

or whether it is seen as a dynamic gift, which we have to receive constantly anew from God amidst our many doubts and questions. If, as I believe, the second is the case, then the church can never be completely sure of its answers but is always called to grasp its faith more fully and more deeply. This is the work of theological renewal, and its approach lies not in the rejection of the past but in the constant and patient return to the sources.

The Reformation, to which Brother Dunn alludes, was guided by the vision of returning to the original teachings of Christianity. Likewise, the Herrnhut community was inspired by the ideal of the apostolic church. The renewal of the life and theology of the Moravian Church today requires, in my view, that we take our past more seriously, not as a burden, but as an asset

and a resource. This does not mean that we should submit to a mindless traditionalism. It means, rather, that we trust that the Bible, the creeds and the classic doctrinal formulations, as well as the hymns and customs of our Moravian tradition, will speak to us, or better that God will speak to us through them, when we honestly listen to them as we face the questions and concerns of our own time.

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## The Author Responds

First of all, I want to thank all of the respondents for the thought and care which they gave to my comments about the future of the Moravian Church. As with any sharing of thoughts and ideas, I hope my own horizons have been expanded, and that together we can continue to find ways to engage one another in dialogue and, ultimately, concrete action as we all seek to be the Body of Christ in today's world. That having been said, let's get to it, engaging in the dialogue.

I want to begin my response to the respondents with a bit of a disclaimer which might seem like a cop-out or an excuse. I

realize that I made many sweeping statements and prescriptive claims within the very tight space limitations of the lead article for this issue of *The Hinge*. As I read the responses, many times I wanted to say: "But I addressed those very issues." However, I addressed those very issues in the full text of the three Moses Lectures. I have to keep reminding myself that the respondents to my article in *The Hinge* did not have the full text of my lectures. This isn't to suggest that the complete lectures have all the answers. It is simply to say that some of the respondents' comments are, to some extent, addressed in the larger lecture texts.

To **Carol Bruce**, I want to say that I appreciate your Roman Catholic background and the reminder of the richness of the Moravian liturgical and sacramental tradition. I am certain that there are others out there who, like you, are spiritually fed and nurtured by our liturgies and sacraments. Perhaps many more than I realize. However, I must admit that my experiences with both the unchurched and with fellow congregation members, suggest that many find our liturgies and sacraments still steeped in pietistic and atonement language which does not match their own experience of the holy. It is not that they do not find meaning in liturgical worship and sacramental rituals. They desire a more expansive and life-affirming liturgical tradition. I am not so much interested in throwing out all the “old” liturgies. I believe we stand on the shoulders of the centuries of wisdom which have gone before us. The *Litany*, for example, is an affirmation that we are part of a centuries old faith community. However, even the “new” liturgies in our *Book of Worship* are simply more contemporary statements of the same, pietistic and atonement language. As you might have gathered from my theological perspective, I believe our liturgies and our hymns shape our theology greatly and our theology is therefore quite narrow and exclusive.

To **Ann Schenz**, I hardly know what to say? How do I respond to what you have written as a “response” to my article? In essence, you simply have strung together a series of scripture passages and then closed by saying: “So long as what we do and who we are glorify Him, the church will persevere.” In simple honesty, your response

felt like a perfect example of the difficulty we have in the church today in talking to one another when we stand on top of our Bibles and point the finger at each other. To respond to me without a single personal word or acknowledgment of anything I was saying, but only with scripture passage after scripture passage, makes it impossible for a dialogue to take place, not to mention that your interpretation and my interpretation of each of those passages of scripture might be entirely different. And that is where we are in the Moravian Church today. Until we begin to actually talk to each other, and try to understand each other, I believe we might as well just spout scripture at each other and try to convert each other to our way of thinking.

To **Galen Hahn**, I appreciate your comments about the real “culprit” in our declining numbers not being found in our “simple theology” but in our “relationships, in our reticence to relate adequately to others.” I, too, believe that relationships are far more important than our “theology” per se. It’s long been very Moravian to minimize the importance of theology and “head” stuff, and to affirm instead the “heart” and relationships. However, I believe that our relationships as Christians, and our relationship to God have a theological dimension which we Moravians have long ignored. We simply assume that when we talk about the importance of our relationship with God, we are all talking about the same thing since, after all, it is one of essentials and in the essentials we are united. I happen to believe that it is simply not possible for all of us to be united in “essentials.” When it comes to speaking about

God, I believe there are no bedrock, immutable claims. And, I believe that is what we Moravians have always claimed.

Galen, when you talked about the “controls” the church has exerted through economics and theology, I was with you. Especially when you said: “Such control of our interpretations, communications, and daily operations has severely limited us to a broader experience of Christ.” I could not agree with you more. However, you go on to say, near the end of your remarks, that “salvation in and through Christ is not a truth I wish to dismiss. It is an essential in relationship to God.” I simply do not believe that we can make such truth claims, and thereby claim that other pathways are wrong or inferior. You talk about how many say that nothing is ultimate and everything is relative. How can it be otherwise? We are human beings with limited capacities. We believe what we believe because of who we are, and what we have experienced. I am a Christian because I was born in Pennsylvania. Had I been born in India I might be a Hindu.

To **Peter Vogt**, I appreciate your belief that, despite declining numbers, the Moravian Church is not dying. I agree that the Moravian Church might be better equipped to deal with its decline, but not, as you say, because Moravians have never been concerned with numbers. I think we talk about not being concerned with numbers, and that may have once been true. However, I do believe we are concerned with numbers and we keep statistics and look at trends just as other churches do. It is more tempting to say we are not concerned with numbers

because it is a sensible answer as to why we are so small in number.

You point out that I am not clear about what I mean by the death of the Moravian Church. This is one of those places where I elaborated more in the full text of the lectures. I see our death, not just as a continuing decline in numbers, but also as the death of our relevance in today’s world. As long as we continue to hold to ancient truth claims about God and insist that they are THE truth, I believe we will slowly die of irrelevance as more and more people seek spirituality in communities beyond traditional denominations.

I agree with you when you say that “discarding one set of beliefs and adopting another one does not look very promising.” I am not advocating the substitution of my beliefs for present Moravian belief claims. I am advocating the freedom not to be tied to “essentials” or doctrine which is deemed immutable. When you say “the truth and value of a theological position should not be determined by its popularity or appeal to spiritual aspirations of a particular section of the population,” I also agree that theology is not a popularity contest. However, when you go on to say, “we should take very seriously contemporary questions about traditional doctrine,” I believe we have not even begun to do that. We make a few nodding comments in that direction from time to time, but we do not take these questions seriously and we always retreat to our institutional defenses of the tradition.

In your last objection, you suggest that I reject the whole tradition. If it wasn’t clear, what I hope for is not the rejection of the tradition. All who wish to believe in traditional doctrine should be free to do so. I am

simply pleading for us to open the doors of our churches for those who do not, and value those persons as being just as “Christian” as those who echo the tradition.

To the newly retired Dean of Moravian Seminary, **David Schattschneider**, I appreciate your willingness to take the time to respond when you could have been out fishing or riding a train somewhere. I appreciate your noting that the questions raised in the article cannot be ignored. I accede to your historical methods in your suggestion that there is only anecdotal evidence that the Moravian Church is “graying.” I do stand behind my sense that this is where we are heading, however, because I do believe that denominational traditions of all sorts are becoming less and less important to the vast majority of today’s generations.

I also realize that the implication of my remarks about the non-Western Moravian Churches eventually experiencing the faith questions we are experiencing in North America and Europe does sound like cultural imperialism. As a bleeding heart liberal, that accusation hurts deeply. I understand that the way the African or Asian churches move along in their history will not be a carbon copy of our own. However, many sociologists have noted that educational levels seem to be higher in those who question and think more critically. It is simply a fact that the vast majority of third and fourth world Christians have not had those educational opportunities.

I also agree with you, David, that the Ground of the Unity “could” be interpreted more broadly and less exclusively in places. However, it is my view that it would be far

better for us to say clearly and unequivocally what we mean instead of trying to find it in nuances or universalizing the name of Jesus or the Christ. Either we believe that we have an exclusive revelation for all time, or we do not. Once again, I believe that we try to pay homage to the accusation that we are being exclusive by making more inclusive, yet nuanced, statements. But, we still hold to the traditional claims of having THE truth. I am with you entirely when you talk about our need to have a far better understanding of the history of doctrine. When the folks in my Sunday School class began to look at all that, they continually have said: “Why haven’t we heard this before?” And that is the question. Why haven’t we?

You close with an excerpt from a statement on gospel and culture from the Unity Standing Committee on Theology. I began reading it with hope and expectation, as I read the words: “We cannot claim absolute knowledge and the right to establish absolutes for others, even though in the past the church did just this.” However, the statement closes with negative comments about relativism and then states the absolutes we Moravians believe. Once again, I believe we continually nod to the contemporary questions, as if that means we have dealt with them, while we continue to affirm our absolutes.

It is easy, of course, to respond to **Jeff Tibbs**. Jeff is a fellow member of Messiah Moravian Church and an active member of the Sunday morning class where we explore the difficult issues of faith freely. Jeff represents, for me, just one the thousands I believe are longing for new language, symbols and myths to express the experience of

the holy in life. It is gratifying for me to read Jeff's response and to see him grappling with theological questions and with the writings of authors such as Tillich, Borg, Gomes, Spong, and N. T. Wright. I honestly believe that the folks in our pews are hungering to learn and to grow in their understanding. Yet, most often we feed them the usual pabulum of quarterlies and other materials which simply rehearse the same, time-worn claims. I see Jeff as willing to take the more difficult road of not having the security of an unquestioned creeds and beliefs, finding his comfort instead in the quest for meaning and for the reality of God in his life.

And last, to **Steve Nicholas**, I say thank you for being forthright and clear in your claim that I am "profoundly wrong" in my diagnosis of why the Moravian Church is dying. I would rather be profoundly wrong than lukewarmly right. I'm not trying to be a smart-aleck. I like passion and conviction, even if it is diametrically in opposition to my own. With you, Steve, I sense that our passions are, indeed, diametrically opposed.

Steve, you begin by pointing to the "sin-salvation-Jesus theology" churches as the churches which are growing, and thus, my diagnosis doesn't mesh with the facts. My concern is not for those for whom the sin-salvation-Jesus theology speaks. My concern is for what I believe are thousands who cannot connect with that kind of theology but who still seek to follow Jesus. The fact that "conservative" churches are growing doesn't validate that theology and disprove any other theological approach. It simply illustrates that there are few if any outlets in

the mainline churches today for those who are looking for something different. We don't build new churches for those folks.

I understand your concern about whether or not I am calling for a reformation or for a completely different church. If I wanted to do that, I would not seek to try to urge my fellow Moravians to re-form. Unfortunately, due to space limitations, I was not able to include much of the prescription for a new Moravian Church which I talked about in my three lectures. For example, I noted four insights of the present Moravian Church which could be the sparks for a new reformation, not only in our church but throughout Protestantism. Those four insights were: 1) our unwillingness to be tied to time-bound doctrines; 2) scripture as a ministerial rather than an essential; 3) heart religion as an affirmation of the individual experience of God; and 4) community as relationship and intimacy rather than common belief. I am not seeking to call for a completely different church but rather a return to our roots.

Steve, we know one another and I respect the integrity of your hopes and desires for the Moravian Church. Expecting the same respect from you, I was disappointed that you chose to resort to accusing me of wanting to turn the Moravian Church into a group of Unitarians sponsoring string quartets, yoga and discussions of Emerson. It cheapens your argument to retreat to those time-worn jabs, although I must confess that a church sponsoring string quartets, yoga and Emerson discussions lights my candle. You say that we cannot become "religious chameleons who bend to accommodate every wind of culture." Yet we have no trouble bending to the whims of

culture in our manner of worship. Those “growing” churches you talked about are often filled with contemporary culture’s music and need for flashy video screens and the like. I happen to believe that the church cannot be separated from culture regardless of the biblical dualism we keep adhering to about the church and the world. We Moravians tried the separatist mode and found that culture could not be kept out of the church, because we church members are part of the culture. I believe that we have ignored the cries and needs of our people who long for meaning and depth beyond the doctrinal boxes we have insisted upon. We maintain control of the box by claiming that to open the box would be to accommodate culture. No wonder the church hasn’t budged on its exclusivity claims for centuries.

I agree with you when you say that a faith journey isn’t just one’s own individual journey. Becoming a community requires common values and beliefs. However, we Moravians have always understood the danger of claiming common beliefs and their time-boundedness. I am not saying we

should not have common values. They simply cannot be believed by everyone in the community 100 % and we must allow for such freedom. If John Hus had not had the courage to publicly speak out against the common values and beliefs of his faith community, where would we Moravians be today?

You quote Bishop Anderson to bolster your conviction that Christianity is a revealed religion. If that which we believe, based on the Bible, is revelation, then is there no more revelation? Cannot God speak and reveal new truths and new ways of understanding? Isn’t that what Jesus was about in his own faith community? Why must we continue to insist upon correct belief based upon a time-bound set of interpretations of God’s “revelation?”

Once again, thank you to all of the respondents. I hope that we can continue to talk with one another about the life of our church, and how we can respond to the longing and desires of all of us to experience God’s presence in the midst of our life together.

## Book Review

Robert Wuthnow, Growing Up Religious: Christians and Jews and Their Journeys of Faith (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 234 pages plus endnotes.

The esteemed sociologist of religion, Robert Wuthnow, addresses a question so fundamental that it has often been ignored by sociologists, historians, theologians, and church planners. What is the actual experi-

ence of the vast numbers of Americans who grew up in religious homes? Rather than focusing on unusual aspects of religion (e.g. cults), Wuthnow focused on the normal life experience of religious people.