 1875. The New York Bethelship Mission provided the pattern for similar floating chapel projects both in Gothenburg and Copenhagen before the close of the century. (For details, see the published histories of each of the societies concerned.)

\textsuperscript{57} True, the vast majority of Nordic immigrants staunchly refused to renounce traditional ties with the Lutheran denomination to which the national church of their native land belonged. Andersen, 59-60. Especially was this the case among Norwegian immigrants. Nelson & Fevold, I, 124-125. Nevertheless, not least through the impact of the Bethelship Mission, Scandinavian-American Lutheran Churches found to their cost that they could rely neither on formal loyalties alone, nor on a European definition of proselytism. Cf. Lawson, 188.
doctrinal machinery, only "more steam." Lutheranism's historic emphasis on the theory of the faith has been both its strength and its hazard. The destiny of the Bethelship Mission was to challenge Nordic Lutherans at a crucial juncture to recapture the missionary urgency of the New Testament Church. In this sense, the Bethelship saga must not only be commemorated. It must be constantly emulated.


58. Bud og Hilsen, 1887, 2nd Appendix:4. Cf. Rev. O. P. Petersen in the Missionary Society’s 51st Annual Report, 1870:95, “If the Methodists have done and do no else in this country (Norway), they have the honor of making the Lutherans work...” See also Hassing, op.cit., especially ch. 9, 226-256.