

This Month in Moravian History

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Synod of 1857: End of the Unity?

In the mid-19th century the Moravian Church faced a constitutional crisis that could well have ended the international Unitas Fratrum. While American Moravians were pushing for independence, others did not want to give up the centralized governance, based in Germany.

The Moravian Church had always known a highly centralized form of administration. 18th-century Moravians did not consider themselves to be a member of a particular congregation, but rather part of a world-wide unity. All congregations were organized on the same principles, and life in Bethlehem, Pa., was not much different from life in, for example, the Moravian congregation of Sarepta, Russia. This strong sense of global fellowship was reflected in the government of the church.

After the death of Count Zinzendorf (1760) General Synod was the highest authority of the world-wide Moravian Church. General Synod consisted of representatives of all branches of the Unity and met at regular intervals in Herrnhut, Germany. The executive leadership was placed in the hands of the Unity Elders' Conference (UEC). All important matters were coordinated by the Unity Elders' Conference: calls of ministers, purchase and sale of property, the beginning of new work, or the closing of a congregation. The UEC resided in Germany; for many years its offices were located in Zinzendorf's old manor house in Berthelsdorf.

In years when transatlantic communication was slow, this centralized form of administration proved problematic. During the 19th century the Moravian Church was changing. The national identities of Moravians in America, in Britain and in Germany became more distinct. Traditional communal forms that had originally been the same in all Moravian congregations grew outdated and were abandoned.

By the mid-19th century American Moravians felt the current constitution hindered the church in its development. Many of the resolutions made by General Synod did not apply to the American situation, and there did not seem to be much opportunity to discuss specific American issues at General Synod. Many American Moravians felt like "the stepchildren of the Unity" (Hamilton, 238). In 1847 Americans asked for more self-control. The next year

General Synod approved the establishment of Provincial Synods in America and the institution of the Provincial Elders' Conference as the executive of the province.

The General Synod of 1857 had to consider the future constitution of the Unity. Synod chose to establish three provinces within the Unity: a British province, a European-Continental province and an American province (after 1899:

Northern and Southern Province). Each of these provinces had its own Provincial Synod and executive Provincial Elders' Conference (PEC). From then on each province had the authority to supervise its congregations and to legislate in provincial matters. General Synod, however, remained the highest authority in the Unity, especially regarding church doctrine, the administration of the missions and other Unity undertakings. The Synod of 1857 established the

principles of the constitution of the Moravian Church that are still valid today. Today the Moravian Church is comprised of 19 official provinces. Unity Synod (the current name for General Synod) meets every seven years.

What seems so sensible today, must have been a courageous step for the Moravians of 1857. Before Synod met, many of the delegates feared the idea of a world-wide fellowship was going to end. "I thought we were going to bury the Unity," one delegate remarked. At the conclusion of the Synod Johann Martin Nitschmann, president of the Synod, said: "We realized we had to make changes. This made us stronger. Our bond has not been torn, but it has grown. We still feel inseparable."

Sources: synod records; Hamilton, *History of the Moravian Church* (1967). Image: View of the Widows' House in Herrnhut, where the General Synod met (Scholz/Gregor).



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