

## Letters to the Editor

The recent editorial by Craig Atwood in *The Hinge* struck a chord with me regarding the reluctance of Moravians to discuss and attempt to resolve conflict. As a lay person, I will try to tread lightly with this letter amidst the offerings in this journal from more august and educated scribes.

I admit that my opinions are not typically Moravian due to my comparatively eclectic theological experiences. During my career, I worked for many years for church-related colleges and universities, including United Methodist, Lutheran, United Church of Christ and Roman Catholic institutions. One of my assignments was to handle all publicity, media relations and external communications as three Lutheran synods in Wisconsin merged into one. My professional experiences showed me the constant conflicts and debates which occur in the various denominations.

My exposure to religious strife began many years before adulthood, however. My father was a Protestant. My mother was a Catholic. She made sure we attended St. Patrick of Heatherdowns Church as children. My parents and their families often debated religion loudly, heatedly and boisterously.

The lovely spring day in the year of 1955 that the good Fathers Frank Brogan and Francis O'Brien (may the Lord grant these well intentioned Irishmen eternal peace) visited our brand new home and dumped holy water on the living room floor to bless the house was a benchmark in my young religious life. My mother the Catholic approved. My Protestant father was outraged. This prompted an Irish uprising involving all parties the likes of which most Moravians will never witness and probably cannot imagine.

This brings me to a major point. I believe that Moravians have extreme difficulty with theological conflict because most of them have never truly experienced it. As much as I love the Moravian Church, I must admit that it is quite isolated from other denominations and singularly set in its ways. Perhaps our insular nature may keep us from learning from other Christian sects about how they attempt to handle conflict creatively.

An illustration of our comparative isolation is the scores of times Moravians have said to me "Lutherans believe this about that" or "Catholics believe that about this." The very construct of such statements shows them to be indigenously false. Most Moravians do not understand that the majority of denominations are not nearly as homogenous as ours historically has been.

The only true statement would be "The official doctrine or position of the Lutheran Church (or whatever denomination) on this matter is such-and-such." Since the major churches number their membership in the millions and their congregations in the thousands in the United States

alone, there is often an enormous difference in official church position and what various members actually believe, leading to frequent conflict and ongoing debate.

One need look no further than the Roman church's official position on birth control vis-à-vis the actual practices of most American Catholics to view this schism. The Catholic Church is not alone, though. During my career, I personally knew Lutheran ministers who were gay, United Methodist ministers who did not necessarily believe in eternal damnation within the context of God's infinite love and mercy, and an United Church of Christ clergy member who was significantly bothered by factual conflicts in accounts of Jesus' life as recounted in the Bible.

Another rather idiosyncratic situation in the Moravian Church which may keep us from facing conflict is our somewhat limited view of history. Perhaps we Moravians do not have a clear concept of how much societal changes inevitably influence the evolution of Christian denominations.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but the Protestant Reformation was as much a product of its times as it was an influence on its era and beyond. The Moravian view seems to be that Martin Luther and his contemporaries were divinely inspired men who spontaneously were called to lead the world from darkness. While I certainly subscribe to a great deal of this view, it is also obvious that the times were right for their work and the religious reformers were part of the beginning of a human tidal wave of changes in the arts, sciences, medicine and virtually all other fields of endeavor.

Let me hasten to add that this does not diminish in any way from the inspired, divine nature of the work of Luther, Hus and other reformers. It also can be viewed as consistent with God's mysterious and wonderful plans in that the Almighty created the reformers to live when they did. The fact that these Christians were influenced by their evolving societies, however, is unmistakable.

Another more controversial but also somewhat humorous reason why our denomination has trouble with conflict is that Moravians can be as intransigent on certain issues as any other Christian group. It is humorous in the sense that Moravians are admittedly very traditional and conservative even to the point that we poke fun at ourselves upon occasion. It is a serious issue in another sense because we simply do not handle change and controversy well.

For example, female pastors have found rough sledding in several Southern Province churches even in very recent months and years with many church members simply not ready or willing to accept female leadership. I have seen the same attitudes toward male pastors who are duly ordained by the Moravian Church but have earlier religious backgrounds with denominations which many Moravian congregation members do not understand or accept.

Similarly, our full communion relationship with the Lutheran Church is not necessarily a functioning reality. There seems to be a negative inertia among rank and file Moravians in regard to inviting Lutheran ministers to stage joint communion celebrations in our congregations. In spite of our extreme shortage of pastors, it would not appear there is a ground swell of support to call ministers from other, “approved” denominations to our pulpits.

Moravians are certainly not alone in their hesitancy and uncertainty regarding theological change and doctrinal diversity. Even the largest denominations find themselves in much the same position.

In his 1997 book “Nearer My God,” William F. Buckley, Jr., describes a forum of Roman Catholic clergy and others he assembled to discuss conflicts within that denomination regarding celibacy for priests, birth control, the ordination of females, divorce and other thorny issues.

The commentary regarding these discussions sounds uncannily and stunningly similar to the rhetoric heard in the Moravian Church today. The “bottom line” is that even the most conservative Catholic clergy and laypersons know that change might occur, but they want to be sure any change is scriptural and truly the Will of God. They doubly want to make sure changes are not made merely to bow to contemporary pressures or as the result of fatigue over turmoil and strident conflicts.

I emphasize that my remarks are not intended to be unfairly harsh regarding the Moravian denomination, nor are they suggestions for any specific reforms we might adopt. They also are not endorsements of the practices of any other Christian organization. They are, however, intended to note that other denominations of all ilk are currently engaged in similar struggles. Many have faced these challenges for centuries and have learned to survive and even thrive amidst repeated cycles of seemingly overwhelming criticism and conflict.

My only suggestion would be that perhaps one of the most important steps for the Moravian Church would be to look beyond itself. There might be much to be learned from and much to be taught to our Christian brothers and sisters from other denominations.

In the end, we will one day all be united as one, anyway. We might as well start the work now and fulfill God’s will by growing in love and unity.

Rick Cochran  
Pfafftown, NC

*Rick Cochran has been a member of Calvary Moravian Church for nearly ten years, is a former member and chair of its board of trustees and has served briefly several times in the mission field in Honduras.*