SUMMARY

This study suggests that the Moravian congregation at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania during the first two decades of its existence (1741-1762) can be helpfully viewed in terms of James McClendon’s notion of a *convictional community*; that is, a community which lives under a guiding vision which encompasses its self-identity, sense of purpose, and way of life. The guiding vision for Moravian Bethlehem, as conceived by its leaders, placed this Pietistic religious community at the very center of an elaborate scheme to penetrate colonial North America and the Native American tribes beyond white settlement with the gospel message and the benefits of Christian fellowship. The constellation of outwardly reaching ministries which quickly developed and extended throughout the mid-Atlantic colonies was sustained by a lifeline of provision that originated in the congregation at Bethlehem. Aside from economic and logistical forms of support, the Bethlehem congregation sustained this broad mission through its own spiritual life. This study centers upon the connection between the early religious life of colonial-era Moravian Bethlehem and its existence as a missional center in British North America. The primary research question which frames this study is this: How did the mid-eighteenth century Moravians of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania shape, articulate, and sustain their community’s sense of missional identity and purpose?

Religious life in Bethlehem was organized to nurture hour-by-hour fellowship between congregation members and Christ. Within an intricate system
designed to nourish the soul, however, were ever-present reminders of the outward calling of the church. This study demonstrates that Bethlehem’s missional identity, communal fellowship, and outward ministry were consciously emphasized and sustained by means of varied and deeply meaningful spiritual practices. Through daily participation in the community’s religious rituals, congregation members came to share certain convictions regarding their participation in Christ’s mission to the world. These convictions and related spiritual practices ultimately gave shape to Bethlehem’s distinctive spirituality—a missional spirituality.

Prior studies of early Bethlehem have described the mission theory and praxis emanating from the congregation; they have not, however, adequately explained the connection of the community’s missional purpose to the fertile spiritual life of the congregation. Other studies have examined Bethlehem’s early religious life but without serious consideration of the way spiritual practices undergirded Bethlehem’s missional identity. By investigating the ways varied spiritual practices of the community expressed and reinforced its missional outreach, this study has sought to contribute to a process of bridging a gap in the literature between studies which have examined Bethlehem’s mission theory/praxis and those which have probed the internal dynamics of the community in the mid-eighteenth century.

The thesis begins by identifying important theological perspectives and antecedent events which later shaped the creation of the Moravian congregation at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Arguing against the view of some scholars, it suggests that, though political opposition and religious acrimony in Europe may have been contributory causes for Moravian expansion from Europe to British North America, it was ultimately a missional ecclesiology and vision which moved the Moravians to form new settlements in Georgia and later in Pennsylvania. Once the Bethlehem
congregation was formally organized in 1742, its communitarian economic and social structure proved to be an effective mechanism for deploying ministry resources and also a means to sustain the community’s missional identity. Bethlehem’s “sending” and “going” subcongregations and also its small-group structure known as classes/bands were used to reinforce important missional convictions.

Several additional chapters demonstrate how various spiritual practices were used not only to foster devotion to Christ, but also as vehicles to articulate important theological convictions and to build group identity around Bethlehem’s missional purpose. Two chapters demonstrate how Moravian hymnody and communal singing helped infuse a sense of missional purpose throughout the Bethlehem congregation. Certain Moravian hymns express missional convictions, evidenced through hymn structure and also in the theological content of hymn texts. This part of the study describes nine missional emphases discerned in the selected hymns and demonstrates that the Moravians gave primacy to Christological factors when developing a missiological framework within their hymnody. Modern studies of Moravian hymnody have largely overlooked the missional qualities of early Moravian hymns. Through their own hymnody the Moravians created a strong link between their devotion to the atoning work of Christ and the outward mission of their church. In doing so, they fostered a perspective which viewed personal service in Christ’s global mission as the appropriate response to Christ’s work of salvation. Another chapter considers the ways in which community-wide expressions of prayer (i.e., the Hourly Intercession, monthly Congregation Days, and sung formal prayers) were understood as a means to enable effective witness. The thesis argues that the Moravians’ intercession, fellowship, and outreach were motivated by a desire to see
new cultures respond to the gospel and then join the rest of the church in offering praise to Christ. The study continues with a chapter which demonstrates that Bethlehem’s overall witness to the world can be considered multidimensional; it was important for the Moravians to communicate the message of Christ in both words and deeds. This dual focus can be seen in the content of daily devotional literature and its use, in deeds of hospitality to outsiders, and in missional preaching within both of these contexts.

Collectively, Bethlehem’s religious practices and their underlying theological convictions gave shape to a distinctive missional spirituality. Spiritual practices were used to strengthen the community’s support of its outward witness and to form a group identity that was missional at its core. This study suggests that the starting place for the Moravians’ theology of mission was not the vision of a potentially better world, the program of the church, or even obedience to a command of Christ; instead, the impulse of mission for the Moravians originated as a joyful response of the heart to the implications of Christ’s work on the cross. Moravian artist Johann Valentin Haidt’s painting of the *First Fruits* is presented as an example of this Christocentric theology of mission as well as a central motif which points to Bethlehem’s identity and missional purpose. The *First Fruits* painting portrays the risen and nail-scarred Christ, surrounded by an ethnically and socially diverse representation of the church. Christ has gathered these souls through the missional outreach of the church. The first-fruits converts in the painting were understood to be the reward for the Savior’s atoning sufferings. Bethlehem’s mission was to gather this reward for Christ, and the Moravians’ understanding of the universal scope of Christ’s atonement meant no group of people was too sinful, too difficult, or too costly to reach, for all fell within the biblically prescribed circumference of God’s mission to “every tribe, language, nation, and people” (Rev. 7:9). Haidt’s
First Fruits painting suggests the perception that the mission of the Moravian Church originated from Christ, was for Christ, and will ultimately end with Christ.

By operating through foundational elements such as spiritual practices, theological convictions, and the nature/form of Christian community, Bethlehem’s leaders shaped congregation members’ basic conception of the Christian life and its purpose. The living expression of missional spirituality cultivated in Bethlehem put missionary purpose into the lifestyle of every church member. The essential responsibility for mission was not delegated by the congregation to a third-party mission society or group of specialists; it was embraced by the community at large. The plan for Bethlehem brought the contemporary concepts of the local church fellowship and the specialized ministry organization together into one organic unit.

Given the Moravians’ enthusiastic acceptance of the Pietists’ renewal of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and the Moravians’ emphasis upon every member’s contributing to Christ’s worldwide mission, I suggest that missional communities like Bethlehem were ultimately necessary within the broader mid-eighteenth century Moravian movement of which the Bethlehem congregation was a part. There needed to be a fresh expression of congregational life and missional spirituality in order to facilitate the church-wide missionary purpose of the mid-eighteenth century Moravian Church.