

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.

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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.

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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