



NIKLAUS VON ZINZENDORF 1700-1760

Imagine that you have a big house, and ample land, when a refugee shows up at your door asking if he might camp out in your backyard. As a Christian, you are moved to compassion and say, "OK." Later, he asks if some of his relatives, who are also homeless, might come to live on your property. These people are also believers, so again, you say "yes," which happens repeatedly, until there are hundreds on your property! In 1722 something very similar to this happened to Count Niklaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, on his estate in East Germany.

Born on May 26, 1700, Niklaus Zinzendorf was raised in Dresden Germany under strong Christian influence. By age twenty, the young nobleman was overcome while observing a painting of Christ crowned with thorns. An inscription below the painting said: "I have done this for you; what have you done for me?" Zinzendorf responded that day, "I have loved him for a long time, but I have never actually done anything for him. From now on I will do whatever he leads me to do." No doubt at that moment he had no idea that within two years he would have his estate swarming with homeless people from Moravia.

The community of refugees rapidly organized into an efficient society, dubbed Herrhut, meaning the Lord's watch. But divisions threatened to undermine them. Zinzendorf organized them into "bands" charging them to regularly meet to discuss their spiritual growth, study Scripture, pray, reprove and encourage each other. On August 13, 1727 they experienced a powerful out-pouring of the Holy Spirit. They organized a twenty-four-hour-a-day prayer chain, seeking what God wanted them to do. Learning of the plight of slaves in the West Indies from a former slave, two young Moravians were moved to go and help. They left Herrhut on August 25, 1732 to sail to St. Thomas. As other lands were studied, many more missionaries were sent. Many died quickly, but were willingly replaced by more volunteers. Within 25 years, more than 200 had gone out as missionaries from this small community.

The influence of the Moravians reached notable missionaries beyond this active community. John Wesley was touched by them and went on to lead the Methodist movement. William Carey is popularly hailed as the "Father of Modern Protestant Missions." However, in his writing, he used the Moravian experience some 60 years before, as his model and referred to their example as his inspiration and precedent for Christian missionary community living.

Zinzendorf visited Moravian communities named Bethlehem and Nazareth in the American colony of Pennsylvania. He pled unsuccessfully for unity among various religious communities there. He personally exemplified this unity by denouncing his nobility and encouraging the equality of noble, slave and Indian believers in all congregations. Zinzendorf was said to be the only European nobleman who went among the Indians, visiting their leaders as equals, little realizing his impact on the world by supporting such a missionary movement in his back yard.