

Lutheran Church Bodies in America

Family trees and lineages aren't always the most interesting reading—just try to keep your interest up as you read the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles. On the other hand, when looking at a church body like the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a tracing of mergers (and divisions!) can be helpful as we learn where we came from, what issues disturbed us, and thus where we may be headed.



Hans Nielsen Hauge

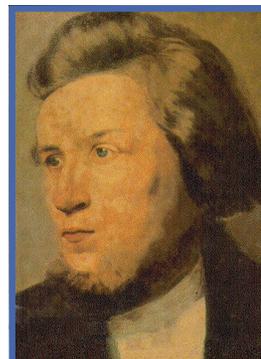
The Lutheran (or evangelical) movement began, of course, in Wittenberg, Germany. And in European countries the church organizations remained relatively stable, thanks to the tradition of state churches. For a long time, the principle was *Cuius regio, eius religio*—meaning, roughly, the king gets to decide the religion. Even in the “old country,” though, that began to break down in the nineteenth century as some Lutheran leaders, such as Hans Nielsen Hauge in Norway and

the Saxons who would form the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, chafed under rules they felt violated their consciences.

When Lutherans began to arrive in the United States, they came from several countries—early on, mostly northern European and Nordic, each group affiliating with their country of origin. But Lutherans, having foresworn strong centralized control from the outset, kept thinking for themselves. Differences of opinion formed, or were inherited, over issues such as relations with Christians of differing beliefs, membership in lodges, and slavery, and theological matters such as millennialism (whether Christ will reign on

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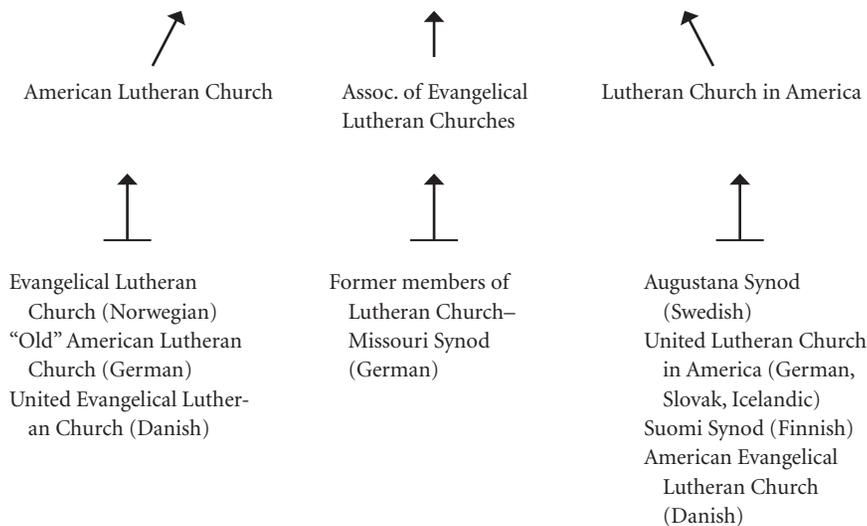
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earth for a thousand years), predestination, and ordination. So there are at least seven German groups, three Norwegian ones, and two Danish bodies, plus Swedes, Finns, Slovaks, and Icelanders, that through a series of mergers became the ELCA. A rough family tree can be seen on the other side.

Unfortunately, divisions have continued, more recently over issues like biblical inerrancy, relationships with other church bodies, ordination of women, and ordination and marriage of homosexual members. Today, even though the great majority of Lutherans in the United States belong to the ELCA, the Missouri Synod, or the Wisconsin Synod, there are more than thirty additional groups with ties to Lutheranism.

For Christians who follow the Lord who prayed that his followers might be one (John 17:11), such divisions are a cause for sorrow and repentance. The ELCA, a product of mergers, labors and prays that unity in Christ will continue to grow closer.

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