

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.

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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