

# Race and Faith in the Moravian Church

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## 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 11<sup>th</sup> 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.

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