

1999 MOSES LECTURES

The Roots of the Contemporary Moravian Church in North America

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During the 1960s political, educational, and religious institutions in America came under attack for being outmoded oppressive paternalistic structures that were unable to cope with modern times. Historical studies were particularly hard hit as many questioned their relevance. In response, someone in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago came up with the idea that things might go better if the traditional courses in church history were taught backwards. That is to say, they would begin with a description of the contemporary church and then explore how it came to be in the condition it was. Leaving aside the debates about the merits of that idea, let me suggest that we are going to begin that way. If we are going to examine the roots of the contemporary Moravian Church in North America (the Northern and Southern Provinces), we have to share an understanding of what we mean by the “contemporary” church.

As of December 31, 1997, the two Provinces reported a total membership of 49,631 members (as compared to the all-time high of 60,643 in 1966). The members are found in one hundred and sixty-two congregations and fellowships in

nineteen states, the District of Columbia, and two Canadian Provinces. There are one hundred and ninety-four ordained ministers. Besides the congregations, the denomination expresses its institutional ministry in a variety of ways. There are two archives, six retirement communities, two urban social ministries, three camp and conference centers, two bookstores, three historical societies, and one music foundation. In addition, three preparatory schools, two colleges, and one theological seminary all claim their origins within the Moravian tradition, though with varying degrees of intensity. Within the denominational structure there are also a variety of boards, commissions, and agencies devoted to specific tasks. The mission of the church thus incarnated in its institutions suggests that it sees itself as a full-service denomination with specific programming from the edification of children to care of the aged.¹

Another way to define the contemporary Moravian Church is through an examination of its website (www.moravian.org). In answer to the question, “Who are the Moravians?” the reader is informed that the Church is a “mainline

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Protestant denomination” which predates the Lutheran, Presbyterian, or Methodist Churches whose history stretches back “even before the discovery of America.” Hallmarks of the tradition are: faithful living and Christian unity...preaching the basics which all Christians share ...and a mission commitment to working with the poor, the powerless, and “groups largely unreached by other denominations.” The following pages give specific examples of these forms of ministry, offer a very brief historical synopsis and end up stating that the Moravians are, “founding members of the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches.”²

Whether working from printed sources or electronic sources, we have here a description of the contemporary Moravian Church with which its members and friends are familiar. It sounds about right. While we can offer no opinion as to the spiritual vitality of this enterprise, its institutional forms are clear and the few historical moments touched upon are comforting. This is how the Church presents itself publicly today.

How did this all come to be? What are the roots of this contemporary Moravian Church? I believe there are actually two sets of roots that reflect two very distinctive periods of the history of the Moravian Church in North America and that they have given rise to two conflicting interpretations. The two periods are the colonial period for the Moravian Church (1735–1857), a period of one hundred and twenty-two years, and the contemporary period (1857 – now), a period of one hundred and forty-two years. The pivotal year is 1857 which was when the General (or international) Synod of the Moravian Church

recognized the results of sixteen years of agitation with the grant of autonomous Provincial status to Moravians in America and England, along with those in Europe. These two periods have been interpreted in two different ways.

I. Scholars and Tourists: scholars of North American religious life have created an external or public perception of the Moravians which knows only the colonial era, which is enjoyed by tourists, and valued by both groups.

II. Moravian Leaders and Synods: Moravian leaders have created an internal or private perception that rejects the external perception of the colonial era and does not value it. Their work created the groundwork for synods to set aside the characteristics of the colonial era and to embrace generic American Protestantism.

I propose to examine these two interpretations and then to offer some suggestions about what might be done to reconcile them in the future.

Scholars

In 1988 the American actor Eddie Murphy starred in a movie called *Coming to America*, which has been described as a good-natured comedy fantasy in which a prince from a fictional African country finds his queen in Queens, NY. *Coming to America* is indeed a theme that has fascinated all scholars of the history of religion in the new world.

Sydney E. Ahlstrom of Yale, in his monumental 1972 study, *A Religious History of the American People*, starts us on our journey through the public perception of the roots of the Moravians in North America with his discussion of what he terms “panoramic” presentations of American church history, grand overviews of the

whole story.³ This approach begins with Robert Baird's 1844 book, *Religion in America*. Baird presents the familiar history of the Moravians up to his time and offers some observations about the state of affairs on the eve of the dissolution of the settlements, "the pleasant villages of Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Lititz, in Pennsylvania, and Salem in North Carolina ...their doctrines coincide, in the main, with those of the Augsburg Confession ...Their settlements ...are the same abodes of order, provident regard for the morals of the young, and for the comfort of the aged, of cheerful industry, and pleasant social life, enlivened by the sweet strains of music, and, withal, of that deep interest in missions, which characterize their settlements in the Old World. It may be said, perhaps, that too much world prosperity has been to them, as to many other Christians, a hindrance to their piety."⁴

In 1888 Philip Schaff gathered a group of fellow church historians and formed the American Society of Church History that remains today the premier American professional society for the study of church history. A mere five years after its founding, Society members began producing the thirteen-volume *The American Church History Series*, described as a series of denominational histories. The thirteen volumes are a fascinating study of American religious life written in the hey-day of Protestant triumphalism. The series concluded with a summary volume thirteen, *A History of American Christianity* by Leonard Woolsey Bacon. His review of Moravian activity is, to the modern reader, almost embarrassingly positive. In the second, 1736, voyage of colonists to Georgia, "one ship's company,...included some mighty factors in the future church history

of America and of the world."⁵ Included in his list are Governor James Oglethorpe, Bishop David Nitschmann, and John and Charles Wesley. Noting the religious destitution of the Germans in Pennsylvania, he writes, "It seems to us...as if the man expressly designed and equipped by the providence of God for this exigency in the progress of his kingdom had arrived when Zinzendorf, the Moravian, made his appearance in Philadelphia."⁶ Bacon's discussion of Zinzendorf's efforts to form an ecumenical "Congregation of God in the Spirit," and his difficulties with the Lutheran Henry Melchoir Muhlenberg is decidedly favorable to the Count: "he retired from the field, leaving it in charge of Muhlenberg, 'being satisfied if only Christ were preached,' and returned to Europe, having achieved a truly honorable and most Christian failure, more to be esteemed in the sight of God than many a splendid success."⁷ The author does allow that those writing the volume on the Lutherans in America might have a different view of things!

The rest of Bacon's account of colonial Moravian activity is equally positive, with particular emphasis upon missions to Native Americans. "The story of these missions is one of the fairest and most radiant pages in the history of the American church, and one of the bloodiest...No order of missionaries or missionary converts can show a nobler roll of martyrs than the Moravians."⁸ Many late nineteenth century Protestant Christians believed that there would soon emerge a sort of general American Protestantism. Bacon assigned the Moravians a role in that process through their worship forms: "the inheritance of liturgic

forms and usages of unsurpassed beauty and dignity. Before the other churches had emerged from a half-barbarous state in respect to church music, this art was successfully cultivated in the Moravian communities and missions...when the elements of a common order of divine worship shall by and by begin to grow into form, it is hardly possible that the Moravian traditions will not enter into it as an important factor.”⁹

The first volume in the series deserves special mention for its uniqueness. *The Religious Forces of the United States, Enumerated, Classified, and Described on the Basis of the Government Census of 1890* was written by H. K. Carroll, who was “In Charge of the Division of Churches, Eleventh Census.”¹⁰ The five-page narrative about the Moravian Church contains a brief historical description and then a snapshot of the denomination as it was in 1890. The statistics are detailed. If the *Moravian Trivia* game is still around, you would be a winner if you knew that in 1890 there were 94 congregations in seventeen states and the Indian and Alaska territories with a total membership of 11,781. “Of these, 4,308 are in Pennsylvania, 1,734 in North Carolina, and 1,477 in Wisconsin. In no other state are there as many as 900. Half of the total valuation of church property, \$681,250, is reported for 24 edifices in Pennsylvania. The average seating capacity of the 114 edifices returned for the denomination is 277, the average value \$5,975; 4 halls, with a seating capacity of 715, are occupied.” The total seating capacity for all Moravian places of worship was 31,615.¹¹ Someone was really reading the Annual Reports then! In 1930 William Warren Sweet of the University of Chicago issued his *The Story of*

Religion in America.¹² Once again the story begins on a familiar note: “Among those connected with the German settlement of Pennsylvania, none are more interesting than Nicholas Ludwig Zinzendorf, a Saxon nobleman and a religious and social reformer, who was chiefly responsible for the Moravian migration to America.”¹³ The by now familiar story of Moravian activity in the early colonial period is then recited in six pages, ending with emphasis upon David Zeisberger’s work on the eve of the American revolution.

The only other significant mention of the Moravians in the rest of the book is to cite them as a negative example. In a review of denominational life after the revolution, it is pointed out that the Moravians were hampered from expansion in America by a number of attitudes, which we will mention later, and then Sweet remarks, “the Moravian Church is the best example among the churches of the folly of resisting the rising spirit of nationalism in America as it manifested itself in the years following the Revolution.”¹⁴ Ahlstrom claims that with Sweet’s history the field of American church history was now firmly established as a respected academic enterprise. It can be noted that Sweet’s work also gives evidence of the cozy church and state relationship of his era in another way. His *Appendix* reprints the 1926 “Census of Religious Bodies,” gathered by the Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C., which compares the 1926 data against the 1916 Census data. The Moravians reported 110 churches in 1916 and 127 in 1926. The membership was 26,373 in 1916 and 31,699 in 1926.¹⁵ When was the last time the federal government conducted a census of religious bodies?

The next comprehensive presentation of the whole story appeared thirty years later when Clifton E. Olmstead produced *History of Religion in the United States* in 1960.¹⁶ I have a personal fondness for this book. It was the first scholarly study of American religious life I had read, having been directed to it in a course with Professor Ahlstrom. I was just coming to the realization that the Moravian story was an important one for the general history of America and that it was appreciated as such by ‘non-Moravians.’ There were all the familiar stories of Moravian colonial activity in this book even with their own sub-heading!¹⁷ But it was also from Olmstead that I first learned about what happened later. “Among those denominations that maintained ties with European religious bodies prior to the Revolution, the Moravians alone remained dependent upon the centralized authority in Europe after the completion of American independence.”¹⁸ The author carries the story through to the Synod of 1857, which he notes enabled the American Moravians to enjoy “some real measure of independence.”¹⁹

In 1965 Winthrop Hudson published *Religion in America*, a book which has appeared in many editions since then.²⁰ His discussion of the Moravians offers only a short discussion of Zinzendorf and a survey of the usual eighteenth century developments before they disappear from the general story.

The next year Edwin Gaustad followed with *A Religious History of America*.²¹ This book was aimed at college students and is sprinkled with pictures and quotes from various original sources, including Ben Franklin’s account of his visit to Bethlehem as found in his *Autobiography*,

and a quote from the Salem Memorabilia of 1766.²² While Gaustad’s account of Moravian life centers exclusively on the colonial era, there are pictures of restored buildings in Salem, and of a group of white-robed children identified as young Moravians in the Lititz, Pennsylvania Sunday School at weekly worship.²³

Ahlstrom himself has a Moravian reference rather early in his massive 1972 volume. He begins his discussion of American religious life with a lengthy description of fifteenth century European life and the Council of Constance. According to his view, the variety of opinions about authority in the church that would work themselves out on our continent was already present there. So he notes, “Also in the cathedral on 6 July 1415, John Huss, the patriot reformer of Bohemia, whose spiritual descendants three centuries later would be evangelizing the Indians in Pennsylvania, was condemned as a heretic and led out of the city to be burned for the manner of his invoking still another principle of authority, that of the Bible.”²⁴ His discussion of the Moravians proper comes in a subsection entitled, The Moravian Brethren. “The most important of the pietistic sects in America was the Renewed Church of the United Brethren.”²⁵

What follows is the standard accounting of Moravian activity in the eighteenth century, with an emphasis upon the Wesley connection. But then there is this comment: “The Moravians never succeeded in entering American life as an influential church movement despite the unique way in which they blended churchly and sectarian traditions. They were hindered at the outset by Zinzendorf’s grandiose ecumenical schemes, and then for a century they were cramped by

supervision of authorities in Germany.”²⁶ Wars and Jackson’s removal of the Cherokees ended the Indian missions. “They remained a relatively static movement, numbering about 3,000 in 1775, 8,275 in 1858, about 20,000 in 1895, and over 60,000 in 1965, scattered widely across the country, but still concentrated in Pennsylvania. Their largest influence in America probably came through the Wesleys, but more intrinsic to the *Unitas Fratrum* has been its characteristic form of pietism, its devotional literature, and a tradition of hymnody and church music that would make its mark on many churches in Europe and America.”²⁷ While we might be tempted to regard this account with characteristically modest Moravian pride, it also sounds uncomfortably like an obituary.

Ahlstrom’s book did not stem the tide of panoramic treatments of American religious life. They have continued to appear. Martin Marty published *Pilgrims in their Own Land* in 1984.²⁸ His presentation is focused entirely on the eighteenth century story with a particular emphasis upon the difficulties experienced by those Moravians who held to pacifist beliefs and behavior.

A more extended discussion is given by Mark Noll in his 1992 book, *A History of Christianity in the U. S. and Canada*.²⁹ The particular aspects of the general story that receive special attention are the relationship between Zinzendorf and John Wesley and the missions to Native Americans. Indeed, a sketch of Zinzendorf and Wesley deep in conversation while strolling through a garden is provided, as is a drawing from the picture collection of the New York Public Library entitled, “Baptism of

Indians in America.” Noll provides the caption, “Perhaps because they were themselves strangers and wanderers in the world, Moravians proved to be the most effective Protestant missionaries in America.” The singular reference to Moravians after the eighteenth century is an oblique one. In discussing the slump in Roman Catholic religious vocations following the Second Vatican Council, Noll claims that in 1984, “there were still more priests (57,000) than there was total membership in some Protestant denominations, such as the Moravians or the largest body of Quakers.”³⁰

Finally, in this year’s third edition of her book, *America: Religions and Religion*, Catherine L. Albanese restricts mention of the Moravians to a summary of the career of David Zeisberger and his work among Native Americans.³¹

Thus ends the litany of panoramic views of Moravians in America provided by historians of American religious life. This has not been an open-stack search. There may be other panoramists out there but this search of the major works of this genre from 1844 to 1999 (155 years) reveals several general themes which need to be noted. First, the coming to America of a genuine German nobleman has intrigued these historians. The personality and career of Zinzendorf plays a prominent role in most of the accounts. Secondly, there is a genuine appreciation for the work of Zinzendorf and his colleagues and their contributions to colonial American religious life. The unique characteristics of the settlements, the missionary work among Native Americans, the

devotion to the arts, are often cited as specific examples of positive activity.

Two other trends may be more disturbing. There is a general assumption that it is safe to say good-bye to the Moravians after bringing them into the late eighteenth century. Either the references to them disappear or they are dismissed from the scene with obituary-like summary statements. I am reminded of the remark by a student in a Moravian church history class some years ago, "After Zinzendorf it's all downhill, anyway!" Secondly, the closer one gets to 1999, the shorter the discussions of the Moravians become. There are simply more groups, and ideas, and trends, to cover. Recent listings of self-identified Christian groups in North America now number in excess of 225. This means that as with so many aspects of traditional Christian knowledge, the culture will no longer insure the passage of information from one generation to the next. To put it another way, it means that the college student in a history or religion course, or the lay person who picks up a panoramic treatment of North American church history today is going to learn less about the Moravians than they would have learned one hundred years ago.

This is the view that the scholars have created. The Moravians were a uniquely creative and important group in eighteenth century North American religious life, but, regrettably, they have no enduring significance. It is summed up in an essay by A. Leland Jamison, "Religions on the perimeter." In his discussion of German colonial sectarianism in Pennsylvania he claims, "The major Mennonite, Brethren, and Moravian groups...have more and more made their peace

with American society, until they can only with difficulty be distinguished from their more churchly Christian colleagues. Brethren and Moravian groups, indeed, hold membership in the National Council of Churches."³²

Tourists

The other group that I suggest has created an external and public view of the Moravians is the tourists as they encounter colonial era restorations and reconstructions. No one has yet produced any comprehensive discussion either of the history of or the impact of such exhibits so I will venture to offer some preliminary thoughts toward this project. These sites may be divided into two general categories. First there are congregations in the Northern and Southern Provinces that trace their origins back to the earliest days of Moravian activity on this continent. Some of them were originally settlement congregations while others resulted from early diaspora work outside the settlements. They are in control of the interpretation of their history and how it is presented, whether or not they possess buildings dating back to their beginnings. They are in the unique position of being able to present the continuity of their history. Colonial origins have led into a contemporary center for Christian life. While the structures for ministry have changed, the ministries offered did not fade away in the late eighteenth century.

The second category is perhaps more problematic. Here I would place those restorations and reconstructions that are not under the control of any agency of the contemporary Moravian Church. These include such sites as Old Salem, Inc., The Bethlehem

Historical Partnership, the Bethabara Historical Park, the Schoenbrunn Village reconstruction, the minimal effort at Fairfield, Ontario, and the emerging effort at Hope, New Jersey. Perhaps you know of others. The work of the Rev. Joseph Weinland in lobbying the state of Ohio to bring about the 1928 reconstruction of Schoenbrunn Village is well known. Moravian involvement in the origins of these other projects is perhaps less well documented or recognized. These projects do an admirable job of teaching local history and are worthy community efforts. Yet my sense is that the Moravian Church is unclear about its relationship to these efforts. Quite frankly, the comments I hear from Moravians about these efforts are usually negative ones. Yet these enterprises are involved in proclaiming the same public, external message as the panoramist historians. They are very good at depicting everything positive about eighteenth century American Moravian life to their tourist visitors. But, in varying degrees and for lots of reasons, the connection of these sites to the contemporary Moravian Church in North America is fuzzy.

The situation is summarized for me in a personal experience connected with the restoration efforts in Hope, New Jersey. Several years ago the community bank which is housed in the former *gemeinehaus* had restored the second floor so as to reveal its original wood and stone work. It had been the Moravian *saal*. I still don't know exactly how it came about but I ended up driving my father over to Hope since it was thought it would be good to have a genuine Moravian bishop offer a rededicatory prayer to mark this event. What we did not know until we arrived was that the former *saal* was now the

site of the bank's computer operations. So while we stood there and the computers hummed, the employees bowed their heads and my father prayed. His prayer was appropriate as always, but I sure wish I had a copy of it!

Moravian Leaders

The contemporary South African writer Andre Brink, in his novel, *Devil's Valley*, has one of his characters say, "Look, man, there's nothing one can do about tomorrow. It comes as it must. All you can do something about is yesterday. But the problem with yesterday is it never stays down, you got to keep stamping on it."³³

How have Moravian leaders and synods in North America gone about stamping on the external or public perception of our history so beloved by panoramist scholars and tourists? The story goes back to that thirteen-volume series on American church history produced by the American Society of Church History beginning in 1893. While Bacon was lavishly extolling the virtues of Zinzendorf in volume thirteen and Carroll was counting the number of seats available in Moravian edifices nationwide, J. Taylor Hamilton set out to tell the Moravian story in detail in volume eight published in 1894.³⁴ He shared the volume with the histories of the Dutch and German Reformed Churches in America. It is indicative of the situation that whereas the Dutch and German Reformed historians needed 423 pages to tell their stories, Hamilton used only 83 pages. Though he constantly stresses the connectedness of the American Moravians to an international denomination, his interpretation is decidedly pro-American. His comments about Zinzendorf are somewhat more even-handed

than those of Bacon: “He had eccentricities, and, being but a man, made mistakes; but he has left an imperishable name, as the one who recalled the church of Christ to the obligation of its missionary commission. He had sacrificed rank, wealth, and the joys of the home circle, and had spent his powers for his Saviour’s cause, though it entailed being misunderstood, reproached, and maligned.”³⁵ His discussion of what happened at the conclusion of the American Revolution is rather more opinionated:

With...the assured separation of church and state in the young Republic, there was no reason why the *Unitas Fratrum* in America...should not have entered upon a period of new life and extension. But now operations were cramped by the unwise extension of regulations out of keeping with the national life. Painfully minute attention was given to the development of subjective phases of piety in the exclusive settlements, to the cramping of energies in other directions. The financial demands of the church’s work were met by the proceeds of business enterprises carried on for its benefit, rather than by the voluntary gifts of the people. The use of the German language in worship was perpetuated, to the loss of members in the cities and the keeping of strangers at a distance. Persons who lived away from the settlements but sought the fellowship of the church were formed into societies sustaining only a quasi-connection with it, and not into regular congregations—a usage that had little meaning in a land free from government ecclesiasticism. The laymen had practically no voice in the general management. There was a deficiency of well-qualified ministers. Men of mature years, who were sent from Europe, however scholarly, could

not readily adjust themselves to the conditions and spirit of American institutions or appreciate the opportunities which [were] offered. Administrative affairs of highest importance had to be referred to a foreign executive board.³⁶

Thus ends this rather long quotation in which Hamilton set the stage for his presentation of Moravian Church history in America from 1782 to 1812, the year in which serious agitation for change began though it would not bear fruit until the General Synod of 1857. Hamilton here introduces two themes which will reoccur again and again in later interpretations and which will gradually produce the atmosphere in which synods will reject the panoramist view of the American Moravian story and look around them for clues as to what it means to be an American denomination. These themes are a growing lack of appreciation for the role of Zinzendorf, with an emphasis upon his “mistakes” and a growing tendency to blame post-Revolutionary foreign (read German) control for the failure of the American church to grow. Sometimes the discussions of these two themes will run together and Zinzendorf will be blamed for it all.

J. Mortimer Levering is best remembered for his 809 page tome on the history of Bethlehem, published in 1903. But on Trinity Sunday, May 28, 1899, he delivered an address, “The Modern Moravian Home Mission Revival,” at the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Bethlehem Home Mission Society that raised some different issues:

[I]t must be remembered that in the early days the Moravian Church carried on the work of evangelization among civilized and savage alike in nine of the thirteen English colonies supported by a Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel organized in 1745. In consequence of Count Zinzendorf's objection to distinct church extension and his well meant but impracticable plan of Evangelical Alliance (read: Church of God in the Spirit) with the Brethren serving the different elements in ways adapted to their various ecclesiastical characteristics, their work, outside of their few established centers, lacked cohesion and stability and most of the groups they had gathered were disintegrated when representatives of the several denominations came among them to organize on sharp sectarian lines. The Moravian Church had twenty-one congregations and twenty-four outposts and preaching-places, numbering about two thousand souls, under its care in six of the colonies at the beginning of the Revolutionary War. It is safe to assume that the Brethren might have had four times this number as the fruit of their remarkable activity if they had at the beginning adopted a policy of definite organization in every field they entered.³⁷

Levering offers three reasons why:

[A]fter the Revolution Moravian Home Mission work ceased almost entirely in America...One was the restraint of direct foreign supervision under a system which became most rigid just when the new era of American liberty required flexibility

and adaptiveness...another cause was the deliberate promulgation of the doctrine that because the Moravian Church seemed to have a special call to evangelize in heathen lands the duty of its existing congregations was to unite in the support of this work, leaving church extension at home to other religious bodies beyond here and there an exception where the duty of organizing a congregation was so imperative that it could not be evaded." Finally, there was, "a sad degree of spiritual stagnation which gathered upon the old settlements. People grew up in these congregations without vital godliness or even sincere loyalty to the Church as such in their hearts, while under the system which prevailed, they were members as a matter of course...the ministry consisted mainly of men past middle age, growing weary and preferring an easy walk in the beaten paths or unable to adjust themselves to new conditions. Even the younger ministers were for the most part men from Germany incapable of entering readily into the spirit of the country and quite satisfied to confine their efforts to that routine which was the same in both countries."³⁸

The remaining twenty-two pages of Levering's address constitute a valuable source of information on American Moravianism in the late nineteenth century. He skillfully weaves together the growing demand for constitutional change within the Unity, achieved at the 1857 General Synod, with the development of national home mission work from 1817 on, noting the formation of local and provincial home mission societies and chronicling the beginnings of new

congregations in the northeast, the south, and in what would later become the Western District of the Northern Province. It was not always easy work. He notes that in 1824, the Northern Province Synod directed the Provincial Helpers' Conference to establish home mission societies in congregations with the hope that they in turn would raise funds to support the expanding work. It took a while for the idea to catch on since, as he notes, "the idea of other Moravian congregations sending money to Bethlehem, however important and needy the object, was not popular."³⁹

In 1899 Levering was looking back over the previous years and noting signs of growing restiveness among the American Moravians both about the structure of church government and about their identity in America. They were no longer settlement bound pietists, but what were they? A diaspora society on the European model or an American denomination?

The Western Ministers Conference of the Moravian Church, meeting in Hope, Indiana, in 1853 had put it this way in discussing the diaspora idea: "Her [the Moravian Church] activity has thereby been limited, her energies crippled, her spiritual life well nigh extinguished; for we deem it a principle deeply grounded in the eternal truth of God, that Christ's people can only flourish, in proportion as they work for the salvation of others. Thus while other denominations have filled our young country with churches and preachers, we have for the last fifty years scarcely retained our own. Yes, and while our church in Germany through her diaspora work, and in England, by awakening an interest in our extensive missionary effort, has

existed to some purpose, it would be difficult for anyone to point to the great good we have done in this country. In our opinion we declare freely, though sadly, the Brethren's Church in America has been comparatively speaking pointless and fruitless. We therefore protest against the view of our Church so often put forth, that it is not a distinct and independent church, but rather a society within the Church. Political necessity has caused the assumption of that character in Europe; no such necessity exists here."⁴⁰

Levering and other Moravian writers often cite the establishment of Moravian Theological Seminary in 1807 as one example of the American restiveness leading up to the constitutional changes of 1857. The centennial of the institution was observed on October 2-3, 1907 and ranged from a solemn service in Central Church to many speeches in Comenius Hall on the campus. Since a collegiate department had been added in 1858, it was also possible to have a baseball game between the college students and the alumni, which the alumni won 8 to 3. Various distinguished alumni were asked to share recollections of their student days. Bishop Edward Rondthaler had this to say:

When I became a student in the Seminary it was not long enough after 1857 to permit the beneficent alteration in the government of our unity to have had as yet any marked effect. We had just become...an independent American Church...but the lack of appreciation of the distinctive features of our unity which had arisen, through the earlier excessive centralization, still prevailed. It was still a time when old things were discounted, without due regard to the good that was in

them, and which might have been transferred into new forms and fresher ideals. This radical state of feeling was reflected in the Seminary. Probably no subject elicited so small an interest as Moravian church history, and no danger was greater than that of belittling the characteristic achievements of our Moravian Unity. There has been a great change in this respect, and a happy one. It has come through the independence of the American church, and through its increased activity along its own chosen lines. The historical labors of Reichel, deSchweinitz, Hamilton, Clewell, Fries, along with those of other workers, have opened a new era of generous recognition of the gifts of God to our Moravian Unity. We can say, in the main, that a school of church patriotism has succeeded one of church disparagement.⁴¹

The opening address for the celebration was delivered by the now familiar J. Mortimer Levering. He made it abundantly clear that the establishment of Moravian Theological Seminary was a key to the independence of the American Moravian Church, and that it helped bring the Church into alignment with everything else that was good in contemporary American Protestantism.⁴²

When Rondthaler referred to the work of Hamilton, he might have had in mind the large one volume *A History of the Church Known as the Moravian Church, or the Unitas Fratrum, or the Unity of the Brethren, during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, which had appeared in 1900.⁴³ Here Hamilton's assessment of Zinzendorf has moderated slightly from his earlier opinion. "Being but a man, Count

Zinzendorf had his faults." But they were faults for a good purpose and his achievements are recounted. "Zinzendorf was worthy of a place in Germany's Walhalla."⁴⁴ But Zinzendorf's legacy in his diaspora ideas, though not attributed to him by name, is roundly condemned for nearly two pages. The familiar devil of German centralization and control would be the root of problems for the next fifty years. "Had Ettwein and his associates received a freedom of operation even measurably corresponding to that enjoyed by Asbury and Coke, or Seabury and White and Provoost, the future of the Moravian Church in America would have assumed a different form. But just at the time when the Methodist and Protestant Episcopal Churches were making provision for natural activity and expansion, the tendency to ultra-centralization in the Moravian Church caused it to ignore the boundless opportunities in America which carried with them proportionate responsibilities." He even suggests that the political slogan, "No taxation without representation" and the American institution of the town meeting should have had an equivalent in church government.⁴⁵

The Moravian Manual, Containing an Account of the Moravian Church, or Unitas Fratrum, third edition, appeared in 1901, carrying on a tradition begun by Spangenberg in 1774.⁴⁶ The text for this manual was originally written by Edmund de Schweinitz and published in 1859. Although the contents cover the church north and south, this third edition appeared with the imprimatur of the Northern Province Provincial Elders' Conference. The historical synopsis of the American experience covers the involvement of Zinzendorf but offers virtually

no assessment of his contributions or ideas. However, there is no lack of opinion about what went wrong with Zinzendorf's legacy. Again, the implicit failure of the Count to understand American realities as reflected in the policies of his successors is condemned. Regarding the diaspora idea and America, "This was a radical error which the Brethren committed, in the very inception of their work in America. They failed to recognize the religious difference between it and Europe...A domestic mission, in order to be successful, must be equivalent to church-extension." After explaining the German control and the centralization that developed in post-Revolutionary America, we read, "This is the sufficient answer to the question often asked: 'Why is the Moravian Church so small?'"⁴⁷

We leave the shores of North America and American writers for a moment to consider the British Moravian historian, J. E. Hutton, and his *A History of the Moravian Church*. The second, revised and enlarged edition of this work appeared in 1909.⁴⁸ His bombastic style is often fun to read, though he displays the annoying trait of too many Moravian history writers. The text is sprinkled with wonderful quotes and a bibliography is provided, but the connection of quotes to sources through footnotes is omitted. His treatment of Zinzendorf provides a case in point. After describing Zinzendorf's funeral in detail, he launches into his assessment of the man. This covers such judgments as, "His faults and virtues stood out in glaring relief. His very appearance told the dual tale. As he strolled the streets of Berlin or London, the wayfarers instinctively moved to let him pass, and all men admired his noble bearing, his lofty brow, his

fiery dark blue eye, and his firm set lips; and yet, on the other hand, they could not fail to notice that he was untidy in his dress, that he strode on, gazing at the stars, and that often, in his absentmindedness, he stumbled and staggered in his gait. In his portraits we can read the same double story. In some, the prevailing tone is dignity; in others there is the faint suggestion of a smirk."

Still, when all is said and done, "Of all the religious leaders of the eighteenth century, he was the most original in genius and the most varied in talent; and, therefore, he was the most misunderstood, the most fiercely hated, the most foully libeled, the most shamefully attacked, and the most fondly adored."⁴⁹ Hutton's view of what happened in America after Zinzendorf's death is clearly stated in the title to Chapter VI, "The Struggle in America, 1762-1857." It begins, "For nearly a century the Moravians in America had felt as uncomfortable as David in Saul's armour; and the armour in this particular instance was made of certain iron rules forged at the General Synods held in Germany."⁵⁰

Back home in America, Harry Emilius Stocker published *A Home Mission History of the Moravian Church in the United States and Canada (Northern Province)*, in 1924, probably the only book length treatment of the subject ever produced.⁵¹ It brings together in one place a lot of valuable information. His presentation of the story has a slightly different spin to it. Chapter I is a thorough explanation of the diaspora movement in Europe. The history of this method of planting renewal societies within state churches is reviewed with appreciation as he notes that the great leader Spangenberg, who

later led the church in America, was himself a “recruit” from the diaspora. The application of this method in America is noted and Zinzendorf is clearly identified as the originator of this approach. All this is offered without judgment. But the implication is that some congregations formed in colonial America (and he discusses those in North Carolina, too) almost came about by accident and in spite of the preference for the forming of settlements and diaspora societies. But, “the Moravian Church learned nothing from the outcome of the American Revolution. This was perhaps natural for its seat of government was in Germany, where wholly different conditions obtained. ...an exclusive system that practically paralyzed all effort in the direction of church extension was inaugurated.”⁵² According to Stocker, there were sporadic efforts at growth in the post-Revolutionary period but the modern era did not really dawn until North Carolina Moravians moved to Indiana in 1825 and began what became the Hope Moravian Church.

J. Taylor Hamilton’s son, Kenneth G. offered a revised and updated version of his father’s book in *History of the Moravian Church: The Renewed Unitas Fratrum, 1722-1957*, which appeared in 1967.⁵³ The rhetorical flourishes of the earlier version have been reduced to a much sparser style, in part to allow for the coverage of an additional fifty-seven years of history that had passed by since the original work appeared. There are other subtle changes. The son reproduces the chapter on the theology of Zinzendorf that the father had written, although he eliminates the paragraph concerning the controversial “sifting period.” References to that era, as well as to other

controversial aspects of Zinzendorf’s thought show up in small print endnotes. A good example is the comment, “The designation of the Holy Spirit as our ‘Mother’ ...is an illustration of the danger of substituting vivid figures of speech for logical ideas.”⁵⁴ Modern readers will find as much of interest in the endnotes as they will in the text. He faithfully reproduces his father’s comments on the situation after Zinzendorf with their condemnation of the policies of the Count’s successors as being responsible for the stunted growth of the American Moravian Church. Kenneth G. (or his editor) made their opinions clear in the very way they organized the book into three sections: The Moravian Church under Zinzendorf, 1722-1760; A Century of Centralized Government, 1760-1857; and The Unity Takes Form, 1857-1957.

This review of the writings of Moravian leaders has not been an open-stack search either yet it presents an overview of the general interpretative pattern followed in viewing the development of the American Church. It goes like this. Zinzendorf was an important but controversial figure to whom the church will always owe a debt of gratitude. The Moravians grew in Europe in three ways under his leadership. Three forms of church life reflecting his ideas were developed. There were the self-contained settlement congregations which were to provide the “home base” from which to develop the two other forms of outreach: missionary work among those peoples who had never heard the gospel and the formation of renewal societies (the diaspora movement) among European state churches. This approach was followed in colonial America with negative results. The inability to recognize

the changed political situation which rendered the diaspora approach ineffective resulted in missed opportunities in the colonial era, and, coupled with the control from Germany which followed, permanently crippled the church until the mid-nineteenth century. Who was to blame? Zinzendorf and his ‘wrong ideas?’ ...his successors and their passion for control?

Opinions would vary but there was clearly emerging a tendency to view both Zinzendorf and his era in a negative light. Moravian leaders were crafting a view of their early history in America that would be at variance with the positive evaluation of the panoramist church historians and the tourists. Or, as Arthur Freeman, himself the author of the most recent study of Zinzendorf’s theology, stated in a lecture last month, “As to the Zinzendorf period, the century of control of the North American Provinces from Europe ending in 1857, which limited its indigenous development, left an unpleasant taste. Zinzendorf and his ideas were often seen as the cause rather than the post-Zinzendorffian conservatism of the Moravian Church. Even in my lifetime I heard older ministers and even bishops lay the blame on Zinzendorf for the smallness and the limits of the Moravian Church. An elderly bishop recently wrote me after reading my book...indicating that he now sees himself as more of a Zinzendorffian Christian than he thought he was—though he still has some reservations.”⁵⁵

Moravian Synods

Through much of the nineteenth century Moravian Church synods set about the task of disassembling the old order and, at least in

America, looking around for new ideas about how to develop a denominational identity. The examples that follow concern primarily the Northern Province. On the eve of the 1857 constitutional changes, the Southern Province had 1,930 members. It was devastated by the Civil War. The Southern Synod vote in 1868 to seek union with the Northern Province, though approved by the Northern Province and the General Synod, came to naught when the southern congregations could not afford the congregational assessments, which were a condition of merger. In 1884, a southern Synod proposal to dissolve itself failed to pass by only one vote. That was enough shock to revitalize the Province and lead it to the growth it would experience in the twentieth century. I suspect, however, that further study of twentieth century Southern Province synods would reveal the same trends we are about to see unfold at an earlier time in the north.⁵⁶

The old settlement congregations of the Unity gradually gave up their distinctive communal arrangements from the 1840s on and converted themselves into “normal” towns. Some traditions were dealt with on the international level through the periodic meetings of the General Synods. In 1818 the ceremony of foot washing was abandoned. The use of the lot as a means of resolving difficult decisions proved particularly vexing. By 1818 the Americans had succeeded in their desire not to have it used any longer in the process of selecting marriage partners. But the matter would drag on as the occasions when the lot could be used would be continually restricted until the General Synod of 1889 eliminated the obligatory use of the lot altogether. Concessions

to what both Hamiltons refer to as “the spirit of the age” rolled on. This was evident in 1836 when the Kiss of Peace evolved into the Right Hand of Fellowship in the Communion ritual “where the former no longer tends to edification.”⁵⁷

The Americans lost no time in looking for new ideas. In preparing for the upcoming General Synod of 1857, a northern synod met in 1855. A group of New Yorkers suggested that the new organizational form should be patterned on that of the Episcopal Church and the name of the denomination changed to the “Moravian Episcopal Church in the United States of North America.” Synod demurred and the idea died in committee. The 1856 Synod was worried about freedom of the press when it learned that the Germans were preparing to present to General Synod a proposal calling for the approval of all articles in church periodicals by the executive board of the Unity. It was deemed that “the adoption of such an act by the general Synod would be an act of retrogression, highly injurious to the best interests of our Church, and its execution so far as the American Provinces are concerned at least, absolutely impossible.” The resolution passed on this declared “its adoption would necessarily endanger our farther connexion with the Unity.”⁵⁸

The moderation-in-all-things approach of the traditional Brotherly Agreement was momentarily forgotten by the Northern synod of 1893 with its ringing condemnation of “legalized and organized liquor traffic” and its resolution “that the only position which the Christian Church can occupy with regard to the liquor traffic is one of uncompromising hostility.”⁵⁹ This synod also heartily endorsed participation

in the Christian Endeavor Society movement as a primary youth programming vehicle for the Moravian Church. The Southern Moravian Christian Endeavor Union would be formed in 1928. This American non-denominational, ecumenical, evangelical youth movement would become the youth program of both Provinces until the 1950s. Levering, in his review of home mission activity, could report favorably about the formation of the American Bible Society, American Sunday-School Union, American Tract Society and the American Home Mission Society.⁶⁰

Synods often have to try to catch up and offer an opinion on things that are already happening. The northern Synod of 1913 was no exception in its resolutions, “Synod expresses its conviction that it would be a very difficult matter to change the practice in those churches where the individual cups are used in the Communion or the pulpit gown for preaching....Synod sanctions the introduction of the individual cups in connection with the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.”⁶¹

Throughout the 1920s synods south and north were busy appointing representatives to the plethora of ecumenical organizations forming throughout the period such as the Federal Council of Churches, the International Sunday School Association, and many of the other American societies on Levering’s list. That is a trend which would continue to the present day as the American Moravians more and more took their clues as to how to “be a church” from the surrounding larger denominational and ecumenical bodies. Their confidence in themselves as an American Church was reflected

in the resolution of the 1925 northern Synod which instructed the secretary of synod, “to send to the President of the United States a copy of the preambles and resolutions number 28 to 32 inclusive, on the subject of War by this Synod, with the assurance also of its support in his efforts towards the peace of the world.”⁶²

One could go on, and on, but the drift is clear. But there is one additional issue I have left until now due to its timeliness. In the mid-nineteenth century American Protestants were embroiled in controversy over the role of women in the church. Could they teach? Could they preach? How would one know the difference? What about public versus private gatherings? So the debates went and the Moravians were not immune. The northern Synod of 1856 issued recommendations as well as formal resolutions. One of its recommendations read, “Concerning the question of the propriety of females praying in a promiscuous assembly, the Committee, inasmuch as there is no definite rule in regard to this point laid down synodically, would endorse the views set forth by the P.E.C. on a recent occasion viz: First. We do not object to audible prayer by sisters, married or unmarried, in the family circle. Second. But we disapprove of the offering up of audible prayer in a more extended circle, or in a more public place, which is visited by persons of both sexes, by any but brethren. And we rest our disapproval upon the instructions, which the apostle Paul has given on this subject I Cor. 14, 34,35; I Tim. 2, 11-13. Deeming it, moreover, inconsistent with the relation assigned to woman by the Creator, and incompatible with the female virtue of modesty, that she should, in such companies, put herself

forward, and by her audible prayer, for the time, occupy the highest place.”⁶³

And you can guess what happened. The very next Synod, in 1861, received a petition from sixty-six members of the Gnadenuhnten, Ohio, congregation proposing a resolution to be substituted in place of the recommendation, but with a plea for mutual respect among those who may differ on this issue. It was referred to the committee on worship and discipline. The following resolution came back and was adopted:

Whereas, a distinction should be recognized to exist between a private dwelling house, and the public house of worship, where all members of the church have equal rights and privileges of divine worship, therefore Resolved,

1. That in the public house of worship, the apostolical rule should at all times be observed: “Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.” (I Cor. 13, 34 and 35; I Tim. 2, 12.)

2. That our ministers should not encourage their people by word or example, to act contrary to our synodical recommendations, but strive to enlighten the minds of their people by sound scriptural teachings, to prove themselves law-abiding members of the church, in accordance with the prayer in our litany, “Purify our souls in obeying the truth, through the spirit, unto unfeigned love of the brethren.” (I Pet. 1, 22)

3. That our members have the right in their own houses to allow females to pray audibly, even though others besides members of their own families, be admitted to these religious meetings.

4. That the Provincial Synod enjoins the duty upon all the ministers and elders of our churches most carefully to watch over meetings for social prayer, lest what is begun in the spirit, should end in the flesh.

5. That we deem it of paramount importance most affectionately to request those brethren and sisters who take part in such social prayer meetings...and those who are not in favour of them, mutually to abstain from all harsh and uncharitable judging of those of their brethren and sisters who differ with them on this question, bearing in mind the injunction of the Apostle, "Let brotherly love continue" (Heb. 13, 1) and the declaration of our Saviour, (John 13. V. 34, 35) "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye also love one another, by this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye love one to another."⁶⁴

Remember that this discussion took place a mere twenty or so years after the dissolution of the settlements which in their earlier days were regarded as enlightened for the active role which women played in those communities.

Bringing it all together...conclusion

I will conclude with several suggestions as to how we might view the history of the American Moravian Church in a useful way in the future. I do so bearing in mind the admonition of the noted theologian Franz Bibfeldt, "By the grace

of God, the church moves forward, even while constantly sidestepping."⁶⁵

1. Let us abandon the traditional bifurcated approach to Moravian history in favor of a unified approach to the history of the Moravian Church. Banish forever talk of the Ancient Church and the Renewed Church. Recent scholars have provided abundant knowledge about the origins of the Moravian Church in the teaching of Hus and his first followers. What is needed now is an integrated approach as we write and talk about a tradition that institutionally stretches from 1457 to yesterday. The Moravian experience is not unique. Groups as disparate as the Waldensians and the Jesuits have experienced periods of growth and vitality followed by times of suppression and near extinction which gave rise to periods of renewal. The Moravian version of this cycle should be treated in a holistic manner.

2. Let us honor Zinzendorf and let us forget Zinzendorf. Next year will bring many celebrations to mark the three-hundredth anniversary of Zinzendorf's birthday. The best possible celebration would be to undertake a translation of Zinzendorf's major writings into English, Swahili, and Spanish, to be published along with critical commentary. The fact that such translations do not now exist is the result of remaining mired in nineteenth century attitudes regarding him. This project is needed for Zinzendorf to be finally blended completely into the life of the contemporary Moravian Church worldwide.

My proposal to forget Zinzendorf is a little more complicated. There is a tendency in a lot of Moravian literature and now even on the history

screen on the website to try to build a tradition around the ideas of three men—Hus, Comenius, and Zinzendorf. Frankly, I think this is a case of trying to ride their coattails to fame and recognition. These are three well-known figures who have a reputation in their own right beyond their connection to the Moravians, however important that may be. The thinking seems to be that the reputations might guide people beyond them to the community of which they were a part. It is a classic problem in Comenian studies. Comenius is famous for this or that educational idea and, oh yes, he was a bishop or something in this obscure group called the Unity of Brethren or something. And we try to build a tradition by trying to figure out how their ideas played out in the Moravian Church. Let's turn the process around. The description of the tradition should place its emphasis upon the 542-year story of a Christian community—the beliefs, activities, and life style of that community in many places and circumstances. Along the way it has been influenced by a variety of leaders who played their roles and made their contributions. It is time for a new assessment of the way we consider these three to be a part of the ongoing tradition.

Let us find new heroes and heroines. In keeping with the above thought, it's time to look beyond the big three. We need to identify people—primarily American, men and women, clergy and lay—whose life stories send meaningful messages to contemporary Americans. The recent studies of settlement era women have started the process but what about nineteenth and even twentieth century people? The true story of the remarkable Moravian persistence over 542 years may lie in the faithfulness of women and men

to the Gospel in the midst of the mundane ups and downs of life. The Gospel proclaimed in the Moravian context sustained them and their witness can be mighty.

3. Let us establish a positive relationship with the restorations and reconstructions. Notice I did not say reclaim them. If, as I have maintained, an ambiguous relationship to these enterprises now exists it is time to explore building a positive relationship. Like the big three, these entities from our history have a meaning beyond our history but they need to be blended into the larger picture of our history.

4. Let us examine the connection between our history and our contemporary mission. After 1857, American Moravians, like many other American Christians began to buy into American cultural values in a big way. Voices are now being raised from within the Christian community, which question the continued wisdom of that approach. Some say the authentic Christian witness in tomorrow's America will be a counter-cultural one. We have been counter-cultural a few times. What are the values from our tradition that can provide a Christian critique of American ideas about sexuality, consumerism, violence, and the other plagues of modern life?

Finally, I end with a story about traditions and the contemporary world. The 1998 Northern Province Provincial Synod passed a resolution allowing elders in a congregation to assist the pastor in the distribution of the bread and wine at Holy Communion.⁶⁶ This is not a new idea. During the 1950s the pastor of the New Dorp congregation on Staten Island instituted this practice. He consecrated the elements at the

table, handed the trays to the elders, and then he sat down behind the table. The elders moved among the congregation, passing the trays through the aisles as people helped themselves first to the bread then one of those individual communion cups. When all had been served, the congregation partook together, first the bread and then the wine.

There were three principles at work here. 1. Theological—in the service of Holy Communion, the method of distribution is not an essential, as that term is understood in Moravian tradition. 2. Pragmatic—there was a task which needed to be done in the most efficient manner, bearing in mind the setting of a crowded church, the length of the service, and so on. 3. Contextual—at that particular time and place many of the members of the congregation came from Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed backgrounds. This way of receiving the elements was familiar to them. The “traditional” Moravian way was not. And so the decision was made to proceed in the manner described. What better discernment can we bring to our appropriation of Moravian history in the contemporary American world than theological, pragmatic, and contextual?

(endnotes)

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