

The first 'United' church in history embraces the two branches of Protestantism

No one was satisfied with the Westphalian settlement, but the lines were drawn. Germany lay devastated, plundered by lawless armies, much of its population decimated. Commerce and industry had disappeared; moral, intellectual and spiritual life stagnated. Religion was dispirited and leaderless. A time for mystics and poets, much of German hymnody comes from this period in the early 17th century.

The German churches needed a revival. This was the context of a reform movement that changed the history not only of the German Protestant churches but eventually influenced worldwide Christianity. Whenever Christians talk about a "personal relationship with Jesus" they are (usually without knowing it) expressing the values of "Pietism"—a spirituality of the heart with both a personal and social dimension. Pietism was founded by Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705), the Lutheran pastor of a war-demoralized congregation. Churches, Spener believed, had become cold and sterile, and therefore pastorally unresponsive. His movement was a moral and spiritual reformation, emphasizing personal warmth, Christian values in everyday life and the development of Christian character. His "little churches" engendered a spirit of self-discipline—including abstinence from card-playing, dancing and the theater. But Pietism was more than a private religion of personal holiness: Pietists were often zealous both for evangelism and social reform. A similar spirituality found its way into the "Puritan" churches of the British Isles.

But Pietism itself could not erase the ravages of war. The population of Germany had been reduced from 16 million to 6 million. For lack of manpower, a third of German farmland was left uncultivated between 1648 and 1680. Peasants existed on linseed and oilcakes or bread baked from bran and moss. As the 17th century wore on, the greedy rulers of the divided German states seemed determined to live in opulent ease while fighting each other in expensive wars financed by ruinous taxation. But for some of their oppressed subjects found an escape: the new lands in North America were opening up to emigration. In small groups, thousands of German Reformed people quietly slipped away in 1709 to London and from there joined British immigrants to the New World. Many found hope in William Penn's vision of brotherly love and joined his colony in Pennsylvania. Others, many as indentured servants, settled in New York, Virginia and the Carolinas. This was the first wave of German Protestant immigration, and was the origin of the German Reformed Church in the U.S., a grandparent of the United Church of Christ.

Lutherans and Reformed join in "United" churches

As a religion of the heart, Pietism motivated many German Protestants to find a way through the sterile intellectual divide between the main Lutheran and Reformed branches of the Reformation. Early in the 19th century, proposals for Lutheran-Reformed union began to change the spiritual landscape of Germany. There were political motives, too. The rapidly expanding Prussian Kingdom was absorbing Lutheran, Reformed and Roman Catholic territories. Frederick the Great's gesture to his new Roman Catholic subjects was to decree religious toleration—a policy that was both politically useful and consonant with the spirit of the European Enlightenment. But his son—Frederick William III (1797-1840)—was faced with the problem of two competing Protestant confessions. In 1817, he pressured the Lutheran and Reformed churches in regions under Prussian rule to unite into a single state church—the Evangelical Church of the Prussian Union. Later in the century, a second wave of German immigration brought this "United" church to what was then the American frontier—the Mississippi River Valley. This was the beginning of the Evangelical Synod of North America, a second UCC grandparent.



Friedrich Wilhelm III's ecumenism "from above" created a unified Protestant church in the Prussian Kingdom.

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