

## *Special Features*

**A Reply to “Facing the Death of the Moravian Church with Courage and Vision,”** an article by pastor Truman Dunn of Winston-Salem, N.C. (Hinge 8:4, Autumn 2001).

*Note: This is a summary of the discussion in the working group for theological questions in the Moravian Church meeting at Bad Boll. The working group includes Bishop Henning Schlimm and Pastor Helge Heisler, who both are members of the Editorial Committee of ITD (formerly TMDK) for Europe. Dr. Albrecht Gerstenberger, member of the group and physician in Dürnau near Bad Boll, wrote the following summary of the discussion on October 5, 2003 regarding Truman Dunn’s article, which appeared in the European version of ITD. On January 24, 2004 the working group looked at this summary again and decided unanimously that this text of their discussion of the provocative questions raised by Truman Dunn in ITD should be published, which the editor was pleased to do. [Translation provided by Craig Atwood, with assistance from Peter Vogt and Hartmut Beck.]*

Certainly the article from Brother Dunn was written with the intention to help the Moravian Church out of the “valley of tears” into which it has entered through obsolescence. There is no comfort in the fact that other churches are in the same situation. We acknowledge the effort and logic of his article, but we disagree with his starting points in our conviction that the Moravian Church can indeed convey a message to the world even in her current constitution.

The style of argument and language in the article from Brother Dunn is reasonable and appropriate for the subject. Actually, his distinctive language, which is so different from what we are accustomed to, is very stimulating and works to break off the crust, so to speak. We are proud to be part of a church that allows such a discussion to take place. We are thankful, for this reason, to have a discussion of what we want to be and how the Moravian Church should or can develop. Here we can only point to the main points of our discussion of the article because there is not time nor is this the forum for a more thorough examination.

### **Biological-Statistical Line of Argumentation**

We are sure that the Moravian Church, like the German and American people, will certainly change in the next decades but will not die out, because nature abhors a vacuum. The same biological law that Br. Dunn cites, that something must first die so that something new can develop, will ensure that the Moravian Church in her lands of origin will perhaps be smaller but will not disappear.

Basically, Br. Dunn proposes a change in niche, but this is not established theologically. Certainly he does not propose this from base motives but from a feeling that the situation is desperate. Yet he does not consider that in his observation of the situation he is not in a position to be able to see the entire system. By excluding the ultraconservative and charismatic churches from consideration, he fails to take into account that they are bound to have a cyclical phase of retrenchment, which may result in good for the mainline churches. Therefore the starting propositions of his reflections are already inopportune and adversely chosen. Since he observes only negative developments in the marketplace of all church and parachurch proposals,

he is only able to conclude that this will be the end, even though he has not yet observed it. And he cannot move forward because, at least in our opinion, the scope in which he has considered our small voluntary community is much too limited. This is seen particularly in the fact that his article contains an excessive number of arguments that are based on nothing other than his own presuppositions. In such an unopposed discussion, it would have been appropriate for him (in the way of the scholastic method of the Middle Ages) to have examined counter arguments and establish why he did not follow them.

### **Rhetorical Structure**

In order to help the listener/reader follow his argument, Br. Dunn first presents the current expressly adverse development. Then he awakens the hope that one could escape it all if only one struggles against it radically enough. He attempts to disperse the bad feeling that this could be dangerous by repeating the same argument in a number of variations throughout several paragraphs. Next he attempts to gain the unreflective agreement of the hearers by exploiting the shakiness of their own unreflective views in comparison to the not fundamentally unreflective standpoint of those distant from the church. In doing so, he appeals to a kind of innate meekness that appears to be quite common in the world-wide Moravian Church. Moreover, he uses a kind of rhetorical “fishhook” that makes any line of reasoning with biblical citations impossible. Each individual piece of the argument therefore appears valid and is in agreement with itself. Their progression, however, is not.

We have not described this rhetorical strategy in order to run down the efforts of Br. Dunn, but only to make clear why an immediate counter-argument, such as that of Sister Anne Schentz, which is a gut-reaction made from the feeling of the conviction of faith, and which does not value the line of argument of Br. Dunn, must miscarry. But the eruptive “poison” of his argument is made innocuous to us.

### **Logical Flaws – Christology**

There is a logical break in the chain of argument of Br. Dunn. After the description of the gradual decline of the churches, one indeed might be inclined to agree with his impression that many of our fellow people loath the dogmatic teachings of the church. But to conclude from this that one would merely need to amputate such old antiquated things like “I am the Way, the Light and the Life; no one comes to the Father but through me,” and this would immediately make Christianity more acceptable of Christianity, is not acceptable: for then you must put something new in the empty place. Does he seriously propose that we should look to Buddhism, Hinduism, and so forth for useful things? That leads only to other forms of dogmatism, including the rigidity of an undogmatic stance or to the religious consideration of all sides with a corresponding verbal confusion, which surely will bewilder people at least as much as the current confessions of faith.

Hardly any church prescribes so little that individuals are expected to believe as the Moravian Church does. A personal understanding of the common faith stands so much in the center of our liturgy and dogmatic expressions that many already miss what is unifying among us. Naturally, Bible quotations should not be turned into loveless cudgels used against those who think differently, but only the unchurched may simply ignore the Bible. The touchstone of our interaction with one another is certainly love rather than

the Scriptures, but touchstones for how such loving interaction may be practiced can surely be found in the words of Jesus. These ought not to be diluted through further individualism. However, we are no longer responsible for those who separate themselves from the fellowship of the church. It is unlikely that such a person would quickly change his or her mind if we were to say to him or her: “We do not see this or that so narrowly at all!” Why should we cut the chief stones of the church anew, if it already offers enough room for everyone, even if this is not recognized by all? The church will not accept further adding-on from various foreign cultures anymore.

Naturally, we are proud of our wide-spanning diversity in unity. That has been the essence of the *Unitas Fratrum* since the beginning. Brother Dunn recognizes that in the discussion initiated by him, where the possibility of his contribution is accepted. Unfortunately, often an expressed drive for consensus has robbed of us opportunities to develop a mature way of dealing with cultural conflict. Too often has the mantle of brotherhood covered a conflict which should have been discussed in public. But that may change since many of us have learned how to mediate such conflicts without reducing the differences to nothing. Naturally, binding arbitration decisions indeed must be enforceable. This is where we see our greatest deficiency: not in being too far removed from the world.

### **Flaws in Content: Mission**

Brother Dunn rightly points out that the identity of the Moravian Church is strongly associated with the mission to foreign peoples. This is even much more the case than is often acknowledged and appreciated by us. But one wonders to whom Brother Dunn has been listening that he gives such a negative portrayal of our contemporary mission work. It is incomprehensible.

For many years now at Star Mountain, in Ladakh, and in China (moreover, it would astonish us if there really were many Hindus in China!) Christianization in the old sense has not been taking place. Rather there has been a charitable social ministry with a Christian background. Presumably he is raising criticisms against a style of mission that we in Europe have already vigorously and fruitfully addressed. In fact, it may surprise him that missions in our own land have become ever more important to us. For this reason, his argument (no longer) holds up: that the decline of our church will only be delayed by the founding of new churches. Yes indeed, our church is (and hopefully will remain) a Protestant mission church! What is wrong in that? Sometimes one holds what is right even from false motivations. But many also criticize something falsely from the right motivations.

### **Actual Deficits: Reasonable Theology**

Brother Dunn rightly reminds us that Christian theology has not actually been satisfactorily evaluated in the marketplace of possible worldviews. For what is missing in our day, actually, is a renewed expression of “why do we believe?” Who still accepts the many metaphorical expressions of the Ancient Near East, such as “Son of God,” “sitting at the right hand of God,” “ascended into heaven,” “Majesty of God,” “Kingdom of God on earth,” “Prince of Peace and Righteousness,” and many others besides at face value? But what helps us here is not the further abandonment of what is at the bottom of these ancient expressions, for they concern the seminal expressions of Christian faith. Losing one’s identity contradicts completely every insight of modern business management.

Let us consider that expression about Jesus: “This is my dear Son in whom I am pleased.” Tied to that expression is a bunch of resentment against the Christian faith. If we translate it: “This is the one whom I believe to be most likely to be able to carry on my work among people according to my intentions,” then it clearly loses its colorfulness, but it also loses the strength of its offensiveness. However, such a translation, as Brother Dunn perceptively remarks, amounts to nothing more than re-arranging the furniture. Yet, it will make it easier for potential friends of the Moravian Church to recognize the religious message behind the expression and not have to struggle against it: Christ remains God’s true representative on earth!

Thus we give up nothing if we endeavor with courage and imagination to speak in the language of the unchurched to the unchurched and use our traditional language with our old faithful members. This agrees well with the Pauline tradition, but requires better communication on the part of the preacher. If Brother Dunn himself feels that he himself is not able to do so, then he may not be surprised if his church remains empty or even if he drives people away by his preaching. The attested silent majority in our church pews certainly know the value of what comes by faith from the heart and what is simply performed as a duty and re-arranging of furniture. Progress is not to be expected from the abandonment of the high demands of dogmatic truths but from their heartfelt explanation.

Simply dare to be pious without forgetting to employ your intelligence in good time so that no one accuses you of being irrational. Even today faith must be plausible, then no one comes to the idea of fundamentally questioning the authority of the Bible and of religion. The church must regularly place its own authority on trial, otherwise it will be pushed aside by the concerns of society at large.

The currency of the church is trust; the product, which should originate among the members, is faith, and the common asset is the fellowship of brothers and sisters with each other. This is not a vain description of the lexicon of religion; it is merely a description in the unaccustomed concepts of business economics. We lose nothing in using such unaccustomed models; yet we could lose everything if we renounce the realm of myths and mystic, the rich images and theological expressions of faith, the Holy Spirit and the discipleship of Jesus, spiritual practices the proclamation of the word.

Using the same raw material as Brother Dunn, we thus have come to a completely different conclusion. Moreover, the suggestions of Brother Dunn are neither new nor original. They seem to be only a warming-over of the discussions of the 1930s, 50s, and 80s. If we, as apparently each generation must, do continue this discussion about the gospel and culture, religion and the spirit of the times, Christology and Western civilization so as to arrive at a reasonable conclusion, then we will once again gain a new measure of confidence of faith. We will have a vision to defy the death of the Moravian Church!