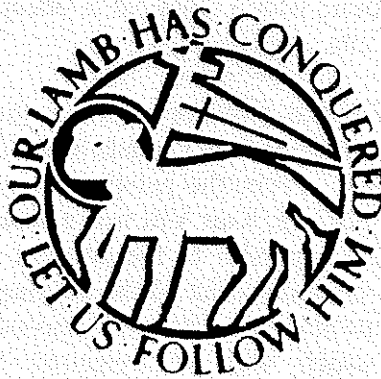


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## FOREWORD

The inaugural issue of the Canadian Moravian Magazine was produced in 1995 to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the founding of the Moravian Church in western Canada. This issue is our 13th. The number of articles which each issue has contained has varied with the length of the articles. Four times an issue has contained three articles. Seventeen was the most articles which any issue has ever contained. In total the 13 issues have included 78 articles. For the first time, this issue contains only one article, which attempts to encapsulate the Life and Service of Kurt Vitt.

The Rev. Dr. Kurt Vitt was a pastor-seminary professor, whose service to the Moravian Church in Canada and Alaska is briefly chronicled in this issue. From the perspective of the Canadian Moravian Historical Society, Kurt Vitt was a noted and devoted church historian. The appendix to the account of his life and service in this issue contains a list of the publications which he was instrumental in producing. His work leaves us a legacy of inestimable value which will be treasured by succeeding generations.

I had the good fortune to work with Kurt Vitt on many of the publications which he authored, by editing his work. His contribution to documenting the history of the Moravian Church in western Canada and Alaska was prodigious. Kurt loved history. He had a sense of its importance and the value of documenting it. His work was marked by painstaking, accurate research, great organizational ability and the application of emerging computer technology to his writing at its earliest stages.

English was Kurt Vitt's second language. He had a natural proclivity to follow the pattern of the German language, which

was his mother tongue, and use long flowing sentences. Happily I can say that when editing his work he was highly amenable to editorial assistance. He would gladly rewrite where necessary, and any suggestions for improvements were always received with grace. Our relationship was always amicable. His aim was to produce the best work possible and he spared no effort to accomplish that. Moreover, he quickly adapted his style and the editor's task diminished with each successive piece of work .

In the FOREWARD to The Founding of the Moravian Church in Western Canada and the Andreas Lilge Story, written in November of 1982, Kurt Vitt wrote, "It is my hope that this study will be a worthwhile contribution to Moravian and Canadian History, and that some time in the future I will have the opportunity to write the remaining part of that history". This important work of chronicling the entire story of Moravian service in western Canada remains to be done. It had been our fond hope, that when Kurt and Renate Vitt returned to their home near Edmonton in 1996 after serving in Alaska for 14 years, that Kurt Vitt would resume his historical writings. But Kurt was called home to be with his Lord and Saviour and that episode of the church's story awaits the attention of the next historian. No doubt that person will be inspired by Kurt's work and will follow in his footsteps. But those are very big shoes to fill.

Wm. G. Brese, Editor

# **A WINDING PATH**

**The Life and Service of the Rev. Dr. Kurt H. Vitt,  
Th.M, Th.D.**

Compiled by Wayne D. Schiewe



## A Winding Path

**The Life and Service of the Rev. Dr. Kurt H. Vitt,  
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Kurt H. Vitt was a complex man. The better you knew him, the more apparent this was – to the point where occasionally his beliefs, ideas and actions could appear contradictory. He expressed tolerance and keen appreciation for other cultures and expressions of spirituality, but professed complete and absolute adherence to the Holy Scriptures, *“no additions, no subtractions, no struggles how they ought to be applied.”* He upheld women’s rights and minority rights, but relations in his personal life were completely traditional. Arguing and debating philosophical and theological interpretations was a passion, but decision making in a congregational setting was not quite so open. Did these contradictions grow as a result of the experiences in the long and winding path of his life and ministry, or did he change his course as he grew?

Kurt’s ministry spanned two continents and four cultures. While most of his life was spent within the Moravian church, he was very aware of the effect that long history and tradition has on local life. Although the Moravians of western Canada sprang from German background, their ancestors had left Germany several generations earlier. Many of their traditions, values and priorities were different from the Germans of Kurt’s homeland. The Inuit and Eskimo cultures of Labrador and Alaska are even distinct from each other due to the large geographical separation and different outside influences over the last several hundred years. Perhaps it is fortunate that he was complex and contradictory, because it probably helped him to adapt.

## **Early Life**

Kurt Hans was born April 14, 1931 in Siegen, about 150 km northwest of Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Even his family background was not completely conventional. His mother Helene, born in Cologne, moved with her family to Stafford, England when she was three years old in 1900. Her first language was English and her German was poor until she and her family moved back to Germany at the close of the First World War. Kurt's father's ancestral home was the Siegen region. His name was Gustav Vitt. He began his career as a machinist in the steel working industries in the region, but was drafted into the artillery during the war. After the war, Gustav returned to industry, but by 1921 started rising in the leadership of the Christian Metal Workers Union. Through the tumultuous 1920's, he continued in Union activities and served in local political and community administrative positions.

In 1930, Gustav joined the staff of the SIEGENER VOLKSZEITUNG, a social democratic oriented newspaper supportive of working people and labour union efforts. Although he began in the accounting department, he soon became the editor of the newspaper. His work involved writing and publishing political articles opposing the rising fascists. As a result of his position and views, he was frequently invited to speak in public at political party rallies, especially during elections.

By 1932, Nazi party leaders were already attacking Gustav Vitt with lawsuits. When Hitler and the Nazis came to power in 1933, they shut down the newspaper and dismissed the employees. On May 2, 1933, the SA (the brownshirted storm troopers of the Nazi party) took over anti-fascist newspapers

and unions across the country. Gustav was beaten and jailed in the Nazis' effort to rid the nation of the socialist pest. The results were predictable – Gustav was a changed man, fearful for years that the Gestapo would return for him, and unable to speak out against the Nazis. Broken physically and spiritually, no longer a prominent person in the community, Gustav with Helene struggled to provide for their family for several years. Eventually, the Nazis' attention turned to bigger matters and the Vitts were able to start a small wholesale greeting card and postcard publishing business.

By the time Kurt was ready to start kindergarten and then school, the Nazis were well established, and their influence extended into every home, through the school system and the Hitler Youth Organization. Kurt was fortunate that not all of his teachers ascribed to the official Nazi philosophy. His kindergarten teacher in particular, a gentle soul, became a life-long friend and later godmother to one of Kurt's own children. Other teachers too were cool to the party line and so provided some balance in his education.

Kurt had two brothers. Helmut was six years older, and Gerhard was two years younger. Kurt took on the role of protector for both of them. Helmut was very much an academic - learned, intellectual and artistic. These were qualities that Kurt admired in him all his life. Gerhard needed protection just because he was younger and smaller. Kurt turned out to be, in his own words, "*a daredevil, fighting, defending in three directions.*" In spite of his self appointed role as protector, Kurt was still very aware and sensitive to the fear and political pressure overshadowing the family.

There were opportunities for the family to instill their own values in Kurt. Hiking and nature walks with his parents awakened in him a deep love and appreciation for the natural

world, which perhaps contributed to his later love of the North. The family attended a Protestant church. Kurt went to Sunday school, but they were not overly pious. Attendance at church was not regular – it was as time allowed, but not an obligation.

As the war turned against Germany, there was added pressure on the family as scapegoats were sought for the declining fortunes. Yet when Helmut turned eighteen, he volunteered for the Waffen SS. Imagine the dismay this must have caused his anti-Nazi parents. Helmut's reasoning was that by doing so, perhaps the regime would leave his family alone. Also, at that time in 1943, volunteers were given some choice in their assignment, unlike conscripts. Helmut intended to be a war correspondent with the SS. Unfortunately, by the time he finished his basic training that luxury was no longer available. Helmut was assigned to the infantry and sent to France, near Calais. In July 1944, he was seriously wounded in the face by shrapnel during the battle for Normandy. That wound left a life-long disfiguring scar, but at least his combat days were over.

Siegen, a steel making centre and important rail junction, was bombed several times during 1944 and early 1945. Much of the city was destroyed and even the Vitt's house was damaged. By April 1945, the German army was in retreat through the Siegen area, but they made a stand in nearby Netphen and Herzhausen, the Vitt's ancestral village. The American army prevailed, of course, and rolled past. The war was over in Siegen, but the family was still embroiled in the immediate aftermath. Kurt, as a youth of 14, was enlisted to serve with a military burial detail at Herzhausen, which helped to bury the German soldiers who were killed there. Helmut, meanwhile, was a prisoner of war, a status that was to remain until the end of 1948.



With death and destruction all around, and persecution for the family, it's amazing they were able to hold on to any kind of faith. They continued to attend church. Kurt was confirmed in March 1945, but by the fall of 1945 he was questioning his personal salvation.

For the first few years after the war, Kurt worked as an agricultural laborer on various large farms some distance from Siegen. It gave him an opportunity to attend Vocational College for agriculture part time, but also exposed him through fellow students to other topics such as medicine and psychology. Over the 1949-50 winter term he attended Agricultural College full time. By this time he was looking at everything religious far more critically. He eventually considered himself to be an atheist. In the introduction to his doctoral dissertation, he writes,

*"The horrors of the war, as I personally experienced them, eventually brought me to accept, in the post-war era during my studies, atheistic philosophies and the anti-christian (sic) attitudes and perceptions of Freudian psychoanalysis and related technologies."*

While this transition was taking place, Kurt fell in love with his first serious girlfriend. At the age of 19, his parents felt that he was too young to be in a serious relationship. They intervened by forcing him to return home to Siegen to help with the family business. Unfortunately, the interference together with the impetuosity of youth, resulted in the couple attempting to prolong and strengthen the relationship. Kurt's girlfriend became pregnant shortly before they separated permanently.

Kurt's son from this union, Ralph, has never been a complete secret within the family. Unfortunately, however, in Kurt's career as a minister, he believed that he would never be

accepted if it was known that he had a child out of wedlock. Not until after his retirement did he feel comfortable to acknowledge Ralph publicly. Kurt had few opportunities to visit Ralph while he was growing up. It is regrettable that Ralph could not be a part of the family until the 1990's. Ralph and the family missed out on over forty years of family relationships. At least they have made up for it since then. Perhaps today a minister would not have the same fear of judgement for a youthful indiscretion, but we must consider to what extent attitudes in the Church and in the community were different in the 1950's through the 70's before judging that belief. At the least, this experience in his own life enabled Kurt to be much more empathetic and understanding when dealing with young love affairs and unexpected pregnancies.

### **Marriage and Conversion**

In the fall of 1950, Kurt was introduced to another young lady, Renate Haas. There was a bit of competition for her attention from other suitors, for she was a vivacious, fun loving girl. But Kurt won out, and they were soon seeing each other regularly. Over the next few years, they became closer and closer, each finding in the other what they were looking for. Renate proved life-changing for Kurt in more ways than one. They eventually married, but equally important, Renate re-introduced Kurt to the church, where she was active in the Christian Endeavor group (a youth group). Kurt began attending church again, although it appears to have been primarily for Renate and for social reasons.

After returning to Siegen, Kurt had changed careers to become an industrial tool making technician. His training entailed both vocational college studies and on the job experience. By March 1953 he had completed his training a year ahead of schedule.

His good position with his employer, together with Renate's position in the County Administration office, provided a reasonable degree of financial security, so they were able to marry in April 1953.

In his spiritual life, Kurt remained distressed. In 1991 he wrote of this period:

*"The fact of having a rewarding profession, an enjoyable marriage, caring relatives, lots of activity, and exciting plans for a family house, ... could not remove from Kurt the reality of an inner spiritual turmoil. ... The increasing steadiness of their joint lifestyles, in addition with more frequent attendance at the Christian Endeavor meetings and Sunday worship services, would or could not really appease Kurt, or grant him 'inner peace'. The many occasions when 'the Word' was shared with him in youth groups or preached by 'experts' from the pulpit, it did little to remove Kurt's hidden atheism ... Kurt was unable to shake off the depressive understanding that being a real Christian meant living, acting, thinking like a 'sour puss', being subject to a multitude of 'life and joy denying rules'. ... Thus, an emotional dichotomy plagued Kurt with little hope projected for a resolve (sic)."*

Thanks to Renate's perseverance and personal faith, she kept Kurt involved in the activities that would challenge his atheism. In September, 1953, Kurt had a personal conversion experience.

No one can describe it better than he could himself:

*"September 1953: In September then a radical change occurred, both for Kurt and – in the end- for Renate also. An Evangelism Movement, which proved rather new and different, had come to Germany, and ultimately Siegen, in the form of Youth for Christ. Their approach to preaching the Gospel*

*included American methods in striking contrast to the well established formats used by German evangelists and preachers.*

*Beginning on Sunday, September 13, 1953, a week of evangelistic services was conducted by Jugend fuer Christus/Youth for Christ at the Freie Evangelische Gemeinde, Weiherstrasse, in Siegen. The evangelist was Anton Schulte, quite unknown in the area and by the established Christian churches and fellowships. He was rather small of stature, had a 'rolly polly' appearance, with an ever smiling face that practically 'oozed' inner peace, constant joy and a comfortable disposition, i.e. too good to be true for a skeptic! Still, it took only three days and as many meetings to crack Kurt's armor decisively.*

*This was not in any way the old fashioned and proverbial 'holier than thou' approach Kurt had become accustomed to. The services were filled with joyful, easy to learn songs and hymns, and the preaching was done 'free standing' - the speaker moving around, not 'tied to a pulpit' - with effective interaction and personal eye contact. The message, no matter how serious in content, was presented with the inherent joyfulness that emanated from Anton Schulte. His was a truly persuasive 'invitational' approach that reached beyond a listeners intellect to the 'heart', the very depth of spiritual being. In addition, he challenged individuals to a rather public response - quite unheard of at that time in German Christian circles: decisions to accept Jesus Christ as Savior ought to be made by coming to the front of the assembly. The reasoning for such a call had a clear intellectual and psychological basis, which made it indeed attractive to Kurt. At the same time the offer was made to provide honest biblical counsel without undue pressure.*

*Thus on Tuesday evening, September 15, 1953, Kurt responded to the invitation. However, he felt a certain psychological*

*impact produced by the evening hour and the presence of the rather supportive, joyful assembly made a rational resolve for him as a thinking individual impossible. He made an agreement with Anton Schulte to meet privately with him at the meeting hall the next day in the early afternoon following work.*

***Wednesday, September 16, 1953***, became probably the single most important and life changing day in Kurt's and Renate's - as well as their families - existence and relationship. Kurt met with Anton about 4pm, and within an hour he walked out 'a new being' - freed from the past, liberated for the present, with a specific direction for the future. At last Kurt had come to agree that his life would be better, different, and more useful and positive if he allowed Jesus Christ to take charge of it through his Spirit. Anton served as a most capable 'midwife' in this new birth, putting the decision making clearly up to Kurt without any soul massage or undue pressure. It almost appeared as if it made no difference to him whether or not Kurt would accept the Savior's offer as presented in this counseling session strictly from the Scriptures. He seemed that sure, Kurt would make the right choice.

*From that moment on, whether at home, at work, at fellowship, or 'at play' - of which there was to be very little - Jesus Christ, his word, call and challenge, became the focus of Kurt's life and interests, combined with a missionary zeal that was complimented or impaired, as the case might be, by his rather determined nature and total commitment.*

*The evening meeting and prior prayer session became Kurt's first outright supportive involvement in evangelism and witnessing. The eagerness and force on Kurt's part was such, that after giving his first testimony that night, he started 'pressuring' Renate, indicating that she needed to be converted too; because 'how could she have become involved with him, in*

*his way of life, and indeed be married to him', when she knew only too well that he was not a Christian. Her faith had to be false. She, however, stood her ground, denying any need for a conversion - and the still young married couple 'split up' - went home by separate means, unable to find a mutually acceptable solution. They met again in their one and only room with an invisible barrier now between them. It's futile to reflect who was right and wrong, or how it could have been handled differently."*

This was not an auspicious beginning for a new convert – jumping from atheism to a faith so profound that his wife could not measure up! And the zeal of the new convert then extended into Kurt's workplace, which he now saw as fertile ground for witnessing and evangelism. If you knew him, you can probably imagine the intensity with which he pursued this new calling – likely to the annoyance of everyone around him.

Again, credit must go to Renate for her patience and understanding through this period. Over the next few months they increased their activities in the various church organizations and began an active lay ministry. Renate too eventually "*gave over her life to Jesus Christ, and the two... became in the Biblical sense 'one' – a togetherness quite different from anything previously experienced by them – engendered with a complete willingness to fulfill God's will in their lives, and to be truly witnesses of Christ where ever he would determine.*"

## Calling

By the summer of 1954, Kurt and Renate felt willing to respond to God's call to serve in the Christian ministry, particularly as

missionaries in the north. Alaska was the place they had in mind. That calling seemed to be confirmed by the results of the medical exam needed for their application to a seminary in Switzerland. The official comment of the medical certification was "Suited for mission service, not for countries with warm climates, however."

In February 1955 they both began two years of theological and missionary studies at the Bibelschule (seminary) in Beatenberg, Switzerland. It was a wonderful time in an idyllic setting in the Swiss Alps, with stimulating and dynamic instructors and students. Renate's studies were punctuated by a return to Siegen, for the birth of their first child, John, in March 1956.

They graduated from the seminary in December 1956. Kurt was able to obtain a position as assistant pastor in a large Evangelical Church of Germany congregation in Siegen, (Buschuetten-Sohlbach) which would enable him to continue additional studies and obtain practical training and experience. For the next two years, Kurt worked hard at serving the congregation. This included Sunday worship and sermon preparation, as well as studying. While at Buschuetten, their second child, daughter Tabca, was born.

In 1959, Kurt and Renate first made contact with the Moravian Church (Herrnhuter Mission) at annual Mission Festivals celebrated at local churches. A German missionary, Gerhard Vollprecht, who was serving in Northern Labrador among the Inuit, was the guest speaker. He spoke about the need for additional missionaries and indicated that he and his family would leave Labrador in 1963 for the sake of their children's education. This was the opportunity for which Kurt and Renate had been hoping for five years. They approached the Moravian headquarters in Bad Boll, volunteering their services, since their commitment at Buschuetten was nearly complete. At the same

time, Kurt contacted the Deutsche Missionsgemeinschaft (DMG - German Missionary Fellowship) in Stuttgart, for sponsorship if the Moravians would send them to Labrador.

Both of these contacts marked the beginning of relationships that were to continue for many years. The Moravians were initially cautious, extending a three month probationary call to a Moravian congregation in Neuwied, on the Rhine. If the probationary period went well, then a full call would be made for two years, for Kurt to complete studies in Moravian traditions. The DMG was quicker to confirm their intentions, by agreeing to a sponsorship in partnership with the Moravians.

The plan at Neuwied was for Kurt to complete all the remaining training necessary for missionary work and to attain ordination in the Moravian church. Prior ordination in the Evangelical Church of Germany had not been necessary. Later, final consideration and approval for missionary work would be assessed by the staff at Bad Boll. If that was approved there would be further specific training for the remote location, such as emergency medical skills.

The final five months at Buschuetten took an unexpected and dramatic turn when the senior pastor, Rev. Gueffroy, became ill and could not work. Effectively, that meant Kurt took over almost all the duties at the 5000 member congregation. It was a hectic and tiring time, but his ability to handle the unexpected responsibilities and the favorable response by the members, the community, and district church leadership laid the foundations for a strong and long lasting relationship. The congregation as well as other area fellowships, became strong supporters of the Vitt's mission for decades.



## **Neuwied and the Introduction to the Moravian Church**

In May 1960, Kurt reported to Neuwied, alone, for his three month probationary period. The Moravian church in Germany is a relatively small formal organization, with only a handful of congregations spread through the country. With their mission tradition, they concentrated on spreading the gospel beyond Europe's shores, rather than trying to poach from the established Christian churches at home. As a result, Kurt was not familiar with Moravian traditions, music and hymns, much of it unique.. So the first three months helped him concentrate on the transition to a different style of worship. He started to get to know the congregation of 400, many of whom lived within walking distance of the church in houses that were owned by the church.

Kurt had no difficulties in gaining the acceptance and approval of the Moravians. Even though his sermons were more evangelistic than they were accustomed to (no doubt still burning with the zeal of his conversion experience), his energy and dedication won them over. He particularly struck a chord with the young people, revitalizing the youth programs and made contact with other church youth programs, including that at Buschuetten.

By July 1960, Kurt was appointed the junior pastor, and Renate, John, and Tabea were able to join him. Kurt and Renate always counted the two years at Neuwied as among the most joyful and rewarding for the whole family.

Kurt's ministry at Neuwied was by no means exclusive to the congregation. He was encouraged to reach out to surrounding communities and fellowships with evangelistic services or Bible studies. The Moravian Church in Germany, because of its

mission history, received support from a wide range of friends within the German Evangelical Church and related fellowships. Thus, upon invitation, Kurt conducted meetings in the surrounding towns and villages. Many of those in attendance became active mission friends for the benefit of the Moravian Mission.

Probably the most challenging aspect of the new church was learning the music. The traditional Saturday evening singing service, the Singstunde, required the pastor to pitch the tune correctly without the organ, which only came in at the third measure of each verse. The congregation followed the lead of the pastor, so if he didn't get it right, there was a dramatic disharmony when the organ came in. Even some Moravian pastors who had grown up with the practice could have difficulty with this. For Kurt, doing this well meant he could adapt to Moravian ways. In time, these singing services were among his most beloved memories of the Neuwied learning experience.

In June 1961, Kurt had the opportunity to participate in a final, historic, conference of all German Moravian ministers in Berlin. It enabled him to meet and get to know all of the Moravian ministers from the East and the West. Two months later, in August, the Berlin Wall went up. The wall severed those kinds of ties for many years.

Thanks to the tutelage of the Neuwied pastors, Colditz and Dober, and the organist Sister Foerster, by October 1961 Kurt's ordination was approved by the Moravian board. His ordination took place on October 19 at the Neuwied Moravian Church, presided over by Bishop Sieboerger.

This also marked the beginning of his final preparations for mission service in Labrador. For three months he received

special medical training at the Red Cross Hospital in Neuwied. The training concentrated on first aid, simple surgery and obstetrics, as it was expected that the missionaries in Labrador would be able to provide these services. The training was intensive and practical, with close supervision and assessment by the medical staff. It proved to be of immense practical value in Labrador.

By the middle of March 1962 Kurt had completed all remaining academic and theological requirements for the Moravian Church. The Vitts and the congregation bid each farewell. Many of the relationships fostered there continued for the rest of their lives.

## England

The next step saw the family moving to London, primarily to learn English, but also to meet the English Moravians, who administered the Labrador mission. Kurt and Renate both enrolled in intensive English language courses. Visits to numerous Moravian congregations in the country side gave them many opportunities to communicate in the new language. The children, John (6) and Tabea (4½), were sent to school, where they were warmly received by staff and students alike. As is often the case, the children learned the new language faster than their parents, and their pronunciation was classically English. It wasn't long before the kids were correcting the parents' speech.

This was the family's first exposure to a culture significantly different from their own. It was a remarkable and enjoyable experience. The stage was set for Kurt and Renate to move across North America over the next thirty years. It even gave them a chance to visit the places in England where Kurt's

mother and grandparents had lived and worked before the first war, which was a moving experience for him.

Six months in England passed quickly. The fall of 1962 saw the family back in Siegen for a final eight months. Kurt's duty for this time period was to conduct mission meetings in churches across Germany. The mission meetings were an opportunity to describe the work in Labrador and set up a large network of supporters. Over 400 meetings were conducted in just 200 days.

They departed for Labrador from England on May 29, 1963. The trip required a flight to England from Germany, but the transatlantic crossing was by ship, the Empress of England. It was a seven day voyage, and young Tabea was the only member of the family who was not seasick.

June 10, 1963 was the arrival day in Quebec, as landed immigrants. But the voyage was not over yet. There was still a train trip to North Sydney, Nova Scotia and a ferry to Port-aux-Basques, Newfoundland. The famous "Newfie Bullet" train took them across the island (agonizingly slowly) to the east coast, where they sailed on the freighter MS Nonia for Labrador. That trip in itself was a long ten day voyage, past picturesque Newfoundland harbors, through Labrador Sea icefields, with stopovers at several Labrador communities. At last, on July 1, after thirty three days travel, the Vitt family disembarked at Hopedale.

## Labrador

Hopedale was not the first Moravian mission in Labrador, but it is among the oldest. By the 1960's, Hopedale was a mixed community, with the majority being Inuit, including some

families who had been moved south from more remote locations. There were some settler families who came to Hopedale during or after WWII, so that their children had better access to education. The community had a school, staffed partly by young volunteers from Newfoundland or from England. There were a couple of RCMP officers, and representatives of the Department of Northern Labrador Affairs (DNLA). The nursing station was administered and staffed by the International Grenfell Association (IGA), usually with only one nurse. About a mile away from the town was a US Air Force radar station (a Ballistic Missile Early Warning System base) with 150 American military personnel stationed year round. And in addition to the Vitts, there was generally another missionary helper, usually from Europe.

The first few months were naturally a period of transition. There were only a few weeks of overlap with the departing missionaries, the Vollprecht's, before the Vitts were on their own. The first priority was learning as much Inuktitut as possible, so the worship services and singing could be conducted in the local language. Then, they had to establish good relations with the Chapel servants (the church elders), all Inuit, some speaking no English. The Mission Helper (Sam Terriak, then later Solomon Igloliorte and Renatus Hunter) acted as pilot and guide when Kurt traveled to other communities, and assisted with maintaining and supplying the Mission House and church.

Once established, the family had no difficulty fitting in to the community. Thanks to the love of learning instilled in Kurt by his father and brother, and no doubt reinforced by the many years of preparation for missionary service, there was a genuine interest in the Inuit way of life. Kurt accompanied the men on hunting trips in the winter and on fishing trips in the summer.

The two storey Mission House was large and built like a rooming house. The DNLA representative and his family lived downstairs. Not only the Vitt family, but also the school teacher volunteers, an RCMP officer, and the missionary helper lived upstairs. Most times, Renate and a local Inuit girl cooked and served fourteen people at noon and at supper time.

There is no doubt that Kurt and Renate's ministry in Hopedale was effective and appreciated. This writer knows from independent contacts from Hopedale, from outside of the church organization, that the memory of the Vitt family is still alive in the community today.

Among the enhancements initiated by Kurt was the first Children's Camp, conducted in 1966. It was held at a bay north of Davis Inlet, where a Moravian settler's family had a home. Tents provided the lodging for the children and Renate took care of the cooking. Missionary nurse, Rosina Welti, who had arrived from Switzerland in the summer of 1965, regaled the children with Bible stories. It was great fun for all involved and the children were truly excited.

Photos from Hopedale show the family normally fitted out in Inuit clothing, as it was naturally far superior than Western clothing for the Labrador climate. The photos also show many local people joining in the pose, suggesting a natural integration between the missionary family and the community.

The presence of the American military nearby was a mixed blessing. Although it provided a source of emergency help for Hopedale and another means of contact with the outside world, there were social problems arising from the mix of cultures. Mutual agreement put the base off limits to locals except for those employed there, and the village was off limits to military personnel. Nonetheless, the base was a constant source of

problems with military men defying the ban on socializing. The contact brought alcohol into the village, unwanted pregnancies and recriminations as a result. Most of the base commanders did not actively enforce the ban on socializing in the village, nor did they allow acknowledgment by base personnel of their fathering children with native women, regardless of the proof presented. A sixteen year old girl thus gave birth to the first Inuit-Black baby, and an Inuit boy was charged and convicted in court of rape. The US Air Force man was transferred immediately, putting him out of the reach of Canadian courts. For many years, Kurt spoke with frustration about these kinds of outrages.

Although this writer is not aware of the efforts Kurt made to improve relations, by 1967 he was invited to serve the base personnel as an auxiliary chaplain. The Air Force chaplains were only able to come once a month, so although they were sympathetic to the problems, there was not much they could accomplish. Relations between the mission staff and the chaplains were good. So it is most likely that Kurt and the chaplains saw the auxiliary chaplaincy as an opportunity for Kurt to work more closely with the military in improving the situation.

Two enlisted men at the base, likely draftees, became close to the family. One was an agnostic, but he sought out Kurt for conversation and intellectual stimulation. One speculates that the evangelistic fervor Kurt displayed in 1953 must have moderated somewhat, so an agnostic would have been willing to continue debating him. (Indeed, the writer, who conversed extensively with Kurt from the 1970's onwards, always found him to be assured and persuasive in his views, but always sensitive to an individual's need to make a personal choice in matters of faith.) The other close friend from the base was a committed Christian who sought out spiritual nourishment.

When he completed his military service, he studied for the ministry. He kept in touch with Kurt and Renate through to Kurt's retirement. When he was in need of personal counseling, he turned to "his old Christian friends".

Kurt and Renate's third child, Esther, was born in Hopedale in 1965. There were children born in the village almost every month. Kurt delivered several babies when the midwife or nurse was absent. His medical training was put to good use too in some minor surgical procedures in accident cases. It was fortunate that Kurt had some experience, for Esther's birth turned out to be much more difficult and dangerous than expected. It happened during a snowstorm that made it impossible to contemplate an emergency flight to Northwest River. The complications were life threatening for both mother and child, but by God's grace, Kurt and the nurse were able to save them both.

One aspect of mission life did not go well. The Moravian Mission in Labrador was administered by the British Mission Board. The Mission Superintendent in Labrador was based in Happy Valley and did not visit Hopedale frequently. He and Kurt never established a good relationship, although it was no secret that most missionaries of German origin faced the same difficulty. The most significant difficulty was in the way the missions were supplied. The Mission Board continued to sole source most supplies from a single vendor in St. John's, who had no incentive to provide any price reductions, and actually found ways to increase their revenue. In addition, the missionaries' salaries were set the same as those for Moravian clergymen serving in England, even though costs in Labrador were significantly higher. The annual order for heating oil and food alone was more than the annual salary, so the missionaries found themselves deeper and deeper in debt each year. Most



missionaries' wives took local paying jobs in order to make ends meet.

Kurt was not one to tolerate injustice or even foolishness. He took the initiative to make some improvements. For example, he purchased two 2000 gallon oil tanks for \$500, which saved \$4000 annually in oil barrel "rental fees" for the mission and school. His annual reports to the British Mission Board contained facts and details regarding the difficulties the mission faced, not just glowing articles on the great successes achieved. He added clear proposals for improvements in stewardship and economics. These reports were not welcomed, as they would raise questions in the minds of supporters.

In April 1967, the British Mission Board sent a letter indicating their desire to recall the Vitts from their service in Labrador. It was completely unexpected and even shocking. Kurt felt that it was due to the poor relations with the Board and the superintendent, and the unwelcome suggestions for improvements.

This writer does not have access to independent information about the effectiveness of the Vitt's ministry in Hopedale. Nonetheless, there were plenty of tears and great astonishment in the church service in Hopedale when the recall was announced, suggesting that they were indeed fine missionaries. On the day in July when the Vitts boarded the plane to leave the village there were a goodly number of well wishers on hand, even though fishing season was in full swing. Most families would normally have been away in their fish camps. It was not easy for the Vitts to wave good bye to those who had become dear friends.

They left Hopedale not only with fond memories, and feelings of accomplishment, but with a great many Inuit carvings and artifacts, which Kurt had collected.

### **The Next Call**

Whether by fortunate coincidence or by God's grace, events were already in motion that minimized the time that the Vitts were uncertain about their future. Before the recall notice, the family had already planned their first trip away from Labrador in the four years they had been there. It was to be a short family vacation to Montreal to visit Expo 67. After that, Kurt had planned to travel to Alberta, at the invitation of the Calgary Moravian church, to participate in local mission services in the Alberta Moravian congregations and talk about the work in Labrador. With the recall, plans were expanded to include a visit to New Jersey, to visit with Kurt's aunt and her family, some of whom they had never met. Also, Renate and the children would return to Germany for a visit while Kurt explored opportunities for their future.

During the summer of 1967, Kurt contacted the Moravian Church Headquarters in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. He met with them in late August, and the interview went well. They were confident that they would have a position for him, possibly even in Canada. Kurt's first interest was to continue missionary work with the native people in Alaska. But at the time there was no position open that was suitable for the Vitts.

Kurt's availability allowed the original visitation plans to be expanded significantly. Through September and October, Kurt traveled extensively through western Canada and among churches of the Western District of the Moravian Church in the USA. He spoke and preached at many churches and functions,

often about the Labrador work, illustrated with slide presentations. Meeting almost all the district ministers and their wives was an added benefit of the engagements. It would appear that Kurt made a favourable impression on many people, including Brother Milo Loppnow, the Western District President. By mid October, Kurt received a call from the South Edmonton parish – Heimtal and New Sarepta - to begin service there on November 15, 1967.

Normally, after four years service in Labrador, six months furlough would have been granted, but due to the urgency of the situation in Heimtal, all involved agreed to waive the furlough. There was just enough time for Kurt to return to Germany, for a very brief visit and reunion with his family, as well as to make a number of mission presentations to German congregations. There was also the need to complete all necessary changes to the arrangements with the German Moravian Mission Board and the German Missionary Fellowship (DMG), both of which were distressed by the events in Labrador.

### The Alberta Years – Heimtal, New Sarepta, Bruderfeld, Bruderheim

on the family arrived in Edmonton, from Germany, on November 16, 1967. On November 19, Kurt was installed by Bishop Percy Henkelman as the new pastor of the Heimtal-New Sarepta parish. This was the start of a fifteen year ministry in Alberta.

Once again, the Vitts were immersed in a new culture. Kurt adapted by bringing together parts of his cultural experiences in a way that worked for him. Even by the 1960s, the Germans were accustomed to driving small, sporty cars very fast. In North America, the custom was to drive very large cars somewhat close to posted speed limits. Upon arrival in

Edmonton, the Vitts bought their first “Schwimmwagen” -- (swimming car), the German nickname for large American cars because of the way they floated over the roads. It had a big V-8, almost unheard of in Europe. Kurt had been advised that such a vehicle would be necessary to travel the 50 km (30 miles) over gravel roads between Heimtal and New Sarepta each Sunday, especially in the winter. The advice proved to be right, for the big car was able to plow through the snow drifts and get Kurt to New Sarepta on time, shortly after Heimtal’s service. But he brought with him the German driving practices and he became known as the “Flying Minister” because of the tremendous speeds he was able to reach on the gravel roads.

The Alberta years form a long stretch on the path of Kurt’s ministry. Nine years were spent at Heimtal-New Sarepta, (with Bruderfeld, now Mill Woods, included in the parish for six and a half years), and six years at Bruderheim. All indications to this author are that the ministries within the congregations were successful in meeting the needs of the parishioners. The call to Bruderheim apparently did not come as a result of dissatisfaction at Heimtal, nor did the later call to Alaska (although there was evidently some discord in Bruderheim in the final months). Conversations among parishioners with this author over the years have always highlighted appreciation for Kurt’s ministry in the congregations, although objectively one must bear in mind the family relationship that exists. So, for the most part, this account will concentrate on aspects of Kurt’s Alberta ministry outside of or in addition to the typical parish work.

Kurt was truly a life-long learner. He was in Edmonton for less than a year before he was looking for formal study and learning opportunities. In the summer of 1968, Kurt’s first course was a two week Pastoral Institute seminar on professional marriage counseling. This set the stage for the next fourteen years, with a

progression of courses and seminars. Kurt was always grateful to the church boards, the district leadership, and the Provincial Elders Conference, for the support and understanding they displayed in allowing him time for study and learning in formal settings. The topics ranged from chaplaincy, to intern supervisory skills, to a wide range of theological subjects. This study provided him with the necessary skills and background to take on a number of additional responsibilities, such as supervising a ministry intern from north India, to being the Canadian Director on the Board of World Mission for the Moravian Church in America. As early as the fall of 1969, Kurt was channeling his study efforts towards attaining his Masters of Theology (Th.M.) degree through St. Stephen's College at the University of Alberta. He was formally enrolled in that program in April 1977.

It is interesting to note the topic of Kurt's Th. M. thesis. It is entitled "Conscience in Bonhoeffer" and deals with the life and theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian, church leader, and outspoken opponent of the Nazis. They hanged him only a few weeks before the final defeat in 1945. In the choice of this topic, we can see that throughout his life, Kurt reflected on his own experiences in Nazi Germany and the war. Questions about personal choice and autonomy versus being open to God's guidance were central to his explorations. A pivotal experience for Kurt in his studies was the opportunity in 1979 to spend several weeks with Professor Eberhard Bethge who lectured on "The Church, A Confessing Community", using the German situation between 1939 and 1945 as an example. Bethge was a close friend and associate of Bonhoeffer. Fortunately, Bethge survived the war. No doubt, Bethge, who became a lasting friend to Kurt, significantly influenced Kurt's academic work.

The masters degree was achieved after a long effort, considering the need to fulfill professional and family responsibilities at the same time. The final work was completed during a three month sabbatical in 1982. The oral defense of the thesis was conducted on November 10, and the degree was subsequently conferred With Distinction.

The importance of this accomplishment to Kurt, and the subsequent theological doctorate a few years later, really needs to be emphasized. Although Kurt was always very careful not to let personal pride, ambition and ego interfere with his faith and relationship with God, he nonetheless enjoyed a great deal of personal satisfaction from receiving these degrees. First, the German culture places tremendous importance on the achievement of formal academic recognition. Second, the experiences in his own family reinforced the motivation to attain the degrees. His father instilled in all his sons a love and appreciation for learning and independent thinking. In addition, Kurt wanted to do his best as a tribute to his brother Helmut. Kurt always felt that Helmut was superior to Kurt in intellectual and academic abilities, but the situations he faced during and after the war prevented him from reaching his potential. So Kurt felt obligated to make the best of the opportunities presented to him. There were never feelings of rivalry or jealousy between Kurt and Helmut. In fact, it was just the opposite. They were both proud of each other's achievements. (Incidentally, Helmut's avocation was history and he published numerous articles and papers, and two extensive volumes dealing with the history of the Siegerland. One book covered developments from the Ice Age to the Middle Ages and the other was a study of a medieval blacksmith who became famous across Europe. They received critical acclaim from the formal German academic historians in the 1980's. It was rare for the academic community in that country to extend recognition to "amateurs" outside of their own circle.)

Even after the call to Alberta, Kurt was still interested in Alaska. He spent his 1969 vacation there, with others, on a volunteer work and preaching mission. He helped with the construction of the Dillingham church, and painted the newly built Provincial Office in Bethel. Kurt was a speaker at the General Bible Conference of the Alaska Moravian Church. It was a rewarding and revealing experience for him, and it had lasting consequences because it prepared the way for the future ministry there.

There were two milestones in April 1970. At the Canadian District Synod in Banff, Kurt was consecrated as a Presbyterian of the Moravian Church by Rev. Percy Henkelman. At the same time, he was elected as the Canadian Director on the BWM (Board of World Mission of the Moravian Church in America). This was the first four year term to which he was elected, and he held the post until 1982 when he accepted the call to Alaska.

The BWM post entailed attending semi-annual meetings, generally at various locations in the U.S. Those meetings also provided the opportunity for deputation work in congregations in the Northern and Southern provinces on behalf of Moravian Missions. Over the years, Kurt responded to the invitations of twenty eight Moravian congregations, conducting mission festival and mission emphasis services, most often with slide presentations on Moravian work in Labrador.

A third congregation joined the Heimtal-New Sarepta parish on December 24, 1968 – just in time for Christmas. The Bruderfeld Moravian church, now known as the Millwoods Moravian Church, was served by Kurt until May 31, 1975. However, in 1969, Brent Marshall was recruited to serve as Assistant Pastor, sharing the duties with Kurt. It is nonetheless amazing to consider what Kurt was able to accomplish through

the 1970's while providing leadership and service to three congregations.

The summers of 1974 and 1975 saw Kurt begin another form of mission outreach for Heimtal. This involved Stephen Hishey, who was a Moravian from northern India studying at the Missionary Alliance Church's Canadian Theological College in Regina. During those two summers, Stephen came to Heimtal, living with the Vitts, for summer internship experience. Stephen was in Canada without his wife, but Kurt and Renate spearheaded the effort to raise funds and obtain permission from Immigration for her to join him. By early 1975, this became possible and she and Stephen were together for the rest of his time in Canada.

Following Stephen's ordination at Heimtal, the Hisheys returned to Rajpur, India, where Stephen joined the staff of the Moravian Institute, which operates a residential school for needy children. Kurt launched the Rajpur Foster Children's Project, which began by organizing sponsorship for a few children at the Moravian Institute. (This project is still flourishing today, with 53 children under sponsorship by Canadian Moravians.) The special relationship between Stephen Hishey and the Vitts and the Heimtal congregation was maintained over the years.

In June 1976, the entire Vitt family applied for Canadian citizenship, which was conferred in September. Kurt was mindful of the situation faced by his grandparents in England during the First World War. Although they had lived in England for fourteen years, at the outbreak of the war, they had not become naturalized British subjects. As a result, Kurt's grandfather was interred from 1914 through 1917. Either late in 1917 or early in 1918 he was sent to Germany in exchange for a captured British officer. From this experience Kurt would not



underestimate the importance of citizenship and preparation for unexpected circumstances.

At this time, their ministry in Heimtal and New Sarepta was going well and there was strong support. The future looked bright for both congregations. But the Bruderheim congregation had just lost their pastor (Bob Grey had accepted a position with the Canadian Bible Society). Bruderheim extended a call to the Vitts. Kurt and Renate had turned down two previous call inquiries (it is not clear if they were formal calls or inquiries only – author), one for mission service in the Caribbean (remember – too hot for the Vitts) and one from the USA. Considering that the move to Bruderheim was not very far and therefore still conducive for family life, and that they had already spent nine years at Heimtal, Kurt and Renate gave it prayerful thought. Kurt was wary of ministers staying too long in one congregation, resulting in staleness and complacency for both the minister and the parishioners. So the call was accepted and the effective date was set for September 1, 1976.

The move to Bruderheim opened up some new opportunities for Renate, too. Already in Heimtal she had taken on leadership in the Women's Fellowship, first at the congregational level and soon at the district level. By 1975 she was elected district president, a position which she held through 1979. This gave Renate a chance to travel to various meetings in the U.S., and meet leaders and clergy throughout the church. In Bruderheim she taught Sunday School and participated in the Ladies Aid. There were opportunities for community outreach. Renate was for many years secretary of the Ladies Community Club, a non-religious women's support group. She gave religious instruction at the Bruderheim school, once Kurt was able to establish that program there.

During his time at Bruderheim, Kurt began to take on some historical research projects, perhaps partly inspired by his brother's interests. Earlier in Heimtal, Kurt had edited very brief commemorative booklets to mark milestone anniversaries of the Heimtal, New Sarepta and Bruderfeld churches. In 1981 or 1982 he was commissioned by the Bruderheim Church and the Canadian Moravian Historical Society to write more complete and documented histories of Bruderheim and also the founding of the Moravian Church in Alberta. The church board granted him a month's leave in 1982 to conduct the research and write the church history. The result was "They Came to Serve ... A Pastoral History of the Bruderheim Moravian Church 1893-1982". The early history of the church as a whole in Alberta was entitled "The Founding Of The Moravian Church In Western Canada And The Andreas Lilge Story". With Kurt's insistence and dedication to documentary evidence, some of the findings from his research were not consistent with anecdotes passed down over the years. The "Andreas Lilge Story", as a result, met with some resistance from pioneer families.

A number of times in this narrative there have been descriptions of Kurt's participation and presentations at mission festivals and churches in Germany and North America. There were even more of these during the Bruderheim years. Frequently connected with the BWM meetings, Kurt would visit a number of American churches. Always during the occasional vacations to Germany to visit family, many deputations to German churches were scheduled. Kurt and Renate still had connections with the DMG (German Mission Fellowship) who would arrange the visits.

As a result of the additional responsibilities taken on by Kurt and Renate in North America as well as Germany, and from Kurt's participation in many seminars and courses in

conjunction with the BWM meetings, they had become quite widely known within the Moravian Church. In early 1982, the Alaska Moravian Church decided to establish a formal seminary for native Yup'ik ministers. They needed a Director of Theological Education. With Kurt's background working with the Inuit in Labrador, his academic credentials, and extensive experience presenting to a wide variety of people and churches, he seemed a good choice for the position. At the April 1982 BWM meeting, they extended the Call to him, subject to approval by the Alaska leadership and favorable results from medical and psychological examinations of Kurt and Renate.

Renate and Kurt wholeheartedly agreed to the call. It was still consistent with their early calling to missionary service in the North. By late August, with favorable medical results, the Alaska leaders gladly accepted the recommendation of Kurt for their position. Many of the leaders remembered Kurt from his 1969 ministry there.

The final hurdle was achieving landed immigrant status in the U.S. That was cleared in November, after all the extensive documentation had been submitted and the personal interviews at the U.S. Consulate in Calgary concluded favourably .

By this time the two oldest children, John and Tabea, were both married. Only seventeen year old Esther was to accompany Kurt and Renate to Alaska.

The ministry at Bruderheim concluded on December 1, 1982 after six years. There was just time to celebrate an early Christmas with the whole family before boarding the plane on December 13, 1982.

## Alaska

When Kurt and Renate first became interested in missionary work, they really wanted to go to Alaska. It took many years, most of a career, and a journey across a continent before they finally arrived in Alaska. When they got there, Kurt thanked God for making that possible. And then he told Renate how good it was that it took so long. Probably remembering his early zeal, he said, "Imagine how much damage I could have done if we had come here right away".

Kurt and Renate spent almost fourteen years in Alaska. With a period of this duration, a chronology of events would be long and perhaps less interesting than a description of the pattern of life and key achievements.

They lived in the city of Bethel, which is about 550 km west of Anchorage. Situated on the Kuskokwim River, it is the administrative and supply center for the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region. When they arrived a few days before Christmas, 1982, there were about 4500 people in the city. Located only about 30 km from the coast, the area is flat, treeless tundra. Most of the local population consists of Yup'ik Eskimos. (Note that in Alaska the indigenous Arctic people prefer the name Eskimo, unlike the Canadians who prefer the term Inuit.)

Bethel was originally a Yup'ik village (Mumtrekhlogamute) that became the site of an Alaska Commercial Company trading post in the late 1800's. The Moravian Church established a mission in the area in 1885 under the leadership of Rev. John Henry Kilbuck. Already by the 1980's, the Moravian Church in Alaska was headquartered in Bethel and was administered locally in the same way as other Provinces of the church in America. It is important to recognize that this implies local

indigenous leadership, and the church in Alaska was not considered a mission area. In the 1980's there were 22 congregations in the state with about 5000 members.

The decision by the Alaska church to found a local seminary was driven by the need to provide training for local ministers. Many of the Moravian clergy in Alaska were and are local people, primarily Yup'ik, and most worship services are conducted in Yup'ik. A local seminary would be far better able to accommodate local considerations and cultural requirements. For example, most clergy still needed to participate in traditional aspects of the way of life, such as regular hunting and fishing to provide for their families. The seminary curriculum and calendar was ultimately set up to accommodate this, with only a single teaching semester each year, from January to April.

Kurt was an excellent choice for director of the seminary. He had always been very interested in native culture. By the time he was selected, his life experiences and study had made him really upset about the way that early (and some not so early) missionaries around the world worked to destroy native culture when they brought Christianity. He believed that the native traditions brought strength to the people and that Christianity could be compatible with their traditions. That belief was incorporated into his teachings and interactions.

When the Vitts arrived, there was not much time to prepare for the first teaching semester, starting in January. After teaching during the day, most evenings were taken up with learning the Yup'ik language, a task made somewhat easier due to the similarities to Inuktitut, which Kurt had learned in Labrador. For the first two years, 1983 and 1984, the seminary consisted of a single room used as a lecture hall, in the church Provincial Office. It was certainly not suited to learning and teaching, and

imposed a limitation on the number of students that could be accommodated. More students were willing to come, so more appropriate facilities were needed. The Synod of January 1984 authorized Kurt to start planning a seminary building, fundraising and enlisting volunteers to help with the construction.

The summer of 1984 saw seventy five volunteers from the Lower 48 and Canada rotate through Bethel to build the seminary, together with local people and contractors. By the fall it was ready for use, even though there were still finishing touches to be done. The seminary building was designed to provide living accommodation for the students, classrooms, a library and office space for the staff – essentially just Kurt.

By the end of 1984, the pattern for the Vitt's life in Bethel was set. Preparation for the winter teaching was done from September through December. January through April were the formal teaching months at the seminary. May through August provided vacation time, time for the many other projects Kurt became involved in, as well as for his own studies, and travel to the U.S., Canada, and Germany for presentations on the work of the seminary or other missionary activities. Such presentation opportunities were still important to maintain awareness about the mission activities of the Moravian Church worldwide. As well, most summers saw visitors coming to stay with the Vitts for short periods. Most of the them were family and friends interested in the seminary work, but there were also many more "official" visitors from the church organization or from Germany.

With a total staff of one, (Kurt Vitt), the Alaska Seminary was only able to offer a single stream of instruction. The ministerial candidates moved through a four year (four semester) program and then were ready for graduation. The teaching semesters

were sequential, one following another, which meant that in each year only the current year's courses were offered. If a person decided he or she wanted to become a minister, they would need to wait until the next time that the first year courses were offered before they could begin. April of 1986 saw the first class of graduates and then January 1987 was the beginning of the second group. By the time Kurt retired in 1996, three groups had completed their studies at the seminary and a fourth was half way through.

An addition to Kurt's work began in the fall of 1986. The 1986 Synod authorized the establishment of the Alaska Theological Institute in Bethel. Under its auspices, Kurt provided continuing theological education opportunities for active pastors and church workers. Institute courses were conducted at any time over the year according to the needs of the registrants.

When Kurt arrived in Bethel in December 1982, he was somewhat weary from the effort to complete his Masters of Theology degree just the year before. Nevertheless, he began working in 1983 on his doctorate in theology. He believed it would enhance the standing of the seminary and the position of the director within the Moravian Unity and with the ecumenical community in Alaska. By 1988, he had completed his studies and dissertation, and was awarded the Doctor of Theology degree, again With Distinction. His doctoral dissertation was titled "The Imaging of God and Conscience and Related Issues in Genesis 1-3", again building on Kurt's interest in conscience. In the dissertation he compares the traditional perceptions of conscience against the Biblical discernment of conscience provided in Genesis 3, in order to understand and appreciate the redeeming commitment and action on the part of God.

Another project begun in 1983 was a comprehensive history of the Moravian Church in Alaska, from 1885 through to the

upcoming centennial in 1985. This project was authorized and commissioned by the Alaska Moravian Church and the Board of World Missions, with support from the Alaska Historical Commission (State of Alaska). However, funding for the project came entirely from private donations and subsequent book sales. No church funding was required.

The project was a full partnership between Kurt Vitt and James W. Henkelman. Jim Henkelman was born and grew up in Alaska, the son of Canadian Moravian missionary parents (Clarence and Pauline Henkelman from New Sarepta, Alberta). Kurt and Jim shared the intensive research work and each wrote sections of the book. "Harmonious to Dwell - The History of the Alaska Moravian Church 1885-1985" was published in 1985. Kurt was very pleased with the joint effort with Jim and proud of the result. This book is probably the most widely disseminated and available publication by Kurt. It is recognized for its scholarship and thoroughness, but it is still easily readable and enjoyable.

This was not the only publication to which Kurt devoted his considerable energy. He was assigned to prepare and edit the Book of Order of the Alaska Moravian Church in 1986-87 - in English and Yup'ik. Also, a visitor to Bethel in 1985 told Kurt about a journal from a German-American trader (Bernhard Bendel) to the Kuskokwim region in 1870. The visitor was Dr. Himmelheber from Heidelberg, where the journal was kept in the archives. Through 1987 Kurt was able to edit the journal for publication - "1870 Kuskokwim Expedition - Bernhard Bendel". The response to this among the scientific and native communities exceeded expectations. In 1989 he published an expanded second edition, which included a photo reproduction of the entire journal.



There were many opportunities for Kurt to continue to participate in the activities of the Alaska Moravian Church. He provided coverage on many occasions when local ministers were away for several weeks or months at a time. He attended local meetings and seminars, meeting all the Provincial clergy and church leaders. Kurt played a big part in the 1985 Centennial celebrations, hosting visitors and tour groups, and leading the restoration of the first Moravian Mission House in Bethel, built in 1885. It opened in October 1985, housing the City of Bethel Visitor's Center, but the plans were eventually to establish a Moravian Mission and Archive there.

May of 1987 saw Kurt and Rev. Jacob Nelson, Bishop of the Alaska church, invited to the Board of World Missions meeting. Along with representatives from Labrador, they were there to help formulate an inclusive North American mission policy which would enable future participation of the Alaskans on the Board.

One final unexpected opportunity to expand the ministry of the church in Alaska occurred in 1987. A Siberian Yup'ik couple from St. Lawrence Island started in the second class at the seminary. St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea is part of Alaska, but it is much closer to Siberia than North America. The Yup'ik there are Siberian rather than Alaskan by ethnic and family relationships, but contacts with their relatives had been essentially cut off through the communist period. The Siberians at the seminary were members of the Methodist Church, but wanted to train for the ministry in a native institution suited to their needs.

Starting with the couple from St. Lawrence, it became possible to send missionaries and ministers to Siberian Yup'ik on the mainland. With glasnost in the USSR in the 1980's and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet regime later, contacts between

Alaskan and Siberian Yup'ik were reestablished. Kurt became part of this work with the founding of the Chukotka Native Christian Ministry in 1991. He served as its president from 1994 to 1996. The organization was a joint effort of the Methodist and Moravian churches in Alaska. Kurt was even able to travel to Chukotka in Siberia to meet the local people. It was a trip of a lifetime to see Russian Siberia soon after the fall of communism.

By this time, Kurt was in his mid sixties, and it was time to think about retirement. Upon completion of the 1996 teaching semester in April, Kurt turned sixty five and retired from his post. He could look back on 36 years of service with the Moravian Church, 35 of those as an ordained minister. Kurt and Renate returned to Alberta, to their beloved acreage outside of Edmonton, to be close to their children and grandchildren.

### **The End of the Path**

Unfortunately, it was not to be a long retirement. Kurt's health began to decline within a year, starting with an undiagnosed stroke at the first Christmas. He became less active and less mobile. Even sadder, his energy level declined, due to leukemia (which was not diagnosed until the week before his death). He found he could not complete old projects or take on new ones. On December 9, 2000, at the age of 69, after a short hospital stay and sudden complications, Kurt went to be with his Lord.

Those four short retirement years still provided Kurt and Renate a chance to reconnect friendships, especially those in Alberta. Kurt and Renate had always been consciously careful to avoid being selective in socializing or exhibiting favoritism among parishioners in the congregations in which they served. For the

most part, friendships became close after a congregational ministry ended.

This period of retirement also provided an opportunity for the whole family to discuss and consider the balance between work and family life. It should be evident that Kurt's commitment to God and therefore his work was his first priority. By his retirement years he realized that there was a cost associated with this choice. He also realized that he had not considered that cost earlier. He could not say if his choices would have been different, but the acknowledgement of the issue helped provide perspective and closure to his career.

As this is the story of Kurt's life, descriptions of Renate's role are by necessity brief. But Kurt would be the first to acknowledge her unfailing, continuous, generous and loving support. She embraced each new call and opportunity with enthusiasm. She stood by her man in times of adversity and stress. She did everything she could to ensure he could devote his energy to his work.

There are some observations we can make about Kurt's long winding path of life and ministry. No doubt influenced by his family's wartime experiences and his later study of Bonhoeffer, Kurt believed that if you don't stand up strongly and determinedly for what you believed, then you could easily be swept up in a tide of compromise or led to destruction. So when Kurt was being stubborn about something, it wasn't just ego or competitiveness or the desire to have power. He did not need to win or impose his will on others. It was simply a heartfelt desire to do what was right.

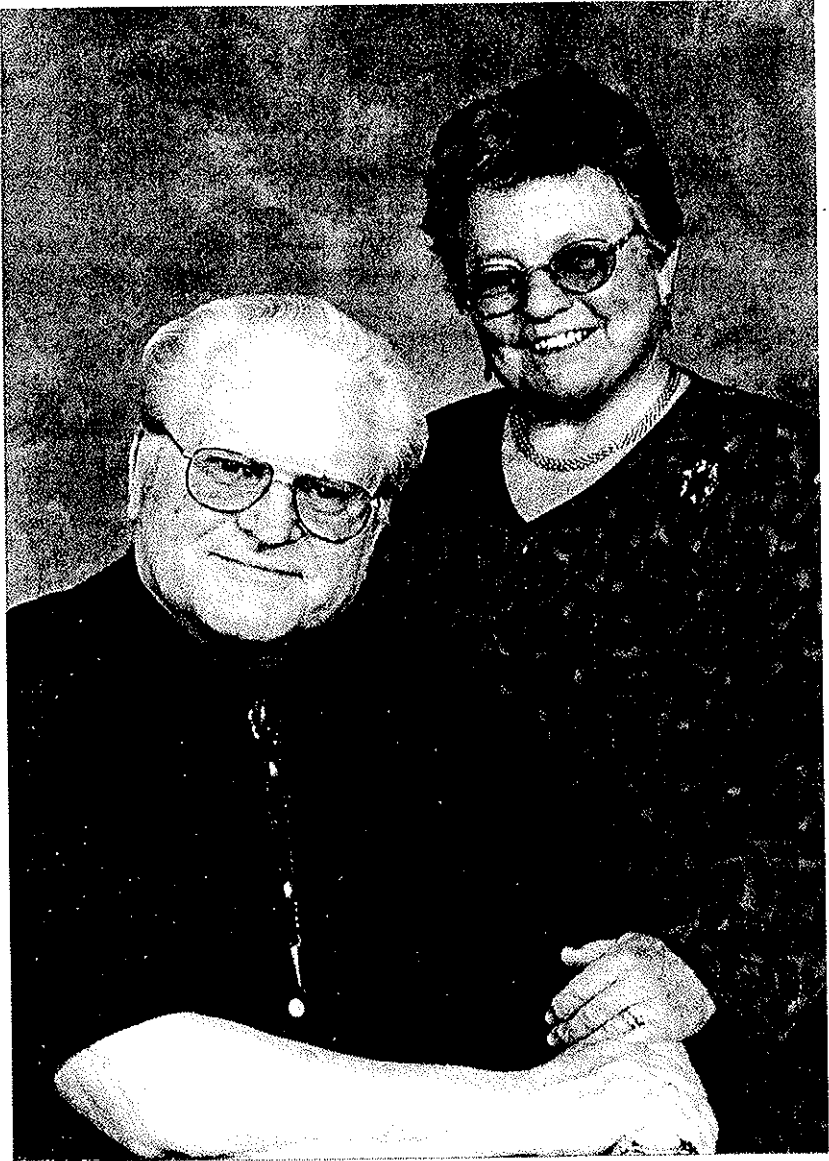
Kurt's faith and determination did not include being judgmental about people. He practiced his faith with compassion. He knew

how fallible people, including himself, could be. That was most evident when he was helping people in times of trouble.

Although he was strong in his convictions and faith, and he was prepared to argue them forcefully, he would never advocate imposing his beliefs on others. He preferred to win people over through love and by example.

It was probably these kinds of traits that enabled Kurt to adapt to the different cultures of Labrador, Alberta and Alaska. Today, with our world view so strongly centered on North America, we might underestimate those differences. But when dealing with the core of people's emotional and faith needs, their differences in values, ways of thinking, and traditions can be very significant. Kurt himself recognized this when he noted that he would not have been adequately prepared to come to Alaska twenty years earlier.

By the time he got to Alaska he had the maturity to be respected by the Yup'ik. By the time he left, they had bestowed on him a very high honor. They called him "Shaman". You may think that Shaman means witch doctor. Indeed, the early missionaries tried to ban shamans and discouraged people from consulting with them for that very reason. But for the Yup'ik, a shaman is much more. A Shaman is also a spiritual leader and a respected elder. For a white man to receive that title is a rare honor.



*(Author's note: The source material for this narrative has been somewhat limited. Kurt's own writings provided most of the information, in the form of an extensive, documented family history compiled over several years. His thesis and dissertation, and other publications also proved helpful. Due to the limited sources consulted the author takes responsibility for errors of fact arising from not checking against other sources.*

*In matters of interpretation of events, a careful reader should be able to distinguish between Kurt's interpretation and the author's interpretation.)*

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Publications by Rev. Dr. Kurt H. Vitt, Th.M., Th.D.

**They Came to Serve ... A Pastoral History of the**

**Bruderheim Moravian Church**

**Bruderheim, Alberta, Canada 1893-1982**

Vita Historical Publications, Edmonton/Ardrrossan 1982

**The Founding Of The Moravian Church In Western**

**Canada And The Andreas Lilge Story**

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**Conscience in Bonhoeffer: Freed of the Past – Directed by**

**the Future – Serving in the Present**

Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Theology, St. Stephen's College, University of Alberta, Edmonton 1982

**Harmonious to Dwell The History of the Alaska Moravian**

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