

Facing the Death of the Moravian Church with Courage and Vision

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As a former editor of *The Hinge*, writing the lead article for an issue is a new role for me. I am grateful to the editorial board, and to the new editor, Dr. Craig Atwood, for giving me this opportunity to, in essence, write an “executive summary” of the 2001 Moses Lectures which I had the privilege of delivering in Bethlehem in April. Space limitations in *The Hinge* dictate an executive summary rather than printing the full text of the three lectures.

A Dying Moravian Church

The main thesis of the lectures is that the Moravian Church here in America is dying. That is, I believe that the Moravian Church, as an institution, as an American denomination of mainline Protestantism, is and has been in a steady decline for years. In terms of membership, for example, the Moravian Church in North America in 1989 reported a total of 54,705 members. Ten years later the number of Moravians in North America was 48,070, which is a drop of more than 12% in just ten years. That includes several new church starts. Indeed, the only churches which seem to be growing in numbers are the newer churches and those in outlying areas which have not been traditionally Moravian. Our older Moravian churches in the heartlands of eastern Pennsylvania, western North Carolina, and the midwest appear to be in decline, or barely replacing the dead and transferred.

In addition to declining membership rolls, the “graying” of the Moravian Church is also a topic in most congregations and provincial agencies. The faces we see at traditional Moravian gatherings such as Holy Week services, church bands, and the like are getting older and grayer. Church boards and other groups in many of our churches cannot understand why the younger generations aren’t coming out for these wonderful and very special events that are really at the heart of what it means to be a Moravian, at least for the older generations of Moravians. Of course, the conclusion usually drawn is that the rising generations just aren’t as dedicated and as appreciative of the specialness of uniquely Moravian practices. Instead, they are preoccupied with their children’s soccer games, weekend vacation homes, and working long hours to buy new boats and bigger televisions in order to keep pace in an increasingly materialistic American society.

I will talk about why I believe today’s generations do not seem to be falling over themselves to attend Moravian churches and Moravian Holy Week services later in this article. But, for now, I simply want to focus upon the fact that today’s generations are NOT rushing to join the Moravian Church here in America. Despite all our positive thinking, our enthusiastic rhetoric about growth and all the wonderful things

we believe the Lord is doing in the Moravian Church, the hard truth is that we are a dying, decaying institution. This is happening despite all the efforts on our part to insure the survival of the Moravian Church. In fact, I would contend that, given our steady decline, the Moravian Church has been in survival mode for years now. In other words, I believe that institutional preservation and survival have long been the primary driving forces for most of our provincial and congregational decisions and strategies. We have become pre-occupied with finding ways to turn the numbers around and begin to report steady increases and growth rather than steady decreases and declines.

Evangelistic Efforts

In recent years we have begun to invest much time and energy into church planting and growth. We have read all the materials about Generations X and Y, and consequently, casual worship, hymns flashed on the walls, and field trips to mega-churches have become part of the Moravian landscape. In a somewhat more controversial strategy, some of our Moravian churches have even removed the word Moravian from their signs and now call themselves "community churches." The rationale, of course, is that the word Moravian is archaic and too often confused with white shirts, thin ties, and bicycles which hampers evangelistic efforts.

Yet, despite all our heroic efforts, the fact still remains that the Moravian Church is not a growing church. It is a dying church. Now, I am sure some of you have already begun to shake your heads at the

absurdity of such a contention. The Moravian Church is not dying, you might be saying. Yes, some churches are in decline, but the Moravian Church "as a whole" is growing -- in some places, even rapidly. That is true, if we are talking about the world-wide Moravian Church. The Moravian Church IS growing in Africa, in Latin America, and in the Caribbean. However, while we are all part of the world-wide Unity, the contexts in which, for example, the American and African churches exist are extremely different.

Let me speak for a moment about our "mission efforts" around the world, which clearly have kept our numbers "growing" rather than "declining" world-wide. Why are we doing this? Why are we continuing to start new Moravian churches all over the world? We never ask ourselves that question, do we? We simply take it for granted that this is what we are supposed to do as Christians and as Moravians. In fact, we take great pride in our mission efforts as Moravians. We like to think of ourselves as the pioneers of Protestant missionary work. So why would I even ask such a question? Aren't we compelled by the Great Commission of our Lord to take the gospel into all the world? But, is it really the Great Commission that compels us to begin new Moravian churches around the world?

I have no doubt that there is much zeal in our missionary efforts around the world to share Jesus with those who do not yet know Jesus. I will have more to say about that shortly, but I wonder if that is the whole story. You see, I believe that our desire to plant churches, primarily in the

Third World, is as much about survival and numbers as it is about the Great Commission. I just don't think we would admit such a thing, even if we believed it to be true.

Decline of Western Christianity as a Theological Problem

If it were not for our missionary efforts, the Moravian Church would probably be nearly gone by now. The Moravian Church in the original motherlands of Czechoslovakia and Germany is barely holding on. It serves more as a relic of the past than a dynamic, alive church. We Moravians in America are now following suit. Have we ever asked ourselves why the Moravian Church is growing in Third World, less-developed nations, while at the same time it is declining in North America and Europe?

I believe that there is one very plausible explanation for why it is primarily our mission churches in lesser-developed areas of the world that are growing, while our churches here in America are slowly dying. Our churches in Africa and other mission fields have not yet begun to experience what we already experience in our churches in America and Europe.

Here in America and in Europe, what the church has to say about God, Jesus, the Bible is making less and less sense to more and more people. In other words, I believe that the reasons for our slow but sure death as a church are primarily theological in nature, rather than whether or not today's generations are attracted to our worship styles, customs and traditions.

It is so easy for us to blame the decline in our numbers as Moravians on the current trends toward mega-churches, contemporary worship, and casual dress. The implication, of course, is that this is all just a fad which will fade in time and folks will soon realize the shallowness of the "bells and whistles" churches, and that they will return to the more substantive churches which have been around for hundreds of years. Interestingly enough, in some of our churches, "going contemporary" as we call it, has had some success, but I would contend that going contemporary is only re-arranging the furniture. It is not getting to what I believe is the heart of the matter which, as I said earlier, is a theological issue. I firmly believe that we, along with other mainline Protestant denominations, are dying because we have examined and re-examined everything about the church except our theology and what we proclaim.

In my view, the most troubling parts of what we proclaim, which I believe are turning more and more people away from our churches, are the claims that Christians have the "true" faith; that Jesus is the only way to salvation; and that unless we repent of our sins, we will end up burning in hell. This may not be what you personally believe is the essence of Christianity. However, this is what people are hearing, because it is what we proclaim in our doctrinal statements, hymns and liturgies. More and more people simply no longer accept such claims as their own beliefs. There are great numbers of so-called "unchurched" persons who were actually raised in Christian churches, but the exclusivist truth claims, the emphasis on sin, sin, sin, and

on there being winners and losers in God's final judgment no longer make sense to them. It is not that these unchurched people do not have spiritual longings. It is not that they do not wish to live good and faithful lives. It is simply that what the church, including our own Moravian Church, has taught them no longer has meaning for them. To be sure, I am certain that the rejection of some of the most fundamental church teachings is not unique to today's generations. However, what is unique is that today's generations, unlike previous generations, are not afraid to voice their rejection of many fundamental teachings of the church. Previous generations, as a whole, seemed to be more willing to allow the church to define the terms and manage the conversation about God and faith. The church used the Bible as the proof-text or foundation for its claims, and few were willing to question the authority of the Bible as revealed truth or the Word of God. That is no longer the case.

In fact, in most of the conversations I have had with the unchurched, they do not believe there is a place for them in the Christian community. They believe that they will be judged as inadequate or less faithful because they do not accept many of the "major tenets" of the faith. They also talk about being able to finally let go of the guilt for not believing what they are "supposed" to believe, as key to helping them find new communities of faith outside the Christian churches. In plain words, many in today's generations no longer see the Christian world-view as the only way to experience God and spirituality. They are much more willing to think critically and

come to conclusions for themselves rather than accept what their parents believe or what the church has taught for centuries.

Robert Wuthnow, in his book The Restructuring of American Religion, points to survey after survey that indicate that today's generations are no longer simply falling in the footsteps of their parents. Denominational loyalties have become a thing of the past. Wuthnow says: "In 1955, a Gallup poll showed that only 4% of the adult population no longer adhered to the faith of their childhood. But in a poll taken 30 years later, in the mid-1980's, 45% of Presbyterians raised as Presbyterians now belong to another denomination or no denomination, 40% of United Methodists, and 38% of Episcopalians also reported no longer being affiliated with the church of their childhood"(page 88).

Many of those former mainline Protestants have gone to independent and fundamentalist churches. There is no question that fundamentalist churches have been growing by leaps and bounds while mainline Protestant churches wither on the vine, but I am bracketing out more conservative and fundamentalist churches in this article. I believe there will always be a fundamentalist movement in every religious community. My concern is for those thousands and thousands of people who are at the other end of the spectrum, so to speak. They are people who are looking for spiritual meaning and depth in their lives, but they cannot find it in the mainline churches, including our own Moravian church.

New Spirituality

Wade Clark Roof, in his book Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Re-making of American Religion, talks about today's generations and their interest in deepening their spirituality. Roof has this to say about the language and symbols in American religion over the last 50 years: "Since mid-century especially, the images and symbols of religion have undergone a quiet transformation. Popular discourse about "religion" and "spirituality," about the "self" and "experience," about "God" and "faith," all point to subtle, but crucially important, shifts in the meaning of everyday religious life." (pages 3-4)

Roof sees one of the most crucial shifts taking place today as a movement toward "reflexive spirituality," which Roof defines as "a contemplative act of stepping back from one's own perspective and recognizing that it, too, is situated in a plurality of possibilities, understanding one's own view as just that, a view. Generally it encourages a more open stance toward religious teachings and spiritual resources; more experiential and holistic views; and active incorporation of religious input into constellations of belief and practice, or greater agency on the part of an individual in defining and monitoring one's own spiritual life." (p.75)

This is new ground for us as denominational Christians, isn't it? The society around us is becoming more and more reflexive in its understanding of spirituality, more and more interested in a constellation of beliefs and practices in the pursuit of a deeper, more authentic spirituality, and yet, we stand firm that we have the answers,

revealed once and for all. We stand firm that we have the only way to salvation. Yet we continue to wonder why fewer and fewer people are finding their way into our churches.

I know that we Moravians like to think of ourselves as being open to diversity, and we trot out our "motto" to illustrate how open we are, except in the case of the essentials. However, when it comes to actually stating clearly what our "essentials" are, we seem to have no common understanding. To be sure, the motto is not an official statement of the Moravian Church in the same manner as The Ground of the Unity which we say is our doctrinal statement. Have you looked at The Ground of the Unity lately? It clearly says on the very first page that we Moravians "believe and confess that God has revealed himself once and for all in his Son Jesus Christ....and there is no salvation apart from him." Now, I ask you how those in today's generations who are much more reflexive in their spirituality, much less willing to accept exclusive truth claims, find a spiritual home in the Moravian Church when this is what we say we believe?

For those of you who might be wondering, I do not believe that Jesus is the only way to find "salvation." Nor do I believe that we Christians have the exclusive lock on religious truth or knowledge of God. Moreover, I believe that it is time for us, as Moravians and as Christians, to finally admit these things. As I said earlier, I have talked with countless lay people, both Moravians and the unchurched, who no longer believe these things. Why do we

continue to insist that Christianity, or rather our own particular interpretation of Christianity is the only way? For me, this begs the question as to why we are trying to convert not only African and Latin American tribal peoples, but now even Buddhists and Hindus in China. Our “mission” efforts are predicated on our claim that Christianity is somehow “superior” to all other pathways to God.

My faith in God, as a follower of Christ, is not dependent upon the belief that my religion and my God are better than that of someone else. I believe that there are thousands of Moravians sitting in our pews who agree with me, but they wouldn't even begin to think about saying it publicly. To say such a thing would be to deny a basic “tenet” of the Moravian Church as stated in The Ground of the Unity. So we continue to proclaim “truths” which simply do not “ring true” to thousands who have left our churches.

A Dying Church and A New Reformation

By now you are probably calling me a unitarian, a universalist, an atheist, anything but a Christian, much less a Moravian. However, my hope is that there are enough people out there in our churches who not only understand and resonate with what I am saying, but who would be willing to become part of a new reformation in the Moravian Church, that could lead the way toward a new re-formation in the larger Christian community. After all, we Moravians like to say that we are the oldest Protestants and that we led the way in the first reformation.

This new reformation would actually begin with the death of the Moravian Church as we now know it. By death, I mean the death of exclusive truth claims, beginning with the narrow and arrogant claim that Jesus is the only way to salvation. I believe that we can still be faithful followers of Jesus without having to claim that following Jesus is the only way, if we are willing to quit proof-texting our doctrines by waving the Bible in the air and rattling off scriptures. The Bible has never been an “essential” for us as Moravians, and yet today we beat each other over the head with our own narrow interpretations of scripture as if they are synonymous with “God said.” The homosexuality issue is a prime illustration of how easily we pick and choose the scriptures that justify our own biases, and then call it “truth.” No wonder the unchurched, looking in from the outside, don't want to be a part of such bigotry and the denial of basic human dignity to all persons as children of God.

The only way we will ever reform the Moravian Church and move away from the exclusive truth claims of the past is by literally allowing the old ways and the old church to die. Resurrection or new life only comes through death. This idea that the Moravian Church as we know it must die before a new church can be formed is not something I just came up with one day while walking alone on the beach. It comes from our own history, from none other than Bishop John Amos Comenius who, in 1650, wrote that fascinating treatise entitled, The Bequest of the Dying Mother, the Unity of the Brethren.

Those of you who are familiar with this work know that, after the Battle of White Mountain in 1620, Comenius saw little hope of his beloved Moravian Church returning to Bohemia and Moravia from exile in Poland. Despite holding on to the hope that the political climate might change, the Westphalian Treaty of 1648 left little doubt to Comenius that it was over for the *Unitas Fratrum*. The time had come to face reality. So he wrote The Bequest of the Dying Mother as a bishop of a church he now believed was dying.

Bishop Comenius was trying to make sense of the impending death of the Unity, trying to find meaning and purpose in its death, tragic as he believed it to be. The only purpose and meaning he could find in the impending death of the Moravian Church was that it would allow God to do a new thing. He wrote in The Bequest: “Even so, the congregations of the Unity pass away, doubtless because the Lord is about to renew the face of the earth.” (p.10)

I believe that Comenius, in writing The Bequest, offers an important insight to Moravians today as we too, face impending death. We need to face that death head-on, seeking to find meaning and purpose in it, rather than scurrying frantically about looking for a new form of worship to attract new members or launching missionary efforts among people of other cultures and religions. Instead, I believe we should not only face the impending death of the Moravian Church head-on with courage and vision, but that our death could be the best thing that could happen. As I mentioned earlier, I believe that the only way we will

ever reform the Moravian Church into a church that no longer makes exclusive truth claims is when the old ways and the old beliefs finally die.

This means that we should welcome the death of the Moravian Church as we now know it, and even hasten its death by willingly give up our exclusive truth claims. I believe that if we continue to preserve and defend our ancient and beloved institution and beliefs, we will continue to lose more and more members as they seek to find deeper spirituality in communities open to the journey beyond the fences of time-bound doctrines. Either way we will die. One is a slow and meaningless decay; the other a courageous death leading to new life.

There is so much more to be said. Many of the claims I am making in this article require far more elaboration and explanation than space will allow. However, I do hope that this helps to get us talking to one another about what it means to be a Moravian today and who we might become as we seek to follow Jesus in the times in which we are living.

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