# German Evangelical Synod

UCC Histories - Part 9

Unlike the German and Swiss Reformed immigrants of the 18th century, Germans who crossed the Atlantic between 1830 and 1845 were likely to have lived through the spiritual and physical damage inflicted by the Napoleonic wars that convulsed Europe early in the 19th century. They also were affected by a long history of religious coercion by the state.

In Prussia, King Frederick William III of the Hohenzollern dynasty had united the Lutheran and Reformed traditions in 1817 into one state church—the Evangelical Church of the Prussian Union. His declaration of union included a strongly personal note: a reference to his grief that he had been unable to receive communion with his late wife because she was Lutheran and he was Reformed.

Union was defended by theologians like Friedrich Schleiermacher—then a professor at the University of Berlin—as an answer to Christ's prayer for the unity of the church. But many Lutherans in Prussia resisted this "ecumenical movement from above" and faced persecution. Some of them left Prussia and other lands ruled by the Hohenzollerns, seeking religious freedom. Traveling by ship and covered wagon, they arrived in Missouri to become the nucleus of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Proud of their confessional heritage and suspicious of theological compromise, these conservative Lutherans were not only separatist in their relations with other Protestant churches but remained outside the international mainstream of Lutheranism—a tradition that continues in the 21st century.

Other 19th-century German immigrants—both Lutheran and Reformed—were attracted to the more inclusive spirit of Pietism and its zeal for mission and reform. Many of their first pastors were missionaries trained by evangelical mission societies in Basel, Switzerland, and Barmen, Germany. These societies believed that confessional distinctions between Lutheran and Reformed should not divide the church, and—like the merged Protestant church in Prussia and other German states—adopted the word "evangelical" as a unifying term. (In Europe, "evangelical" did not suggest—as it does in the United States today—a particular kind of religious conservatism or fundamentalism, but simply meant "of the Gospel" and was a term frequently used at the time of the Reformation to describe Lutheran and Reformed churches.) With an ecumenical spirit that was a century ahead of their time, the Swiss and German mission societies cooperated across theological and national borders with both the London Missionary Society (founded by Congregationalists and Presbyterians) and the foreign mission movement of the Church of England.

## Thousands head west

Between 1830 and 1845, 40,000 Germans sailed every year for America where they joined the great migration towards the West. Most settled in Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Iowa and Wisconsin. The German Evangelical Church Society of the West (Der Deutsche Evangelische Kirchenverein des Westens), founded in 1840 in St. Louis, was a transplanted Evangelical Church of the Prussian Union.

Like the first German Reformed congregations a century before, the churches organized by Evangelical immigrants were at first led by laypeople. Although Presbyterians and Congregationalists had tried to welcome them into their existing churches, the language barrier was difficult to overcome. The German Evangelicals needed their own pastors. One of their first lay ministers, Hermann Garlichs, returned to Germany for ordination after gathering the first Missouri Evangelical congregations at Femme Osage and St. Charles in 1833. The Basel and Barmen mission societies responded quickly to the need for missionaries. Following the ecumenical pattern already established in Europe, they contacted the two mission associations founded by U.S. Congregationalists—the Congregational Home Missionary Society and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions—both of which financially supported the work of European-trained German and Swiss pastors in the new Evangelical churches.

## Anti-slavery supporters

Barmen missionary Joseph A. Rieger was one of these missionary pastors. A supporter of the abolitionist movement, he lived for a time with abolition martyr Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, Illinois and in 1837 became the first secretary of the Illinois Anti-Slavery Society. At the same time, he taught school and served as an itinerant preacher.

In 1847, the German Evangelical Church Society in the West, the Kirchenverein, produced its own Evangelical Catechism, abbreviated in 1862 by Andreas Irion. In 1848, the Kirchenverein acknowledged the key testimonies of both the Lutheran and Reformed traditions: Luther's Small Catechism, the Lutheran Augsburg Confession, and the Reformed Heidelberg Catechism. Their intent was not to coerce Christian conscience at points of disagreement by adopting exclusive confessions of faith but to affirm symbols, or expressions, of God's word. These symbols, they believed, pointed to the fundamental reality of God's love for humanity in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By 1857, an Agenda (Worship Order) was adopted and in 1862, an Evangelical Hymnal.

Among the German immigrants were free-thinking rationalists, who placed their hope in science, education and culture. Many of them were Deists. Like the Deists of the previous generation—Voltaire, Franklin, Jefferson—they rejected the Bible's claim that God intervenes or acts decisively in history to save humanity. Instead, God was an "unmoved mover" who set creation in motion and then withdrew from human time and space. They considered themselves emancipated from the church and instead found the experience of community in secular lodges, clubs and singing societies. Some were contemptuous of the new congregations that tried to hold these German frontier communities together. But they knew the value of a good education, and even many rationalists accepted the services of missionary pastors who often were the only teachers in the community.

The social and political instability of life on the 19th-century American frontier aborted several attempts to found colleges and seminaries to train teachers and ministers for the Synods of the West. A college founded by the Kirchenverein at Washington, Missouri, opened in 1858 but closed its doors a few years later during the Civil War (along with 26 others), when parents refused to allow their sons to travel to the guerrilla-infested region along the Missouri River. But Eden Theological Seminary (1850) and Elmhurst College (1871) survived and have endured with distinction.

To assure authenticity and high standards of ministry on the frontier, pastors not yet ordained who sought admission to membership in the Kirchenverein were examined as to their character and their knowledge of the traditions of "our Evangelical Mother Church in Germany." By 1850, total dependence upon men of German theological training had been relieved by the establishment of a seminary in Marthasville, Missouri, later to become Eden Theological Seminary—a school of distinctive Lutheran and Reformed union-oriented piety. The seminary received financial support from other denominations, from Germany and from friendly benefactors. The new journal, Der Friedensbote (Messenger of Peace) helped to unify the church.

## Isolation of the frontier

Naturally harsh frontier conditions, remnants of Lutheran-Reformed controversies, the arrogance (often cruelty) of the rationalists, and geographical isolation made communications, association, and mutual support urgent. Such difficulties also contributed to the establishment of free, unassociated churches and to the defection of some pastors to join established American denominations. Pietistic Evangelicals, facing some of the same conditions that New England settlers experienced and sharing with the Puritans an ascetic tendency, felt drawn to the Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Congregational leaders such as Horace Bushnell were instrumental in aiding establishment of German Evangelical churches in the West and providing them with ministers from Basel and Barmen. Presbyterians sent teachers and preachers as well.

The primary thrust of Evangelical mission was to establish churches in countryside and city and to serve the needs of the German population in areas west of Ohio. The Board of Home Missions, created in 1870, was called on to assist German-Russian immigrants to Colorado, descendants of Germans who had been asked by the Empress Catherine the Great to settle the lower Volga area. They had been promised that their language and culture would be respected and preserved. Abridgement of agreed-upon rights under Nicholas II sent the German-Russian settlers in search of freedom. They came in such numbers that the Board of Home Missions, in 1914, established an academy at Fort Collins to train German-Russian ministers and lay workers. It was closed when World War I cut off the flow of immigrants.

Evangelical churches were grateful recipients of mission society aid. Between 1840 and 1860 they responded with funds, gifts out of proportion to the church population, for the societies at Barmen and Basel that had provided pastors. At home, Evangelical Society missions would focus on needs arising among the German settlements on the frontier. Led by Louis Nollau, an Evangelical hospital was established in St. Louis, and in 1858 200 patients were rejected for lack of space. With community support, the Good Samaritan Hospital opened in 1861. Nollau also reached out to the plight of orphaned and victimized children by taking many into his own home until a proper shelter was provided for their growing number. Parochial school children would contribute pennies to their support through "orphan societies." Nollau and others went on to enlarge the mission to the young, the sick, and the aged.

At a General Conference in Indianapolis in 1866, the name Evangelical Synod of the West replaced the term Kirchenverein. A disciplined and committed natural church leader, Adolph Baltzer, was elected its first president. Two years later, instead of a meeting of the full membership, as in the Old Kirchenverein, a system of delegates, elected by district, was instituted.

As stated by Baltzer, faithfulness, obedience and discipline—along with the classical Lutheran affirmation, "Christ alone! Faith alone! The Bible alone!"—would be the guiding principles and articles of faith of the Evangelical Synod. Baltzer would recognize the ephemeral nature of organizations and institutions, even denominations, but emphasized the enduring and fruitful nature of "work done in the name of the Lord and in his spirit." Baltzer traveled thousands of miles by railroad, steamboat, horse and foot, to visit all the churches and would report, after two years, a 20 percent increase in churches and pastors, an incredible transformation in the land from frontier conditions to prosperous farms abundant with fruit and grain, and an increasing need to attend to the education of children. In 1884, the Evangelical Synod began its foreign missions in India.

Between 1857 and 1872, four unions took place between the Missouri Evangelicals and other church associations. In 1872, the major Synod of the West, the Synod of the East (western New York and Ohio), and the Synod of the Northwest (Illinois, Michigan and Indiana) united. Five years later, the denomination was renamed the German Evangelical Synod of North America. Later, the word "German" was dropped. By 1934, when the Synod merged with the Reformed Church in the United States, Evangelicals totaled 281,598, pastored by 1,227 clergy.

## The Niebuhr brothers

Reinhold Niebuhr

Two theologians of the 20th Century of great influence and acclaim throughout Protestant America were nurtured in the Evangelical Church. Helmut Richard Niebuhr, called a "theologian's theologian," wrote and taught Christian ethics at Yale Divinity School. Educated at Elmhurst College and Eden Seminary as well as Yale Divinity, his older brother Reinhold Niebuhr became the most influential American theologian since Jonathan Edwards. Pastor of a Detroit church during the difficult anti-German years of World War I, he guided the Evangelical War Welfare Commission to support 25,000 young people from Evangelical churches serving in the American armed forces. While a Union Theological Seminary professor, he wrote books of ethics and theology, among them Moral Man and Immoral Society and The Nature and Destiny of Man. He became the American exponent of "neo-orthodoxy"—a theology associated with the Swiss German teacher Karl Barth that both reaffirmed the sovereignty of God and explored the meaning of biblical truths for the great social and moral questions of the day. Unlike the "Religious Right" of the 1970s, 80s and 90s, the neo-orthodox of the 1920s, 30s and 40s did not want to wall the church off from modern secular movements. The church, they believed, should be able to absorb the insights of secular society but also free in relation to it. So the neo-orthodox, by today's standards, could appear to be liberal on social and political issues and conservative on theological issues. This "middle way" in theology and social ethics was attractive to those Christians who wanted the church to be active in struggles for human liberation but, at the same time, claim its own tradition over against the danger of a secularized Christianity. The Niebuhr brothers—Reinhold, teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York, Richard, teaching at Yale Divinity School—were decisive in their influence on the generation of theologians and pastors from the Evangelical, Reformed, Congregational and Christian traditions who joined hands in the 1957 union that formed the United Church of Christ.

Despite his profound influence on ethics, religion, politics and science, more Americans are familiar with Reinhold Niebuhr's "Serenity Prayer" than with anything else he wrote. Its phrase "one day at a time" became the slogan of Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery movements, and the first part of the prayer is probably repeated daily by thousands who have never heard of the Niebuhr brothers.

Source: http://www.ucc.org/aboutus/shortcourse/evan.htm
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