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Three Free Churches Become One Church

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THE EVANGELICAL-LUTHERAN FREE CHURCH, founded in 1876 by Lutheran men in Saxony and since then known usually as the Saxon Free Church voted to adopt a new constitution, called *Grundordnung*, by which action it ceased to exist and became a part of the new Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church (*Die Selbstaendige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche*) consisting of a fusion (Fusion) or organic union between three previously existing Free Churches in Germany.

Quantitatively this is no great event. The three churches perhaps will count no more than fifty or sixty thousand souls. Qualitatively this was an event of great concern to any and all true Lutherans in the whole world. These churches have for more than a hundred years (Breslau for 125 years) been the last strongholds of confessional Lutheranism in a country known as the land of the Reformation. Always spoken of as splinter groups, they have now joined in forming a stronger unit—stronger in number, and we pray, stronger in battle against the inevitable and total disintegration of Lutheranism in Europe.

This event of interest to all students of the history of Lutheranism was long in preparation. After World War II the Free Churches had, we may say, also at the suggestion of men from Missouri, made serious efforts at arriving at doctrinal agreement. When the "*Einigungssaetze*" (Unionstatements) were adopted by the three Free Churches (The so-called Breslau, Selbstaendige, and Saxon Free Church) organic union was still very far from becoming even a matter of serious consideration. Many conferences and meetings of committees later, the representatives were able to set up a "*Grundordnung*," a constitution. This constitution was presented to the congregations and was adopted by the synodical meetings of these Free Churches. The first to adopt the *Grundordnung* was the Breslau Free Church in convention assembled in Wiesbaden in April this year, The Selbstaendige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche having no general synod, met in two sessions of its church and accepted the constitution in May and June of this year. It was now up to the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church to do the same. Already in a previous convention the "*Grundordnung*" had been presented and discussed. Congregations had been asked to make their suggestions and wishes known. The convention called especially for the presentation and final vote on this *Grundordnung* met in Wittingen (near Hannover) October 7-10 this year. At this meeting the constitution was presented in a first and second reading after which a secret ballot was taken. Of the 62 votes cast, 56 voted for the *Grundordnung*. By this

vote the history of the old Free Church came to a conclusion. Those casting votes against the constitution, that is against the fusion, will be given a chance, if they so desire, to discuss their objections before January 1, 1972, so that if all matters are cleared, the new church will begin its function on the first day of the new year.

The writer had the great privilege of attending the historic convention at Wittingen as representative of the President of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Dr. J. A. O. Preus and of Synod. He felt the privilege great because his two grandparents were founders and charter members of the Saxon Free Church. Both Heinrich I. Naumann and Pastor Otto Willkomm were delegates at the first little convention in Saxony in 1876. Five years previously two independent congregations were established against great odds and against opposition of the German State Government itself. Both congregations, Dresden and Planitz, celebrated their centennial this fall. The first called pastor of these congregations was Pastor C. F. Th. Ruhland. He was suggested to these congregations by Dr. C. F. W. Walther, to whom they had turned for advice.

The convention was opened by a communion service in the renovated church of the Free Church congregation in Wittingen. The sermon was preached by Vice-President Hahn. A pastoral conference had preceded in the afternoon. The President of the Free Church, Dr. Hans Kirsten, presided. After the usual formalities, Dr. H. L. Poetsch presented an essay on the topic: "The Lutheran Church and its Ecumenical Self-Understanding" (German: *Selbstverstaendnis*). After this the topic and business of the church was mainly the *Grundordnung*. The importance of this meeting was recognized by all Lutheran churches in fellowship with the brethren in Germany. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Church was represented by its President the Rev. Oscar Naumann, also a grandson of one of the founders, and by four other members of this Synod. Naturally the other two Free Churches were also represented by their leaders. Oberkirchenrat Dr. Gerhard Rost of the "Breslau" brethren and Kirchensuperintendent Horst Bruegmann of the "Selbstaendige" were key men at this decisive meeting. President Jean Bricka represented the Free Church of France and Belgium. President Noack of Australia was guest of the Free Church, and even a representative from Africa was present. Dr. Robert Preus of St. Louis, Missouri attended the meeting on Saturday.

One of the questions arising now will be: What will be the relation between this church and other Lutheran churches? At the last regular convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Steeden, this church declared itself in a state of confession with regard to the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod mainly because of the fellowship of Missouri with the ALC. Will the *Selbstaendige* Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche take the same position? What will be the future relation of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Church to this church? One of the churches fused into this new body was not in fellowship with Wisconsin Synod, and for doctrinal reasons

this problem could not be ironed out in a meeting between the two churches previous to the synodical convention in Wittingen. Tremendous difficulties may arise in the question of who fellowships with whom.

Within the three church bodies that are now united into one, there have existed traditional practices and rules of vastly differing character. Each one of the churches no doubt will have to surrender something of its character and tradition. Each of the three churches has its own peculiar strength and weakness too. Without going into details we could say that numerically the so-called former Breslau Church has the advantage. Although there is this that some of their congregations are in type similar to the State Church congregations with a more lax way of counting members. The Independent Free Church has a mission seminary of its own, and has a flourishing daughter church in South Africa. The Saxons have a stronger theological position, and its members are more active in support of their church. This church also has shown more activity in evangelism and in work with the Lutheran Hour. Our prayer must be that the Lord of the Church bless and prosper this union which came into existence not for pragmatic reasons of church polity, but by a desire shared by these churches to be true to the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions in a country that had long abandoned Lutheranism as a working force.

Because of our concern with our troubles over here which have increased with our size, and because of the small number of brethren involved in this segment of confessional Lutheranism in Europe—the Free Churches have been forgotten, particularly after they became virtually financially independent. We hope that this noteworthy event of the birth of a new church will focus the attention of world Lutheranism on this last fortress of confessional Lutheranism in Germany. All kinds of movements protesting the liberal trend in the church of Germany and all kinds of individuals remembering their obligation to Word and Confession have looked to, and will in future look still more with interest to this new Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church. Already one movement of the "Gathering about Bible and Confession" has resolved to let its members attend and join the Free Church congregations if they can find no orthodox pastor in their town. In word and deed we should support these Lutherans overseas.

One little thing ("little" for big Missouri) we could perhaps do. At present the Missouri Synod is about to sell to the New Church the Oberursel Seminary property, once bought for the purpose of establishing this seminary. Would it not be a fine 'birthday' present to the Independent Evangelical-Lutheran Church if we could give them the property? After all it was purchased by us at a nominal sum after World War II, and we have been supporting this training school for pastors in the past. Could Missouri afford not to congratulate the new church? In word and deed let us do so! God bless you, friends and Lutherans of Germany!