This Month in Moravian History

"For True Philanthropy": the Founding of the SPG in 1787

Two-hundred and twenty-five years ago, in 1787, the Society for Propagating the Gospel (SPG) was founded as a mission society of the Moravian Church in America. The purpose of the Society, that continues to exist today, is to support the missionary work of the Moravian Church in America.

The SPG was not the first Moravian missionary society in America. August Gottlieb Spangenberg founded the Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel in 1745. This society consisted of over a hundred members, including women, and raised funds to support Moravian missions during a period of almost twenty years. In the account books we find expenses for many needs of the mission stations: spelling books, fabric, nails, as well as for travel expenses of missionaries. After 1759 the Society ceased to exist.

At the end of 1786 Bethlehem leader John Ettwein developed plans to establish a new mission society. The finances of the Moravian Church in these years were strained. As American Indians were forced to move further west the expenses for the mission work had increased. It was hoped the Society would raise additional funds and so alleviate the finances of the church. Furthermore, the tragic events of recent years played a role in the deliberations. The Revolutionary War had devastating effects on the Moravian missions along the Muskingum River in Ohio. In 1782 ninety-six American Indians were killed by Pennsylvania militiamen in the mission station of Gnadenhütten; other Moravian villages were burned and many Indians were forced from their villages.

The original preface to the by-laws of the SPG state: "The holy scripture teaches us to consider the whole race of men, as one great family. God created us all. We come all from one blood. … These are strong and solid reasons for true philanthropy, and for suppressing that inveterate malicious hatred against the Indian nations."

After approval was received from leaders of the worldwide Unity in Germany, Ettwein called a preliminary meeting of the Society in Bethlehem on September 21, 1787, to elect officers and to read the final draft of the by-laws. Ettwein himself became the first president of the Society. A few weeks later, on November 1, 1787, the first general meeting of the Society was held at 10 a.m. in the Old Chapel at Bethlehem with fifty-three members present. At this meeting new members were received and the by-laws of the SPG were approved. It was determined that all ordained ministers of the church were automatically members of the Society; others, including non-Moravians, could become members, but only church members had the right to vote. Women were not allowed as members of the SPG. This was different with the earlier Society for the Furtherance of the Gospel where women were allowed to join.

One of the first expenses of the SPG was for the erection of a marble monument at the site of Gnadenhütten (now Lehighton), Pennsylvania, where eleven Moravians were killed in the year 1755.

According to the by-laws of the SPG every member was to contribute "as often as it is found necessary." Sometimes legacies were received but there were many years that ended with a deficit. The deficit was covered by the Mission Department of the worldwide Moravian Church. Things changed in 1825, when Godfried Haga, a wealthy merchant from Philadelphia and a member of the Moravian Church in that city, died and left his entire estate of about $220,000 to the SPG.

From 1788 on, the annual meeting of the SPG was held on or around August 21st: the date the first Moravian missionaries left Herrnhut for St. Thomas in 1732. In 1921 the meeting date was moved to November 1st to commemorate the day the SPG was organized. In 1975 the name was officially changed to Society for Promoting the Gospel.

Sources