

assumptions that undergirded all of life. The religion of the Moravians filled this void and touched the heart. We may not be able to use their words and images, but we need to find new language and new pictures to convey the eternal message to our generation just as they did so effectively to theirs.

Recently I heard a lecture by the retiring Presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In response to a question about how we should change our message in a pluralistic culture, Bishop George Anderson replied that "Christianity is a revealed religion. It is not something you can figure out for yourself." Bishop Anderson is right! We are not free to change the message nor to improve on it. Our mission is to communicate the good news about Jesus Christ to all kinds of people using a variety of methods and invite

## **David A. Schattschneider**

The thesis presented by Truman Dunn is that adherence to Christian exclusivistic claims is driving Americans away from the churches, including the Moravian Church. This is a serious proposition but one that nevertheless takes contemporary culture seriously and must be dealt with. It is a revisiting of the classic Gospel and culture debate but one which takes on a particular urgency today. While American Christians have long been aware of the growing "spirituality" movement in the country, awareness of the presence and growth of other religions in America has taken on a particular urgency in recent months. While

them to know the joy of being his disciples. The Moravians did this well in the past. They went all over the world, to very difficult places. "Souls for the Lamb" was their cry. Today we have their traditions but not the same relationship with the Savior from which those forms grew. If we regain the passion and love for the Savior that the early Moravians possessed, then I believe that we will find appropriate forms to reach contemporary people and we will not have to worry about the death of the Moravian Church.

---

*Steve Nicholas has served the Moravian Church in several congregations in Staten Island and Pennsylvania. Currently he is pastor of St. Paul's in Upper Marlboro, Maryland.*

Dunn's thesis may be an uncomfortable one to consider, it cannot be ignored.

If we start with the numbers, the records is even more alarming than Dunn has indicated. The Moravian Church in North America was the largest it has ever been in 1966 with a total membership of 60,643. The percentage drop in membership from 1966 to 1989 (23 years) was 9%. The percentage drop in the last ten years has actually increased to 12%.

Dunn presents a number of assumptions about characteristics that he believes have contributed to this situation. These merit closer examination. The "graying" of the membership must be regarded as an anecdotal observation since no data on the age distribution of American Moravians exists.

The claim that church planting and growth have been emphasized in recent years more than “ever before in our history,” can also be challenged. Again, while no objective study yet exists, it would be instructive to compare recent efforts with those of the 1950s. That era witnessed a tremendous investment of money and energy in church growth and resulted in the geographical expansion of the church in America. If the “community church” sign debate is going on now, it’s a rerun of a 1950s debate!

The interpretation of Moravian church growth outside North America presented in the paper is problematic. In the first place, North American Americans are actively supporting missionary activity in three places: China, Labrador, and Mexico. The careful and culturally sensitive approaches being utilized in these locales hardly suggest the goal is the rapid growth of a large Christian community in order to improve the numbers. Secondly, in the other seventeen Unity Provinces when new congregations are formed it is at the direction of those Provinces themselves. If, for example, the Surinam Province decides to evangelize in neighboring countries (as it has), it is their project alone. Since 1988 the Unity has attempted to coordinate its expansion through the New World Witness program, but that program is not a North American program alone nor does it directly affect the North American situation.

The claim that Moravian churches outside North America are growing because “Our churches in Africa and other mission fields have not yet begun to experience have already experience in our churches here in

America and Europe” is troublesome. This sounds like a subtle form of North American cultural imperialism. The churches of Europe and North America are heirs of the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the Post-Enlightenment and a host of other more recent trends. Why should we assume that the churches of “Africa and other mission fields” would have to go through all those stages to ‘catch up’ with us? The current debates about American economic imperialism through globalization have their counterparts in religious circles. To put it another way, is traditional North American theological education the best model for such education everywhere or does it suppress the contextualization of the Gospel in other cultures?

Dunn asks “Have you looked at The Ground of the Unity lately?” as he identifies this statement as a text for the exclusivistic claims of the Moravian Church. The Ground is an interesting statement but not without its own internal ambiguities concerning exclusive truth claims. Space does not permit a detailed exegesis of the Ground, but there is no denying that it does contain claims about the exclusive nature of the Christian faith. But there are also statements that suggest an interpretation with a more contextual nuance. Of particular interest is “Paragraph 5, Creeds and Confessions.” Consideration of that section should remind the reader again of that oft-neglected topic of study: the history of doctrines. As the church created the Bible and still debates its contents (does your Bible include the Apocrypha?) so also the early church councils took the biblical roots of doctrines and grew them into exclusive

truth claims. Early statements of faith became absolute tests of orthodoxy. The discussion begun by Dunn could move forward through a consideration of the historical development of the “exclusive claims” which cause him concern.

Finally, Dunn has rendered a valuable service in presenting issues of Gospel and culture and context which will become increasingly important in Moravian Church discussions. The recent Unity Seminar grappled with these issues during its sessions in Surinam. At the request of the 1995 Unity Synod, the Unity Standing Committee on Theology has prepared a paper, “A Moravian Perspective on Gospel and Culture,” which is being circulated to the Provinces for discussion in preparation for the 2001 Unity Synod. It is appropriate to conclude with comments from this paper.

“The question of truth is one aspect of the ambiguity of our situation. As Christians we confess that we know the One who is the Truth and whose Spirit ‘can guide us into all truth’ (John 16:13). But we are finite beings in a relative world, and the absoluteness of God’s truth is a matter of faith and hope for us, not a matter of certain knowledge or possession. We cannot claim absolute knowledge and the right to estab-

## **Anne Schenz**

The eternal Creator God LOVES US! He wants a relationship with us. After God created Adam and Eve, He walked with them in the garden and talked with them. After they sinned, they hid from Him. The conversation stopped.

lish absolutes for others, even though in the past the church did just this. Nevertheless, faith and hope prevent us from falling into the relativism that is spreading throughout postmodern cultures. This relativism asserts that there is a plurality of truths in the area of values (morality, ethics, religion, etc.) and that no absolutes exist. In faith and hope we are assured of the truth that can be known in following the path of Christ. What is this truth? That God, out of his love for the creation, became human in Jesus of Nazareth for the salvation of all creation. Knowing this truth prevents us from accepting the false absolutes of other authorities. Accepting the incomplete nature of our faith and hope helps to protect us from setting forth our own absolutes for others, which often disguises our personal or group interests or prejudices.”

---

*David A. Schattschneider, former Dean of Moravian Theological Seminary, is currently on sabbatical leave from the Seminary faculty as he researches the development of the Moravian Church in America.*

God provided a flood, leaders, priests and a sacrificial system, prophets, and kings to try to bring people back in communication with Him. These things were temporary. So, God sent His Son Jesus to live on earth as a human being, and to be killed by crucifixion as a sacrifice for our sins. So, the relationship with God was open again. But, a relationship takes two. God is open; what is our response?