

Church and Life
Volume LXXV, Number 6
Merry Christmas!

We hope this issue of *Church and Life* finds you and yours well and happily anticipating Christmas! The cover image, painted by Viggo Johansen in 1881, of a family singing carols around a candlelit tree, captures for us the warm feelings of tradition, family, and community.

Here in the middle of Advent, this issue opens with "Splendid are the Heavens High" by N.F.S. Grundtvig to capture the sentiments of renewal, hope, and promise that Christ's birth brings to our lives. Jennifer Rose Escobar describes the unique Christmas "fællesskab" she has experienced through the years in Berea, Kentucky. Maddie Benton tells how, growing up, she experienced Danish Christmases in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Adam Bierstedt gives the true history of the tradition of Danish Christmas plates (many of which are now on display at the Museum of Danish America). Shaun Sayres tells how Julefest is celebrated in Elk Horn, Iowa, and Andrés Albertsen shares images from Christmases past in his hometown in Argentina.

We then shift to reflections on Christmas by Grundtvig scholar Anders Holm, who considers the gifts (and lessons) Grundtvig brings him each year and by Ana Wright, who explores how Hans Christian Andersen, in two of his tales, depicts the "bittersweet spirit" of the season. If you need a quick recipe for "brunkager" or "frikadeller" or pointers on Christmas lunch etiquette, Martin Hjortsø joins *Church and Life* with suggestions for both.

This December issue closes with "Dateline Denmark" by Edward Broadbridge, who celebrates his church's participation in the Porvoo Communion, with remembrances of Renee Showalter-Hanson and Annette Andersen, and with a postscript by the editor, Brad Busbee.

The editor and coeditors of Church and Life are particularly grateful this holiday season, to those who provide financial support and to those who submit articles for publication. We are also thankful to [The National Foundation for Danish America](#), which generously shares information about this publication in its own newsletter.

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Splendid are the Heavens High/ Dejlig Er Den Himmel Blå
by N. F. S. Grundtvig, translated by J.C. Aaberg

Splendid are the heavens high,
Beautiful the radiant sky,
Where the golden stars are shining,
And their rays to earth in clinging,
Beck'ning us to heav'n above,
Beck'ning us to heav'n above.

It was on the holy night,
Darkness veiled the stars so bright;
But at once the heavens hoary;
Beamed with radiant light and glory,
Coming from a wondrous star.
Coming from a wondrous star.

Sages from the East afar,
When they saw this wondrous star,
Went to worship and adore Him,
And to lay their gifts before Him,
Who was born this midnight hour.
Who was born this midnight hour.

Guided by the star, they found
Him whose praise the ages sound.
We, too, have a star to guide us,
Which forever will provide us
With the light to find our Lord.
With the light to find our Lord.

And this star as bright as day,
Which will never lead astray
With its message so appealing.
Is the Word of God, revealing
Christ to us as Lord and King.
Christ to us as Lord and King.

Grundtvig, N. F. S., "Splendid are the Heavens High," *Songs of Denmark, Songs to Live By: A Danish American Heritage of Music*. Translated by J.C. Aaberg, Compiled by Joy Ibsen, Ibsen Lenef, 2005, page 78.

The song, as presented here, is reprinted from *Songs of Denmark*. It is meant to be sung on Epiphany, celebrated January 6th, which traditionally marks the end of Christmas. For readers of Church and Life, the context of the song's composition is significant: Grundtvig wrote it in

early December 1810, when he was in the middle of a serious personal crisis. His father had asked him to come home to become his assistant pastor at Udby, and he was experiencing major swings between days of peace and days of deep depression and spiritual struggle. He was unpredictable to his friends, who watched anxiously over him. After he realized his hubris and felt renewed zeal for the church, Grundtvig wrote this song as his first conscious attempt to articulate his renewal and, simultaneously, to renew the tradition of Danish hymn writing. Fittingly, this song's illustration of Epiphany aligned with his personal epiphany of Christ in his life.

The hymn was originally written as a children's song that tells the story from the Gospel of Matthew about the star that heralds the birth of a new king for the Jews. However, while Grundtvig originally penned nineteen stanzas, he later cut it down to seven, which accounts for the lack of direct address to children. Today, the hymn commonly contains seven stanzas. The five-stanza form used here is an abridged version of the hymn.

Santa Lucia

by Jennifer Escobar

Nu bæres lyset frem, stolt på din krone . . .

The lights go out, and a hush falls on the room as a solo voice rings out. A hundred people hold their breath as a door opens in the corner and flickering candlelight is seen. Ten or twelve teenage girls dressed in white, their lovely faces just barely visible above the candles they hold, emerge from the storage room hidden behind the fireplace.

Rundt om i hus og hjem, sangen skal tone . . .

The girls walk two by two through a gap in the circle of onlookers and slowly curve around a small fir tree in the center of the room, which is decorated with handmade paper stars, woven hearts, and carved figures. They join the song with English lyrics and end in a single circle, facing the tree.

Power of light is great—warmth, peace on earth create . . .

Her head crowned with a wreath and four flaming tapers, the leader of the procession steps forward to light a small candle on the tree. The rest of the girls follow suit, and when the tree is fully lit, they turn and share their flame with the circle of onlookers as someone starts singing "Silent Night." Soon, everyone is singing, lighting each other's candles, and feeling that sense of togetherness inherent to Christmas, candles, cold nights, and hygge.

This is how my Christmas starts.

Back in the 1970s, my parents and my dad's brother were involved in starting an exchange with Denmark that focused on dance and gymnastics as inclusive forms of community recreation. Our

little community in East Central Kentucky, along with several like-minded individuals in similar small communities around the USA, found connections with the tiny country of Denmark that have made a lasting and positive impact across the world and through generations of people. It's impossible to know for sure how many people participated in the Danish-American Exchange, housed at Berea College in Kentucky from 1973 until 2017, but I'm sure it's in the thousands.

Perhaps the impact is most clearly seen at the Danish American Yule Fest at the Berea Folk Center, a community center designed to look like den Ottekantede Forsamlingshus on Mors in Northern Denmark. On the first Sunday evening in December, we gather with anyone who wants to participate, eating yummy winter treats, telling stories, and singing carols in English and Danish. We close the evening with a Santa Lucia procession and the sacred act of singing "Silent Night" together by candlelight. It is a holy time, and it stays with us throughout the rest of the year.

The impact of the exchange can also be seen in April, when a group of nearly 100 teenage students from a Danish efterskole visit Berea with their teachers—all of them staying with private host families in the area. The task of arranging activities and host families for the group falls to me, and I'm certain that if I lived anywhere else it would prove completely impossible. However, thanks to five decades of private hosting and exchange with Denmark, we have a culture of openness here in Berea that is rare in other places.

The Danish word "fællesskab" is a good description of what has made our community different and, in my estimation, happier than the typical modern community. Directly translated, fællesskab means "togetherness," but it's more than that. It's the philosophy of togetherness—the practice of being in community with each other. It crosses the boundaries of religion, politics, age, education, and socioeconomic status; it calls us together as humans who enjoy singing, dancing, reading, listening, walking, playing tennis . . . or anything else you can think of. With fællesskab, each activity has an added element of relationship, usually in the form of community singing or facilitated discussions over a shared meal or snack. Like the word "hygge," fællesskab is a distinctively Danish phenomenon that the rest of the world ought to adopt as standard practice. I know I'm glad my community did.

Indeed, the power of light is great—warmth, peace on earth it creates.

Glaedelig Jul!

Danish Christmas Louisiana Style

by Maddie Benton

As a college student living in Birmingham, Alabama, who has grown up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, perhaps it seems a bit strange for me to write an article on Christmas traditions in Denmark. But Danish Christmas traditions are actually a large part of my family's Christmas celebration because of our family friends Martin and Karen Hjortsø, with whom we celebrate Christmas every year. Martin is from Denmark and introduced us to the Danish Christmas traditions we now celebrate. One of my favorites is the advent candle, pictured here, where we

burn one number on the candle each day until Christmas Eve. My family loves opening our new candle each year to start Advent. But an even bigger tradition is the Danish Christmas Lunch.

Martin described to me how the lunch was an ordinary part of his childhood Christmas, and it only made sense to continue the tradition when he moved to the U.S. Though the lunch has not particularly changed over the years, Martin noted that some items are harder to find in Louisiana than they would be in Denmark (but interestingly there is a store that sells pickled herring in New Orleans!). He shared a detailed document with me, explaining each facet of the Danish Christmas Lunch which usually “consists of smørrebrød, which roughly translates to ‘buttered bread’ and it can be traced back to the Icelandic Sagas.” The smørrebrød is typically topped with cold cuts and various toppings. Martin noted that his favorite type is the “Dyrlægens natmad” (the Veterinarian’s Night Snack): “rye bread, fat, and paté on which is placed aspic and a slice of salted meat.” There’s even one depicted on a Danish stamp!

The Danish lunch goes through several phases, beginning with pickled herring, then seafood, cold cuts, a few miscellaneous dishes, a warm dish, cheese, and finally coffee, cookies, and pastries. I asked Martin what his favorite part of the lunch was. He said that he loves it all, but he especially enjoys going back to the cold table for leftovers when the eating slows, and everyone savors their food.

Although Martin noted that it is not a particularly Danish tradition, candle competitions are part of his Christmas lunch. It’s where every partygoer gets a candle and the person whose candle lasts longest wins a prize. My family also has adopted this tradition, and we always have the candle competition on Christmas Eve. It’s been known to get pretty competitive, but it’s one of our favorite ways to celebrate. (I’ve included a picture of me winning the candle competition when I was younger!)

Talking to Martin about the Danish Christmas Party helped me remember the Danish origins of some of the Christmas traditions my family celebrates. To me, they just feel like an ordinary part of the holiday season even though we aren’t Danish. As Christmas time approaches and we prepare to get “hygge os,” it is a perfect time to celebrate and remember all of the traditions that make Danish Christmas special. If you want to host your own Christmas party to celebrate the season, some of Martin’s recipes are included below.

Merry Christmas!

A Tradition for the Season: The Real History of Danish Christmas Plates

by Adam Bierstedt, Albert Ravenholt Curator of Danish American Culture
Museum of Danish America

As the season ticks on and snow begins to fall, the time has come once again for Royal Copenhagen to continue one of its longest traditions. Each year, two new plates grace the market, one branded under Bing & Grøndahl and the other under the Crown of Royal Copenhagen itself.

This tradition has brought striking blue-and-white designs to homes in Denmark and beyond, representing an important tradition in the 250-year history of Danish porcelain.

The origins of Danish Christmas plates are steeped in legend. One tall tale claims that aristocrats used to gift their servants painted wooden platters at Christmas. The servants, delighted by this presumably unusual display of generosity, would proudly display these platters on their walls to brighten up their drab living quarters. This is nothing more than a tall tale, though it speaks to a desire to make this tradition ancient. In truth, though, the tradition of Christmas plates is so long-lived because of innovations that could only have been created near 1895, when Bing & Grøndahl released their first plate.

To understand the origins of Christmas plates, we need to rewind a few years. Around 1880, Bing & Grøndahl and Royal Copenhagen (then known as the Royal Porcelain Manufactory) were bitter rivals, but they were both struggling to stay in business. Their designs were uninspired, sales were sluggish, and competing with French, German, and English wares was difficult. A bold new direction was needed for both companies with young, ambitious leadership. Luckily, two candidates proved up to the task. Bing & Grøndahl hired Pietro Krohn, who would go on to establish the Designmuseum Danmark, while Royal Copenhagen settled on Arnold Krog. Both men were on the cutting edge of the art world and had seen the development of a radical style of New Art.

Art Nouveau, to translate the phrase back into French, burst onto the scene at the start of the 1880s. At its core was a group of 20 artists, known as “Les Vingt,” who looked to unify nature and industry. A vase should not merely hold flowers; it should itself evoke the lines and branches of a leafy stem. Art Nouveau was also a social movement – it reacted to the glut of mass-produced industrial wares by finding ways to incorporate human ingenuity and artistic expression into a factory setting. These are the ideas that Krohn, Krog, and their respective teams began to play with, and in 1888, the two stood in competition at the Nordic Exposition of Industry, Agriculture, and Art in Copenhagen. Critics raved at the delicate colors and shapes of both studios, including the first lifelike animal figurines, but Royal Copenhagen proved the commercial winner. Key to this was a simple plate that Arnold Krog had designed. Featuring Royal Copenhagen’s crown and waves on a snow-white background, these 1,200 plates proved to be a staggering success. Demand for commemorative plates exploded, and Krog was soon producing designs for organizations, anniversaries, and events across Denmark and beyond.

Bing & Grøndahl was falling behind, and the owner of the company, Harald Bing, knew the company needed to find a successful plate of its own to underwrite the complex, expensive porcelain the company was praised for. A fracture in Royal Copenhagen gave him the chance.

Frans Hallin, one of Arnold Krog’s original team, was unhappy working at Royal Copenhagen. After almost a decade with the company, he had several ideas to improve the commemorative plate scene. He felt stifled – he’d worked on several important projects for other people, but he wasn’t allowed to make his own ideas reality. Pietro Krohn left Bing and Grøndahl in 1892, and Harald Bing asked Hallin to be artistic director at the studio. Hallin agreed, joining his former rival, and began putting his ideas to the test.

This is the secret to Christmas plates. Unlike other commemorative plates from the period, Christmas plates are textured, with the image carved into the mold. This relief design can then be spray-painted instead of brushed on – the lower parts of the plate turn out a darker blue. An artist can go in and scrape away any excess, resulting in a piece that has the allure of hand-painted work without the errors that can result from an unsteady brush.

Harald Bing was not entirely certain whether Hallin's passion would pay off, and so he ordered only 400 plates for the first year. He didn't need to worry, though. They were a smash hit and quickly became a staple of B&G's annual catalog. Royal Copenhagen would take a few years to catch on, but in 1908 they would issue their own Christmas plate using Hallin's method. Even though the two companies have now merged, they have issued a plate in the style they each developed every year since, without fail.

No other studio anywhere in the world has turned Christmas plates into such a long-lived tradition. Many have tried – my own family owns a Royal Vienna Christmas plate—but none have succeeded. It is not entirely clear why Danish Christmas plates have proven uniquely popular. Even as new materials were introduced, new design philosophies took hold, and market tastes changed, Christmas plates have endured. Generations of Danes, Danish Americans, and others have hung these plates. Some buy specific years, recording their own family history through art. Others collect as many as they can. Others only buy ones with dogs, or cats, or deer. In short, there is something in these plates for everyone.

As the holiday season continues and families gather, we hope you will enjoy these icons of Danish design. And, if you would like to see the first ever Christmas plates alongside eighty-three other spectacular pieces of Danish design, consider taking a trip out to MoDA. We'd love to see you!

Happy holidays!

"Danish Ceramics: Beyond Blue and White," on display at the Museum of Danish America until April 20, 2026, features 85 objects from 1775 to today. The display represents the largest retrospective of Danish ceramic art in a generation, including never-before-displayed pieces by some of Denmark's greatest artists.

Celebrating Julefest in Elk Horn, Iowa

by Shaun Sayres, Manager of Elk Horn's Danish Windmill

For residents of Elk Horn and Kimballton (sister villages we locally refer to as the Danish Villages), Julefest is a special time of year, and we send invitations far and wide to encourage others to join us in celebrating the arrival of the holiday season with a Danish twist. Tradition has been a yearly focal point of our celebrations.

Elk Horn's first official Julefest was held in 1978. Many of the traditions that began then are still present, including an annual breakfast of aebleskiver and medisterpølse, a Christmas concert at the Lutheran church, and the dance around a Christmas tree decorated with candles, woven hearts, and the Dannebrog garland. Local businesses still offer specials and coordinate other community-wide events. After the arrival of the windmill in 1976, it became tradition to have Christmas lights put on the windmill every year.

Though some events have come and gone over the years, Elk Horn's Julefest has maintained most of its traditions. A piano recital featuring Victor Borge's piano is still typically held at the Museum of Danish America, and both the museum and the windmill continue to offer free admission into their museum spaces for the weekend. The town is always decorated in a mix of traditional Danish décor and more typical American lights and fixtures along Main Street. For our organization, The Danish Windmill, this is our second busiest time of the year after Tivoli Fest (Memorial Day Weekend). We spend a lot of time decorating the shop and grounds just for this time of year. We serve gløgg and hot chocolate, and at times we have aebleskiver, as well. Black Friday is one of two days during the year when our gift shop is simply not big enough to accommodate all the people who come celebrate with us, and we love it.

An Argentine Christmas Collage

Images shared by Andrés Albertsen

Gathered here are some images of Christmases past in Andrés Albertsen's hometown, Tres Arroyos in Argentina.



Argentine Christmases are typically warm and sunny, but most other features of the holy day are the same as in the USA, complete with nativity scenes and big meals.

His former pastor, Aldo Bidán, shared the first images from Christmas celebrations during his tenure in the congregation. The last two images were shared by his sister, Mariana Albertsen, from two Christmas celebrations at the nursing home which was built by the combined effort of the Danish (Lutheran) and the Dutch (Reformed) communities in the town.



N.F.S. Grundtvig – A Real Santa Claus?

by Anders Holm

One might think that Christmas is a fun time for a Grundtvig scholar. Not only can you, with a bit of goodwill, say that the old codger resembles—or resembled—Santa Claus, especially in his later years, with his long beard and shaggy hair. Danes sing his hymns during Advent and Christmas, and he has appeared in children’s Christmas calendars on several occasions. So isn’t Grundtvig simply delightful and festive?

Well, yes, it’s amusing—but also a bit exhausting, especially if you believe that Christmas and work should be kept separate, at least for those of us who aren’t clergy. The worst part is that Grundtvig Studies needs to be published before the end of the year, which means that the editor does a lot of hard work in December. (Grundtvig Studies is the scholarly yearbook of the Grundtvig world, published since 1948. Have a look at this link: [GS](#).) Surely other yearbook editors know the pressure of getting everything done at the end of the year.

Being a Grundtvig scholar is both captivating and daunting. It’s captivating because studying Grundtvig automatically brings you into contact with many aspects of everyday life. He was a pastor, historian, poet, hymn writer, politician, public educator, mythologist, translator, philosopher, and more. In his vast and sprawling body of work, he commented on nearly everything—probably too much—from the origins of Anglo-Saxon words and church liturgy to agricultural issues and financial relief for the poor. I’m personally convinced that being a Grundtvig scholar has led me to work across more fields—both within and beyond theology—than I otherwise would have.

At the same time, it is daunting. Grundtvig is everywhere. Just open a Danish newspaper, and you can be sure he would have had an opinion on most topics: freedom of speech, Danish identity, religious freedom, international relations, or education policy—all issues he addressed in the context of his time.

Even in spring of 2016, when I was in the U.S., in Alabama, on a Fulbright fellowship studying religion and politics, I couldn't escape him. In the middle of an event at the White House, then President Obama suddenly mentioned "the great Danish pastor and philosopher Grundtvig who, among other causes, championed the idea of the Folk School Grundtvig's influence on the Civil Rights movement."

A question that always triggers anxiety for a Grundtvig scholar is: What would Grundtvig—the national symbol—have said? The press often calls to ask. Of course, I can safely reject the question with the researcher's detached caveat and say that his worldview can't be transferred to our time. That's often wise, given the limited room for nuance. But ultimately, such battles are lost. If Grundtvig research isn't relevant to the present, it's meaningless.

In my view, the relevance lies primarily in the many principled discussions sparked by Grundtvig's viewpoints and his overall contributions as a poet, theologian, and public educator. Grundtvig significantly impacted Denmark—and in some ways the rest of the world as well.

He's often worth engaging with because of his ability to delve deeply into issues, but it's equally liberating that, as a scholar, you're obligated to abandon wrong-headed or irrelevant ideas when necessary.

Grundtvig is certainly not a Santa Claus who always delivers the answers you want or need. On the other hand, like other great and influential thinkers, you can often learn a lot from his mistakes.

And so, in response to his mistakes, you might actually encounter the most "Grundtvigian" thing that can be said about being a Grundtvig scholar: The world evolves.

That was Grundtvig's view too, and he frequently changed his stance throughout his long life. Reality is more important than ideas, he believed. That's why it goes against both his and scholarship's purpose to use his statements as substitutes for independent thought in our time, when various answers are needed. This is precisely where the Grundtvig scholar must tread carefully.

The Bittersweet Spirit of Christmas in H.C. Andersen's Fairytales

by Ana Wright

I recently read through a collection of Hans Christian Andersen's Christmas fairytales, fully expecting to come away with a glimpse into 19th century Danish Christmas traditions and heart-warming reflections on the holiday season. I was surprised, however, not to encounter joyful scenes of love and good cheer, but deeply moving accounts of loss, disappointment, and poverty. I quickly realized that while the American Christmas stories I grew up with, such as How the Grinch Stole Christmas, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, or the infamous Elf aim to romanticize the Christmas spirit; to temporarily transcend the troubles of everyday existence and immerse us in happy illusion, Andersen's fairytales bring us face to face with the most tragic

aspects of the human experience. But although they are dark, this darkness allows the goodness imbued within them to shine through all the more. Indeed, the Christmas spirit that Andersen presents is bittersweet, but beautiful. Two tales stuck with me in particular as reminders to cherish this goodness that is present even in the midst of un-romanticized realities.

First is the well-known tale of "The Little Match Girl," in which a young match seller wanders the streets on Christmas Eve, afraid to go home before she sells her matches because she knows that her father will beat her if she returns empty-handed. The streets are deserted, however, because everyone is inside having their Christmas dinner and, as it grows dark, she realizes she has nothing to show for her day's efforts. Eventually, she tucks herself away in a corner between two houses and decides to strike one of her matches in hopes of gaining some warmth. In the glow of the flame, then, she begins to see visions of a warm stove, a table set with beautiful china, roast goose, prunes, apples, a Christmas tree. She then strikes match after match, imagining herself within the scenes she is picturing, until eventually her grandmother appears before her. Smiling, she "takes the little girl into her arms," and together they fly away "into joy and splendour, up, up, to where there was no cold, no hunger, no fear. They were with God" (123).

The next morning when people find the match girl's body and discuss how she may have died, Andersen comments that "nobody knew what lovely things she had seen and in what glory she had gone with her old grannie to the happiness of Christmas" (123).

He is given a place of honor in the living room and decorated splendidly, just as he dreamed. He is soon disappointed, however, when everyone becomes occupied with other things, and rather than being the center of attention, he fades into the background of the evening's festivities.

The day after Christmas, he is relegated to the attic, where he reminisces about his former life in the woods, longing for the day when they will take him back outside. Several months later, he is rediscovered when the attic gets cleaned out, but rather than being restored to his woodland home and friends as he hoped, he is chopped into pieces and burned. "It was all over with the tree," Anderson says, "and so it is with the story. That's what happens at last to every story –all over, all over!" (134). Indeed, the tree spent his entire life longing, until all at once his life was over, before he felt that he had really begun to live.

Indeed, although the Little Match Girl dies, this story is not a tragedy. Despite her situation, she never once complains, but simply makes the most of what she has, and is content. In the end, although no one on earth pays her any attention, she ends up in heaven with God, her suffering exchanged for eternal happiness.

In "The Fir Tree," however, we encounter precisely the opposite perspective. In this tale, a young tree, despite his friends' exhortations to "rejoice in your youth out here in the open" (130), longs to "get away" and become a Christmas tree, full of "glory and splendour" (129). At last, one Christmas, his longing is fulfilled, and he is delighted!

While the Little Match Girl teaches by example, then, the fir tree serves as a warning. The Little Match Girl has nothing and is content with her lot, but the Fir Tree gets everything that he

dreams of and remains discontented. He is forever waiting for a better future, and this discontent causes him to miss the small glories all around him.

Anderson's stories ultimately remind us that happiness does not depend on our circumstances, but on our perspective. Bad things may happen that we cannot control, but we can always choose to be good to others, and to express gratitude for the good things that we have, and in doing so, we become bearers of light into a dark world. That, I think, is the truest Christmas spirit there is.

Source of quotations and images:

Andersen, Hans Christian. *80 Fairy Tales*, translated by R. P. Keigwin and illustrated by Vilhelm Pedersen and Lorenz Frølich, Copenhagen, 2004.

Two Recipes and Some Etiquette Tips from Martin Hjortsø

Brown Christmas Cookies (Brunkager)

Ingredients:

32oz flour
13.3 oz of butter or margarine
8.8 oz syrup
13.3 oz sugar
2 tsp cinnamon
1 tsp ground cloves
1 tsp cardamom
3.5 oz coarsely chopped almonds
1 copped bitter orange peel
1 chopped candied lime
0.7 oz potassium carbonate, (or baking powder or baking soda)

Instructions:

Boil almonds briefly, cool, remove skins and chop. Melt together syrup, sugar and butter and add species, almonds and candied peels. Stir the potassium carbonate out in a bit of water (to prevent clumping) and add when the sugar-butter mixture reaches boiling. (Stand back! Ammonia will be released). Let the mixture cool a bit before working the flour into it. When the dough is lukewarm, roll it into cylinders approximately 1.5 in. in diameter.

Let sit overnight in a cool spot. Slice with a sharp knife and bake at 350F.

Danish Meatballs

(Frikadeller)

Ingredients:

2.2 lbs ground pork

1/2 cup milk
1/2 cup oats
1/2 cup all-purpose flour (or breadcrumbs)
2 eggs
2 large onions (finely chopped)
1 Tbsp salt
Pepper according to taste

Instructions:

Mix all the ingredients together in a large bowl using a spoon or hand mixer. Heat up a frying pan with butter or oil. Use a spoon to form the meatballs. If you dip the spoon in a glass of water before you form a meatball it will be easier because the meat will not stick to the spoon. Fry the meatballs for about 5-10 minutes depending on the amount of heat you give them. It is best to flip the meatballs often in order to give them an even crust.

Some thoughts on Christmas Lunch Etiquette (especially about pålæg and snaps)

The first thing to remember is the rule every parent has tried to enforce with children: One must politely eat what is served, no matter how much one dislikes it. This rule does not apply to the Danish cold table! The whole point of the Danish cold table is that you make your own smørrebrød, and you are under no obligation to try all the types of "pålæg" offered. (Pålæg is the ingredient or ingredients that you place on top of the bread.) Make and eat only the types that you like. Eschewing the offerings that do not appeal to you is perfectly acceptable.

Other than this little bit of encouragement, etiquette varies between families, but here are some rules that are still probably common in Denmark.

Don't start eating until everyone is ready. Let the trays of pickled herring pass around the table and let everyone make their first herring sandwich before you start eating yours.

Never drink on an empty stomach. You must have one bite of your herring sandwich before you can drink, and the first drink is always snaps, not beer.

The first glass of snaps must be drunk in one gulp, not be "bitten in half" as the Danish expression goes. My father would remind us of this rule every Christmas lunch, and he would obey it religiously. (Personally, I do not respect this rule. Even though you are supposed to have eaten one bite of your herring sandwich before drinking the snaps, one bite is not much of a cushion against a shot glass of snaps, and you can get really drunk, very fast if you follow this rule.)

Never eat pålæg without bread (but if you are getting full and still want to try more types of pålæg or help to get rid of leftovers, it is okay to use just a small token amount of bread)

Glaedelig Jul!

Dateline Denmark: The Porvoo Communion

by Edward Broadbridge

On Sunday 16 November, Pastor Jacob Haukedal Neergaard from my Lutheran church in Randers, Denmark, preached the sermon in St. Peter Mancroft Anglican Church in Norwich, England, and participated throughout the service alongside Rev. Edward Carter. There are two explanations as to how this collaboration could happen.

The first explanation is that in a progressive step for ecumenism in 1992 the Porvoo Common Statement, also known as The Porvoo Communion, established full communion between four Anglican Churches (the Churches of England and Ireland, the Church in Wales and the Episcopal Church of Scotland) and seven Nordic and Baltic Churches (the Churches of Norway and Sweden, and the Evangelical-Lutheran Churches of Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, and Lithuania). The first joint Eucharist was held in Porvoo Cathedral in Finland. The Porvoo Communion claims to represent 45 million members among the member churches, approximately 50% of Europe's Protestants.

The second explanation is that in 1995-96 the two churches, Mancroft and Clemens, also in Norwich, exchanged congregations. For four days in 1995, fifteen Danes, including my wife, Hanna, and myself, visited Mancroft and shared our faiths and our experiences and were shown around the "fine city," as Norwich calls itself. The following year a similar number of Mancroft congregants visited my town of Randers. Although greatly enriching for both parties, this exchange proved to be a one-off experience, until, that is, I was elected onto my church council in November 2024 and set about promoting a repeat exchange. Thus for a weekend in November three of us from Randers visited Norwich, and stayed in private homes. Our Pastor Jacob stayed with their Rev. Edward for a mutually enriching weekend, and it is hoped that a return visit will take place in Randers in April 2026, when Anglican Edward will preach in Lutheran Jacob's church here in Randers – thanks to the Porvoo Communion!

Renée Showalter-Hanson (September 11, 1948 - October 7, 2025)

Renée Showalter-Hanson, 77, died peacefully at her home in Minneapolis on October 7, 2025.

She was preceded in death by her parents, Laurence and Miriam (Rodholm) Showalter and her brother Scott, and she is survived by her husband Robert, her daughters Laura (Joe) and Emma (Frank) and her beloved granddaughter Madeline.

Renée grew up on the south side of Chicago and attended Grand View College, the University of Iowa, and the University of Minnesota. Following in her mother's footsteps, Renée became a Special Education teacher and taught in Cedar Rapids, Iowa before spending 35 years with Wayzata Public Schools making contributions to students' lives at Plymouth Creek Elementary and Wayzata East Junior High.

She loved reading, volunteering, hiking on the North Shore, celebrating her Danish heritage, and spending time with her granddaughter. Renée had an incredible ability to build meaningful connections wherever she went. Her warmth, generosity, and kindness will be deeply missed.

Annette Andersen (July 13, 1934 — November 11, 2025)

Annette O. Andersen passed away at her home, surrounded by her family, on Tuesday, November 11, 2025, having attained the age of 91 years, three months and 29 days.

The daughter of Neils J. and Nadjeschda M. (Lynge) Overgaard, Annette was born in Guthrie County, Iowa. She attended Kimballton Public School through the eighth grade and then Elk Horn High School. In 1952, she married Keith W. Johnson in Kimballton. They lived and farmed in Sharon Township. Keith passed away in 1978. In 1983, Annette married Eigel “Andy” M. Andersen on the family farm near Kimballton. The couple made their home in Omaha, NE, and later retired to Kimballton. After Andy’s passing in 2001, Annette purchased her childhood home outside of Kimballton and moved there—a place that held special meaning for her.

Annette was a devoted member of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Kimballton. She was also a member of the Progressive Danes, Historical Society, Danish Brotherhood, the Museum of Danish America, Audubon School Board and 4-H, for which she was a leader. She taught Danish folk dancing to generations of adults and children. She enjoyed traveling, folk dancing, sewing, framing, genealogy and doing handiwork.

She was preceded in death by her parents; husbands Keith Johnson and Andy Andersen; a son in infancy Karl William Johnson; twin girls in infancy Lois Ann and Lisa Marie Johnson; sisters, Ardis Petersen, Elsa West and Eva Leistad; and sister-in-law, Carol Overgaard. She is survived by her children: Susan (Jeff) Edwards of Audubon, Linette (Randy) Hadley of Urbandale, Kurt (Barbara) Johnson of Audubon, Kris (Michelle) Johnson of Austin, TX; grandchildren: Matthew (Tracy Deutmeyer) Edwards, Kellie (Dave) Geater, Brett Edwards, Jessica (David) Northwick, Rebecca (Shawn) Hunt, Larissa (Jason Coellner) Hadley, Alec Johnson, Dana Johnson (Porter Reim), Ruby Tai (Brian Guappone) Johnson, Benjamin Johnson, and Hannah Johnson; 13 great grandchildren; sisters and brother: Karma (Howard) Sorensen of Elk Horn, Egon Overgaard of Walker, MN, and Ebba Johnson of Omaha, NE; stepchildren: Michael Andersen, Erik (Patricia) Andersen, Linda (Mark) Griffith; many nieces, nephews, other relatives and friends.

Visitation with the family greeting friends took place on Sunday, November 16, 2025, from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m., at the Ohde Funeral Home in Kimballton. Funeral Services were held on Monday, November 17, 2025, at 2:00 p.m. at the Immanuel Lutheran Church in Kimballton.

Memorials may be directed to the Museum of Danish America in Annette’s name.

Postscript: What Grundtvig and Kierkegaard Thought about Christmas

In this issue, Ana Wright offers a reading of two of H.C. Andersen's tales to understand how he depicts Christmas. Her essay started me thinking about how Grundtvig and Kierkegaard, two towering figures of 19th-century Danish theology, viewed Christmas, particularly what it means and how it should be celebrated.

Most people think of the two men as opposites. In *To Samtidige: Kierkegaards og Grundtvigs kritik af hinanden*, Andes Holm explores the drastic differences and surprising similarities in how the two men regarded the world. He tells me that Kierkegaard "was more interested in the ethics of Jesus's birth as a model," while Grundtvig was more focused on "the human aspect of Christ's birth, how people can identify with it and discover God's grace through it." I would add that while Søren Kierkegaard challenges us to internalize Christmas, to "leap" beyond tradition into personal, transformative faith, Grundtvig invites us to celebrate, singing hymns together that unite mind, heart, and community in the joy of Christ's birth. Reading the many wonderful expressions of Christmas in this issue, it seems to me that a truly meaningful Christmas blends Kierkegaard's urging for inward spiritual depth with Grundtvig's encouragement for outward human celebration. There's little doubt that both personal authenticity and communal joy occupy distinct yet intersecting spaces during the Christmas season.

Kierkegaard was keenly aware of the dangers of empty ritual; he worried that Christmas celebrations often become mere societal routine, void of real faith. Danes are in fact born into the church, they are almost obliged civically to participate in church events, and their social activities year-round correspond to the feasts of the church. Kierkegaard argued that, as a result, many Christians merely perform Christmas rituals by going to church and attending nativity plays without letting the truth of Christ's birth truly penetrate their lives. Their observance is not authentic; rather, it is routine.

But how can we avoid falling into rote, unintentional Christmas celebrations? In *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*, he emphasizes the necessity to think about the ever-present nature of the incarnation. He writes,

It is indeed eighteen hundred years since Jesus Christ walked here on earth, but this is certainly not an event like other events, which once they are over passes into history and then, as distant past, passes into oblivion. No, his presence here on earth never becomes a thing of the past. This does not become more and more distant—that is, if faith is at all to be found upon the earth; if not, well, then in that very instant it is a long time since he lived. But as long as there is a believer, this person, in order to have become that, must have been[,] and as a believer must be[,] just as contemporary with Christ's presence as his contemporaries were. (416)

He says that we can go even further in contemplation of the birth of Christ, God becoming human, as an existential paradox and even an "absurdity" that escapes logic. In *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard offers a beautiful parable that allows us to ponder the depth of God's incarnation in Christ: God, infinitely exalted, humbles Himself to become human so that humanity can love Him freely, without fear or compulsion. To articulate what is at stake in this

paradox, Kierkegaard tells the story of a mighty King who falls in love with a poor maiden. The King faces a dilemma: If he brings her into his palace and clothes her in splendor, she might feel overwhelmed and love him out of obligation, not of her own volition. If, as King, he commands her to love Him, her love would not be authentic. To genuinely win her freely given love, the King must come down from his throne, lay aside his royal power, and approach her as an equal. For Kierkegaard, this decision is not logical, but radical, even absurd, and meant to elicit an active, personal response. Christmas is meant to inspire humanity to respond personally with an active “leap” beyond mere intellectual acknowledgement, which is insufficient, into an inward, subjective experience of the incarnation.

Readers of *Church and Life* are no doubt more in tune with N.F.S. Grundtvig’s conceptions of Christmas as an occasion for communal rejoicing and spiritual renewal. Like Kierkegaard, Grundtvig worried about watered down, lackluster Christianity.

His 1817 hymn “Det kimer nu til julefest” (The bells of Christmas chime once more) calls Jesus the “heavenly Guest,” and Grundtvig invites believers to celebrate with hearts filled with peace and good will. In the middle stanzas of the hymn, we are encouraged to move from quiet contemplation and, after attending to the “gentle baby,” express our joy with singing.

Now let us go with quiet mind,
the swaddled babe with shepherds find,
to gaze on him who gladdens them,
the loveliest flow'r of Jesse's stem.

Oh, join with me, in gladness sing,
to keep our Christmas with our king,
until our song, from loving souls,
like rushing mighty water rolls!

This joyful tone contrasts sharply with Kierkegaard’s focus on existential solemnity. The movement is outward like “rushing mighty water” rather than inward “with quiet mind.” Clearly, Grundtvig calls for a different kind of response, one that emerges from community. In other well-known Christmas hymns, however, Grundtvig calls for a personal encounter with Jesus, and he, too, puzzles over the paradox of God becoming man. In “Forunderligt at sige” (How wonderful to voice it), Grundtvig comes even close to Kierkegaard’s paradox.

How wonderful to voice it
And strange to think thereon!
The king of God’s own kingdom
Was in a sable born!
And heaven’s light and honour,
The living God’s word free
Among us walked here homeless,
A son of poverty!

Grundtvig's emphasis on tradition and community pushes the paradox out into the world to be celebrated. He attempts to root the Christmas celebration in history and Danish folk culture so that Christmas is not only a church event but also a living part of communal and national life.

Possibly Grundtvig's most complete statement on Christmas comes in his sermon "Om Julefesten" (On the Christmas Feast) from the 1840s. Again, like Kierkegaard, he emphasizes the incarnation as a living revelation of God's love and grace. It is the greatest mystery: God choosing humility, entering our world not in power but in weakness. The infant Jesus in the manger is not merely a symbolic figure, but more significantly the divine Logos entering human history—God becoming fully present, humble, and vulnerable among humankind. The incarnation is the pivotal moment when God enters time; this is a reality that links personal salvation with cultural awakening. The incarnation embodies living truth, not abstract dogma, and the manger itself signifies God's approachability—Jesus makes salvation accessible to all, especially the common people. Jesus must be regarded as a source of joyful personal, communal, and national renewal.

Kierkegaard and Grundtvig offer complementary insights: Christians need personal authenticity in their faith, and they value shared joy in worship. A meaningful Christmas may well unite both—the silent wonder of faith and the ringing bells of communal praise, especially in challenging times. I wonder what the two would say about the commercialization of Christmas in contemporary America, or how they would react to the many secularized extensions of Christian tradition into culture. Regardless, the central aspect of the depth and breadth of God's love as evidenced in the incarnation of Christ remains central for Christians individually and communally. Despite their differences, Kierkegaard and Grundtvig would most certainly agree that Christ's birth brings to our lives sentiments of renewal, hope, and promise.

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