

Gerry Harris

Interpreting the Present Time

This is from a sermon that was preached for the eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, 2001 (Aug. 13 lovefeast) based on the lesson Luke 12:49-56.

The governing consideration in this text is the presence of Jesus as the crisis of the world. Crisis here does not mean emergency but that moment or occasion of truth and decision about life. It is the moment when one's response to Jesus will determine one's destiny. Such a moment was Jan Hus standing before the Council of Constance, boldly declaring what he understood to be the truth of the gospel, believing that ultimately the truth would conquer, and begging for a reasoned discussion of his writings. The decisions made in that moment created division, cost Hus his life, and determined the destiny of the church. Hus knew the baptism of which Jesus speaks in this text. The signing of the "Covenant for Christian Living" on May 12, 1727 by a group of refugees on the estate of Count Zinzendorf represents another such moment of decision that determined the destiny of our church.

What of the present moment? How do we interpret the present time? I think we, as Moravians, must answer for our time what it means to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. I believe we live in a time of identity confusion. We are not sure who we are and therefore we become like whatever appears

to be the latest cure all. If we continue down this road of accommodation, we will end by looking like every other church trying to secure its place in the world. What we will lose in the process is our soul.

I.

Times of confusion are unsettling. We need not be reactionary, however, allowing ourselves to be defined by our worst fears. We have reinvented ourselves a number of times by discerning what the present moment required of us. In the days following Hus' execution, it meant praying in secret in the woods since meeting publicly was forbidden and dangerous. In the days of Comenius it meant living the life of refugees, permanent exiles. In the 1700s it meant forming closed communities and embarking on enlightened mission work.

We have known long periods of confusion confounded by homelessness and persecution. In short, we have known much tougher times than we face in the present. It is to be expected that in times of confusion many and various voices will proclaim the way of the Lord. It is like the prophet Jeremiah writes of God: "Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw to do with wheat?" Many and various voices are attempting to define, or redefine, the

character of the Moravian Church. The task of the people of God in every generation is to discern the word of God from the dreams of false prophets.

Bill Leonard, Dean of Wake Forest University Divinity School and survivor of such a crisis in his own denomination, argues that churches need to practice intentional identity with integrity. *Intentional identity with integrity* strikes me as the proper prescription for the confusion of the present moment. I cannot speak for the church, only synod can do so, but I can ask some of the questions pertinent to intentional identity with integrity. My questions come from the core values that attracted me to this tradition at a time when I was a religious refugee.

II.

The worship practices of the Moravian Church, especially its liturgies and most particularly what we now call General 1, bore witness to my spirit of a deeper spirit in corporate worship. I came to know the Moravian Church's worship as liturgical in nature, and the spirit of God breathed new life into my soul through those ancient prayers of the church. Do we still understand ourselves as a liturgical church that attempts to bear witness to the mystery and majesty of God? Or do we believe we must accommodate an entertainment-saturated culture until our worship looks and sounds like something from late night TV?

Do we still believe in the theology of God's grace that informs our traditional

understanding of infant baptism? Do we still believe, as both Comenius and Zinzendorf taught, that we should so raise our children that they forever and only know themselves to be sons and daughters of God? Or have we become so influenced by popular American religious culture that we must teach our children that they are sinners in the hands of an angry God who will send them to hell if they are not born again?

Do we still understand faith, as the early church did, to be principally and primarily, a relational term? Or have we given way to seeing faith as a set of propositions that require our intellectual assent? In the early days of our tradition, we believed that what was essential to salvation was God revealed to us as father, son and holy spirit and our response to God in faith, love and hope. What has become known as the eight essentials embodies doctrinal assertions most of us don't believe and which the Faith and Order Commission of the Moravian Church has shown to be an aberrant reading of our tradition.

Do we believe in the truth of the Old and New Testaments, or do we believe in the Old and New Testaments? Are we Christocentric or theocentric in our theology? Do we still adhere to a confessional form of church government or have we become congregationalists? Do we still believe as Zinzendorf taught that the Holy Spirit is present in all of creation including in all humanity, or do we think the

Holy Spirit is somehow our possession that we must take to those who are without? Do we still believe in the power of truth to conquer as Hus taught, knowing that we do not possess the truth but pursue it as our common good? Do we still believe that all things ought to be taught to all people from all points of view as Comenius taught, seeing this as the only possible path to peace?

Just as you don't have to become a Moravian to be a Christian, we don't have to become like everyone else to survive. Historically, spirituality has meant living deeply into a particular tradition until one

has a place to stand, a point of view, a sense of perspective. If we can no longer offer such a spirituality, we have lost our reason for being; we have traded our soul for a mess of porridge. The present time calls for an intentional, deep living into our tradition and a living out of this identity with integrity in a world hungry for something authentic. We can offer a genuine feast of spiritual riches, if we but remember who we are!

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Judy Knopf

Vision Discernment in the Southern Province

As I have met with Moravians in the Southern Province, I have continually heard us name and claim one common core value: community. Community means different things to different people even though they claim the same word as a "value." This is very confusing for many of us, but, strange as it may seem, the concept that there can be unity in diversity is an underlying principle in this discernment process. Drawing upon the work of Thomas Bandy in Moving Off the Map (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), we can see four movements toward rediscovering our identity and claiming our mission in our current Vision Discernment Process. These are Core Values, Bedrock Beliefs, Motivating Vision, and Key Mission.

Taking the core value of "community" and following it through to a possible conclusion will hopefully assist us in a better understanding the discernment process.

By engaging in this process we hope (as we have many, many times before) to rediscover and uncover our identity as Moravian Christians in the Southern Province. By inviting people into small gatherings of pastors, DCE's, Youth Directors, Pastoral Assistants, Synod Delegates, and congregational members, every person has had the opportunity to participate in sharing who we are, what we believe, and in discerning our vision. During these small group gatherings we have discussed Core Values and Bedrock Beliefs, the first two movements. The results