

Is the Moravian Church, Southern Province a Viable Option for Affiliation?

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Background:

The Moravian Church is a Protestant tradition that dates to 1456 (also known as the Unitas Fratrum). This tradition experienced a renewal movement beginning in 1727 in the settlement community of Herrnhut (Saxony). The community had been organized under the oversight of Baron Nicolas von Zinzendorf in 1722 as spiritual asylum for Protestant dissidents from around Europe whom the Baron had come to meet during a European tour just before this year. By 1727, the community was estimated to have a population of 600 people – one third of which were people from Moravia and Bohemia affiliated with the Unitas Fratrum whom Zinzendorf dubbed the “Moravians.” They made up the largest cohort in the community.

Following the great renewal of August 1727, the members of the community dedicated themselves to the pattern of Christian practices and pietism common among the Moravians. Over the following five years did this in three ways:

- Establishing Herrnhut as the prototype for other settlement communities to come:
 - Members were divided in small groups based on gender, marital status, and relative age – the leaders of these groups made up the leadership board that governed the community.
 - Those living in the village committed to an economy where property was held in common through the church and governed through the leadership board.
 - All members of the community committed to abide by the statements of the Moravian Covenant for Christian Living (known then as the Brotherly Agreement).
- Setting up outreach stations in the cities of nearby regions and countries:
 - Many were led by lay leaders, the goal was to inspire Christians in other traditions to experience renewal by engaging active pietistic practices of prayer, Christian study, and using their talents for share the love of God with all.
- Establishing mission stations in the corners of the earth wherever ships of trade would sail from northern Europe:
 - By 1741, mission stations had been set up on five continents – including North and South America.

The very first mission team to arrive in North America came to Savannah, GA on the same ship and John Wesley in 1735. Due to several points of contentions and struggle, the team accepted George Whitfields appeal to move operations to Pennsylvania where they started a boys school for first nations people in Nazareth. In 1742, this same group began their first settlement community on American soil in Bethlehem, PA.

It 1752, an expedition was sent to North Carolina at the request of Lord Granville to consider building a settlement and becoming a positive influence on other settlers in the area. Granville promised the Moravian 100,000 acres, which they eventually selected in Forsyth County. The first settlement group made up of all men, arrived in November 1753.

Polity and Government:

The worldwide Moravian Church is known as the Moravian Unity. It includes nearly two dozen regions or districts throughout the world commonly referred to as “provinces.” Each province functions with full authority for his geographical zone. Each is governed by a board of Elders referred to as the Provincial Elders’ Conference. This includes a president or chair who functions as the principal officer of the church for each province (geographical zone), and several lay elders and clergy elders – all of whom are elected by a Synod held every four years. The presidents (or chairs) also serve together to form the Unity Board. And there is a Unity Synod every seven years – which serves as the primary space for creating or changing doctrine.

A distinctive uniqueness in the Moravian tradition is the function of Bishops. The function is to pastor the pastors and offer collective insight in the interpretation of doctrine. In some provinces a bishop may also serve as Provincial President, but this is an exception. Presidents (or Provincial Chairs) serve in a similar role to a Methodist Bishop.

In many provinces, the call process for selecting clergy leadership to serve congregations is appointive in a manner like the Methodists, Lutherans, and Episcopalians. North America includes two provinces – the Northern Province (NY, PA, OH, WI, MN, MD, DC, ND, CA, and Canada); the Southern Province (VA, NC, SC, GA, FL). These two provinces use a call process format that includes a three-way conversation of discernment between the candidate, the congregational boards, and the Provincial Elders’ Conference (PEC). Once a pastor comes under call to a congregation, he or she is directly superintended by the PEC and are expected to follow the guidelines defined by that Provinces Synod.

The Northern and Southern Provinces work together in a very close partnership and even share several interprovincial ministries.

One exception between the Northern and Southern Provinces is the topic of inclusion for LGBTQIA individuals regarding weddings and ordination. The Northern Province adopted a position of acceptance in 2014. The Southern Province adopted a position of allowing each congregation to determine for itself through the Elders the path that fits their ministry.

There are a little more than 50 congregations in the Southern Province. Since the 2018, a few congregations have determined to approve weddings and ordination only for heterosexual persons. A few congregations have adopted a policy of full inclusion. The remainder have not taken a position either way.

The 2018 Synod of the Southern Province also adopted a resolution that holds clergy and congregations accountable for judging other congregations or the Synod body or Provincial leadership in an unchristian manner. This has resulted in a splinter group attempting to speak for the denomination and to characterize the vote of the 2018 Synod of the Southern Province related to same-sex marriage and the ordination of non-cyst gendered and non-binary persons as blanket approval for inclusion – which is flatly false. And at the same time doing so in a manner that is in violation of the vote that called upon everyone to refrain from such harmful and unchristian characterizations from those who oppose inclusion or support inclusion.

Guiding Principles and Governance

The Moravian Church (Unitas Fratrum) has three levels of polity, each with its own statements of polity. While the Moravian Church does not dictate or require a system of theological thought, it does capture the essentials of Christian belief and practices in two key documents:

- The Ground of the Unity statement & The Moravian Covenant for Christian Living
- Membership in a congregation, no matter where it exists in the Moravian Unity, carries the expectation of living and practicing the Christian faith in a manner that reflects these documents.
- Furthermore, these documents serve as the foundation for faith formation, leadership development, the preparation of clergy, and the development of specific mission and purpose statements for communities and institutions within the Moravian Church.

A new document that is important to the Moravian Church in America (Northern and Southern Provinces) is the Guidelines for Biblical Interpretation. It serves as expression for describing key

beliefs and practices with the Moravian Church that date back to 1550s, when beliefs were divided into three areas: “Essentials,” “Ministerials,” “Non-Essentials.” Essentials include our relationship to God in Jesus Christ which has two parts: what God has provided and what believers much choose in response. God’s part is the gift of grace already provide freely through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Our part is to respond to this gift of grace daily through our decision to act through faith, love, and hope. Christian life is viewed as process of learning to live into this responses through the passage of life from birth to death. And this learning ideally occurs in the context of Christian community where daily and weekly worship, study, and service to the one another and the community around us takes place.

“Ministerials” include the tools and faith expressions that reveal to us who God is in Jesus Christ. They do not rise to the level of God in Jesus Christ or the worship of God in Trinity. But being in relationship with God is made possible through these them. They include: Scripture, the Sacraments, and a commitment for living the Christian faith in community with others.

“Non-Essentials” are the necessary things needed to function in Christian community, but for which there is great latitude for expression. They include: the shape and style of the church facility; the form through which communion and baptism are experienced; and the style and form of worship, preaching, and music.

Expressions of Governance

- **Highest Level of Polity: The Unity Synod – Where Issues of Doctrine Are Stated**
 - Meets every seven years
 - Only group that sets policy of key doctrines
 - Main space for collaboration in ministry and mission through the world
 - 21 provinces and several mission provinces
 - The **Unity Board** is made up of the presidents or chair of the PEC in each province
 - Serves as the governing body between synods
 - Decisions are codified in the Church Order of the Unitas Fratrum
- **The Provincial Synod – the Regional Level of Policy**
 - Meets every four years
 - Votes upon legislation related to ministry for the given region of the church
 - Elects representatives to attend Unity Synod
 - Elects the governing board – **Provincial Elders’ Conference** – the President or Chair serves as the chief executive officer of the province (regional area)
 - Serves as the governing body between synods
 - Decisions are mostly made by consensus of the PEC
 - Call-process for clergy is managed by the PEC

- Elects all other provincial boards
- Sets the operational budget for the next four years
- Decisions are codified in the Book of Order for that province – but all policies and practices must align with Church Order of the Unitas Fratrum
- **Congregational Council – the Local Level of Polity**
 - Congregations where daily ministry is shared and where discipleship empowers service to the local community.
 - Annually a council is held to approve a new budget and to elect members to the boards.
 - Half of the congregations use a one-board system, the rest use a two-board system (Trustees and Elders).
 - The pastor is also the chair of the Elders and the chair of Church Council
 - Ahead of a provincial synod, Church Council elects delegates to attend
 - All congregations and pastors are superintended by the Provincial Elders' Conference

The Function of Bishops vs the President of the PEC

Within the Moravian Church, bishops function as pastors to the clergy and collectively as advisors to the Provincial Elders on matters of doctrine and practice. Different from the Episcopal, Lutheran, and Methodist Churches, Moravian bishops do not hold administrative authority. A person consecrated as a bishop holds this office of ministry for life. A bishop is elected by provincial synod, and is automatically considered a bishop of the Unity (not just the local province). The conference of bishops (one representative from each province) gathers periodically to discuss ways to support the ministry of the church and wellbeing of clergy.

The chief administrator in each provincial area (the equivalent of superintendent and bishop in other communions) is the President (or Chair) of the Provincial Elders' Conference. He/she is elected at synod to a four-year term and is eligible for multiple re-elections. Generally they are clergy, but laity are also eligible for this office. The only restriction is election after the age of 65.

Congregational Operations

Each congregation is free to develop and set mission and direction statements. This level of leadership is provided through the church board(s) but may be delegated to committees. The PEC does not require a specified set of mission and direction statements, but it does hold accountable each congregational community to align such statements with the Moravian Covenant for Christian Living and the Ground of the Unity statement.

The Call Process to Select a Pastor

- The call process in the two provinces of the Moravian Church in America is confessional.
 - It is a shared conference of dialogue with three equal parts: the candidate, the calling church board, and the PEC.
 - During a call process in places where there are two boards, the board merges into a Joint Board chaired by the Vice-Chair of the Board of Elders (in a one-board setting, the church board is chaired by the Vice-Chair).
- Step One: It begins when a pulpit becomes vacant due to the pastor accepting a call to a new setting or retirement or choice to leave that pastoral setting.
- Step Two: The PEC and the Joint Boards (or Church Board) arrange a mutual meeting to review the process and each step that will be needed for a successful process to unfold.
- Step Three: The PEC assists the Joint Boards to conduct a survey of the congregation to capture an accurate assessment of current strengths and challenges and to build a picture of what is needed in the next pastor.
- Step Four: The PEC uses the resulting description of ministry to develop a list of potential candidates to be considered. When ready, the PEC returns to meet with the Joint Boards to present up to three names.
 - Ideally the Joint Board decides within a week of one candidate to invite to a ministry dialogue.
 - The PEC works with the Vice-Chair to develop an invitation to a ministry dialogue that includes a proposed financial offer with compensation and benefits in detail, along with expectations for ministry.
- Step Five: The candidate has 2-3 weeks to discern a response; if the invitation is accepted, a ministry dialogue meeting is arranged with the Joint Boards and including the candidate and at least two members of the PEC.
 - Following this meeting, the Joint Board has 24 hours to reaffirm or decline the call.
 - Once the call is reaffirmed, the candidate has up to two weeks to confirm or decline the call.
 - Following a positive answer, the PEC helps the Vice-Chair and the candidate to coordinate a timeline for transition into this new ministry setting.

Note: The Moravian Church in America (Northern and Southern Provinces) shares a full-communion partnership with the following groups which includes an orderly exchange of ministry (as well as appropriate equipping for clergy serving another tradition than his/her own):

- Presbyterian Church – USA
- Episcopal Church in America
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
- United Methodist Church

Ownership and Maintenance of the Church Property

With few exceptions, church buildings within the Moravian Church Southern Province are owned by the denomination and insured under an umbrella policy. The cost of this policy is part of the

annual provincial share. The cost of maintenance to the church building is the responsibility of the congregation. Capital improvements must be approved by the PEC. Because of this arrangement, congregations (fellowships and ministries) within the MCSP can share a tax status for charitable deductions under a shared tax identification number and do not require self-incorporation. MCSP is presently incorporated in North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Exceptions to church ownership are granted where there is binding commitment on the part of the congregational board(s) to abide by the governance of the MCSP Synod and the PEC.

What Is the Provincial Share?

This is the annual assessment each congregation is expected to support. A formula is voted upon at synod and managed by the Provincial Support Services Board (PSSB). It includes a scale that is calculated on the amount of operational receipts for the year for the congregation and a tiered table – similar to the US Tax Rate. The low end of the table for small and struggling congregations is 10 % and the max for 2023 is 18%. Note that the provincial budget is inclusive of clergy pension, denomination administration, share mission and ministry, clergy candidacy, and ecumenical causes.

Clergy Compensation and Benefits

The Moravian Church, Southern Province uses a prescribed pay scale for minimum salary based on years of service. It also offers a group insurance plan for the pastor with the option to include family (which is negotiated with the congregational board). Clergy are also free to be secure insurance through their spouses insurance plan – in such cases the congregation picks up the cost of including the pastor and any additional cost for the spouse and eligible children. Part of the annual provincial share includes an amount paid in to cover pension benefits for the pastor. Less than half of our congregations still supply a parsonage or house – in such cases they are required to provide \$2500 annual toward a housing equity allowance for the pastor. In other cases a housing allowance of \$15,000 minimum for the pastor is required for congregations without a parsonage. Congregations also provide a FICA allowance for the pastor.

The decision to ordain clergy candidates who are not cis gendered or binary is up to the local board of Elders or Church Board. The MCSP does not have blanket policy that approves or prohibits the ordination of such clergy. Clergy are permitted to conduct wedding ceremonies for couples who

are cyst gendered or binary but holding such ceremonies on church property requires the approval of the board of Elders or Church Board.

The Moravian Church, Northern Province does provide for the ordination and marriage of people who are not cyst gendered or binary.

Resources

1. Moravian Book of Order, Southern Province PDF:
<https://www.moravian.org/southern/2018/08/southern-province-book-of-order/>
2. The Moravian Covenant for Christian Living Webpage:
<https://www.moravian.org/2018/06/moravian-covenant-for-christian-living/>
The Moravian Covenant for Christian Living PDF:
<https://www.moravian.org/2018/06/moravian-covenant-for-christian-living/>
3. Ground of the Unity Webpage: <https://www.moravian.org/2018/10/the-ground-of-the-unity/>
Ground of the Unity PDF: <https://www.moravian.org/2018/10/the-ground-of-the-unity/>
4. Principles of Biblical Interpretation Webpage:
<https://www.moravian.org/2018/10/moravian-guiding-principles-of-biblical-interpretation/>
Principles of Biblical Interpretation PDF: <https://www.moravian.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Guiding-Principles-of-Biblical-Interpretation.pdf>