

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.

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