

BI-LINGUAL GERMAN CHURCHES IN THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

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Since World War II many ethnic churches have existed in a state of equilibrium, certain of a supply of bi-lingual pastors and members. Many influences are now working against the bi-lingual congregation. Marginal churches can no longer support the cost of a full-time pastor. Many ethnic neighborhoods are changing, as members move to the suburbs. Bi-lingual pastors are in short supply and the younger members of ethnic congregations are not interested in maintaining a bi-lingual institution. The bi-lingual church seems to be doomed. For that reason, a survey was conducted of the bi-lingual German congregations in the Lutheran Church in America. The purpose of the survey was to ascertain the present status and probable future of German Lutheran churches.

The congregations were selected from the 1974 Yearbook of the Lutheran Church in America.¹ The Canada Section of the LCA was not included in the figures because the large number of bi-lingual churches in Western Canada would have distorted the overall picture. The Yearbook lists 31 German congregations in nine states.² Of the nine states, only one (California) is west of the Mississippi. New York has eight German congregations and Pennsylvania six. The 31 congregations have a total membership of 19,745 baptized members. Seventeen have less than 500 baptized members. Seven have 500—1000 members, and seven have over 1000 members. The

congregations consist mainly of Transylvania Saxons, Pommernians, Danube Swabians, and Volga Germans. Other groups are: Prussians, Austrians and Bavarians.

A questionnaire was mailed to each of the 31 congregations³ Twenty-four questionnaires were returned, one of them blank. The questions covered two general areas: 1) the background of the bi-lingual pastor, 2) the attitudes and the future of the German ethnic congregation.

Generally speaking, the bi-lingual pastor is elderly, born and trained in Europe, and poorly paid. Fourteen pastors out of the 23 are over 60 years of age, and only two are under 30. Six of the older pastors have been in the same parish for over 20 years. Eight of the pastors reported that they were not born or educated in Europe. Eleven were born in Europe and fourteen studied there. The pastors are well educated as a group, but poorly paid. Four have earned doctorates and four others have done graduate work beyond their first professional degree. They were asked: "Do you consider yourself well-paid for your experience, education, and responsibilities?" Eleven answered yes, while ten answered no. Three did not answer. One pastor teaches college to supplement his income. Another receives supplements from the synod. That pastor's predecessor sold insurance to help make ends meet.⁴ Figures supplied by some of the pastors show that they are indeed poorly paid. Two of the pastors with doctorates are the least paid of the seven reporting their incomes.⁵ According to the standards of the Ohio Synod of the Lutheran Church in America, five are paid far below the minimum guidelines. The base salary reported ranges from \$7200 to 10,800 a year.⁶ The size of the congregations varies from 90 baptized members to 1600, and the experience of the pastors from two years to over 40. Thus the narrow salary range is even more remarkable.

The data indicates that the bi-lingual pastor will be increasingly in demand but shorter in supply. The 14 pastors over 60 years of age will retire in the near future. The

vacant parishes cannot all be filled by bi-lingual pastors, unless they are imported from Canada or Europe. The salaries offered are no incentive for one who speaks German. Further education and increased experiences are not rewarded.

The situation is a curious reversal of the pastor's role in Europe, where he was well paid and highly respected. He was a leader in the town, sometimes a dictator of mores. He was paid through the government, which taxed people to support the Church. He also received land, food, and services from the congregation. The parishioners were often rather poor, and he was relatively prosperous. In contrast, the ethnic pastor in America is usually poor, and his members are rather prosperous.⁷

The factors affecting the supply of bi-lingual pastors are not the only influences which work against the continuing existence of ethnic parishes. The decline in immigration has closed off the supply of people who would gravitate toward a bi-lingual parish. Years of living in America has also led to the assimilation of many members into English congregations. First generation Americans do not want to learn German. Two pastors report that the young people are interested in keeping the language, but the rest say that the youth are uninterested in knowing German. The mobility of American families also takes them away from the few neighborhoods where German is spoken in the stores and in church. The presence of German schools in some cities has not affected the trend away from the language.

Bi-lingual congregations are harmed, ironically, by their ethnic identity. The very force which unites the members into a cohesive body can also eventually strangle the institution. If the parish maintains its special character in the midst of change, it becomes increasingly isolated from the community it serves, the neighborhood which supplies it with members.

The tendency of the German population is always toward the English language; no resistance on the part of the ministers can be of any avail; let them persist

in preaching German, and the people will fall off by crowds to the Presbyterians, Methodist, Baptists, and Episcopalians, a dead loss not only to the German nationality but also in the Lutheran Church.⁸

Only two pastors answered that the German service is increasing in attendance. One congregation has dropped its weekly service since this survey was taken. Another was no longer able to find a bi-lingual pastor. A third has only one German hymn a month.

The decline of the bi-lingual congregation is being hastened by the accidents of church policy. The Lutheran Church in America maintains a German Interest Conference, but the seminaries do not train pastors to serve in bi-lingual congregations. The absence of support for bi-lingual ministry is enough to accelerate its decline. Moreover, the merger of the smaller ethnic seminaries into large, metropolitan schools has diluted the identity of the ethnic groups represented in the LCA. A Missouri Synod pastor contends that Americans have been ashamed of their German heritage ever since the First World War. Such a theory is hard to prove. Many ethnic congregations face problems similar to those of the German parishes.⁹ Bi-lingual congregations have fallen prey to the melting pot of America. They have made it difficult for their own pastors to continue in the ministry, and they have not adjusted to the changing social scene.

The future is dim for the German congregation. One might expect that many smaller congregations will be unable to meet the challenge of existing under adverse conditions. Others may abandon German as an antidote to declining membership. Many will have the decision made for them when they can no longer find a bi-lingual pastor. Probably the most likely to continue a bi-lingual ministry will be those churches which can hire an extra pastor to preach in German.

The survival of German in churches will be determined more by its continued usefulness than by the traditions and sentiments of the people.

NOTES

¹Board of Publication of the Lutheran Church in America, *1974 Yearbook*, (Philadelphia: 1973).

²California (3 congregations), Connecticut (1), Illinois (3), Maryland (1), Michigan (1), New Jersey (4), New York (8), Ohio (4), Pennsylvania (6).

Five of New York's German congregations are in New York City.

³The other major Lutheran bodies also have bi-lingual congregations. This survey probably represents the situation in other synods and in other European ethnic churches. A parallel study of all bi-lingual Lutheran churches in Greater Cleveland yielded similar results. For a summary, see the *Cleveland Lutheran Messenger*, January 1975. "Bi-Lingual Lutheran Churches in Cleveland," by Gregory Jackson.

⁴A former pastor in one congregation did the janitorial work for an extra \$15 a month.

⁵They report a base salary of \$7400 and \$7500 a year. One has served his congregation 14 years, the other 40 years.

⁶The 1973 Minutes of the Ohio Synod, LCA, pp. 173 ff., gives a minimum scale for pastoral compensation, based on experience and the size of the congregation. The following scale compares 1974 base salaries to the proposed minimums:

	1974 base salary	Proposed minimum
Pastor A (S.T.M.)	\$ 7,200	\$ 8,260
Pastor B (S.T.D.)	7,500	10,880
Pastor C	10,800	10,840
Pastor D (Ph.D.)	7,400	11,380
Pastor E	9,048	11,380
Pastor F	8,600	11,380
Pastor G	7,500	7,760

⁷The problems of bi-lingual pastors were documented in an article by D. P. Rosenmiller, "Peculiar Difficulties to Lutheran Clergymen Arising from the Use of Two Languages," *Lutheran Observer*, XVII, 26 (June 29, 1849), p. 2. The bi-lingual pastor cannot be an expert in both languages. The harder he tries, the more likely he is to confuse the two. Preparing a sermon in two languages is very taxing, and often results in the Germans resenting his English work while the English complain about his German.

⁸Edward Hengstenberg, *Lutheran Observer* XVI, 6 (February 11, 1848) p. 2. Quoted by William D. Allbeck, *A Century of Lutherans in Ohio* (Antioch Springs: Antioch Press, 1966), p. 89.

⁹See the *Cleveland Lutheran Messenger* (January 1975).