

# AN INVITATION TO THE TABLE: A PROPOSAL FOR A MORAVIAN/REFORMED COVENANT PARTNERSHIP

*We're gonna sit at the welcome table,  
We're gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days, Hallelujah!*

*---Traditional Spiritual adapted*

As representatives of five different communions met for theological discussion, worship, and fellowship between 2002 and 2007, the image—and reality—of *the table* emerged as central in the group's understanding of its task. We have identified three ways (happily and conveniently Trinitarian) in which this image speaks to our past work and our future hopes.

*First is the table of conversation.* We recognize that each communion brings specific gifts to this table, and that all share a commitment to honest and far-ranging exploration of our differences and similarities. The table of conversation is graced by sincere questioning and respectful listening. We have discovered that miscommunication can result when shared terms carry different meanings, and have spent long and fruitful hours expanding our understanding of one another's polity and practice.

For example, both the Moravians and the Presbyterians include the office of Elder, so at first glance it would appear that this is one instance of commonality. But as we discovered, the structure and functions of the office are quite different. Moravian Elders are elected for a fixed term and installed to serve only the congregation, district, or province in which they are elected. They form a governing board and have oversight responsibility within the jurisdiction, which they serve. Presbyterian Elders, on the other hand, are ordained for life and can function as elder within any Presbyterian congregation. They have ministerial duties, which in the Moravian church are reserved for the ordained clergy.

Another example is the office of Bishop. One of the gifts that Moravians bring to the table of conversation is the concept of Bishop as a pastor to pastors, one charged with providing spiritual leadership and praying for the welfare of the church. Considerable discussion centered **on** the function of the Bishop within the Moravian Unity. Reformed partners in the Dialogue were surprised and intrigued to learn that Moravian bishops have no administrative duties by virtue of their office.

As Christians we are a people of story. In sharing the narrative of our faith journeys, as individuals and as denominations, we make of the table of conversation a place to gather in witness to the wonder and graciousness of God's work in the world.

*The second table is the table of fellowship.* The simple act of sitting together to share a common meal recalls the Agape meal of the early church, with its emphasis on

hospitality to all who gather. While all of our denominations recognize the benefits to the community of church suppers and other opportunities for food and fellowship, the Moravians demonstrate with their practice of Lovefeast a way to integrate meal and liturgy in a service of worship engaging all the senses. The Lovefeast, precisely because it is not sacramental in nature, has the added advantage of being a liturgical meal in which all may participate freely.

The Psalmist invites us to “taste and see that the Lord is good.” (Psalm 34:8) In the Lovefeast hymns, participants taste sweet words of praise and thanksgiving, and in the Lovefeast meal itself **they** taste the sweet buns and pungent coffee, filling mouths and hearts with gratefulness for the Lord’s bounty. The table of fellowship invites all to delight in God’s graciousness.

*The third table is, of course, the Eucharistic table.* It is the place where each of us encounters our crucified and risen Lord. It is the table of nourishment for our spirits, before which we stand or kneel in awe and wonder. The covenant partnership to which we aspire recognizes no barrier to full participation by any of our members in the celebration of Holy Communion in any one of our churches. The verse of a familiar Moravian hymn expresses it clearly and simply: “With one cup and with one bread thus one cov’nant way we tread.” In such manner we join to bear witness to God’s all-encompassing invitation. The feast is prepared. The banquet table is spread. Let us work together to gather in all who are hungry and thirsty, that all may be satisfied.

To this end we offer a proposal for Covenant Partnership.

### **A Brief Introduction and Background for This Proposal**

The Moravian-Reformed Dialogue, and its proposal for “covenant partnership” among the Moravian Church,<sup>1</sup> the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ, are products of earlier ecumenical work.<sup>2</sup> In 1998, *A Formula of Agreement* initiated a full communion relationship between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and three Reformed partners: the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PCUSA), the Reformed Church in America (RCA), and the United Church of Christ (UCC). In 1999, the ELCA and the Moravian Church entered an agreement of full communion.

For almost fifty years, Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC) and its predecessor body, the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) have searched for a meaningful and demonstrable expression of church unity that is “truly catholic, truly reformed and truly evangelical.” The PCUSA, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the UCC have been full participants in this process from the beginning; more recently the Moravian

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this document and the relationships it establishes, reference to the Moravian Church is exclusive to the congregations who are organized under the authority of the Northern and Southern Provinces.

<sup>2</sup> Descriptions of each of the participating communions are at the end of this document.

Church-Northern Province has become a full participant. Among the stumbling blocks to progress have been questions and tensions regarding certain reformed and episcopal practices of the ministry of oversight. “Reformed” generally refers to oversight by representative bodies of both clergy and laity. “Episcopal” generally refers to oversight vested in an individual, especially a bishop whose authority derives from participation in the historic succession.<sup>3</sup>

Recognizing that the Moravian Church practices a ministry of oversight that is at once reformed and episcopal, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in 2000 invited the Moravian Church to enter into a formal dialogue. Because of earlier ecumenical commitments made through the *Formula of Agreement*, the United Church of Christ and the Reformed Church in America were also invited to join; the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was included because of its participation in CUIC and its long-standing ecumenical partnership with the UCC.

The PCUSA entered the dialogue with several goals: 1) to reach an understanding of the ministry of oversight in each tradition; 2) to explore areas of cooperative work in global, national and local settings; 3) to enable PCUSA and Moravian congregations to gain greater knowledge of one another and of the denominations’ cooperative work; and 4) to seek common agreements that could lead to establishing full communion between the Moravian Church and one or all of the Reformed churches.<sup>4</sup> The dialogue began formally in April 2002 in Winston-Salem, and representatives have met once or twice annually through May 2007, although changes in the Moravian Church occasioned a yearlong hiatus in 2003. Initial meetings focused on introducing and clarifying the several communions’ structures and the ordering of ministry within those structures. The group gave particular attention to identifying the divisive issues within each of the five churches, recognizing that many of these issues were common to all. Equally important, conversation about the theological principles held in common among all five communions made clear that no doctrinal or ecclesiological barriers stand in the way of closer relationships.

While the impetus for this dialogue, and the present proposal, was the relationship of “full communion” that both the Moravian Church and three of the four Reformed churches have with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we have chosen to use the language of “covenant partnership” in our recommendation that a new relationship be

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<sup>3</sup> In practice, denominations mix and vary these elements of collective and individual oversight. Moravian bishops, while standing in historic succession, do not exercise judicial oversight; rather such oversight is exercised by the Provincial Elders Conference, a representative body of clergy and laity. The PCUSA and RCA, on the other hand, vest oversight exclusively in representative bodies (presbyteries and classes) of clergy and laity.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the three other Reformed partners (RCA, UCC, CC/DC) entered the dialogue primarily with the first three goals in mind. As the dialogue proceeded, however, representatives of all three communions perceived the appropriateness and usefulness of seeking deeper formal relationships with the Moravian Church. If pursued, such relationships would be effected bilaterally, rather than (as with the *Formula of Agreement*) by the Reformed bodies acting together. It is further understood that the Moravian Church will proceed in each case only if both the Northern and Southern Provinces agree to pursue a closer relationship with a given denomination.

established. There are two reasons for this linguistic choice. First, in both the Reformed and the Moravian traditions, we understand ourselves to be called into covenant relationship with the Divine. As a covenant people we are called to seek meaningful relationships with other Christian bodies as a reflection of our covenant with Christ. Covenant partnership indicates a commitment to gather at Table together—for dialogue, fellowship and Eucharist; it also indicates commitment to rise from Table and to engage in mission together. Second, we believe that the language of “full communion” suggests a relationship accomplished, rather than—as we envision—a relationship emerging and ongoing. “Covenant partnership” points toward a shared journey, one that leads us together to greater faithfulness and witness to the ministry of Jesus Christ. It seeks to name relationships that already exist on many levels, and to open the door for growing relationships in the future.

### **Toward a Deeper Relationship: Past History and Ecumenical Commitments**

Both the Moravian Church and the four Reformed bodies see no obstacles, present or past, to covenant partnership. Moreover, all five churches have histories of cooperative and ecumenical commitments.

#### ***The Moravian Church***

The Moravian Church has a long history of ecumenism. In its first decade (1457-67) adherents managed with dissident Catholic priests before they sought an ordained ministry of their own. Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf, the chief influence in the renewal of the church in the 1700s, saw the Moravian Church as an *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, a pietist “yeast” and mission society within larger state churches of Germany and Scandinavia. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, many Moravian preaching places in America became congregations of other communions. More recently, Moravians have been active in ecumenical groups from local bodies to the World Council of Churches. In 1999 the Moravian Church concluded a full communion agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and it is now involved in dialogue with the Episcopal Church, as well as with the four Reformed partners in this dialogue.

Because of their world mission heritage, identification with the global Moravian communion has always been important for American Moravians. However, with the end of political colonialism and the independence of former “mission fields,” this is less central than in the past. Also, Moravians are increasingly aware that denominationalism has sometimes distracted them from seeking relationships with other Christians and responding to social issues closer to home.

There appear to be no discernible barriers to deeper relationships between the Moravians and the communions engaged in this dialogue. The Moravian spirit toward traditional creeds and confessions is expressed in *The Ground of the Unity*, the official doctrinal statement of the denomination, adopted in 1957 and modified only slightly since then:

The Unitas Fratrum recognizes in the creeds of the Church the thankful acclaim of the Body of Christ. These creeds aid the Church in formulating a Scriptural confession, in marking the boundaries of heresies, and in exhorting believers to an obedient and fearless testimony in every age. The Unitas Fratrum maintains that all creeds formulated by the Christian Church stand in need of constant testing in the light of the Holy Scriptures.

It acknowledges as such true professions of faith the early Christian witness: “Jesus Christ is Lord!” and also especially the ancient Christian creeds and the fundamental creeds of the Reformation.<sup>5</sup>

The irenic spirit with which the Moravian Church approaches creeds also inform its approach toward potentially church-dividing issues such as baptism and human sexuality. Because of the understanding of prevenient grace, the normal practice of the Moravian church is children’s baptism; however, parents have the right to postpone the baptism of their children. There are differing convictions among Moravians regarding sexual orientation, but the Unity Synod (the highest international Moravian body) has stated that the issue of human sexuality “does not rise to the level of the Lordship of Christ,” indicating that believers can in good faith disagree on some questions of sexuality.

There are, of course, differences of emphasis. Moravians, for example, have put more stress on devotional life and have been less likely than some Reformed bodies to see social and political advocacy as part of the total Christian witness. This is one of the many areas in which we can learn from one another.

***The Four Reformed Churches-- Presbyterian Church (USA), Reformed Church in America, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), United Church of Christ***

Although these four Reformed communions have different origins, structures of governance, and confessional emphases, all share historical commitments to, and participation in, ecumenical activities. Beginning in the mid-1790s, members of the Dutch Reformed Church (now the RCA) partnered with other denominations to send missionaries to the American Indians. In 1801 Presbyterians and Congregationalists<sup>6</sup> adopted a Plan of Agreement, often called the first formal ecumenical agreement in America, which for half a century committed the two bodies to work cooperatively in planting churches on the frontier. Roughly two decades later, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) emerged as a movement committed to ending the unscriptural “party divisions” of both belief and practice that separated denominations.

All four bodies are presently active in numerous bilateral and conciliar ecumenical relationships. All are members of the National Council of Churches, the World Council

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<sup>5</sup> In the various Provinces of the Renewed Unitas Fratrum the following documents gained special importance, because in them the main doctrines of the Christian faith find clear and simple expression: The Apostles’, Athanasian, and Nicene Creeds, The Confession of the Unity of the Bohemian Brethren of 1535, the Twenty-one Articles of the unaltered Augsburg Confession, Martin Luther’s Shorter Catechism, the Synod of Berne of 1532, the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England, the Barmen Declaration, the Heidelberg Confession.

<sup>6</sup> Congregationalists are the largest constituent body within the United Church of Christ.

of Churches, and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches; individually, each participates in other ecumenical alliances and conversations, including Christian Churches Together and Churches Uniting in Christ. Three of the four participants (the UCC, PCUSA, and RCA) were signatories to the *Formula of Agreement* with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) shares with the United Church of Christ an ecumenical partnership that enjoys full reconciliation of ministries.

None of the Reformed bodies perceives historic or present barriers, either of theology and practice or of governance, to fuller and deeper partnership with the Moravian Church.

### **Toward A Deeper Relationship: Current Cooperative Work**

Moravians and Reformed bodies already work together in many ways, both formal and informal. All participant communions in this dialogue are members of the National Council of Churches of Christ. The Moravian Church—Northern Province and three Reformed bodies (UCC, CC/DC, and PCUSA) are members of Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC). Reformed bodies have at various times worked with Moravians in Nicaragua and Honduras. Sister bodies in the Caribbean work together at a seminary in Jamaica. Since the fall of the iron curtain, Moravians, Presbyterians and others in Alaska have done church planting among people in nearby Siberia.

Theological seminaries of all the bodies welcome students from the other groups, and faculties serve across denominational lines as well. (This is a significant change from a not-too-distant past when pastors were educated almost exclusively at denominational seminaries.) Ordained ministers of Word and sacrament serve across denominational lines, both as interim pastors and installed pastors. A closer ecumenical agreement will only facilitate the ongoing exchange and eventual reconciliation of ministries.

Most of the communions in this dialogue are concentrated in some geographic areas and less represented in others. (For example, there are Moravian congregations in only seventeen states.<sup>7</sup>) This regional distribution has affected where congregations of the dialogue communions have worked together thus far. Nevertheless, there are many local instances of common effort, especially in social service—for example, homeless shelters, Habitat for Humanity projects, CROP Walks, food pantries, and racial justice work.

### **Covenant Partnership: A Proposal**

The value of a covenant partnership between the Moravian Church and one or more Reformed bodies is evident. Such partnership reminds us, first of all, that our separate churches have missed many opportunities to share in ministry and mission, although God calls us to work together as one. Equally important, covenant partnership makes intentional witness to the churches' diversity in unity. Discussions in our five-year-long dialogue have highlighted a number of ways, both in practice and in polity, in which each communion brings unique and valuable gifts to the table. Rather than minimize

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<sup>7</sup> North Carolina, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Ohio, Wisconsin, Maryland, Minnesota, District of Columbia, Florida, Virginia, California, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, North Dakota, Michigan

denominational differences in favor of bland uniformity, a covenant partnership will recognize and celebrate the many different ways in which partners are able to worship the one Triune God and proclaim the Gospel of Christ to the world. Contemporary groups, both civil and religious, too often suggest, “my way is the only way.” Partnership offers the opportunity to speak a prophetic word to those who disparage diversity.

Finally, covenant partnership will facilitate a process for joint—and thus more effective—mission. Ideally, the various mission boards will come to the point where a covenant partner or partners will automatically be invited to participate in any new mission efforts. (Indeed, if covenant partnership is to become real locally, joint mission is essential. Perhaps, for example, concrete goals—such as local partnerships to build Habitat for Humanity houses—could inaugurate the partnership and make it more meaningful.)

What is involved, specifically, in a covenant partnership between the Moravian Church and one or more of the Reformed communions?

- *As Covenant partners The Presbyterian Church USA and the Moravian Church Northern and Southern Provinces recognize each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered according to the Word of God in the Scriptures.*
- *As Covenant partners The Presbyterian Church USA and the Moravian Church Northern and Southern Provinces recognize each other's ordained ministries as valid and will seek to reconcile their ordained ministries. We will develop a process to provide for the orderly exchange and mutual oversight of ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament. When possible, partners will regularly consult regarding the preparation of candidates for ordination, and the processes necessary for preparing them to serve both within their tradition and ecumenically.*
- *We covenant to work cooperatively—locally, regionally, and nationally—in mission. Such efforts may include sharing models of existing cooperation, as well as creating new opportunities for common witness and mission.*
- *We covenant to invite mutual participation in governance and other activities. We will invite each other regularly to participate in church-wide assemblies, synods, and councils; and where appropriate, to give advice and counsel regarding the ongoing work and decision-making in the churches. We will also encourage and invite mutual representation in various caucuses, conferences and other gatherings, with particular attention to youth/young adult and racial/ethnic caucuses.*
- *We covenant to develop joint resources, as appropriate. Such resources may include but not be limited to Christian education curriculum, mission education*

*resources and liturgical resources that could be used jointly and may facilitate mutual understanding and commitment throughout the wider church.*

- *We covenant to seek regular opportunity to sit at Table together for conversation, fellowship, and sacramental celebration. In this intimate sharing, partners will deepen their knowledge of one another, their faith in God's abundant presence, and their commitment to being Christ's body together in a world that needs both help and hope.*

We find this language, adapted from *A Formula of Agreement*, to be an appropriate way to conclude:

In affirming covenant partnership, each participating communion acknowledges that it is undertaking a serious commitment, one that involves actions as well as words. Covenant partnership cannot be achieved without awareness of existing differences and similarities among the partners; it will demand dedication to walking and working together in ways that may, at times, represent a break with the past. Walking together involves not only the likelihood, but also the certainty of mutual challenge and change; because of this commitment, each body will eventually be different in ways that presently cannot be seen. The partner churches commit themselves to this new relationship with seriousness of intent, and full assurance that the One who calls us to greater visible unity is faithful and worthy of trust.

#### **Five communions have participated in the Moravian-Reformed Dialogue:**

*The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* is a faith community of some 700,000 members across the United States and Canada. From its founding along the western frontier of the United States in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century this church began as a movement proclaiming the unity of the church and oneness among all Christians gathered at a common Table of the Lord's Supper. Initially the vision of unity was based upon the restoration of New Testament practices; today, the denomination's efforts in seeking unity focus upon covenantal agreements and shared mission.

The church is structured in three expressions: congregational, regional and general. Each expression has its own particular responsibilities and authority, but always in covenant and ministry with the other expressions to fulfill the whole church's mission. The congregations are divided into 33 geographic regions that bear responsibility for oversight and nurture. Eleven general ministries and the Office of General Minister and President link the denomination with the wider church, world missions and support services to expand the church's ministry to fulfill the mission of being "a faithful, growing church, that demonstrates true community, deep Christian spirituality and a passion for justice."

*The Moravian Church (Unitas Fratrum)* is a worldwide body consisting of nearly 800,000 members in 19 provinces. In the United States and Canada, the Northern and Southern Provinces together include, respectively, roughly 25,000 and 18,000 members. Alaska and Labrador are separate provinces. Governance is representative: quadrennial synods plan the work of provinces, while Provincial Elders' Conferences, with both lay and clergy members, exercise ministries of oversight (including ministerial ordination and discipline) between synods. There are three orders of ministry: Deacon, Presbyter, and Bishop; all three orders may preside over the rites of the church, including baptism and Holy Communion. Bishops, elected for life, exercise no special ministries of administrative oversight; rather, they serve as theological resources, servants at the request of the Provincial Elders' Conferences, intercessors for the church and "pastor to pastors."

The Moravian Church recognizes a variety of historic creeds and confessions; it steadfastly maintains, however, that the Bible contains no single system of doctrine, and it refuses to use any one creed as a litmus test of faith. (Indeed, the best picture of Moravian doctrine may be found in the group's hymns and liturgies.) Moravians are eager to recognize and partner with all Christians and Christian denominations that recognize the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Two mottos guide members' life and work: "Our Lamb has conquered; let us follow him"; and "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, love."

*The Presbyterian Church (USA)* traces its ancestry back to Scotland and England by way of reformers John Calvin and John Knox. In the United States, the Presbyterian Church has split and united several times. The PCUSA, formed in 1983, is the result of reunion between northern and southern branches of the church. With roughly 2.5 million members, it is the largest Presbyterian denomination in the United States.

**The Constitution of the PCUSA consists of two volumes, the Book of Confessions,<sup>8</sup> which includes ancient and contemporary creeds and confessions, and the Book of Order, which enumerates governmental, worship, and disciplinary standards. The latter volume**

makes clear that the "nature of Presbyterian order is such that it shares power and responsibility. The system of governing bodies,<sup>9</sup> whether they have authority over one or many churches, sustains such mutual relationships within the structures such as to express the unity of the church."<sup>10</sup>

The PCUSA understands itself to be only one part of the Body of Christ. It is committed to seeking the full visible unity of the church and is active in conciliar, cooperative, missional and bilateral dialogues and partnerships, including membership in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The Presbyterian Church (USA) is committed

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<sup>8</sup> Included are the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds; the Scots, Heidelberg, Second Helvetic, and Westminster Confessions; the Shorter and Larger Catechisms; the Barmen Declaration; the Confession of 1967, and A Brief Statement of Faith.

<sup>9</sup> The governing bodies are Sessions (local congregations), Presbyteries, Synods and General Assembly.

<sup>10</sup>From *The Presbyterian Church USA Book of Order*, G-4.0302.

to living its faith both in creedal affirmation and in faithful public witness and social action.

***The Reformed Church in America*** was founded in 1628 as the established church of the Dutch Colony of New Netherland. Strongest in the mid-Atlantic region and the upper Midwest, it consists of roughly 300,000 members. Governance is presbyterian and conciliar. Ordained ministers, elders and deacons meet in deliberative assemblies at four levels: local consistories, classes (analogous to presbyteries, with the power of ordination and discipline), regional synods, and a general synod.

The denomination's heritage is Calvinist; today the RCA is theologically conservative but irenic and non-judgmental. Traditionally it has stressed doctrine over lifestyle. Pastors must hold to several historic creeds and Reformed confessions, including the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century, foreign missions were ecumenical, and the RCA has historically been a strong participant in ecumenical activities. This commitment is expressed both in a pattern of partnership globally with indigenous bodies, and in conciliar and full communion relationships with other denominations, including the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the United Church of Christ.

***The United Church of Christ*** was formed in 1957, the union of two previously merged bodies in the United States. The Congregational and the Christian churches (joined in 1931) have their origins in the English reformation and post-Revolutionary America, respectively; the Evangelical Synod and the Reformed Church (joined in 1934) were churches of German heritage with roots in the continental reformation. Current membership is roughly 1.2 million. UCC polity is both congregational (the rights of local churches are inalienable) and connectional (ministerial standing and discipline are handled regionally, by Associations). The concept of "covenant"—mutual accountability and respect among individuals in, and settings of, the church—binds together otherwise autonomous Associations, Conferences, and a biennial General Synod. The latter representative body, which coordinates the work and witness of the denomination, speaks "to, not for" the local churches.

Theologically, the UCC "looks to the word of God in the Scriptures," and "claims as its own" historic creeds and confessions, while insisting that Christians in each generation must re-examine and re-interpret these authoritative sources.<sup>11</sup> From its founding in what has been called "an ecumenical crucible," the UCC has engaged in numerous bi- and multi-lateral conversations and partnerships. Its members are active nationally and globally in direct action for social and economic justice and peace.

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<sup>11</sup> *The Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ* (2001), 2.

## **Moravian Reformed Dialogue Participants**

### **Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**

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### **Moravian Church**

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