

Sharing Jesus from Generation to Generation

As Good Shepherd celebrates its anniversary, this is the 4th in a series of articles on church history.

A History of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod

In Luther's wake were other leaders, such as Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, who led reforms in other places for various reasons and with different teachings on doctrines such as the sacraments and how we are brought to faith. Their followers often did not feel that Lutherans changed enough in the Reformation. Attempting to keep civil peace, European rulers often forced Lutherans and these "Reformed" churches to join in a compromise of teaching and practice. At the same time there began a questioning of the reliability of Biblical writings.

A group of Lutherans in German Saxony, unwilling to abandon any of what they were convinced was truth, and unable to endure the resulting oppression, decided to immigrate to the United States. In 1838, under the leadership of Rev. Martin Stephan, 700 of them sailed from Europe in five ships. Four shiploads reached America and the settlers made their way to Missouri, where they settled in St. Louis and Perry Counties. When Stephan, a dynamic leader, was exposed for severe immorality, a young pastor in the group, C. F. W.

Walther, reunited the bewildered group with the reminder that the true church depended on no human leader but on God's word alone.

It was also Walther who, through publication of "Der Lutheraner," established ties with other like minded Lutherans in Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana who traced their origins to Rev. Wilhelm Loehe, a pioneer missionary. In 1847, the "Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States" was formed with Walther as president. The term "synod" means "walking together" and describes self-governing congregations freely uniting.

From its very beginning, this Synod had missions and education among its top priorities. Every congregation was expected to have a school. As it rapidly grew, it always sought to establish contact with other Lutherans and to work with them as far as agreement with Christian teaching allowed. In the decades around the turn of the century, the LC-MS was growing rapidly as Lutherans from northern Europe immigrated to America. The opening of frontiers in the Midwest and northwest also brought the rapid growth of Lutheranism in those areas. It was soon necessary to divide the Synod into districts, and before long the mission outreach also spread overseas.

By 1938, the Missouri Synod was supporting missions in five foreign countries and was a leader in special work in America among Indians, blacks, the deaf the blind. The Missouri Synod was an early

pioneer in using broadcasting media to spread the Gospel and a leader in educating children through parochial schools.

Conflict and struggle have not disappeared from history. In the early years there were disagreements with other Lutherans about compromising doctrine and practice for the sake of outreach, predestination, and belief in "millennialism". In the 1970s, the Synod experienced a controversy concerning the Bible as the word of God and became the first mainline denomination in modern times to reverse the trend toward theological liberalism and reaffirm its historic doctrines. A group left the Synod at that time, but there remain disagreements within the church about church fellowship with other Christians, worship practices, and other issues.

Once called the "sleeping giant" of American Christianity, the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod has repeatedly reemphasized the importance of Biblical Lutheran teachings and of gospel outreach. Recently, the LC-MS set the goal of working with partners to share the gospel with 100 million new people by the 500th anniversary of the reformation in 2017.

There are now about 2.4 million Lutherans in about 6,000 congregations who are part of the Missouri Synod in the United States, along with mission and partner churches throughout the world. The LC-MS is second in size to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.