

The Diaspora District of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church

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After World War I an attempt was made in Poland to unite the Protestant minority churches into an ecclesiastical organization. Opposition arose, however, from various quarters.¹ Especially the provincial churches in Silesia, Pommerania, and Posen, which formerly belonged to the Evangelical Church of the old Prussian Union, resisted being put under the control of the Warsaw Consistory. On the one hand, they were unwilling to give up their close ties to the German state churches. On the other hand, they emphasized their special confessional character as united churches, which made their merger with all the rest of the Protestants in Poland impossible.

Within the Evangelical Augsburg Church in Poland also, the planned new church arrangement led to tensions. At the constituting synod of this church, which met from June 20, 1922, to April 10, 1923, the conflict between the Polish and German groups came out into the open. The Polish group under the leadership of General Superintendent Julius Bursche succeeded in passing a draft of basic regulations. But this resulted in even stronger opposition on the part of the other group.² After this, the conflicts, which had political ramifications, were brought more and more into the congregations as well. Among others, a group of confessional Lutherans in the city of Lodz resisted this development.³

In the year 1920, the Lodz Lutherans contacted an aid committee of the Lutheran synods in North America. In 1922, the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod⁴ sent Pastor Otto Engel as its representative to Poland. He was to gather information about the ecclesiastical and economic conditions of the Lutherans there.⁵ After a ten-month exploratory visit, Pastor Engel returned to America in the fall of 1922. Especially in Lodz he had succeeded in sharpening confessional consciousness among some Lutherans. The old Superintendent W. Angerstein was still living there at that time. Even before the turn of the century he had worked in behalf of

¹For what follows cf.: W. Gastpary, *Bischof Bursche and die polnische Sache* (Berlin, 1979), pp 87ff; A. Wantula, *Die Evangelisch-Augsburgische Kirche in Polen* (Warszawa, 1965); E. Kneifel, "Julius Bursche" in *Religion in Geschichte and Gegenwart* I, col. 1532; G. Malschner-Maliszewski, *Die Evangelisch-lutherische Bekenntniskirche in der Diaspora* (from U. Kunz, *Viele Glieder—ein Leib*, Stuttgart, 1953), separately published (Frankfurt [M.], 1953), pp 27ff.

²Gastpary, *op. cit.*, p 100; Malschner-Maliszewski, *op. cit.*, p 27.

³Malschner-Maliszewski, *loc. cit.*; Horwitz, *op. cit.*, p 93.

⁴The Wisconsin Synod was founded in 1850 by German immigrants in the US state of Wisconsin. In 1893 [1892] it merged with the Synods of Michigan and Minnesota. Since 1918 [1917] it has been called "The Ev. Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States." From 1871 [1872] to 1963 it was in close association with the Missouri Synod in the Ev. Lutheran Synodical Conference. Cf. *Die lutherischen Kirchen in der Welt in unseren Tagen*, by A. T. Jorgensen, A. R. Wentz, and P. Fleisch (Leipzig, 1929), pp 194f.

⁵*Die Evangelisch Lutherische Freikirche, Zeitschrift zur Belehrung and Erbauung*, Zwickau, 1876-1941, Vol 47 (1922), p 47.

Lutheran confessionalism and had carried on close contacts with the confessionally faithful Lutheran synods of North America.⁶

In view of the efforts in behalf of a united Protestant church and the growing political character of the congregations, the confessional Lutherans in Lodz reached the decision to establish a Lutheran free church faithful to the Confessions. The initiative was taken especially by the Christian Fellowship⁷ preacher, Gustav Malschner-Maliszewski, in Lodz. Malschner-Maliszewski was influenced by publications of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church in Saxony and Other States to work for a renewal of the church according to the Lutheran Confessions. Pastor O. Engel persuaded him to improve his theological knowledge by going to the theological school of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church in Kleinmachnow [then known as Zehlendorf] near Berlin for several months of study. Malschner-Maliszewski then declared his withdrawal from the Christian Fellowship and at the beginning of 1923 went to Kleinmachnow. There doctrinal discussions were held with representatives of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church, in which full doctrinal agreement was established.⁸

Early in June 1923 Malschner-Maliszewski returned to Poland and began to hold Lutheran services in private quarters in Lodz. At the beginning of 1924 he, together with 40 Lutherans who had left the Evangelical Augsburg Church, founded the Evangelical Lutheran St. Paul's Congregation of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession in Lodz.⁹ This congregation held its first public service May 11, 1924, in Lodz.¹⁰ After Pastor Engel returned from America in June 1924, G. Malschner-Maliszewski was ordained on August 3, 1924, in Lodz as pastor of the separated Lutheran congregation.¹¹ Already on August 17, 1924, a second separated congregation was established in the nearby town of Andrespol.¹² The two congregations formed the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Poland, which attached itself closely to the Wisconsin Synod.¹³ When Pastor Engel left Poland again in 1925, the Wisconsin Synod sent Pastor Adolf Dasler as his replacement.

The Lutheran Free Church in Poland experienced further growth when the city missionary August Lerle withdrew from the Evangelical Augsburg Church in 1926/27 and joined the Free Church. After passing a colloquy, A. Lerle was ordained and installed as pastor in Andrespol on February 20, 1927.¹⁴

In the summer of 1927 the Ev. Lutheran Free Church in Poland had, in addition to the two congregations previously mentioned, ten preaching stations, which were served by the three pastors, Malschner-Maliszewski, Dasler, and A. Lerle. At the same time six students from Poland went to study at the theological seminary of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church in Kleinmachnow.¹⁵

⁶J. Szeruda, "Polnische Prot. Theologie," in RGG³ V, col. 434.—J. Forchheim, *Chronik des Diasporabezirkes der Ev.-Luth. Freikirche*, 1945-1965, mimeographed, p 2. Cf. also our book, Ch. V, C,8.

⁷Christian Fellowship was a group of believers who belonged to the Evangelical Augsburg Church but who had their own places of worship, services, preachers, and mission seminary (translator).

⁸*Freikirche*, Vol 49 (1924), p 135.—Cf. Malschner-Maliszewski's own report in *Die Ev.-Luth. Freikirche in Warthegau* [the part of Poland seized by Germany in World War II], a monthly, Lodz, 12 (1941), No 3, p 2.

⁹A request for a license submitted to the Ministry of Culture in Warsaw was granted March 26, 1924. Cf. *Freikirche*, *loc. cit.*

¹⁰This date is considered to be the official founding date. Cf. Malschner-Maliszewski, *op. cit.*, p 27; Horwitz, *op. cit.*, p 93.

¹¹*Freikirche*, Vol 50 (1925), p 32. [Prof. Joh. P. Koehler of the Wisconsin Synod's seminary in Wauwatosa, who was doing research in Europe at that time, performed the ordination. He was assisted by his son, Pastor Kurt Koehler, and by Pastor Otto Engel (*Durch Kreuz zur Krone, Kirchenblatt der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Bekenntniskirche*, Vol 25, No 5, [May 1974], p 2). A report in the 1925 Wisconsin Synod *Proceedings*, p 67, states, however, that Pastor Engel performed the ordination, assisted by Prof. Koehler and his son, Kurt (translator)].

¹²*Ibid.* The congregation consisted originally of 30 members.

¹³Malschner-Maliszewski, *op. cit.*, p 28.

¹⁴*Freikirche*, *loc. cit.*; cf. A Schlender, "Bezirkspraeses Pastor August Lerle zum Gedächtnis," in *Ev. Luth. Volkskalender*, 1966, pp 67ff.

¹⁵*Freikirche*, *loc. cit.*

In 1929 Pastor William Bodamer came to Poland. The Wisconsin Synod sent him to serve as director of the work in the mission field. Beginning in 1930, Bodamer published *Die Evangelisch-Lutherische Freikirche in Polen* as the periodical of the Free Church congregations.¹⁶ At the beginning of 1940, 20 congregations with 12,000 members belonged to the Lutheran Free Church in Poland. They were served by eight pastors.¹⁷ The end of World War II brought the dissolution of all the congregations of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church in Poland. Their members were scattered throughout both East and West Germany.

As early as the end of January 1945 a number of pastors from Poland met with District President August Stallmann in Zwickau-Planitz. Since many congregations in the Ev. Lutheran Free Church [in Germany] lost their pastors as a result of the war, the pastors [from Poland] declared their willingness to help out. Some of them were sent to the districts of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church in West Germany. Pastor Helmut Schlender had already since 1944 been helping out in the Schoenfeld parish (Zschopautal). Pastor A. Lerle took over the congregations in Altengesees and Lothra, which had been vacant since 1943, while Pastor Malschner-Maliszewski served the congregations in Lengenfeld and Plauen.¹⁸

In June 1945 Pastor Malschner-Maliszewski moved to Memmingen (Allgau). From there he organized the reconstruction of his church in the territory of the later Federal Republic. On February 22, 1946, the pastors of the Western occupied zones met for a conference in Memmingen. They decided to reorganize the Ev. Lutheran Free Church in Poland under the name Ev. Lutheran Refugee Mission Church. The leadership was entrusted to Pastor Malschner-Maliszewski as president.

In April 1951 the name of the church was changed to the Ev. Lutheran Confessional Church in the Diaspora.¹⁹ By 1952 about 15,000 immigrants from Poland had been gathered into about 30 congregations, which were served by ten pastors.²⁰ From the beginning of the '50s the Refugee Mission Church and the Ev. Lutheran Free Church as well as the Old Lutheran Church were in church fellowship with one another.²¹ On January 1, 1976, the Ev. Lutheran Confessional Church merged with the Independent Ev. Lutheran Church [SELK] in the Federal Republic, which had come into being on June 25, 1972. At the end it still had 23 preaching stations, which were served by four pastors and four emeriti.²²

The reorganization of the Polish Free Church in the territory of the later DDR [German Democratic Republic] took an entirely different course. In addition to helping out in the congregations of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church, the pastors made efforts to ascertain where the members of their former congregations were now living. Pastor A. Lerle was the first to make contact with former members of the Polish Free Church. He appealed therefore to the Ev. Lutheran Free Church to have their existing congregations take up the immigrants from Poland as members. And this did indeed happen where the immigrants settled near such congregations.²³

¹⁶*Die Evangelisch-Lutherische Freikirche in Polen*, a monthly, edited and published by Pastor W. Bodamer, Lodz, 1930ff. Beginning in 1939, published by Pastor G. Malschner-Maliszewski under the name *Die Ev.-luth. Freikirche im Warthegau*.

¹⁷The pastors were: A. Lerle (Wola Mlocka), G. Malschner-Maliszewski and Henry Mueller (Lodz), A. Reit (Andreapol), Armin Schlender (Skrzypkowo), Helmut Schlender (Petrikau), Alfons Wagner (Stavenshagen), and Leopold Zielke (Karolinow). Cf. *Freikirche*, Vol. 65 (1940), pp 59f; Malschner-Maliszewski, *op. cit.*, p 28.

¹⁸Forchheim, *Chronik des Diasporabezirkes*, p 4.

¹⁹Malschner-Maliszewski, *op. cit.*, pp 28f, The phrase "in the Diaspora" was dropped in 1960.

²⁰*Ibid.*; Ev. Luth. Volkskalender, 1953, pp 102f.

²¹There was no fellowship with the Independent Ev. Lutheran Church (in Hesse and Lower Saxony) then or later because no agreement was reached on whether it was right to establish a new Lutheran free church in the territory of another Lutheran free church. Cf. Horwitz, *op. cit.*, p 94; H. Kirsten, *Einigkeit im Glauben und in der Lehre* (Grosz Oesingen, 1980), pp 110, 140.

²²*Ev. Luth. Volkskalender*, 1975, pp 88, 92ff.

²³In part the immigrants were also directed to congregations of the Old Lutheran Church, as, for example, in Weiszenfels, where a new congregation comprised especially of immigrants from Lodz was formed. Cf. Forchheim, *Chronik des Diasporabezirkes*, pp 8, 12.

A large number of the former members of the Polish Free Church had, however, settled in the northern part of the later DDR, where there were no congregations of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church. It was impossible for the Refugee Mission Church to minister to these members because all contact across the borders of the occupied zones was blocked. So Pastor A. Lerle decided to undertake personally to gather the immigrants in the Soviet zone of occupation. He believed it would be better to do this work under the mandate and aegis of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church instead of establishing a new church as in the zones of the West. The Ev. Lutheran Free Church assured him of the necessary support.²⁴ For the first, Pastor August Lerle was to remain as pastor of the Altengesees congregation, but on occasion in longer journeys he was to gather the immigrants and minister to them spiritually. In the period from September 1946 to October 1947 Pastor A. Lerle made eight so-called "mission journeys," especially through the northern territories of the later DDR.²⁵ He succeeded in contacting 4000 members. In the years 1948/49 these united to form 14 congregations in five parishes.²⁶ Church buildings and parish houses of the Evangelical state churches were used for worship services and official acts.²⁷

At first Pastor A. Lerle hoped to affiliate the newly organized congregations with the Saxon District of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church. The Saxon district president was to take over the supervision of the entire work. Since this not seem advisable because of the great distances involved and the overburdening of the district president, A. Lerle proposed that a separate diaspora district of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church be created. In a consultation with President Heinrich Petersen of Berlin and District President A. Stallmann in June 1945, this proposal was approved. The five parishes then united to form the Diaspora District of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church. A. Lerle was elected as district president.²⁸

This did not mean, however, that all unclarities regarding the constitutional status of the new district had been settled. At the 56th synodical convention of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church in Berlin, August 27-30, 1950, the minutes stated that Pastors "Lerle and Rachner of the Diaspora Mission in Germany" were greeted as guests. President A. Lerle objected to this designation.²⁹ He was given the explanation that a misunderstanding must have crept in. According to the constitution of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church, only the reception of individual congregations or persons into the church was possible, not the admission of whole districts.³⁰

Before the next synod convention the congregations and pastors of his district should therefore submit a written application for membership together with their congregational constitutions and a declaration of their agreement with the church's constitution. At the same time a petition should be made to form a separate district on the basis of their geographical situation and their special circumstances.³¹

²⁴This was necessary in order to get a travel permit. Cf. *op. cit.*, pp 4f.

²⁵The 1st journey, September-October 1946: Mecklenburg; 2nd journey, November 1946: Mecklenburg; 3rd journey, January-February 1947: Jueterbog, Luckenwalde, Weiszenfels; 4th journey, March 1947: Weiszenfels; 5th journey, Easter 1947: Mecklenburg; 6th journey, June 1947: Luckenwalde, Jueterbog, Weiszenfels; 7th journey, end of July 1947: Altmark; 8th journey, September-October 1947: Mecklenburg, Mark Brandenburg, Weiszenfels. Cf. Forchheim, *op. cit.*, pp 5ff.

²⁶These parishes were: 1. Mecklenburg (Hohen Pritz), 269 members, Pastor A. Lerle of Halle; 2. Altmark (Giesenlage, Danstedt), 334 members, Pastor Dr. Ernst Lerle of Halle; 3. Jueterbog and Heinsdorf, 455 members, Pastor Helmut Schlender of Jueterbog; 4. Prignitz (Koetzlin, Dabergotz, Damerow, Krampfer, Bad Wilsnack), 573 members, Pastor Waldemar Schmidt of Kuhblank; 5. Sernow (with Grafendorf, Schlenzer, Nonnendorf), 591 members, Pastor A. Lerle of Halle. Cf. Forchheim, *op. cit.*, pp 24f.

²⁷The relationship to the Evangelical Church of the Union was regulated, for example, as a result of a discussion regarding ministry with General Superintendent Dr. Braun of Potsdam at Luckenwalde on April 20, 1949. Cf. Forchheim, *op. cit.*, p 15.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p 17.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p 18.

³⁰Cf. the Constitution and Bylaws of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Saxony and Other States of the year 1926/27, Zwickau, 1927, p 21.

³¹To this Pastor A Lerle protested, "This report astonishes me. I could not really understand it. Our members and congregations are of the firm conviction that they have been members of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church for years already and will not readily understand why they should submit applications for membership in the same" (*op. cit.*, p 19).

The applications were not yet submitted by the time of the next synod convention in 1952. For that reason the reception of the congregations of the Diaspora District did not take place until the district convention of the Saxon District, May 31 to June 1, 1953, in Leipzig. The 58th synodical convention of the Ev. Lutheran Free Church in Grosz Oesingen in 1954 took cognizance of the report concerning the reception that resulted.³² The first joint district synod of the Saxon and Diaspora Districts took place in Dresden, June 10-12, 1955. Since then the two synods, [i.e., district conventions] as a rule meet jointly.

In the Diaspora District the '50s were marked by a great migration of members of the congregations. From 1953 to 1956 the membership dropped from 2222 to 1485.³³ In the mid '60s a noticeable improvement in the way the congregations were served could be achieved through the fact that four young pastors were received. In the six parishes at that time 1296 members in all were cared for.³⁴

On February 9, 1965, District President August Lerle died in Halle. In June of the same year his son, Prof. Dr. habil. Ernst Lerle of Halle became his successor as district president. After his retirement in March 1981, Vice President Johannes Wilde of Kleinmachnow took over the leadership of the district. In 1980 a total of 987 members belonged to the Diaspora District, who were grouped into four parishes and were served by four pastors.³⁵

Translator's Addendum

President Gerhard Wilde of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in his presidential report to the 78th convention of the church in 1991 stated that there are now 483 souls in the Diaspora District. They are served by three pastors: Johannes Wilde, Helmut Kaufmann, and Artur Ortel. The Saxon District has 1675 souls and 14 pastors, two of whom are retired. Two WELS missionaries, John Sullivan and Harris Kaesmeyer also serve the church.

For further information readers are referred to the chapter, "A Battle for Confessionalism—Missions in Europe," in *To Every Nation, Tribe, Language, and People, A Century of WELS World Missions* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1992), pages 67-97.

³²Forchheim, *Chronik des Diasporabezirks*, pp 24f.

³³*Ibid.*, p 25.

³⁴*Ibid.*, pp 30f. By the pastors: J. Wilde (Kleinmachnow), H. Kaufmann (Jueterbog), R. Seyboth (Potsdam), J. Forchheim (Luckenwalde), A Ortel (Dahme), and E. Boehm (Neuruppin).

³⁵President's report to the synodical convention in Karl-Marx-Stadt, 1980. Cf. *Ev. Luth. Volkskalender*, 1981, pp 74f.