

surprised if both they and we are malnourished in the faith. I am grateful to Steve Simmons for helping me to think seriously about what our priorities should be.

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## **Truman Dunn**

My thanks to *The Hinge* for inviting me to be a respondent to the very thoughtful article by Dr. Simmons concerning the plight and promise of theology in the Church today. I want to begin by commending Steve for bringing the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher to a forum for Moravian theological discourse. The Moravian connection to Schleiermacher's life is, perhaps, our most significant contribution to theology, even if it is somewhat indirect.

While some might disagree, I have found that the "aversion to theology" of which Simmons speaks at the beginning of his article is something we Moravians possess in spades. We Moravians seem to take great pride in saying that ours is a simple faith, unencumbered with the "wrangling of words," (to cite another phrase Simmons uses) which plague other denominations. We often use our long-standing motto about being united only in the few essentials to illustrate what we mean, implying that Christian faith is much simpler than many seek to make it.

It is not surprising, then, that there have been few books of theology written by Moravians in

our more than 550-year history. That, in itself, is quite telling as to how unimportant theology has been to Moravians over the centuries. Instead, we say, you can find our theology in our Easter Morning Liturgy. Never mind that the work of theology would be to understand and discern the meaning of the Easter Morning Liturgy.

Because this is to be a brief response, let me cut to the chase. As I understand what Simmons is trying to say, there have been a number of reasons for the aversion to theology in most of Christianity. Simmons seeks to identify the reasons why, suggesting that many of them are self-inflicted by theologians themselves. Using the voices of Schleiermacher and African-American Christians in particular, Simmons then seeks to demonstrate why he believes "theology matters."

I think Simmons is right when he says that serious theological reflection takes time and energy, and we live in a fast food, instant gratification world. This, in turn, has led to what Simmons describes as a "marketable Jesus," along with health and wealth interpretations of the gospel. The implication, of course, is that few Christians are really interested in serious theological reflection, including most pastors. In my experience, most pastors do not seem to be interested in serious theological reflection, nor do they see the need to do so. Like Simmons, I have also listened to many pastors bemoan having been required to read Karl Barth when they could have been learning something useful such as how to balance a congregation's budget or settle church fights.

And, in my view, it has been the aversion to theology by pastors of local congregations which is the primary, if not singular reason, why most laity don’t see serious, thoughtful and deliberate theological reflection as important or even necessary. Add to that, in our own Moravian context, our long-standing minimizing of the importance of theological reflection, it is no wonder that we Moravians are not accustomed to theological discourse with one another and the result is polarization and lack of civility when there is disagreement.

I would agree with Simmons that theologians can think of themselves as an intellectual elite, substituting abstractions for a living faith. I’m just as weary as the next person when hearing someone drone on about eschatology and hermeneutics, while using words like “salvific.” However, in my view, it is those of us in pastoral leadership who have literally “dumbed down” the laity over the years, feeding them countless “marketable Jesus” sermons and platitudes that allow them to go away feeling warm all over. There, of course, is nothing wrong with warm and uplifting sermons. Yet, in my more than thirty years in the ministry, I have found that many who are out there in the pews are struggling with far deeper questions of faith.

What I have found to be true of so many among our Moravian laity when they are willing to trust you with their doubts and their fears, is that they have more questions than answers. But, they feel a great sense of guilt for having doubts or having questions. We who lead often see ourselves as shepherds and our congregations as the sheep. My own sense is that we pastors aren’t publicly asking questions, thinking, struggling,

or sharing our doubts. That is not the kind of image most pastors want to project. It makes us appear weak or lacking in faith.

About five years ago, I began to offer a Sunday morning class in reading theological works, both classical and contemporary. At first, only a few came. Those who were already interested in struggling with the questions of faith, despite having been discouraged from doing so by pastors or fellow Christians, were thrilled to finally have a community, a place to be open and vulnerable.

These days, the John Hus Class, as it is called, is moving to the largest classroom we have, and it is still not large enough. There has been an almost insatiable hunger among class members to go deeper, but more than that, to share their questions, their doubts, their insights and discernments with others. The sense of community, that “I am not the only one” with these questions or doubts, is the first step in letting go of the guilt they have carried inside for years. Most also admit to a bit of fear, wondering if serious theological reflection might cause them to “lose their faith.” I wonder where that fear might have come from. Those pastors I know who have an aversion to theology have all talked about how their seminary professors tried to destroy their faith and how glad they are to be in the local congregation with real believers.

I realize that the congregation I serve has its own unique context and history. However, I am convinced that our pews are filled with people who, when permitted or encouraged by pastors and church leaders to explore their deepest thoughts and longings, will welcome and

embrace the opportunity to share their hearts and souls with others.

The John Hus Class at Messiah is an extremely diverse group theologically, coming from very different backgrounds. That is why all class members are asked to sign and embrace *The Covenant for Christian Living* as the model for how we reflect and share with one another despite our differences. And, much of our growth in numbers at Messiah has come from those who have left the Church for years, because they longed to go deeper and to not be ridden with guilt for having doubts and questions. We Moravians have long seen “missions” as who we are. Our mission statement at Messiah truly does reflect our mission: “*Messiah Moravian Church seeks to be a window to faith and service in Christ.*”

Brother Simmons, I’m with you! Theology matters. It matters deeply to many, many Christians. Let’s open the windows to faith and allow the Spirit to take us where it will!

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## **Lisa Mullen**

Theologians aren’t the only obscure people around. “Have you heard of Wilco?” I asked my husband. “Oh yea, they played with Billy Bragg.” Doing a little hermeneutical Google browsing, I found the rest of the words to *Theologians*, in where I encountered some pretty obscure lines. The little I know of this art/rock genre of singer/

song writers is they sing songs of protest. They sing of the “Common man,” capitalistic bullies, war, and slag heaps. Their version of theology might just ring true with the “pedagogy of the oppressed,” albeit for a limited audience. So my guess is that this is not slur against the guild of theologians, but against anything that smacks of elitism or anyone paid by the “establishment” to think. Maybe we have entered the time when theologians, pastors and teachers are dismissed as irrelevant. For many, it’s a simple issue of who has the power, or perceived power, and, well, who doesn’t.

Some of my most formative years were at the Presbyterian School of Christian Education (P.S.C.E) and Union Theological Seminary. We shared a dining hall and library, and whenever we needed to journey from one campus to another, we would have to “cross the brook,” that is Brook Road. At times that road might as well have been an ocean. Some people on one side of “the brook” viewed P.S.C.E. as a place where students actually used puppets to tell the story, a community for the “not so serious” student. PSCE eyed Union with equal disdain, a place where disconnected, “heady” professors nourish students to focus their energy on mental gymnastics with little or no regard for truly communicating the faith. A goodly portion of these “slurs” were perpetrated by some of the faculty, but perhaps these attitudes were born out of a sin of neglect — neglecting to notice the whole body of Christ. I didn’t feel whole until I “crossed the brook” and attended both schools. For the sake of the congregations we serve, we needed to ask, “how can I communicate this to a kindergartner, a middle schooler, the “person in