

# International Ecumenical Consultation on N.F.S.Grundtvig

Chicago, July 19-23,1995.

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»Deeply involved in the study of remote areas of the Judaeo-Christian tradition and our early European past [N.F.S. Grundtvig 1783-1872] was nonetheless involved in the common life and struggle of the people to whom he belonged. For him the past is never something inert and inaccessible. In his hands it proves itself to be a living heritage, a source of prophetic insight and of incentive for action now and in the future« (A.M. Allchin et al. eds. *Heritage and Prophecy. Grundtvig and the English-speaking World*, Aarhus Universitetsforlag and Canterbury Press 1994, p.2).

Some forty-five persons - scholars, educators, church leaders and laity - recently gathered in Chicago, Illinois to give serious consideration to the life, accomplishment, and present contribution of Nicolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, 19th Century Danish churchman, poet, intellectual and educational innovator, and political and social leader. Participants in the consultation included Grundtvig scholars and educators, theologians and literary scholars from Denmark, the United Kingdom and the United States. Attendees included persons from the Churches of Denmark and England, and the Lutheran, Episcopal, and Reformed traditions in the United States.

The achievement of the consultation is perhaps best described by the title of the volume from which the above quotation is taken-*Heritage and Prophecy*. Participants were first of all concerned to discover whether the heritage of N.F.S. Grundtvig could once again be claimed. Secondly, they were concerned to learn whether or not that heritage contains prophetic insight for the life of church and society in the present age. The fact that a continuation committee from the consultation is now discussing ways to keep consideration of these themes alive bears witness to the depth and stimulation of the Chicago event. The consultation was largely conceived by the Danish historian and theologian, Jens Holger Schjørring of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Århus. Dr. Daniel Mar-

tensen of the Department for Ecumenical Affairs of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America served as coordinator for the event.

The focus of the meeting was on Grundtvig as a potential resource for renewal in contemporary church, school and society. An initial presentation by Dr. Axel Kildegaard, retired professor at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, situated Grundtvig as a formative influence for the 19th Century immigration from Denmark to the United States. Subsequent presentations initially concentrated on Grundtvig's theological accomplishment, not least as one who saw his work as a response to the »modernism« of his time. Presenters included Professor Philip Hefner of the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago who compared Grundtvig with the 20th Century American scholar Joseph Sittler; Professor Michael Root of the Ecumenical Institute at Strasbourg, France, who concentrated on the influence of Grundtvig on the work of the Danish theologian Regin Prenter; Professor William Franklin of the General Theological Seminary in New York City who compared Grundtvig to the 19th Century German Roman Catholic scholar, Johan Adam Möhler; and Professor Bruce Kirmmse of the University of Copenhagen, who contrasted Grundtvig's view of the church to that of Søren Kierkegaard. A.M. Allchin, British theologian and churchman, highlighted the consultation's consideration of Grundtvig the theologian with a discussion of the Dane's sermons and hymns as a source of theological and ecclesial insight.

Two major presentations at the consultation centered about the literary accomplishments of Grundtvig: Professor S.A.J. Bradley of the University of York, England, discussed Grundtvig's considerable contributions to modern knowledge of Anglo-Saxon poetry; and Professor Jakob Balling of the University of Aarhus, Denmark, lectured on »Old Europe and Its Aftermath: Poetry- Doctrine-Western Culture«. Professor Penelope Gill of Mount Holyoke College reflected on »Gender in Grundtvig's Thought« and Dr. Lillian Zøllner of the Center for Research on Life Enlightenment and Cultural Identity in Ollerup, Denmark, reviewed the influence of the Grundtvigian »Folk High School« throughout the world with special emphasis on Israel, Japan, and the Philippines. Three Danish Grundtvig experts, Professor Flemming Lundgreen-Nielsen of the University of Copenhagen, Professor Knud Eyvin Bugge of the Royal Danish School of Educational Stu-

dies, and Dr. Kim Arne Pedersen of the University of Århus, discussed particular developments in contemporary Danish circles.

The spirit of N.F.S.Grundtvig pervaded the Chicago consultation. In addition to academic presentations and discussions, many of the more than fourteen hundred hymns written by Grundtvig were sung, and the conference banquet was given to the enjoyment of the folk atmosphere associated with Grundtvigianism. Rita Juel and Fylla Kildegaard, well-known Danish-American Grundtvig interpreters, presented the banquet program.

It is the clear impression of those who participated in this first consultation on Grundtvig and »renewal« that the themes of *heritage* and *prophecy* in Grundtvig were approached with uncommon insight and seriousness. The consultation was but the first in what is foreseen as an enduring study of the towering accomplishment - for church, school, literature and society - of Grundtvig, »a man who more than most believed that past, present and future belong together, and that we shall not be able to move freely into the future unless we have the Lines of communication open to the past (*Heritage and Prophecy. Grundtvig and the English-speaking World*, Aarhus Universitetsforlag and Canterbury Press 1994, p.2).