**Reformation Neighbors: Moravians**

The Moravian Church traces its ancestry to areas of Europe that were once called Moravia and Bohemia, which are located in today’s country of the Czech Republic. It was in Prague that a reformer named John Hus arose in the late 1300s and early 1400s, predating Martin Luther. Hus was a professor of philosophy and a rector at the University of Prague. Gaining support from the students and many of the common people, he led a protest against the practices of the clergy and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. Because he advocated such reforms as Christ being the head of the church and not the pope, the removal of clergy who abused their office, and the abolition of indulgences, as well as other reforms, Hus was accused of heresy, tried at the council of Constance, and burned at the stake on July 6, 1415, which is why a more widespread Reformation movement did not happen until Martin Luther came on the scene years later.

Despite this setback, however, a group of Hus’ followers continued on, and founded the Moravian Church, or the Unity of the Brethren as it was first known, in 1457. By 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, the Moravian Church numbered 200,000 with over 400 churches. Persecution in the 1500s and a defeat of the Protestants in the Thirty Years’ War led to a dwindling of this church body, but a renewal of the Moravian Church came in the 1700s when Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf offered refuge on his estate. Many Moravians fled from persecution there and founded the community of Herrnhut, located in present-day Germany on the border with the Czech Republic.

Under Zinzendorf’s leadership and encouragement, missionaries from the community began to emigrate to the West Indies, Georgia, and Pennsylvania. In William Penn’s colony, which offered freedom of religious practice, the Moravians flourished and established the towns of Bethlehem, Lititz, and Hope. The headquarters today for the Northern Province of the Moravian Church are still located in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

The Moravian Church states that it does not have any systematic doctrinal system, since Holy Scripture itself does not contain a systematic doctrine. The mystery of Jesus Christ as attested to in the Holy Scriptures, they say, cannot be comprehended completely by any human mind or expressed completely in any human statement. The Moravian Church does recognize the following creeds as aiding the Church in formulating a Scriptural confession and marking the boundaries of heresies, as well as exhorting believers to obedience and fearless testimony: the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed; The Confession of the Unity of the Bohemian Brethren of 1535; The Twenty-one Articles of the unaltered Augsburg Confession; The Shorter Catechism of Martin Luther; The Synod of Berne of 1532; The Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England; The Theological Declaration of Barmen of 1934; and The Heidelberg Catechism. These creeds, however, and others like them, stand in need of constant testing in light of the Holy Scriptures.

Baptism and Holy Communion are regarded as Sacraments in the Moravian Church. Baptism is administered to both infants and adults, and can be done by sprinkling water, pouring water, or immersing the baptismal candidate in water. All forms are recognized as belonging to one Baptism.

For those who are baptized as infants, the Moravian Church also has the rite of confirmation for these children to affirm their baptism when they are old enough. Baptism is recognized as a gift of God’s grace, but being baptized also carries a responsibility for the person to participate fully in the life of the congregation. In Holy Communion, the Moravian church has tried to avoid being involved in the disputes over how Christ is present in the Sacrament. Their position is as follows: “Our earlier theologians sometimes spoke of a special sacramental presence of Christ that was different from a tangible physical presence, but was at the same time more than merely remembering a departed friend as one ate and drank.” Moravians practice open communion, inviting all baptized Christians to join them at the table.

One custom that Moravians are known for is the practice of the lovefeast. This is not Holy Communion, but it is also more than a potluck. It is a worship service in which primarily songs and hymns are sung and prayers are prayed. The food is prepared ahead of time and is quietly distributed during the singing; the food is usually sweet buns, with a few different options for drinking. If it is a special occasion or there are many visitors present, the minister may address the congregation. When a lovefeast is held, Christians from other denominations may also partake.

In many ways, Moravians are very similar in belief to Lutherans. Martin Luther himself was at first horrified when he was accused of promoting doctrines similar to John Hus, but later, when he read some of what Hus had written, he acknowledged that much of it was good Christian doctrine. It makes sense, then, that the ELCA has a full communion agreement with the Moravian Church.

The Moravian Church is a small church body, and their website does not list any congregations in either Montana or Wyoming. If you are traveling, though, and run across a Moravian church, please visit one of their congregations and worship with them.

*Much of the information in this Newsbrief has been taken from the official website of the Moravian Church,* [*www.moravian.org*](http://www.moravian.org)*. Written by Rev. Tonya Eza, Hope Lutheran, Powell, WY.*