

The Renewal of the Unity

When Comenius, Bishop of the Unitas Fratrum, died in Amsterdam in 1670, the future of his church was far from bright. Protestantism was illegal in the Czech lands and the Polish branch of the Unity had also endured many hardships. In 1661 Comenius published *The Ancient Christian Catholic Religion*, a catechism to be used by the few remaining hidden adherents of the Unity in Moravia. The places where they lived were listed in the dedication, but only by their initials so as not to endanger these few faithful. It was from these villages that sixty years later people would leave and go to Herrnhut, hoping to be able to live there according to the faith of their ancestors.

In the first decades of the 18th century many Czechs left their homes and crossed the border to live in the Protestants lands of Germany. Some did so for economic reasons, others for religious motives. One of the wandering men of the early 18th century was Christian David (1690-1751), a German speaking Moravian from near Nový Jičín who converted to Protestantism as a young man. During his travels Christian David met a group of Protestant Moravians who desired to live according to their faith. David promised to find a new home for them. He found such a new place in Berthelsdorf, the estate of Nikolaus Ludwig Count von Zinzendorf (1700-1760), who allowed the refugees to settle and build houses on his land.

In the spring of 1722 the first group of refugees arrived in Berthelsdorf: two cutlers, Jacob and Augustin Neisser, with their wives and children and two other relatives. Zinzendorf's estate manager decided to let them settle not in the village of Berthelsdorf but on the other side of the hill, along the trade route between Löbau and Zittau where they could practice their trade. The decision to let the refugees settle outside of the existing village proved to be crucial for the development of the community the refugees were about to form.

On June 17, 1722 Christian David felled the first tree for the construction of a house for the refugees. Three weeks later we find the name of the new community mentioned for the first time: Herrnhut, meaning "Under the Watch of the Lord". Soon other people followed. Five years later Herrnhut counted 300 inhabitants. Half of them came from Moravia; the other half came from other parts of Germany to live in this new Christian community.

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One can imagine that people who leave everything behind because of their faith have outspoken ideas about what they believe and do and even more so about what someone else has to believe and how someone else has to behave. It was not any different in Herrnhut. In the summer of 1727 tensions had risen so high that some people decided to move away from Herrnhut. Amid this turmoil the owner of the estate, Count Zinzendorf, decided to come and live in the community in order to minister to the inhabitants.

On August 13th of that year an event took place that the inhabitants of Herrnhut soon considered to be the spiritual birth date of the Renewed Moravian Church. During the celebration of Holy Communion in the Lutheran parish church of Berthelsdorf the communicants felt the presence of Jesus so realistically that they decided to overcome their differences and concentrate on their common love for their Lord. From then on the people of Herrnhut believed that God had brought them together to form a congregation, rooted in the traditions of the Unity of the Brethren. They believed the days of the Unity were not over; on the contrary, God had renewed the Unity and given it a new purpose and a new mission. Soon messengers went out from Herrnhut to find like-minded Christians and to preach the Gospel to those who had not heard it before. These Moravians spread out over the world and laid the basis for the worldwide Unity we know today.

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