

## **Der Deutsche Evangelische Kirchenverien des Westerns The German Evangelical Church Society of the West**

By Bill Schwab

### **Events which made this movement possible**

Until 1787 the Louisiana Territory was strictly a Roman Catholic territory. Non-Catholics were not allowed to here. But in 1787 the Spanish adopted a more tolerant policy. They had difficulty getting people to settle in Louisiana and they needed people to secure and explore the land, so they opened it to everyone. Shortly thereafter it passed over into French control.

In 1803, Thomas Jefferson doubled the size of the United States by purchasing the Louisiana Territory from the French. Just as this huge land mass became available for settlement, masses of people in Germany were suffering religious oppression and were looking for a better way of life.

In the early 1800's, what is now Germany, was comprised of 39 nation-states. This area had been home to centuries of warfare and destruction, especially in the Rhineland territories of the southwest. The Napoleonic wars had brought difficult times throughout Europe. The generation that lived in these nation-states after the defeat of Napoleon in 1814 found themselves in a war-ravaged land with poverty, sickness and devastation. Historians have compared the situation to the conditions found in our southern states after the Civil War.

Crop failure and famine were common. Taxation was heavy and any attempts toward democracy and intellectual freedom were thwarted by an autocratic government. At the same time, accounts of freedom and economic opportunity in America were reaching Germany. To many Germans the prospect of leaving for a better life elsewhere was tempting. Some emigrated from

Germany to Eastern Europe, into countries like Ukraine, but thousands of them came to North America.

In religious life, Germany had been divided since the Reformation of 1517 into two major branches of Protestantism: Lutheran and Reformed. While they held much in agreement, Lutheran and Reformed church leaders and members were passionately divided over the doctrine of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper.

In order to defuse this conflict, King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia established the Evangelical Church of the Prussian Union in a declaration issued on September 27, 1817, the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. This new denomination unified Lutheran and Reformed congregations under common forms of worship and church government. The Evangelical Church became the tax supported state church of Prussia. The king decreed that henceforth the Lutheran and Reformed churches in his kingdom would work together as one. The name "Evangelical" means "the gospel church." After this unification occurred in Prussia, rulers in many other small German states followed suit.

Some church goers resisted the union, but the majority favored it. No differing standard church practices had existed to truly designate a congregation as distinctly "Lutheran" or distinctly "Reformed" anyway. Each little nation-state, some the size of our counties, had its own church administration, which was tied to the nation-state in much the same way that our school systems come under state supervision today. Each district developed its own hymnals, teaching tools and forms of worship.

Besides, Lutheran and Reformed leaders found themselves drawn closer together in a common battle against rationalism, a movement that relied on reason as the basis for establishment of truth. The rationalists had no use for the church and especially for clerics. They thought religion was a matter of science and

reason. They felt clergy fleeced the public by imposing priestly authority on people. Yet, despite the arguments against the church by the rationalists, the union church spread to other parts of Germany so that eventually thousands held to the Evangelical faith.

By 1800 a strong Pietistic movement had arisen in Germany. The Pietists were convinced that faith is more than the possession of doctrine. Their theology called for members to be involved in social change. This understanding of Jesus' message in the Bible led them to establish mission institutes at Basel, Switzerland in 1815 and Barmen, Westphalia in 1828. These institutes or mission societies were ecumenical and inclusive; they were opposed to narrow confessional differences in belief. They were not concerned about denominational affiliation or the adherence to creeds by their students. Their goal was to train leaders to go into the world to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to visit the prisoners and shelter the homeless.

While these mission societies were established to address the misery of the average citizens in Germany, when letters came from America reporting glowing opportunity and wealth and Germans began to emigrate, the mission institutes saw a need to extend their work to the United States.

### [The Migration to America](#)

When the migration began, it was like flood gates had been opened. From 1830 to 1845, 40,000 Germans left their homeland annually (600,000 in fifteen years). Many immigrants stopped at the Atlantic coastal cities, but more of them continued westward. They went to Ann Arbor, New Orleans and inland ports such as St. Louis, Cincinnati and Evansville. They settled along the rivers because of ready transportation and water. Between 1830 and 1845, forty thousand Germans settled in Missouri and Illinois alone.

They came to escape a depressed economy and an authoritarian political life. Many detested the control of the church by the German state governments. They resented government control of the rites of baptism, confirmation, marriage and burial. They were strongly opposed to their clergy being state officials. Of the immigrants who were members of the Evangelical Church, about 90% of them had previously been Lutherans and 10% Reformed.

These new immigrant communities were often vulnerable to opportunistic preachers who had few or no legitimate credentials. However, there were some devout, free-lance ministers who faithfully served these settlers.

Among the early arrivals was Hermann Garlichs, a gifted layman, who purchased a farm on Femme Osage Creek, in southern St. Charles County. Garlichs failed as a farmer and was about to return to Germany when his neighbors begged him to stay and become their pastor.

Garlichs was qualified, except for the fact that he was not ordained. He had attended four universities. He knew six or seven languages; he loved music and had some knowledge of medicine.

At their request, Garlichs remained and in 1833 organized the Femme Osage Church, the first Evangelical Church west of the Mississippi River. He also organized Friedens Church, near St. Charles, St. Peter's Church, Washington, Harmonie Church, Innsbruck, Immanuel's Church, Holstein, St. Johns Church, Cappel'n and Bethany Church at Schluersberg. Six of those congregations continue today—all except Harmonie. Garlichs returned to Germany long enough to be ordained and to get married and was soon back in Missouri.

Back in Germany, the Basel and Barmen Mission Institutes responded to appeals from the German population in the Mississippi Valley for clergy. Two students, George Wall and Joseph Rieger, were ordained and commissioned to go as missionaries to America. In November of 1836 they arrived in St. Louis, where

the population included about 3000 Germans. Wall founded the German Protestant Evangelical Church of the Holy Ghost in St. Louis. Rieger went to Alton, Illinois where he joined ministry with Elijah Lovejoy, the abolitionist, whose anti-slavery views he shared.

Two years later, Louis Nollau, the minister at Gravois Settlement, (now Mehlville) sent out an invitation to a number of German Evangelical ministers to meet at Gravois in order to organize various small congregations into some type of fellowship to overcome the solitude and isolation which plagued the immigrants. Six men were present, among them Herman Garlichs of Femme Osage. At this meeting *Der Deutsche Evangelische Kirchenverein des Westens* was formed.

The first decade in the life of *Der Kirchenverein* was filled with difficulties and discouragement. Many members feared a bureaucratic church government similar to the one they had left in Germany. Other immigrants had trouble adjusting to a church without the fiscal support and sanction of the state. They were not used to supporting the church with voluntary offerings. They missed some of the status which came with belonging to the official state church.

*Der Deutsche Kirchenverein* group was a minority movement even among the Germans. It was an alternative to the more dogmatic approach to Protestantism held by orthodox Lutheranism. Many early Evangelical Churches in the United States split since there was no longer a king decreeing that they stay together. For example, in Washington, a group left St. Peter's Evangelische Kirche to form Immanuel Lutheran Church. The group that left was longing for more clearly articulated doctrines and norms than was typical of the Evangelical movement.

On another front, the evangelical movement in America was pressed by the rationalists or *Frei Denkers*. The Free Thinkers were children of the Enlightenment, steeped in rationalism and a scientific awareness that regarded the

matters of faith as superstitious. The rationalists did not believe in the divinity of Jesus. They basically believed the gospel had no power. In extreme cases, Evangelical pastors were attacked in their homes by the rationalists because of what they preached.

Scoffers appeared at church meetings to embarrass and run off clergy. Some pastors left areas for fear of their families' safety. A keg of wine was found in a pulpit one Sunday with a note attached: "We can have wine at the tavern, we don't need it at the Lord's Table." The church in Marthasville was burned by rationalists while it was under construction.

The book Builders of our Foundations by Henry Bode gives this account: "On one occasion there was a great wedding at the little village of Femme Osage, to which many guests had been invited. The pastor and his family were also there. From one of the neighboring towns had come a man who, inwardly at least had no wedding garment. He was a graduate of a European university, but gone to seed, shiftless in his habits, and a scoffer who knew all about the so-called higher criticism, which boasts that the Bible had been done away with. In the pride of his unbelief he was eager to challenge the positive faith of Pastor Bode, although his acquaintances warned him against such an undertaking. Nevertheless, emboldened by liquor, he believed himself fully able to win the victory. So he went into the room where the pastor was engaged in conversation and introduced himself with the blunt words: 'perhaps you know, pastor, about the higher criticism which has put the Bible on the shelf as an ancient book that can no longer be relied on as the source of true religion.'

"Pastor Bode could be lenient in many things, but never when the authority of God's Word was questioned. At first, being hard of hearing, he did not fully catch the intention of the speaker. When he fully understood, however his very soul was stirred. He eyed the man keenly and bystanders noticed that the pastor's

anger was thoroughly aroused. Slowly he arose to face the scoffer and with impassioned voice and the authority of genuine conviction hurled at him such an invective that he was utterly annihilated. When the pastor had finished, the poor fellow picked up his hat and sneaked out like a licked dog to look of his horse. Some men standing outside called after him ‘We told you so!’ but he had nothing more to say, and merely whipped up his horse and galloped home. For such bold and fearless witnessing of the truth the people loved and revered their pastor.”

In the Pietist tradition, the Evangelicals in Missouri believed the practice of faith was primarily a matter of the heart. They held that all people are creatures of God, dependent upon God and standing in need of redemption and of a guidance that is higher than human wisdom. They also did not think they had to protect God by formulating strict creeds and practices. Their faith was expressed unpretentiously in simple prayers like: “Come Lord Jesus, be our guest and let this food to us be blessed.” They were pietists.

Politically, the Evangelicals were largely Republican because they were anti-slavery and were opposed to the miscegenation laws. Some congregations would not allow slave owners to be members.

### **The Founding of a Seminary**

A few years after the establishment of *Der Kirchenverein des Westens*, there was a growing concern about the source of additional pastors. The German population was increasing rapidly. The Evangelicals insisted on an educated clergy, so they imported many clergy from Europe—many from the Basel and Barmen missionary societies. But many of these men were not equipped to handle what they found on the frontier; they wanted to go home. Early on, most training of local pastors was not formal, but occurred at the side of an experienced pastor.

In 1845 The Church Society of the West appointed a committee to consider every way possible to support young men desiring to enter the ministry.

Eventually, this led to founding a school for pastors in Marthasville in 1850 on land donated by the Nienkamp family. Eight students comprised the first seminary class, including one Methodist and one Mennonite. It took five years to complete the course of study.

During this same period scores of colleges were established on the western frontier. In 1858, *Der Kirchenverein* attempted to develop a college at Marthasville as a preparatory school for the seminary. The Missouri Pacific Railroad came to Washington that year. The Washington depot was only six miles from the Marthasville location and prospects looked good for a successful college. In its second year the college enrolled eighteen students. But with the beginning of the Civil War attendance dropped off. Skirmishes fought in Union and the burning of the Washington depot discouraged enrollment. By 1862 only five boys appeared for spring semester classes and the school was discontinued. Out of 85 colleges previously established in Missouri, only eight survived the Civil War. However, Marthasville Seminary served the church until 1883 when it was moved but not disbanded.

### *Der Friedensbote*

In 1850 the Kirchenverein began publishing a newspaper called *Der Friedensbote or Messenger of Peace*. The title page included the text from Ephesians Chapter Four, verse 3, "Eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." This came to be adopted as the motto of the society. *Der Friedensbote* was a very successful weekly journal. It became a profitable source of financial support for a strong missionary program both in this country and abroad.

Over the course of the next forty years, German groups and societies banded together in *Vereins*. *Der Friedensbote* played a major part in the *Vereins* becoming acquainted with each other. Because these groups held so much in

common, they united in 1872 and adopted the name The Evangelical Synod of North America.

With the formation of the Evangelical Synod there was a demand that the seminary be in a less secluded place than Marthasville. Efforts were made by the citizens of Washington to have the seminary moved there since the community was on the rail line, but the seminary was eventually moved to St. Louis County, on St. Charles Rock road. In 1924 it was moved again, to Webster Groves, where it continues today as Eden Theological Seminary.

A private high school for boys and girls was established in Washington by the Evangelical Church in 1887 after an attempt to form a public school failed. Students came from neighboring communities and boarded in people's homes so they could attend school. In 1900, a school levy was finally passed, so the church trustees closed the school and sold it to the public school district. The Evangelical High School is still in use as the administration building of the Washington Public Schools.

### [The Evangelical Synod of North America](#)

The synod soon created boards to oversee home and foreign missions. Synod-sponsored mission work was begun in India in 1884 and in Honduras in 1921. These were primarily medical missions

The Evangelical Synod was especially concerned about orphans, the aged and invalids, but the poor in the Ozarks also received help from the Synod. About 3500 acres of land was purchased in Shannon County and local farmers were trained in how to produce crops there. One of the largest crops was strawberries which were shipped to St. Louis. This business venture was successful until air transportation made it easier to fly in strawberries from warmer climates than to grow them in Missouri.

Locally, the Synod established the Emmaus Home on the former Marthasville Seminary site. Its original mission was “to care for epileptics and feeble-minded persons.” Now it provides residential care for adults with developmental disabilities. The German Protestant Orphanage was founded on St. Charles Rock Road in St. Louis County where it continues today as The Evangelical Children’s Home or Every Child’s Hope. The Good Samaritan and Deaconess Hospitals were founded in St. Louis. In addition, several settlement houses were established throughout St. Louis to acclimate immigrants to their new land.

### The Form of Government

The congregations of the Evangelical Synod were autonomous churches. Each had its own governing council. Whatever authority the synod had was derived from the consent of the churches. Each congregation was left largely to attend to its own immediate business and the Synod acted only in an advisory capacity. Church members believed in the freedom of the individual and the responsibility of each person to make decisions.

### Architecture

The Germans brought their architectural design for churches with them from Germany. Their buildings were made of local materials. Many of them were frame or rock hewn from the hillsides. Outside they were rather plain with a little detail work on the stones or bricks and, often, saw-tooth boards for the gables. Roosters or crosses were usually placed atop the steeples. If churches were close to each other the first church was typically called St. Peter’s, the second St. Paul’s and the third St. John’s. Friedens or Peace was another common name, reflecting the contention they sought to overcome.

On the interior there was typically a high central pulpit declaring the centrality of the Word. There would be a small altar with cross and candles and

often a frieze painted on the wall behind the altar. The baptismal font was present, but was not given much prominence. The Sacrament of Holy Communion was served four times a year from the altar. Music was a very important part of worship. Music from the great German composers became a part of the life of the worshipping congregations. Pastors wore academic robes as a sign of an educated clergy.

Current Franklin County churches with roots in The Evangelical Synod are:

Pilgrim, Labadie	Zion, Union	St. John's, Washington
Zion, Oakfield	St. Peter's, Washington	St. Peter's, New Haven
St. John, St. Clair	St. Paul's, Gerald	St. Paul's, Stony Hill
Catawissa Union Church	Ebenezer, Gerald	St. Jordan's, Jeffriesburg
St. John's, Casco		

The Evangelical Synod of North America existed for only about 65 years. In 1937 it merged with the German Reformed Church to become The Evangelical and Reformed Church. In 1957 this denomination merged with the Congregational-Christian Churches to form the United Church of Christ.

Some of the more famous people from this area that came from this tradition include: Reinhold Niebuhr. He grew up in Wright City and went on to become the greatest theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century according to many historians. The Serenity Prayer is attributed to him.

Harold Wilke, who grew up in Washington, was instrumental in the passage of the Americans with Disability Act. Born without arms, he attended school here in Washington and graduated from Union Seminary in New York City.

Helen Nahm is a native of Augusta. She graduated from the University of Missouri in Nursing. She went on to become a professor at the University of Southern California where she established the first Doctor of Nursing Program in the United States. A building at USC bears her name.

Lloyd Pfautsch grew up in Washington, went to seminary and became well known as a church musician. He wrote countless choir anthems and taught for many years at Southern Methodist University.