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More Than Summer Camp: The Almont Experience

By Pastor Paul Deming, Ben Gunter, and Dell J. Rose

One of the requirements for those who are pursuing ordination with the Swedenborgian Church of North America is something that is referred to as "camp experience." Candidates must attend either Almont Summer School in Michigan, Fryeburg New Church Assembly in Maine, or an approved equivalent. The purpose of this requirement is to experience intergenerational ministry, practice informal pastoring, design and deliver at least one lecture on the camp's theme, and observe and participate in a denominational cultural experience.

This summer Pastor Paul Deming, Ben Gunter, and Dell Rose (who are all on the path to ordination) attended Almont Summer School (almontnewchurchassembly.org) and have shared their experiences here.

A Week to Remember!

By Pastor Paul Deming

One might think that summer camps are all fun and games (and some lectures) but this one… well, it was even more special! The theme for the week was the Seven Days of Creation. Rev. Jane Siebert started us off with a Sunday morning communion service in the historic Almont chapel. This was day one of creation–and if it was any sign–the rest of creation would have its own challenges. It turns out the communion grape juice became tainted when it was poured into the flagon (which must have had rust or something inside) and what everyone sampled with

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Almont "survivors" are campers who went through the Almont survivor ritual as a teen. Once you are a survivor, you are always a survivor!

Installation Ceremony!
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SCYL Memorial Day Retreat
Teens explore the question of "Who are we becoming?"
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Church Calendar

- **September 4-7, 2026:** Labor Day West Coast Swedenborgian Retreat, including an SCYL retreat.
- **September 15, 2026:** All Reports due for the *2026 Journal*.
- **September 25–26, 2026:** SCFA Annual Meeting.
- **October 9–12, 2026:** SCYL Fall Retreat.
- **October 27, 2026:** Investment Committee Meeting.
- **November 13–14, 2026:** annual hybrid General Council meeting.

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Editor's Corner

Seeds of Becoming



This month my family welcomed a new addition to our home, an eight-week-old kitten! Adding a kitten to a household with an older cat and five children takes intention and planning. Sowing the seeds for a harmonious household not for the present, but for the future. This means keeping people in their separate spaces, discouraging rough play between humans and cats, and rewarding good behavior with the goal of the good behavior becoming second nature.

There is so much that we do now and in the past, preparing for the future; and there is so much about future success that depends on what we do now and in the past. Much like the SCYL during their Memorial Day Weekend retreat, we need to continuously ask ourselves, "*What Are We Becoming?*" And so often the key to that is honoring where we have been.

In the cover article about *The Almont Experience,* all three ordination students identified ways in which tradition at Almont will continue to shape church community. By going through the same camp rituals day after day, year after year, the camp creates a shared history to be inherited and built upon by future generations.



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A tree cannot grow without roots, but roots are not the point of a tree. Our responsibility isn't simply to preserve the past, but to help what we have inherited to become something capable of growing.

Will all my efforts to create a smooth transition with our new kitten pay off in the ways that we expect? I can be almost certain it won't entirely. However, we need to try. Tradition, planning, and history give us roots from which we can grow.

—Brittany Price
editor@swedenborg.org

Message from the President

Financial Help for Our Ministries Is Fund-A-Mental

The Year of the Lord: 2026–27



Swedenborg once remarked in his eighteen-year diary that the love of only possessing money often becomes an obsession to the point of evolving into a kind of insanity, whereas the love of being useful through money always develops into a driving force creating angels. This counsel is on my mind this time of year when we especially focus on money in our church. August is high-gear time for grant applications for the next calendar year, and it involves a lot of time and effort on the part of dozens throughout our church organizations.

Our Standing Committee for Financial Accountability is one of the hardest working groups in our Church. Chaired by our treasurer, Jennifer Lindsay, she is joined by elected members Kurt Fekete, Tom Neuenfeldt, Rev. Rachel Madjerac, Rev. Jane Siebert, Kei Peng, and Andrea LoPinto, and they are always assisted throughout the year by our incredible account manager, Gina Peracchi. They shepherd the application and decision-making process for how our many funds will support the hard-working faithful organizations in their ministries next year.

Our per capita financial strength tops the chart for denominations in America, and that's because we have been growing wealth for twenty-two generations. We may be tiny in terms of membership numbers, but our per capita footprint in history and culture is outsized. And that outcome is due in no small measure by our passion for our mission. The highly regarded sociology of religion scholar Rev. Dr. Bill McKinney, a longtime supporter of our seminary in Berkeley, once commented that Swedenborgians tend to be more passionate about their denominational identity than the typical rank and file of the mainlines. A noted fundraiser himself, he believed Swedenborgian passion also created our outsized per capita financial strength through our long endurance and commitment. We have been building a New Jerusalem vision in North America for 225 years and have accrued quantitative results from our perseverance.

Therefore, our ability to support the ongoing effort and passion of our people who go into ministry, certainly not for the money but for the imagination of making a better world, comes in no small part from the chain of generations creating our per capita wealth. The accumulated assets in our buildings and in fund accounts give us an ever-present opportunity not only to support longstanding heritage sites that continue to reach people but also to buoy new adventures.

The Zacchaeus story is one of my favorites in the New Testament. The tiny tax collector had become extremely wealthy largely through devious and aggressive tactics (Luke 19:1-10). Yet, he was intrigued by Jesus's persona and messaging. Something touched him; something called him. Being the shortest guy around, he climbs a tree to get an upper-deck view. He is stunned when Jesus directly engages him "up there" and invites him down for a meal. Zacchaeus ends up transformed in the way he handles money and his life goals.

We are not guilty of devious behavior like old Zacchaeus—far from it—but we are of small stature with large assets. And we, too, are working hard to connect with the Lord in our mission. May we hear the invitation to dine with the Lord and in our own way discover, yet again, renewal, commitment, and faith.

—Rev. Dr. Jim Lawrence
president@swedenborg.org

Cover Story

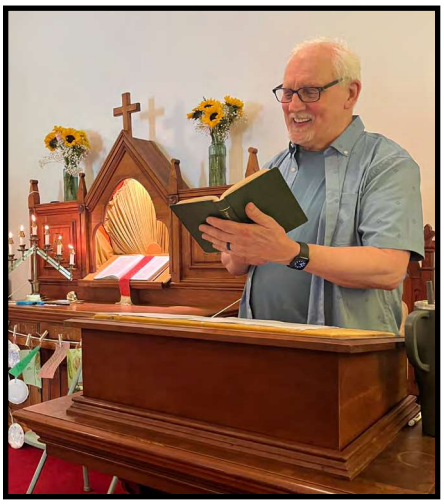
More Than Summer Camp

Continued from cover

their communion drink was as close to bitter as you could imagine. What would normally be a poignant sacrament turned into a Stephen King movie, with people making the most disgusted expressions and children acting like they were retching on the church carpet. What made it especially humorous was Rev. Renée Machiniak exclaiming at the beginning of the ceremony, after the bread was consumed, "Oh this is much better than last year," only to retract that statement after the bitter juice, "This is definitely not better than last year!" Rev. Jane took it all in stride, knowing this would be a memorable experience!

This was my introduction to summer camp. Days two through seven proved equally interesting, with record heat in the high nineties, which is unusual for Michigan. Remember: camps don't come with air-conditioning. When you get assigned a room, you open a window and pray for a breeze!

My roommate for the first few days was a lovely gentleman, Elliot, who came to offer lectures about the Quran and how it explains the days of creation. He was also a guitar player, so I found much common ground and enjoyed our discussions.



Pastor Paul Deming



The flagon responsible for a memorable first day of creation.

I especially loved the morning-sing with the raising of the flag, as well as the evening-sing with the lowering of the flag just before chapel service. The regulars sang it with reverence as newcomers (like me) struggled to remember all the words.

Although cell phone reception was sketchy at best, my wife called to warn me of the dangerous invisible parasite that was traced to vegetables in Michigan (among other places). She begged me not to eat any lettuce for fear of experiencing "explosive diarrhea." "It's OK honey," I told her, "They've already tried to poison me with communion, and I'm still here, although it's dang hot!"

On Wednesday, I drove into town to do my laundry and when exiting the laundromat, I noticed a strange fog had descended upon the town, but as soon as I smelled what could only be burned wood, I realized that the smoke from the Canadian fires had descended upon the camp. For the next few days, it was advisable to wear masks, especially for those with asthmatic conditions. This was already a summer camp to remember!

The camp was not without additional special moments. At one meal in the dining hall, fellow ordinand Ben Gunter was sitting across from me having just arrived the night before. At the end of the meal, it was announced that each camper would be allowed only one cookie. Ben blurted out, "What is this, the Soviet Union?!" "I heard that, Ben!" yelled Laurie, the facility manager and food service director, who was all the way across the room. She appeared with lightning speed at the table and explained to Ben the necessity of making sure each person was offered at least one cookie before taking seconds. I especially enjoyed the "busted" expression on Ben's face at her reaction.

While the camp offered opportunities to meet new friends and hear interesting lectures, the pinnacle of enjoyment, for me, was performing in the Almont Orchestra under the skillful baton of Becky Shelly Moore. There is something about music that unites for performer and listener alike. This was the prelude to the talent show where campers got to hear a variety of skits, songs, poems, and performances. I was touched by the community feel and encouragement each performer was given with applause and cheers. Even though it was my first year at summer camp, this felt like family.

I learned new board games, engaged in lecture discussions, and played on "Karenaoke Night" with the most talented keyboardist (Karen from the

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More Than Summer Camp

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Royal Oak church society) as teens and adult campers had a chance to sing almost any song they wished. A highlight was when all the teens sang "Don't Stop Believing!" Rev. Renée and Joe Machiniak did a wonderful duet and Renée's niece Bella proved, once again, that a gift of a golden voice can stop people in their tracks to listen.

On the morning of day seven, Rev. Sage Cole was leading a discussion on the spiritual significance of a day of rest. I was so captivated as I was taking my morning meds that I didn't realize that I might have swallowed a hearing aid battery that had been mixed in with the pills. Talking to the camp doctor, it was agreed I would get an x-ray at a nearby Urgent Care and get checked out. I drove about five miles away and spent three hours at the Urgent Care verifying that I indeed had absentmindedly swallowed the small pill-sized battery (a lesson in mindfulness for me!). The ingestion hotline suggested I just let it pass naturally and get another x-ray back in St. Louis (which ultimately happened and everything is fine). However, while I was at the Urgent Care, a thunderstorm had blown through the area creating havoc with the roads (fallen limbs and branches) and, driving back to camp, I was shocked to see how much damage the storm had done in less than three hours. Returning, I discovered that the camp was now without power. It would be several hours before power was restored. Like every other challenge the week had presented, campers embraced the situation with the most positive spirit and resilience.

The lectures on each day of creation provided much food for thought and discussion throughout the week as different ordinands and ministers offered their own style of presentations and creative insights.

The Almont summer camp experience provided me a chance to meet many of the spirited young people that make our denomination what it is, and I appreciated the chance to hear many stories from those who have lived the Almont experience from childhood through adulthood. Many relaxing discussions were enjoyed on the porch of the Big House with a phrase that keeps playing in my head, "We hope to see you again next year!"



Welcoming new Almont Survivors.

High Church of Almont

By Ben Gunter

When we describe the practice of churches, we use a certain vernacular about ritual and community. A Protestant parish might be "high church" if it has a neo-gothic building and incense and vestments. Or it might be "low church" if it meets in a strip mall with a pastor who wears a t-shirt.



Almont camper Greyson with Ben Gunter.

I will confess to quite a bit of cognitive dissonance with this language. On the one hand, it seems outright condescending to refer to a simpler, sparser (maybe lower-budget) practice as "low." Who are we to judge how people choose to worship God?

On the other hand, I am a total sucker for high church. Whether it's my attention dysregulation or my childhood experiences with religion, I find that a little bit of ritual and sensory stimulation go a long way in making the Divine accessible to me.

So why would someone with a propensity to lean on high church to feel connected to God, like me, feel that way swimming through the hellish humidity of Michigan, collecting mosquito bites, choking on wildfire smoke, and eating cafeteria food?

In pondering this, and in hearing people talk about it, I settled for a while on the idea that the difficult and rustic conditions make campers bond over shared challenges. After seeing the Survivor ritual, I realized that that's not it at all.

What I realized is that Almont is the "high church" of Swedenborgian summer camp.

The parents and grandparents, alumni of the Survivor ritual, who put on suits and gowns to take a

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More Than Summer Camp

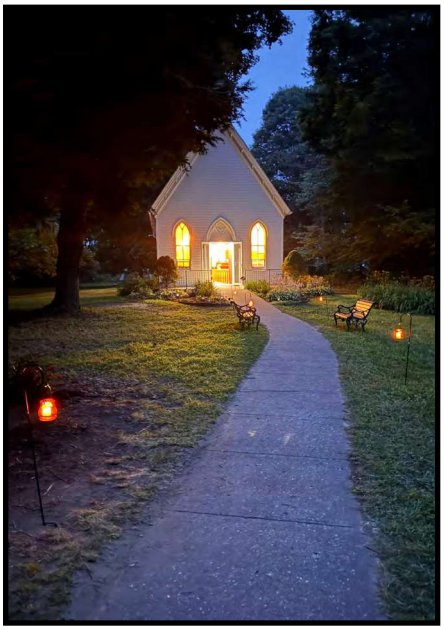
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nighttime walk to the lake, are dressing for their high church. The teens who sincerely look forward to partaking in Holy Communion as the highlight of their year are preparing for their high church. The children forming an orderly single-file line and patiently waiting to negotiate how many Jolly Ranchers a quarter can buy at the Candy Lady table are processing into their high church sanctuary.

When the Holy City comes down to Almont, adorned as a bride for her husband, its clothes might not be what we expect. It might look like mud and sweat and the tears of joy cried by generations of campers, all passing down timeless rituals and gathering 'round the flagpole.

That is the real high church.

Thank you to everyone who has kept this tradition alive and for welcoming me into the community.



The chapel at Almont Summer Camp.



Dell J. Rose

Without Adornment

By Dell J. Rose

Anthropologist Victor Turner (1920–1983) was interested in that palatable acceptance that came when social hierarchies were disbanded. He named it *communitas*, defined as "an unstructured or minimally structured group of individuals in a state of equality, solidarity, and togetherness." The experience of other people confronting "life with its teeth out," to quote the writer Janet Frame (1924–2004). Almont was such a place for me.

For many in the denomination, Almont was the first encounter with the warmth of the Swedenborgian tradition, shorn of the baggage of 'church'. It is a place where people learn of the kingdom of uses without adornment. With mud on the trousers and through the red-eyed tiredness of myriad late-night conversations about the entirety of the human condition. At Almont, Swedenborg's teachings about the necessity of angelic community seem both clear and a certainty.

To release the proverbial cat, I was terrified by the thought of camp. I never attended sleep-away camp as a youth, and I had no idea that I would be attending it on the cusp of middle age, but, as an ordinand, I had to go, and I did. And I am very grateful for it. But, were I to say that I was looking forward to the experience, that would be a lie.

Quizzically, many of the worries I had about the natural realities of the camp did turn out to be just as I feared: no air-conditioning, Pepsi products, or Wi-Fi. But I rarely thought about them. I worried for days about whether or not I would get my emails in time and then never thought to check them anyway. As an introvert with a glorious sense of humor—and I know everyone else would agree (or I pretend they would)—I was concerned about the constant proximity of other minds. But what started as a feeling of social claustrophobia ended with the realization about what Almont truly is: not a camp, but a place where people have the courage to be completely who they are.

Like heaven, you are stripped away at Almont. The lodging is what it is. The food is what it is. And you, for better or worse, are just you. The personas we wear with such skill in the wider world are just a hindrance there. At first it is only a disorientation; you feel as though the ground underneath you is shifting. But, if you give in to it, before long the magic of the place appears to you, and you find that pure release that is so rare it meets you like an ache. Whatever it is, it is alright at Almont. To be sweaty, fat, thin, ugly, pretty, uncoordinated, or cynical, there's room at the table for you. When you leave, there's a longing to be there again. Not for the water pressure, not for the ninety-degree heat, but to be who you were there. Just sun cream and mosquito spray required. See you next year (three days maximum).

Thank you to Craig Carson, Beki Greenwood, and Rev. Renée Machiniak for sharing your photos.

Featured Community: Church of the New Jerusalem in Bath, Maine

Rev. Alison Lane-Olsen's Installation Ceremony at the Church of the New Jerusalem in Bath, Maine

By Gretchen Goodine

On Sunday, June 21, 2026, the Church of the New Jerusalem in Bath, Maine, held an Installation Ceremony for Rev. Alison Lane-Olsen. Alison began preaching at the church as an interim minister beginning in October of 2024. While the congregation endeavored to search for a permanent minister, the desire to find a replacement began to wane. We didn't want to lose our Rev. Alison! The overall feeling of the congregation was one of healing, renewal, and replenishment. Our cups were running over. Discussions were had, meetings were held, and the overwhelming opinion was that we approach Alison to see if she might be open to the idea of a permanent residency. Divine Providence continued to shine upon us, and she agreed to apply. We held a rather lengthy interview to allay any doubts about the authenticity of this gift. There was no doubt: Rev. Alison was our clear choice. We have been grateful and blessed for the past year to have her as our full-time minister.



Six members of the church's executive board laid hands on Rev. Alison during the installation ceremony.

Rev. Dr. Jim Lawrence performed the Installation Ceremony. First, he shared with the children that speaking with God was just like making a call, which he then proceeded to demonstrate. This was very impactful, even for adults. He spoke about experiences he had with Alison at seminary, and on the tennis court. He talked about ministers being shepherds to their congregational flock and then moved right into his main message, "An Interpretation of the Swedenborgian Spiritual Sense of Psalm 23," including a list of fourteen key correspondences within the psalm. The six members of the executive board came forward and laid hands upon Alison while she received the Rite of Installation. It was a moving and powerful experience for all. The final hymn, "She Walked in the Summer," selected by Alison, was the perfect ending not only for the service, but also for our final service before going on our annual summer hiatus.



Rev. Alison Lane-Olsen with an artist's rendition of a map of Bath, with the church marked as a heart.

Guests included Rev. Alison's family, former congregants from the Fryeburg New Church, and three first-time attendees. All were invited to stay for a luncheon given in Alison's honor. There was a variety of sandwiches, salads, and sweets. Balloons and flowers in purple and white decorated the entrance and the sanctuary. A sparkling cider toast was given, and Alison was presented with a framed church silhouette showing a map of Bath with a heart at the location of the church. It included the date of the installation and a quote used by Alison at the beginning of all her services, "This is the day the Lord has made. This is the day love has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it."

Amen to that.

Gretchen is a lifelong member of the Bath New Jerusalem church and sixth-generation Swedenborgian. She is currently serving as the church secretary, and will be assuming the role of president this fall.



Justice is the New Jerusalem

My Kingdom Is Not of This World (John 18:36)

By Rev. Robert McCluskey

Since the rise of the religious right in the 1970s, the dispute between those who want to establish their religion and restrict the free exercise of others, and those who work to maintain the separation of church and state, has continued and grown more contentious. In the February 2022 issue of *the Messenger*, I offered an overview of Christian nationalism and its threat to both religious freedom and democracy ("Not in My Name!"). It is a position which wrongly holds, among other things, that the USA was founded as a Christian nation, should be led only by conservative Christians, and that Christians should have privileged status and legal protection not available to others.

In this article, I report on how this movement is currently manifest in our society. We will do so by briefly examining four contemporary efforts: Dominionism, Seven Mountain Mandate, Project 2025, and the Religious Liberty Commission.

Dominionism

> The kingship and dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.
>
> —Daniel 7:27

Dominionism can be traced back to the writings of R.J. Rushdoony (1916–2001), especially *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (1973), and the movement known as Christian Reconstructionism, which states that society should be "reconstructed" to reflect the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life. In *The Institutes*, Rushdoony called for a new form of government: theonomy (from *theo* 'God' + *nomos* 'law'). Closely related to theocracy, where the state is ruled by the clergy, theonomy is where the state is ruled by God's law. Dominionism advocates for such a theonomic perspective, which means that God's law, as revealed in the Bible, should be the standard and authority for civil law and government. Derived from a literal reading of the Hebrew Scriptures and Paul, it calls for Christians to take control of government and install God's kingdom on earth. Or as Rushdoony put it, "Take back government and put it in the hands of Christians!" Other prominent representatives of this movement are Greg Bahnsen, Gary North, and Doug Wilson (Secretary of War Pete Hegseth's pastor).

Seven Mountain Mandate

> In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.
>
> —Isaiah 2:2

> This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; also, they are seven kings.
>
> —Revelation 17:9

Following close on the heels of Dominionism is the Seven Mountain Mandate. Also tracing its roots to the 70s, the idea became popularized and coined into a specific strategy by Lance Wallnau and Bill Johnson in their 2013 book, *Invading Babylon: The 7 Mountain Mandate*. The Seven Mountain Mandate proposes that believers are called to "take dominion" over society by occupying and Christianizing seven key cultural spheres: religion, family, education, government, media, arts/entertainment, and business. It routinely frames cultural and political engagement as spiritual warfare, viewing the secularization of public institutions as the loss of ground that needs to be reclaimed.

Dominionism and Seven Mountain both insist that only government takeover will ensure the return of Christ and fulfill the Great Commission. (Under Secretary Hegseth's leadership, our troops are currently taught to see the Iran war as a necessary prelude to Armageddon.)

The Christian nationalist agenda of Dominionism and Seven Mountain is clearly stated. Project 2025 and the Religious Liberty Commission are more guarded in their language. One must read between the lines—but it's not hard to do.

Project 2025

If the Seven Mountain Mandate is the gameplan for Dominionist theology, Project 2025 is the playbook. Most readers have heard of this 900-page Christian nationalist manifesto outlining a radical restructuring of the executive branch and implementing a far-right conservative agenda. Put out by the Heritage Foundation, it has several primary goals.

- It seeks to expand presidential power by promoting the "unitary executive theory," which

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Justice is the New Jerusalem

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aims to place the entire federal bureaucracy, including independent regulatory agencies, under the president's direct control. (*BBC)*

- It calls for "Schedule F" reforms, which strip civil service protections from tens of thousands of federal employees to easily replace them with political loyalists. (*Center for American Progress)*
- It proposes the elimination or severe reduction of the Department of Education and the Department of Homeland Security, along with cuts to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). (*Wikipedia)*
- It advocates for strict abortion restrictions, the end of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs, and the rollback of LGBTQ+ civil rights protections. (*ACLU)*
- It also seeks to turn anti-discrimination laws against those who fight systemic racism, who advance DEI, and advocate for accessibility. And it rejects efforts to present an honest account of America's racist history. (*Americans United)*

The Religious Liberty Commission

The Religious Liberty Commission was formed by President Trump in May, 2026. Chaired by Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, its stated purpose is to strengthen religious liberty in the USA. It has also been described as a thinly veiled appeal to religious patriotism.

While the word "religion" is used often in their documents, the word "Christian" only appears occasionally. But consider that the Commission is made up of eleven conservative Christians and one conservative Rabbi. They ask the Department of Justice (DOJ) to clarify "the proper understanding of the Establishment Clause and separation of church and state." But then consider that in his opening remarks to the Commission, President Trump said, "They say separation between church and state . . . I said, 'All right, let's forget about that for one time… .'" Or as chairman Patrick said, "That phrase should have no power over people of all faiths ever again in America."

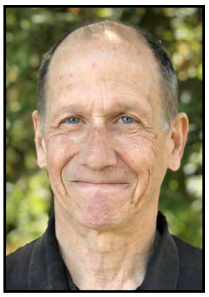
They also call for the repeal of the Johnson Amendment; the appointment of religiously aligned political allies; diverting public money into private, predominately religious schools; promoting religious coercion in public schools; weaponizing religious freedom as a license to discriminate; and many more suggestions aimed at allowing the government to impose one narrow set of religious beliefs on everyone.

Our best response to all of this? Strengthen religious liberty and the separation of church and state. Get informed. Get involved. Write letters. Sign petitions. Support those in your community who are impacted by these policies. Have conversations with family, friends, fellow church members, and others in your community. This is not about one individual. That may be the ultimate distraction. It's about a movement that has been in place for over 200 years, and is recently growing much stronger; a movement which is quite simply "un-American."

This article provides only a glimpse into a few deeply complex movements. Readers are encouraged to explore them in more detail. Recommended as a key resource for such exploration is Americans United for the Separation of Church & State (au.org).

> [Whenever] the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world and through all time.
>
> —Thomas Jefferson: A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, June 18, 1779

I am indebted to Americans United for much of the material in this article.



Rev. Robert McCluskey holds a BA and MA in philosophy, with a focus on Greek philosophy, modern idealism, existentialism, and hermeneutics. He is a graduate of the Swedenborg School of Religion and was ordained into the Swedenborgian Church of North America in 1984. He has pastored churches in Portland, Maine, and New York City, and served on the Social Justice Committee. He also served for eighteen years as representative to the National Council of Churches, with specific attention to the work of social justice and religious freedom. Until recently, he administered rites and sacraments at Wayfarers Chapel near Los Angeles, California.

SAAR
SWEDENBORGIANS IN ACTION AGAINST RACISM

Swedenborgian Church Youth League

Who Are We Becoming? The SCYL Memorial Weekend Retreat

By Kurt Fekete

Fifteen teenagers gathered at Almont Retreat Center in Michigan for the Memorial Day Weekend Swedenborgian Church Youth League (SCYL) retreat titled *Becoming You: A Retreat on Freedom, Formation, and Divine Providence*. SCYL Chaplain, Rev. Renée Machiniak, seminarian Ben Gunter (with Rev. Kit Billings observing), and I led spiritual workshops and worship, while Heather Oelker, Jill Baxter, and Bill Baxter worked in the kitchen cooking delicious meals and assisted with games and activities. Concurrently, Tammara Mounce led a group of eleven young adults participating in a Transitions retreat. This adult group worked on opening the outbuildings in preparation for camp and doing projects, while they also met for sessions with Tammara on the same Divine Providence theme.

The retreat kicked off around 8PM on Friday evening after everyone arrived from the surrounding cities and states. Pizza awaited the incoming retreaters, and afterward the teens and staff all sat down to gather to do an icebreaker, go over retreat rules, dish teams, and the schedule. Then I closed our opening evening session with a brief explanation about the theme. I told the teens, "At this retreat we will look at some big questions. Questions like: Is life random or is there a deeper pattern? Why does freedom matter so much? If there is Divine guidance, why is it so subtle?" I went on to explain how our habits are shaping us. How our loves are shaping us. How our choices are shaping us. How we are shaped ultimately determines who we are, and Emanuel Swedenborg believed that the process of Divine Providence is continually guiding our shape towards heaven.





(above) SCYL 2026 Memorial Day Weekend Retreat teens posing with Sandy the Penny Horse. (bottom left) Nora, Elin, and Noah enjoying time together at the local skating rink.

Renée led our Saturday morning session on *Is There a Bigger Story?* The teens considered whether their lives are shaped by pure chance or by something greater. After reflecting on hard experiences that led to growth, the group considered Swedenborg's idea of Divine Providence: the belief that God is quietly guiding all human life toward good. Teens mapped out their own life timelines, looking for patterns, and asking what they might be growing toward.

After lunch, Renée did a follow-up session entitled, *Why Freedom Matters*. This session tackled a big question: does forced goodness even count as goodness? Drawing on Swedenborg's teaching that real love and belief require freedom, teens worked through everyday scenarios—group chat drama, cutting corners on homework, late-night scrolling—to see how small, repeated choices quietly shape character over time. The intended takeaway was that freedom doesn't just decide what we do, it shapes who we become.

Our Saturday evening session was led by Ben Gunter. Ben's session, *Why Would a Good God Allow Evil?* took on one of life's hardest questions head-on by discussing why a good God would permit suffering. Grounded in Swedenborg's teaching that evil is permitted,

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Swedenborgian Church Youth League

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not caused, and can give rise to good, the group examined real, age-appropriate scenarios—rumors, being cut from a team, bad habits—asking what freedom and growth look like even in difficult circumstances, without minimizing the real pain that can be experienced. With Ben's gentle leadership, the teens explored deeply not that suffering is good, but rather if positive growth can happen in response to it.

I led our Sunday morning session which was titled *What If Guidance Is Subtle?* Using the analogy of GPS recalculating after a wrong turn, my session explored how Divine guidance might work quietly rather than through dramatic intervention. I showed how small choices over the course of a lifetime can lead you to heaven or hell. Then, the teens mapped their own past mistakes through choice, consequence, lesson, and change, to notice how they've grown gradually, often without realizing it in the moment.

Our last session was again led by Ben. His session, *How Should We Live If This Might Be True?* closed the retreat session workshops by turning insight into action: if our choices truly shape who we become, how should we live? Teens reflected on personal responsibility for character and habits, then wrote personal letters from their future thirty-year-old selves back to who they are today. This was a moving way to close out a weekend of thinking about purpose, freedom, and growth.

Much of our free time was spent lounging in the upstairs library and playing CatchPhrase, Werewolf, Codenames, and other games in the downstairs Pfister lounge. Outside, when weather permitted, the teens enjoyed time with the young adults playing frisbee, fishing, or taking a stroll around the pond. On our way to our Sunday afternoon outing to Lake Nepessing Golfland, we abruptly encountered a violent thunderstorm. When we discovered that this storm was going to last a long time, teen activities coordinator, Caroline, acted quickly and found us a nearby roller rink. What a fun twist to our usual afternoon outing! Many of the teens had never skated before, so this was an exciting and, for quite a few, an adventurous activity. After skating, on our way back to camp we stopped at a Meijer department store for a quick shopping excursion. It was Micah's eighteenth birthday, so he was thrilled to buy himself some action figures with his newly acquired birthday money. After a group photo with *Sandy the Penny Horse* (Did the store actually call security on our gaggle of teens?), we returned to the retreat center for our traditional spaghetti dinner and festive ice cream social.



Teens participating in the "Knots in a Tapestry" activity for closing worship.

Our spiritual programming ended with a closing worship service led by Ben and me. Teens read scripture from Romans 8:24–26 and Proverbs 3:5–6, on trust, patience, and God's presence in life's uncertainty. Maudie read a beautiful poem that she wrote about providence. We then took part in a "Knots in the Tapestry" activity, tying knots into strands of yarn to represent the fears, struggles, and burdens we carried, then weaving those strands together into one shared tapestry. The knots stayed visible, a picture of how God works through real, imperfect lives rather than erasing life's tangles. The evening closed with a final reflection tying together the weekend's big themes—freedom, suffering, guidance, and growth—leaving teens the final critical question to carry home: *What kind of person am I becoming?*

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We are clay molded by
Life and experience
Love and hate
Change and stability
God guides and shows us a path
This path is ours to accept
This path is ours to deny
We are shaped by those who love us
By those who raise us
By those who hold us when the night is cold.
We choose our path
We are molded into people
Independent and connected.

—Maudie Baxter, age 14

The Year of the Lord

The Word Became Flesh

By Rev. Dr. Jim Lawrence

A European Scripture scholar recently asked me whether Swedenborg paid more attention to the Gospel of John than to the other three canonical gospels. The answer is yes, and a reflection on the matter shapes a useful contemplation for the Year of the Lord. When diving deeply into his theology of Jesus Christ for his 1758 work, *The Lord*, our Swedish seer cites the Gospel of John 201 times in building out his deep thought on The Lord. None of the other gospels are referenced even half that many times. The reason is that the Fourth Gospel produces the ambitious theology needed for illuminating the full nature of The Lord.[1]

Swedenborg shapes his famous "high Christology"[2] as the Lord especially from the Fourth Gospel, which dramatically opens with its "Logos" verses (John 1:1–14) that are among the most memorized scriptures in the Bible. Here are the first five verses:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all humanity. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

It is no stretch to regard Swedenborg as preeminently a Logos theologian. The "Word" that became flesh in biblical Greek is λόγος (logos), which means primarily "word," and Swedenborg's deep theology arises from his constructions of the *inner* Word. And since that Word became a Person, it is exciting to follow Swedenborg's testimony that throughout the heavens no other idea of God exists except as a Person. In *Divine Love and Wisdom* §11, he claims:

> God is the *Essential Person*, and throughout all of heaven the only concept of God is God as a Person. The reason is that heaven, overall or regionally, is in a kind a human form, so it is not possible for angels to think of God in any other way than as a Person.

The Logos section then concludes with:

> The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

If we consider the role this idea has had in Christian history, we come to a very important point about the essence of Christianity. God as a Person working and walking in the world (in the form of Jesus) is arguably the single most powerful reason why Christianity has become the largest faith tradition on the planet at 2.1 billion confessing souls. For two thousand years there has been a form of religion that enables a believer to relate to God as personably as they might with their best friend. So we shouldn't be surprised that Swedenborg's favorite Swedish hymn was "Jesus är min vän den baste," which translates to "Jesus Is My Best of Friends."[3]

The Lord, our friend, is the God who became flesh and who still walks among us—not only as a cosmic force but as a personal confidante with whom we can talk and lean on every day.

Rev. Dr. Jim Lawrence, currently the president of the Swedenborgian Church of North America, is working on an invited chapter for a scholarly book exploring eighteenth-century engagements with the Fourth Gospel.

1 The four canonical gospels are routinely divided into the "synoptic gospels" (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and "the Fourth Gospel" (John) by New Testament scholars.

2 Emphasizing the divine nature of Jesus.

3 Hymn 194 in the 1950 *Book of Worship*.

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Early Monday morning, the east coast group was off to the airport at 4AM while the rest of the teens slept in as late as they could before waking up to clean or just in time to be picked up by their parents. We all departed this Almont retreat understanding that we are becoming something. We learned that every repeated choice forms a habit, every habit forms a love, and every love shapes who we are becoming. Swedenborg would say that heaven begins when we choose what is good because it is good. We are free to reject that, but we are not free from the fact that our life is being shaped. Be intentional! Be honest! Be thoughtful! Pay attention to who you are becoming because your life is not random, freedom is sacred, and your choices have eternal weight.



Kurt Fekete has been the Youth Director for the Swedenborgian Church for over twenty years. He also currently serves as vice president of the denomination.

Preserving Our History

Library of Congress Considering Audio Recording of Helen Keller's *My Religion* for National Recording Registry

By James Patterson

The Library of Congress is considering adding the audio recording of Helen Keller's book *My Religion* to the National Recording Registry (NRR). This 1974 recording needs preservation.

Each year since 2002, the National Recording Preservation Board (NRPB) and members of the public have nominated recordings to the NRR. The depth and breadth of nominations received highlight the richness of the nation's audio legacy and underscore the importance of assuring the long-term preservation of that legacy for future generations. Twenty-five recordings are added to the NRR annually.

In 2014, I worked with Kathy Spahn, then-Executive Director of Helen Keller International, to nominate *My Religion* to the NRR. In our letter to then-Librarian of Congress Dr. James Billington, we told him about the importance of Keller's 1928 book. We told him that she wrote about how the writings of nineteenth-century Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg influenced her faith. The book and recording successfully informed and reflected on the importance of faith and overcoming great personal challenges.

Actress Lillian Gish, a pioneer in American silent film, became the voice of Helen Keller when she recorded the book for the nonprofit Swedenborg Foundation, then based in New York City. This was a one-time recording. The American Federation of the Blind was also involved in the production of the recording.

Helen Keller and Lillian Gish were major cultural figures of the twentieth century. They developed a friendship during the 1920s while working in Hollywood. Miss Keller received many awards in her lifetime, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President John F. Kennedy in 1964. Miss Gish, who made over 100 films, received an honorary Academy Award in 1971, the Kennedy Center Honor in 1982, and the American Film Institute Life Achievement Award in 1984. Miss Gish died in 1993. Little documentation remains on the original recording of *My Religion*. The Swedenborg Foundation, now located in Pennsylvania, was unable to provide background on the recording. *My Religion* was transferred from vinyl to CD. It is available for sale from the Swedenborg Foundation. We obtained information on the recording from the Lillian Gish Papers archived at the New York Library for the Performing Arts at New York's Lincoln Center. In 1974, the Library of Congress was so impressed with the internationally popular recording of *My Religion* that its Division of the Blind and Physically Handicapped bought 900 copies for distribution to Libraries of the Blind throughout the country. We asked for Dr. Billington's assistance with additional information about the recording, including the label name and identification numbers, if this information was needed for our nomination of *My Religion* to the NRR.

My Religion is in need of preservation by the Library of Congress. The files at Helen Keller International were destroyed in the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center. Swedenborg officials told us they had temporarily lost the recording but managed to recover it. Ms. Spahn and I told the Librarian of Congress that the audio recording of *My Religion* is a historically significant collaborative work by Helen Keller and Lillian Gish, two American

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We Need Your Help!

To support the nomination of the 1974 audio recording of Helen Keller's book, *My Religion*, to the National Recording Registry, please submit a "National Recording Registry Nomination" by October 1, 2026 using the following link: www.loc.gov/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/recording-registry/nominate

To support the nomination of the films "Emanuel Swedenborg: The Man Who Had to Know" and "Johnny Appleseed: The Frontier Within" to the National Film Registry, please submit an online nomination form using the following link: www.loc.gov/programs/national-film-preservation-board/film-registry/nominate

Lillian Gish, a pioneer in silent film and friend to Helen Keller, is featured in all three productions.

Theological Reflection

Between Nothingness and Fundamentalism: The *Via Media* of a Conservative Vision of Swedenborgian Theology

By Dell J. Rose

Every tradition that claims a special revelation eventually confronts a fork in the road. Down one path lies dissolution: the sacred texts become literature, the doctrines become metaphors available for endless private reinterpretation, and the community that once gathered around a shared vision of God dissolves into a loose affinity group united by nostalgia rather than conviction. Down the other path lies petrifaction: the texts become a fixed code, the historical moment of their writing is mistaken for eternity itself, and the community narrows into a sect defined chiefly by what it excludes. Swedenborgian Christianity, the tradition that traces its origin to the theological writings of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) and finds institutional expression in bodies such as the Swedenborgian Church of North America, the General Church of the New Jerusalem, and kindred New Church communities, has faced this fork since its inception and arguably faces it now with renewed urgency. A movement that in the nineteenth century numbered influential adherents among scientists, poets, and reformers and that once seemed poised to reshape American religious consciousness today exists as a small, dispersed, and often uncertain body, torn between those who would reduce Swedenborg's writings from a source of inspirational quotations compatible with any belief whatsoever and those who would enshrine every sentence of the writings as propositionally and literally binding and immune to historical or scientific correction.

This essay proposes a third way. It borrows its method, though not its content, from a document produced by another tradition wrestling with an analogous crisis: *Emet Ve'Emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism*, issued in 1988 by the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Rabbinical Assembly, and allied lay organizations. That document does not resolve the tension between fundamentalism and dissolution by splitting the difference or by vague appeals to moderation. Instead, it offers something more interesting: a coherent account of how a tradition can hold fast to the reality of revelation, the authority of an ongoing interpretive process, and the legitimacy of internal pluralism, all at once. It shows how a community can affirm that God has spoken decisively without pretending that the human reception of that speech is exempt from history, reason, and continued development. What follows is an attempt to translate that structure of thought, not its Jewish content, which remains particular to Judaism, into a comparable architecture for Swedenborgian theology: a *via media* that is conservative in the true sense of the word, meaning not rigid but committed to conserving what is essential while allowing what is accidental to breathe and grow.

> **The choice between nothingness and fundamentalism is, in the end, a false choice...**

The first and deepest choice any Swedenborgian theology must make concerns the nature of Swedenborg's own claim: that he was granted, over nearly three decades, an opened spiritual sight by which he perceived the inner sense of Scripture and the structure of the spiritual world, and that he set down what he saw and heard in the writings. Two temptations present themselves. The fundamentalist temptation treats every sentence of the writings as if it were dictated syllable by syllable so that a comment Swedenborg made about eighteenth-century astronomy or about the customs of a particular spiritual society carries the same binding force as his account of the Divine Human or the doctrine of correspondences. The dissolving temptation goes the other way: it treats the writings as merely one gifted man's spiritual literature, an inspiring but ultimately optional artifact, no more binding than a beautiful poem, its truth claims quietly bracketed so that the reader may extract whatever resonates and discard the rest.

A conservative Swedenborgian *via media* rejects both. It affirms that revelation is real: that something more than human invention broke through in the opening of Swedenborg's spiritual sight and that the doctrines he articulated concerning the Lord, the Word, charity, and the life after death disclose truth that human reason alone

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would not have reached. At the same time, it insists that revelation was received by a particular man, in a particular century, writing in a particular language for readers who shared his assumptions about the physical universe. The content of revelation is divine; its clothing is human. To confuse the clothing with the body is the fundamentalist error. To imagine that removing the clothing leaves nothing at all is the error of dissolution. The task of a living Swedenborgian theology is the same task Conservative Judaism assigns itself with respect to Torah: to distinguish, through careful, communal, historically literate interpretation, the enduring doctrine from its incidental historical vesture, without ever concluding that because the vesture is historical, the body it clothes is therefore invented.

This means, concretely, that later Swedenborgians are entitled and indeed obligated to read the writings in light of what has been learned since 1771: about cosmology, about the ancient Near East, and about the psychology of religious experience. It does not mean that such learning gives anyone license to discard the doctrine of the Lord's Divine Human, or the reality of a spiritual world, or the teaching that Scripture holds an internal sense. Those are not incidental vestures; they are the body of the revelation itself. A conservative Swedenborgian theology must be able to say, with confidence and without apology, which is which, while remaining humble that reasonable, committed readers within the tradition may draw the line in somewhat different places.

If revelation supplies content, then doctrine and order supply structure, the New Church equivalent of what Judaism calls halakhah. Here again a bifurcation threatens. One wing of the tradition risks a kind of doctrinal antinomianism: since the New Church has never developed a centralized magisterium comparable to Rome's, and since congregational polity leaves considerable latitude to local societies, it can seem as though there simply is no operative doctrinal order at all, each reader an island, each society its own denomination, doctrine reduced to whatever a given minister or study circle currently finds congenial. The opposite wing treats a particular nineteenth or twentieth-century systematization of doctrine, a catechism, a set of doctrinal classes, or a specific reading of the writings on marriage or on the nature of hell as though it were itself part of the revelation, unchangeable and beyond reconsideration.

> **The content of revelation is divine; its clothing is human.**

The corrective borrowed from the Conservative Jewish model is instructive. Halakhah, that document insists, is indispensable, not optional, not merely one lifestyle choice among others, precisely because it is a concrete, communal expression of the encounter with God. But halakhah has never been monolithic; it has always developed through interpretation responsive to changing circumstances, while the burden of proof rests on those who would change it, not on those who would conserve it. Applied to Swedenborgian life, this yields a clear principle: New Church doctrine and practice, the order of worship, the sacraments, the ethical teaching on marriage, vocation, and the moral life, and the doctrine of charity and use are not negotiable decorations that each generation may discard at will. They are the concrete form the tradition takes as it seeks to embody, in worship and conduct, the truths disclosed in the writings. Yet neither are they frozen. The writings themselves teach that truth unfolds progressively, that the church is perfected by degrees, and that genuine spiritual life looks to uses, that is, to the actual, changing needs of human beings in their own time. A conservative Swedenborgian order, then, will hold firmly to its doctrinal center, the acknowledgment of the Lord, the life of charity, and the reality of an internal sense to the Word, while allowing considerable, disciplined variation in liturgical form, pastoral practice, and applied ethics, always placing the burden of justification on those proposing change rather than treating tradition itself as the thing that must justify its own continuation.

A further principle emerges directly from this: pluralism is not a regrettable compromise but a positive good, so long as it operates within acknowledged boundaries. Just as different Jews throughout history perceived the revelation at Sinai, each according to their own spiritual capacity, so too have different readers of the writings, in different centuries and cultures, received the doctrine of the Divine Human, or of the nature of the spiritual world, with different emphases and sensibilities. Some Swedenborgians have stressed the mystical, experiential dimension of regeneration; others the rational, doctrinal architecture of the writings' teaching on discrete degrees and correspondence; others the ethical and social implications for education, marriage, or the treatment of the poor. None of these emphases are illegitimate. What would be illegitimate is a reading that denied the Lord's Divine

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Human altogether, or that treated the doctrine of an inner sense to Scripture as a merely metaphorical flourish rather than a real, disclosed truth about how revelation operates. Pluralism operates inside the walls of the essential doctrines; it does not entail the removal of the walls.

This distinction, pluralism bounded by a shared doctrinal core rather than a relativism that dissolves the core into personal preference, is precisely what separates a conservative *via media* from dissolution. A tradition that says "believe whatever helps you" has not achieved openness; it has achieved incoherence, because it has ceased to say anything distinctive at all. A tradition that says "believe exactly this, in exactly these words, or you do not belong" has not achieved fidelity; it has achieved brittleness because it has confused the accidents of one generation's formulation with the substance of the revelation. The middle way insists that there is a real, identifiable center, the acknowledgment of one God in the Lord Jesus Christ, the authority of an internal sense within the Word, the necessity of a life of charity and use, and the reality of heaven and hell as states into which the whole human character enters after death, around which legitimate diversity of interpretation and practice can flourish without becoming its opposite.

Any conservative theology must also show that it can face suffering honestly rather than either explaining it away with cheap certainty or dissolving the question into despair. Swedenborgian theology possesses unusual resources here because its doctrine of freedom, that no one is compelled by the Lord to good or to evil and that heaven and hell alike are freely chosen through the whole shape of a life's loves, provides a framework in which human evil is neither excused as illusory nor blamed on an arbitrary deity. A conservative reading of this doctrine refuses two temptations: it refuses the fundamentalist temptation to treat every particular suffering as a legible, deserved punishment, and it refuses the dissolving temptation to abandon the doctrine of providence altogether and treat the universe as morally indifferent. Instead, it holds, as the Jewish statement holds regarding the Holocaust, that no theology can fully justify the suffering of the innocent, even while affirming that human freedom, and its abuse, accounts for a great deal of the world's evil, and that the Divine Providence works, patiently and often invisibly, toward an ultimate good it does not force upon us. This is a harder position to hold than either alternative, and for that reason it is the more honest one.

Swedenborg's own eschatology, centered on his account of a Last Judgment already accomplished in the spiritual world in 1757, offers fertile ground for the same distinction between revolutionary and gradualist readings that any living eschatology must confront. A fundamentalist reading might treat this teaching as license for a triumphalist, world-denying sectarianism, certain that the true church is a small remnant and the rest of history a matter of indifference. A dissolving reading empties eschatology of content altogether, treating talk of judgment, heaven, and regeneration as merely psychological metaphor with no bearing on ultimate reality. The conservative *via media*, consistent with the doctrine of use at the heart of Swedenborgian ethics, understands the New Church not as a triumphant remnant awaiting vindication but as a patient, gradual work, a "new church" understood primarily as a new spiritual state slowly leavening human consciousness, growing not inevitably, not steadily, and perhaps not in our lifetimes through the accumulated small redemptions of ordinary people living lives of genuine charity and use. This gradualist hope refuses both the impatience that curdles into sectarian militancy and the despair that curdles into a vague spirituality with no future to hope for at all.

> **Not to abandon the mountain, nor to mistake the base camp for the summit, but to keep walking, purposefully, toward it.**

A conservative Swedenborgian theology, finally, must decide how it relates to other Christian communions and other faiths, and here too a middle path presents itself. Swedenborg's own teaching that people of every nation and religion who live according to their conscience have a place prepared for them in heaven offers grounds for a stance that avoids both triumphalism and indifferentism. The New Church need not claim that salvation is impossible outside its own explicit doctrines; the writings themselves forbid such a claim, nor need it conclude that its own distinctive teaching on the Lord's Divine Human and the internal sense of Scripture is therefore dispensable or merely one option among equally valid others. It can hold, with theological humility, that God's saving work extends beyond the visible boundaries of the New Church while still insisting that the New Church possesses something true and needed to say to

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Gathering Leaves

Gathering Leaves 2025 and 2027

By Rev. Roslyn Taylor

Women from across the Swedenborgian and New Church communities gathered September 25–28, 2025 for the international women's retreat Gathering Leaves, at the beautiful Temenos Retreat Center in West Chester, Pennsylvania. The theme, "Remaining Rooted Through Adversity," framed a weekend filled with worship, learning, creativity, and sisterhood. Thirty-six women from North America attended in-person, while another fourteen joined virtually from the United States, Canada, and Australia, bringing total participation to fifty women. The hybrid format helped create a warm sense of connection across distances and Swedenborgian affiliations.

The retreat opened with keynote speaker Dr. Soni Werner on conflict resolution and compassionate communication, followed the next day with a plenary session led by Rev. Sage Cole, who introduced her "Be Love, Be Honest, Be Useful" initiative. Her presentation invited participants to approach both personal relationships and community life with compassion, authenticity, and intentional service. Throughout the weekend, women also took part in workshops on spiritual growth, communication, creativity, spiritual tools for positivity, trauma-informed Bible study, women's ecclesiastical leadership, and self-care. Music, worship services, Sister Circles, and outdoor shared meals offered many opportunities for reflection and meaningful connections.

Other highlights included chair and restorative yoga, a healing gong sound bath, along with an old-fashioned hootenanny around the fireplace, and an outing to the prominent du Pont family's magnificent former home and gardens. Some of the du Pont family had been members of the Swedenborgian church in nearby Wilmington, Deleware. The retreat concluded with gratitude for the friendships and encouragement that emerged over the weekend.

Women have gathered for Gathering Leaves retreats eight times since 2004. The theme of the ninth retreat will be "Be Still and Know," held at the peaceful Mary and Joseph Retreat Center in Rancho Palos Verdes, California, in Los Angeles County. We hope to be able to include women from the western USA and Canada, who have mostly been unable to attend in person in the past, in this wonderful opportunity for spiritual sisterhood. The retreat will run from Thursday afternoon, May 6, 2027 until after worship service on Sunday, May 9, 2027. Muriel Morgan, former Media Coordinator for General Conference and Purley Chase, is leading the Steering Committee for Gathering Leaves 2027. Save the date!



In-person attendees of the 2025 Gathering Leaves conference at Temenos Retreat Center in West Chester, Pennsylvania.

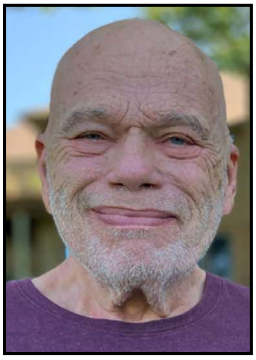
Rev. Roslyn Taylor is a minister with the Swedenborgian Church of North America, living in Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania. She has been the spiritual leader of the Home Church in Bryn Athyn since 2003. She was the editor of a volume of essays by Swedenborgian authors, published in 2005 as Healing Words: A Sampler of Wholeness Theology. More recently, she founded the Deborah's Tree ministry in 2021, which promotes the work of female Swedenborgian scholars, writers, clergy and artists, and is currently serving as the Interim Minister at the Temenos Church. Rev. Taylor has been active in the Gathering Leaves retreats for Swedenborgian/New Church women since 2004, and chaired the Steering Committee for Gathering Leaves 2025.



Passages

Deaths

Dan Halle, 74, of LaPorte, Indiana, entered the spiritual world on August 4, 2026, at Munster Community Hospital, with hospice care. A lifelong LaPortean, his final five years clearly showed how family love, humor, determination, pragmatism, good friends, and a package of Twizzlers carried him through to one too many serious health issues.



After seventy-four years of a busy life filled with a wealth of time with loved ones, so many self-employed business ventures and adventures, world travels, favorite foods, and crass jokes, Dan passed peacefully.

Although not a Sunday church-goer, he generously spent much of his spare time on LaPorte New Church maintenance and upkeep, always on the lookout for existing or potential problems and then fixing them. He so enjoyed getting to know the many SCNA folks he and his wife Barb hosted overnight who came to LaPorte for denominational meetings throughout the years.

He is survived by his high school sweetheart and loving wife of fifty-five years, Barbara (née Bowman); his daughters: Arianne (Rahul) Menon of Lafayette, Indiana, and Amy (Brad) Balcerak of Riehen, Switzerland; his five grandchildren: Connor, Elliott, and Maddox Menon, and Laine and Miles Balcerak; his older sisters, Daisy (Ron) Ebert and Patricia (Steve) Tukos; his nieces and nephews: Melina, Lon, Rachael, Chris, and Sarah; and his wonderful lifetime guy friends. And his feisty cat, Fritz.

He was preceded in death by his beloved mother, Daisy Halle, who raised him and whom he cherished and has missed dearly, his father Alden Halle, and several favorite aunts, uncles, and cousins.

A casual open house was held in his memory with family, friends, and business associates on Sunday, August 9, 2026, at the Frank L. Keszei Funeral Home, Essling Chapel in LaPorte. There was no formal memorial service, but those attending enjoyed sharing stories and memories together, and celebrating the colorful life of Dan.

This big guy will be greatly missed.

Margaret Marion Larson, 91, entered into the fullness of the spiritual world on March 26, 2026. Margaret was Barbara Tourangeau's cousin and life-long friend. She was a member of the Detroit/Royal Oak Church and the Michigan Association, and spent her childhood attending Almont Summer Camp. Eventually, she brought her own family to visit Almont. Through the years, family memorial services were held in the chapel for her parents and her brother.



A Celebration of Life service was held for both Margaret and her cousin Barb on the first Saturday of Almont Summer Camp, July 11, 2026, in the chapel with their families and friends honoring their lives and years of service and friendship, Rev. Renée Machiniak officiating.

Robert E. Reber, 88, passed away peacefully on July 14, 2026. Dr. Reber was a nationally known educational theorist for ministry and spirituality, first working as Director of the nationally known Thompson Center for adult education in religion and spirituality in St. Louis, and then as Dean of Auburn Theological Seminary in Manhattan in 1985, where he served until his retirement in 2001. Born and raised Methodist but finally settling into the Episcopal church as a lay member his last few decades, Dr. Reber first met Swedenborgian seminarians when the theological school was still in Cambridge in the mid-sixties. He was earning his Ph.D. in education at nearby Boston University and by chance started lifetime friendships with several Swedenborgians.



Dr. Reber long served on the board of trustees of our seminary through the span of three different names. First elected in 1995 to the board of managers of the Swedenborg School of Religion in Newton, Massachusetts, he became instrumental in the move to Berkeley in 2001 when the seminary transformed the self-standing seminary in Boston to become the Swedenborgian House of Studies at Pacific School of Religion (PSR). As a professional and innovative educator, he was helpful in the board's evolution of vision during its long and still unfolding presence in California. Robert served multiple terms before term limits were adopted, but in his last phase he continued providing strong leadership as the Swedenborgian House of

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Conservative Vision

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the wider Christian and human family: that genuine faith is inseparable from a life of active charity, that Scripture holds within it a depth the letter alone does not exhaust, and that the human being is intended, uniquely among creatures, to become a vessel of Divine love and wisdom through freely chosen use.

What, then, does the person formed by this *via media* look like? Following the pattern of the "ideal Conservative Jew" with which the Jewish statement concludes, we might describe an ideal Swedenborgian along three lines. First, such a person is a willing Swedenborgian, whose ordinary life, work, family, and civic engagement are themselves understood as the primary arena of religious life, since the writings teach that genuine regeneration occurs not chiefly through withdrawal into ritual but through the conduct of one's use in the world. Second, such a person is a learning Swedenborgian, unafraid to read the writings alongside history, science, and the wider Christian tradition, trusting that careful study deepens rather than threatens genuine faith. Third, such a person is a striving Swedenborgian, aware that regeneration is the work of a lifetime, that no one arrives at final certainty or final holiness in this life, and that the opposite of this patient striving is not humility but the complacency that mistakes either rigid certainty or comfortable vagueness for faith.

The choice between nothingness and fundamentalism is, in the end, a false choice, though it is the choice most religious communities under strain feel forced to make. A conservative vision of Swedenborgian theology, (conservative not in the political sense but in the sense of conserving what must be conserved while allowing genuine, bounded growth in everything else) offers a third way. It takes the writings with full seriousness as a real disclosure of divine truth, while refusing to confuse that truth with every incidental sentence of their eighteenth-century expression. It maintains a firm doctrinal center while welcoming a wide diversity of interpretation and practice within that center. It faces evil, judgment, and the fate of those outside its own walls without either false certainty or corrosive doubt. This is, admittedly, a harder path to walk than either of its alternatives, since it offers neither the comfort of certainty nor the comfort of endless accommodation. But it is the path most faithful to what a revealed tradition, rightly understood, actually requires of those who would carry it forward: not to abandon the mountain, nor to mistake the base camp for the summit, but to keep walking, purposefully, toward it.



Dell J. Rose develops and hosts programs for the Swedenborg Library in Chicago and is on the ordination track for the Swedenborgian Church of North America.

Passages

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Studies at PSR pivoted to become an affiliated Center for Swedenborgian Studies at the Graduate Theological Union in 2015. Finally terming off in 2018, he gave freely and generously his camaraderie and professional skills for a quarter-century to Swedenborgian spiritual education. He often commented on the serendipitous path of friendships in the Swedenborgian Church that started on a lark long ago, and how he always felt community with Swedenborgians. We celebrate his community with us and his profoundly useful contributions.

Helen Keller–NRR

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women still admired globally for a lifetime of inspiration. Helen Keller's message of hope in *My Religion,* as dramatized by Miss Gish, remains an important message for those who are struggling in our world.

In 2014, Ms. Spahn and I asked the Librarian of Congress to provide copies of *My Religion* to the blind in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2026, the Library should consider providing copies to the blind in Ukraine, Russia, and Iran.

Lillian Gish also appeared in two Swedenborg Foundation film projects: "Emanuel Swedenborg: The Man Who Had to Know," and "Johnny Appleseed: The Frontier Within." These short films are eligible for nomination to the Library of Congress's National Film Registry, which preserves films for future generations.

In 2023, the Library of Congress (LOC) selected the 1954 documentary "Helen Keller: In Her Life" for the National Film Registry. In 2024, the LOC selected the 1962 film "The Miracle Worker" for the National Film Registry. In "The Miracle Worker," director Arthur Penn told the Helen Keller story in a direct and unsentimental manner unusual for its time. The film won two Academy Awards, including Best Actress for Anne Bancroft and Best Supporting Actress for Patty Duke, who, at sixteen, was the youngest person to win an Oscar at the time.



James Patterson, a former U.S. diplomat, is a writer based in the Washington, D.C. area.

Spiritual Sunshine
A Swedenborgian Community Online

The Swedenborgian Church of
North America
50 Quincy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

Address Service Requested

About the Swedenborgian Church

Emanuel Swedenborg was born on January 29, 1688, in Stockholm, Sweden. Although he never intended a church denomination to be founded or named after him, a society was formed in London fifteen years after his death. American groups eventually founded the General Convention of Swedenborgian Churches.

As a result of Swedenborg's spiritual questioning and insights, we as a church exist to encourage that same spirit of inquiry and personal growth, to respect differences in views, and to accept others who may have different traditions.

In his theological writings, Swedenborg shared a view of God as infinitely loving and at the very center of our beings, a view of life as a spiritual birthing as we participate in our own creation, and a view of scripture as a story of inner life stages as we learn and grow. Swedenborg said, "All religion relates to life, and the life of religion is to do good." He also felt that the sincerest form of worship is a useful life.

SCYL Fall Retreat

SCYL Fall Teen Retreat

A SCYL retreat for ages 13 – 18
Theme: Birds, Bugs, and Bovines: Animals in our Lives
Dates: Friday, October 9, 7:00 PM – Monday, October 12, 10:00 AM
Location: Cedar Hill Retreat Center, Duxbury, Massachusetts
Cost: $50 with a household maximum of $100

The Swedenborgian Church Youth League is thrilled to announce an upcoming retreat this fall. The retreat will run from 7PM, Friday, October 9 to 10 AM, Monday, October 12 at the Cedar Hill Retreat Center, 346 Standish St, Duxbury, Massachusetts. All teenagers ages 13–18 are invited.

At this year's 2026 SCYL Fall Teen Retreat we will look at animals of the Bible, what they represent, and their hidden meaning for you. Of course, there will be plenty of time for recreation, relaxing, beachcombing, and hanging out with friends. Register at swedenborg.org. For more information, please contact Youth Director, Kurt Fekete, kfekete@hotmail.com. I hope to see you there!



SCYL teens enjoying Kingston Bay beach at the 2025 Fall Teen Retreat.