

MORAVIAN MOMENT #113

God's Acre and its significance

God's Acre is the traditional name given to the graveyards of Congregations of the Moravian Church. The first was at Herrnhut in Germany, the Moravian Mother Congregation. The name comes from the symbolic gesture of the bodies of the Moravian dead being "sown" in God's Acre, as in a field, so that they can rise again when Jesus Christ returns to the world. God's Acre is not literally one acre in size; many are larger or smaller.

Moravians believe strongly in equality in death; therefore, every stone in a God's Acre ought to be a significant stone with the same proportions and made of the same material so that no one person stands out among the stones. The Communion of Saints is continued even on the graveyard as it reflects the continuity of the congregation. In addition, the deceased were buried by *choir* or groupings. To the Moravians, these were the living groups into which the Congregation was originally divided to meet the needs of the members according to their age and station in life. Originally men and women sat in their choir groups in church at worship. The burial by choir in God's Acre also reflects the way the members of the congregation sat as a worshipping community, so that visually and symbolically the Congregation continues in the graveyard.

Along with being separated by gender, there were also sections for different ages and marital statuses. The typical configuration has sections for infant girls and infant boys, girls and boys, single men and single women, and married men and married women. The deceased were buried in their section in the order they died. Smaller God's Acres may combine the infant and children sections. Some larger God's Acres, such as the one for the Salem Congregation in Winston- Salem, North Carolina, may also have separate sections for those who were cremated, as their remains take up less space than those who were buried with their bodies intact. This section is also organized by choir.

Many God's Acres also feature arched entrance gates inscribed with an appropriate Bible verse along the top. Smaller God's Acres may only have one, but there can be more than that if there is more than one entrance to the graveyard.

Many Moravian churches have a custom of holding an Easter sunrise service, or *Resurrection Service* in a God's Acre, the "Church Militant" gathering together amid the graves of the "Church Triumphant" before the Risen Savior. The week prior to the service, families and church groups clean the gravestones and decorate them with flowers, transforming God's Acre into an almost garden like place. The opening words of the Resurrection or Easter Dawn Service is, ***The Lord is risen! The Lord is risen indeed!*** **This** dates back from the first such Moravian style service in Herrnhut, Germany in 1732. The liturgy for the service is a Confession of Faith drawn up by Nicolaus Ludwig, Count von Zinzendorf (1700-1760) patron and leader of the Renewed Unitas Fratrum. It is based on Martin Luther's Small Catechism.

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