

Keith Stirewalt

A couple of months ago, I overheard a woman describing a man that she was looking for to a person on the other end of the phone. The attributes she was describing did not seem to add up to any person that I knew. Suddenly, I realized that she was describing me! I stood up quickly to spare us both further embarrassment. Her description was not uncomplimentary or inaccurate. The attributes that she used in her description, however, were not attributes that I recognized or appreciated as being accurate ways to describe me.

I had a similar reaction to the article by Douglas H. Shantz. The attributes of gender equality, ecumenism, and worship provided a striking description of the early Moravian Church. The question is, “Do these attributes sound familiar (and complimentary) to the modern North American Moravian Church?” What attributes would a non-familiar observer use to describe us now? Shantz sees the Moravian Church as the early embodiment of Keith Ward’s ideal Christian community of faith, and he describes the attributes by which Moravians historically are identified. I especially was taken by W. R. Ward’s statement that Zinzendorf’s central problem was “his universal ability to make a splendid first impression, and his universal inability to cooperate for long with men of independent mind.”

I wonder about our current ability to make a ‘splendid first impression.’ I spend most of my days surrounded by non-Moravians who are temporary or permanent transplants to Winston-Salem. I make the point to ask many of these non-Moravians what they know about us. The

overwhelming response is a description of trips to Old Salem and experiencing a Lovefeast at Christmas time. Curiously, few seem to know of our Easter sunrise services and fewer still are acquainted with our theology.

Several of these people have asked me whether we allow women to be part of the ordained ministry. Shantz’ comment is interesting: “While we should recognize the remarkable opportunities that existed for Moravian women, full equality awaited a later time.” Speaking specifically of the Southern Province, the movement of women into the ordained ministry does not betray a sense of gender equality in ordained church leadership roles. Women play an active part in much of our church leadership; however, the percentage of female pastors in the Southern Province does not reflect the gender distribution of many seminaries and divinity schools. While the current inequitable gender distribution may only be a direct function of seminary ratios and gender roles of the past, we do need to examine ourselves critically to insure that females have an equal opportunity for ordained church leadership.

Disappointingly, people often describe to me their negative experiences of visits to a variety of local Moravian churches. The common theme is the conveyance of a closed society. “No one said hello to us.” “We could not find anyone to tell us where the nursery was.” “We were told that, if we joined, we would probably not be able to _____ (help with Lovefeast, usher, serve on a church committee, etc.) for many years...maybe not ever, because these jobs are handed down.” “The people there just were not friendly.” “I’ve not been to church in decades. When I raised questions in Sunday School class, people got angry with me.

How am I supposed to learn about Christianity if I can't ask questions?"

Does this describe the type of church that you would want to visit again? Does your church environment invite someone to explore Christian community? Jesus told us that it is not the healthy, but the sick who need a physician. Asking explorers to visit only after they have accepted our theology and attitudes excludes those in need. Do we see ourselves as healthy? If we automatically exclude others because they don't think like or look like us, we are not doing our job as Christians to spread the Gospel. I'm not implying that our theology should shift purposely to make others comfortable. Some who visit will not embrace our theology or our ways. We should, however, provide inviting space to those wanting to visit or join us.

As you leave your neighborhood next Sunday, look at all the cars that won't be driven to church. As you enter your church next Sunday, put yourself in the place of an intimidated visitor. Pretend that you don't know any of the people around you. Pretend that you are not related to half of the congregation! How would you describe the Moravian Church? What would be your first impression? Would you want to come back next week and explore Christian faith in community? Or, would you choose to stay home and clean out

the gutters? When I provide these anecdotes to church members of the respective churches, the usual response is, "But this is a really friendly church! We all love each other and we love visitors!" Maybe so, but in this case our works must demonstrate our faith.

How do we represent the Moravian Church when we are at work, home, the grocery store? I had one woman come to me (unsolicited) to tell me of her experience with 'the Moravians.' A woman in a large vehicle with a Moravian Church lamb magnet cut this lady off in traffic. When the lady honked her horn in response, the 'Moravian' woman made an obscene gesture and yelled an obscenity. The 'Moravian' woman then pulled into an ABC store parking lot! The purchase price of a Moravian car magnet bears the added responsibility of church representation. Likewise, the claims of being a Christian and a Moravian bear the responsibility of carrying that claim into the ethical decisions of our work and personal lives.

To the un-churched or to those of other denominations, the first impression that we provide may be our only chance to show who we are in our hearts. Provide that splendid impression to those who visit our churches or who work beside us. Our future...their future... depends on it.

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