

# [The moravian missionary experience: essay](https://assignbuster.com/the-moravian-missionary-experience-essay/)

The West Indies, Guiana and Surinam, 1732-1800European Competition and ExpansionFinal Paper17 December, 2003I. The MoraviansThe Moravians were a Protestant sect that, under the leadership ofCount Nikolas Ludwig von Zinzendorf und Pottendorf, experienced a strongrevival in the 1720s. The doctrine of the Moravians centered on thesufferings of Christ on the cross and involved much contemplation of thevarious wounds he received therein. Zinzendorf began the practice ofsending Brethren to minister among the heathens in the New World andAfrica, and potential missionaries underwent extensive indoctrination: These missionaries, both men and women, envisioned themselves as“ brides of Christ” whose father was God and whose mother the HolyGhost. In this imagery, the church was born in the savior’s sidewound, betrothed to Christ in Holy Communion, making it the daughter-in-law of both God the Father and the Holy Ghost (Price, 57).

Missionaries were taught to not involve themselves with politics orcommerce in the colonies, although this did not always hold true. Theyalso accepted slavery as the status quo, and in some cases, became slaveowners themselves.

II. The West IndiesThe Moravian presence in the New World began with the death ofFrederick IV of Denmark and Norway. Count Zinzendorf, wishing torelinquish his secular title and gain some office within the Danish court, traveled to Copenhagen to gain contacts within the court of the new king, Christian VI. This protracted visit failed to gain the Count any appointedoffice, but his new connections within the court shed light on a problemthat fell well within his realm as spiritual leader of the MoravianBrethren. A slave named Anthony, the body servant of an acquaintance ofZinzendorf’s, told the Count of “ the dark moral and intellectual andreligious condition of the slaves in the Danish West Indies” (Hamilton 50).

His plans for recognition within the court of the new king quashed, theCount immediately began to plan missions to the Danish holding in the NewWorld.

Zinzendorf returned to Herrnhut, followed shortly after by Anthony, who gave his same testimony to the Brethren that the Count had heard inCopenhagen. Two young men, Leonard Dober and Tobias Leopold volunteeredthemselves to travel to the West Indies and serve as missionaries. TheBrethren decided that Dober would travel, and Leopold would remain inHerrnhut for awhile longer.

After undergoing extensive training Dober and David Nitschmann, acarpenter, set out on foot for Copenhagen in August of 1732. They set sailin October of that year, Nitschmann employed as ship’s carpenter, andlanded in St Thomas in early December.

Upon their arrival in St Thomas, the two Moravians were the guests ofa planter. Two slaves served as contacts among the potential congregation; Anna and Abraham, the sister and brother of Anthony. Nitschmann supportedthe pair for four months with his carpentry skills. Dober was unable tofind the clay of the necessary quality to employ himself as a potter. WhenNitschmann, as planned, returned to Europe, Dober was employed as stewardof Governor Gardelin’s household and tutor of his children. Although theincome was steady and sufficient for his needs, Dober found his dutiesoccupied too much of his time to allow him to minister to the slaves. Heresigned and found work as a watchman in town and on surroundingplantations.

Dober’s religious work among the slaves was hardly appreciated by theplanters. There were extremely strict regulations monitoring the movementsof slaves, and subsequently harsh punishments for relatively minorinfractions. Rebellions among the slaves of St Thomas and St John werebloody and often resulted in the deaths of white planters. Mistrust andgeneral wariness were extreme, and Dober’s association with the slavesearned him much of the same treatment from the planters.

In 1734, the French sold the island of St Croix to the Dutch WestIndia Company. Count von Pless, the Chamberlain of the Danish court, andnew owner of six New World plantations, petitioned the Moravian Brethrenfor men to act as overseers of the land and the religious welfare of thenatives. Zinzendorf objected to this proposal; he did not like the idea ofmissionaries involved in the commerce and politics of the island, but wasoverruled by the rest of the Brethren.

In June 1734 Tobias Leopold and seventeen others arrived in StThomas. Some were to remain on St Thomas, others were to colonize andevangelize the abandoned St Croix. Dober sailed back to Europe to assumethe mantle of chief elder of Herrnhut.

The journey of the new missionaries to St Thomas was a horrible one.

Forced to winter over in Norway, and enduring terrible conditions aboardthe ship, several of the missionaries were ill before they reached StThomas. Once there, they found the conditions not much more in theirfavor; several succumbed to yellow fever before setting foot on St Croix.

In the following six months eight of the original eighteen missionariesdied, including Tobias Leopold. In February 1735 eleven reinforcements setout from Herrnhut, including physician Dr. Grottausen, who was the first todie. Within two months of landing on St Croix, four of these newcomerswould fall victim to various tropical illnesses. Most of those thatsurvived the initial illness, “ during the years 1735 and1736…returned home in a miserable plight, three of them sufferingshipwreck en route” (Hamilton, 54). In December 1736 the last Moravian onSt Croix traveled to St Thomas to join Frederick Martin, who had been incharge of the mission there for almost a year. Martin had found somesuccess on St Thomas. He and his assistant had found themselves preaching, at times, to some two hundred slaves.

1736 marked the first of the Moravian baptisms on St Thomas. AsMartin and his associated were not ordained, these were preformed byAugustus Spangenberg. Spagenberg was a prominent member of Bethlehem, aMoravian community in Pennsylvania. He arrived in St Thomas in Septemberand baptized what was to become the core of the first Moravian congregationin the West Indies; three slaves named Andrew, Paul and Nathaniel.

Relations between the missionaries and the planters became heatedwhen, in August 1737, the Moravians purchased the estate of Posaunenberg.

In their anger, the planters had incited their Reform clergyman to questionsome of the slaves that the Moravians had been ministering to. Theconverts refused to answer clergyman Borm’s questions. In turn, Borm wentto the Common Council to petition for the Governor to prohibit theMoravians from baptizing their converts. The Governor refused to be drawninto this plot, so false charges of robbery were raised up against theBrethren. To clear themselves of these charges, the Moravians wererequired to take oath, which was contrary to their convictions. They weresubsequently imprisoned.

When Count Zinzendorf arrived in St Thomas in January of 1739 to findall of his Brethren imprisoned, he immediately petitioned the Governor fortheir release. His wish was granted the next day, along with an apologyfrom the Governor.

Zinzendorf and the visiting Brethren were impressed with the successof the mission on St Thomas. There were some eight hundred converts amongthe slaves. Zinzendorf spent his visit preaching to these new converts.

After a sensational farewell address, the missionaries accompaniedZinzendorf from Posaunenberg to town. During their absence Posaunenbergwas attacked, causing much damage to the property. Upon appraisal of thedamage, the missionaries lodge a complaint with the Common Council, butthis only made matters worse. Relations with the planters became sostrained that services had to be held in the woods under guard for fear oftrouble.

In 1739, Theodore Feder and Christian Gottlieb set sail for the NewWorld. After losing Feder in a shipwreck, and nearly dying himself, Gottlieb arrived in St Thomas. He and another young Moravian, GeorgeWeber, later left for St Croix to recommence the mission there. Progresswas rather slow, and the first converts were not baptized until 1744, andFriedensthal, the first permanent mission station was founded in 1755.

In 1741, a pious planter on St Johns requested the presence of one ofthe Brethren to preach to his slaves. Baptism was first preformed there in1745, and in 1754, a resident missionary was stationed at Bethania, anestate purchased in 1749.

In 1751 the New World missions of the Moravians came under thecontrol of the now Bishop Augustus Spangenberg. The missions came under aprogram of systemic development; twenty four national helpers wereappointed, land on St Thomas, St Croix and St John was purchased forsettlement, and resident missionaries were appointed to live on these newlypurchased estates. Converts were secured as workers for these settlementsin an attempt to mitigate the supposed evils of a religious orderparticipating in rampant and exploitative capitalism. No real thought wasgiven to the conflict of taskmaster versus spiritual advisor that theseconvert slaves were facing.

In 1754 two members of the English Brethren, Barham and Fosterrequested that missionaries be appointed to their plantations on Jamaica.

Zinzendorf was afraid that the poor financial situation of the Brethrenwould not allow him to send someone, but Zacharias Caries volunteered, andhis Jamaican patrons were very generous with their funds. Caries had arelatively easy time of it, as compared to his compatriots on the DanishVirgin Islands. Although he didn’t gain converts as easily as the others, he was well supported by the Jamaican planters and was given access to theslaves in ways that the others hadn’t. The planters provided the land forthe first mission settlement of Carmel. Many were converted, and moremissionaries followed, at the request of the planters, another missionsettlement was added at Emmaus. Later, outposts were added at Bogue, Island and Mesopotamia, three plantations.

The 1790’s were a difficult time for the West Indies and theCaribbean in general. The islands faced drought, among other naturaldisasters, and slave revolts in the French and British colonies. TheDanish witnessed the ramifications of the successful slave revolt in Haiti, and decided to adopt a more progressive policy, to preserve neutrality andperhaps share in the major economic boon that was the slave trade. Butthis would also expose the slaves in the Danish colonies to insurrectionistattitudes. In an effort to preempt this, the King issued a royal order inMay of 1792 “ that the traffic in slaves should cease in Danish possessionsfrom the end of the year 1802″ (Hamilton, 328). At this same time, repeated requests were issued to the Brethren that they expanded the scopeof their enterprise and undertake the religious and civil education of thechildren of the slaves. These requests, made by landowners on St Croix, were refused. The Moravians faced the financial burden of reconstructingmission settlements after a devastating series of tornadoes hit St Thomasand JamaicaThe Moravian Brethren closed out the century reconstructingsettlements. They were attracting ever more converts, although at thistime, their focus had turned a bit more inward.

III. Guiana and SurinamDuring a visit to Europe in 1734, upon the suggestion of CountZinzendorf, the Bishop Spangenburg met several times with the directors ofthe Society of Surinam in Amsterdam. He pledged a Moravian presence in thecolony, agreeing to form one or more missions there. In 1735, three of theBrethren were sent to explore the area. They settled briefly on the RioBerbice in Guiana to preach to the slaves of a Danish planter there, butfound themselves thwarted by those in charge of the estates.

In 1738 two of these men, John Guttner and Christian Dahne foundedPilgerhut on a tributary of the Berbice, about 100 miles inland from thecoast. The only native inhabitants of this area were Arawaks, some of whomhad a small understanding of Dutch. 1739 through 1741 saw the arrival ofmore Moravians from Europe. The missionaries began to travel through theforest to reach potential converts. They would provision themselves forlong journeys and travel to Arawak and Carib settlements. By 1748, someforty five natives had been converted, many of whom settled aroundPilgerhut. In 1750, Pilgerhut received groups of Natives from the Orinocoand Corentyn Rivers that had heard of the mission through word of mouth. Anumber of these remained at Pilgerhut. This same year a group of whiteplanters began to take offense at the Moravians’ interaction with theNatives, fearing their enlightenment would be damaging to trade.

Manipulation of colonial government led to the impressment of two ChristianNatives into the colonial militia. Military duties and taxes upon theheads of each convert were also levied against the Moravians. After thesehostilities, some of the Brethren returned to Europe.

During this time, a man by the name of Theophilus Schumann had becomeprominent among the converts of Guiana. Called “ the apostle of theArawaks”, he was a Protestant scholar that had fallen out of favor with thechurch in Europe, and had found refuge with Count Zinzendorf at Herrnhut.

His arrival at Pilgerhut was the beginning of an easier time for themissionaries that had been struggling with the language of their potentialconverts. He translated parts of the scripture into Arawak and begun thecompilation of a dictionary and grammatical lexicon. Shortly after hisarrival, he was preaching in the vernacular, something that not one of hiscolleagues had been able to achieve.

In 1758, Schumann was forced to return to Europe on business for themission. The man that was supposed to replace him for this period hadfailed to find a ship in Europe. For two years, the converts at Pilgerhutlived without one of the Moravian Brethren. When Schumann returned in1760, he found his congregation depleted due to epidemics, raids bymaroons, and general loss of discipline. Shortly after he returned to themission, Schumann died of tropical disease. His passing marked the end ofthe mission at Pilgerhut.

The first Moravian mission in Surinam was in the capital ofParamaribo. Because the cost of living in the city was so expensive, andso much of their time was consumed working to support themselves, themissionaries found themselves with no time to work among the Natives. TheMoravians then settled on the Cottika, a tributary of the Corentyn. Theyhad some small successes ministering to the Arawaks, but internal divisionslead to the abandonment of the mission in 1745.

In 1747, two tracks of land were purchased for the purpose of missionsettlement: Ephraim on the Corentyn and Sharon on the Saramaka. In 1757 alone missionary set up residence “ on the Corentyn in the midst of an utterwilderness” (Thompson, 137). He faced innumerable hardships, but waspleasantly surprised when, after two years of his continued presence, asmall congregation of Arawak, Carib and Warow converts began to settlearound Ephraim. Dehne was relieved in 1759 by three missionaries; heretired to Sharon and later returned to Europe.

After making peace with the Maroons in 1764, the Government ofSuriname solicited the Moravians to send missionaries to Maroon settlementson the Saramaka River. In 1765, three men were sent from Europe to serveamong the Saramaka maroons; Ludwig Dehne, Rudolph Stoll and Thomas Jones, an Englishman. Brother Dehne, the leader of the group, had served for twoand a half decades among the Natives of Guiana. Upon their arrival inSurinam, the missionaries found themselves courted heavily by the Governor.

He wished for them to act as agents, supplying incidentalintelligence, and in return, he would provide material support. TheBrethren were somewhat wary of this offer; they had been taught to notinvolve themselves in local politics, but would not be allowed to workamong the Saramaka until they made some sort of compromise with thecolonial government. The Moravians finally agreed to report any suspiciousactivities among the Maroons.

The chief intermediary between the colonials and the Saramaka, Postholder Dorig, introduced the missionaries to their new potentialconverts on the day that the Maroons received their tribute in 1765.

The chiefs among the Saramaka saw two potentials in the missionaries.

First, thewhite brothers, connected to the government as they were, could be used asa connectionto the power structure within the capital of Paramaribo. Just as thechiefs jockeyed forfavor with the Postholder, they jockeyed to have the missionaries live withthem, not for prestige, but for power. Second, as whites closelyassociated with books, the Saramaka saw the Moravians as their entranceinto the hitherto forbidden world of reading, writing and arithmetic.

The Moravians found acceptance slow among the fiercely independentSaramaka peoples. Much as with their other missions, they faced death anddisease and a general mistrust among the populace of potential converts.

No real progress was made until the son of a deceased chief, Alabi, becamethe vocal proponent of the Moravian brothers. Powerful in his own right, Alabi was the heir apparent to his father’s chiefdom, and was instrumentalin gaining general acceptance for the Moravian Brethren and their gospels.

Even with Alabi’s ascension to chief, and the knowledge that their chief nolonger accepted to obeah faith, the Saramaka remained deeply superstitious, clinging to their old practices even after baptism.

The close of the eighteenth century saw the missions among the Arawakand other natives dwindle. Only two posts remained in Guiana and Surinam, these manned by six brothers. The missions among the Saramaka saw someprogress, but had to deal with occasional outbreaks of obeah. Death bydisease still loomed large over the European missionaries, and all of themissions of the New World were constantly replacing those who succumbed todisease.

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