



# A Brief History of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Guyana

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The year 1492 was a watershed moment for Europe, marking the beginning of the great European migration. Migration and the growing political struggle of rising nation states leading up to the Reformation were signs that major changes were afoot that would permanently change the world. The stage was set for religious reform chiefly due to the decline of the papacy. Flames were ignited by those who protested corrupt church practices across the empire. Englishman John Wycliffe (ca. 1328–1384), a persistent Roman Catholic dissenter, and Bohemian Jan Hus (1371–1415) are both prominent forerunners to Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564). Hus was condemned by the Council of Constance on July 6, 1415. While being burnt at the stake, it is alleged that he prophesied, “In 100 years, God will raise up a man whose calls for reform cannot be suppressed.”<sup>1</sup> Another rendering of the alleged prophecy popular among Guyanese Lutherans states, “You may roast this goose, but in a hundred years a swan will arise whose voice you will not still.”<sup>2</sup> In Bohemian *Hus* means *geese*. Therefore, in the history

<sup>1</sup> “John Hus,” English Bible History, Greatsite.com, <https://tinyurl.com/yc4t3gvs>.

<sup>2</sup> Paul B. Beatty, *A History of the Lutheran Church in Guyana* (Guyana: The Daily Chronicle, 1970), 129.

*Eighteenth-century European colonists brought Lutheranism to the area of South America that is now the country of Guyana. The history of these churches shows their gradual transformation from being European enclaves to an indigenous church, first supported by American missionary work and then as a self-directing church.*

of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Guyana (ELCG), the swan is understood to be Martin Luther.

“Up until the early sixteenth century, despite growing national differences, there remained a distinct European ‘Community of Christendom,’ presided over by the pope.”<sup>3</sup> Yet no sooner had Europe made claim to the New World than it became greatly divided. “The greatest source of internal friction was religion.”<sup>4</sup> Common Christian religious practices, which had always been a major shaping influence in European culture and political life, were disrupted by movements for reform. “Led by the Roman hierarchy, sharp, realistic, sixteenth-century minds compared the origins of Christianity with the conditions of the church in their day and concluded that radical reforms were needed.”<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther was a chief architect who in the early sixteenth century initiated the Protestant Reformation. This movement permanently changed the face of Western Christianity and in so doing brought about major religious and political demographic alteration that spread from Europe to the Americas.

The success of Spain and Portugal overseas launched European expansionism. Even if prospects outside of Europe appeared to be mere speculation, European migrants readily risked their lives in the hope of changing the fortune of war-torn Europe. Their aspirations led to a movement that eventually brought whole nations into being in the New World.<sup>6</sup> Thus a New World emerged not because of European success but rather because of failures in Europe.

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Attempts by the Dutch to settle in Guyana began as early as 1580 with a search for Eldorado. Sir Walter Raleigh’s (1554–1618) publication on the famous city of Eldorado attracted other European nations to Guyana in search of gold. The Dutch West India Company was established in 1621 and two years later took control of Essequibo.<sup>7</sup> In 1648, with the Treaty of Munster between Spain and the Netherlands, Dutch colonies of Berbice and Essequibo in South America were given formal recognition.<sup>8</sup> Sometime between 1720 and 1732, Berbice was organized as a

<sup>3</sup> Edward McNall Burns, Robert E. Lerner, and Standish Meacham, *Western Civilizations: Their History and Their Culture* (New York: Norton, 1984), 456.

<sup>4</sup> Richard S. Dunn, *The Age of Religious Wars 1559–1715* (New York: Norton, 1979), 62.

<sup>5</sup> Eric W. Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross, *Mission in the Twenty-first Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 193.

<sup>7</sup> James Rodway, *Guiana: British, Dutch and French* (London: T. Fisher, 1912), 58.

<sup>8</sup> Cheddi Jagan, *The West on Trial: My Fight for Guyana’s Freedom* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 25.

Dutch colony, and in April 1733, Bernhard Waterham became the first governor in the colony.<sup>9</sup> Dutch administrative structure was completed with provisions for a religious minister, so in 1735, Jan Christian Frauendorf arrived in Berbice to serve the Dutch Reformed Church, which was founded sometime in 1735.<sup>10</sup>

Eight years later, on October 15, 1743, Ebenezer Lutheran Church was established in the colony, just a year after Henry M. Muhlenberg arrived in America.<sup>11</sup> This congregation was organized by scattered settlers and maintained by lay initiative.<sup>12</sup> Lutherans practiced the faith as they did in Europe and identified themselves as believers of the Evangelical Unaltered Augsburg Confession.<sup>13</sup> They moved quickly to establish a relationship with the Lutheran congregation in Amsterdam that lasted about one hundred years and relied on it to supply clergy. However, there was little or no eager foreign or diaspora missionary spirit among the Lutherans.<sup>14</sup>

From 1743 to 1840, the year the last Dutch pastor's tenure concluded, Ebenezer was served by a total of six pastors. On May 23, 1752, Pastor Taerkenius (a.k.a. Pastor Kendrick) was called, but it took almost a decade for him to arrive in the colony.<sup>15</sup> There were significant gaps between pastorates. The longest gap took about thirty-seven years to fill. In addition, the colonial authorities insisted "that [Lutherans] should, moreover, contribute to the ordinary church [Dutch Reformed] fund equally and in the same proportion as all other inhabitants."<sup>16</sup>

The 1763 slave revolt in the colony adversely affected the infant church as slaves controlled the colony for eleven months.<sup>17</sup> Africans never quite accepted slavery and "riots were common all over the West Indies, and so were mutinies on board ship, both arising from similar causes."<sup>18</sup> Still, the most compelling statement by the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) was its silence on slavery. Missionary Beatty suspected that bitterness following the revolt might have led to the ELC's exclusion of slaves from public worship.<sup>19</sup> But it is more likely that Lutherans used this event to publicly state their position on slavery because they never sought to end slavery. In fact, by 1778 the ELC operated a slave plantation and took the extraordinary step to establish the Berbice Lutheran Fund.

<sup>9</sup> Henry G. Dalton, *The History of British Guiana: Comprising a General Description of the Colony*, vol. 1 (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1855), 190.

<sup>10</sup> Dalton, *History of British Guiana*, 191.

<sup>11</sup> Theodore E. Schmauk, *A History of the Lutheran Church in Pennsylvania (1638–1820)*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: General Council Publishing House, 1903), 152.

<sup>12</sup> Beatty, *History of the Lutheran Church*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Howard R. Kunkle, *Under the White Swan: The Story of the Lutheran Church in the Guianas* (New York: United Lutheran Church in America Board of Foreign Missions, 1959), 15.

<sup>14</sup> Kunkle, *Under the White Swan*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Charles A. Hay, *History of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of East Pennsylvania: With Brief Sketches of Its Congregations* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1893), 313–14.

<sup>16</sup> Hay, *History of the Evangelical Lutheran*, 314.

<sup>17</sup> Raymond T. Smith, *British Guiana* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 19.

<sup>18</sup> James Rodway, *History of British Guiana From the Year 1668 to the Present Time*, vol. 1 (Georgetown, Guyana: J. Thomson, 1891), 167.

<sup>19</sup> Beatty, *History of the Lutheran Church*, 22.

In 1795, land was approved for the construction of a church, and in 1803 the original building was reconstructed at the new site.<sup>20</sup> By 1803, Great Britain had taken control of Berbice, Essequibo, and Demerara from the Dutch and made New Amsterdam the city in Berbice. Planters were greatly encouraged by the British policy to freely grant land on the coast along with tax exemption for purposes of agricultural development.<sup>21</sup> Initially, Britain was no more sympathetic to evangelization of slaves than the Dutch, but his policy soon changed following the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. The 1826 reforms allowed slaves the legal right to own property, purchase their freedom, and marry. Despite these developments, Lutherans kept up their resistance to the evangelization of slaves. “In October 1828, [Reverend Johannes] Vos made a formal complaint to the [British Colonial] government that while he was marrying slaves at Plantation Catharinasburg, Upper Canje, a meeting of the Lutheran vestry was deliberately held in his absence dismissing him as pastor of the congregation.”<sup>22</sup> Evidently, the pastor and vestry held differing views on the evangelization of slaves.

From the mid-nineteenth century, there began a gradual shift from Dutch to Creole leadership in the ELC. “Failing to obtain any more supplies [of clergy] from Holland, the Berbice Lutherans had recourse to offer their pastorate to the Rev. Alexander Riach, of the Presbyterian church.”<sup>23</sup> Following the departure of Reverend H. W. P. Junius in 1841 up until 1875, the ELC experimented with ecumenical clergy, and for a period of time the church came under the control of Wesleyans.<sup>24</sup> “During the Wesleyan occupation of the Church . . . for the period of twenty-three years, the Lutheran church had died out.”<sup>25</sup> Surprisingly, the church’s doors remained open because a remnant took back control of the congregation from Wesleyans. “When Lutheran services were resumed in the fall of 1875 the actual number of Lutherans was twelve.”<sup>26</sup> It kept the church alive.

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In 1878, Reverend Mittelholzer was called to be pastor of the ELC and in July 1890 established relations with Lutherans in North America.<sup>27</sup> The period from 1888 to 1890 revealed to members the character of the man they had called to be their pastor. Testing and subsequent triumph gave the young pastor confidence in his abilities to lead, although two administrators persistently stood in his way.

<sup>20</sup> Beatty, *History of the Lutheran Church*, 28.

<sup>21</sup> Vere T. Daly, *A Short History of the Guyanese People* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 122.

<sup>22</sup> Beatty Jr., *A History of the Lutheran Church in Guyana*, 36.

<sup>23</sup> Hay, *History of the Evangelical Lutheran*, 316.

<sup>24</sup> Beatty, *History of the Lutheran Church*, 37–39.

<sup>25</sup> Hay, *History of the Evangelical Lutheran*, 318.

<sup>26</sup> Hay, *History of the Evangelical Lutheran*, 318.

<sup>27</sup> United Lutheran Church in America General Synod, *Minutes*, 49th Convention, September 17–23, 1890.

They managed the Berbice Lutheran Fund when there was no resident clergy and refused to turn over funds and submit a financial statement. This was a declaration of ecclesiastical war, and the matter went all the way to the Supreme Court, during which time Reverend Mittelholzer went without his salary. Nearing the end of the legal battle, word from America reached the vestry “announcing . . . recognition by the East Pennsylvania Synod, which led to the consummating event of official connection with the Synod.”<sup>28</sup> A new era had dawned when Reverend Mittelholzer was accepted into the Lutheran Ministerium in America, and the ELC felt emboldened when the courts ruled in favor of the pastor and vestry.

Reverend Mittelholzer was the first indigenous pastor, and near the end of his ministry, the ELC became a multicongregation body. Upon his death in August 1913, the vestry petitioned the East Pennsylvania Synod to send a minister to their church.<sup>29</sup> “The Ebenezer vestry pledged \$1,200 (US) per year for [Dr. Stine’s] salary and paid the travelling expenses for Pastor and Mrs. Stine.”<sup>30</sup> The haste with which Dr. Stine’s visit was conducted strongly suggests that Americans were eager to engage in foreign mission, and this provided a perfect opportunity to do so. Less than two years after the death of Reverend Mittelholzer, on March 25, 1915 a unilateral decision was made in North America that led to the recognition of the ELC as a mission of the United Lutheran Church in America. “The transfer was accordingly made, and in January, 1916, [Missionary White] took charge [of the ELC on behalf of] the Board.”<sup>31</sup> A continuous stream of personnel from America to the ELC began in 1916 and extended into the early 1980s. The missionary replaced the vestry as the sole decision-making body and, in collaboration with the BFM, articulated a vision for the church.

When in 1919 the ELC was finally ready to share the gospel with East Indians, White contacted an East Indian for this mission.<sup>32</sup> Charles Bowen, a former Lutheran, was encouraged to return to the ELC. He knew the language and culture of his people, which made him an insider. White employed him as the first East Indian catechist, and he served until his death in 1924.<sup>33</sup> This changed the culture of the ELC by making provisions for worship in Hindi, and its success led to a strategy of educating and training locals to be catechists and for ordination. In 1936, Aubrey Roy Bowen, son of the late Catechist Bowen, became the second indigenous pastor.

In celebration of the two hundredth anniversary of Lutheranism in Guyana, the church’s press began producing a bi-monthly publication of the periodical *The Southern Cross*.<sup>34</sup> This Lutheran publication was a useful communication between

<sup>28</sup> Hay, *History of the Evangelical Lutheran*, 322.

<sup>29</sup> Ralph Jerome White, *Six Years in Hammock Land: An Historical Sketch of the Lutheran Church in British Guiana* (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication House, 1922), 56.

<sup>30</sup> Beatty, *History of the Lutheran Church*, 78.

<sup>31</sup> White, *Six Years in Hammock Land*, 57.

<sup>32</sup> Kunkle, *Under the White Swan*, 116.

<sup>33</sup> Kunkle, *Under the White Swan*, 116.

<sup>34</sup> Kunkle, *Under the White Swan*, 98, 151.

congregations in the colony and farther afield. That same year, a constitution was prepared for the twelve congregations, and 804 communing members formed the Evangelical Lutheran Church in British Guiana (ELCBG).<sup>35</sup> Still, the church continued to function under the direction of the BFM. Progress aimed at self-reliance was very slow. For more than two centuries, the ELCBG was considered a wealthy church. In the 1980s, when the church resumed self-governing status, the weight of its financial obligations impeded its ability to rise to the missional challenges of the day. The lengthy missionary era in which personnel and funds were lavished upon the church grew the church by leaps and bounds, but it also Americanized the church and hindered its maturity.

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In 1947, lay missionaries were introduced to work alongside clergy, and this continued up until 1985. From 1947 through 1961, there were two missionaries to each local clergy. In 1953, there were eleven missionaries on assignment in the ELCBG compared to three local clergy, although there were as many as twenty-six to thirty catechists on staff. Surprisingly, this increase occurred at the same time a goal was set to make the local church more self-sufficient. The turning point was 1961, with seven local clergymen on the roster. Local clergy numbers peaked at twelve in 1977, which coincided with the closure of the catechist program.<sup>36</sup>

The Catechist Training School was looked upon as a laboratory through which prospective local clergy were identified and given seminary education in preparation for ordination. Sometime after 1952, a few Guyanese pastors were prepared for the ministry at the Inter-American University in Puerto Rico.<sup>37</sup> The pattern of seminary education for locals continued in North America until the late 1960s. In 1965, the first Guyanese candidates for the ordained ministry to study at United Theological College of the West Indies were James Lochan and Catechists Samuel Seeram and David Udit. Thereafter, most Guyanese clergy received their theological education from United Theological College of the West Indies in Jamaica.

In the 1960s, when American Lutheranism was consolidating and flourishing following mergers, there was no pull back in support of the church. From 1962 onward, the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), through the Board of World Missions, and later through the Division for World Mission and Ecumenism

<sup>35</sup> *Lutheran Work in British Guiana*, May 26, 1961.

<sup>36</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church British Guiana Executive Committee, *Minutes*, no. 22, October 11–12, 1946.

<sup>37</sup> "Statement of Training Clergy," in *Document Presented to the ELCBG*, 1965.

(DWME), related to the ELCBG. In 1972, some six decades into the American Foreign Mission era, for the first time there was an equal number of local clergy to missionaries in the now Evangelical Lutheran Church in Guyana. In May 1966, Guyana became an independent state, and earlier that year the ELCBG at its annual convention adopted a new constitution. The church changed its name to the Lutheran Church in Guyana (LCG) following the example set by the Lutheran Church in America after the merger.<sup>38</sup>

The decision by the LCA to withdraw missionaries and pave the way for the LCG to stand on its own moved ahead when the Board of World Missions assigned one missionary to organize and implement ongoing lay leadership development. Whereas the faculty of the Catechist Training School was drawn from the missionary pool, with the development of the Guyana Extension Seminary, there was no need for an extensive faculty. Also, this experiment began in 1972 under the auspices of the Guyana Council of Churches.<sup>39</sup> It was unlike the Catechist Training School because the strategy was to equip the church with unsalaried lay professionals. In 1975, it gained momentum with the arrival of missionary Reverend Paul A. Tidemann. By 1979, the Guyana Extension Seminary came under the directorship of Dr. Dale Bisnauth, a Guyanese and Presbyterian minister, and received one third of its funding from the DWME, but it could not replicate the success of the Catechist Training School.

By 1976, merely sixty-one years into the American Foreign Mission era, the LCG had expanded to fifty-two congregations divided up into sixteen parishes with seventy-four Sunday schools. At the 1979 and 1980 conventions, the local leadership expressed concern that the staffing situation was more critical than in previous years.<sup>40</sup> It became clear on the eve of assuming self-rule that everything seemed rushed and premature. Between 1982 and 1985, all missionary clergy were withdrawn from the ELCG leaving only lay missionaries. The DWME's secretary for Latin America and the Caribbean believed that the Guyana Extension Seminary was functioning well under its Guyanese director, but it did not achieve its intended goal.<sup>41</sup> The concept was good, but the church was no better for it because it proved ineffective to meet the leadership needs of the LCG. The LCG did not have adequate staffing with advanced theological education capable of providing leadership for a church with an extensive infrastructure and financial and personnel challenges.

In 1980, President Pillay's report on the state of the church painted a bleak picture for the future. He called attention to "the unending 'braindrain' which persists in crippling the Church in Guyana as the better trained pastors continue to leave the Caribbean looking for what they consider a less oppressive environment and one which they believe offers more economic security."<sup>42</sup> But there was

<sup>38</sup> Lutheran Church in America Board of World Missions, *Minutes*, June 1966.

<sup>39</sup> Lutheran Church in Guyana, *Minutes*, 28th Annual Convention, May 1972.

<sup>40</sup> Lutheran Church in Guyana, *Minutes*, 36th Annual Convention, May 1980.

<sup>41</sup> Lutheran Church in America, Division of World Mission and Ecumenism, *Report*, March 1979.

<sup>42</sup> LCA, Division of World Mission and Ecumenism, *Report*, October 1980.

no going back to the way things were before. The church had to learn fast. It had to cope with the demands of an oppressive political climate, poor economy, migration, and inadequate staff. In the end, the church had become inward looking and some of its leaders self-serving at the expense of being a prophetic voice, especially when it was most needed in the 1980s.

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Currently, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Guyana has nine pastors, all locally educated and trained, assisted by eleven deacons, also locally trained. However, most of the leaders have benefited from one semester of theological studies at Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa, and a basic unit of Clinical Pastoral Education in North America. This program began in the mid-1980s. Reverend Dr. Winston D. Persaud, professor of systematic theology at Wartburg Theological Seminary, has been and continues to be the mastermind behind this program and an invaluable resource for in-service training. He also coordinates the Guyana Mission Network that supports the ELCG with literature, Bibles, theological books, and funding for small projects. His work with and on behalf of the ELCG lightens the burden of the leadership currently serving forty-four congregations with approximately a thousand active members (communing 1,332).<sup>43</sup>

ELCG logo



The swan, Bible, and the cross brought by Dutch Lutherans to Guyana are enduring symbols connecting Lutherans in Guyana with their evangelical heritage in Europe and beyond. Together these three symbols make up the ELCG logo.

<sup>43</sup> "ELCG 75th Annual Convention Bulletin," January 15, 2018, PDF, 34, <https://tinyurl.com/y8rktq67>.



It is also a reminder of the struggles and sacrifices made for the gospel. Indeed, throughout the ages people have killed prophets only to discover that God raises up new servants of the word. The church is a reminder that God is alive in the world, and God is calling sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Today, the church aims to transform lives by motivating believers to proclaim Christ, who makes transformation possible. By its very proclamation, the ELCG exists to inspire hope in Christ's real presence as the one who purges, heals, and reconciles a broken people to one another and to God. ☩

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