

The English Candidate: The Rev. Mr. John Wade

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We know that the Rev. Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, by virtue of being the patriarch of the Lutheran Church in America and for some time the President of the united Lutheran Ministry in Pennsylvania, was often called upon to settle disputes in the many Lutheran congregations he established or oversaw. We know also, from numerous entries in his journals, that he occasionally was called upon to offer his sage advice in ecclesiastical controversies among members and clergy of the German Reformed Church. A case in point was the problem with the Rev. Frederick Rothenbuehler, who, in the 1760s, served the Reformed congregation in the Hexagon Church on Sassafras at Fourth in Philadelphia until he was deposed. He then led his followers out to build a new church a few blocks away, calling it St. George's (later sold to the Methodists). In 1764 Muhlenberg, along with Dr. Charles Magnus Wrangel, Professor William Smith, and the Rev. Mr. William Sturgeon, was summoned to arbitrate this division and strife among the Reformed Philadelphians.

Early Lutherans and Reformed folks, being German, frequently cooperated, even to the point of sharing houses of worship, so it doesn't seem odd that Pastor Muhlenberg should be drawn into such controversies. His journals reveal, however, that he was drawn into the middle of English Episcopal matters as well.

On Thursday, August 5, 1779, Messrs. Paul Custer and Bean came knocking on Muhlenberg's door with a request on behalf of St. James' Episcopal Church across the Perkiomen and a young man, John Wade, English born but here for six years, brought up in the High Church, a little over thirty and single. Mr. Wade had been serving several small English congregations in the Blue Mountains, but unfortunately he was not ordained. Let Father Muhlenberg tell you himself:

"They asked me to examine him. I spoke with him concerning infant baptism and the Lord's Supper, and he gave good answers from Holy

Scripture. I had him read some Latin, which he read fairly well according to the English pronunciation, but which I could not understand according to my pronunciation; he said, however, that he had not had much practice in speaking. I then had him read and explain the first verse of the third chapter of John in the Greek Testament, which went only moderately well. With regard to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Episcopal Church, he declared that he accepted them all in so far as they were in accord with the Word of God, excepting the seventeenth article concerning predestination, which he could not accept because it was contrary to God's Word. For the rest, he spoke well on the subject of practical Christianity. His and the men's request was whether he could not be ordained by or Lutheran Ministerium for service in the English Church. When he preached the last time in the Perkiomen church, the people had brought nine children for baptism, whom he had declined to baptize because he was not ordained. They requested that I send a written statement of the matter to the English congregation. I promised to do this during the next week, God willing. It is a dubious matter, however. (a) The English Episcopal congregations are now, as it were, destitute of human aid. Their missionaries can expect nothing from their Society [The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts]. (b) The congregations cannot obtain preachers ordained by bishops, unless they should be papistical. (c) Hence they do not know where to turn, and must either give up their form of government or be scattered or go over to other denominations or make use of ministers without episcopal ordination, though with the latter they can retain and propagate their *Common Prayer Book* or liturgy."

This seemed to be an entirely reasonable request. St. James' last pastor, loyalist William Currie, had resigned from his congregations in 1776, necessitating a reliance on occasional supply preachers, including Wade, who preached every fourth Sunday.

Moved by the seriousness of their plight and yet wanting to be correct, Muhlenberg looked to scripture, sought guidance in prayer, and weighed the options. His assessment of the situation reveals his theology of ordination as well as his concern for all the sheep:

“It is therefore my humble Opinion without the least pretence of prescription viz (1) that in the present Emergency a vacant Congregation might venture to accept such a Candidate if both parties please, first for probation and let him preach the Gospel, baptize their Children and instruct the neglected Youth in the principles of Religion, which is most necessary, otherwise a Congregation will dwindle to Nothing and the Lord require the blood at the hand of the parents and Rulers. But if the necessary Means of Grace and Salvation are offered and used by Preaching, Baptizing the Children and Instructing Youth, the Flock may be increased by the blessing of God. 2) If the aforesaid chief Points are settled, so that no variance and Division arise, and a good harmony subsists between the Minister and Congregation, the further Examination and Ordination may be easily obtained, if not by a Bishop, yet by a regular Protestant Ministry, which is the nearest related to your episcopal Church. For it is my humble Opinion, that in the present critical Junctures an Examination and Ordination of a regular Protestant Ministry may do as an episcopal one. And since there is as yet no Episcopal Jurisdiction established by Law in the independent States of North America, why should Congregations be left destitute of the necessary Means of Salvation, be neglected and destroyed, only for Want of an Episcopal Ordination which is but a piece of pious Ceremony, a form of Godliness empty of Power, and may be of Service where it is established by Law, tho it does not appertain to the essential parts of the holy Function itself. In the primitive Christian Church the Ambassadors and Ministers of Christ could impart extraordinary Gifts of the Holy Ghost unto believing Candidates, by prayers and laying their hands upon them, but this Prerogative is not continued and we may controvert for ever about apostolical and Episcopal Succession, Experience shows too plain, that neither Episcopal, nor Ministerial or Presbyterial Ordination doth infuse any natural and supernatural Gifts or Qualities, otherwise we should not find so many counterfeited

Ministers, refined Hypocrites, and grievous Wolves in the Christian Church on Earth, instead of true and faithful Shepherds. All Christian Protestant Congregations, which enjoy the blessed Liberty of Conscience, should be cautious and careful in choosing and calling Ministers, and follow the Rule of the holy Apostle Paul in his 1 Ep: to Timoth: 3:1-13—especially the 10 v [and] Math: 9,36, 38 [Aug. 10, 1779].”

After his initial interview with Muhlenberg, the Rev. Mr. John Wade was a frequent visitor at the patriarch’s home, sometimes for friendly conversation, sometimes to relate news—his arrangement to preach at Molatton Episcopal Church, the Swedish church in Amity Township, Berks County, for instance—or to deliver petitions from the congregations which desired his services but begged for his ordination.

Finally, in the spring of 1781, Muhlenberg sought the advice of Pastors Christopher Kunze and Henry Helmuth, who were much more familiar with the English church, and urged Wade to meet with them in Philadelphia. As spring turned to summer, Wade’s visits and anxiety increased, for he longed for a quick decision from the Lutheran pastors. Muhlenberg sent this message to the English candidate on June 8, 1781:

With Compliment to Mr. Wade I am to acquaint him, that no Answer is come from Philad. It seems to me, the Revd Gentlemen of our Ministry in Town, are afraid to comply with your Request concerning Ordination, and to interfere with Objects, belonging to the established Episcopal Church, because of the present critical Times and Situation of political Affairs. Therefore you need not come to Town, but leave the Matter in Suspence, and permit me to be and remain your humble and well-wishing Servant H: Mb.

Muhlenberg conferred with his Lutheran colleagues and Rector (not yet Bishop) White of the Episcopal Church but could only counsel patience until the united Lutheran Ministry could meet with Wade after its conference—next year. In the meantime, Wade would do well to provide the Ministerium with a written Vocation or Call from the congregations wanting him as well as a certificate that he had taken the oath of allegiance to the united independent States of America—and he should undergo a thorough examination according to the Lutheran practice.

In late August 1782 Wade approached Muhlenberg with a *bona fide* call from a church in the State of Delaware. The old man wrote out a sample call letter for him to take back. By the spring of 1783 Wade was also serving three English churches in Chester County. The need for ordination was all the more urgent! He finally was permitted to meet with the Lutheran Ministerium.

At long last, in the summer of 1783, four years after he first knocked on the door of the venerable house in Trappe, Wade was examined by the Ministerium at the close of its annual synodical meeting in Yorktown. Muhlenberg recorded in his journal on August 16, 1783, “ Mr. Wade also stopped in and desired me to sign my name with the others on his ordination certificate, which I did. After preaching on 1 Peter 5:10, 11, he was ordained in St. Michael’s Church by the reverend committee acting upon the authority of a resolution of the reverend synod, namely, the Rev. Messrs. Kuntze, Helmuth, Schmid, and Streight.”

Practical pastor, authentic Lutheran, nascent ecumenist, Muhlenberg trusted in God that the appropriate action had finally been taken. Thoughts written in his journal the summer before speak to the condition of the diasporic Church then and now:

“The visible church is divided into various parts. Every party has hedged in its part with regulations and rules and keeps within its own limits. For example, the Roman Catholic, the English Episcopal, the Presbyterian, the Independent, the Baptist, the Evangelical Lutheran, the Calvinistic, the Moravian, the Anabaptist, etc. Each part has its articles of faith, regulations, rules, and organization and considers them to be better or the best. How, then, could it be proper for a Lutheran or a Presbyterian minister to examine and ordain a candidate for an English Episcopal congregation? Supposing that the candidate agreed in every particular with the Unaltered Augsburg Confession or with the against this. But if he did not agree with the doctrine of the said ministers, then they could not declare the candidate orthodox and they would be acting contrary to their own rules, which do not permit one alone to ordain a man. This matter probably can never be solved until the church of Christ on earth again becomes one flock with one shepherd. Meanwhile it is to be regretted that various Episcopal congregations are left so deserted and wounded. The priest and the Levite go unconcernedly by until, perhaps, the good Samaritan may come and care for them.” Henry Melchior Muhlenberg was that Good Samaritan.