

Cross of Christ Chronicles

Vinje Church and Its Connection to Our Congregation

I recently ran across an old black and white photo of the interior of the Vinje Church in West Telemark, Norway. As I looked closer, I noticed the central feature of the church is what we call an “altar-pulpit,” in which the altar is built out from the upper portion of the altarpiece thereby projecting out over the altar table itself. Naturally, I thought immediately of the Stone Church in its early years when the altar and pulpit were together in a similar configuration for thirty years,

from the completion of the church in 1866, until it was moved down at Rev. Endre E. Jaastad’s request in 1896.



The pulpit at Vinje is barrel shaped, just like the one out at our church and it was this main section of the pulpit that was once attached to the upper part of our altarpiece spanning the opening now occupied by the well-known statue of Thorvaldsen's *Consoling Christ*. Whereas Jesus stands in the threshold of that opening our early pastors would have taken a step or two forward into the pulpit itself in which they were actually suspended high over the altar table — not so good if one suffered from vertigo (as did Jaastad) or had a serious fear of heights.

As you look at our pulpit as it stands now, everything behind the barrel-shaped original portion — the newel post-shaped pillars, side panels, and stairway— was built to provide support, once it was detached from its altarpiece aerie. It must have been quite an experience for the pastor to ascend to the platform that reaches from the back of the altarpiece to the nearby wall, and at the appropriate moment dramatically appear in the pulpit itself. (It makes me wonder if they had curtains across the opening, but there is no one left to ask.) If you look up at this platform you will see holes along the edges which held the balusters of the long-gone railing, and the narrow notch cut into the southeast corner where the steep stairway was attached.



I realize I've written about this altar-pulpit before, but perhaps there are some who haven't heard the story, and I also wanted to share these visual examples. As I've also stated before, the majority of the early founders and members of the Stone Church Congregation were from West Telemark, especially the parishes of Vrådal, Kviteseid, Fyresdal, and Skafså. The Vinje parish is located above them in the northwest corner of Telemark and is much larger than the others. It extends northward up onto the Hardangervidda

plateau and parts of the Setesdalsheiene mountain plateaus, the upper end of the long, storied and previously almost inaccessible valley of Setesdal, just across the border in Aust Agder.



Exposure to this church by our early members could well have influenced their decision to follow its example. It and this altarpiece gets wider as it goes up, while ours becomes narrower. And isn't it something to see the pulpit up on its high perch? also has a balcony with wings on either side of the center aisle that extend almost to the front of the church. You can easily see the support columns, as well as the underside of the balcony floor at the top of the

photo.

If the vibrant color scheme and the most noticeable embellishments, including the massive pew ends, were to be removed it would look basically similar to our church in its earliest incarnation. Notice the flat, decorative, pilaster-style columns at the outer edges of the altarpiece—also quite similar except that our columns are round,

The connection to Vinje is not strong since we are aware of only three families who hailed from that remote and architecturally medieval district. I have also previously mentioned Thore Aadneson Lofto who lived on the farm just south of the church now occupied by Ben and Linda Lind, and who sold one acre of land on which the south half of the Stone Church was constructed. Thore was from Fyresdal, but his wife, Aasne, came from Vinje. They were married over here by Rev. Jensen in 1862.

At some time in the 1870s Thore was paid the princely sum of \$5.00 to cut the grass around the church two times a year, once in June and again in August. This was done of course by hand with a scythe comprised of a narrow, curved blade attached to a long, serpentine handle with offset grips (see drawing). Back in those days the churchyard didn't even extend northward as far as the first road through the cemetery so it wasn't a huge job, but the early settlers used the same tool to harvest both hay and grain, so they had plenty of practice on their way to becoming expert in its handling.

I would be willing to bet that in my younger days every farm still had at least one of those ingeniously designed and essential implements hanging from a crosspiece overhead in one of

their outbuildings. We have several including one with a stouter handle and a much shorter, broader, and heavier blade for more strength and better maneuverability when used for its intended purpose of clearing out brush. If you've ever had to clear brush, you will understand the obvious advantage of using such a scythe over one meant to cut grains and grasses. *(Continued in a future Parish Visitor.)*

— Shelley and Jim, *Cross of Christ Archives*, August 2020



This drawing of Ole Thortvedt, made by his granddaughter, Orabel, depicts the rugged and sturdy pioneer with his essential scythe resting over his shoulder during a pause from harvesting duties. No rest for the women though (just kidding) as you can see his wife, Tone, raking in the background. I will be writing much more about this worthy couple and many of their friends and family members next month.