

Moravian Civic and Community Values
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Introduction:

I am very honored to be with you this morning, and I am happy for an opportunity to thank the Rotary Club for a kindness extended to me 25 years ago. The last time I stood before this group, I was awarded a scholarship for college, and I remain grateful for your help in sending me to UNC. I know that you continue to perform acts of benevolence that help make the lives of individuals and our community better. Even if I did not owe an act of gratitude to the Rotary Club, I would have accepted Cedric's invitation to speak anyway, simply because I have never successfully told Cedric "no." I am thankful that Cedric uses his powers of persuasion only for good!

Moravian Distinctiveness

This morning I would like to talk to you about the Moravians. I'm afraid that if you did not grow up in this area, and all that you know about the Moravians comes from the Winston-Salem Journal, then you probably have a distorted picture of who we are. Let me take this opportunity to talk to you as civic leaders about the Moravian Church and how we have understood our role in the civic community.

If you haven't noticed, we're a bit different from other churches. It's not just that we give you a cup of coffee during special worship services or wake people up with trombones before sunrise on Easter. Moravians have some deeply ingrained values that the rest of the world does not always share or appreciate. There is an apocryphal story about a Moravian farmer in Wachovia who was having difficulty with his mule. The mule was being mulish and would not

pull the plow. In desperation the Moravian said to it, “Brother mule: I cannot curse you. I cannot beat you. I cannot kill you. But I can sell you to a Methodist who can do all these things!” My apologies to the Methodists here this morning.

History

The Moravian Church is one of the oldest churches in the world. Fifty years before Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to a door in Wittenberg, our ancestors formed a Unity of the Brethren. We trace our roots back to John Hus who was burned at the stake for speaking out against the corruption and abuse of the church and state of his day. Sometimes a tourist in Old Salem will stop me and ask where we burned the witches. I point north and say “about a thousand miles north, in Salem, Massachusetts.” Then I tell them that one of the things that made the Moravians different from other churches is that we never killed those suspected of heresy or other crimes. To the contrary, many of our Moravian ancestors were killed because of their faith.

In general, Moravians have avoided violence and we do not like to get involved in political or religious fights. Because of this, Moravians have been the objects of persecution for centuries. John Railey of the *Journal* once asked me if the theological tiff in the Moravian Church today threatens the church’s existence. I explained to him that it would take more than bad publicity to destroy the Moravian Church. There have been times when Moravians worshiped in caves and cellars because of persecution.

An old Moravian hymn says, “Blessed be the time when I must roam far from my country, friends, and home” because so many Moravians were driven into exile by intolerant religious foes. Moravians have died on the mission field in some of the most hostile areas of the world: Labrador, Greenland, the Mosquito Coast, South Africa, and so on. It will take more than

a few inflammatory remarks in the press or disgruntled preachers to destroy the Moravian Church. Our faith is strong.

Conservatism

I am not pointing to the courage and faith of my Moravian ancestors in order to claim that Moravians are more saintly than other people. In fact, we have many flaws, as some of you know. We have our struggles and divisions, but for the most part we try to be a community of faith that holds to what is good, right, and true. I can honestly say that Moravians are basically conservative. By that I don't mean conservative the way some American politicians and preachers have twisted the meaning of that word. I'm talking about true conservatism: preserving what is good and right and true. Moravians tend to rely on trusted tradition rather than embracing the latest fads. We like to build stable institutions rather than innovative laboratories. Quite frankly, this conservatism is sometimes a detriment, but it is part of who we are.

When the Moravians settled this area, they named it in Wachovia in honor of the ancestral home of Count Zinzendorf. They arrived with years of experience in building communities that were stable and effective. Next time you walk through Old Salem, take a moment to contemplate the fact that the Moravian settlers intended those buildings in the wilderness to last for generations. Like the nursery tale; they built with brick. Like the wise builder in Jesus' parable; they built on rock. They knew the value of preserving what is good; of planning ahead; and organizing their lives together. Indeed, we can be too conservative and stable. How many Moravians does it take to change a light-bulb? Change? My apologies to the Moravians in the room!

Change

That's not really a fair joke, I know. Moravians have, of course, changed and adapted through the centuries. It took us a hundred years, but eventually we learned to speak English in North Carolina and even started singing Methodist hymns. We no longer have a communal economy or look to the church to help us arrange marriages. Though we share many religious convictions and history with groups like the Amish, Moravians have always recognized the value of modern technology and innovation. Moravians did not fear progress so long as it was not chaotic or abusive. In fact, we can be called one of the most progressive churches in history.

Our communities were among the most advanced in colonial America, and people like Benjamin Franklin and George Washington held the Moravian communities up as models for the rest of the new nation. Moravians knew how to provide running water in homes long before the rest of the country, and our products were valued for many miles. We understand clearly that business ethics and a work ethic are part of our Christian witness. We also made sure that widows, children, and the impaired were taken care of. Moravian efficiency provided health care and employment for everyone in the community. These are values Moravians seek to preserve.

Values:

The Moravians changed as the world changed, but through all the changes we can still perceive a number of core Moravian values. These values continue to influence who we are and how we relate to society. Many of our deepest values are shared by most Christians, Jews and Muslims. Like many other communities of faith, we try to live by the principle that it is always better to do the right thing rather than the easy thing. Sometimes this has been painful and forced us into exile.

Like all of the children of Abraham, we believe in the one God who created the heavens and the earth and who calls all people to be stewards of the earth. For Moravians this means that

we make every effort to clean up any messes we make in order to leave the next generation with a wholesome world. We have always taken care to make the ground fruitful rather than destroying it, and our gardens have been famous. Most Moravians are confused by people who profess a love for God while destroying God's good creation. We also share the common vision of the children of Abraham that one day swords will be beaten into plowshares and God's people will no longer learn to wage war. We believe in the Bible's teaching that all people are created in the image of God and should be treated as images of God.

We believe that God calls people to live by certain basic laws and to respect the rights of all people. To do this, Moravians believe that we should educate children to be people of good character. The famous Moravian bishop and educator, John Amos Comenius, taught that educating children without concern for developing their characters was like sharpening the knife of a madman. We try to teach integrity, honesty, self-control, peacefulness, and decency to our children. These have been cardinal virtues for Moravians for generations. In fact, we are one of the few churches that incorporates fundamental ethical principles in our statements of belief. We stress the need for people to be honest and fair in their business dealings; diligent and incorruptible in their public service; and faithful and true in their friendships. We strive to conserve these values.

As Christians, Moravians believe that Jesus Christ died not only for our sins but for the sins of the world, and we take that message of hope to others. We believe that the good news of Jesus Christ is a message of forgiveness and reconciliation rather than judgment and rejection of others. We believe that the best way to show our love for our Savior is by following Christ's own commandments to love our brothers and sisters, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and even to love our enemies. We also believe in the Holy Spirit who comforts, guides, and nourishes us. We

believe that the Holy Spirit brings joy, peace, and community. These are the spiritual gifts we pray for. These are our distinctly *Christian* convictions.

Community:

Beyond these beliefs and values that we hold in common with others, Moravians for five hundred years have stressed the importance of community. Our church began with a group of young men and women who formed a separate community in the wilderness of Moravia in Central Europe. They dedicated themselves to living as closely as possible to the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. They did not “parade their piety before men,” but instead supported and challenged one another. They tried to put into practice Paul’s instruction “to bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Despite often intense persecution, these brothers and sisters remained committed to their Unity.

When our church was reborn from the ashes of the horrifying period of religious violence called the Thirty Years War, it was again the idea of community that distinguished the Moravians. They tried to live as brothers and sisters who put aside theological controversies and cared for each other. Many people associate the Moravians with the lovefeast service. How many of you have participated in a Moravian lovefeast? It is a simple religious festival which is nothing more than eating together in a spirit of love and worship. The lovefeast is a way to nourish one another in spirit and body as a community of faith.

We try to take that same spirit of reconciliation and gentleness into the world. It is not uncommon for Moravians to have friends in Africa, the Caribbean, and Europe because of our worldwide Unity. Today, there are far more dark-skinned Moravians than light-skinned Moravians. I am a minority in the Moravian Church. Whether African or European, Caribbean or American, we still call each other brother and sister and open our homes and hearts to one

another. Even during two World Wars when we fought in opposing armies, we prayed for each other and for peace.

Difficulties in American Society

This Moravian emphasis on community is central to our identity. If you stroll through God's Acre in Salem you will see that Moravians are buried communally rather than in families. You'll also see that there are no monuments for wealthy or powerful Moravians. We enter and leave this life as equals.

One of the difficulties that Moravians face today is that so many of our core values, such as a focus on community, run counter to the dominant values of modern American society. It took the people in Salem decades to come to grips with the free enterprise system in business, for instance. The founders of Salem knew how to make a profit, but they resisted the impulse to harm a competitor. Business was as much a matter of the common good as it was for individual profit.

Moravians for centuries have stressed cooperation rather than competition. One reason the Moravian Church is so small in America is that we have never fully come to terms with the American free enterprise approach to religion where churches compete for members. We find it confusing that people try to convert us to their church when we have made it clear that we are Christians trying faithfully to follow the way of Christ. It is rare that a Moravian tries to convince a member of another church to abandon their community of faith and join ours. That is not our way.

You are familiar with the American myth of the lone ranger, the cowboy hero with nothing to tie him down. We talk about rugged individualism and pulling oneself up by ones bootstraps. Such ideas have always sounded a little strange to Moravians. We believe that we are

most free when we are secure in a community that loves us and cares for us. It has been hard for some individuals, especially some preachers, to control their egos and learn to live within the Moravian community and follow the rules we have agreed to, but that is our way. Unlike other Protestant churches, Moravian congregations are not independent. Each is part of the world-wide Unity of the Moravian Church, and our ministers form a fellowship of brothers and sisters working toward a common goal.

Community does not mean that individuality is suppressed. Moravians understand the sentiment in the theme song from the TV show *Cheer's*: “sometimes you want to go where everyone knows your name.” For over two centuries, we have read the life-story of each person to the community at time of death. These memoirs are stored in our archives building so future generations can read about the life and faith of each individual in the Moravian Church.

Everyone in the Moravian Church has a name.

The Moravians have also understood that the premise of the TV show *Survivor* is wrong. We do not survive by voting people off the island. We survive by caring deeply about the survival of each one of us. We survive by helping one another live with dignity, making sure that each has food and clothing and shelter. We survive by coming together to plant crops for the next year's harvest, trusting in the goodness of God. We survive by leaving a fruitful and wholesome land for our children to raise up a new generation.

Politics

We are in a political season and I will not tell you how to vote, but I will tell you that the Moravians had a bit of difficulty coming to terms with democracy. In the early years following the Revolution, the Moravian elders carefully examined each candidate and generally chose those who shared their commitment to stability, justice, and good sense. Then the elders

informed the people who they should vote for! Gradually Moravians adapted to the new democratic approach to government. We are one of the few churches to make it a point of doctrine that we will pay our taxes, obey the laws of the land, vote responsibly, and participate in all levels of government.

Unlike many churches, Moravians have never looked to government to promote our church or even Christianity. You probably don't know this, but the Moravians were the first church to insist on a strict separation of church and state. Moravians do not look to government to promote faith. We expect governments to do those things outlined in the preamble to the American constitution: "To establish Justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty." I can't speak for all Moravians as individuals, but for most Moravians, government is merely a means to promote for the general welfare and to establish a stable and peaceful civic life.

Promoting Goodness

Indeed, Moravians have tended to be rather conservative in politics, economics, and church life. We try to preserve what is good. We have also quietly, persistently, and faithfully promoted the common good. This concern for the common good beyond the Moravian Church has made us progressive as well as conservative. It is important to remember that a time when the US Constitution declared that people of African descent did not have human and civil rights, Moravians in North Carolina were sharing the kiss of peace with black brothers and sisters. At a time when the US government ruled that native peoples could not be citizens and would have to relocate to reservations, Moravians were educating Cherokee sisters right here in Forsyth County.

At a time when it was illegal in many places in the US for women to speak publicly, Moravians allowed women to sit on their governing boards and hold important offices in the community. During many times of conflict and hatred in our country, Moravians raised a voice for peace and reminded the world of our shared humanity. And we have always shared our own food, money, and clothing with the poor. You will see Moravians today actively involved in organizations like this one seeking ways to do good in the world. True conservatives, we are builders, not destroyers.

Conclusion:

Community, tradition, stability, justice, and mercy. These are some of the traditional values that the Moravian Church tries to preserve and promote. We know that we are an unusual people and that we are often misunderstood, but we have borne witness to these values through the centuries. Our ancestors held to such values even during times of persecution when they were forced to live as exiles in the world. In establishing Wachovia, the Moravians tried to build a small, imperfect model of the kingdom of God on earth.

It may not seem to others that the Moravians have thrived in the competitive American environment, but we have thrived by our standards. We have remained faithful through the years and created small enclaves of heaven in an often hostile world. I like to think that we have had a lasting and positive impact on life in Forsyth County. If you find that this area of the country feels a little different, a little more wholesome, a little more peaceful, a little more beautiful, a little more tolerant, think of the Moravians. And you are all welcome to join us in worship and lovefeast any time.