

## Moravian History Text

For over five centuries the Moravian Church has proclaimed the gospel in all parts of the world. Its influence has far exceeded its numbers as it has cooperated with religious faiths on every continent and has been a visible part of the Body of Christ, the Church. Proud of its heritage and firm in its faith, the Moravian Church ministers to the needs of people wherever they are.

The name Moravian identifies the fact that this historic church had its origin in ancient Bohemia and Moravia in what is the present-day Czech Republic. In the mid-ninth century these countries converted to Christianity chiefly through the influence of two Greek Orthodox missionaries, Cyril and Methodius. They translated the Bible into the common language and introduced a national church ritual. In the centuries that followed, Bohemia and Moravia gradually fell under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Rome, but some of the Czech people protested.

The foremost of Czech reformers, John Hus (1369-1415) was a professor of philosophy and rector of the University in Prague. The Bethlehem Chapel in Prague, where Hus preached, became a rallying place for the Czech reformation. Gaining support from students and the common people, he led a protest movement against doctrinal positions of the Roman clergy and hierarchy. Hus was accused of heresy, underwent a long trial at the Council of Constance, and was burned at the stake on July 6, 1415.

## Organized in 1457

The reformation spirit did not die with Hus. The Moravian Church, or Unitas Fratrum (Unity of Brethren), as it has been officially known since 1457, arose as followers of Hus gathered on the estate of Lititz, about 100 miles east Prague, in eastern Bohemia, and organized the church. This was 60 years before Martin Luther began his reformation and 100 years before the establishment of the

Anglican Church. By 1467 the Moravian Church had established its own ministry, and in the years that followed three orders of the ministry were defined: deacon, presbyter and bishop.

### Growth, Persecution, Exile

By 1517 the Unity of Brethren numbered at least 200,000 with over 400 parishes. Using a hymnal and catechism of its own, the church promoted the Scriptures through its two printing presses and provided the people of Bohemia and Moravia with the Bible in their own language.

A bitter persecution, which broke out in 1547, led to the spread of the Brethren's Church to Poland where it grew rapidly. By 1557 there were three provinces of the church: Bohemia, Moravia and Poland. The Thirty Years War (1618-1648) brought further persecution to the Brethren's Church, and the Protestants of Bohemia were severely defeated at the battle of White Mountain in 1620.

The prime leader of the Unitas Fratrum in these tempestuous years was Bishop John Amos Comenius (1592-1670). He became world-renowned for his progressive views of education and was offered the first presidency of Harvard. Comenius, however, never came to America, living most of his life in exile in England and in Holland where he died. His prayer was that some day the "hidden seed" of his beloved Unitas Fratrum might once again spring to new life.

### Renewed in the 1700's

The eighteenth century saw the renewal of the Moravian Church through the patronage of Count Nicholas Louis von Zinzendorf, a pietist nobleman in Saxony. Some Moravian families fleeing persecution in Bohemia and Moravia found refuge on Zinzendorf's estate in 1722 and built the community of Herrnhut. The

new community became the haven for many more Moravian refugees. Count Zinzendorf encouraged them to keep the discipline of the Unitas Fratrum, and he gave them the vision to take the gospel to the far corners of the globe. August 13, 1727, marked the culmination of a great spiritual renewal for the Moravian Church in Herrnhut, and in 1732 the first missionaries were sent to the West Indies.

### To America in 1735

After an unsuccessful attempt to establish a Moravian settlement in Georgia (1735-1740), the Moravians settled in Pennsylvania on the estate of George Whitefield. Moravian settlers purchased 500 acres to establish the settlement of Bethlehem in 1741. Soon they bought the 5,000 acres of the Barony of Nazareth from Whitefield's manager, and the two communities of Bethlehem and Nazareth became closely linked in their agricultural and industrial economy. Other settlement congregations were established in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Maryland. All were considered frontier centers for the spread of the gospel, particularly in mission to the American Indians.

Bishop Augustus Spangenberg led a party of men to survey a 100,000 acre tract of land in North Carolina, which came to be known as Wachau after an Austrian estate of Count Zinzendorf. The name, later anglicized to Wachovia, became the center of growth for the church in that region. Bethabara, Bethania and Salem (now Winston-Salem) were the first Moravian settlements in North Carolina.

Bethlehem in Pennsylvania and Winston-Salem in North Carolina became the headquarters of the two provinces (North and South), which developed as the Moravian Church in North America became established as an autonomous church body after the Unity Synod of 1848. The church spread out from the geographical centers of Bethlehem and Winston-Salem, following German

emigrants to the Midwest. At the end of the nineteenth century they responded to the spiritual needs of Moravian refugees of German ancestry who were fleeing to western Canada because of persecution in Eastern Europe. Such wide geographical spread caused the Northern Province to be divided into Eastern, Western and Canadian Districts.

After World War II, strong pushes for church extension took the Northern Province to Southern California (where only an Indian mission had existed since 1890) as well as to some Eastern, Midwestern and Canadian sites. The Southern Province added numerous churches in the Winston-Salem area, throughout North Carolina and extended its outreach to Florida and to Georgia. The Moravian Church has congregations in 17 states of the USA and two provinces of Canada.