

Moravian Church as an Historic Peace Church

Craig D. Atwood

Originally published in *The Moravian* March 2010. Reprinted with permission of the author.

The Rev. Dr. Craig Atwood is Director of Admissions and Student Life at Wake Forest University School of Divinity of Winston-Salem, N.C. where he also teaches theology and Moravian studies. Br. Atwood was ordained in the Moravian Church in 1987 and has served as a college chaplain, pastor, and theologian in residence. He received his PhD from Princeton Theological Seminary and is the author of several books and articles on Moravian history and theology.

The Unitas Fratrum was the first peace church.¹ Our church was founded in 1457 during a period of intense religious conflict and persecution. Brother Gregory and his companions were frustrated that the state church had beautiful worship and sophisticated theology but had forgotten the weightier matters of Jesus' teaching. In a little village called Kunwald they tried to create a Christian community that followed the Law of Christ as presented in the Sermon on the Mount. Gregory drew heavily on the writings of Peter Chelčický who insisted that Christ's commandment to love our neighbors and our enemies is central to our faith. Peter frequently pointed out that it is impossible to love someone while killing or maiming them. The original Brethren were uncomfortable with the way churches use the violence of the Old Testament to justify violence. Even though the ancient Israelites had engaged in warfare, that does not mean that Christians may violate the commandments given by Jesus. It is the New Testament that should govern the lives of Christians.

Members of the Unitas Fratrum were forbidden to serve in the military or even to serve on juries since they might participate in the harming of others. This strict pacifism was threatening to rulers who expected the church to sanctify the violence of the state. As a result, hundreds of Moravians were harassed, arrested, tortured, exiled, or killed. As time passed, it grew harder for the Moravians to maintain such a strict pacifism and separation from the state. There were a few nobles who offered protection to the church, but only if members were willing to assume the duties of citizenship, such as serving on juries. Gradually the elders moderated the original non-violence. Members were allowed to serve on juries, but they were to temper justice with mercy. Eventually, Brethren were allowed to serve in the military, but only if they were forced by the state. Brethren could not be professional soldiers, and members who were conscripted into the army were instructed to seek out non-combat roles. If they had to fight they should try to wound rather than kill.

During the Protestant Reformation, the Unitas Fratrum established ties with the Calvinists in Geneva, and they drifted further away from their original peace witness. In 1618, some of the prominent members of the Unity participated in the rebellion against the Habsburg rulers. During the ensuing Thirty Years War (1618-1648) the Unitas Fratrum was destroyed by religion persecution and violence. Thousands of Moravians went into permanent exile; others tried to keep the faith alive in secret in their homeland. The greatest Moravian scholar in history, John Amos Comenius, lived during this violent era. He is most famous for his books on education reform, but Comenius also dedicated himself to the cause of peace. Toward the end of his life he wrote: "Mankind has had enough of folly and war, and it is to be

hoped that the time will come when all men are exhausted with wars and return to peace.”² Comenius revived the waning peace witness of the *Unitas Fratrum* and made it central to his theology, pedagogy, and ethics. Violence is contrary to the nature of Christ and should be banished from the church. He urged his readers: “Whenever you encounter one of your neighbours, regard him as yourself in another form (which he is), or indeed as God in another form, for he is the image of God, and God will be watching to see how reverently you treat him.”³

Comenius tried to preserve the witness of the *Unitas Fratrum* through his writings, and he lived in hope for a better day when those who profess Christ would live as Christ commanded. Decades after his death, a new generation of Moravians chose to go into exile so that they could live according to the teachings of the New Testament. Under the leadership of Count Zinzendorf, they formed a covenant community called Herrnhut in Germany. The Brotherly Agreement they signed in 1727 stipulated that they would seek to live in peace with all people. Disputes were to be settled through conversation rather than violence. Although the Moravians did not condemn the military per se (and had many friends in the military) members of the Moravian Church were not allowed to enlist. Those who did so were generally removed from membership in the church. Moravians also did not participate in capital punishment, although they did not protest the state’s authority to try capital cases. It is not surprising that Moravians settled in the Quaker colony of Pennsylvania.

The pacifist stance of the Moravians was hard to maintain during the long years of the American Revolution. Some historians argue that pacifism was merely a way to maintain neutrality and to avoid the consequences of choosing sides in the conflict, but the commitment to the Sermon on the Mount ran deeper than that. The pastor of Hope Moravian in North Carolina was beaten up by an American militia because of his pacifism, and many of the younger brethren had to hide in the forest to avoid conscription. The church paid heavy fines to both the Americans and the British during the war, and the residents of the Moravian village of Gnadenhutten in Ohio were murdered by an American militia without defending themselves. Some of the younger Moravians in Pennsylvania and North Carolina did enlist in the revolutionary army and were allowed to rejoin the church after the war.

As Moravian communities declined in the 1800s, it grew harder for the church to maintain its original pacifism. After the Nat Turner rebellion in 1830 every municipality in North Carolina was required to have a militia, and so the Moravians in Salem formed a regiment. For the first time the church sanctioned the study of war because of the fear of a slave revolt. During the Civil War, there were Moravians in both the Federal and Confederate armies. It is sadly illuminating that the first war that Moravians fully endorsed was one in which brother fought against brother. By 1865 the Moravians had largely forgotten their four hundred year history of pacifism. Some even denied that the *Unitas Fratrum* had ever been a peace church. Moravians on both sides of the Atlantic fought in World Wars I and II, thinking that their fight was just.

During the peace movement of the 1960s, some Moravians tried to claim the church was a peace church, but it was hard to convince the federal government of that since the church also had military chaplains. By 1969 the question of peace and war divided Moravians, and it remains a point of contention. Still, the fact remains that the *Unitas Fratrum* was the first peace church. For four hundred

years the Moravian Church maintained a fairly consistent peace witness, but this was largely forgotten during the titanic conflicts of the past two centuries. The question we face in the 21st century is whether the Moravian Church should reclaim this identity and become a peace church again. This is not a question of history, but of faith, love, and hope. How will this generation respond to the Law of Christ?

¹ This is explored in detail in my book *The Theology of the Czech Brethren from Hus to Comenius* (Penn State University Press, 2009).

² John Amos Comenius, *Panorthosia or Universal Reform, ch. 1-18 and 27*, trans. A. M. O. Dobbie (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 57.

³ *Ibid.* 197-198.