

Five Centuries of Women's Leadership in the Moravian Church

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[Slide 1 – Title]

Introduction

[Slide 2 – Comenius Quote]

Women “also are formed in the image of God, and share in His grace and in the kingdom of the world to come. They are endowed with equal sharpness of mind and capacity for knowledge (often with more than the opposite sex), and they are able to attain the highest positions, since they have often been called by God Himself to rule over nations, to give sound advice to kings and princes, to the study of medicine and other things which benefit the human race, even to the office of prophesying and of inveighing against priests and bishops. Why, therefore, should we admit them to the alphabet, and afterwards drive them away from books?”¹

[Slide 3 – Comenius Portrait]

So wrote Moravian bishop John Amos Comenius in his *Great Didactic* three and a half centuries ago. He was a prominent public witness to the traditional Moravian belief that all of God's children should be valued and encouraged to pursue their vocations in the world, and his words still inspire us. Comenius was writing to educated men in a society that systematically and sometimes brutally denied women the opportunity to pursue their own sense of vocation and develop fully as beloved children of God. Comenius was writing to a society that tolerated violence against women in their own homes and that largely ignored the suffering of poor women without homes.

[Slide 4 – Malala]

In other words, the world of Comenius was not that different from our world today. In many places around the globe violence against women is still tolerated or even encouraged. In many regions women are not allowed to hold public office or have authority over men. In many churches around the world, women are not allowed to study theology, preach, and serve as pastors. Over the past five centuries, though, the Unitas Fratrum, or Moravian Church, has offered the world a different view of women and the role of women in the Kingdom of God. For centuries our church was one of the few churches that viewed women as spiritual equals of men whose gifts for preaching, teaching, and counseling should be used for the good of the church and the world.

[Slide 5 – Moravian Women clergy]

This evening we are going to take a brief tour of the role women played in the leadership of the Moravian Church. We will see that the Moravians centuries ago

¹ Comenius, *The Great Didactic of Comenius*, tr. by M. W. Keatinge, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1910 reprint by Kessinger Publishing, no date), 68.

were very progressive in their ideas of women's leadership, but after the death of Zinzendorf they adopted the sexist norms of their society. When Moravians in Europe began ordaining women after World War II, many people thought this was something new and radical. Little did the average Moravian know that our church had a long history of appointing women to leadership offices. Tonight we will meet some of the women who played vital roles in the mission of the Moravian Church, and I hope that all of you will be encouraged to answer God's call in your life.

Ancient Unity

[Slide 6 - Hus]

As you probably know, next month we will commemorate the 600th anniversary of the martyrdom of John Hus. Moravians sometimes mistakenly believe that Hus was the founder of our church. In fact, he had been dead for nearly half-a-century when our church was founded, but his courageous witness inspired the young men and women who formed the first Unity of the Brethren. Moravians tend to look at Hus primarily as a religious reformer, but much of his preaching was about social justice. As a professor and preacher in Prague Hus recognized that religion was being used to abuse ordinary people rather than to save them. Rather than heeding Christ's call to serve the poor and lift up the brokenhearted, the bishops and priests sought to increase their power and luxury.

[Slide 7 – Queen Sophia]

Women in particular suffered during the Middle Ages. They had few legal rights and women who spoke up for themselves could be accused of witchcraft or heresy. At least 10,000 women were burned in the 1400 and 1500s alone. But Hus used sermons and music to promote human rights and to empower ordinary men and women to live together as God's children. Hus preached at a place called Bethlehem Chapel, and even Queen Sophia of Bohemia came frequently to hear him. Unlike many theologians, Hus recognized that women faced unique difficulties. He taught that prostitution is caused by poverty and abuse, not immorality on the part of the women. Some of the reformers in Prague founded a convent named Jerusalem where former prostitutes could turn their lives around.

[Slide 8 – women and communion]

One of the most radical things the Hussites did does not seem shocking today. Today almost all Christian churches allow lay persons to drink from the chalice during Holy Communion, but that was not allowed in Hus's day. In fact, it was a crime for anyone other than an ordained clergyman to drink the blood of Christ. Since only men were ordained, this meant that for centuries years women were denied full communion throughout Europe. That changed in 1414 when a student of Hus, name Jakoubek, gave the cup to women in Prague. Jesus said, "drink of this all of you," and that's what the Hussites did. Not only did women drink from the chalice in communion, there are reports that some women preached in Hussite churches and may have even served communion.² Keep in mind that this was illegal. In 1419 the

² John M. Klassen, *Warring Maidens, Captive Wives, and Hussite Queens: Women and Men at War and*

king of Bohemia began to execute Hussites who persisted in letting women drink from the chalice. Some historians claim 5000 people were killed because of the chalice. The next time you receive Holy Communion, think of those who died for the privilege of sharing in the blood of Christ.

[Slide 9 – Tabor quote]

Just four years after Hus's death, thousands of men and women gathered on a hill in southern Bohemia to celebrate communion. They renamed the hill Mt. Tabor in honor of the mountain on which Jesus was transfigured before his disciples. We have the following description of what happened on Mt. Tabor: "The people having been divided into groups, the men by themselves and the women and children by themselves, the more learned and eloquent priests, from early morning on, fearlessly preached the Word of God and especially those things that concern the pride, avarice, and arrogance of the clergy. There all called each other brother and sister, and the rich divided the food that they had prepared for themselves with the poor."³ This is what a lovefeast is all about!

[Slide 10 – Tabor]

The most radical Hussites attempted to create a more just and equitable society based on Acts 4. They separated from the state church and created the first Protestant Church in a town they named Tabor. Our Moravian Church has direct roots in the Church of Tabor. Although women were not ordained to the priesthood in Tabor, they played a major role in the church. They were educated and some served as teachers and shared in worship leadership as readers. The Catholic Inquisition repeatedly expressed its frustration that Taborite women were educated and could discuss Scripture better than many trained theologians. Some of the inquisitors claimed that this was proof that the devil was working at Tabor since only the devil could teach a woman.

[Slide 11 - Kunvald]

Tabor was too radical for the 15th century, and in 1452 the king of Bohemia conquered the city and arrested the bishop of the church. However, some of the survivors of Tabor formed the nucleus of Unity of the Brethren, which we Moravians often call the Ancient Unity.⁴ A man named Gregory the Patriarch formed the Unity of the Brethren in the village of Kunvald in Bohemia sometime around 1457, and in 1467 the Brethren ordained their first bishop and priests. The Brethren tried to live strictly according to the teachings and example of Jesus in the Gospels. They called each other brother and sister because all are equal in the Body of Christ. They refused to take up arms or participate in state-sanctioned violence. They agreed that violence has no place in the home. Husbands were admonished to treat their wives and children with respect, kindness, and loving discipline. Mothers were taught how to raise children through love rather than fear.

Peace in Fifteenth Century Bohemia (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1999), 199-200.

³ Kaminsky, *Hussite Revolution*, 284-285.

⁴ Craig D. Atwood, *Theology of the Czech Brethren* (Penn State Press, 2010).

[Slide 12 – Kralice Bible]

They believed that men and women alike should learn to read the Bible, and so they translated it into Czech and published it so everyone could read. Mothers were encouraged to sing hymns to their children because the home is the first church. Although the name “Unity of the Brethren” sounds sexist today, from the beginning the church recognized that sisters were equally members of the body of Christ. Many girls were educated and learned the same catechism at confirmation as the boys.

[Slide 13 – Comenius Statue]

The Brethren did not ordain women as priests, but they did have an office in the church for women. Women could be “congregational Judges.” The Judges in the Unity were similar to modern elders, in that they assisted the pastor in his duties of oversight. From the instruction manuals for the judges we learn that they heard confessions and helped people improve their behavior and attitudes. Judges were trained to settle disputes within the congregation and were expected to be wise enough to prevent disputes from developing. What this means is that in the 15th century the Unity of the Brethren chose wise women to be pastoral leaders. They were responsible for teaching and caring for women in the church. The Moravians were pioneers in women’s leadership in the church. The only other churches in the 16th century to have similar offices for women were the Anabaptists.

[Slide 14- Comenius quote]

As you may know, the original *Unitas Fratrum* was destroyed by religious persecution in the 1600s. Comenius led hundreds of Moravians into exile in 1628, and over the decades the church slowly died. Comenius kept alive the witness of the Brethren through his writings, and he advocated for the right of women to be educated and serve in God’s kingdom. One of his most important books was *The Mother School*, which was written specifically for mothers. It was remarkable in his day that a scholar would view mothers as teachers rather than just caregivers. Comenius rejected the opinion of many theologians and scientists who claimed that women were less rational than men, and so he wrote a textbook to assist mothers in the divine task of educating the young. But few listened to him in his day. However, a new era would dawn in the 1720s in a place called Herrnhut

Zinzendorf Era

[Slide 15 – Zinzendorf portrait]

I’m sure you’ve heard of Count Zinzendorf who was the leading figure in the renewal or resurrection of the Moravian Church in the 1720s. Herrnhut was founded by people who left the Catholic Church in Moravia so they could worship as their ancestors in the Unity of the Brethren had done. This was illegal. The rebirth of the Moravian Church came when Count Zinzendorf allowed illegal aliens to settle on his lands. He protected them from deportation and helped them build a community. The church created by Zinzendorf and the Moravians at Herrnhut was not the exactly the same as the old Unity of the Brethren, but many of the ideals of the old Brethren

found new life in Zinzendorf's community.

[Slide 16 – Widow's Choir]

What you may not know is that the Moravian Church was one of the most controversial Christian groups in the 18th century. To be a Moravian at that time was to be a member of the most egalitarian, multi-racial, and multi-cultural organization in the Western world. The church was not perfect by any means, but it was only in Moravian communities like Salem and Bethlehem that you could find European aristocrats living with commoners and peasants.

[Slide 17 – footwashing]

Moravians from Europe called Africans and Native Americans “brother” and “sister” and even knelt to wash their feet. Many of the most beloved practices of the Moravians today, such as the lovefeast and the Daily Texts, had their origin in Zinzendorf's radical vision of the New Jerusalem where all followers of Christ in every church are brothers and sisters. It was shocking to people in the 18th century that aristocrats and wealthy people ate with poor people in lovefeasts and washed their feet before communion.

[Slide 18 - Erdmuth]

One of the most important leaders in the Moravian Church was Countess Erdmuth Dorothea von Zinzendorf. She was raised in a very pious household at Ebersdorf in Germany where the mystic Hochman von Hochenau was a preacher. She and the count viewed their marriage as a partnership for the service of Christ, and she played an important role in managing the affairs of the Zinzendorf household and the church. She travelled as far as Russia to advocate for the Moravians and was the author of many hymns. Zinzendorf once claimed that his theological principles came from her. Erdmuth was given the important office of the Charnier or Hinge for the church at the same synod that elected Christ as Chief Elder. Most Moravians simply called her “Mama.” No other church at the time allowed women to have the kind of authority that the Countess had.

[Slide 19 – Anna Nitschmann]

One of the most shocking things the Herrnhuters did in the early days was to select women to serve as elders alongside of the men. In 1727 the Moravians began electing male and female elders for the community. One of the youngest elders ever to be chosen was Anna Nitschmann. She had fled with her father to Herrnhut when she was a child, and she experienced conversion in 1727 as part of the great Children's Revival. She was just a teen-ager when she assumed office as an elder. Anna later founded the Single Sisters Choir and was part of the inner circle that governed Moravian affairs for thirty years. She travelled extensively, and was a participant in some of the most momentous decisions of the church, most notably the election of Christ as Chief Elder. She traveled to America in the 1740s and was a missionary to the Iroquois. In addition, she wrote hymns and was a much beloved counselor. Eventually she was ordained as a deacon and later became one of the first female presbyters in the Moravian Church. She was also the Chief Eldress and

ordained several other female presbyters and deacons. In Moravian circles she was simply called "Mutter."

[Slide 20 - Pentecost]

Some of radical Protestant churches, like the Quakers, allowed women to preach and teach, but it appears that the Moravians were the first church with formal ministerial ordination that ordained women. Zinzendorf recognized that many women are identified in the New Testament as disciples, prophets, co-workers, deacons, and even apostles. He believed that the church should strive to live up to the standard of the New Testament, and under his leadership, the Moravian Church provided many leadership roles for women denied them in other churches. According to Zinzendorf the Holy Spirit at Pentecost anointed one hundred and twenty people to the apostolic preaching office, including women. He claimed through that "an equality in the teaching office between the sisters and brothers" was made that has not stopped.⁵

[Slide 21 – Deaconesses]

Moravian historian Peter Vogt has shown that most of the pastoral care of women was carried out by women who were ordained. Some of these women even preached publicly to men.⁶ Scholars have identified over two hundred women who were ordained deaconesses during the time of Zinzendorf. There were also fourteen *Priesterinnen* (female priests or presbyters) who were ordained in secret. Some of them wore the surplice. According to Riddick Weber, women served as deacons in the Southern Province well into the 1800s. We should not make too much of the fact that these deacons and presbyters were called deaconesses and priestesses. That was simply the female form of the words deacon and presbyter. It appears that these offices were the equivalent of the male offices. Here we see deaconesses receiving new members into the church.

[Slide 22 – a woman residing at footwashing?]

The Moravians were one of the few Protestant churches that claimed its bishops were in apostolic succession, and they were the only one in which bishops ordained women. Anna Nitschmann often assisted in the ordinations of women. In other words, as Chief Eldress, she functioned like a bishop in the Moravian Church even if she was not called a bishop. The first ordinations of women in America were in the 1740s. I think that it is time that the Moravian Church officially acknowledges that it first ordained women in the 1700s rather than 1957 or 1972.

[Slide 23 – Communion close up]

It is not clear whether women presbyters ever consecrated or presided at Holy

⁵ Zinzendorf, *Gemeinreden* 32 (ZH 4), 69.

⁶ Peter Vogt, "A Voice for Themselves: Women as Participants in Congregational Discourse in the Eighteenth-Century Moravian Movement," in *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, ed. by Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998), 227-247.

Communion, but we know these women assisted in serving communion.⁷ Here is a picture of women serving communion to women. No church at that time allowed women to have a leadership role in Holy Communion, but Moravians allowed women to serve communion to women.

[Slide 24 – women behind the table]

Here we have a picture of women standing behind the communion table beside the pastor when the bread and wine were consecrated. No church in that age would have allowed women to stand behind the table and play a role in the consecration of Holy Communion. This had been done in the Orthodox Church until the 5th century, but this picture would have been shocking to most theologians in the 18th century.

[Slide 25 – Widow’s Choir again]

One of reasons that women in the 18th century Moravian Church had leadership roles was the Choir System. You are probably familiar with the 18th century Moravian practice of dividing the church into groups organized according to gender, age, and marital status. One of primary reasons for the choir system was so that women could be guided by other women rather than by men. Women choir leaders played important roles in the governing structures of Moravian villages. As Beverly Smaby puts it, "Male and female roles were much more symmetrical than in any other colonial society, including the Quakers."⁸

[Slide 26 – Single Sisters House]

Women were in charge of women’s education and discipline and devotional life. The choir houses for Single Sisters and for widows provided room and board so that women were not forced into marriage by economic necessity. Katherine Faull has written on the many ways that choir leaders helped women deal with physical, emotional, and spiritual needs as they progressed through the stages of life. The choir system provided a useful network of support for women in Moravian communities. Single Sisters had older women to guide them through puberty and maturity. When a Sister married, the Married Sisters Choir provided spiritual and emotional support for the new bride. Pregnant sisters met together for devotions, and they continued to have meetings for months after giving birth. When a woman’s husband died, she was immediately welcomed into the widows choir where her Sisters helped her deal with grief and change of life. In short, women were supported in every aspect of their physical, social, spiritual, and mental health by women who had offices in the church.

[Slide 27 – women in synod]

Women had their own sphere for leadership and growth, but they were not

⁷ Hans Joachim Wollstadt, *Geordnetes Dienen in der Christlichen Gemeinde: dargestellt an den Lebensformen der Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine in ihren Anfängen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1966), 346-348; cf. Otto Uttendorfer, *Zinzendorf und die Frauen: Kirchliche Frauenrechte vor 200 Jahren* (Herrnhut: Missionsbuchhandlung, 1919).

⁸ Smaby, *The Transformation of Moravian Bethlehem from Communal Mission to Family Economy* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 13.

separated from the community as whole. All of the choir helpers, deacons, elders, and presbyters served on the governing bodies of congregations and the Moravian Church as a whole. Here we have a painting of a Moravian synod from the mid-1700s. Notice how many women are present for the synod. There are women sitting at the central table with Zinzendorf and the other leaders of the church. With the exception of certain financial matters, women participated in every major decision of the church. When Christ was elected as Chief Elder in 1741, women were part of that decision.

[Slide 28 – prayers for women]

The whole church, including the men prayed for women and the needs of women regularly. This is most evident in the 18th century Litany where the congregation offered the following prayer:

Regulate and keep in Order the festival Seasons of Matrimony (Especially of the newly married Pair *N.N.*) (*Deut. xx. 8. ch. xxiv. 5. I Cor. vii. 5.*), Let our pregnant Sisters reap the Blessing of thy having lain under a human Heart, And let those who give Suck, enjoy the Blessing of thy having sucked the Breasts of a Mother;

Sanctify all bodily Fathers to the spiritual Father, And all who bear Children, to the Mother of us all; Bless thy Gift, the Children; Visit them even in their Mother's Womb!

May Faith in the Marriage of the Lamb be the Girdle of the Reins of the espoused Sisters, Call their Chamberlains thy espoused ones, and this will be a Girdle to their Loins; Be thyself the Reward of those Brethren, who have discharged their matrimonial Ministry with Faithfulness,

And be Thou the blessed Hope of those Sisters, who are lonely and Widows indeed; Pour out thy Holy Spirit on all thy Servants and handmaids!

Hear us, O dear Lord and God!

Examples of Female Leadership

[Slide 29 South Africa]

There were many important women leaders in the 18th century Moravian Church. Tonight I want to focus on two of them, both of whom were African. In the 1730s, the Moravian missionary Georg Schmidt traveled to South Africa where he made contact with the Khoi people, who were called Hottentots by the Europeans. These people were viewed as animals by the European settlers and sometimes were hunted like game, but Schmidt went to them with the simple message of God's love shown in Jesus Christ. Among the people who responded to his teaching was a young woman whom Schmidt renamed Magdalena when he baptized her. Her name recalled Mary Magdalene, the first witness to the resurrection of Jesus. Magdalena, or Lena as she was called, learned to read the Dutch New Testament that Schmidt gave her.

Schmidt planted a pear tree in the valley where he formed a small community of about three dozen converts. Lena was one of his assistants. Unfortunately the European authorities in Cape Town decided that the Christian Gospel was too

dangerous for the native peoples of Africa. Schmidt was forced to leave South Africa. It was half a century before Moravian missionaries allowed back into the territory. When they arrived they went immediately to the valley that Schmidt had worked in. There they found the pear tree blossoming. More important, the elderly Lena was still holding worship services with a small flock of believers. Like her biblical namesake, this Khoi woman was a witness of the resurrection and the mother of the Moravian Church in South Africa.

[Slide 30 - Rebecca]

Moravians today celebrate the names of Leonard Dober and David Nitschmann, but how many of us know about Rebecca Freundlich Protten?⁹ Rebecca was a freed slave living on St. Thomas who responded to the preaching of the Moravian missionaries. She became an evangelist who assured other slaves that the Moravians were white people who could be trusted. She was one of the founders of the Posaunberg congregation, which is now called New Herrnhut. Rebecca married one of the Moravian missionaries, Matthew Freundlich, which was a rare instance of inter-racial marriage blessed by a Christian pastor during the colonial era. The marriage was controversial, and the Freundlichs and the pastor were imprisoned by colonial authorities. She continued to preach to the slaves from her prison cell. When Zinzendorf came to St. Thomas in 1738 he was able to secure her release. In the 1740s the Freundlichs traveled to Germany, but Matthew died before reaching Herrnhut. Rebecca was ordained a deacon in Germany. She was the second African woman to be ordained by the Moravians, which means that she was the second African woman we know of to be ordained by any Christian church in the history of Christianity. After the death of her first husband, she married an African brother named Protten and they went to Africa as missionaries where they died. She was the first African American missionary.

[Slide 31 - Benigna]

Ermuth Dorothea von Zinzendorf, Anna Nitschmann, Lena, and Rebecca Protten are just a few of the courageous Moravian women who defied social norms and traveled the world inspired by the love of their Savior. They labored long into the night counseling and caring for their sisters. They were pastors who cared for their flocks. They were preachers and writers and musicians; brides of Christ and mothers of the church. They crossed oceans and forests to bring the good news that no land is godforsaken and all people are God's people.

Theology

The historical record is clear. There were many leadership positions for women in the Moravian Church, and women played vital roles in the mission of the church. Zinzendorf deserves much of the credit for creating such an inclusive community. He did not do it alone, obviously. His wives helped shape the practice of the church, but I think it was primarily Zinzendorf's theology that provided the foundation for

⁹ Jon Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005).

women's leadership in the 18th century. If you think that ordaining women in the 18th century was controversial, just imagine how people responded when they heard the Moravians calling the Holy Spirit "Mother."

[Slide 32 – Mother Office]

During the period when the Moravians ordained women and used the "choir system", they also prayed to the Holy Spirit as the Heavenly Mother. For more than thirty years, the church's prayers, hymns, and liturgies addressed the Holy Spirit as Mother. There was even a special day called the Mutterfest to celebrate the Mother Office of the Spirit. Zinzendorf said that the motherhood of the Holy Spirit was "an extremely important and essential point ... and all our church and practice hangs on this point."¹⁰ Despite the importance of this doctrine in the life of the church and the theology of Zinzendorf, it has only been in the past 25 years, since Gary Kinkel first published his dissertation on the topic, that people have studied this aspect of Moravian history.

[Slide 33 – Zinzendorf sermon]

In one of the first sermons Zinzendorf preached in America, he explained why it is a good idea to pray to the Holy Spirit as the Mother. "In heaven we have a father, a mother and a husband. The father of our Lord Jesus Christ is our true father and the Spirit of Jesus Christ is our true mother. The Son of the living God, his only born Son, is our true brother and husband. It can be no other way but that his father must also be our father and his mother also our mother."

[Slide 34 – Single Brothers House]

This was not some kind of secret teaching. Moravians published hymns and sermons about the Motherhood of the Spirit. Zinzendorf once dedicated an entire year of the Daily Texts to this theme. They even carved it in stone on the front of one of the largest buildings in colonial Pennsylvania – the Single Brothers House in Bethlehem!

One of the most important litanies to the Holy Spirit during Zinzendorf's time was titled the *Te Matrem*, which was based on the ancient *Te Deum Laudamus*. *Te Matrem* means "to the Mother."

[Slide 35 – Te Matrem]

The litany begins: "Lord God, now be praised, you worthy Holy Spirit! You, the mother of Christendom, the Church honors in unity. All the angels and the host of heaven and whoever serves the honor of the Son; also the cherubim and seraphim, they all sing with a clear voice." This litany represents an extremely rare example of

¹⁰ N. L. von Zinzendorf, "Eine Rede, vom Mutter-Amte des heiligen Geistes. Gehalten in London den 19. Oct. 1746," in *Der öffentlichen Gemeinreden im Jahr 1747 (hereafter Gemeinreden), Anhang, p. 2, reproduced in Hauptschriften in sechs Bänden (hereafter abbreviated as ZH), vol. 4, ed. by Erich Beyreuther and Gerhard Meyer (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1962)*. This discourse is found between the two sections of the *Gemeinreden*. For more on the mother office of the Spirit, see Gary Kinkel, *Our Dear Mother the Spirit: an investigation of Count Zinzendorf's Theology and Praxis* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), and Atwood, "The Mother of God's People."

Christian liturgy using feminine language to describe God, but it was only one of several worship pieces to the mother Spirit in Moravian churches.

Zinzendorf acknowledged that this type of language for the Holy Spirit was not typical, but he always insisted that it was the simplest, clearest, and best way to communicate the nature of the Holy Spirit. This is language that even a child can comprehend.

[Slide 36 - Bible]

Zinzendorf argued for the scriptural authority of the Mother Office by linking together the Old and New Testament verses Isaiah 66:13 and John 14:26: “When the dear Savior at the end of his life wanted to comfort his disciples (at that time the language was not as rich as ours is); by that time the Savior, who was a very great Bible student, had doubtlessly read the verse in the Bible ‘I will comfort you as a mother comforts.’ Then the dear Savior thought, ‘If I should say to my disciples that I am going away, then I must give them some comfort. I must say to them that they will receive someone who will comfort them over my departure. It will not be strange to them, for they have already read it in the Bible. ...There it reads they shall have a Mother: I will leave you my Spirit.’”¹¹

[Slide 37 – Madonna and child]

Zinzendorf insisted that the church should be a school of the Holy Spirit, which would unlike any human educational institution. It is “a family school, that is a school on the lap, in the arms of the eternal Mother” who tenderly loves her children. A Christian is like a child who “sits on the Mother’s lap, is received into the school, and is led through all classes; then it is under the special dispensation, under the motherly regimen of the Holy Spirit, who comforts, punishes, and kisses the heart, as a mother comforts, punishes, and kisses her own child.”¹² We do not know if Zinzendorf ever read Comenius’ *Mother School*, but this quotation is certainly consistent with Comenius’ understanding that education is a benevolent process guided by a nurturing figure.

[Slide 38 - Mutterfest]

The idea of the Holy Spirit as Mother became an important part of Moravian devotional and communal life. The church established a festival for the Holy Spirit, popularly called the *Mutter Fest* (the Mother festival), which was first mentioned publicly in 1752. It was observed annually until 1770. It appears that the devotion to the Mother was particularly important to the women of the community. For instance, *The Church’s Prayer to her Mother* was regularly used on the Single Sister’s festival day. It is very significant that Zinzendorf compared the Holy Spirit to Anna

¹¹ Zinzendorf, *Gemeinreden* 3 (ZH 4), 64 and 65. He also uses the Song of Solomon as support. *Eine ist meine Taube, eine ist ihrer Mutter die liebste. Wer ist die Mutter? Ingleichen seheth Salomo in seiner Krone, damit Ihn Seine Mutter gekrönet hat am Tage der Freuden seines Hertzens*. Spangenberg records a vigorous disagreement within the *Brüdergemeine* over Zinzendorf’s exegesis of this passage. *Apologetische Schluß-Schrift* (ZE 3), 79 f.

¹² Zinzendorf, *Gemeine Reden* 27 (ZH 4), 375.

Nitschmann, who was also referred to simply as the *Mutter*.

[Slide 39 – John the Baptist and baby Jesus]

The 18th century Moravians also had a remarkably positive view of the human body. We do not have time to go into detail on Zinzendorf's view of the human body, but I will say that Zinzendorf took the doctrine of the Incarnation very seriously.¹³ Like the early Church Fathers, Zinzendorf spoke of a union of the divine and human in Jesus that was so complete that one can say that God was born in a stable to a virgin. God suffered. God died on the cross.¹⁴ The Creator took on human flesh in Mary's womb because he wanted to restore human nature and bless human life. We do not need to be ashamed of our bodies because Christ took human form.

According to Zinzendorf, the blessing of women's bodies comes through Mary, the mother of Jesus. Zinzendorf boldly proclaimed that the bodies of women are holy because Mary was holy. Zinzendorf insisted that the conception of Christ in Mary's womb and the natural birth of Jesus removed all shame associated with the female body. As such, women and their bodies ought to be honored by all. "And from that same hour the womanly member, the womanly mother, was no more a shame but the most honorable of all members."¹⁵

Think of the shame that is heaped on women in our day and how this idea could bring hope and healing to women around the world. Once all notion of shame is removed from women's bodies, there was no longer a barrier to their being fully included in leadership. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene should be more important in Moravian preaching than they are today. God chose a woman to bring the Savior into the world; why would he forbid women from preaching about the Savior of the world? God chose a woman to care for his son and provide him nourishment; why would he forbid women from baptizing people into the covenant of grace or serving Holy Communion? God chose a woman to go to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus and there she met an angel who proclaimed that the Lord is Risen; would God forbid women from burying the dead and announcing the good news of the resurrection?

What Happened?

[Slide 40 - graves]

It is clear that the Moravian Church actively promoted the full inclusion of women in the leadership and fellowship of the church during the time of Zinzendorf. The church valued women of all ages and status in life. Strong women leaders helped build up the kingdom of God. But something happened during the 19th century and this history was almost forgotten. This is why in some parts of the Moravian Unity women are not treated as equals or allowed to be leaders.

¹³ For more on the incarnational theology of Zinzendorf, see Craig Atwood, *Community of the Cross*.

¹⁴ Zinzendorf, *Einundzwanzig Diskurse über die Augspurgische Konfession* (ZH 6), 65.

¹⁵ Zinzendorf, *Gemein Reden*, (ZH 4), Anhang, 36; Zinzendorf, *Gemein Reden 1* (ZH 4), 29.

[Slide 41 – anti-zinzendorfiana]

When the public learned what was happening in Moravian communities there was pressure on the Moravians to conform to the sexist norms in society. Vicious polemics were published against Zinzendorf and the Moravians. Missionaries were imprisoned, and evangelists were assaulted. Many of the polemics against the Moravians mentioned the danger they posed to public order by allowing women to hold offices. Even some of the Moravians were concerned that the church was being too dominated by women.¹⁶ After the death of Zinzendorf in 1760, the leadership in Germany tried to reassure the public that the Moravians were not a dangerous cult threatening social norms. August Gottlieb Spangenberg published apologetic works that minimized the radicalness of the Moravian Church. Zinzendorf's boldest ideas were repressed.

[Slide 42 – Synod 1760]

Beverly Smaby has shown that demise of women's leadership was a conscious decision on the part of prominent male leaders of the church to remove women from the decision-making process. Women were excluded from the committees that were established to manage the church's affairs after the death of Zinzendorf. Not surprisingly, the all-male committees decided to end women's ordination.¹⁷ Women were no longer allowed to assist in serving Holy Communion in groups where men were present, and they gradually lost other rights in the church.

The male elders explain the new policies thus: "we are obliged to adjust ourselves as much as possible to [the world's] customs in those things that don't belong to the essence of our Church, and to do nothing different unnecessarily that could give the public cause to conceive all kinds of false conceptions of us and, even with the appearance of truth, to draw detrimental conclusions from [what we do]."¹⁸ In other words, they were more concerned about public relations than the New Testament's vision of the true Christian community that had motivated their ancestors.

One of the most disturbing discoveries made by modern historians, especially archivist Paul Peucker, is that the church's leaders intentionally destroyed some of the documents associated with the radical experiments of the 1740s and 1750s.¹⁹ This included the burning of most of the letters and personal papers of Anna

¹⁶ P.M. Peucker, "„Gegen ein Regiment von Schwestern“: Die Stellung der Frau in der Brüdergemeine nach Zinzendorfs Tod," *Unitas Fratrum*, Heft 45/46,

¹⁷ *Es sey diese erste Conf: ohne die Schw. veranstaltet worden, damit wir über ihre Concurrenz erst mit einander sprechen möchten, u. es würden sodann die Schw. ausgemacht, die künftig zur Conf: kommen solten*, Moravian Archives Herrnhut, R.3.B.4.c.1, May 30, 1760, quoted by Smaby, "Negotiating Gender Restrictions."

¹⁸ *Unvorgreifliche Anmerkungen und Desideria dem Ehrwuerdigen General-Synodo zur Prueffung und Decision pflichtmaessig dargelegt von dem verordneten Unitaets Syndicats Collegion nebst Beylagen Sub. Cit: A. bis Cit. H.*, page 41, Moravian Archives Herrnhut, R.2.B.45.2.a, quoted by Smaby, "Negotiating Gender Restrictions."

¹⁹ Peucker, "Im Staub und Asches"

Nitschmann.²⁰ The reason we know so little about the most important woman in Moravian history is that the church's elders burned her records. Men have often erased the history of women in the Christian church, but at least the Moravians were honest enough to record that they had done this.

[Slide 43 – Holy Spirit]

It was not just women's leadership that suffered in the years after Zinzendorf's death. The devotion to the Holy Spirit as the Mother of the Church was also a source of anxiety for his successors. The first synod held after Zinzendorf's death raised the issue of the *Mutter Fest* and decided that it should be restricted to private gatherings because outsiders would not understand it.²¹ Some protested that the church was pulling back from one of the most important aspects of its devotion. Mother "is a sweet name, and our entire folk would be troubled if it were not permissible any longer to use it" since it was considered "a real and divine truth which the Savior has declared to us through the blessed Disciple [Zinzendorf]."

[Slide 44 – Dethroning Mother]

It was also decided that the litanies of the church needed to be revised, and the word Mother was systematically removed. The new litanies appeared in the liturgy books of 1770 and 1773. The word "comforter" replaces "mother" in most places. The Spirit is no longer referred to as the "Mother of God's People" but is instead "Lord God Creator." What was once vital to the community was removed, and it was not accidental that the worship of the Moravians changed at the same time that women lost their roles in leadership.

[Slide 45- Synod 1789]

In 1789, male delegates expressed concern that women were attending synod, and this time the women protested in writing. They called the proceedings "humiliating" (*demütigend*) and they tried to reclaim their accustomed leadership role stating: "that the Savior had granted us the gift that [people of] our sex want to be led and reprimanded by their own kind, which, especially in spiritual matters, is not usual in the whole rest of the world.... [T]o legitimate the service of the Sisters in the Church it is necessary, that the male servants of Jesus honor [the Sisters] with respect and trust.... [O]ur cause will surely fall into chaos, if the maids of the Savior are, from one time to the next, more and more pushed back."²² This would be the last General Synod that women attended for over 150 years.

Women's Continuing Work in 19th century

Even though the men in the Moravian Church greatly restricted women's leadership

²⁰ Extr. aus einem Briefe von Br. David Nitschm. an Br. Petrum. London. 13 Sept. 65, Moravian Archives Herrnhut, R.14.A.z.44.a.18, quoted by Smaby, "Negotiating Gender Relationships."

²¹ 28th session of the synod. August 9, 1764. Verlass des Synodi zu Marienborn im Jahr 1764 gehalten, p. 1305- 1310. Archiv der Brüder-Unität, Herrnhut, Germany. Item R.2.B.44.1.c.2, quoted by Smaby, "Negotiating Gender Restrictions."

²² Protokoll der General synode 1789, Moravian Archives Herrnhut, R.2.B.48, pages 481-484, as quoted in Peucker, "Gegen ein Regiment von Schwestern," 69-70.

and their devotional lives after the death of Zinzendorf, this did not mean that the church completely repressed women or denied them all forms of leadership. During the workshop time we can talk more about the ongoing work of Moravian women around the world. For now, I will just highlight a few examples of how Moravian women continued to play a vital role in the life of the church.

[Slide 46 – Women’s Education]

Moravians remained pioneers in women’s education in the 18th and 19th centuries. Wherever the church established congregations, it also built schools for boys and girls. One of the first schools that the church began in America was a school for women in Germantown, PA, which Countess Benigna began during her visit in 1742. That school gradually developed into the Moravian Female Seminary in Bethlehem, PA, and that school eventually joined with Moravian College in the 1950s. It is interesting that both Moravian institutions of higher education in the United States: Salem Academy and College, and Moravian College and Theological Seminary trace their founding to Moravian schools for girls. I think it is safe to say that Moravian communities were the only towns in the world before 1800 where it was expected that most, if not all, women residents would receive formal education and learn to read and write.

In 1785 the Female Seminary in Bethlehem began admitting non-Moravian students, some of whom came from wealthy and prominent families. Some of the female relatives of Generals Ethan Allen, Nathaniel Green, and George Washington attended. A North Carolina congressman said that the school was “unrivalled in the United States as a place for female education.” It should be noted that the school also admitted a few non-white students until that practice grew too controversial in America.²³ The school promised parents that their daughter “will be taught a perfect knowledge of her mother tongue – she will be taught with the utmost elegance the French and German languages; reading, writing, composition, and arithmetic, will be given in as high perfection as she is capable of attaining them, music, painting, and geography, with the rudiment of astronomy, she will acquire, and at the same time the strictest attention to her health, and the purity of her morals, will be unremittedly paid.”²⁴

The Moravians in Lititz and Salem also opened boarding schools for girls after the American Revolution. It should be noted that Moravian Single Sisters served as teachers at all of the Moravian schools for girls. This was decades before women were accepted as teachers in America or Europe. Women also served as the administrators and counselors for the schools; however, a man was always the official head of the school in order to deal with non-Moravians who did not understand that women are able to run a school and manage finances. Salem Academy is famous today not only because the wife of President Polk was a student,

²³ Catherine Bancroft, “Maria Beaumont: Race and Caribbean Wealth at the Early Nineteenth-century Moravian Boarding School for Girls in Bethlehem,” *Journal of Moravian History* 13 (2003):158-196.

²⁴ Bancroft, 179.

but because the school admitted the daughters of Cherokee chief Major John Ridge in the 1820s. Among the graduates of the Moravian schools were Lisetta and Amelia Van Vleck, two of the most important women composers in 19th century America.

[Slide 47 – Women Pastors and Missionaries]

We cannot begin to name all of the courageous Moravian women who answered God’s call to serve as pastors, teachers, and evangelists around the world. Even after the church stopped the practice of bishops ordaining women, women still served as co-pastors with their husbands. Anna Catherina Ernst was pastor of Friedland Church in North Carolina after her husband died. Women were given special training in Moravian schools in Niesky Germany and elsewhere so they could be missionaries in the tropics, the arctic, and even South Africa. It was not until 1957 that the church began ordaining women again as deacons and presbyters, but that does not mean that women were not ministers and pastors in many parts of the world. Today we have female bishops, and I have no doubt that Anna Nitschmann and Count Zinzendorf would be proud that we finally caught up to their enlightened understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As the apostle Paul wrote 2000 years ago: “In Christ there is neither male nor female.”

[Slide 48 – past and present]

Conclusion

What have we learned tonight? For hundreds of years the Moravians taught that women are equal to men spiritually and should be fully incorporated into the life of the church. For most of the history of the church there were specific offices for women so they could provide pastoral care to women. For a brief, extraordinary period in the 18th century the Moravians ordained women as elders, deacons, and presbyters. During the days of Zinzendorf two of the most important leaders in the Moravian Church were called Mama and Mutter. Women served as missionaries and helped found some of the most important congregations in the Americas and Africa. Moravians even worshiped God as both Father and Mother. Over time the church grew more conservative and sexist, and less comfortable with the biblical idea that women are disciples and apostles, but that did not stop women from being leaders in the church. The Moravian church continued to educate women for service and leadership throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Thanks to this conference and many other efforts, women and men throughout the Moravian Unity today may be inspired by the past to create a more just and equitable future for Moravian women and all women in the world.