

# Saints' Names in American Lutheran Church Dedications

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LUTHERAN PARISH CHURCHES in North America have various kinds of names.<sup>1</sup> Some of them are geographical, identifying the location of the church by the name of the town or section of town or street (e.g., Northgate Church), while others may indicate national origins or language (e.g., First English Church). Most of them, however, follow the tradition which uses a distinctively Christian appellation: a name of the Godhead, a Christian virtue or doctrine, a season or feast of the church year, or a Biblical place name (e.g., Holy Comforter, Faith, Advent, Gethsemane). Several thousand Lutheran churches in the United States and Canada are named for individuals, generally with the prefix "Saint" although sometimes without it, and it is of some interest to analyze these names as a measure of the relative popularity among Lutheran congregations of the Christian men and women in whose honor the churches are dedicated.

The information on church names analyzed here was taken from the 1965 yearbooks of the three largest Lutheran bodies in North America.<sup>2</sup> These three church bodies, Lutheran Church in America (LCA), The American Lutheran Church (ALC), and The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (MO) include well over ninety percent of Lutheran parish churches in North America and represent Lutherans of various national origins and diverse liturgical and theological traditions. The general trends in the use of saints' names

<sup>1</sup> For previous discussions of naming patterns in American Churches, see G. Thomas Fairclough, "'New Light' on 'Old Zion,'" *Names* 8 (1960) 75–86; P. Burwell Rogers, "Naming Protestant Churches in America," *Names* 11 (1963) 44–51.

<sup>2</sup> *1965 Yearbook Lutheran Church in America*, compiled and published by the Board of Publication of the Lutheran Church in America (Philadelphia, 1964); *1965 Yearbook of The American Lutheran Church*, William Larsen editor, Shirley A. Ledin associate editor, published by Augsburg Publishing House (Minneapolis, 1964); *The Lutheran Annual 1965 The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod*, Otto A. Dorn editor, Armin Schroeder statistical editor, Cecil E. Pike statistical assistant, Concordia Publishing House (St. Louis, 1964).

in church dedications are about the same in all three bodies, but there are a few differences. Some of these differences are clearly related to the nature of the earlier synods or other national bodies which in recent decades have merged to form the present larger bodies, and in some instances this will be pointed out, but no attempt has been made to check back into the complex history of former adherence of the parishes now listed in the three major yearbooks.

At the time of the Reformation, the Church of Rome recognized more than thirteen hundred saints. Most of these saints had churches named in their honor, and hundreds of them had dates appointed for annual commemoration, the saints' days of the church calendar. The followers of Luther were opposed to the doctrine of the intercession of saints, and were highly critical of many of the legends of non-scriptural saints, laying greatest stress on those mentioned in the New Testament. As a result, in the Lutheran church orders of the sixteenth century, the number of saints' days was drastically reduced.<sup>3</sup> Some of the orders eliminated all such days except the Nativity of St. John the Baptist and one or two feasts of the Virgin Mary. Most of them, however, also included on the calendar days of commemoration for the twelve Apostles, the four Evangelists, St. Lawrence, St. Mary Magdalene, St. Michael, and All Saints' Day. In some areas other saints' days were retained.

In the naming of churches there was no drastic change, since the followers of the Reformation generally continued to worship in the same churches and retained the familiar names. In some cases there were re-namings and in some areas there was a strong tendency to call the local church by the name of the town or the geographical name of the parish. New Lutheran churches built in Europe since the Reformation have tended to restrict the use of saints' names to those commemorated on Lutheran calendars, but information on this is difficult of access. The churches of the New World present a different picture: since there were no earlier churches to take over, the congregation in every case had to give itself a name. Accordingly, a study of the names used in North America is of particular value in showing which of the saints Lutheran Christians seem to revere the most.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Edward T. Horn, III, *The Christian Year* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957) pp. 177-84, 213-5.

The total number of different persons' names appearing in the names of Lutheran parish churches in North America is about fifty – the actual total from the three yearbooks is forty-eight. The total number of churches bearing such names is under five thousand, the total from the yearbooks being 4,570. If the distribution of these names were even, this would mean that there would be on the order of ninety churches named after each of the fifty persons ( $4570/48 = 93$ ), but the distribution is far from even. Over half of the churches named for saints<sup>4</sup> are named either for St. Paul or St. John (1333 and 1273 respectively), and most of the rest are named after five men: St. Peter (420); the Evangelists St. Mark (305), St. Luke (234), and St. Matthew (231); and the Apostle St. James (188). The fact that so many churches are named after the four Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, certainly reflects the great emphasis which Lutheran faith and practice puts on the Scriptures and especially the Gospels. St. Peter's role as the leader of the twelve Apostles and his importance in the events of the New Testament would seem to account for his popularity in the naming of churches. St. Paul, as the great Apostle to the Gentiles and the first great contributor to Christian theological thought, has always been a figure of importance for Lutherans. The most puzzling member of the group is St. James. Although he was one of the "inner circle" of the Apostles, there is relatively little information about him in the New Testament, and he has not been one of the outstandingly popular saints in the history of the Christian Church.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the seven men just listed, who account for over 85 percent of the churches named after saints, there is a group of fourteen figures (including "All Saints") each of whom has at least five churches. This group of fourteen is of considerable interest in that about half of them are not on the Lutheran church calendars in use in North America and hence must reflect a special respect

<sup>4</sup> The term "saints" is used here for all these men and women although some have never been officially canonized by the Roman Catholic Church; the Lutheran Church has a different view of sainthood, has no machinery for canonization, and is very inconsistent in the use of the title "Saint" before a name.

<sup>5</sup> St. James is the only one of the Apostles whose martyrdom is recorded in the Bible, and he has been especially venerated in Spain since the ninth century. This is not the place to treat the vexing question of the identity of the various Jameses mentioned in the New Testament or the identity of the author of the Epistle of St. James.

or popularity on the part of the Lutherans who named their churches for them. It is not surprising that three of the Apostles are in the group (St. Andrew, St. Thomas, and St. Philip) or that St. Stephen, St. Michael, and All Saints are on the list, since the official calendars of the three church bodies contain days of commemoration for all the Apostles and include St. Stephen's Day, the Feast of St. Michael and All the Angels, and All Saints' Day.

Of the remaining eight figures only two are scriptural: St. Timothy and the Virgin Mary. St. Timothy is near the head of the list, being in fourth place with sixty-two church dedications, and even though he has no appointed day of commemoration in Lutheran church calendars he is a New Testament figure of importance who is remembered as the friend of St. Paul, a faithful bishop, and the model of the pastoral office of the ministry. The case of the Virgin Mary, who is at the bottom of the list with only seven Lutheran churches in North America named for her, is a special one. The Reformers reacted very strongly against what they regarded as the excessive reverence paid to Mary, and although they retained the Feasts of the Annunciation and the Visitation in the church year they kept moving further and further away from the great respect for the Mother of Jesus which Martin Luther had. Eventually almost any special honor paid to the Virgin Mary came to be regarded as un-Protestant or "popish." Many old Lutheran churches in Europe are named for Mary, for example the well-known Church of Our Lady in Copenhagen, but new churches are rarely named for her.

Three saints who lived between the Apostolic period and the age of the Reformation are among the fourteen: St. Martin of Tours, a patron saint of France, was one of the most popular saints in the Middle Ages, the facts of his life are well known, and he was much revered in Germany at the time of the Reformation. It seems likely, however, that his continued popularity among Lutherans, particularly Lutherans of German origin, is due in part to the fact that Luther was born on St. Martin's Eve and was named for him. St. Ansgar, the missionary bishop who tried to bring Christianity to Scandinavia, is regarded by the Danes as a national hero or patron saint, and the churches named for him in North America were probably all founded by Lutherans of Danish origin. St. Olaf, the king who established Christianity in Norway and died a martyr's death in

battle, is the patron saint of Norway, and his feast day, July 29, is a national holiday in Norway. The churches named for him in North America were probably all founded by Lutherans of Norwegian origin. All American and Canadian Lutheran churches named for St. Ansgar or St. Olaf are in either the LCA or the ALC, both of which have substantial Danish and Norwegian components.

As one might expect, Martin Luther is also included among the group of fourteen. Lutherans do not refer to the Great Reformer as a saint, although some Lutherans regularly call him "blessed Martin Luther," but his special position among Christian leaders is recognized, and he is regarded by many Lutherans as the greatest Christian figure after the Apostolic period. There are over seventy-five Lutheran churches in North America named either Dr. Martin Luther Church or Luther Memorial Church, which puts him between St. Stephen and St. Andrew in popularity for church dedications. One other post-Reformation figure is included: the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus (reigned 1611–32) who brought peace, order, learning, and prosperity to his dominions and supported the Protestant cause in the Thirty Years War.

The one unexpected figure among the fourteen is St. David, who ranks with the Virgin Mary at the bottom of the list. David, an abbot and bishop of the sixth century and the patron saint of Wales, was not widely commemorated in Northern Europe at the time of the Reformation. Also, although he is the only Welsh saint canonized by Rome, he is not greatly honored in the Roman Catholic Church and is not well known among continental Lutherans. The seven LCA churches named for him may reflect Anglican influence, since St. David's Day appears on some modern Anglican calendars and St. David is a popular name for church dedications in the Episcopal Church.

The list of fourteen is as follows:

St. Andrews	90	St. Philip	32
St. Stephen	85	St. Martin	32
Martin Luther	77	All Saints	20
St. Timothy	62	St. Ansgar	11
St. Michael	54	Gustavus Adolphus	10
St. Olaf	35	Virgin Mary	7
St. Thomas	29	St. David	7

The remaining twenty-seven names are generally represented by a single church, although several have more than one. They are of three kinds, Scriptural (13), pre-Reformation (9), and post-Reformation (15). The Scriptural saints are Abraham, Barnabas, Bartholomew, Benjamin, Daniel, Enoch, John the Baptist, Joseph, Matthias, Nathanael, Nicodemus, Simeon, and Simon. Surprisingly, this group seems to include four Old Testament figures who are not usually included among the saints in the Western Church. Most surprising of all, St. John the Baptist is here instead of being among the more popular saints. In view of the fact that at least one day in commemoration of him is included on all Lutheran calendars, the only explanation of his lack of popularity in Lutheran church names in North America is the possible confusion such names could cause with Baptist churches. The three churches named for St. John the Baptist are, incidentally, all Slovak Lutheran churches.

The post-Apostolic saints are Ambrose, Augustine, Elizabeth, George, Gregory, Henry, Lawrence, and Sebald. The St. Elizabeth in question is presumably the thirteenth century princess of Thuringia rather than Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, since St. Elizabeth of Thuringia is well known in Germany. St. Henry is the patron saint of Finland and the church named for him is a Finnish church. St. Sebald is the patron saint of Nuremberg and the American church is undoubtedly named after St. Sebald's Church in that city. The other five men are all famous figures in the history of the Christian Church.

The remaining saints are John Hus, the fifteenth century Bohemian reformer and martyr; the two sixteenth century reformers Philip Melanchthon of Germany and Michael Agricola of Finland; and the nineteenth century Lutherans Hans Nielsen Hauge, the lay preacher of Norway, and C. F. T. Walther, the founder of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod.

Of the 83 Lutheran institutions of higher learning in North America (universities, seminaries, colleges, junior colleges, and teachers' colleges), only a handful are named for individuals, but these seem to fit the pattern of saints' names in church dedications. There is a St. Paul's College (MO Concordia, Missouri), a St. John's College (MO Winfield, Kansas), and a St. Olaf College (ALC Northfield, Minnesota). Also, there are two Luther Seminaries and two Luther Colleges (all ALC) and a Gustavus Adolphus College (LCA

St. Peter, Minnesota). Muhlenberg College (LCA Allentown, Pennsylvania) is named for the best-known Lutheran leader of colonial America.<sup>6</sup>

*Summary.* North American Lutherans, as shown by the names they give to their parish churches, have special respect and admiration for about a score of saints. Chief among these are St. Paul, the inner circle of the Apostles, and the Evangelists, but also included among them are a half dozen other New Testament figures, three leaders who spread Christianity in Europe (St. Martin, St. Ansgar, St. Olaf), and Martin Luther, the Great Reformer. This list coincides only in part with official Lutheran calendars of saints' days, since it omits some of the Apostles who are commemorated but includes St. Timothy and a number of post-Apostolic figures who have no days in their honor.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Two institutions named after individuals (Hanna Divinity School and Hartwick College) belong in a different category: in each case a Lutheran pastor left a sizeable bequest to the institution and the dedication was in grateful memory of that fact.

<sup>7</sup> After this article was completed, a brief but interesting study of Lutheran Church names was called to the author's attention: Charles Lutz, "Does your Church's Name Confuse or Confess?" *Lutheran Standard*, 96: 36 (Sept. 6, 1958), 8-10.