

PALMYRA MORAVIAN CHURCH 1852

The Moravian Church is one of the oldest of the Protestant denominations. The establishment of the Moravian community was directly related to the works of the martyred John Hus who died at the stake in defense of his beliefs on July 6, 1415. The "Unity" as it is sometimes called, enabled its members to maintain a living and working fellowship with the help of the Bible, to preach and witness, in words and in song, in their own tongue. They were also able to establish a careful system of discipline and schooling for the young.

The Church thrived for approximately two hundred years. Then came the great persecution in Bohemia. The Brethren fled to Poland under the leadership of their Bishop, John Amos Comenius. The church was, in effect, forced to go under-cover and remained out of open existence for approximately one hundred years. But though it was hidden away from public view, it was kept alive during this period of travail by secret societies, known as "The Hidden Seed."

In 1722, some of the old families from Moravia and Poland who had remained steadfast in their beliefs and practices, found refuge on the estate of Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf in Saxony. After having experienced an outpouring of the Holy Spirit on August 13, 1727, they inaugurated a foreign missionary program and to this day the Moravian Church is noted for this activity.

The Moravians crossed the Atlantic in the middle seventeen hundreds and founded the community of Bethlehem in Pennsylvania. It was from this center that the church reached out to the entire American Continent.

The middle nineteenth century saw a great, exciting, strong home mission program of the Moravian Church in America. One of the men most active in this movement was the Reverend Phillip Henry Gapp. Reverend Gapp worked out of Philadelphia, under the auspices of the Philadelphia Home Missionary Society. In his annual report for 1852, Reverend Gapp put down these words: "After my attention was drawn to Palmyra and its neighborhood by a Philadelphia Brother, I went there for the first time in September 1852." Reverend Gapp must have found believers who had no church, in an organized sense of the word, because he goes on to say: "I went there from then on every Sunday afternoon on a steamboat and held meetings in their homes. In the winter, when no steamboats went, I traveled during the week on the railroad and held evening services." In this manner, the Moravian beliefs were served.

Brother Gapp, assisted by two other brethren in the community, continued this ministry for ten years. The people were wonderfully thankful for this blessing, as there was no church which held services in the German language within a radius of ten miles. (In light of today's ease of movement, ten miles seems a short distance, but in the eighteen hundreds when roads were merely paths and the horse and buggy was the standard method of getting from one place to another, ten miles was a long distance indeed.)

In the absence of Brother Gapp, the service was led by Brother George Frank and Brother George Hintermeir. Brother Frank and his wife started the first Sunday School for the children of the area. It was held in their home. Existing records reveal that the first Moravian Holy Communion was conducted on Whitsunday, 1856, by Reverend Gapp.

The meetings in the farm houses were attracting so many, a larger meeting place was needed. A meeting was called and after much prayerful discussion and consideration, a building committee comprised of George Frank, George Hintermeier, John Sperber and Brother Gapp was appointed and charged with the responsibility of finding a suitable piece of land. The ground for the building was purchased in 1860. Half of it was set aside for a burial ground, half given over to the location of the church proper. Building commenced in 1862 and the building was completed the following year at a cost of \$1,325.19. The consecration was held on May 17, 1863, by the Right Reverend Samuel Reinke. The congregation was formally organized on that same date with a charter membership of nineteen people.



"Original Palmyra Moravian Church and Wagon Sheds as they stood from 1863 thru 1902."

The Civil War had begun and the heartache of brother against brother, the boom of cannon and the grief of battle dead lay heavy across the land. Among those conscripted for service was the Reverend Gapp. The church raised from among its members what was then the princely sum of \$300 to secure his release. He was ordained a Presbyter by the Moravian Church in May, 1865, and in September of that year took Anna Sperber, a member of the Palmyra congregation, for his bride. His pastorate closed in 1870 when he accepted a call to the Egg Harbor Moravian Church. For eighteen years, Palmyra Moravian Church and Brother Gapp had labored and served side by side and it must have been a sad moment when the time to part was at hand.

One year became ten, ten became twenty, and still another decade made a total of thirty. Church membership increased as new families found their way into the tri-borough area. The growth was slow but steady. When Brother Gapp left, the rolls showed a total of forty communicant members. In 1890 there were ninety-five, better than a one hundred per cent increase. The membership though small in number were strong in faith, determined in their commitment, and dedicated to being the servants of the Lord. The church made other big strides, not the least of which was the construction of the parsonage in the year 1880. This house is directly adjacent to the church, and full evidence of the fact that it was built to last can be proven by the fact that it is still in use.

In 1890 the Reverend Otis Reidenbach began his pastorate. It was not the most peaceful ten years the church ever knew, but it was a time when a great many things of deep significance took place. The English language had been introduced into the service of the church as early as 1868 but had only been used for the Evening Service. The morning worship was still conducted in the traditional German. Times were changing, and many of the younger members neither understood nor spoke German. The general welfare of the congregation could not be best served if the language used was not the one which was used by the majority. Consequently, in 1895, the Church Council voted to gradually stop holding services in German and make the transition to English. This did not go well with all the members. Feelings ran high and it wasn't long until the angry response to the change began to come bubbling up to the surface. Some boycotted the service. Several members, whose feelings about the matter were too strong to permit them to be a party to the step, withdrew from the membership. But time and change would not be denied, and the last service in the German language took place during the pastorate of the succeeding pastor, the Reverend Paul S. Meinert. Brother Reidenbach

left us a record of his thoughts on the changeover. In a piece of written material, this is what he had to say: "I heartily and most strongly approve of the change. May the Lord bless the congregation in the future more than ever before."

Try though he did with all the zeal and strength he could muster and work though he did with unflagging determination, the congregation did not seem to prosper, and before long it looked to be a hopeless cause. Therefore, Pastor Reidenbach accepted a call to another church in Lake Mills, Wisconsin. His successor, Reverend Paul Meinert, was in poor health when he came to Cinnaminson to take over the pulpit. The idea seemed to be a dying pastor for a dying work. It wasn't however God's will that either Pastor Meinert or the church should pass away, and both the pastor and the church regained their vitality.

With a tiny step forward here, and a great leap there, things began to happen — exciting things that brought the people together and gave them new zeal and a new and stronger dedication than ever before. The service organizations were set up and became extremely active. A Ladies Aid Society began in 1901, a trombone choir in 1903, a Christian Endeavor Society in 1903, and a Kings Daughters and Usher Society in 1910.

More people were coming to the church. The membership was increasing. The old building, once so spacious, was getting to be too crowded for comfort. It was evident that the moment for expansion was at hand. By August of 1902, the construction of the new building was underway. The cornerstone was laid on August 10, 1902, by the Right Reverend Edmund O. Oeter right in the middle of a summer thunderstorm. Not the torrential rain, the thunder, nor even the flashing of lightning could dampen the enthusiasm or take away one bit of the happiness that went along with this ceremony.

The builder worked well, the good weather held up into the late fall, and on November 23, 1902, the first worship service was held in the new building. This same building is now the sanctuary. By April of 1904 the building was debt-free and the congregation and Brother Meinert burned the mortgage.

The actual consecration of the building took place on May 29, 1904. The Right Reverent Mortimer Levering officiated on this most auspicious occasion. In March of 1905 the Church bell was hung and the Synod of the Second District chose to hold their session at Palmyra in October of 1906.

The Palmyra Moravian Church observed its 50th anniversary in May, 1913. Communion was held. There were three services, one of which was presided over by Dr. Samuel Gapp, son of the church's founder. In the afternoon, the people gathered to share a Love Feast and during the evening they came together once more to hear the Pastor deliver the history of the church. It was during this service that a hymn was sung in honor of the only living Charter member, Mrs. Katherine (sic) Hoehn. Time does move along, and, in the case of the Moravian Church, as the years behind them increased in number, the current rolls of the church showed a steady increase in the number of members. The activities in which the congregation was involved were expanded in many directions. One of the traditional and most-loved works was the Moravian Easter Sunday Sunrise Service which was held in Lakeview Memorial Park from 1932 to 1944. Even though these Sunrise Easter Morning Worship Services were conducted in the Moravian manner and held under the joint auspices of the Riverside Church and the Palmyra Church, along with their pastors and choirs, they were attended by people of many other denominations. It is estimated that the attendance at this service was often upwards of five hundred who came to celebrate the Resurrection, the Joy of the Risen Christ, as the sun itself rose in the East.

In 1928, the Palmyra congregation celebrated their Diamond Jubilee. On this occasion, as on the day of the 50th Anniversary observation, Dr. Samuel Gapp was the guest speaker at one of the services. Dr. Gapp returned to Palmyra one more time — June 3, 1956, when the dedication ceremony took place to commemorate the extensive renovation to both the church and the parsonage.

In the nineteen fifties, Cinnaminson, Riverton and Palmyra were attracting many new families, and new homes were being built on the still available land. These new families were young, and usually there were several children in addition to the parents. Palmyra Moravian Church found their Sunday School enrollment advancing towards the two hundred mark, and housing the students was becoming something of a problem. The best course of action seemed to be the addition of extra space to the existing facility, as opposed to replacing it in its entirety. Consequently, the Church Council of 1959 voted in favor of this undertaking, and the ground breaking took place on December 13, 1959. The cornerstone was laid as a part of the 97th Anniversary service on May 15, 1960. The construction went along without any delays, and the completed building was dedicated to the Lord for use in His name on September 18, 1960.

When the Centennial celebration of the Palmyra Moravian Church was held in May of 1963, there were 225 communicant members. The Sunday School that had met in the home of one of the original members, now brought Christian education to two hundred and twenty-five students. What had, in the beginning, been a tiny little home mission congregation, served by a Brother who came from Philadelphia in good weather on the steamboat, and on foul days on the single track railroad facility, had done far more than survive the vicissitudes of time, it had grown and thrived in all it did — a work given over to the Lord and blessed with His grace.

At the time of the One Hundredth Anniversary, the membership remembered the prayer delivered by Brother Meinert on the Golden Anniversary of the church: "May God's blessing continue to rest upon the work here and may the coming generation take inspiration from our history as we, today, take it from the example of our fathers."

Eighteen pastors have served the Palmyra Moravian Church during its one hundred and thirteen years of active work. Each has brought to his pastorate some unique part of himself and each has left his mark, made his particular impact upon the members. In 1976, the Reverend William A. Cranford leads this flock.

The geography of the area surrounding the church has changed with the years. Industry and business structures are nearby. The street on which Palmyra Moravian fronts is one of the busiest thoroughfares in the area. Where horses and buggies once brought the faithful to worship, trailer trucks, passenger cars, buses, move in an endless stream of traffic. But the quietness of the church and the land around it remains even as they always were. The old burial ground in back of the church is still in use, and the markers showing at the grave sites read like a directory from years past. The oldest stone, still legible, marks the final resting place of a member who went to be with God on January 1, 1862.

Here we stand, in the year 1976, much involved with our Bicentennial observations. In this year, Palmyra Moravian is still busy with the same work that has given it life and purpose over all the years that it too has been moving with the times. The Christian Education building is used extensively, and the present enrollment of students is somewhere around ninety. The number of Communicant members is two hundred and twenty-three. Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts have used the building as a meeting place and have been sponsored by the congregation. The Choirs, so much a part of the Moravian joyful worship service, still sing the familiar well-loved hymns, for the pleasure of the listening ears and the glory of the Lord. The traditional Love Feast, followed by an actual meal, is held regularly and is one of the highlights to which the congregation bring their offerings of thankful hearts and prayers for all people everywhere, that they may live in peace and brotherhood, loving and caring for one another in obedience to the commandment of our Lord.

Everyone is welcomed at Palmyra Moravian Church — not only in word but in fact and in deed. There is a feeling of warmth and concern that give the visitor an assurance that he is welcomed, accepted and seen as a brother or sister in the Lord, to be treated with all Christian concern and care.

Palmyra Moravian Church
Cinnaminson, NJ

