

# Evangelical and Reformed Church Came to Detroit in 1833

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● The Evangelical and Reformed Church is a liberal church that stems directly from the Reformation and traces its beginnings to Martin Luther, John Calvin and Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli.

The denomination made its appearance in Detroit in 1833, when the first Evangelical missionary reached here.

Evangelical, literally translated, means "the Gospel," and it was used in those days to cover what are now known as Lutherans and the various specific Evangelical Church bodies. In Germany the Evangelical Church still carries its original connotation.

The first Evangelical minister in this area was the Rev. Friedrich Schmid, who came here from Basel, Switzerland.

He came here to found a Lutheran church in Scio Township, near Ann Arbor, but of necessity landed in Detroit first, on Aug. 16, 1833.

Two days later he held service in a local carpenter's shop, thus laying the foundations for what is now St. John's Evangelical and Reformed Church, Russell and Gratiot.

A rather remarkable man, Rev. Schmid went on to found the Lutheran congregation in Ann Arbor, but remained a zealous missionary.

On foot, sometimes on horseback or clinging to a lumber wagon or some other type of conveyance, he ranged from Monroe to Detroit, to Grand Rapids, Lansing and a dozen other cities in between, preaching and founding churches.

He returned to Detroit in the early fall of 1833 and helped to formally organize St. John's, then comprised of both Lutherans and Evangelicals.

The Lutherans later withdrew from the congregation, but most of the other churches he founded became Lutheran. Rev. Schmid later became the first president of the Michigan Synod of the Lutheran Church.

The demarcation line between Lutherans and Evangelicals in those days was slender, and sometimes a newly founded congregation went to the conservative side and became Lutheran, sometimes liberal and Evangelical.

Today the differences are more accentuated, but basically it remains a division between conservative and liberal elements that grew out of the combined thinking of the original reformers.

In 1836, Pastor J. Schwabe arrived in Detroit from Basel, Switzerland, to become the first permanent pastor of St. John's, freeing pastor Schmid of his duties in this city.

His pastorate was brief, however, as he died



The cornerstone of St. John's Evangelical and Reformed Church, certifying how long this church building has been standing at Russell and Gratiot.

a few months after his arrival.

In October, 1837, a Rev. Schaad arrived to minister to St. John's, and under his leadership the congregation built its first church, a simple frame building, in 1838, on the southeast corner of Monroe and Farmer.

Seven years later the Lutherans in the congregation obtained their own minister and withdrew from St. John's.

It was some years later, on Nov. 20, 1849, that the first Zion German Reformed Church was organized here by the Rev. A. Berky, bringing into the area the Reformed branch of the Protestant faith.

This was a congregation of the German Reformed Church, later known as the Reformed Church in the United States.

It was liberal, but leaned toward Calvinism, while the Evangelical Church (then known as the Evangelical Union of the West, and later as the Evangelical Synod of North America) was also liberal, but leaned more toward Lutheranism.

Both drew heavily upon Zwingli, the Swiss reformer and contemporary of Luther, whose teachings were between the conservative ones of Luther and the more radical approach of Calvin.

It was Zwingli who provided the actual doctrinal beginnings of the Reformed Church movement in Protestantism.

In 1934, just 26 years ago, the two church bodies merged into what is now known as the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

Today's Evangelical and Reformed Church doctrine is based on the Heidelberg Catechism, a Calvinist document, Luther's Catechism and his Augsburg Confession, which are accepted as an "authoritative interpretation of the essential truth taught in the Holy Scriptures."

The Old and New Testaments are recognized as the "Word of God and the ultimate rule of Christian faith and practice."

The constitution of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, after citing these things, continues:

"Wherever these doctrinal standards differ, ministers, members, and congregations, in accordance with the liberty of conscience inherent in the Gospel, are allowed to adhere to the interpretation of one of these confessions. However, in each case the final norm is the Word of God."

Two sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, are administered, and are considered essential to salvation.



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The Lord's Supper, or communion, however, is regarded as a memorial sacrament, in remembrance of Christ. A denomination member must receive this sacrament at least once every three years to remain a member of his congregation.

Confirmation, ordination, marriage and burial are considered rites. Ordinations by other denominations are recognized as valid.

Wide freedom of worship is offered, but the form of worship leans toward the liturgical, and in some churches liturgy is used so thoroughly they are known as "high" churches among members of the denomination.

A modified form of the presbyterian type of government is used to run the church.

Each local church is governed by a consistory or church council elected from its own membership. Local churches are grouped into synods, with a pastor and a lay delegate from each church serving as a member.

The synod meets twice a year and has jurisdiction over all ministers and congregations; examines, licenses and ordains all ministers, and elects its own officers. It also appoints committees necessary to carry out the work of the synod on behalf of the congregations.

The General Synod is the highest body in the church, and is comprised of an equal number of lay and clergy delegates from each of the 34 ordinary synods.

It meets once every three years, and elects a general council of 21 members to supervise the work of the denomination between its meetings. It also appoints committees and commissions to carry on the necessary national church work.

In June, 1957, the General Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed Church began a proposed merger with the Congregational Christian Churches, with the thus-formed denomination to be known as The United Church of Christ.

While the Evangelical and Reformed Church joined in the proposed merger quite wholeheartedly, a number of Congregational churches and leaders objected strenuously.

As a result, lawsuits were filed that are still in the courts, effectively preventing culmination of the merger.

The General Council of the Congregational Churches, lacking power to commit individual Congregational congregations, went ahead with the merger, acting for itself.

A proposed constitution for the new United Church of Christ will be submitted to a merger convention in July for ratification. If ratified, it will be sent to each individual Congregational Christian Church and each Evangelical and Reformed Synod for ratification by them, a process that could take as long or longer than the court cases which have delayed the merger to date.

While the Evangelical and Reformed Church is of German origin, and the German language was once used exclusively in its services, this is no longer true.

The melting pot of America brought language changes, and while some few of the denomination's churches in strictly German areas still use the German language, and a few others use Hungarian, the great bulk of them now use English.

Today the denomination has 2,731 churches in the country, with a membership of 806,500.



The newest completed church building of the Evangelical and Reformed Church in the Detroit area is Nativity Church of Livonia (above). The chapel of the first unit is in the design of an eight-pointed Nativity Star, symbolizing the name of the church. It is built of open framework with marble front and top and seats 200. Rev. I. Kenneth Shreiner is pastor. Left: the communion table of Nativity Church, with a cross suspended from the ceiling.