

BELL TOWERS AND BAY WINDOWS FOR THE LUTHERAN CHURCHES OF AUSTRIA

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The official name of the Lutheran Church in Austria is the Evangelische Kirche A.B. in Österreich. A.B. stands for *Augsburger Bekenntnis*, Augsburg Confession: thus “the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Austria.” Emperor Joseph II gave this name to the newly established church in 1781 when he issued his *Toleranzpatent*, a declaration of tolerance for people of Protestant, Orthodox, and Jewish faith. This declaration ended more than a hundred years of so-called *Geheimprotestantismus* (secret Protestantism), because the rulers of Austria before Joseph II had prohibited all denominations except Roman Catholicism. And so it is by the grace of Joseph II that the Austrian Lutheran church regained its right to exist in public.

Lutheranism Comes to Austria

During the time that Martin Luther’s Reformation was spreading successfully over the whole continent, Austria was one of the leading nations in German-speaking Europe. It was not long before the vast majority of the Austrian population accepted Lutheran doctrine. The entire city council of Vienna, the capital, was Lutheran, as well as about two-thirds of the population. And while the Austrian bishops and their cathedral clergy continued to be loyal to the Roman Catholic church, many parish priests preached the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Lutherans laid the foundation of new schools and built new churches, all under the enthusiastic support of Austria’s nobility. For nearly a century the new church expanded and blossomed. Even though the emperors remained Roman Catholic, only isolated cases of religious oppression were recorded within the first decades of this period.

Emperor Ferdinand II was the first ruler to impose counter-reformatory measures. His soldiers traveled throughout the country, forcing much of the population to return to Catholicism. The only alternative for those who decided to remain Lutheran was to leave the country and settle in Protestant countries. Thousands moved to Franconia, nowadays a part of Bavaria, where many Austrian family names can still be found around the city of Nürnberg. Other refugees moved to East Prussia and Transylvania in

central Romania. Lutherans from the state of Salzburg suffered the worst: they had to leave their children behind.

At that time Austrian Lutherans had to make a decision between their faith and their homeland. Even nowadays these traumatic experiences are present in the collective mind of Austrian Protestantism. For example, the primary annual publication of the Evangelical Church of Austria is named *Glaube und Heimat*—faith and homeland.

The year of the *Toleranzpatent*, 1781, is no doubt the most important in Austrian Protestant church history. Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, and Jewish congregations were allowed once again to practice their respective faiths and to worship in public. In spite of the imperial edict, a whole series of restrictions continued to apply: church buildings as well as synagogues had to look like residential homes. No bay windows, no towers, no direct entrances from the street were allowed. Even so, the Lutheran church resurfaced in public life and grew steadily.

In fact, the Lutheran faith had not completely vanished through the years of Counter-Reformation. In remote mountain villages beyond the reach of the emperor’s soldiers, the farmers had been hiding their Bibles and their evangelical prayer books in secret places. On Sunday nights they closed their window shutters and held their own secret worship services according to Lutheran doctrine. Soon after the *Toleranzpatent* these house churches became the first Lutheran parishes under the new law. They were able to gather the minimum of one hundred families required to form an official Lutheran congregation.

From Monarchy to Anschluss

In 1861, Emperor Franz Joseph I made further concessions to religious freedom. Now the churches had “full liberty to confess their faith and to live their religion in public.” Lutheran church buildings with bay windows and bell towers were permitted.¹ From this point forward Lutherans and Reformed Christians could found their own associations. In the same year an important association for the aid of other Protestant minority churches was founded. The Gustav-Adolf-Verein, the Austrian branch of the Gustav-

Adolf-Werk originally founded in Germany in 1832, still supports projects in southern and eastern Europe and in South America, where Protestant minority churches are still in need of Christian solidarity in the spirit of contemporary ecumenism. After 1861 the Lutheran church in Austria grew continuously. By 1900 there were 107,000 Lutherans and 430,000 by 1962. This remarkable growth was fueled in part by a nationalist call for closer ties with Germany, which meant in practice asking Catholics to join the Lutheran church. About sixty-five thousand did so. Since then membership has declined, as in all the other Christian churches of Austria, an effect of growing secularism.

It was unfortunate for Austrian Lutherans when Hitler annexed Austria in 1938. He was welcomed enthusiastically by the majority of the German-speaking population. Many Lutherans were happy to belong to the country that had produced their Reformation; their minority status seemed to have been overcome at last. Too late they realized that Germany had a ruler who regarded himself as superior to any God. Only a very few Austrian Lutherans and a small number of pastors understood the real nature of Hitler's regime and were able to participate in the resistance against its ideas.

After the war it took a long time until the Lutheran church government accepted responsibility for this failure. Nowadays the Lutheran church in Austria works together with other churches and religious communities to promote interreligious and crosscultural understanding. Diakonie Österreich is a widely recognized independent church organization (Lutheran, Reformed, and Methodist) for social work within the country and abroad.

Ecumenical Relations

The Austrian church is an effective bridge to the other Lutheran churches in eastern Europe. There are long-

standing links to the churches of Hungary and Romania that continued even through the time of the iron curtain. Nowadays the former countries of the Austrian empire in eastern and southeastern Europe have many close connections with Austria. The ancient capital of the empire, the city of Vienna, lies once again at the center of Europe—and not only in regard to church matters.

Recently the central secretariat of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE), which was formed in 1973 to reunite European churches separated by the divisions between Lutheran and Reformed bodies, moved from Berlin to Vienna. The recently installed Lutheran bishop of Austria, Michael Bünker, is now the general secretary of the CPCE. In this way the Austrian Lutheran church has regained new significance within the wider church.

The relationship between Austria and its “big brother,” Germany, is not

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easily described. The two countries do share a common language. Since Austria is part of the European Union, the borders are open for Germans to live and work in Austria. Even so, Austrians in general have reservations about the German newcomers. Many German pastors work in Austrian Lutheran congregations. They did not grow up in a minority situation and do not share the painful history of the Counter-Reformation. The Austrian Lutheran church survived for generations as a secret church without pastors. For more than a century it had been a church of laypeople only. After the *Toleranzpatent*, new pastors arrived from Germany bringing a different theology and piety. They had studied at universities under the influence of

Enlightenment thinking, whereas their Austrian flocks had maintained their faith with prayer books and Bibles dating from the time of the sixteenth-century Reformation. Even now some church members are not very welcoming to pastors from Germany, preferring Hungarians or Romanians instead.

Austrian Lutheranism Today

At present there are about 315,000 Lutherans in Austria, 4–5% percent of the total population. The majority of the country continues to be Roman Catholic. There are two hundred Lutheran parishes in Austria with 280 pastors, seventy-five of them women. The church is organized in seven dioceses with a superintendent (regional bishop) leading each one. The bishop of the Austrian Lutheran church is elected by the synod for a period of twelve years. The bishop's office, structured according to the Austrian Lutheran model, has not been recognized by the Anglican Communion as belonging to the historic episcopate.

Austrian Lutherans tend to emphasize the differences between their church and Roman Catholicism. They stress the democratic structures of their church and the importance of lay ministry. Every church has two leaders at the local level, one ordained and the other an elected lay person. Parish congregations are led by the vicar and the lay president or *Kurator*. Dioceses are headed by the superintendent (regional bishop) and his or her lay president, the *Superintendent-ialkurator*. At the national level, the Lutheran church of Austria is led by the bishop and his or her lay president, the *Landeskurator*. Elections to these offices play a crucial role. This electoral process is continually underscored as a fundamental difference from the corresponding Roman Catholic structures. Every baptized person over the age of fourteen has the right to vote in elections for the parish vicar and the members of the parish council. The parish council in turn elects

the lay president.

The life and work of an ordained minister is not an easy one within these democratic structures. Until some decades ago ordained ministers, similar to others in positions of authority, were widely respected. Nowadays their life and work are much more difficult; in fact, they must accept the parish council's decisions and have a very limited scope of action. Pastors are expected to work uncounted hours. They teach eight lessons a week of religious education in the public schools (a full-time teacher is responsible for 19.5 lessons).

Together with ordained pastors, lay readers lead many worship services and administer the sacraments. Lay readers, however, are not ordained. Many parishes have several churches, chapels, or other places of worship where regular services are held. Due to the diaspora situation of Austrian Lutheranism, ordained clergy cannot possibly serve all these small congregations on a regular basis. Thus the important role of lay readers emerged. In this period of ecumenical dialogue, however, there is a problem: Roman Catholic and even Anglican partners in ecumenical conversations do not understand why nonordained readers are permitted to administer the sacraments. At the moment, the Lutheran church is trying to restructure the lay readers' ministry and redefine their educational qualifications. Ordination will not be an option, however, as it will remain reserved for academically trained candidates. A pastor's training in Austria takes about five years of

study at the university level followed by three years of pastoral training and canonical examinations.

The Anglican church in Austria feels equally distant from the Roman Catholic and the Protestant churches. The Lutheran church has full communion with the Reformed church of Austria. Both Protestant churches established their new church centers in Vienna at the end of the eighteenth century on neighboring grounds. Both are independent churches but work together in all important issues. The Reformed have two separate synods and a common general synod. In 2007 the Methodist church of Austria became the third evangelical church in the country.

Ecumenical dialogue works very well in Austria. Fourteen churches are members of the National Ecumenical Council in Austria, with the Roman Catholic church as a full member. The Lutheran church has had a leading role within the movement from the very beginning. Even the interfaith dialogue works much better in Austria than in many other European countries. The Austrian Lutheran church is very proud of another ecumenical achievement, a newly founded school for the training of teachers of religion for all Christian denominations. This school even helps unofficially with the training of Muslim teachers.

Past as Prologue

And so, we have come full circle to the traditions of the Reformation era, when Lutheran schools played an out-

standing role in the early growth of this church. It is true that even at present many Austrian Lutherans identify with the Lutheran church not through parish life or Sunday services but through religious education and school worship services. This is a good reason for having parish pastors teach regularly in the schools. Religion classes are small, often with no more than three students, due to the diaspora situation. This small size influences the way that many Lutherans in Austria understand their church: as a very small minority, not very important in the life of the country. But it is a church of freedom: after a difficult history with Bibles hidden in the straw, Austrian Lutherans are allowed to be Austrians and Lutherans at the same time.

The Austrian Lutheran church is now a free church in a free country.

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Note

1. At this point, history seems to repeat itself in our times. There are fervent discussions about the construction of new mosques in Austria: should Muslims have permission to build minarets? Many Austrians, including Lutherans, are against it. At the same time, the official statements of the Lutheran church in Austria commend remembrance of the times when Protestants suffered the same mistrust that Muslims suffer today.