

Moravian Missions

The Moravian Church in Herrnhut had a passion and a zeal for souls. They had the conviction that God, who had saved **them**, was calling them to share the good news to the whole world — especially with those who had never heard of Jesus Christ. It was a passion and zeal that was so strong that their small numbers did not deter them. The most important factor in evangelism is not necessarily numbers — but intention, sincerity, desire, dedication, and a willingness to be used by God.

Through the work of missions, the small community of Herrnhut grew into a church with about 1,700 congregations in more than 40 countries — the world-wide Moravian Church/Unitas Fratrum. In 1732, ten years after its founding, Herrnhut had just under 400 inhabitants. Today, the world-wide Moravian Church has about 1.1 million members.

According to Moravian understanding, mission is not a matter for specialists, but the task of every Christian. We are grateful that this realization was put into practice in our church earlier than in other churches. Church and mission have always belonged inseparably together in our church.

The Moravian Church is considered the first church in which, from the beginning, not only individuals but entire congregations burned for mission. At all times, their mission was done without imperial ulterior motives. It knew only one goal, “that the Gentiles may learn much of our Savior.” As a driving force for the mission was the knowledge “that there are still souls who cannot believe because they have not heard (of Jesus).”

In Moravian understanding, mission is not aimed at the numerical growth of the church or at increasing its power and influence, but at the salvation and well-being of the individual. It means holistic, loving, unconditional, and binding care from person to person.

Moravian Mission Theology

Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf was the initiator of the Moravian mission. He visited the North American mission areas twice, which was extraordinary for an imperial count considering the dangerous sea voyages of the 18th century. Zinzendorf did not express himself coherently or systematically on mission. A mission theology of Zinzendorf therefore does not exist. His statements on mission, however, can be found in various sermons, speeches, letters, synod minutes, and occasional writings.

The vast majority of Moravian missionaries sent into the world were simple craftsmen, not educated theologians. In principle, any person whose heart burns for Jesus Christ can be a missionary. Attending a special mission school beforehand only became common practice later. The craft work was intended to give the missionaries economic independence on site and to give them easier access to the people. In 1736, Zinzendorf wrote to the South African missionary Georg Schmidt: “Let yourself be used for physical work everywhere until you gain love and entry into people’s hearts.”

Zinzendorf’s mission theology has very modern, even ecumenical features. Ultimately, it was of no interest to him which denomination the converted “heathens” later joined. He knew that God was at work in all denominations. Therefore the missionaries were not concerned with the systematic founding of congregations and churches. They never aimed for mass conversions. Their attention was always focused on the individual. Count Zinzendorf expressly warned against “converting entire nations but not making many disciples.” Mission work should go deep and not wide. It should bear good fruit and not produce quick success. It must not aim at an outwardly formal conversion or a quick baptism. What is important is not church growth, but personal

faith — it must result in a reorientation of the whole life. Zinzendorf believed that if they concentrated on making Christian disciples, everything else would fall into place.

Moravians believe the countries visited by the missionaries are by no means godless areas. God was always there before the missionaries and had been working on the peoples' souls long before they arrived. They recognized the real missionary in Christ and in Christ's spirit. All mission comes from Jesus; human action can only prepare the way for this. "Now in this country, now in another, now here, now there, there have been times and hours when the Holy Spirit has worked on people in a special way."

From the beginning, the traditional missionary approach was linked to development aid and medical care. The address "brother" and "sister" was also used as a matter of course towards people no matter the color of their skin. Zinzendorf taught that the missionaries should appreciate the culture of the native peoples and beware of judging all things according to European criteria. The missionaries therefore did not belittle the native culture. On the contrary, they did a lot to maintain and preserve foreign languages and customs. As a rule, the missionaries personally adapted to and even adopted the way of life of the natives. Mindful of their own history, they learned the local languages and translated Bibles and hymnals as resources for the newly converted. Missionaries involved native men and women in their work at an early stage and gave them responsibility as well as suitable offices and tasks.

The missionaries were concerned not only with salvation but also with the well-being of the people entrusted to them. They were therefore critical of slavery; there were even campaigns to buy slaves free. By integrating locals into the Christian community, particularly through school and vocational training and by transferring offices, the missionaries did much to improve the community's status.

Because Zinzendorf was convinced that "the Savior's preaching chair is as wide and as big as the whole world", the mission of the Moravian Church spread rapidly across all continents within a few years, despite great sacrifices in terms of personnel and finances. Hundreds of Moravian missionaries set out on long and sometimes dangerous journeys across the world. They worked where no one else had ever done missionary work. They specifically sought out slaves, indigenous people, and other particularly disadvantaged population groups.

Climatic obstacles could not deter them — they established stations in the tropical jungles of the West Indies, on the wide rivers in the north of South America, and on the wild Bay of Bengal. They built meeting places near the eternal ice of Greenland, on the impassable coasts of Labrador, and in the distant expanses of Alaska. They defied the supposed danger of the Native Americans, the South African "Hottentots" and the Mongolian Kalmyks on the lower Volga.

They courageously bore witness to the love of God everywhere and gave this love visible form. Moravian mission is basically long-term and sustainable. Whoever goes on a mission does not undertake a visiting trip but begins a strenuous work lasting several years. Hundreds of men and women served with loyalty, usually for decades, often on two or three continents, and only reported back home from time to time.

The Beginning of Moravian Missions

Ten years after the first emigrants arrived in Herrnhut the mission work of the Moravian Church began. The Moravians knew what it was to sacrifice all for the sake of the Gospel. They firmly believed that the evangelization of the world was an imperative obligation for the living Church.

On 13 August 1727, during a service at the local church, the congregation felt a powerful awareness of God's presence. The impact was profound. Not only were differences put aside, but the believers in Herrnhut

became known for their holy and disciplined lives, their love of others and their desire to take the gospel to the lost. Count Nicholas Zinzendorf urged the renewed Moravian Church to consider mission overseas.

On February 11, 1728, twenty-six young men consecrated themselves to answer God's call to the mission field when it came. They started to study medicine, geography, and languages so that they would be ready for that call. The call came just three years later.

In 1731 Count Zinzendorf was invited to attend the coronation of King Christian VI of Denmark. While there he met Anthony Ulrich, a converted slave from St. Thomas and valet to Count Laurwig. Anthony shared with Zinzendorf the conditions in the Islands, of the hardships which the slaves suffered, and of their need for the Gospel.

The story of Anthony weighed heavily on the mind of Zinzendorf, and he felt that God was calling him to do something for the slaves in the West Indies. Upon his return to Herrnhut, he told of his experience and shortly afterwards Anthony himself came to Herrnhut. What Anthony Ulrich revealed concerning the wretched condition of the slaves and of their need of the Gospel made an impression on the minds two of men, Leonard Dober and Tobias Leopold.

Dober and Leopold offered themselves in July 1731, but the decision of the lot in 1732 was that Leonard Dober (a potter from Franconia) and David Nitschmann (a carpenter from Moravia) should go as the first missionaries to St. Thomas. They had no idea how they would get there and even thought they might have to become slaves themselves if they were to minister to the slaves. They were leaving the comfort of their family, their home, their friends and all the familiar things of life to enter the unknown.

Nothing could dampen their enthusiasm though and on August 21, 1732 they left Herrnhut (in Saxony, Germany) to walk to Copenhagen in Denmark. Dober and Nitschmann boarded a sailing ship in on October 8, 1732 for a nine-week passage on the open seas to the island of St. Thomas. They arrived in St. Thomas on December 13th, with less than \$10.00 between them. How were they going to survive in a strange land where they knew no one and had so little money? Dober and Nitschmann were exercising their faith in God. They said to themselves, "Little is much when God is in it".

Dober and Nitschmann had a letter from Anthony Ulrich for his brother and sister in St. Thomas. In the letter was a quotation from John 17: 3 "This is life Eternal that they might know thee, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent". After reading the letter, Dober and Nitschmann began to testify of Jesus who came to save the world, slaves included. This was the unlocking of the door to the evangelization of the slaves in the West Indies.

Within fifty years, the Moravians had established churches in St. Thomas, St. Croix, St. John's, Barbados, Antigua, and St. Kitts, and over 13,000 converts were baptized.

Around The World

From Herrnhut, men and women went to many different places of the world:

- 1732 – St. Thomas in the Danish West Indies
- 1733 – Greenland
- 1734 – Lapland
- 1735 – The British colony of Georgia
- 1735 – Suriname
- 1736 – Africa's Guinea Coast
- 1737 – South Africa

- 1738 – Amsterdam’s Jewish Quarter
- 1739 – Algeria
- 1740 – The British colony of Pennsylvania; Ceylon; Romania; Constantinople

Between 1732 and 1742 more than 70 men and women from a community of not more than 600 had answered the call to mission service. Many knew that they were going to take the place of those who had died of fever and other tropical diseases, and that they might suffer the same fate. Not all projects were successful, but failure never detracted from the vision.

In subsequent years missions were established in Labrador, Jamaica, Antigua, Barbados, St. Kitts, Tobago and Trinidad; Ladakh on the borders of Tibet; Alaska; Russia; Guyana; Honduras; Nicaragua; and Costa Rica. Some missions were started and handed over to national churches. For example, the work among the Australian Aborigines was handed over to the Presbyterian Church of Australia.

The Tanzanian Provinces (East Central Africa) where Moravian missions started in 1889 is now the fastest growing Moravian church. There are more than half of a million Tanzanian Moravians, and the Church is reaching out in mission to the neighboring countries of Malawi, Zambia, Kigoma, Zanzibar, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, and the Eastern Congo.

All the missions once served by Europeans are now self-governing and mostly staffed by their own people. On the West Bank in Palestine a building once used by the Moravians as a Leper Home, Star Mountain, is used to care for handicapped Arab children. There is a revival of the work in Estonia. Original mission provinces are themselves now engaged on mission outreach, sometimes in partnership with other denominations, as in Mexico and the Alaskan mission to Siberia. Other countries recently added to the list are Cuba, Albania, Venezuela, Assam (a state in India) and Nepal. The vision of the ‘World for Christ’ is still before us and in His name the work continues.

The Moravian Church In America

The Moravian Church in America is one of the stronger regions of the Moravian Church today, but its origin was partly a mission enterprise. General James Oglethorpe invited the Moravians to America as part of his plan to create the new colony of Georgia, which began in 1733. The Moravians responded by sending a party to Savannah in 1735. They sought to evangelize the Native American tribes and minister to the settlers there.

Their attempt to establish a community in Savannah did not succeed. Several insurmountable difficulties arose almost immediately. The natives to whom they wished to bring the gospel had moved too far into the interior to be effectively reached. The climate proved pernicious. The Brethren refused to take part in the impending war with the Spanish and, as a result, were evicted from Georgia in 1739.

After the failure of the Georgia mission, the Moravians were able to establish a permanent presence in Pennsylvania in 1740, settling on the estate of George Whitefield in Nazareth. Moravian settlers purchased 500 acres to establish the settlement of Bethlehem in 1741. Other settlement congregations were established in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, and New York. All were considered frontier centers for the spread of the gospel, particularly in mission to the Native Americans.

In 1752, Bishop Augustus Spangenberg led a party to survey a 100,000 acre tract of land in North Carolina, which came to be known as Wachau after an Austrian estate of Count Zinzendorf. The name, later anglicized to Wachovia, became the center of growth for the church in that region. Bethabara, Bethania and Salem (now Winston-Salem) were the first Moravian settlements in North Carolina. Over time congregations were established in Charlotte, Greensboro, Wilmington, Raleigh, in Stone Mountain, Georgia, and in Florida.

For about 100 years the American Moravian settlements were primarily closed communities. These communities served both as places where the Moravians could live the life they chose, and places from which many missionaries were sent out. Missionaries were primarily sent to the Native Americans, whose languages the Moravians learned, in order to preach in the language of the people. The dedicated missionary David Zeisberger worked among his “adopted brethren” for 63 years.

A Note Regarding Our Mission History

Since 1732, missionaries (men and women) of the Moravian Church have traveled to countries colonized by European states. The shock of hearing reports of the unbearable situation of enslaved people and the desire to proclaim God’s love to them marked the beginning of the missionary movement.

The motives for the desire to “go out” with the Moravian Mission were primarily spiritual, but also to help in times of need, for example as a doctor, midwife, teacher, or farmer. The goal of missionary work in many parts of the world was to proclaim the Christian faith. This was achieved through the establishment of churches, but also through efforts to improve education and healthcare, and to conduct responsible trade. The missionaries certainly acted in good faith, but they were also “children of their time” and worked within the structures and mindsets of their colonial environment.

The assessment of history changes over time. This also applies to the missionary history of the Moravian Church. Questions about its stance on colonialism and racism are legitimate and should be considered in a differentiated manner. Given the long and diverse history of missions, it will not be possible for us to comprehensively research all regions and periods in a timely manner. Therefore, we welcome and support research at specialized institutes and universities to examine colonial and missionary history.

The Moravian Church/Unitas Fratrum values the language, culture, and historical experiences of the peoples and groups with whom we interact. Our lives are enriched by our connection with people of all skin colors, ages, and social classes on five continents. Mission is not a one-way street, but rather an exchange of experiences for mutual benefit. We provide emergency aid and support projects in community development, education, and health. We promote fair trade. We pursue our mission on the ethical and moral foundation of hope, respect, and togetherness. These values shape our organizational culture and the projects we develop with our local partners. We view the diversity of beliefs and lifestyles we encounter in the world-wide Moravian Church as a gift from God.

Sources:

“*The Moravian Mission – A Brief Historical Overview*” by Andreas Tasche from the Evangelical Moravian Church in Germany ([Evangelische Brüder-Unität – Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine](#)) website. Copyright © 2025 Evangelische Brüder-Unität – Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine. All Rights Reserved.

Herrnhut Missionary Aid eV ([Herrnhuter Missionshilfe](#)) website. Copyright © 2025 Herrnhuter Missionshilfe eV. All Rights Reserved.

“*Statement on the Missionary History of the Moravian Church*” — Adopted by the Evangelical Moravian Church in Germany and Herrnhut Missionary Aid (HMH) on March 10, 2023 in Bad Boll, Germany.

“*Moravian Moments #4 — The Decision for Missions*” written by Rev. Dr. Cortroy Jarvis, February 4, 2007. Copyright © 2025 [The Moravian Church – Eastern West Indies Province](#). All Rights Reserved.

“*Moravian Moments #6 — Leaving All for the Sake of Christ*” written by Rev. Dr. Cortroy Jarvis, February 18, 2007. Copyright © 2025 [The Moravian Church – Eastern West Indies Province](#). All Rights Reserved.

“*Moravian Moments #163-166 — Moravian Missions Parts 1–4*” written by Rev. Dr. Cortroy Jarvis, May 2010. Copyright © 2025 [The Moravian Church – Eastern West Indies Province](#). All Rights Reserved.

“*Moravian Moments #180 — The Great Commission, The Moravian Response*” written by Rev. Dr. Cortroy Jarvis, August 29, 2010. Copyright © 2025 [The Moravian Church – Eastern West Indies Province](#). All Rights Reserved.

The [Moravian Church in America](#) website. Copyright © 2010-2025, Interprovincial Board of Communications, Moravian Church in America. All Rights Reserved.