

Female Piety Among Eighteenth Century Moravians

Beverly Prior Smaby
Clarion University

On May 4, 1730, a precocious young Moravian named Anna Nitschmann led seventeen other Moravian single women into a covenant with Christ. They bound themselves to him and vowed to live only for him as "their blood Bridgroom." This event in early Moravian history represented the beginning of a remarkable example of female piety that spread from Herrnhut, a small village in southeastern Germany, to Moravian settlements around the world.

The Moravians were Pietists whose Protestant history in Moravia and Bohemia pre-dated the Luther Reformation by more than fifty years. After Catholics gained control of that region during the Thirty Years War, the Moravians were driven underground until 1722, when Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf offered them refuge on his estate in eastern Germany. Nitschmann, her parents, and her siblings were among the first to accept his offer and to escape at great peril from Moravia into southeastern Germany. Under Zinzendorf's leadership, the Nitschmanns and other Moravian refugees renewed their church in a swell of religious rebirth, establishing many settlements in Western Europe, in Greenland, and in North and South America. Their evangelical program drew hundreds of converts, young and old, male and female.

During the three decades following her 1730 covenant with Christ, Nitschmann became the revered model for Moravian women and served as their highest leader. Building on her example, Moravians developed a special piety for women that was unique among eighteenth-century religious groups in Europe and America. In some respects, Moravian female piety paralleled female pieties of other Protestant Churches. Moravians subscribed for a time to the notion that *all* believers must practice a feminine subjection to a masculine Christ, just as the Puritans had. And like the Quakers and early Baptists, they gave considerable spiritual and supervisory responsibility to women.¹ But in other respects, Moravian female piety went well beyond the Puritans, Quakers, and Baptists. Moravians emphasized feminine themes especially appropriate to women, and they developed a religious practice separate and distinct from the practice of men.

At its greatest maturity during the 1740s and 1750s, female piety among Moravians included the appointment of women to religious governing boards, worship services for women often led by women, and themes that featured Christ as husband, Mary as the medium through which Christ became human, and the Holy Spirit as Mother. During this period, Moravians ordained women as Acolytes, Deaconesses, Eldresses, and, for a brief moment, even *Priesterinnen*

(female Presbyters or ministers). The only religious ordination never officially bestowed upon a Moravian woman was that of Bishop. Finally, religious practice elevated Anna Nitschmann to an object of religious inspiration, if not devotion.

With Nitschmann as their guide, Moravian Single Sisters actively embraced female piety. But this proved to be possible only while Zinzendorf remained the leader of the renewed Moravian Church. As became clear after both Zinzendorf and Nitschmann died in 1760, other major Moravian leaders had had doubts about the use of female themes in Christian theology and about significant religious roles for women, even while Zinzendorf was implementing them. Surprisingly, these doubters included August Gottlieb Spangenberg, one of Zinzendorf's closest advisors and most ardent apologists. At times, Zinzendorf himself shared such doubts, and he often expressed concern about the possible effects of his innovations.

Moravian female piety was rooted in the faith espoused by all Moravians, regardless of gender or age. Among Moravians, life's most important goal was an intense, personal relationship with Christ. Christ had bridged the chasm between a perfect God and deeply flawed human beings by becoming human and suffering agonies to give humans the possibility of eternal life. Moravians felt that Christian believers owed Christ a life of thanksgiving for his willingness to sacrifice himself to save them. For this reason they set their focus on Christ's blood and wounds. Especially the Sidehole became a symbol of his sacrifice, a place of refuge, and a source of nurture.

To encourage the religious growth of individuals, each Moravian was assigned to a "Choir," a group of people who shared age, gender, and marital status. Each Choir practiced its particular form of Moravian piety, focusing on the aspects of Christianity deemed most suited to its members. In the Choir context, Moravians developed a distinctive piety for women, one designed to reflect female experience. The seeds of Moravian female piety lay in the childhood household of Zinzendorf. This large baronial household was skillfully run by his remarkable grandmother, Henrietta von Gersdorf, an unusually talented, strong-willed, well-educated, and deeply religious human being. She carried on an extensive and lifelong correspondence with religious, intellectual, and political leaders in Europe. She wrote good poetry in German and Latin, and she read the Bible in "its original languages." She painted in oil and played music. Upon her husband's death, she became the head of her large household, when Zinzendorf was just two years old. She proved a skilled administrator and a model of religious guidance. Everyone on the estate—family member, servant, and worker—was required to attend the family devotional services she led each morning and evening. Because of her, the household was alive with "energy, spirit, intellect, and a sense of truth." Another extraordinary woman, Zinzendorf's unmarried young aunt, became his confidant and close spiritual guide as he grew up.² Zinzendorf credited these two women with shaping him into a committed Christian believer.

As he began to establish Moravian communities around the world, the examples of his inspiring grandmother and his concerned aunt influenced him to define roles for women that often exceeded those accepted by most eighteenth century Europeans. However, one must be careful not to interpret Zinzendorf as a modern-day feminist. His understanding of the roles of men and women remained characteristic of the eighteenth century in many ways. Zinzendorf was not an egalitarian—in his view, human beings were not equal to each other except before the Savior. In the Moravian world that he constructed, an elite ruling class maintained its authority over rank and file members, and men continued to govern women. However, the encouragement Zinzendorf gave to untraditional female roles and to a special female piety was enough to cause discomfort inside the Church and bitter criticism outside of it.

Moravian female piety was strongest during the 1750s, the decade before Zinzendorf's death. The surviving records which best reflect this period are those kept by the Single Sisters Choir in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.³ It would be a mistake, however, to study eighteenth century Moravians in Bethlehem as if they were isolated from the authorities in Europe. Policy was set by Zinzendorf and his inner circle in Europe, who saw to it that trans-Atlantic ties remained strong. For these reasons, an account of the practice of female piety must be drawn from the Bethlehem records, but discussions of policy need to center on Moravian headquarters in Europe. To Moravians of the mid-eighteenth century, such moving back and forth from America to Europe would have seemed quite natural, since at that time they formed one remarkably seamless community.

Indications of female piety are especially strong in descriptions of the yearly Choir Festival on May 4—the anniversary of Anna Nitschmann's 1730 covenant. By the late 1750s, this event had become the climax of the Single Sisters' religious year. A preparatory celebration held on May 3 included a review of the past year, a ceremony of absolution, and a spiritual cleansing through a footwashing ceremony.⁴ On May 4 itself, the Sisters were awakened by the sounds of citterns and hymns. The rest of the day was filled to the brim with ceremonies, including a general Morning Benediction, a Choir Morning Benediction, a Choir Homily, a Choir Liturgy, a special mid-day Choir meal, a Choir Lovefeast, and a Choir Communion. During the day, the Sisters remembered Nitschmann's original covenant, renewed it for themselves, and initiated new members into the Choir.

The themes and symbols of these celebrations reflected a deeply developed female piety among Moravian Single Sisters. In diary entries during the 1750s, Single Sisters described their covenant in terms of marriage with Christ. He was a "blood bridegroom" and an "eternal husband." They were "chosen maids of the Lamb," "maidens, very much in love," and "brides in his sidewound."

They possessed “completely faithful hearts” and “burning hearts towards their blood bridegroom.” “Held in a conjugal embrace by their husband,” they sensed His “intimate closeness,” and felt His “embracing” and “kissing.”⁵

The Biblical text often associated with their sisters’ special covenant was the parable of ten virgins who “took their lamps and went forth to meet the bridegroom.”⁶ In a song composed for the 1758 celebration, the Single Sisters were urged to be like the five wise virgins who were prepared: “Keep your lamps filled with oil and ready, expect him any moment, go towards him, and meet him. He is coming!”⁷

Another frequent theme in the Sisters’ Choir Festivals was the characterization of the Holy Spirit as Mother. According to Zinzendorf, the two functions of the Holy Spirit were to patiently help believers accept Christian truths and then to help them turn these truths into a Christian life. The motherly qualities of the Holy Spirit were especially clear in the second of these functions, one of teaching or socializing.⁸ In the song quoted above, it was the “little Mother” who carried the message that the “Bridegroom is near”, and admonished the Sisters to “be prepared.” It was the “Mother’s hand” which bestowed on them the “bridal finery.” In the May 3 ceremony for 1759, the Sisters prayed for “absolution for everything in which we haven’t . . . been attentive enough to the voice of the dear Mother.”

A third feminine theme was identity with the Virgin Mary. For the Choir Festival in 1760, Nitschmann was depicted in a painting with “the corpse of the Savior on her lap” and with Zinzendorf “standing close by.” The painting obviously recalled both the Pietá and manger scenes.

Theoretically, feminine themes were meant to apply to the whole Moravian community, not to women alone. Christ was the Bridegroom of the entire Church, including men, and the Holy Spirit was Mother to men as well as women. In a song prepared for the Single Sisters Choir Festival and sung for them by the presiding male priest, Christ is addressed as “Bridegroom of the loving Church [Gemeine], we are expecting you.” When the death of Zinzendorf’s charismatic son Christel was announced to the Single Brothers in Bethlehem, it was characterized as his “going home into the arms and bosom of his beloved bloody Bridegroom.”⁹ Single Brothers were reminded in 1754 that they were brides of Christ and that their transgressions distressed “the dear Mother the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰

But these themes were never stressed for men to the marked degree that they were for women. Instead, in keeping with the intent behind the Choir organization of the community, Single Brothers were urged to model themselves on Jesus, who was a single man like themselves. For example, a song composed for the Bethlehem Single Brothers 1752 Choir Festival asks Jesus to “impress yourself so [deeply] into each [brother’s] heart and limbs that the world will say of each of our Brothers when he goes out into the field, ‘that is the way

Jesus looked.”¹¹ There is little doubt that the entries in the Single Brothers’ Diary were written for men and not for women.

There is also little doubt that the Single Sisters found joy in their female world. The elaborate decorations for the Single Sisters Choir Festival underscored the importance that Single Sisters placed on this anniversary of their special covenant with Christ. No other holy day during the year warranted the same treatment. In 1758, for instance, the Choir hall was adorned with greens. Trees stood in each of the four corners of the hall. Hanging on the walls were biblical texts in large elegant hand-painted letters that were surrounded by openwork embroidery, greens, flowers, and red Choir ribbons. Portraits of Nitschmann and Anna Johanna Pietsch, the head of all Single Sisters Choirs, were prominently displayed on one wall. On another wall was a painting of the Savior “as a corpse.”¹²

This scene was filled with objects that were either products or symbols of their female world. The texts were ones that spoke to their femininity, especially the familiar admonition to ready their lamps for the approaching bridegroom. The intricate embroidery was the work of skilled female fingers. Choir ribbons reflected their status as Single Sisters. Among Moravians, each female Choir tied their caps and bound their bodices with ribbons of a color which distinguished it from all others. Single Sisters wore red at this time. The portraits of Nitschmann and Pietsch were displayed with as much prominence as that of Christ’s body, indicating the reverence in which they were held.

Anna Nitschmann’s high status came from her significant roles in the history of the Moravian Church. In 1730 at the age of 14 (!), she was named Eldress of all women in the Moravian Church because of her unusually cogent and precocious religious insights. As the inspiration for the Single Sisters’ covenant, she was considered the founder of the Single Sisters Choir. By 1740, Zinzendorf was conferring with her on every matter concerning the women of the Church and on many general Church matters as well. In 1746, she became the “Mother of all [Moravian] Congregations.” Clearly Nitschmann was revered as a primary force in the entire Church.¹³

Local female leaders played meaningful religious roles in the everyday devotional life of Single Sisters Choirs in the separate settlements. Women were regularly admitted to the ranks of Acolyte, Deaconess, and Eldress. A total of twenty-seven women were ordained as *Priesterinnen* (female Presbyters or ministers), thirteen by 1746 and fourteen in 1758.¹⁴

Acolytes had the responsibility for spiritual and behavioral guidance on a daily basis. Some acted as room overseers in charge of the six to ten Older Girls or Single Sisters who shared each room in the Single Sisters House. Others were caretakers of toddlers and young children, and teachers of Older Girls. In the years of most intense female piety, perhaps twenty percent of Single Sisters were Acolytes.¹⁵

A Single Sister Deaconess generally served as *Pflegerin* (or head spiritual Worker) of the Single Sisters Choir in one of the Moravian communities. The *Pflegerin* was responsible for the spiritual well-being of the Choir members. She counseled the Single Sisters under her care, served on local governing boards, participated in synods, and reported regularly to Anna Nitschmann.

The devotional duties of a Deaconess as Choir *Pflegerin* are well reflected in the accounts of Choir Festival celebrations.¹⁶ She conducted the interviews called *Sprechen* to decide which communicants were spiritually prepared for Communion. She led the absolution and footwashing ceremonies. On the morning of the Festival, she woke the Sisters with her cittern and hymn music. Later she led the Choir's Morning Benediction service. In this service, she gave a short sermon on the original Covenant,¹⁷ prayed for a renewal of the Covenant, and blessed the Sisters with the laying on of hands. At the end of the day, she helped to administer the most special Communion of the Single Sisters' devotional year.

To some extent, a Deaconess's duties were like those of a minister, but there were major distinctions. A Deaconess did not lead Choir liturgies, homilies, lovefeasts, or services for both men and women. She only helped administer Communion, she did not consecrate for it. These activities were reserved for male Deacons or male Presbyters.¹⁸

Eldresses had duties that transcended any particular Moravian community. They monitored women's Choirs around the world through personal visits and regular correspondence, and they ordained Deaconesses. Nitschmann, who was Eldress of all women in the Church, ordained women to the priesthood jointly with Zinzendorf. Significantly, she did not help ordain men.

The roles that female Presbyters or *Priesterinnen* played, are difficult to determine. Part of the reason for this is the ambivalence that surrounded their ordination. Zinzendorf's 1758 announcement of the ordination of three *Priesterinnen* in Herrnhut strongly defended women's "right to the priesthood," arguing that they already held offices which "required" the priesthood. However, in the same breath, he gave assurances that communities which did not approve of *Priesterinnen* would not be forced to have them. The entire passage reads as follows:

Brothers and Sisters, we have today a new phenomenon after 12 years [without it], even though it is not new in God's church or in our hearts. We tried it first with 2 Sisters, then with 11 (of whom you will eventually get more news on a Congregation Day [*Gemeintag*]), all of whom, however, occupy such important callings, that a public conferring of this honor would not be appropriate. Now after 12 years, we begin again to confer this office

as a rank among the Sisters, [and to do it] publicly in front of the Church.

The Sisters, after all, also have a right to the priesthood; they have among themselves and in their capacity, the [same] first 3 ranks of Church offices as the Brothers do. The rank of Elder in the Church is an honor which comes with the years; the priesthood, however, is motivated by a certain requirement of [religious] office. It is of course understood that no person will receive this honor for whom it would not be suitable in that person's society. The 3 Sisters, Elisab. Leyriz, my daughter Mariegen, and Lenel Vierorth, will now partake of this rank in our church with the blessing of the Sisterhood, especially with that of all its spiritual leaders [Juengerinnen] up until now, and will undoubtedly be better consecrated through the blessing hand of our dearest Mother [Nitschmann] than through our own. The congregation then sang [a hymn]. With that the 3 Sisters knelt on the above-mentioned steps and received their ordination through the laying on of hands of the Disciple [Zinzendorf] and the Disciple [Nitschmann] with the following spoken words: "An earnest priest's heart, mother's sorrow, virgin's thoughts, diligence, simplicity, steadfastness like iron, and humble beginning; the sum of all his salvation, may it in this hour become yours!"¹⁹

Despite Zinzendorf's strong statement that "the Sisters . . . have a right to the Priesthood," he himself showed considerable hesitancy about asking Moravians to accept and implement that right. In this 1758 announcement, he revealed publicly for the first time thirteen ordinations of females to the priesthood which had taken place twelve years previously. Even then, he did not give their names on the grounds that they "occup[ied] such important callings." One would think that these important callings were the very religious offices that "required" the priesthood, as Zinzendorf said two sentences later. It would seem that a public announcement was not only acceptable but necessary.

But behind these obvious hesitations there was yet another. On the very day of this public ordination of three women, Zinzendorf had already privately ordained eight other women to the priesthood. These were apparently never acknowledged publicly, nor were those of three *Priesterinnen* which took place a month later. The words used to describe the ordination of male presbyters during this same ceremony reveal not a shred of this sort of hesitancy and secrecy. Instead of a long and defensive introduction, there is a short, forthright announcement that "From God's grace . . . the priesthood shall fall to the following venerable Deacons."²⁰ Ordaining men as priests was business as usual.

Since the names of the thirteen women ordained in 1746, are unknown, it is impossible to determine the roles of these *Priesterinnen*.²¹ We do know the names of the fourteen women ordained in 1758, but without exception their work was focused in Europe, and the surviving records on European Moravian Congregations do not cover women's work as extensively as Bethlehem records do.²² The biographies of these women do not even mention that they had been ordained as Presbyters.

Why would Zinzendorf defend women's right to the priesthood so forcefully and yet hesitate to make the Moravian practice public? And if he felt the need for secrecy, why would he ordain three women publicly? Clues lie in Zinzendorf's 1757 sermon on women's roles.²³ He argued, on the one hand, against the prevailing interpretation of Paul's much-quoted letter to the Corinthians:

It is well known that in most Christian religions the sentence, "May the women keep silent in the Church" is generalized, although it isn't even clear that the Apostle said it about the feminine gender. Rather he said it only to one nation: Let *your* women keep silent in the church [Zinzendorf's emphasis]. [The usual interpretation of] the sentence is . . . false and against the Holy Scripture.

But Zinzendorf continued with an acknowledgment that, in contrast to the Quakers, Moravians had placed limits on women's right to speak:

We have followed the other religions and have thrown the baby out with the bathwater, so that we could rid ourselves of the constant quarreling with others [non-Moravians].²⁴

This passage suggests that earlier Moravian women had assumed more public roles²⁵ and that Moravians had limited their roles *only* in reaction to the resulting criticism.

In this same sermon, Zinzendorf expressed regret that the limitation on women's roles in the ministry had had unintended results:

Since [then], the Sisters no longer speak in the place where they should speak[.] [As a result,] a jewel has been lost and the carriage of the women amongst us no longer [has] the blessing that it had before this.

But in good eighteenth-century fashion, Zinzendorf strongly believed in the need for social order based on hierarchy and authority. Already by the 1740s he had begun to worry that the practice in some Moravian settlements of

raising children communally was creating “harmful equality”—“only officers and no common soldiers.”²⁶ During the same period, he stated that “the male must direct the [Moravian] Church, and according to God’s plan, the female Choirs must stand under him. For if the Sisters had sovereignty, then there would be a confusion in the Church.”²⁷

Zinzendorf justified his requirement that men govern women with examples from the Old Testament. Not only were “women” (not just Eve!) weak enough to be deceived by a snake,²⁸ but “the greatest holy women” of the Old Testament belonged in his view to “the genus of Holy snakes.” Rebekah, Rachel, Judith, Deborah, and Esther—all these women, he argued—got their way with men through snake-like deceit.²⁹ Furthermore, women’s “snake-like ways” were their particular “expression of original sin.”³⁰ Because women were inherently untrustworthy, Zinzendorf concluded, God intended that men must govern them.

Zinzendorf did criticize the effects of women’s subordination to men, but in a way that underscored the need for hierarchy:

It can’t be helped that the Brothers in the Church have to take upon themselves [the oversight of] the Sisters, [but] it . . . has the effect that the Sisters aren’t subordinate enough to each other. . . . Whenever the Bands [sub-groupings of the Choirs] meet, the Sisters take care that they don’t have the appearance of being placed above the others.³¹

Zinzendorf lamented that in deferring to men, women had lost the will to ask for deference among themselves. So his objection to the subordination of women was not that it caused inequality between genders, but that it created too much equality among women.

On the other hand, Zinzendorf also argued that Christ had introduced a revolutionary, positive conception of women which was designed to encourage equality among men and women. Christ’s special gift to women was to “make good again . . . the harm one woman brought into the world by [his] being born and made human through another woman” thereby restoring women to respectability.³² Zinzendorf interpreted this gift, first of all, as self-respect. Women who had had to share the disgrace of Eve’s disservice could now share the honor of Mary’s service and rejoice in their womanhood. In Mary, women also had an example of their special feminine potential as followers of Christ: like Mary, they, too, could become “warmhearted,” “childlike,” “loving,” and “loyal.” But according to Zinzendorf, the Gospel message went further. By giving important Gospel roles to women like Mary, Mary Magdalene, and the two sisters at Bethany (Mary and Martha), Christ demonstrated loving respect for women and demanded that others show the same. Zenzendorf also believed

that Christ considered women more capable than men of attaining these generally desirable traits of warmheartedness, childlike simplicity, love, and loyalty. Believing women should therefore serve as good examples to men.³³

Interestingly, Zinzendorf noted that Christ's efforts to encourage respect for women failed to overcome "ingrained prejudice" among the Apostles, most notably Peter and Paul. These men "seemed to support the principles of the Old Testament which held the sisters back and didn't let them come too far forward."³⁴ But Zinzendorf argued that Christians must "act exactly like the Savior . . . Mimicking him, one must strive for equality of Brothers and Sisters."³⁵

Zinzendorf also espoused equality in another context. He claimed that the three persons of the Trinity, were perfectly equal,³⁶ and that Christians should reflect the Trinity.³⁷ All this suggests the reason for Zinzendorf's ambivalence concerning the priesthood of women: the egalitarian logic of his theology ran counter to the hierarchical nature of his eighteenth-century European culture. To modern readers, Zinzendorf appears to have resolved this ambivalence in favor of eighteenth-century culture. But to most of his contemporaries, he had given female themes and feminine leadership far too much importance in Moravian piety and practice. As a result, Moravians in general and Zinzendorf in particular were victims of constant verbal attacks by critical outsiders.³⁸

Although Zinzendorf was content to live with a creative vacillation about the roles of women, his successors were not. They had tired of the unending criticism of the Moravian Church and resolved to bring their religious practice into line with that of other Protestant churches. In an effort to make their church more orthodox, Moravians eventually instituted an obvious gender inequality and extinguished female piety altogether. However, because female piety was so deeply embedded in Moravian culture, the task was not easy. The purposeful campaign of Zinzendorf's successors began within a few years of the deaths of Zinzendorf and Nitschmann in 1760 and continued for a full generation thereafter.

Evidence of the diminution of female piety can be found in every aspect of daily practice at the local level. In Bethlehem, female themes were noticeably deemphasized after 1760. Christ was less and less "Bridegroom" to the Single Sisters and more and more their "Choir Prince" or "Lord." Nitschmann's role as the initiator of the covenant and founder of the Single Sisters' Choir was increasingly downplayed and then forgotten. Until 1761, the descriptions of May 44 Single Sisters' Choir Festivals in the Bethlehem Single Sisters' Diary always gave Nitschmann credit for initiating the covenant and founding the Single Sisters Choir. The description for 1761 called her "our blessed and unforgettable Mama, the originator of this covenant with the Savior." This was the last time that she was named as the sole founder of the Choir. In the

descriptions for 1767 and 1770 she had to share the credit with Zinzendorf and the Savior. After 1770 the descriptions referred only to “the 18 Sisters” who had made the covenant—Anna Nitschmann had disappeared into the crowd of the eighteen Sisters. After the mid-1780s, the covenant was not even mentioned. May 4 had become merely the occasion for a yearly blessing from the Lord and for receiving Older Girls into the Single Sisters’ Choir. Even the hundredth anniversary of the covenant in 1830 treated the day as just another Single Sisters’ Choir Festival. The original meaning of the celebration had been lost, and the “unforgettable” Anna Nitschmann had been forgotten, after all.

The records of ordinations in Bethlehem trace a parallel reduction in the offices bestowed on women. On the average, more than two women were ordained as Deaconesses each year through 1762, whereas after 1762, just over one woman was ordained each year. The rate at which Acolytes were received also went down. Through 1762, an average of almost five women became Acolytes each year, whereas just over one woman per year on average became an Acolyte after that date. After 1786, no more Deaconesses were ordained. After 1790, no more Acolytes were received.

Women’s roles as *ordainers* in Bethlehem were also reduced in the years following Zinzendorf’s death. From 1750 to 1762, Eldresses ordained all Deaconesses in Bethlehem. During the next eight years, Deaconesses were ordained by Anna Johanna Pietsch Seidel *and* her husband, Nathanael Seidel. From 1780 on, Deaconesses were ordained by a male bishop, acting alone.³⁹

There is strong evidence that the dismantling of female piety at the local level was being directed by the top Moravian authorities as a part of their campaign to make the whole Moravian Church more orthodox. This campaign is reflected in the records of the four General Synods of 1764, 1769, 1775, 1782 (which set about redefining Moravian practice and doctrine) in the minutes of the Unity Elders Conference (the worldwide Moravian governing board), in *Die Gemeinnachrichten* (the early Moravian journal distributed in all settlements), and in the writings of Zinzendorf’s successor, August Gottlieb Spangenberg.

These records show that women’s decision-making roles were noticeably reduced after 1760. Under Zinzendorf’s leadership of the Moravian Church, Anna Nitschmann and Anna Johanna Pietsch had participated in any decisions about Single Sisters’ Choirs. The General Synod of 1764 explicitly curtailed such participation: the practice of bestowing Unity-wide or general offices on women “as was the case before, [was] deemed not good.” The roles of women in the directorship of the Unity were limited to “helpers and advisors,” while men were reminded that they “must always carry the authority.”⁴⁰ The minutes of the Unity Elders Conference make it clear that Moravians put these directives into practice. In dealing with various problems, the head Workers of the Single

Sisters Choirs were consulted and their views respected, but males made the decisions. Furthermore, only men served on committees named to investigate problems in the Single Sisters Choirs.⁴¹

Women's access to the priesthood was done away with soon after Zinzendorf's death. In a 1762 issue of *Die Gemeinnachrichten*, a terse paragraph announced that "the ordination of the Sisters to *Priesterinnen* has no precedent in the apostolic church and shall in future cease."⁴² In addition, women's role as ordainers was revoked. The General Synod of 1775 decided that henceforth Sisters could be ordained as Deaconesses by Bishops only and without the assistance of any Sister.⁴³

Female themes in Moravian worship were also systematically invalidated. In his official biography of Zinzendorf, written during the early 1770s, Spangenberg acknowledged that Zinzendorf had developed the concept of Holy Spirit as Mother, but he treated this notion as a mistake.⁴⁴ His 1779 Moravian catechism discussed the Holy Spirit at length, but revealed not a trace of the Mother concept. (He *may* have had in mind the idea of Holy Spirit as Mother when, in his discussion of the Trinity, he warned readers to keep to the scriptures, because it is "useless," "foolish," and "dangerous" to "penetrate the depths of God and unfathomable eternity if nothing has been revealed to us."⁴⁵

The concept of the Incarnation as a theme especially appropriate for Single Sisters did survive Zinzendorf for a few decades. The summary of results of the four General Synods still claimed that the Incarnation was "the great Gospel for the Single Sisters."⁴⁶ This summary was completed in March, 1786, but just one month before, Spangenberg began to suppress even this form of a separate piety for women. In a lengthy discussion in the Minutes of the Unity Elders' Conference for February, 1786, he roundly scolded the Single Sisters for their belief that "the Incarnation of our Lord God in the body of a virgin is the primary material which should be promoted in their Choir services." He told them that doctrine should not be tailored to each individual "heart" but should come from the Holy Scripture, where the essential point was the "Savior's blood and death." He insisted that "the whole of Jesus's service belongs to the Sanctification of every human being, no matter what age or gender they are," and that therefore the "doctrine of the Incarnation . . . cannot be made into a *loco topico* of the Single Sisters."⁴⁷

This discussion of the Incarnation became the occasion for other objections to female piety. The Elders claimed that the late Zinzendorf's idea of the Savior as husband of the Widows was "actually not biblical." They complained that "the [Single] Sisters have made the naming of the Savior—my best Friend—into their favorite expression, even though the Savior actually cannot be compared to any [human role]."⁴⁸ The very devices which Zinzendorf had encouraged to make the Savior a more intimate part of women's lives were now frowned upon as unorthodox.

This reprimand of Single Sisters for their emphasis on female themes indicates that a separate female piety had become an important concern. It is true that the Elders also mentioned "a similar case . . . with the Single-Brother status of the Savior, from which, by itself, the Sanctification of the [Single] Brothers does not follow."⁴⁹ The Single Brothers had been encouraged to identify with the Savior on the grounds that they, like Christ, were unmarried and male. This admonition was designed to remind Single Brothers that this similarity alone would not bring them salvation. It also reveals that the policy of encouraging just one piety was being applied to both genders. However, in this lengthy discussion in early 1786, only one sentence dealt with the problem of a special piety among the Single Brothers, whereas complaints about female piety continued for nearly two pages. By the mid-1780s, female piety had become more threatening to orthodoxy than male piety. This imbalance in emphasis suggests that the move towards a uniform piety was at its core a way of quelling female piety. General arguments were more difficult to refute than those leveled only against women.

It is clear that August Gottlieb Spangenberg led this effort. Not only his writings from the decade of the 1770s, but the leading role he played in policy decisions of the Unity Elders Conference support this view. It is, however, not entirely clear why he acted so resolutely. For most of the 1740s and 1750s, Spangenberg was the main leader of Bethlehem. He and his equally gifted wife Eva Maria governed Bethlehem as a team. When he traveled, she took his place. Zinzendorf called her "a heroine and [a] true Deborah." Zinzendorf's son-in-law described her as a "regent among the people [who] had the greatest influence on everything [and who] was always a speaker in governing bodies [Konferenzen] and love feasts and elsewhere."⁵⁰ There is no evidence that Spangenberg ever tried to limit her influence and active participation in governance.

Spangenberg also carefully protected the authority of the leaders of female Choirs. At one point, when the leader of nearby Nazareth overstepped himself and interfered with matters that concerned Single Sisters, Spangenberg reprimanded him, saying that the problem was the prerogative of Anna Rosel Anders, the leader of the Single Sisters Choir in Bethlehem and Nazareth.⁵¹ Given this record, it is truly puzzling that he would actively work to suppress female piety and female authority in his later years.

We do know that Spangenberg's early years contrasted starkly with those of Zinzendorf. He grew to manhood in a world almost devoid of female influence. His mother died when he was three years old. His three siblings were all brothers. His father died when he was just nine, and he spent most of his remaining youth in a series of male boarding schools. For a time, as a student of theology at the University of Jena, he was a devout adherent of Gichtelism, a separatist religious group for men that required a vow of life

without earthly marriage. In fact it required spiritual marriage "with the heavenly virgin Sophia."⁵²

After becoming Moravian, Spangenberg resisted marriage until 1740, when he was thirty-six years old. Three years after the early death in 1751 of his strong and influential first wife Eva Maria, he remarried. His second wife, Martha, who lived to the age of eighty-one, was the polar opposite of Eva Maria. Where Eva Maria was a compelling and outgoing presence, Martha was withdrawn and quiet. Where people thought of Eva Maria as a woman of great influence and natural authority, they were apt to describe Martha as "a child and a truly simple soul." Where Eva Maria worked at his side, Martha supported him from the background.⁵³

Although we do not know for certain why the older Spangenberg attacked female piety with such resolve, his biography does suggest some possibilities. His childhood and youth had offered him no examples of women in positions of authority, and perhaps the eleven years of his first marriage were not enough to counteract either that beginning or his much more traditional second marriage of forty-five years. Perhaps, too, he was making amends for his own involvement with a radical separatist religious movement by bringing the Moravian Church into solid orthodoxy. Whatever the reason, it is clear that it was Spangenberg who directed and personally implemented the dissolution of female piety among the Moravians.

That a man ended female piety underscores the fact that a man made it possible in the first place. This does not deny that strong women carried out Zinzendorf's design for female piety. Anna Nitschmann's potent letters and the Sisters' devotion to her show that she governed women and inspired them on her own. But Nitschmann had always enjoyed Zinzendorf's protection, which was motivated by his twin beliefs that the Savior had given women the potential for exemplary Christian lives and that female themes in Christianity benefited all believers, especially women. However, Zinzendorf was also a man of his era who believed that men must hold ultimate control. He had spent many years and much thought in building female piety among the Moravians. But no doubt he would have supported Spangenberg's right as a man and as the new Moravian leader, to disassemble it.

Notes

*I wish to thank Richard S. Dunn not only for his inspiration, wisdom, and guidance as a teacher and dissertation advisor, but for his generous encouragement of my recent research on Moravian Single Sisters. I would also like to thank the following individuals for their very helpful comments on previous versions of this article: Brian Dunn, Demerie Faitler, Edith Gelles, Charles Hambrick-Stowe, Joseph Illick, George Michael LaRue, James Merrell, Steven Piott, Elisabeth Sommer, and Frank Towers.

1. See Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Vertuous Women Found", *American Quarterly*, XXVIII (Spring 1976), pp. 20-40; Mary Maples Dunn, "Saints and Sisters: Congregational and Quaker Women in the Early Colonial Period", *ibid.*, XXX, Winter 1978, Number 5, pp. 583-595; Amanda Porterfield, *Feminine Spirituality in America from Sarah Edwards to Martha Graham* (Philadelphia, 1980), pp. 19-50. On Quakers, see Dunn, "Saints and Sisters," pp. 595-601; Jerry Frost, *The Quaker Family in Colonial America* (New York, 1973), pp. 35-40; Jack D. Marietta, *The Reformation of American Quakerism, 1748-1743* (Philadelphia, 1984), pp. 29-30, 16, 64, 66, 81. On Baptists, see Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelism in Revolutionary New England* (New York, 1994); William Lumpkin, "The Role of Women in 18th Century Virginia Baptist Life," *Baptist History and Heritage*, VIII (1973), pp. 158-67. For the eighteenth century generally, see Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York, 1986), pp. 105-115.

2. John R. Weinlick, *Count Zinzendorf* (Bethlehem, 1984), pp. 13-22; Ludwig Carl Freiherr von Schrautenbach, *Der Graf von Zinzendorf und die Brudergemeine seiner Zeit* (Hildesheim, 1972—written in 1775 as a corrective to Spangenberg's biography of Zinzendorf, but first published in 1851), pp. 91-93.

3. All Single Sisters' Choirs kept their institutional diaries. The Single Sisters' Diary from Bethlehem appears to be the only surviving Single Sisters' diary that covers the important decade of the 1750s. Moravian Archives Bethlehem.

4. In this ceremony, a handful of spiritual workers remembered Christ's example in John 13 and washed the feet of the other Sisters.

5. Single Sisters' Diary, May 4, 1749-1759.

6. *Matthew* 25:1-13.

7. Song sung for the Lovefeast on May 4, 1758.

8. Gary Steven Kinkel, *Our Dear Mother the Spirit: An Investigation of Count Zinzendorf's Theology and Praxis* (Lanham, MD, 1990), pp. 140-193.

9. Single Brothers' Diary, Bethlehem, September 8, 1752, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem.

10. Single Brothers' Diary, Bethlehem, September 8, 1754.

11. Single Brothers' Diary, Bethlehem, August 28, 1752.

12. Single Sisters' Diary, Bethlehem, May 4, 1758.

13. Lebenslauf of Anna Nitschmann, Moravian Archives Herrnhut R.22.2.b.13.; Anna Johanna Pietsch Seidel called her one of "2 main persons in the renewed . . . Church," Lebenslauf of Anna Johanna Pietsch Seidel, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, MEM, Box 6.

14. The most efficient way to determine this is to study the conjunction of roles and ranks as reported in the Bound Catalog of Single Sisters. This information can be supplemented with the Catalog of Ordinations and the daily accounts of activities in the Single Sisters Diary. All of these materials focus on Bethlehem.

15. During the late 1750s there were over a hundred Single Sisters in Bethlehem. From 1745-1762, 81 women were received as Acolytes. The estimate of twenty percent assumes that about one-fourth of them were alive and still living among the Single Sisters at any one time. I do not have an exact percentage—not easy to calculate with an ever-changing population.

16. These accounts are found in the May 4th entries in the Bethlehem Single Sisters' Diaries for the 1750s.

17. Sometimes this sermon was her own. At other times she read one of Zinzendorf's sermons from a previous Single Sisters Choir Festival. In services where men gave such sermons, they would also often read a sermon by Zinzendorf or another Moravian leader like

Spangenberg.

18. The material for the two previous paragraphs comes from the descriptions of the yearly May 4 Choir Festivals in the Single Sisters' Diary in Bethlehem. Note that a Deaconess could also serve as *Vorsteherin* (or Overseer) for a particular Choir house. In this office, she kept the Single Sisters' Diary and managed the affairs of the house. After Bethlehem's Communal Economy was ended in 1762, she collected monies for room and board and kept the account books. And when the Single Sisters House was greatly expanded in the early 1770s, the Overseer managed the construction.

19. Note that these words of ordination are much more feminine than the parallel words for men, uttered on the same occasion in 1758.

Press them [those men] on your heart, on your wounds. Let *your* priests' hands come onto their heads through our poor visible service, with the blessing of thy people who are here and of the whole Church of the Brethren [Moravian Church]. Give them priests' hearts and lips, and faithful ears, eyes fixed towards you against all harm, and hands which bestow blessings. Receive, then, these his priest-blessings and become transformed into priests of God in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and their Church.

Both of these ordination ceremonies are described in: Juenger-Haus Diarium, May 12, 1758, Moravian Archives Bethlehem.

20. Juenger-Haus Diarium, May 12, 1758.

21. It is likely that they included, among others, Anna Nitschmann, Anna Johanna Pietsch, and Zinzendorf's daughter, Benigna. But even if that could be proven, it would be difficult to separate their activities as Church Eldresses from any activities they might have had as Priests.

22. This is because the activities of married people were reported only in the main diary for each Moravian settlement, which tended to report more male activities than female ones. The Single Sisters' Diaries for Europe have apparently not survived.

23. Included as an addendum to the Juenger-Haus Diarium of 1757.

24. Juenger-Haus-Diarium, 1757, Beilage I, 4th Sermon.

25. The only account I have found of a Moravian woman preaching in public is in a report about a Sister who served in Norway. It makes clear that she spoke in public before large and small groups in which "she read reports from the Church, led proper Prayer Day services, spoke about biblical texts, and posed all kinds of questions. The preachers themselves gave her the opportunity. . . . The listeners were exceedingly attentive." Clearly she both preached and taught. But the tone suggests that this was an unusual case, worthy of special note. See Hans-Christoph Hahn and Hellmut Reichel, eds., *Zinzendorf und die Herrnhuter Brueder: Quellen zur Geschichte der Brueder-Unitaet von 1722 bis 1760* (Hamburg, 1977), p. 295. The date of this event is not given. Recent research has called into question whether this woman's public preaching took place before or after she became a Moravian.

26. "Verlass der Vier Synoden," (Moravian Archives Bethlehem), pp. 457-458.

27. *Barbysche Sammlungen*, p. 118, included in Hahn and Reichel, p. 295.

28. "Reden vor die Frauenspersonen, gehalten in Philadelphia, Erste Rede, Moravian Archives Herrnhut, R 14 A 38, 1a, as quoted in Uttendoerfer, *Zinzendorf und die Frauen* (Herrnhut, 1919), p. 6.

29. "Reden vor die Frauenspersonen, gehalten in Philadelphia, Erste Rede," Moravian Archives Herrnhut, R 14 A 38, 1a, as quoted in Uttendoerfer, p. 6.

30. From a sermon given at a Synod for Single Brothers on December 29, 1752 Moravian Archives Herrnhut, R2 A 32 B. ps 200f., as quoted by Uttendoerfer, p. 8. Men's expression of original sin was the animal like and the lustful.

31. Juenger-Haus Diarium, Beilage to 1757, 4. Rede, included in Hahn and Reichel, p. 294.

32. "Reden vor die Frauenspersonen, gehalten in Philadelphia, Erste Rede," Moravian Archives Herrnhut, R 14 A 38, 1a, as quoted in Uttendoerfer, p. 6.

33. From sermons given May 4, 1750 and April 6, 1755, as quoted in Uttendoerfer, pp. 16 and 18.

34. From a sermon given August 22, 1756 to

the Married People's choir, as quoted in Uttendoerfer, p. 45.

35. From a sermon given August 22, 1756 to the Married People's Choir, as quoted in Uttendoerfer, p. 45.

36. Kinkel, pp. 134-140.

37. Kinkel, pp. 190-193, 223-224.

38. A selection of "Anti-Zinzendorfiana" fills five of the eighteen volumes of *Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf: Materialien und Dokumente* edited by Erich Beyeuther, Gerhard Meyer, and Amedeo Molnar as Series 2 of *Nicolaus Ludwig Graf von Zinzendorf: Leben und Werk in Quellen und Darstellungen*.

39. Catalog of Ordinations, Church Register, Bethlehem, Vol. II, Moravian Archives Bethlehem.

40. *Verlass des General Synodi in Marienborn Mense Julii & Augusti 1764* (bound ms. in the Moravian Archives Bethlehem), p. 28.

41. See, for example, a long discussion of the affairs of the Single Sisters Choir in Herrnhut that took place in the Unity Elders Conference on February 8, 1786, Unity Elders Conference Protocol, Moravian Archives Herrnhut.

42. *Beilagen zum Diarium des Gemeinhauses* 23.-39. Woche (= *Gemeinnachrichten* 1762, Bd. 5, page 766-767).

43. *Verlass des im Jahr 1775 zu Barby gehaltenen Synodi der Evangelischen Brueder=Unitaet* (bound ms. in the Moravian

Archives Bethlehem), XIV, 24.

44. *Leben des Herrn Nicolaus Ludwig Grafen und Herrn von Zinzendorf und Pottendorf* (Barby, 1773-1775), p. 1574.

45. August Gottlieb Spangenberg, *Idea Fidei Fratrum* (Leipzig, 1779), pp. 166-168, 210-234.

46. *Verlass der Vier Synoden* (bound ms. in the Moravian Archives Bethlehem), "The Basic Principles of the Single Sisters Choir", Paragraph 152, Number 2.

47. Unity Elders Conference Protocol, February 9, 1986. Many thanks are due to Elisabeth Sommer, who alerted me to this very interesting and significant passage.

48. Unity Elders Conference Protocol, February 9, 1786 Moravian Archives Herrnhut.

49. Unity Elders Conference Protocol, February 9, 1786 Moravian Archives Herrnhut.

50. Gerhard Reichel, *August Gottlieb Spangenberg: Bischof der Bruederkirche* (Tuebingen, 1906), p. 147.

51. See Spangenberg's marginal comments on a letter to him from Johann Christoph Franck September 17, 1755, in Box: Misc. re the Choirs, Folder: 4, Moravian Archives Bethlehem.

52. Gerhard Reichel, p. 29.

53. Gerhard Reichel, p. 263f.