

## The Founding of the Unity

March 1, 1457 is the traditional date for the founding of the Unitas Fratrum, or Moravian Church. It was then more than forty years since the martyrdom of John Hus at Constance, and during those intervening years the lands of Bohemia and Moravia (the modern Czech Republic) had been decimated by bloody wars between the Hussites and the Catholic Imperial forces. Finally, there had even been bloodshed among various Hussite factions themselves.

Many in the Czech lands were wondering how such atrocities could be, and asking “Isn’t there a better way? Whatever the Kingdom of God is, it surely isn’t this!”

It was from such people that a small group of men and women decided to withdraw from all the competing factions and form a group of their own which would seek to abstain from the religious controversies which had shattered their people and would mirror as closely as possible the pattern of the church given in the New Testament. They hoped to live in quietness and peace and to devote their lives to active and dedicated following of the “Law of Christ.”

They came from varied backgrounds. One, Gregory (who became their leader) was the nephew of the Hussite Archbishop-elect of Prague. A few were university trained, and some were city born. Others were simple peasants and merchants. They were united, however, by a driving desire to follow Christ not only in word, but also in deed and in truth. They hoped that their secluded rural setting would keep them not only out of the public eye (thereby avoiding persecution), but also away from many of the temptations so prevalent in public life around them, especially in the crowded cities. And so they gathered at a little place called Kunvald on the estate of Litice, where the local nobleman allowed them a place to settle.

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they could have fellowship or even join. They had been inspired by sermons of John Rokycana, the conservative Hussite leader, but he was too wedded to the establishment to lead them further where they needed to go. He had sent them to a pious lay person, Peter of Chelčický, and they had learned much from him about simple Christian living, but Peter was not the one to lead them in the close fellowship they desired. Thus at Kunvald they banded together as “Brothers and Sisters of the Law of Christ,” determined to give their all to the service of Christ and the living out of God’s law.

For a time they were served by pious Catholic priests who sympathized with their aims. News of their community also spread to others who were seeking a simpler and deeper Christian life, and soon other small groups around the country joined with them as “The Unity of Brethren” (Czech: Jednota Bratrská; Latin: Unitas fratrum). With the spread of their reputation greater attention and eventually persecution also came their way, and in 1467, with the help of the Waldensians, they established their own ministry to ensure an adequate supply of “shepherds” for the growing flock.

Over the course of years this Unity had to come to terms with how to be “in” the world but not “of” the world. It welcomed the Lutherans, Reformed, and others of the later Protestant Reformation, and sought to have fellowship with them while avoiding doctrinal wrangling and maintaining its own theological and practical insights. It was persecuted and reviled more often than not, but developed a rich devotional life and discipline. Theologically they stressed the essential relationships flowing from the good will of God for our salvation, the saving work of Christ, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, to which humans are called to respond with faith, love, and hope.

The Unity was practically wiped out in the Thirty Years War (1618-48) as an ecclesiastical institution, but its survivors were instrumental in founding a renewed Unity in Germany, which developed into our Moravian Church of today.

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