

A Church Ahead of its Time: The 18th Century Moravian Community on Gender, Worship and Ecumenism¹

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Introduction

The 18th century Moravians or “Herrnhuters” have been described as “the most significant religious community that the age of Pietism produced.”² The present study has a dual purpose: to discover the nature of 18th century Moravian communal life, and to consider the surprising insights for contemporary Christianity that we can derive from such historical study. These early Moravians were innovators in their practice of Christian community. They were a church ahead of their time and provide a model for Christian community in the 21st century.

The subject of Christian community is an important one, fraught with issues and emotions, successes and failures. In his recent study, *Religion and Community*, theologian Keith Ward observed that Christianity “is essentially a communal faith.” The Christian church views itself as “a community which mediates the power of the divine love, the Spirit, to the world.” As the body of Christ, the church is called to disclose to the world “the compassionate love and liberating activity of God.”³ But as a fragile, human institution, the church’s success in achieving this mission is often mixed. According to Ward, the church “needs to learn from its own history and from the history of other religious traditions the sorts of limits on power and authority that

are needed to counterbalance the repressive tendencies which seem inherent in all human institutions.”⁴

The kind of church that is needed in the 21st century is one marked by “a new ecumenical or global paradigm, for which the old divisions of Christendom are largely relegated to history. ... Within such a paradigm, the church would be more self-critical, recognizing the historical conditionality of its formulations and the symbolic nature of many of its basic images. It would be more openly plural, accepting a diversity of religious insights, and seeking positive interaction between them. ... It would be committed to social structures making for liberation and fulfillment for all humans. ... It would consist of those who have been grasped by a vision of the ultimate goodness of a suffering and universally loving God, of the ultimate hope for the whole world of sharing in the life of God. ... They will accept that their primary vocation is to witness to the universal love of God in a world of many disputes and many destructive hatreds.”⁵ Ward observes wistfully that until now this vision has been shared “by relatively small groups of odd, imperfect people.”⁶

I will argue that the 18th century Moravians were one of these small groups that shared the vision that Ward speaks of, making them truly

a church ahead of their time. *In a day of bitter religious wars, disputes and hatreds, the Moravian community exhibited to the world a non-dogmatic liturgical Christianity marked by ecumenical openness, affirmation of women in leadership, a piety shaped by exile and focused on the sufferings of Christ, and a global vision of God's love for a world of diverse cultures and beliefs.*

I have both personal and historical reasons for focusing on the Moravians. On the personal side, during my research sabbatical in Germany in fall 2002 I took the opportunity to spend a few days in Herrnhut and Berthelsdorf. I stayed at the Moravian guesthouse in Herrnhut, visited various historical sites, including Zinzendorf's estate, and worked in the Moravian archive. I met scholars of Moravian studies from Germany, Poland, Finland and Canada. This experience was a rich one, both personally and academically, and sparked my own latent research interests in this field.

On the historical side, it makes good sense to look to the 18th century to learn something about Christianity and community. Gordon Rupp observed that the Reformation affirmed two great dimensions of church life: Word and Sacrament. In the period 1560-1660 a third dimension was stressed, "the discipline of Christ," which can be seen variously in Calvinist Geneva, English Puritanism and elsewhere. The next period, he suggested, saw the addition of a "fourth dimension": the church as koinonia or fellowship, the Christian cell meeting for prayer and mutual guidance and edification.⁷ Rupp pointed to the examples of German Pietism, Moravianism and English Methodism as movements that discovered afresh the dimension of Christian community. In this presentation we will examine

just one of these groups and their contribution to our understanding of Christian community.

The 18th Century Moravians

Moravians are known outside their church for several reasons. Many have heard of their round the clock prayer vigil, which lasted for over a hundred years. Others are acquainted with the Moravian devotional book, the *Losungen* or Daily Texts, which are advertised as "one of the most widely read Christian devotional books," and appear in some fifty languages worldwide. The Moravians are also be known for their leading and distinguished service in worldwide missions. Mission scholar Stephen Neill reflected on this: "Under the leadership of Zinzendorf this small Church was seized with a missionary passion which has never left it. The Moravians have tended to go to the most remote, unfavourable, and neglected parts of the surface of the earth. Many of the missionaries have been quite simple people, peasants and artisans; their aim has been to live the Gospel, and so to commend it to those who have never heard it."⁸ Still others have heard of the role that the Moravians played in John Wesley's conversion and in sparking the evangelical revival in England.⁹

The founder of the Moravian Church, Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760), is recognized as "one of the most colourful and intriguing figures of eighteenth century Pietism."¹⁰ Hans Schneider observed: "Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf...is without doubt one of the most original figures in all of church history, and also one of the most controversial. Already in his own lifetime, opinions on him were divided: his followers called him tenderly 'dear

Papa' (*Papachen*), submitted to his authority, ... and saw in him a 'true prince of God,' but his opponents untiringly cautioned others against this 'false apostle,' denounced him as a heretic unparalleled in the history of the church, or poured their scorn upon this 'most laughable spiritual Don Quixote.'"¹¹ Certainly his social behaviour and creative energy were unusual for his time. "His background in the upper nobility on the one hand and his complete identification with the artisan/craftsman class and uneducated on the other, in a way that superseded all social boundaries, was unusual for his day. ... The extent of his writings [over 67 volumes] points to his unusual energy."¹²

Since Zinzendorf's biography is well-known to most readers of *The Hinge*, I will highlight those areas related directly to the themes of this paper. Zinzendorf was still young when his father died; when his mother remarried he was sent to live with his maternal grandmother, Henriette Katharina von Gersdorf (1648-1726). Henriette was admired by theologians of the day for her abilities in Biblical languages and was widely praised for her religious poetry and verse. She corresponded with the philosopher Leibniz, prominent Lutheran theologians, and with Pietist leaders such as Spener and August Hermann Francke. She used her wealth to support struggling Pietist leaders such as Johann Wilhelm Petersen, and studied even radical religious thinkers such as Jakob Böhme and Jane Leade. These thinkers advocated the creation of a loving community of true believers who set aside their denominational differences.¹³ Zinzendorf said of Henriette: "I received my principles from her. If it weren't for her, the movement would never have

come about. She saw no great difference among Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed religion; whomever she met who had a heart for faith was her neighbour."¹⁴ Henriette's ecumenical interests helped to inspire the Moravian vision.

In 1719-1720 Zinzendorf embarked upon an educational trip known as a *Bildungsreise*, visiting leading church figures in Holland and Paris. His dealings with Reformed and Catholic Christians in these places confirmed his views about a cross-confessional religion of the heart. In his description of his experiences in Holland and Paris he sounds like a modern university student:

I came to know all kinds of religious groups, and found that they had more to say for themselves than I had heard. ... I became so familiar with the Catholics that I gained a better idea of the honest souls that there are among them. From this time on, I determined to discover the best in all religions and...to attain a better and more benign understanding of their teachings and what might be removed as a hindrance to godliness. For I knew that the Lord must have his own among all kinds of people. I returned from my travels with the conviction not to allow myself to engage in any [religious] favouritism, for I saw that [even the Pietists] in Halle and Wittenberg were also human and fallible. This notion helped in promoting the kingdom of God on my estate, but it alienated the Halle Pietists from me somewhat.¹⁵

After returning from his travels, Zinzendorf sent Cardinal Noailles a book of Pietist devotion

(Arndt's *Wahres Christenthum*). The two men continued to exchange letters right up to the cardinal's death.¹⁶ In fall 1721 Zinzendorf began his service in Dresden as legal counselor in the court of the Elector of Saxony. On Sundays Zinzendorf welcomed into his home a Philadelphian gathering of Pietists, Separatists and devotees of Jakob Böhme, to whom he offered edifying discourses.¹⁷

Herrnhut

In 1722 Zinzendorf purchased his grandmother's estate in Berthelsdorf in Upper Lusatia, hoping to establish Halle-style institutions there. That summer he began welcoming to his estate religious refugees who suffered persecution by the Catholic Habsburg Emperor Charles VI (d. 1740). The emperor sought to enforce the decree of 1648 in the *Peace of Westphalia* that only three official faiths should be tolerated in the German Empire: Lutheran, Reformed and Catholic.¹⁸ The refugees included Moravians, Schwenkfelders and other Protestant groups. The Moravians consisted of German-speaking Christians from villages in Moravia led by the carpenter and Pietistic Catholic convert Christian David (1691-1751). W.R. Ward observed that, "This handful of refugees brought by David to Berthelsdorf in 1722 were to leave an indelible mark on the history of Protestantism."¹⁹ In five years (1727) there were 300 settlers on Zinzendorf's estate, about half of these Moravians.²⁰ The other groups came from various parts of Germany and included Pietists, Separatists, Lutherans and Calvinists (Reformed).²¹ The vast majority of these settlers were craftsmen, artisans and handworkers.

In 1724 they began calling the settlement, *Herrnhut*, "God's protection," or "the Lord's watch." Zinzendorf later described the situation in Herrnhut: "I found three kinds of subjects on my estates: the Lutherans, the Schwenck-felders, and the Moravian Brethren...The Moravian Brethren, founded some sixty years before the Protestant Reformation and accustomed to certain Church regulations, impressed three things upon my mind: their doctrine, the condition of their souls, and their regulations. In doctrine they were all Reformed. But in 1725 after heartfelt discussion, they welcomed all the Evangelical Lutheran teaching that I presented to them."²² In 1732, under pressure from the Emperor, the Saxon government forbade acceptance of any more Moravian emigrants. Princes and parish clergy alike felt that public order and the parish system were threatened by the flood of "footloose immigrants from Silesia, Bohemia, Moravia and Hungary."²³

Inevitably, tensions and divisions arose among the diverse Herrnhut settlers, but Zinzendorf helped them create a new type of community. "Through his intensive efforts with individual members, through the imaginativeness of his ideas, and not least through the charisma of his personality, in a short time he was able to bring about peace among the settlers, indeed, to make them a close community...a cross-confessional brotherhood."²⁴ On May 12, 1727 Zinzendorf delivered a constitution to the community, consisting of his "Things Required and Forbidden" (*Herrschaftlichen Geboten und Verboten*), and forty-two articles comprising "Statutes of the Community of Brethren." Herrnhut was to be a community free of outside

princely interference, and ruled by elders. Their life together should be according to the pattern of the first Christians, and express Christian freedom before God. Zinzendorf created a series of offices for the laity: Elder, Teacher, Encourager, Nurse to the sick. The Herrnhuters must commit themselves to live “in constant love toward all the brethren and children of God in all Religions.”²⁵ These statues were signed by almost all those in the Herrnhut community.

The community continued to worship on Sundays at the Lutheran Church in Berthelsdorf, participating in the sacraments of the Lord’s supper and baptism. However, they also held their own meetings in Herrnhut. They were a gathered group of disciplined Christians within the larger Lutheran church. Luther had envisioned such groups, and Spener described them as *ecclesiola in ecclesia*.²⁶ The whole community was organized into small groups called “bands” or “choirs,” separated by gender. Choirs held their own daily devotions, liturgical celebrations, and musical events; on Sundays they sat in church divided according to choirs.²⁷ The purpose of the choirs was to “encourage the intellectual and religious development of each member of the community, as well as strengthening the unity of the community.” The assumption was that “people in similar life situations [were best suited to] encourage each other in spiritual growth.”²⁸

What especially knit the colony of refugees into a vital Christian community was a revival that broke out at a celebration of the Lord’s Supper by Pastor Rothe on August 13, 1727. This day has been celebrated ever since as the movement’s spiritual birthday.²⁹ Just prior to this event there had been all night prayer meetings led

by children. These began with Susanne Kühnel, who had been present at her mother’s deathbed and was deeply moved by the joy and surrender that she saw in her mother. “For three days and nights Susanne’s distress and prayers lay upon the whole community. Then at one in the morning she awakened her father with the words, ‘Father, I am now a child of God, now I know how it was and will still be with my mother.’”³⁰ Three of her friends experienced the same struggle and conversion that same night. Zinzendorf met personally with the girls and prayed with them. At their first communion the whole community was present with much weeping and singing. The revival soon spread to the boys and adults as well.³¹

Zinzendorf’s Theology

The Moravian movement was shaped by Zinzendorf’s piety and vision. Dietrich Meyer has nicely captured the twofold genius of Zinzendorf’s enduring vision: a childlike Christocentric piety focused on the wounds of Jesus, and a diverse community that provided a model to the world of Christian cooperation and ecumenism.³² Zinzendorf taught that child-like faith and trust should characterize Christian faith: “I believe and teach: philosophy has nothing to do with theology...Let people clarify their minds with philosophy as long as they like, but tell them that as soon as they wish to become theologians they must become *children and fools*.”³³ The chief feature of this childlike faith was its focus upon the suffering and death of Christ [see *Hinge* 8.3]. Zinzendorf made the blood and wounds of Christ the primary object of devotion for his followers.³⁴ This “distinctive foundation of Zinzendorf’s theology” became the object of severe criticism from those outside the

community.³⁵ Zinzendorf complained in 1747 that the main accusation against the Moravian Church was, “that we know nothing else than the blood and wounds [of Christ].”³⁶ His response to the accusation is worth noting:

[T]hey consider this a miserable theology, that one knows nothing except this. [Yet], there was an old Latin proverb, *Si Christum discis, satis est, si caetera nescis*. If you know the Saviour, then it is enough, even if you know nothing else...But [our critics say] that this cannot be taken seriously. It is only a manner of speaking. We are good Lutherans and everyone else is a heretic. That is what they would say, but that is mistaken. For [our critics] show their mistake in that they have learned and taught everything else [but Christ], and have forgotten him...You theologians, don't you know that from of old that has been the sum of true doctrine? Have you not understood what is written in the old books of belief? Or maybe you have not believed it and not realized that it was written in earnest?...Even if others do not wish to accept this, if they reject it, mock it, and despise it, if they proclaim it as the mark of a false church: [we say:] “Preserve it among us, dear Lamb, as our peculiar blessing, for the sake of your five holy wounds.”³⁷

In later times, this “blood and wounds theology” would become a source of some embarrassment to the Moravians causing them to soften some of Zinzendorf's language.

Zinzendorf's piety of childlike simplicity should be understood as his response to the rising Enlightenment rationalism of the day and to the experience of exile. This “theology of the heart”

was a “creative, anti-rationalist approach to Christianity.”³⁸ The first threat of exile came in December 1732. On that occasion Zinzendorf penned the following hymn:

Our wandering at this time
has many rugged ways,
And some little side trails built
through courageous faith.
Yes, at times our Lord, the Lord
whose name is love, awakens
The enfeebled traveler's desire
by [providing] a good way.

We see then this manifold working
of God's wonderful ways,
Which in the weak [is] powerfully strong,
The goal [subjected to] so much derision,
Established in the world as the
goal of the Almighty,
in the earth to his praise.
From few our Hero establishes
many hundreds.

So come you much-loved
Prince of the weak and the small,
After whom our souls do thirst,
you their only good.
Multiply your power of grace
even here within our fold,
Ease for our knighthood the burdens we must
bear.

We offer you once more,
with mouth and hand,
our body, soul and spirit,
We promise our unquestioning
faith for every bond.
But keep your oath and
do not forget your work,
And cause your true Christian faith
to triumph even in defeat.³⁹

In 1741 the Moravians purchased 500 acres on the Lehigh River in Pennsylvania where they built the town of Bethlehem as the center for the Moravian mission in America. Bethlehem was originally conceived as a communal enterprise. Everyone gave their labor and its fruits to the community, and the community gave them food, shelter, and clothes in return.⁴⁰ In Bethlehem before 1762, we see the Moravian communal ideal in its most developed form.⁴¹

The Moravians and Recent Scholarship

Moravian scholarship has been a lively research field in recent years. Craig Atwood is one of several young Moravian scholars who are contributing to a growing historical reassessment of the Moravian heritage. Despite the wealth of research on Zinzendorf and European beginnings, Atwood observes that there has been a real neglect of Moravian history in America. Only recently has Bethlehem begun to receive the attention it deserves from scholars who work in colonial history and American religious history.⁴² Atwood has called for scholars to widen their purview in selecting their source materials.⁴³ He notes that scholars of American religion have tended to rely on theological sources, sermons and systematic theology, even when discussing popular religion; yet it was liturgical practice that was formative for the Moravian communities. “Bethlehem combined a Lutheran sense of liturgy and devotion with radical Pietist spirituality and communal living.”⁴⁴

Another young Moravian scholar is Peter Vogt in Germany who has highlighted the implications of Zinzendorf’s lack of theological training. “Zinzendorf was not a trained theologian and never wrote a systematic exposition of

his ideas. Instead, he expressed his views in hymns, sermons, letters, occasional pamphlets and administrative instructions.”⁴⁵ As a result, “Zinzendorf’s thought has been susceptible to widely diverging interpretations.” Also, his “Idiosyncrasies [in terminology and vocabulary], together with numerous inconsistencies and contradictions, often obscure the underlying structure of Zinzendorf’s thought.” Clearly, Zinzendorf’s “greatest achievement” was his organization of the Moravian community “as a living embodiment of his theological ideas.”⁴⁶ Vogt’s research has also examined such themes as Zinzendorf and ecumenism, Zinzendorf and the Philadelphian movement, and marriage among the Moravians.

Dietrich Meyer’s recent book on Zinzendorf and the Moravians skillfully traces the impact of social, economic and political forces and events upon the life of the Herrnhuters. He suggests that “the history of the Herrnhuters reads like a dialectic between financial crisis and spiritual renewal.”⁴⁷ Another theme that Meyer emphasizes is the readiness of the Herrnhuters to change with the times. Matters of organization and even faith emphases changed significantly under the impact of Zinzendorf’s death, under the influence of Enlightenment and Awakening, and especially as the center of gravity shifted decisively to provinces outside of Germany. Meyer sees the Herrnhuters as a movement ahead of their time, and deserving of credit for inspiring 20th century ecumenism and interfaith dialogue.

Meyer highlights two issues of scholarly debate regarding Zinzendorf’s personality and ideas. Meyer notes that contemporaries recognized “the contradictions” of his life, and

the originality and colourfulness of his “almost modern” religiosity. Fascinating as Zinzendorf’s complex character may be, Meyer opposes efforts to psychoanalyse the Count because of the difficulty of understanding his Baroque style and context.⁴⁸

The second issue has to do with the main influences on Zinzendorf’s view of Christian community. Pietist historian Johannes Wallmann pointed to the influence of Spener and his idea of forming a small church of the committed from within the larger church (*ecclesiola in ecclesia*). This is evident in the way the Herrnhut community continued to associate with the Lutheran parish church while meeting separately during the week. Hans Schneider, on the other hand, highlighted the influence on Zinzendorf of Jane Leade’s Philadelphian conventicles and their notion of an invisible church of the reborn superceding all denominational differences. This is evident in Zinzendorf’s home gathering while in Dresden. Meyer suggests that a mixing of the two ideas became necessary as the Herrnhut community spread and became a worldwide fellowship.⁴⁹

In his 1992 study of international revival in the 18th century Protestant world W.R. Ward devoted two chapters to Zinzendorf and the Moravians.⁵⁰ According to Ward, the “central biographical problem” of Zinzendorf’s life was “his universal ability to make a splendid first impression, and his universal inability to cooperate for long with men of independent mind.” Ward illustrated this by reference to the “in-fighting” between Halle and Herrnhut. This conflict “formed the context of Zinzendorf’s greatest failure (in America) and his greatest success (in the Baltic).”⁵¹ One should also

remember the tensions that developed between Zinzendorf and Wesley.

The Christianity of the Herrnhuters has been summed up nicely in their conviction that “There is no Christianity without community.”⁵² In Vogt’s judgment, “Zinzendorf’s greatest achievement was the organization of the Moravian community as a living embodiment of his theological ideas.”⁵³

In a time of bitter religious wars, disputes and hatreds, Moravian Christianity exhibited to the world a nondogmatic liturgical Christianity marked by ecumenical openness, affirmation of women in leadership, a piety shaped by exile and focussed on the sufferings of Christ, and a global vision of God’s love for a world of diverse cultures and beliefs. We will now examine each of these features in turn.

Moravians, Liturgy and Worship

Zinzendorf was convinced that the common worship experiences of the community had a greater impact than the experiences of the individual. This applied especially to the community’s liturgical worship gatherings.⁵⁴ “I am persuaded that the feeling [sensitivity] that the community experiences altogether in attending the service of the Sacrament at one and the same moment and place...is more noticeable and produced in a higher degree than in any private conversation ...For there is a certain dignity in the Body broken together, when he is present in all the members and joints and none is missing.”⁵⁵ Zinzendorf viewed all of life as liturgical. The ordinary tasks of the day should be done in a spirit of worship to God and service to the community. All callings and skills were considered equal before God.⁵⁶

“Liturgy was the primary way in which the doctrine of the *Brüdergemeine* was communicated because for Zinzendorf and his followers the truths of the Christian religion are best articulated in poetry and song, not in systematic theology or polemics.”⁵⁷ In 1748 a believer in Bethlehem expressed the matter this way: “Whoever wants to get acquainted with us and to learn our first principles and progress of grace can acquire that knowledge better from our hymns, our *litany of the wounds*, and the homilies upon the same, than if we respond to such writing against us.”⁵⁸

Not surprisingly for a religious movement that arose during the Baroque period, music played a prominent role in Moravian gatherings.⁵⁹ The Moravians believed, “Well-performed music served to edify the hearer and was a foretaste of the heavenly music of the angels who surrounded the throne of Christ.” “In the fellowships of the brethren there developed a distinctive musical life.”⁶⁰ The Moravian church’s creed and faith are to be found in its music.⁶¹ “From the beginning, the Moravians were a singing community.”⁶² By 1725 the Herrnhuters had their own hymnbook compiled by Zinzendorf.

Many times the gatherings would consist entirely of hours of singing. Often they would sing thematically, the leader guiding them from verse to verse of various hymns, jumping from melody to melody, following a theme. Zinzendorf called this the “song sermon” [*Liederpredigt*]. Sometimes during these *Singstunden*, or song services, Zinzendorf would improvise. Taking an idea from his sermon or a previous verse of a hymn, he would compose and dictate a hymn on the spot while standing before the congregation

during a service, leading the congregation stanza by stanza.⁶³ “During our public prayer services... if I cannot find something [appropriate] in the hymnbook, then I simply dictate a new hymn of which I previously knew nothing and which [often] is forgotten again once its purpose has been fulfilled. We prefer to worship in such a way that makes sense to our people and their changing circumstances, so that they meet God face to face.”⁶⁴ Zinzendorf’s emphasis upon singing from the heart was an encouragement to members as well not only to rely upon traditional hymns, but to compose their own. For Zinzendorf, these song services were more important than any sermon or doctrine class. Singing shared with God’s Word a certain power of divine inspiration, and was able to awaken and illumine the singing community.⁶⁵

There was instrumental music in Herrnhut as well. A brass choir performed regularly accompanied by organ, under the direction of the gifted Lutheran musician, Tobias Friedrich. “But only after 1739 [in Herrnhag] began the cantata performances with the various elements of Choir, Recitative, Aria, and Chorale along with playing on stringed and wood-wind instruments.”⁶⁶ At special events, cantatas were performed in which soloists, choirs and whole communities took turns, accompanied by instruments. Especially significant was the cantata performed at the laying of the cornerstone for the Choir house for single men in 1739. The music was composed by Philipp Heinrich Molther, and the words by Zinzendorf. At the dedication of the Bethlehem brotherhouse on July 7, 1742 in the Pennsylvania wilderness, the members performed a cantata.

Mention should be made of Zinzendorf's contributions as a gifted liturgist. He created a vast variety of new liturgical forms: for Sunday preaching services, Prayer services, Reading services, Bible study services for the Choirs, Song services, the Lord's Supper services, and Easter morning celebration. Zinzendorf looked to the early church as the basis for services devoted to the Love Feast, Footwashing, and the Kiss of Peace. Soon the various liturgical forms were gathered together in a book called, *Liturgiebüchlein*, or *The Small Liturgy Book*, so that each member could have it in their hand. It went through many editions as Zinzendorf continued to make changes and add new forms.⁶⁷ Zinzendorf especially began to demonstrate his liturgical abilities after the move to Herrnhag.⁶⁸ Here he had the opportunity to plan community life from scratch. Between 1739 and 1744 Zinzendorf created liturgical forms for the most important Christian events. For the first time he broke free of the order of the Mass, the basis of the Lutheran liturgy, and drew on other liturgical traditions such as the Ambrosian *Te Deum* of the Litany.⁶⁹

A prominent example of Zinzendorf's liturgical work is the *Liturgy for Easter Morning*, based on Luther's Smaller Catechism. The *Liturgy for Easter Morning* is recognized as concisely summarizing Moravian beliefs.⁷⁰ The liturgy begins with the *Lord's Prayer*, and moves to the second article of the Nicene Creed:

I believe in the name of the only begotten Son of God through whom all things were made. I believe that he became flesh and dwelt among us and took on the image of a man through the overshadowing of the holy spirit, borne by the virgin Mary...And

being found in appearance as a man was tempted in every way as we are, but without sins....He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, in the spirit preached to the spirits in prison...On the third day he rose again from the dead, entered heaven and sits at the Father's right hand; he will come again just as he went.⁷¹

After responses inviting Christ to come, there follows the third article of the Creed:

I believe in the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and whom our Lord Jesus sent after his resurrection to abide with us forever...To him be glory in the church which is in Christ, the holy catholic Christian Church, in the communion of saints from all time, forever and ever. Amen

I believe that I am able to believe and come to Jesus Christ, my Lord, not of my own reason or strength but that the Holy Spirit calls me through the Gospel.⁷²

Zinzendorf took great interest in matters of architecture and building as well. In a typical Moravian church hall there was no pulpit; the preacher/ worship leader would give his sermon while sitting down. Beside the speaker sat the other leaders of the community. Men and women sat separately.

Maternal Imagery for the Holy Spirit and Women's Roles

Zinzendorf conceived of the Godhead as a heavenly family, including Father (God), Mother (Holy Spirit), and Son (Christ), to whom the Daughter-in-law (the Church) is married.⁷³ For Zinzendorf the Holy Spirit was Mother in three senses. *First*, the Spirit was the true mother of

Jesus, “preparing him in the womb and giving him into the arms of his mother,” Mary. *Second*, the Spirit is the mother of all living things in the ongoing act of creation. *Third*, the Holy Spirit is the mother of the Church and all those who are reborn. The Spirit is the “active agent in conversion.”⁷⁴ “Zinzendorf’s understanding of the Holy Spirit as mother of the Church was expressed liturgically in the *Brüdergemeine* through hymns and litanies devoted to the Spirit.”⁷⁵ When critics asked why the mother office of the Holy Spirit had not been noticed by Christians until the time of Zinzendorf and the *Brüdergemeine* if it was so clear in the Bible, Zinzendorf responded simply: the Spirit “waited for the right time to clarify this biblical truth.” “It happened with this as with a hundred other truths” that lay hidden within God’s revelation until the proper time.⁷⁶

Atwood has argued that, “The use of maternal imagery for the Holy Spirit was not a tangential or [short-lived] aspect of Zinzendorf’s theology, but thrived for more than thirty years and was, in Zinzendorf’s words, ‘an extremely important and essential point...and all our *Gemeine* and praxis hangs on this point.’”⁷⁷ However, the Mother metaphor virtually disappeared in the *Brüdergemeine* after 1774, at least in public. There was concern that this expression would bring reproach to the *Brüdergemeine* from other churches. Following Zinzendorf’s death, “as leadership grew more cautious and concerned about public opinion, the mother metaphor was one aspect of the Zinzendorf tradition that was rather quickly repressed.”⁷⁸

This Mother office of the Holy Spirit helps to explain the enhanced status that women enjoyed

in Herrnhut and Bethlehem. The power and status of women in the *Brüdergemeine* was greatly enhanced compared to contemporary society at the time. “In their inclusion of women in the work of the church, the Herrnhuters were far ahead of their time.”⁷⁹ Also among Moravians in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, scholars find that “male and female roles were much more symmetrical than in any other colonial society, including the Quakers.”⁸⁰

This was evident in 18th century Moravian communities in several ways. Women were sometimes chosen to exercise independently the pastoral care of sympathizers meeting in outlying communities, often preaching to these groups. In Herrnhut itself, women took part in the confirmation of young girls, and sometimes preached at these services. Women held higher leadership roles at every level of the Moravian community: at the Conference level, at the community council level, and at the Synod level. Women were appointed to undertake the pastoral care of other women, including counseling and instruction. In the women’s Choirs, women oversaw devotions, worship, love feasts, and counseling, “as would a Pastor his church.”⁸¹

Anna Nitschmann, one of the most important female leaders of the international Moravian community, was referred to commonly as *Mutter*. She was elected eldress in 1730 at age 15 and remained leader of single women in the *Brüdergemeine* until her marriage to Zinzendorf in 1756. Women administered the houses in which single and widowed women resided in their Choirs, managing their various craft industries.⁸² Almost all positions in Herrnhut were filled in a twofold manner, with one man and one

woman in each, with women playing key roles in the leadership and administration of Moravian communities.⁸³

During the early communal period in the Moravian community in Bethlehem, Pa., the ideals for men and women were “virtually identical.”⁸⁴ Both men and women were to develop a humble relationship with Christ; both were to spend their lives serving the Community with their gifts and talents; after marriage, men and women served together as husband and wife teams, doing similar work in service to the community. Zinzendorf called Moravians “fighters” (*Streiter*) for God; and marriage was “marriage militant” (*Streiterehe*).⁸⁵

Raising children was a communal enterprise, and no more the mother’s duty than the father’s.⁸⁶ Even nursing mothers could pursue “the same outwardly directed lives focused on the needs of the Gemeinde that they had led before their children were born.” Anton Böhler and his mother are an example of this. “Little Anton Böhler traveled with his mother at least 1,000 miles before he was born while she went about her duties as a missionary... Before Anton was a year old, he had made five trips back and forth between Bethlehem and Philadelphia...such trips required two days each way. As infants grew, unrelated adults...took an active part in their upbringing. Anton’s biography names 10 adults besides his parents who played with him, sang to him, gave him medicine for an eye infection, reprimanded him, wrote songs for him on his 1st birthday, and prayed for him both before and during his final illness.”⁸⁷ The early Moravians freed parents from responsibility for their children so they could work in the Gemeinde. At age 4 or 5

children joined Boys’ and Girls’ Choirs.

Nevertheless, there was not complete equality of the sexes among the Moravians. Women were not allowed to assume the chief leadership position in the community. Likewise, the main teaching office was closed to women in the larger community, although in smaller communities and on the mission field women assumed the preaching role.⁸⁸ In Bethlehem the principles for married people reflected the sexual hierarchy “typical of colonial society in general”: “The husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ of the *Gemeine*...The wife is entrusted to his care in spiritual and physical matters. He must treat her with understanding.”⁸⁹ While we should recognize the remarkable opportunities that existed for Moravian women, full equality awaited a later time. Throughout Moravian history women’s roles have varied widely in degree of egalitarianism and opportunity compared to those for men.

Ecumenism

The third aspect of Moravian community that impresses us as being ahead of its time is its ecumenism. Zinzendorf intended the community in Herrnhut to be “an ecumenical risk and model.”⁹⁰ It was an ecumenical experiment in Christian unity, whose greatest affirmation and fulfillment would only come about two hundred years later with the rise of the Ecumenical Movement.

Even as a young man, Zinzendorf was influenced (probably by his grandmother) by the Philadelphian ideal of brotherly love that superseded all denominational differences.⁹¹ Zinzendorf made several efforts to bring unity

to divided Christians: he tried to restore peace to two warring faculties of theology, the orthodox faculty in Wittenberg, and the Pietist faculty in Halle; and he tried to bring about unity among the various German denominations in Pennsylvania. After these failures, he determined no longer to seek an organizational union of Christian denominations and confessions; rather, he encouraged Christians in the various churches to work together in living out their common faith in community.⁹²

Zinzendorf placed his emphasis upon the invisible church founded in Christ, the “community of God in the Spirit” (“*Gemeine Gottes im Geist*”). The various “Religions” or denominations were simply necessary expressions throughout history which represent the invisible community from various angles and in various degrees: “The beauty of the invisible church becomes apparent in the variety of the denominations; the invisible church, like a crystal ball, refracts its beauty in the variety of Christian confessions...That Zinzendorf could be so positive in his judgment of the various churches and traditions and not withdraw to an antagonistic mentality...as some radical Pietists did, constitutes much of his importance for us today.”⁹³

Like Wesley and the early Methodists, Zinzendorf never intended to found a new church. Zinzendorf was not inclined to separate from the Lutheran church; he always considered himself a member of the Lutheran confession. The Herrnhut community worshipped at the Lutheran parish church in Berthelsdorf on Sundays, took communion there and had their children baptized there. Herein lies Zinzendorf’s

uniqueness compared to many separatist reformers of his day who were disdainful of the failings of the state churches. In this he differed from such restitutionist groups as the Quakers, the Baptists, and the Mennonites.

So, what role did the community in Herrnhut (*Brüdergemeine*) play in his ecumenical ideal? It was not just another church or denomination, but a kind of “experimental station” where the various Christian groups could come together and discover their commonalities. The Moravians sought to serve the denominations by leading them to the central issue: loyalty to Christ. Rather than seeking to convert or proselytize Christians to join an organization, they encouraged individual believers to experience a living contact with Christ.

Herrnhut is founded by God the Holy Spirit in order to bring souls to the Saviour. There we deal directly with people’s hearts and do not concern ourselves with any one Religion (denomination); each one remains in his own tradition. But because in some places the tyranny of the clergy is so great, and toleration [of some Pietist groups] has been withdrawn in some places...therefore places of refuge are necessary where people can live in peace.⁹⁴

Zinzendorf’s ecumenical vision was also a global vision. This point cannot be addressed to the degree it deserves. Suffice it to observe that Zinzendorf’s global vision was also ahead of his time. He has rightly been described as “a pioneer of world mission.”⁹⁵ “As early as 1732 two members went to St. Thomas on the Virgin Islands; missions were also established in Greenland, North America

(1734), South America (1735), South Africa (1736), Labrador (1752), Australia (1850), and Tibet (1856)...The proportion of missionaries to home communicants has been estimated as 1:60 compared with 1:5000 in the rest of Protestantism.”⁹⁶ This global outlook, including all cultures and races in the family of God, eventually gave rise to a Moravian community with independent provinces in Africa and the Americas.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this study I indicated that my purpose was to spell out how the 18th century Moravian community was ahead of its time and how it might serve as a model for Christian community today. The most impressive feature of early Moravian spirituality was the way in which the Moravian community embodied Zinzendorf’s ideas on Christian worship, gender equality and ecumenism. I agree with Peter Vogt: “While some of Zinzendorf’s ideas now appear obscure and obsolete, others, such as the image of the Holy Spirit as ‘mother,’ his appreciation of the historic character of Holy Scripture, have been re-discovered for contemporary theology.”⁹⁷ I think we should add to that list the Count’s views on equality of gender and class, and his belief that the children of God are one in Christ across all ethnic and denominational boundaries.

Endnotes

¹ This article originated as the Swanson Lecture on Christian Spirituality, 3 March 2003 at Good Shepherd Community Church (Moravian), Calgary.

² Johannes Wallmann, *Der Pietismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht,

1990), 109.

³ Keith Ward, *Religion and Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 356.

⁴ Ward, 4-5.

⁵ Ward, 361.

⁶ Ward, 361.

⁷ See Henry Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1989), 168.

⁸ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 237.

⁹ JGG Norman, “Moravians,” in J.D. Douglas, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 676.

¹⁰ Peter Vogt, “Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf,” (Lecture delivered Feb. 16, 2003), 1.

¹¹ Hans Schneider, “Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf als Gestalt der Kirchen-geschichte,” in Dietrich Meyer and Paul Peucker, ed., *Graf Ohne Grenzen: Leben und Werk von Nikolaus Ludwig Graf von Zinzendorf* (Herrnhut: Unitätsarchiv in Herrnhut, 2000), 10. See also Wallmann, 110.

¹² Dietrich Meyer, “Zinzendorf und Herrnhut,” *Der Pietismus im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 8.

¹³ Wallmann, 110.

¹⁴ Wallmann, 110.

¹⁵ Zinzendorf, “Kurze Generalidee meiner Absichten und Handlungen,” in D. Meyer, ed. *Nikolaus Ludwig Graf von Zinzendorf: Er der Meister, Wir die Brüder* (Giessen: Brunnen Verlag, 2000), 17.

¹⁶ Wallmann, 111.

¹⁷ Wallmann, 112.

¹⁸ “The Religious boundaries created by the Peace of Westphalia lasted essentially until the population upheavals unleashed by the Second World War.” See Mary Fulbrook, *A Concise History of Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1994), 70.

¹⁹ W.R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992), 124.

²⁰ W.R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening*, 125; Wallmann, 113. Thanks to the preaching of a Pietist friend of Zinzendorf, the Lutheran preacher in nearby Berthelsdorf Johann Andreas Rothe (1688-1758), Zinzendorf’s estate became a gathering place for Pietist preachers. By 1734 the total number on the estate grew to 600.

²¹ Wallmann, 113.

²² Zinzendorf, “Kurze Generalidee meiner Absichten und Handlungen,” pp. 22f.

²³ W.R. Ward, 125.

²⁴ Wallmann, 113.

²⁵ Wallmann, 114.

²⁶ In his 1526 Preface to the German Mass, Luther wrote: “The third kind of Service which a truly Evangelical Church Order should have would be...for those who mean to be real Christians and profess the Gospel with hand and mouth. They would record their names on a list and meet by themselves in some house in order to pray, read, baptize, receive the Sacrament and do other Christian works.” See Luther, “The German Mass and Order of Service, 1526,” in Bard Thompson, ed., *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), 125.

²⁷ Wallmann, 115.

²⁸ Beverly Smaby, *The Transformation of Moravian Bethlehem* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 10.

²⁹ *Graf ohne Grenzen*, 189.

³⁰ W.R. Ward, 127.

³¹ W.R. Ward, 127. “...through Susanne Kühnel an extraordinary movement arose in their assembly which became daily more true and serious. In particular there was to be heard on the night of 29 August from ten at night till one in the morning a heart-rending praying and singing by the girls of Berthelsdorf and Herrnhut upon the Hutberg. At the same time the boys were at prayer in other places. So powerful a spirit prevailed among the children as is beyond words to express.”

³² Dietrich Meyer, *Zinzendorf und die Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine, 1700-2000* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 15.

³³ W.R. Ward, pp. 117, 123

³⁴ Dietrich Meyer, ed., *Nikolaus Ludwig Graf von Zinzendorf; Er der Meister, wir die Brüder* (Giessen: Brunnen Verlag, 2000), 230.

³⁵ There were three great periods of literary controversy against German Pietists: in the 1680s and 1690s opposition was aimed largely at Spener; in the first decade of the 18th century opposition was focussed on Francke and Halle; in the 1740s opposition was directed against Zinzendorf. See W.R. Ward, 201.

³⁶ Zinzendorf, “Das Leiden Christi als das brüderische Leitmotiv” (1747), in Dietrich Meyer, ed., *Nikolaus Ludwig Graf von*

Zinzendorf; *Er der Meister, wir die Brüder* (Giessen: Brunnen Verlag, 2000), 231.

³⁷ Zinzendorf, “Das Leiden Christi als das brüderische Leitmotiv” (1747), pp. 231, 234.

³⁸ Craig D. Atwood, *Community of the Cross: Moravian Piety in Colonial Bethlehem* (State University, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 6.

³⁹ D. Meyer, *Er der Meister, Wir die Brüder*, pp. 337f.

⁴⁰ Smaby, xv.

⁴¹ Smaby, xv.

⁴² Atwood, *Community of the Cross*, 5.

⁴³ Atwood, *Community of the Cross*, 7

⁴⁴ Atwood, *Community of the Cross*, 3.

⁴⁵ Peter Vogt, “Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf” (Lecture delivered on Feb. 16, 2003), 4.

⁴⁶ Vogt, “Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf,” p. 15.

⁴⁷ Dietrich Meyer, *Zinzendorf und die Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine, 1700-2000* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 158.

⁴⁸ Dietrich Meyer, “Zinzendorf und Herrnhut,” *Der Pietismus im achtzehnten Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 8.

⁴⁹ Meyer, “Zinzendorf und Herrnhut,” p. 92 n.110.

⁵⁰ W.R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992), chapters 4 and 5.

⁵¹ W.R. Ward, pp. 141f.

⁵² *Graf ohne Grenzen*, 189.

⁵³ Peter Vogt, “Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf,” (A Public lecture on 16 Feb. 2003), 15.

⁵⁴ Hans-Christoph Hahn and Hellmut Reichel, *Zinzendorf und die Herrnhuter Brüder: Quellen zur Geschichte der Brüder-Unität von 1722 bis 1760* (Hamburg: Friedrich Wittig Verlag, 1977), 216.

⁵⁵ Hahn and Reichel, 218.

⁵⁶ Hahn and Reichel, 210.

⁵⁷ Atwood, *Community of the Cross*, 141.

⁵⁸ Quoted by Atwood, “The Mother of God’s People,” *Church History* 68 (1999): 886-909, 899.

⁵⁹ Dietrich Meyer notes that, “Only in recent times have scholars begun to assess the large music collection in the Unity Archive and to make it available for performance.” Meyer, 52.

⁶⁰ *Graf ohne Grenzen*, 193.

⁶¹ *Graf ohne Grenzen*, 189.

⁶² Hahn and Reichel, 220.

⁶³ Hahn and Reichel, 220.

⁶⁴ Hahn and Reichel, 222.

⁶⁵ Hahn & Reichel, 220.

⁶⁶ D. Meyer, 52.

⁶⁷ Wallmann, 115, and Hahn and Reichel, 216.

⁶⁸ Forced to leave Herrnhut in 1736, Zinzendorf found welcome in the Wetterau region of Germany, settling in Herrnhag.

⁶⁹ D. Meyer, 51. See Atwood, “Theology in Song,” in *The Distinctiveness of Moravian Culture* (Nazareth, Pa.: Moravian Historical Society, 2002) for translations of these litanies.

⁷⁰ C. Daniel Crews, *Zinzendorf: The Theology of Song* (Winston-Salem: Moravian Archives, 1999), 3.

⁷¹ Zinzendorf, "Liturgie am Ostermorgen," Meyer, *Er der Meister, Wir die Brüder* (2000), 344.

⁷² Zinzendorf, "Liturgie am Ostermorgen," p. 345.

⁷³ Hahn and Reichel, 297.

⁷⁴ Atwood, "The Mother of God's People," *Church History* (Dec. 1999), pp. 886-909. See Gary Kinkel, *Our Dear Mother the Spirit* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1990) for a discussion of this aspect of Zinzendorf in its Lutheran context.

⁷⁵ Atwood, "The Mother of God's People," 899.

⁷⁶ Atwood, "The Mother of God's People," 892.

⁷⁷ Atwood, "The Mother of God's People," 887.

⁷⁸ Atwood, "The Mother of God's People," 909.

⁷⁹ Martin Jung, *Frauen des Pietismus: Zehn Porträts* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998), 51. "In der Einbeziehung der Frauen in die kirchliche Arbeit waren die Herrnhuter ihrer Zeit weit voraus."

⁸⁰ Smaby, 13

⁸¹ Martin Jung, 52.

⁸² Zinzendorf divided the community into Choirs, each Choir having their own pastors and leaders, their own worship meetings and sometimes their own residences. *Graf ohne Grenzen*, pp. 191f.

⁸³ Jung, 51.

⁸⁴ Beverly Smaby, *The Transformation of*

Moravian Bethlehem (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1988), 170.

⁸⁵ Smaby, 159, 170.

⁸⁶ Smaby, 170.

⁸⁷ Smaby, 146 f.

⁸⁸ Hahn and Reichel, 292 f.

⁸⁹ Smaby, 168.

⁹⁰ D. Meyer, 159. "Für Zinzendorf war die Gemeinde in Herrnhut ein ökumenisches Wagnis und Modell. Die spätere Entwicklung hat gezeigt, in welchem erstaunlichem Maße dieser Impuls auf die Kirchen gewirkt hat."

⁹¹ W.R. Ward, 121.

⁹² Hahn and Reichel, 373.

⁹³ Hahn and Reichel, 373.

⁹⁴ Hahn and Reichel, 376. As Peter Vogt notes: "Zinzendorf insisted that the [Moravians] form an interconfessional brotherhood rather than a church. Its specific purpose was precisely to gather believers from various confessional backgrounds without abrogating their confessional identity." See Peter Vogt, "Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf," 11.

⁹⁵ Schneider, 13.

⁹⁶ JGG Norman, "Moravians," *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*.

⁹⁷ Vogt, 1, 4, 15.