

THE STORY OF THE GERMAN CHURCH IN MANCHESTER

History and Recollections



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This is a most interesting, if brief work covering over 150 years of the German Church, in two parts. The first is the résumé of how the Protestant Church was founded and through the diligence of German congregations land was procured, funds raised and, eventually, a church built. The development of the German church coincided with the rapid development of Manchester as Britain's (and perhaps the world's) first industrial city. The North West gave birth also to free trade and the co-operative movement. German industrialists - not all Protestant - contributed to this development.

The authors have assembled an interesting range of German emigrants who contributed to Manchester's 19th Century growth – industrially and culturally- notably the Hallé Orchestra founded by Karl Hallé in 1857.

Within the social context of Manchester's often irreligious community it does not surprise that an Annual Church report in 1860 laments 'I grieve to say that attendance at our place of worship is anything what might be desired or expected'. By 1875 assimilation had been so effective that only about 15% of the parishioners 'still had German names'.

Given economic constraints and the movement of the German population it is a wonder that the church remains intact- there were 3 parishes in Manchester endeavouring to support poorer members of the church, visiting hospitals and poor houses, even setting up a savings bank.

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 had a 'traumatic' effect on the community with 'public hostility, police actions' and internment. Church activities closed and, despite the German contributions to 'the commercial, cultural and social life of Manchester this had changed into expressions of hate' with many Germans tried 'to make themselves invisible'. There were other difficulties, too; when a Swiss theologian took over a Liverpool parish in 1920 he had 'difficulty empathising with the German mentality' and by 1923 had resigned.

The external world invariably impacts on the community in Manchester, and the more liberal policies under Stresemann in Germany, 'affected a wider acceptance of Germans in Manchester'. Acceptance was short

lived and Hitler's rise to power in 1933 divided the German parishes in England - Manchester and Liverpool rejected National Socialist policies, whilst Bradford was 'more receptive to the new ideas'.

At the outbreak of war in 1939, parish life again 'came to a standstill', with many parishioners interned on the Isle of Man. After WW II there was 'a new beginning', a church built and families returned. German festivals were again celebrated, especially at Easter; there were painted eggs, gardens opened for the parish and Kindergartens established.

An outreach policy ensured that the old were visited at home and the sick in hospitals. German students studying in Manchester were encouraged to participate in their exiled community. There were regular visits to Germany - the foundation stone for the Martin Luther Church was imported from the castle church in Wittenberg. Strenuous attempts to ensure the retention of German identity continue, a Saturday school is established and even a sheltered home for older parishioners. In these respects, the German church and community gradually resembles the host community and especially that of other emigrant groups- West Indians, Polish and Jewish- each attempting to stem the dominance of the host culture.

Part II comprises a résumé of established members of the German church community in Manchester; it is interesting -though marred by the impression that it was imperative to include everybody. Meandering through it all is the nostalgia of elderly and exiled Germans determined to re-create or express sentimentality for a Heimat left behind. Prayers, in the mother tongue 'are more emotional and deeply moving' and there are frequent allusions to early childhood memories. Another regards the 'function of the German church throughout the world to give Germans abroad a homeland in faith'. I wonder whether this generation is fading, and a new generation may be more fully integrated into British society? Will their children retain the same levels of longing for their roots - or feel the poignancy of exile from Germany? Will the re-affirmation and eulogising of early childhood memories be transferred to a new generation?

The concluding interview is with Pastor Strobel who provides a contrasting perspective; 'what unites Germans between 45 - 60 here, is above all, that they don't want to be German'. Their longing is for an era that has vanished. 'They have turned their backs on German stiffness, perfectionism, love of order and above all - naturally - any trace of nationalism'.

There is an invariable conclusion in evaluating such reports; having whetted our interest, the reader wishes to know more. Was the German community in exile as homogenous as the Protestant church membership appears to be? How, if at all, were the divergent pressures towards Gemeinschaft (community) reconciled with Anglo-Saxon emphasis on individualism? Even within the church, were the legacies of German class divisions replicated here?

The volunteers who assembled and collated this project have worked hard and laid firm foundations for a future, more in-depth study.

The brochure can be obtained for £10 from:

Martin Luther Church, 9 Park Road, Stretford, Manchester M32 8EF or Ursula mobile: 07970 676 239