

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!

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## **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.<sup>1</sup>

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].<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup>

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 literature<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.”<sup>6</sup>

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)<sup>7</sup>] was, in the original Latin, “*In necessariis unitas; in dubiis libertas; in omniis caritas*,”<sup>8</sup> 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"<sup>9</sup> 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*, 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.