Religious diversity, according to the conventional view, had a pernicious effect on church life in the eighteenth-century Middle Colonies. The sheer variety of sects and denominations competing for adherents, it is claimed, so befuddled the minds of the people that “many laymen no longer knew what religion to believe.” As the provincials drifted aimlessly from one denomination to another or abandoned their beliefs altogether, the Middle Colonies experienced a “shocking growth of religious indifference.”

Such confusion and drift are thought to have been especially pronounced among immigrant Germans and Scotch-Irish in the 1720s and 1730s, when a shortage of Lutheran, German Reformed, and Presbyterian ministers left the newcomers almost defenseless against the competing inducements of Anabaptists, Quakers, and other sects. The few orthodox clergymen in the region struggled to preserve traditional religion and to assert moral discipline over incoming church-people, but with no ecclesiastical structure or state authority to reinforce them, and with their meager salaries dependent on voluntary contributions, ministers were supposedly “at the mercy of the people.” Only the Great Awakening, according to this view, saved the German and Presbyterian churches from imminent collapse.1

The evidence does have a certain persuasiveness, inasmuch as both ministers and laymen at the time regularly criticized the condition of the churches. Yet such “evidence” looks different when examined closely within the conventions of eighteenth-century religious discourse. Recent studies show that early religious rhetoric was heavily weighted with
sectarian bias and shaped by hidden animosities. Eighteenth-century usage can itself be misleading—as seen, for example, in the tendency of modern scholars to translate comments about religious “indifference” to mean apathy rather than latitudinarianism, which are hardly the same thing. Another tendency, perhaps understandable in twentieth-century minds not attuned to the complex variations of eighteenth-century piety, has been to settle for the negative side of early religious commentary while ignoring abundant evidence of spiritual concern and church growth. Though religious diversity no doubt perplexed many middle-colony inhabitants, very few responded so uncharacteristically for their time as simply to reject all religion. Some adopted a latitudinarian outlook that allowed them to attend whatever house of worship happened to be located in their neighborhood. But many others responded to diversity with a positively sharpened religious self-awareness and a heightened attachment to the doctrinal uniqueness of their own denomination. Though this second response has not received much attention, there is strong reason to conclude that the devotion of many provincials to their orthodox, Old World churches, and the competitive impulse this loyalty engendered, fostered a definite surge of congregation building. This less familiar side of middle-colony religious life becomes strikingly evident in the beginnings of the Lutheran and German Reformed churches in early eighteenth-century Pennsylvania.

II

Germans who emigrated to Pennsylvania by the thousands from the early eighteenth century onward were predominantly churchpeople—that is, Lutherans and German Reformed. Because very few ministers accompanied the early waves of settlers, the German churches began as spontaneously gathered congregations. After the stresses of uprooting, transporting, and resettling themselves, these newcomers—like others before and after them—sought the security of familiar ways. The church, which offered both spiritual succor and cultural reinforcement, became a primary means of reconstituting immigrant communities in the New World. As early as the 1710s, a number of Reformed laypeople “encouraged each other to hold religious services on each Lord’s Day, etc., according to the doctrine and Church Order of the Reformed Church, as far as it was known to them.” Gathering first in houses, the worshippers read sermons, prayed, and sang together. Having no pastor to administer baptism and communion, they occasionally resorted to neighboring Presbyterian ministers for the sacraments. But by and large
such ecumenicism was resisted, since the aim of these congregations was, in the words of an early leader, “without delay to set up a pure religious worship and to maintain it by every agency possible.”

A primary stimulus for congregation building was the churchpeople’s wish to protect themselves against what they called the “allurements . . . and contamination” of the sects. In this contest the Lutherans and Reformed were at competitive disadvantage owing to their dependence on an educated, professional clergy. The sects drew their leaders from the laity, which enabled them to create congregations at will and to hold services more regularly. And indeed, some churchpeople did go over to the Dunkers, Seventh-Day Baptists, Mennonites, or Quakers, in order, as one convert explained, to prevent their children from “grow[ing] up like wild sheep,” and in view of their urge to “seek pasture and food for their souls wherever they can find it.” Most Germans, however, remained “watchful against the sects” by fortifying in various ways their own doctrinal and liturgical identity as Lutherans and German Reformed.

Bereft of ordained clergymen, the early congregations formed voluntarily around schoolmasters and pious laymen. A number of Germans in the Perkiomen Valley appealed in 1720 to a newly-arrived schoolmaster, John Philip Boehm, to serve as reader at their devotions. Still without a minister in 1725, the settlers implored Boehm to continue in that office, promising to support him with voluntary contributions to the best of their ability. Not being an ordained clergyman, Boehm at first declined. But when the people “pressed upon my conscience whether . . . I should leave them thus without help” among the ravenous sects, Boehm consented to take on the expanded role being urged upon him. Dividing the settlers into three groups he drew up a constitution that was subscribed to by each, after which the congregations thus formed issued individual calls for Boehm’s services. Boehm rode a circuit of over sixty miles in ministering to the three churches in his immediate charge, sharing authority with the founding elders in each congregation.

Other Reformed congregations were coalescing similarly in the Conestoga Valley under the leadership of a pious tailor and lay reader from Heidelberg. There, as elsewhere, each congregation elected elders who “exercised a strict and careful supervision” over the members. Though the faithful initially “gathered in houses here and there,” before long they were raising log churches throughout the region. Pennsylvania would see no ordained Reformed minister until 1727, but the voluntary gathering of congregations in the preceding decade confirms
that these people in substantial numbers would rather “be edified by an unordained teacher than remain entirely desolate of spiritual nourishment.”

The Lutheran church developed in the same manner, the history of the congregation at Tulpehocken being typical. The band of Palatines that removed from New York to settle on Tulpehocken Creek in 1723 were without a minister for several years. Intensely religious, the Palatines held services in their houses or in a fort built for protection against the Indians, receiving occasional visits from itinerant Lutheran and German Reformed preachers. In 1727 all ablebodied members of the community—young and old, men and women alike—built a church and a schoolhouse of hewn logs and rough boards. Because the people were poor, support for the church was “gathered in pennies, so that one contributed to it six pence, another eight pence, and another a shilling.” A Lutheran schoolmaster arrived from Germany that same year, and in addition to operating a school for the congregation he probably served as lay reader on the sabbath. The congregation, according to a contemporary account, “gathered themselves on a Sunday under a Vorleser out of their own midst, until they at times called a minister who distributed the Lord’s Supper to them.”

These early congregations often went for years without a resident pastor. Yet so eager were the provincials to hear sermons and to partake of church sacraments that any self-proclaimed preacher who came within range might be called into service. With no Lutheran or Reformed synods to authenticate ordination papers or regulate the acceptance of calls, false claims and forged documents were a commonplace. (Actually this was a problem that beset all professions in the colonies.) Thus a number of notorious charlatans wandered through the colonies preaching sermons patched together out of books and offering communion “for cash in hand.” One such mountebank, touting himself as the Prince of Württemberg turned Lutheran preacher, was forced out of Georgia only to turn up in Pennsylvania, where he was reported to be roving “about the whole country, whoring, stealing, gluttonizing, and swilling.” A number of German schoolmasters and tailors also passed themselves off as preachers. Such versatility could arouse suspicion, as when one vagabond wandered into a German settlement claiming to be a minister but letting it be known that in a pinch he could also serve as a bloodletter or dentist. Such stories are sometimes used to show the disarray of middle-colony religious life or the low caliber of the colonial “clergy.” But they show other things as well: the settlers’ craving for
religious leadership and denominational legitimacy, at almost any price, in that highly competitive environment.

III

One consequence of this early religious instability was that pious and strong minded lay elders became the focus of continuity and leadership in the Pennsylvania Lutheran and Reformed churches. When the first ordained clergymen finally began arriving in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, they often had trouble getting control away from the lay leaders. Most congregations were understandably reluctant to deliver themselves over to untested preachers, at least not without a conclusive trial period. Those few churches already fortunate enough to have found devout and Godly preachers—whether ordained or not—resisted all efforts by the newcomers to dislodge them. One such case was that of John Philip Boehm. Boehm had been a Reformed schoolmaster in Lambsheim, Germany, before coming to Pennsylvania in 1720. Being a man of blameless conduct, and with more knowledge of Reformed doctrine and liturgy than any of his less educated neighbors, Boehm had been the obvious choice to lead the Perkiomen Valley congregations. But when the first ordained minister reached the Valley in 1727, he denounced Boehm as an incompetent preacher who was not fit to administer the sacraments, and attempted to displace him in the three congregations. Boehm's followers resisted, and then sent him to the Dutch Reformed ministers in New York armed with a petition from his people praying that he be ordained. The petition pointed out that since the Germans lived among all sorts of "terrorists," they had the choice either of abandoning themselves to "the constant attacks of ravening wolves in sheep's clothing" or of turning to Boehm, "who was known among us as a man of more than ordinary knowledge in the sound doctrine of truth, of praiseworthy life and of exemplary zeal." After lengthy correspondence with the classis in Amsterdam, the New York ministers took an unprecedented step. They ordained Boehm to the Reformed ministry.17

A similar elevation was realized by the tailor John Bernhard Van Dieren, a native of Königsberg, Germany, who became a Lutheran deacon in the colonies. Of a pious nature, though possessing no formal theological training, Van Dieren took up school teaching in his spare time and soon acquired ambitions to be a preacher. With some vague references to having been ordained already, he began in the 1720s to
preach with considerable success throughout parts of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. The incoming professional clergy scorned Van Dieren as a "preaching vagabond," but he was vigorously defended by his congregations, which he continued to serve throughout an apparently irreproachable life. In later years the Lutheran leader Henry Muhlenberg, who had a shrewder appreciation of Van Dieren's ministry than did most of his brethren, ticked off the principal factors in its success: "the man's awakened condition, his edifying speech . . . the lack of preachers, the free American air, and the man's inner desire and aspiration."  

Muhlenberg had himself learned first hand about the "free American air" in 1742, when he arrived in Pennsylvania to find pretenders occupying each of the three pulpits to which he had been assigned by the consistory in Germany. The most irritating intruder was an old Lutheran preacher, Valentin Kraft, who had been dismissed from his church in Germany but claimed that letters from Darmstadt authorizing his call to Pennsylvania would arrive at any moment. When Muhlenberg appeared with his letters testimonial, one congregation responded wearily that "they had already been taken in so often, and who knew whether I had not written the letters myself?" The elders could not force the congregation to accept a preacher since, as Muhlenberg put it, "everything depends on the vote of the majority"; nor would "the government . . . concern itself with such matters." Lacking any coercive sanctions, the newcomer saw that "a preacher must fight his way through with the sword of the Spirit alone." Muhlenberg proved up to the challenge. Making no attempt to oust Kraft forcibly, he simply took turns with him preaching to the congregations, meanwhile engaging the elders in quiet discussion. The coarse and cantankerous Kraft made a bad showing against Muhlenberg's superior learning and dignity. But not all at once. It took Henry Muhlenberg more than six weeks to get possession of his Pennsylvania pulpits.  

Establishing the validity of his call was but the minister's first step toward gaining authority. Since many congregations had been operating for years under fairly open and democratic forms, their sense of collective proprietorship over church affairs constituted a formidable barrier to any clerical gestures toward control. Pastors had to strike a delicate balance between their sacerdotal responsibilities and the opinions of a congregation upon whose affections and financial support they were dependent. The clergyman's mettle was most severely tested when he attempted to discipline parishioners for moral offenses. Henry Muhlenberg once barely escaped a caning when he spoke privately to a
member about his wife's unchaste life. "If we come too close to their consciences," he observed, "they let loose and cry out, 'What right has the parson over me?'" Disgruntled members sometimes refused to contribute to the minister's salary. If denied communion, they threatened to go over to the sects.

Nor did the sects, which stood on at least equal ground with the churches in Pennsylvania, let pass any opportunity to defame the church clergy. They charged the ministers with materialism for insisting on fixed salaries, and they seized with glee upon any lapse in clerical behavior. Thus the German Reformed pioneer, the Reverend Michael Schlatter, thought his mother church would be best advised to send only young men "inured to toil [and of] correct deportment," who were capable of "long suffering and sympathy toward those who oppose them . . . that they may win such and bring them into the right way."

Some clergymen simply could not adjust to these rude conditions. One was the Lutheran minister Tobias Wagner, a man of irascible temperament and a stiff, unpopular preacher. Wagner had been seeking a permanent post for a year when he was sent to the church at Tulpehocken. Angered by the congregation's refusal to offer him more than one year's tenure, but unable to do better elsewhere, Wagner finally returned to Germany in disgust. As Henry Muhlenberg observed, Wagner "had no insight into the circumstances of Pennsylvania. He imagined that one could bend and force the people here . . . as in Germany with the secular or consistorial arm of the law. But . . . experience proves something different."

IV

Against such a background, what generalizations can be made about the character of religious life in Pennsylvania during the first half of the eighteenth century? That it was diverse, competitive, and volatile is beyond question. No established church dominated the landscape in Pennsylvania, as in New England and the South. The result was a kind of free market for theistic beliefs and practices that reflected almost every color in the spectrum of western Christendom. Orthodox ministers from the Old World churches found this unsettling. That some felt mightily afflicted in Pennsylvania's "soul destroying whirlpool of apostasy," as one of them called it, is surely true. But historians have for too long taken this rhetoric at face value, without being moved to unravel it to determine how diversity and competition may have affected the actual development of religious institutions.
This is one of those subjects about which numbers may tell us more than words, since the incidence of formed congregations is the best single measure we have of that most elusive phenomenon, religious commitment. The Middle Colonies, authorities agree, had more congregations per capita than either New England or the South by the middle of the eighteenth century. Moreover, the Great Awakening is not responsible for this surge, since it started in the two or three decades preceding the revival when Germans and Scotch-Irish in considerable numbers began entering the region. Nor is there testimony lacking to show that some provincials recognized the potential benefits of religious liberty and competition. Lewis Morris, among other New York Anglicans, noted how much faster his church grew in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, where people freely joined the communion of their choice “upon Principle.”

William Smith, Jr., linked the religious diversity of New York with the thriving condition of its churches at mid-century. Thomas Jefferson observed in 1781 that “difference of opinion is advantageous in religion.” Pointing to the then regularized competition among denominations in Pennsylvania and New York, he noted with approval, “they flourish infinitely.” These comments and others like them suggest that open religious competition in the Middle Colonies stimulated, rather than discouraged, church growth. Religious chauvinism may have been especially pronounced among the German immigrants, reflecting their sense of isolation and disorientation in an English culture. But for whatever reason, most Germans remained within the Lutheran and Reformed denominations, fostering their rapid expansion from the early decades of the eighteenth century onward.

Another factor that shaped German church life was the short supply of ministers, which shifted responsibility for religious leadership to the laity. With the initial gathering of congregations, building of churches, and conducting of services being largely in the hands of devoted laymen, the German churches very early took on some of the characteristics of voluntary associations. Voluntarism is a rich theme in American life, especially in the nineteenth century, but it was in the religious life of the eighteenth century that groups formed from below through voluntary association first became significant instruments for change. True, such groups could be unruly and factious; they were subject to manipulation; and, as we have seen with the German congregations, they could sometimes be worked upon by charlatans. But voluntary associations by their very nature have a way of reflecting popular attitudes and aspirations more accurately than do institutions whose order has been imposed upon them by inheritance and customary acquiescence. Thus
voluntary associations frequently achieve a kind of stability—despite surface appearances—that make them real centers of influence.\textsuperscript{34} That the German congregations could sustain themselves for years without permanent clergymen or ecclesiastical apparatus testifies to a kind of inner strength that may have been lacking in some of the more structured established churches.

For the German churchpeople, to be sure, voluntarism was not an end in itself. The element that most clearly distinguished their churches from the sects was the office of minister, and the Lutheran and Reformed congregations—even as they found remarkable resources in themselves while making do—constantly sent emissaries to Germany pleading for qualified clergymen. When ordained ministers finally began to settle in Pennsylvania in the 1730s and 1740s, they were welcomed, after some initial testing, not only for their priestly authority but because they enhanced the churches' distinctive identity in a pluralistic society. Nevertheless, their early history of voluntarism left its mark, and the professional clergy never quite recaptured the full measure of authority exercised by lay leadership in the time of troubles. The elders' insistence on hiring ministers for limited terms was one effective means of preserving some control over them; another was the laity's continued and close involvement in every aspect of church affairs.

Some ministers, as we have seen, would not compromise what they saw as professional standards, and returned to Germany. But the majority stayed on, discovering perhaps that the ultimate test of a minister's power was his ability to gain and hold a voluntary following. For as Henry Muhlenberg observed: "It means something more here in this land . . . than it does in Germany, for a person to adhere to the church . . . People here cannot be attracted to services by honor, respectability, material advantages, gain, expensively decorated church buildings, and high and manifold gifts or offices."\textsuperscript{35}

A new kind of religious institution emerged from this formative era of German church founding. Both the Lutheran and German Reformed denominations, after a difficult beginning in which much energy was expended resisting the encroachments of the sects, had by 1750 achieved an extraordinary growth. Lay leaders gradually gave way as ordained ministers arrived in America, but lay involvement would continue strong throughout the colonial era. Moreover the German churches, owing to their voluntary character and broad base, had acquired a new and unanticipated aid to both vitality and stability. That religion had flourished in the diverse society of Pennsylvania through the voluntary
participation of its inhabitants may have made some difference as Americans of the Revolutionary generation embarked on a still newer experiment that rested heavily on the uncoerced virtue of its citizens.

NOTES

4. Ibid., 162.
5. Ibid.
7. Boehm’s Life and Letters, 162.
8. Ibid., 29, 159.
11. Theodore E. Schmauk, A History of The Lutheran Church in Pennsylvania (1638–1820) from the Original Sources (Philadelphia, 1903), 435–45. In New York the Palatines had been led by the late Lutheran minister, Joshua Kocherthal.
12. Ibid., 446, 462–68.
16. Boehm’s Life and Letters, 162.
17. Ibid., 27–39.
20. Ibid., I, 65–75; quotations on p. 67. Muhlenberg also had to thwart the efforts of the Moravian Count Zinzendorf to usurp his Philadelphia pulpit; ibid., 76–82.
21. Ibid., 100.
22. Boehm reported that, if refused communion, his people denied “that anyone has a right to speak to them about their wicked life, and want to play the master”; Boehm’s Life and Letters, 267.
23. Ibid., 162.
27. Boehm's Life and Letters, 162.
30. Lewis Morris to the Secretary, New York, Feb. 20, 1712, SPG Records, Letterbooks Series A, VII, 168 (Micro Methods, Ltd.).
32. Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia (New York, 1964), 154 The Middle Colonies were frequently pointed to as the region where diversity and liberty thrived; see for example James Madison to Edward Livingston, July 10, 1822, in Adrienne Koch ed., The American Enlightenment (New York, 1965), 465-66.
35. Muhlenberg, Journals, 1, 381.