

# NEW SCANDINAVIA LUTHERAN CHURCH APRIL NEWSLETTER 2025



“Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless.  
Not to speak is to speak.  
Not to act is to act.”  
— Dietrich Bonhoeffer

For many in this country, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a complete unknown until last year’s release of a movie called *Bonhoeffer: Pastor. Spy. Assassin*. The movie, listed as a historical drama, focused on a man that some would consider controversial. For some people, including myself, Bonhoeffer was a pastor that was not willing to remain silent while the people around him were suffering. Unlike the movie, many, including myself, saw Bonhoeffer as one who thought about others before himself and recognized the importance of true Christian community in the face of Christian Nationalism. While the movie seemed to promote political violence, Bonhoeffer was a pacifist. As a seminary friend of mine posted on Facebook, “This film makes Bonhoeffer a hero in ways he was not and would be abhorrent to Bonhoeffer himself. It portrays Bonhoeffer as the glib American hero who stands up against the evils of his day and is driven by a faith with little depth or internal reflection. Instead, Bonhoeffer’s central concern was about the needs of his neighbor. The film did nothing to lift this aspect of his theology and his life.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer is on my mind lately as I look around the world and at this country and with the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death coming near, it is hard for me not to focus on him in this month’s article.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in what is now Poland, in February of 1906. He and his twin sister were the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of eight children and at 14 he made the decision to study theology, eventually earning his Doctor of Theology degree from Humbolt University of Berlin at the age of 21. He received a fellowship to study at Union Theological Seminary in New York and it was during his time in New York City that he encountered and created a lifelong love of the African-American church. It was during this time that Bonhoeffer became sensitive to the social injustices experienced by racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. as well as the ineptitude of churches to bring about integration. He eventually realized that he and his voice was needed in Germany and returned to his home in 1931 to teach systematic theology at the University of Berlin.

Bonhoeffer spoke out against rise of Hitler and Nazi Germany when doing so would put a person in direct line of the Nazi regime. Bonhoeffer was the founder of the Confessing Church, a movement that came about during the rise of Hitler, and who spoke out in opposition to the idea that all Protestant churches unify into a single pro-Nazi church (an “idea” that stemmed from German Nationalist). While he was given the opportunity to study non-violent resistance under Mahatma Gandhi, he eventually turned it down to lead an underground seminary in Germany, training pastors to be part of the Confessing Church.

In 1938, things became obvious as Bonhoeffer learned that war was imminent. He was particularly troubled by the prospect of being drafted by the Nazi regime as he could never swear an oath to Hitler or fight in his army, though refusal to do so was potentially a capital offense. He worried about consequences of refusing military service could have for the Confessing Church, as it was a move that would be frowned upon by most nationalist Christians at the time. It was during all this that, in June of 1939, Bonhoeffer returned to the United States at the invitation of Union Theological Seminary, but his stay was short and returned to Germany after only two weeks. While his friends in the United States strongly encouraged him to stay in the US, where it was safer, Bonhoeffer wrote to a friend and fellow Pastor,

*I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America this time. I must live through this difficult period in our national history along with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people ... Christians in Germany will have to face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that a future Christian civilization may survive, or else willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization and any true Christianity. I know which of these alternatives I must choose but I cannot make that choice from a place of security.*

Things were difficult for Bonhoeffer after his return home and after speaking publicly about his thoughts of Hitler, and his possible (though never proven) knowledge of plots to kill Hitler, Bonhoeffer was arrested on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1943. For the next year and a half, he continued to minister to those around him, including fellow prisoners and guards. It was during this time that letters written by Bonhoeffer were smuggled out and posthumously published as *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

On April 4, 1945, the diaries of Admiral [Wilhelm Canaris](#) were discovered, which outlined his intentional work against the Nazi and sabotage the regime, and an enraged Hitler ordered the execution of Canaris, Bonhoeffer, and all those believed to be part of anti-Nazi resistance. Bonhoeffer and others mentioned in Canaris' diaries were sentenced to death on April 8<sup>th</sup> of 1945. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed in Flossenbürg concentration camp by hanging at dawn on April 9<sup>th</sup>, 1945. Bonhoeffer was stripped of his clothing and led naked into the execution yard where he was hanged with five others, including Canaris, his deputy, a military jurist, a lawyer, and a German resistance fighter. The irony in it all was that Flossenbürg was liberated by US forces on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, two weeks after Bonhoeffer's execution.

Besides this Lutheran pastor standing up to Hitler, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is best remembered by his book "Cost of Discipleship," which speaks directly to the life of a Christian in a secular world and is considered a modern classic as well as his book "Life Together" which is a staple reading in many Lutheran colleges and seminaries.

While there are numerous quotes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I will close with two:

"If my sinfulness appears to me to be in any way smaller or less detestable in comparison with the sins of others, I am still not recognizing my sinfulness at all. ... How can I possibly serve another person in unfeigned humility if I seriously regard his sinfulness as worse than my own?"

—[Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community](#)

"No sacrifice which a lover would make for his beloved is too great for us to make for our enemy."

— [The Cost of Discipleship](#)

God's peace be with you.

Pastor Sara