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# FOCUS ON THE LOYALISTS

*Norman J. Threinen*

In the wake of the U.S. bicentennial celebrations, it is fitting that we focus on a group of early Canadian Lutherans who are an unknown entity to many Lutherans today. That there were Lutherans among the United Empire Loyalists in pre-Canada is often overlooked. The question of identity faced by these Lutheran Loyalists is the same question which still confronts us today.

The American Revolution and the experience of the Loyalists probably helped to set the tone for what Canada became. Both the United States and Canada are based on the same principles ideologically. But, whereas the United States evolved as a nation with national symbols, a gallery of heroes and a national identity, we as Canadians always seem to be faced with an identity crisis and with the need to explain ourselves in terms of what we are not. As one writer affirms, "When the Loyalist asked, 'Who am I?' his experience of expulsion precluded his giving the only conceivable answer -- I am an American."<sup>1</sup> Robbed of his identity, the Canadian Loyalist invented a new one based largely on the myth that he is British. The result is, "The Loyalist builds an American society and calls it by British names." What is said here of the Loyalists historically can probably also be said of Canadians in general in a modified way even today.

For the establishment of the Lutheran Church in Canada, this identity problem of the Loyalist provided a real dilemma. The very real, if unrecognized, question which faced the Lutheran Loyalist was whether ecclesiastical

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<sup>1</sup> David V.J. Bell, "The Loyalist Tradition in Canada", *Canadian History Before Confederation* Georgetown, Ontario: Irwin-Dorsey Limited, 1972), pp. 210-229.

connection could appropriately be kept with the Lutheran Church in the U.S.A. or whether the British state religion -- Anglicanism -- was really the British form of Lutheranism which he ought, patriotically, to embrace. The small number of Lutherans, their scattered condition and their lack of a European source for Lutheran clergy precluded a third alternative at that time, that of establishing an indigenous Lutheran Church in Canada.

## THE LUTHERAN LOYALISTS

Who were the Lutheran loyalists?

Most of the United Empire Loyalists of Lutheran faith who emigrated to Canada were Germans who had originally come from the Palatinate during the first decade of the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> With their country devastated by war and their religious freedom threatened, thousands of Palatines responded to the books and papers from England which encouraged them to find refuge in that country. The response to the invitation was so great that the Queen of England had a problem knowing what to do with these refugees.

The Lutheran churches in London interested themselves in the physical and spiritual well-being of these immigrants. The German Lutheran clergy, who had considerable influence at the English court due to the fact that the husband of the Queen was a Lutheran, arranged for army tents to be supplied and vacant warehouses to be opened to take care of the Palatines. In addition, money was provided for their daily needs and collections were taken up in the churches for their benefit. Thus a strong loyalty to the English Throne was established among the Palatines.

In 1710 the Queen provided passage for about 3,000 of these Palatines to go to New York where they were settled on both sides of the Hudson River. The Palatines were expected to protect the frontier and engaged in the production of turpentine and tar to repay the Crown for the cost of transporting, maintaining and settling them in New York. But eventually the project was abandoned and the Palatines were told to shift for themselves. Some remained where they were. Other migrated to New York City, to northern New Jersey, to the Mohawk and Schoharie Valleys and to the Carolinas. About half of the Palatines were of Lutheran faith. They were served by such pastors as Kocherthal, Falckner, Berkenmeyer, Sommer and Kunze.<sup>3</sup>

Those of Lutheran faith in the New World included, of course, more than the Palatines. Other German colonists arrived later, settling in Pennsylvania,

2 Information on the Lutheran Loyalists is based largely on the extensive research of Carl Cronmiller. Chapter IV, "In Old Acadia," and Chapter VI, "In the Wake of the American Revolution," of his book, *A History of the Lutheran Church in Canada*, Vol. I (The Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Canada, 1961), pp. 34-55, 73-100, document much of this research and the footnote references to these chapters list the many primary and secondary sources.

3. E. Clifford Nelson, editor, *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 22-25.

Maryland, Virginia and other areas on the eastern seaboard. But, because of the positive relationship which they had with the British Crown in the course of their immigration to the New World, many of the Palatines in particular refused to take up arms against the King at the outbreak of hostilities in the War of the American Revolution.

The Lutheran population, as was true of the population in general, was severely divided as to its loyalties in the struggle. The senior Muhlenberg, for example, opposed the war when it began and sided with the English cause. Later he modified his stand and attempted to take a neutral position. His sons, Peter and Frederick, were avid supporters of the revolution.<sup>4</sup> The observation is made that the Germans seem to have been inclined toward supporting the revolution where they were already anglicized (acculturated) but not where they had kept their language and separate outlook. Many were Loyalists because they thought that Britain would protect them from the cultural aggression of an Anglo-American majority.<sup>5</sup> Many Lutherans, even those of Loyalist persuasion, remained in the new Republic. Others became United Empire Loyalists and emigrated to the territories which were still under the British Crown.

Most Lutherans, given their background of pietism, may have been personally uninvolved in the political maneuvers which lay behind the American Revolution. But many were influenced by their leaders to take up the cause against the Revolution. One of the leaders of the Palatine Germans at the time of the War of the American Revolution was Sir John Johnson. Because his mother had been Lutheran and his father had presented them with land upon which to build their church, he was held in high respect by the Lutherans. When Johnson fled his large land holdings in New York to avoid being taken prisoner for being a Tory, many of the people in the area, including many German Loyalists, followed him and fought in the two battalions which he was commissioned to raise in support of the King's forces in the struggle.<sup>6</sup>

Some of the German Loyalists who followed Johnson to Montreal eventually chose tracts of land in the eastern seigniories of Quebec which border on New York state. Although some of these German Loyalists were Lutherans, there was no Lutheran clergyman in the area and so they drifted into membership in the Methodist and Anglican churches.

A group of German Loyalists who followed Johnson settled in Ontario in the vicinity of the Bay of Quinte which is situated off the north shore of Lake Ontario. There these German Loyalists established three Lutheran churches and four preaching stations. The first Lutheran pastor who served these congregations was the Rev. John Guntur Wigandt (Weigant, Weagant). He had been granted a license to preach by the ministerium of Pennsylvania in 1792. In his own words he says, "I was ordained in the U.S.A. by three Lutheran clergymen, but I now doubt whether the ordination was in due form as I was not

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4. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

5. W.H. Nelson, *The American Tory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 89-90.

6. Cronmiller, pp. 80-81.

bound to a conforming with the Symbolic Books.”<sup>7</sup> Other pastors came to serve these Loyalist congregations over the years but many of them left the Lutheran Church and joined the Methodists. Although there were glowing reports of revival meetings and new churches established, the statistics of membership showed little or no increase and eventually the congregations disappeared as identifiable Lutheran churches.

Another area where the soldiers of Sir John Johnson's regiments, together with their wives and families, were conveyed in the Province of Ontario was along the St. Lawrence River across from the north-west corner of upper New York state. The Lutherans who made up the Loyalist settlement in that area were apparently more eager to maintain their Christian life and their Lutheran identity. They began to hold lay reading services in the German language in August, 1784. A church was built in Williamsburg and a call was extended to the Rev. Sammuel Schwerdfeger of Albany, New York. Schwerdfeger was apparently known to the members of the fledgling Lutheran Loyalist congregation. Deeply sympathetic to the Loyalist cause, he at first came to serve the congregation only at intervals but in 1791 assumed permanent residency as the pastor of the Loyalist congregation. He served as pastor of the congregation for fourteen years, also organizing Lutheran congregations in neighbouring communities, until he died in 1803 at the age of 74 years.<sup>8</sup>

The two pastors who followed Schwerdfeger were enticed by the government salary of 200 pounds sterling per year to join the Church of England and considerable disruption resulted. For a time it seemed as though also these Lutheran Loyalists would become either Anglicans or Methodists. However, the coming of Rev. Herman Hayunga, professor at Hartwick College, in 1826 resulted in the continued existence of the Lutheran presence in that area with the result that there are today four Lutheran congregations in existence there.

The United Empire Loyalists who made their way to Nova Scotia need separate treatment. From the beginning of the war Nova Scotia had been an easy and natural place of retreat for fugitive Tories. By the time the great Loyalist migration to Nova Scotia was ended, there were 50,000 Loyalist expatriots in that province of British North America.<sup>9</sup>

Of these thousands of Loyalists in Nova Scotia, those of Lutheran faith were a very small minority. Some disbanded German soldiers came to Nova Scotia and settled in the Annapolis Valley. There they built a church which is still standing. Since they did not have a Lutheran pastor, they called on a bishop of the Church of England to consecrate their house of worship. When they were unable to secure a Lutheran pastor, they were served by Anglican clergymen and as time went on the church was transferred to the Church of England on

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7. Quoted by Cronmiller, p. 84 from the J.G. Weagant correspondence filed in the Church of England Archives at Ottawa.

8. Cronmiller, pp. 87-89.

9. W.S. MacNutt, *The Atlantic Provinces: The Emergence of Colonial Society, 1712-1857* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1965), pp. 77-102.

the condition that a hymn in the German language be sung every Sunday morning at the beginning of the service.<sup>10</sup>

Some of the Loyalists who sought new homes in the vicinity of Halifax were Lutherans. Among them was the Lutheran clergyman Hausihl (Houseal). They became part of St. George's congregation whose origin went back to 1750. Hausihl was the congregation's first resident Lutheran pastor. But within a year's time he applied for Deacon's Orders in the Church of England. He continued to serve the congregation from 1784 until his death in 1799 but his pastorate only hastened the development which finally saw the congregation formally become Anglican.<sup>11</sup>

Although Lutheran congregations survived from this early period in Nova Scotia, Lutheranism stemming from the United Empire Loyalists who immigrated to Nova Scotia was apparently never successful in getting off the ground. On the contrary, the pattern was that Lutheran communities normally drifted either into the Anglican or the Methodist fold. Only in one isolated instance did the Lutheranism of the United Empire Loyalists of Lutheran faith survive the experience of immigration. The most easily identified reason for this is that the Loyalists were in most instances unsuccessful in finding Lutheran clergy who would provide for their spiritual care. However, further reasons, inherent in the United Empire Loyalist immigration itself and in the conditions which they met on the Canadian frontier, motivated those Loyalists who were Lutherans to give up their Lutheran identity. This is true in general of those who constituted the early Lutheran communities in Canada. It was particularly true of the few Lutheran clergy who chose to serve the Lutheran Loyalists.

## UNDERMINING FORCES

The period during which the Lutheran Loyalists emigrated to present-day Canada and in most instances gave up their Lutheran identity is a period of time during which a similar trend can be seen in what is now the U.S.A. The frontier was beset by vagabond preachers who lacked theological training and ordination. Lutherans seemed particularly beset by this problem because of the absence of effective ecclesiastical supervision in North America, as well as by a great shortage of clergymen. You will recall that the elder Muhlenberg confronted these pretenders immediately on his arrival in Pennsylvania and it was this situation which prompted the move toward organizational expression for the Lutheran Church in the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

The presence of clergy pretenders on the frontier made the matter of legitimacy a very serious concern, particularly to the clergy who had been

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10. Cronmiller, pp. 54-55.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

12. E.C. Nelson, pp. 44-45.

theologically trained and were licensed by an ecclesiastical body. But it also became a real concern for congregations misled by charlatans who were often in the business of preaching and administering the sacrament because their immoral lives had made it impossible for them to continue in their previous employment. This concern for legitimate clergy, particularly when English came into greater prominence, gave the Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. and the Anglican Church in Canada genuine appeal. The appeal was there not only for the congregations who felt the need for clergy, but also for those clergy who were theologically trained.

On both the U.S. and the Canadian frontiers, there was also a considerable blurring of confessional distinctiveness. Thus, when the transition from German into English occurred, the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England and their similarity to the Augsburg Confession offered strong support for the position that the Church of England had the same religious stance as the Lutheran Church.

In addition to those undermining factors which were common to the frontier on both sides of the international border, the United Empire Loyalists of Lutheran faith were faced with the question of what it meant, religiously speaking, to continue to be loyal to the British Crown. Since the Anglican faith was the British state religion, it was logical to assume that to embrace the Anglican faith was to take the final step as a loyal subject of the British Crown. The Anglican Church's Society for the Promotion of the Gospel (SPG), which had been charged with converting dissenters, both Protestants and Catholics and Indians, undoubtedly promoted this view. Politically, the government of loyal colonies viewed the SPG activities as desirable since adhering to the Church of England was viewed as a means of assuring loyalty to the British Crown and the constitution.<sup>13</sup> Protestant dissenters from Europe (Germans) were particularly to be converted and educated to assimilate into British America and to prevent further ethnic divisions beyond those already present with the French Canadians who were never totally removed from the colony.<sup>14</sup> The psychological pressure on Loyalist Lutherans to embrace the Church of England was considerable.

The irony of the charge to the SPG to convert and educate for the purpose of assimilation into British America the Protestant dissenters from Europe is seen when it is put over against the contention by the Rev. Thomas Chandler of New Jersey in 1774. In a pamphlet in which he argues for a strengthening of the Anglican Church and against the emerging American Republic, he warns that the Anglicans, Quakers, Baptists, and Lutherans, as well as the "moderate and candid" part of the Presbyterians, would find themselves brought under a stern Puritan yoke, if not in religion, then in politics and manners. He contends that the Germans and Dutch and other foreigners who had prospered under the mildness of British ways would suffer from the xenophobia of the New

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13. J.M. Bumsted, "Church and State in Maritime Canada, 1749-1807," *Canadian History Before Confederation* (Georgetown, Ontario: Irwin Dorsey Limited, 1972), pp. 177-195.

14. Winthrop P. Bell, *The "Foreign Protestants" and the Settlement of Nova Scotia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961) is a definitive work on the Germans in early Nova Scotia.

Englishers, and would be subjected to a double portion of "rancor and severity."<sup>15</sup>

For the Lutheran clergy who became Loyalists or who came to Canada to serve Loyalist congregations, the pressure was even greater. In the first place, the Church of England was the established church in Nova Scotia and in present-day Ontario. All who were citizens of these colonies were called upon to support the established church. In their poverty the Lutherans had no financial base from which they could support their own pastor. But while the Lutheran clergyman lived in abject poverty, the Anglican clergyman was supported by 200 pounds per annum from the government. While Lutheran congregations struggled to build their own churches, the parishes of the Church of England received government grants to assist them in the erection of their churches.<sup>16</sup> For the Lutheran clergy who chose to serve in present-day Canada, the psychological pressure was supplemented by the added pressure of simple survival.

Lutherans living in Canada today need to appreciate the conditions which led to the wholesale defection of these Lutheran Loyalists. The history of Lutheranism in Canada shows that a similar fate for other Lutherans moving into Canada was avoided by the rescue mission operation of U.S.-based Lutheranism.

The challenge for Canadian Lutherans today is to recognize that we no longer have only two options as we face the matter of identity. The composite size of Canadian Lutheranism is such that we no longer need to fall into the arms of Anglicanism nor do we any longer need the rescue mission operation of U.S.-based Lutheranism. In other words, when asked the Loyalist question, "Who am I?" we no longer need to choose between being British or being American. After over a century of experience on the Canadian scene, it should now be possible for us to see ourselves as Canadian Lutherans. Unfortunately, the Loyalist search for identity continues to haunt us. Only history will tell whether this legacy of the Loyalists will finally be laid to rest among us.

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15. Thomas Chandler, *A Friendly Warning to All Reasonable Americans* (New York, 1774), referred to in W.H. Nelson, p. 79.

16. The extent of the Anglican Church's privileged position is seen when we note that in two matters of dispute over real estate in Halifax between St. Paul's Anglican and St. George's Lutheran Church, both were decided in favour of St. Paul's simply because the former was the Established Church. Cited in a footnote by Cronmiller, p. 272.