



THE HINGE

*A Journal of Christian Thought
for the Moravian Church*

***“Race and Faith in
the Moravian Church”***

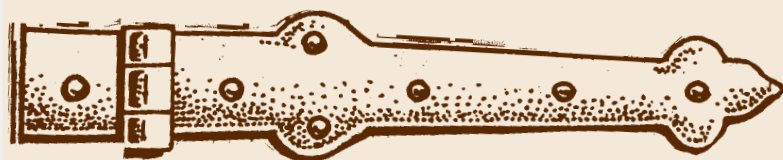
Kathryn Woestendiek Scepanski

Responses by:

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Summer 2003

Volume 10, Number 2



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The Hinge is a forum for discussion in the Moravian Church. Views and opinions expressed in articles published in *The Hinge* are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editorial board or the official positions of the Moravian Church and its agencies. You are welcome to submit letters and articles for consideration for publication.

One of the early offices of the Moravian Church in Bethlehem, Pa. was that of the Hinge. “The office of the Hinge requires that the brother who holds it look after everything and bring troublesome factors within the congregation into mutual accord without their first having to be taken up publicly in the congregation council.” September 1742, *The Bethlehem Diary*, vol. 1, tr. by Kenneth Hamilton, p. 80.

This idea from the Moravian past has been chosen to represent the character of this journal. *The Hinge* is intended to be a mainspring in the life of the contemporary Moravian Church, causing us to move, think, and grow. It is especially sensitive to troublesome factors that may be an obstacle to our mutual accord. Above all, it is to be an instrument for opening doors in our church.

The Hinge cover design was provided by Todd Tyson of Kernersville, N.C.

Notes from the Editor

The Ground of the Unity states: *We oppose any discrimination in our midst because of race or standing, and we regard it as a commandment of the Lord to bear public witness to this and to demonstrate by word and deed that we are brothers and sisters in Christ.*

According to C. Daniel Crews and Richard Starbuck's history of the Southern Province, *With Courage for the Future: The Story of the Moravian Church, Southern Province* (Winston-Salem: Moravian Archives, 2002), the earliest use of the *Ground of the Unity* to resolve a conflict in the Southern Province was on the matter of race. The question was whether African-American Moravians could attend the summer camp and play in the Easter Band. The answer in the early 1960s was "yes" (p. 669). In large part because of the firm stance of the *Ground of the Unity*, Moravians in North Carolina chose to break with a long cultural (and legal) tradition of segregation because it was what Christ would have wanted them to do.

Unfortunately, racism remains a reality in the Moravian Church, just as it does in America. Things are much improved from the days of separate drinking fountains, voter intimidation, and socially-acceptable terrorism, but we have not entered the Promised Land. It is hard to overcome centuries of prejudice and division. Some things cannot be changed by laws or doctrinal statements; they require an opening of our eyes and a change of our hearts.

About ten years ago, we gave our daughter a Cabbage-Patch doll we named Naomi. Sarah loved Naomi and took her with her to church and many other places, but Naomi bothered a lot of people. For some people in New Jersey where we lived, in Pennsylvania where we worshiped, and in North Carolina where we visited family, it was wrong for a white child to love a black doll. We saw people take Naomi out of Sarah's hands and replace her with a white doll. We found Naomi hidden under furniture. We had people tell us that we shouldn't let her carry that doll because it might offend people.

I never knew a child's beloved doll could be so threatening, but she was. Sarah is now a pre-teen, and it is good to see that she has an inter-racial group of friends at school. She is not bothered that we live in an inter-racial neighborhood or that her new principal is African-American. I like to think that Naomi made a small but significant difference in the world.

The Ninth Women's Conference held in this summer demonstrated the great racial and cultural diversity of our intimate community of faith. It also highlighted things that continue to divide us and cause needless pain. There is a long road ahead of us, but if we remain faithful to Christ, we will see the world transformed.

In this issue of *The Hinge*, Kathryn Woestendiek Scepanski reminds us that the Moravian Church continues to make a small, significant difference in the world. She has provided us with a different type of *Hinge* article in that it is based on extensive interviews with Moravians around the country who have been actively involved in inter-racial work over the past half-century. We have fewer respondents than usual because Sr. Scepanski's article reflects the views (and words) of over a dozen Moravians rather than just her own. Our respondents include a bishop of the unity, a former police officer, a retired professor, a current professor, and a retired editor. Two are clergy and three are lay persons.

Race and Faith in the Moravian Church

Kathryn Woestendiek Scepanski

Introduction

Some time ago, someone in Bethlehem encouraged me to write an article for *The Moravian* which combined two subjects he knew had been entwined in my heart for years; 1) race relations and 2) the Moravian Church of North America.

The interim editor who granted me permission to pursue this story was not aware of the prayers and questions on these two fronts that I had had for years. What plans might God have for a denomination as globally diverse as ours? Was it truly the desire of our Chief Elder for us to keep treasures such as diversity, Love Feasts and motto so much to ourselves when, if more fully shared, they could be the source of so much healing to the world around us? If so, why?

Would I live to see North American Moravians come close to reaching out to others as well at home as we do abroad? And why the gap? Was there any truth to the observation that one church leader had once shared with me that newcomers and outsiders have always seen the Moravian Church more clearly than those within its own ranks? If so, how were we to reconcile that fact with the fact that here in North America, so many people have never even heard of such as thing as a Moravian?) You get the picture...

Several years ago, a friend who had saved every issue of *The Hinge* loaned me his collection. As I hungrily wended my way through that stack of

Hinges, I found an article written by Paul Graf entitled “Should the Moravian Church Survive?” I was shocked to discover that many of the concerns he addressed nearly ten years earlier were the same as those that were on my heart during my first seven years in this denomination. Personally, there was both an upside and a downside to that experience for me. The upside was the realization that I was not alone in my concerns. The downside was that apparently nothing had changed.

In the process of working on this article, I was delighted to discover that each of the Moravians I spoke with was willing to communicate with an openness I had come to see as an exception to some invisible rule. I had often asked God if this denomination had secretly adopted an 11th commandment that had infiltrated our church over the years: “*thou shalt not toot thine own horn*”. Heaven knows, and we do too — of late — all the ways the United States knows how to toot its own horn. Does heaven also know of our tendency to exclude our own nation from some of the treasures buried within the Moravian Church in our reticence to be seen by others as tooting our own horn? I stand convinced that the time is now for the Moravian Church of North America to claim its true place among the nations Jesus referred to in Matt. 28:19-20. I can’t imagine my God or my Jesus wanting us to get lost in arguments over His supremacy or what place to give homosexuals in our Church. My Jesus simply insists that I do what

I can to reflect the love, forgiveness and healing He meant for us to come to know and share more fully with each other and the rest of humankind, regardless of our opinions.

For many reasons, it seemed best that the following article should appear in *The Hinge* rather than *The Moravian*.

Cross-Cultural Missions in America

North American Moravians may be more aware of the world mission activities of the church than the challenges the Moravian Church of North America faces when it comes to sewing seeds in its backyard. According to Brother *Hampton Morgan*, former executive director of the Board of World Mission of the Moravian Church, the United States has a lot of room for our denomination to grow and blossom. “We might (from time to time) try to tell ourselves that our mission here is in our traditions,” Brother Morgan said, “but to our spiritual ancestors, it was always to tell the story. Our mission in the U.S. should be no different than what it is in the world, to tell the story of Jesus in appropriate ways with integrity. I’m not sure that’s where we are as a church in this country right now. If we were, we would be trying to plant new churches not just where a cluster of Moravians have moved, but to clusters of Vietnamese, Hispanics or whatever.”

Brother *Gordon Sommers* is a past president of the Northern Province PEC and is currently interim Director of the Board of World Mission. He is the son of an immigrant and has lived in four different cultures: western Canada, Guyana, Nicaragua and the northeastern U.S. “I am very hopeful that we can experience the richness of the body of Christ through the diversity and cultural

interchange we experience as a worldwide church,” he said. “We still have much to learn here in the United States from the richness of the church worldwide.”

Sommers said that over the last forty years the Northern Province has answered the call to start churches among Moravian immigrants but has struggled with the issue of moving beyond those boundaries. “We have not done a good job of planting churches in the Moravian Church of North America,” he said. “Overall our Moravian membership in North America has either declined or remained static, and that is largely due to not finding the key to starting new churches. I don’t have the answer. It caused me grief for twenty years of service on the PEC of the Northern Province. We began new churches, but always used former Moravians as a nucleus. Without the start of those new churches for West Indian Moravian immigrants, our numbers could show decline.”

Expressing concern over some of the challenges now facing the Moravian Church in North America, he said that current concerns over homosexuality and the primacy of Jesus Christ could cause the Moravian Church to lose some of its more fundamentalist members. “They may not be comfortable with the way the church interprets the Scripture critically rather than literally,” he said. “That comes out in the issue of homosexuality immediately before us at this time. If the fundamentalists choose not to stay with the church, our unity could be destroyed.”

Brother *Hopeton Clennon*, a bishop in the Moravian Church and a native of Jamaica, thinks local congregations should reflect the racial, ethnic and socio-economic composition of their neighborhoods. “I think the Moravian Church

has a responsibility to plant and grow churches in neighborhoods that need to receive the Gospel,” he said. “My hunch is that those neighborhoods come in all colors and socio-economic statuses. Those who live in walking distance of the church are the ones who will reflect the humanization of God.” Brother Clennon draws upon the New Testament for support. “In John 20:21, Jesus appeared to his disciples to say ‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ His disciples got the best possible view of God through Jesus. Our neighbors will get the best possible view of God through our day to day ministry with them. Our responsibility is to engage in church planting and/or witnessing in all areas of these United States and in so doing we will have Moravians who are from suburban, urban and rural communities: black, white, brown and all shades in between. I hope we engage in that today. I can’t say how well we’re doing that, but I can say that’s what we’re called to do.”

Brother *Ted Wilde*, a former pastor at Prince of Peace in Miami, and former executive director of the Board of World Mission, said it is important for the church to take the lead in breaking down racial barriers since this is what the church recommends to society. “While most of the churches in our area are Caribbean-, Hispanic-, or African-American, Prince of Peace has had the advantage of being more nationally and ethnically diverse,” Wilde said. “This gave us a special opportunity to witness into the future. New generations are apt to be less intensely ethnic and less likely to want to hold on to their own cultural borders.” Wilde believes that one of the best ways to put an end to prejudice and to form creative relationships between culturally different parts of the Moravian body is for churches to issue calls to pastors outside their own ethnic

or cultural borders.

“Both North American provinces passed a pledge over the last dozen years that they will not discriminate on the basis of gender, race or national origin when calling pastors,” he said. “The first generation of women ministers was not called as senior pastors of thriving congregations. That has changed in the Northern Province over the last ten years. Congregations have called both blacks and women. No white congregation in the Southern Province has yet called a pastor of color, but that will change. I am convinced that congregations are richly blessed when they are more open in their calling of pastors.”

Inter-racial Moravian Congregations

Brother *Belfield Castello*, a native of St. Vincent in the West Indies who is now serving his second all white congregation in the Northern Province, might assure you that those blessings can also extend to pastors who are called to those congregations. He remembers his interview at First Church in Easton, Pa. over six years ago. “In the Moravian Church we talk a lot about fellowship,” he said. “When I came for the interview here, the people asked me what they should call me. I told them they could call me Brother Belfield, and I would call them Sister Mary or Brother John. There is a respect there that is special to who we all are as Christians.”

Sister *Dawn Hughes*, an elder at First Church, remembers the process of calling Brother Belfield. “One of our elders at the time had served on a Synod committee with him and thought he was a great guy. But the rest of us had no idea what he was like. We weren’t a church out to get a black minister, but it turned out to be that the things

Brother Belfield excelled in were the very things we were starving for at the time.” Hughes said some members of the congregation are as likely to call Castello “Peacemaker” as they are to call him “Brother Belfield. “He always encourages us to look at things from all angles,” she said. “He wants us to look at things holistically and try to understand how other people feel.” She said she hopes the experience First Church has had with Brother Belfield might inspire other Moravian churches to consider the possibility of doing things differently. “We all seem to put a lot of attention on tradition, rituals and the way things have always been done,” she said, “and that is good. But sometimes we might also need to see that trying something new or changing something could bring us closer to God.”

Both Hughes and Castello readily admit that occasionally the Spirit will move him in such a way that he will preach beyond the hour most white people have come to expect their worship services to last. Hughes said concerns of the church are given high priority on the agenda of every meeting and Castello only seeks people’s opinions, but also doesn’t get angry when he gets them. “He just says ‘I’m learning, I’m learning . . . your pastor is still learning,’” she said. Brother Belfield said what’s happening in Africa and the West Indies could be a tremendous object lesson for the rest of us. “Moravian missionaries went to black countries and the people heard the Gospel. I think Moravians should see that this is what they can do here too. Christianity has no walls. We build the walls. We talk about love, right? I still believe love is the strongest force in this world.”

He also believes the expression of that love should extend beyond our own walls. “I am telling

the church that I am here as a black, and as long as I’m here and there are also black people in this area, we should reach out to them and encourage them to come to our Sunday school and church. This will be a blessing to all of us. I am ministering to a white church and they are ministering to me, too, and we should be open to ministering to anybody in the community. So far two black families have joined the church. I know our denomination needs to get our churches to look outwardly again. I think we have to begin with the children. I think we have to get young people in the church again, because we do not have many young people presently in our church. While I’m here in this community I will try to get involved in the community.”

Brother *Cedric Rodney*, the only black Moravian minister currently serving in the Winston-Salem area, is a native of Guyana. He is the pastor of St. Philips Moravian Church in Winston-Salem, a predominantly African-American congregation. While still in seminary, Rodney was told about a black Moravian church in Winston-Salem that he might be called to pastor. “I asked several well-known Moravians about St. Philips Church and they didn’t know of it at that time,” he said. “It’s not something people are aware of. You can’t hold it against them. It’s just the way people think. If you are at Unity Synod, you are aware that there are more blacks represented than whites, but the average Moravian member who sits in a pew doesn’t necessarily know that. (If you are in a boat, you don’t look out to see how many sharks may be around.) Most members focus on their own congregation and they aren’t interested in other congregations. You can’t hold that against

them.”

“When I was growing up attending Queenstown Moravian Church, I was there to praise God. I didn’t try to find out how many black people were in the Moravian Church. How many people look in the Daily Texts to see how many Moravians there are in Tanzania? That’s just not how people think.” Rodney said it is not unusual for people he meets to assume he is an African-American. “In most cases, it would be stupid of me to tell them I am not,” he said. “If I know someone well, I might tell them I was born in Guyana, South America. But when you live in Rome, you must do as the Romans do.”

Dr. *Clarence Newsome*, dean of Howard University’s School of Divinity is an ordained Baptist minister who has spent the last two years as pastor of Faith Moravian Church in Washington, D.C. “I’m a good example of how the Moravian Church can reach out,” he said. “My background is Baptist, yet this congregation warmly received me. This congregation seeks to reach out to the community. Our neighborhood association holds its monthly meeting right here at Faith Moravian.” Newsome described the Faith Moravian congregation as 99% black composed mostly of African-Americans, but diverse enough to also include people from Nicaragua, Tanzania, the Virgin Islands and Jamaica. Other than adjusting to the fact that the Moravian Church is more liturgical than the Baptist Church, Newsome said he has not found his transition too difficult. “I attended a Methodist school (Duke), my wife was baptized Catholic, we were married by Presbyterian ministers, and for a while we attended an AME Church and sang in the choir,” he added.

A past president of the Society for the Study

of Black Religion, a nationwide think-tank of scholars engaged in studying the religious experience of African-Americans, Newsome was asked what black Christians might wish white Christians better understood. “That’s a question I usually spend a semester addressing...” he said. “Reciprocity, complementarity and mutuality. All these are expressions of equality, which can be addressed in the ways people interact in reciprocal ways, complementary ways and mutually beneficial ways. In many ways, the black church is built on these things as an affirmation of personhood.”

Newsome said white congregations might take heed of the fact that black congregations seek these kinds of relationships with their counterparts. “Black congregations are always open to white members wanting to join. What’s not clear to the blacks is that membership in white congregations would be affirming in some way. The Moravian Church is so right about how it interprets the Good News. It needs to live as fully as possible what it teaches. If it lives this out as sincerely, openly and honestly as possible, the rest will take care of itself. What the Moravian Church has done over the years is admirable. When the first and second commandments ring true, they ring true in the way that we live them. They have much more to do with how they enrich our relationships than as a convenient way to divide ourselves.”

If it had not been for an outreach program at Second Moravian Church in Indianapolis, Ind. Brother *Mark Breland* might never have become a Moravian pastor. He is the first American born black Moravian pastor serving churches in the U.S. Today Breland is not only pastor of the church that ministered to him as a youth, but is also pastor of Haverford Moravian. He is the only

black minister currently serving both an all white and a predominantly African-American Moravian church. “I just see God’s people,” Breland said. “I see people before I see color. I know that both Haverford and Second try to be open to all people. One of the things that may be different between the two churches is that I am not always a slave to Moravian tradition at Second Church where we sometimes use gospel music and we don’t always use liturgies from the Book of Worship.”

Breland’s introduction to the Moravian Church came through an outreach program Second Church conducted in the mid 1960s initially called the Saturday Club and later Opportunity for Youth. He said that through the efforts of people like Evi Berling, who is now one of the older members of his own congregation, he moved from participating in the outreach program to going to Sunday school. He wonders if the Moravian Church in the United States answers the call to witness to African-Americans today. “If they grew up like I did in the Moravian Church of North America, I think they know about us, but if they didn’t, they might have never heard of us,” he said.

Breland said both Haverford Moravian and Second Moravian agreed to a name change last year by putting Christian after the word Moravian in an attempt to reach beyond their walls to people not familiar with the Moravian Church. “We added the name Christian as an outreach tool,” he said. “We love our Moravian tradition, but at the same time we realized that most people don’t know about the Moravian Church. By adding the name Christian, we let people know that we are a Christian church, so they don’t have to ask. Most folks in America don’t know about the

Moravian Church. Our goal is not so much to promote Moravians as to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. The name change is for those who don’t know about us. To many people outside our church, the word ‘Moravian’ doesn’t mean Christian.” He said most African-Americans, when asked what church they go to, are more apt to respond with the name of their pastor than the name of their church. “African-Americans can become very attached to their pastors,” he said.

Breland likes to believe that his call to ministry is to serve all God’s people, and said he that hopes the two churches he currently serves can continue to shape their ministries to be open to all God’s people. “I have never served two churches before,” he said. “Since you don’t learn that in seminary, this has been a real learning experience for me. I would really like for the Moravian Church to simply be seen as a valuable place for all God’s people to come.”

Sister *Dawn Volpe*, now in her tenth year as pastor of Trinity Moravian in New Carrollton, Md., has witnessed the church she serves grow in visibility as a valuable place for all of God’s people. Trinity now has a membership so diverse that its congregation includes blacks from Nigeria, St. Thomas and Trinidad, and whites from Germany, northern and southern America, with religious traditions that can range from Roman Catholic to Pentecostal.

“I won’t say that this kind of diversity is easy,” Volpe said, “because it isn’t. Sometimes people have to give and take because of the diverse religious and cultural traditions we have here.” Volpe said the gift that members of her church would love to share with other Moravian churches in North America is how much richer they are through their willingness

to diversify. “Our attitudes are less apt to become entrenched,” she said. “Sometimes when you are in a church for a long time with people just like you, things can really get entrenched. We have all the ‘Moravian’ stuff but we are not set in concrete. Our attitudes have become more flexible because we know that not everybody here thinks the same way we do. Not everybody comes from a white European background.” She continues, “When you treat somebody of a different culture differently than you treat members of your own, it’s not treating them as a brother or sister. People feel it when they are not being treated like family. Excessive politeness or trying to get consensus is not what we’re about as a church.”

Members of the Trinity family frequently socialize during the week as well as on Sundays, often to celebrate events such as a birthday, a graduation, or the birth of a child. “We go to each other’s houses,” Volpe said. “Often people invite the whole church. True friendships are not established by shaking hands on Sunday. If you’re going to have true Christian fellowship, it happens by staying in touch between Sundays.”

Volpe remembers a Sunday in the early 1990s when a snowstorm forced a Nigerian man who lived nearby to bring his family to Trinity. “He thought it was bad enough that a woman was in charge,” she said. “And the strange name (Moravian) that he had never heard of made him wonder if we were some kind of a cult. At that point, we were still a mostly white organization. He told me later that said the Lord spoke to him as he sat in our midst and told him not to look at appearances but to simply sit and listen. Today that man is one of my staunchest supporters. He has served on our Board of Elders and his children are very active in our youth group.

I know I can call on that family any time I need help. And he calls me every week just to ask how I am and check on my family.”

She attributes the change in Trinity’s complexion over the last ten years not only to changes in the neighborhood but also the openness of the congregation. “One man who came in said he knew that I’d be friendly because that was my job, but he watched to see how the others reacted to his presence. He decided to stay because they were friendly and welcoming. That’s the key to diversity in a church right there. People know when you love them and when you don’t. I asked a woman from a Pentecostal background why she joined our church and she said it was because she just couldn’t get around the fact that we loved her just as she was.”

Volpe joined the Moravian Church at the age of 22 after growing up in an Assembly of God congregation. “My first Moravian minister was Jamaican,” she said. “Now he is Bishop Stanley Thomas. Sometimes North Americans can forget that we are as much of a mission as the rest of the world. “My greatest challenge as minister here has been learning the different cultures and the way other people’s world views can differ from mine, as well as looking for and finding what connects us all. Not every person of color is from the same culture and each culture can have a very different worldview. It’s not easy to have a diverse congregation. We all have to have a lot more patience.”

Despite the diversity of the population in New Carrollton, Volpe said many nearby churches remain segregated. “One of our young men asked me what I thought about segregated churches. I told him that it probably breaks the heart of God, but it’s reality.”

Three Generations of Moravians Engaged in Reconciliation

A look into the hearts and experience of three Moravians from different generations can help us understand how those with a deep concern for race relations view reality. Brother Herbert Weber is 77. Brother Frederic Bahnson III is 57. Brother Paul Couch is 37. They are by no means alone in their commitment to improve race relations, but each of them has his own story to tell about how he came to care.

Herbert Weber's interest in racial relations began when he was a student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill more than fifty years ago. "I attended services at the University Methodist Church," Weber said, "where Henry C. Ruark often preached on the subject of race relations. At the same time, Charlie Jones was pastor of the Presbyterian Church and he too was quite outspoken on race relations. Dr. Frank Graham was president of the university at that time and he was also outspoken in that area." Weber said he had never been forced to think about race relations before college. "Chapel Hill was seen as a hotbed of liberal thinking back then," he said. "I rejected most of the other things. But I did develop a concern about race and it was those three people who were willing to speak out in those days who affected me."

Although Weber served on the Human Relations Commission of the City of Winston-Salem for at least seven years, the now retired Moravian minister admitted that a lot of his interest in race relations over the years has been focused on the Moravian Church. "I have often thought about the fact that in this worldwide community of ours, the percentage of nonwhites is way up there between 80-85 percent," he said. "I don't think

the average Moravian in Winston-Salem knows that is true. People can grow up in white churches here and just assume that Moravians everywhere are just like them. But the areas where the church is growing today are places where the people are not white, like Africa and Central America, not Europe or North America. I know this is true not just of the Moravian Church but also of mainline denominations. Part of that is not so much racial as our secular society. Perhaps the Christian faith today reaches more people in the third world than it does in our own very secular society.

Last fall, Weber was greeted in the parking lot of the Little Church on the Lane in Charlotte by a lady wearing a big smile. "I recognized her immediately as a woman who had come to that church 25 years ago as an immigrant from Sierra Leone, West Africa. She and her husband were then students at a Charlotte community college. They had come from a British colony and liked the dignity and ritual they found at the Little Church on the Lane. They applied for membership at a time when no African-Americans had worshipped there regularly. The Board of Elders approved their membership without objection. Soon after they began to bring other friends with them who were also foreign students from West Africa.

"That woman is not only a Sunday school teacher now, but has also served on the boards of the Little Church on the Lane. On the same Sunday I saw her in the parking lot, I counted at least fifteen others in the parking lot, almost all of which (I assume) may have come from West Africa. Once immigrants in a foreign land, they found a home at the Little Church on the Lane."

Weber wonders if many white people in Winston-Salem, the South and maybe even the

entire country live in a kind of cocoon with no idea as to what life is like for African-Americans. “I don’t think it’s because they have any ill will toward them,” he said. “It’s just out of the range of the experience of the average white and that’s a big part of the problem. “I couldn’t do it any more successfully than anyone else, but I often tried to imagine what it would be like to have a black skin in this society rather than a white one.”

Dr. *Fred Bahnson*, a descendent of one of the original five adults who left Moravia for Count Zinzendorf’s estate, knows what it feels like to shed the shackles of prejudice for a new way of thinking. Bahnson grew up as a Moravian in Winston-Salem. He never realized what a standoffish attitude he had toward blacks until he developed a great appreciation and love for the people he and his wife Julie had the opportunity to get to know when they served in Nigeria from 1984 to 1987. “I went from wanting to be separate to wanting to be with them,” he said. “Ever since we returned from Africa we have found that much of white America is not interested in and does not want to hear about this kind of change in attitude. It just doesn’t seem to touch their hearts.”

The Bahnsons lived in Montana for nearly a decade after returning from Africa, until they felt God’s call to become involved in racial issues and decided to move back to Winston-Salem. His first day back in Winston-Salem on a Sunday in October of 1997 came right after a Promise Keepers meeting he had attended in Washington, D.C. “I met two black women on the flight to Greensboro and they and their husbands were kind enough to drop me off at Home Moravian Church. That very day the Church had invited the black congregation from St. Philips to have lunch

and hear a speaker from Africa after the service. I noticed the white Moravians started eating before the St. Philips Moravians got there. I was surprised to see how very few people got out of their seats to greet the St. Philips members when they did arrive. And I realized then what a huge gap continued to exist between black and white people, even among Moravians.”

The Bahnsons visited a variety of Winston-Salem churches over several months before they chose to join Emmanuel Baptist Church, a predominantly black congregation that was also a sister church to Home. “We joined with the blessing of the church elders at Home Church,” Bahnson said. Asked why a white Moravian joined a predominantly black church, Bahnson said his mother asked him the same question. “We wanted to show solidarity with our black brothers and sisters in Christ,” he said. “We also happen to feel more akin to worship in a black church than we do in a white church. Black churches feel more real to us with freedom of expression, and with joy and thankfulness much less stifled by the need to appear proper.”

Since Bahnson did not want to separate his faith in God from other aspects of his life in Winston-Salem, he decided to open his ear, nose and throat practice in East Winston, which is also predominantly black. His medical practice never took off in East Winston, for reasons he said ranged from medical politics and group referral patterns to an abundance of ear, nose and throat doctors. He closed the practice after being open for only two months. In 1999 they moved to Brevard, N.C. where an ear, nose and throat doctor was needed. Once there, he and Julie joined the largest black Baptist church in town, Bethel.

In retrospect, Bahnson considers the time he spent in Winston-Salem time well spent. “Even though I had a failed medical practice,” he said, “I look at the time I spent in Winston-Salem as successful. I had the privilege of meeting the daughter of a slave that used to belong to my family. She came to our house for dinner and baked me a chocolate cake. I met a black man who is my fifth cousin as a result of a master-slave relationship and became friends with him. I got to know the people at Emmanuel Baptist and I got to spend more time with my immediate family.”

For Bahnson, the call to do what he can as an individual to bridge the gap he perceives to be present between white and black residents of his home state is as present today as it was several years back. “One of the things that has to take place among our people is truth and honesty,” he said. “Us white people need to see if our hearts are right toward our fellow man. I think any white person serious about their walk with God should be willing to ask God if their hearts are right toward people of color and be open to the answer.”

Paul Couch has no doubt in his mind that his own interest in race relations began at a very early age. “You learn a lot about life before the age of five. My father started Redeemer Moravian, an intentionally integrated church that was ahead of its time, in Philadelphia in 1965, when I was six months old. We were there for six years.”

Couch was the pastor of another Redeemer Moravian Church (this one is in Richmond, Va.) and chairman of the Virginia Council of Churches’ Faith and Order Commission when his childhood experiences began to kick in. He organized a statewide summit to explore the ways racism was

still affecting the church at the time of the rash of church burnings in the 90s. Ben Campbell, the grandson of Bishop J. Kenneth Pfohl, was one of the speakers to participate in that event. “Ben and I hooked up because of our Moravian connection,” Couch said. An Episcopal priest and pastoral director of Richmond Hill, an ecumenical urban retreat center, Campbell thought Richmond Hill might benefit from a program similar to what Couch had done for the Council of Churches and asked him to consider working for the retreat center for a year.

“I had never consciously made the decision to work in race relations,” Couch said, “but a position funded for one year at Richmond Hill was just what I needed to be able to learn to listen to African-Americans, which is something I think many European-Americans don’t do very well.” Couch listened to white ministers as well as black ministers, visiting with both in their offices. He attended African-American minister-ial meetings. What he heard gave him a sense of the challenge at hand. “The black ministers were not interested in talk but in doing,” he said. The white ministers were interested in relationship building and thought the best way of doing that was talk. It caused me a great struggle, because as I listened to all these folks I was trying to figure out how to meld these things together.”

In the midst of that struggle, urban transportation became an issue of social justice that brought whites and blacks together. “It was something that all of us could come together over, talk about and take action on. The action component brought the African-Americans to the table and the European-Americans came because it

involved relationship. Shortly after that, the pastors came together with one voice on that issue and took the appropriate action as a group.”

When his year was up with the retreat center, Couch moved to North Carolina expecting to be able to find more work in race relations here. “Now, I know there are not a lot of jobs in that field here,” he said. “So what I do in that area, I do as a volunteer.” Currently an assistant pastor at Raleigh Moravian, Couch has facilitated Study Circles on Race, a national program offered through the Wake County YWCA. “The group comes together to discuss racism and prejudice, how it affects our lives, families, work environment and nation with the idea being at the end of those ten hours participants will take some action toward making changes in their individual lives as well as their spheres of influence. It’s interesting to see those who participate grow and come to understand each other more. The highest percentage of participants is women, followed by African-American men. It’s the European-American male who does not seem to show up for this.”

Couch doesn’t feel like he has much of a choice when it comes to trying to improve race relations. “I think once you get involved in this kind of work and you see how oblivious we as European-Americans are to our own privilege, it’s really hard to look at the world in the same way anymore. You just can’t.” Couch was asked if he could envision a time when he might no longer feel the need to be involved with this kind of work. “Always is a long time,” he said, “but I don’t expect to be able to walk away from this work.”

Closing Commentary

Over the past few years, there have been several calls for change within the church, and although not much of the struggle has filtered through our well-insulated communication channels, perhaps a few seeds have fallen in places where they bear some chance of taking root. We are apt to view any issue currently in our midst as a glass half-full or a glass half-empty, depending on our individual perspectives. I’m not inclined to label or judge the issues at hand. I’d rather make the choice to rejoice over the what I perceive to be a call for every member of this denomination to begin to recognize—and maybe even move beyond—the walls of our own making. We must be willing to enter into a fuller dialogue with each other, as well as our Chief Elder, about what we have to share with others. And if some of us have come to take the treasures in our Church for granted, then perhaps it’s time to see them newly (“try them again, for the first time!” as a Kellogg’s ad for corn flakes once said). We must also begin to identify those whom we consider “others”. Are they black or white, rich or poor, newcomers, outsiders or old-timers, church leader or rank and file member, male or female, single or married, gay or straight, fundamentalist or traditionalist, Christian or non-Christian? No matter who they are, we are called to reach out to them in love.

One outstanding memory I have from time spent in the Southern Province of the Moravian Church of North America is a service held at Home Church for a large group of multi-denominational interim ministers from throughout the country who were attending a conference at Wake Forest University. From my perch in the choir that evening, I could not only see, but also feel, their response to this brief

exposure to the Moravian Church. Many of their faces told me that they could see and feel what (as well as who) was welcome in this place. Again the words of one former church leader rang in my ears. “Newcomers and outsiders have always seen the Moravian Church more clearly than those within its own ranks.”

Our Chief Elder knew the Source of the power he came to demonstrate. He told his disciples, “You will do these things and more.” He was no stranger

to the love He knew would be more fully shared with, and by, those he had known and those he would be able to come to know just the other side of his own pain.

He was no stranger to the healing power of love. Neither are we.

“Nevertheless, by the work of contemplative love, man will be healed.” The Cloud of Unknowing.

Former Winston-Salem resident Kathryn Woestendiek Scepanski now lives in DeForest, Wisconsin, where she is a member of Christian Faith Moravian Church. When she's not hibernating, she continues to explore writing, healing, music and the Moravian Church.

Responses

Paul Graf

We can appreciate the journey on which Sister Kathryn has ventured with the issue of race relations, one that initially seemed to have been sidetracked. Her wayside stops catch the perspectives of our sisters and brothers and have an impact that, needs to be shared. Though significant progress has been made since the Civil Rights moment of the Sixties, there's still a mountain to be moved in breaking down the walls of intolerance, bigotry and racism. This mission is huge, and her is paper helpful in reaching new levels of understanding.

I immediately looked for common threads of thought between the various individuals with whom she visited. Initially, I was disappointed that Sister Kathryn hadn't provided more of this in her commentary. That absence, however, caused me to dig and scratch, and made her article come alive in a way not experienced at first or second reading. The threads of insight and wisdom winding and weaving their way through the life experience of her respondents are truly significant.

➤ **The call to ministry in improving race relations is not optional.**

By their testimony, each of the respondents has demonstrated their passion for and commitment to the task. This reminds us all of Paul's encouragement to the Corinthian Church when he states, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us this ministry of reconciliation." 2 Corinthians 5:18 NRSV.

➤ **We are called to treat one another with respect, truth, and honesty.**

Especially helpful was the suggestion of identifying each other as "Sister" and "Brother." This was a "2 X 4 experience" for me (laid alongside the head to get my attention), since I have had an aversion to doing this, seeing it as one more antiquated Moravian custom. I'm converted. To call someone "brother" or "sister" really can be a pathway to respecting that individual. When there is respect, perhaps there can be understanding.

➤ **Let reciprocity, the complementarity and mutuality under gird our relationships.**

One brother lifts up for us that "as an affirmation of person-hood, we as white Christians, would do well to interact in reciprocal, complementary and mutually beneficial ways." It doesn't take much to jump to wider levels of relationship opportunities where these three concepts can be applied, as with our Islamic sisters and brothers.

➤ **A listening mind and heart is essential to improving all relationships.**

A dear friend who coordinated a Hospice program stated, "There is a reason God created us with one mouth, but two ears!" What are our sisters and brothers of all genders, races and cultures really saying to us, and will we listen carefully enough that we truly understand their meaning?

➤ **The improvement of race relations requires dropping labels.**

My mother, Evangeline Hauptert Graf, taught me a vivid lesson in “just seeing people,” as one respondent noted. While visiting prior to the funeral of a family member she said, “Paul, isn’t that a beautiful woman?” I replied, “Which one...and where?” She said, “The one in the gorgeous red dress.” Mom was right; she was strikingly beautiful. But if that had been I doing the identifying, I would have identified her by saying, “Why the black woman!”

➤ **Expand our boundaries to embrace the diversity of God’s people.**

I recall the “church growth” emphasis that momentarily touched the Northern and Southern Provinces a number of decades ago. The concept of “homogenous” was an integral part of growing a church, where “like kinds will be drawn to like kinds.” For far too long the Christian church in America has been there. Then and today I would have to label this approach to growth as prostituting the Gospel and contrary to the witness to which we have been called. Diversity is God’s gift in and to the Body of Christ. Homogenous may grow churches, but does that further serve to create enclaves where potentially intolerance, bigotry and separation can be fostered?

➤ **Being friendly is not enough; we are called to offer our friendship.**

It is wonderful when visitors compliment our congregations for our friendliness, but it is not so wonderful when those visitors attempt to break through and into the taproot of established relationships, only to shrivel up and die on the vine because no one offered them the gift of friendship.

➤ **It’s time to crawl out of our comfortable cocoons.**

It is so safe and comfortable to live in our chosen cocoons, but if we are to effect improvement in race relations, we must abandon old havens and structures. In a particular way, one respondent did just that in seeking out and uniting in membership with a black congregation. This brother redrew his circles of opportunities.

Bishop Milo Loppnow often quotes the words of Edwin Markham, writing in *Lincoln, the Man of the People*. He states in his chapter titled “How the Great Guest Came:” “He drew a circle that shut me out—heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But love and I had the wit to win: We drew a circle that took him in.”

Sister Kathryn has demonstrated in her own life and the lives of over a dozen others that when you talk about race relations, when facing anti-Semitism, religious arrogance, and any other kind of arrogance and intolerance, there is the constant and continual drawing of lines that either includes or excludes. The task of the faithful is to continually redraw lines that lovingly embrace the whole people of God, regardless of the labels and distinctions with which we in our culture so often tend to brand one another.

Even now across the Moravian Unity the lines are being drawn between disagreeing factions. I thank God for the prophetic word of the few who warn that we have become far too one-dimensional, obsessed with issues such as “correct theology” and “homosexuality.” We need to move on in a spirit of acceptance and love. What would happen in race relations if all that passion and energy were re-directed toward identifying with our sisters and

brothers whom many still attempt to marginalize and keep out of the circle?

All said and done, I am faced with a question; “how has Sister Kathryn’s article impacted me?” Simply this: If I am to err in drawing the line, let it be in redrawing an ever-widening circle to be inclusive of all of God’s children. I believe this is what Christ is calling us to do. However, it just may be that we still have to figure out just what it means to truly follow the one Head of our Church and Lord of our lives, Jesus the Christ.

The Right Reverend Paul A. Graf is a retired pastor and serves as a bishop of the Moravian Unity.

Edward J. P. O’Connor

Kathryn Woestendick Scepanski has written an important and timely article (witness the rededication of St. Philips Moravian Church in Old Salem on May 4, 2003). The article gains in validity from the fact that she has not just stated her own opinions but has allowed people to speak for themselves from their varied perspectives. It would be a shame, however, if we did not move beyond discussion to action. I would like to make a few suggestions based on literature, observation, and past experience.

I am not experienced enough in Moravian missions and the call process to be very definitive on church planting outside the Moravian community and on increasing the number of minority ministers in our churches. However, it would seem that Synod resolutions would move church planting to a top priority. And, if the Moravian Church is not training enough minority ministers, it may be necessary, as Brother Wilde suggested, to look outside the denomination. I have had enough experience with affirmative action (having chaired several search committees at the University of Connecticut) to know that the key is not quotas; the key is communication. It is necessary to be certain that qualified minority candidates are informed of openings and encouraged to apply. It is equally necessary for Provincial officers to communicate with churches and guide them toward these candidates.

Following are some principles for “moving beyond the walls” on other issues.

➤ **Invitation.** I have frequently heard people say, “Our doors are open to anyone who wants to come, regardless of race, social status,” etc. But as Brother Breland noted, many people do not

know about the Moravian Church and may be reluctant to enter those doors. Brother Belfield said, “we should be open to ministering to anybody in the community.” White churches need to be more aggressive in reaching out to people in the community. Members can invite minority people to their services and programs whenever they encounter them as individuals, and they can invite groups: church boards, committees, youth, seniors, fellowship groups, etc. They must then be prepared to welcome the visitors, introduce them to people, invite them to Sunday School classes, and the like. It does not accomplish much if minorities simply attend a service, occupying the same space as church members, but do not interact with anyone. The objective initially probably should not be to increase membership, because the people invited may be members of other churches, but rather, as Brother Sommers stated, to “experience the richness of the body of Christ through diversity and cultural interchange.” If some later choose to join, that is a bonus.

➤ **Preparation.** Unfortunately, we become set in our ways. Brother Breland pointed out that various churches may have different styles of worship. And Sister Volpe said that, “Not every person of color is from the same culture and each culture can have a very different worldview.” If groups with different traditions are invited to a Moravian service, or vice versa, it might be well to have a representative from a given church prepare the others for what they will encounter. For example, the late Prof. Pearl Williams Jones, an authority on the history of spirituals and gospel music, described the fact that most white congregations sing hymns with the same style and intensity for all of the verses, while in black churches, the objective is to build in intensity

to an emotional peak at the last verse. Other African retentions in performance style include the “call and response” song form, repetition and variation, movement to the music, and clapping. An orientation to a style of worship might be presented during a worship service, a reception after the service, a special Sunday or Wednesday night program, or a meeting of a particular group that plans to attend the other church (youth, for example).

➤ **Introduction.** For people of different backgrounds to interact successfully, it is important to break the barrier of anonymity immediately. A project in New Haven, CT, in 1974-78, brought together middle school students from predominantly black and predominantly white schools for an extended experience in the arts. The premise was that an arts experience would promote positive racial interaction. In the first session the students learned the names of everyone else in the group so that they were no longer strangers. Then they did a series of activities that mixed everyone in a non-threatening way (build a human “machine,” with each person being a different part). The project was very successful.

In the fall of 2002 members of a black church and a white church met together at Laurel Ridge for a weekend family retreat. They, also, started with an activity in which everyone got acquainted and soon felt comfortable with each other. Discussion groups were organized not by race or church affiliation, but by month of birth. People were mixed in a manner that helped avoid the pitfall that Sister Volpe mentioned of people feeling that they were being treated differently.

➤ **Seeing Ourselves.** Several times I have heard people say, “When I was growing up, we

didn't think about segregation as being wrong. That's just the way things were." It is difficult to observe and analyze our own thoughts and behaviors, especially when, as Brother Weber noted, "People can grow up in white churches and just assume that Moravians everywhere are just like them." In 1964, Arensberg and Niehoff wrote a book for Peace Corps workers called *Introducing Social Change* to help them understand the cultures in which they would be working. But, the authors included a chapter on American Cultural Values so that the workers would be aware of the impression they would make on others and sources of conflict. Sometimes it is necessary to confront our perceptions, or lack of them, directly. There are some models for doing this. The Interprovincial Faith and Order Commission published a document in 1998, "Racism and the Church: A Study of the Church's Statement on Racism." It includes a guide for four one-hour study sessions with the following objectives (in part): to articulate the definition of racism and prejudice; to identify concrete practices of individual and institutional racism in our society; to identify strategies for changing attitudes and behavior. This study guide is available through the office of the Board of Christian Education, but has rarely been used.

Another model, initiated by Rev. Neil Routh, was a series of six sessions on racial reconciliation in which members of Grace Moravian met with members of black churches in Mount Airy with Rev. Carlton Eversley, a Presbyterian minister in Winston-Salem, as facilitator. Members of Grace learned a great deal about the experience of black people in Mount Airy. One black participant said, "I've never had a chance to say these things

to white people before." She was a teacher with a master's degree and certified in administration, but had never been, and did not expect to be, offered a position in administration. I think that the white participants shared Brother Couch's experience of learning to listen to African-Americans. This model responds to Brother Weber's concern that "a lot of white people . . . have no idea as to what life is like for African-Americans." As part of this program, participants interviewed people in the community to gain a perspective on the black experience, over the years, in Mount Airy in regard to health, education, real estate, etc. It was revealing for all. For example, there are minority people who are suspicious of white doctors, based on past experience. They will go to a pharmacist and ask for "something for a headache" without being treated for the cause.

In regard to models, I would also highlight the program, Study Circles in Race, mentioned by Brother Couch.

➤ **Youth.** Brother Belfield stated: "I think we have to start with the children." White churches can invite minority children to Sunday school and Vacation Bible School. Youth groups from white and black churches can meet together and, especially, do joint projects such as community service, Habitat for Humanity, and mission trips. In his book, *Race Matters*, Cornell West recommends youth leadership training. Chambers of Commerce and the YMCA have developed such programs. Our churches could use these as models or direct our youth into them.

➤ **Action.** Brother Couch noted the importance of having some action as the focus of group meetings. At times it is appropriate to talk about race, but at other times positive racial interaction results from

concentrating on other goals together. In the New Haven arts project mentioned above, students as a group developed stories, staged them, added sound, movement, and scenery, and videotaped the stories as scenarios. The students were completely and unselfconsciously intermixed racially. At the family retreat previously cited, the focus was on Bible study. In Winston-Salem, the interracial project known as CHANGE (Communities Helping All Gain Empowerment) is a grass roots coalition working successfully to resolve various civic problems.

➤ **Celebrate diversity.** It is important for people to gain respect for each other's accomplishments. One of the best ways is through public presentations (even if the public is just our congregations). Let's bring together choirs from white and minority churches to sing for and with each other. Surely there are talented artists in our congregations who could come together for an exhibit of their works, perhaps with "gallery talks." No doubt, there are many other possibilities.

I submit the above suggestions as ways that Moravians can, as Kathryn Woestendick Scepanski puts it, "move beyond the walls of our own making."

Edward J. P. O'Connor, Ed.D., is Professor Emeritus at the University of Connecticut, a member of Grace Moravian Church, and Chair of the Southern Province Commission on Church and Society.

Charlotte Disher

First of all, I would like to say how honored I am to have been asked to respond to Kathryn Woestendick Scepanski's article "Race and Faith in the Moravian Church" in *The Hinge*, particularly on a topic that is as near and dear to my heart as race relations. I was born and raised in New England, but I have made North Carolina my home for the past twenty-three years. I have been a committed Moravian for fifteen of those twenty-three years and I am currently a rising third-year Divinity student at Wake Forest University Divinity School in Winston-Salem, N.C. After I graduate, I will undoubtedly work in urban ministry setting: embracing the poor, standing beside the downtrodden, and working toward racial harmony together with my brothers and sisters of color, if I am privileged enough to be entrusted with a part in this vital mission toward unity. How can I be so certain of this vocational calling, one might ask? The answer is quite simply providential. To borrow a phrase from the title of a life-changing book by Parker J. Palmer, it will be high time I "let my life speak."

Prior to this call into the professional ministry, I patrolled the streets of Winston-Salem as a beat cop for fifteen years. I desperately tried to fulfill my oath of office, "to protect and serve" the citizens of Winston-Salem as impartially as the law and the Criminal Justice System would allow, but neither the laws themselves nor the system that upholds those laws embraces such impartiality. Everything within that archaic and impenetrable system is either black or white, right or wrong, good or bad, legal or illegal, and people are either guilty or not guilty in

the eyes of the law. If only reality and the people who live and function within it were indeed as straightforward as the Criminal Justice System would have them to be! Thankfully, however, they are not and my complex view of our diverse world did not meld with such a clear-cut yet intrinsically flawed perspective on reality.

While working from within that dichotomous Criminal Justice System, many African American citizens hated me, for good reason, because of the color of my skin and the stigma of hatred associated with the uniform I wore. It was not until I sat watching a slide-show in an orientation session for Divinity School in August of 2001 that I was spiritually jarred awake by the imagery of a youthful Martin Luther King, Jr. in handcuffs, being led away by two uniformed patrol officers. Then I fully grasped the deep-seated hatred I, in my white skin wearing that blue uniform, had repeatedly rekindled within many African Americans in our community. I knew then and there that my new vocational calling would quite probably entail me wearing the handcuffs, not carrying them, and that was just fine with me!

As I read Scepanski's article, a most glaring and surprising omission leapt off the pages at me at every turn. Although each of the persons interviewed for Scepanski's article, and even Scepanski herself, espoused progressive ideals about race relations from their own personal experiences, not one of these people referred to either *The Ground of the Unity* or *The Covenant of Christian Living* as a basis for their observations, behaviors, or beliefs. It saddens me, especially in light of recent divisive issues surrounding *The Ground of the Unity*, that we Moravians do not turn to these vital and living documents more often

for direction and guidance in such challenging matters as race relations. I find both of these foundational Moravian statements of faith and life as fluid and thriving as the Holy Scriptures themselves and I am certain that the original authors, as well as the more recent editors, fully intended that to be so!

Both *The Ground of the Unity* and *The Covenant of Christian Living* are very clear when it comes to the subject of racial equality and the like. There is little, if any, room for doubt about where all members of the Moravian Church, its laity and clergy alike, are currently supposed to stand on these issues. The former states, "We oppose any discrimination in our midst because of ethnic origin, sex, or social standing, and we regard it as a *commandment* of the Lord to bear public witness to this and to demonstrate by word and deed that we are brothers and sisters in Christ." The latter goes even farther than that in making a universal statement, based in Scripture, which affirms, "Because we hold that *all people are God's creatures* (Genesis 1:27) and that [God] has made of one blood all nations (Acts 17:26), we oppose any discrimination based on color, race, creed, or land of origin and declare that we should treat everyone with love and respect." The language in both of these seminal Moravian documents is precise, indisputable and direct.

Each of us, as committed members of the worldwide Moravian Church, has a covenantal as well as Scriptural "command" to "oppose" racial discrimination in not just one, but two, sound Moravian documents. Not only are we to seek racial harmony "in our midst," which I interpret to mean *within our local communities*,

we are to “bear public witness” to positive and progressive, race relations among “all nations” upon the soil of our own backyards. Scepanski has sown some of these positive seeds, to use her own words, by writing and ensuring the publication of this article. Those persons interviewed and quoted in her article have also been sowing their own seeds of racial reconciliation in myriad and wonderfully unique ways along their individual life paths.

I implore each one of you reading this written response to revisit both vibrant Moravian documents known as *The Ground of the Unity* and *The Moravian Covenant for Christian Living* and read them carefully through to their conclusion. Then, ask yourself what type and where you have sown seeds of racial reconciliation lately? If you cannot remember or simply do not know the answer to these two simple questions, might I suggest “listening for the voice of vocation” (the subtitle to Parker Palmer’s book, which I referred to at the beginning of my response) once again in your life? It worked for me!

Charlotte Disher is an M.Div. student at Wake Forest Divinity School and is a member of Home Moravian Church.

Neil Thomlinson

The lead article by Sister Kathryn Woestendiek Scepanski raises two important and interconnected questions for the North American Moravian Church: the way it handles “race relations” (or what we Canadians prefer to call “ethnic diversity”) generally and, more specifically, the way its perception of ethnic diversity affects Moravian outreach within North America. In the words of the lead article, this is about the way the North American Moravian Church handles the challenges faced “when it comes to sewing seeds in its own backyard.”

Although the thesis of the lead article is not stated explicitly, I read it as a two-part argument. First, the article seems to argue that, notwithstanding the notable exceptions cited, a form of racism is alive and well in the Moravian Church. This argument is supported by the continuing positive correlation between the skin colour of the pastor and that of his/her congregation. The second, less developed, argument seems to be that Moravian outreach in rapidly growing non-white-European communities is inadequate, and that this can be at least partially explained by the presence of some form of racism within the North American Moravian Church. These are certainly arguments that demand thoughtful consideration.

In responding, I’m going to try to push the analysis a little further in four ways. First, I’ll set out a working definition of “racism” as the word itself tends to stir up a controversy that inhibits the rational discussion of attendant problems. Second, I’ll explore a couple of models intended to promote peaceful coexistence at the level of the nation-state and ask whether there are from those

models that can be applied within our church as it attempts to deal with all kinds of diversity. Third, by raising a series of questions to which I have no answers, I'll argue that the church needs to do some basic sociological research into the issues flagged by this discussion. Finally, I will argue that, in a democratically governed Protestant church, there are issues involved here that transcend the obvious bases of racism — skin colour and culture — and suggest that they may be rooted in doctrinal difference (what, in a temporal setting, would be called “ideology”).

Racism: A Working Definition

First, it must be recognised that the whole conception of “race” is:

... a socially-constructed phenomenon based on the erroneous assumption that physical differences such as skin colour, hair colour and texture, and facial features are related to intellectual, moral, or cultural superiority. The concept of race has no basis in biological reality and, as such, has no meaning independent of its social definitions. But, as a social construction, race significantly affects the lives of people of colour.

Racism (more correctly, “social racism”) refers to the assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of individuals as well as to the institutional policies, processes, and practices that flow from those understandings.¹

Racism is not, of course, one-dimensional, but rather represents a fairly broad spectrum of views. There are “dominative” racists—strong, hard-core bigots who are prepared to act on their attitudes—and there are “aversive” racists. The latter can be further divided into at least two categories: those who are still prejudiced but don't act on their

prejudices, instead behaving politely when interracial interaction is unavoidable; and those who are “impelled by a strong social conscience, consider themselves liberals and, despite their sense of aversion (which may not be admitted inwardly) do their best within the given structure of society to ameliorate the conditions of the [oppressed].² The “poster children” of this form of racism must surely be Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn in the classic movie *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner*.

In short, racism, at its root, is about a “we/they” model in which, while “... one must accept the idiosyncrasies of the ‘others,’ the underlying premise is that the dominant way is superior.”³

Do the circumstances described in the lead article constitute “racism?” I think it's pretty hard to argue that racism (as described above) is not at least one factor in the preponderance of cases where the pastor is a mirror image of those who have power within a given congregation. As we will see below, however, other related factors may also be at work.

On “Melting Pots” and “Mosaics”

In considering the way in which our church handles diversity (ethnic and otherwise), it is instructive to think about the way broader society deals with the same issues. Most societies aim for a similar policy goal—the peaceful coexistence of people with diverse backgrounds, customs, beliefs, and values—but different societies choose different policy instruments to achieve that end.

The USA and Canada are fine examples of a similar goal being pursued by different means. There is ample literature⁴ contrasting

the American “melting pot” model (and the preoccupation with assimilation that underpins it) with the Canadian “mosaic” model (and the official policy of bilingualism and multiculturalism that it produced). There is little doubt that the application of those different policy instruments has shaped our respective societies in lasting ways.⁵

The American model sought to assimilate diversity into a new American identity, whereas the Canadian model appealed to its citizens to recognise, appreciate, and even value diversity. Neither model has, of course, been wholly successful, since the ideal of peaceful coexistence remains elusive in both countries. Still, the phrase “un-American” is often used to attack those who disagree with dominant norms, whereas the notion of something being “un-Canadian” would probably elicit more laughter than anger.

Does the Moravian Church want to define its essentials so rigidly that it is easily possible to be “un-Moravian,” or does it want to spend its energy developing more constructive ways of dealing with the tensions produced when liberty is exercised at the level of the individual, the congregation, the District, or the Province?

It’s probably human nature to want to have it both ways. The idea of a mosaic appeals to us intellectually, but it’s a whole lot easier to run a large organisation if it operates as a melting pot (which is partly why large corporations spend so much money on “team building”). The Church feels good when it looks in the mirror and see lots of diversity reflected back. But that diversity is superficial and largely illusory if it’s accompanied by a sense of apprehension—or even fear—that the world as we know it will be somehow “damaged”

if the attitudes, values, beliefs and doctrines of the mostly-white-European core are challenged.

It is the uncritical acceptance of existing ways as “superior” that makes the thought racist; it’s translated into action by the assimilationist project that seeks to make the “they” more like the “we.” In so doing, the assimilation project first papers over important differences on the grounds that open discussion of them would be “dangerous,” and then it forces diversity into conformity with pre-existing norms.

It’s pretty hard to “experience the richness of the body of Christ,” a goal splendidly articulated by Brother Gordon Sommers, if one is simultaneously convinced that white North American Moravians have already discovered the “one right way” of so doing; and that peaceful coexistence will only come when the rest of the world recognises that fact. Brother Ted Wilde is quite right to say that “it is important for the church to take the lead in breaking down racial barriers,” but I’m not so sure that those barriers are best broken down by the melting pot model, which is what he seems to be wishing for in saying “New generations are apt to be less intensely ethnic and less likely to want to hold on to their own cultural borders.” Similarly, I don’t think too many barriers have been broken down when Brother Cedric Rodney, a minister of Guyanese extraction, believes that “In most cases it would be stupid of me to tell them I am not [African American] ... when you live in Rome, you must do as the Romans do.” A more graphic example of the extent to which the assimilationist project has been internalised would be difficult to find! Wouldn’t the church be stronger if it celebrated his Guyanese roots, instead of forcing him to hide his light under a bushel?

This, then, is the lesson of the two models. Embracing a true mosaic requires participants in the dominant group (those with power) to discard the notion that they've already found the "one right way" of doing anything. Second, it requires a certain act of faith. We must believe that God (or pluralism, in secular terms) will lead everyone to embrace the "best of all worlds" and that we will all be better for it. It all sounds so easy, so consistent with traditional Moravian teaching, so logical. So why isn't it happening?

Questions

I would like to see further study inform our discussions of which diversities there is will to accommodate, why we would choose to accommodate some but not others, and how that accommodation could or should be best effected. I think the answers to those questions would be very revealing and might, perhaps, suggest further answers to the race and outreach questions raised by the lead article.

I'd also like to know whether North American Moravians think there are overwhelming correlations between ethnic background and particular doctrinal beliefs and whether their perception is, in any way, accurate. Do, for example, "liberal" and "conservative" values cut across all ethnic groups within the church or do they broadly parallel ethnic divisions?

Dr. Clarence Newsome emphasises "reciprocity, complementarity and mutuality" as "expressions of equality" and suggests that "the Black church is built on these things as an affirmation of personhood." Nobody is very likely to argue with those principles, but it seems to me that discussion of broad principles is no longer enough, because

it is the interpretation and application of those principles that cause difficulty. Does, for example, the "affirmation of personhood" extend to gay and lesbian Christians?

I would like to see further study of our differences. I would like to know whether we have retained sufficient agreement on broad principles to even know what it is that we're "seeding" when we think about outreach within North America. I quite agree with Bishop Hopeton Clennon that "local congregations should reflect the racial, ethnic, and socio-economic composition of their surrounding neighbours." I would argue, however, that local congregations should also reflect the "essentials" of Moravian doctrine as defined by the governing councils of the Church. It goes without saying that if those two are in conflict, any outreach program is in fairly serious trouble.

Answering questions such as these might help not just to explain the great divide, but more importantly, to bridge it. I don't mean to minimise the real danger to the church of racism in any of its forms, but I can't help but wonder whether much of what is chalked up to racism of the "black/white" variety is actually racism that assumes a parallel between skin colour and doctrinal position. More study might show us that there's more common ground than even the most optimistic of us believe. At least it might show us that our divisions are not along traditional lines. Most importantly of all, it should identify the common ground and suggest to us an answer the fundamental question of whether that common ground is sufficient to sustain a denomination.

I sympathise with Brother Gordon Sommers in his concern that "If the fundamentalists choose

not to stay with the church, our unity could be destroyed.” On the other hand, if no common ground can be negotiated between those who interpret the Scripture critically and those who interpret it literally, our “unity” is illusory, our ability to conduct any form of meaningful outreach is limited, and our capacity to address other divisions is constrained.

Doctrinal Differences, Institutional Structure, and Outreach

In trying to articulate the questions (above) for which I have no answers, I began by wondering about what kind of racism mostly keeps pastors and congregations mirror images of each other and arguably inhibits effective church outreach. The outward image, the shorthand version of which is skin colour, masks the true elements of racism which, according to our earlier definition includes “assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of individuals as well as to the institutional policies, processes, and practices that flow from those understandings.”⁶

Therefore, when, as a church, we talk about “accommodating diversity” we should not just talk about making people of other backgrounds feel welcome at Sunday service, although that is obviously important too. Rather we should be looking closely at the political machinery of our church to see whether we have in place the “institutional policies, processes and practices” to genuinely embrace diversity. Do we? Even more centrally, is the accommodation of diversity even an article of faith for most Moravians.

We might do well to remember that our oft-cited motto [variously credited to St. Augustine and Richard Baxter, but correctly to Rupertus

Meldenius (Peter Meiderlin)⁷] was, in the original Latin, “*In necessariis unitas; in dubiis libertas; in omniis caritas*,”⁸ a more accurate translation of which would be, “In necessary things, unity; in doubtful things, liberty; and in all (omnipresent) things, love (charity).” Revisiting the translation allows us to highlight what has become a defining issue of almost all modern churches: the question of “doubt” and “certainty.” That is the central division between fundamentalists (who often express much certainty and little doubt) and interpretivists (who often express much doubt and little certainty).

The task for anyone seeking peaceful coexistence is to recognise that there is a lot of territory in between. There are, in other words, degrees of doubt. Thinking people must challenge the kind of binary thinking that reduces important and complex social phenomena to a simplistic presentation of polar opposites (right/wrong, black/white, good/evil, left/right, “with us or with the terrorists”). Are we up to that challenge or do we prefer the artificial simplicity of binary models?

In terms of institutional structure, the higher levels of the church are able to accomplish “unity” by paring away significant differences and leaving them to be administered at a lower level where, perhaps thanks to a certain historical flexibility in interpreting what was “essential” and “non-essential,” some fairly fundamental doctrinal differences exist within the world-wide Moravian community. Has this model run its course? Can we go about communicating God’s presence, power, and purpose for a life of witness, even if we “agree to disagree” on exactly what “a life of witness looks like”? This, it seems to me, is the question

underpinning the current debate of issues such as homosexuality, but it also has obvious implications for church outreach.

As long as the focus, at the local level, is on maintenance, and on promoting growth only where a community of Moravians already exists, these doctrinal differences don't cause very much trouble. The trouble begins, though, if we are "trying to plant to churches not just where a cluster of Moravians have moved, but to clusters of Vietnamese, Hispanics, or whatever"⁹ without first developing a clear and reasonably cohesive vision of exactly what it is that we're seeking to plant. Are we really willing to just identify "neighbourhoods that need to receive the Gospel" and have new churches consist of "those who live in walking distance of the church" as Bishop Clennon suggests? What is the role of doctrinal "unity" in this equation? This is the ecclesiastical equivalent of secular political concerns that immigrants will "swamp" the core values of society—and the power bases of existing policy-makers. That is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is hardly a decision toward which the existing church should "sleep-walk" without a full and frank discussion of its implications.

Conclusion

It is not my intention here to offer up a prescription designed to solve the issues raised by Sister Kathryn Woestendiek Secepanski in the lead article. In fact, I fear that I've raised rather more questions than I've answered. I do have one prescription, however, that is remarkable in its lack of originality. The members of the Moravian Church, particularly in North America, need to provide more space for discussions such as this. While *The Hinge* serves an incredibly useful purpose

by providing a forum in which divergent views can be debated, it is a poor substitute for the kind of face-to-face dialogue that is so necessary to keep the diverse elements our church engaged in constructive debate that will, with God's help, lead to solutions to these and other difficult issues. Trying to side-step contentious issues simply undermines our faith in each other. As Winston Churchill famously said, "To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war."

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(Footnotes)

1 Frances Henry, Carol Tator, Winston Mattis, and Tim Rees, *The Colour of Democracy: Racism in Canadian Society*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace and Company, Canada, 2000) 5.

2 J. Koval, *White Racism: A Psychohistory* (New York: Pantheon) 55 ("Negro" in original); quoted in Henry, et. al., 21.

3 Henry, et. al., 30.

4 See, for example, Seymour Martin Lipset, *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1990) particularly Chapter 10.

5 For the most recent statistical documentation of this fact see Michael Adams, *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada, and the Myth of Inevitability* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2003).

6 Henry, et. al., 5.

7 <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine/quote.html>

8 <http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/unitas/essrev.html>

9 Hampton Morgan, quoted in the lead article.

Hermann Weinlick

First, a few stories. From 2000 to 2002 I served a small predominantly white congregation of a mainline denomination. We rented our facilities to a larger black Pentecostal group. On a visit to an evening Bible study of about fifteen men of the Pentecostal congregation, I heard participants talk about their struggles to forgive enemies, about taking responsibility for children they had fathered and then neglected, about trying to help addicts who walked in off the street, about being models and mentors for teenagers, about learning to pray. Here were people whose lives were being changed in the context of the body of Christ. At the same time, denominational leaders were suggesting to the congregation I was serving that these Pentecostals were second-class Christians, because they had questions about ordaining women. (There may be more than one way to be a second-class Christian.)

When in 1973 my wife and I as a white couple adopted an infant who was black, this caused some discomfort for some of my good Moravian relatives. (Of course, when I call her “black,” as she herself does, I reveal how strange our American racial categories are. A little black ancestry makes a person “black,” just as a little dirt makes a clean floor dirty.)

That daughter and I recently attended a Philadelphia Orchestra concert. After we climbed over a dozen people to reach our middle-of-the-row seats and sat down, the elderly matron sitting on the other side of my daughter quite obviously wrapped her purse straps around her arm several times to prevent theft. (Racism? We’ll never really know.)

In 1984 I spent some days in Jamaica, visiting Moravian congregations and leaders. I thought myself open and progressive on racial questions. I was impressed with the quality of leadership I found in clergy and laity alike. Then I realized how little I really expected these Jamaicans to be capable of and how racist I really was!

Friends moved to a major East Coast metropolitan area. After visiting the school their daughters would attend and finding most the posters on the walls dealt with keeping guns out of school, although they were eager for their daughters to experience economic and racial diversity, they reluctantly bought a home in a first-ring suburb.

Ms. Scepanski’s article really has two subjects, both important: growing the Moravian Church and race in the Moravian Church. First, concerning church growth. The growing of churches—whether this means starting new congregations or expanding older ones—is hard, and not getting easier. There are many reasons: decline of all long-term commitments to organizations, mobility, secularization, church scandals. Perhaps as important as any of these is the splintering of society. One mark of the New Testament church is the minimizing of the things that divide humans, like gender, social standing, age, race, and even language. We think, “I want to be with people like me.” God says, “I like all kinds, and if my church is to reflect me, it will like all kinds too.” Working toward that kind of church has always been difficult, but it is even harder in a society with niche marketing, niche TV channels, niche magazines, and all the other things that stress our differences. (The congregation I worship with works hard on inclusion with relation to race,

gender, attire preference, age, sexual orientation, but I think someone with no education beyond high school or without appreciation for four-part music may feel a little out of place.)

I am a little uncomfortable with Gordon Sommers' using the term "fundamentalist," because, for too many mainline Christians, "fundamentalist" means "someone more conservative than I am, to whom I can therefore with a clear conscience feel intellectually and morally superior." I believe that terms like this encourage the same sort of niche marketing and narrowing of vision that blocks our outreach. The sorts of experiences recounted at the beginning of this response have made me wary of political and religious labels. Unfortunately the fact that Fred Bahnson finds his faith nurtured by Promise Keepers lowers him in the opinion of many Moravians.

Second, concerning race. I especially appreciated the stories of Paul Couch, Herbert Weber, and Fred Bahnson, because they remind us race is still an issue both in the larger society and in the church, and they push us to look not only at the church but also at the larger social framework of the nation. Half a century ago Northerners in the U.S. smugly thought that racism in America was a problem of the South. Today it is in the cities of America that challenges of racial division and poverty, which has a closer relationship to race than we like to admit, are greatest. While we have seen significant positive changes in recent decades—including, for example, calling of Moravian pastors across racial lines, an issue for which I have had a special concern—we still see residents leaving the big cities for places that are usually less crowded, less diverse, less poor, less taxed, more white.

There are no easy answers. Real estate prices

have driven some folks out of the city and trapped others in the city. (In the city of 350,000 where I live, many of the best bargains in real estate are in racially mixed neighborhoods.) Quality of schools varies greatly from place to place. Safety is a legitimate concern. But, to a significant degree, caring about race relations in America means caring about cities. Christians and Christian congregations need to raise up living in the city, caring about the city, and supporting community leaders and political candidates who care about the city, as significant Christian responsibilities to which God is calling some Christians—not all Christians, but more than have responded. As others have pointed out, it is no accident that the dwelling place of God pictured in Revelation, the final book of the Bible, is not a garden but a city, the New Jerusalem. I do not believe we will make much further progress in race relations as long as Christians turn away from the cities of America.

Hermann I. Weinlick is a retired pastor living in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He served as editor of The Moravian 1987-98.

The Author Responds

Brother Hermann, first I must thank you for the gift of sharing your experience with your daughter.

You mentioned several reasons why “the growing of churches is hard, and not getting easier” before one rang bells in my belfry. “*Perhaps as important as any of these is the splintering of society. One mark of the New Testament Church is the minimizing of the things that divide humans, like gender, social standing, age, race, and even language. We think, ‘I want to be with people like me.’ God says, ‘I like all kinds, and if my church is to reflect me, it will like all kinds too.’*”

As a self-professed xenophile, I much prefer what you have God saying in the above statement to what “we think”.

I, too, am wary of labels, whether political, religious, or any other kind. When I was growing up, I would occasionally run into kids who liked to make fun of the name Woestendiek. I’d often tell myself “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me” and let it roll off my back.

I didn’t know then what I know now. Whether we attribute it to labels or niches, the insidious fear of being lumped into some undesirable category can so dishearten individual members of our larger society that genuine communication can be short-circuited altogether. Over the past twenty years I have observed a real trend toward cautious—if not altogether inhibited—communication. In that context, pure communication often shines all the more brightly.

I like to think there is a difference between the word “divisive” and the word diversity, don’t you? Do they share a common root?

Brother Neil, after I forgave your use of the words “racism” and “argument,” both of which I tried to avoid in an article that I intended as more reflective than incendiary, I was truly intrigued by what you had to say. I crave more information on the Canadian mosaic model you refer to and can’t help but wish a good dose of it would cross the border. I laughed when you said the notion of something being un-Canadian would probably elicit more laughter than anger.

It seems that the more I think about all of this, the blurrier the line gets between the challenges of the society I live in and the denomination to which I belong. Your references to binary (and “one right way”) thinking hit home hard. And I find myself wondering, how true today are those words about doing as the Romans do which Cervantes put in Don Quixote’s mouth nearly 380 years ago?

What is remarkable to me about the one prescription you offer at the end of your response is not its lack of originality, but the reluctance of our denomination to open their hearts and minds to dialogue on these issues. One pastor who knows how important I think dialogue is for the future of the Moravian Church said, “We don’t know how.” How can we learn to swim if we avoid the water and the waves? If we should one day find ourselves in over our heads, would sidestepping get us any closer to shore?

Brother Edward, as I studied your response there were two parts that struck strong chords for me. The first was your reference to African retention in hymn performance style. And the second was your suggestion to bring together choirs from white and minority churches to sing for and with each other.

The wheels in my head churned as I thought about the differences in the way most white and most black churches sing, remembering the many times I had been so richly blessed to find myself in the midst of the intensity of black church singing. The more I thought about this, the closer I came to having to ask a question I hope the larger Moravian Church is able to ask itself from time to time. Who are we?

Before we can really begin to tear down walls of our own making, we must become aware of what they are. And before we can become aware of what the walls are, we must recognize who we are. What does the Lord require of a denomination that has “people of color” as 80% of its worldwide membership? I don’t have the answer, but I can tell you this much: the question sure has a way of hanging around. It’s been on my mind for nearly as long as I have been a Moravian.

It is my sincere belief that the Moravian Church will flourish when it learns to celebrate its diversity in a way that is no longer only within the walls of our own making. What an example we could set for others if we dared to identify and intentionally bridge a few of our own gaps without getting lost in the quagmire of what Neil referred to as “we/they” or “right/wrong” thinking.

Sister Charlotte, I salute you for noting the absence of *The Ground of Unity* and *The Covenant for Daily Living* in this piece, as well as for your

obvious commitment to your own mid-life career change. I hope you never forget either the unique life experience you take with you into your calling or your own interpretation of the harmony we are to seek “in our midst” to mean “within our local communities as well as within our individual congregations or the world-wide Moravian Church.”

Brother Bishop, I am grateful to you for whatever it took to dig and scratch your way through this article long enough to find the insights and wisdom those interviewed were willing to share. This is why it pained me so to think their words might never see the light of day.

What a privilege it is to have been an instrument in writing an article that contained a “2x4” experience for you! (I trust you have not forgotten the ways reading your article in an old copy of *The Hinge* had a similar affect on me a few years ago.) Frankly, I wasn’t far from viewing the Brother/Sister references as an antiquated custom myself, until Brother Belfield shed fresh light on the subject for me.

I thank God (with a little help from Edwin Markham and Bishop Loppnow) for the impact you say this article had on you. I hope the dialogue we’ve been able to generate in this issue of *The Hinge* will not fall between the cracks, but instead take root among those who would like to see it grow. A few years back, I found myself close to taking the “shrivel up and die on the vine” route of which you write. For me, it was not so much a result of no one’s offering me friendship. It was my own intense fear of waking up five or ten years down the line to discover that I had become so fully assimilated into the Moravian Church that I had become another proud stone in an invisible

and unidentified wall that unwittingly shut others out.

It occurs to me that before we can draw circles that take people in, we must generate a willingness to identify—and discuss—where our existing circles lie. I remember reading a Southern Province “State of the Church” message by Bob Sawyer in the late 1990’s in which he mentioned newcomers leaving the church without so much as a whimper. I knew as I read those words that this was something I should not do. I began to whimper for more dialogue between “old” Moravians and “new” Moravians to heal whatever gaps might exist between those two circles and lead to mutually beneficial understanding, as well as more open doors.

I was directed to submit a proposal to the Vision Committee of the church I then attended. I was told “No” in a tone that implied there would be no discussion or further explanation. Aware of how strongly I continued to feel the need for open dialogue, a pastor friend encouraged me to meet with Revs. Truman Dunn and Lane Sapp to see if they were receptive to this kind of dialogue. By the time my meeting with the two of them rolled around, my whimpering had turned to tears and I was apt to have come across to them at best a fool, at least a near hysterical woman.

Recollections of that meeting have been on my heart frequently over the last two years as the controversy over Truman Dunn’s Moses Lectures prompted the Southern Province to dialogue more as it went through the wringer with our Brother Truman.

Whether we’re talking about race relations, human relations, public relations, Americans,

Moravians or church growth, we have got to acquire the ability to ask each other honest questions. An honest question, (as I was once told and refuse to ever forget) is a question you don’t

Book Review

John Granger, *The Hidden Key to Harry Potter: Understanding the Meaning, Genius, and Popularity of Joanne Rowling's Harry Potter Novels* (Hadlock, WA: Zossima Press, 2002), 364 pages.

Harry Potter is a phenomenon unlike any in recent history. One may have to go as far back as the time of Charles Dickens and Victor Hugo to find authors whose books have been as eagerly anticipated as those of J. K. Rowling. Millions of children (and adults) eagerly anticipated the release of the fifth book, *The Order of the Phoenix*, in June, and quite a few had read all 875 pages by Monday morning. It is fascinating that so many people, including me, actually care about Harry and his friends Hermione and Ron are moved by the challenges they face and the choices they make.

John Granger offers an intriguing explanation for the popularity of the *Harry Potter* series. “Joanne Rowling is a Christian novelist of the Inklings School writing to ‘baptize the imagination’ and prepare our hearts and minds for the conscious pursuit of the greater life in Jesus Christ. Harry Potter is a Christian hero” (p. 140). Such a claim may come as a shock in light of the fierce opposition of some conservative groups against *Harry Potter* on the grounds that Rowling is seducing children into witchcraft and other evils, but Granger makes a very strong argument for seeing Hogwarts as a modern version of C. S. Lewis’ Narnia or Tolkien’s Middle Earth.

I, like Granger, read all of the *Harry Potter* books aloud to my daughter (and wife), and have always felt that there was more to these books than just a good adventure tale. I have found it hard to express my thoughts on this, but the books always felt deeply Christian to me. To be honest, I have been surprised by how many Christians have raised doubts about the morality or spirituality of the books because I feel that Rowling has done a marvelous job of depicting the difference between good and evil. Harry and company are not perfect, but they are good at such a deep foundational level that they are able to see through the deceptions of evil and conquer it while still enjoying Everyflavor Beans and a game of Quidditch.

What John Granger has done is give support for this sense that the *Harry Potter* books are fundamentally and intentionally Christian. Contrary to the popular press’ depiction of the Rowling as a welfare-mom who struck it rich as much by luck as by pluck, Granger points out that she was an honor student in French, German, English, and Classical Languages. Her favorite authors are Lewis, Jane Austin, and Dickens, and the Christian sensibility (and sense) of those authors are evident in *Harry Potter*. The books are filled with images and motifs from ancient and medieval Christian symbolism that touches the reader at a deep, unconscious level.

It is not accidental that the symbol of Harry’s “house” at Hogwarts is a lion, a symbol of Christ or that Harry’s “Patronus” is a stag which in medieval art was also a representation of Christ. It is not accidental

some of the key characters teach (or taught) Transfiguration Class because one of the key themes of the books is transformation in a spiritual sense. It is intentionally that Harry's mother, who gave her life to save Harry, is named Lily, which is the flower of the resurrection.

Many of Rowling's characters have meaningful names if you seek the meaning. Albus Dumbledore means "white bumblebee," which is not illuminating unless you know that in Christian tradition the bee was a symbol for the soul. Dumbledore, then, is the white soul. Malfoy, on the other hand, means "bad faith" and Lucius recalls Lucifer. Hermione, the most brilliant mind at Hogwarts, is named for Hermes, or quicksilver in alchemy. Peter Pettigrew, the rat who betrayed Harry's parents, has a name that implies a certain lack of manliness while Sirius Black means "black dog" which is a symbol of faithfulness. Salazar Slytherin recalls the snake of the Garden of Eden. Granger demonstrates that this attention to symbolic detail runs throughout the books but is done so subtly that it does not turn the books into a dry allegory.

One of the strongest sections of Granger's book concerns the theme of death in *Harry Potter*. Some people have been concerned that there is so much about in these "children's books" (forgetting Grimm's Fairy Tales apparently), but Rowling herself has pointed to death as the most important theme. The basic evil impulse in Lord Voldemort (wings of death) is his quest for immortality at any price. He fears nothing more than death, and he is willing to cause death to keep himself alive.

With the help of Dumbledore, Harry discovers that one of the things worse than death is to live like Voldemort. Consistently, when Harry has to choose between the right thing and the easy thing, he chooses the right thing even though it could lead to his death. He also learns from Dumbledore that "to a well-ordered mind" death is not to be feared. True to Christian teaching, the soul that is prepared for death is prepared for true life now and beyond.

Granger may push his analysis too far in places, and I imagine that even Rowling will be surprised at some of the Christian symbolism he pulls out, but all in all he makes a very strong case that Rowling, who worships regularly in the Church of Scotland, is writing a self-consciously Christian series that is not overtly Christian. Had it been overtly Christian, *Harry Potter* would have been relegated to the Christian bookstores instead of touching the lives of millions of people.

Magic in *Harry Potter* is not about performing spells or conjuring; it is a way of seeing the deeper spiritual significance in life itself, just as it was for Lewis and Tolkien. It is the magic of art, of the Eucharist, of baptism, and of sacrificial love in a selfish world. Still, the books are not for everyone, and many who enjoy them will miss some of the point. Just as the Muggles (non-magical humans) cannot actually see the magical world even though it is all around them, Muggles who read *Harry Potter* have trouble seeing the symbolic and spiritual message in the series.

Harry Potter, though, learns that there is bad magic in the world, too. Religion and spirituality can be twisted to perverse and destructive ends. As Granger points out, one of the central themes of the books is that prejudice, especially racism, is evil. There are evil wizards who want to destroy those who

are not of “pure blood.” Voldemort clearly is modeled on Hitler and the Death Eaters bear a striking resemblance to the Klu Klux Klan. But the concern about the evil of prejudice goes beyond overt racism and anti-Semitism to all forms of social cruelty and oppression, including child abuse. *Harry Potter* is ultimately about liberation personally and socially. The many symbols of Christ all point to this freedom from fear and the transforming power of love.

With this in mind, we may be able to see why certain Christian groups instinctively reject *Harry Potter* despite its positive message. Some Christians may simply be “Muggles” and are blind to the symbolist perspective of *Harry Potter*. It is hard to look at the world “diagonally” to see what is really there. Some Christians have difficulty discriminating between symbolism and idolatry or between imagination and Satanism. Others Christian leaders, though, may be guilty of using bad magic and they are rejecting *Harry Potter* because of its Christian message that perfect love casts out fear. *Harry Potter* is a direct challenge to those who would use the resources of Christianity to encourage prejudice, oppression, and cruelty instead of embracing a suffering world with love and the hope of transformation.

— *Craig D. Atwood*

Letters to the Editor

There was no mail this summer, other than bank statements. I hope that the summer was a restful hiatus, and I look forward to printing your letters and your book reviews.

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The cost for subscribing to *The Hinge* is \$30. *The Hinge* is provided free of charge to Moravian clergy thanks to the generosity of the Center for Moravian Studies.

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