

This Month in Moravian History

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Women Priests in the Moravian Church in 1758

During an ordination service in Herrnhut on May 12, 1758, three women were ordained as “priestesses” or presbyters of the Moravian Church: Elisabeth Layritz, Marie von Zinzendorf, and Magdalena Vierorth. It was a memorable ordination service during which not only the three priestesses but also eighteen deaconesses, twenty-seven deacons, six priests (presbyters) and two (male) bishops were ordained.

The ordination of women was unheard of in the 18th century. Even today, some Christian religious groups do not allow women to be ordained, based upon Paul’s admonition that “women should be silent in the churches” (1 Cor. 14:34). Zinzendorf, leader of the Moravians, however, interpreted this bible text as being specifically intended for the situation in Corinth and he did allow women a much more prominent religious role.



In 1745 Count Zinzendorf decided to ordain a group of 20 women as deaconesses and in the years to follow many other women were ordained as well. Zinzendorf was influenced by other radical Pietists such as Gottfried Arnold, who in his widely-read publications had demonstrated the existence of “diaconissas” and “presbyteriae” in the early Christian church.

In 1745 the Moravian Church adopted the system of various degrees of pastoral service from the Ancient Unity: acolytes, deacons, presbyters, and bishops. Acolytes were unordained ministerial helpers, whereas deacons, presbyters, and bishops were members of the ordained ministry. From the beginning women were accepted as acolytes as well as ordained as deacons. It seems that Zinzendorf intended to consecrate women as presbyters,

although he was hesitant to do so in public. During the ceremony on May 12, 1758, Zinzendorf announced he had ordained other priestesses in the previous years, however, without making these events public. Even among Moravians the prominent role women played was controversial; in many cases Zinzendorf had to defend this policy before the other leaders of the church. During the service on May 12, Zinzendorf declared: “The sisters also have a right to the priesthood. They have among themselves and in their capacity the same three first degrees of the congregational offices [acolytes, deacons, and presbyters] as the brethren.” As they knelt, Zinzendorf and Anna Nitschmann laid their hands on the sisters’ heads and consecrated the three women as priestesses while the choir sang a doxology that has since remained part of every Moravian ordination service (“Glory Be to Thy Most Holy Priesthood”).

What were the responsibilities of ordained women in the early Moravian Church? Ordained women were allowed to perform pastoral services within their respective choirs and to give an address in meetings with only women present; they also assisted in the distribution of Holy Communion, and some of them (the so-called archdeaconesses) even performed ordinations of other women. The office of the archdeaconess came closest to that of a male bishop. Although the women’s responsibilities were confined to the female realm and therefore not equal to those of their male counterparts, their roles were quite extraordinary when compared to other groups of the time.

Zinzendorf’s successors did not approve of women in prominent leadership roles. Although the ordination of deaconesses continued until 1790, female presbyters were no longer consecrated. Women continued their service to the church, although they played their roles not as openly as when Zinzendorf was still alive. It would not be until 1967 when a Moravian woman was ordained again in Dresden, Germany.

image: consecration of female and male acolytes, 1754 (courtesy Unity Archives, Herrnhut)

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