

THE HINGE

*A Journal of Christian Thought
for the Moravian Church*

SPECIAL SYNOD ISSUE

Church Governance:

On Bringing “Politics” (back) In

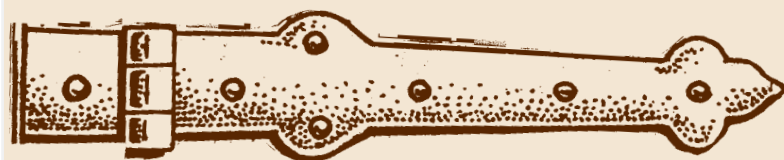
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*Responses: Doug Borwick, Milton Fenske,
Jeff Mortimore, Ken Schwanke, and Lane Sapp*

Book Review

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One of the early offices of the Moravian Church in Bethlehem, Pa. was that of the Hinge: “*The office of the Hinge requires that the brother who holds it look after everything and bring troublesome factors within the congregation into mutual accord without their first having to be taken up publicly in the congregation council.*”

— September 1742, *The Bethlehem Diary*, vol. 1, tr. by Kenneth Hamilton, p. 80.

The Hinge journal is intended also to be a mainspring in the life of the contemporary Moravian Church, causing us to move, think, and grow. Above all, it is to open doors in our church.

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Notes from the Editor

This special issue of *The Hinge* has been prepared with both the Northern and Southern provincial synods of the Moravian Church in North America in mind. Synod is the highest governing authority in a Moravian province, but since we hold synods only every four years, most of the power in a province rests with the Provincial Elders Conference. One of the primary functions of synod is to hold PEC accountable to the church. Synod does this through elections and by giving specific directives to the PEC. PEC also turns to synod to authorize its decisions and vision for the next four years. It is Synod that gives PEC its legitimacy, and PEC enacts the will of Synod. Synod is also the institution that Moravians use to unite a province in common ministry and build closer relationships among congregations.

Many first-time delegates to provincial synod leave with a far greater appreciation for the work of the province and the wisdom of its leaders. Synod can be a wonderful experience as clergy and laity struggle together to make sense of God's will for the church in our time and place. Sadly, Synod can also be a confirmation that our church and our society are deeply divided on some very serious issues. Partisanship is one reason that many people approach a Synod with anxiety and dread rather than excitement and joy. The same may be said of meetings of a local board of elders, or the process of calling a pastor, or congregational council. These things have been developed to help the church function effectively as the Body of Christ, but too often they become a source of tension, boredom, or even abuse. When our systems of governance are dysfunctional, everyone involved suffers.

Neil Thomlinson is a political scientist with a Moravian background who has thought deeply about the issue of politics in the church. Christians are often loath to admit that there are politics in the church, but Thomlinson reminds us that politics is nothing to be ashamed of. Politics is merely the process by which we govern ourselves and order our lives together. Even the order of worship is a form of politics! Thomlinson reminds us that politics is more than the formal rules of governance, such as the Book of Order. There is also a system of unspoken assumptions about who should make decisions and how they should be made. This invisible code is often stronger than the formal structures of the church and should be acknowledged.

It is important that the church be honest and forthright in governance. If we make the right decision through improper and deceptive means, we have actually made the wrong decision. If we abuse one another and abuse the rules that we have chosen to live by, then we are all losers. It is time that Moravians take a hard and honest look at our church government on the provincial and local levels so that our way of ordering our affairs may better reflect our convictions. This issue of *The Hinge* can help us in this important cause. We have responses from a pastor and four lay persons from the United States and Canada. We hope that you will find this discussion enlightening and helpful as you serve as part of the Body of Christ.

Church Governance: On bringing “politics” (back) in

Neil Thomlinson

When I was first elected to a United Church of Canada Board some years ago, I phoned my elderly father, who had spent much of his life involved in Presbyterian church governance, to tell him the news. His response, after offering congratulations, was to say, “You think, just because you’ve sat on a lot of Boards and have a Ph.D. in Political Science you know something about politics? Just you wait, sonny ... just you wait.” As usual, he was right.

Within many denominations much attention has recently been focused on two distinct but related challenges: internal conflict and appropriate structures of internal governance. While this has engendered much discussion, those doing the looking and talking seem largely to ignore one important variable that underpins and connects both challenges: the role and responsibilities of individual members as they participate (or not) in the governance of their church.

It will be argued here that most of the current problems are not so much the result of shortcomings in the formal structure of the church as they are of lay people neglecting our political responsibilities. The spirit and intent of the formal structure has been undermined by

that neglect so that there is now a considerable disjuncture between the “letter of the law” and its application in reality. Some may find this a discomfiting message, but it is one that I hope will foster some prayerful examination and discussion of a very important — but sadly neglected — aspect of church life.

It is well known that an apathetic membership will frustrate even the most ingenious and democratic civil or ecclesial structures. Put another way, it doesn’t really matter what kind of governance structure exists if only a few people take the trouble to understand and engage it. George Bernard Shaw had it right when he observed: “If despotism failed only for want of a capable benevolent despot, what chance has democracy, which requires a whole population of capable voters?”¹ The problem in the Moravian Church, as in North American society, is that we have failed to nurture a “population of capable voters.” We have, in other words, neglected our politics.

In the church, we have not only *neglected* our politics, we have actively *denigrated* the very idea that Protestant church governance is, or should be, an inherently political process. Are we so blinded by sleaze and corruption in secular

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leaders that we don't even know what "politics" means any more?

Definitions of "politics" begin, of course, with the Greek concept of *polis*, roughly paraphrased as "how shall man [sic] order his ways?"² In other words, it was about applying *reason* to life. For V. I. Lenin, politics was about "who could do what to whom."³ With that, he pithily summarised the view that *power* is the essential element of politics. That view has proven remarkably durable, particularly as people have realised that power is exercised by all sorts of people in all sorts of ways, many of which are outside the formal mechanisms of civil authority.

As the title suggests, Harold Lasswell's classic, *Politics: Who Gets What, When and How*, considered politics to be fundamentally about a question of *distribution*.⁴ But lurking in any discussion of resource distribution are also questions of authority, power, and legitimacy, since the very idea of distribution implies that some entity can make distributive decisions, and can make their decisions stick. In some circumstances, of course, this is accomplished through brute force, but in a democracy, power and its exercise flow from authority and legitimacy given to leaders by citizens: the "consent of the governed." Political theorist Bernard R. Crick saw politics as "ethics done in public," where people, through their public institutions, coordinate individual actions to agree, disagree, or intervene to achieve mutual gain.⁵

The time has come to acknowledge that church governance, like the governance of other human organisations, is about reason, power, distribution, and process. It is one thing to

recognise that the church is different in several respects from most secular organisations, but it is quite another to try to pretend that the church — composed as it is of good Christian folk — is somehow immune to the imperatives of good governance and the politics that attends thereon.

Although we don't much like to talk about it (or admit it?), church governance, too, is about authority, legitimacy, and the exercise of power. Most Christians might even agree that, while authority and legitimacy flow from God through Christ, power is exercised by human servants. There is no agreement as to *how* authority and legitimacy flow — or should flow — to the human servants, nor is there agreement as to the extent to which those human servants can be considered agents of Christ. A bewildering array of structures and processes has emerged within Christendom, as humans set about the very political exercise of creating structure and process intended to guide the flow of authority and legitimacy and the exercise of power. Without providing an exhaustive survey of the available models, four well-known examples serve to illustrate the point.

Roman Catholics and Episcopalians (Anglicans in Canada) utilise an *episcopal* form of government, in which all power is exercised by a hierarchy of individual bishops. Most Protestant denominations, however, have rejected the notion of God's authority being vested in individual hands, and so have created a variety of structures designed to emphasise collaborative decision-making. Of course, it is assumed that the "hand of God" guides both the individual actors and the collective entity.

Presbyterians talk of *conciliar* governance, in which legitimate authority is exercised by assemblies of presbyters (elders) in which the ordained often have considerable influence, but not decisive power. Presbyteries, Synods, and General Assembly (the “courts” of the church) are often deliberately structured to ensure that the number of clergy is balanced by an equal number of lay members (elders).⁶

The *congregationalist* model is designed to avoid the concentration of decisive power in one person or one ruling body.⁷ The ordained are regarded, in the congregationalist model, as the servants of local structures of governance that are set up by independent local congregations. This highly decentralised form of governance models the principle of *subsidiarity*, defined in political analysis as “the quality of governance is best (and costs least) when services are delivered by the most local level that has sufficient scale to deliver them.”⁸

The Moravian form of government is described as *confederal*. While there is not universal agreement as to what this means in practical terms, three elements seem central: 1) Christ is the Chief Elder; 2) leadership is exercised by a conference of church leaders (the Provincial Elders’ Conferences) rather than by a single head; and 3) the “conference of church leaders” (PEC) works in consultation with congregational officials rather than ruling arbitrarily.

Regardless of the model of governance utilised, it is clear that decision-making in Protestant churches is inherently political in nature. The process involves individuals and

groups making decisions that affect others. The process features reason, power, distribution and process. So why do so many Protestants complain about “church politics?” How have the ideals that drive democratic decision-making come into such disrepute in the church? Or, does the calling of politics into disrepute just provide convenient justification for members who wish to avoid the duties and responsibilities attendant upon membership in a Protestant church?

The Moravian Church in North America represents an interesting case study for students of governance. *The Book of Order* of each Province sets out the architecture of the polity in a way that draws heavily on the very best of democratic theory. A gap exists, however, between the *formal* (what the law says) and the *substantive* (the application of the law “on the ground”). Why?

For the purposes of this examination, it is possible to identify five challenges to which many subsequent problems can be traced.

1. The “invisible code”

Participants in virtually any organisation desire a decision-making process that is both understandably orderly, and that produces results widely accepted as legitimate. Church members and potential members are no exception. Church processes, however, are not well-equipped to deliver on these goals for a variety of reasons explored more fully in the sections that follow. It must be recognised at the outset that the norms, values and experiences that decision-makers bring to the process can differ sharply from the norms, values and experiences of the many members who do not participate actively in decision-making, preferring instead to observe or participate only

by voting. If the former offends or disturbs the latter, the “credibility gap” between the governors and the governed widens.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the percentage of church decision-makers who, in their “other lives,” are decision-makers or leaders in business, in government, or in non-profit organisations, is quite high. Many church decision-makers know something about the conduct of meetings, organisational behaviour, and interpersonal dynamics before ever getting involved in church governance. What they will *not* know (and may find shocking), is that, in the church, an “invisible code” is superimposed upon the norms and processes that are standard-fare in organisational decision-making. In addition to the fact that those rules are nowhere written down, they will discover that they are not open to question or even discussion. “That’s not the way we do things” is not an answer that should satisfy any intelligent and thinking adult. But, in church circles, some variant of that statement is used with distressing frequency to shut down further discussion. In so doing, several unpleasant realities are masked:

- 1) that few, if any, people can remember why things are done as they are;
- 2) that even fewer people can offer a coherent or rational explanation for the norm; and
- 3) that there is no structural pressure to re-examine norms and processes from time to time, to ascertain whether the values and reasons that underpin them remain relevant.

The paradox of a code of conduct that is neither explicit nor open to discussion and review

should be obvious: although few can explain it and even fewer can justify it, demonstrated loyalty to it is demanded. As the late Grant Notley was fond of observing, when he was the only member of his party in an Alberta Legislature dominated by a single party: “When everybody thinks alike, nobody thinks very much.”

Decision-making processes that are opaque and undemocratic should be seen as problem, particularly in the Moravian Church, where we are required by *The Covenant for Christian Living* and *The Ground of the Unity* to deal with each other with honesty and openness. But invisible codes undermine accountability and, in the process, destroy trust.

So how did such practices emerge, particularly in a denomination that has a very long history of dealing directly and lovingly with conflict, of commitment to discussion and consensus, and of seeking redemption and reconciliation? There is no easy or complete answer to such questions, but part of the problem is that we seem to have lost the ability to talk openly about the use and abuse of power within the Church. In short, we’ve neglected our politics.

Historically, the Moravian Church has espoused a commitment to community as a theological principle. Indeed the church has considered it a kind of calling to build a community capable of transcending barriers of language, class, ethnicity, background and even confession. This commitment to community has made the Moravian Church a leader in the ecumenical movement, but it has also extracted a price on the governance front.

Whereas most secular organisations have members who have agreed “up front” on important and potentially divisive matters, the Moravian Church membership is united mostly by a common belief in the “essentials.” Unfortunately, the distinction between “essentials” and “non-essentials” is blurry to many. Worse, the commitment to community that was once a hallmark of Moravians seems to have been diluted to the point that differences can no longer be engaged and agreement reached. Like most of the rest of North America, we seem to be “bowling alone.”⁹

Although not normally expressed in such terms, the Moravian commitment to community carries with it a belief in *pluralism* — the idea that distinct groups are present and will bring their ideas and positions to a decision-making “table,” at which necessary compromises will be made. It is assumed that the decisions made will reach or surpass some minimal threshold of acceptability for everyone, so the groups will remain engaged in the broader community even if they and their members are not totally happy with any particular decision.

Not surprisingly, this model works best if all concerned are able to see the policy alternatives under consideration by decision-makers as points on a continuum, rather than as binary (right/wrong) options. This is challenge enough in any organisation, but becomes particularly taxing in organisations where many participants are wont to claim that their values, beliefs and positions are influenced, if not dictated directly, by God.

2. Organisational Structure

As described above, Protestants have generally chosen to vest legitimacy in collective entities, in order to prevent power and authority from being exercised by any single individual. Most Protestants would probably agree that this imposition of “checks and balances” is a good thing in order to protect the many from the arbitrary and idiosyncratic actions of the few. As in the realm of secular government, however, it sets up a tension between fundamental values. Democratic considerations demand the increased empowerment of the many, and are therefore usually perceived as inherently decentralising. They are depicted as a *centrifugal* force that would disperse legitimacy to the many local boards and committees that are closest to the people, whose exercise of authority and power will supposedly encourage and nurture individual involvement. [This is *subsidiarity* in action ... and is the line of logic is evident in the congregationalist approach.]

On the other hand, as Paul Pross succinctly reminds us, “power diffused is power confused.”¹⁰ So the need for a coherent denominational identity, together with the desire for efficient decision-making, produces a *centripetal* force that supports and nurtures a strong and effective central structure. Centripetal, or centre-seeking, forces are strengthened by another very simple reality: lay people at the local level are volunteers and have limited time. Local volunteers must expend an enormous amount of time and energy to function effectively as decision-makers. This is a level of commitment often unrealistic in the modern world. Therein lies the rub: although

much formal power can be delegated to the grassroots, the realities of modern life tends to preclude its effective exercise at that level.

But power, like nature, abhors a vacuum. So it drifts toward those who are paid, trained, or otherwise dedicated to the matters at hand. In any organisation, such people are more likely to be found at the centre than at the periphery. There is, however, nothing *undemocratic* about a strong central structure, as long as the processes by which power is exercised enjoy the support of the members and are thus perceived as *legitimate*.

As many have observed, church governance bears a striking resemblance to the *Corporate Model* typically associated with a business corporation.

Corporate Model / Ecclesial Equivalents

Shareholders	Parishioners Synod delegates
Board of Directors	Board of elders PEC
CEO	Clergy President, PEC

In such a model, the gap between *formal* and *substantive* power is immediately visible. Formally, shareholders have a lot of power, but in substantive terms they have little. Formally, the CEO is the direct servant of the Board (and the indirect servant of the shareholders), but that's rarely the way it works "on the ground." The Board has almost all of the formal power, but uses it sparingly, if at all. Power, in other words, has gravitated toward the place where the action takes place on a day-to-day basis: the Office of the CEO. It will do exactly the same thing in

structures of church governance, for exactly the same reason.

Churches looking for an alternative to the corporate model would do well to turn to the nonprofit sector. There, the connection between members and elected officials is often much more of a two-way street, and the supervision of staff by elected Boards can be somewhat more direct. *Governance Matters* has developed a guide¹¹ which sets out nine key indicators of good nonprofit governance: Board Effectiveness, Board Operations, Strategic Planning, Program Effectiveness, Funding Stability, Financial Oversight, Constituent Voice, External Relations, and Organizational Evaluation. Of course, these indicators could be applied within a corporate model, but the "fit" is better with the nonprofit model, where service delivery (as opposed to profit-making) is emphasised; where it is recognised as crucial to ensure that the Board, the professional management (if any), and the staff are "on the same page" with respect to the mission and goals of the organisation; and where the mission and goals of the organisation are democratically determined by the membership.

Part of the problem of the Moravian Church is that there has been a culture shift at the level of the congregation to which the central structure has been slow to respond. The result is an odd kind of "disconnect" between the leaders and the led. Historically, the Moravian Church in North America was like a family ... and a rather small family at that. New members were occasionally "adopted" to be sure, but the family was easily able to acculturate (some would say "assimilate") its new members as it welcomed them. But all of that has changed. The Moravian Church in

North America has now reached out to a variety of people whose background, culture and beliefs are outside the band of what was previously considered the Moravian “mainstream.”

While such a development is cause for celebration on many levels, it is naïve to think that internal decision-making can carry on as before. There are now more identifiable groups within our Moravian community, and there are many more ideas now demanding space at the table. Willingness to compromise — or even to live with compromises negotiated by others — is diminished. The potential for conflict is increased.

This unsurprising reality should have acted as a catalyst for open and honest internal debate aimed at adopting, in a very visible way, a strategy of conflict management. Those who favour a strong central “core” reflective of what it means to be a Moravian in North America would probably advocate exercises of consultation and discernment designed to identify, strengthen and build-upon the points of agreement, together with a process to address areas of disagreement. Those who favour decentralisation might argue for a structure that puts more power at the level of the congregation, and thus reduces the need for agreement at the centre.

Both approaches have their merits and demerits, of course. But either approach, to be successful, demands open and honest engagement around the *real* points of potential conflict. If we have reached a place where those points of potential conflict cannot even be named, much less discussed, we are probably destined to drift toward a “solution” based on three elements:

decentralisation, de-politicisation, and deference. All are familiar from secular experience in both the United States and Canada, and all hold out the tantalising — but false — promise of peace without engagement.

Decentralisation

The federal political arrangement of both the United States and Canada shows us that there is value in having a national government that deals with those things important to everyone, and sub-national governments (states in the USA, provinces in Canada) that deal with things of heightened salience to particular populations and/or geographic areas. However, the history of federalism in both Canada and the United States is also fraught with sometimes-bitter disagreement, seemingly-endless power struggles and, in some cases, threats to national identity. Devolving power to the sub-national units has not solved very many problems, but it has certainly strained our respective senses of cohesive citizenship. So before embracing congregationalist principles as a means to a decentralised, but unified and peaceful, church, Moravians would do well to consider prayerfully our historic commitment to community, to discuss honestly and openly the merits and demerits of any and all proposed structural changes, and to ensure that the resulting decisions are reached in a way that is widely recognised as legitimate. Needless to say, that kind of decision-making can't happen unless and until members take our politics seriously.

De-politicisation

Whereas decentralisation attempts to avoid conflict by devolving power to smaller, more homogenous groups where disagreement is less

likely, de-politicisation seeks to avoid conflict by removing contentious issues from the reach of democratic decision-making. This logic is embedded in the episcopalian model. Like decentralisation, it has a secular parallel in the “turn-of-the-[20th] century reform movement,” which attempted to “take the politics out” of municipal government decisions. By casting difficult issues in technocratic terms, the reformers tried to move the decision-making action from the political to the administrative sphere. “There is no political way to build a bridge!” was the oft-repeated claim of reformers who sought to reduce all decision-making to its technical elements. While most would likely agree that a bridge should be designed by engineers rather than politicians, decisions about for whom the bridge is to be built, where the bridge is to be built, and which neighbourhoods are to be dislocated to facilitate its construction, are inherently political in nature.

Churches have Synods for the same reasons cities have Councils: to balance the political realities against technical and administrative considerations; to prevent the central machinery from considering its own interests as somehow more important than other interests; and to provide some measure of accountability and transparency to those ultimately responsible for whatever policy directions are undertaken. Denying the political dimensions of a decision doesn’t make them disappear — it only drives them underground. Synods that merely “discern” have given up their exercise of properly-constituted power and, in so doing, have made invisible the very political dimensions of important decisions.

Deference

In this context, deference as a conflict-avoidance strategy is counter-intuitive. When political scientists study “deference” they are usually concerned with the ways in which changing attitudes to authority in the family are connected to changing attitudes to the workplace and to politics. In other words, they are examining the extent to which the masses defer to leaders and elites, and they usually find that such deference is in decline.¹² In church governance, however, what is at issue is the opposite side of the same coin: it’s about an increasing level of deference on the part of the bodies that hold, according to foundational documents, all the power. Whether deference or a lack of familiarity with the foundational documents is the cause, it has become commonplace for such authorities to assert — and to behave as if — they had no power.

In the United Church of Canada, for instance, the Presbytery has near-total power over the actual operation of the Church.¹³ However very few Presbyteries have exercised effective oversight of Pastoral Charges, partly because the volunteers who make up Presbytery simply don’t have time, partly because the problems are many and complex, partly because the fine line between “oversight” and “interference” is not well defined, and partly because nobody wants to believe that power sometimes gets abused in a Church. So Presbyteries have become deferential toward the very bodies they are supposed to be supervising. The inability (or unwillingness) of many Presbyteries to discharge their many duties as outlined in *The Manual* was one of several factors that contributed to the creation

of a Working Group to examine the Church's governance structure. The Working Group addressed these problems and proposed replacing the "four-court" structure with a "three-court" model that eliminated the Presbytery. Despite its advantages, the proposal was defeated.¹⁴ So Canada's largest Protestant denomination continues to be governed by Presbyteries that are unable to fulfil their mandates effectively because they lack resources (administrative and personnel) and because they are in denial about their own power.¹⁵

In the Moravian Church, the Provincial Elders' Conference (PEC) carries most of the power of the Church, including the oversight of boards and agencies within the Province, authority to hire and fire pastors and other staff, the ability to recognise and dissolve congregations, and control over much of the "administrative state" of the church (NP, Book of Order ¶119). The PEC functions as the Executive of the Provincial Synod, and so "administers the government of the Church during the intersynodal period" (BOO, ¶119c). Unlike the Presbytery of the United Church of Canada, the PEC is a relatively small body and has a President who essentially functions as a Chief Executive (BOO, ¶117a).

Such a concentration of power in so few hands reinforces the need for Synod to remain the seat of real political power and for mechanisms to be devised to ensure that the PEC remains accountable to Synod. The considerable power and authority of the PEC, as well as its legitimacy, flow to it from the Synod, so one might expect that deference would be shown to the Synod by the PEC. One should not expect, however, the PEC to follow the path of Presbyteries in

the United Church of Canada, and become deferential to those over whom it is supposed to exercise oversight, namely congregations and clergy.

3. The clergy-lay relationship

Church governance functions on two related but separate planes, the spiritual and the temporal, and each is guided by a slightly different dynamic. While church members expect generally accepted principles of democratic governance to inform decisions of a temporal nature, there is a perfectly defensible expectation that our theology will be informed, influenced, and shaped by trained clergy. This means that the governance model of the church must specify the rights and responsibilities of trained clergy (who are employees) and lay members (who are usually volunteers).

The fact that employees have real political power as well as administrative power distinguishes churches from other nonprofit organisations and places some interesting demands on both clergy and laity. For lay members, this structure demands that we be attentive, concerned and involved; and it demands that our involvement be committed, knowledgeable and critical. For clergy, it demands the adoption of a leadership model that empowers and encourages lay governance, particularly with respect to temporal matters. Too often, shortcomings on both counts leave the clergy with too much power and influence, doing too much work, and bereft of adequate lay assistance and responsible lay oversight.

In some (many?) congregations, elected lay leaders would rather complain about "legalism" than take seriously their obligation to understand

the processes of democratic church government. A lack of familiarity with the provisions of *The Book of Order* and *Robert's Rules of Order* (or, in Canada, *Bourinot's Rules of Order*) is often worn like a badge of honour instead of being recognised and named as the shortcoming that it is.

Similarly some clergy may see themselves as a “Chief Executive Officer,” overseeing not just the pastoral and spiritual affairs of the congregation, but temporal matters as well. Such an approach is inconsistent with democratic impulses, and is certainly not an effective use of the training and experience of most clergy. It also reduces the ability of the clergy to minister effectively to those with whom s/he has disagreed. Yet this model is often facilitated — or even actively encouraged — by elected lay members who don't want to do the work and/or who lack the political will to assert and defend their legitimate role in the decision-making bodies of the church.

In any organisation, the people who control the process are usually able to control the outcome. And the people who control the process are usually the people who understand it best: *Nam et ipsa scientia potestas est* (For knowledge itself is power.)¹⁶ As full-time, trained, and paid staff, clergy have an obvious advantage in the knowledge department, but they should be expected to use their knowledge responsibly, and not as a blunt instrument of power.

Elected lay members, on the other hand, have a duty to do more than simply agree with the minister. We should be expected to do our jobs willingly and well, and to take seriously the requirements of effective and accountable church governance. This might involve spending more time at meetings; self-education with regard

to both process and issues; holding the clergy and fellow lay members accountable to the membership and to the fundamental Christian values of the Moravian Church as outlined in *The Moravian Covenant for Christian Living* and *The Ground of the Unity*; and exercising independent, critical, and analytical thought.

The corporate model concentrates knowledge and power in the hands of the few. Until recently, business corporations attempted to justify that tendency with the claim that externalities such as the “bottom line” would force the few to work for benefit of the many. The spectacular collapse of Enron has disabused most observers of such thoughts, and has spawned a veritable explosion of publications advocating the “democratisation” of corporate governance.

Although churches, too, are affected by the deficiencies of the corporate model, calls for democratisation have not resonated throughout Protestant Christendom, not least because ecclesial considerations limit the appeal of a structure that is totally democratic. Still, there are some lessons that can be learned from the corporate push toward more democratic models of governance. In particular calls for greater transparency, openness and honesty are entirely consistent with the history of the Moravian Church, and would certainly do much to alleviate the cynicism of those members who dare to venture into the field of church governance.

4. Secrecy vs Accountability, Transparency and Trust

It is a truism that, in any organisation, trust and legitimacy go hand in hand. Secrecy is the enemy of both. When creating or modifying an

organisational structure, the “default position” should be disclosure, transparency and visibility. Justification must be required for any exceptions to that position. The structure must also be given its own internal “teeth” to make sure that the requirement of openness does not simply become another example of a disjuncture between the formal (what the law says) and the substantive (what the law does).

Discussions of trust, legitimacy, secrecy and accountability presuppose that something is going on that matters: that some people have authority to make decisions on behalf of others; that people are affected by the actions and decisions of those in authority; and that power is being exercised. Legitimacy is determined by studying the way in which those variables interact. In the realm of secular government, it is usually relatively easy to follow lines of authority and power so evaluations of legitimacy are seldom difficult. Process that is proper — *and seen to be proper* — usually yields legitimate, if not necessarily good, decisions.

In churches, however, things are not so clear. Whereas the state can, on the basis of the “consent of the governed,” exercise coercion legitimately, a church cannot. For the church, the consent of the governed is something that is constantly negotiated on both the spiritual and the temporal fronts. To the extent that followers believe their church to be doing the work of God, they recognise the spiritual source of authority. When followers cease to believe, they may reject the authority of the church (as expressed by its leadership). They may simply leave or they may stay and try to convince church authorities to realign the work of the church with an alternative conception of God’s will.

On the temporal front, things are similarly fluid: the “consent of the governed” is very much contingent upon their perceptions of legitimacy and direction. The point is that in churches it is relatively easy for the governed to withdraw their consent. This may explain why it is a rare church official who encourages the open discussion of power, authority and legitimacy. The existing patterns of all three are perpetuated by keeping the processes of governance inscrutable and obscure.

In any organisation, people take positions on issues, often reflecting deeply-held beliefs. People quite naturally want their positions to prevail, and are likely to expend considerable effort to ensure that result. They may use rhetoric to try to convince others of the “rightness” of their position. They may try to install like-minded individuals in influential or decision-making positions. They may seek to reduce or even undermine the power and authority of those with whom they disagree. Those who occupy decision-making positions may engage in “log-rolling” (“I’ll support your pet issue if you support mine”).

None of this should be surprising in any organisation where many positions are outgrowths of deeply-held beliefs. Indeed, it is through precisely such methods that pluralism is accommodated and made operational. Nonetheless, such behaviour *does* surprise when it occurs in the church. Not only is it surprising, it is considered unseemly, and so it is driven underground by the invisible code. Instead of having the openness and honesty that good Christian principles would seem to require, we have instead a situation in which engaging delicate issues directly is *verboten*.

Not surprisingly, perverse results follow. We set up certain issues as being “out of bounds,” but then allow other issues to become their “proxies,” and we watch as individuals are categorised and judged based upon their positions on the “proxy” issues. Instead of encouraging widespread engagement in and discussion of contentious issues, we watch as the group of people who really understand the nuances of what is happening gets smaller and smaller. Meanwhile, rhetoric, candidate-selection and campaigns, opponent-baiting, and log-rolling continue apace. But to avoid being deemed unseemly, un-churchlike, or even un-Christian, participants are very careful to keep the practices “below the radar.”

The filling of important positions in the church engenders the same curious avoidance of the real issues. Although everyone recognises (even if they won't admit it) that certain positions in the church carry with them considerable power, campaigning for those positions (or at least *openly* campaigning for the positions) has been rendered out of the question by the invisible code. Indeed, we seem to persist in the fiction that the best candidate for any elected office in the church is the one who desires the position the least, has no discernible platform, beliefs, or goals, and has no visible team of supporters.¹⁷

But deep in our souls we know that it *is* a fiction. If people didn't desire these positions, there would be no candidates; and if the candidates had no platform, goals, beliefs, or supporters, they probably wouldn't desire the position. We also know that voters don't just sit around waiting for divine inspiration. As with secular politics, they may vote for the candidate they genuinely prefer, or they may

vote “strategically” to block the candidate(s) they want least.

Engaging in such calculations is problematic enough even when the electors know the candidates very well (perhaps at the level of the congregation), but what happens at the level of the Synod? In particular, what happens to those who are attending Synod for the first time? To the single most powerful position in the Province, we elect someone who is prevented from articulating a vision for the future, prevented from stating his or her position on the pressing issues of the day, and prevented from creating any kind of “team” that shares her or his priorities. We learn those things about the winner only after s/he is safely ensconced in the position. We never do find out about the other candidates. Such a practice would be absolutely unimaginable in any other kind of organisation.

The members of any sensible organisation should expect in candidates for leadership such attributes as vision, ambition, commitment, organisational ability, leadership, conflict mediation skills, and devotion to the community. But in the church an overt display of many of these characteristics is apt to be viewed with suspicion and alarm. People interested in church leadership are apparently expected to “light a lamp and put it under a bushel” rather than put it “on a stand where it gives light to all in the house.” (Matt. 5:15, RSV)

5. The “hand of God”

The final challenge to be discussed here is one that is not found in most secular organisations, and that is the role of God in church governance. It is generally agreed that the will of God should

supersede other considerations in ecclesial decision-making, but ascertaining the will of God is no easier now than it ever was. It is now more than two hundred years since William Cowper wrote the lines for which he is rarely given credit: “God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.”¹⁸ Yet throughout history, humans have demonstrated a spectacular inability to recognise either the “mysterious ways” or the “wonders.”

That hasn't stopped various human agents from claiming — and possibly even believing — that the “hand of God” is more evident in their interpretations, beliefs, and machinations than in the interpretations, beliefs and machinations of those with whom they disagree. The appropriate response to such hubristic assertions is not the imposition of an invisible code designed mostly to spare God from seeing the unseemly behaviour of His children. Moving legitimate decision-making away from public, transparent and accountable venues doesn't spare an omniscient God at all. It merely protects some humans from other the oversight of other humans.

Why are we so reluctant to concede that God might perform wonders through vigorous, open and honest debate? Can results that flow from scheming and manipulation that occurred “below the radar” qualify as the hand of God at work? Perhaps if our structures of governance encouraged — or even forced — open and honest debate, a new sense of legitimacy would emerge, and with it a renewed commitment to community. If the participants who engage that debate would do so with the full realisation that the hand of God may be motivating those with whom they disagree, the process would be civil, and the result may truly be a “wonder.”

It is not the intent here to question whether or how the hand of God influences decision-making in the Church. I have taken as a given that it does. It must be recognised, though, that we don't make God's work easy. Consider, for example, a very visible manifestation of our belief that God's hand guides developments: the idea that people are “called” to do certain things within the Church. That call is a very personal experience between the individual and God. But within the councils of the church, any call is mediated by other humans.

The election of the President of the PEC, as described above, is one example in which the human mediation fails to meet a number of sensible standards. Another example is the call of pastors. When a congregation is seeking a pastor, its Board identifies the characteristics desired, but it does not then post a job ad to which any interested pastor could respond. Similarly, a pastor who feels called to minister to that congregation cannot simply apply.

Instead, the PEC or its appointee engages in a mostly-secretive process intended to “match” the characteristics identified by the congregational Board with the characteristics of the pastors it knows to be “available.” But the PEC may have no connection to pastors wanting to move, and the pastors have no way of applying. In fact, pastors are apt to know of vacancies only through informal channels. Can the hand of God be expected to guide simultaneously the PEC or its appointee, the congregation Board, and the prospective pastor? Of course. But if we paid attention to our politics, we could make things easier for God.

We also seem to expect God to behave in predictable and historically consistent — rather than in mysterious — ways. For example, the realities of today's pastor-family, particularly the preponderance of dual-career households, are markedly different from the situation of a hundred years ago. God is doubtless well aware of the societal and familial changes, and may even have been the motivating force behind them. Yet, neither the expectations of the polity nor our process for matching pastors and congregations have evolved to take those realities fully into account. As a result, our structures expect a lot from God. Again, thoughtful political engagement on our part could lighten that expectation.

The “hand of God” is very real in church governance, and its presence should not be underestimated. However, its presence should not be used to justify practices that do not meet minimal standards of good governance. Decisions that are the product of human manipulation should not be presented as God's handiwork. Those decisions should be scrutinised by an engaged membership that does not expect divine intervention when we fail to take seriously our duties and obligations.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper has shown that the essential elements of politics — reason, power, distribution, and process — are also staples of church governance, which raises the question of why the very word “politics” causes so many in the church to recoil in horror. I have speculated that this reaction flows from our unwillingness to admit

that power is both used and abused within the structures of church governance, and have argued that a more appropriate reaction is prayerful engagement of our duties and obligations as Protestants and as Moravians.

Five challenges to effective church governance have been explored here. First, an invisible code was identified as a serious threat to our Moravian sense of community, to the application of pluralism, and to the transparent and accountable decision-making that is so necessary if its results are to be considered legitimate by all participants. Full, open and honest discussion was prescribed as the antidote to the corrosive effects of an invisible code that is not universally understood nor accepted.

Second, organisational structure was examined, with the decentralising (centrifugal) demands of democracy set against the centre-seeking (centripetal) demands of efficiency and common identity. Our structure, which roughly parallels the corporate model of the business world, has exacerbated the disjuncture between the formal (what the law says) and the substantive (what the law does). The nonprofit model has been shown to provide a more responsive, reflective, and stable structure in which the relationship of all participants is clearly linked to a mission, and to goals and objectives that are democratically determined. Increased legitimacy results. Reluctance to confront internal conflict forecloses the possibility of a positive growth experience and instead sets the church down a path of conflict avoidance characterised by decentralisation (creeping congregationalism), de-politicisation (creeping managerialism), and a form of deference that leaves the church

leadership unsure of — and insecure in — its own power and unwilling to challenge ideas that threaten the community.

Third, the relationship of clergy and lay members was explored against a theme of responsibility. While power will tend to gravitate toward those possessed of a combination of knowledge and time, clergy must resist the opportunity to centralise too much power in their own hands. Lay members, despite their status as volunteers and the limitations on their time, must take their positions and attendant responsibilities seriously to ensure that lay power over temporal matters and input into spiritual matters is protected.

Fourth, the need to build trust through increased transparency, accountability and legitimacy of the decision-making process was emphasised. Church governance labours under a big burden: everyone is expected to be “nice” even

when there is no agreement as to what that entails. Normal aspects of political decision-making such as the use of rhetoric, campaigning, log-rolling, and candidate selection are characterised as unseemly in the church, but the alternatives have produced an atmosphere of secrecy in which trust and legitimacy cannot thrive.

Fifth and finally, the ways in which believers expect the “hand of God” to guide church governance were briefly examined. A major challenge for the church lies in recognising the “mysterious ways” in which God moves, and in minimising human barriers to divine direction.

Throughout, this paper has argued that “politics” is not a dirty word. Bringing healthy politics back into church governance offers a realistic and workable way for the Church to face its challenges as a real community. I hope this commentary helps to launch us on that process.

Endnotes

¹ George Bernard Shaw, “Preface,” *Man and Superman*, 1903.

² Usually translated as “How would men best dwell in cities, and with what observances?” Hesoid, Loeb Classical Library, 581.

³ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, translated and edited with an introduction by Robert Service (New York: Penguin Books, 1993 [originally published in 1917].)

⁴ Harold Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When and How* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1936; reissued Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1958).

⁵ Bernard R. Crick, *In Defence of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962; 5th ed. London: Continuum, 2000).

⁶ see, for example, Presbyterian Church in Canada, *The Book of Forms* (Toronto: Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1993) s. 176.2.2 (Presbyteries); s. 260 (Synod); s. 278.1 (General Assembly).

⁷ <http://www.webenglish.com.tw/encyclopedia/en/wikipedia/c/co/congregationalism.html>

⁸ Gardner Church, Ken Greenberg, and Marilou McPhedran, “Toronto: An Urban Alternative,” in *Cities in Our Future*, ed. Robert Geddes, with a foreword by Wally N’Dow and an introduction by Ellen Posner (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1997) 97.

⁹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New

York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” *Journal of Democracy* 6:1 (January 1995): 65-78. “Putnam warns that our stock of ‘social capital’ — the very fabric of our connections with each other — has plummeted, impoverishing our lives and communities. Putnam draws on evidence including nearly 500,000 interviews over the last quarter century to show that we sign fewer petitions, belong to fewer organizations that meet, know our neighbours less, meet with friends less frequently, and even socialize with our families less often. We’re even bowling alone. More Americans are bowling than ever before, but they are not bowling in leagues. Putnam shows how changes in work, family structure, age, suburban life, television, computers, women’s roles and other factors have contributed to this decline.” Synopsis taken from the website: <http://www.bowlingalone.com>.

¹⁰ A. Paul Pross, *Group Politics and Public Policy*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1992), 65.

¹¹ “Nonprofit Governance Indicator Guide” <http://www.governancematters.org/web/NGIG/index.aspx>.

Governance Matters, [formerly the Alliance for Nonprofit Governance (ANG)], is an organization whose mission is to improve the governance of New York’s nonprofits.

¹² See, for example, Neil Nevitte, *The Decline of Deference: Canadian Value Change in Cross-National Perspective* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996).

¹³ United Church of Canada, *The Manual* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1998) ss 320-368.

¹⁴ Jeff Cook, "Restructuring the Church Gets Another Look," *General Council 38 News* online at: <http://www.united-church.ca/gc38/news/1303.shtm>, 13 August 2003.

¹⁵ For example, "Where, in the opinion of the Presbytery, the functioning of a Pastoral Charge is ineffectual or the Pastoral Charge fails to take appropriate action, or where the Pastoral Charge requests the Presbytery to take action on its behalf, the Presbytery shall adopt such measures as it may deem necessary." United Church of Canada, *The Manual*, s 107.

¹⁶ Francis Bacon, *Meditationes Sacrae*, 1597.

¹⁷ At the level of the President of the PEC, European Moravians have chosen to have a rotating Chair, rather than to elect a leader who can't campaign for, or be seen as seeking, this important office.

¹⁸ William Cowper (1731-1800), "God moves in a mysterious way," *The Book of Praise* (Toronto: The Presbyterian Church in Canada, 1997) #55.

Responses

Jeff Mortimore

I am grateful for Dr. Thomlinson's article, and grateful for the opportunity to respond to it, but not because I believe it offers much hope for solving Moravians' discontent with how the church addresses internal conflicts. Whatever Moravians might think about recovering "our politics," two features of contemporary American Protestantism will continue to limit the effect doing so has on stabilizing Moravian governance. First is the laity's "free market" approach to church affiliation, which has only increased with the successes of the ecumenical movement. Second is the laity's ends-oriented approach to church polity. Taken together, these features limit the church's ability to enforce any political structure on a membership with little or no incentive to recognize its authority short of producing desired outcomes.

In other words, and to bring the point home, Moravians' formal conferential structure tends to be process-oriented, democratic to the point of entailing a pluralism that goes beyond many members' comfort level. Such a polity remains open to the possibility of outcomes that will appear foreign, if not threatening, to its members. On the other hand, lay expectations tend to be ends-oriented, such that the authority of the polity lies in its ability to affect desired outcomes, rather than in its ability to preserve any particular process. In our religious free market, it is difficult to convince members to hold to a process that would put them at risk of saying

and doing things — or having things said and done on their behalf — that are in conflict with their beliefs or expectations. While such risk may be a fact of life in a constitutional democracy, this is not so in a religious free market where participants may just as easily vote with their feet. If recovering "our politics" only means recovering our formal structures from otherwise ambiguous practices, then Thomlinson's project does not go far enough.

Exacerbating this situation is the very diversity we find within and between our own congregations. On the one hand, we are called to see this diversity as a strength. However, as Thomlinson suggests, the church has struggled to integrate new members (and I would add pastors) who bring with them other traditions, politics, and cultural and theological expectations. Not only does this diversity increase the potential for conflict, but it increases the potential for disagreement about how to respond to conflict — procedurally and otherwise. On its own, reassertion of "our politics" is insufficient to channel or discipline the diversity of experiences and opinions represented among our leadership without harming the ecumenicity Thomlinson otherwise celebrates.

How then to proceed? First, while Thomlinson is correct to suggest that lay leaders too often neglect the structures and processes of Moravian polity, we must acknowledge that polity and politics are not coterminous. The problem is not so much method as it is content, and among

an ends-oriented laity of diverse expectations, this presents no small challenge. Essentials are important, and what we seem to have lost is the ability to articulate why a formal confederal structure, pluralism and all, is appropriate to our understanding of the ecclesia. Why, in light of our essentials, should members want to hold to a process that puts them at risk of having things said and done that are in conflict with what they believe?

Second, we must adopt institutions and practices that render explicit and model our answer to this question. If our formal confederal polity entails democratic deliberation, then we should be able to say how it accommodates and disciplines controversial discourse. One such way is to provide outlets like *The Hinge* or the *Moses Lectures*, where Moravian intellectuals may test the limits of Moravian belief and practice without fear of reprisal.

Of course, both strategies require that we specify further than Thomlinson has what we mean by pluralism. His definition opens with recognition of the fact of diversity, but it never contemplates the cost to the ecclesia (bound as it is to our essentials) of acknowledging the *right* of distinct groups to “bring their ideas and positions to a decision-making ‘table.’”(6) The pluralism required here goes beyond mere “tolerance” to what Martin Marty calls “counter-intolerance,” or the absolute insistence that *everyone* be understood on his or her own terms first *before* disagreeing.¹ Our pluralism, therefore, is not just a procedural consideration, but a practice in search of theological justification. While I feel the argument for this pluralism can be made, nevertheless someone needs to make it.

In spite of my concern that Thomlinson may have limited himself to the smaller of the two horns of method and content, as a lay leader I am grateful for his insistence that we become better stewards of our own deliberative and decision-making practices. Thomlinson offers us a fitting preamble to what should be a larger conversation about Moravian polity and politics. I hope this conversation continues, not just here but in our boards and Sunday schools. If Thomlinson is right, then this is where change needs to take place anyway.

Footnotes

¹ Martin Marty, *When Faiths Collide* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 128.

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Doug Borwick

Neil Thomlinson’s article does an excellent job of acknowledging one of the larger “elephants in the corner” of church governance. Churches, of all denominations, are associations of human beings who pool resources (time and money) to implement ministries addressing needs in the world. Human institutions require decision-making processes and, when those processes depend on human input (the Moravian tradition of decision by lot being an exception) someone or ones must eventually make choices. That’s politics, no matter how unpopular or sullied the word has become.

My spiritual and professional background gives me an interesting view of Dr. Thomlinson's article. I was raised a Lutheran, did the nearly-obligatory late adolescent agnostic/atheist stint, spent 25 years as a Southern Baptist, and, for the last decade have returned to my liturgical roots in the Episcopal Church. I now serve on the vestry of my parish. I also am an educator in not-for-profit management, having created Salem College's degree program in the field and work as a management consultant with a wide variety of nor-for-profit organizations, including churches.

Consortial Polity: Church governance for Christians is generally divided into two spheres: the nature of one congregation's relationship with others and the management of the local congregation. On the consortial level, polity centers on the relationship between congregational autonomy and centralized authority in both spiritual and temporal matters. The argument for autonomy is, of course, the threat of tyranny. The rationale for control is the specter of apostasy or moral turpitude. The trouble primarily stems from individual understandings of tyranny and apostasy. In addition, the increasing polarization in American life makes finding common ground ever more difficult.

As with almost anything human, there is a great disparity between theory and practice. Dr. Thomlinson rightly points out the difference between the formal and substantive in application. This *de jure/de facto* distinction is important in understanding that the issues facing one denomination are far more similar to others than might appear on the surface. The Southern Baptist Convention, over the last thirty years, has

moved from a coalition of fiercely independent congregations to a tightly centralized association, with temporal control employed in the service of spiritual discipline. The General Convention of the Episcopal Church in the USA, in theory one of the most centralized denominations, has experienced a revolt on the local level challenging the authority of the Convention and the Presiding Bishop. The practice of consortial polity, over time, swings across a somewhat narrower continuum than might be surmised from studying denominational theory. The Moravian Church today is no exception.

Congregational Polity: For the individual church, polity deals with the degree of temporal authority granted to the clergy. The essential model for this governance is corporate or, more to the point, not-for-profit practice. Churches in the U.S. are not-for-profit corporations, albeit with somewhat more autonomy than is true of secular 501(c)(3)'s. The governing board serves the role of a board of directors and the clergy, in general, fill a role similar to a CEO's. The principal difference between the two structures today is the lack of training clergy are given for administrative functions compared to current expectations of other not-for-profit executive directors.

The devolution of board power to the CEO cited by Dr. Thomlinson in secular not-for-profits is somewhat less pervasive than he suggests (although it is absolutely true, especially in smaller or less dynamic not-for-profits). What is unquestionable is the church's susceptibility to this trend. There are three reasons for this. First, compared with secular not-for-profits, the clergy play a unique role as "keepers of the mission." The deference that congregants feel

toward the clergy on spiritual matters inevitably carries over to temporal ones. Second, unlike not-for-profit board members (except in the smallest organizations), church governing board members often assume operational volunteer roles (Sunday School teachers, choir members, etc.) in addition to their policy volunteer roles. They are incredibly busy! The real work of governing becomes an even greater burden for them than their secular counterparts because of their greater total responsibility. Third, even those governing board members with administrative expertise are hesitant to apply it in the church because of the sense that the church should somehow be “above that.” This hesitancy with respect to administrative matters, while related to Dr. Thomlinson’s critique of the avoidance of political analysis in church life, is the stuff of an entirely different article.

Avoidance: Acknowledgement of the workings of politics in the church is avoided because of the “invisible code” that Dr. Thomlinson cites. This code is rooted in the “shouldness” of the Christian life. People expect their public selves to “behave” in church and for a docile civility to be the rule. In spite of the evidence of Peter and Paul, it is assumed that Christian community must exhibit quiet agreement at all times. And, of course, it is unseemly to seek individual aggrandizement in the church since Jesus told the sons of Zebedee, in effect, to get over themselves when they were vying for greatness in heaven. Unfortunately, avoidance merely allows decision-making to fall to those wanting to take it up, to those willing to take it up, or, worst of all, to those who take it up simply because no one else will.

It has been said that the political infighting in the church is so bitter because the stakes are so low. While funny, the premise untrue. The stakes are high. The choice of what ministries to pursue and the application of resources to implement them are both “political.” Those ministries are the reason the Church exists and the ramifications of the choices should be momentous for our world. If we understand that these decisions are of significance, perhaps we can develop comfort in intentionality about the political nature of the processes by which we choose. I applaud Dr. Thomlinson for his attempt to rehabilitate the concept of politics in the life of the church.

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Ken Schwanke

When I think of all the people I know who have decided to move out of positions of lay church leadership, several reasons reoccur time and time again. For many it's the conflict. Whatever ideas they had about church leadership didn't include the conflict that often accompanies the decision making process and more often the repercussions afterwards.

For others, the reason for leaving church leadership is because of change. Either there's too much and it happens too quickly, or there's not enough and it takes far too long.

One might think that if we could just get a handle on church conflict and find better ways to manage change, then we'd be able to draft more lay leaders. Yet change and conflict are two ingredients that give our churches life.

Many reading this may find the mention of conflict objectionable. Doesn't conflict argue against the unity we should find in the Spirit? Yet conflict, or more precisely the willingness to have conflict, is a sign of organizational health.

Patrick Lencioni in his ground breaking book, "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team" points out that conflict allows people "to engage in passionate and sometimes emotional debate, knowing that they will not be punished for saying something that might otherwise be interpreted as destructive or critical."¹

Thomlinson posed the question: "Why are we so reluctant to concede that God might perform wonders through vigorous, open and honest debate?" That's a good question. Have

we created an environment where the fear of reprisal or exclusion or censure keeps us from speaking our mind? If that's the case then we have undermined our ability to find the best Spirit-led solutions in the least amount of time.

Moravians define themselves as a tightly knit community. Yet community requires the glue of trust and that comes only as we have confidence that we can speak freely. Trust allows us to have meaningful productive conflict. Without an environment for productive conflict we undermine the trust that holds community together.

For many people who find their involvement in church government less than satisfying, it often comes down to losing sight of the big picture. It isn't that people don't want to be involved; it's that they don't understand why they should bother. It's one thing to be on the sidelines asking, "Why are we doing this?" It's a whole different matter when you're on the inside asking that same question. Especially when you're dealing with change.

The church is notorious for taking too much time making simple decisions, and not enough for complex ones that require thoughtful reflection. This is often frustrating for lay leaders who have a secular job where decisions are made quickly and the reason for them is simple: the bottom line. But what's the "bottom line" in the church?

A number of years ago the church board I was serving on made a decision to introduce a new children's program. The decision came after surveying the teachers and leaders of the program to determine whether the curriculum was accomplishing what they had hoped it would. It was clear from the results that it was not.

People were dissatisfied and losing interest in the program — but it kept on year after year.

Leith Anderson notes that many churches that begin strong with a clear sense of direction either fulfill their original mandate or it is forgotten. Over time “the purpose becomes to keep the institution going.”²

When a church loses sight of why it exists it loses the single most important tool for managing change. If those in charge can’t give a good reason for the decisions they’re making, they open themselves up to endless debate and criticism.

When a church clearly understands its purpose it has a grid for decision making. Purpose answers a lot of questions up front. Why should we do this activity instead of that one? Why should we make this purchase instead of making do with what we have? Is this issue worth debating? Should we make this change?

I’m afraid the motivation behind many changes is little more than, “because we need to try something to attract new people.” In other words, we need to keep the institution going.

What is our purpose? For Moravians serving in both vocational and lay leadership positions this is a vital question. It’s at the heart of why we do what we do.

I can think of dozens of things I’d rather do than sit in a church basement on a Thursday night talking about whether we should replace the linoleum. But get me talking about ways we can tweak our ministry so we are more visitor friendly — that gets me excited. Or whether we should be intentional about starting small groups that are geared towards inviting new people — that gets me excited too! Or providing ministry

opportunities for members at a local soup kitchen or mission experiences for youth — that really pumps me up! Why is that? Because it directly addresses our purpose: making disciples (Matthew 28:19, 20).

Footnotes

¹ Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 202.

² Leith Anderson, *Dying for Change* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1990), 112.

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Milton Fenske

The formal structure for both educational and religious organizations can be viewed as the written directions as to specified tasks, duties, and behavior of individuals within the organization. An informal structure arises when the formal structure does not include directions as to how a task or issue is to be handled; when written directions are viewed as no longer appropriate and are challenged, in principle, by a significant group of individuals acting contrary to written directions; and when individuals or small groups act contrary to written directions for a variety of personal reasons — philosophical to base.

In education in Canada, structural studies have generally fallen into one of the following three broad areas: Status studies: Knowledge of the formal structures at a point in time have proven useful in the administration of a system.

Evolution of structure studies: These studies have helped to understand how and why organizational structures have changed over time. These studies provide some insight in how to handle and predict change.

Issues within the formal structure: These studies are usually in depth investigations of a controversial issue.

Educational studies may well provide a direction for similar studies within the religious realm. *The Book of Order* and the formal structures for the Moravian Church were established during a period when very few (the clergy) were well educated, with the vast majority of members having limited educational qualifications. Not only have there been significant changes in the

greater society in relation to the societal, political, and economic milieu, but also the membership has significantly improved educational and professional qualifications.

“Church Governance: On bringing ‘politics’ (back) in” is a carefully conceived and developed paper on an issue within the formal structure of governance. While it challenges some of the current modus operandi within the organization, this should be viewed as positive and not threatening. Personal experience in observing organizational changes and how individuals “behave” within organizations has led to some general conclusions:

Vigorous debate of issues should not be feared.

Appropriate formal structures must be provided to appropriately discuss issues, or festering wounds will remain.

Some issues require careful and prolonged discussion over time. Sometimes years are required before an issue is fully understood and moves through various stages of change in order to develop reasonable consensus. When action is taken on bare majorities, battle lines tend to form which often spill over into other areas.

If the above are taken into consideration, the chances of consensus developing are greatly enhanced.

Finally some comment on the guidance of “the invisible hand” appears appropriate. The premise that “the invisible hand” provides some guidance is accepted. A question does arise, however, as to whether God is guiding us more when we choose to do little or nothing, or when we undertake open and vigorous debate.

As thinking individuals should we not all do all within our power to resolve issues?

To do little or nothing leaves the determination of acceptable conduct open to a few, perhaps the very few. Are we to accept that the few are the only ones receiving guidance? Religious groups have had some very sad experiences when all were expected to conform to the edicts of the very few.

Dr. Milton Fenske is a retired educational administrator with over thirty-five years of experience within the Province of Alberta.

Lane Sapp

I am grateful to Brother Atwood for asking me to respond to Neil Thomlinson's provocative article, "Church Governance: On bringing "politics" back in." I use the word "provocative" to describe the article because I found it particularly stimulating, stirring within me a desire to examine in a more critical way the governance of the Moravian Church.

I admit from the outset that my response to this article is from the perspective of one who sincerely believes that the Moravian confessional system of church government, while having its weaknesses, is a style of leadership that can promote a political process that is open and healthy yet ordered and structured. While our structures are not without confusion and fault, their theological underpinning was an avoidance

of a "politics" where authority and power is inappropriately invested in one person. Thus, the Chief Elder experience of 1741 where Christ was declared as the one who would, by his Spirit, govern the church through a consultative structure, still seems normative for us today. Does it need review and "tweaking" periodically to adapt itself to a changing culture? Certainly!

At first, I found myself "balking" at Brother Thomlinson's use of the word politics when referring to church governance. In our day with a nation clearly polarized and divided by "red" and "blue" states, the notion that the church should be more "political" brought to my mind the images we often see in seats of local and national governance where an attitude of "drawing a line in the sand" seems dominant. However, after reading Thomlinson's definition of politics as given by Hesoid ("how shall a man order his ways") I understood more clearly Thomlinson's first argument, "that most of the current problems are not so much the result of shortcomings in the formal structure, as of lay people neglecting our political responsibilities." He goes on to write, "the problem — in the Moravian Church in North American society is that we have failed to nurture a population of capable voters."

I say, "ditto, Brother!" As I see it, one of the problems with our confessional system of church government is our failure to properly educate the laity about our structure. In that sense, we have neglected our politics if politics in its truest sense understands how we order ourselves. I've often heard clergy say that they do not see much need in offering educational sessions on church government. "That's not where people are," or

“that’s boring,” are responses often heard. We assume that governance is not an issue the laity cares much about, but I think they care a whole lot more than we think they do.

In order for our system to be an open process where debate is encouraged and people are fully engaged in the process, the Church needs to do a better job in the area of education. I was astounded during my service on PEC that many people did not even know the basics of our confessional system of church government, and yet they were expected to operate effectively within it.

Continually educating ourselves about our “politics” is essential particularly since the Moravian Church as Thomlinson writes, “has now reached out to, and attracted as members, a variety of people whose background, culture and beliefs are, to greater and lesser degrees, outside the band of what was heretofore considered the Moravian mainstream.” Years ago it seemed as if Moravian ideals, norms and values were simply transmitted through the “Moravian” family by osmosis, but we cannot assume that reality any longer. Thus, our need for continual education in the area of church politics.

While I agree with Brother Thomlinson that our historic commitment to community may at times extract a price on the governance front, and often makes it harder to reach a decision, I would not have it any other way. In a world where we are tempted to succumb to the attitude which says, “mark your position,” I am hopeful that we can preserve a system of church government where we find our unity in a relationship with Christ and agree to disagree on other issues in a spirit of love. Thomlinson writes, “not surprisingly

this model works best if all concerned are able to see the policy alternatives under consideration by decision-makers as points on a continuum, rather than as binary (right/wrong) options.” I am optimistic that if we do a better job of educating our folks as to how we order ourselves we can preserve the beauty of a system of governance where we do not all have to agree on every issue in order to be a community grounded in Christ. Living in Christ, it seems to me, is a willingness to live with the questions of life, to explore them together and even to disagree. While I do not mean it as a tiring platitude, our motto rings as true as ever: In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty, but in all things, love.

I found Neil’s discussion of the relationship between lay persons and clergy a helpful insight when dealing with issues of governance in the church. The clergy need to be more proactive in looking for ways of adopting a leadership style that encourages lay governance, while the laity need to be responsible for educating themselves about church government without forming an unhealthy dependence and deference to the opinions of the clergy. A healthy interdependence that uses the best gifts of both clergy and laity strengthens the mission of the church and renews its effective governance. In its purest form, our confessional system of church government can and should promote this kind of interaction.

Finally, I disagree with Brother Thomlinson when he says that the “filling of important positions in the church engenders the same curious avoidance of the real issues. Although everyone recognizes (even if they don’t admit it) that certain positions in the church carry with them considerable power, campaigning for those

positions (or at least openly campaigning for the positions) has been rendered out of the question by the invisible code.” I am glad that we retain the tradition of electing the President of the PEC and its members without nomination. To do otherwise, would speak against all we believe about the Holy Spirit’s guidance in the election process. I trust that the Chief Elder knows who is needed in leadership for His Church at a particular time and he reveals this to any given synod in a balloting process that is free of nomination. Thomlinson says, “such a practice would be absolutely unimaginable in any other kind of organization.” That is well and true, but the Church is not called to be an organization.

The Church is the living body of Christ, and He reveals his will even in the weakness and fallibility of our human structures.

In closing, I want to thank Brother Thomlinson for his thoughtful and stimulating article. I pray that his insights will continue to provide the Church with challenge and points of discussion as we seek to be good stewards of the various structures God has given for the governance of His Church.

The Rt. Rev. Lane Sapp is pastor of Calvary Moravian Church in Winston-Salem, N.C. and is a bishop of the Unity.

The Author’s Final Word

I must begin by saying how delighted I am that my article sparked such thorough and thoughtful responses from Doug Borwick, Milton Fenske, Jeff Mortimore, Ken Schwanke, and Lane Sapp. I’m also pleased that the responses covered so much disparate territory within a subject area that is so much bigger than this issue of *The Hinge* can hope to explore. I hope that these contributions will provide a basis for — and perhaps fuel — a much more wide-ranging discussion within the Moravian Church.

I am glad that Lane Sapp chose to share with us his experience of initially “balking” at my use of the word “politics” and then understanding

why I did. On that front, I do hope his experience is shared by many readers because, to “order their ways” effectively and appropriately, people must first recognise that they have some degree of power in so doing. The instant that such recognition dawns, a political process is begun.

I’m grateful to Doug Borwick for pointing out the distinction between the consorial and the congregational policy and to Milton Fenske for contributing a classification of structural studies. I agree with Doug Borwick that the dynamics of political interaction are quite different at the level of denominational decision-making than they are within an individual congregation. And in general I agree with his sketching of the

differences. But there are similarities too, the most obvious of which is attitudinal. Milton Fenske highlights this point in summarising his observations of individual behaviour and organisational change. Certainly the need for formal structure and vigorous debate — together with a recognition that “Rome wasn’t built in a day” — are common to both the congregational and the denominational practice of church politics.

I cheer Milton Fenske’s recognition of the need for vigorous debate; Ken Schwanke’s celebration of the willingness to have conflict as “a sign of organizational health;” and Doug Borwick’s reminder that Christians are not called to be docile nor to “exhibit quiet agreement.” We are however, called to treat each other with respect and dignity, something that is a good deal easier to accomplish through full and frank discussion undertaken within defensible and well-understood processes than it is when disagreements — often profound disagreements — are driven underground by an invisible code. This is particularly true if the bases of the invisible code are more about protecting power and privilege than about dealing directly and lovingly with conflict, commitment to discussion and consensus, or about seeking redemption and reconciliation. Patrick Lencioni (quoted by Ken Schwanke) had it right in observing that people must feel free to engage in passionate and emotional debate without fear of reprisal. The invisible code undermines that both by proscribing passionate and emotional debate, and by hinting at the prospect of repercussions.

Like Jeff Mortimore, I’m concerned about approaches that he calls “free-market” and “ends-

oriented” on the part of members and prospective members. My concern, though, is that those two approaches — particularly when taken together — produce a lack of “brand” loyalty, and with it a loss of understanding of what the “brand” is about in the first place. But the solution to this problem is surely not to have “the church ... enforce any political structure on a membership ...” The challenge is to get the membership to realise that we are “the church” (at least in the sense of its governance), and that we have to develop, respecting the traditions of the “brand,” political structures that we both understand and respect. That is the basis of legitimacy, and legitimacy is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to ensure “buy-in” by members. This, in my view, is the link between method and content, and it fits neatly with Martin Marty’s notion (which I thank Jeff for highlighting) of “counter-intolerance.”

Brother Mortimore also raises an important question, when he asks “Why, in light of our essentials, should members want to hold to a process that puts them at risk of having things said and done that are in conflict with what they believe?” The answer is easy to articulate, but much more difficult to put into practice. On a purely political basis, they should want to hold to a process that produces decisions that are widely accepted as legitimate. On a theological basis, they should want to hold to a process that permits, within the confines of civility, exploration of “what they believe.” This requires also some real exploration of the sense of purpose described by Ken Schwanke.

The real problem here is an attitude that fears any exploration of belief, and therefore puts such some things beyond the reach of sensible — and

hopefully informed — discussion. Even more than is the case in civil society, too many people of faith are inclined to say, “Don’t confuse me with the facts, my mind is made up.” Jeff Mortimore is quite correct that reforms to “method” are not going to deal with that problem of “content.” My point, however, is that without having legitimate “method,” there is no way to even explore “content.” Not surprisingly, then, I totally agree with Jeff in his support for *The Hinge* and the Moses Lectures as appropriate places to explore what we believe.

Similarly, I agree totally with Brother Sapp about the need for continual education about the processes of governance but I’m not at all sure that the need is confined to the laity. I have a nagging fear that the reluctance of many of our clergy to engage their congregations in discussions of church governance stems from their own ambivalence toward the subject, as much as it does from their fear of pushing parishioners to consider things deemed boring or inconsequential. But in any case, it is important for lay people to seize the agenda here and not wait for clergy to do all the heavy lifting. The government of our Church is the collective responsibility of all of us — laity and clergy together. As Doug Borwick correctly notes, “the deference that congregants feel toward the clergy on spiritual matters inevitably carries over to temporal ones.” This is a trend to be resisted.

I share with Bishop Sapp affection for the historical Moravian commitment to community and, like him, I hope that the Moravian Church can (continue to?) “find our unity in a relationship with Christ and agree to disagree on other issues in a spirit of love.” Also like Brother

Sapp, I believe that our motto [which, I should confess here, was one of the major features that drew me to the Moravian Church in the first place] gives us a roadmap to “living in Christ,” which Lane beautifully suggests is “a willingness to live with the questions of life, to explore them together and even to disagree.” Sounds a bit like “counter-intolerance,” doesn’t it? But I worry when individuals or congregations are allowed to almost decide for themselves what is “essential” — and thus subject to the demand for “unity.”

Where Bishop Sapp and I clearly differ is on the way in which the PEC and its President are chosen, and perhaps about the role of the Holy Spirit in the election process. Lane says “I trust that the Chief Elder knows who is needed in leadership for His Church at a particular time and he reveals this to any given synod in a balloting process that is free of nomination.” “Free of nomination,” in the Moravian context, means that delegates write a name on a piece of paper and the votes are tallied. The names and number of votes are read aloud, and then people vote again until there is a majority for one person. A nomination process normally involves interested parties putting their names forward (or a nominations committee actually soliciting names to put forward) well in advance, allowing full campaigns for the position. However, it is not necessary to choose between these binary extremes. For example, the first ballot could be conducted just as it is now: a process intended to identify the individuals in consideration but to forestall lengthy — and possibly divisive — “campaigns.” But then those individuals could be invited to make a public statement of belief and platform. And then the run-off ballot could

continue until one person has a majority of the votes cast. I don't think that inserting into the process a public statement by candidates in any way diminishes the capacity of the Chief Elder to reveal to Synod what is needed in leadership.

The current system assumes that everybody voting at the given synod is a blank slate passively awaiting the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Is that true? Can PEC members and Presidents past and present truthfully say that no "campaigning" was undertaken by them or on their behalf? Can delegates (especially experienced delegates) truthfully say that they went to Synod with no preconceived notions? If not, where did those notions come from in a system where "campaigning" is supposed to be forbidden? And on what basis did inexperienced delegates cast their ballot? Finally, how often do those with the most votes on the first ballot win? Does the answer to that question suggest the agency of the Holy Spirit, or that the decidedly human voters engage in "trending" in order to bring the

process to conclusion more quickly? I don't, of course, know the answers to these questions, but it occurs to me that it would be very interesting to interview a number of first-time delegates as they are leaving a synod and ask them whether they felt moved by the Holy Spirit or manipulated by human agency during the election process.

Finally, I'm a bit uncomfortable with Lane's suggestion that being an organisation and being the "living body of Christ" are somehow mutually exclusive. I totally accept the idea that the Holy Spirit can prevail over the "weakness and fallibility of our human structures," but I don't think this realisation should give us license to retain human structures that have easily-identifiable weaknesses and fallibilities.

Thanks to Craig Atwood for initiating this conversation, and thanks to Doug Borwick, Milton Fenske, Jeff Mortimore, Ken Schwanke, and Lane Sapp for their insights, wisdom, and thought-provoking responses. May the discussion continue!

Letters to the Editor should be sent via email to Craig Atwood: atwoodcd@wfu.edu

Book Review

Marsha Keith Schuchard, *Why Mrs. Blake Cried: William Blake and the Sexual Basis of Spiritual Vision* (London: Random House/Century, 2006). Reviewed by Craig Atwood.

You have probably heard of William Blake. You may have seen his highly imaginative artwork, or sung his great hymn “Jerusalem,” or read his poem “Tyger.” What few people knew about Blake, before the research of Keith Schuchard, was that he had a Moravian background. Blake’s mother joined the Fetter Lane Society in London in the 1750s when Christian Renatus von Zinzendorf was very influential. Blake’s mother loved Moravian hymns that sang of Christ as the Bridegroom of the soul, and she was instructed in the 18th century Moravian view of marriage. The Moravians at that time had a “sex-positive” theology that viewed marital intimacy as sacramental. Moravians also celebrated the Incarnation and the full humanity of Jesus. Schuchard argues that Blake’s unorthodox views on sexuality had been influenced by his mother’s Moravian involvement, but Blake’s contact with the Moravians went even further than that.

Schuchard suggests that there was a direct influence of the Moravian painter Valentine Haidt on the young Blake, and she shows that Blake maintained professional contact with a number of prominent figures in British Moravianism, such as James Montgomery and James Gillray. This opens up significant areas for research into the Moravian influence on modern art and poetry; however, the results of that research may be uncomfortable for modern Moravians who would like to forget the era of Zinzendorf as the “Sifting Time.” Particularly surprising for Moravians today may be Zinzendorf’s appropriation of the Jewish Kabala.

The reason Mrs. Blake cried, though, had little to do with the Moravians. Blake brought his wife to tears with his request that she allow him to have a concubine, like the biblical patriarchs. Schuchard reveals that this request was made in the context of the late 18th century’s sexual experimentation, which was similar to the sex revolution of the 1960s. Christian Kabalists, like Emanuel Swedenborg, saw a close connection between sexual and spiritual potency. Many readers will be surprised to learn there was a connection between Swedenborg and the Moravians in London. Schuchard also writes about physicians who experimented with electricity, magnetism, and mesmerism to enhance the sexual experience. Secret societies met for sacred orgies, and scholars published Tantric texts from India that celebrated sexuality. Enlightenment era scholars argued that sex had originally been a central component of religion. Blake was deeply involved in this underground movement to recover pre-Christian priapic religion, and his creative works take on a new life when viewed through the prism of this sexualized spirituality. Mrs. Blake was not always as enthusiastic about this enterprise as her husband.

Schuchard is to be commended for bringing to light this hidden aspect of the so-called Age of Reason and uncovering the complex history of a great artist. It is unfortunate that reviews in the popular press in England have misrepresented both her work and Zinzendorf’s teachings on the mystical marriage and Incarnation. Schuchard draws some conclusions that I am not sure are warranted, such as that Moravian missionaries brought back Tantric practices from the Tranquebar Islands and that the polemic of Henry Rimius can be accepted as a trustworthy description of Moravian sexual practices. Readers of *The Hinge* should be forewarned about the graphic nature of much of the discussion. This is definitely an “R-rated” history.

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