

Episcopalians, Moravians inaugurate full communion relationship

by [Mary Frances Schjonberg](#)

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Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, February 14 (ENInews)--Representatives of the Episcopal Church and the two provinces of the Moravian Church in North America on 10 February formally inaugurated a full-communion relationship with a service that blended elements of the liturgical and musical practices of both traditions.

The service at Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania included a newly written Liturgy for Christian Unity from the Moravian Book of Worship and an Anglican Eucharistic prayer, reports Episcopal News Service.

Episcopal Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori and Moravian Provincial Elders Conference presidents, the Rev. Dr. Elizabeth D. Miller (Northern Province) and the Rev. David Guthrie (Southern Province) officiated at the service.

The service's prayers for Christian unity, which were said to conform to classical Moravian ecumenical theology, focused on the unity of faith, hope and love that exists among all Christians.

"We know that the strength of this full-communion relationship depends ... upon our continuing to discover what God is calling us to as his people, allowing God's uniting spirit to work in us," Episcopal Diocese of Milwaukee Bishop Steven Miller, co-chair of the Moravian Episcopal Dialogue, said during his sermon.

"We say in our full communion document that full communion is not merger ... But can it not be something more than advancing the ecumenical ball a little bit further down the field?" Miller asked.

Churches in full communion formally recognize that they share essential doctrines, including baptism and Eucharist; agree to accept the service of each other's clergy; and pledge to work together in evangelism and mission.

The two churches began discussing full communion in 1997 and have had interim Eucharistic sharing since 2003, allowing joint celebrations of the Eucharist using the liturgy of the host church with ministers of both denominations at the altar.

The Moravian provinces agreed in 2010 to enter into full communion with the Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church's General Convention approved it in 2009.

Moravians in America are part of the worldwide Christian communion formally known as the Unitas Fratrum, or Unity of the Brethren, which was founded in 1457 as part of the movement to reform the church in what is now the Czech Republic.

Persecuted almost to extinction, members of the Unitas Fratrum eventually found refuge on the estate of German nobleman Count Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf. In the 1700s, they went through a rebirth under Zinzendorf's protection and grew into a global communion. The Moravian Church now has more than 900,000 members in 19 different provinces.

The Moravian Church in North America is concentrated in Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Wisconsin. Some Moravian congregations in Canada are structurally part of the Northern Province.

The Episcopal Church also is in full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, the Philippine Independent Church and the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar, India.