

This Month in Moravian History

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commemorating events from Moravian History

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The Cup of Covenant

The cup of covenant is one of the more unusual celebrations in the Moravian tradition. Although unknown to many Moravians, the cup of covenant is still celebrated in some places. This month we commemorate the first celebration of the cup of covenant in Herrnhut on August 17, 1733 – 275 years ago.

The celebration of the cup of covenant is a tradition that goes back to the early years of the Renewed Moravian Church in Herrnhut, Germany. On August 17, 1733, a lovefeast was held in Herrnhut before the departure of a group of missionaries on their voyage to St. Croix. Following the lovefeast they continued to Zinzendorf's room where the cup of covenant was celebrated. This celebration did not remain a one-time event. In the Moravian Church the cup of covenant became a liturgical celebration during which the entire congregation or a specific group within the church renewed its unity and commitment to the service of Christ.

In 1735 Christian David described the ceremony as follows: "After the address an elder gives a blessing to all the brethren who are present. While the cup is being passed around and we drink from it, everyone gives a personal blessing to his neighbor, after which we give one another the kiss of peace."

In the Moravian liturgical tradition the cup of covenant is not to be confused with Holy Communion, although terminology and form remind us of Communion. Whereas the cup that is shared during the celebration of the Lord's Supper is based on the cup that Jesus took *after* the meal, the cup of covenant goes back to the cup that was shared by Jesus and the disciples at the beginning of the Passover meal (Luke 22:17). The cup of covenant is not a sacrament, such as Baptism and Holy Communion, but a sign of the renewed commitment to service of those who partake in it.

The resolutions of the 1775 General Synod state the following: "The intention [of the cup of covenant] is to praise God for particular displays of mercy as well as to unite together in new faithfulness in serving Jesus and adhering to the principles of the church. This intention is to be explained clearly to the group that

shares this cup of covenant."

The cup of covenant was not celebrated very frequently. Traditionally, the "workers of the church" (such as the ministers, the local helpers and the teachers in the Moravian schools) would join in the cup of covenant once a year. Today the cup is sometimes celebrated with individual boards or at youth conferences, but it is mostly the ordained clergy that gather for the cup of covenant. It is customary to do this is on or around September 16th, the festival for the servants of the church.

The cup of covenant is a simple gathering; usually an explanation of the event is given and a cup of wine or grape juice is passed around, during the singing of hymns. Traditionally, in order to avoid confusion with Holy Communion, white wine was used. The Book of Order of the Southern Province calls it "a specially good opportunity for them [to] mutually strengthen the consciousness of their opportunity for the leading of the Divine Chief Shepherd and Elder, Jesus Christ, and therewith of their high and holy calling and of their common debt of service" (par. 1364).

Image: from the German Moravian hymnal of 1967. Sources: *The Moravian* (Sept./Oct. 2006); *Jahrbuch der Brüdergemeine* (1937/38).



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