

# The Moravian Mission Machine

By Dean Taylor



**"Our Lamb has conquered,  
let us follow Him."**

Revival, by its very definition, implies something is brought to life that was once sleeping or dead. Throughout history, God has repeatedly sent revival to awaken His church from sleepy self-indulgence to an active, world-changing force. It is interesting how history repeats itself, and it becomes apparent that we will never "arrive" at any destination on this earth in which we will outgrow our need for this continual, life-changing phenomenon we call revival. The church lives or dies in direct proportion to the measure in which it operates under this Holy Spirit anointing. In Acts 2 and 4 when revival came at Pentecost, it didn't just usher in great feelings; it was the birth of the church—a gathered, called-out people.

These people changed the world around them. When you read the book of Acts, you encounter the amazing testimony of a people who were obsessed with the propagation of the Kingdom of God. These radical brethren sold everything they had and changed all their plans and earthly attachments, just to be followers of Jesus. Throughout the centuries—once in a great while—it happens again. When it happens to an individual, it makes a great testimony; but when it happens to a church—it makes history.

Not far up the road from me, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, are the remains of a Moravian mission community from the 1700s. A few years ago, impressed with some Moravian literature I was reading, I decided to do some research on this little mission outpost. Early on in my study, I could hardly believe what I was reading. While I had hoped to encounter some good mission stories—what I discovered was so much more than that!

## Visit to Bethlehem

As soon as I stepped into the old graveyard in Bethlehem, aptly named "God's Acre," I immediately noticed

that, there amongst the stones of the founding bishop and other well-known missionaries of the time, were dispersed the stones of numerous American Indians. One tombstone really caught my attention. It read simply, "Joseph, a Mohican, Departed July 21st, 1746." I thought, "Wow, so few words—but what a story!"

At the time, each stone seemed to conceal a treasure trove of untold mission stories—all seemingly locked between the dusty pages of time. Eager to know more, I dug deeper, and what I discovered was just how effective this often overlooked mission outpost actually was. Between this humble little community in Bethlehem, PA and their sister community in Herrnhut, Germany, their mission activity spanned an amazing distance—four continents in under 14 years. What's more, their converts were successfully disciplined and trained, many of them going on to become pastors and missionaries themselves. I was impressed when I read this, but when I stopped to consider the conditions of the time in which they lived, I was simply astounded:

- No modern transportation
- No modern communication, such as Internet, e-mail, cell phones, etc.
- No hospitals or antibiotics
- No developed postal system

Indeed, I now found myself smack-dab in the middle of one of the biggest treasure troves of mission histories I had ever read! I knew this had to be the work of God among another revived and called-out people, but I also knew I needed to know more. And I knew that if I wanted to fully understand the Moravians of Bethlehem, I would first need to know where they came from.

## How did they do it?

### From Moravia to Herrnhut

Forged in the kilns of centuries of revival fires, Moravia (located in the modern day Czech Republic) was a melting pot of radical Christianity for over a millennium. From the Cathari, Bogomili, Albigenses and Waldensians, to the Hussites, Hutterites, and Czech Brethren (*Unitas Fratrum*), this area gave birth to a heritage of radical Christianity like no other.

But in the 1700s, a new wave of Catholic persecution came upon the non-Catholic church all over Moravia. As a result, many recanted and some grew cold. Those who refused to recant were severely persecuted. Then, in 1722, a small remnant of the *Unitas Fratrum*<sup>1</sup> felt the Lord urging them to flee to nearby Germany. Once in Germany, they ended up on the property of a young, newly married count named Ludwig von Zinzendorf.<sup>2</sup> Ludwig had a deep desire to follow Christ in a radical way. As Moravians moved onto his property, he developed a relationship with them. Ultimately, Ludwig was so moved by their devotion to Christ and their godly example that he soon joined them. Together, they propelled one another on to greater devotion. Eventually, God would bless them with something truly extraordinary.

Not long after the first group of refugees settled at Herrnhut, Christian David (one of the original Moravian leaders) had a longing to invite more of his fellow brethren back in Moravia to escape to Herrnhut. Subsequently, in August 1723, he returned to Herrnhut with many new believers. However, rapid growth had its predictable effect and substantially stressed the little community. Instead of an idyllic “retreat” for the spiritually inclined, the surrounding area, lying as it did near the borders of Silesia and Bohemia, became a raw refugee camp. There were all kinds of Christians showing up—Schwenkfelders, Anabaptists, Lutherans, Calvinists, and more.

<sup>1</sup> Sometimes called “The Unity of Brothers” or “The United Brethren.” This is not to be confused with the later group in the USA of the same name. The *Unitas Fratrum* was a small branch of the Hussites who practiced the Sermon on the Mount (most Hussites did not), beginning in the early 1400s.

<sup>2</sup> His life is a story in itself!

Desiring to be more intimately involved with what was going on at Herrnhut, Ludwig and his wife eventually moved into the community and threw in their lot with the Moravian refugees. Quickly sensing the unrest among the refugees, Ludwig and his wife invited all the settlers to join into “bands” for interpersonal responsibility, confession, and prayer. Several times a week, members of the bands—usually from three to half a dozen—voluntarily met to share their thoughts. They shared their temptations, pointed out faults, and opened themselves up to one another in the presence of God. Miracles happened, but even more amazing happenings were yet to come. (Hoover, 170-171)

### “Brotherly Agreement”

The Moravian refugees had come from a church heritage that believed that the Holy Spirit could lead the church in both spiritual and practical matters. As Christ’s incarnated witness on the earth, they believed that when they—Christ’s church—met together to pray, the Spirit would lead them to unity in just about every matter. In May of 1727, with the help of the settlers from Moravia, Ludwig drew up a plan of “brotherly agreement.” This agreement gave the growing community some needed expectations and boundaries. Then, following their ancient custom, the people



A Moravian prayer meeting.

at Herrnhut chose four men to be their overseers: Christian David, Georg and Melchior Nitschmann, and Christoph Hoffman. On May 12, 1727, they all signed their names and shook hands, promising to keep the rules in Christ’s peace. This was a time of radical, and at times even painful, transparency and honesty.

Zinzendorf wrote in his journal about one of these accountability meetings saying, “David Nitschmann and Christian David sat at my table today. We took stock of ourselves and told each other what still remained to mar the image of Christ in us. First I let them say what was the matter with me, then I said what was still the matter with them.” (Hoover, 175) With this kind of sincerity and honesty, a genuine unity started to emerge. And it was with this heart of unity that they began to call upon God in prayer.

## Prayer

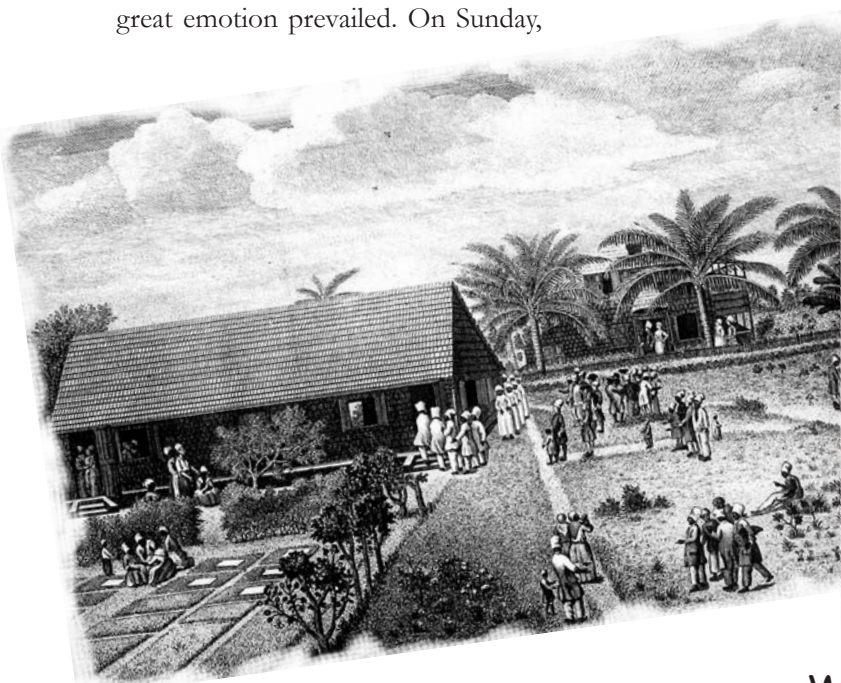
The historical account of the prayer life of these people is tremendously challenging. One such account reads:

On July 16th, the Count poured out his soul in a prayer accompanied with a flood of tears. This prayer produced an extraordinary effect. The whole community began praying as never before. On 22 July, many of the community covenanted together on their own accord to meet often to pour out their hearts in prayer and hymns.

On 5 August, the Count spent the whole night in prayer with about twelve or fourteen others following a large meeting for prayer at midnight, where great emotion prevailed. On Sunday,

Loud weeping and cries to heaven nearly drowned out the singing. The service did not end until, as Ludwig [Zinzendorf] described it later, true *Herzengemeinschaft* (communion of the heart) had descended upon them all. Where they had been one body before, now they were one in spirit, the Spirit of Christ. ... Those who had seriously annoyed each other, now embraced and promised to serve one another in peace, so the whole congregation came back to Herrnhut as newborn children. (Hoover, 174)

Following the communion service, their prayer meetings did not stop, but increased in both commitment and fervency.



10 August, Pastor Rothe, while leading the service at Herrnhut, was overwhelmed by the power of the Lord about noon. He sank down into the dust before God. So did the whole congregation. They continued till midnight in prayer and singing, weeping and praying.” (Greenfield)

## Revival

The Lord had blessed them with unity in practical matters and in prayer. Then, on August 13, 1727, Zinzendorf called for a special communion service. During this service, God poured out a special blessing on them. One participant reported, “No one present could tell exactly what happened on that Wednesday morning, 13 August 1727, at the specially called Communion service. They hardly knew if they had been on earth or in heaven.”

Another account of that morning reads:

Wherever they moved, the Moravians found here (L. to R.) in St. Croix (West Indies), Guiana (the Native Americans), Labrador

## Non-stop prayer begins

One historian records the beginning of the famed, non-stop prayer chain of the Moravians. While there is nothing dramatic about the account, it does give us a glimpse of the simplicity of spirit behind the prayer burden: “The thought struck some brethren and sisters that it might be well to set apart certain hours for the purpose of prayer, at which seasons all might be reminded of its excellency and be induced by the promises annexed to fervent, persevering prayer to pour out their hearts before the Lord.”

So it was, that on the 26th of August, twenty-four men and twenty-four women covenanted together to continue

praying in intervals of one hour each, day and night, each hour allocated by lots to different people. On August 27th, this new regulation officially began. Others joined the intercessors and the number involved increased to seventy-seven. They all carefully observed the hour which had been appointed for them. The intercessors had a weekly meeting where prayer needs were given to them.

The children, also touched powerfully by God, began a similar plan among themselves. It is reported that those who heard their infant supplications were deeply moved. The children's prayers and supplications had a powerful effect on the whole community. (Greenfield)

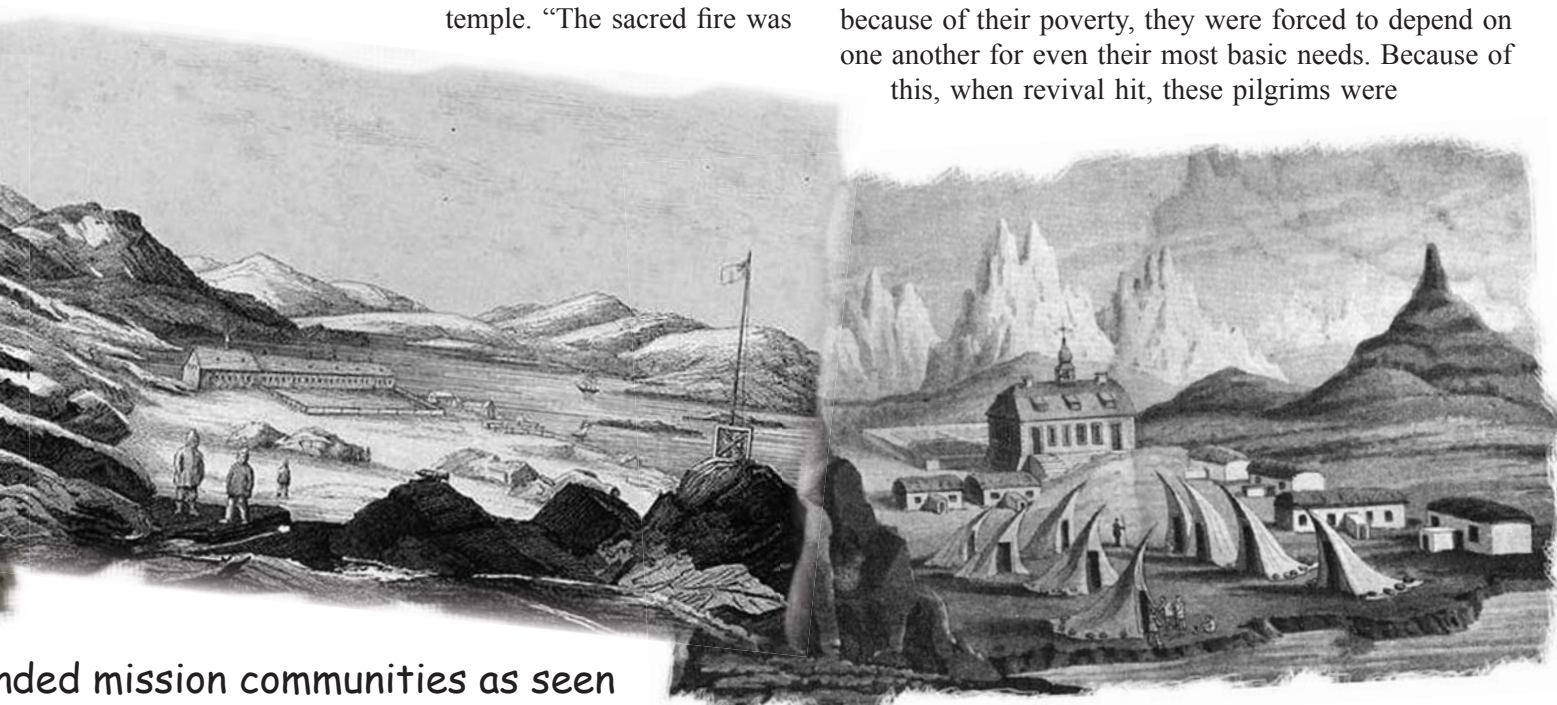
The Moravians felt that the call to nonstop prayer was likened to the Old Testament typology of the fire in the temple. "The sacred fire was

## But there's more ...

If the revival would have stopped there, I would have been impressed enough. But as I kept reading, I found that what happened next was even more extraordinary. Sadly, it's this next part that you never hear about in the typical accounts of the Moravians—and for good reason. Nothing about what happened next fits into our modern American idea of what we call "normal" church life.

## Disclaimer

Since most of the Moravians were poor refugees, they had a few advantages over us. First of all, they were already strangers and pilgrims in their new land. Their attachment to their surroundings was minimal. Secondly, because of their poverty, they were forced to depend on one another for even their most basic needs. Because of this, when revival hit, these pilgrims were



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never permitted to go out on the altar (Leviticus 6:13).” Likewise, they said that “a congregation is a temple of the living God, wherein he has his altar and fire; the intercession of his saints should incessantly rise up to him.”

It is said that this prayer meeting continued, unbroken, for one hundred years. Also, young people should note here that this prayer watch was started by a group of young, zealous believers. The average age of people in this community was about thirty. Zinzendorf himself was only twenty-seven. (Tarr)

poised and ready to be moved anywhere the Lamb would lead them. It was in these early days that their motto became: “The Lamb has conquered, let us follow Him”—and they meant it!

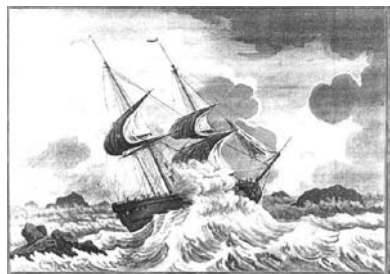
## Go ye into all the world ...

As they kept praying and asking God for more, it wasn't long before the Holy Spirit put them into action. They soon felt the call to spread the Lamb's kingdom to the ends of the earth. Feeling called to missions, the brethren sent out their first two missionaries to the island of St. Thomas. These “two young Moravian missionaries”<sup>3</sup> were named David Nitschmann and Leonhard Dober.

<sup>3</sup> Paris Reidhead's well-known sermon *Ten Shekels and a Shirt* tells the story, although some of Reidhead's details are not altogether historically accurate.

Their dedication was incredible. In order to win the souls of these slaves, they were willing to sell themselves into slavery. However, this was not legal because they were white, but they eventually found a way to get to know the slaves. These missionaries ministered in some of the worst conditions you could imagine.

Not long into the work, David Nitschmann returned to Herrnhut and later was made the first bishop of The Renewed Moravian Church. In a few years, Leonhard



**The ship "Irene" was owned by the church to transport missionaries and colonists to various parts of the world.**

Leonhard would also be called to return to Herrnhut to be involved in ministry in Europe until his death. The work in St. Thomas continued to grow rapidly as others came to fill the need. Eventually, David Nitschmann would lead the mission community to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where he is now buried in "God's Acre."

The requirement to be one of these missionaries was nothing short of total surrender. In one interesting account, a young couple who wanted to be missionaries to St. Thomas were questioned about their desire to be missionaries. The wife was called before the conference, and the following questions were asked: "Had she lived long enough for herself?" Answer: "She had lived for herself long enough." "Had she lived long enough for the church?" Answer: "She did not know." "Had she the courage to die for this?" Answer: "She had the courage and joy to do this." Her husband was asked the same questions at a later time, separately. When they asked him if he had lived long enough for himself, he said that he had not. He also said that he was uncertain whether he was willing to die in this cause. Due to his hesitancy, they were both denied the work. (Sessler, 46)

Another requirement for those desiring to be missionaries was that they be married. Many young men took a wife for this reason. But they had a name for these marriages—they called them "Streiter-Ehe," or "militant marriage." (Engel, 50) Once they met all of the requirements, their names were given to the lot, where they let the Lord decide if they would be chosen to go to the mission field or not.

Obviously, these missions were very costly. But the brethren back home not only felt like they were laboring along with them, they actually were. While the mis-

sionaries were away on the field living sacrificially, the people back home didn't think it was right for them to live for themselves. In a short amount of time, everyone in Herrnhut was working and living sacrificially so that they could collectively propagate the Gospel. Their accountability groups grew into shared living quarters and working groups. Ultimately, they shared their lives, their prayers, and their stuff.

This kind of sacrifice is hard to imagine in our day and age. I have been challenged many times in the past from the cries of missionaries in the field, preaching that if we folks back home would live like we were on the mission field, a lot more could be accomplished for the Gospel. Often, I pondered, "Wow, if any of us today really heeded these cries from the mission field, it could really be radical." After reading about the sacrificial home life of the early Moravians, I realized that when a whole church does this, it is nothing short of invincible!

To keep in touch with those back home, the missionaries kept detailed journals of their travels and progress. I saw hundreds of these journals when I visited the vault of the Bethlehem archives.<sup>4</sup> In the evenings, at the completion of their typical 16-hour workday, the home community would all go to their nightly prayer meeting, and there they would read a copy of the journals. This kept them connected to the work. It must have made 16 hours of slopping the hogs feel a lot better, knowing that what you were doing was for the propagation of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God. And it worked! As the reports from the mission field labors started coming in, they bought a few ships and started expanding their missions to other places.

## America

By 1735, they felt the call to America. Georgia was their first choice. Interestingly, on their trip over, they met a couple of young Anglican priests—John and Charles Wesley. It was on this voyage that John Wesley records in his journal that the ship ran into a hurricane. Apparently, everyone was in a panic, including Wesley—everyone, that is, except the Moravians. Wesley records in his journal on that Sunday, Oct. 25, 1735:

In the midst of the Psalm wherewith their [Moravian] service began, the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans [Moravians] calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterward, 'Were you not afraid?' He answered, 'I thank God, no.' I asked, 'But were not

<sup>4</sup> Sadly, most of them are not even translated into English yet!

your women and children afraid?’ He replied, mildly, ‘No; our women and children are not afraid to die.’ (Wesley, *Works*, 22)

After they had landed safely in America, the Moravians rebuked the young John Wesley for his lack of faith and therefore questioned his salvation. Wesley asked Bishop Spangenberg about the Moravians’ faith. The bishop took it as an opportunity to ask John Wesley some hard questions about his faith. Wesley records the account:

He said, “My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?” I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it and asked, “Do you know Jesus Christ?” I paused and said, “I know He is the Saviour of the world.” “True,” replied he; “but do you know He has saved you?” I answered, “I hope He has died to save me.” He only added, “Do you know yourself?” I said, “I do.” But I fear they were vain words. (Wesley, *Works*, 23)

Not long in Georgia, the Spanish started to make war against the British. Because of the Moravian nonresistant stand of loving their enemies, they felt it best to cut their losses and headed north to Pennsylvania. Some of the brethren had already been working in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, helping George Whitefield build a school for African-American children. However, not long after they were there, they got into a disagreement with Whitefield over predestination. Whitefield ended up firing the Moravian brothers because of their belief in free will. Once released, the brothers found the plot of land that they felt would be perfect for their mission outpost.

On Christmas Eve, 1741, Count Nicolaus von Zinzendorf, along with a small band of pilgrims, named the new community “Bethlehem.” Right from the start, this community was baptized with laser-sharp vision, purpose, and dedication.

### The start of the “Pilgrim Community”

One of the secrets for their unprecedented success at Bethlehem was due to their idea of a pilgrim community. A year before the founding of Bethlehem, Zinzendorf was forced off his own property in Saxony by the local government. Never losing an opportunity, Zinzendorf leveraged this setback to design something powerful. Zinzen-

dorf actually started a traveling mission community that he called the *Pilgergemeine* (pilgrim community). He said that it should be a “school of prophets that moves like a blessed cloud, as the wind of the Lord pushes it and makes everything fruitful.” A year later, at Bethlehem, this vision came to fruition. This pilgrim spirit is what shaped Bethlehem.

When I stopped to consider my own life ... the Starbucks coffee houses and various restaurants that I have frequented along my mission trips and preaching engagements ... well, I must confess I felt pretty sheepish reading about their journeys. Even when the pilgrim community was sailing on the way to America, they conducted themselves like a military fleet prepared for war. I found a glimpse into the dedicated lifestyle of these missionaries from a letter, now in the Bethlehem archives, that gives details of ship life.

Even when the pilgrim community was sailing on the way to America, they conducted themselves like a military fleet prepared for war.

On board ship daily texts were read and meditated upon at their morning and evening devotions; the Night Watch or Hourly Intercession was observed; one whole day was set aside as a day of prayer and thanksgiving; Love Feasts<sup>5</sup> were frequently observed.... Regular times were set apart in these floating congregations for worship, and regularity and promptness were meticulously observed. At six o’clock in the morning came the call to arise, wash, and dress; at seven was the morning blessing; at eight, breakfast; from nine to twelve, the English Brethren studied the German language and the Germans the English; at twelve, the noon meal; the afternoon was spent in some useful occupation, as spinning, sewing, mess duties, and making hammocks; at six, the evening meal; at seven, song services, one in German and another in English; at nine, a conference of the officers, class-leaders, and supervisors; and at ten the night prayer watch began, continuing until 6 A.M. These night watchmen, working in pairs and hourly shifts, spent their time in prayer and vigil.

The letter continues:

A system covering minutest details was carried out to provide cleanliness, proper decorum, and discipline. Before the sailing of the second Sea Congregation,

<sup>5</sup> Moravian “love feasts” consisted of a bun and a cup of tea or coffee. They feasted on the love to God and man, and not the natural food. Love feasts were generally a time of singing, testimony, and exhortation.

Spangenberg, who was in Europe at the time, divided it into six groups, three of men and three of women. The women, both married and unmarried, lived on one side of the ship, and all the men on the other. Each person was assigned definite duties: one struck the hour on a bell; some were teachers, others exhorters; a health committee was appointed, consisting of a doctor and assistants; some were chosen as nurses; other committees were the cook and his assistants, the steward and his assistants, those who had to wait on the tables, and finally the ship crew, all Moravians working under Captain Garrison.” (Sessler, 77-78)

## Life in Bethlehem

Needless to say, when this committed group of believers landed in America, they hit the ground running! As you can imagine, a group this dedicated had no desire to settle down into nominal church life once they arrived in America—in fact, it was just the opposite. From reading their history, it almost appears as though they were racing each other to see just how far they could go.

What you are about to read next may shock you. Before I go on to tell you some of the ways the Bethlehem mission community conducted themselves, I should preface it with a few important facts. First of all, life at Bethlehem was very different than your typical American church. Nevertheless, the amazing thing is that the Moravians did not believe their way of life was “the only way.” That kind of sectarianism was not their way of thinking at all. To be honest, I would even say that, by my taste, they were at times a bit *too* ecumenical. So, please, keep this spirit in mind as you read their radical testimony.

Furthermore, as I read about “church life” at Bethlehem, I first felt humbled and even a bit ashamed, but I then felt inspired—inspired about what God could do with a congregation today that would be totally sold out to Him in the same way they were. The Moravians at Bethlehem knew what they wanted. They wanted to follow the Lamb and they weren’t going to let anything get in their way. I think it was Leonard Ravenhill who once said that in every age God has given the church the resources and ability to evangelize the whole world—if we would just do it. I used to think that he was exaggerating. But after reading what these Moravian brethren were willing to sacrifice for the Gospel, I began to understand what Ravenhill was talking about.

**We all belong to the Savior, as He is Lord, and what we have, that all belongs to Him, and He shall dispose of it as pleases Him.**

## Possessions

Out of a burden for the lost and a desire to be used of God as pilgrims and strangers, the brothers at Bethlehem did not feel they had the time to establish their own estates and businesses. Therefore, like the early church at Pentecost, they pooled their resources and worked together in community. To them, working as soul winners and missionaries was their entire life and business.

People desiring to move into the community had to understand this type of dedication. The following contract from the Bethlehem archives shows what Moravian newcomers chose to sign—and believe.

We all belong to the Savior, as He is Lord, and what we have, that all belongs to Him, and He shall dispose of it as pleases Him. We do not, accordingly, regard ourselves as men-servants or maid-servants, who serve some man for the sake of wage, and who might demand hire or pay for their labor; but we are here as brethren and sisters, who owe themselves to the Saviour, and for His sake. We declare, therefore, not only in general, but also in particular each one for himself, that we do not for this time nor for the future pretend to any wage or have reason to pretend to any. We were received into the said Economy<sup>6</sup> with no idea of having, taking, or seeking wage, the Economy having dedicated itself to the service of the Saviour, and with no promise that wage or pay should be given; we, on the contrary, regard it a mark of grace that we are here and may labor according to the above-stated intention.” (Sessler, 85)

Wow, now that’s commitment! Keep in mind, as I said earlier, the Moravians did not feel that their way was *the only way*. Even Bishop Spangenberg, speaking about this way of life said, “It is a particular thing, and not advisable for all souls.” (Engel, 37) Nevertheless, after reading this you kind of have to say—“Wow!” Furthermore, like the disciplined life they maintained on the ship, the brethren kept looking for more effective ways to arrange their community. They soon combined their housing and working conditions for ultimate productivity with the sole intent—win more souls. Historian Engle, writing about this arrangement said:

Because they believed it to be more cost effective than forming many single-family homes, the people who built Bethlehem lived in a large communitarian

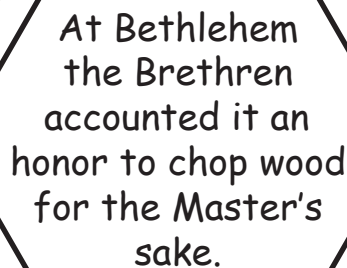
<sup>6</sup> “The Economy” was the name given to the whole system of management under which Bethlehem operated.

household. Those who stayed in town pooled their labor for efficiency's sake, so that they could maximize the number of pilgrims in the field at any one time. They shared dining rooms, dormitory-style housing, workshops, and ownership of buildings, tools, fields, and pastures, and they relied on their piety to render comprehensible all the sacrifices necessary to build a home in the rugged country of northeastern Pennsylvania. The missionary project thus led to Moravian communalism the town's most distinctive economic structure and a deliberate endeavor that maximized profit for the sake of spreading the Gospel. Bethlehem's *Oeconomy*, its communal household, embodied the Moravians; devotion to their task, and within it missionary work provided a religious context for even the smallest economic choices. During its twenty-year history it was the base from which grew all other negotiations between the spiritual and the material among Pennsylvania's Moravians. (Engel, 14)

## Work

Whenever new mission prospects came up, they often jumped at the opportunity. But these missions were costly—very costly. Accepting new mission fields meant more work for everyone back home. But again, the home congregation felt one with the work. At Bethlehem, literally everyone was a missionary. The brethren knew that the missionaries overseas were enduring deplorable living conditions, therefore they were willing to sacrifice back home as well. To them, whether you were slopping the hogs in Bethlehem or building igloos in Labrador, both were serving the Lamb. Speaking about this unity between the foreign workers and the home workers, Bishop Spangenberg wrote:

At Bethlehem the Brethren accounted it an honor to chop wood for the Master's sake; and the fireman felt his post as important as if he were guarding the Ark of the Covenant. They mix the Savior and His blood into their harrowing, mowing, washing, spinning, in short, into everything. The cattle yard becomes a temple of grace which is conducted in a priestly manner. ...Therefore, in our Economy the spiritual and the physical are as closely united as a man's body and soul, and each has a strong influence upon the other. As soon as all is not well in a brother's heart, so soon we notice it in his work. But when he is happy in Je-



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sus' wounds and his love to the Lamb is tender, then one notices that immediately in his outward conduct.

In another place, Bishop Spangenberg wrote, "...each child among us, when it is hardly four years old, spins or picks cotton for the pilgrims, serves the Gospel." (Engel, 49) Count Zinzendorf expressed it this way: "One does not work only so that one can live but rather one lives so that one can work, and when one has no more work to do, then one suffers or passes away." (Engel, 48)

One of my favorite quotes about the Bethlehem community came from my good friend, Mike Atnip. He and I were visiting Bethlehem, and as we marveled at all the factories and various mills and workshops they used solely for the propagation of missions, Mike looked at me and exclaimed, "Bethlehem was a mission machine!" His quote was my inspiration for the title of this article.

This "mission machine" mindset really made me think about the way I think about my personal career and life choices. I know that I would like to say that I consider my job and bank account completely dedicated to the Lamb, but after reading the way the Moravians did it—well, I had to wonder.

## Strong sense of membership and unity

Unlike your typical American church plant, Bethlehem was to be a place where total surrender to the cause of Christ was a prerequisite to get in the door. The brethren felt this prerequisite was crucial to winning the souls of the Americans of this outpost—both Indians and Europeans alike. They also knew that if they were not single-minded the work would be hurt. Zinzendorf was jealous to keep this unity and purity. Each person wanting to come to Bethlehem had to be sure that they meant business and that they could support the vision of the community completely.

Speaking at a brother's meeting only a year after the start of the community, Zinzendorf is already raising the red flag that they were letting people join too easily. The *Bethlehem Diary* records:

Indeed Bro. Ludwig gave the warning that Bethlehem must not be thwarted in its striving for purity. He stated that he was not satisfied with the congregation in that the individual brethren recently arrived from Europe had not been examined more carefully, prior to their having been admitted to the congregation. Brethren who arrive from a distance, even those



who have been considered outstanding brethren and confessors in the congregations from which they respectively come, must be tested, grilled, and dealt with in an impartial manner; all must depend upon humility and discernment. In this way a congregation could maintain its purity. All denominations and sects strive to grow larger and stronger; but our rule must remain that of keeping the door open for everyone to leave us, yet of being more cautious in admitting them. It is to be feared that in time our church may sicken due to its largeness rather than its smallness. (Hamilton, 106)

Sounds like today's trend of "seeker sensitive" churches, with all their amusements and enticements, wouldn't go over too well with Count Zinzendorf!

### Standards?

Church standards are a hot topic these days. Questions such as: "Is it right for a church to have 'brotherly agreements' about specific things that they feel the Holy Spirit is telling the congregation?" "What do you do if someone does not want to keep the agreements of the brotherhood?" "If an agreement has lost its meaning, should we keep it or discard it?" I was surprised to discover that questions such as these were prevalent in their day as well.

When I first started reading about the Moravians, I found people saying that since they were officially called "Pietists" they only focused on the inner life, and were not particularly concerned about external things. And while it is true that the Moravians did indeed stress the importance of the inner life, to say that they didn't care about externals is dishonest and misses an important aspect of their spirituality. I found that they saw their church more in terms of a Marine Corps than a social club. To them, everything mattered. At a brother's meeting in Bethlehem, Zinzendorf commented:

In a congregation of Jesus nothing should be done apathetically and by half measures, but everything should go on with constant uniformity and conscientiousness.

No, Moravians were not at all afraid of brotherhood agreements. However, they also believed that everything was done for a reason. If the standard lost its meaning or reason for being, they felt that it should be discarded or changed. Zinzendorf, addressing what should be done if standards become empty or slack remarks:

As soon as negligence develops, the proper earnestness with which congregation affairs should be treated and the appropriate spirit are lost, and thus their designed purpose is not maintained; they had better be dropped and allowed to disappear or they should be terminated rather than be allowed to continue impaired in this manner. This is a basic principle of our church, and it keeps it pure. In other denominations, on the contrary, once anything is introduced, it endures in spite of there being neither spirit nor power in it any longer (Hamilton, 105).

What the Moravians had was rare even in their day. They were able to be radically unified in purpose and design without being judgmental toward others.

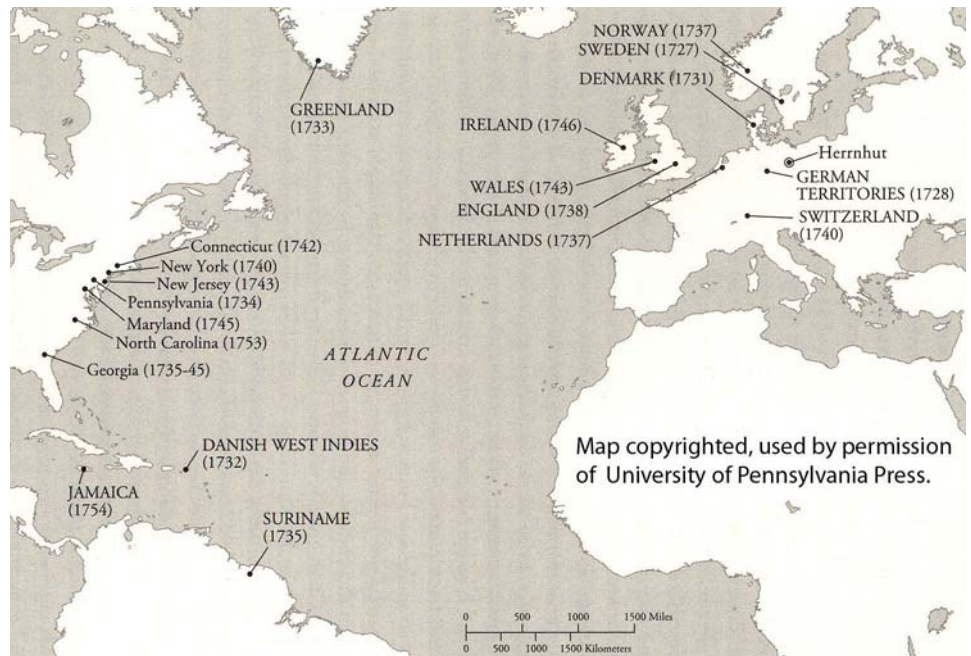
The Moravian spirit was surprisingly open to other sincere believers. They certainly didn't feel that these brotherly agreements added to their salvation. But as far as their local community was concerned, they felt the Holy Spirit wanted to make a testimony of their unity. Therefore, they submitted to the Spirit in everything they did. When doing this, they knew that everything must be done in fear and trembling before a God who sees to the heart.

Like me, you may be asking, "So, what kind of things did they feel they wanted the community to represent?" Here are a few of the things they hammered out in the brother's meetings. When you read them, remember that it was "absolute purpose and dedication" they were after. I'll mention only a few here to show how they dared to speak about detail, about clothes:

1. The brothers shall not wear any fresh colors, lay-down collars or lapels, double-breasted coats, unnecessary pleats, or starched garments. But the one who still has clothes like this is allowed to wear them out.
2. The sisters shall not wear any type of lace or embroidery on their dresses, nor lacy veils. They shall not use sheer materials, fancy headbands, buttons, or ribbons, nor shall they use white yarn to decorate their clothes. They shall not wear white gloves, nor white or colored stockings, colorful caps, or any fresh or bright colors whatsoever. They shall use no colorful ribbons in their bonnets, but only black or blue ones. Red striped or blue printed aprons are to be dyed solid blue on both sides. No printed cotton shall be worn, except for winter head coverings, where plain brown is allowed, but no multi-colored prints.
3. Pointed shoes and slippers shall no longer be worn, nor shoes with high heels. Form fitting or short-sleeved jackets shall not be worn, nor ruffled clothing,

The Moravians saw their church more in terms of a Marine Corps than a social club.

Moravian missions in the Atlantic area. Not shown are the missions in Russia, Nepal, South Africa, and many other places. After a few years, Saxony government officials forbade any more Moravians to settle at Herrnhut, so a worldwide hunt for colony locations began. Mixed with missionary zeal, these colonizations led Moravians "into all the world."



nor straw hats that cost more than two Groschen. Hat bands shall be of uncolored, rough linen only. Cloth printed on a white background shall only have black patterns and no big-flowered or flashy designs. ...

4. The one who does not follow this prescribed manner of dressing, exactly, shall be excluded from the Gemeine [community], and should not be surprised if in his stubbornness he does not get included in future activities. (Hoover, 191)

By today's taste, these standards on clothes may seem a bit "over the top." However, I find it interesting that even in their day, other groups noticed their unity and wrote about it. John Wesley, speaking late in his life, wrote a surprisingly painful letter, anguishing over the fact that he had not led the Methodist societies in this course:

I am distressed. I know not what to do. I see what I might have done once ... With regard to dress, in particular, I might have been as firm (and I now see it would have been far better) as either the people called Quakers, or the Moravian Brethren: ... I might have said, "This is our manner of dress, which we know is both scriptural and rational. If you join with us, you are to dress as we do; but you need not join us, unless you please." But, alas! The time is now past; and what I can do now, I cannot tell." (Wesley, *Sermons*)

## Prayer Watch

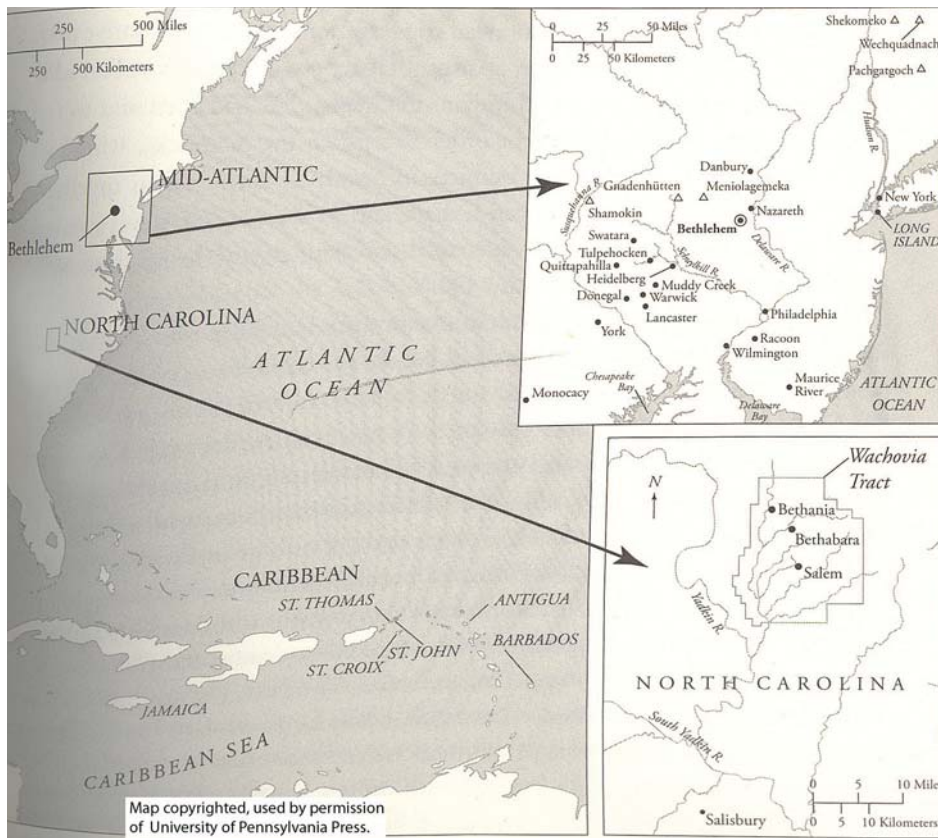
As I mentioned earlier, a powerful witness of prayer was birthed from their original revival. When I started researching the Moravians, I just had to find out whether this prayer meeting was real. I was blessed to discover

that right there in the Bethlehem journals, right along with the other practical details of community life, was their insistence on the continuing need of prayer. To my amazement, I discovered the actual names and times, chronicling the faith of those soldiers that kept watch throughout the day and night! As a matter of fact, these prayer watches were so important to them, that if you were not part of the prayer warrior team, then you were not welcome in the brothers' meeting. (Hamilton, 85)

## Detailed plan of evangelism

As soon as the brothers and sisters set foot into Bethlehem, they started making plans for evangelism. In addition to their extensive mission-forging endeavors, the Moravians also felt that local missions should not be neglected. The *Bethlehem Diary* records that they had different categories of evangelists, all working at different times and places. The first classification was a group called "fishers." These evangelists were to go "in the countryside." Their job was to win the locals to the Lord, both Indian and others. Next were the "rural ministers." They were to go a little further from the home base and were consequently away on a more fulltime basis. Some of these were commissioned to go to a specific Indian nation. Finally, they had their famous "messengers to the heathen," which took the Gospel to the ends of the earth. (Hamilton, 118)

When they started a new work among the Indians, the Moravians copied the colony pattern established at Bethlehem and Herrnhut. All around the world, little mission communities started popping up. One of the greatest ad-



Map of the local outreaches from the two main Moravian settlements in the United States.

Not shown are the many missions to the Native Americans.

David Zeisberger, for example, helped to found about 15 Christian Indian villages in Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York, Michigan, and Ontario. These native converts laid the war hatchet aside and followed Christ in nonresistance. Alcohol was totally banned from these villages as well.

vantages of these communities was that they converted, educated, and disciplined the new converts. Once established in the faith, these little communities continued the pattern and set up their own little mission communities. Not all of these little native colonies were as communal as Bethlehem, but all of them carried the same Moravian spirit of community and common purpose, and they were all devoted to serving the Lamb with everything they had. Speaking of the Indians' acceptance of this colony structure, Engel wrote, "The Delaware and Mohican Indians lived in an extended series of networks that stretched throughout the region. The advent of the Moravian missions as a new form of native community thus fit within a pattern already familiar to the Indians." (Engel, 85)

### It worked!

Over time, the missions to the local American Indians proved very successful. By 1757, there were 214 American Indians living in Bethlehem alone—82 of them had actually become a part of the community "Economy." In addition to these Indian converts, the brotherhood also continued to grow among European converts. Together, with everyone working as a "nation of priests," they grew in personal holiness and labored to spread the Gospel to the entire world.

I marvel at all the people groups and countries these little communities were able to reach. After hearing of their successful missions, it makes me ask myself, "Just how serious am I about reaching the lost? If we as churches were this serious, what could we accomplish?"

Here are a few of the mission settlements that I was able to identify for the article. Beginning with the 1730 mission to St. Thomas, the missionaries also reached Greenland (1732), Suriname (1735), Georgia (1735), South Africa (1736), Gold Coast (1736), Switzerland (1740), New York (1740), England (1740), Connecticut (1742), South Africa (1742), Wales (1743), Maryland (1745), North Carolina (1753), Jamaica (1754), India (1760), and that's not all—countless other scouting trips and short term ministries were going on all the time in many other places.

### So what happened?

About 35 years after Bethlehem started, America declared its independence with England and ended up in the Revolutionary War. Since the Moravians were nonresistant and therefore refused to go to war with England, their patriotic neighbors mistook them as loyalists to England. Moravians then became very unpopular. They suffered much reproach and some persecution. During this time, some of their strong nonresistant ideas began to weaken.

Also, in time, their previously radical, pilgrim way of life made way for a more moderate household model. Eventually, a more “moderate” or “relevant” Moravian church evolved. Some felt that this new Moravian church was healthier and more balanced. They felt it was good that they had shed their extreme practices and rough edges of the past.

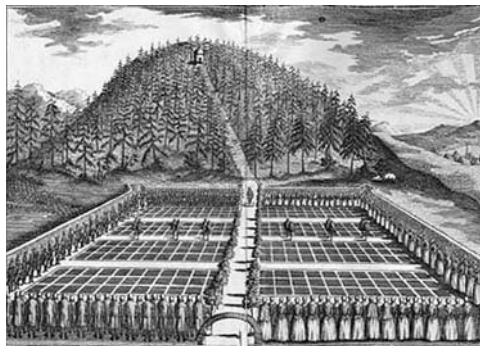
As for me, when I go there, I can’t help but mourn the loss. I feel that something rare and precious on this earth has been forever lost. Many of the old buildings are still there. Visitors are met by museums, quality buildings, cobblestone streets, quaint shops and restaurants, limestone rockwork, and scattered blue historical marker signs, telling of a people centuries ago who carved out a heavenly city from the wilderness.

But those days are long gone. While I can’t say for sure there are no radical individuals there today who might have a similar otherworldly mind-set, I can definitely tell you there are no churches in existence today like the one we’ve just discussed. Things are different now. Historian Jacob Sessler closes his history of the Bethlehem Moravians with this thought:

Where once the Pilgrim Congregation went forth, ‘their feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace,’ today stands the thriving city of steel.<sup>7</sup> These grounds, hallowed by the incarnation of the Invisible Church, have been defiled by the smoke and sordidness of American industry. The rule of Spangenberg has given way to the rule of Schwab,<sup>8</sup> and Bethlehem, though it cherishes its religious origins as the seat of Moravianism, now lives on steel. The spirit that prevailed when the foot-washing and the “kiss of peace” were significant symbols, has yielded to the principles of competition and mechanical progress necessarily adopted by modern Moravian business men. The exclusive brotherhood has lost both its former holiness and its communal regime. The quiet devotional atmosphere of the old Choir houses, still standing, is displaced by the clanging and grinding of the wheels of industry.” (Sessler, 213)

<sup>7</sup> Bethlehem was known as the “city of steel” from the big steel factories acres long. Ironically, the steel industry has faded away and part of the old buildings has been rejuvenated ... into a \$600 million casino.

<sup>8</sup> Charles M. Schwab was the head of Bethlehem Steel for many years.



At God's Acre on Easter morning, celebrating the resurrection!

So, if you ever make it to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, be sure you go to the old graveyard, “God’s Acre.” If you have a bit of an imagination, you can still imagine those saints that walked those grounds a few hundred years ago. In those days, on Resurrection Morning, in each of the little communities around the world, the whole community would come out and circle the graveyard. At sunrise, they

would sing and pray to the Lamb. They sang in earnest expectation, anticipating the time when these “seeds” of the resurrection would one day rise with them. Actually, that’s why they called it “God’s Acre.” They waited for the harvest when, the field, having been seeded, planted and watered, would rise again—the church militant and the church triumphant—praising their Lamb that was slain, forever and ever and ever.

Find some of the old gravestones of saints like David Nitschmann.

Then cast your glance across the field and survey all those Indian names. But don’t stop there. Dare to ask yourself a searching question, “What’s stopping us from doing this today—isn’t God worth it?” The saints of Bethlehem thought He was. I still love the cry of that ancient Moravian motto, given at the end of Paris Reidhead’s sermon, *Ten Shekels and a Shirt*. “May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward of His suffering!”

Could it happen again today? If God gives you the faith to believe that it could, then let’s pray earnestly together, “Do it again, Lord—do it again!” ~

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