

State of the Church Address to the Synod of 2018
from the Provincial Elders' Conference
April 19, 2018

Forty-seven years ago the Provincial Synod established the practice of the Provincial Elders' Conference providing a "state of the church" message to delegates. One of the purposes was to "set forth the spiritual and temporal condition of the province." We have decided to do so under the headings of challenge and opportunity.

I.

Challenges. Just over a year ago, as part of the Intersynodal Conference, I presented a statistical report of the province in the areas of membership, attendance, growth and decline, and finances. The challenges identified at that time continue today. We are a smaller province than when we gathered in 2014, with roughly 550 fewer in total membership, 400 fewer in average worship attendance, and about half of our congregations experiencing declines in worship attendance of greater than 5% during the two year period of 2014-2016. About two-thirds of our congregations have average attendance below 100 worshipers. One quarter are under 50.

This trend toward being a smaller church began about 50 years ago, and has continued at a bit faster pace for the past 25 years. This is not unique to the Moravian Church, but is the experience of most Christian denominations, and for some to an even greater degree. The rise of the "nones" – the quarter of the population who report no particular religious affiliation, and of the "dones" – those that were significantly involved in traditional expressions of church, but have departed are socio-cultural trends that have significant impact.

The numerical decline has also impacted congregational as well as provincial financial resources. While three quarters of our congregations are doing "OK" to "well" in the area of financial stewardship, the remainder are still struggling. Congregations are dealing with the repair of aging facilities, rising maintenance costs, and unanticipated capital needs. Some congregations are discovering that their financial capacity no longer will support having a full-time pastor. During this intersynodal period, about one third of our congregations were granted some relief from their assigned Provincial share contribution in at least one year. With the change to an income-based method of calculating these contributions, shrinking church budgets have also meant a smaller provincial budget to support shared ministries. This leads to the challenge of finding ways to do the same things with fewer resources and, in some cases, fewer people.

We have faced a continuing shortage of ordained pastors, primarily driven by expected retirements from the ministry. We have 54 congregations. 41 are served by active ordained pastors. 12 are served by retired or interim pastors. 5 are served by Provincial Acolytes.

Nine years ago, our special Synod adopted by an overwhelming margin a reorganization of provincial boards and agencies. The purpose was "improving communication, polity, unity and community building, and [to] discover how we might better organize ourselves for the service of Christ." (2006 Synod). The PEC was expanded in number, a new Board of Cooperative Ministries was created, Regional Conferences of Churches were formed, and new roles and functions were assigned to every component – from the congregation to the PEC.

A slogan of the time was "Healthy congregations make a healthy province." Growth was an expected characteristic among eight that were identified and emphasized. Living into this new organization, investing energy and commitment to help achieve its purposes, and being on guard not to fall back into old patterns of behavior and thinking have also proven to be a challenge.

Most of what I have said thus far could have been cut and pasted from the 2014 state of the church message, or from those of at least the past 5 synods. We live in a time of challenge. This is not new to us as Moravians. We have faced and moved beyond greater challenges than these in our 561 years. There may be headwinds. We navigate not by them, but by the wind of the Spirit.

II.

And so, we live in a time of opportunity.

I just mentioned the current shortage of pastors. However, since last Synod we have seen 12 individuals approved as candidates for ordination. Four of these are still completing preparation for ordination. Of the remaining eight, six have received calls and are serving congregations. I would invite those present who were ordained since our last Synod to stand: Adam Goodrich, Victoria Lasley, Angelica Regalado, Rusty Rushing, Fran Saylor, and Chaz Snider.

While new pastors are not quite arriving at the replacement rate of those who are retiring, these new pastors and the candidates in preparation, provide our Province a leadership opportunity and genuine excitement for the future, as their gifts and strengths are being deployed to build up and to the body of Christ and to help us engage and strengthen our witness and service.

The Ground of the Unity values ordained ministers, but equally recognizes the priesthood of all believers. "All members may gladly and confidently carry on their work in and for the congregation and by their devotion and faithfulness all can render service to the whole Church." (GOU, Essential Features of the Unity, #104)

The development of lay leadership, in addition to the ordained, is another opportunity that is bearing fruit, especially through the work of the Board of Cooperative Ministries to develop congregational leadership. Dozens have participated in the Moravian Leadership Network, hundreds in the Comenius Learning Series, and annual Leadership Focus workshops. The social media and communications footprint of our province has been greatly enhanced, providing ways for lay members of all ages, but particularly young adults, to engage, learn and grow.

I mentioned financial struggles. One would think that going beyond operating and maintenance to raise funds for things beyond the local congregation would be difficult. However, in response to the mission and work of the Unity Women's' Desk, hearts and hands have opened, and contributions have flowed beyond expectation. And, many congregations have robust support and giving that does not show up in the annual operating budget, but is equally significant in local mission.

As a PEC colleague frequently reminds us: "Resources flow to ministry, not the other way around." The opportunity before us is to trust that, to be about the work of the kingdom, and to look for the ways God will bless and provide.

Another area of unfolding opportunity centers on our Moravian identity. It's there in our Synod theme: "Living the Essentials." Talk of eight characteristics of healthy congregations has given way to a simpler, more easily remembered, and more Moravian framework for understanding and living the Christian life. Rooted in the work of a great leader of the old Unity, Luke of Prague, this framework is showing up in such places as a book, "Moravian Treasures," being developed as a common resource for theological education in the world-wide church, in the new Moravian heritage curriculum, in a new membership preparation resource (Catechism) which hopefully will be completed this year, and in various other resources, including a Proposal submitted to this Synod for consideration.

So, what is this framework of Moravian identity and practice? I have been a Moravian for 39 years. Like many of you, I've had to search for answers to that question we all have faced, "What is a Moravian?" Here is one response:

Moravians experience God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In love, God creates, redeems and blesses us. We respond to God in faith, love and hope. We focus on spiritual growth, community with one another, and service in the name of Christ to a world in need of God's love.

And, there are eight characters to spare if anyone wanted to tweet that message.

We have an opportunity to allow that framework of identity and practice, and our rich heritage to draw us forward into the new life to which our Risen Lord calls. There was a visitor to the March meeting of the Moravian Ministry Association- a believer from Nigeria who is living in the Winston-Salem area. He knows about and may be able to help with plans for a mission radio station in the Sierra Leone Unity Mission area. He said an amazing thing: "You Moravians should start churches everywhere, because what you have to offer is what the world needs."

In our spiritual lives, we have opportunity to grow as disciples more deeply in faith, love and hope. I have been personally and pleasantly surprised over these past years to participate in various groups and meetings in which the conversation eventually turns to a basic conclusion: What we need and are talking about is not some new "program," but something more fundamental. Something out of which everything else in our lives, and all of our activity grows. Something about really following Jesus in our daily lives. Something to do with truly living the essentials.

In our community as brothers and sisters, we have opportunity to be known by the love we have for one another, as the Gospel of John describes. Our Moravian Covenant for Christian Living declares:

We will be eager to maintain the unity of the Church, realizing that God has called us from many and varied backgrounds, we recognize the possibility of disagreements or differences. Often these differences enrich the Church, but sometimes they divide. We consider it to be our responsibility to demonstrate within the congregational life the unity and togetherness created by God who made us one. How well we accomplish this will be a witness to our community as to the validity of our faith. (MCCL, #14)

The 2014 Synod Resolution 12 conversation process, "*Tis a Pleasant Thing to See*," involved an estimated three hundred laity and clergy in small and larger group meetings, and provided a way for us to test this principle in action. As shared in the Report to Synod:

We have learned, as each generation of Christians must, that there is no topic that we cannot discuss in love with one another, as brothers and sisters in Christ. We have proven, through smaller and larger groups, that we can love one another, we can listen and talk honestly, respectfully, humbly and openly, about a difficult topic, and yet remain in relationship. Our work can be a model for future conversations. (Report p. 14)

In a world of increasing polarization, animosity, and conflict, perhaps we Moravians have a special opportunity to bear witness and to be a demonstration project of "the unity and togetherness created by God who made us one."

Also in the area of community, there is opportunity to take a creative look at how we are organized and how our mission and ministries can be more effective. It is encouraging to see church boards, during review meetings with PEC, having conversation and discovering strengths and capacities around a Congregational Vitality Survey with 15 simple questions focused on: relationship with God, with one another, and with others.

Several churches are asking fundamental questions: Who are we as a community of faith? Who are the neighbors God is calling us to serve? What is God calling us to do and to be in this day? And, not only asking, but taking action based on the answers.

As a province, we have opportunity to look again at the way we are organized, particularly the way the various boards function, connect, and interact; and also to discover ways for congregations, regional conferences of churches, and the Board of Cooperative Ministries to work more effectively together as the “engine” of congregational health and vitality.

In mission, we have opportunity to cross boundaries, help others trust and follow Jesus, bear witness to the reality and power of God’s love, and to serve others even as our Lord came to serve. In response to a 2014 Synod Resolution the PEC has developed guidelines for “new and emerging ministries.” This umbrella term includes room, resources and support for congregations to develop new initiatives in mission, outreach and service in their own contexts which will remain connected to and part of their congregational life. This phrase also encompasses provincial opportunities to develop and support “fresh expressions” of church -- what used to be known as “new church development.” These are communities gathered around word and sacrament, with the opportunity for formal membership, and intended to become self-supporting ways of being church in a new day. An example of this is the fresh expression currently being developed by Angelica Regalado.

We Moravians are almost famous for being “both/and” in an “either/or” world. It is important to say that new and emerging ministries are “both/and.” Congregations are not going away. New and emerging ministries will be an opportunity to reinvigorate these vital, inherited expressions of church, especially in their mission outreach to others. And, emerging ministries are, well, emerging -- developing out of existing expressions of church, not in competition, but as a compliment, again with a mission focus to reach others with the Good News.

Whether it is through a congregation or a fresh expression community of faith, you and I have opportunity to claim our heritage and to reengage our calling:

The Lord Jesus Christ calls His Church into being so that it may serve Him on earth until He comes. The Unitas Fratrum is, therefore, aware of its being called in faith to serve humanity by proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It recognizes this call to be the source of its being and the inspiration of its service. (GOU, #1)

III.

Our Synod theme is: “Living the Essentials with Courage for the Future.” As we consider the challenges and opportunities before us, as we live in an era of constant, even relentless change, yes, we will certainly need courage for the future.

A dictionary tells us that this word “courage” comes to us from Middle English (denoting the heart, as the seat of feelings): from the Old French corage, from Latin, cor ‘heart’.

We hear this word in the Gospels: Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven. Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well. Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid. Take heart; get up, he is calling you. (Mt. 9:2, 22; 14:27; Mk 6:50; 10:49)

In John’s gospel, before his death and resurrection, Jesus is trying to explain things to his confused and frightened disciples there in the upper room. He speaks of sending the Spirit, the Advocate, the one who stands close beside, and who will be their guide. Jesus talks about their mourning turning to a complete joy that no one will be able to take away. He describes his departure, his leaving the world to go to the Father. The disciples express their faith. Jesus knows they will struggle. And he says, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33 NIV)