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**Episode Description:**

Pastor Scott Schul, Senior Pastor, Grace Lutheran Church describes his recent visit to Denmark where he met and served alongside leaders in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Denmark in an effort to “build a bigger Lutheran Church” united by common creeds and confessions, and not divided by national boundaries, politicians, or parochial allegiances to pastors, buildings, and boundary lines on a map. He explains ways that Danish Lutherans are using beauty and education, especially the “folk church tradition,” to reach a new generation of seekers.

**Transcription:**

00:00

United Lutheran Seminary presents the Seminary Explorers podcast: conversations on faith, art, people, politics, theology, life, and more, with voices from around the corner and around the globe.

**Jerry C. 00:16**

A decline in church membership seems to be leveling off, and if so, what new models might be emerging for the church today and tomorrow? Hello, I'm Jerry Christiansen. It's great to be back with you again, and my guest is the Reverend Scott Shoal.

**Scott S. 00:34**

Scott is the pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in State College, Pennsylvania, and he joins us by phone to tell about what he has learned from the Church of Denmark. And by the way, Scott, to intrude already with another kind of a note, Scott is a former tax attorney. So around here, we often say that Scott epitomizes the idea of the law and gospel. Now, with that, I was going to say

**Scott S. 01:00**

I epitomize the need for repentance. Are you kidding?

**Jerry C. 01:04**

Known firsthand, you just returned from an extended study tour in Denmark. What was your purpose in going there and reaching out to the Danish Lutheran Church?

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Person to Person, Heart to Heart: Lessons from the Church in Denmark  
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**Scott S. 01:20**

Well, it really has to do with what's happening in the American church here in the United States. As you know, the American voice is relatively small on the religious landscape, and too often our people are they're more convicted more, I guess, attached to their local church buildings, maybe to their worshiping community. God forbid they become converted to their pastor, and those are not durable things. That means that our Lutheran identity is not very stable, and I think that we have something of great value, great merit, great beauty in this day and age as Lutherans that should allow us to think of ourselves more broadly. And so, this effort was really aimed at trying to build a bigger, broader Lutheran identity. And I ended up in Denmark in part because I am of Scandinavian ancestry. My some of my ancestors came from a region called Descona, which is the extreme south of what what is now Sweden, but at times it's been Denmark as well, based on whatever war was waging. I used to be part of Denmark? Yeah, yeah, and the people of Skåne continue to have sort of a dual affiliation with both of those nations. Even linguistically, there are a lot of overlaps. So it seemed not only genetically, but because of the state Lutheran Church there in Denmark, it seemed like a natural place to go, and then along the way, I discovered some other things about Denmark that really made it ideal. And you know, of all places, where the light bulb really went off for me in Denmark was the Danish Museum of Design. They have an entire hall devoted to the design of chairs. In fact, one of the first major purchases a young married couple makes is a well-designed, expensive chair. There's there's something about mid-century modern Danish design that just intuitively resonates with everybody, but it unlocked for me an essential element of the Lutheran, or I should say, the Danish character, that they just again intuitively appreciate beautiful beauty, well-designed things. They view chairs of all things, as sort of an organic extension of the human being, and to me that that resonated because that's how people are now coming into the church. We are, as you said at the outset, blessed at a time when an increasing number of seekers are looking at their lives, taking inventory of their lives, and like Augustine said, what how many 1500, 1600 years ago, our hearts are restless until they rest in you, Lord, and they and they've felt that, especially post COVID. There's a realization that the normal things we use to fill ourselves up, you know, career, Money, vacations, drugs, sex-you name it-all of those things that we that we look to to establish meaning. It's not working, and they're coming to the church now. There was a few generations ago where people came to a Lutheran church, for example, because they had. Lutheran identity. Well, that doesn't happen anymore. Or they came to a church because they were steeped in the stories of the Bible. Well, that's not happening anymore either. Or, or maybe somebody gave them a copy of the Small Catechism and said, "Hey, look, this is this is really you know cleverly designed. There's there's a lot of wisdom here. Read this, and I think you'll want to learn more.

**Jerry C. 05:22**

Yeah. but

**Scott S. 05:23**

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and and that's not happening either anymore.

**Jerry C.** 05:25

Okay, so

**Scott S.** 05:26

where where they are finding us is in beauty. The most the most committed secularist will probably say to you, "Hey, you know, I was up on that mountaintop, or I was listening to that symphony, or I saw something in the art museum, and I really, you know, for the first time in a long time, I felt close to God. And our response needs to be, "You did just like Paul at the Areopagus. It's it's not a matter where we cluck our tongues to say, "Oh no, no, no, that's not authentic church because you didn't have vestments and liturgy and and lectionaries and all of those things. No, this is how God is reaching people through nature, through through beauty, and and we need to meet people in beauty again, following the model of Paul and the apostles in Acts, and and the Danes are doing that very intuitively, and so this is our opportunity to build a bigger Lutheran church, and to evangelize this new generation of seekers through beauty. And I'm finding some really willing and able partners in Denmark.

**Jerry C.** 06:36

I think you've answered my next question: Is of all the places that you could have gone or could be reporting on why Denmark. Certainly, one of them you've emphasized is their commitment to design and beauty. I would suggest another thing is, of course, there are there's a history of immigration to the United States. Both countries, this one in Denmark, are ministering in a secular context, and one thing about Denmark, as little country as it is, had some great thinkers.

**Scott S.** 07:07

Yeah, you're absolutely right. And and and let's talk about those thinkers. You know, I I was looking around at my bookshelf, and and some of my heroes, and and a surprising number of them are are Danes. You start with with Gruntvig, the great hymn writer, the great poet, he used mythology and ancient stories to help build a religious identity, which is you know no different from from Thomas Aquinas drawing on Plato or Aristotle, non-Christians to to sort of flesh out our understanding of how God works and who God is, Grundvig also feeds into this this very much Danish ethos of of a horizontal church. There's very little hierarchy there. It keeps the clericalism at bay. He also did something that I think represents the best of what we as American Lutherans have been in the past, and maybe can be again, and that is to embrace education, especially lifelong education, as not just something that's a good idea or or a handy tool in your pocket, but something that is a reflection and outcropping of our faith through the folk schools that Grundfig established in Denmark, and then they spread throughout Sweden and Norway. He has he has helped create a notion of an educated church, a curious church, a church of wonder, not not an an intellectual church to the point where the heart is lost, but one that that looks outward and upward, and even downward to the ground, and and finds God in all

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of those places. So he he's become quite a hero to me. He was he was very much a Renaissance man in all of the things that he was able to do, and the writing and the hymnody and so many gifts, but then move a few more books down the shelf and you get to Kierkegaard. Now there's a real gadfly, again deep thinker, a guy with obvious flaws. So he's a very accessible sort of saint in our in our cosmology, and and somebody who again points us to two important, I think, Christian pathways today. One is don't fall in love with the institution. Don't preserve the institution. You're not there to serve the institution. You're there to serve Jesus Christ. And then the second thing he brings to us is that ongoing reminder that we we have to take this leap of faith. That our that our our our work as Christians, our life as Christians, should demand something of us. This isn't just a career path. This isn't a club. This isn't a national identity. There is something transformational and life changing. About this, and we can't ever take that for granted. So he's a gift to me as well. And and the third one, I'll the third and final one I'll lift up to you is probably the least well known of them, at least by name, and that's Kai Monk. Monk was a pastor in the Danish church in the 30s and into the 40s, again a remarkable man of letters. He wrote poetry. He wrote plays. The the great Dreher movie Ordet, one of my favorite movies of all time. Something I discovered while I was in seminary there in Gettysburg. He wrote that, and then when Germany invaded Denmark on I think it was April 9, 1940, it was over in a day. He continued to be somebody who spoke as a public minister, a public witness of the gospel. He spoke not only the gospel truth, but he spoke against the Nazis and what they were doing, and ultimately paid for it with his life. He was dragged out of his house, executed in a ditch, and he reminds me that to be a rostered leader in this church is to stand for for Jesus Christ and for Jesus's truth, even when that causes you a lot of difficulties in other ways, so lots of models there.

**Jerry C. 11:25**

I'm talking to Scott Shull, who is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in State College, Pennsylvania, by phone to talk about lessons that could be learned from the Church of Denmark. I'm Jerry Christiansen. Always glad to be with you, Scott. With all this having been said, what what are the leading lessons that American Christians, American Lutherans in particular, can learn from the Danes?

**Scott S. 11:56**

I'll tell you a couple of stories. My first weekend there in Denmark, I was invited to participate in a service at Elias Kirke, which is in Copenhagen in the Westerborough region. And for anyone who is a literary fan, it's not far from where Tove Ditlevsen lived, the great 20th-century Danish writer of short stories and poetry. And Maria Fiel is the pastor there. And Maria is a just an incredibly talented leader. She served as a diplomat for the Danish government, working with refugees in war-torn nations until she heard the call of Jesus and went into ministry. And her church worships entirely in English, and they do so accompanied by world-class jazz musicians playing everything from pop standards to jazzy things to things out of the Danish hymn book. And of course, the obvious question was: Here we are in Copenhagen. Why are we playing

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jazz? Why are we doing this in English? And the lesson is a lesson in the need of all of our congregations to listen to our neighbors. We oftentimes don't do that. We figure we've we've built the mountain. They'll come to us. Here's what they discovered: 29% of Copenhagen is not Danish, and hence not speaking Danish as their first tongue. And if you try to speak Danish, you know it's a bit of a challenge. So they looked around and they said, "Okay, if we're if we're really going to be the people's church, the Fulkakirke, as the as the tagline goes, then here's 29% of our biggest city, who have no place to go, and let's fix that. So they established a number of places, Elias Kirke being one of them, where everything is done in English. And because of the sort of artsy ethos of the neighborhood, they decided, well, we've got jazz musicians around here. Let's do that. And and I went. It was beautiful. And and most of the people there were seekers, and that leads me to to lesson two. Well, so so lesson one is is listen to your neighbors. Lesson two is is to find a way to merge the old and the new. Right? We live in we live in these these ages where we think we've got a. It's either red or it's blue, it's black or it's white, it's yes or it's no. You know, we live it with all these these artificial dichotomies. Everything is is is binary, and of course, life for most of us is not black or white. It's always gray, and and a lot of theology is that way too. So, for example, in Elias Kierkegaard, what I saw was a a very gifted pastor in a traditional, you know, the Danish ruffle and the big long black gown. She preached a very heady, intellectual, challenging sermon again in English. But then we were singing, you know, jazz music, and they had a Beatles song they were playing, and and all of these songs that people were, you know. Swaying back and forth, they they had a real gift of being able to merge together the treasure chest of the church's tradition with things that today are a little bit more accessible, particularly for a congregation that is not steeped in that tradition. They have a way of of very easily and seamlessly blending those things together in a way that doesn't feel forced, and I think we can do that too. The days are long gone when we think we we have to choose between whatever we say a contemporary service is, which, by the way, generally ends up being contemporary for the 1970s or 80s, not contemporary for today, or or some sort of a high church liturgy that that may be very attractive to me, but would leave somebody who's new to the church way behind. You know, sort of like going back back to Luther's day and and worshiping in in Latin when everybody's speaking German. So they they really blend those together in a way that feels very very natural and very authentic. And the other place where I saw that was in their art. Easy example is a beautiful cathedral, about a 45 minute to an hour train ride west of Copenhagen, called Roskilde. Roskilde is one of their oldest cathedrals. It is where all of the Danish kings and queens are buried.

**Scott S. 16:30**

And as you would guess, it's a it's a medieval style cathedral with lots of statues and things from that era, and big tombs to the kings and so forth, very traditional in many ways, and and yet all around you find you know peppered in amongst this very very modern and sometimes even edgy statuary, and somehow it works. It it gave me the impression of a church that is not stuck in time, a church that's not static in a time warp, but a church that is living and breathing, and finding a way to take a timeless message of Jesus Christ and transmit it in a way that resonates

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and communicates and connects with the people of today. And I, and again I think that's something that we can learn from that. Whether you're Lutheran or not, we we have a timeless message, but we're we're in a particular time, and our call is not to be the church of 1950 or 1970 or whatever your period is. Those days are gone. Those people are dead. Jesus has called us here now to be the church of 2026 and beyond, and that is a real gift, and that's a responsibility. And Denmark and its ability to blend these styles and genres together, I think provides us a way of going forward. Some of the purists aren't going to like it, but we're not there to serve the art critics. We're there to serve Jesus and His people.

**Jerry C.** 18:05

Someone who was very close to the two of us at one time said, and I'm sure he was barring it as well. The church is not called to be successful. It's called to be faithful. So, in that regard, what what was the goal, or what is the goal of this study that you did of churches in in Denmark,

**Scott S.** 18:24

well, I was under no illusions that spending 10 days in Denmark and meeting with you know as many people within the national church and in the parishes and cathedrals as I could. No illusions that that alone was going to suddenly create these these bridges of of welcome and cooperation and things. I wanted to plant a seed, as I told them over there, time after time. These kinds of relationships they grow organically when they happen, person to person, heart to heart. Now I could have put all of this into an email or some sort of a paper and shipped it off, and it would have been probably half of it would have been read, and then the email gets deleted, and we're done. I went there in person because that's how you gain credibility. That's how you make friendships. That's how the Holy Spirit works with us, and and they were able to see this work in a new light. They saw themselves in a new light. They saw new gifts within the Danish Church, that that were evident to an outsider, but but to them, you know, they they weren't so sure. They were also able to see in an American, an American Lutheran, a different face for the United States than they are seeing in the news right now. Our friends in Denmark are deeply hurt by by the political static that's been coming out of Washington, the sense that long-term allies who have literally bled and died with us on battlefields are now somehow our enemy, or or parts are are just for the for the for the taking for sale. No, no, no. I had people in in these Congress. Is I would pray for unity and talk about that. Who would who would wipe tears from their eyes? And that wasn't because I was particularly eloquent or anything special, but it was meaningful to have an American there saying those things. That matters. Showing up matters. And so, what do we do going forward? Well, I'm continuing to pester my Danish friends as much as I can by email, phone call, WhatsApp messages, whatever I can to keep this alive. I have committed to them. I'm going to keep coming back. Find me some places where I can speak. Find me places I can meet with groups, study groups, whatever. We we need to. We we've got a little flame that we've lit here, but we need to turn this into a bonfire, because again, in those 10 days, I could see that that it worked for them. They they got it, but now more people need to get it. And then when I got back, another delightful surprise is as I as I was writing about

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this, talking about this, posting things on social media, I started hearing from other ELCA pastors who said, "I've been following this. This is fascinating. You know, our church, the church I serve, was founded by Danish immigrants 150 years ago, and you're you've helped me to see that we have a certain way of being and doing and worshiping, even the way we decorate our church, that's totally related to that period. We've got this Danish DNA worship in us, and it's helping us to appreciate not only who we were, but who we are. And we want to learn more. We want to we want to be in relationship with Danish churches too. So that's exciting. It's a it's it's self discovery, but not as an end. It's self-discovery as a means to building that bigger church for the future, centered around Jesus Christ and unity that's grounded in our common creed, our common confession, our common baptism as the body of Christ, no longer divided by national boundaries or mere politics or political personalities, Jesus calls us to be bigger than that, and and if we are limited in any way, it is only by our courage and our imagination.

**Jerry C.** 22:13

I'm Jerry Christiansen, and our guest today has been Scott Shull, the pastor of Grace Lutheran Church and State College, Pennsylvania, and we've been talking about lessons or models that can be learned from the Church of Denmark. I have a great day. We'll see you next time. Thanks for listening.

22:35

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