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Lutherans in North America

Mark Granquist

Lutherans have been in North America for almost four hundred years, beginning with an ill-fated Danish expedition to explore the Arctic in 1619. Scandinavian colonization efforts led to the first two permanent Lutheran communities, a Swedish colony on the Delaware River from 1638 and a Danish colony on the Virgin Islands from 1672, but neither was a major settlement. There were a number of Lutherans in the Dutch colony in New York in the seventeenth century, and they formed a parish there in 1649. It's the oldest surviving Lutheran congregation in the United States. Increasing migration of Germans to the middle colonies of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New Jersey in the eighteenth century brought the formation of scattered Lutheran congregations in the region, while Lutheran refugees from European wars settled in New York and Georgia. But those congregations were poor and mostly without pastoral leadership, as it was difficult to get Lutheran pastors to leave their comfortable European parishes to come to the wilds of North America. At times, colonial Lutheran congregations were plagued by failed pastors from Europe, or even outright imposters.

This situation improved in 1742 with the arrival of Pastor Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, sent to Pennsylvania by the Pietist Halle Institution in Germany. Muhlenberg quickly began to gather together the scattered Lutheran pastors and congregations into the first Lutheran synod, the Ministerium of Pennsylvania, formed in 1748. The Ministerium examined and regulated pastors, helped resolve disputes, and helped defend Lutheran con-

From the Sixteenth Century to Today

gregations from the encroachments of other denominations. Through his personal leadership, Muhlenberg became the acknowledged leader of Lutherans in colonial America, which grew to about twenty-five thousand persons by 1790. A network of Lutheran congregations stretched from Georgia to New York, with the largest concentration in Pennsylvania, mostly worshipping in German. There was also a small German Lutheran settlement in Maine and one in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia.



Monument to Henry Melchior Muhlenberg located at The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.

Lutherans become Americans

With the coming of the American Revolutionary War (1775–83), Lutherans were caught up in the conflict. Some Lutherans remained neutral in the struggle, seeing it as an “English” problem. Other Lutherans supported the Revolution and served with distinction in the American forces, a few rising to positions of leadership. A smaller group remained loyal to the British crown, and some of them migrated to Ontario after the war. With the peace in 1783, Americans began to move west, seeking new lands in Appalachia and the Ohio River Valley. Lutherans streamed westward too, depleting established congregations in the East. This was a huge problem, for the lack of pastors, poor transportation, and immense distances meant that frontier Lutherans might go years without visits from a handful of traveling Lutheran missionaries. Slowly new congregations were formed on the frontier. The distances also necessitated the formation of new regional synods, first in New York, and then in Ohio, Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas.

Another struggle for these Lutherans was the conflict over the transition to using the English language. Most colonial Lutherans practiced their

Together by Grace

religion in German, but the younger generations, increasingly proficient in English, began to urge the use of that language in worship. The struggle over this was intense in the 1790s and 1800s, but inevitably the transition occurred. Lutherans learned to worship and do their theology in English and became more influenced by the English-speaking religious groups around them. The increasing number of regional Lutheran synods meant the need for a national organization, leading to the formation of the General Synod in 1820. This group existed to coordinate the work of the synods, and in 1826 formed the first Lutheran seminary, at Gettysburg, to address the extreme need for Lutheran pastors.

In the nineteenth century, these colonial or “Muhlenberg” Lutherans expanded across America and became involved with the growth of Protestant Christianity in the new country. This was a time of religious renewal and revivalism, and American Lutherans participated in these movements, which led to questions about Lutheran identity and practice, especially concerning its core documents, the Lutheran confessional writings. Some Lutherans sought to become more like their Protestant neighbors and to minimize Lutheran theological distinctiveness. Others sought a renewed appreciation for particularly Lutheran theology and worship, leading to conflict. Lutherans were also drawn into the national battle over slavery, with southern Lutherans defending the practice, while some northern Lutherans became increasingly opposed to it. During the Civil War southern Lutherans broke off from the General Synod, and in 1867 the northern Lutherans split over theological issues and formed a new group, the General Council.

Immigrants swell the ranks

Beginning in the 1840s a great wave of immigration from Europe to the United States began, and by 1918 some thirty million persons had crossed the Atlantic to North America. Lutherans were well represented in this migration, mainly from Germany and Scandinavia, but also from Lutheran areas in eastern Europe. Wanting to use the language of their homelands, and suspicious of the older, English-speaking “American” Lutherans, these new immigrants developed their own congregations and denominations rather than joining existing ones. Thus began the multiplication of Lutheran denominations in North America during the nineteenth century, and by 1900 there were at least twelve major groups and many smaller ones. Some of

From the Sixteenth Century to Today

the differences involved language; there were German, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, and Slovak groups. But differences over theology and practice within each ethnic group led to even more denominational splintering. The largest of these groups was the German-language Missouri Synod, but all these new immigrant Lutheran denominations grew rapidly, and by 1900 Lutherans were the third-largest Protestant “family” in the United States, after the Baptists and Methodists.

For many new immigrants, their Lutheran congregations were the center of their religious, ethnic, and cultural lives. The congregations functioned in many roles, including assisting the new immigrants in their transition to American life. But the religious transition to this new country was difficult. In Europe religious life was provided (and determined) by the state;

it was a given. In the United States, religion was voluntary, and if they wanted religious life the immigrants had to organize it (and pay for it!) themselves. The immigrants were poor, and there were never enough pastors; many immigrants took the

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freedom of religion as an opportunity to join non-Lutheran congregations or as an excuse to drop religion altogether. Only a fraction of Lutheran immigrants actually joined American Lutheran congregations.

Despite all this, American Lutherans in the nineteenth century developed a rich world of congregations and institutions, including many schools, colleges, and seminaries, and social service institutions, including hospitals, orphanages, and retirement homes. The local congregations were often supported primarily by the women, who organized women’s missionary societies and religious organizations. Though these denominations were stretched to their limits just to reach the new immigrants, many of them also aspired to join the great Protestant crusade to evangelize the world. Some Lutherans felt called to mission work within America (with Native Americans and African Americans), others to missionary service to Asia and Africa; many others formed voluntary mission societies to raise funds to support these missions. Lutherans also published thousands of books and hundreds of religious newspapers intended to further the work of their particular Lutheran denominations and organizations.

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Lutherans developed this rich religious culture mostly away from the mainstream of American life, but in the twentieth century events drew them more fully into this world. The First World War (1914–1918) was pivotal; anti-foreign attitudes brought a quick transition to the use of English, while drastic restrictions slowed immigration to a trickle. Now moving quickly to the use of English, there seemed less of a need for separate ethnic Lutheran denominations, so the long process of mergers and consolidations began. Beyond this, Lutherans learned to work cooperatively through the National Lutheran Council and the Synodical Conference. The heady economic expansion of the 1920s ended with the crash of 1929 and the subsequent Depression of the 1930s, which dramatically squeezed the mission and ministries of these denominations.

Expansion and decline

After the full mobilization of the Second World War (for the United States, 1941–45), the expansion of the 1950s allowed American Lutherans to spread into new areas of the country, especially the South and West. The “Baby Boom” (1946–64) swelled congregational membership, and hundreds of new congregations were formed, many in the new suburbs. American Lutheranism hit its statistical peak around 1965, with some nine million members. Further merger activity resulted in the formation of two large denominations, the American Lutheran Church (ALC) in 1960 and the Lutheran Church in America (LCA) in 1962. With the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), these three bodies represented 95 percent of all Lutherans in America. The Canadian congregations of these groups separated and formed their own Canadian Lutheran denominations during this time period.

By the beginning of the 1960s American Lutheranism was generally fully integrated into the mainstream of American Protestant life, but this happened as the mainstream itself was beginning to decline. The 1960s was a turbulent period, with social and political tensions reaching a boiling point. Civil rights, the question of the war in Vietnam, and the push for women’s rights all wracked the country and divided denominations and congregations. The ALC and LCA moved toward some of the new social realities; for example, they began to ordain women into the Lutheran ministry in 1970. The LCMS was divided internally over many of these issues and suffered

From the Sixteenth Century to Today

dissension and division in the early 1970s, as a moderate group broke away to form the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches (AELC) in 1976.

Through the 1980s, the ALC, LCA, and AELC moved toward closer ties, as the theological and social gaps between them and the LCMS widened. In 1988 these three formed the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which represented about two-thirds of American Lutherans, with the LCMS numbering most of the other third. The Wisconsin

Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) is the largest of a number of other much smaller Lutheran denominations. The decline of old-line Protestantism in America and the rise of Evangelical groups are reflected

in the number of American Lutherans, which declined to about seven million by 2015. While the more conservative LMCS has lost a moderate number of members, the decline of the ELCA has been steeper, fueled by internal debates about ministry, ecumenism, and human sexuality. Two new Lutheran denominations have been formed by those leaving the ELCA, the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC) in 2001 and the North American Lutheran Church (NALC) in 2010.

Though buffered by the events of the last fifty years, American Lutheranism remains an important religious family within the country. It has a strong and distinct tradition of theological and spiritual life, robust traditions of worship, important institutions of learning and social service, and thousands of active congregations. As Lutheranism moves toward its 500th anniversary, it is challenged to draw on these historical resources to meet the challenges ahead.

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