While Moravian contributions to theology, missions, education, and music have received ample attention, one aspect in the life of the eighteenth-century Moravian Church has gone almost unnoticed, even among modern Moravians: the fact that women shared many of the pastoral responsibilities within the church, wrote spiritual autobiographies, received ordination, and even engaged in preaching. The example and role of the Moravian Sisters’ ministry deserves a wider audience, as does the way Zinzendorf and the Moravians dealt with biblical passages prohibiting the preaching of women.

Moravian history

The story of the eighteenth-century Moravian Church begins in 1722 when Protestant exiles came from Moravia to Zinzendorf’s estate in Saxony. These spiritual descendants of the persecuted Unity of Bohemian Brethren subsequently established a small village called Herrnhut—“The Lord’s Watch.” Zinzendorf was a Lutheran pietist who harbored high aspirations for a life fully devoted to Christ. He regarded the appearance of the Moravian settlers as an opportunity to organize a truly Christian community of regenerate souls. In the following years, additional immigrants and other spiritually minded people of varying confessional backgrounds from all over Germany were attracted to this germinating Pietist colony.

A spiritual revival in 1727 unified the residents of Herrnhut as a Gemeine (“congregation” or “fellowship”) determined to pattern itself after the church of the apostolic age. Through a rapid internal and external development, the local community soon evolved into a larger movement, with contacts and establishments throughout Europe and numerous mission stations overseas. A strong sense of the immediacy of Christ inspired the Moravians to sanctify all aspects of life and to cherish their individual and shared religious experiences.

Although the Moravians reinstated parts of the church discipline of the Bohemian Brethren, Zinzendorf did not intend to establish the Moravian Gemeine as a separate church, nor did he regard it as the only true Christian community. Its external organization was merely to serve as the roof under which regenerate Christians from all confessions could join in fellowship and work together for the expansion of Christ’s kingdom. This fellowship, as it was actualized in Herrnhut and then in other Moravian societies and settlements, was seen as a reflection of the life of the true, invisible Church Universal—Christ’s Bride—and as a preparation for her glorious restitution at the time of Christ’s second coming. When Zinzendorf died in 1760, the Moravians counted about two dozen settlements in Europe and North America, centers of an intense religious life and numerous wide-ranging ministries and missions.

The fact that from its beginning the settlement at Herrnhut and the movement that grew out of it strove to form an exemplary Christian community had a significant bearing on the role and status of women. Conventional “worldly” norms and concepts about womanhood were questioned and modified according to the community’s spiritual ethos, which was to some degree egalitarian in character.

At the same time, the situation of Moravian women was also shaped by the steadily evolving needs and experiences within the movement, especially by the emphasis on speaking about one’s spiritual life with others. The conjunction of both aspects—the egalitarian tendency and the importance of communication—resulted in an involvement of women as leaders and speakers that was uniquely Moravian and effectively turned the traditional interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:34—“let the women keep silence in the churches”—on its head.

The equality and particularity of women

A good starting point for the presentation of the scope and form of the Moravian Sisters’ involvement in ministry are Zinzendorf’s remarks about the spiritual status and character of women. What is most significant is that Zinzendorf affirms the equality of men and women with...
Because the old regulation (from the fall) that the female sex can have nothing to do with priestly matters had already been ignored in case of one or another important woman (e.g., the old matron in the temple), but now, since the creator [i.e., Christ] is born by a woman, it is abolished, and [because] now the sisters belong to the class of those whom the Savior has declared to his heavenly father as priests just as much as the men: therefore it is no question that the whole band, the whole company, the whole choir of his maidens and brides, are priestesses, and not only priestesses but also priestly women.

It should be clear that in this context the word priestess should not be understood as the female equivalent of priest (i.e., ordained clergy person), but rather that the word signifies a status of spiritual purity and qualification before God. Still, there can be no doubt that the sisters’ practical involvement in ministry was greatly furthered by such an understanding.

At the same time, Zinzendorf recognizes that the sisters differ from the brothers in some important ways. The sisters are more tender and spiritually receptive than the brothers: “The enjoyment, the feeling, the sense of tasting is a particular privilege of the sisters, that no one may deny them.” They have their particular spiritual gifts and their particular spiritual needs. Accordingly, Zinzendorf argues that the ministry of spiritual care for the sisters should be placed in their own hands. Men should minister to men, and women should minister to women. The same principle in a more sophisticated form applies also to the so-called choir system, which divided the Moravian community into smaller groups, or “choirs,” according to sex, age, and marital status.

**Forms of female ministry**

From very early on, and mostly for reasons of propriety, a strict separation of men and women was practiced at Herrnhut. In this situation, it was only natural that almost all positions of leadership and ministry that developed within the community were filled by both men and women. So there were elders and eldresses, male teachers for boys and female teachers for girls, male and female overseers, helpers, sick-nurses, caretakers of the poor, and so on. Although the names and forms of the various offices changed over time, the underlying principle of a male-female symmetry was retained as the Moravian Church grew and even found its visible expression in the architecture of the settlement congregations, with the parallel design of a “brothers’ side” and a “sisters’ side.”

As the Moravian community grew beyond Herrnhut, the sisters continued to take part in the leadership of the movement. The female choirs were largely administered by the sisters themselves, women were represented on the governing boards of the individual congregations, and they were also involved in the leadership of the whole church. Sisters participated in synods and carried out numerous administrative, diaconical, and even some pastoral responsibilities. A catalogue of 1746 lists 479 sisters holding positions in some kind of church office.

Around the same time, Zinzendorf restituted the ancient Christian rite of ordaining sisters as deaconesses in order to confirm and equip them for their ministry. About 200 women were ordained as deaconesses between 1745 and 1760, and in 1758 Zinzendorf arranged the consecration of 14 sisters as presbyterae or “priestesses.” These offices were not directly equivalent to that of the (male) pastor of the congregation, but they entailed a considerable degree of autonomy and responsibility with regard to the ministry among the sisters, especially in the sisters’ choirs.

In one memorable quote from 1756, Zinzendorf beautifully expresses his view of the sisters’ spiritual competency: “We now do not want to hear anymore from our sisters: ‘You men, you talk with God, and we will do everything you tell us; just put yourselves between God and us, so that we won’t get to close to him.’ Rather they are all there to hear him and his word themselves, and we [the brothers] might well see to it that we so conduct ourselves that the word which he gives to them and our words and actions may always agree.” The sisters and the brothers should be partners in the ministry of the church.

**Zinzendorf on women’s preaching**

Much of the sisters’ ministry consisted apparently of administrative work, spiritual care, and charitable aid in the female choirs. But it also included the leading of devotions in their particular choirs. Accordingly, one of the issues during Zinzendorf’s lifetime was the question of whether and in what way the sisters should be allowed to preach. Mindful of Paul’s command that women should be silent in the congregation (1 Cor. 14:34), Zinzendorf gave a great deal of attention to this matter, and he arrived at some surprising conclusions. A commentary on 1 Corinthians from 1734 explains, with regard to Paul’s injunction: “From this it cannot be inferred that women could not be used in the congregation, for previously that has been explicitly stated in ch. 11, v. 5. The passage here deals only...
with the regular and general teaching when the whole congregation is together. And yet there might occur circumstances in which even in this setting a woman could and had to serve the congregation with her gifts."¹²

A few years later, at the Moravian Synod at Gotha in 1740, Zinzendorf commented positively on the practice of female preaching among the Quakers. When someone pointed out that the Quakers believe "that women may preach, if the Saviour directs them to," Zinzendorf responded:

Oh Yes! If the Saviour commands them, I have nothing against it. The Bible only says that the matrons should not teach, thus the maidens may well do it. To the matrons the teaching is forbidden for the very reason that the men do not become jealous if they are ignorant. The Apostle also adds a reason, namely that the women have not the soundness of the men, even if it would appear so, and that it therefore would be good if they kept silence in the congregation. Yet, he would be in the wrong, if he had forbidden it to all. Peter says: I will pour out my Spirit over all flesh, sons and daughters, manservants and maidservants, and the maidens shall have visions. If the women should not teach, this surely would not have come true.¹³

Similarly, the Manual of Doctrine of 1742 offers the example of Peter’s reference to Joel’s prophecy in Acts 2:17–18 as an instance of “Women’s speaking in publick.”¹⁴

While it is unlikely that the sisters would have spoken or even preached in the assembly of the whole congregation, there is clear evidence for the fact that some sisters sometimes delivered the so-called choir homilies within their own choirs. These homilies were short addresses, usually based on the Moravian watchword of the day, that were directed at the particular circumstances of the choir. Their goal, as characterized by Zinzendorf, was “that there be a communication of the spirits, that one may understand one another and affect one another, that a person may enter into the other’s soul and thus into the view and the emotion of the one who speaks.”¹⁵ Accordingly, Zinzendorf pointed out that it is best when a choir is addressed by one of its own members:

In a living congregation it is required for a sound discourse, which one could call a choir homily, that foremost one would hear some brethren speaking to their choir who speak out of their own experience. This is the reason why I persistently advocated, as long as it was even possible, that in all choirs members of the same kind should hold the choir addresses. This [rule] I have extended so far that in some congregations I have let no one other deliver addresses to the single sisters than some of them themselves. Not so much that this [practice] was proper, but also that the aim was reached and not merely pious talks were given but conversations to the heart and soul of the members which were coming out of an inner experience.¹⁶

That these words were more than mere theory is attested by the survival of several homilies from Anna Nitschmann and other sisters in the Unity Archives at Herrnhut. It appears that in the last decade of his life Zinzendorf made his most radical statements in favor of the sisters’ equal participation in ministry. In a speech in 1756 he argues that the Savior’s own practice of equality between men and women rather than the subordination of women by the apostles forms the model for the Moravians: “They [the apostles] knew what reasons they had for their conduct: they were called out of the Jews. We poor gentiles have the basic plan, that we act precisely like the Saviour, who chose us. After him, we work toward the equality of brothers and sisters.” Zinzendorf notes that Jesus did not continue in the tradition of the Old Testament, where women played only a minor role: “The dear Saviour has intervened in this rule [and] has disclosed himself to a good number of sisters, even more than before to the brothers; yes, he has used them as evangelists to the brothers, particularly after his resurrection.”¹⁷

Another speech, from 1754, emphasizes the equality of the sisters with reference to Galatians 3:28:

The proof is clear enough in Paul’s words: in Christ there is neither male nor female. There, the difference of the sexes as regards the privilege to spiritual things is completely abolished; before him they appear as the same. Because of this principle, the sisters can also teach in the congregation, and it is quite probable that they have taught in the earliest church, since Paul made an order for it and said how they should be dressed in doing so. What Paul said contrariwise to the Corinthians is a special case. He disciplined the Corinthian women . . . and said: Your women shall not teach.¹⁸

Finally, in 1757, Zinzendorf expressed regret that, for reasons of caution, the gift of the sisters’ preaching had not been fully espoused:

It is known that in most of the Christian denominations the phrase mulier tacit in ecclesia [a woman should keep silent in the church] has been applied in the general sense, although it is not even certain that the Apostle has directed it at the female gender. Rather he has said it to one nation: let your women be silent in the congregation. This case may still occur today but cannot bear a consequence on another nation, particularly where they [the women] are much too silent to begin with. . . . In order to avoid strife with others, we have followed the other denominations and have thrown out the baby with the bath-water. The phrase, however, is wrong and against the Holy Scriptures. It has been a disorder that the Motherly Office of the Holy Spirit has been disclosed to the sisters not through a Sister but through me. . . . Since the sisters ceased to speak in the
place where they are supposed to, a jewel has been lost and the female affairs among us do not stand anymore under the blessing as before. It is odd, when the Holy Spirit says: your daughters shall prophesy, that we say: they shall not prophesy.¹⁹

This quotation is perhaps Zinzendorf’s most radical statement on the subject of female preaching, and it illuminates how far Zinzendorf and the Moravians were able to go in their attempt to restore the biblical equality of women within the church. Not Enlightenment theories but a careful listening to the voice of Scripture and to the needs of the church led Zinzendorf and the Moravians to the implementation of women’s ministry to a degree unknown in Protestant Germany at that time. One wonders how this practice might have evolved if Zinzendorf had lived longer. As it was, his death in 1760 cut short any tendencies toward a fully egalitarian structure. While the sisters continued to carry out important ministerial functions in their choirs, the emphasis shifted to the subordination of their work under the leadership and authority of the brothers. Still, the sisters retained a considerable degree of autonomy, and their continuing involvement in schools, in the female choirs, and on the mission fields testifies to the Moravians’ enduring appreciation of the biblical equality of women and men in Christ.

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Endnotes
5. Zinzendorf, Gemeindeleben (1747, reprint in Zinzendorf, Haupt- schriften, vol. 4), part 2, 311. All translations from the German sources are my own.
6. Ibid., part 1, 88–89.
7. Uttendörfer, Zinzendorf und die Frauen, 18.
11. Ibid., 46–47.
13. Uttendörfer, Zinzendorf und die Frauen, 49.
16. Uttendörfer, Zinzendorf und die Frauen, 55.
17. Ibid., 44–45.
18. Ibid., 56–57.