

This Month in Moravian History

Issue 87  April 2014

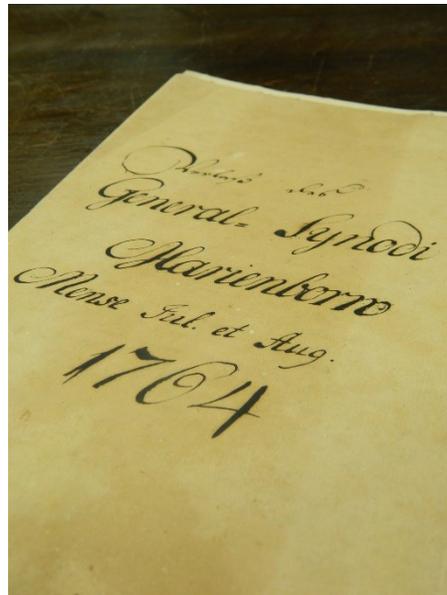
Moravians at a Crossroads: The Synod of 1764

On July 1, 1764, Johannes von Watteville opened the first General Synod of the Moravian Church after Zinzendorf's death. Representatives from all areas of Moravian activity were present to determine the future of the Moravian Church. After the death of their leader, Moravians faced many important questions: Who would become the leader of the church? What would be the future role of women in the church? How would the church be perceived by outsiders?

Ludwig von Zinzendorf, leader and founder of the modern Moravian Church, passed away in 1760. Because his death occurred in the midst of the Seven Years' War, a General Synod had to wait until the war was over. Until then, an interim administration took control and set the stage for the new direction of the church. After the war was over the lot approved to convene a Synod. Unfortunately, the date of the Synod, also determined by the lot, did not allow sufficient time for Moravian leaders from America to travel to Marienborn. Therefore, no American delegates were present at this first General Synod.

From July 1 to August 27, 1764, sixty-nine men and twenty-one women gathered as delegates in Marienborn, a manor house owned by the Moravians, located thirty miles north east of Frankfurt, Germany. It was the endeavor of this Synod to place the organization of the Moravian Church on a firm basis.

A sensitive issue was the leadership of the church. Johannes von Watteville, son-in-law of the deceased leader, had pictured himself as successor and assumed he was going to continue the leadership style of the count.



Opposed to this notion, the interim administration installed a collegiate form of governance. Johannes became a member of this board but he had to share his authority with others. At the 1764 Synod it became clear that Johannes still enjoyed much support among the delegates, receiving the greatest number of votes during the election for Synod president. It seemed the collegial form of administration as instituted during the previous years was to be overruled by Synod and that Johannes was going to be placed into the position he so much aspired. However, in a surprise move it was decided to put the matter to the lot. The lot decided Synod was to be presided over by a committee of four, including Johannes. We can only suspect that the image of Johannes presiding over Synod by himself reminded some delegates too much of the synods during the Zinzendorf era. From 1764 on, the collegial style of government became characteristic of the Moravian Church.

The 1764 Synod was very different from all previous Moravian synods. No longer did one person dominate the proceedings, but every delegate was encouraged to speak. Many resolutions were made by majority vote, but to ensure decisions were not based solely on human insight, the church came to rely more on the lot. Whenever important decisions were to be made, Synod cast the lot in order to consult Christ as Chief Elder of the church.

Another important issue was the future role of women in the church. In the past, Moravian women held important pastoral and administrative positions. Because in the 18th century women with strong positions and prophetic voices were generally associated with religious fanaticism, Moravian leaders tried to limit the visibility of women and their participation in the highest level of church life. Although women resisted the proposed changes, men were eventually successful in reducing their roles. The last time a woman was ordained before the 20th century was in 1790.

Other important decisions were made: to publish a new hymnal and liturgy book, to start a Moravian church in Russia, to found the Unity Archives, to pay off the church's debt, and formulate statutes for each congregation.

The 27th General Synod of the Moravian Church (now called Unity Synod) will convene in 2016 in Jamaica.

Sources

Minutes and Results of the 1764 General Synod, MAB.

www.moravianchurcharchives.org