

When is a Lutheran not a Lutheran?

The (German) Evangelical Synod of North America

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The Evangelical Synod of North America (1840-1934) is one of four historical predecessors of the present-day United Church of Christ. A direct heir of the 16th century Protestant Reformation in Germany, it was unique in America in that it merged Lutheran and Reformed doctrinal traditions into a united Evangelical Church, as had been done in Prussia and the other German states beginning in 1817. Although most congregations were located in the Midwest, they could be found almost anywhere 19th-century German immigrants settled.

European background

By the early 1800s, the people of Germany had witnessed warfare and destruction during the Napoleonic wars. Crop failure and famine were common. Heavy taxation and increasing industrialization were taking a heavy toll on the peasantry. Democratic movements failed to bring freedom to the population. Accounts of liberty and economic opportunity in America reached a German population eager for such prospects.

The religious situation in Germany had been divided since the Reformation between Roman Catholics and Protestants and within Protestantism itself. The two branches of German Protestantism—Lutheran and Reformed—failed to unite because of disagreements over points of doctrine. By the late 18th century, the intellectual and spiritual movements (Rationalism and Pietism) began to break down these divisions and set the stage for King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia to merge Lutheran and Reformed churches into the Evangelical Church of the Prussian Union in 1817. Rulers in other German territories also created united Protestant denominations. Although the intent was Christian unity, these efforts created a third denomination that now exist alongside Lutheran and Reformed ones in modern-day Germany. United Protestant mission societies were established in Basel, Switzerland (1815); Barmen, Westphalia (1828); Berlin (1824), and other places to train pastors for the foreign mission field.

Establishment in the United States

By the 1830s, tens of thousands of German immigrants began settling in what is now the American Midwest. Settlers arrived to find no organized German-speaking churches. The existing U.S. German Lutheran and Reformed denominations, formed a century earlier, had already assimilated to the American context and found themselves unprepared to minister to the surge of German-speaking immigrants. Appeals went out to German missionary societies to send pastors. In 1833, missionaries began arriving from the Basel Missionary Society in Ann Arbor, Michigan and established congregations in Michigan,

Ohio, and Indiana. Missionaries from the Rhenish (Barmen) and Basel Mission Societies arrived in the St. Louis area beginning in 1835 to establish churches in St. Louis, the Missouri Valley, southern Illinois, and Iowa.

In October 1840, a group of six St. Louis-area German Protestant clergymen led by Louis Nollau convened at Gravois Settlement (now Mehlville) twelve miles southwest of St. Louis to discuss ways of supporting themselves and their fledgling congregations in the midst of a chaotic frontier environment. This meeting resulted in the formation of the *Deutsche Evangelische Kirchenverein des Westens* (German Evangelical Church Society of the West). A pastors association rather than a denomination, the Kirchenverein provided solidarity for its members and the means to screen and credential clergy.

Denominational development and consolidation

Despite contacts with established German denominations in the eastern U.S., the frontier isolation of the *Kirchenverein* and cultural differences with these already assimilated denominations prevented union with them. The *Kirchenverein*'s united Protestant stance also repelled newly arriving, strictly Lutheran immigrant groups that were establishing themselves on the frontier at the same time. The *Kirchenverein*, therefore moved on its own path toward denominational development. It established a seminary (1850), began admitting congregations as members and lay delegates to its conferences, and published official catechisms, worship books and hymnals, and periodicals.

The *Kirchenverein* became the catalyst for the consolidation with several other united German Protestant groups in other areas of the Midwest. It merged with the German Evangelical Church Society in Ohio in 1858, the Evangelical Synod of the East (Indiana, northern Kentucky) in 1860, and the United Evangelical Synod of the East (western New York, north-eastern Ohio) and the United Evangelical Synod of the Northwest (southern Michigan, northern Illinois, northern Indiana), in 1872.

In 1866, the *Kirchenverein* took the name, *Die Deutsche Evangelische Synode des Westens* (German Evangelical Synod of the West), and the denomination became *the Die Deutsche Evangelische Synode von Nord-Amerika* (German Evangelical Synod of North America) in 1877. "German" was dropped in 1927.

Doctrine and ethos

Although many congregations included "Lutheran" or "Reformed" in their names, the denomination as a whole avoided confessional disputes by emphasizing what the Lutheran and Reformed traditions held in common and relied on individual consciences where the two diverged. The Evangelical Synod affirmed the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the sole rule of faith and life and subscribed to the Augsburg Confession, Luther's Small Catechism and the Heidelberg Catechism as valid interpretations of scripture, insofar as they agreed. On points where these confessional documents disagreed, churches were instructed to make their own judgments based on Scripture. The Evangelical Catechism, first published in 1847, provided a basic outline of doctrine that was predominately Lutheran in character but included Reformed elements.

Despite their united confessional position, most congregations tended to be noticeably Lutheran in doctrine, practice and custom. Congregations in Chicago, Texas, and some other areas of the country included "Lutheran" in their names, although "German Evangelical" was common elsewhere. The identifiable Lutheran element in many congregations and the frequent use of "Lutheran" in their names often led to confusion about denominational affiliation.

Institutions

The *Kirchenverein* founded the Evangelical Preacher's Seminary near Marthasville, Missouri in 1850. In 1883, the seminary moved to Wellston, a suburb of St. Louis, where it became known as Eden Seminary. It moved to its present location in Webster Groves, Missouri in 1924.

The German Evangelical Pro-Seminary in Elmhurst, Illinois, now Elmhurst College, was founded in 1871. Its original purpose was to prepare men for theological study at Eden Seminary or to become parochial school teachers. Elmhurst is now a liberal arts college affiliated with the United Church of Christ.

The Evangelical Synod operated hospitals, orphanages, retirement homes and other benevolent institutions, many of which continue to be supported by the United Church of Christ. The denomination established deaconess societies beginning in 1889. Deaconesses established hospitals and nursing schools, and they served as nurses, parish workers, and missionaries.

The denomination's headquarters and its press, Eden Publishing House (1896 – 1979), were located in St. Louis.

Missions

The Evangelical Synod established both home and foreign missions. Home missionary efforts concentrated on organizing congregations among the waves of newly arrived German immigrants in cities and frontier areas. Influenced by the Inner-Mission Movement in Germany, the Evangelical Synod established settlement houses and neighborhood missions beginning in the early 20th century. Foreign mission activity began in India's Central Province in 1883 and expanded to Honduras in 1920.

Transition to English

The Evangelical Synod and its congregations and institutions operated almost exclusively in German until the early 20th century. By the 1890s, members began expressing concern about the loss of the younger generation to English-speaking denominations. Although an English language liturgy had been published as early as 1874, the denomination did not translate its catechism into English until 1892 or publish an English hymnal until 1898. An increasingly assimilated younger generation put pressure on the denomination for change, but World War I quickened the process. By 1927, when the Evangelical Synod dropped "German" from its name, the official transition to English was complete. Some congregations continued to offer German-language worship services until well into the 20th century, however.

Mergers

The Evangelical Synod and the (German) Reformed Church in the United States merged to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church in 1934. A further merger with the Association of Congregational Christian Churches in 1957 formed the present-day United Church of Christ. The Evangelical Synod had 281,598 members at the time of its merger with the Reformed Church.

Church records

Records of congregations commonly include baptisms of infants, confirmations, marriages, and deaths. Immigrant pastors often continued the detailed record keeping practices familiar to them in Germany. The maiden names of married women are commonly noted. Early marriage records often list the place of birth of the bride and groom. Other records include membership lists, communion and Sunday school attendance, and minutes of the church council and other parish organizations.

Locating church records

No regulations govern how United Church of Christ congregations are to dispose of their records when they close. Most functioning congregations still possess their historical records, although the Family History Library has filmed those for many congregations. Check the Family History Library catalog first to see if records are available digitally. If not, contact the congregation if it is still open. Be aware that the congregation may have merged with another or changed its name. If the congregation no longer exists, contact Eden Theological Seminary Archives for further suggestions on locating records.

The Eden Theological Seminary Archives collects and preserve records of the Evangelical Synod of North America, 1840-1934, and congregations and institutions originating in the denomination to present. The archives holds original church records for some congregations located primarily in Missouri and southern Illinois. Family History Library has filmed most of them, and microfilm copies are also available at St. Louis County Library—see the online finding aid at <https://bit.ly/3fxxNfE>. The St. Louis Genealogical Society digitized records for St. Louis congregations held by the archives: <http://www.stlgs.org>. Historical information for congregations and biographical information for pastors and Eden Seminary graduates are also available at the archives. Contact: Eden Theological Seminary Archives, 475 E. Lockwood Ave., St. Louis, MO 63119; 314-252-3141, sholl@eden.edu, <https://www.eden.edu/the-archives-at-eden-theological-seminary/>.

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