

established a variety of businesses, including tailoring, watchmaking, and baking. As their economic influence grew, so did their spiritual influence, and a thriving Moravian church emerged in that country.

“The most important contribution of the Moravians,” writes William Danker, “was their emphasis that every Christian is a missionary and should witness through his daily vocation. If the example of the Moravians had been studied more carefully by other Christians, it is possible that the businessman might have retained his honored place within the expanding Christian world mission, beside the preacher, teacher, and physician.”¹

Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf

Count Zinzendorf was one of the most influential mission leaders of the modern Protestant missionary movement. He pioneered ecumenical evangelism, founded the Moravian church, and authored scores of hymns; but above all else, he launched a worldwide missionary movement that set the stage for William Carey and the “Great Century” of missions that would follow. Yet in many respects he lacked leadership skills, and the mighty movement to which he devoted his life more than once nearly collapsed due to poor planning and decision making.

Zinzendorf was born in 1700 into wealth and nobility. The death of his father and the subsequent remarriage of his mother left him to be reared by his grandmother and aunt, whose warm evangelical Pietism turned his heart toward spiritual matters. His early teaching was reinforced by his formal education. At the age of ten he was sent away to study at Halle, where he sat under the inspiring teaching of the great Lutheran Pietist August Hermann Francke. Here Zinzendorf banded together with other dedicated youths, and out of their association came the “Order of the Grain of Mustard Seed,” a Christian fraternity committed to loving “the whole human family” and to spreading the gospel.

From Halle, Zinzendorf went on to Wittenberg to study law in preparation for a career in state service—the only acceptable vocation for a nobleman. But he was unhappy with his prospects for the future. He longed to enter the Christian ministry—yet to break with family tradition would be unthinkable. The decision weighed heavily on his mind until 1719, when an incident during a tour of Europe changed the course of his life. While visiting an art gallery, he viewed a painting (Domenico Feti’s *Ecce Homo*) that depicted Christ enduring the crown of thorns, with an inscription that read, “All this I did for you, what are you doing for me?”² That experience had a profound impact not only on his future vocation but also on his theological and spiritual formation.

A turning point in Zinzendorf’s call to ministry came in 1722 when some Protestant refugees sought shelter on his estate at Berthelsdorf, later named Herrnhut, meaning “the Lord’s watch.” He invited the refugees to settle on the land, and Herrnhut grew rapidly as word of the count’s generosity spread. Religious refugees continued to arrive, and the estate became a thriving community dotted with newly constructed houses and shops. But with the increasing numbers came problems. The diverse religious backgrounds of the residents created discord, and on more than one occasion the very existence of Herrnhut was in jeopardy.

Then in 1727, five years after the first refugees arrived, the whole atmosphere changed. A period of spiritual renewal was climaxed at a communion service on August 13 with a great revival, which, according to participants, marked the coming of the Holy Spirit to Herrnhut. Whatever may have occurred in the spiritual realm, there is no doubt that this night of revival brought a new passion for missions, which became the chief characteristic of the Moravian movement. There was a heightened sense of unity and dependence on

God. At this time a prayer vigil was initiated that continued around the clock, seven days a week, without interruption for more than a hundred years.

Direct involvement in foreign missions did not come until some years after this spiritual awakening. Zinzendorf was attending the coronation of Danish King Christian VI, and during the festivities he was introduced to two native Greenlanders (converts of Hans Egede) and an African slave from the West Indies. So impressed was he with their pleas for missionaries that he invited the latter to visit Herrnhut, and he himself returned home with a sense of urgency for world evangelism. Within a year the first two Moravian missionaries were commissioned to the Virgin Islands, and in the two decades that followed, the Moravians sent out more missionaries than all Protestants had sent out in the previous two centuries.



Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf.

In 1738, some years after the first missionaries had arrived in the Caribbean, Zinzendorf accompanied three new recruits who were joining their colleagues. But when they reached their destination, they learned that their colleagues had been imprisoned. Zinzendorf quickly took charge, using his prestige and authority as a nobleman to secure their release. During his visit he conducted daily services for the Africans and revamped the organizational structure and territorial assignments for the missionaries. Satisfied that the mission work was on a solid footing, he returned to Europe. Two years later he sailed to the American colonies, where he observed the mission work to the native Indians.

Although Zinzendorf had renounced his life as a nobleman, he was never able to suppress his taste for the good life, and he found it difficult to lower himself to the life of a rank-and-file missionary. He did not conceal his displeasure with living in the wilderness and the drudgery of day-to-day missionary work. He viewed the Native Americans as uncivilized and crude, and he resented their invasion of his privacy. However, his inability to relate to them or even get along with them did not dim his enthusiasm for evangelizing them. Before leaving America he appointed twenty more missionaries to American Indian mission work.

As a missionary statesman, Zinzendorf spent thirty-three years as the over-seer of a worldwide network of missionaries who looked to him for leadership. His methods were simple and practical and ones that endured the test of time. All of his missionaries were laypeople who were trained as evangelists, not as theologians. As self-supporting artisans and laborers, they were expected to work alongside their prospective converts, witnessing

their faith by the spoken word and by their living example—always seeking to identify themselves as equals, not as superiors. Their task was solely evangelism, strictly avoiding any involvement in local political or economic affairs. Their message was the love of Christ—a very simple gospel message—with intentional disregard for doctrinal truths until after conversion; and even then, an emotional mysticism took precedence over theological teaching. Above all else, the Moravian missionaries were single-minded. Their ministry came before anything else. Wives and families were abandoned for the cause of evangelism. Young men were encouraged to remain single, and when marriage was allowed, the spouse was often chosen by lot.

The chief example of single-minded ministry was Zinzendorf himself. His wife and children were frequently left behind as he traveled through Europe and abroad, and his exile for more than a decade from his homeland further complicated his family life. While he was away, his business and legal affairs were handled by his very capable wife, Erdmuth, but she was less adept at keeping their marriage relationship intact. It was no secret that he and Erdmuth had grown cool toward each other and that the last fifteen years of their marriage was a marriage in name only. Nevertheless, her death was a difficult time for Zinzendorf. According to John Weinlick, “the count’s sorrow was aggravated by remorse. He had not been fair to Erdmuth. Cynics to the contrary, he had not been unfaithful to her during their long periods of separation; but he had been extremely thoughtless. He had forgotten that she was a woman, a wife, and a mother.”³

THE MORAVIAN CHURCH AROUND THE WORLD



After a proper year of mourning, Zinzendorf married Anna Nitchmann, a peasant woman who, along with others, had been his traveling companion for many years. The marriage was kept secret for more than a year, partly to avoid a family controversy over his marrying a woman so far beneath his social rank. Anna had a strong ideological influence on Zinzendorf, particularly in the area of mysticism, and this phenomenon led to grave problems for the mission.



Erdmuth Zinzendorf, Count Zinzendorf's wife.

Under the count's leadership, the Moravian church had placed great emphasis on the death of Christ. As a child Zinzendorf had meditated on the death and agony of the Lord, and his call to ministry had been influenced by a painting depicting Christ's agony. As time passed, what once had been an emphasis turned into an obsession, and the whole church seemed to be carried away in a radical form of mysticism. Through his example, the Moravians began denigrating their own worth as they morbidly meditated on the death of Christ. In a circular letter to the churches, Anna (years before she and Zinzendorf were married) had written, "Like a poor little worm, I desire to withdraw myself into his wounds," and Zinzendorf himself spoke of the brethren as "little blood worms in the sea of grace." An "Order of Little Fools" was formed, and he encouraged the members to behave like little children and to think of themselves as "little fish swimming in the bed of blood" or "little bees who suck the wounds of Christ."⁴

This mysticism had a negative impact on missions. The more mystical and introspective the Moravians became in their identification with Christ's physical suffering, the less they focused on world evangelism and the needs of others. Active missionaries were sometimes discredited because they had not yet reached the mystics' high plane of spirituality, and the cause of missions therefore suffered.

This turn of events might have brought a quick demise to the missionary movement, but the count recognized the problem before that occurred. Admitting that the condition of the church had "greatly degenerated" and that he himself had "probably occasioned it," Zinzendorf was able to put that "brief but fearful"⁵ period behind him and to steer his following back on course again.

Other problems were soon to surface, however. By 1750 the Moravian church was deeply in debt due to Zinzendorf's lack of financial management. "Its expansion," writes J. C. S. Mason, "its land purchases, its great buildings and other initiatives—in which the cost of missions was no more than a fraction of a much greater problem—was funded mainly by loans."⁶

In Britain and on the Continent there was an "avalanche of books and pamphlets," the effect of which was "nearly ruinous." The mystical theology of previous years was not forgotten as critics took aim at the now financially strapped movement. "Herrnhutism,"

wrote Henry Rimius, “has debased Christianity by connecting with it the most detestable absurdities, and expresses doctrines which it has grossly corrupted.” Such derision did not fade quickly. “As late as 1808 the evangelical *Christian Observer* reminded readers that Moravians, like the ‘Anabaptists’ in an earlier period, had more recently ‘exhibited a deplorable licentiousness of practice.’”⁷

Despite his flaws and failures and his marred reputation, Zinzendorf left a legacy that continued on long after his death. Indeed, his contribution to missions is perhaps best seen in the lives of the men and women who left behind family and homeland for the cause of world missions.

Christian David and Hans Egede

Apart from Count Zinzendorf, the individual most involved in the founding of the Moravian church was Christian David, who was largely responsible for bringing refugees from all over Europe to Zinzendorf’s estate. David was born in Moravia in 1690 into a Roman Catholic family. As a youth he was a devout Catholic, zealous in his observance of rituals, holidays, and in his adoration of the Virgin Mary. Later he recalled that his heart burned like a stove with religious devotion—a devotion that took the form of evangelical enthusiasm while he was serving as an apprentice and living with his master’s family. But even then his exposure to Christian teachings was limited. He was twenty before he acquired a Bible, a book that he had never before laid eyes on.

In 1717, at the age of twenty-seven, David experienced an evangelical conversion, and soon after that, through the encouragement of his wife, Anna, he became a traveling lay preacher. During his travels he met hundreds of disheartened, persecuted Christians who longed for a refuge where they could worship freely. Against that backdrop David met Zinzendorf in 1722, which led to their joint efforts to establish Herrnhut. During the years that followed, David represented Herrnhut as he traveled around Europe recruiting settlers.

Although he was a carpenter by trade and had been effective in recruiting settlers, Christian David was eager to become involved more directly in evangelism, and in 1733 his opportunity came. Along with two other Moravians, he was commissioned as a missionary to Greenland to revitalize the mission work there. Two years before their departure for Greenland, Zinzendorf had heard a rumor that Lutheran missionary Hans Egede was about to abandon his work there, and it was this erroneous information that prompted Zinzendorf to come to the rescue. He immediately called for volunteers among his Moravian following to fill the gap, and David was chosen to be the leader.

The arrival of Moravian missionaries came as a surprise to Egede. He welcomed them, but almost immediately problems and misunderstandings arose. Both Egede and David were strong willed, and a language barrier further complicated matters. Egede, a native of Norway, had difficulty understanding the German spoken by the Moravian newcomers, and they could not comprehend his Norwegian tongue at all. David and his companions, however, quickly realized that Egede had no intention of forsaking his mission.

Hans Egede and his family had been in Greenland for more than a decade when the Moravians arrived, and despite setbacks, they remained wholly dedicated to the mission. Born in Norway in 1686 (four years before Christian David), Egede grew up in a devout Lutheran family and was deeply influenced by a warm spirit of pietism that had penetrated the Scandinavian countries. He studied for the ministry and then spent a stormy ten years in the pastorate. Conflict with another minister in his diocese over money matters resulted in his being fined more than once by an ecclesiastical court. He charged that he was not receiving enough money to cover even the basic needs of his family, but his manner was considered by the court to be disrespectful of authority.