

## HISTORY OF THE COVENANT

In early days of the Moravian community of Herrnhut there was a danger that the fledgling community would collapse because of conflict. People were divided over theological opinions, religious ceremonies, organizational matters, and ethnicity. Under the leadership of Count Zinzendorf, the residents of Herrnhut discussed their many differences and began to recognize that what they had in common as followers of Christ was more important than their divisions. They also saw the need for some guiding principles to help organize their life as a community. The result of this discussion and prayer was the Brotherly Agreement that was signed on May 12, 1727. The Moravian Covenant for Christian Living traces its roots back to the original Brotherly Agreement.

After Zinzendorf wrote the Brotherly Agreement, he read some of the writings of Bishop Comenius and was surprised and pleased that what he wrote was consistent with the teachings of the Unity of the Brethren. Like the old Brethren, the people of Herrnhut believed that people with different theological ideas could join together to live in Christian fellowship so long as they remained true to Christ and his teachings.

The original Brotherly Agreement included rules for living together in a community as well as specific economic instructions and legal matters in Herrnhut. All of the Moravian settlements, such as Bethlehem and Salem, developed their own Brotherly Agreements. Since these settlements were religious settlements rather than congregations in our sense of the word, their Brotherly Agreements also included economic and legal matters.

With the dissolution of the communities in the middle of the 19th century, the old Brotherly Agreements were obsolete. In the 1860s both of the American provinces established new Brotherly Agreements to guide their members. There were slight differences between the two Brotherly Agreements, but they were similar in most respects.

The Northern Provincial synod of 1946 proposed that the Brotherly Agreement be recast in a more contemporary style with a closer conformity with Scripture. The Sunday nearest May 12 each year was to be a day for educating

congregations about the document. Unfortunately, as sometimes happens in the church, nothing happened after synod to fulfill that mandate.

The issue came up again in 1961 in a proposal to the Synod. "It is the feeling of many in the Church that the present form of the 'Brotherly Agreement' has lack of organization, no particular thought being given to an organized statement of the Christian life and discipline, but rather items being added on as they were felt necessary. It is also felt that some of the language used is outmoded and that some of the thought expressed reflects attitudes of the 19th century." In other words, delegates at the Northern Province's synod agreed that the church's doctrine should address contemporary issues rather than historical ones. This was consistent with Moravian practice from the time of Luke of Prague to the present.

What was different about 1961 than the 19th century? World War and the Holocaust had happened, and the United States possessed enough nuclear weapons to destroy life on earth. The first astronauts had been in space, and medical science was conquering diseases like polio and measles through vaccinations. Divorce had become more common and even faithful members of the church were divorced. The Civil Rights movement was in full swing and the whole world witnessed the destructive evils of racism, colonialism, and anti-Semitism. Women were using their right to vote granted in the 19th amendment to push for civil rights. And the list can go on. For many adults in 1961, it looked like they were living in a period of rapid progress that was also fraught with violence and fear. In 1957 the Moravian Unity had adopted a new doctrinal statements (The Ground of the Unity) and it seemed wise to revise the old Brotherly Agreement as well.

A committee consisting of bishops, pastors, theologians, and laity was assigned to compose a new Brotherly Agreement. Their work was approved, with some revisions, by the Northern Provincial Synod of 1966. As we examine the current Moravian Covenant for Christian Living, we will look at some of the most significant changes, such as the teachings on marriage and divorce.

There was also growing dissatisfaction with the Southern Province's Brotherly Agreement in the 1960s. A special provincial synod was called in 1969 to discuss the many social, political, and spiritual issues that the church was facing at that time, including the Vietnam War and the peace movement. The synod instructed the Provincial Elders' Conference to appoint a committee to revise the province's Brotherly Agreement to make it more relevant for the 20th century. At the time there were serious plans to reunite the two provinces, and in preparation for that some "interprovincial" boards and agencies had been developed. This included what is now called the Interprovincial Board of Com-

munication and the Board of World Mission. A committee examined the doctrine and practice of each province and determined that while the Southern Province was a bit more conservative than the Northern Province, there was no theological barrier to unification. The Southern Province committee that was charged with the task of revising the Brotherly Agreement proposed that the Southern Province should simply adopt the revised Northern Province's Brotherly Agreement.

So from the early 1970s until now the two provinces have used the same document, and later changes in the Brotherly Agreement were approved by both provinces. In 1986 both provinces approved the use of non-sexist language in the document. Thus "mankind" became "all people," "Brethren's Unity" became "Moravian Unity," and "brotherly love" was changed to "Christian love." Most significantly, the title of the document itself was changed from the Brotherly Agreement to The Moravian Covenant for Christian Living.

The title was changed in 1986 to make it clear that this covenant includes sisters as well as brothers. The word *covenant* is a biblical word for a solemn agreement or contract. Israel's relationship to God is defined in Scripture as a covenant. In the Moravian Church we also describe marriage as a covenant. A covenant is a voluntary bond that holds us together even when we fail to meet all of the obligations of the covenant.

The Moravian Covenant for Christian Living (often abbreviated at MCCL) is part of the Book of Order of both the Northern and Southern Provinces and is therefore an official doctrinal statement of the Moravian Church in North America. It does not apply in other provinces of the Unity. As we have seen, it has been revised many times over nearly three centuries. Each revision was made to express more clearly the Moravian understanding of Scripture and Christian living for that time period. The last revision to the Covenant came in 1995 when the statement on Scripture was changed to conform to the Ground of the Unity. That will be discussed later in this study guide. The Moravian Covenant for Christian Living includes guidelines for individuals, congregations, and the denomination as a whole. Although it is not binding on individual members, it is a statement of what the Moravian Church most values. It is intended to guide our decisions as a community of faith.

## QUESTIONS:

- Which title do you like better “Brotherly Agreement” or “Moravian Covenant for Christian Living”? What does each title mean to you?
- What do you think about all of these changes to the Brotherly Agreement over the years?
- Why do we need something to help us live together as Christians? How does Christian living differ from other types of living?
- Do you think this statement is intended just for Moravians or is it a guide for all Christians?

## SESSION 2

# CALLED INTO FELLOWSHIP

### PARAGRAPH 1:

*We are called into a Christian fellowship by the Lord Jesus Christ, according to the eternal purpose of God the Father (Ephesians 3:11) by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:18-21), and as members of Christ's Body, the Church, to serve all people by proclaiming the Gospel and witnessing to our faith by word and deed.*

### COMMENTARY:

The Covenant begins with the statement that Christ calls his followers to live in fellowship with each other. This is not a statement specifically about the Moravian Church as an institution; it is instead a reminder of the New Testament's teaching that the new life in Christ is a life that includes being part of Christ's Body, the church. The Moravian theologian Luke of Prague identified the visible church on earth as a ministerial thing (see Part 1) because it is within the fellowship of the church that we learn and experience the Good News of salvation in Christ. In the church we learn how to love those who are not part of our biological family. And it is in the church that we learn to have hope for the future as we work together for the Kingdom of God on earth. The institutional church is imperfect because we humans are imperfect, but we Moravians believe that the Holy Spirit works within the community of faith to produce good fruit. Notice that the Covenant moves quickly from Christian fellowship to Christian service and proclamation of the Gospel. Simply the act of participating in a Christian fellowship is a form of witness, especially when that participation shows the world that you are a follower of Christ. Through the community of faith we witness to the Good News of Jesus and demonstrate what it means to be a forgiving and forgiving community.

## QUESTIONS:

- What does the Church mean to you?
- Why is it important to see our connection to all followers of Christ?
- What does it mean to serve people by proclaiming the Gospel? Why do we say we do this in “word and deed”?
- How do you proclaim the Gospel? How does your congregation?

## SESSION 3

# SCRIPTURE

### PARAGRAPH 2:

*The Triune God as revealed in the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments is the only source of our life and salvation; and this Scripture is the sole standard of the doctrine and faith of the Unitas Fratrum [Moravian Church] and therefore shapes our life.*

### COMMENTARY:

A list of authoritative books is called a “canon,” and in Christianity the canon of Scripture is the Old and New Testaments. Some churches also include intertestamental or apocryphal books. Almost from the beginning of the church, there has been controversy over the Scriptures. In the days of Jesus and the Apostles, the controversy focused on the sacred texts of Judaism and how to interpret them. We can read some of this controversy in the New Testament as Jesus discusses the Law and Prophets with rabbis and priests. Eventually the church decided that the Jewish scriptures were the Old Testament (or Covenant).

But early Christian theologians, including the Apostle Paul, encouraged a figurative (or spiritual) reading of much of the Old Testament. The canon of specifically Christian writings, which we call the New Testament, developed over a period of many decades. It consists of four Gospels that tell the story of Jesus and his teachings from different perspectives and letters written by apostles and their followers. Early Christian bishops debated which letters and gospels should be included in the canon. It was not until the 360s AD that our New Testament was finally approved as canon and officially “closed.” The two testaments together formed the Bible. Some of the books not included, such as accounts of martyrs and saints or legends about Jesus and his family, continued to be read and influenced some of our traditions regarding Christmas and Easter. Other books were forbidden because they taught things about Jesus that were contrary to the faith of the apostles, such as the claim that Jesus was an angel rather than a human.

Over the centuries the Catholic and Orthodox churches developed a tradition of biblical interpretation that was the basis of doctrine and church life. This tradition eventually had had as much authority as the Bible itself. Beginning with John Wyclif (d. 1384) and Jan Hus (d. 1415), various reformers called for Scripture rather than tradition to be the final authority in the Church. The Moravian Church was part of this biblical reformation and encouraged the reading of the Bible in the common language of the people. It has always been important to Moravians, especially in our missions, to provide the Bible in the language of the people. It is a bold claim that the Bible can be translated into any language on earth.

After the Ground of the Unity was revised in 1995, this statement in the Covenant was also revised to be consistent with the Ground. We are here reminded that in the Moravian Church that Scripture is the standard of our faith and practice, but God is the source of our life and salvation. Scripture, for Moravians is the chief ministerial. The Bible is sacred to us because it points us to God who is the source of our life, our salvation, and our hope.

## QUESTIONS:

- What parts of the Bible do you read most often? Why?
- How do you think that Scripture shapes your life as a Christian? How does Scripture shape the life of the Moravian Church?
- What do you learn about God from reading the Bible?
- Do you think it is helpful to read the Bible in light of what we know about its original historical context?
- Why do we say that God is the source of our life and salvation rather than Scripture? Does this understanding diminish Scripture or make Scripture more useful for you?