

Will Sibert

“Zinzendorf’s greatest achievement was the organization of the Moravian community as a living embodiment of his theological ideas.” Douglas Shantz thinks enough of Peter Vogt’s observation above that he quotes it twice. I appreciated Shantz’s well constructed, in-depth validation of Vogt’s point as he fleshes out Zinzendorf’s theology and its influence on the 18th century Moravian community. Shantz points to ecumenism, the role of women, and dynamic worship as emergent features of this early Moravian community, making his credible case for the Moravian community being “a church ahead of its time.”

Given Shantz’s choice of title, I would like to suggest that Vogt’s quote might as easily stated that the Moravian community was “a living embodiment of (Zinzendorf’s) ecclesiological ideas.” When Shantz notes Keith Ward’s vision for the 21st century Church as important for framing future reflection on “being church,” he believes that this community in fundamental ways reflects Ward’s vision. Ward argues this future church should represent “a new ... global paradigm... more self-critical, recognizing the historical conditionality of its formulations and the symbolic nature of many of its basic images.” Ward goes on to say that the church would consist of those “grasped by a vision” and strive to “witness to the universal love of God in a world of many disputes and many destructive hatreds.” In juxtaposing Ward’s two quotes, I also hear Shantz asking a challenging question to the contemporary North American Moravian Church: Are we willing to be sufficiently tough in our self criticism to examine whether

our historical formulations of “being church” (ecclesiology) now help or hurt our ability to embody the vision Ward lays before us as we move into the 21st century?

Early in the 20th century Martin Kähler wrote, “Mission is the mother of theology.” I read Kähler’s statement as a succinct summary of the dynamics at play in the early apostolic church. It’s struggling to work out its theological understanding of Jesus in the complex 1st century cultural milieu was driven by its mission mandate. The early Christian community being committed to God’s mission also, in a very real sense, was a community constantly reflecting and adjusting its own internal self understanding of the person Jesus and how to communicate and witness to this understanding effectively. Therefore, the community within itself was in a process of ongoing conversion or “evangelization.” Equally important, “being church” at a fundamental level becomes a missiological enterprise. Thus, the concept of “evangelization” forms the core of an ecclesiology that some now call “missional” — that the apostolic way of “being church” (ecclesiology) was focused on building up the body precisely to equip it for carrying out its mission (i.e. Ephesians 4:11-16). Any severing of inner communal “evangelization” from its outward missional/proclamation witness serves to undercut a proper understanding that Christian community has a very intentional purpose, not existing for its own sake.

Understanding “evangelization” in this way helps to bolster Shantz’s stress on the “communal faith” that shaped Herrnhut’s heart — “there is no Christianity without community.” Many of Herrnhut’s activities and structures were very

much centered on strengthening witness — *and more importantly, did so to the extent that the ratio of “missionaries to home communicants has been estimated at 1:60 compared with 1:5000 in the rest of Protestantism.”* In other words, the Moravian community with its unique combination of values created such synergy that the community literally exploded in sending its people out into the world as witnesses. However, I don’t mean to suggest that Herrnhut developed a “missional” ecclesiology self consciously. Rather, perhaps Zinzendorf and the Herrnhut leadership intuitively shaped a missional way of “being church” with their conscious reference to apostolic values. What were some of Herrnhut’s apostolic, thus “missional” values one is able to lift out of Shantz’s article?

Zinzendorf wrote that three things attracted him to the Moravian Brethren: “their doctrine, the condition of their souls, and *their regulations* (italics mine).” These regulations helped inform Zinzendorf as he wrote Herrnhut’s constitution and “almost all members” signed the 42 “Statutes of the Community of the Brethren.” This intentional ordering of their community guided members to understand the *high expectations* required to participate in Herrnhut’s communal life and the community’s witness. Shantz notes, “Their life together should be according to the pattern of the first Christians, and express Christian freedom before God.” Such expectations were not seen as strict adherence to certain doctrinal formulations, but rather focused on encouraging a deeper spirituality and strengthening their capacity to obey God’s call on their lives. Creating choirs to “encourage the intellectual and religious development of each member of

the community as well as strengthening the unity of the community” demonstrates the Moravian community’s “evangelization” character. The Herrnhut community embraced these high expectations willingly and was subsequently blessed in its mission vision and vitality.

Zinzendorf’s concept of the Moravian community as a “church within a church” helps to explain the concept that a missional church *measures growth by its capacity to release people, not retain them.* In other words, the goal is to be building God’s Kingdom *by building up His Church.* Shantz develops Zinzendorf’s ecumenical vision well. I find it interesting that within some circles of the American church, ecumenism is seen negatively as an unnecessary imposition of institutional structure upon the organic nature of the church. In my travels worldwide, the church in the global South more intuitively understands that by working together despite theological differences it witnesses to the power of the Gospel, especially where the church is persecuted. Therefore, regional councils of churches are quite common. Zinzendorf, despite frustrations championing his ecumenical vision, still held to his positive “judgment of the various churches and traditions and not withdraw to an antagonistic mentality ... (this attitude) constitutes much of his importance for us today.” Thus, missional churches focus on God’s mission even as they continue to wrestle with evangelization both within and without their institutional structures.

The incredible creative energy that Zinzendorf as well as the whole Herrnhut community brought to worship endorses the idea that missional churches see *worship both being highly participatory and flexible* — which certainly

describes Zinzendorf's constant liturgical experimentation. One of the enduring traditions regarding Zinzendorf was his composing hymns on the fly where the congregation sang verses he had just composed minutes before as he wrote new ones. Take a moment to read Hymn 401 (Blue Hymnal) "Heart with Loving Heart United." I believe we see Zinzendorf laying out a "missional" ecclesiology: we stand ready to die for each other; we are waiting to be commanded to go out into the world as a witness, and we must work hard as a community to incarnate the "the promise of a new humanity." Missional ecclesiology consciously sets the bar high.

I have noted three characteristics of a missional ecclesiology that I find in reflecting on Shantz's discussion of the early Moravian community's unique way of being church: high expectations for membership; a capacity to measure growth by releasing people, not retaining them; and creative worship that invites the whole congregation to participate and focus on God alone — worship that stays fresh and alive.

So, back to my initial question — Are we willing to be sufficiently tough in our self criticism to examine whether our historical formulations of "being church" (ecclesiology) now help or hurt our ability to embody the vision Ward lays before us as we move into the 21st century?" Perhaps we already manifest a missional way of "being church," perhaps we don't. I think this is an important question to decide. We need

some very painful reflection on the way we think of "being church," including a willingness to recognize that what needs to change is our focus on our "traditions." We can continue "being church" based on the "historic conditionality of our formulations," but at what price? Obviously, such formulations today more directly reflect our attempts at engaging our culture of the past century or so, rather than what we see in the Moravian community of Herrnhut.

Where Herrnhut consciously sought to be apostolic in nature, can we say the same? I fear the language of "community" we now typically employ is severed from the early Moravian community's underlying powerful missional values. The early Moravian's communal nature with its high expectations no longer has sufficient traction today given the individualistic ethos of our contemporary culture. The context has changed. I believe we no longer have the luxury of believing that somehow today we possess or will somehow intuitively form a missional ecclesiology reflecting the values of the early Moravian community. We certainly might experience an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, though we'll miss Zinzendorf's creative genius and energy. Hopefully, in reflecting on Shantz's fine article I succeeded in bringing out some of these missional values. And, by doing so, I have supported his contention that the early Moravians were once a "church ahead of its time" — can we say the same thing today?

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