

Report to the 2014 Provincial Synods of the Moravian Church–Southern and Northern Provinces on the Dialogue with the United Methodist Church

The dialogue between the United Methodist Church and the Moravian Church–Northern and Southern Provinces began in 2013 with its first session held March 1–2 in New York City and continued with a second session held September 23–24 in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. United Methodist members of the dialogue are: Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar (co-chair, New England Conference), Dr. Ulrike Schuler (Theologische Hochschule, Reutlingen), and Dr. Jason Vickers (United Theological Seminary, Dayton, OH; first session only—Dr. Vickers resigned before the second session and his successor will be named shortly). Dr. Glen Alton Messer II of the Office of Christian Unity and Interreligious Relationships of the United Methodist Church serves as staff to the dialogue. Moravian representatives are: Rev. Gary L. Harke (co-chair), the Rev. Dr. M. Lynnette Delbridge, and the Rt. Rev. J. Christian Giesler.

This bilateral dialogue is framed in relation the communions' exploration and deepening of understanding of each other by means of an examination of the meaning of the Christian life. United Methodists and Moravians share points of contact in the 18th century Pietistic revival and missionary movements. Both traditions have historically encouraged their members to pursue modeling their individual and collective lives upon the example of Christ Jesus and his disciples. Theological and ecclesiological questions have been shaped and given substance by this primary concern; and, accordingly, both traditions have tended to take pragmatic approaches to these sorts of questions—leading to innovation in practices and structures that sometimes give concern to Christian traditions that emerged from Constantinian notions of what it is to be church.

The United Methodist–Moravian dialogue offers new opportunities for exploring the meaning and practicality of Christian unity. It may open new avenues for cooperation that may push beyond those that have already been generated in the Faith and Order/Life and Works paradigms of the ecumenical movement of the 20th and early 21st centuries thus far. Indeed, the United Methodist–Moravian dialogue is a potential recovery of a much older ecumenical practice that points towards cooperative concern for the poor, ministries of mercy, and mission that were characteristic during the earliest decades of Methodism and which have continued, especially at the grass roots level, to the present.

The hope of the dialogue is not only to move into a vibrant full communion relationship between United Methodists and Moravians of the Northern and Southern Provinces, but also to open new possibilities for the engagement of traditions that have not felt called to participate in the Post-Edinburgh ecumenism of the past century (e.g., other Pietists, Pentecostals, and Charismatics).

The recent initial meetings of this dialogue proved to be a great success with much promise for the developing relationship in coming years. Members of the dialogue are looking forward to their planned sessions in 2014. The February 27–March 1, 2014 session, scheduled for New York City, will focus on two topics: congregational life and understandings of “full communion” embedded in each communion.

On behalf of the dialogue,
Gary L. Harke, co-chair
November 22, 2013