

A brief history of the Evangelical Synod of North America

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The Evangelical Synod of North America (1840-1934) is one historical predecessor 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 joined Lutheran and Reformed denominations into one united Evangelical Church, as had been done in Prussia and the other German states beginning in 1817.

European background

By the early 1800s, the people of Germany had witnessed centuries of warfare and destruction, most recently by the French in the Rhineland territories of southwestern Germany. Crop failure and famine were common. Heavy taxation and increasing industrialization were taking a heavy toll on the peasantry. Movements toward democracy were suppressed by autocratic governments. Accounts of freedom and economic opportunity in America reached a German population eager for such prospects.

In religious life, Germany had been divided since the Reformation. The two major branches of the Protestant faith—Lutheran and Reformed—while much in agreement, were antagonistically divided over the key points, including the mode of Christ’s presence in Holy Communion. By the late 18th century, Rationalism and Pietism began to break down these divisions. Rationalists sought to establish religious truth through reason. Pietists, stressing personal faith above doctrine, found such divisions increasingly irrelevant. These influences set the stage for King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia to establish the Evangelical Church of the Prussian Union in 1817, a new denomination unifying Lutheran and Reformed congregations under a common liturgy and government. Similar “union” churches were later formed in other German territories. Meanwhile, Pietists established mission institutes at Basel, Switzerland (1815) and Barmen, Westphalia (1828). Both were early sources of clergy for congregations that would later form the Evangelical Synod.

Establishment in the United States

In the 1830s, tens of thousands of German immigrants began settling St. Louis, southern Illinois and along the Missouri River Valley. These new immigrant communities, isolated on the frontier from existing denominations, were often vulnerable to opportunistic “preachers” with few or no legitimate credentials. When qualified pastors began arriving from Germany, they not only faced opposition from the opportunists, they also found themselves caught between the rhetorical attacks of the rationalistic anti-religious German press on one side and the hostility of recently-arrived “Old Lutheran” Saxon immigrants on the other. The Saxon Lutherans would be influential in establishing the present-day Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

In October 1840, a group of six St. Louis-area German Protestant clergymen convened at Gravois Settlement (now Mehlville) twelve miles southwest of St. Louis to discuss ways of supporting themselves and their congregations in the midst of a chaotic and hostile 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 Lutheran and Reformed denominations in the eastern U.S., the frontier isolation of the *Kirchenverein* and cultural differences with these already assimilated denominations prevented union with them. In addition, the *Kirchenverein* very early dedicated itself to the

idea of a united Evangelical Church that avoided confessional disputes. As it became more established, the *Kirchenverein* began to take on the attributes of a full-fledged denomination by setting up a seminary (1850), admitting congregations as members, admitting lay delegates to its conferences, and publishing official catechisms, liturgical materials and periodicals. Beginning in 1858, the *Kirchenverein* began to consolidate with other doctrinally similar regional groups:

1858—German Evangelical Church Society in Ohio

1860—Evangelical Synod of the East (Indiana, northern Kentucky)

1872—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 1866, the *Kirchenverein* renamed itself the *Deutsche Evangelische Synode des Westens* (German Evangelical Synod of the West). At the 1872 merger, the denomination became the *Deutsche Evangelische Synode von Nord-Amerika* (German Evangelical Synod of North America). “German” was dropped in 1925.

Theology and doctrine

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 practicing tolerance 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 the Lutheran and Reformed views disagreed, congregations and their members were instructed to search the scriptures and make their own judgments.

Despite this unionistic confessional position, most German immigrants that made up the Evangelical Synod came from Lutheran territorial churches or United Churches where the Lutheran tradition was strong. The denomination, therefore, tended to be identifiably Lutheran in practice and custom as long as the German language held sway. This also produced a preference for the Lutheran theological position on such issues as Baptism and Holy Communion, although alternate views were tolerated. The transition to English and assimilation to American culture after 1900 corresponded to a greater denominational attraction to the Reformed theological position, culminating in a merger with the (German) Reformed Church in 1934.

The Evangelical Synod produced two notable 20th-century theologians: Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) and his brother H. (Helmut) Richard (1894-1962). Themselves the sons of an Evangelical Synod pastor, they attended Elmhurst College and Eden Theological Seminary and were ordained in the denomination.

Institutions

The Evangelical Synod operated hospitals, orphanages, retirement homes and other benevolent institutions, many of which continue their existence in the United Church of Christ. Notable early institutions were:

- The Evangelical Preacher’s Seminary was founded in 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 1925. Eden Seminary remains a school of the United Church of Christ, although students from other denominations make up a sizeable percentage of its student body.
- The German Evangelical Children’s Home was founded in 1858 in St. Louis by the Rev. Louis Nollau in response to the many children orphaned by cholera epidemics. The home was operated near St. Peter’s German Evangelical Church at 14th and Carr Streets where Nollau was pastor. In

1866, the home was moved northwest of the city on St. Charles Rock Road, where it continues to provide services as a ministry of the United Church of Christ.

- The German Evangelical Pro-Seminary in Elmhurst, Illinois, now Elmhurst College, was founded in 1871. Most early graduates went on to become parochial school teachers or to attend Eden Seminary for pastoral training. Elmhurst is now a liberal arts college affiliated with the United Church of Christ.
- The Emmaus Home for Epileptics and the Mentally Retarded was established in 1883 in Marthasville, Missouri by area pastors and lay persons. Today, Emmaus Homes continues to serve the developmentally disabled in a number of locations in the St. Charles, Missouri area.
- The Evangelical Deaconess Society, founded in 1889 in St. Louis, trained nurses and operated hospitals, nursing homes and orphanages in St. Louis and other cities. The office of deaconess was officially recognized as a vocation and consecrated ministry by the denomination. Deaconess sisters remained celibate and lived in community. Although all were trained as nurses, deaconesses in the Evangelical Synod also taught in parochial schools, served as missionaries, and became parish workers. The last deaconess was consecrated in 1949.

The Evangelical Synod founded hospitals, orphanages and other benevolent institutions in areas where the denomination had strength, including Buffalo; Chicago; Cincinnati, Cleveland; Evansville, Indiana; and Indianapolis, as well as St. Louis and many smaller communities in the Midwest. The denomination's headquarters and its press, Eden Publishing House, 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. Foreign mission activity was established in India in 1883 and later expanded to Honduras.

Transition to English

The Evangelical Synod and its congregations and institutions operated almost exclusively in German until the early 20th century. By the 1890s, some members began expressing concern about the loss of the younger generation to English-speaking denominations. Although an English language liturgy had been introduced as early as 1874, the Evangelical Synod did not offer an English translation of its catechism until 1892 or publish an English hymnal until 1898. The introduction of English-language worship services often created strife within congregations. World War I and an increasingly assimilated younger generation helped speed the transition, however. By 1934, when the Evangelical Synod merged with the Reformed Church in the United States, the transition to English—at least on an official basis—was complete. Many congregations continued to offer German-language worship services until well into the 20th century.

Later 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.

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