

2. Evangelical and Reformed Churches

Introduction

The German Reformed Churches in western Canada were mainly populated by German-Russian people, most of whom had emigrated prior to the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Nearly 100,000 people left the Volga region for Canada, the United States and Argentina between 1882 and 1914. Other families managed to escape between 1921 and 1928.

In Canada, many German-Russian families arrived before 1914 and settled in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. In Alberta, German Reformed Churches were established in the north-central area, specifically in Edmonton, Stony Plain, Spruce Grove, Duffield and Vegreville. There was another German Reformed Church located at Josephburg near Fort Saskatchewan, but its members had come from Galicia, Austria.

The congregations in Edmonton, Stony Plain, Spruce Grove, Duffield and Vegreville had their beginnings with German-Russian immigrants desiring to duplicate their churches with the same style of construction both on the outside and the inside, which would resemble the mother church in Norka, Saratov, Russia. The next most important step for these churches was to call pastors who subscribed to the Heidelberg Catechism and were either prepared to switch their allegiance to the Reformed doctrine or were already confirmed in the Reformed faith. Very often these pastors were not available in the local area. Therefore it was necessary to put out a call to the main body of the Reformed Church in the United States where the clergy was trained at the Mission House College in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, which was accredited for service in the German Reformed churches further afield. Some of these pastors who came to serve in the Alberta congregations had a Lutheran background, but agreed to switch and become part of the body of the Reformed Church.

The Reformed congregations in the province were founded at different times. The Stony Plain congregation began its church services in 1898 in a log building. There were approximately 66 members in that early community. By June 16, 1908 it was officially established as "*die Hoffnungs Gemeinde der deutsche Reformierte Kirche*" (Hope Congregation of the German Reformed Church) and operated under the Dakota Synod and the Manitoba Classis. The congregation continued to exist until 1965 when it was unable to find another German-speaking pastor after the passing of its last minister, the Rev. John F. Krieger. This congregation voted to join the Christian Reformed Church, which subscribed to the Heidelberg Catechism.

The Duffield congregation originally operated in the homes of its members from 1900 until 1926 when a new building was erected in the Mewassin district. This congregation was called "*die Friedens Gemeinde*" (Peace Congregation). It followed the lead of its sister congregation in Stony Plain (Glory Hills) and ceased its association with the general church body in the Dakota Synod by 1968; it joined the United Church of Canada.

The Spruce Grove congregation was established in about 1907 as the Bethanian Reformed Congregation, and a building was purchased from the Presbyterian and, later, Methodist congregation. It was a relatively small log church with about 25 members attending. This congregation comprised the German-Russians who had settled in Spruce Grove; later it was closed when the members had motor vehicle mobility and decided to join the Hope Congregation of Stony Plain. The log building stood where, at present, a public community cemetery is located on Pioneer Road alongside Highway 16A. The church remained empty for nearly forty years until it burned down during a grass fire sparked by a railway clean-up along the CNR line.

Another congregation, this one in Edmonton, was begun in about 1912, and it too had a considerable number of German-Russian families attending. This congregation was called the Zoar Reformed Church of Edmonton. It closed its doors in about 1930 and the property was purchased by a Christian Reformed Church.

In Vegreville, about 100 km east of Edmonton, two German-Russian congregations were established. One congregation to the south of the town was called the Salem Reformed Congregation; the other one, to the north, was called the Brush Hill Reformed Congregation. Both congregations became part of the United Church of Canada in the mid 1960's.

At present there are no German Reformed Churches in Alberta. All of their members, who originally were German-Russian immigrants, have passed away and their descendants have either lost interest in a church relationship or have moved out of the area of their birthplace because of marriage or search for employment.

There were other reasons for the younger generation to lose heart in a continuation of their interest in the work of the Reformed Churches. The General Synod in the U.S. failed to give support in the form of financial assistance and personal encouragement to the younger generation of potential candidates who sought to become pastors and were willing to train for the ministry. In the years following the Second World War many young men could receive much better pay in the commercial and industrial fields, which ultimately drew their attention and gave them a fresh start for employment in the local private and public sectors.

As well, at that period of time the General Synod in the United States was caught up in a series of mergers with other denominations in the U.S., which had little impact and were of little interest to the Canadian body of the Reformed Church. Moreover, the American main church body provided little support for existing German-speaking pastoral staff, and the General Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed Church in the U.S. failed to show a substantive interest and willingness to supply financial assistance to the Canadian congregations for the purpose of building programs. All these factors contributed to the decline in church memberships causing many in the local congregations to join in with other more progressive and aggressive religious fellowships.

The membership in the Reformed Churches in Alberta around the turn of the century was not large. The 1891 Census of the region later to be called Alberta did not report any Evangelicals or members of a Reformed church as such, but there were 24 members who claimed to be Reformed Lutherans. Ten years later, the 1901 Census recorded 146 members of the Reformed Church in northern Alberta, none in the southern part of the province. Virtually all Reformed resided in the Spruce Grove, Stony Plain, Josephburg and Sturgeon areas. Only a handful of Albertans of German origin claimed to be Evangelicals at that time.

By 1911 the number of Reformed of German descent had risen to 179 members in northern and southern Alberta, again most of them in the Edmonton electoral sub-district to the west of Edmonton (N=50), the Victoria sub-district to the northeast of Edmonton (N=44), in the City of Edmonton (N=30) and the City of Strathcona (N=30). The 1911 census recorded 106 Evangelicals in northern and southern Alberta, the majority residing in the Calgary electoral sub-district (N=51) and the MacLeod and Lethbridge electoral sub-districts (N=34).

Birk, Reinhold R., born on June 1, 1873 in Riga, Latvia, Russian Empire; married Wilhelmine Kadner on June 22, 1899; immigrated to the USA in 1907; served Hope German Reformed Church, Glory Hills (Stony Plain), AB and Duffield, AB (May 17, 1908–September 1, 1913); served in Winnipeg, MB (1907). A Pastor Birk is mentioned as holding services in school houses near Scapa, AB in the *50th Anniversary Book of the Canada District of the American Lutheran Church – German Reformed Church*.

Buenzli, John Henry, born in Switzerland; served Hope German Reformed Church, Glory Hills (Stony Plain) AB (1918–1919) – German Reformed Church.

Graeser, Carl Friedrich Wilhelm, born on May 23, 1858 in Schleswig-Holstein (then Denmark, now Germany); served in the German Army as a chaplain; served Salem German Reformed Church, Vegreville,

AB (1901–?), which later became Salem United Church (of Canada), located a short distance south of Vegreville; he also served Brush Hill Reformed Church, Vegreville, AB (1916–?); served Hope, Glory Hills (Stony Plain), AB (1920); in the *1907 Yearbook of the Reformed Church in the United States* he is listed as serving in Winnipeg, MB; Pastor Graeser died of a stroke in Stony Plain, AB on January 14, 1921 and was buried there. He was later exhumed and re-buried at Josephburg Peace Congregation – German Reformed Church.

Krieger, Johannes Friedrich, born on March 11, 1893 in Aulrich, East Frisia, German Empire; married to Elisabeth née Busch, the sister of the well-known German pastor-evangelist Wilhelm Busch; studied at the Mission House of the Reformed Church in Sheboygan, WI; after graduation J. F. Krieger served congregations of the Evangelical and Reformed Church in Manitoba and Saskatchewan for a short time and then near Edmonton at Josephberg/Fort Saskatchewan; served Brush Hill Reformed Church and Salem Reformed Church near Vegreville, AB (1940s); Hope Evangelical and Reformed Church at Glory Hills near Stony Plain and Duffield, AB (1950s, every second week); Hope Church, Glory Hills (Stony Plain), AB (1947–1963); died in Lamont, AB on January 11, 1962 – Evangelical and Reformed Church – United Church of Christ.

Lehrer, Emil, served in Saskatchewan, then at Hope Congregation, Glory Hills (Stony Plain), AB (1913–1918); served a Reformed Church in Humboldt, NE (1907) – German Reformed Church.

Reppert, Charles Henry, upon graduation from Mission House College went to directly to serve Hope, Glory Hills (Stony Plain), AB (1921–1945); upon returning to the U.S. he served in Wisconsin for three years and then died – German Reformed Church – Evangelical and Reformed Church.

Roemer, Armin Henry, parents: John and Marie (née Fehler) Roemer; served as a student pastor in the 1940s for two years at the Hope Evangelical and Reformed congregation, Glory Hills, and at Duffield between Pastors Reppert and Krieger (1945–1947) – Evangelical and Reformed Church.

Roemer, Henry Bringfried, born on January 3, 1919 in Wolseley, SK; parents: John and Marie (née Fehler) Roemer; studied at the Mission House College of the Evangelical and Reformed Church at Plymouth, WI (1936) and received a B.A. from there (1940); studied at St. Stephen's College (United Church of Canada) Seminary, Edmonton, AB; served Salem and Zion Reformed near Vegreville, AB during the summer of 1942; married Lydia nee Giebelhaus of Vegreville; was ordained on October 20, 1946 and served Salem Reformed at Vegreville and Zion Reformed at Brush Hill (1946–1958); upon retirement he returned to Scotland, SD; Bethany Evangelical and Reformed; Ebenezer Evangelical and Reformed, Alpena, SD and Hope Evangelical and Reformed near Wessington Springs, SD; Friedens and Emmanuel Evangelical and Reformed Churches, Tripp, SD; died on January 7, 2013 in Tripp, SD; the funeral service was held at Friedens Reformed Church, Tripp, SD on January 12, 2013 with Pastor Fred Sprenger officiating – German Reformed Church – Evangelical and Reformed Church – United Church of Christ.

Sommerlatte, Paul, served Hope, Glory Hills (Stony Plain), AB (1921); in the *1907 Yearbook of the Reformed Church in the United States* there are two pastors with this last name: Paul, who served in Philadelphia, PA, and John, who served in Baltimore, MD – German Reformed Church.

Vetter, Georg Friedrich, served Hope, Glory Hills (Stony Plain), AB (1898–1903) from Edmonton; held services bi-weekly in warmer months and during the winter only for festival services (i.e. Christmas and New Year); he took the train to Stony Plain where the line ended at that time; he was likely an independent Lutheran pastor who felt that this little fledgling congregation needed help and so he decided to follow this up – German Reformed Church.

Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge the contribution of the text by Reuben Bauer, renowned researcher, historian and author.

Reuben Alexander Bauer was born on November 2, 1936 in Stony Plain, Alberta. His parents, Alexander and Elisabeth (nee Hohnstein) Bauer, were both born in Norka, Volga Region, Russian Empire. He studied at the University of Alberta in Edmonton (1957–1962) and graduated with a B.A. and B.Ed. and M.Ed. (1968). He is married to Ruth Miriam (née Peter), born in Prince George, BC, whose parents were Adolf and Maria (née Bieber) Peter. Reuben was a teacher in Stony Plain (public school) and Edmonton (four years in the Catholic School System) as well as employed by the Government of Canada in teaching positions at the following First Nations Schools: Alexis, Duffield, Enoch and Coal Lake in Alberta. He is a prolific author and photographer. He was the director of the Stony Plain Pioneer Museum for a period of five years and was an active member of the Monarchist League of Canada and extremely active in the preservation and research into the Germans-from-Russia cultural heritage. At one time he had a Gospel recording studio in Edmonton. In 2015 he was nominated as a candidate for the position of Lieutenant Governor for Alberta. On an international level, Reuben is recognized as one of the top 100 notables in the field of German-Russian cultural heritage. Reuben remains very active in his Christian faith and church life. He has resided in the Stony Plain/Spruce Grove area all of his life. Recently it was discovered by historical research that Reuben is 26th cousin to Queen Elizabeth II and 23rd cousin to Prince Philip via the relationship of his mother's family Hohnstein in marriage to the German royal family known as Hohenzollern and the family Anhalt-Zerbst and Saxe-Coburg Gotha in Germany.

Endnotes

Introduction: Wikipedia contributors, "Canadian and Reformed churches," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_and_American_Reformed_Churches (accessed on December 15, 2016).

Birk: *Kalender der Reformierten Kirche in den Vereinigten Staaten (Yearbook of the Reformed Church in the United States)*, 1907, 54.

Graeder: "Christian Reformed Church," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://www.crcna.org/>; *Kalender der Reformierten Kirche in den Vereinigten Staaten*, 1907, 56.

Lehrer: *Kalender der Reformierten Kirche in den Vereinigten Staaten*, 1907, 58.

Reppert: "Christian Reformed Church." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <https://www.crcna.org/>.

Sommerlatte: *Kalender der Reformierten Kirche in den Vereinigten Staaten*, 1907, 61.

Stepper: partly from the obituary sent by the family.

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Wikipedia contributors, "Canadian and American Reformed Churches," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canadian_and_American_Reformed_Churches (accessed on December 30, 2016)