

History of Our Denomination The Reformed Church in the U.S.

Early Colonial Beginnings in Pennsylvania

The Reformed Church in the United States is of German origin. The beginnings of our denomination in this country trace back to the beginning of the eighteenth century when large numbers of immigrants from Switzerland and the Palatinate settled in eastern Pennsylvania, North and South Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, and New York. Since many of them were Reformed, several Reformed congregations were started in the course of time. The first German Reformed minister in Pennsylvania, Rev. Samuel Guldin, arrived from Bern, Switzerland in 1710. Though he organized no churches, he labored earnestly, and for 35 years did a most valuable preparatory work. John

Philip Boehm is considered the founder of our church in America. Driven from the Palatinate in Germany by persecution, he settled near Philadelphia in 1720. Although he was a school teacher and not ordained, the Reformed people of nearby settlements begged him to become their pastor. Three congregations, Falkner Swamp, Skippach, and White Marsh, were founded by him in 1725 and organized according to a constitution he drew up for them. The Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort were the doctrinal standards. Later he organized other congregations in a similar way, so that his parish increased in size until it nearly covered the territory between Philadelphia, Allenton and Lancaster. His salary was only \$24 a year, so he made his living chiefly by farming.

Rev. George Michael Weiss arrived in Philadelphia from Heidelberg in 1727 with 400 Germans and organized the first Reformed church in that city. Weiss insisted that Boehm be ordained, and in 1729 he was ordained by the Dutch Reformed Church in New York. Both Boehm and Weiss, with their congregations, placed themselves under the jurisdiction of the Reformed Church of Holland, which took a lively interest in the Dutch and German colonists of the Reformed faith and sent them ministers. In 1746 Rev. Michael Schlatter from St. Gall, Switzerland was sent out by the Synods of North and South Holland to regulate and put in order the church affairs of these people. Arriving in Philadelphia, he invited the four Reformed ministers of the city to a conference. Three of them responded to the invitation, and the fourth sent a

letter. This was their first meeting, although some had labored in this country for 20 years.

Schlatter now visited the churches, preaching to them and administering the sacraments. On September 29, 1747, in Philadelphia, he organized a synod, or “Coetus” as it was then called, with four ministers (Boehm, Weiss, Reiger, Schlatter) and 28 elders of 12 charges. At the time there were in existence 46 German Reformed congregations, most of them without ministers. Soon after, however, 38 ministers were sent from Holland, in addition to about \$40,000 in financial assistance. At the second meeting of the Coetus (1748), the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort were adopted as the creed or confession of faith. Regular meetings of the Coetus were held except during the War of Independence.

Reorganization after the War of Independence

Benjamin Franklin stated in 1776 that a third (over 50,000) of the white population of Pennsylvania consisted of Germans, and that fully half of them (25,000) were Reformed. The number of ministers to serve this great number was a mere handful. During the period from 1748 to 1791, the German Reformed Church was under the authority of the Synod of Holland. All its proceedings had to be reported to and approved by that synod across the Atlantic Ocean—a long, cumbersome process. Only by permission of the Holland Synod might the Coetus receive and ordain ministers, an inconvenient and irksome situation. On this account, the German Reformed ministers declared themselves independent of the Synod in 1791, and the following year drafted a new constitution, which was adopted April 27, 1793. The name “Coetus” was changed to “Synod of the High-German Reformed Church in the United States of North America.” The words “High-German” and “North America” were later stricken, and our church is known at present simply as “The Reformed Church in the United States.” Her creed is the Heidelberg Catechism. In 1793 there were 22 ministers, 178 congregations, and 15,000 members, which averaged one pastor for almost nine congregations! In 1800 there were 31 pastors, and in 1820 there were 60 ministers.

Some interesting historical facts may be noted about our church during and after this Revolutionary War period. For example, the Liberty Bell was hid in the Zion Reformed Church in Philadelphia until the British left the city. A Reformed elder, Michael Hillegass, served as treasurer of the colonies from 1775 until the establishment of the Treasury Department in 1789. President George Washington lived several months with Pastor F. L. Herman in

Germantown because of the yellow fever plague in Philadelphia. Benjamin Franklin contributed heavily toward the founding of Franklin College, a German Reformed school in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. And James Buchanan, the first president of the Board of Trustees for Franklin and Marshall College (1853) in Lancaster, later became President of the United States.

Growth and Development in the Nineteenth Century

At first our church was entirely German, but the language question soon arose. Gradually the English language was introduced, sometimes after lengthy and bitter controversies. Another difficulty was the dearth of the ministers in the early days, since the church had no institutions for their training. They either had to receive their education abroad, or be privately trained by gifted ministers. Three of these, the Rev. F. L. Herman of Falkner Swamp, the Rev. C. L. Becker of Baltimore, and the Rev. S. Helffenstein of Philadelphia, trained a total of 61 ministers in this manner. Others trained smaller numbers. Yet, all these efforts could not supply all the ministers needed.

The first theological seminary was founded in Carlisle, PA, in 1825; Rev. Lewis Mayer at first was the only professor. The seminary was moved to York, PA, in 1829; thence to Mercersburg in 1837, and finally, in 1871, to Lancaster, PA. Other college-seminaries were established: Heidelberg at Tiffin, Ohio, in 1850; the Mission House near Sheboygan, Wis., in 1862; the Ursinus at Collegeville, near Philadelphia, in 1870. The Heidelberg and Ursinus Seminaries were united in 1907 to form Central Seminary and moved to Dayton, Ohio, in 1908.

In 1824 the Ohio Classis (70 congregations, 13 ministers) constituted itself an independent synod called "The German Evangelical Reformed Synod of Ohio," but maintained a friendly relation to the mother synod. In 1863 a general synod uniting these two synods was formed. Of the 94 ministers, 56 belonged to the Eastern Synod and 38 to the Ohio Synod. That same year a notable celebration in honor of the 300th anniversary (tercentenary) of the Heidelberg Catechism was held at Philadelphia. A new translation of the Catechism highlighted the event.

Theological and liturgical controversies troubled the church during the middle of the last century (1844 to 1878) and hindered her development. One of the points at issue was the "new measures" of revivalism, against which Dr. John W. Nevin (1803-1886) published the *Anxious Bench* in 1843. Part of the church favored the revival meetings, then so popular in other denominations; by others they were abhorred as unreformed. Another controversy was caused by the teachings of Professors Nevin and Philip Schaff (1819-1878), who

deviated from the old Reformed doctrine. Since they were teachers at the theological seminary then at Mercersburg, their views were called the “Mercersburg Theology.” Opposition to it led to the founding of the Ursinus School of Theology in 1870. Interwoven with this controversy was the liturgical controversy about the forms of worship. One party, headed by Nevin and Schaff, defended and upheld a formal worship with altars, responses, set forms of prayer, etc., while the other clung to the simple forms of worship, in vogue since the Reformation, and saw in the “High Church” movement a return to Catholicism. A compromise was finally effected by the adoption of the “Directory of Worship” in 1887 (revised in 1926). Other liturgies still used were the “Order of Worship” (high church) and the so-called “Western Liturgy” (low church). A new Directory of Worship was produced in 1970.

The first church paper was founded in 1828, which was later called The Messenger. Nine years later the first German paper, the Kirchenzeitung, was started. The first Board of Home Missions was erected in 1832, the Board of Foreign Missions in 1838. Dr. Ben Schneider, our first foreign missionary, served in Turkey from 1838 to 1855.

Development of Synods

As the territory of the church widened, more synods were formed. The influx of German immigrants about the middle of the last century, over one and a half million to the Midwest alone, led to the founding of many German congregations. The first synod (1793) became known as the Eastern Synod; the Ohio Synod was organized in 1824. Both were using the English language primarily when the new wave of immigrants arrived. Soon German synods were organized to accommodate the many new German-speaking congregations. Thus the Synod of the Northwest was formed in 1867, with 162 congregations (divided into five classes) stretching from Ohio to Canada to the West Coast. The German Synod of the East was formed in 1875, and Central Synod to 1881. Pittsburgh Synod was formed in 1875 and Potomac Synod in 1873, as offshoots of Eastern Synod. Interior Synod was organized in 1887. The extremely large territory covered by the Synod of the Northwest led to the formation of the Synod of the Southwest in 1914. With the German language gradually yielding to the English, certain German and English synods united. Southwest and Interior united in 1921 to form the Synod of the Midwest. In 1923 the Central and Ohio Synods united. Two Hungarian classes were added in 1924 from the old Hungarian Reformed Church.

The General Synod of the Reformed Church, which included all the regional synods, was organized in 1863. It met every three years. The work of the

denomination was carried out through five boards appointed by the General Synod. After 1926 there was an Executive Committee consisting of 20 members (ministers and elders).

New Constitutions of the church were adopted in 1828, 1846, 1863, and finally in 1908. The latter book, with certain amendments, is still in effect in the Reformed Church and represents certain compromises between different theological factions in the church in earlier times.

Formation and Separation of the Eureka Classis

In 1911 the Eureka Classis was organized in Scotland, South Dakota, by a group of churches separating from the South Dakota Classis. It, along with the mother classis, became a member of the Synod of the Northwest. The congregations which made up this new classis reorganization consisted chiefly, if not entirely, of German Russians. These Reformed Christians had emigrated from the German colonies of South Russia to the upper Midwest, in the 1870's and later, as a result of the Russian government cancelling their previously guaranteed privileges in that land.

In the providence of God this Eureka Classis, originally consisting of seven ministers and fifteen congregations, later became the entire denomination of the Reformed Church in the U.S.! It fell upon these recently immigrated farmer-pioneers to uphold the Reformed faith as the multitudes forsook that faith for the humanistic religion of Church Unionism.

The story of that sad development is as follows: There had been a number of attempts at church union with other denominations at various times in our long history, including talks with the Dutch Reformed, Lutherans and Presbyterians, but all to no avail.

By 1900 the leadership of the Reformed Church had become quite liberal and began to push with great enthusiasm for church union. In 1934 a Plan of Union with the Evangelical Synod of North America (an immigrant church from the united Lutheran and Reformed Church of Germany) was approved. The union was finalized in 1940 and the new denomination took the name Evangelical and Reformed Church. The new constitution stated that there was to be "liberty of conscience" concerning doctrine, the doctrinal statements (which were both Lutheran and Reformed) to be simply advisory, not binding statements. In reality it was a confessionless church. The Eureka Classis, meeting at Artas, South Dakota in 1932, notified its Synod of the Northwest and the General Synod that it would not enter into the proposed merger. In

1940 the Classis, meeting at Leola, South Dakota, officially declared itself to be the continuing Reformed Church in the U.S. (incorporating as such in 1945), and watched the bulk of the denomination dissolve itself into humanistic liberalism.

The Scriptures ask: “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3). This is often ignored in the modern day church-union movement, so appealing to many protestant groups. Unity becomes the overriding concern at the expense of truth. For this reason the Reformed Church in the U.S. is not a member of the National Council of Churches (NCC) or the World Council of Churches (WCC).

However, our separation is not a denial of the value and need of Christian unity, or a rejection of the biblical teaching of the “one Body of Christ,” or that we are spiritually proud and “stuck up.” On the contrary, we heartily confess in our churches the Apostles’ Creed which includes, “I believe in the one holy catholic (universal) Church.” We acknowledge that all true believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, as He is revealed in the Scriptures, are members of the one spiritual Body of Christ, the invisible church, regardless of their denominational affiliation.