

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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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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