

# This Month in Moravian History

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commemorating events from Moravian History

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## Michael Weisse, Hymn Writer and Composer

*On March 19, 1534, Michael Weisse passed away in the Bohemian town of Lanškroun (Landskron). Weisse is well known as the editor of the first German hymn book of the Unity of Brethren. His hymn texts and tunes are still widely used within the Moravian Church and beyond. This month we commemorate the 475<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death.*

Not much is known about Weisse's early years. Scholars assume he was born in Nysa (Neisse), today a town in southwestern Poland in 1488. He was probably enrolled at the University of Krakow in 1504. After completing his studies he became a monk in Wrocław (Breslau) and he was ordained a Roman-Catholic priest. This was a time of intense theological discussion between reformers of the church and defenders of the existing order. In 1518 Weisse left the monastery and joined the Unity of Brethren in Litomišl (Leitomischl) in Bohemia.

Weisse soon became a leader of the Unity. He oversaw the German-speaking congregations in Lanškroun and Fulnek. Together with Jan Roh (Horn) he made various visits to Martin Luther to discuss theological matters. In 1531 he was consecrated a presbyter of the Unity and in 1532 he became a member of the Inner Council, the leading council of the Unity.

Weisse was most famous for the hymn book he published in 1531: *Ein New Gesengbuchlen* (A New Hymn Book). This hymnal was intended to be used by the German-speaking congregations of the Unity. Weisse translated many of the Czech hymns and added texts of his own; he also composed some of the tunes. Because of the poetic quality of his work, many of Weisse's translations and compositions made it into the general German body of Protestant song, and from there into Anglo-American hymnals.

In some respects Weisse held theological views that were not generally accepted by the Unity. This becomes clear when one compares the revised hymn



book of 1544 with Weisse's original edition. Jan Roh, the editor of the 1544 edition, expressed his discontent that Weisse had included some Communion hymns that did not reflect the Unity's teachings. Weisse believed Holy Communion was a symbolic meal, with no real presence of Christ in the elements (bread and wine); his Communion hymns reflected this view. The Unity, however, taught that Christ was present in the sacrament "spiritually, powerfully, and truly." When the leaders discovered Weisse's hymn texts, they required that he change them. Before he was able to do so, Weisse died of food poisoning in

1534.

The current American Moravian hymnal contains five hymn texts that are connected to Weisse and eight tunes composed by him. Among these hymns are "Once He Came in Blessing" and "Join We All With One Accord."

We use the current Czech and Polish spelling of place names with the German name between parentheses.

Sources: D. Crews, *Faith, Love, Hope* (2008); Andreas Marti in RGG, s.v. "Weisse." Hymn books from the collection of the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem. Images; title page of Weisse's hymn book and his crest.

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