

From Where Have We Come? Where Do We Stand? Where Are We Going?

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From where have we come? Where do we stand? Where are we going? Any anniversary must address these three central questions if it is not merely to be a historical remembrance. Remembering the past does not automatically provide vitality for the future. It could give way to nostalgia which simply glorifies the past but otherwise does little if anything to relate to the present or the future. But if remembering creates a dialog between past and present—between that which once was and that which now is—then it is more likely that impulses to guide the future can be discovered as well as the possibility for those to have a positive effect.

Thus the past must be critically examined. Undesirable developments and thought and behavior patterns of the past from which it makes sense to part must be scrutinized as well as traditions which are held onto at all costs merely to preserve one's identity. It is also possible that traditions which once were good and have been wrongly forgotten can be rediscovered and can come alive again in similar or modified ways. The present must likewise be examined in a critical manner. We must identify points in which our current standard and level of knowledge should be handled in ways different than those of our forefathers to prevent stagnation or the creation of an illusory world that no longer connects to reality. This is

as much part of a critical dialog with the past as the identification of trends that can successfully be accepted, promoted, and further developed. Such a process will insure that all which is valuable remains to be passed on as a precious inheritance for future generations possibly to combat certain currently popular trends.

There exists a considerable discrepancy in many ways regarding the outward and inward perception of the Moravian Church. Because of its history, its theological imprint, and some of its attractive forms of community life, the Moravian Church continues to be held in esteem and even garners admiration. This church with its special traditions is expected to insert itself ecumenically into all sorts of places to play a special and distinctive role. In contrast there is the reality in many countries (not only in Europe) of the church's small size, leading some to ask if the Moravian Church will even exist in 25 years. Small congregations may often develop a surprising tenacity to survive. Nevertheless we must remind ourselves that every average city in Germany has more citizens than the Moravian Church. And we must see to it that we do not sink into irrelevance due to our small size while trying to meet every outside expectation of the Church.

In the global perspective there has long been a shift of the center of gravity of the

Moravian Church from the North to the South. The worldwide Moravian Church is already now—when one looks at it as a whole—an African church with a few non-African dependents. When future development is considered this will likely become an even stronger trend since the growth of the church is greatest in eastern Africa. Soon there will be six provinces in Tanzania rather than the four current ones, possibly even eight. And in virtually all its neighboring countries there are congregations and groups seeking connection to the Moravian Church.

In view of this development it becomes even more important for the Moravian Church to find a way which allows everyone to have bona fide participation at all levels (material, organizational, spiritual, and theological); which overcomes forms of domination and paternalism that still continue in the Church; and which honors existing realities. Therefore going back to the rich heritage of our traditions (which also can and must transform during the process) becomes very important. It is the only thing which can prevent the Moravian Church from passing on its name in outward growth while succumbing to influences from external pressures to the point where its character is unrecognizable. In nearly all provinces there is now some degree of Pentecostal influences. Should the theological development of the Moravian Church continue to go in a direction that more or less resembles those, then it truly would give up the connection to its heritage.

How far away the Moravian Church

is from having a clear identity is seen by the volatility that topics such as interfaith dialog, gay partnerships, or finances have, not just in the worldwide Unity but in our own province as well as in individual congregations. Again and again these topics polarize. And not just a few people have turned their backs on the Moravian Church because they no longer felt at home there with their beliefs.

Naturally, however, it does no good simply to make such conversation taboo. To remain viable and to have significance in the future, it will be necessary for the Moravian Church to develop an identity that can integrate a variety of pieties and not seem exclusive. This can only be done through listening to one another, as has been our Moravian tradition. The traditional distinction between essentials, incidentals, and nonessentials can be helpful in this regard with agreement being constantly sought anew about what the essentials in which we must be united are and what, by contrast, can be settled in liberty.

One area in which the Moravian Church because of its foundation of integration rather than exclusivity could take a leading role is that of fostering a new understanding among the various world religions. On the foundation of Zinzendorf's theology the Moravian Church has the right to be considered a leader in the modern ecumenical movement. After all, Zinzendorf and before him Comenius were among the first who saw Christianity in its various forms of confession and denominations not as a catastrophe or evil which had to

be quickly and completely overcome but as richness. Even today overcoming multiple beliefs is often handled with the attitude “All will agree with me and become like me.” How unrealistic this is can be seen by the fact that there are often larger differences within a single denomination than between people of various faiths and denominations that live within a similar culture.

To allow others to stand in their own beliefs, accept them, and allow them to go their own way while still considering oneself a companion—what we have learned in ecumenism—can be helpful to the learning process which still lies before us with members of various religions. This must not necessarily stand in contrast to mission work. Mission cannot be primarily understood as merely the attempt to convince others of our own beliefs since each person’s creed is after all just a patchwork requiring continual revisions and amendments.

The first missionaries from Herrnhut were intent on regarding all whom they encountered at the same level and in humane ways just as God meets us, and thereby to be a witness for Him and His love of mankind. Can we, the

Moravian Church, with a background of multicultural experiences over the past 275 years play a leading role in the dialog between religions? An orderly and peaceful coexistence is present in many provinces of the Unity especially there where it has grown for hundreds of years, for example in Surinam. On the other hand in many areas of Europe people seek ways to draw boundaries between groups. Here is another case where we can learn from the experiences of others. It truly is not the task of mission or the function of Christianity to create conflicts or to seek separation, but to work for peace and justice among all types of people as a witness for the God whose will it is for peace and justice to reign.

Frieder Vollprecht, born in 1960, was pastor at Neuwied from 1993 to 1997 after previously holding various roles in eastern Germany. He served from September 1997 until 2002 as pastor of the congregation in Paramaribo as well as at the theological seminary there. In May 2002 he was elected by the provincial synod of the European Mainland to their Board which he now leads.