

This Month in Moravian History

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Moravian East/West Synod Meets in the Midst of the Cold War, 1986

More than forty years after the end of the Second World War a Synod of the European Continental Moravian Church was able to meet in Herrnhut, East Germany. Delegates from both East and West came together despite the political divisions caused by the Cold War. For those present but also for the entire church, this was an important and historically significant event.

When Germany was divided by the Allied Forces after World War II, the Moravian Church in Germany faced a difficult situation with congregations on both sides of the dividing line. Herrnhut, traditionally the administrative center of the European Continental Province, lay in the Eastern zone occupied by the Soviets. For that reason, several members of the Provincial Board went to the West in 1945 to secure Moravian interests in the West. In Bad Boll, a small Moravian-owned spa resort near Stuttgart, they established an administrative center to oversee Moravian congregations in West Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden. The churches in East Germany continued to fall under Herrnhut's jurisdiction. Very soon it became obvious that the division of Germany was not going to end in the foreseeable future.

The European Continental Province of the Moravian Church was now divided into two districts: District Herrnhut in the East and District Bad Boll in the West, each with its own Synod and Provincial Board. Despite this factual separation into two districts, European Moravians held on to their ideal of unity; formally the European Continental Province continued to exist with a common Book of Order for both districts. Practically, the districts had a great degree of independence. Each district held their own separate synods to regulate their own



affairs; however, resolutions affecting the Province as a whole (such as changes to the Book of Order) had to be passed by both synods.

By the 1980s church and society had changed so much that a revision of the Book of Order seemed necessary. Both districts began preparing for a new Book of Order and a draft proposal was read at each District Synod. However, there was a strong desire to pass the final version not separately but by a combined, Provincial Synod. Because of heavy travel restrictions imposed by the communist regime, East German citizens were not allowed to travel to the West, so this synod had to be held in the East. Fortunately, Moravian leaders succeeded in getting permission from the East German government to host this meeting in Herrnhut.

So when Synod delegates from the West traveled to Herrnhut at the end of March 1986 they received unusually polite and courteous treatment by border patrol, normally reserved for diplomatic travelers.

For one week delegates met in the Herrnhut church and debated the new Book of Order. Some of the technology, such as the Xerox machine, had to be brought in from West Germany. But when the copier broke down because of the excessive amount of copying so typical of synods, the repairman had to come from West Berlin because no East German technician had experience with these machines.

Today the significance of this combined synod may be hard to imagine, now that the end of the Cold War occurred more than twenty years ago. But in 1986 German unification seemed nearly impossible to most Europeans. The American Moravian magazine wrote: "The most important achievement of the whole week was that the Moravian Church was able to prove that the fellowship among Christians is much stronger and more powerful than any kind of division in this world, be it different cultures or different ideologies. This is our Moravian heritage, and this must be our witness for the future." In 1989 the East German regime collapsed. Germany reunited and so did the Continental Province: in 1992 the two districts, in existence since World War II, were combined once again into one province. The existence of a common Book of Order, approved in 1986 when the vision of a unified Province seemed so far away, proved fortunate.

Sources

Image: The church in Herrnhut ca. 1985. Articles in *Der Brüderbote*, no. 443 (1986); *The North American Moravian*, (June-July 1986).