

Responses

Sarah Groves

I have read and re-read Dr. Simmons’ article with pleasure. He is attempting to deal with a huge area of thought and practice and to plot a way ahead in for the Church in contemporary society. I’m not sure that Dr. Simmons has fully answered his own question in this essay, but just disentangling the threads of the argument helps us to see the difficult place that we are in as Church now, compared to even twenty years ago. So I welcome his description of his article as exploratory and will look forward to further development of his ideas.

I write as a British Moravian minister working at present in the multicultural and multi-religious atmosphere of an industrial city in Northern England. Although we share a common language I am well aware that British and American societies are very different, and I hope that a different cultural perspective will add to the debate. For example, church going is numerically less common in Britain, and although the faith agenda is unusually high in British politics at the present time, the Christian Church is not usually seen today as a ‘pillar of society’. Rather it often seems to be a dissident voice, criticising various Government policies and unthinking devotion to materialism. From a minority position, the Church challenges society to embrace ‘the other’ amongst us.

In many denominations in the UK, not just in the Moravian Church, many ministers look after two or more congregations. This has the

effect of swamping ministers with administrative tasks and reducing the amount of time that can be spent on theology and Biblical reflection. A response to this from many ministers, as Dr. Simmons noted, is why don’t theological colleges do courses in balancing budgets, management of volunteers, professional fundraising... or (add your own particular problem here). I am sure that this call for multi-disciplinary training completely misses the point about our role as ministers. What we need is more “thinking about God,” studying the Bible and relating it to the situations we and our congregations find ourselves in.

This knowledge of Christian theology, particularly the works of contemporary writers, an understanding of Christian History, and the theology of and practice of other faiths has to become a wellspring that we can draw on when times are dry and hard. We have to know who we are, what shaped us in the past, and how our faith relates to the world around us. Our congregations deserve the best of our hearts and minds. If this knowledge is not deep within us then we have nothing to share with those we serve.

My gut feeling is that it is not just theology that is the problem but a number of other contributing factors. Ministers, certainly in the British Province, have had other work added to our ministry, like barnacles to a ship’s hull, slowing us down so that we become starved of the time to absorb theological input and new ideas. Of course there is also the reluctance of our

congregations with regard to evening meetings or extra meetings on a Sunday which has had the effect of reducing the theological input in the congregation life to a 20 minute slot on a Sunday. This is because our congregations are made up of busy people whose time is precious to them and their families or of the active retired who are doing many other interesting things or much older folk who are not so keen about coming out at night to something that doesn't interest them. Yet, the idea that theology is the work of the community rather than the sole responsibility of the ordained outsider is an insight, often neglected, of our Moravian heritage that Dr. Simmons picks up through his study of Schleiermacher.

So the obvious thing would be to start with issues that have gripped people and look at the theological questions that are associated with them. An example of a passing interest would be the Dan Brown book, *The Da Vinci Code*. A major continuing concern would be the environmental. An issue of particular local importance here in Bradford is how we respond spiritually to devout people of another world faith. We could use theology as the tool to understand the world God has given us rather than proclaiming a particular theology and then using it to mould the world and people to the shape prescribed by it. But this is a pipe dream in our current situation. It requires ministers with time to think, and we are too often judged by what we do, the state of our buildings and budgets, and how compliant our policies are.

Along with the ideas of using theology in a new way must also come a redefining of the role of the Pastor. I like Dr. Simmons' sporting

analogy. Our role must not be to determine and to enforce what people believe, but to encourage them to grow into a fuller knowledge of God so "that with deep roots and firm foundations may you in company with all Gods people be strong to grasp what is the breadth and what is the depth of Christ's love and to know it, though it is beyond knowledge" (Ephesians 3:18-19). So, rather than enforcers of right doctrine, we become educators, encouragers and enablers. Our congregations are encouraged to think for themselves in other spheres of life, and we must help them to apply it in their Christian understanding too.

The problems Dr. Simmons looks at include the problem of why theology is unpopular; how its importance can be transmitted to ministerial students, pastors and congregations; which theologians are relevant for today's pressing concerns. How we do this will need new ways of trying to educate congregations in theological understanding; and most challengingly, encouraging congregations to live as the body of Christ. These issues cannot be ignored and must be confronted because they are at the heart of what it means to be a living Christian community.

The Rev. Sarah Groves is a Moravian pastor serving the Fulneck and Gomersal congregations in the British Province.