

Statement on the Mutual Recognition  
of Full Communion  
between  
The Moravian Church  
(Northern and Southern Provinces)  
and  
The United Methodist Church

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## Introduction

The Northern and Southern Provincial Synods of the Moravian Church and the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church authorized a dialogue team with representatives from both churches to meet and explore deepening our common fellowship, worship, and work together with the goal of entering into a full communion relationship.<sup>1</sup> It became quickly apparent that our two Christian traditions had many points of contact over two and a half centuries ago. Eighteenth-century leaders, Count Nicolas Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760) of the Moravians, and The Reverend John Wesley (1703–1791), of the Methodists, had significant contact with one another. The movements to which they gave inspiration and organization had similarities; but these renewal movements eventually drifted apart.

As a dialogue team coming together over two and a half centuries later, we therefore met partly as strangers, but also as fellow Christians whose paths have run parallel. As we met and came to know each other, we found that we were friends who had returned to each other as family. Historical disputes that divided our leaders and their adherents a quarter of a millennium ago clearly have no lasting meaning to us. We discovered that our traditions share a passion for music, living the Christian life, mutual tolerance for all people, pragmatic approaches for contextual mission, commitment to ministry by the laity, and yearning for the unity of the church.

We found that we had never denounced one another. We return as those who are, in a very real sense, in full communion already. Now we are challenged to live into that previously fallow relationship. We hope that the vitality of our shared faith will leave no doubt to any that we are united with one another in the love, mission, and ministry of Jesus Christ.

## That Which Unites Us

Both Moravians and Methodists share many core characteristics that shape and define our churches. Moravians and Methodists both have their origins as revival movements functioning within European churches, calling people to live as faithful Christians. Both, from the very beginning, sought to co-operate with

other Christians and looked for fellowship and spiritual nourishment wherever the Spirit of God provided. Both seek to live by Augustine’s maxim, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love.” In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, both organized small groups, held lovefeasts, wrote and sang hymns, and developed missions.

Similarly, we have both struggled with matters of justice. Both of our traditions experienced transformations from revival movements within official government churches into free churches in their own rights in the context of a new North American society. This mixed heritage of traditions shaped both as missionary movements and as freestanding churches has left a lasting mark on the forms and practices of our spiritual and institutional identities.

Both Methodists and Moravians were mobile and agile enough in ministry in large measure because of the central ministerial role played by lay women and men. Their passion and zeal for reaching beyond the geographical limits of the official churches of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries into lands inhabited by non-Europeans, or lands being newly settled by Europeans and Euro-Americans, helped establish new foundations for the expanding Christian church. As colonialism waned, both traditions left important marks upon the Christianity of a world no longer ruled from Europe.

Where Moravians and Methodists have gone, we have offered new models of being church that have included sacred song, worship and fellowship in small groups, commitment to education, and a persistent ecumenical spirit. Across the world, both traditions have provided leadership and commitment to the building of closer bonds of love among Christians of other differing traditions. It is natural that we now find ourselves coming closer together.

## Our Histories

Our 18<sup>th</sup> century leaders, John Wesley and Nicolas von Zinzendorf, responded to the needs of the people of God from the perspectives of their geographical and religious contexts. The experience of Wesley and the Methodists was in the context of the Evangelical and Pietistic revival movements and the growing British Empire. The Moravians were Pietists who had been shaped by centuries of functioning as minority constituents of established state churches and experiencing occasional persecutions. Both Wesley and Zinzendorf valued personal religious experience. Early on, Wesley experienced the sense of a living grace among the Moravians. He learned and incorporated into the Methodist revival movement spiritual practices he encountered in Moravian life.

<sup>1</sup> The Bilateral Dialogue Committee met four times over a period of two years: in March 2013 (New York, New York), September 2013 (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania), February/March 2014 (New York, New York), and September 2014 (Winston-Salem, North Carolina). Members of the Committee were: For The United Methodist Church—Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar, co-chair (Lawrence, Massachusetts); Prof. Dr. Ulrike Schuler (Reutlingen, Germany); Rev. Dr. Robert Williams (Ocean City, New Jersey) [2014]; the Rev. Dr. Jason Vickers (Dayton, Ohio) [2013]; and Dr. Glen Alton Messer II, staff (New York, New York); For the Moravian Church (Northern and Southern Provinces)—the Rev. Gary L. Harke, co-chair (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania); the Rt. Rev. J. Christian Giesler (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania); and the Rev. Dr. M. Lynnette Delbridge (Staten Island, New York).

But there were theological differences—most notably over Wesley’s emphasis upon growth in love through God’s grace and Zinzendorf’s emphasis upon stillness and waiting upon God. These doctrinal differences were obstacles to working together in shared worship and fellowship.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, neither man, nor the movements of which they were a part, repudiated the other as Christian brothers and sisters. These theological perspectives from the past are expressed today in ways that do not present obstacles to cultivating our relationship.

### Our Doctrine

While we have different theological emphases, after a careful examination of the United Methodist Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith and the Moravian Ground of the Unity, we found no church-dividing issues. As worldwide churches, our differences in practice and theological emphases are rooted in our various contexts for ministry.

Church leaders of the United Methodists and Moravians in Germany met in 2012. In a subsequent letter, they wrote:

We discovered that we have not only historic connections with each other. The current-day character and spirituality also very much bind us together: The centrality of Christ in our theology and piety, the significance of singing in our churches, and, not least the missional challenge...in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

This affirmation is also true for United Methodists and Moravians in the North American context. Additionally, both the Moravian Church and The United Methodist Church have entered into full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. While this does not imply that the doctrinal teachings of our churches are identical, it does imply a remarkable degree of mutual agreement.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For example, the disagreements between John Wesley and other leaders of the Fetter Lane Society in London.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Rosemarie Wenner, Bishop of the Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche (Frankfurt am Main), and Frieder Vollprecht, chair of Direction of the Evangelischen Brüder-Unität (Herrnhut), January 1, 2013 (translation by G. A. Messer II).

<sup>4</sup> See *Confessing Our Faith Together* (2009) between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and The United Methodist Church and *Following Our Shepherd to Full Communion* (1999) between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Moravian Church, Northern and Southern Provinces, available at [http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Following\\_Our\\_Shepherd\\_To\\_Full\\_Communion.pdf](http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Following_Our_Shepherd_To_Full_Communion.pdf). The Moravian Church (Northern and Southern Provinces) is also in a full communion relationship with The Episcopal Church (*Finding Our Delight in the Lord* (2009/2010), available at [http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sites/default/files/finding\\_our\\_delight\\_official\\_text.pdf](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sites/default/files/finding_our_delight_official_text.pdf)) and is in a “covenant partnership” with the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (*An Invitation to the Table: A Proposal for a Moravian/Reformed Covenant Partnership* (2008/2010), available at <http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/moravian-pres-cov.pdf>). The United Methodist Church is also in a relationship with the Pan-Methodist Churches (see *Implementing Resolution for Full Communion among the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the African Union Methodist Protestant Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the Union American Methodist Episcopal Church, and the United Methodist Church* (2012).

### Our Living of the Faith Today

Today, both churches show similarity in practices of worship, Christian education, evangelism, and mission. Both ordain women, include laity in structures of governance, reach out in service to the world, and seek peace and justice. Both welcome all to the Lord’s Table, not excluding members of other churches. Both use liturgical patterns to express the apostolic faith, value personal religious experience, and administer the two sacraments of Baptism and the Holy Communion. Both teach that God works through Holy Scripture to lead us to salvation through Jesus Christ and both are tolerant of the beliefs of other Christians.

### Our Future

Coming together as a dialogue committee, we have discovered that we readily recognize each other’s ministries, the validity of each other’s practices of sacramental life, and the authenticity of each other’s churches as expressions of Christ’s one, holy, and apostolic church. We are united in our missional outlook, our practical approaches to ministry, and our yearning to live lives modeled upon Jesus’s love. While our conversation has brought our mutual recognition of each other to the fore, we are profoundly aware that the conditions of full communion, as understood in each church, have existed long before we began the dialogue.

In Mark, Jesus asks, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” He goes on to answer his own question by saying, [“. . . W]hoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”<sup>5</sup> We yearn to do the will of God by building community and consensus within our own churches and together. We yearn to do the will of God by proclaiming the gospel of God’s love and redemption made known to us through Jesus Christ. We yearn to do the will of God by serving all God’s family, the rich, the poor, the powerful and the powerless. We yearn to cultivate a vital relationship of mutual love and ministry. We challenge our churches to declare and confirm the existence of a full communion relationship so that, together, we may increase the love of God and neighbor in the world.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 3:31–35

**Recommendations**

Consequently the Bilateral Dialogue Committee of The United Methodist Church and the Moravian Church (Southern and Northern Provinces) calls for the adoption of the following by each church in a single vote to accept or reject without amendment:

1. Each of the two churches, through legislative action appropriate to the polity of each, formally declares itself to be in a relationship of full communion with the other. For The United Methodist Church, this would be an action taken by General Conference; for the Moravian provinces, this would be actions taken by the provincial synod of each province.
2. For the purposes of this relationship, full communion be understood to entail
  - 2.1. recognizing and valuing the diverse gifts present in each church;
  - 2.2. respecting each other as part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church as affirmed in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed;
  - 2.3. committing each church to cooperate in common ministries of evangelism, witness, and service;
  - 2.4. recognizing the validity of each other's sacramental life and ministerial orders, allowing for the transfer of membership between churches as within each church and the orderly exchange of clergy (subject to the regulations of church order and practice of each church); and
  - 2.5. committing each church to continue to work for the unity of the church, recognizing that this relationship of full communion is but a step toward the unity to which we are called.
3. To facilitate growing into this relationship of full communion, the two churches appoint a coordinating committee consisting of no fewer than three representatives each (that is, three representatives of The United Methodist Church and three representatives of the Moravian Church (Northern and Southern Provinces)). This committee shall make policy recommendations to the two churches to aid in the reception of the relationship and shall explore opportunities for common ministries of evangelism, witness, and service.
4. Both The United Methodist Church and the Moravian Church, Northern and Southern Provinces, commit to urging Central Conferences of The United Methodist Church and other provinces of the Unitas Fratrum to explore formal relationships of full communion, especially in Africa and Europe, where these do not already exist.