

Finally, although we cannot explain who we are without reference to our history, we do need to recognize that other elements have had a part to play in establishing our identity. Worship styles may vary between and even within provinces, but there remain practices that reflect our common heritage, especially in the Holy Communion and in the specifically Moravian services such as the lovefeast (with or without fancy dress), as well as in the liturgical practices and customs associated with some of the seasons of the church year, especially Advent and Easter. Emphasis on the particular nature of our international fellowship, summed up in the concept of the Unity, is another important element in establishing our identity.

Perhaps above all, the essence of “being a Moravian” is to be found in what the late Bishop Clarence Shawe called “the spirit of the Moravian Church.” In a series of lectures, using history, theology and biography, he tried to go beyond the externals and get to the heart of Moravianism. It seems to me that this remains an excellent example of how, while being deeply rooted and grounded in history, we can go beyond history to discern the character of the Moravian Church.

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## Christie Melby-Gibbons

History indeed shapes our identity, so it’s understandable that archivists are sometimes leery about letting certain tidbits of our history get into careless hands. However, our own hands often shape history to be how we’d like to remember it, conveniently scrapping historical facts which might embarrass, incriminate, or convict us now. Intentional history-tweaking is shameful, but usually it’s simply the passing of time that serves to exaggerate or sanitize history.

I think it’s time that we get over our fear of what people might think of us. What if we Moravians got bold with our historical blemishes, acknowledging our humanity and its perpetual tendency toward flaws? What if we candidly embraced our tarnished past (and present)? This might actually render the Moravian identity a bit more irresistible to folks who know little to nothing about us—particularly those who’ve been turned off by the way much of the institutional church has failed to acknowledge its contaminated past (and present). Perhaps these individuals who are so adamantly disinterested in nostalgic religion might be the ones to eagerly join us in our quest for “critical, scholarly” Moravian historical research.

The question remains: Who are Moravians? Concocting innovative ways to tell (*and show*) the world who we are as Moravian Christians today is essential to our continued existence. Dressing in mid-1700s garb is a quaint and memorable way to tell folks about who the Moravians were at one point in our history. And,

yes, charging (mostly wealthy) tourists to come and see a play about a Moravian settlement set in the mid-1700s is a good fundraiser and a good way to tell folks about how the Moravians first came to North America. However, my fear is that the folks upon whose doors those 18th-century role players have knocked still have no clue who Moravians *are*. I also fear that those who've paid to watch a glorified version of Moravian history go on their way thinking that Moravians are an antiquated group of religious puritans whose heyday is long past.

Why have we immortalized mid-1700s attire anyway (haubes for women, white puff sleeves for men) as a Moravian fashion *must*? Why not what folks were wearing in the mid-1400s in the land that's now the Czech Republic? After all, that's part of our Moravian history, too. The Blata folk costume, for example, was worn in areas such as Tábor and Moravia. The women wore lavishly beaded and sequined, embroidered costumes. The plena (a long scarf) was tied through a multi-layered, embroidered bonnet with a laced collar. The výkladek (another collar) hung around the neck over an embroidered shirtfront.<sup>1</sup> Heck, why not hark even farther back to what folks wore in ancient Palestine—muted-color linen ankle-length inner tunics; shirt-like linen tunic-coats worn over the inner tunic; and hard leather sandals? These are all merely historical details.

In all these details let's not lose the larger picture of who Moravians were and are: Christians—Christ-ones—those who seek to emulate the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Joyfully embracing this identity will render us more inviting,

outwardly focused and relevant (!) to those who find themselves on the outside of what we call the Moravian Church. Like de Schweinitz in 1867, many today fear that Moravians are in *imminent danger of disintegration*, of being absorbed into the sloshing sea of *other* denominations. Perhaps this is (and always has been) the case, and perhaps absorption would be a good thing. After all, we're merely Christians of the Moravian brand.

Paul Peucker writes that we are *who we say we are*. Yet I've long thought that we are what we *do*—that our identity is determined by our activity, not our verbiage. If there's anything I've learned as an insider of the institutional church it's that our self-proclaimed identity often does not match the identity that others witness when observing how we live. Surely this has always been a struggle for the church—because it's comprised of humans—and even for those whom we glorify from our Moravian heritage.

The theologies and daily life of our spiritual ancestors fundamentally differed from our own theologies and daily life today. Even so, we've maintained some ancestral customs: Daily Texts, candlelight services, lovefeasts, etc. At some level, our observance of these customs does link us to previous generations; but how strong is the link when much of the life has been drained out of those customs? Many a lovefeast I've experienced contained no trace of celebration or love. We venerate the 1727 Herrnhuters' experience of revival on August 13 by trapping the lovefeast custom in 18th-century garb and song. Can we not reimagine the lovefeast for today?

We can! This year at the Moravian Church of Downey, we will be hosting an August 13th Hootenanny in the alley behind the church building. We hope to have jugglers, stilt-walkers, folk music, hula hooping, art booths, a taco vendor, etc. This is one of our attempts to put the celebration and love back into our customs and festivals, which, while rooted in our history, must remain joyful and relevant to people today. What is important to preserve is not the nostalgic details of our festivals, but their celebratory nature.

History indeed plays a defining role in the renewed Moravian Church. Renewal, however, is ongoing—not a one-time deal.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Czech Republic - The Official Website. Operator: Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Information on folk costumes found at <http://www.czech.cz/en/culture/charm-of-traditions/folk-costumes>.

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## **Corey Whittaker**

What's in a name?

As our culture becomes more cynical about organized religion, more hesitant to step in the doors of a church and less likely to really engage with congregational life, church leaders must always ask, "What are the speed bumps at the entrance to my church?" We're not talking about roadblocks, which keep people away altogether, or potholes, which damage

people as they come in, but speed bumps that slow people down. These may be things under our control, like the appearance of our facilities, or out of our control, like bad press about churches in general. Either way, our job as leaders is to lead people into the body of Christ with as few bumps as possible, but without at all compromising the whole Gospel. The first impression is very important, whether that impression comes from a friendship, an advertisement or a sign on the road.

Many churches try advertising in different and catchy ways. Some of these advertising methods are just fine; some perhaps go too far. Other churches have community events so that new folks find it easier to cross the threshold. Still others try to make their building look and feel welcoming. Probably a bit of all of this is good as we look at reaching out and drawing others in.

One of the speed bumps that we recognized at Christ the King is the word "Moravian." Now, before readers get defensive, let me emphasize: The *word itself* is the speed bump. Not the meaning, or the history, or the traditions; just the word. For this reason, we decided to remove it from our sign at the road, which now just says "Christ the King." If you come in the door, you will see Moravian band and lovefeast pictures, the Moravian seal and that very word "Moravian" on bulletins and other places. But you see, you came in the door.

When new members join our congregation, they come to the board and talk about their faith and anything else they want to share, so the board can know them better and welcome them. Two themes regularly come up in these