

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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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.