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A Short History of the Lutheran Church in Great Britain

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“LUTHERAN” is a word that many English people find hard to pronounce because it is so seldom used in this country. In few countries of Western Europe is the Lutheran Church as little known as it is in Great Britain. When recently an inquiry was made at the B. B. C. in London regarding the possibility of a Lutheran religious broadcast, the surprising reply was given: “It is the policy of the B. B. C. to broadcast only the services of those churches which are in the mainstream of the Christian tradition.” How strange that the largest of all Protestant churches should be largely unknown in a country which has always been a bastion of Protestant Christianity! Today the word “Lutheran” comes somewhat easier to the English tongue because of the influx of tens of thousands of Lutheran refugee workers. Four centuries ago it was a common English word, not only in church circles, but even among the populace. The intervening four hundred years record interesting pulsations in the history of the Lutheran Church in Great Britain. At one time political expediency almost made her the official religion of the English people, at another period she was the only non-Anglican Church allowed by law, for another and long period she was the third official faith of the English court, but for the most of those four centuries she has been content to carry on quietly in her restricted sphere and away from the public eye.

LUTHER IN ENGLAND

The history of the Lutheran Church in England begins with Martin Luther in Germany. Less than four weeks after he had nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, people were talking about them in Oxford and London. From England admiring eyes watched the Saxon monk boldly challenge the Roman colossus. Merchant ships plying the Channel from ports in the Low Countries smuggled Luther's latest books under bags of flax into England, where they were read avidly. Oxford and Cambridge became the distributing centers of Lutheran teachings. Bishops and King rose to stem the tide. Henry VIII, in a surprisingly scholarly book, denounced

"the little friar of Wittenberg" as a heretic more dangerous than all infidels, Saracens, and Turks put together. For this effort Rome rewarded him with the title that still appears on every British coin: *Defensor Fidei*. But more than a book was needed, however royal its author. The King's displeasure notwithstanding, Luther's influence continued to grow and to spread. Near King's College at Cambridge was a public house that was called "Little Germany" because it became the focus of the Lutheran Reformation in England. Here the latest events of Luther's stand against the Pope were discussed; here the latest writings of Luther read and circulated. Among those who gathered in secret at this tavern were two young divinity students who years later as primates of the English Church had much to do to shape the course of the Reformation in this country: Thomas Cranmer and Matthew Parker.

HENRY VIII AND ENGLISH LUTHERANS

It was during this period that two Englishmen came forth whom Lutherans in this country will always hold in the highest regard. One was Robert Barnes, like Luther an Augustinian monk, who was destined to become the first prominent English Lutheran martyr. The other was William Tyndale, the translator of the English Bible. Both were close friends of Luther; both attended his lectures at Wittenberg, Tyndale matriculating under the name of Guillelmus Daltici in 1524, Barnes as Antonius Anglus in 1533; both found refuge in Luther's home when the ire of King Henry drove them from England. Barnes' fiery and eloquent espousal of Lutheran doctrine filled the Augustinian chapel at Cambridge and traveled far beyond it. Of the entry into England of Tyndale's immortal translation, linked so closely with Luther's, the fiercest Roman Catholic opponent, Cochlaeus, said in a letter to Henry: "This is the way to fill your realm with Lutherans." Men like these and like Patrick Hamilton of Scotland caused Lutheranism to spread quickly all over Britain and to give promise of becoming the religion of the people. A surprising development took place which brought support from an unexpected source. Henry of England suddenly became friendly toward the Lutherans in Germany. In his conflict with the Pope over the question of his divorce, the King saw a Papist coalition of France and Spain rising against him. Robert Barnes, a fugitive heretic at Luther's home, was invited to return to England to become Henry's personal chaplain. Negotiations were opened with the Lutheran Smalcaldic League. Barnes returned to Germany in 1535 as a member of an English theological commission appointed by the King to discuss doctrine with a delegation of Lutherans headed by the

great Reformer and Melancthon. Article by article, the Augsburg Confession—the only basis the Lutherans would allow—was discussed. The results were most encouraging. Returning to England, Barnes' committee met again, this time under the chairmanship of Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, to write a statement of faith for the new Church in England. The confession this royal commission produced, the Thirteen Articles, was never officially sanctioned as the doctrinal statement of the English Church, but became indirectly the basis for the Thirty-Nine Articles, subscription to which is demanded to this day of all Anglican clergy. By this time, however, the political threat to England had passed, and Henry resumed his true role as a persecutor of English Lutherans, whether at home or abroad. William Tyndale, after a fruitful but fugitive life on the Continent, was betrayed into the hands of English agents, was strangled, and then burned at Vilvorde near Brussels in 1536. Four years later Robert Barnes was burnt at the stake as a heretic in London. Martin Luther honored his English Lutheran friend, who had so often sat at his table, by translating and publishing Barnes' dying confession into German. Henry's own death in 1547 brought this period, which is so interesting to the Lutheran historian, to a close. But for this one man—Henry VIII—England might have become Lutheran. Anne Boleyn, one of his wives, is said to have been a Lutheran in secret.

THE FIRST LUTHERAN CONGREGATIONS IN BRITAIN

The next landmark in the Lutheran history of Great Britain was the establishment of the first Lutheran congregation in the City of London in 1669. This was a different England than that which Henry VIII had ruled. By now the Church of England, which had oscillated so fitfully between Wittenberg, Rome, and Geneva during the first thirty years of the Reformation, had settled down. The Elizabethan settlement established the Anglican Church and gave her the midcourse position in theology and practice that she holds to this day. The first Lutheran congregation in Great Britain, founded during the reign of Charles II, was not the lineal descendant of the English Lutherans of Henry's day. If there was a connection, the link was the church of foreign Christians that worshiped since the reign of Edward VI in Austin Friars in London. Headed by the illustrious Polish nobleman and Calvinist theologian John à Lasco, this congregation was made up of German- and French-speaking Protestant refugees and probably included Lutherans even though it was strongly Reformed in character. These foreign Protestants enjoyed even more liberty than Englishmen themselves. They were not subject to the Act of Uniformity of Ed-

ward VI which forbade every type of worship other than that of the Book of Common Prayer. When, one hundred years later, after the stringent Puritanism of Oliver Cromwell, this same law was enacted again by the Parliament of Charles II, the Lutherans were not exempt. In all of the United Kingdom but one form of religion was allowed; the law required every Englishman to be an Anglican. There were no exceptions. Heavy penalties were dealt out to offenders. Yet this was the England which allowed the establishment of Hamburg Lutheran Church within the walls of its ancient capital in the year 1669. Why did Charles II make this one startling exception? Certainly not because he was a crypto-Lutheran. Like all the Stuart kings, his deepest sympathies were toward Rome. But it was a noteworthy group of Lutherans who approached him. They were members of the wealthy Hanseatic League whose trade Charles needed badly to furnish the funds to pay off an expensive war with the Dutch and to rebuild London gutted by the Great Fire of 1666. Furthermore, at the head of this Lutheran delegation was the ambassador of the Swedish king, his military ally against the territorial ambitions of Louis XIV of France. Charles's Royal Charter gave England her first independent Lutheran congregation and made her at this time the only legal free church in the whole of Great Britain.

This first-born of Lutheran churches in Great Britain exemplified an ideal toward which modern Lutheranism is only today finding its way: it was a church in which the deciding factor for admission was faith and not nationality or language. It was open to anyone who espoused the Lutheran faith. The original congregation had members from each of the three large Lutheran blocs of that day: Germans, Scandinavians, and Balts. This ideal was short-lived, however, for twenty years later, when the Act of Toleration was passed under William III, the Scandinavians withdrew and founded their own place of worship in Well Close Square, a short distance from the Tower of London. The first pastor was the Rev. Iver Brinch, well-known as an hymnologist in Scandinavian circles. Around the turn of the century the foundation of several more new congregations completed the process, and Lutheranism assumed the specific national pattern it exhibits to this day in Britain. War between Denmark and Sweden at this time caused the Swedish Lutherans to secede from the joint Scandinavian body in Well Close Square and to found their own in Swedenborg Square in Stepney in 1728. Hamburg Lutheran Church meanwhile became a purely German-speaking church. A second and a third were added when St. Mary's Lutheran Church of the Savoy was established in the ancient Savoy

Palace on the Thames in 1694 and the Lutheran Court Chapel in St. James' Palace in 1700.

The interesting and continuous history of both of these latter-named congregations deserves more than a mention. The Court Chapel of St. James was erected at the expense of George of Denmark, Consort to Queen Anne, for the benefit of the royal household. The subsequent accession of the Hanoverian dynasty placed George I, a Lutheran, on the throne of England, made a Lutheran the titular head of the Anglican Church, and raised the Lutheran Chapel at St. James' Palace to a recognized place of worship for the British Royal Family. Lutheranism became the third official faith of the English court. To add to the confusion, a German translation of the Book of Common Prayer became the regular service book of this Lutheran congregation! This anomalous situation persisted for well over a hundred years until the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1837, when the Hanoverian succession came to an end. In 1901 the Lutheran Court Chapel of St. James was suddenly and without explanation dissolved by the royal decree of Edward VII. Through the liberality of the well-known Lutheran philanthropist Baron von Schroeder this homeless 200-year-old congregation was given a new and beautiful Gothic home — Christ Church in Kensington, erected in 1904.

An arched doorway is all that remains of the Church of St. Mary le Savoy, the third German Lutheran congregation whose history goes back to the seventeenth century. Bombers of the *Luftwaffe* laid waste the church during the terrible ordeal of the Battle of Britain. Londoners say that the West End, in which the building stood, received special attention from the German Air Force because it contained the underground headquarters of the Supreme Allied Command. This was the Church which Queen Victoria had ordered to be built on Crown land when the old Savoy Palace, the home of the congregation for nearly two hundred years, was demolished. At one time the elders of this congregation addressed a request to the English King appealing for aid to pay the pastor's salary. The unlooked-for result was a document bearing the signatures of King George II and the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole, guaranteeing an annual subsidy of £40.

The eighteenth century was a comparatively quiet period as far as Lutheran expansion in Great Britain was concerned. Other than St. George's German Lutheran Church — also rich in historical lore — which was built in Whitechapel in London in 1762, available records show no new Lutheran endeavor. The last half of the nineteenth century, however, found the Lutheran Church venturing beyond the capital city and extending itself to all parts of the United Kingdom.

LUTHERAN SEAMEN'S MISSIONS

This increase was due largely to the efforts of various Lutheran seamen's societies. The middle decades of the last century witnessed a widespread concern among Christians in seafaring nations for spiritual service to sailors. The movement began in Great Britain with the organization of the Port of London Society in 1818. Since the Scandinavian countries supplied a large proportion of seamen for the world's merchant shipping, it was but natural that this movement found favor there. In 1864 the Norwegian Seamen's Mission was organized at Bergen under the initiative of Pastor Storjohann, who later served in this work in London. Within a few years this Society had stations and pastors at Leith, North Shields, Cardiff, and London in Great Britain besides in ports in other parts of the world. The Norwegians were quickly followed by the Danes, who added new stations in England at Hull and Grimsby, Newcastle and Hartlepool, then by the Swedes in 1869, with missions at Liverpool, Grimsby, Gloucester, and London, finally by the Finns in 1880, with seamen's centers in London, Grimsby, and Hull. Later the German Church set up seamen's missions in several British ports, in the cases of Hull and Liverpool coupling them with the resident congregations founded earlier by immigrants stranded in these ports while on their way from Germany via England to America. At this time, too, a Latvian seamen's pastor lived at Cardiff. Over the course of years some of these sailors' stations have been dropped and others added, but this very necessary work still goes on as one of the most prominent and distinctive aspects of Lutheran activity in Great Britain.

BEGINNINGS OF BRITISH LUTHERANISM

It was also this stage that marked the entry of American Lutheranism and a new type of Lutheran enterprise in this country: work among the local English population which would lead eventually to a native Lutheran church in England—the spiritual successors to Robert Barnes and other English Lutherans of the sixteenth century. It was The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod which in 1896 sent the Rev. F. W. Schulze from America in response to an unexpected request from six young Lutheran bakers in London to send them a pastor. Upon his arrival, Pastor Schulze met with the six laymen in a factory in Camden Town, and Immanuel Lutheran Church came into being. Forty-two years later, on the occasion of the dedication of its new church in Kentish Town, the congregation altered its name to Luther-Tyndale Memorial Church. This adoption of the names of the German Reformer and the translator of the English Bible symbolized the objective en-

visioned: an English Lutheran church. Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, organized in South Tottenham in 1903, is the second congregation making up the Evangelical Lutheran Church of England. These two purely English-speaking Lutheran churches were during the war years the spiritual homes of thousands of Lutheran servicemen from English-speaking Allied countries all over the world.

POSTWAR LUTHERAN INFLUX

A sketch of Lutheran activity in Great Britain must take into account two significant developments of the present day: the great influx of Lutheran volunteer workers and the consequent formation of the Lutheran Council of Great Britain. One of the cruelly persisting effects of the Second World War and its attendant horrors has been the displacement of populations. In this age of mass expulsions and forced exile, of all Christian communions the Lutheran Church has been perhaps the greatest loser. Characteristically, Great Britain was one of the first countries to open her arms to displaced people. In the four years from 1946 to 1949 under various schemes initiated by the British Ministry of Labour, over 100,000 were admitted into the country, the majority as European Volunteer Workers. About one third of these are Lutherans, most of them from the Baltic countries and Germany, others from eastern European lands, where Lutheranism is a minority faith. To these may be added 2,500 Polish Lutherans who were formerly soldiers in Gen. Anders' Army, and an estimated 25,000 ex-P. O. W.s and other German Lutherans who were permitted to remain in this country. This recent invasion of Lutherans altered the whole situation and created problems that never had to be faced before in 280 years of history.

LUTHERAN COUNCIL OF GREAT BRITAIN

To meet the great problem of bringing spiritual ministrations to these thousands of new Lutherans, speaking eight or nine different languages and scattered all over England, Scotland, and Wales, the Lutheran Council of Great Britain was formed in London on March 18, 1948. Preliminary efforts were made as early as 1946 and 1947 through free grants from The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to individual Polish and Latvian pastors in London, but it was soon felt that the task at hand called for a concerted and co-ordinated program. In response to an invitation of the Rev. E. Geo. Pearce, pastor of the English Lutheran Church and representative of the Missouri Synod in Great Britain, Dr. Jaak Taul (Estonian), Senior Pastor W. Fierla (Polish), and Pastor R. Slokenbergs (Latvian) came together in what is now the

Polish Lutheran Center in London and on March 18, 1948, established the Lutheran Council of Great Britain. The fledgling Council was faced with a formidable question: how to find the ways and means of bringing the Gospel to the 50,000 new Lutherans known to be in this country. At the same time other Lutherans were tackling the same problem. In January, 1948, Dr. David Ostergren arrived in England to conduct a survey of Lutheran refugees on behalf of the National Lutheran Council of America. German ex-P. O. W.s and domestic workers arriving from Germany gave the independent German Lutheran congregations in London a responsibility they could not decline. Two difficulties faced all three parties: men and money. Some pastors were available in England, but, like their fellow European Volunteer Workers, they were under contract to work only in hospitals, factories, or farms. These could be released, German pastors could be gotten from the Continent, Polish chaplains could be demobilized and employed, but for this funds were necessary. The needed financial backing was supplied when after a series of meetings in London and Chicago the two American bodies, the National Lutheran Council and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, agreed to assume equal shares of the costs of a united project. Consequently the Lutheran Council was enlarged to include Dr. Ostergren, representative of the National Lutheran Council, and Dr. H. H. Kramm for the existing independent German Lutheran congregations in this country.

The Lutheran Council of Great Britain enjoys the recognition of the ecclesiastical authorities of the various parent churches in Europe and America which are concerned. Its purpose, as laid down in a memorandum dated April 30, 1948: "the provision of spiritual ministrations for each of the several groups in its own language and cultus." The Lutheran Council of Great Britain is not a church and therefore does not affect in any way the confessional or organization affiliations of any of the Lutheran groups associated with it. It "operates on the understanding that the direction of work within each group is left in the hands of its authorized representative on the Council, who, in turn, is responsible individually to the Council as a whole for the efficient carrying out of spiritual service among the pastors and people he represents," as the above memorandum states.

Under the blessing of Almighty God the Lutheran Council, during its first three years of existence, has gone a long way toward finding a common solution to the many problems which arose when tens of thousands of displaced Lutherans streamed into British towns and villages from D. P. camps in Germany. All pastors have been released

from secular labor; other new pastors have been brought in from the Continent. The work of preserving the new Lutherans of Britain for their old Church has been launched. Annual pastoral conferences are gradually leveling the walls that divide and bringing these diverse scattered elements together. Two important events testify to the same appreciation of a common spiritual heritage growing among the laity: the International Lutheran Rally held at Westminster Chapel in London on July 17, 1949, where a thousand Lutherans of all nationalities gathered to hear four prominent Lutheran churchmen: Bishop Nygren, Bishop Lilje, Dr. S. C. Michelfelder, and Dr. Theo. Graebner; the other, the 1950 Reformation Festival Concert at one of London's large concert halls, presented by the combined choirs that make up the newly organized London Lutheran Choral Society.

Confessionally, the future of the Lutheran Church in Great Britain bodes well. Theological discussions, a regular feature on the agenda of Lutheran Council meetings since its inception, reveal a genuine appreciation of, and adherence to, the conservative teachings of the Lutheran Reformation. May God grant that out of these diversified elements a new Lutheran Church will one day emerge, loyal to the Holy Scriptures and to their common historic Confessions, and He shall have all the glory.

London, England