

The Episcopal Church

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Episcopal Bishop Steven Miller addresses “strength of full communion” at festive service with The Moravian Church in North America

[February 11, 2011] In his sermon at the February 10 festive service of full communion between the Episcopal Church and the Northern and Southern Provinces of the Moravian Church in North America, Bishop Steven Miller of the Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee addressed the meaning of this relationship, and its possibilities for the future.

“We know that the strength of this full communion relationship depends not on the document and the synodical resolutions that have made this day possible,” he said in his sermon, “but upon our continuing to discover what God is calling us to as his people.”

The landmark Moravian – Episcopal Full Communion Inaugural Service was celebrated at the Central Moravian Church, Bethlehem, PA.

Miller serves as co-chair of the Moravian-Episcopal dialogue.

A video of the service is available here: <http://episcopalchurch.org/multimedia/celebration-of-full-communion>

The following is Bishop Miller’s sermon:

The Rt. Rev. Steven Miller Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee

Now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near in the Blood of Christ. For he is our peace who has made us both one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility. (Eph: 2:13)

We hear these words in our reading this evening from the letter to the Ephesians. The apostolic message to the letter’s first recipients and to us is that in Christ God brings together that which had been separate.

In the case of the Church at Ephesus, the apostle is writing to a community living after the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem, after the Church’s first wrestling with implications of God’s act in Christ Jesus and for whom that act was accomplished, in a time in which the word Christian had become the primary label for believers. The Apostle wanted those who heard and read this letter to know that the distinctions of the past were no more. Echoing the letter to the Galatians with its proclamation that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female (Gal 3:28), the apostle reminded the church in Ephesus that in Christ Jesus what was separate is now united. He, Jesus, is our peace who has made both Jew and Gentile one. The author goes on to build an ecclesiology that shapes and challenges us today.

Jesus is our peace who has made us both one.

This is the apostolic word to us tonight as we gather to celebrate and inaugurate the full communion relationship between the Northern and Southern Provinces of the Moravian Church in the United States of America and of The Episcopal Church. They are to us reminder, comfort, and challenge. Reminder, in that what we celebrate tonight is God's action at work in us. That the impetus to begin the conversation 17 years ago that resulted in first interim Eucharistic sharing and now a full communion agreement is the activity of the unifying spirit of God at work in Christ in his incarnation and his Body the Church today. It is comfort, in that we are strengthened and our hearts are warmed in that God continues to work his promise in us, God continues to be the God who breaks down walls and who brings together.

But these words are also a challenge: for we know that the strength of this full communion relationship depends not on the document and the synodical resolutions that have made this day possible, but upon our continuing to discover what God is calling us to as his people, allowing God's Uniting Spirit to work in us, not just those gathered here but every member of our communions, as we seek to discover and live into the full communion we inaugurate this night.

We were reminded earlier in this liturgy that a part of our brokenness and sin is our tendency to make "idols of our achievements" (Moravian Unity Liturgy). It is important for us to remember that this liturgy is not an end but a beginning. My fear is that unless we are attentive and intentional we will miss the opportunities before us.

As I was reflecting on all this, words from my first spiritual director echoed in my ears. "The question is, Steven," she said, "Jesus is Lord, what are you going to do about it."

We are here tonight because we have found our delight in the Lord who has found his delight in us and sent his only Son to be our Savior. We have discovered through our dialogue and proclaimed in our synods and convention that difference does not mean division. And so the question before us tonight is: We're in full communion, what are we going to do about it? Or better yet, we are full communion partners, what does God want it do in and through us. As I prayed and pondered this question three words came to mind: Transfigure, Transform, Send. And it is each of these that I want to focus on tonight.

Transfigure:

In just a few weeks the Epiphany season will come to a close and we will hear again on the last Sunday after the Epiphany the story of the Transfiguration. The story of how Jesus, after the prediction of his passion, took with him Peter, James, and John, the inner circle of the twelve, up on a mountain to pray. And while he was praying, he was transfigured before them, his face shone like the sun, his garments became dazzling white, and there appeared with him Moses and Elijah. And a voice came from heaven, "This is my Son. Listen to Him."

In each of our churches we sing of this event in the life of Jesus with these words:

*O wondrous type, O vision fair, of glory that the church may share
Which Christ upon the Mountain shows, where brighter than the sun He glows*

In the Transfiguration we get a glimpse of our destiny and calling that “we may shine with radiance of Christ’s glory that he may be known, worshipped and obeyed to the ends of the earth.” (BCP collect for 3 Epiphany). My prayer and hope is that in this new relationship for our two churches we will gain insights into who Christ Jesus is and what he calls us to do. We will discover a deeper and fuller sense of the meaning of Christian discipleship. If that is to happen it will require of us intentionality and effort. Taking this intentionality, to be in the presence of one another, to listen and learn, and discover. Together in the light of the transfigured Christ we can discover new songs to sing to the Lord.

But visions are not enough, the purpose of vision is to **transform**.

I can witness, as I know can all of us who have labored to make this day possible, sisters and brothers with whom I shared this journey, that our work together has given us a greater vision of what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ and made us more the people he has called us to be. Bishops of both churches have testified to experiences like that of another famous Anglican in which our hearts were “strangely warmed” through our fellowship one with another. Our walk of faith is enriched by the daily devotional strength of each of our traditions.

However, we are now in the second century of the Ecumenical Movement. I am fearful someday historians will be writing about the second and third centuries of the ecumenical movement unless we embrace the vision God puts before us and truly bring it into being.

We say in our full communion document that full communion is not merger. And so it is. But can it not be something more than advancing the ecumenical ball a little bit further down the field? God does not call us to stop here and build three booths, one for the Moravian Southern province, one for the Northern Province, and one for the Episcopal Church, particularly in an age when such identities matter very little to those who are outside them. Is perhaps part of the call that our denominational structures and boundaries be transformed to a new reality and new life? The call is still there to be one church on earth as it is in heaven.

Here I am reminded of Dr. Martin Luther King’s words on the night before his assassination, “I have seen the promised land.” We know how sweet and pleasant it is when sisters and brothers live together in unity. We know God’s will is that all may be one as Christ and the Father are one. May that unity be revealed in us. We have seen the promise of Ecumenism. Let us enter that promised land.

Seeing God’s vision and transformed by his work in us God **sends** us. Each of our traditions has a rich missional heritage. The introduction to the Moravian Daily Texts of 1739, just 17 years after the establishment of Hernhut on the estate of Count Zinzendorf, is addressed to congregations and missions throughout the world including South Africa, Surinam, Guyana, Ceylon, Ethiopia, and Persia.

The Episcopal Church is incorporated as the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, giving birth to new provinces of our communion in the Phillipines, Japan, and South America and other places through our missionary efforts. The diocese which I serve was born of our commitment to domestic mission and the efforts of the first missionary bishop, Jackson Kemper. Another of

those missionary bishops, Ethelbert Talbot, later served this community as Bishop of Bethlehem and Presiding Bishop.

That Mission field is as ripe for harvest today as it was then. Our Gospel lesson tonight reminds us and proclaims to us the harvest is plentiful. The harvest is plentiful. And to each servant the master says, go work today.

The penultimate paragraph of the full communion document, Finding our Delight in the Lord, states:

44. We do not know to what new, recovered, or continuing tasks of mission this agreement will lead our churches, but we give thanks to God for leading us to this point. We entrust ourselves to that leading in the future, confident that our full communion will be a witness to the gift and goal already present in Christ, “so that God may be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28). Entering full communion and thus removing limitations through mutual recognition of faith, sacraments, and ministries will bring new opportunities and levels of shared evangelism, witness, and service. It is the gift of Christ that we are sent as he has been sent (John 17:17–26), that our unity will be received and perceived as we participate together in the mission of the Son in obedience to the Father through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Tonight God calls us to discover what those new, recovered, and continuing acts of mission are: Together, each with its purpose “to restore all people to unity with God in Christ.” My sense is that mission has at least something to do with the ability to embrace difference while working for the common good and discovering God’s mission of reconciliation not just as for the Church but for the world.

May God bless our witness. May the God who makes us one, Make all one, that Christ may be all in all.

The final report of full communion, “Finding Our Delight in the Lord: A Proposal for Full Communion Between The Episcopal Church, the Moravian Church-Northern Province and the Moravian Church-Southern Province” is located here: http://www.episcopalchurch.org/110055_111526_ENG_HTM.htm or http://www.episcopalchurch.org/documents/Finding_Our_Delight_Official_Text_2_.pdf

The video of the service is here: <http://episcopalchurch.org/multimedia/celebration-of-full-communion>

The Moravian Church, which celebrated its 550th anniversary in 2007, is one of the oldest Protestant denominations, dating back to 1457 in Europe and first coming to America in 1735. The Moravian Church, whose motto is, “In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things love,” has strong traditions of ecumenical work, missionary endeavors and creativity in music and worship. The Moravian Church in North America includes more than 150 congregations in the U.S. and Canada. The Unitas Fratrum -- the worldwide Moravian Church -- counts nearly 795,000 members.

The Moravian Church in North America: www.moravian.org

The Episcopal Church welcomes all who worship Jesus Christ in 109 dioceses and three regional areas in 16 nations. The Episcopal Church is a member province of the worldwide Anglican Communion.