

This Month in Moravian History

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Unity Prayer Watch: 1957 - 2007

In 1957 the Unity Prayer Watch was installed as a worldwide prayer chain within the Moravian Church. Unity Synod, meeting in Bethlehem in 1957 for the first time after the Second World War, reaffirmed this suggestion by the women of Herrnhut. For the past 50 years Moravians from all around the world have shared in the Unity Prayer Watch.

The origins of the Prayer Watch date back to the beginnings of the Moravian Church in Herrnhut. The celebration of Holy Communion on August 13, 1727, made the Herrnhuters believe that God had a special mission for their newly founded community. In the days following this awakening a group of men and women decided to establish a "holy watch over the congregation." In the Herrnhut diary we read: "During these days we deliberated that it is necessary for a congregation, that is in its earliest childhood and where Satan can easily make himself be felt, not to fall asleep during the day nor during the night and that we defend ourselves and continuously keep guard over the congregation. Therefore it was resolved to light a voluntary sacrifice in our town that would burn day and night." Within a few days, on August 25, enough brothers and sisters had signed up so that each one could take one hour of the day or night to pray in his or her room. This prayer watch, for which the biblical inspiration was taken from Isaiah 62:6-7, was called the *Stundengebet* or *hourly intercession*.

Whenever new congregations were established the hourly intercession was also introduced. Men and women were chosen for this office, even though it could be difficult to fill all the time slots. Sometimes it was decided that one brother or sister would be responsible for a full day of 24 hours. Because Moravians considered every activity a service to God it was possible to participate in the hourly intercession during work or even during sleep. Not being too strict, Moravians sometimes left the night hours open if not enough people were available to fill them.

After continuing successfully for decades in many Moravian congregations, it became clear that it was

becoming more difficult to find enough volunteers for the hourly intercession. The 1801 General Synod resolved that the participants should henceforth be appointed by the lot, but the disadvantages of this practice became apparent at the next synod. In 1818 General Synod had to acknowledge that those appointed by the lot to take part in the hourly intercession sometimes showed little interest in performing this office. Seven years later, General Synod recognized that the hourly intercession could no longer be a requirement for each congregation.

In reality the hourly intercession had already been discontinued within many congregations; some congregations replaced the hourly intercession with a prayer group.

In 1957 the worldwide Moravian Church celebrated its 500th anniversary. The women of Herrnhut, Germany, proposed a revival of the hourly intercession as a prayer watch for the entire church during the anniversary

year. After the Second World War a new awareness of the worldwide fellowship within the Moravian Church had developed. Especially for Moravians behind the Iron Curtain who had lost their ability to travel freely, it was of utmost importance to know that they were part of a larger Unity. The proposal by the Herrnhut women was met with great enthusiasm in all parts of the Unity. At the 1957 Unity Synod the u.s. Southern Province suggested the continuation of the Unity Prayer Watch, which was unanimously approved.



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image: *Das Anbeten* or *Prosternation*, Moravian engraving
in *Zeremonienbüchlein* (1757).