

Glen Stoult

It seems a worthy endeavor to contemplate our long and rich Moravian history, in the hope of discovering anew a few notes of spiritual identity which still resonate in the church today. And it feels especially gratifying when those threads from the past are not only visible in the current fabric of our church but also available to be woven into the future of Christian community. Any historical grounding of contemporary issues evokes a sense of stability and authenticity in our current and future search for meaningful ministry, and justifiably so. In this spirit, Shantz's article attempts to do just that, by exploring three distinct arenas of Zinzendorfian fascination and applying them to present day concerns; to some degree, he succeeds.

Not being a historian, I am conscious of the potential pitfalls in reading something into our history that might be hinted at, but not necessarily present. There is always the temptation to make too much of what we discover, and overstate its relative significance. Throughout the article I found myself wondering how the historians among us would react to some of Schantz's assumptions. For example, in his introduction, Shantz suggests that "these early Moravians were *innovators* (emphasis mine) in their practice of Christianity. They were a church ahead of their time." Most of us would agree that, historically speaking, there is truth in this idea. Certainly the innovations of our forebears *in their day* are noteworthy. The efforts of Hus, Comenius, Luke of Prague, and Zinzendorf, to name only a few, set in motion and helped shape the ever-evolving movement that has become the Moravian Church. Nevertheless, when Shantz continues by

suggesting that 18th century Moravians, "provide a model for Christian community in the 21st century," he may be overstating any reasonable application of our history to the present day. This is especially evident in considering some of Zinzendorf's more fanciful theological and ecclesiastical ideas referred to in his essay.

In his defense, Shantz writes provocatively of Moravian history in order to address some significant global concerns of the present and future age. He gathers those issues under the banner of "Gender, Worship and Ecumenism," but he also hints at others, including "non-dogmatic liturgical Christianity ... in a day of bitter religious ... disputes," and a new sense of "piety shaped by exile and focused on ... Christ." I recognize his desire to challenge this present generation of Moravians so we might reconsider our heritage and apply it anew as our legacy to the current development of Christian community. For this encouragement we can all be grateful, regardless of any individual disagreements we may have with Shantz's point of view. Perhaps we can listen to Shantz as Zinzendorf listened to other religious leaders, with an open mind and heart, in order "to attain a better and more benign understanding of their teachings and what might be removed as a hindrance to godliness."

Still, there are some peculiarities in Shantz's interpretation of Moravian history which cause me to question his grasp of our faith tradition as a whole. The most obvious is his reference to Zinzendorf as "the founder of the Moravian Church," and I wonder how much Shantz is aware of the 300 year history of the Ancient Unity. He does refer later to the Moravian refugees "led by the carpenter and Pietistic

Catholic convert Christian David,” who were welcomed by Zinzendorf at Berthelsdorf in 1722. In addition, he acknowledges that Moravians were just one group among other Protestant refugees who, under Zinzendorf’s guidance established the settlement of Herrnhut (an important distinction occasionally downplayed in some popular histories), and that they were “founded some sixty years before the Protestant Reformation.” Yet, I get the impression that Shantz considers this ancient history, to which these references point, as inconsequential. As significant as Zinzendorf’s influence may have been on Moravian history, it is not the starting point, perhaps not even concerning the matters which Shantz addresses.

Regarding the effect of Zinzendorf’s sometimes eccentric theology on the 18th century Moravian community, it was helpful to see described these two enduring ideals: “a child-like Christocentric piety focused on the wounds of Jesus, and a diverse community that provided a model to the world of Christian cooperation and ecumenism.” Many of us are aware of the ongoing discussions concerning Zinzendorf’s “‘blood and wounds’ theology of the heart,” and of the recent reconsiderations encouraged by Moravian theologian and historian, Craig Atwood. At the risk of oversimplifying, Shantz attempts to focus Zinzendorf’s primary contribution as the emphasis on an enduring, intimate, personal relationship with Christ that is known more through “liturgical practice” (public worship) than through doctrinal teachings.

Of equal importance, though, according to Shantz, is Zinzendorf’s “greatest achievement:” “his organization of the Moravian community

‘as a living embodiment of his theological ideas.” Shantz contends that “Zinzendorf was convinced that the common worship experiences of the community had a greater impact than the experiences of the individual,” and that this shaped the community, its worship, and its theology. Certainly in an environment, like the one we currently live in, which accentuates personal faith, personal salvation, and personal relationship with Christ as personal savior, our Moravian appreciation of the centrality of communal liturgical experience is engaging. As personal as the relationship with Christ may be, in the Moravian context it is not private.

When Shantz finally addresses his thesis, well over half way through the article, I found his consideration of Moravian liturgy and worship less than compelling. The central place of music and hymns in the worship life of the community was articulated clearly enough, including the acknowledgment that “the Moravian church’s creed and faith are to be found in its music.” But he did not adequately develop the stated idea of a “nondogmatic liturgical Christianity” as a means of helping shape a 21st century model for Christian community. Aside from suggesting the empowering effect of the “song sermon ... (as possessing) a certain power of divine inspiration ... to awaken and illumine the singing community,” he gives no obvious application to the current scene. I was grateful to be reminded of Zinzendorf’s innovative and spontaneous approach to composing new songs and not just relying upon traditional hymns, as well as his preference “to worship in such a way that makes sense to our people and their changing circumstances, so that they meet God

face to face.” These were the closest Shantz came to contemporizing Zinzendorf’s theology of worship, and as laudable as they may be, several other Christian traditions have long since assumed leadership roles in the contemporary worship scene.

With regard to gender roles, and in particular, affirming women in leadership, we have embraced (in many provinces of the Moravian Church) the spirit of our 18th century ancestors, by continuing to work toward a more equitable appreciation of the roles of women and men within Christian community. That the status of women in Herrnhut was above the cultural norm for their day should encourage us to continue striving for this justice issue in our day. Concerning Zinzendorf’s maternal imagery of the Holy Spirit, I was disappointed that Shantz did not use his succinct description of Zinzendorf’s theology to challenge our 21st century Moravian Church in its predominantly masculine references to the divine, especially given his observation that “this Mother office of the Holy Spirit helps to explain the enhanced status that women enjoyed in Herrnhut and Bethlehem.” Because of this legacy, Moravians today are uniquely positioned to help lead the Christian church in this matter. Still, for many this may be too inflammatory a subject to undertake, but it certainly will be an issue which succeeding generations of Moravians must address.

Finally, in Shantz’s discussion of ecumenism, Zinzendorf’s attitude of being “so positive

in his judgment of the various churches and traditions and not withdraw(ing) to an antagonistic mentality” is noteworthy. This kind of open-mindedness and open-heartedness to other doctrinal understandings, both within and without the Moravian Church, could enable us to serve as the vanguard for other confessional churches in theological tolerance and inclusion. Our faith communities could serve as “experimental station(s)” where the various Christian groups could come together and discover their commonalities,” or as “places of refuge” where “rather than seeking to convert or proselytize Christians, (we) encouraged individual believers to experience a living contact with Christ.”

All in all, when I close my eyes and imagine the Moravian Church of the 21st century, I see communities exhibiting to the world a “generous orthodoxy”¹ marked by openness and compassion; I see congregations where Christ’s love is at the heart, and where diverse ways of loving Christ are affirmed; I see places of spiritual refuge from the dogma wars of this generation, where women and men can find comfort and strength in simply worshipping God; and if that makes me a “most laughable spiritual Don Quixote,” then I suppose I’m in good company.

Endnotes

¹ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Zondervan, 2004).

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