

stifled with a “you must believe in order to be saved” rebuttal, the tradition loses its living reality.

The Bible and the church itself are two immediately recognizable Christian symbols. Both of them seem to me to point us toward God, just as my credo points toward my understanding of God. It is a symbol of my spiritual journey. When the Bible and the church become the object of worship themselves, they cease to be symbols and become idols. This idolatry is one explanation for the decline of the church Truman alludes to in his article.

Matthew Fox, in his book One River Many Wells, introduced a metaphorical definition of the divine which is known as God to Christians and by other names in other religions. It helped me see my Christian tradition in the context of humanity as part of a larger family of religious traditions. Fox defines divinity as “an underground river with many wells into that river, an African well, a Taoist well, a Buddhist well, a Jewish well, a Muslim well, a Christian well. Many wells, one river. To go down a well is to practice a tradition, but we would make a grave mis-

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Current pronouncements about the state of the Moravian Church are confusing. While Truman Dunn bids us face the impending death of our church with vision and courage, David Wickman, in a recent issue of The Moravian, assures us that the Moravian Church “has a solid future” (Sept. 2001, p. 24). How can this be? Are we

take (an idolatrous one) if we confuse the well itself with the flowing waters of the underground river. Many wells, one river.

If the exclusive truth claims can be allowed to die perhaps we can begin to learn from all religions, rather than fighting over superiority. Seeking the wisdom within other traditions helps us know God as an experience not just as doctrine. As I tell my patients when discussing their dental health, we are wise when we learn from the past, look to the future and live in the present. I feel more alive in a spiritual sense than at any other time in my life. Church services and Sunday school are enjoyed with an optimistic enthusiasm looking for an active meaning in today's world. As the Buddha said, “Seek not to follow in the footsteps of the old men, rather seek what they sought.”

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talking about the same church? If yes, it is obviously a church that is so confused about its own destiny and identity that different writers can arbitrarily chose whatever rhetorical trick will best suit their needs. Perhaps this confusion, this lack of a clear sense of purpose and calling, is the root of the problem with which we are dealing.

Before responding to the argument of Truman Dunn's article, I would like to express my respect to Brother Dunn for the

courage of raising an important issue and presenting an opinion that is likely to be controversial. It seems to me that his proposal is rooted primarily in a pastoral concern, namely, in concern for the future and integrity of our church and in concern for the struggle of many people with issues of faith and spirituality. Although some may disagree with his conclusions, we are indebted to Brother Dunn for drawing our attention to these matters.

At the same time, I want to express my respect to Brother Dunn for placing the debate on the theological level. There are, as he notes, many ways to deal with the problem of decline in the life of our church: organizational strategies for church growth, the implementation contemporary worship, the attempt to learn from so called “mega churches,” and so forth. I would agree that none of these really cut to the root of the problem. What matters for the life of a church is not only how it organizes and advertises itself, but on what kind of message it is founded. Reflection about our theology is indeed necessary. What do we believe? How do we articulate our faith? And how are we able (or unable) to relate our faith to our experience and to the world around us? These are the kinds of questions we must ask if we want to address the cause, and not simply the symptoms, of the problems that we are dealing with.

It is appropriate to carry out such a conversation about theology in the form of an open and honest debate, where the dialectic of different views may lead to new insights and a deeper sense of understanding. Accordingly, I shall focus in the following

remarks on three points of disagreement with Brother Dunn’s argument.

1. I disagree with his description and assessment of the current state of the Moravian Church. Although membership is in decline, the Moravian Church is not dying. Here, several things need to be said. First, the phenomenon of numerical decline is not particular to the Moravian Church, but a broad trend in North American main-line Protestantism, which implies that we are not dealing with a specifically Moravian issue. However, the Moravian Church may be better equipped to deal with the reality of this decline, since “at least traditionally” it has never looked to numerical strength as a criterion for its spiritual vitality and veracity.

Second, the association of the actual decline with the metaphor of death represents to my sensibilities a case of inflated rhetoric, unable to illumine the problem constructively. It is never stated what this “death” would actually mean. The closing of the last congregation? Intellectual bankruptcy? A complete break with tradition? In fact, Brother Dunn leaves us wondering whether this “death” is ultimately a bad or a good thing.

Third, the reference to Comenius and his Bequest seems out of place. Whereas Brother Dunn celebrates the death of the Moravian Church (in a symbolic sense, I take it) as a way to move beyond its outmoded beliefs of the past, Comenius lamented the actual, organizational death of the *Unitas Fratrum* (through outside forces) and sought to entrust the legacy of its

beliefs and ministry to the other Protestant churches so that its tradition would not be lost. In sum, the essay's powerful style stands on unsure footing.

2. My second area of disagreement concerns Brother Dunn's approach of addressing the problem of the "death" of the Moravian Church. He proposes that only a radical shift in our theology will avert this event (although in another sense he seems to welcome this "death" as the occasion that will finally bring about such a radical shift).

As I said above, I agree with him that the problem is theological in nature and that it therefore requires a theological solution, yet simply discarding one set of beliefs and adopting another one does not look very promising to me. The truth and value of a theological position should not be determined by its popularity or appeal to the spiritual aspirations of a particular section of the population. While we should take very seriously contemporary questions about traditional doctrine and the corresponding quest for a fulfilling spirituality, we need to respond to them out of the fullness of our own theological and spiritual resources rather than surrendering before the lowest common denominator. It may well be that for some people the Moravian Church does not offer the kind of spirituality that they need at that particular place in their faith journey. This is not tragic. We do not claim to be the only true church, but joyfully recognize the gifts of other churches. The kind of post-mortem communities that Brother Dunn envisions do already exist; we do not need to invent them or try to be what we are not.

3. Finally, I disagree with Brother Dunn's rejection of the traditional theological position of the Moravian Church. The problem is, I think, that he explicitly rejects a whole tradition when in fact he only reacts against the problems of a specific, and probably rather narrow expression of it. In the case of Scripture, he rejects the practice of fundamentalist proof-texting and insists that we should give up seeing the Bible as the Word of God altogether. Isn't there a third alternative between these two extremes? The same thing could be said about Christology or the meaning of sin and repentance.

There is not space here to sort out all the theological issues raised in his paper; my point is simply that I believe the classical Christian tradition and the Moravian interpretation of it, especially in the Ground of Unity is not the ugly monster that Brother Dunn portrays it to be. It offers many more resources to respond to those who are honestly searching and critically thinking than he is giving it credit for. I am thinking here specifically of the Trinitarian view of God, of Christ as an expression of God's all-embracing love, and of sin as the name for the realities of estrangement both from God and from one's neighbor. The problem is not the message, but the way how we hear, interpret, and speak it.

This brings me to my own, alternative proposal, with which I will conclude. According to Brother Dunn, a church should not presume to have all the answers. I agree with him, but in a different sense. For me the issue is whether doctrine is understood as a possession, as a static reality that we can nail down once and for all,

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.