

A BRIEF HISTORY
OF THE
ENGLISH DISTRICT OF THE MISSOURI SYNOD

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When Martin Luther sat down to write his translation of the Old and New Testaments he did so with the idea in mind that he was going to put the Words of God into a language that the people of Germany could read without having a priest translate for them. Instead of merely writing a new Latin translation, Martin Luther took the Words of God and put them in German. By doing so he began a new era in which people would finally have access to the Bible in their own language; an era in which people could worship God and understand what was being said in the service they were attending. It is this era which has lasted until the present. And it is this same era in which the founders of the English District of the Missouri Synod decided that this same basic truth still applied to the people in the New Country, America.

The beginnings of the English District go back to even before the Revolutionary War. Although there was no Missouri Synod, let alone an English District, at this point in time, the early ancestors of those who would form the new English District were arriving in New York and Pennsylvania. As America opened up and people began to move West they took with them their heritage. In the case of the German immigrants who were streaming into the country, they

brought with them their Lutheran religion in the language in which they had learned it. These German speaking Lutherans did not remain in New York and Pennsylvania however. As the years passed and their children and grandchildren grew up they moved away from their heritage and from their parents home. Settlers coming out of the New York Ministerium and the Pennsylvania Ministerium moved into the southeastern corner of Missouri before 1821. In addition, this same area saw arrivals from the Tennessee Synod who moved away from North and South Carolina. It was these people who would form the congregation known as Zion Lutheran Church in Gravelton in the year 1857.

Between 1821 and 1851, the settlers in the Gravelton area were served by a variety of licensed Lutheran Pastors who would come to the small community, stay for a short while, and then, be gone again. Among these circuit pastors were such men as Christian Moretz and Ephraim Conrad. This haphazard care for the budding congregation eventually caused them to look for a more permanent pastor to look after their souls. Finally, Pastor Jonathon R. Moser of Flint Rock, North Carolina came to Gravelton in 1851. Unlike the previous pastors who had come and gone, Rev. Moser came to stay. He settled down on a large tract of land on Big Creek which he purchased for \$300. In addition to his duties as pastor of the Zion congregation he also operated a saw

mill with which to earn his income. Six years later, in 1857, the Zion congregation was officially organized.

Four years later the congregation almost collapsed with the onset of the Civil War. The members of Zion were divided as to which way they should go, secede with the South or remain in the union. Pastor Moser then made the mistake of voicing his opinion as a citizen from his pulpit. By crossing the line and blending his pastorate with his citizenship he only succeeded in furthering the division in the congregation and ruining his own reputation with its members. By the end of the war Reverend Jonathon R. Moser had lost his credibility and the trust of the congregation. Again, the Tennessee Synod which had supplied Moser came to the aid of the small church near Big Creek. Pastor Moser contacted the man under whom he had trained and learned his theology, the Rev. Polycarp Henkel. Henkel arrived in Gravelton in 1869 and remained as the pastor at Zion until 1877.

To this point there would seem to be little or no difference between Zion and any other Lutheran congregation of the time. Its organization was similar to any other; it had the same problems in attracting its first pastor as any other congregation on the frontier; and it suffered the same sort of internal problems as many other congregation did during the Civil War. What separated the small congregation at Gravelton from others was the language spoken

within its doors. Unlike other traditional Lutheran congregation started in Missouri, the members of Zion spoke English within the church. Its services were in English and the work of the church was also conducted in English. The reason for this can be traced back to three items. The first is the background of the members of Zion. They were, for the most part second and third generation Americans and had lost or given up that heritage in order to be a part of this new world in which they were living. A second reason is the men who served the congregation in its early years as well as those who became regular pastors at the church. The itinerate pastors spoke English as a way of getting around the country where they were operating. Tying into that second reason because of Moser and Henkel, is the third reason behind English at Zion. both men were a part of the Tennessee Synod; a synod which made great use of English. Along the East Coast, Lutherans moved more quickly to adopt the language of America than elsewhere.¹ And the Tennessee Synod was no different. Although strongly confessional, they apparently felt that such confessionalism could be maintained without German. This attitude stood in sharp contrast to the attitude of the faculties of Milwaukee Concordia and the St. Louis Theological Seminary who said that since Luther did his work in German it was next to impossible to study Lutheran theology in any other language.²

Missourians and other staunch German Lutherans were convinced that English was not the way to go even in a country which spoke English as its main language. There was simply a distrust of English as evidenced by the attitude of the seminary faculties mentioned above. There was a fear that the use of English in Lutheran churches would also bring about the same doctrinal laxity already seen in eastern Lutheran churches. As a matter of fact, most Missourians saw English as the root and cause of doctrinal laxity and unionistic Lutheranism.³ Even in 1887, only fifteen years after the organization of the English Evangelical Lutheran Conference of Missouri that same fear was very much evidenced in such opinions as the following:

"When we consider that we live in a land where English prevails; when we consider that the pure doctrine is preached by so few in English; when we consider that God has graciously given us pure doctrine, not without reason placed us in this land; when we consider that we are duty-bound to transmit the heritage of the pure doctrine to our descendants who will perhaps use English--should all this not move us to pray earnestly: Dear God, grant that the Word may also be preached pure and unadulterated also 'among those who speak English, as it is among us.'"⁴

In spite of such fears and worries on the part of some in the German Evangelical Lutheran synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, there was a new plan made in 1872 at Zion Lutheran Church. In August of 1872 a plan was brought forward to unite the Missouri and Tennessee Synods into one body. The place chosen to discuss this merger was the small congregation at Gravelton.

In attendance at this meeting was the one man who could sway the minds of men to chance something unheard of. Reverend C.F.W. Walther gave the keynote address at this conference and lead the discussions on doctrine and Holy Scripture. Also in attendance were Gravelton's own Rev's Moser and Henkel as representatives of the Tennessee Synod and Rev. Andrew Rader from the Holston Synod. Three main topics of discussion were: 1) the scattered English Lutherans in the West and how to minister to them; 2) the propriety versus the impropriety of organizing the English Lutherans in the West; and, 3) the establishment of English parochial schools. By the end of the five days of meeting and discussion the men of both the Missouri and Tennessee Synods were acting as if there had already been a union between the two of them even though such had not come about at the meeting. It was also decided that English work would not be carried on by the Missouri Synod but such work should be done by a conference of those churches which intended or already did use English as their primary or sole language. And so, on August 20th, 1872 the English Evangelical Lutheran Conference of Missouri came into being. Those original men who were willing to venture into virgin territory, English Lutheranism that is, were Jonathon R. Moser, Andrew Rader, and Polycarp C. Henkel.

For the next six years there was little to no contact between the

fledgling English church and the German Missouri Synod. For three years following that it was noted in the minutes of the English Conference's conventions that it was with deep regrets that there were no representatives of the German Missouri Synod. The reason, according to rumor was that the conference secretary failed to notify the Missouri Synod of the conventions. For whatever the reason, Missouri failed to help the work of the English conference as was promised in the August, 1872 meeting. Because there was much work and the English Conference was small they realized that they could not carry out their task of working among the English Lutherans in the West because of a lack of funds. So, in 1878 the English Conference applied for fellowship in the Synodical Conference. The application was turned down because of the language difference and the English Conference was given the advice to seek affiliation with the Western District of the Missouri Synod.

Although 1879 saw the growth of the English Conference to a total of seven congregations and seven pastors it also saw the hopes of synodical affiliation blown away. In its 1879 meeting the members of the English Conference looked at the facts that they had no representation at the convention of the Western District and that their own committee had recommended continued separation at this time. In order to further any plans toward affiliation with the Western District it was decided that The English

Conference would have to have representatives at the next Western District Convention and vice versa. In answer to this idea, the Western District formed a Board for English Missions. As representatives of this board, Pastor C. L. Janzow and Professor M. Guenther were sent to the English Conference's eighth convention.

Back in the East, only one truly English Conference congregation remained after the Synodical Conference rupture and this was Coyner's Congregation at Coyner's Store in Augusta County, Virginia. In 1884, under the direction of Pastor F. Kuegele, Coyner's Congregation pushed for the organization of the English Conference as a synod. This was motivated by the fact that they were no longer synodically affiliated because of their difference in language not doctrine. The Synodical Conference responded that they could not do so at this time but they, the English Conference that is, could continue to try. In 1886, Coyner's Congregation and the English Conference petitioned The German Missouri Synod for permission to become a district of said synod. The reply in 1887 was that such status was denied but the German Missouri Synod would supply aid so that English work could continue. It was at this time that the synod created a synodical Board for English Missions. Also during this time two new men added their names to the growing list of pastors who did purely English work although they were graduates of St. Louis Concordia

Seminary. These men were A. W. Meyer and William Dallmann.

With the finding of common ground between Kuegele's work in Virginia and that of the English Conference the road was paved to complete affiliation between the two. With the work of Pastor Kuegele and William Dallmann this was realized. Since the Missouri Synod had turned down their petition for district status, the move was made to organize as a synod separate from their German speaking brothers. The fourteenth convention of the English Conference at Springdale, Arkansas appointed Pastors Meyer and Dallmann to draft a constitution for a general body. This was accomplished in 1888 and was published in the official body of the English Conference the *Lutheran Witness*, which had been begun during the 1880's and the height of the predestinarian controversy. At the fifteenth convention, held in Pastor Janzow's Bethlehem Church in St. Louis the constitution was read and adopted. The General English Evangelical Lutheran Conference of Missouri and Other States elected Pastor F. Kuegele as its first president. As part of the agenda, resolutions acknowledging Dr. Walther as one of the guiding lights of the formation of the English Conference were passed and it was resolved to join the Synodical Conference. In addition, Pastors Dallmann, Kroeger, and Kuegele were also elected as a publication board. This had to be done because of the rush of English materials which were all of a sudden being presented.

A manuscript for an English hymnal with more than two hundred hymns was presented at the 1888 convention by Prof. Crull and was accepted. Pastors Dallmann and Bartholomew were to prepare an order of service to accompany it. The new hymnal saw its first edition published in 1889. So successful was the hymnal that each year saw a new edition published. Along with the hymnal came other publications including *The Ten Commandments*, and *The Lutheran Witness Tracts*. Other writings which were to come right away were an English agenda and an English Common Service. It should be noted that the common service adopted for use came from the General Council, the General Synod and the United Synod of the South. In later days English publications would include a children's paper, *The Lutheran Guide*, a book of funeral sermons, and a Sunday School hymnal.

In 1890 the name of the conference was changed to The English Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri and Other States. Growth now came quickly; new missions were opened in St. Paul, St. Louis, Buffalo, Albany, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Fort Wayne, Milwaukee, and others. As the new English Synod began to grow it quickly became obvious to all that they could no longer rely on graduates from the Concordia system. In 1893 the English Synod was given the use of a college at Conover, North Carolina and picked up a second in St. John's English Lutheran College at Winfield, Kansas. Concordia College at

Conover was turned over to the English Synod because it lacked teachers not money and so control was easily assumed by the Synod. St. John's came as a gift from Mr. John P. Baden along with a promise of \$50,000 in donation. (St. John's was eventually turned over to the German Synod.) In addition, the English Synod was to receive \$3,000 per year from the German Synod's Board for English Missions to help finance the schools.

While the English Synod was growing by leaps and bounds, other English work was still being conducted by the German Synod's Board for English Missions. It was one of these English congregation which belonged to the Western District that brought to light the problem of who should do what. The German Synod advised that congregation to join the English Synod but two unanimous resolutions were passed in the process: 1) that the English Synod restudy the question of becoming an English district of the German Synod; and, 2) that this question be brought up at the next convention.⁵ In 1897, the German Synod sent President F. Pieper and Pastors P. Brand and G. Spiegel to the English Synod convention to discuss the question of district status. The end result was that German should seek German and English, English. At this point it could be said that attempts at union with the German Synod were all to be frustrated but even so, the drive towards union was strengthened.

In 1899 the English Synod once more requested district status in the

German Synod. After six years the reply came back to the English Synod that the language of the German Synod would not change in the constitution nor would English be permitted on the delegate floor but the German Synod was ready to receive into membership the English-speaking congregations, their pastors and teachers. To the eleventh convention of the English Synod in 1909 in Cleveland the German Synod sent Professor F. Bente, Pastor J. W. Miller, and Mr. N. Schuetz to discuss union with the German Synod. Articles of Agreement which had been drawn up by the German Synod were presented to the English Synod and its congregations. As part of these articles it was conceded by the German Synod to use English on the delegate floor and to allow a synopsis of the minutes to be published and read in English. It was resolved by the English Synod to unite with the German Synod either by amalgamation or as a district on the basis of the Seven Articles of Agreement.

In May of 1911 both the English Synod and the German Synod held their conventions in St. Louis. The English Synod met at Redeemer Church and the German Synod at Holy Cross. Out of 53 possible votes the English Synod voted in favor of a District Union as follows: 39 1/2 in favor of district status, 1 in favor of amalgamation, and 12 1/2 entirely opposed. Across town the German Synod adopted the Cleveland Articles of Union with cosmetic changes. On Monday, May 15th, the members of the English Synod marched across town to

Holy Cross and were given seats of honor in the front of the church. President H. P. Eckhardt of the English Synod spoke first to the now united body. "We come here to join ranks with you and march with you, hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, bearing farther and farther into the world of lost sinners the one saving Gospel, whether it be by means of the German language or the English or any tongue, just so it be the old Gospel. We have been one in faith. Now we are one in organization. May we ever be on and inseparable."⁶ was the sum and substance of his address. Pastor F. Kuegele spoke next, in German, and told of the hard times now at an end and how after 32 years of being separated from the German Synod he was now home. Finally, President Frederick Pfotenhauer of Missouri addressed the crowd. After 39 years of working on their own, through hard times and times of doubt, the English Synod became a non-geographical district of the Missouri Synod with the right, not the duty, to associate with the geographical districts of the Synod.

In retrospect, when the history of the English District is considered in light of its goal to bring the Word of God to those Lutherans who did not speak German, it has to be said that it accomplished its goal. Unfortunately, when the entire scope of the English District's history is considered from its union with Missouri to its eventual expulsion during the Seminex crisis, it has to be said that it failed to bring the pure Word of God to people. It became a matter

of pride for those affiliated with the English District to claim that their "...district was one of the leaders in urging participation in the Lutheran Council and fellowship with the ALC."⁷ It would seem then that some of the fears voiced by those who saw the use of English as an opening to the liberal doctrines of American Lutheranism came true. The acculturation and Americanization of the Missouri Synod brought an end to isolationism which had tended to secure a purity of doctrine for the Synod as a whole. The idea that it was necessary to come to terms with the intellectual climate of America did nothing but pull Missouri further and further from the truth. This so called acculturation brought historical-critical method and other forms of Bible-reductionism into a church that had at one time been a paragon of steadfastness.

As the Wisconsin Synod moves to modernize its language in the hymnal and the Word of God there are those who have voiced the same fears as were heard when the English District first began to use English exclusively. It needs to be pointed out that there is one major difference between the up-dating of material in the WELS and the philosophy of the English District. When one begins with the Word of God and merely brings it to date, changing no doctrine or "modernizing" no thought of God it maintains the same basis as before. However, if one intends to give into pressures from without to make God more

palatable to so-called modern man then all will indeed be lost. As the WELS moves its language into the twentieth century, its people do not need to fear that what has gone before in another church will happen again. It is not done with speculation or human thought but with the simple hope to bring more people to a greater understanding of God's Word.

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