

**Review: Comenius Foundation, *Count Zinzendorf*, 2001**

**Runtime:** 100 minutes

Four twenty five minute documentaries, well produced and fascinating in terms of the historical content of a forgotten Christian denomination of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Count Nicolas Ludwig Von Zinzendorf was of a wealthy and noble German family who gave up his position in life to stage a world-wide Protestant missionary movement.

Having roots in the Unitas Fratrum (Hussites), the Moravian Church had an astonishing impact for its small size. Zinzendorf seems rightly portrayed as the driving force behind the movement's success.

Zinzendorf had fourteen children with his wife, but was only survived by three daughters after he himself was widowed.

In its ecumenical style the DVD skims over major doctrinal issues between Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Anglicans, etc.

The focus does *not* seem to be on the Word of God, with very few scripture references across the combined film.

**I) Prophet of the Heart**

Includes general knowledge about the Count: he was born 26/5/1700, the 22<sup>nd</sup> generation of his noble line. In his early years he was heavily influenced by the Lutheran Pietist movement which sought to bring love back into a denomination frozen by academia. Pressured to take up the mantle of nobility, he put aside his desire to serve Christ exclusively.

His studies were at the University of Wittenburg, the cradle of Lutheranism. Training involved fencing, dancing and law though he also entered into many theological discussions. After graduating he went on a traditional 'wanderyar' (year-long sabbatical, usually involving debaucheries). It was during this time he saw the painting X by Diminico Fetti. Moved in such a way he decided to dedicate his life to serving Christ.

At 21, again succumbing to family pressure, he moved to the court of Saxon King August the Strong at Dresden to serve as Count. Not content he found himself back at Zinzendorf.

A Silesian carpenter, Christian David had sought refuge and freedom of worship in the count's land, to which he agreed. Christian began to build what became the Moravian town of Hernhudd. Although illegal to worship outside the Lutheran Church, Zinzendorf found a suitable Lutheran Pastor to minister to Christian. Soon other Moravians began to arrive and as the reputation of a bastion of liberty spread, so did many other persecuted Christian groups.

This influx of different denominations and beliefs caused some disharmony, and Zinzendorf stepped in as a pastor to visit people and work out how to bring unity. By attention to the scriptures and regular meetings 'Brotherly Agreements' were worked out. The culmination of these was a service of repentance or reconciliation on 13/8/1727, said to be the birth date of the Moravian Church. This tradition is also called a 'love feast' during which a simple communal meal is shared amongst the congregation during service.

From historical studies, it was found by the Moravians their agreement was very close to the *Unitas Fratrum* from almost 300 years earlier. This reinforced their doctrinal convictions.

An innovation of the Moravian Church were *banden*, or small group meetings of believers. Archaeological evidence of stone seats in forests can be found. These are the precursor of John Wesley's 'bands' and indeed modern-day 'cell-groups'.

The Moravians also organised congregations differently (called choirs): by age, gender and marital status.

Standing the test of time are their 'daily readings', the first from 1731 when Zinzendorf published the *Daily Textbook*. Also, the Moravians managed to keep continuous intercessory prayer for a period of 100 years via a schedule of hourly blocks. A contemporary example is the 24/7 prayer movement in England – here though believers are body pierced and pray in 'decorated' (graffitied) room.

## **II) Count Without Borders**

Beginning locally, the Count began a reformation movement across all denominations, helped by his ecumenical spirit.

It came to pass he was invited to King Christian VI of Denmark's coronation, at which he met a negro slave, Andrew, from St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands. Back in Herrnhut, Zinzendorf's account of the coronation centered on Andrew, and the Moravians were pricked in their hearts over the coming nights for his people. Thus the first two missionaries were sent out to the Virgin Islands.

The slaves were suspicious and land owners hostile to the Moravians, nevertheless they eventually made their first convert of a young boy. The idea was to convert a small group and make disciples rather than simply preaching to the people. Further converts were called the 'first fruits', of which a painting exists as a depiction.

In 1733 the Moravians then went to Greenland where the Inuit peoples. Hindered by distrust of Europeans it took five long years to win a convert, but then the whole people was converted.

Zinzendorf had been continuing his studies and in 1734 was ordained a Lutheran minister. His zeal and global outlook were unabated – in 1735 three missionaries were sent to Surinam in South America, and in 1737 one to the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa.

Meanwhile in Dresden the count had fallen out of favour for two reasons: amongst his peers for receiving their citizens into his land (being attracted by the liberty on offer), and the growing status of the Moravian Church as a separate institution outside the Lutheranism. As a result the King exiled Zinzendorf and a 'pilgrim congregation' was born.

Fortunately, Zinzendorf had seen the writing on the wall and had previously sold his estates to his wife. From a sympathetic count in West Germany, leave was granted for the Moravians to begin a new settlement which they called Herrhaag. By 1738 it had grown to a population of 1000.

Zinzendorf had since also become a Bishop of the Moravian Church.

Disturbing reports were filtering back re: Virgin Island missions – death and sickness, so that Zinzendorf was charged with sending others to die while remaining at home. To this end, in 1739 he braved the voyage. Reaching St. Thomas, he exercised influence to free missionaries jailed on false charges. This changed how the slaves saw the Moravians and they became more receptive to the gospel – in two weeks of Zinzendorf's stay 800 converts were made.

A musical side of the count is shown – while traveling at sea between islands he wrote many famous hymns. His philosophy was 'sing from memory' as lyrics should only be for visitors.

Next, missionaries were sent to St. Anne in India, and Georgia in the America and the native American Indians. Georgia was a disaster as the had bought marshland, people died, got sick or returned to Europe, and Spain (Florida) was at war with England (Georgia). What did arise however was a meeting between a young Anglican priest, John Wesley and a Moravian Peter Beuller. Beuller compelled John to attend a Moravian meeting, at which he was truly converted to Christ.

Eventually, due to theological differences, Wesley went on to start the Methodist movement. Beuller had also met John's brother Charles, who he converted. Unlike John, Charles never officially left the Moravian movement.

In summary, an apt description is given at the end of the Moravian existence: “simple life, fearless work, and burning love for the saviour.”

### **III) New Heart, New World**

This chapter has much information as many events unfold in America and within the Church, also the social and economic aspects are explored.

The Moravians ran into difficulty with their office of Chief Elder. In London, 1741, Leonard Boker resigned the position claiming its impossibility to fill – the Elder was responsible for knowing the spiritual state of every Church member. After a vote they decided the office should be held by Jesus Christ, to this day in Moravian meetings an empty chair is set signifying Jesus' presence, although believers are free to regard this tradition or not.

Zinzendorf visited America with his daughter. He also met with Benjamin Franklin, who published many of his sermons. He ran into difficulty though due to his aristocratic background and mannerisms. To counter this he discarded his titles, dressed in common clothes, as evidenced by his title 'Friend Lewis' from the Quakers.

He built a missionary hub on land purchased from the British (one William Penn) in Pennsylvania and named a town the Moravians built Bethlehem. To this day the Central Moravian Church holds services [the DVD shows a candle-based service-perhaps a Romish influence?]. Bethlehem is known as the Christmas city.

The mission was two-pronged - organise the German protestants into a cohesive community, and evangelise the Indians. The first was a failure due to suspicions between different groups, as well as what Zinzendorf described as lukewarmness.

The second was a success, an agreement was attained between the six-nation Indian Iroquys and the Moravians, allowing freedom of movement. This may have been possible as the Moravians first learnt the language of the Indian peoples rather than forcing them to adopt theirs. They also preached in the people's language. *The Last of the Mohicans* is thought to be based on a Moravian convert named 'Choot'.

Other towns of Nazareth and Salem were Moravian missionary centres. In America they created the 'general economy', i.e. centres of tradespersons such as bakers, die-setters, windmills, tin shops, tanners, etc. They were also able to manufacture instruments such as violins and pipe organs previously imported from Europe. The music in their services was quite impressive.

Education was also a priority, especially of women who had over 90% participation, in contrast to 5% of the non-Moravian population. They were doctrinally unconventional in having women preachers and ordaining them to leadership. This brought controversy and condemnation of the Moravians. Similarly, they had a strange description of the Holy Spirit as 'mother' of the Church, supposedly to aid in the layperson's understanding of the difficult concept of the Trinity and religion in general.

Back in Germany their industrious nature became the best defence against persecution, Frederick of Prussia and other leaders began inviting groups to settle in their lands. In 1747, after testing Moravian beliefs against the Augsburg confession the King of Saxony had a change of heart and withdraw Zinzendorf's edict of expulsion.

Also, the earliest instance of the two-day weekend is attributed to the Moravians, who did so out of respect for the Jews as well as Christian Sabbatarians.

#### **IV) The Pilgrim Comes Home**

The picture in Europe of the Moravians is summarised as strong, with the twin cities of Herrnhut and Herrnhag. However the fruit of women leaders and charismatic excesses no doubt led into a period known as the 'sifting time', taken from Peter's temptation by Satan in Luke 22.31.

A great focus was placed on the Saviour's wounds, that one could 'hide in them' and somewhat inordinate devotions were created. Doctrinally at the root these seemed innocent though, the Moravian hymn 'Rock of Ages' widely sung today captures these sentiments.

A bigger problem arose when the 'Order of the Little Fools' was begun. Every day was 'child's play at the foot of the cross' according to one of the documentary historians. Daily tasks were neglected and missionary zeal lost, so much so they began to be looked down upon. People also became more child-like in their faith. This is *uncannily* what can be seen in the modern Pentecostal movement in the Church – doctrine and missionary focus is substituted by emotionalism and 'fluff'.

The Pastor at this time was Zinzendorf's son, Christian Rhenatus. Showing good leadership Zinzendorf had him removed and disciplined.

The German Church was upset when the Count of Herrnhut died and the new Count was opposed to the Moravians. He issued an ultimatum – renounce allegiance to Zinzendorf or leave. To his surprise they chose the latter, abandoning their wonderful properties and resettling mainly in England and America over a period of three years. In England, the Parliament recognised them as an ancient branch of Christianity going back to the Unitas Fratrum.

At such a time missionary efforts actually *expanded*, into Persia, Egypt, further in the Carribean, to Indians deep in the Surinam interior, and Greenland

In 1753, a second American effort was planned, one hundred thousand acres of land in North Carolina was purchased from Lord Granville. Zinzendorf names it Wachovia after his ancestral estates. He never visited this mission, but named the main town Shalom (or Salem). In his honour the largest manor house in America was planned for him.

Contemporary world events were Frederick of Prussia's invasion of Saxony, triggering the seven year's war [providentially for the Jesuits, the Moravians towns were pincerred in the middle]. In the American mission, ten Moravians and one child were murdered by the Indians, one mile from the Nazareth manor house.

Zinzendorf was devastated when his wife Countess Eerdmuth Darchaea died in 1756, who was still grieving for her son. She is said to have been taken for granted, treated 'like an old shoe'.

He soon remarried a commoner Anna Nitschmann, the announcement being made in 1758. Anna was a leader in high position within the Moravian Church, functioning like a Bishop and was called 'mother of the congregation'.

After a European family preaching tour, they returned to Herrnhut in 1759. Zinzendorf quickly declined in health and he died in May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1760. His reported final words are encouraging, the wonderment at the Lord's work as opposed to what his original small vision was.

After his death, Moravian finances were in a grave state and practicalities led to the governing Bishops transferring all debts (from Zinzendorf's collateral) under the Church. Herrnhut was purchased from the family as well. A conservative board called the directorium was created to steward the church They returned women to their traditional roles, the Holy Spirit was no longer called mother, and they were less willing to experiment with new Bible **translations**.

Despite the new outlook, missionary efforts were still maintained, however from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the focus shifted from disciplining new converts. Today the visible legacy of the Moravians seems faint, the

likely cause may be the (admirable) strong focus on tradition and missionary zeal at the expense of the Bible, the written word that will outlive any missionary.

William Carey, famous leader of modern missions himself gave credit to Zinzendorf as the first true modern missionary. The most astounding thing about his life as a man was to give up the customs of 18<sup>th</sup> century aristocracy in favour of Christian missionary activity. His life was such that it could *not* be intentionally designed.