The German Language and the Lutheran Church in Queensland

by

Glen L. Williams, M.A.*

Within a society in which two or more languages are spoken, it is frequently the case that one language becomes more and more dominant, gradually forcing the others out of use. Both linguistic and extra-linguistic factors exert their respective influences in this process, tending either to preserve or to erode the usage of the languages involved. As a factor in the preservation of a language within such a situation, religious adherence is often of considerable importance. When the use of a particular language is bound up with the practice of a minority group’s religious activities, the language may well continue in use for longer than might otherwise have been expected. Such was the case with the German language in Queensland, especially during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The effects of this link between the German language and the Lutheran Church are still readily observable in several parts of the State.

Professor A. Lodewyckx, one of the most authoritative writers on the nineteenth and early twentieth century German immigration to Australia, wrote, in 1932:

Whatever of German character is still alive in Australia, and whatever of the German way of life has been preserved, we owe first and foremost to the Lutheran Church and the self-sacrificial efforts of her clergy.

It is my purpose to examine this view, more particularly with respect to the role of the Lutheran Church in Queensland in the preservation of what is, after all, the core of the ‘German character’, the German language itself. I shall attempt, therefore, to describe some of the activities of the Lutheran Church in Queensland during the 110 years of its existence, indicating ways in which such activities might have contributed to the retention of German amongst members of the church. Finally, it will be suggested that, in some ways, the church itself might have contributed to the decline in the use of German in Queensland.

The emphasis in this article is on the role of the church in influencing the extent of German spoken, rather than on the type of German spoken. Consideration will be given to the type of German taught within the Lutheran Church, or tolerated by its members, only insofar as this influenced the amount of German spoken. In the compilation of material relating to the activities of the Lutheran Church in Queensland, various sources have been used:

1. Primary sources such as the minute books and other records of congregations, synodal reports, school textbooks and workbooks, catechisms, hymn books, pamphlets, as well as the Queensland Education Department’s files on State and private schools.

2. Secondary sources such as parish anniversary publications, official church histories, and historical works on German settlement in various parts of Australia.

3. Verbal reminiscences of elderly pastors and lay people.

Apart from a small community of German missionaries who arrived in Queensland in 1838, the first group of German immigrants arrived in 1852, and by 1861 their numbers had risen to 2,124. For the next thirty years Germans continued to migrate to Queensland, establishing in several places group-settlements, which were exclusively or largely made up of German-born and their children. In 1891 there were 14,910 persons of German birth in Queensland, 92.9% of whom were living in areas other than cities and towns. In the same year, of 23,400 Lutherans resident in Queensland, some 83% were German-born or of German descent, the remaining 17% being almost entirely Scandinavian-born or of Scandinavian stock. During the twentieth century, German immigration to Queensland, apart from a few group settlements established shortly before 1914, has been mainly to the cities, and the Lutheran element has not been nearly as strong as it was during the nineteenth century.

The German Department of the University of Queensland has so far recorded 116 persons of German descent in fourteen different towns in south-east Queensland. Of the persons recorded (‘informants’), some sixty-three are members of the Lutheran Church, were born and educated in Queensland, have lived all their lives in this State, and have never visited Germany. These are the informants referred to in this paper. Not all informants spoke German with equal fluency — 18% had difficulty speaking any German at all and could not always understand simple questions put to them in German; 24% could speak a little German and understand the questions put to them; the remaining 58% spoke German fluently, and carried on a conversation with ease.

The topics of these conversations were usually limited to discussions of the history of German settlement in the areas of the informants’ birth. Eighteen per cent of informants spoke both High German (Hochdeutsch) and Low German (Plattdeutsch); 70% spoke High German only; 12% spoke Low German and very little High German. Only 40% of the informants admitted to using German with any regularity, either within the home or in conversations with old friends. 71% of the informants had both father and mother of German birth; in the cases of 21%, one parent was German-born, the other Australian-born; 8% of informants had both of Australian birth. All parents born in Australia were themselves of German stock. All informants spoke fluent English, some with slight traces of German influence in the phonological and grammatical systems.

Informants have been recorded in most areas of former German group settlement in south-east Queensland, and the data so far collected suggests that, whilst the German language has not yet entirely disappeared from the group settlements, there are few cases in which it could be said that it is still a living language.

It is not possible, unfortunately, to separate some activities of the Lutheran Church from others, and to label one separated group ‘influences in preserving the German language’ and the other group ‘effects of influences tending to preserve German.’ The facts allow no such dichotomy, since a particular activity may be regarded, from one angle, as an influence in preserving German, whilst from another point of view it may be regarded as an effect of that influence. Thus, the system of schools set up within the church may well be regarded as an influence in the passing-on of the German language from one generation to the next; but the very existence of these schools may, at the same time, be viewed as an effect of views regarding the use of German which prevailed in the church at that particular time.

During the period when German group-settlements flourished in Queensland, from about 1860 until the 1914-18 War, the Lutheran Church in Queensland, as has already been indicated, was almost entirely a German Church. More importantly, many of these German Lutherans settled in groups which remained, for several years, compact German settlements. It was only to be expected that, when isolated from contact with speakers of English, the members of these group settlements would speak German with one another. Their church provided them with the ideal opportunity for this, ‘it was not theology as such, but the church as

* Graduate of the University of Queensland, at present teaching in the Odenwaldschule, Oberhambach, Federal Republic of Germany.
the major immigrant institution that preserved the old language and reinforced some of the old country patterns.

In the first place, the church served as a meeting-point for these settlers where, shut-off completely from the English language, they could chat, gossip, and worship in their mother tongue. Besides regular Sunday worship, they came together at church for special days in the Christian year — Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost — for marriages, baptisms, for confirmations, and for the burial of their dead.

At annual synods and at meetings of the Church Committee members (Vorsteber), the language in use up until 1914 was German, almost without exception. By 1936, however, scarcely any German was to be heard at synod, whilst 1930 saw the last Committee Minutes (Vorstands Protokoll) in German.

At least three church newspapers were obtained direct from Germany before 1914, as well as two American German-language Lutheran papers. Few, if any, subscriptions were renewed after the war. Several Australian German-language Lutheran papers circulated in Queensland prior to the war, and when Das Kirchenblatt recommenced in 1925, it soon acquired some seventy Queensland subscribers, four times that number preferring to subscribe to its English equivalent, the Lutheran Herald.

In some congregations, the discipline of the Lutheran Church inhibited contact between German settlers and their Australian neighbours. Public dances were regarded as sinful, marriage to a non-Lutheran was frowned upon, and Lutheran partners were often available in any case. The need to preserve the purity of Lutheran doctrine precluded cooperative activities with other Christian denominations. Within this situation, the role of the pastor was central, and up until the 1914-18 War, nearly all Lutheran pastors who worked in Queensland were German-born and trained. Besides performing his other pastoral duties, the pastor also taught the German language at the Gemeindesthule (Congregational or parish school) at least once a week. In some congregations, a full-time German language school operated, in which a lay teacher and the pastor shared the teaching duties. A more detailed examination of three particular features of the church, however, throws considerable light on the activities of the church in preserving the German language, these features being the pastors, the services of worship, and the schools.

In the following discussion, the term 'United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia' (U.E.L.C.A.) refers, not only to the U.E.L.C.A. itself, but also to the two Queensland synods which joined in 1921 to form the Queensland district of U.E.L.C.A. The term 'Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia' (E.L.C.A.), besides referring to E.L.C.A., also refers to its forerunner, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Australia (E.L.S.A.)

Prior to 1899, when E.L.C.A. sent the first Australian-born and trained Lutheran pastor to Queensland, most Lutheran pastors had been both German-born and trained. During the period 1900-14, the pattern changed.

E.L.C.A. supplied Queensland with several more Australian-born and trained clergy, whilst in U.E.L.C.A. general practice was for Australian men to receive their theological training in either Germany or Switzerland. Thus, it was not until 1925 that U.E.L.C.A. was able to send an Australian-born and trained pastor to Queensland. He joined six German-born and trained pastors, and fifteen Australians, two of them were American-trained, and the remainder German-trained. In the same year, E.L.C.A. fielded only one German-born and trained pastor and eight pastors who were Australian-born and trained. During the first seventy years of its history, then, the Lutheran Church in Queensland was dominated by clergy whose theological training had been in the German language.

Besides often acting as teachers of German in the Gemeindesthule, these pastors contributed significantly in other ways to the retention of the German language within Lutheran congregations. The view that the purity of Lutheran faith was dependent on its being expressed in the German language was held by most Lutheran pastors in Queensland prior to the First World War. Thus, in 1907, it was stated in the Synodal Statuten of the Vereinigte deutsche und skandinavische lutherische Synode von Queensland (a forerunner of the U.E.L.C.A.)

34. The Synod recognises that for the preservation of the Lutheran Church in this country, the establishment and maintenance of German congregational schools is urgently necessary.

The fact that very few pastors who served in Queensland prior to World War I were themselves able to use the English language fluently was probably not without significance in the formulation of this particular recommendation. To be sure, these pastors did bend every effort towards both retaining the use of German in their congregations and the teaching of German to the young. The former achieved considerable success; in the latter, their success was more limited. German certainly was retained as the official language within the Lutheran Church in Queensland right up until World War I. This was, however, at the expense of considerable numbers of young people who, unable to become fully involved in the church because they were not fluent speakers of German, simply left the Lutheran Church altogether. After 1918, however, the situation during the 1920s and 1930s was not limited to the pastors. Many of their flock who were born and educated in Germany and had migrated to Queensland as adults shared this view. It is not surprising that they felt this way for, in a pioneering situation such as that in which the nineteenth century Germans found themselves, the language represents the old culture, and the nostalgic and even sacred memories of the past are embedded in and symbolized by religious worship.

The view that in the Church, at school (Gemeindesthule) and at home, everything should be in German and should remain in German was not limited to the pastors. Many of their flock who were born and educated in Germany and had migrated to Queensland fed and nourished these nostalgic memories held by older members of the church and kindled within the hearts of some of the younger generation a love of things German, especially of the German language itself.

Until 1896, nearly forty years after the first Lutheran pastor arrived, the German language was still exclusively in use in all Lutheran congregations in Queensland. By 1913, fifteen congregations (out of a total of nearly seventy) were having monthly English services. The First World War hastened the anglicizing of Lutheran public worship, both by creating a climate of public opinion in which German-language worship could not easily survive, and by effectively preventing the teaching of the German language. This anglicizing process continued during the 1920s and 30s, and by 1936, of nearly two and a half thousand Lutheran services in the State, only one-sixth were in the German language. In all but two congregations, the number of English services far exceeded the number in German. The number of German services continued to decline up until the outbreak of the Second World War, and the advent of war greatly accelerated this development. A negligible number of German services were held during the war years.

During the post-war immigration boom period, there has been a considerable influx of German Lutheran immigrants to Queensland, but they have had little contact with their church, in comparison with the central role of the church in the lives of the nineteenth century immigrants. These recent immigrants were described by one Queensland Lutheran pastor as 'a bitter disappointment, as the majority will not attend church regularly'. Consequently, the church has played a far smaller role in the retention of the German language by these immigrants than it did in the older group settlements. The church has, indeed, supplied some German language services, for example in Brisbane, Ipswich, Toowoomba, and Mt. Isa, but, on the whole, has not provided an environment in which German might be adequately preserved and passed on.
It is now necessary to summarize the role of Lutheran schools in Queensland:

1. Gemeindeschulen: Historical sources are very meagre until 1909, but it is clear that at least six full-time Gemeindeschulen were operating in Queensland at various times during the fifty years 1857-1907, all but one of these having a life of at least twenty years. In 1909, the situation was as follows:
   - Schools operating five days per week: 1
   - Schools operating one day per week: 21
   - Schools operating fortnightly: 2

In 1909, then, with approximately sixty-one congregations in Queensland, only twenty-four had a Gemeindeschule, and of these, twenty-one were on a weekly basis only. Somewhere between 600-700 children were attending a Lutheran Gemeindeschule in this year, but this figure represents less than half the children eligible by age to attend such a school. By 1920 only one weekly school remained, and it continued until 1931, no other schools having been revived after the First World War.

Schools operating five days per week:

It was often the case that children who attended these schools would have already attended the local State School for a few years, and they would then finish their schooling with a few years at the German-language school, their confirmation (at the age of thirteen or fourteen) marking the end of their schooling. It was the exception, rather than the rule, for a child to receive all his schooling from the Gemeindeschule and no other. Subjects taught in the German language included reading, writing, grammar, High German pronunciation, Bible History, Luther's Catechism, hymnals, and arithmetic. In some cases reading and writing in English were taught, along with arithmetic and Australian geography. The teaching of doctrinal subjects was usually carried out by the local pastors, the German language and all other subjects being taught by full-time lay teachers, almost without exception German-born. It is doubtful, however, if all were trained teachers, and the teaching of English, in particular, seems to have been of a fairly poor standard. The actual physical conditions in which this teaching was carried out seem to have sometimes left much to be desired. A visiting German teacher, writing in 1866 of a North Brisbane Gemeindeschule, described the situation in the following gloomy terms:

One of the Germans had divided his hut into two parts by a wooden partition, and had arranged one of these halves for our church and school. The seats are unplanned and so rough that the children usually remain stuck to them whenever they want to stand up. Naturally there were no teaching materials; no blackboard, no primers, no catechisms or reading-books.

Schools operating one day per week:

These were in most cases run by the pastor, who taught German reading and writing, High German pronunciation, Bible History, and Luther's Catechism. The German language was used for all instruction. After attending such a school for anything from two to six years, pupils were usually confirmed into the church. The effectiveness of these schools in teaching the German language seems dubious. A number of informants remarked to members of the Speech Survey team, Department of German, University of Queensland, that a good many children who attended such schools understood very little of what transpired therein, and learned their German Confirmation lessons by rote.

2. Sunday Schools: In 1909 there were twenty-four Lutheran Sunday Schools in Queensland. German was not usually taught at Sunday School, although it was usually in use. In at least four cases, however, the medium of instruction was English, even before 1909. The role of the Sunday Schools in retaining the German language in Queensland was supplementary to that of the Gemeindeschulen. Where the actual teaching was carried out.

3. Present-day Schools: At the end of World War II, both synods established a secondary school, one in Brisbane and the other in Toowoomba, German being the only modern foreign language offered at either school.

Throughout the first sixty years of its history, the Lutheran Church in Queensland (and, indeed, in Australia as a whole) was rent and divided by dissension within its own ranks. It has been claimed of these Lutherans that:

In their case it was the religious evangelicalism and fervour born of religious schism which proved to be the strong cohesive force within the group.

It has been further suggested that dissension within the Lutheran Church actually contributed to the retention of the German language among its members. This view does not seem to take adequate account of the fact that, strong as the cohesiveness within the rival factions was, its force as a language-preserver was largely offset by the numerical and financial weakness of the factions themselves. For a language to stay alive within a community, it must be passed on from one generation to the next, and there is a lower limit of speakers (the number depending on the particular circumstances involved) below which this process does not take place. It is clear that, in several instances, dissolution and schism within the Lutheran Church in Queensland resulted in the social isolation of small groups of German-speakers from their fellows. Whereas in the past the members of these splinter groups had been part of a German community which had been socially and economically self-contained to a very high degree, schisms threw them into a position where they were forced to live and work in much closer co-operation with Australians than was previously the case. In these circumstances the use of German would quickly make way for English, especially with the younger generation. The loss of members in this way did not leave those from whom the splinter groups broke away unaffected. Rather small in numbers before the schism, thus-weakened congregations were not financially able to provide attractive conditions for lay school-teachers, the result usually being that they were forced to engage second-rate teachers, or were unable to acquire a teacher at all. Whenever competent teachers were acquired, their period of service was almost invariably short. Most parents, therefore, were unable to ensure that their children obtained a good grounding in the formal elements of the German language.

The Lutheran Church, by its use of High German in all its activities up until the First World War — particularly in worship and religious instruction — was ministering to only one section of its adherents, namely, the generation of German-born and educated and those Australian-born who understood High German. For the remainder, High German was virtually a foreign language.

The Church, when it used the German language, did not speak the language of the home of this young generation. The Church, when it used the German language, did not speak the language of the home of this young generation. The children learned Low German as their first language, only to discover later on that they had learned 'bad German'. English, on the other hand, was easily learned at State School, and the great majority of Lutherans attended State School for at least two or three years, even before 1914.

This, then, was the position in which many Australian-born Lutheran children found themselves. Ashamed to use their native Low German, and with a very poor knowledge of High German, they turned to the English language, which carried no stigma, was easily learned at school, and which opened the door to employment opportunities later in life. In many instances parents insisted on their children speaking English at home, so that they themselves could pick up some of the language. Low German, then, disappeared from the home as well, fell into disuse, and was largely or partly forgotten.

Notwithstanding the above-mentioned qualifications, there can be no doubt that, viewed as a whole, the Lutheran Church,
during the first half-century of its existence in Queensland, acted as both preserver and purveyor of German customs and language, by providing a favourable environment for their practice and cultivation.

REFERENCES
2. This article excludes consideration of those German lay missionaries — generally termed the Gossner Missionaries — who arrived at Moreton Bay in 1838 and established a settlement in the Nundah area. Very few members of this group joined the Lutheran Church in Queensland in later years. 1857 has been chosen as the starting point of the activities of the Lutheran Church since in this year the first Lutheran clergyman took up pastoral duties in Queensland.
6. High German is literary German, a derivation from one of the original ‘low’ forms, whilst Low German can be described as ‘Dialect’ German, pronunciation varying according to regional influences. In the survey, both the High and Low German showed regional variations and the Low German also showed some High German influences.
9. Borrie. p. 182. Between the years 1861 and 1871, the ratio of German-born females to German-born males in Queensland improved from 1 : 3 to 1 : 2, whilst from 1881 to 1911, the ratio changed to 2 : 3.
10. The exceptions were three pastors from Scandinavia, plus Johann Gottfried Haussmann and his son John. Haussmann Senior was born in Germany, trained as a lay Gossner Missionary and later was ordained a Lutheran pastor after training at John Dunmore Lang’s theological college in Sydney. Haussmann Junior was born in Australia, but was trained in Germany.
11. It should not be assumed that all these Australian-born and German-trained pastors were any less insistent on the use of the German language in the life of the Lutheran Church than were their German-born and trained counterparts. Pastor F. O. Theile, for instance, was the first German-trained Australian pastor to work in Queensland, taking up service in the Bethania parish in the year 1901. Within two years he had re-established the full-time Gemeindeschule (the last of its kind in Queensland), and when the parish school teacher resigned in 1909, the pastor and his wife taught German once a week at three of the four congregations in the parish, until the outbreak of World War I.
15. Bethania, where there was an equal number of German and English services; and Guluguba, where some English had been introduced only in 1934.
17. Theile. p. 87. Conversations with elderly residents in areas of former German settlement suggest that persons who attended German schools only were often handicapped in later life by lack of fluency in English. On the general proficiency of the teachers in these schools, Pastor Theile names several of good repute, but adds that ‘others possessed but little education and no teaching abilities’.
21. For example, at Lowood, Marburg, Minden, Kalbar, Nundah, and Maryborough.