

the current historical and rhetorical scholarship, know all the varied interpretations that are already out there and grasp all the possible heresies that a text might engender — I know I am asking a lot. I am not saying you have to be a brainiac to open the Bible and meet God there — that someone uneducated has no way to engage the written word. What I am saying is that it behooves you as pastors, who have the luxury of three years of intense study, to know your stuff. To continue your critical Bible study, to reflect on what you hear in contemporary culture and how God is at work in it and how you can aid the Creator in that work.

So in answer to the question posed more than once in my seminary education:

“This is all well and good for here in the classroom, but what does this have to do with my people in the pews, with my congregation?”

The answer would be: Everything. Pastors and educators, your task is not easy, it is only necessary. Study up.

Endnotes

¹ Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, ed. *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

The Rev. Dr. Amy Gohdes-Luhman is pastor of Main Street Moravian Church in Northfield, Minnesota, and an assistant professor at St. Olaf College.

Rachel’s Story

Sam Gray

Rachel was raised in a good Moravian family. In fact, she had two good Moravian families: her biological family and her church family. Her parents were loving and affirming, and they brought her up in the fear and admonition of the Lord as they had promised to do. She loved her Sunday School teacher, dear old Mrs. Taylor, and she enjoyed listening to her tell all those wonderful stories from the Bible. The pastor’s sermons weren’t always that

easy to understand, and some of the hymns put her to sleep, but it didn’t matter because she felt at home. And besides, the fun that she had at Youth Group kind of made up for it.

She went to camp in the summer and had the mandatory mountain-top experience. She had actually had a part in leading worship, and she thought that was cool. Some of the other kids had told her, “Rachel, you’re like a natural.

You ought to lead worship every Sunday.” And she smiled. But that night she thought about what the kids had said.

Rachel started to notice some things. She noticed that her world was changing. It was becoming a lot more diverse. At school, at the mall, at McDonald’s, she would always see people from different cultures. She heard different languages being spoken. This was a normal part of her life. At the grocery store where she worked, it was even required! But Rachel noticed that the ONLY place that she could think of that wasn’t like that was her church. And that bothered her. So she asked some people about it (her parents, her pastor, her friends), but they couldn’t give her a good answer.

It wasn’t long before she started questioning some other things. Mrs. Taylor was a wonderful person, but did she really believe that some guy had lived to be 969 years old? Or that the world was created in six days? This just didn’t fit with the other things she was learning. And something else bothered her. In confirmation class, they studied church history. Most of the kids thought it was boring. Rachel actually found it to be exciting. But she thought about how committed those folks seemed to be: the sacrifices that they had made; the way they put their lives on the line. And then she thought of her own church — of how hard the pastor seemed to have to work just to get people to show up every Sunday.

She liked the “Moravian stuff,” as she called it, especially the lovefeasts. She even got

to serve on Christmas Eve one year, and that, too, was cool. But that night she thought about the candles. And she wondered what would happen if people really would carry that light with them out into the world.

It may have been that thought that made her have the dream she had that night. There was this homeless man walking by the church, and he was cold. And he looked in the window and saw all the candles and could almost feel the warmth. And then he saw the people start to walk down the aisles; they were coming toward the door. Were they actually going to bring their candles outside and surround him with light and warmth? It was too good to be true!

Yes, it was. When they got to the door they blew out the candles (as they had been told to do), and his hopes went up in smoke. When Rachel woke up, she did something she had never done before. She got down on her knees right there and said a simple, spontaneous prayer:

“Oh God, let me be your light in this world for someone like him.”

There was no turning back now. The clincher came a week later when a missionary came to a potluck supper at her church. He showed pictures of people in far-away places. And then the pastor announced that there was going to be a mission trip to Camp Hope in Jamaica. And Rachel was hooked.

It was on that trip that Rachel realized that she was being called — called to ministry, called to mission.

She wasn't really sure which one, or, even if they were two different things. She couldn't really explain it, but she knew it was happening. So she spoke with her pastor and together they charted a course that would eventually bring her to Moravian Theological Seminary.

At first, she didn't think that there was a very extensive "mission curriculum" beyond History of Christian Mission and a few other courses, but then she started to realize that many of the courses helped her to look outward — look beyond herself, and listen to many different voices. And wasn't that what "mission" was all about? Her courses didn't always answer all of the questions that she had about her faith, but they helped her to understand that it was OK to ask them. And that was important to her.

The Seminary community was everything she wished her home congregation could be. There were people from different countries, different cultures and different perspectives. That wasn't what she found, though, in the congregation where she did her guided ministry or internship. That's when she decided that "mission" for her would be not taking off across the world somewhere. No, she would transform her first call — her first congregation — into a "missional" community (that was a word that she had learned at OMSC).

When Rachel graduated from Seminary, she was cross-culturally aware. She could relate to and, yes, minister to all kinds of people. She found it somewhat frustrating in her first call when she was reminded that those skills — those attitudes — wouldn't really be that necessary.

She had heard someone from another seminary use the term "homogenous unit." She found it disturbing, even offensive. But there was no getting around it. That's what her congregation was. That's who they were. But Rachel loved them. And they loved her. There was a great sense of fellowship. Oh, sometimes they thought her ideas were a bit wild or extreme. But they attributed that to her age ("she'll grow out of it"). That didn't bother her.

What did bother her was the fact that their focus seemed to be so inward. When they sang "for us, for us the Lamb was slain," they were pretty convincing! At Board meetings, the only mention of the outside world seemed to be a discussion of how they could attract them and get them to come in. What kind of programs, music, services, and activities would inspire people to come and join them? That sounded great, but, for some reason, Rachel wasn't sure that those were the right questions. Because it seemed to her that if they wanted to attract people (and do it well), then at some point they would have to decide whom they wanted to attract; and, Rachel thought, like it or not, whom they were choosing to neglect or shut out. That didn't seem right to her.

One of those crazy thoughts crossed her mind: what if, instead of bringing them in, we would go out to where they are and *be* the church with them — maybe even *be Christ* with them? They're right. I'm young. I'll grow out of it.

All too often the meetings seemed to be about things. Rachel joked to herself that they

seemed to have what she called an “edifice complex.” They were obsessed with their buildings. She laughed at her own play on words. That night, though, as she lay in bed thinking about it, her laughter gave way to tears.

She thought to herself: when we spend more on being comfortable and secure and maintaining what we have and less and less on caring for orphans and widows, feeding the poor, and breaking down cycles of economic, social and moral oppression that keep people from embracing the unconditional love, mercy, grace and forgiveness that can be theirs in Christ Jesus, then something is wrong!

Even in her own life, as a pastor, Rachel could see that her practices didn’t always reflect her priorities.

The next evening, the Mission Committee was meeting, and Rachel could tell that they really had a heart for mission — they were mission-minded. But they talked a lot about sending and supporting, but very little about being and doing. They talked a lot about going across the world, but not much about going across the street. And afterwards she thought: why should we even need a mission committee?

It’s as though mission was one expression of our ministry and not the essence of our existence or, as the *Ground of the Unity* says, our reason for being.

Well, an amazing thing happened. Rachel was at Home Depot one morning, of all places. And she met a young woman in line at the

check-out counter. She was Hispanic (from Costa Rica), but she spoke English well enough to have a conversation with her. It turned out that her name was Raquel. That was Rachel in Spanish! Rachel thought, “This can’t be a coincidence. God is telling me something. God is doing something here.”

So she invited her not to church, but to her house for dinner. And they became friends. One Sunday Raquel did come to church. And Rachel was happy (relieved) to see that the folks gave her a warm welcome. They were nice to her. So, yes, there was hope! The Worship Committee chair even said to Rachel after the service, “if she comes again, we ought to sing that Spanish hymn in the *Book of Worship* and make her feel at home.” And Rachel said, “Yes!”

Things seemed to go really well for several months. But then one day Raquel called Rachel and said she wanted to talk with her. They sat at the kitchen table and Raquel had a tear in her eye as she said, “Rachel, I’m sorry, but I’ve decided to look for another church.”

Rachel was devastated. “Don’t you feel welcome? Don’t you feel accepted?” And Raquel replied: “No es que no me siento aceptada; es que no me siento involucrada.” “It’s not that I don’t feel accepted; I don’t feel involved.”

Rachel forgot her pastoral counseling skills for a moment and said, “What do you mean you don’t feel involved? You take part in lots of things. You’re more than welcome to be a part of everything that we do.”

Raquel shook her head. “How can I say

this, Rachel? You remember when I brought you those coffee beans from Costa Rica? You love coffee and you were anxious to try my coffee. And I was glad. But when you went into your kitchen you laughed when you realized that you couldn't just put the beans in your Mr. Coffee! You had to go out and buy a coffee grinder. You see, in order to truly appreciate my gift you had to make some changes. Rachel, sometimes in the church I feel like I'm the coffee beans in a Mr. Coffee machine. The cool water of your worship and your fellowship flows over and around me, and it's refreshing — it really is! But I'm not sure that any of my flavor is coming out. And it wouldn't be fair to ask you, your church, to go out and buy a grinder — to change the way you do things so that you can truly appreciate my gifts. No, I need to find a different machine, a different structure, a different form. Because you, Rachel, my sister in Christ, *you* have helped me to understand that there's a lot of flavor in me. And I need to find a place where it can be shared.”

What went wrong in Rachel's story? The members of her congregation will be shocked and confused when they hear of Raquel's decision. Things seemed to be going so well.

Father John T. Ford, in a publication of Churches Uniting in Christ, reminds us of a similar situation, a similar story, in the early church as recorded in Acts chapter 6. Everything seemed to be going so well. We have heard that ALL who believed were together and had all things in common. There was not a needy person among them.

Well, I guess that depended on who you asked. Because, as the times changed, and as the church grew, the church somehow ended up reflecting the inherent prejudice and cultural bias of the society around it. The system was favoring one cultural group (the Hebrews), and discriminating against (or at least ignoring) another group (the Hellenists or Greek speakers). The structure of the church was not serving the stated mission of the church.

So what did they do? They restructured! They went out and bought a coffee grinder. I'm not sure if, almost 2000 years later, we realize how amazing that really is! Now, granted, the decision concerning what was best for these Greek women was made by twelve Hebrew men. Thankfully, they were guided by God's Spirit! 2000 years later one would hope that we would be beyond that. In other words, we should involve at least some of the Greek women not only in articulating the problem, but also in formulating the solution.

But I'm not sure that we would be willing to change the structure even if we would see that it is keeping us from doing what we know God wants us to do. Someone who *is* academic and scholarly said it like this: “To attempt to live by Kingdom principals is a radical paradigm shift for even the most devoted followers of Jesus, and few are willing to make the kind of sacrifices necessary, especially when we are quite comfortable in our existing religious structures and ministries, despite the reality that those structures are failing to serve humankind as they once did.”

Raquel was right. It's asking a lot of a church to expect them to go beyond programs and projects and strategies and be willing to undergo a radical rearrangement that would result not only in a new way of doing church but in a new way of being the church. But imagine a church where every member understands their place and their purpose within the body: a church where every member is going out and ministering, not just coming in and being ministered to. There are lots of Raquels out there and in here who want to share their flavor. And they don't all speak Spanish. I'm sure you know some of them.

But what do they have to do with the Seminary? The Seminary's job is to prepare Rachel and give her the theological background and the tools and skills for ministry so that *she* can reach out to Raquel, isn't it? Well, since you asked (or at least Brother Dreydoppel asked) I'd like to offer the Seminary another job, another mission, should you choose to accept it.

You have taken very seriously the task of helping Rachel to examine critically many of her theological assumptions including many of the things that Mrs. Taylor taught her and some of her Western ways of viewing the world. That's not always pleasant, and I don't even always agree with you, but I think it's an important process. And I'm inviting you now to help us, to help the church, engage in another kind of "form criticism." That is, a critical examination of the forms and structures within which we do ministry and mission. I'm asking you to ask the question that was posed by one of your former deans: "does the present structure help or

hinder the work of God's Spirit in and through the church?"

And I would add some further questions: does our way of being the church allow and equip Raquel to use whatever gift she has been given for the work of ministry? When we tell Raquel that she is welcome, are we really saying that she is welcome to be like us? Of course, you would ask these kinds of questions with the intent not to destroy but rather to strengthen. You could offer us what Brueggemann has called "Biblically-informed fresh configurations." And you would do this with what Ian Barbour calls critical realism, embracing a combination of faith and doubt — commitment and enquiry.

I know, the real question is "why?" Why should *you* do this? Aren't you the Theological Seminary, not the Structural Seminary? Yes, but sometimes our structure doesn't reflect our theology. It doesn't always allow us to *be* that which we *believe*. So I'm not asking you to de-Moravianize us.

Actually, I think I'm asking you to re-Moravianize us. To help us strip away the layers of editing and get back to the original text — the original intent. To rediscover how our dearly loved Moravian Church can be and remain a living one.

We can learn a lot by looking back. We can learn a lot by looking around. The Western world is the only major segment of the world's population in which the Christian church is not growing. According to George Barna, in 2004 there had been a 92% increase in the number of unchurched Americans in the last thirteen

years. In 1991 there were 39 million unchurched Americans compared with 75 million in 2004. “Stay the course” is not working! And changing it will not be easy. Isaac Newton said that everything continues in a state of rest unless it is compelled to change by forces impressed upon it.

When millions of people are dying of AIDS...

When children are being sold as sex slaves...

When hundreds of thousands of people in the richest country in the world are hungry and homeless...

When countless young people are begging us to let them use their gifts and talents in mission...

When people all around the world are dying without ever hearing the good news of Jesus Christ...

I would say that we are compelled to change! Well, maybe this wasn't what you expected to hear about global mission. But, you see, if we can't get past these walls then it's kind of pointless to talk about getting across the ocean. So we have to start right here. No, we have to start... right here (in our hearts), because mission is not a place. Mission is an attitude. Mission is a heart — God's heart.

So, what about the ending of Rachel's story? You'll have to tell it to me sometime.

The Rt. Rev. Sam Gray is Director of Intercultural Ministries and Communication for the Board of World Mission and bishop of the Moravian Church.

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