

Moravian Histories

NOTE: This chapter was designed both to give information and to stimulate discussion and further study. It can be read straight through without using the optional questions and activities. In fact leaders may want to do this first in order to understand the points I am trying to make. You may request learners to do the same.

Moravian History 1.0 Prevalent Traditions

GENERAL BACKGROUND

Moravian understandings and approaches to our own history have varied greatly over time. While the events that took place and the people involved in them have not changed, which events we pay attention to, which people we celebrate or criticize and how we interpret these people and events certainly has. When I first became interested in Moravian history (way back in the last century), Moravian history was basically taught as the highlights (and lowpoints) of three important men: John Hus (1369?-1415), John Amos Comenius (1592-1670) and Nicholas Lewis the Count of Zinzendorf (1700-1760). I'm using modern English spellings for these men, but the first two were from Bohemia (the modern Czech Republic) and spoke Czech, and the third was from Saxony (modern German) and spoke German. I point these facts out to highlight some of the difficulties of trying to understand Moravian history. We often have to deal with differences in time, place, culture and language to understand our history. While that is certainly challenging, it can also be exciting. Some of you have already gone to Moravian Convocations and met and become friends with people who are different from you in at least in terms of place, language and culture. Such friendships deepen who we are. Likewise taking these differences into account we study history deepens our understanding of history.

OPTIONAL QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES: GENERAL

- 1) Google (with safe search on, of course) images for Hus, Comenius, and Zinzendorf.
- 2) What can you learn from the types of historical images that you see (paintings, drawings, maps, etc.)?
- 3) What photographs show up? What can you learn about people who want their names associated with these men? What countries and languages are the websites in?
- 4) Do you already know anyone from these countries or who speak these languages?

TRADITIONAL HISTORIES: HUS

So what about these men that Moravians have traditionally highlighted in our histories? We have celebrated John Hus for several important reasons. At the time and in the place he lived,

there was only the Roman Catholic Church. While Hus loved God and loved the Church, he thought the church had gotten off track in several significant ways. When the church celebrated Holy Communion, most people took only the bread. Only the priests were able to take both the wine and the bread. Hus thought that this went against the way Jesus shared the Last Supper with his disciples. Similarly, worship was conducted in Latin, a language that no one spoke any more. Only the very well educated people, once again often just the priests, could understand the words spoken in church. Hus also thought that because the priests had such privileges, they abused their positions and used them to become wealthy at the expense of everyday people.

Though Hus loved the church and believed the changes he wanted to make would help the church be more like God wanted it to be, his ideas for reform were not well received by many holding power, both within the church and within the government. Many people tried to force Hus to change his mind, but when he continually refused, first he was excommunicated (kicked out of the Roman Catholic Church) and then executed by the political powers by being burned at the stake. This action infuriated many of his followers. Surviving a series of wars that came after Hus' death, one of several groups of his followers decided to become a separate church on March 1, 1457. They called themselves the *Unitas Fratrum*, the Unity of the Brothers, which is still the official name of the Moravian Church throughout the world today. You can see why our historians have wanted us to know about John Hus.

OPTIONAL QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES: HUS

- 1) What, if any changes, do you hear people talking about in your church? How do you feel about these ideas for change? Where might you learn more about these ideas?
- 2) What language do you hear in your church? Is it your native language?
- 3) What religious or theological words do you hear in church that seem like a foreign language to you?
- 4) Describe communion in your church. Have you taken communion at another church (especially in another denomination)? What was different about it?

TRADITIONAL HISTORIES: COMENIUS

Roughly two centuries after John Hus lived, a leader of the *Unitas Fratrum* did such important work that historians have highlighted the important events of his life too. His name was John Amos Comenius. Comenius was a minister, philosopher, educator, linguist, and bishop. He, too, led our church in a time of great difficulty. He lived in a time when a plague called Black Death would sweep through portions of Europe from time to time. He lost a wife and daughters to this. He also lived through a terrible war called The Thirty Years War (1618-1648). The fighting began in his homeland, and following the disastrous Battle of White Mountain he led many of the surviving members of the *Unitas Fratrum* into exile in Poland. There he continued to minister to church members and to work on his academic interests as well. He travelled

throughout Europe working for educational reform. Among the 150 books he wrote was a Czech-Latin dictionary.

Unfortunately Comenius and the congregations of the *Unitas Fratrum* were not safe even in exile. His works were burned. Because of the great tragedies in his personal life and in the life of the church that he loved, he feared that his beloved *Unitas Fratrum* would die out. However, he believed that his church had learned many things and had a valuable legacy to share with the other denominations that had been gathering to reform parts of the Roman Catholic belief and practice. Because of his wide-ranging interests and his leadership and devotion to his church in the face of such difficult circumstances you can understand why historians have thought it important to tell us about him.

OPTIONAL QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES: COMENIUS

- 1) What would you like to do in your work life? Do you think you could combine as many interests as Comenius did?
- 2) Why might someone want to burn Comenius' works? What do you think about censorship and access to information (remember, I suggested you use SafeSearch, even to Google images of religious figures)?
- 3) What do you think about warfare and peace? How do you relate to family, church members, friends who think differently about this than you do?

TRADITIONAL HISTORIES: ZINZENDORF

Finally, our historians have written about Nicholas Lewis, Count Zinzendorf. Moravian historians and theologians have probably devoted more words and pages to talking about and trying to understand him than any other person (except Jesus). Zinzendorf had such a wide variety of interests and achievements, and some pretty spectacular failures, that most Moravians find something interesting about him. He was generous, allowing refugees from the homelands of the *Unitas Fratrum* settle on his estates. It was there that important events of August 13, 1727 took place. That was the first *lovefeast*, an event most congregations still commemorate today. He was mission-minded, sending Moravian missionaries and evangelists throughout Europe, the Caribbean, England, North and South America, and Africa during his lifetime, and personally going on missions to the Caribbean and North America. Though a nobleman, he often dressed plainly and associated with everyday people. A gifted writer, he used his talents to pen many hymns and liturgies for the church. A sensitive theologian, he looked for ways to understand the human side of Jesus Christ, because he thought most others in his day overemphasized the divinity of Christ, and for ways to praise the nurturing, feminine characteristics of God.

But the Count wasn't perfect. At times his noble upbringing made him haughty and difficult to deal with. He was never good with money, and the church struggled with debt issues under his

leadership. Some argued that his understandings of personal relationship with Jesus actually undercut the importance of the existing churches in Europe. Some thought his liturgical creativity crossed over into grotesque excesses, leading to a gory fascination with the death of Jesus and a heretical belief in a Mother God. Because of these controversies some Moravian historians have avoided dealing fully with the details of his beliefs or argued that the things they didn't like about Zinzendorf were passing trends and didn't reflect his true beliefs. Some seemed relieved that when he died more rational followers stepped up to lead the church.

OPTIONAL QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES: ZINZENDORF

- 1) Have you ever thought about why you dress the way you do? How do others relate to you based on the clothes, jewelry, tattoos, etc that you might wear?
- 2) What does "mission" mean to you? Who should carry out this "mission."
- 3) How do you understand all of humanity to be created in God's image? How do you understand the divine and human aspects of Jesus Christ.

Moravian History 2.0 Additional Considerations

Like Hus and Comenius before him, Zinzendorf made such contributions to the church that historians have rightly celebrated their roles in the church. However, when historians focus so closely on these church leaders, people reading the histories may not realize many other important parts of our history. As I am writing this, many Americans are hotly debating immigration law, legislators are in the process of changing the American health care system, the economic outlook raises many questions about the job market, our banking system, retirement and care for those retired and/or aging, and the Internet and other technological breakthrough bring with them issues of access to information and knowledge and the ways they are related religious concerns. All the while, America has been fighting a war in Afghanistan. Deeper study of Moravian history shows that, although the particulars of these current issues may be different, Moravians have wrestled with these kinds of issues for much of our existence.

For example Moravians have often had to deal with issues of (im)migration, often with racial or ethnic implications. After Hus's death in 1415 wars, civil unrest, and the desire to begin separate religious areas where they could practice their beliefs in freedom led large numbers of Hus' followers to relocate voluntarily or to have to move. Likewise during the Thirty Years War, Comenius led members of the *Unitas Fratrum* into exile searching for a place to live and worship in peace. The Herrnhut community was founded in 1722 on the estates of Zinzendorf by another generation of people looking for a place to worship according to their understandings of the Christian faith. From Herrnhut, large numbers of Moravians went to other countries as missionaries, and even those who remained in Germany moved to new communities as they continued to develop their understanding of Christian community. In the process, Moravians

often had to deal with conflicting cultures and issues of learning foreign languages. While Moravians may not have always done the greatest job in learning about other cultures, Moravians were well noted for learning other people's languages to be able to share the Good News with them.

OPTIONAL QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES: MORAVIANS AND IMMIGRATION

- 1) What contacts do you have with people who look and sound different from you?
- 2) Have you ever had to relocate? What do you find challenging or exciting about this?
- 3) What does your congregation do to share the good news with people who seem different than the "majority" of your congregation?

As part of their travels and their developing understanding of faith, Moravians often experimented with social expectations and with social and economic structures. In the process, they often found that ways of doing things that had worked well for their grandparents' and parents' generation did not necessarily work as well for them. Sometimes this meant separating from the rest of what they considered a hopelessly corrupt and violent society; sometimes it meant accepting that society was not as bad as they had thought, and so they figure out how to work within an imperfect society. At times it meant that the church owned property and controlled economic decisions, but then the church also made sure that all were educated, had jobs and a place to live, and had access to health care. (This means that what it has meant to live as a Moravian has changed greatly throughout our history!)

OPTIONAL QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES: MORAVIANS AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

- 1) Go to your favorite news site and pick a big topic. What if anything do you think your faith has to do with this? Is our denomination or your congregation involved in this issue? If not, should it be?
- 2) Are you aware of a family issue (for example, the need for after school programs if your parents work, day care for younger siblings, adult day care for grandparents that live with or near you) that you think the church might be able to provide a creative solution for?
- 3) Ask your Board of Trustees about the property your congregation owns. Why do you have it? Is your congregation being good stewards of it? Are the larger groups (for example, the Bethlehem Area Moravians, the Salem Congregation, your Province, etc) that own property? Why do you have it? How would you assess the stewardship of these properties?

During Comenius' lifetime issues of religion and science were hotly debated in academic circles. Some people thought religion, based on things revealed by God, and science, based on things that humans could understand, were mutually exclusive. Others, like Comenius believed that Christians should study science and the natural world because they could teach people about the Creator, just like Scripture revealed knowledge of God. Also, during his lifetime, some people believed in Pansophism, the idea that all knowledge was related and ultimately knowable by humanity.

With the rise of the massive databases, international communication, and the Internet, questions about whether humanity can know everything, or have access to all information are becoming debated topics. Along with advances in technology come ever-larger questions about how to make the best use of it (think of discussions you may have had with your Mom or Dad about how many messages you can send or the relevance of Tweeting). For me these are important reasons to study our history, not to be bound by it, but to learn how our Moravian ancestors dealt with similar issues when they arose in the past.

OPTIONAL QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES: MORAVIANS AND HEARTS AND HEADS

- 1) How well do you head and heart work together?
- 2) Do you have intellectual questions that challenge your faith? How can these be helpful? Who can you talk with about these?
- 3) Do you see areas where technology has created more problems that it has solved? How might your faith inform your understandings or decisions?

Moravian History 3.0 The Creation of History

Now there are still two very important aspects of history. First of all, history has continued to be made since the last history books were published. The definitive history of the Moravian Church (J. Taylor and Kenneth G. Hamilton's *History of the Moravian Church: The Renewed Unitas Fratrum 1722-1957*), was published in 1967, nearly half a century ago. Since that time the numbers of Moravians have risen in some places and declined in others. There are countries in Africa that now have more Moravians than there are in Europe and that had no Moravians when this book was written. Finally since this book was written, Moravians in North America have begun to ordain women. Virtually all Moravian provinces do this now, though it is more difficult for women in some provinces than others. As this practice has become more widespread we have learned that Moravians have actually been very progressive when it came to roles of women within the church, especially during the times of the Zinzendorfs.

The Countess von Zinzendorf played a crucial role in the administration of the church during her lifetime (1700-1756). She herself came from a noble household with a rich heritage of talented women who used their positions, wealth, and skills to improve the lives of everyday people and to serve God. The Countess drew from her rich legacy and wrote hymns, travelled on behalf of the church, offered spiritual counsel and founded institutions for the betterment of women, in addition giving birth to twelve children, four of whom became notable leaders of the Moravian Church in their own right, and managing both the Zinzendorf household and many of the church's financial affairs. She was truly a remarkable woman who is just beginning to receive the recognition she is due.

The Countess also set the tone for women of her day who became ordained as deaconesses. (That's right Moravian ordained women in the 18th century!) We know that two hundred women were ordained before 1760, and even after the Count and Countess von Zinzendorf died, Moravians continued to ordain women for nearly a generation. For North American readers it may be interesting to note that women were ordained in both Bethlehem and Salem, and that most of the churches in Forsyth County that we founded before 1800 were served by at least two ordained women at some point before 1800. We now also know that the Zinzendorfs were becoming more rather than less progressive in terms of the understandings of women in leadership positions, and in their understanding of the Holy Spirit as the Mother of the Church.

The second additional aspect of history is that you and I will continue to make it. Personally, I believe it is important that we take note of the 18th century Moravian understandings of women, and of human understandings of the feminine within the Divine (Yes, historians do have opinions, in addition to being interested in the facts!). I say this because while the Moravians started ordaining women in the 18th century, they also stopped ordaining women in the 18th century. The Southern Baptists also started and stopped ordaining women, but for them this happened in the 20th century. The vast majority of Christians, both in the United States, and throughout the world, still do not ordain women. Will we continue to uphold this important role for women, or will we give in to the prevailing understandings of women's roles in the churches once again? The answer may well depend upon what you and I learn from our history.

OPTIONAL QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES: MORE HISTORY

- 1) What do you know about the world in 1967? How has it changed since then? How do you feel about these changes?
- 2) Ask some more chronologically advanced members of your congregation how your church has changed since 1967? What do they think of these changes? What do you think of these changes?
- 3) As you think back on this study, what issues do you feel are most important coming from our history? What do you think our church needs to do in light of these?
- 4) What do you hope future historians will say about you and the church of our present and our future?

Moravian history is much more than just talking about three dead men. Studying Moravian history gives us the opportunity to learn how our ancestors dealt with the challenges that faced them, meeting many of them with such discernment and determination that it led to sharing the Gospel throughout the world, even to the point of influencing your life (or else you wouldn't be reading this). Learning from both their mistakes and their successes can help us as we seek to faithfully follow, not them, but the same Lord that they were trying to follow.