

# **100 Year Prayer Meeting**

## **The Moravian Prayer Experience**

### **The Homeless Piled In, Missionary Pioneers Poured Out**

Imagine that you have a big house and ample land. Imagine further that a refugee shows up at your door asking if he might camp out in your backyard for awhile. You are moved to compassion and say OK. A little later he asks if some of his relatives, who are also homeless, might also come and live on your property. You are a Christian. These people are also believers. How can you turn them away? So again you say yes. But then many more hear and they too come. And more. And more! Soon there are hundreds. What have you gotten yourself into, you begin to wonder?

Something like that is what happened to a 22-year-old German nobleman in 1722. His name was Niklaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf. His estate was in East Germany. He was heir to one of Europe's leading royal families. As you might expect, the neighbors were not too pleased with his offering the "riff-raff" asylum near them. But there was no stopping the influx. The first group of ten arrived in December, 1722. By May of 1725 there were ninety. And by late 1726 over 300. The place was known as "Herrnhut" meaning "The Lord's Watch." It soon developed into a small city of grateful and motivated Christian craftsmen and laypeople.

As Zinzendorf looked at what he had gotten himself into, he began to realize that instead of being burdened, he was being blessed with one of the historic opportunities of all time. His refugee crowded estate within a little more than a decade would be transformed into one of the most dynamic and strategic missionary launching pads since the early church.

#### **Zinzendorf Was a Rich Young Ruler Who Said Yes**

Zinzendorf was born on May 26, 1700, in Dresden, Germany and brought up under strong Christian influence. Even as a child he showed a deep spiritual awareness. Invading Swedish soldiers broke into the castle where he lived when he was six years old and were astounded to observe the child's prayers. Zinzendorf later trained at Halle under the Pietist movement leader August Francke. At age twenty the young nobleman was overcome while observing a painting of Christ crowned with thorns. An inscription below the painting said: "I have done this for you; what have you done for me?" Zinzendorf responded that day: "I have loved him for a long time, but I have never actually done anything for him. From now on I will do whatever he leads me to do." No doubt at that moment he had no idea that within two years he would have his estate swarming with homeless people from Moravia. Nor could he have imagined the role that would be his in bringing the message of Christ to the whole world. There followed a rapid succession of events. Some of the highlights:

◇ The community rapidly organized into an efficient and productive little society.

◇ But then jealousy, divisions and discord set in and threatened to undermine them.

◇ Zinzendorf organized everyone into "bands." These were small groups who met together regularly to discuss their spiritual growth, study Scripture, pray together, reprove and encourage each other.

◇ The Moravian community was moved to repentance for its divisions, and on August 13, 1727 they experienced a powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

◇ They began to pray fervently and seek the purposes for which God had brought them together under Zinzendorf. What did he want them to do?

◇ A twenty-four-hour-a-day prayer chain was organized. At least two people were at prayer every hour of the day. This prayer meeting would last over 100 years.

◇ They became known by the nickname "God's Happy People."

◇ Anthony, a former slave, came to speak at Herrnhut of the deplorable conditions of the slaves in the West Indies. The night he spoke, two of their young Moravians could not sleep as they struggled with a sense that God was moving their hearts to offer themselves to go and minister to those slaves. When they were told that perhaps the only way they could do this was to become slaves themselves, they said they were willing if that is what it would take.

◇ Their first two missionaries, Leonard Dober and David Nitschmann, left Herrnhut on August 25, 1732 to sail for St. Thomas.

◇ Thereafter, other lands were studied and more missionaries were sent. They went to the toughest places under the most severe conditions. Many of them quickly died. For example, of 18 who went to St. Thomas as reinforcements for the work begun by Dober and Nitschmann, half died within the first nine months. But, the more that died, the more that volunteered to go to replace them. Within 25 years more than 200 had gone out as missionaries from this small community to every continent of the world.

◇ Their influence spread far beyond their own efforts. Consider two notable examples. Moravians played the key role in the profound religious experience of John Wesley. Wesley went on to lead the Methodist movement. William Carey is popularly hailed as the "Father of Modern Protestant Missions." But William Carey sailed 60 years after the first Moravian missionaries went to the West Indies. Carey would probably insist that the real father of modern missions was Zinzendorf and the Moravians. In Carey's classic "Enquiry Regarding the Obligation of Christians" he used the Moravian experience as a model. In his letters and journal he often referred to them and drew inspiration from their example, and in his "Serampore Compact" -- a covenant for Christian missionary community living -- he again appealed to Moravian precedents.

◇ Their influence extended to North America. The Moravians founded two communities in Eastern Pennsylvania -- Bethlehem and Nazareth. Zinzendorf personally came to the colonies. Not far from the offices of Christian History Institute, and long before the word "Ecumenism" was in vogue, Zinzendorf pled unsuccessfully with the various religious communities in Eastern Pennsylvania to transcend their European denominational backgrounds and witness and work together as one Body of Christ.

◇ While in America, Zinzendorf legally renounced his titles because he found them an impediment among the colonists. Benjamin Franklin was present at the ceremony, which was conducted in Latin in front of the Governor of Pennsylvania. Zinzendorf was said to be the only European nobleman who went among the Indians, visiting their leaders as equals.

◇ Though Zinzendorf did not promote the abolition of slavery, inside the Moravian Church slaves were truly equal. In Bethlehem, PA, at the Single Sisters' House you could find a German noblewoman, a Delaware Indian, and an African slave sleeping side by side in the same dormitory room. Where else in the world at that time might that occur?

◇ Zinzendorf endured much criticism for allowing women to preach and to hold roles of leadership in the church.

## **A New Phenomenon**

Think of what it would mean if everyone in your church thought of themselves as missionaries. They did at Herrnhut, and this represented a significant development in the history of Christian missions. Eminent Yale University historian, Dr. Kenneth Scott Latourette, in his classic History of the Expansion of Christianity commented, "Here was a new phenomenon in the expansion of Christianity, an entire community, of families as well as of the unmarried, devoted to the propagation of the faith. In its singleness of aim it resembled some of the monastic orders of the earlier centuries, but these were made up of celibates. Here was a fellowship of

Christians, of laity and clergy, of men and women, marrying and rearing families, with much of the quietism of the monastery and of Pietism but with the spread of the Christian message as a major objective, not of a minority of the membership, but of the group as a whole."

## **Christian History Institute's Debt to Count Zinzendorf**

Twenty years ago our sister company Gateway Films/Vision Video was approached to make a dramatic film on the 250th anniversary of the launch of the Moravian missionary movement under Count Zinzendorf to be celebrated in 1982. We had already put out a film on the life of the 15th century pre-Reformation martyr John Hus, and we had also been requested by Wycliffe Bible Translators to make a film on John Wycliffe for the 600th anniversary of his death. Although these three films treated subjects that occurred over close to four hundred years, we were struck by the amazing connection among them. Wycliffe's movement and his memory were condemned in England, but his plea for reform was carried to Bohemia and advanced there by John Hus. The followers of Hus formed the *Unitas Fratrum*, The Unity of the Brethren. They somehow managed to survive three centuries of persecution and became the major core of the Moravian refugees who settled on the estate of Count Zinzendorf beginning in 1722. Christian History Institute was founded to provide educational print support materials for such films. Our first project was Christian History magazine with the first issue devoted to Zinzendorf. Incidentally, the magazine soon demonstrated that it deserved a life of its own and we are pleased to have it now published by Christianity Today Inc. The film we made on Zinzendorf was a drama titled *First Fruits*. That was the catalyst that led us to recognize that our primary calling in both film and publishing was the telling of the stories from our Christian history for lay audiences.

On May 12, 1727, Zinzendorf addressed the community for three hours on the blessedness of Christian unity. The people sorrowfully confessed their past quarreling and promised to live in love and simplicity. Herrnhut became a living congregation of Christ. The entire summer of 1727 was a golden one at Herrnhut as the community worked together in peace and love. There was eager anticipation that more was to come.

A turning point On August 5, Zinzendorf and fourteen of the Brethren spent the entire night in conversation and prayer. On August 10th, Pastor Rothe was so overcome by God's nearness during an afternoon service at Herrnhut, that he threw himself on the ground during prayer and called to God with words of repentance as he had never done before. The congregation was moved to tears and continued until midnight, praising God and singing.

The next morning, Pastor Rothe invited the Herrnhut community to a joint communion with his nearby congregation at Bethelsdorf on Wednesday evening, August 13. Count Zinzendorf visited every house in Herrnhut in preparation for this Lord's Supper. The exiles, gathered at Herrnhut, had come to a conviction of their own sinfulness, need, and helplessness. During the service, they made many painful prayers for themselves, for fellow Christians still under persecution, and for their continued unity. Count Zinzendorf made a penitential confession in the name of the congregation. The community united in fellowship. Count Zinzendorf looked upon that August 13th as "a day of the outpourings of the Holy Spirit upon the congregation; it was its Pentecost."

Yes, for 100 years! Like the first Pentecost, men and women would move forth with the gospel from Herrnhut to the uttermost parts of the earth. Two weeks after the revival, twenty-four men and twenty-four women of the community covenanted together to spend one hour each day, day and night, in prayer to God for His blessing on the congregation and its witness.

**For over 100 years, members of the Moravian church continued nonstop in this "Hourly Intercession." All Moravian adventures were begun, surrounded, and consummated in prayer. They became known as "God's Happy People." They launched a missionary society in a time when Protestant missions were unknown. The first missionaries, two young men, declared their willingness to become slaves if necessary to reach the slaves in the West Indies with the Gospel. Within fifteen years of the revival, the Moravians at**

Herrnhut had established missions in the Virgin Islands, Greenland, Turkey, the Gold Coast of Africa, South Africa, and North America. They endured unspeakable hardships. Many died in difficult circumstances. But as fast as they died, others came forth to take their places.

**An unquenchable flame** The eighteenth-century revivals in America and England were influenced by the Moravian mission and prayer movements. Peter Boehler, a Moravian missionary in England, counseled John Wesley, later leader of the Revival in England, leading to his conversion. Wesley wrote of Boehler, "Oh what a work hath God begun since his coming to England! Such a one as shall never come to an end, till heaven and earth pass away!" --but that's the subject of our next issue.

**A new phenomenon** The noted historian, Kenneth Scott Latourette, said of the Moravians: Here was a new phenomenon in the expansion of Christianity, an entire community, of families as well as of the unmarried, devoted to the propagation of the faith. In its singleness of aim it resembled some of the monastic orders of earlier centuries, but these were made up of celibates. Here was a fellowship of Christians, of laity and clergy, of men and women, marrying and rearing families, with much of the quietism of the monastery and of Pietism but the spread of the Christian message as a major objective, not of a minority of the membership, but of the group as a whole.

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