

Taking Root in America

The history of the German Reformed Church in Pennsylvania begins with the story of John Philip Boehm, a lay schoolmaster from Worms on the Rhine, who settled north of Philadelphia. In 1725 Boehm formed three congregations at Falkner Swamp, Skippack, and Whitemarsh. Four years later he was ordained by the Dutch at New York.

When the Rev. Michael Schlatter arrived in Pennsylvania from Switzerland in 1746, he found thousands professing the Reformed faith. Sent over by the Dutch, he traveled constantly as a missionary through Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, New York, and New Jersey, and brought the German Reformed into an organized whole. Most of the services were held in German, though some were in Dutch or French, depending on the origin of the people taking part.

The first German Reformed convention was organized in 1747 under Schlatter's direction. It was connected with the Dutch Reformed Classis of Amsterdam, which acted as a presbytery and raised money for the American churches. These close relationships with the Dutch were maintained until 1793, when the Synod of the German Re-

formed Church in the United States of America, composed of twenty-two ministers, convened independently at Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

The German Reformed people became thoroughly attached to American ways. During the Revolution, many of their pastors were "earnest advocates of independence." Michael Schlatter, previously a chaplain in the French and Indian War, was imprisoned, and his house, "Sweetland," at Chestnut Hill, looted by the British. The Rev. Johannes Wickel, a Pennsylvania minister, found himself in hot water from the beginning of the war for preaching on the text: "Better is a poor and wise child than an old and foolish king who will no more be admonished." It is also of interest that Baron von Steuben, who aided George Washington at Valley Forge in 1777-1778, became a ruling elder in the Nassau Street German Reformed Church in New York City after the war. A few of the Reformed pastors were Loyalists, feeling permanently bound to the English crown. After Independence, the Synod exchanged greetings with President Washington, who occasionally attended English services of the Reformed church at Germantown.

It early became apparent to the German Reformed that the next generation must be trained in America and not in Europe. Hence, Franklin College was established "in the borough and county of Lancaster" in the historic year — 1787.

The French author-traveler, Crèvecoeur, wrote that he had accompanied Benjamin Franklin to Lancaster, where that venerable American patriot laid the college cornerstone. Marshall College, founded in 1838 at Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, was named after the great Chief Justice, John Marshall. Franklin & Marshall College today represents the union of these two institutions.

The Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church was established in 1825 and met successively at Carlisle, York, Mercersburg, and Lancaster, where it now stands opposite Franklin & Marshall. Other colleges came in due course, among them Heidelberg (1850) at Tiffin, Ohio, and Mission House (1862) at Plymouth, Wisconsin. The latter combines education at three levels — academy, college, and seminary — in one institution for the training of ministers, especially for those in the Middle West.

As America moved West, the German Reformed Church followed her people by sending missionaries among them. The Old Northwest was the first region to be touched in this manner, though some set out for Iowa during the 1850's.

The trans-Mississippi region was filling with settlers when other Germans — "Evangelicals," representing the Prussian Church Union of 1817 — began to come to Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Some crossed the "Father of Waters" into Missouri and the Territory of Iowa. In getting their

start on the American frontier, the Evangelicals were aided, as were the German Reformed, by the American Home Missionary Society, a Congregational and Presbyterian organization. But the first Evangelical ministers came over as beneficiaries of European Pietism, sent by missionary societies in Barmen, Germany, and Basel, Switzerland.

On October 15, 1840, six Evangelical pastors met for prayer and deliberation in the two-room log-cabin parsonage of the Rev. Louis Nollau at the Gravois settlement in Missouri (Mehlville today), about twelve miles southwest of St. Louis. There, amid rejoicing and thanksgiving, the *Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchenverein des Westens* was duly organized as a bond of fellowship. The German Evangelical Church Society of the West soon became the rallying point for pastors and people alike. Later it was renamed the Evangelical Synod of North America.

Two main streams of German immigration and churchly influence, each having its own rich historical background, have now been introduced — the Reformed and the Evangelical. The roots of both go back more than a century in Iowa history. Since the two branches united at Cleveland, Ohio, in 1934, the larger fellowship of three-quarters of a million souls has been known as the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

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