

The Birth of the Moravian Church 550 Years Ago

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The Moravian Church (Unitas Fratrum) was founded in the woods of Kunwald in eastern Bohemia 550 years ago. Since most Moravian congregations hold special observances on July 6 each year to commemorate the martyrdom of the John Hus, many people assume that our church was founded by him. Hus' courageous witness is important for Moravians, but he was burned at the stake forty years before our church was founded. During this anniversary year, we should recall the work and witness of Gregory the Patriarch who first called together a small band of believers into a Unity of Brethren.

It might help to briefly review what happened after Hus was arrested and convicted of over thirty counts of heresy. In 1414, Hus' friend and student, Jakoubek, took the revolutionary step of allowing lay persons to drink from the chalice in Holy Communion. For over 200 years, the Catholic Church had reserved the cup for the priests, but the Hussites believed that the entire church (including women) should have the benefits of full communion. The Catholic Church changed its doctrine and practice in the 1960s, but in the 15th century both the Church and Empire were willing to kill those who offered the cup to ordinary women and men.

The Hussites successfully defeated five crusading armies sent to force them to obey the Church of Rome; however, they disagreed over how far to reform the church. The stronghold of the most militant Hussites was called Tábor. The Taborites were the first Christians to celebrate the sacraments in a Protestant fashion, and they wrote the first Protestant catechism. The more conservative Hussites were called Utraquists, and their leader, Jan Rokycana, preached at the Týn Church in Prague. At the Council of Basel in the 1430s the papacy agreed to allow the Utraquists to serve communion "in both kinds" (bread and wine) and to administer their own church if they would assist the Catholics in a

military campaign against the feared Taborites. The radicals were mercilessly slaughtered in battle.

The Taborites and Utraquists were the two parents of our Moravian Church. Gregory the Patriarch was the nephew of Rokycana, the Utraquist leader in Prague. He and his friends were so moved by Rokycana's preaching that they copied his sermons down word for word so they could study them. They also read the works of the Taborites and believed that there was truth in what they preached as well. Rokycana encouraged his nephew's quest for true faith by giving him some of the works of Peter Chelcicky to read. Peter had heard Hus preach and had lived through the exciting and dangerous days of the Hussite revolution. He was the link to the Hussite Reformation that Gregory had been seeking, but he was an old man in the 1450s and died shortly after the Moravian Church was founded.

Peter is not famous today, but the Moravian Church was founded on his ideas. He proclaimed that the feudal order of the Middle Ages (nobles, clergy, and serfs) was pagan rather than Christian. The true Church of Christ is a brotherhood (and sisterhood) of those called by Christ. It is a community of sacrificial love, not coercive power. Peter also argued that the mark of a true Christian is the commitment to live according to the law of love revealed in the Gospels. Christ called us to love our enemies, Peter argued. How can you love someone and kill them at the same time?

Gregory took Peter's ideas so seriously that his uncle was afraid that he would be arrested because of his heretical beliefs. He was able to get permission for Gregory and his companions to move to the isolated village of Kunwald where they would be unnoticed as they experimented with a church based on the example of the early Christians. Gregory called his group the Unity of the Brethren (in

Latin: *Unitas Fratrum*), but today we call it the Moravian Church.

Gregory also traveled constantly, inviting former Taborites and Waldensians to join his Unity. Much of the doctrine of the Unity had its roots in the Taborites, but the Unity rejected the militancy of Tabor. Gregory and his followers were very strict pacifists in a very violent world. Neither the Catholic Church nor the Utraquists could tolerate a small band of devout men and women trying to live according the Sermon on the Mount.

Since there was no hope for reconciliation with Rome or the Utraquists, Gregory decided in 1467 to establish a separate priesthood for the Unity of the Brethren. They used the lot to choose three men from among twelve respected elders to serve as priests. A fourth person was chosen to serve as Senior. There was a legend that one of the people who helped ordain the first Moravian bishop was a Waldensian bishop named Stephen, but modern research has shown that was unlikely at best. Stephen was under arrest at the time of the consecration.

The Unity was reluctant to use the word “bishop” because it was associated with oppressive structures of the state church. Our Moravian Church was the first “free church” with regular orders of ministry to be established in Western Christianity. Long before the United States’ First Amendment, the Moravian Church consistently and persistently taught that it is wrong to use secular power in matters of faith.

Discipline in the Unity was strict, but not cruel. Erring members were reminded that they were welcome to join the state church if they wanted to live like “worldly” people rather than like followers of Jesus. The Unity provided detailed instructions on ethical living that included everything from proper business practices to how to discipline children with love rather than fear. Each congregation had lay leaders, called Judges, to assist the pastor. There were Sister Judges for the women, which was a practice centuries ahead of its time.

When Martin Luther began his reformation of the church in Germany in the 16th century, the Unity sent a delegation to meet with him. Luther published a German translation of the Unity’s catechism in 1523. This was the first Protestant catechism ever to be printed. Luther’s more famous Small Catechism appeared five years later. The Brethren’s hymnal was also translated into German and republished several times. Many of those hymns are still sung in Protestant churches.

The Unity of the Brethren founded by Gregory was never large, but it was one of the most important churches in early modern Europe. Unfortunately, it was always illegal (except for a brief period, 1609-1618) and subject to severe persecution. During the Thirty Years War, the Unity was virtually destroyed. August 13, 1727 marks the rebirth of the Moravian Church under the leadership of Count Zinzendorf, but that is a story for another day.