

## ABOUT THE LUTHERANS

# Lutherans in the Caribbean

Lutheran churches have deep roots in northern Europe and have large numbers in North America. Partner churches are flourishing in the Middle East, southern Africa, Australia, and Asia. But many Lutherans don't know that there have been Lutherans in some parts of the Caribbean for almost four hundred years.



*Frederick Lutheran Church,  
Charlotte Amalie*

Historically, Lutheranism came to the Caribbean as the religion of white European and, later, American settlers. But in time some of these churches opened their doors to local inhabitants, Hispanics, African Americans, and Native Americans. Some of these congregations have become truly indigenous and multicultural ministries. More recently, North Americans moved and settled in some parts of the Caribbean, beginning other congregations for expatriates and vacationers.

The oldest Lutheran congregation in the Caribbean was founded in the Virgin Islands in 1666 by Danish settlers on the island of St. Thomas, the Frederick congregation in Charlotte Amalie. They later founded other congregations on the islands of St. Croix, St. John, and St. Thomas in the eighteenth century. Although these congregations were originally intended for Danes, by the 1750s they were ministering to the enslaved Africans on the islands.

When Denmark sold these islands to the United States in 1917, these congregations affiliated with American Lutheran denominations. There are also several congregations of Virgin Island Lutherans on the mainland of the United States, most notably in New York City.

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Similarly, Dutch Lutherans founded congregations in the area of Guyana and Suriname in the eighteenth century, as the Europeans planted colonies there. Congregations generally consisted of white settlers and their descendants until the middle of the nineteenth century, when they began to reach out to other populations. Guyana is especially racially diverse, and the Lutheran congregations there include African Americans, Native Americans, East Indians, and some Chinese.

Though it has a long history of European colonization, Lutherans did not become established on Puerto Rico until it became a part of the United States in 1898. In that year a young student, Gustav Swenson, moved to Puerto Rico and eventually started a Lutheran congregation there. He was eventually followed by a number of different pastors and missionaries from the United States, who began to preach in Spanish to the local population.

Lutheran congregations can be found in some of the other islands of the Caribbean. There is a small Lutheran presence in Cuba. Antigua, Bermuda, and the Bahamas all have Lutheran congregations affiliated with various bodies. Even Haiti hosts a Lutheran enclave, connected with the Church of the Lutheran Confession in Alsace and Lorraine (France).



Although many of these Caribbean Lutheran congregations were begun by Europeans or Americans, either as settlers or missionaries, most of their members are now predominantly local people—Virgin Islanders, Guyanese and Surinamese, Puerto Ricans, and others. They may be Hispanic, Native American, African American, or other local populations, worshiping in Spanish, English, French, or other local languages. These congregations enrich the palate of world Lutheranism, and help spread the gospel of Christ into every corner of the world.

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