

From spirituality and community into mission - the Moravian model

The Moravian churches date their commitment to world mission from 21st August 1732. Over the next 150 years, this movement, centred on the original Moravian community at Herrnhut, in Saxony, Germany, sent out a total of 2158 missionaries. These missionaries displayed a distinct form of spirituality and community, which provided a model to the emerging Protestant mission movement of the early-nineteenth century.

The roots of the Moravian community are to be found in Pietism, which was a late-seventeenth century renewal movement within the Lutheran church in Germany. Protestant theology (both Lutheran and Reformed) had become as formal and arid as the Roman Catholic scholasticism it had originally reacted against. By contrast, Pietism focussed on a relationship with Jesus Christ, not on dry, correct orthodoxy. A disciplined life was more important than sound doctrine, and piety and the fear of God replaced irrelevant intellectualism. Personal conversion and experience superceded a satisfaction with nominal Christian allegiance. As such, the Pietists preceded the Evangelical Revival in Great Britain and North America by some 50 years or more.

As well as developing a faith which engaged the heart rather than the mind, Pietism was responsible for stimulating a new interest in missionary outreach. In Lutheranism, the religion of the people was the choice and responsibility of the state. The Puritan theocratic vision meant that church and state, if not co-terminous, were at least closely allied. In both cases, missionary work was easily seen as the property of the civil and ecclesiastical hierarchy. By contrast, the Pietists taught that missionaries were to go out under the direction of Christ and the Spirit alone, irrespective of political considerations. As such, mission outreach became a matter in which the “ordinary” person could be interested and participate. This breakthrough was to have profound implications for the life and vision of the Moravian community, to which we now turn.

The Moravian community was formed in 1722, when Count Nicolas von Zinzendorf, who had been nurtured in Pietistic circles, allowed a group of persecuted religious refugees from Moravia to settle on the family estate in Saxony. The new community was named Herrnhut (“The Lord’s Watch”), from Isa 62:6-7. Herrnhut developed its own form of Pietism, with a deep devotion to the crucified Christ, and an absolute unconditional surrender to his will.

The community’s missionary interest was stirred by a number of factors. Some of the community, while in Denmark, met a slave from the West Indies. Zinzendorf himself, while in Copenhagen in 1732, heard that the Lutheran mission to Greenland was in danger of being abandoned. This information was in fact wrong, but it spurred Zinzendorf to call on the Herrnhut community to support this mission. Thus was the decision made, and it mobilised a new missionary movement, almost unparalleled in passion and commitment, which would in turn have a significant impact on the later Protestant missionary movement.

The Moravians’ experience, and their distinctive take on spirituality and community contributed to aspects of their missionary methodology:

1. Mission as a ‘popular’ movement

We have already noted the democratising influence of Pietism on Christianity. Intellectual ability was not deemed necessary in order to follow Christ, for it engaged the emotions and the will, rather than the mind. By the same token, mission was not an activity reserved for the interest of the ruling elite.

The Moravian missionaries exemplified this way of thinking, in that the Herrnhut community was largely composed of uneducated peasants and artisans. Not that they disdained preparation for mission, but they saw their settlements as “proved seminaries” for

missionaries, and even as late as 1818 they rejected a proposal to form a separate training school for missionaries.

In 1793, the Moravians informed the newly-created BMS that “learning, and what the world calls accomplishments, we have not experienced to be of much use”, and in 1795 the LMS were advised that, among non-Europeans, a craft was more appropriate than theological learning, as the Moravian missionaries already knew the Bible, and they prayed for the constant guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This ‘democratization of mission’ was also a characteristic of the early British and American ‘faith’ missions of the late nineteenth century, which saw themselves as releasing for mission the ‘neglected forces of Christianity’. They also saw the new ‘mission halls’ functioning as training grounds, in much the same way as had the Moravian communities.

2. Mission as communal action

The Herrnhut community was self-supporting, and it was expected that their missionaries would follow this model, wherever they worked. The tension inherent in such a dual role, in that missionaries might be diverted from their core calling, was recognised. One check on this was that each Moravian mission community lived “as one family”, with a common cash account, so as to restrain any member who might be tempted, out of self-interest, to abandon their missionary calling.

The BMS drew on this model in its early days, and recommended it to Carey, Marshman and Ward in Serampore; “...you will find it necessary to form what you proposed, a kind of Moravian settlement; as otherwise we do not see how (you) can be supported”.

Strict discipline was another characteristic of the Moravian community, and the LMS lamented in 1796 that “we have not, like the Moravians, disciplined troops, but a hasty levy of irregulars and we are not to expect the subordination kept up in their missions”.

3. A martyr mentality?

The Moravian missionaries seemed to specialise in going to remote, difficult and dangerous regions. In the first 20 years of the movement, they could be found working in Greenland, the West Indies, the Arctic Circle, North America (among the native Americans), Surinam, South Africa, Algiers, Ceylon, China, Persia, Ethiopia, and Labrador.

Perhaps their early experience of persecution and migration gave them a special sensitivity and empathy towards those who were marginalised, and who might otherwise be overlooked.

4. “Christ crucified, and nothing else”

The above quotation, taken from 1 Cor 2:2, might be the most significant and lasting contribution of Moravian spirituality to missionary practice. We have already noted how this was a hallmark of the Herrnhut community, and, after an initial false start, it became their distinctive message, and one which influenced the whole of the later Protestant missionary movement.

Moravian missionaries arrived in Greenland in 1733, and worked alongside the existing Lutheran mission (albeit not without some tensions). At first, they followed the Lutheran style of preaching, and sought to prove the existence and attributes of the one God (i.e. to “preach idolatry out of them”) and then to enforce obedience to the divine law. As the Lutherans had already found, this attempt (which could be said to be based on Heb 6:1) made no significant impact on the indigenous shamanism.

In 1740, they reported their first convert, who had been “solidly awakened by the doctrine of

Jesus' sufferings". They believed that the Holy Spirit had revealed this emphasis to them, and thereafter it became their approved method and message.

It led to some interesting experiments in contextualization. Zinzendorf advised his missionaries in Greenland not to speak of Christ as a sacrifice, since the autochthonous shamanism knew no such concepts. He also is reputed to have said "if the greatest need of the heathen is a needle, then we should call our Saviour a needle"! Such attempts were vital, if the focus of Christ was to be maintained, but also be meaningful at the same time.

It is possible, despite their mutual antagonism, that David Brainerd was influenced by the Moravian missionaries who worked within a few miles of him in Pennsylvania in 1744. The Moravians claimed that while he used "the usual method of preaching by connected arguments", he was ineffective, whereas when he "ventured straightaway to preach to them simply the Saviour", he and other Presbyterian ministers were "astonished by such a large and quick awakening".

The 5th clause of Carey, Marshman and Ward's "Form of Agreement" (composed in 1805 to outline their methods in detail) refers to the Moravians specifically in this regard:

"It is a well-known fact that the most successful missionaries in the world at the present day make the atonement of Christ their continued theme. We mean the Moravians. They attributed all their success to the preaching of the death of our Saviour ...".

In summary, we see that the Moravians, by their communal lifestyle and their spirituality, established a model for missionary work which was not just successful in itself, but which had a profound influence on the emerging Protestant missionary movement of their century and the next.

In the contemporary era, when much of the focus of missiological thinking concentrates either on ecclesiology or pneumatology, it is perhaps also important to retain the Moravian emphasis on Christology.

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