

This Month in Moravian History

A monthly newsletter published by the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem,
commemorating events from Moravian History

No. 48

November 2009

"A lovely harmony of voices and instruments: Gregor's Tune Book"

In 1784 Christian Gregor published a tune book containing some 500 melodies. Gregor's tune book became the foundation for Moravian hymn singing throughout the world. There was a unique feature about Gregor's tune book: the tunes were numbered. The numbering of hymn tunes continues to this day and is one of the lesser known Moravian customs.

"One cannot imagine anything more agreeable and more solemn than the singing of a congregational gathering, in which one perceives a lovely harmony of voices and musical instruments, especially the organ." Christian Gregor wrote these words in the introduction to his tune book. Congregational singing was an important feature of Moravian liturgy. Many services, such as the *Singstunde*, Holy Communion, and the Christmas Eve vigil, consisted almost exclusively of congregational singing.

Gregor was born in Dirsdorf, Silesia, on January 23, 1723.

When he was seventeen, Gregor went to visit the Moravians in Herrnhut and in 1742 he joined the church. Gregor served as music director in Herrnhut, Herrnhag, and Zeist, Netherlands. In 1751 he married Susanne Rasch (1725-1799) who was a teacher in the Moravian girls' school in the Netherlands. Gregor was



also a member of the Unity Elders' Conference, the general administrative board of the world-wide Unity. In that capacity, Gregor visited the American churches in 1770-1772. He was consecrated a bishop in 1789.

Gregor's most important contributions to the Moravian Church were in the field of music. He composed numerous anthems and he was the editor of the German Moravian hymnal of 1778, for which he re-wrote and shortened hundreds of Moravian hymns. Because the printing of tunes was expensive and took up much space on the page, 18th-century hymn books were often printed with only the name of the tune rather than the music; this meant that the organist had to search for the music. Moravians designed a more ingenious system. They arranged all the tunes according to meter. Then they numbered the tunes, beginning with the shortest. According to this system, for example, melody 20 was longer than mel. 15 and shorter



than mel. 25. Hymns with the same meter had the same number but received an additional letter. Consequently, tune 96a could be used for the same hymn text as tune 96b, 96c, or 96d. This system made it easy for organists to substitute one melody for a parallel tune when it seemed a better fit for the general context of the service.

Although Gregor's hymn book codified the numbering of hymns in print, the system can be attributed to another Moravian composer, Johann Daniel Grimm, who had developed it in the 1750s. Grimm's chorale book, however, was never printed and only existed in various handwritten copies.

Moravians liked the system and continue using it today! The current American hymn book still shows the original Gregor hymn numbers (although not consistently), and Moravian hymnals from some other countries also use the Gregor system. In Germany, however, the Gregor numbers are no longer used. Because the 1960 German chorale book included many new tunes, it was decided to assign all the tunes with new numbers. However, the chorale book still followed the original principles: the tunes are arranged by meter, beginning with the shortest, and parallel tunes are distinguished by letters.

This month the German Moravian church will publish a new chorale book. Yet again, all the tunes are re-numbered but the organizing principles remain the same. The only difference is that parallel tunes are not distinguished by a letter but by an additional number. Some old customs never die!