

# **A Brief History of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of Germany Including Its Recent Ministry Discussion**

*by Gaylin R. Schmeling*

## **The History of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church**

Our ELS has a sister church body in Germany known as the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church (*Evangelisch-Lutherische Freikirche* [ELFK]). We have been in fellowship with this church for over 100 years through the former Synodical Conference. This church has endured very difficult circumstances, first it spent many years under communism, then it faced a break in fellowship with the SELK (*Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche*), the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod partner church in Germany, and recently it has had serious questions concerning the doctrine of church and ministry in its midst. Yet the Lord has been with our sister church and these questions have been resolved with a scriptural and confessional statement on the doctrine of church and ministry.

The ELFK has a membership of about 2,000 souls in some 30 congregations and preaching stations. Most of these congregations are in the former East Germany but mission work is being carried out in places such as Augsburg and in Ludesch in the Vorarlberg region of Austria. Our sister synod is proclaiming the Gospel in its truth and purity in Lutherland where today that Gospel is seldom heard. Many of the great and beautiful churches of Germany are virtually empty on Sunday mornings. But in the modest churches of the ELFK the Gospel resounds to the glory of our gracious Savior. These buildings and gatherings may be modest but they are rich in spiritual beauty.

Pastor Gerhard Wilde faithfully served as president of the ELFK from 1978 to 2002 when he retired from the presidency. Throughout his presidency he stood firm on the doctrine of inerrant Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. Most of the present pastors of the ELFK had President Wilde as their vicarage supervisor and were ordained by him. President Wilde and his wife Ingeborg have made a number of visits to the States and are well known in our circles. He is a dear friend of the ELS.

At its convention this past May in Hartenstein the ELFK elected Pastor Rolf Borszik from Lengenfeld in the Vogtland as the president. Pastor Borszik, who is 52 years of age was born in Chemnitz. He was originally a member of the state church and in secular employment. However, he left the state church in 1982 for confessional reasons and studied at the Leipzig seminary. In 1989 he was called to serve the congregations in Lengenfeld and Plauen where he continues to serve today. Pastor Borszik and his wife Rosemarie have been blessed with a family of six children.

Since its founding in the 1870s the ELFK has protested against the liberalism and unionism in the Lutheran state churches. In the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century rationalism and unionism were rampant in the German state churches. This is the main reason why the Saxons, Prussians, and other "old" Lutherans went to America and Australia. In 1846 Friedrich Brunn, a pastor in Steeden a town northwest of Frankfurt, left the state church. He established contact with the LCMS and from 1861-78 he prepared students in a pre-seminary who would study at the seminaries of the LCMS. He became one of the early pastors of the ELFK.

The Evangelical Lutheran Free Church was organized in 1876 as a bastion of confessional Lutheranism in Germany. The church body was centered in Saxony but it also included other states in Germany. As soon as it was founded, the ELFK had a close relationship with the Synodical Conference. This was to be expected considering the connections between these Saxon Lutherans and the Saxons who came to America and founded the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Among the early pastors of the ELFK are Friedrich Ruhland, Otto Willkomm, and George Stoeckhardt.

There is an interesting connection between Ruhland and the ELS. Before he was called to the *Johanneskirche* in Zwickau-Planitz, Saxony, he served in the LCMS in America. While he was a pastor at Oshkosh, Wisconsin, he helped organize St. Martin Lutheran Church of Shawano in 1859, which today is a member of the ELS. (St. Martin Lutheran Church Centennial Booklet, p. 6) Pastor Otto Willkomm who was also president of the ELFK later served the *Johanneskirche* in Zwickau-Planitz, Saxony.

George Stoeckhardt (1842-1913) was educated at Erlangen, Leipzig, and Berlin. In 1876 he left the German state church for confessional reasons and joined the ELFK. After serving for a short time as the associate pastor in the Saxon congregation in Zwickau-Planitz he immigrated to America. There he served as pastor of a congregation in St. Louis and as a professor at Concordia Seminary. He was probably the most important exegete of the early Missourians.

Another connection between the ELS and the ELFK is found in the life of S. C. Ylvisaker. In 1907 he enrolled at the University of Leipzig in Germany. While at the university he became closely associated with the pastors of the Saxon church.

In the *vita* prepared later for his ordination into the office of the public ministry Sigurd pays special tribute to these dear friends in his litany of thanks (written in the traditional third person): "From his stay in Germany he remembers with sincere thankfulness President Kunstmann and other pastors of the Saxon Free Church for their friendly accommodation and their willing counsel and guidance in a time and during a course of study in which his Christian faith was not infrequently put to severe test. He likewise thanks the congregation of the Saxon Free Church in Leipzig for the great comfort he experienced in their midst. God reward them all in His grace!" (*Sigurd Christian Ylvisaker 1884-1959*, p. 10)

The pastors of the ELFK were trained in the seminaries of the LCMS for many years. But that changed after World War I. It was decided to found their own theological seminary. In 1921 a seminary was established in Leipzig but it was soon moved to Kleinmachnow near Berlin.

In 1924 the WELS began a mission in Poland working mainly among the many German people in the new Poland. One of the important areas of work was in the city of Lodz. As World War II drew to a close most of the members of this mission church body fled before the advancing Red army across the Oder River into Germany. In 1953 the refugee members of this mission living in East Germany became a part of the ELFK. They entered the church as their own district, the Diaspora District or *Bezirk*.

In 1948 the ELFK declared fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church (Breslau Synod) and with the free churches in Hesse. The Breslau Synod had been organized in 1841 in reaction to the Prussian Union, a union between Lutherans and the Reformed in Prussian lands. This fellowship was declared on the basis of *Einigungssätze*, statements of agreement. After this their pastors were trained at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Oberursel near Frankfurt am Main.

Because of the separation between East and West Germany it was difficult for students in East Germany to travel to Oberursel in the West. In 1953 the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church established its own theological seminary in Leipzig. The name of the seminary is *Lutherisches Theologisches Seminar Leipzig*. In 2003 it will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. The rector of the seminary is Dr. Gottfried Herrmann. The other professors at the seminary are: Pastor Martin Hoffmann, Pastor Günter Meinhold, and Pastor Hans-Wolf Baumann. With the exception of Dr. Herrmann, all these pastors serve congregations in addition to their work at the seminary.

The Lutheran free churches in West Germany merged in 1972 and became the *Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche* (SELK). It was assumed that this merger would also occur in East Germany. However, in the discussions it became evident that the Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church had different theological views. They tolerated higher criticism in biblical interpretation and they had unionistic tendencies. Rather than a merger, in 1984 fellowship came to an end between the ELFK and the Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church. The SELK defended the tendencies found in the Evangelical Lutheran (Old Lutheran) Church and therefore, the ELFK suspended relationships with it in 1989. These suspensions of relationships were very difficult for the ELFK. No longer was there fellowship with those who had been numbered as brethren for many years. They experienced the same loneliness that the ELS did when it broke fellowship with the LCMS in 1955. Some members and congregations were lost, but the Lord of the church supported the ELFK and it made a firm confession on the basis of the inerrant Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

The ELFK was still in fellowship with the LCMS and a number of its European partner churches. It urged these churches to take a stand against the doctrinal position of the SELK, but its request was unheeded. After three years of patient pleading the ELFK demonstrated its seriousness in maintaining a sound scriptural position by adopting resolutions suspending fellowship with its five erring sister churches: The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS), the Evangelical Lutheran Church of England (ELCE), the Evangelical Lutheran Church—Synod of France and Belgium (ELC—SFB), the Confessional Lutheran Church of Finland (CLCF), and the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of Denmark (ELFCD). This action in 1992 at its Hartenstein convention brought to an end the difficulty of a triangular fellowship that involved both the ELS and WELS even after the ELFK suspended fellowship with the SELK.

A very important event occurred for confessional Lutherans in 1993. On April 27-29, at Oberwesel, Germany, the ELFK, together with the ELS, WELS, and other confessional Lutheran churches formed the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC). This conference is the spiritual heir of the Synodical Conference. It provides for the mutual support and strengthening of confessional Lutherans throughout the world. The ELFK had the opportunity to become one of the charter members of this conference.

Since its beginning the ELFK has been very active in the publication of books and other theological material. Even under communism it was possible to print some Lutheran material. This publishing was mainly done through the *Concordia-Buchhandlung* (Concordia Publishing House) in Zwickau. This publishing house was established in 1881. Among other things the publishing house produces the *Evangelisch-Lutherischer Volkskalender*, the *Lutherische Gemeindebriefe*, which is comparable to the *Lutheran Sentinel*, and the *Theologische Handreichung und Information*, which is a journal for pastors similar to the *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*. The *Concordia-Buchhandlung* also prints a quarterly devotional book with the name *Gott ist für uns*. This is much like the *Meditations* used in our midst. The last German devotional booklet produced in America was phased out a few years ago with the result that there was no German devotional book printed on this continent. Now, however, the Tree of Life Publications has the rights to reproduce in America *Gott ist für uns*, prepared by *Concordia-Buchhandlung*. This devotional may be obtained from Tree of Life Publications, 47 Pensville Road SE, Calgary, Alberta, T2A4K3 Canada, email: [tree-of-life@telusplanet.net](mailto:tree-of-life@telusplanet.net)

Dr. Gottfried Herrmann has served as the manager of the publishing house since 1983. In that year he also received the Doctor of Theology degree from Karl-Marx University in Leipzig. In 1990 he was called to the faculty of the seminary at Leipzig where he serves as rector. He lives in Zwickau where the publishing house and bookstore are located.

The ELFK continues to be a valiant voice for confessional Lutheranism in the land where Luther walked. This church body has endured atheistic communism, doctrinal liberalism in its former German sister churches, and the religious indifference of our modern materialistic society. Yet the Lord has continued to be with them and to strengthen them through His means of grace Word and Sacrament. For more information concerning the ELFK, go to their website: [www.elfk.de](http://www.elfk.de)

## **The Church and Ministry Theses of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church**

Recently there have been intense discussions concerning the doctrine of church and ministry within the ELFK. In regard to the doctrine of the church the question was raised: Is the local congregation the only mandated form of external gathering or are other gatherings around the means of grace, such as synod, also church. In regard to the doctrine of the ministry the question was raised: Is the pastoral office the only divinely instituted form of the public ministry or has God instituted the public ministry which may take various forms.

The ELFK came to a resolution of these questions at a special convention in September of 2001, where they produced theses on church and ministry. In their theses they show that Scripture does not make the external forms of the public ministry a matter of divine mandate, just as the external form of the church is not a divine mandate. The theses are found below:

### **Thesen zur Lehre von Kirche und Amt (Theses concerning the Doctrine of Church and Ministry)**

The synod accepted the following series of theses as a scriptural and confessional presentation of the doctrine of our Evangelical Lutheran Free Church.

#### **A. Die Lehre von der Kirche (The Doctrine of the Church)**

(A1) Our Lord Jesus Christ has created one church. To Peter He said, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it." (Mt. 16:18) All who truly believe in Christ belong to this one church. (Eph. 2:19f) This we confess in the Apostles' Creed when we say: "I believe...one holy Christian church, the communion of saints." Cf. AC 5+8

(A2) This church is found wherever the pure Word of God is proclaimed and the Sacraments are administered according to their institution. The Holy Spirit builds the church through this means. We may be certain that the Word of God will not return empty but will accomplish what pleases God. (Is. 55:11) Cf. AC 7

(A3) God has given His church the commission [*Auftrag*] to preach His Word and to administer the Sacraments. This is called the office of the keys. The believers are commissioned to use the keys privately [individually] and collectively. (Joh. 20:21-23; 1 Petr. 2:9) Cf. Tractatus § 24

(A4) God wills that Christians come together in assemblies to use the means of grace pure and unaltered as well for their own edification as to let the unity among them be recognized, and to bring the Good News of salvation in Christ to others. (Jer. 23:28; Joh. 8:31f; Acts 2:42; Ps. 133:1; Mt. 28:19f)—This assembly occurs, for example, in the outward [external] forms of congregation, synod, and church. Although God wills that Christians come together for public worship, He has not prescribed a fixed form of the gathering. "The kingdom of God does not

come with observation.” (Lk. 17:20) The local congregation [*Gemeinde am Ort*] holds the highest rank among these gatherings of Christians because it is the place where Christians normally live and can best carry out God’s command practically.

(A5) The single authority in the church is the Word of God. Where this Word is spoken—whether it is in the private or in the public sphere (in the congregation or the church)—it is as valid as if the Lord Himself had spoke from heaven. (Lk. 10:16) Cf. SA B 2,15; Tractatus § 42; Apol. 7,28

(A6) If we love God and would be faithful to His Word we must see to it that we remain members of the true church: in that we preserve our faith in the Savior; in that we belong to a congregation, synod, or church, which teaches God’s Word without error; in that we do all in our power to further the spread of the kingdom of God through prayer, personal service (2 Cor. 12:15) and financial support; and in that we avoid all false teaching churches. (2 Cor. 13:5; Mt. 7:15; 1 Joh. 4:1; Rom. 16:17; 2 Cor. 6:4)

(A7) The relationship between the various Christian forms of gathering should be orderly and honorable. (Eph. 4:3-6; 1 Cor. 14:33, 40) Christians let themselves be led by the law of Christian love. This applies also to the powers of the synod in relation to the congregation as they are delineated in the synodical constitution. (ELFK-Verfassung, Art. III)

## **B. Das öffentliche Predigtamt (The Public Ministry)**

(B1) The *öffentliches Predigtamt* denotes the public ministry of proclamation [*öffentlichen Verkündigungsdienst*] to which God has commissioned His church. (Divine institution; cf. Mt. 28:19f with 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11f; Apg 20:28; Tit. 1:5-9) Through this ministry the Gospel in Word and Sacrament (office of the keys) is to be publicly administered. This ministry occurs in the name of Christ and is conferred through His church.

(B2) There is only one public ministry of proclamation, [*öffentlichen Verkündigungsdienst*] but this ministry can take various forms as is required in the life of the church. (1 Cor. 12:4-11, 27-31) The purpose of this ministry is to nourish and build up the church of God through the means of grace. (Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 4:1; Eph. 4:11f) The public ministry of proclamation is conferred on individuals. It is to be distinguished from the private proclamation ministry of all Christians. (Universal priesthood)

(B3) The office of the keys (losing and binding key) has been conferred on the one holy Christian church and therewith on every Christian. (Universal priesthood of believers) 1 Petr. 2:9; Mt. 16:19; Mt. 18:17-20; Mt. 28:18-20; Joh. 20:22f, Cf. AC 28,5f; SA C 7,1; Tractatus §§ 22-24. 65-70

(B4) It is God’s will and command that the office of the keys be administered publicly. Therefore He has instituted the public ministry of proclamation. This ministry is conferred on those whom God calls into it through His church. Those who are called exercise the functions of the office of the keys by the commission of the church as well as in the name of Christ and His stead. Wherever we hear Christ’s servant we hear Christ Himself speak. (Lk. 10:16; Tit. 1:5-

9; Acts 20:28, 14:23; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; 1 Thess. 5:12f; 2 Cor. 3:4-6; 4:5; 5:18f; Eph. 4:11f) Thus the public ministry of proclamation is a divine institution and not merely the product of historical development nor merely a beneficial institution of the church. Cf. AC 5; AC 28,5f+21f; Apol 12,39f; Apol 14,1

(B5) The public ministry of proclamation should be exercised only by those who are regularly called, whether immediately through the Lord Christ (as in the case of the apostles) or mediately through the church. If someone publicly proclaims the Word of God or administers the Sacraments without a regular call, this contradicts not only good order, but also the will of God. The duties and responsibilities of each called servant must be determined by his call. (Rom. 10:14-17; Acts 6:1-6) Cf. AC 14; Apol. 14,1

(B6) Ordination is not a divine institution but a fine churchly order from early times. (1 Tim. 4:14; 1 Tim. 5:22; 2 Tim. 1:6) It demonstrates the public confirmation of call by the Word of God and prayer. We speak of ordination when pastors are installed in their office for the first time and are bound to the Confession. But also with other calls into the public ministry of proclamation the commissioning should be publicly recognized. Cf. Apol. 13,11; Tractatus § 70

(B7) The public ministry of proclamation is instituted by God but it is not limited to a fixed form. The New Testament names various offices. Therefore the form of the public ministry of proclamation can vary according to the need of the church but there is only one public ministry of proclamation in the church. (1 Cor. 12:4-11; 27-31; Rom. 12:6-8; Eph. 4:11f; 1 Tim. 3:1,8; 5:17) Cf. SA B 3,1; Tractatus §§ 63-66. 72.26

(B8) The term *Predigtamt* is customarily used in our church to describe the office of pastor. This use should continue. The pastor's office is the most comprehensive and fundamental form of the public ministry of proclamation. Full spiritual oversight over the flock of Christ is conferred on pastors in their local congregations. [*Ort*] (Proclamation of the Word, administration of the Sacraments, church discipline, care of souls, 1 Petr. 5:2f) – Where there are, in addition to the pastoral office, other offices of the public ministry of proclamation in the congregation, the pastor bears the total responsibility [*Gesamtverantwortung*]. Because Christ wills to have responsible shepherds for His flock, such an office is indispensable. (Mt. 28:18-20; Acts 20:28-31; Tit. 1:6-9; 1 Petr. 5:1-3; Hebr. 13:17) In the ministry of the pastoral office only suitable males may be called. (1 Tim. 3:1-7; 1 Cor. 14:34f; 1 Tim. 2:12) Cf. Apol. 14,1

(B9) The purpose of the public ministry of proclamation is to nourish and build up the church of God through the means of grace. This occurs through the Word of God and the Sacraments of Baptism and Lord's Supper. (1 Cor. 4:1; Eph. 4:11f) Ministers [servants, *Diener*] in the public ministry of proclamation possess no worldly authority but only the Word of God in Law and Gospel, through which they should lead their entrusted flocks. (1 Cor. 3:5-9; 1 Petr. 5:3) Where they properly carry out this ministry the highest respect is due them (those in the public ministry of proclamation). (Rom. 10:15; 1 Tim. 3:1; Hebr. 13:7; 1 Tim 5:17) Cf. AC 5; AC 28, 5.8-17; Tractatus § 11

(This is a composite translation of the original by Juul Madson, Tim Schmeling, and Gaylin Schmeling.)

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