

# ***Mission*** ***FOCUS***

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1994 Volume 2

# Mission FOCUS

Annual Review

1994 Volume 2

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### About this issue

The 1994 *Mission Focus: Annual Review* includes three groups of articles. The first on fundamentalism has been commissioned and edited by Nancy Heisey. This phenomenon continues to manifest itself in many parts of the world and within various religio-cultural traditions. The second group was developed under the leadership of Arden Shank and is devoted to the theme of community-based development. The third set of three articles is based on analytical reports to the Europe Committee of the Council of international Ministries in December 1993—an updating of similar reports in 1991—assessing the impact of recent developments in Russia and Western and Eastern Europe on Christian witness and the church in these regions.

The rest of the articles in this volume cover a range of issues, all arising out of personal experience of Christian ministry. *Mission Focus* is intended to be a forum where thoughtful reflections can be shared more broadly.

*Wilbert R. Shenk, editor*

## Introductory Comments: Fundamentalism and Mission

*Nancy R. Heisey*

The term “fundamentalism” has become common currency in diplomatic and public media discourse. Although it emerged in the United States at the beginning of the 1900s, this term now serves as shorthand for a complex cluster of phenomena characterizing a variety of religious responses in these last years of the twentieth century. Some interpret these responses, which include a call to return to ancient religious practices, renewed links of religious and political nationalism, and the use of violence to change unacceptable societal patterns, as dangerous and destructive challenges to modern civilization and culture. Others argue that such an interpretation represents the frightened response to change by those who controlled the world order now collapsing in the post-Cold War era.

In either case, or even assuming that neither approach to the various forms of so-called fundamentalism is entirely accurate, this complex of religious responses confronts people in mission around the world. Those committed to nonviolence and to action for justice as integral to mission can neither ignore the phenomenon nor interpret it too easily.

The articles in this issue explore various understandings and questions about fundamentalism from Indian, Middle Eastern, Central American and North American perspectives. While they clarify some of the issues that Mennonite mission workers and supporters might raise, they do not offer a neat package of appropriate responses for us. It is our hope that they will contribute to further and more informed discussion on the topic.

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*Nancy R. Heisey is a consulting editor for Mission Focus: Annual Review and is currently doing graduate study at Temple University.*



## Religious Fundamentalism and a Christian Response

*Ashish Chrispal*

The word “fundamentalism” first came to be associated with evangelical Christianity. George M. Marsden calls it “a subspecies of evangelicalism.”<sup>1</sup> Christian fundamentalism originated in America in the 1920s. The name referred to a segment of Christians who, in a spirit of organized militancy, defended their religion and resisted modernist theology and other trends which they considered inimical to the essence and cause of the biblical faith.

Today, however, the concept may refer to any movement or attitude stressing strict and literal adherence to a set of basic principles in religious matters. It signifies a milieu of revivalism and awakening which arises out of a real or potential threat to the survival and growth of a particular faith; even an imaginary threat would suffice for such an uprising. Religious fundamentalism emerges and flourishes in such a context and plays the role of a defender, savior, and promoter.

Religious fundamentalism is not merely an Indian problem but also an international one. In one way or another the whole world is under its threat. It questions the very integrity of the human race, but, more particularly, it confronts the largest democracy of the world—India. India’s avowed commitment to the secular character of the nation is being challenged by the rising militancy of religions. The pluralism in India has attempted to mean not merely accepting many religions, but having various religious communities working together to build and maintain a just, humane nation. This very participation in nation-building requires a harmonious coexistence of the various religious communities. Religious fundamentalism has made such coexistence a passing shadow.

Religious fundamentalism is no longer a monopoly or a feature exclusively of the Semitic religions who have a mission mandate. It has become a universal feature in the 20th century as shown by the events in Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka during the past decade. Forms of fundamentalism have emerged and grown even in so-called accommodative, tolerant religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. People like Khomeini and Adwani represent that kind of perspective which feeds fundamentalism.

Before looking into some initial Christian responses necessary to combat reli-

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gious fundamentalism, we must note some of its major features.

### Major features of religious fundamentalism

a. **Dogmatism: Dogmatism strongly asserts an opinion, a viewpoint, or a system of ideas with an element of absolutism in it. It refers to an often unreflective ideological position. It may manifest itself in areas such as:**

- 1) Scriptural dogmatism: One's scriptures alone are true while others have only perversions of truth or are not even scriptures. The clarion call is "Back to the Scriptures."
- 2) Religious dogmatism: One's religion alone has the answer to the problems of the world and is the only custodian of true spirituality. The call to its adherents is to defend the religion by all means, and to bring people to accept it.
- 3) Territorial dogmatism: One's land is the only land of pure spirituality and virtues. It is a God-chosen, the promised land. The call is to defend and promote the cause of this land, to strengthen one's nation and desire to make it the only royal and princely state in the world. As an Islamic Jihad activist told a Mennonite worker in the Middle East:

Because Islam is comprehensive and seeks to show this peace to all people, it really has no physical borders. The whole world is its realm. So toward this goal we will try all means. If nonviolent actions will not bring peace, then we are willing—and indeed it is a duty—to engage in jihad. In regard to the state of Israel, or any other region resistant to the call of Islam, we have a sacred duty to work by all means toward achieving this goal.<sup>2</sup>

Or as Hindu militant groups have said, "If you want to live in India, then you must say 'I worship Mother India' or accept second-class citizen status."

- 4) Communal dogmatism: One's own community or race alone can claim to be the "true children of the soil" the people, the only chosen and privileged people. Others are non-people, enemies of the people, traitors, or fifth-columnists.

In this context communalism and nationalism go hand-in-hand. Thus religion has been politicized and politics sacralized. The call to the followers is to preserve and maintain racial purity—to neutralize the debasing influence of uncultured and wicked races and to nationalize the others (that is, to Christianize, to make Islamic, to Hinduize).

**b. Intolerance.** Along with dogmatism goes intolerance. It is quite blind and prejudiced. It does not have patience to listen to those who differ and cannot consider other viewpoints or arguments. It leads to total arrogance toward others.

**c. Militancy:** It is an outcome of dogmatism and intolerance, and results in an aggressive spirit. All means are legitimated for the sake and defense of one's religious commitment. In religious fundamentalist groups, force is not only endorsed but even

recommended. Offense is considered to be the best defense. One of the leaders of the present militant Hindu political party, Dilip Singh Judeo, says: “The Christians used to sacrifice a calf on Christmas. We declared that anyone who eats a cow will be, in turn, eaten up by us...

“We told the missionaries that for every choti (tuft) clipped, we shall clip two throats... I believe in tit for tat. We have prepared a hit list of missionaries.”<sup>3</sup>

**d. Orientation toward the past:** Old is good, pure, virtuous, and noble. For a religious fundamentalist the present is corrupted. Therefore the call is to be revived by returning to the old values and beliefs. Rather than emphasizing reform, religious fundamentalism calls for the re-establishment of the old religious structures.

**e. Expansionism:** Since the call is to promote the old, progress to the future is not through a new outlook but by reviving the ancient, the old golden days which will help to attain a glorious future. There is a strong sense of mission. It is a consequential element in the Asian religions and not a constitutional one.

#### **A Christian response**

As pointed out in the previous section, fundamentalism generates prejudice, intolerance, and hatred. Being militant and aggressive, it causes communal, racial, or inter-religious clashes. The expression and consequences of religious fundamentalism are thus quite alien to the eternal values and ideals of the Christian faith, even though Christendom has in the past portrayed the same features for Christianity. Religious fundamentalism, even if it is found in Christianity, is dangerous, inhuman, and thus against the very nature of God. This un-compromising stand against the religious fundamentalist position, however, does raise several questions.

The most serious question which needs an answer is whether the anti-fundamentalist position of Christians means that we hold to no absolutes in the Christian faith and practice. Does this position mean that Christians have no commitment to mission or no loyalty to the church? Does it imply that we are not loyal to our nations? Is it possible to be committed to our faith without being intolerant of other faiths?

The answer to the first three questions is a clear “No,” while to the fourth one the answer is “Yes.” Christians have strong convictions and understandings regarding our faith commitments. Persons may be deeply committed to God’s mission in the world and sincerely loyal to the body of Christ as well as to their nation.

It is possible to be dogmatic and entertain an absolute viewpoint without becoming a fundamentalist. Strong convictions and orthodoxy are not bad nor dangerous in themselves. The real difference is that fundamentalists want to **impose** their ideas upon others, and they nurse a desire to annihilate or terminate other beliefs or systems. It is this degeneration of convictions into a desire for totalitarianism of religion through whatever means, that is dangerous and a threat to human life in community.

Christians should refuse to entertain such fundamentalist dreams for the following three reasons:

1) The Christian understanding sees human beings as made in the image of God with freedom of choice. This very understanding commits Christians to recognize its implications in the religious arena and to respect people of other faiths for their choices. Today, Christians are called to develop a sense of commitment which is accompanied by tolerance. Our neighbors of other faiths are free to believe or not to believe what we believe. Our understanding of tolerance is not based on the conviction that other religious doctrines and ideologies are also true but because those who hold them have a God-given right of choice. Fundamentalists do not recognize this freedom as being an intrinsic right and so impose their doctrines and viewpoints.

2) **Christians are not nationalists, but patriots. Nationalism based upon religious** fundamentalism is uncritical, unhealthy, and blindly devoted to country. It seeks to impose a unitary system of government and refuses neighbors the right to be free and devoted to their nation, if they happen to be from a different religious community.

Patriotism, on the other hand, means a deep commitment and loyalty to one's nation. Love for the nation is neither uncritical nor blind. There is a commitment to the nation's honor, dignity, defense, and prosperity. Patriots are equally concerned about the rightness of their country's actions and attitudes. They seek to develop a critical and constructive commitment to the welfare and progress of the nation that is freely rooted in righteousness and justice and looks forward to God's shalom for the whole universe.

Christian patriots are those who love their nations, not in a parochial sense, but with a sound, universal outlook. Thus they must guard against politicization of religious convictions and avoid sacralized territorial dogmatism. Christians are both national and catholic, but not at the expense of others.

3) In the new context of growing religious fundamentalism, the mission of God has to be rediscovered from the very mission of Jesus Christ. God's mission is not that of expansionistic Christendom, but a call, a loving invitation, a sharing of the crucified and risen Lord so that people may have life. There may be gentle, loving persuasion, but no imposition. Our respect for the freedom of others, while being convinced of the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ, is paramount. We must look at others not as "objects" or "things" to be made like ourselves, whether they like it or not. Rather, we must see them as responsible and intelligent beings with dignity and honor.

Religious fundamentalists do violence to that which is human, destroy harmony in the community, and generate fear and hatred even at the international level. Yet they, too, are in God's image. Christians have the privilege to love even such persons. The only way we can do that is the way of the cross, accepting our powerlessness so that God may empower us with love and shalom to bring new life to the human community.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Encyclopedia of Religion, Vol. V (1987), p. 190.

<sup>2</sup> "Lapp Interviews an Islamic Jihad Activist," *MCC Peace Section Office Newsletter* (Jan.-Feb. 1993), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> N. KI. Singh, "A Crisis of Faith," *India Today* (May 15, 1992), p. 52.

## **Rebuilding Old Walls: A Survey of Religious Violence in the Middle East**

*Roy Hange*

### **From the Berlin Wall to other walls**

**I**n service of the Prince of Peace, Anabaptist Christians have attempted to be ministers of reconciliation wherever they find themselves. At the close of the 20th century and the end of the ideological bipolarity of the Cold War, the world longs for peace, yet finds itself host to a multitude of religious and ethnic conflicts. An exploration of the emerging religious and ethnic tensions in the broader Middle East indicates that they have very deep foundations. The assumptions behind many religious conflicts, although heightened by colonialism and suppressed by the Cold War, were drawn out of the centuries-old conflicts between Islam and both the Christian West and the Christian East.

If the Cold War was the Third World War of this century—a battle of attrition fought by proxy on others' lands and in the factories of the superpowers with the world always a few minutes from doomsday destruction—then humanity has struck out in this century in its search for peace. Blinded by these proxy battles and the nuclear duel of the superpowers, many failed to see the deeper ethnic and religious tensions and were surprised by the revolution in Iran and the war in the former Yugoslavia. Although many fanatical and extremist acts of religious violence seem irrational within the Cold War frame of reference, they can be seen to have an internal logic within their own sense of retributive justice. This logic may seem as convincing as the superpowers' argument that they needed to be able to destroy the world to save it, or the United States' need to destroy a Vietnamese village to save it. In the perversion of religious violence is the lie that salvation can be found in the destruction of the other. As a Christian I believe that the cross of Christ saved us from this and other lies.

The following survey of the various sides of this religious violence is made not to condone these acts of violence, but to lay out the structures of historical resentment in which they occur. Political, economic, and religious tensions between the Islamic world and both the Christian West and Christian East have been the primary norm since the inception of Islam in the seventh century. With the recent passing of the Cold War, and the resultant global realignment of tensions, new fault lines have

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emerged, or re-emerged with ethnic and religious differences. Charles Kimball points out that Christianity and Islam now represent nearly half the world's population and "the ways in which Christians and Muslims relate and interact will shape the future of this planet—for better or worse," (Kimball, p. 7).

From the vantage point of the Middle East, and without access to much that has been written on the new forms of conflict in the last few years I will survey religious tensions in the broader Middle East, as they feed extremism, fanaticism and religiously oriented-violence. This paper is an attempt to frankly consider the existing tensions and ways to find peace in the midst of them. This survey will move first toward a focus on resurgent Islam to help Western Christians understand its internal logic as a backdrop to considering inter-religious tensions.

### **Survey of resurgent Islam**

The Middle East and the broader Muslim world have experienced a growing wave of activity focused on restoring the Islamic nature to all of life. Slogans such as "Islam is the answer" and "The Quran is our constitution" have been the rallying cry for many groups. An understanding of resurgent Islam is necessary for understanding the background of religiously oriented extremism and violence in the Middle East. Resurgent Islam is here defined as that broad range of activities carried out by Muslims to restore control over their own religious, social, economic, and political formation. This survey of resurgent Islam and its relation to Christianity and the West should be read with the following assumptions in mind:

- 1) Islam as a religion is a comprehensive way of life including spiritual, personal, family, social and political realms.
- 2) In light of the above, in the Muslim world and especially the Middle East, anything religious is political and anything political is religious. Thus, this topic is sensitive and volatile both religiously and politically.
- 3) In Islam, as well as in Christianity, there is wide diversity in interpretation about what true faith and practice involve. The diversity and scope of this paper does not allow for other than general references to these faiths nor for elaboration on various nuances. The terms Muslim and Christian will here refer to those people and groups primarily formed by those faiths.

#### **a. Reflections of resurgent Islam.**

In the last two centuries the weakness of the Muslim world in the face of the military and economic strength of the West led to an identity crisis and a process of critical reflection for many Muslims. This reflection has fueled the activities of resurgent Islam to recover the Muslim soul, society, and politic. This critical reflection has generally taken two paths toward reform: 1) self-critical reflection, and 2) reflection critical of Western ideologies and alliances which leads to a replacement with Islamic ideology and strengthened alliances with Islamic countries. The following Muslim voices speak to this disillusionment and the struggle for reform of the Muslim world.

Anwar Ibrahim, Finance Minister of Malaysia, reflects on the need for internal reform:

In my view as a Muslim, it would be a helpful beginning if the Ummah, the world Muslim community, looked critically at itself and its problems. The Gulf War provided yet another proof of our intellectual and moral predicament: our inability to think ourselves out of our disunity, frustration and helplessness, and to grasp and deal with the fundamental challenges confronting us. There has been a collapse of moral initiative. We have become accustomed to blaming everything on the colonial past; we remain oblivious to the excesses and brutalities inflicted by Muslims on other Muslims... Rampant corruption, disregard for fundamental human rights, denial of education and employment opportunities to women, illiteracy, economic disparities and tolerance of tyrannical regimes are not the symptoms but the causes of our decay. These social problems are our own creation and we cannot blame them on others. (Ibrahim)

An Egyptian diplomat Hussein Ahmed Amin, comments on the need to find a new central Islamic focus for Egyptians:

For a century Egypt has flirted with a variety of beliefs and ideologies. Each phase was greeted with great fanfare, each new belief adopted with conviction, each new sacrifice accepted without question. Egypt in the past has tried liberalism, military rule, democracy, fascism, one-party rule, and pluralism. It has flirted with capitalism and socialism, it has talked Arabism and Africanism, and then befriended the East.... We made war with Israel, and then peace. We were united with Syria and then not on speaking terms. We fought American domination, and then surrendered to it. We made a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union and then tore it up. And throughout all of this, Egypt's intellectuals have watched and become increasingly disenchanted: Egypt's young people have watched and become incredulous.

Against this background is it surprising that people have come to search for an immutable doctrine, for some constancy in the values they are asked to support? Why, they ask, since everything else has resulted only in corruption, in economic disaster, in the repression of civil liberties, and in military defeat, should we not embrace in Islamic rule, in accordance with the decrees of the Qur'an and Sunna (Amin, 7).

## **b. From historical antagonism to living resentments.**

### **1) Islam's initial expansion: seventh to 17th centuries**

Islam spread quickly after its inception in the seventh century, taking over areas that had once been "Christian." In many areas the new Muslim rulers were, at least initially, often considerate of the rights of other faiths. In Egypt and Syria the Oriental Orthodox Christians welcomed the Muslims as liberators from the oppressive rule of the Byzantine Empire and Church.

Except for the establishment of a few small Crusader kingdoms in Palestine for 150 years and the permanent loss of Spain and Sicily, the Muslim world expanded until the unsuccessful siege of Vienna in 1683. This was a major turning point for the Muslim world's political fortunes. The Muslim Ottoman Empire, which held power until 1918, was for the previous 600 years almost continually either trying to impose Islamic rule on Europe or responding to European counter-attacks. This state of chronic tension and conflict became the foundation of the deeply-held fears, suspicions, and prejudices that are re-emerging now.

### **2) Political contraction of Islam: 17th-20th centuries**

Although most of the people conquered in the initial Muslim military expansion of the seventh and eighth centuries eventually became Muslim in the 16th century, the carpet of Muslim political domination was rolled back with the growing military power of Europe and colonialism. By the end of World War I, only four of the 43 current members of the Organization of the Islamic (Afghanistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Yemen) were not under direct or indirect European colonial rule.

The European powers in most Muslim countries established educational, cultural, and political institutions of Western character. These institutions formed and trained the future, post-independence leadership who maintained the Western structures of governance began by the colonial powers.

### **3) Islam's political independence: 20th century**

This century has witnessed the nations of the Muslim world moving through roughly three stages of independence: 1) political independence, 2) nationalization, and 3) Islamization. All Muslim countries have obtained political independence and the nationalization of political and religious institutions, while Muslim countries are at various stages of Islamization because the various degrees of success of the Islamicists in a given country.

- a) Political independence: The majority of Muslim countries obtained their independence from colonial rulers within the three decades following World War II. Most of the Muslim countries were occupied by either the French or the British. The battles for independence were often costly. The Algerian war for independence from France (1954-1962) left 500,000 dead on both sides. Divisions of the Muslim world that became independent states were often contrived sections or mandates of the Ottoman Empire that the European colonial powers deemed logical for their own interests.
- b) Nationalization: Islam was denied an integral role in the political and social formation of its own people during the colonial era. With political independence most Muslim nations maintained Western governance patterns and institutions in a nationalized form. Initially the prime political loyalty of the citizens was formed to be national rather than Islamic. There were also attempts at Pan-Arab nationalism that resulted in temporary unions of various countries. Most of the new nationalist leaders had Western-oriented political

or military education. Through the nationalization process most Islamicists were thwarted in their attempts to bring in more Islamic character, for example Nasser's suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The dilemma was that emerging Islamic styles of justice and governance were supposed to fit into Western structures. Examples of this mismatch include the Egyptian legal system which, although incorporating many elements of Islamic law, is based on the French system to the extent that all law students are required to study French; also the generation of generals now controlling Algeria were trained by the French colonial forces and switched to the side of the Algerian revolution a few years before its victory.

- c) Islamization: The final stage of political independence, in many Muslims' view, is the current Islamization of the Muslim world. This struggle is a comprehensive reclamation and redefining of their life together in terms of Islam. If necessary, this process can include violence, but most often it need not. This process is seen by some Muslims as the final stage of independence when the "west-toxification" of cultural and political life has been removed. Islamicists work to establish rule by Islamic governments using Islamic law. Some Islamicists have a vision of a transnational, regional Islamic union that would do away with the nation-state divisions left over from European colonial history. This author was once shown a map of such an envisioned union by a Muslim.
- d) The affront of colonialism for Muslims was the separation of their religious and political life. Kenneth Cragg notes: "Islam is totalitarian. It does not distinguish between duty as a believer and duty as a citizen, between what is owed to God and what is owed to society. All social responsibilities are religious in character and religion is fulfilled in what ensues not only in the mosque but also in the market" (Cragg, 128).

A Muslim told this author that "the violence in Egypt and Algeria is a natural reaction by Muslims to not being allowed free and fair democratic expression of their will to bring an Islamic order to society. "He went on to say that these activists were only doing what the revolutionary American forces did before their independence from Britain—a covert fight with superior forces for the right of political self-determination for the majority.

During the Cold War, communist and democratic forces engaged in supporting revolutionary wars in various theaters of "low intensity conflict" to support the propagation of their own ideologies and control. In a similar way some elements of resurgent Islam engage in militancy with the common purpose of bringing society, faith, and politics into integrated submission to Allah. Militant Muslim forces are now fighting for territory or political control in Kashmir, the Philippines, Southern Sudan, Southern Lebanon, Bosnia, Azerbaijan, Algeria, Egypt, Israel/Occupied Palestine, Kurdistan, and Tazjikastans. This militancy is not affirmed by all Muslims.

#### **4) Are new fears of resurgent Islam valid?**

The question of the West's fear of resurgent Islam could well come back on itself.

Islam has faced militant Christianity in the Crusades and colonialism. It has faced secularism in western and Communist media and in the many international institutions which try to tell Muslims how to live without a religious basis. And it has faced militant Zionism in the occupation of Palestine and Southern Lebanon. Many Muslims see the activities of militant Muslims as a simple regaining of political, social, and ideological territory.

Many Muslims would ask who the militants were in this century by pointing to the fact that both world wars began in the “Christian” world and that the smaller conflicts were most often inspired by Communism’s revolutionary wars and the democratic West’s colonial wars. Muslims see both ideologies with their sources in ostensibly Christian lands. The Muslim world has also been a playground for the occasional “low intensity conflicts” between militant democracy and militant Communism during the Cold War.

### **Surveying the walls of vindictive history**

A survey of the scriptures of Jews, Christians, and Muslims reveals that many stories and themes for those scriptures are about religio-political violence, conquest, and nation-building. A survey of the history of those three religions’ relationship to each other will reveal much the same thing.

The following accounts are to be seen as blocks in the dividing walls of hostility as built by and seen by various sides. While acknowledging that this is a comparison of the worst of Islam and Christianity, it is an attempt to face the conflict directly in hope that clearer understanding may point to ways to move beyond conflict.

#### **a. The Muslim side of the dividing wall**

In many areas of the Middle East, Muslims and Christians have lived together relatively peaceably for centuries. Yet, in the last few years a disturbing trend toward an intensification of religiously oriented violence has emerged. The following examples show a disturbing trend toward some Muslims seeing the enemy in religious terms.

In 1993, in Turkey, a governor would not promise security measures for minority Christians in a region where there is severe fighting between the government and the Kurds. He told one church leader: “The Christian West was allowing for the slaughter of Muslims in Bosnia, so why should we protect you here?” In the same year a Christian village was forcibly evacuated and a priest was kidnapped.

Following the Gulf War, the Iraqi common people suffered deeply from the sanctions on Iraq. Such hardships brought out latent religious tensions in some areas. Iraqi Christians were told in bread lines, “Go get bread from George Bush.”

In Algeria on a remote work site on the night of December 15, 1993, 50 armed Muslim militants led 12 Croatian women out of their barracks two by two. After confirming that they were Christians, the militants cut their throats. In May 1994, two French Catholic social service workers in Algeria, a priest and a nun, were killed by Muslim militants. Between September 1993, when an ultimatum was given for all foreigners to leave Algeria, and May 1994, 34 foreigners were killed by Mus-

lim militants.

In Lebanon in June 1993 there was a failed attempt by a militant Muslim organization to bomb a busload of Christian clergy, mostly bishops, on their way to a conference at Balamand University, an institution of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch.

In Egypt the current violence by Muslim militants attempting to install an Islamic government is directed against the government and Coptic Christians. On Friday, March 11, 1994, two Coptic priests and three other Copts were killed in an attack by Muslim militants outside a Coptic monastery south of Cairo.

In India since 1989, more than 8,000 people have died in Muslim-initiated separatist violence in Kashmir. The Indian government claims that Pakistan is arming and training thousands of Muslim militants fighting for the independence of predominantly Muslim Kashmir. Also in India, about 2,000 people were killed in violence between Muslims and Hindus after Hindu militants destroyed a 16th-century mosque in December 1992.

In the Philippines militant Muslim groups have been fighting for independence. In the ongoing conflict one of these groups attacked a church during Sunday mass on December 26, 1993.

The "Voice of Iran's" Arabic service describes "five fronts" on which Islam is fighting in the Middle East. On three of these fronts, (Armenia, Bosnia, and Southern Sudan) Islamic forces are facing direct "Christian" opposition, while in Southern Lebanon and the West Bank and Gaza, they face indirect Western support.

Muslims have also made statements calling for coordinated Muslim defensive measures. Resolution 14 of the Final Communiqué of "International Conference for Supporting the Islamic Revolution of the Palestinian People" issued in Teheran, Iran, on October 22, 1991, noted that:

The conference denounces the American project for arms control in the Middle East and confirms that this project aims at destroying the defensive structure of Islamic countries and granting more strength to the Zionist enemy. Hence the conference calls on all Islamic countries to make all efforts to achieve integration among Islamic nations and consolidate the defensive force of the Islamic world against superpower threats.

#### **b. The Eastern Christian side of the dividing wall**

It is appropriate to acknowledge that Christianity was under attack by Islam for a thousand years from the 7th century until the failed Muslim attempt to take Vienna in 1683. Throughout this history of tension, the Orthodox Christian world has been closest to Islam through minority communities within Muslim countries and through the predominantly Orthodox countries of eastern Europe that border Muslim countries. As minority communities under Islam, the Arabic-speaking Orthodox, Uniate Catholic, and Protestant churches of the Middle East, except for the Maronites of Lebanon, have long ago made peace with living under the wing of Islam. However, this is not so with the Eastern Orthodox communities of Eastern Europe. Both the

Middle Eastern and East European Christian communities paid the initial price of the expansion of Islam and the continued price of the ebb and flow of both the power of Islam and the power of Europe.

Because of fearing for their status under possible future Islamic governments, Arabic-speaking Middle Eastern Christians for the most part affirm the right of Islam to reassert itself in the global community. According to Gabriel Habib of the Middle East Council of Churches, "Another main point for many Muslims today refers to their right to assert themselves in the world community, to gain its respect, to liberate themselves from all past colonialism and cultural oppression by the West. Their mission is to be present and to cooperate with liberation movements in the Third World. From their perspective, the Third World is also seen as in opposition to Western culture and power" (Habib, 31). Except for the Christian militia during the civil war in Lebanon, Arab Christians, who were also victims of Western colonization, have not participated in violence against Muslims.

The situation of the various Slavic and Greek Orthodox communities has been much different. Many of their communities have been alternately occupied by and liberated from Ottoman forces. They experience a dynamic front line, territorial defensiveness built up by centuries of Muslim occupation or threat of conquest. Their experience has built up a strident nationalism that has been violently expressed in recent years.

In Armenia, fighting in the six-year war between Christian Armenian forces and Muslim Azerbaijani forces has cost more than 20,000 lives. When Russian forces withdrew from Armenia they left their weapons behind. The Azerbaijani side is said to be supported by Iran and Turkey. Although over a million Armenians had been massacred by Turkish forces at the beginning of this century, the little-known precursor to that event was the 1877 Russian invasion of eastern Anatolia "spearheaded by Russian Armenian officers and administrators, who have risen in the czar's service since his annexation of Eastern Armenia earlier in the century." The victorious Russian troops "used Turkish rifles they had captured to arm local Christians and stimulated.... 'massacres of the Muslim villagers to thwart local resistance' something the Russians had done on the Balkan front" (Joseph, 83, 84).

In the former Yugoslavia, Serbian Orthodox troops are engaged in a brutal re-Christianization of Bosnia, which had become Muslim under the Ottoman militants engaged in a re-Islamization of territory Islam had lost to European colonialism. In Bosnia in May 1992, "Mustafa Mulkanovich, assistant chief Imam in Bratante, was murdered...the day after he spoke against Serbian atrocities on television. Serbs went to his mosque while he was addressing his 400-strong congregation and demanded that he denounce Islam and perform *salat* (prayers) in the Christian Orthodox way. This the Imam refused to do. So the Serbs beat him senseless. Alcohol was then poured into his mouth until he regained consciousness. He was beaten up further and, finally, his throat was slit—a manner of killing for which the Serbs are notorious" (Dolat-Abadi, 1).

There have been press reports that the weapons used by Christian militia in the

civil war in Lebanon were sold to Serbian militia. There were also attempts to bring weapons from Afghanistan to Bosnia on plane loads of Muslim relief shipments.

In Greece, an August 1993 official security report was leaked to the press stating that “Only Greeks who are members of the Orthodox faith are fully Greek and that the Orthodox religion should form the basis for foreign policy, with Greece seeking to create an Orthodox axis in the Balkans ‘to set against the Turkish Moslem arc in the region’” (“In Greece,” 2).

The resurgence of ultra-right nationalism in predominantly Orthodox Russia raises the question of the future of Russia’s orientation toward bordering Muslim countries and former member states of the Soviet Union that are predominantly Muslim. Vladimir Zhirinovosky, whose ultra-nationalist Liberal Democrats emerged as the most popular party in the December 1993 Russian elections, has been accused of war-mongering after a book he recently wrote proposed attacks on the Muslim nations of Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan. Russian armed forces have been accused by Muslims of assisting the emerging Christian state of Armenia in its fight against Azerbaijan and in Tadjikistan for containing Muslim militants coming north from Afghanistan. There are also reports of Russian volunteers fighting with Serbs in Bosnia.

### **c. The western Christian side of the dividing wall**

Modern, resurgent Islam has lost hope for a change in the “Christian” West. What Muslims have met—beginning with the Byzantine Empire and the Crusaders; European colonialism and missionaries bearing a Western gospel; Western support for displacing the Palestinian people; the modern moral assault through movies, videos and rock music; and the various Western efforts to control the oil and other resources from the region—has left little but bitter resentment.

Although much current media attention has been given to the militant aspect of resurgent Islam, little coverage has been given to the history of “militant Christianity” in the Muslim world. The following statements, all of which were made after the initial Muslim incursions into the Christian world and the Crusaders incursion into what had become the Muslim world, are examples of this militant Christianity and evidence of the depth and continuity of the West’s self-conscious contention with Islam. They indicate that “extremism” can be seen as an ingrained part of the Western Christian mentality and should soften our critiques of militant Islam:

**1490s:** “This gold can be used against the Mohammedans to reconquer the Holy Land,” Christopher Columbus argued before Spanish royalty to gain support for his venture westward. His discoveries led to a pillage of the strange peoples of the West and to conquering the strangers from the East. Columbus’ comment was heard by this author in a seminary lecture and seen in a television cartoon series for Muslim children on the history of Muslim Spain.

**1830:** “However fine, French Algiers replaced something apparently just as fine. When, in 1830 France began its conquest, (of Algeria) it razed most of the villas and gardens of the Moorish city; it turned mosques into churches, barracks, or even a

cabaret. Marechal de Bourmont told his troops that 'you have rejoined the Crusades.' The French took decades, with great and wanton cruelty, to subdue the mountainous interior" (Hirst, 7).

**1918:** After the British Army entered Jerusalem and pushed out the Muslim Ottoman forces, "the Times of London pointed out that what was taking place in the region in 1918 was reminiscent of past French and English participation in the historic Crusades. 'Saladin entered Jerusalem in triumph as Allenby enters in today.' This 'deliverance of Jerusalem' was looked upon as 'a most memorable event in the history of Christendom.' To General Allenby himself is attributed the boast that 'today ended the Crusades'" (Joseph, 121).

**1920:** The famed Lawrence of Arabia, reflecting on his efforts as a British officer in helping the Arabs defeat the Turkish Ottoman forces, wrote: "The Cabinet raised the Arabs to fight for us by definite promises of self government afterwards. Arabs believe in persons, not in institutions. They saw in me a free agent of the British Government, and demanded from me an endorsement of its written promises. So, I had to join the conspiracy, and, for what my word was worth, assured the men of their reward...I risked the fraud, on my conviction that Arab help was necessary to our cheap and speedy victory in the East, and that better we win and break our word than lose" (Lawrence, 24).

**1920:** The French General Gouraud entered Damascus, after the Battle of Maissaloan, and one of the first things he did was to visit the tomb of Salah El Din, the Muslim general who repelled the Crusaders in the 12th century, and said, "Salah El Din, listen, we have returned."

**1944:** Regarding the new-found oil reserves in the Middle East, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt told Lord Halifax, the British Ambassador in Washington: "Persian oil is yours; we'll share Kuwait and Iraq. As for Saudi Arabian oil, it's ours" (Yergin, 401).

**1991:** The following scene was covered by television news in the United States. On an allied aircraft base in the Middle East in the midst of the Gulf War, the following message was handwritten by U.S. military personnel on the side of a bomb about to be dropped on Iraq: "If Allah doesn't listen, try Jesus."

**1990s:** Many Muslims resent what they perceive as a double standard in implementing United Nations' resolutions. When UN sanctions or military actions are against Muslim countries they are enforced quickly and with brutal force, as in Iraq and Somalia, often resulting in many civilian casualties. But when similar sanctions or actions are against opponents of Muslim countries, such as in Occupied Palestine and Bosnia, force is rarely or belatedly used, resulting in the continued occupation, killing, or imprisonment of Muslims. Either way Muslims see themselves as permitted to be victims by the world community.

#### **Disturbing trends in religious violence.**

During the last year various voices in the western media asked the question, "Is Islam the new enemy?" However, what emerges from the above survey is that the

Muslim world and the Christian world are each other's old enemies. Old grievances and territorial disputes are becoming the source of new, violent encounters that in the cycle of the vindictive history between the two peoples will amplify into the grievances of the next millennium. If Islam is the new enemy, it is the relatively new enemy of Zionism and of those in the West who would seek to control or limit Islam's emerging social, economic, and political self-determination. Now that Judaism has a state again, it has the right to join the other children of Abraham who have been fighting each other in the Middle East.

Among the disturbing trends of violence are: 1) religiously motivated massacres of Christians in Southern Sudan, of Muslims praying at a Hebron mosque, of Muslims in Bosnia, and of Jews at a bus stop in Israel; 2) the destruction of holy places such as churches in Turkish-occupied Cyprus and mosques in Bosnia and India; 3) the restriction of citizenship based on religious affiliation, such as in Israel where only a Jew can be a full citizen, and as in the Greek report referred to above proposing that only an Orthodox can be a true citizen of Greece, or as in some Muslim countries where only a Muslim can be a first-class citizen; and 4) the proposal by some to have defensive alliances of nations based on religion as in the call for an Orthodox block in the Greek government report and the call for Islamic defense alliances.

Christians who face the dilemmas posed by religious violence can still find answers in the cross of Christ. Bishop Kenneth Cragg, student and interpreter of Islam and author of the book *The Arab Christian*, calls his readers to look to the cross:

Whatever we can or cannot believe about 'God in Christ,' the way of Jesus' cross escapes these human snares. It gives us no alibi for a false righteousness, no handle to evade our own sinfulness because we are doing God's business. On the contrary, it leaves us in a situation in which it is we who are accused. It saves us by disallowing us the indulgence of forcing others. It tells us that, if we are to be 'jealous' on behalf of God, it must first be against ourselves. This sense of things is the heart of any theology caring for the world as it is in Middle East experience today. For the Middle East is prey to the tyranny of lesser causes made absolute. In taking as ultimate what can only be right as relative those causes repudiate the unity of God. They make idols out of human structures of power and pride and hold themselves accountable only to their own will. So doing they substitute themselves for God, their authority for His sovereignty. The excess they then commit—Muslim, Christian, Israeli—are the 'shirk' that violates the submission due to God alone. Insistently politicized as they are, the confrontations of mosque, church and Zion underline the irony that it is religion itself that is most prone to harden and brutalize the claims of land and tribe and culture and nation. God's name is then named only in being denied. Invocation and desecration are one and the same. The cause of God is betrayed into being only ours (Baily, 1991; 290, 291).

**Seeking common ground**

Considering the growing religious and ethnic tensions around the world, the time has come for Christians and Muslims to find the common ground on which we can stand together without the dividing walls of hostility. Most churches acknowledge the common ground we share with Judaism as a monotheistic faith while also acknowledging differences. Some churches have worked at dialogue with Islam, but often historical and theological animosities bog down the discussions. Following are some ways in which Anabaptist Christians can affirm some common ground with Islam.

**a. Sharing a vision for faith-oriented change**

Resurgent Islam shares many elements with other movements working for profound religious, social, and political transformation. Although the content and method of that change may be different, there is a common call for faith-oriented change. Islam has many commonalities with Christian movements of transformation initiated by religious renewal. In addition to the Anabaptists who pioneered the separation of church and state, such movements include the revivalism of 19th-century North America, its many social reforms and spiritual benefits, and the Catholic base Christian communities whose work for justice comes out of communities which discern Scripture together. Willard M. Swartley has noted seven similarities between Anabaptism and Liberation Theology. Resurgent Islam would share the form of these similarities, although the content would differ and Anabaptism would not condone the use of violence as some Liberation theologians and some Islamicists do. These religious movements:

- 1) are radically oriented to the vision of a new order, rooted in the conviction that God is doing a new thing;
- 2) protest against the evils of existing political orders and contain a variety of responses from violent revolution to non-violence;
- 3) gain strength from potent socio-economic political dynamics within the larger society including economic disparities and dramatic increases in literacy;
- 4) distrust and critique the dominant socio-political-theological ideology with the new religious commitment providing a dynamic of protest and vision for a new social order;
- 5) manifest a wide variety of emphases and forms through which hope and vision for new social orders are to be realized;
- 6) have originated in a number of places at the same time with both similar and differing features; and
- 7) make use of their scriptures in active reflection on their life situations and the content of those scriptures in ways that reshape the commitment of the community to obedience (adapted from Swartley, in Schipani 68, 69).

**b. Sharing a critique of imperial Christianity**

Muslim writers throughout history have critiqued Christians for not following the

basic teachings of Jesus whom Muslims revere as a prophet. In fact, 10th century Muslim theologian Abdal Al Jabar wrote, "It was not the Romans who became Christian but Christianity which was Romanized" (Stern, 128). This comment, made during Islam's golden age, noted a theological shift in Christianity that led toward an imperial identity and loss of its original witness. Anabaptists defined this same shift in the 16th century and out of it built a church separated from the state. Islam has experienced the intolerance and persecution of imperial Western Christianity much as the early peace churches such as the Quakers, Mennonites and Brethren did.

### **c. Shared affirmation of the primacy of faith**

The Anabaptist vision was an effort to recover the original vision of Christianity in the midst of a very corrupted form of it. At the time of the Reformation the state churches served the interests of the established political powers. Resurgent Islam is attempting to achieve a parallel recovery within its own historical and theological framework.

Anabaptist Christians affirmed that the prime loyalty for Christians was religious rather than political and that the church and state should be separate. This elevated the power and status of the church to a level of the state since it asserted that the church could no longer be an appendage of the state structure. Resurgent Islam would argue that the prime loyalty for Muslims is a religion that forms its politics and that the affairs of the state are a part of religion. This move also elevates the power and status of Islam above any secular state structure by making it Muslim (submitted to God).

### **d. Sharing a prophetic voice**

Both Anabaptist Christians and Muslims share a critique of the silence of the church in relation to global injustices, many of which Christians directly participate in. In his characteristically strong rhetoric, the Iranian cleric Ayatollah Khomeini condemned the complicity of many Christian clergy with the injustices in today's world:

Today, the people of the world are subject to the devilish powers who arrogantly confront the teachings of the prophets and hinder the realization of those teachings. The responsibility lies more heavily on the shoulders of the Christian clergy because most of the great powers are Christian or claim to be Christian. It is the responsibility of the Christian clergy to launch a spiritual battle against those powers who act in opposition to the teaching of the prophets and the teachings of Jesus Christ... Why do you confine your attempts to guide people within the four walls of the church? First of all you must try to guide the ruling classes. The prophets were appointed to oppose the strong... Do not allow Christianity to lose its honor and status in the eyes of the masses. Do not allow that the Christian clergy be identified by the people as the supporter of the oppressors (quoted in Musk, 159).

Muslims cannot understand why Christians do not seem to take Jesus's teachings

as a guide for life the same way the Muslims take to heart the teachings of the Quran and the Prophet. Anabaptist Christians do try to live out the teachings of Jesus in worshipping communities despite sacrifices that may entail. In this way they attempt to maintain the integrity of the Christian message. The sensitivity of Muslims to the lack of Christian integrity is stated by Rachid Rida, in the Koranic commentary of Manar. "They seek to attract non-Christians, including Muslims, to their faith, while they themselves do not believe in it." To prove this he refers to Luke 6, where Christians are invited to love their enemies and to do good to those who hate them, and concludes by saying: "Show me one Christian who puts this into practice!" (Van Nispen, 25).

#### **e. Sharing in seeking economic justice**

Anabaptist Christians have worked and called for greater economic justice for the peoples of the earth. This work has included income-generating projects among Muslims. Muslims are also sensitive to this call because of the great economic disparities in the Muslim world and the fact that many Muslim countries were colonized. In the Middle East, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) has assisted with relief and development aid to Palestinian refugees and the poor in other countries in the region. In these efforts, many relationships of trust and cooperation have been built between Muslims and Christians. In all relationships MCC workers have attempted to take a servant, rather than an exploitative, stance, although our presence has often been treated initially with suspicion.

Such suspicion is often well-founded. Nadal El-Saadawi, the famous Egyptian feminist, warns her fellow Muslims.

Were the people of South Africa subjected to killing and banishment because they were Muslims? Or the people of Vietnam? Were the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America subjected to the colonial wars that have taken place this century because they were Muslim?... Western imperialism has always tried to dress up these materialist motives in moral garb, and it is not in our interests, as Arabs and Muslims, to join in this dangerous game. It is basically directed against us, not because we are Arabs or Muslims, but because our countries contain oil, natural gas, and other economic advantages... (El-Saadawi, 7).

#### **Infinitely free to walk through walls**

Many Western churches have issued statements and sponsored and attended inter-faith dialogues. Most of these activities happen from the safe distance of words on paper and representatives of communities sharing perspectives in conference rooms. These churches do not often realize the very important role of the Christians of the Middle East in this dialogue. Ghassan Tuani, president of Balamand University states:

It is for the Christians in the Middle East to reinvent, with Islam, the day by day dialogue, instead of the sterile, and irritating academic debate practiced in the West. To live together with Islam should be a source of

reciprocal enrichment, a truly royal path towards the opening of always new horizons of culture, ideology and even religion... In order for this to occur, Islam must no longer be perceived as a danger and nothing but a danger. This is what it could become each day more and more if it is constantly rejected, held back, misunderstood. An object, nothing but an object of hatred and covetousness, but never a partner (Tueni, 21).

Muslims have been willing to acknowledge and accept acts of impartial Christian love and charity. An MCC relief worker in war-torn Southern Lebanon was told, just before his release by Muslim interrogators following his brief kidnapping, "Keep up the good work." MCC representatives providing relief assistance to earthquake victims in Iran were told by their Iranian Red Crescent hosts, "Finally we have found each other." MCC workers in Damascus, Syria, were told by Muslim hosts following a meal which included a discussion of what MCC was and the style of its service work in the Middle East, "We didn't know there were Christians like this."

In Kenya, MCC worker Hadley Jenner describes a study tour group meeting with members of the Moyale Muslim Association:

The Muslims closed the session by explaining Islamic beliefs and how their faith equips them to face the challenges they meet. They emphasized Islamic teachings on sharing, charity and doing justice, as well as the aspect of hardships coming from God as punishment for our sins. There was a closing plea not to judge Islam by the failure of people, such as in Somalia, a Muslim nation. Some of the study tour members then made the same plea for Christianity. I felt greatly relieved that my earlier fears of a confrontative session had not only failed to materialize, but had been replaced by a swelling glad sense of shared, common ground. Truly we are people of the Book, intent on doing God's will on earth as in heaven (Jenner, 3).

Perhaps the final word should be in the voice of a leader of a church that has lived with Islam for 13 centuries. This church, the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch, had no militia during the civil war in Lebanon and has worked extensively at Muslim-Christian relations. Patriarch Hazim said:

For us Christians, our task is to discern and to draw the face of the coming Christ in and on all this. Useless servants, crucified servants, we become, therefore, infinitely free to love. For the problem of the encounter of religions and cultures in the unification of the earth can only be solved by love, not in its relative and sentimental sense, but in the sense that "God is love" (Hazim, 19).

If there is a way forward for Christians with Islam, it may be for Christians to "keep up the good work" in acts of love in Muslim contexts, to encourage each other on the way of service in our respective faiths, and to find contexts where day-to-day dialogue can build understanding as Christians commend Christ as the One through whom God has made us infinitely free to love, free to understand Muslims on their own terms, and free to forgive.

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## Islamiya: Islamic Fundamentalism or Renaissance?

*Roelf Kuitse*

### A new banner?

The Communist Manifesto, written about 150 years ago, started with the words: “A specter haunts the world, the specter of communism.” These words could be repeated today, if we would replace “communism” with “Islamic fundamentalism.”<sup>1</sup> Some see after the red banner the coming of the green banner, and after the hammer and sickle, the crescent and the star.

Serbian nationalists like Karadzic and Seselj claim that they defend Christian civilization in Europe against Islamic fundamentalism. The danger in this view is that Islam is identified with fundamentalism, especially with the violent aspects of this movement. Western world history carries an undercurrent of negative feelings and images about Islam.<sup>2</sup> The present-day developments tend to reinforce those feelings. Islam is seen as the enemy. Because of the danger of demonizing Islam, it is important to try to come to an understanding of the background of the fundamentalistic current in Islam.

### A world-wide phenomenon

The word “fundamentalism” was first used for a movement among Christians in the United States at the beginning of this century. This movement emphasized the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible as a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith. Fundamentalism in the Christian context was/is a protest movement against the Enlightenment, the methods of modern science, and secular rationality.

At the end of the 20th century, the word “fundamentalism” is used for all kinds of revitalization movements in both religious and secular contexts. In a collection of essays about fundamentalism published in Germany, one can find reflections on fundamentalism in philosophy, in the feminist movement, and in the ecological movement.<sup>3</sup>

Not only in monotheistic religions but also in religions like Hinduism and Theravada Buddhism there are fundamentalistic currents. In the three volumes of *Fundamentalism Observed*, one can find broad and detailed documentation of such

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movements within Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Theravada Buddhism, etc.<sup>4</sup>

Yet it remains a question whether the word “fundamentalism” does not lose its color and content when it is so widely used for movements with such different backgrounds. Scholars from non-Western countries speak about the verbal imperialism of Western scholars, who transfer words or concepts from a Western, Christian context to characterize movements in totally different contexts. Muslim scholars do not use the word “fundamentalism.” Instead they speak about “Islamism” (Islamiya) or about the renaissance (nahda) of Islam.

### **Faith and history**

Sociologist Max Weber once spoke about the disenchantment of the world because of the development of science and technology. Religions would die because of this development, he suggested.

In mission circles at the beginning of this century there was much talk about the disintegration of the so-called non-Christian world religions. They would disintegrate and die it was thought, because they would be unable to survive the collision with modern civilization, which was penetrating the whole world. These expectations have not been realized, however. In many parts of the world there are movements of resurgence, revival, and revitalization, in response to the penetrating power of Western civilization. Islamism, which is one of these movements, is not a monolithic, homogeneous movement. It is a movement with many branches, violent and non-violent.

Islam has spread over a large part of the world. Although the center of the Islamic world is the Middle East, the most populous Islamic communities can be found in Asia (Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh). These populous Islamic countries belong to the periphery of the Islamic world, as do countries with an Islamic majority in Africa.

Islamiya movements have developed especially in the center of the Islamic world, in the Middle East. In the Middle East there is a living memory of a golden era, the era of a rich, Islamic culture, developed in the first centuries of Islamic history. In the Middle East there is also a bitterness that this rich cultural history did not continue. Countries on the periphery of the Islamic world do not look back on such a long and rich cultural tradition, steeped in Islam. That is one of the reasons why they have not been disturbed in the same way, as have countries in the Middle East, by movements of resurgence and revitalization, Pakistan is an exception, as will be noted below.

There have been attempts among some scholars to reduce the Islamiya movement to a socio-political protest movement. The social-political context plays a significant role, but the basic concern is a religious one. This basic religious question is related to the history of the religious Islamic community, the umma. This umma is described in the Quran (3:110) as the best of all communities, a community, so the interpretation goes, which will always be victorious. That was indeed the case in the

glorious years of Islam in the first centuries of its history. History confirmed faith. Muslim fundamentalists look back with pride to this golden era. (The Shi'ites do not look backward to this mythical past, like other Muslims; they look forward to a golden future, when the hidden imam will return as the Mahdi). However, history did not continue to develop according to faith. There was dissension and disunity; there was religious, cultural, and political decline. Worst of all, foreigners, non-Muslims, started to rule the house of Islam during the time of colonialism. Once subjects of history, Muslims then became objects. History no longer affirmed faith. The burning question became more and more: why did history and faith move away from each other?

### Two responses

To this burning question two different responses were given. One response came from the so-called modernists. Centers of the modernist movement were Egypt and India. Things went in the wrong direction, so the modernists claimed, because the past overshadowed the present. Muslims were tied too much to the tradition, to interpretations of Quran and Suna by their ancestors. In this way the dynamic element in Islam was lost, and the Islamic community was unable to react in a creative way to the impact of modern civilization. Instead of taklid (literally "to hang something upon the neck or the shoulder"), that is, submission to the interpretations of the ancestors, there should be room for idjtihad (literally "exerting one's self" to form an opinion), that is, free interpretation of the sources of Islam, in response to the challenges of modern civilization. This free interpretation, according to the modernist view, would show that there is no contradiction between the Quran and modern science. The modernists emphasized that the development of the modern, western world after the Renaissance could not be understood without taking into consideration the impact of the Islam.

This new, fresh interpretation also led modernists to the view that a separation should be made between laws of the shari'a (religious and moral laws which are valid for all times and places) and political, social, and economic laws with meaning limited to certain times and places. Based on these views modernists could cooperate with national, liberal, and social movements. They propagated modern education and modern codes of law. Islam, according to Taha Hussein, should become part of Europe. A present-day representation of these views is found in the writings of the Sudanese scholar Mahmud Taha in his book *The Second Message of Islam*. Taha was executed for apostasy by the government of Numeiry, but his followers (Republican Brotherhood) continue to propagate an Islamic humanism. Despite arguments from other Muslims, they claim that Islam is in harmony with modern human rights.<sup>5</sup>

The other response to the question of why history went in the wrong direction comes from the so-called fundamentalists. Their answer is simply that history went astray, and no longer affirms faith, because Muslims have not kept the divine laws; they have been disobedient. "West-toxification" (Ali Shariati) has driven them in the wrong direction. The only solution to the crisis is to go back to the sources of

Islam, to be obedient to the God-given laws and to create a political structure in harmony with the divine will. The fundamentalistic fervor increased after the defeat of the Arab powers against Israel in 1967, the breakup of Pakistan in two states in 1971, and the revolutionary changes in Iran in 1978-1979.

### Enemies

Fundamentalists feel themselves surrounded by enemies. They react against the secularists. They want to reclaim the public square for Islam, for the laws of God. They do not want a privatizing of religion. They also attack the mystics, because of their dichotomy between soul and body, spirit and matter, religion and politics, faith and history. They vehemently reject the spiritualization and individualization of the Islamic religion. The mystical communities are rejected because of non-Islamic influences in these communities. Yet leaders like Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, have been influenced by mysticism. A third enemy is the modernists. Fundamentalists react strongly against modernist dichotomies, such as those between eternally valid laws and temporary laws, religious and secular education, and religious versus secular laws and courts. Life in all its aspects should be subjected to God and to God's will, as disclosed in the shari'a. Fundamentalists sometimes use arguments developed by modernists, for example, the view that the Quran does not contradict modern science. For different reasons, they also share with modernists the emphasis on idjtihad.

A fourth enemy is traditional Islam, Islam tied to the traditions of the past. In the first place, fundamentalists criticize traditionalists because they do not give room for free interpretation of the Quran and Sunna. A second criticism is that the guardians of tradition, the ulama, accept and justify the status quo in society. Fundamentalists in Egypt, for example, point to the religious leaders of el-Azhar who have, in the course of history, legitimized in their public statements (fatwa's) such events as the short rule of Napoleon, the British intervention, the nationalism of the Wafd party, the socialism of Nasser and the liberalism of Sadat. These religious leaders are sometimes called by their critics, "the parrots of Islam." They say what the political leaders want them to say. This critique explains the remarkable fact that in many countries (except Iran) leaders of the revitalization movements belong to the laity.

The last enemy is the West. A deep distrust exists in regard to the Western world, which is seen as one of the main causes of the decline of the Islamic world. There is still the suspicion, kept alive by the memory of many negative experiences, that it is the aim of the Western world to destroy the House of Islam. It was once tried during the Crusades, later via colonialism, and now by way of cultural penetration. The seductive appeal of Western civilization is seen as a menace to true faith. None of the ideologies of the West to which Muslims have succumbed, neither socialism, communism, nor liberalism, have solved social and economic problems. That is why there is the call back to Islam, to pure Islam.

In contrast to their enemies the so-called fundamentalists regard themselves as the party of God, the defenders of God, the defenders of the unity of God. This unity

does not go together with the dichotomies which are proclaimed by the enemies of God. Islam is comprehensive. To let parts of life be ruled and directed by something else than the will of God is shirk, that is, to give a partner to God, to associate somebody or something else with God. Maududi, one of the leaders of a revitalization movement in Pakistan (Jamaat-i-islami) wrote: "It (Islamic religion) encompasses all areas of human life, from the sanctuary of the human heart to the arena of socio-political relations, from the mosque to the parliament, from the home to the school to the economy, from art, architecture and science to law, state and international relations." "Not only the comprehensive character of Islam, but its universal character is also emphasized in the Islamiya. Islam is seen as something directly related to the unity of God. In contrast, nationalism is seen, as putting something else next to God, as shirk, giving partners to God. This explains the initial hesitation of a leader like Maududi to support the creation of Pakistan, out of fear of nationalism. It is also the background of the resistance in the Middle East among Muslims against the nationalism of the Baath party in Syria and Iraq. Local elements in popular, devotional practices, or folk religion, are also seen as being in sharp contradiction with the universal character of Islam.

After having given attention to what the so-called fundamentalists reject and defend in order to make history affirm faith again, I would like to focus on three countries where the Islamiya movement has had a deep impact: Iran, Pakistan and Egypt.

### **Iran**

Iran is a society with a Shi'ite majority. The Shi'ites have a history of suffering and oppression. That is why in Shi'ite belief all temporal power is by its nature regarded as oppressive. Only the power of the 12th imam, when he returns to the world as Mahdi, will establish the perfect political/social order intended by the Creator, an order of peace and justice. The more or less quietist tradition was that the religious leaders should try to restrain the excesses of the oppressor. In this tradition people should not try to overthrow the oppressor, let alone to replace him. However, that is what happened when Khomeini overthrew the oppressive regime of the Shah and replaced him as ruler in a state based on Islam. This was done against the advice of other ayatollahs, for example Ayatollah Shariatmadari. This taking of exclusive power was, according to many, a strategic mistake. The perfect, divinely-ordered society was no longer a metaphysical idea, to be inaugurated at the return of the 12th imam. Khomeini's government was to inaugurate and achieve it here and now, as a kind of realized eschatology. Failure was in effect doctrinally impossible. And there has been great failure and therefore disappointment and disillusionment among the people. When the deprived erupt in protest, the leading clergy (mullah) have to act in the role of oppressor, sometimes in a brutal way. The moral authority of religious leaders has been damaged because of their political power. The ideal was an Islamic state, based on Islamic law and ruled by those who have studied, know and can interpret the law, guided by the hidden imam. The reality has become for many people an

oppressive regime, which has not contributed much to an improvement of the conditions of life for the people at the bottom of society.

### **Pakistan**

Islam was the raison d'être for the creation of Pakistan, after the Second World War. When political independence came for India, a majority of Muslims did not want to live as a minority, dominated by a Hindu majority. They wanted to live in their own state, based on Islam. That led to the exodus of many millions of Muslims out of India. Since the creation of the new state there has been much discussion about what it means to have a state based on Islam. Does it mean that the leaders in the state should be religious persons, who know the divine laws and who can interpret these laws, as in Iran? Or should it be a state with a special counsel of ulama, with the responsibility to check whether the laws accepted by parliament are in accordance with Islamic law or not? Saududi, a leader of the Islamiya movement in Pakistan, wrote about a theo-democracy, a state where the sovereignty of God will overrule the sovereignty of the people. This theo-democracy should be established in a peaceful way. A traumatic experience was the 1971 creation of Bangladesh. The ties of Islam proved to be not strong enough to keep the eastern and western parts of Pakistan together. There have been many experiments in the short history of Pakistan to let laws of Islam be guidelines for segments of society like education, banking, and administration of justice.

### **Egypt**

Egypt is an important country in the world of Islam. It is the country where a century of Islamic learning and the Al-Azhar, one of the oldest universities in the world, can be found. Egypt also has a central position from a strategic point of view. Three continents meet in Egypt. That is why it has been an object of intervention by France and Britain. Egypt has also played a significant role in the modernistic Islamic movement. At present Egypt is a country with a growing population, much poverty and high unemployment, especially among university educated people. The Islamiya movement shows a very clear development pattern, moving from nonviolent to violent activities. It started in the twenties with the Muslim Brotherhood, founded by Hasan al-Banna, as a movement to counter the corruption of Islamic society. The emphasis was on educational, social, and devotional service, aimed at strengthening the Islamic lower-middle-class. Because of the resistance it experienced from the government (many of the pamphlets of the movement were written in prison), the movement became more radical.

Sayyid Qutb, one of the leaders during the period of radicalization, expressed in his writings<sup>7</sup> his conviction that Egyptian society had become a society of djahilyya, or ignorance, a society ruled by infidels. To reform this society was regarded as impossible; the only thing to do was to create a totally renewed society. The first step should be withdrawal from the corrupt society and the creation of a new Islamic community as the nucleus for a new society. (Takfir wa'l Hidjra is the name of one of

the groups that wants to break ties with the society where infidels rule, as Mohammed did when he moved from Mecca to Medina). The government, however, did not allow this building of a new society; its harassment and persecution continued. Only one possibility was left, according to Muhammad al Farag<sup>8</sup>: “the forgotten duty” to fight against the infidels who rule and who prevent the establishment of a new society. Since the mid-70s, the violence used by certain factions of the Islamiya movement against political leaders, Copts, and foreigners has increased. However, the nonviolent segments of the movement continue to do relief and social work among the poor. A network of mosques, involved in social programs, has been created. Many intellectuals, especially from the so-called “hard” sciences, participate in the work. The social spectrum of the Islamiya movement has broadened.

### Concluding remarks

What about the future of these movements, of Islamiya? Professor Arkoun, a Muslim from North Africa who teaches at the Sorbonne in Paris, believes that the so-called fundamentalistic movement in Islam is a historical accident rather than an inevitable process. He seems to suggest that there have been movements like this before in Islamic history (fundamentalism *avant la lettre*) which have not had a lasting impact.<sup>9</sup> In times of rapid change, in times of encounter with other world-views, in times of invasion of the Islamic commonwealth by other nations, movements like Islamiya were born and will be born, but they have only limited impact on the course of history, according to Professor Arkoun.

As long as there is a strong disparity between the rich and poor, people of the lower and the lower-middle class will be susceptible to religious ideologies like Islamiya. As long as there are people who are of the conviction that history and faith should converge, there will be dissatisfaction about the present situation of Islam, compared with the mythical past. And this dissatisfaction will continue to find expression in movements like Islamiya.

The critical question is whether the dreams of fundamentalists can be realized. Is it possible to base a modern society on a system of laws that goes back to a distant past? Is it possible to create an Islamic political community in a situation of global interdependence? The Islamic world is not John Donne’s island, but, rather, a part of the great world of this modern, industrial era and therefore exposed to many secularizing influences. Violence cannot wipe out these influences.

In various ways attempts by different social groups have been made to attain the goals of the Islamiya movement. In Iran it is the clergy which has played a leading role. In Pakistan and Egypt the laity has started and guided the movement. It is wrong to see violence as one of the main characteristics of the Islamiya movement in Islam. There have been and are attempts to work for revitalization of Islam via *dawah*, propagation of the faith through educational and devotional activities as in Malaysia, India, and Egypt. Yet in some places the great *jihad* (the struggle against evil thoughts and intentions and the struggle against injustice and corruption in society) has given way to the small *jihad*, the violent struggle against people accused

of corruption and infidelity. In countries like Egypt and Algeria this violence has encountered violence from the government. These development have led to much disillusionment, disappointment, bitterness, and hatred.

Is it realistic to expect that history will confirm faith? The Christian church tried to live and act as a victorious community during the Constantinian era. The attempt was a failure. There will always be a tension between faith and history, a tension which cannot be undone by the use of force or violence. Islam should not be identified with fundamentalism, and fundamentalism/Islamiya should not be identified with holy war. In the Islamic world the fundamentalists are a small minority. Not all Muslims are fundamentalists and not all fundamentalists are Muslims. The Church should not only come to a better, more empathetic understanding of Islam, but should also fight against the demonization of the religion of their Muslim neighbors, a demonization in which the Church (in the past?) has also participated.

There should also be awareness among Christians in the West that the Western world has contributed to the radicalization of Islam. Muslims have been deeply humiliated by the way the West has dealt with, spoken about, and seduced Muslims by the products of Western culture.

Finally, there should be among Christians in the Western part of the world a growing awareness of the difficult position in which many Christians of the so-called ancient churches in the Middle East find themselves in a time of growing polarization between main-line Muslims and their fundamentalistic family members in the House of Islam.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas Meyer, *Fundamentalismus—Aufstand gegen die Moderne*, Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag, p 7.
- <sup>2</sup> N. A. Daniel, *Islam and the West*, Edinburgh University Press, 1958, and *Islam, Europe and Empire*, Edinburgh University Press, 1966.  
Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979. Edward Said deals in his book with negative predispositions of many Orientalists toward Islam.  
Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West*, Oxford University Press, 1993. Lewis responds to Said's criticism on pp 99-119.
- <sup>3</sup> Thomas Meyer, ed., *Fundamentalismus in der modernen Welt*. Frankfurt am Main: Edition Suhrkamp, 1989. A collection of essays.
- <sup>4</sup> M. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, *Fundamentalisms Observed*. Three volumes, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991-1993.
- <sup>5</sup> One of the members of the Republican Brotherhood is Abdullah Ahmed an Na'im. Because of his views he was imprisoned in Sudan. He authored *Towards an Islamic Reformation: Civil liberties and human rights*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990. One of the remarkable statements of Abdullah Ahmed an Na'im is, "The Medina message is not the fundamental, universal, eternal message of Islam. That founding message is from Mecca" (*Fundamentalisms Observed*, Vol 1, p 392).
- <sup>6</sup> Maududi, *An Introduction to the Jamaat-i-Islami*. Lahore: Jamaat-i-Islami, 1978, p 5.
- <sup>7</sup> Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) wrote *Milestones on the Road* (Ma'alim fi al tariq), challenging the ideology of Nasser. He was accused of denial of Arab nationalism, defense of class divisions, and rejection of patriotic morality. In 1966 he was executed.
- <sup>8</sup> Muhammad Abd-el-Salam-al Farag, a young engineer, wrote *al Farida al Ghaiba*, or *The Forgotten Duty*, which later became the constitution of the al-Djihad group. A translation of this booklet can be found in *Revolt Against Modernity*, by Michael Youssef, Leiden: Brill, 1985, appendix I, p 146-177.
- <sup>9</sup> Muhammad Arkoun, *Ouvertures sur l'Islam*, Paris: Granchet, 1989, p 201-203.



## Mennonite Responses to Fundamentalism

*Urbane Peachey*

I recently saw a bumper sticker that read: “Orthodox Christianity: Est. 33 A.D.” The history of the church is filled with attempts to get as close as possible to A.D. 33, or to orthodoxy, to correct belief. This desire to understand what is right and to live faithfully according to that understanding is a trait of true religion. But in the United States the desire to understand correctly, to live faithfully, and to defend what one understands, has tragically resulted in the proliferation of 1,500 religious bodies and sects.

In 1965 I traveled around Africa for six weeks on small missionary airplanes. I was fascinated with the visual guidance system the pilots used when they were beyond reach of a radio signal—estimating wind speed by the speed of cloud shadows moving over the surface of the earth, and marking the location by sighting rivers and other landmarks. When we returned to Nairobi, Kenya, from a trip to western Tanzania, the mountains were nearly clouded over. The pilot tried unsuccessfully to find clear mountain passes, then made an emergency landing at an exclusive tennis club, to the dismay of its manager.

Christian movements can obstruct our dreamed-of return to the early days of the church, like the clouds obstructed our return to Nairobi. Christian movements, creeds, and theologies may be vital for the generation they serve in their own socio-religious cultural context, and surely they are important landmarks, but they can be like clouds that prevent seekers from getting back to A.D. 33. The clouds then become the reason for another route to Nairobi, another confession of faith, another creed, and another issue of *Mission Focus*! Any movement or teaching, including the Anabaptist movement or the writings of St. Augustine, can become such a cloud.

I view the fundamentalist movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States as a cloud that still closes some of the mountain passes in our journey back to A.D. 33. This fundamentalist weather pattern still hangs low in evangelical mountain passes.

This paper deals with Mennonite responses to fundamentalism in the North American mission-evangelism context. I suggest that we must view plural Menno-

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nite responses. One of the church leaders with whom I discussed this article asked, “Why are you writing about fundamentalism? I don’t even hear that word used.” I suggest that fundamentalism had a formative influence on and continues to affect American Protestant and Mennonite beliefs, even if unnamed and unrecognized. It is interesting that each stream of North American Mennonite thought today seems to bless its particular view as “Anabaptist” and/or biblical, while often being inattentive to the origins of its religious language.

While on a pastoral exchange in the Netherlands in 1993, I talked with one Dutch theologian who commented, “Dutch Mennonites were seduced by liberalism. American Mennonites were seduced by evangelicalism!” Seduction means that something happens of which we are not aware. I was frequently asked to explain American “God talk” to Dutch Mennonites. “Where does the religious language of American Mennonites come from?” they asked. My response was that popular Mennonite beliefs and categories, as expressed in many local congregations, (in contrast to the views of Mennonite academic institutions) often come from popular evangelical and related sources, while Mennonites think they come from the Bible. In that sense I agree with the Dutch theologian. American Mennonites have been seduced. Some will surely ask about the influence of liberalism among American Mennonites. In the liberal-fundamentalist controversy and the evangelical movement that followed, I suggest that fundamentalism left a much stronger deposit among American Mennonites than did liberalism.

My thesis is that evangelicalism has retained many fundamentalist attitudes, definitions, and emphases, and mediated them to Mennonites. Even though the fundamentalist movement collapsed and splintered after World War II, fundamentalist definitions and categories lived on in the evangelical movement. Evangelicalism was an accommodation between fundamentalism and the religious mainstream. Mennonites have been taking in fundamentalism disguised as evangelicalism. Whatever our orientation, we should know where our religious language comes from, and not think of our religious beliefs as biblical or first century when they come from just around the corner in our own century.

Three definitions of fundamentalism serve as my framework for this paper: 1) Fundamentalism as it emerged in the 1920s and 1930s; 2) selected tight doctrinal definitions as the touchstone of the faith; and 3) an attitude that censures Christians who do not hold to selected tight doctrinal definitions.

### **The historical and sociological milieu**

Fundamentalism in America emerged as part of the complex, dynamic, religious and political growth of the nation. Perhaps we see fundamentalism too narrowly as a product of a religious battle with liberalism. I would like to summarize the milieu that gave energy to a defined fundamentalism in the following points:

#### **a. The rural-urban population shift**

Mark Noll explains that the rural-urban population shift had an enormous impact on

the religious life of the United States. The percentage of the population living in towns or cities of 2,500 or more increased from 26 percent in 1870 to 56 percent in 1930. The absolute number rose from 9,900,000 to 69,000,000. The urban environment provided more intense commercial pressure and more diverse religious and cultural exposure than the previous predominantly rural environment. Moderate fundamentalists were upstaged by radical elements whose quarrel “seemed to be with almost every facet of modern life.” Winthrop Hudson joins Noll in explaining that many who were swept into the ambiguities of an urban environment found security in the religion of their childhood. They write that fundamentalism was as much the product of a cultural as of a religious concern. The mores that were emphasized as indispensable to the Christian life had, in the words of H. Richard Niebuhr, “at least as little relation to the New Testament and as much connection with social custom” as did those aspects of behavior that were condemned, and that the cosmological and biological notions that were stressed as integral to the Gospel were equally culturally conditioned (Hudson, 353).

#### **b. Scientism in American education**

In the 19th century, some of the great universities that originally had a denominational base adopted the German seminar model of education and other new forms of higher education. Education moved from character formation to the German emphasis on specialized, advanced, critical, scholarship. The university placed increased stress on freedom from sectarian control.

#### **c. Historical criticism of Scripture**

Much of the scholarship from Europe toward the end of the 19th century seemed to undermine the confidence most American Christians had in the **literal** truthfulness of Scripture. New ways of explaining and interpreting the text along with new findings or theories about the transmission of texts raised questions about long-held assumptions about the Bible. Historical criticism was perceived as reckless and as squeezing the life out of the Bible. Religious leaders and revival preachers reacted vigorously with an effort to restore the authority of the Bible.

#### **d. Charles Darwin and the *Origin of Species***

There was opposition to the theory of evolution soon after Charles Darwin’s publication in 1859, but Protestants did not generally begin to divide on this issue until the scientific establishment gradually accepted the theory. Theologians like B.B. Warfield and others at Yale and Princeton who emphasized the inerrancy of Scripture still believed that the Bible was not necessarily opposed to evolution. They and others wanted to emphasize devotional experience, not only propositions.

#### **e. Dispensational premillennialism**

In the 19th century, dispensationalism was articulated by John Nelson Darby, a Plymouth Brethren from Great Britain. The 1909 publication of the Scofield edition of

the King James Version of the Bible popularized the teaching in the United States.

**f. Holiness and pentecostal movements emerged**

Emerging toward the end of the 19th century, these enthusiastic groups gathered members for revival meetings, encouraged confession of sins and testified to a cleansing renewal, which they attributed to the Holy Spirit. Wuthnow notes that after the famous Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles in 1906, speaking in tongues and miraculous healings became common in pentecostalism.

**Origins of American Protestant Fundamentalism**

The religious life of Europe was restrained by ecclesiastical structures approved by the state. The European parish system nurtured the people. However, colonial governments did not succeed in exporting their parish systems and ecclesiastical structures. In the Old World everybody had been attached to a religious authority. In the New World people became disestablished. A vacuum quickly developed because religious authority and hierarchy did not keep pace with migrations. For example, the Anglican church had no bishop in America until the early 1700s. Independent lay people cleared land, subdued the Indians, organized community life, preached on the frontier, and wrote church constitutions which often disregarded the norms of the mother country.

Given that vacuum, preaching revivals, mission societies, Sunday schools, and special-purpose groups like the Salvation Army and the YMCA, became the way to address religious need and to get supporting members. The Great Awakening of the 18th century and the revival preaching that came with it in both country and city had a far-reaching influence on the development of American religious life. Preaching became the cornerstone of Protestantism. Equally significant was the degree to which preachers felt required to preach in support of the American political agenda. Those who demurred were persecuted. The utopian vision of the 19th century gave rise to many communal societies including the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Millerites. Many insisted that God had elected this new country for a special purpose.

Most histories of American Fundamentalism trace its roots to Princeton Theological Seminary in the 1880s. J. Gresham Machen, professor of theology at Princeton, drove out even staunchly conservative colleagues with his ill-advised dogmatism in personal relationships and his determination to dominate seminary life. He eventually left and formed Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Archibald Alexander Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield stayed behind to defend biblical authority and inerrancy of Scripture against the challenges of science and historical criticism.

In 1905 Amzi C. Dixon, associated with the Moody Church in Chicago, published a book in which he declared that there could be no reconciliation between science and religion. The duty of the church was to convert people and to keep out of politics. He claimed that there could be no true revival that was not led by “believers in the inspiration and infallible authority of the Word of God” (Hudson, 350).

With the help of Reuben A. Torrey, superintendent of the Moody Bible Institute,

Dixon published 12 small volumes entitled *The Fundamentals*. These brief treatises, financed by two wealthy residents of Los Angeles, Milton and Lyman Stewart, reduced the faith to clear essentials. They were sent to every pastor, evangelist, missionary, theological student, Sunday school superintendent and YMCA and YWCA secretary whose address could be found.

These 12 volumes did not name “five fundamentals,” as has commonly been believed. Ernest Sandeen explains that the 1910 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church is the only body in the fundamentalist movement that ever adopted “five fundamentals.” These five points were the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, physical resurrection, and the miracle-working power of Christ. The creedal statement of the Niagara Study Conference in 1878 had adopted 14 points.

Liberals and Fundamentalists organized mutually antagonistic groups. In 1919 the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association, a dispensationalist-premillennialist group, was organized to combat modernism. In 1920 the Northern Baptist Convention called a “Fundamentals” conference to muster opposition to “liberalism” in that denomination. The term “Fundamentalist” originated at that conference when Curtis Lee Laws, Baptist editor of the *Watchman-Examiner* referred to those ready “to do battle royal for the fundamentals” (Marsden, 57).

After World War I prominent Protestant leaders prepared to resume the social consciousness of pre-war years, but hostile sentiment against modernism would not be quieted. The Fundamentalist cause won public attention through the preaching of William Jennings Bryan, leader in the Democratic party. By his magic voice and moving rhetoric, he was able to mount a unified crusade. It was not difficult to get support for the idea that modernism and Communism were two sides of the same coin. Soon every denomination was embroiled in the modernist-fundamentalist controversy.

The Fundamentalists were not organized into a unified movement, however. The Bible School “dispensationalists” looked for heresy by summarizing key points of faith. Laws, the *Watchman-Examiner* editor, was primarily concerned with the authority of the Bible. This group wanted to retain the integrity of the Christian faith, but did not want to make an issue of evolution, biblical inerrancy, and premillennialism. Thus the Fundamentalist movement was filled with splits and division.

The 1925 Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee, charged John Thomas Scopes with teaching evolution in opposition to an ambiguous state law. The violent language and smear tactics of the vociferous plaintiffs in that case alienated public opinion and caused diminished Fundamentalist influence in major denominations.

### **Mennonite interface with Fundamentalism**

Much has been written about the Mennonite response to Fundamentalism in the first part of this century. Norman Kraus observes, “In the early 1900s a small but extremely significant group of emerging leaders in the Church allied themselves theo-

logically with the cause of Fundamentalism and for a generation guided the denomination in that theological direction. This loose alliance introduced into the tradition a strain of religious expression that was alien to it both theologically and ethically.” These leaders, who strongly identified with the Fundamentalist cause, also emphasized the “all things” of Scripture, teachings not generally recognized by other Protestants. “The Mennonite Church,” wrote Daniel Kauffman, one of those leaders, “is firmly committed to the fundamentalist faith including some unpopular tenets of faith which many so-called fundamentalists reject” (Kraus, 131).

Juhnke explains that J. B. Smith of Hesston College, writing the chapter on the Bible in the 1914 *Bible Doctrine*, introduced terms new to many Mennonites: “plenary inspiration,” “verbal inspiration,” and “original autographs.” Distinctive Mennonite definitions of ordinances and restrictions were reinforced in the spirit of fundamentalism (Juhnke, 129).

The direct influence of this era is still being worked out among North American Mennonites, in my view, but for this writing I simply want to acknowledge its significance and return to more recent evangelical mediation of fundamentalist beliefs and categories.

### **The fundamentalist-evangelical interface**

After World War II the rigid separatist stream of American fundamentalism came under attack by a new generation of conservative leaders who saw greater gains from disciplined participation in society than from withdrawal. Wuthnow explains:

From the beginning, evangelical leaders consciously steered away from the sectarianism, fragmentation, and theological strife that had reduced the effectiveness of their Fundamentalist forebearers. They acknowledged that negativism, confessional disputes, organizational inefficiency, and badly remiss social conscience had left the fundamentalist movement in ill-repute with much of the American public. They took heart in seeing themselves as the defenders of theological truth. But their energies focused less on defending timeless truths than on promoting a new spirit of interdenominational cooperation for the advancement of Christianity... (Wuthnow, 177).

One watershed event was Billy Graham’s city-wide campaign in New York City in 1954. Graham cooperated with mainline denominations in the campaign, causing fundamentalist groups to withdraw their support and part ways with Graham.

New evangelical leaders repudiated the fundamentalist label and selected “evangelicalism” instead. The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) was formed in 1943. Several years later Carl F. H. Henry said, “If, as is often remarked, the Federal Council of Churches is the voice of Protestant liberalism in America, Protestant evangelicalism, too, needs a single voice” (Wuthnow, 174).

One Protestant leader in 1946 wrote that evangelism is concerned above all with the individual’s need to make a “personal decision” for Christ. To its credit the newly emerging stream of Evangelicalism was not entirely separatist; the evangeli-

cal emphasis found a home in mainline as well as independent denominations. There was often appreciation for the warmth and vitality contributed by evangelicals.

But the use of the word “evangelical” to name a movement is problematic. Walter Brueggeman explains, in an unpublished lecture, that “evangelical” is the adjective for “gospel.” Only the noun and verb forms of “gospel” are used in the Greek New Testament. Like Brueggeman I am distressed that the adjective for “gospel” has been co-opted to defend dogma, to divide, and to stake out positions, when its use in Scripture is to herald “good news.” Is the proliferation of 1,500 religious bodies and sects good news for people to whom life has brought bad news?

### **The evangelical-Mennonite interface**

The formation of the NAE provided a platform from which to launch special-purpose groups that grew in importance. Such groups did and do impact American Mennonite mission-evangelism thinking. They included the National Broadcasting Association, the National Sunday School Association, the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association, the Commission for Church Schools, World Relief Commission, and Fuller Theological Seminary. Fuller recruited faculty, administrators, and trustees from evangelical organizations throughout the United States, forming an evangelical nucleus in southern California with a nationwide network.

Evangelical influences among Mennonites were personalized through well-known persons like Elizabeth Elliott, widow of slain missionary Jim Elliott. Daughter of Philip E. Howard, Jr, editor of the conservative *Sunday School Times*, Elizabeth Elliott has been widely read among Mennonites. Mennonites are active participants in Billy Graham evangelistic campaigns and Graham’s seminars on evangelism.

Interdenominational journals such as *Moody Monthly* and *Christianity Today* were founded in hopes of drawing readers from among conservative Christians of widely-differing backgrounds. The doctrinal statements on which these journals were founded tended to emphasize a few core tenets of Christianity, rather than wandering into minefields of theological dispute. Large numbers of Mennonites read evangelical publications rather than or in addition to Mennonite materials. My intent is not to argue against use of evangelical publications, but to underline that evangelical materials, which often mediate fundamentalist categories and beliefs, are being used extensively in Mennonite circles. The influence of local Christian radio broadcasting on Mennonite churches must also be noted.

Having maintained that Mennonites picked up some fundamentalist categories, beliefs, and attitudes from evangelical streams, what are these categories, beliefs and attitudes? The Kauffman-Driedger study uses few fundamentalist categories, compared to issues debated in the 1920s and 1930s, but we can benefit enormously from its systematic research.

Fundamentalism, they write, focuses on specific theological interpretations and emphases, “on the virgin birth of Jesus, the Bible as the inerrant and infallible Word of God, Christ as the only Savior from eternal punishment, and creation of the world in six 24-hour days” (Kauffman & Driedger, 69).

General Conference and Mennonite Church responses indicate that more than 80 percent of the respondents believe Jesus was born of a virgin. More than 70 percent believe the Bible is the inerrant Word of God. More than 50 percent believe that a person must accept Christ as savior or suffer eternal punishment, and more than 40 percent believe God created the earth in six 24-hour days. More than 70 percent believe that those who do not accept the fundamentals should be excluded from membership.

In my pastoral experience I sometimes find people who speak in the above categories and definitions because they think orthodoxy requires it, and because they have not experienced more lively ways of affirming the authority of the Bible and the importance of faith in life. Others step back from clear faith commitment because fundamentalist definitions offend their intellect. Some have never had opportunity to think about the use of literary, rather than historical or scientific ways of hearing the message of Scripture. J.C. Wenger quotes the late M. T. Brackbill of Eastern Mennonite College, "The Bible was not written to tell us how the heavens go, but how to go to heaven" (Kraus, 118).

Kauffman-Driedger respondents also affirmed four basic Anabaptist beliefs—adult baptism, the lordship of Christ, church discipline, and opposition to war. The survey finds that Mennonites take very conservative positions on theological and moral issues. On issues of morality Mennonites probably have much in common with fundamentalist and evangelical groups. But Mennonites are not fundamentalist in attitude or spirit. On peace and social issues Mennonites break company with fundamentalists and many evangelicals, and would be regarded as liberals within the Christian spectrum (Kauffman & Driedger, 213).

The study observes that Anabaptist Mennonites are unique in that they are strong on peacemaking, in-group identity, communalism, and service to others, and are wary of excessive individualism. Yet Mennonites emphasize orthodox beliefs and submissive roles for women. They hold negative views of welfare aid and racial equality. While Mennonites have great contrast on some issues, they have similar scores on moral issues, devotionism, quality of religious life, evangelism, and opposition to secularism. "Anabaptism and Fundamentalism are two major tiles in the Mennonite mosaic—two quite different tiles, but with some common characteristics" (Kauffman & Driedger, 253-255). This summary from the Kauffman-Driedger study illustrates how mixed up we are. While distinctions cannot be clearly drawn, I believe the data supports a view that Mennonites are shaped by fundamentalism much more than we realize.

### **Summary**

Approaching the end of the 20th century North American Mennonites are diverse in belief and approach in much the same way as Catholics are. We are not the monolithic group we once thought we were. I believe Mennonites in local congregations need to step back and take another look at categories, beliefs, and attitudes. I agree with the Dutch theologian who thinks American Mennonites have been seduced.

Local congregations have lost their way and are blown about by too many “winds of doctrine.” Some Mennonites, I hope a small minority, are about to be seduced again by the religious right—by Falwell, Robertson and the Christian Coalition. As evangelical streams of thought are being politicized by the religious right, Mennonites who bought blindly into certain evangelical streams now buy blindly into politicized religion.

But we are not without witness. We do have clear signposts, the first from the biblical canon. No one book of the Bible contains the whole witness. The last two chapters of John’s Gospel make that point for us (John 20:30-31, and John 21:25). The biblical witness comes to us as two covenants. The writers of the New Covenant looked on the Old Covenant as inspired. What we must come to understand is that the witness from heaven came to people of old in many different ways, and in these last days, “by a Son,...the reflection of God’s glory...” (Heb 1:1-4). The witness is partial, but unique in each prophet, each Gospel, each epistle, and each piece of wisdom literature. The inspired witness in each writing is drawn out by the life situation of the people. Such an understanding is, in my view, very different from the way much of evangelicalism, infused by fundamentalism, sees the witness from heaven. It is unacceptable, for example, to insist on “born again” language when the New Testament uses 13 different phrases or words for the same experience.

The second example, related to the first, is found in a prominent footnote written by David A. Shank in *The Transfiguration of Mission* (1993). Observing that “nothing is more noticeable today than the great variety of understandings and interpretations that constitute christological thought in the churches,” Shank argues that “diversity is understandable and justifiable from a biblical point of view” (:37). Shank’s footnote gives the following foundation for this position: 1) There is a “pluralism of names and titles and their meanings” for Jesus. 2) There is a “pluralism of time-events” around one Christ-event—pre-existence, birth, baptism/endowment with Spirit, ministry, etc. 3) The “pluralism within the ministry of Jesus opens up different christological perspectives: evangelist, healer, exorcist, prophet, teacher, man of protest,” Son of Man, Son of God. 4) There is a pluralism of faith responses—baptism, new birth, drinking of living water, eating of the living bread, and taking up the cross. These illustrations only begin to develop the expansive grid of biblical thought and experience of the witnesses (77).

The tight doctrinal definitions hanging like fog in evangelical mountain passes are incompatible with the lively grid of biblical studies now found in ecumenical and Anabaptist scholarship. The Mennonite *Confession of Faith* being brought to the Assemblies of 1995 is a long step toward an open theology that will invite all of us into a new interaction with biblical studies. The advent of this attitude opens the way for our generation to be engaged with sacred Scripture in fresh and transforming ways. That is a challenge that can be picked up in the local congregation as well as in the academy. If we can be thus poised in the church and in the world, we will be “good news” in the sense that the Gospel intends. We may even be in place for the Spirit of God to enliven and shape our history, a little as it happened in A.D. 33!

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## Fundamentalism and the Church in Central America

*Amzie Yoder*

**W**hat does a religious movement that developed on the North American scene nearly a century ago have to do with the church in Central America today? Does fundamentalism play a significant role in how the Central American church today sees itself, its work, and its witness? How have the impressive “mega-churches” in Central America been shaped by their fundamental-dispensationalist theological orientation? Do these mega-churches represent the “nearness” of the reign of God? The following reflections address these questions in the context of what is now happening in Central America and how it relates to historical and modern fundamentalism. Issues facing the church in Central America today cannot be understood apart from knowing something of how the fundamentalist movement and the church developed.

### Fundamentalism’s historical development

Fundamentalism is a very diverse and difficult to define phenomenon. As an affirmative label, the catchword “fundamentalism” is most commonly associated with a type of conservative Christianity that developed out of the liberal-conservative controversy in primarily white North American Protestant evangelicalism at the turn of this century. “The movement took its name from a series of twelve [privately financed] paperback volumes issued between 1910 and 1915.... The volumes consisted of edited articles by leading conservative evangelical leaders, who defended biblical inerrancy and attacked the evils of secular ‘modernism’” (Hadden-Shupe, 109). These writings, which carried significant dispensationalist orientation, identified what were considered to be “the irreducible minimum of belief without which one could not be Christian” (Hordern, 52-53). Among these “fundamentals” were the verbal inspiration and absolute inerrancy of the Scripture, the virgin birth, blood atonement, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the miracle-working power of Christ and the open rejection of the historical-critical method in biblical exegesis.

In the context of the liberal-conservative religious controversies, aggressive, some-

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times brash, militant fundamentalist groups developed and the term “fundamentalism” took on considerable disrepute. Of special offense to those outside the movement were attitudes that claimed fundamentalist understanding as **the only Christian position**. All criticism of this partisan position was seen as a direct attack on historic Christianity. In his definitive work on fundamentalism, James Barr considers this attitude “a pathological condition of Christianity.” He continues:

Contrary to general belief, the core of fundamentalism resides not in the Bible but in a particular kind of religion....In other words, fundamentalism is based on a particular kind of religious tradition, and uses form, rather than the reality of biblical authority to provide a shield for this tradition (4-5, 11).

In the socio-religious atmosphere of turn-of-the-century North America, fundamentalism developed to define and defend the historic Christian faith. The focus was primarily on cognitive adherence to “correct faith” formulation with little emphasis given to the application and incarnation of faith in life. The movement incorporated a completely eschatological dispensationalist doctrine of the church. However, in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s fundamentalism in North America has evolved from its purely religious beginnings. Now its theology and ethics are expressed by the political approaches of the “Religious Right” with the “electronic church” being one of its major expressions.

### **Protestantism established In Central America**

The Protestant (Evangelical) Church was established in Central America slightly over a century ago during the time of the North American fundamentalist controversies. North American Protestant missionaries were brought into the region by liberal Catholic political leaders who were vying with the Roman Catholic hierarchy for greater power, especially the control of the land. The assumption was that Protestant missions (main-line non-Pentecostal groups) would bring much-needed development and modernization and in the process dilute the power of the Catholic hierarchy. Missionaries met strong opposition from what was, for all practical purposes, an official Roman Catholic state church.

Until the late 1950s, the large majority of Protestant churches in Central America were a struggling, persecuted minority, primarily rural. Their Gospel was highly moralistic, and salvation was personalized with the primary focus on life after death. The missionaries taught concerns and religious concepts similar to those then current in North America. This approach encouraged the historically strong antagonism between Catholics and Protestants to continue. For Protestants, conversion meant no longer being Catholic, becoming “Christian”, and distancing oneself from much of the native culture, especially its religious orientation and social structures. Until the late 1960s a very limited number of the professional and political power brokers of society were included among the new Protestants. However, with the development of the mega-churches since the 1970s, the governing elite began to include more people with rightist religious and political views. Many are active members in what is now called the “evangelical” movement which currently repre-

sents the large majority of non-Catholic Christians in Central America.

### **The scene changes**

Natural disasters in the 1960s and 1970s contributed to this shift in the religious “balance of power” in Central America. Honduras was hit by Hurricane Fifi, and Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador suffered major earthquakes. Costa Rica’s major earthquakes came later. In the wake of these natural disasters scores of old and new mission agencies and personnel arrived to offer much-needed emergency assistance. Many came with good intentions, while others saw the time as an appropriate opportunity for evangelizing “lost souls.” Most of these missionaries had very little cultural sensitivity or preparation for international experience. The result was both the proliferation of imported religious ideas and practices and the beginning of “empire building.”

### **Challenges from fundamentalism**

As noted above, fundamentalism developed originally as a corrective to contemporary church-wide concerns for orthodoxy in Christian faith. Like other “defending-the-faith” renewal movements in the history of the church, fundamentalism became characterized by a loss of objectivity, focusing attention primarily upon corrective doctrine and belief rather than on Christian faith addressing the issues of the lived experience of people. It indirectly promoted a religious legalism that undermined the validity and relevance of Christian faith to modern life. Subsequently, fundamentalistic turn-of-the-century agenda was exported to Central America by Protestant missionaries. Little attention was apparently paid to the implications of their basic theological suppositions. The development in the last decades of the political Christian Right in north America has brought a resurgence of historic fundamentalism that, especially via mass media, is now also strongly influencing the church in Central America.

#### **A. Unique hermeneutics**

A major challenge that fundamentalism presents is its strong, individualistic, almost magical, yet selective and arbitrary appeal to literal interpretation of the Scriptures. This approach makes it practically impossible to take into account obvious historical and contemporary factors and to understand any of the original intent of biblical authors. In the heat of defensive conservative liberal debates, biblical passages tend to be taken out of context and used as pretexts to support doctrinal positions or theological systems. The fundamentalist approach to Scripture tends to ignore historical contexts and treats the Bible as a “flat book,” taking all parts of the older and newer Testaments as equally binding.

In contrast, an objective reading of the Scriptures by the faith community allows the Bible to speak for itself as a testimony of God’s people to prophetic and historic events. The Scriptures themselves present God’s self-revelation as progressing from promise to fulfillment. The newer Testament was written in response to the new

covenant and the fulfillment of the older Testament by Jesus Christ. Christ and active faith in him are presented as the basis of interpreting God's Word, for Christ himself "encounters us in the biblical message as the incarnate Word of the Redeemer God" (Secondin, 6). The ultimate goal in interpretation, therefore, is to let the Bible speak for itself with a call to worship and following Christ daily in conscious obedience.

This understanding of Scripture differs substantially from the one which interprets Scripture primarily as a defense for fixed positions and systems of thought. Yet it is the latter understanding that is subscribed to today by most Central American evangelicals, who have seen themselves as the rejected and persecuted religious minority. Such a use of Scripture has been especially notable since the early 1960s as the evangelicals refer to biblical authority as an explanation of their aggressive evangelization of all who are not a part of their specific religious movement. Evangelization thus becomes active proselytism among both the established Protestant and Catholic faith communities.

### **B. Sectarianism**

A second challenge fundamentalism presents the Central American church is its strong tendency toward sectarian exclusiveness that promotes dogmatism and fanaticism. Central American Protestantism is plagued today with hundreds of different denominational groups working in a competitive, independent manner. Most of these groups are the results of doctrinal controversies. Each faction typically lays claim to Holy Spirit guidance in holding on to "sound doctrine" as over and against "human doctrine." Issues of control and power struggles among church leaders have no doubt also been frequent but unrecognized factors leading to the many painful church splits. While most of these groups are small in number and struggle to survive, in the last two decades a new phenomenon is appearing. Congregations patterned after affluent North American churches are developing in most of Central America's capitals and larger cities. Memberships number in the hundreds and thousands, some as high as 10,000. Auditoriums and coliseums are being built to accommodate 5,000 or more for weekend corporate worship and teaching services. Pastors are strong leaders, many of whom are professionals in some secular field but with very limited formal biblical and theological training.

The above-noted literal hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures is used to justify leadership structures that are consciously very hierarchical, not unlike the Roman Catholic structures they so vehemently denounce. A strong and repeated element of the teaching focus is that God will financially bless those who faithfully give their tithes and offerings. The majority of the members have little education and see the church as their best hope to counteract their rapidly deteriorating socio-economic situation. Church leaders with the most charisma, marketing skill, and crowd-management ability are the most successful in retaining positions of authority. Frequently a capable, rising leader challenges the top leader(s) on some procedure or issue and ends up breaking away with followers to begin building another evangeli-

cal “empire.” The income/benefit levels of these pastors are the envy of everyone and perpetuate the historical inequities common to all of Central America from the time of the Spanish Conquest to the later influx of capitalism with its free enterprise system.

Throughout church history, error and apostasy have often been marked not by the total absence of truth, but by an over-emphasis or imbalance of some aspects of truth. It is imperative that the church today put serious effort into developing a more biblical understanding of leadership and ecclesiology.

### **C. Neo-Constantinianism**

A third challenge related to fundamentalism facing the Central American church is its tendency toward a conscious alignment with political systems in order to promote the church’s religious goals and agenda. It is ironical that the union of church and state so strongly denounced and held against the Roman Catholic Church by Protestants is now being accepted by large evangelical groups to further their own cause.

Fundamentalism first developed with the orientation of a nearly complete withdrawal from all “political and cultural involvement” (Cerillo and Dempster, 109-112). In recent years, however, the process of opposing the “secular humanism” sweeping North America led fundamentalists to appeal to American patriotism and traditional values. “Recipients of massive secular media exposure, they forged alliances with other Christian, religious, and secular groups in support of conservative political causes (Ibid, 110). Veteran political activists befriended the rising fundamentalist media stars—the television preachers—forming mutually beneficial relationships. In the interest of achieving their goals, these fundamentalist leaders accepted becoming politicized. The gospel of prosperity became an important element to justify affluent lifestyles related to the public and political world. Wealth was perceived as proof of God’s approval and poverty as evidence of spiritual failure. The gospel of strength and military might developed in the fervor of the perceived world struggle between Christianity and Communism.

Because some Latin American theologians insisted that the Gospel spoke of the redemption, or “liberation” of people from their oppressive, inhuman and hopeless situations, North American fundamentalism saw this “liberating theology” as a form of Communism carefully disguised. Liberation theology and “the Soviet threat became more important in evangelical sermons than the words of Jesus” (Ibid, 135). In its anti-communist stance and its reluctance to recognize that the truth of the Gospel requires solidarity with the marginalized people of the world, the Central American church has frequently been useful to oppressive military governments (Galindo, 12-13).

In Central America, evangelicals aspire for political party roles and several evangelical presidents have gained office, both by military coup and democratic elections. It is again ironic that these well-intentioned national reformers were expelled before the end of their terms leaving behind sad records of basic human rights violations and political financial corruption. Some evangelical groups continue to form

official Christian political parties, but others now insist that the church can be a greater influence in society from without rather than from within the formal political structures. Yet for many in Central America, Christian faith continues to be “ideologized” with little discernment between political ideology and biblical theology.

### Conclusion

As noted above, religious fundamentalism originated as a corrective conservative religious phenomenon within North American Anglo-Saxon Protestantism. Today fundamentalism’s focus has broadened to include a wide range of religious, social, and political issues. In both North and Central America, it has evolved into the Evangelical Right. For this movement, it seems, religion and the Christian church have become a means to create and justify materialistic, militaristic, and even imperialistic values that are at odds with the life and teachings of Jesus, the founder and Lord of the church. We may hope that followers of Christ in Central and North America will become more interested in discerning the times and choosing to be biblical in living out their Christian faith.

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## Introductory Comments: Community-based Development

*Arden Shank*

Over the last 30 years, community-based development is an emerging field of work in low-income and minority neighborhoods. After years of neglect, poverty, and discrimination, communities of all kinds began to organize themselves to save and improve their neighborhoods.

These efforts resulted in new organizations whose primary concern was the welfare of their neighborhoods. Such community-based groups took all shapes and sizes. They formed in urban neighborhoods, small cities and towns, and in rural areas. By the mid-1970s there were about 200 of these groups in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Now, in the 1990s, there are nearly 3,000 such groups in the U.S. They are developing affordable housing, building vital small businesses, creating jobs, and providing education, health care, and social services. These activities not only grow out of a concern for the neighborhood, but in many cases neighborhood people are the prime movers.

People in many local communities around the country are finding ways to address needs and create new options from within. I have been fortunate to see this from my statewide involvement with both the Indiana Association for Community Economic Development and the Indiana Welfare Watch, as well as on a local level with LaCasa of Goshen.

A coalition of foundations and corporations called the Council for Community-Based Development, says that “‘community-based development’ has become the widely accepted term that embraces the full range of activities being carried on by these locally controlled organizations.”<sup>2</sup> The limits are defined by each local community.

“Frequently, as they gain experience and confidence, they diversify their agendas. Organizations interested in housing, for example, may expand their activities into social services. Others formed as advocacy groups for better government services may become active in economic development. Whatever course they take, their basic mission remains the same: to make lasting improvements in their communities.”<sup>3</sup>

Many of these efforts have been started by or sustained by local churches. It has been people of faith in large and small, black, brown, and white, neighborhoods who

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have acted on the vision for neighborhood wholeness and justice. It is both the church as an institution and the people as individuals of faith that have undergirded the work. It is difficult to find even one sustained and successful community-based development organization that does not have church involvement in some way.<sup>4</sup> Community development is church work; it is mission in the profoundest sense.

From nearly the beginning, Mennonite churches and people have been involved in this movement. Early efforts in the late 1960s and early 1970s took place in smaller communities like Fort Wayne, Elkhart, and Goshen, as well as other places around the country. Over the past 10 years in particular the number of Mennonites involved has increased.

Aside from occasional anecdotal essays there has been very little serious theological or ethical reflection by Mennonites on community-based development in the United States, and on Mennonite involvement in this activity. When I pointed out this lack to Wilbert Shenk, he invited me to work with him to gather several articles. The essays in this issue of *Mission Focus* are the result. Bear in mind that the writers are community development practitioners, not seasoned scholars. We have businesses to run, houses to build, programs to manage, and hurting people to encourage. We write from experience and from the gut.

My essay will give some theological and biblical reflections about community-based development using my own work at LaCasa as the starting point. Lester and Mary Beth Lind write from a rural West Virginia perspective emphasizing “self-reliant interdependence” as community development. They root their thoughts in the work of a well-known Anabaptist. Saul Murcia describes Mennonite community development on the border in Brownsville, Texas. Writing from a racial, cultural, and economic minority status, he struggles with the meaning of faithfulness in the context of overwhelming poverty. Sally Schreiner gives a historical review of the community development activities of the Reba Place Fellowship and Reba Place Church in Evanston, Illinois. Their call to be a community has had a profound impact in their neighborhood.

These essays are only a beginning effort. They are an invitation to more scholarly research and writing. The essays are also an invitation to join us as people of faith, maybe in your own neighborhood, in community-based development.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Against All Odds: The Achievements of Community-Based Development Organizations*, National Congress for Community Economic Development, Washington, D.C., 1989, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Venturing into Neighborhoods*, Council for Community-Based Development, Washington, D.C., 1991, p. 1

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4

<sup>4</sup> This claim was made by Phil Amerson, senior pastor of the First United Methodist Church of Bloomington, Indiana, during a workshop on “Church and Community Development Corporations” at the Eighth Annual Conference of the Indiana Association for Community Economic Development in Indianapolis, May 20, 1994.

## Responsible Living as Community Development

*Lester and Mary Beth Lind*

The vision and goal Pilgram Marpeck, an early Anabaptist, had a dual concern for personal repentance and social responsibility. Justice for Marpeck encompassed both individual and social transformation. One was impossible without the other. His call was to a justice without coercion, which included a strong sense of responsibility for the physical and spiritual welfare of his neighbors. Marpeck believed that the Spirit works from the bottom up and is unconstrained, rather than being mediated by institutional structures from the top down.<sup>1</sup> This glimpse of Pilgram Marpeck captures much of the philosophy that motivates us.

We moved to Harman, West Virginia in 1973. We are both college graduates and are committed to living by Gospel values. While going overseas with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), or aligning ourselves with a State-side mission organization had some attraction, we desired to simply live responsibly in a neighborhood and become involved in the life of our community. Our call was to a rural community where we could attempt to live responsibly in matters of finances, patterns of consumption, the well-being of our neighbors, and the care of the natural environment. Community development became part of this greater vision of responsible living.

Our basic premise is that God is creator and owner of all. We are caretakers or stewards of the small portion of this marvelous creation that affects us personally. Our mottos can be described as “self-reliant interdependence” and “think globally and act locally.” Self-reliance is not selfishness, but rather living with the awareness that we are responsible for the shalom of everything affected by our choices. We accept responsibility for the choices we make. This means we count the cost, not merely the economic costs. It is a false illusion that price reflects cost. As caretakers for God, the cost is measured in terms of the health of the whole, not in what seems to benefit us most.

This definition of self-reliance suggests interdependence. In the final analysis there is no difference between how we care for ourselves and how we care for others. Neither is there difference in how we care for the natural world. Biblical stewardship

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*Lester and Mary Beth Lind, Harman, West Virginia, recently completed an assignment as long-term directors of the Harman Discipleship unit. Most recently they were Voluntary Service resources people.*

uses the same criteria for determining how we care for self, others and the environment. Wendell Berry says it succinctly : “It is impossible to care for each other more or differently than we care for the earth.”<sup>2</sup>

We attempt to live from the Anabaptist principle that affirms Jesus Christ as the normative way for life. Jesus’s teachings as well as his model of living guide how we live. His inaugural address in Luke 4, his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, his teaching on life, power, and servanthood in Mark 8-10, and his commitment to accept the consequences of his choices (John 15-20), give us direction in life. But we are faced with a problem. Jesus lived 2000 years ago in a situation much different from the Appalachian setting in which we live. How do we bridge the gap in history and with the credibility claim to be following Jesus? Perhaps glimpses of our involvements will provide the answer.

### **Our experience**

Our first five years in the Harman community were spent getting ourselves established. We did not see ourselves as “mission folk” nor as “developers”; rather we were learning a life of self-sufficiency. Our parents, our neighbors, and our own mistakes became our teachers. These years were crucial in two ways. We developed habits and patterns independent of middle-class North American values. And we learned much about our community.

We also discovered that we were lonely. Most of our neighbors were pursuing middle-class values of materialism, consumerism, and personal profit. We were trying to live by Gospel values. Consequently our social interaction remained fairly superficial. We were also misfits in our local congregation. Our spiritual growth was not being nurtured in a community of believers. After six years of working hard to establish ourselves, we moved from the community in an attempt to care for our social and spiritual needs. We had experienced burn-out.

After a three year “furlough” or “exile,” depending on one’s perspective, we returned to our home in Harman. We were refreshed, but more importantly we had discovered that we needed to accept the responsibility for our own nature. Our attempts at self-sufficiency turned to self-reliance and interdependence. We understood ourselves better and were able to be more responsive to our community.

Building on our earlier years we became more involved in local activities. We put new energy into the Old Mill, a craft shop marketing products from local crafts persons. We had been managers of the Mill before our break. We initiated a VS Discipleship program for young adults in the Mennonite church. We began producing and marketing fresh vegetables from our land. Mary Beth launched a part-time career in dietetics. These four areas, a craft shop, discipleship and spirituality, vegetable production and marketing, and dietetics form the foundation for our involvements in community development. They provide ways of staying connected to the local community and the broader Mennonite church. We will briefly describe the evolution of each area.

### **1. Nutrition: public health**

Mary Beth formed contracts with several state and federally-funded organizations that needed the expertise of a dietician. This put her in touch with many persons, both clients and colleagues. This business has two significant results. First, Mary Beth receives regular calls from individuals or small groups who are interested in enhancing their own health through better nutrition. Mary Beth has the opportunity to be involved in numerous local settings, a neighbor willing to share her knowledge for the benefit of others.

Second, Mary Beth is learning how the structures operate. She has been able to identify funding sources for alternative nutritional and health-care programs. At the same time other leaders in the community are at least exposed to if not influenced by the values that motivate Mary Beth. As a result she serves on various local organizations' boards, including the county housing authority and a community arts board.

### **2. Gardening and marketing**

Lester was the organizer and manager of the vegetable endeavor. Our produce became known for its quality and was in demand by restaurants and many households. This reputation among our neighbors has prompted many inquiries about production techniques, pesticide use, and marketing ideas. Our little farm has become a model for many others who want to produce higher quality food for themselves or for market.

In addition to marketing our own produce, Lester worked with the county agricultural extension agent to develop a farmers' tailgate market. For over ten years he has given leadership to this organization which provides a good outlet for the producers and at the same time provides quality produce for many consumers.

On the state level Lester helped organize the West Virginia Direct Marketing Association. This organization of agricultural producers has become an information bank for marketing techniques and a credible voice of agriculture in the political arena. Several groups have spun off from the organization, including an organic growers group, an herb-growing and marketing group, and an aquaculture organization.

### **3. Spirituality and discipleship**

While the VS discipleship program has been terminated, our interest in nurturing spiritual growth of persons continues. Together we work at Mountain Retreat, offering personal retreats to individuals, and organizing group events that nourish the spirituality of the participants. Not only does Mountain Retreat meet needs of individuals, it also has formal relationships with both Virginia Mennonite Conference and Allegheny Mennonite Conference. We are active participants in the contemplative spirituality movement within the Mennonite church.

### **4. The Old Mill**

The craft shop has several aspects that relate to community development. It has

provided a good market for producers in our area. It has also offered employment to persons in the community. A third feature has been the use of the mill itself. Grains are still milled into flour and local farmers continue to bring their grains which will supply their families with corn meal or flour through the winter.

All of the above examples could be excluded from some definitions of community development. We see it as community development by lifestyle. We are also involved in more standard ways of community development. During the last year we participated in a local group that learned community development philosophy at the same time that community projects were being accomplished. Sixteen small groups within the county received training in assessing needs and resources, organizing a group that operates around a mission statement, learning good communication skills, creating budgets, and writing grants. By the end of this training each group was well-organized and received a small grant as seed money to accomplish a specific project. The group that we were part of will be offering mediation within the school system. Our intent is to grow into a mediation center that offers a variety of mediation and communication resources to the county.

### **Reflections**

Although early on we had ideas of intentional community, we never had any formal support structure such as a mission board or service agency. Our accountability was primarily to ourselves and to a lesser degree, our community. One advantage of this independence is that local acceptance and ownership is essential if the project is to continue. A second advantage relates to the credibility of the project. The examples we shared are important enough that we could form relationships with larger institutions. This kind of networking is important, but the management and control should remain locally based.

The disadvantage of independence is that we had no formal support structures to provide for our emotional, financial, and spiritual needs. Neither society nor the church equips persons to take responsibility for their own personal growth and well-being. It requires an incredible amount of inner strength and God's grace to persevere as an alternative to the norm. If the Kingdom values are truly upside down when judged by normal middle class values, then the church must discover better ways of teaching Kingdom values.

Regrettably the local church never seemed to understand what we were and are about. In our situation the local congregation never considered what we were doing as mission or Kingdom building. A basic dilemma is the difference in defining mission. The local congregation was begun as a mission endeavor. Its understanding of mission is primarily centered around saving souls. We understand mission as concern for the total well-being of all. Our energy is given to human and environmental needs. Mission includes the state of one's soul but is much broader than that. All of creation is going to be redeemed.

Another thing we have learned is flexibility. Our basic principles are solidly grounded, but flexibility is necessary in developing and implementing one's lifestyle.

For example, one of our major principles is to be involved in our local community. Yet we found it difficult to be nurtured by the local churches. So we compromised and now we drive to a completely separate community for our church family.

The church we attend, Philippi Mennonite, is truly a gift to us. It is not a traditional congregation. Among other things it takes its community seriously and speaks clearly on issues of justice. It has been involved in organizing the community to address the issue of mega-landfills. As a result, a “state of the art” landfill that was to receive garbage from Baltimore and Philadelphia was not allowed in the county.

Sometimes we are asked what keeps us going when change happens slowly if at all. We respond that our original goal was not community development. Our goal was responsible living. So with a healthy skepticism toward consumerism and the underlying principle that promises happiness and security as marketable commodities, we attempt to practice the biblical vision of shalom. We are not perfect and we mess up frequently. We experience God’s grace and forgiveness and feel the invitation to stay on the path of shalom. And we cannot walk the path of shalom without sharing it with others!

We began by describing how Pilgram Marpeck understood mission. It is fitting to close with another insight from him. Marpeck was against the centralization of power. He “opposed those whom he thought violated the sovereignty of the individual conscience.”<sup>3</sup> His goal was to provide those “in his sphere of influence with a new sense of identity, worth, and dignity.”<sup>4</sup> We share a similar philosophy and goal with Marpeck.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Boyd, Stephen. *Pilgram Marpeck: His Life and Social Theology*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1992. pp 170-171.

<sup>2</sup> Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. New York: Avon Books, 1977. p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> Boyd, Stephen. *Pilgram Marpeck*. p. 172.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 172.



## “At the Gate Called Beautiful”

*Saul Murcia*

**B**rownsville is located on the southernmost tip of Texas on the Mexico-United States border. The current population of 100,000 is 90 percent Hispanic, young, growing rapidly, and extremely poor. Brownsville, in fact, was recently identified as the poorest city in the United States, with 44 percent of its residents falling below the federal poverty line. Many in Brownsville would argue that the poverty rate is actually closer to 60 percent. The unemployment rate is approximately three times the national level, or 24 percent.

Perhaps nowhere is the impact of unemployment and poverty more evident than in the quality of housing. Frequently, two or three families live in one dwelling. Homes with exposed wiring, no indoor plumbing, and crumbling walls and roofs are common. Many houses are considered unlivable and have been condemned by the city; yet people continue to live in them. Moreover, rent is often unjustifiably high—for example, \$300 or more per month for little more than a shack.

The city of Brownsville has available as much as \$4 million in federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funds for the purpose of community development. Yet it can be difficult to access these funds, since three to five years are often required to maneuver through the bureaucracy. Furthermore, the money that is available from the federal government will not suffice to ensure that housing in the city is upgraded.

This article is based on my experience of the past five years of living and learning about the U.S.-Mexico border. I have also drawn on the reflections of the members of Iglesia Menonita del Cordero [Mennonite Church of the Lamb], of volunteers, and of our pastor, Conrado Hinojosa.

### **History**

Iglesia Menonita del Cordero was founded in 1972. Today the membership is 150. The church holds three services per week, has 11 Sunday school classes, and has youth and women's groups involved in numerous projects. The membership of the church continues to grow at a slow but steady rate. More important, however, is the stability of the congregation, reflecting the members' long-term commitment to one

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another and to the mission of the church.

Mexican Americans constitute the majority of the membership of Iglesia Menonita. The church is currently the largest Hispanic Mennonite congregation in the United States. Moreover, Iglesia Menonita is considered by many to be the most active Hispanic church in terms of its involvement in the community. Early in its existence, Iglesia Menonita identified a need for decent housing in Brownsville. The situation sparked a vision within the congregation to take a role in providing suitable housing. In response to a request to Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM) in 1976 for assistance, a Voluntary Service unit was established in Brownsville, with up to four volunteers at any given time.

Conrado Hinojosa recalls the time when there was no "program" or Mennonite church in Brownsville, just the vision of a young couple without many resources to develop anything. Some 20 years later we are in his office reflecting on how it all developed.

In reply to my question about how the congregation and home repair project got to its current stage, Conrado said: "It's simple. I had a vision and very limited resources. Therefore, the partnership and the cooperation from 'el Norte' was crucial. This meant that volunteer labor, primarily from the mid-west Mennonite world, came down often to serve. And, some capital investment was part of it as well. Initially, MBM bought the several acres of land on which the church is located and loaned the church \$17,000 to construct the church building."

Throughout the years the cooperation and partnership between a young Mennonite congregation and the Mennonite Church, including MBM, have been challenging. Conflicts, misunderstanding, and discouragement have been a part of this relationship. However, those elements are inevitable and have been accepted by both parties as great opportunities to grow as God's people.

### **Construction projects**

The program, "El Buen Vecino" [The Good Neighbor], 1976-1994, emerged from an effort to assist low-income families in Brownsville to improve their housing (in many cases they lacked basic services--water, sewer system, electricity, etc.). This project established a revolving fund of \$30,000, which is available to anyone in the community. To this \$20,000 is added annually for operating expenses.

Most of the revolving fund money used in the program is raised locally. In some cases the construction program can earn some money by taking projects with the municipal Housing Development office of Brownsville.

"El Buen Vecino" has done over 1,000 home repair jobs throughout the Brownsville community, averaging 5,000 hours of volunteer labor per year. Calculated at \$5 per hour, this is a \$25,000 contribution to the program.

The primary financial support of "El Buen Vecino" has come from the pooling of resources by the MBM volunteers. Several volunteers working as teachers and nurses contribute their salaries to the common fund, out of which two or three full-time construction workers are supported.

As the church has grown, its people have been able to help each other. In 1984, Iglesia del Cordero started The Sharing Fund project. This project is a revolving fund established by local church leaders with the purpose of building one house for a family in the congregation each year. 1994 marks the tenth anniversary of “The Sharing Fund.” This project has worked in concert with “El Buen Vecino” home repairs. The accomplishments include: ten new houses plus major remodeling to another five homes and numerous repairs to the homes of church members. Since monies are paid back to the fund slowly, the Sharing Fund tries to manage as well as possible with its \$50,000, attempting to increase this fund with additional grants.

### **Mennonite partnership building initiative**

In an effort to foster a common vision, streamline administration, and increase local resources, Mennonite Partnership Building Initiative, Inc. (MPBI), a non-profit organization, was established by uniting the two projects described above, “El Buen Vecino” and The Sharing Program. MPBI staff consists of an administrator and both short and long-term volunteers. The program operates under a board of directors which includes beneficiaries of the programs and church leaders.

MPBI’s goal is to help alleviate the community’s housing problems, one family at a time—helping those the banks regard as high-risk, those susceptible to being taken advantage of by unscrupulous developers, and those who have no other hope of ever having decent housing. Although the church has actively promoted this project on behalf of its members for 10 years, its aim is to extend the project into the community as a witness to God’s love.

MPBI makes small loans of up to \$3,000 to low-income families for home repairs. Each loan is paid back in small monthly payments based on the financial capacity of each family. The lowest monthly payment is \$25.

The new home program requires the family to meet four conditions:

- Own a lot (sometimes the family is still paying for it while construction is going on).
- Have a minimum of \$7,000 in savings before construction starts.
- Be a member of the church. Consideration is being given to set this requirement aside.
- Help with construction as much as possible.

MPBI loans the rest of the money without interest, up to a maximum of \$10,000, to enable construction of the house. The family, members of the congregation, V-sers, and retirees who come as Winter V-sers furnish the labor. The new homeowners repay the money they borrow into the revolving fund so that additional homes can be financed. The monthly payments start as low as \$150. The project is an example of how sharing financial resources, time, and talents as well as striving to do God’s will on earth can result in needs being met.

In order to increase the base fund of MPBI, efforts are being made to establish a partnership between MPBI and churches of the South Central Mennonite Conference with these congregations investing \$7,000 in each new home built or in major

home repairs. The partnership calls for congregations to make financial contributions, as well as to give volunteer labor.

This is a summary of community development of the Mennonite Church in Brownsville, Texas. The distinctive character of this initiative is shaped by certain factors that need to be considered in order to evaluate its results.

MPBI is not a "success" story based on accepted business principles but a project that still struggles to structure and develop itself. However, MPBI is an opportunity for Mennonite Christians to accomplish certain tasks, which allows us to define "success" in a different way.

- It is an opportunity for direct involvement with those in need.
- It is an opportunity to learn from other people's material and spiritual reality.
- It is an opportunity to learn and practice skills one would not otherwise use.
- It is an invitation to share our resources with others.

### **Theology**

Conrado Hinojosa, pastor of Iglesia Menonita del Cordero, shared with me the dreams and constant struggles he has had to develop this congregational program. Out of Conrado's sharing, I want to offer reflections based on the last home dedication and relate this to a Bible story.

Our most recent home dedication service was for a single mother. She and her two daughters had lived in a small trailer for ten years. With the help of MPBI and many from the congregation, she was able to build her new home! Day after day Maria worked at a sewing factory in order to achieve her dream of becoming a home owner. Finally, she was able to save \$7,000, a fortune in her circumstances. "I never have had that much money in my hands," she said. However, it was enough for MPBI and members of the congregation to starting building Maria's three-bedroom house. For many of us in the congregation, observing people go through the process of becoming home owners has been a highly-rewarding opportunity to learn about community development as a grassroots effort of a "poor" church. Every time a house is finished the congregation is invited to come to a service of dedication and celebration.

At Maria's home dedication service, the pastor referred to Acts 3:1-10. This story describes well the situation being celebrated. In this passage Peter and John are going to the temple to pray. They observed a man, a cripple from birth, being carried to the temple gate where he would beg from those going in. When he saw Peter and John he asked them for money. Peter and John got involved in his situation. They did something for this man without giving him money. They healed him! Naturally, this brought great joy and wonder to this man and to all who knew him as a cripple. If we think about it, Maria's situation is not so different from that of the man described in this Bible story.

The options are limited for a woman like Maria, with no education, unstable,

minimum wage jobs, with two young daughters to feed and educate. As a matter of fact, a woman under these circumstances can easily join the growing number of marginalized families in this country.

Returning to the dilemma facing Peter and John, we recognize that the Mennonite church in Brownsville faces the same questions. Out of this passage I would like to raise three main questions that underscore the importance of community development through a church base.

**1. What do we do with “crippled people” along the way to the temple,** who are waiting at the gate called “beautiful”? What do you do when refugees come to your door, or people cannot afford decent housing, or people cannot find a job, or when drug gangs are lined up outside your church?

These are very difficult questions that the Brownsville Mennonite church has dealt with during its history. The Old Testament emphasizes the importance of welcoming the stranger, and there is no better place to work at this Biblical tradition than along the U.S.-Mexico border and at the Iglesia Menonita del Cordero in Brownsville.

Constantly—and some days more than others—people come, mainly from Mexico and Central America, who need bread and water, a place to stay for a night or so, asking for important information, asking for refuge. They are waiting at “the gate” of a developed country!

It sounds right and easy to help people under these circumstances, but, in fact, it isn't. Along the border, like cactuses, mesquite trees and bushes, nationalistic and legalistic feelings grow strong. If you come from the south or from the other side of the river, you run into a great deal of suspicion. People will look at you, trying to find out if you have a right to be in the United States or not. Here, the Rio Grande separates people with the same ethnic and cultural background into two nations.

In spite of limited resources, “poor” churches cannot turn their backs on such people. These churches, for the most part, welcome and receive these strangers gladly, offering to help them somehow. Often, besides their physical needs, refugees crave to tell the stories of their quest for “freedom.” They have traveled through various countries with nothing more than their trust in God.

Then we also have local people who have made their home in the Rio Grande Valley, subsisting on minimum wages for the past two or three generations. It is not easy to live and grow up in the valley. Here conditions are stacked against achieving the “American dream”: high unemployment, crowded public schools which result in a high rate of drop-outs, involvement in illegal drug traffic, and lack of good housing.

With God's blessing we have seen people's lives transformed and have had many occasions for celebration and praise to our Creator. Through the challenge of this ministry we have developed a strong sense of community and we have experienced spiritual renewal.

## **2. When there is neither silver nor gold to give them, what do you do?**

As the south looks at the north, (meaning the Mennonite churches north of South Texas), it is hard to deny that there is no silver or gold to give away. However, financial aid is not what is needed, in many cases, to deal with "crippled people." As a Mennonite church we are called to "get involved" by experiencing, by supporting, by celebrating and by suffering the pain of the handicapped/crippled people of our communities. This is perhaps a long process and community development efforts needed for to effect change.

Politicians, scholars, community developers, professionals, and even religious groups, keep talking the same language and working at the same issues that "crippled people" in South Texas or along the United States-Mexico border (on both sides). Yet their limited involvement and self-interest make real community development impossible. The problems continue, and the underdevelopment grows deeper. However, the Mennonite church, at least in Brownsville, is trying to do better than that. We must make a difference as a Christian church.

Recently, a volunteer commented that there is a big difference between social services and social justice. This perhaps fits well into what I call "meaningful economic development." Often social services are set up to help people with hand-outs if people follow a set of rules established in order to qualify for help. Needy people are kept in a "system" that is working according to a higher structure. The result is dependency.

Social justice efforts concentrate on empowering people to control their lives. Social justice calls people to a self-discovery process and to use people's potential to create and to develop their lives according to their desires and need for change. Therefore, I believe that community development programs need to incorporate the meaning of social justice in their by-laws.

## **3. Could Peter and John ignore the cripple and go on inside the temple?**

More than ever meaningful community development needs to be encouraged and initiated by the Mennonite church. "Means" meaning that it should be done with a great deal of integrity, and respect. It should focus on the people who participate on both ends--those on the implementation side and those who are recipients.

Perhaps the best way to describe the church-based community development in Brownsville is by the concepts described by Robert D. Lupton in his book, *Returning Flight*. Lupton talks about three important concepts in any Christian community development project today. He redefines the concepts of relocation, redistribution, and reconciliation. These three concepts summarize the potential that a community of faith, (Hispanic Mennonite, or any other Mennonite church), can work at.

**Relocation:** This means that Mennonite Christians are called to move from "comfortable settings" to re-establish or to relocate in those environments where "crippled people" are waiting for our response as a Christian church.

The Mennonite churches play a big role in this process through service programs

and church development when people are helped and challenged to relocate in areas of conflict, in deteriorating neighborhoods, etc. This is not a safe or ideal setting, and it brings sacrifices. But this is where the church is called to be today, in order to renew the church.

**Redistribution:** This means that many critical resources—economic systems, social systems, and needed skills have abandoned “crippled” communities and have been placed in safer and more ideal settings. The Mennonite churches are called to redistribute their resources to communities that have not yet been able to meet basic needs, instead of remodeling church buildings and building new facilities, new programs, and projects.

When I was a volunteer in South Texas I had great difficulty in explaining to a peasant from Central America that “I was a volunteer committed to a simple life style.” As a way of consoling myself I thought that although I could not hide my wealth, at least I was there to contribute something.

Redistribution cannot mean only money but also a redistribution of other wealth, such as education. It can mean vacationing in a poor area, doing business in areas where you normally would not do business, and investing in poor settings.

**Reconciliation:** If those first two concepts can be implemented, reconciliation is more likely to happen among communities that did not have a chance of being part of our church body before. It is clear that when the church is in touch with the poor, that church’s spiritual development and transformation can happen.

I recall a divorced and unemployed woman with five children who was helped by our home repair program. A group of youth from a Mennonite church from the Midwest came, bought materials and helped to put a new roof on her house. After a couple of months and more repair work on her old house, this woman started to talk to us about her pain, her family’s struggles, their great need for reconciliation, with God as well as in their extended family. I felt that finally we were at the gate called Beautiful.

### **Conclusion**

These three concepts—relocation, redistribution, and reconciliation—have been crucial to the development not only of the Mennonite church in Brownsville and its construction program, but also to families and individuals both within and without the church well.



## **Our Growth Toward Community Development: The Experience of Reba Place Fellowship and Reba Place Church**

*Sally Schreiner*

**R**eba Place Fellowship began in 1957 as a group of five Mennonite adults formed a Mennonite Central Committee Voluntary Service unit in a racially changing neighborhood in Evanston, Illinois, just beyond the northern border of Chicago. From the start, founder John W. Miller identified the unit's goal as not only to provide Christian service to meet human need but "to gather together a congregation of believers."<sup>1</sup>

Today that Fellowship has become a church of some 300 members and a communally-owned housing ministry of 22 properties and 125 living units within a 12-block area. The church has launched a separately-incorporated day nursery serving 50 children, and numerous ministries which affect its surrounding community: an outreach to senior citizens, a part-time parish nurse, an after-school program for neighborhood youth, food and clothing depositories, Sonshine Group (a fellowship group for developmentally disabled adults), an evangelistic outreach to neighborhood men and youth, and community organizing to address political and economic structures impacting the area.

### **Some History**

An early writing from the *Reba Place Circular* (June 1958) confirms that Reba Fellowship's leaders desired their life to have an impact on the city dwellers around them:

The life-form of a Christ-centered church community in an urban environment will testify to the power of Christ to shatter the deceptively lonely community of greed which urban man has built and to unite him in a family of love.<sup>2</sup>

In the early years of the Fellowship's life, members worked in schools, social work agencies, and local hospitals and devoted energy to establishing a new kind of intentional Christian community based on the early church modeled in the book of Acts. An early pamphlet, "The Way of Love" describes Fellowship members' intention to model Christ's love through the choice to live in close proximity, through the

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shared economic life of a common treasury, through personal relationships of openness and accountability, and through shared decision making.<sup>3</sup> They tried to communicate their beliefs and radical social concerns through “Open Letters” to friends and neighbors. In 1961, they established a “yoked congregation” relationship with Church of Hope, an experimental communal church among the inner city poor on Chicago’s west side. Personnel exchanges and material assistance flowed between the two groups until urban renewal displaced Church of Hope and most of its white members moved to Reba Place in 1966.

### **The growth of community ministries**

**Reba Place Day Nursery** represents Reba Place Fellowship’s oldest neighborhood ministry. It began on the first floor of one of the Fellowship-owned houses (the space used for worship on Sunday mornings) in 1966 as an outreach primarily to neighborhood children of working mothers, and only incidentally to serve Fellowship children. Hilda Carper, who had worked in children’s ministries at Church of Hope, was its first director. Today, in a second location, recently expanded to include three storefronts, RPDN’s 15 full and part-time staff serve about 50 children of mixed ethnic/racial backgrounds and economic levels. The Day Nursery recently received a \$225,000 grant from the city of Evanston, in recognition of the strong contribution it makes to the day care needs of the South Evanston community. It demonstrates a commitment to children from low-income families by reserving over one third of its enrollment for children funded through Title XX. A \$50,000 HUD grant has recently enabled services to low-income families to expand.

Over the years, many strong relationships have been formed between RPDN staff members and neighborhood parents and children, some of whom have been drawn into the life of Reba Place Church. Lois Shuford, a nursery parent evangelized into Christian commitment and church membership at Reba, is the current director.

**Reba Housing:** By 1959, Mennonite Central Committee concluded its sponsorship of this experimental urban fellowship and members assumed financial responsibility for the two houses on Reba Place where they lived. Up until 1971, properties in the neighborhood were acquired in proportion to the growth of the Fellowship and the amount of space needed to house its members. Though money was often in short supply, God would miraculously supply the resources needed for a down payment from unexpected sources.

In the early 70s, RPF was given opportunity to purchase two local multi-unit apartment buildings (48 units in all) which had 188 housing code violations needing correction. The offer pushed RPF to consider a more active role in the neighborhood to stem the ghettoization of certain “problem buildings” and to become justice-oriented landlords to tenants not involved with the life of the Fellowship. Julius Belser, another long-time Reba elder who came to RPF from being pastor of the Church of Hope, identifies some of the questions this property acquisition posed for RPF:

Could we evict someone? Were we to manage our property for our

neighbors on the same terms that we do for ourselves? We prayerfully proceeded with the assurance to our tenants that they would not need to move as long as things were going well. We have run the buildings on a basically non-profit level and in this way kept the rents at the lower edge of the market.<sup>4</sup>

### **The birth of Reba Place Church**

Until the mid-70s, growth in Fellowship membership had largely come from outside its south Evanston neighborhood. RPF's unique identity as a radical Christian community had attracted idealistic Christian seekers from many parts of the country and even from other countries of the world. Its infectious charismatic worship life began attracting more local folks, however, who were not necessarily convinced of the necessity of total economic sharing as a requirement for church membership. After much prayer and discernment about how to respond to this challenge, the Fellowship reached a decision in 1980 to offer two types of membership—communal and congregational—to those participating with equal integrity in one local body, Reba Place Church. Those remaining in common treasury and joint decision-making structures would retain the name Reba Place Fellowship. Those becoming congregational members would still embrace key features of Reba community life: geographic proximity to one another, radical economic stewardship, relationships of openness and accountability, and seeking the counsel of fellow Christians in making major life decisions.

### **Increased property management**

The resulting numerical growth in the church opened more demand for affordable, accessible rental housing in the Reba neighborhood. Over the years, the Fellowship has acquired seven multi-unit apartment buildings, constituting 97 rental units, managed by **Reba Apartments**. Demand for these units is high, as each size apartment typically has a waiting list of 30-35 people. The 15 houses or smaller two to four unit apartment buildings, constituting 28 units, are managed by **Reba Housing**. Both agencies are managed by Fellowship members.

Ronn Frantz, manager of Reba Apartments since 1988, identifies the housing ministry's purposes as threefold: 1) nurturing intentional Christian community by making housing proximity available, 2) providing affordable housing in the neighborhood, and 3) providing a common work experience for the building crew.

"The common work emphasis has received the least attention in recent years," he notes. "Instead, we have focused on finding, training, and keeping skilled workers so we can make more use of non-skilled workers." Non-skilled workers who have benefitted from employment training here have included children of communal and church members, college students, international visitors, and Cambodian and Central American refugees Reba has hosted over the years. For the first five to ten years, all crew members were communal. Most employees since then have been at least church-related. Presently, the two housing ministries require the services of eight

full-time workers and four part-time workers.

Ronn Frantz says, “I feel comfortable with running Reba Apartments as a business, without contradiction with viewing it as a ministry. If we feel God has called us to this ministry, we ought to manage it in such a way so that the business can continue.”

### **Neighborhood Demographics**

Reba’s presence as property owners and managers has had a definite impact on the neighborhood, both for good and ill. “We’ve contributed important stability in the neighborhood over the years,” Ronn Frantz comments. “In the 60s, our presence moved the neighborhood up, halting white flight and black ghettoization. In the 80s our presence had the opposite effect: it has put constraints on the pressures of gentrification as lots of buildings here were being sold and rehabbed. In the late 80s and early 90s our presence and holdings put downward pressure on how much rents other landlords can ask. Without holding everything, we’ve set a standard to prevent widespread or complete gentrification.”

He goes on, “I believe many of the social problems in our nation stem from economic classes being separated. When resources and awareness of resources are present in one neighborhood, then the neighborhood is better off. I see that [preservation of economic and racial diversity] as the most significant contribution we’ve had on economic and social development in the neighborhood.”

At the same time, Reba’s improvement of its real estate holdings over the years has contributed to the general trend of rising property values in the neighborhood, which have made home ownership out of the question for lower-income residents. Nevin Belser, manager of Reba Housing since 1979, says, “The first couple of houses we bought in the late 50s for \$18,000 or \$20,000. I see comparable houses now going for \$500,000.” He estimates the value of RPF’s current holdings at between six and eight million dollars, depending on the fluctuations of a fickle market. More than 70 percent of the mortgages for Reba Housing are paid off. Reba Apartments have about 50 percent yet to be paid.

In pondering future directions for the communally-owned housing ministry, Belser observes, “Because of our consensus process, involving many different people [communal members number 57 today] with different points of view having to come to unity [whenever a change is proposed], the net effect has been a slow, organic, steady growth in our housing ministry.” Issues under discussion include whether to continue paying off mortgages and build up capital to extend the housing ministry; whether to go into further debt to acquire additional housing more quickly, given scriptural injunctions against indebtedness; or whether to use housing revenues to fund other good causes. A Housing Policy Board of 13 communal members has been formed to work towards broader consensus on these underlying issues.

### **Racial reconciliation and evangelism**

Although the first black residents of the Reba neighborhood were Fellowship mem-

bers, few black neighbors have been attracted to the church over its 37 year history. Racial demographics have stabilized in the neighborhood at 50 percent black and 50 percent white. In the early 90s church members felt convicted to embrace a more deliberate focus on racial reconciliation by calling a black male pastor to join the church staff.

Since 1992 James Offutt has given significant leadership to a more intentional outreach to African-American neighbors around the church through aggressive evangelism and integration of black worship forms into the traditional Reba Sunday service. Music from the Racial Reconciliation Choir, visible African-American leadership down front on Sunday morning, and monthly Sunday evening outreach services to African-Americans have all helped to increase African-American church membership from three to nearly 20 and have drawn additional attenders who now worship at Reba on a regular basis. A group of black Africans, mostly in the U.S. for higher education, have also come to embrace Reba as their home church in recent years.

Offutt has helped take the church to the streets by conducting public memorial services for black neighbors slain through gang violence. He led the church in holding outdoor Sunday evening services in Reba Park, a gathering site for neighborhood youth and illegal drug activity, twice per month during the past summer. And he has encouraged the development of TrueMen, a new evangelistic outreach to African-American men, young men, and boys which is being led by two younger African-American men in the congregation, George Providence in south Evanston and Karl McKinney in the north Chicago neighborhood of Rogers Park.

A church team of a white male and female and a black male and female is presently conducting anti-racism workshops for clusters of 30-40 throughout the church, heightening the awareness of white members, in particular, to systemic causes of racism which must be actively opposed.

### **Community development prospects**

Differences in economic class and educational level are especially apparent between whites and blacks in the Reba neighborhood. Employment stands out as a critical need of African-American males in the south Evanston community. While job creation is sorely needed, Nevin Belser observes that most Reba members have not been successful at starting businesses because they lack the profit motive as an incentive to succeed and they have not been willing to put in the long hours apart from family and church which are necessary to make a business grow.

A notable exception is Jeremy Males, a Reba Church member and local entrepreneur, who has operated his KOG (Kingdom of God) Manufacturing Company in nearby Skokie for several years now as an employment and discipleship ministry for 8-10 men. In his machine shop he has hired recently-released prisoners, Cambodian refugees, persons with mental illness, and church-related folk who have had difficulty finding employment. As he anticipates retiring from the business of manufacturing specialized drill bits, he dreams of establishing a worker-owned and operated

co-operative which can continue to provide employment and Christian character development.

James Offutt, himself an entrepreneur who runs a family sports equipment manufacturing firm on the side, dreams of creating more jobs through more extensive marketing of his free-standing basketball hoop games. He also talks about starting a Reba business to subcontract parts of another intentional community's toy manufacturing business.

Offutt has been working with the Evanston Clergy Association to secure funds for the six-month start-up of the WORTH (Work Opportunity Reorientation Training Help) Program, a vehicle for Christians in the city to provide part-time temporary work experiences for African-American young people in sales and services.

Males' and Offutt's talk of co-ops stems from their exposure in recent months to the story of the successful worker cooperative movement based in the village of Mondragon among the Basque people of northern Spain.<sup>5</sup>

Another Reba player influenced by the cooperative model is a newly-created legal entity called the Reba Development Corporation (RDC.) Its eight-member board includes communal and congregational church members with legal, pastoral, social service, building management, real estate development and business expertise. RDC formed to mount a proposal that an abandoned Nabisco factory building in the neighborhood be turned into a multi-generational housing development project for low-income neighbors. Before they could bring together the necessary partners in funding, they were outbid by a developer with a goal of turning the building into loft condominiums.

RDC has now turned its focus on purchasing a 12-unit "problem building," known in the neighborhood for its drug trafficking, and making the building a low-income cooperative owned by its residents. This would be a new step for Reba in that it is not a communal project involving communal funds or staff. With a likely purchase cost of \$500,000 and fix-up cost of \$300-400,000, government subsidy will need to be secured to keep the cost per unit down to an acquisition level lower-income residents can afford. Julius Belser and Jim Offutt dream of bringing in master carpenters through Mennonite Disaster Service or Voluntary Service to train and supervise local unemployed neighbors to help with the rehabilitation work.

RUN has formed committees focused on public safety, housing, communications, family/youth recreation, special events, and employment. A health care committee is being developed as a means of entering into dialogue with St. Francis Hospital about its commitment to the neighborhood. RUN's leaders aim to be diligent in monitoring developmental activities in the community to insure that hiring comes from the neighborhood. RUN hopes to secure tax-exempt status at some point in the future in order to be able to secure federal funds for housing development and job creation to work in complementarity with what Reba Place is already doing. It is tied into the larger network of the Evanston Neighborhood Conference which coordinates the activities of all neighborhood organizations. Offutt has been pleased with the representation of renters as well as property owners at RUN meetings. The local

alderman, the city mayor, the city manager and all city department heads have come to engage in dialogue with RUN members and hear their concerns.

### **Concluding reflections**

From this brief survey of the Reba Place Fellowship and Church's steps toward community development, some patterns emerge. In seeking to establish a certain quality of life for themselves in the city, members have ended up benefiting the surrounding community as well. Is this the result of enlightened self-interest or Christian faithfulness? Perceptions and interpretations, even among Reba members, are mixed. Some are pleased with the slow, organic growth of Reba's holistic community development endeavors. Others feel Reba has been too focused on its internal life and has contributed to the "suburban indifference" all too common to anonymous city life.

The discovery of the dead body of a young black man slain in gang warfare in the yard of a Reba property in the summer of 1986 sounded a wake-up call to invest more intentionally in neighborhood relationships. "This kind of thing happens when we're not in touch with each other and are distant from our neighbors—people fall through the cracks," Julius Belser remarks. "Our neighbor's need is our responsibility. That's the whole point of the Good Samaritan story our Master told us."

Some Reba members, like Belser and the others who came with him from the Church of Hope on Chicago's west side, have long nourished the desire to be more intentionally involved with the poor and unchurched around RPF and RPC. Others younger or newer to Reba are just now overcoming fears and racial stereotypes to the point where they are feeling at home in the neighborhood and better able to reach out.

To this author, it seems as if Reba now stands at a "kairos moment" in its life as a faith community. Having established credibility in the city and neighborhood through its stable presence amidst racial and economic fluctuations, the Reba body is poised at the brink of entering more deeply and substantially into the life of its neighborhood. Without a racially integrated leadership team, this deeper involvement would have been difficult, if not impossible. But God has been putting the necessary pieces in place to allow social and spiritual transformation to come together.

Building more genuine neighborhood relationships, sharing the Gospel, and forming ecumenical and public/private partnerships to facilitate housing, job development, educational and political empowerment ministries—all will take time and focused attention which have heretofore been invested more internally in the church's development. Certainly we need to count the cost. But may we be emboldened and empowered to plunge ahead and continue to learn from our experience and our mistakes. For as Jeremiah counseled the exiles in Babylon:

Seek the peace of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer. 29:7)

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>2</sup> *Reba Place Circular*, No. 1, June, 1958, p. 2, Reba Place Church Archives, Evanston, Illinois, as cited in Dave and Neta Jackson, *Glimpses of Glory*, p. 75.
- <sup>3</sup> "The Way of Love," date uncertain, Reba Place Church Archives, Evanston, Illinois.
- <sup>4</sup> Belser, Julius, "Affordable Housing - RPF Experience," February 3, 1989 address to Evanston Ecumenical Action Council, Reba Place Church Archives, Evanston, Illinois.
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## A Theological Basis for Community-based Development

*Arden Shank*

Community-based development looks comprehensively at a neighborhood, seeing its strengths and weaknesses. It looks at the social, economic, political, and spiritual health of the neighborhood. As a person with theological training, I have done this “looking” with theological eyes. What follows is my way of making sense out of so many unjust and senseless activities and structures whose result is poverty.

My particular place of looking has been LaCasa of Goshen, Inc. LaCasa is a community development corporation founded by churches in Goshen on an inter-faith basis to create opportunities within low-income and Hispanic communities. We operate programs providing affordable rental housing, options for homeownership, emergency assistance, immigration services, neighborhood organizing and planning, and cultural celebrations.

For 25 years LaCasa has been a change agent in the Goshen area. LaCasa has been a voice for the marginal, for the Hispanic minority, and for low-income people. The people who started LaCasa worked at change in several different ways. As a small organization in a small town, LaCasa was, as it is now, only a small speck on the horizon of injustice and problems.

### **Alternative to the dominant view**

Community-based development was built upon the notion that all the residents in a community have a right to equal access to the economic and social resources of society regardless of income level or cultural and racial origin. Community efforts to revitalize neighborhoods emerged because this equal access was denied to some races, neighborhoods, and people.

While our democratic ideal calls for a society where everyone is equal, often the dominant culture around us uses power and violence in order to reward only some. Our society’s structures and systems have created a large number of people who have been cut off from the resources necessary to maintain a decent standard of living. The dominant culture, including most banks, retail outlets, manufacturing, theater and the arts, and religious organizations abandon some neighborhoods. Decisions in

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far-away corporate offices effect neighborhoods in negative ways.

I have needed a new way to conceptualize this right to equal access, and the accompanying denial of this right. Too often Mennonite thinking and experience have trained us to say that poverty was not our fault. Or we thought serving overseas was the primary way of working at justice. Some Mennonites' experience was so separatist that others' poverty was an unknown quantity.

Most community-based development organizations view their neighborhood differently than the way the larger society does. Neighborhood problems like decaying infrastructure, residents having no voice in community affairs, and the lack of affordable housing and other services can be changed through community-based development. The self-help ideas of broad community participation, of repairing the neighborhood, and of adequate resources is rooted in our Anabaptist history.

Walter Brueggemann's small book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, has provided a beginning point for me to think about my work. Brueggemann claims that the Hebrew faith shaped the community of Moses as an alternative to the royal consciousness exhibited by the surrounding nations and much of the kingship of Israel. The differences came in politics, economics, and religion:

- a politics of justice, not a politics of oppression
- an economics of equality, not an economics of affluence
- a religion of God's freedom, not a religion of God's accessibility<sup>1</sup>

Brueggemann says, "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."<sup>2</sup>

This perspective has allowed many community development people to be critical of the existing systems when necessary. When a neighborhood's people are being cut off from resources, community development leaders articulate the problem and offer alternatives.

An example from my experience took place in the mid 1980's when Goshen had a shortage of affordable housing, a municipal housing code that was not enforced, and a public perception that nothing could be done about either. It was LaCasa as a community development organization that articulated an alternative view. LaCasa was critical of the existing housing conditions and the housing code and also assisted in creating new options for housing and helped write a new code. LaCasa, however, did not do this alone. There were low-income tenants, realtors, local government officials, landlords, attorneys, and social workers who worked together for the good of the entire community.

Community development work is not a one-sided, always-oppose-the-powers-that-be approach. Rather, at its best, community development brings all the persons and groups affected by the change together. It creates a level playing field so that those often left out of the decision-making process are given a voice. Those who are often cut off economically or socially become beneficiaries of the community resources.

Community development brings together the best of the dominant system with the best of the neglected communities. Neglected communities need the education,

the money, and the power that the larger dominant culture has. But the goal is not to completely strip the larger culture of its resources. Proverbs says it well:

Remove far from me falsehood and lying;  
 give me neither poverty nor riches;  
 feed me with the food that is needful for me,  
 lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, "Who is the Lord?"  
 or lest I be poor, and steal, and profane name of my God. (Prov. 30:8,9)

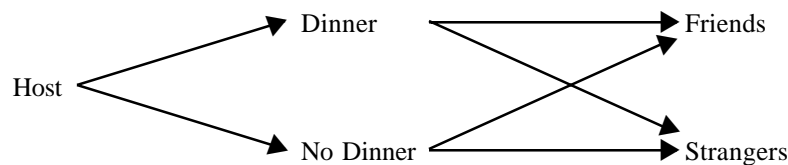
Conceptually, Walter Wink refines the discussion more when he writes that, while the contrast between the two different views is a very sharp contrast, the alternative view, or God's domination-free order, contains the opposites within it. "God's reign does not represent the polar opposite of the Domination System. Otherwise it would need the latter to supply the tension of the opposites. The opposites are contained **within** God's reign."<sup>3</sup>

The use of money, power, connections, and leverage are not the sole possession of the Domination System. It is not inherently wrong to own or use these assets. Community development organizations, which in my mind represent little dots of God's reign, also use money, power, connections, and leverage. They use them for the benefit of neglected communities. Through building alternative structures, they enable neighborhoods to speak for themselves and their own economic and social well-being.

This alternative consciousness and approach is exemplified in Jesus's banquet story in Matthew 22, Luke 14, and the Gospel of Thomas 64.<sup>4</sup> While each of the three stories contains varying details, the general story is that an individual with power prepares for a feast and sends his servants to invite his well-off friends. They decline, saying they have other things to do. The host is angry and invites others, anyone, to the feast. Luke specifically says that "the poor and maimed and blind and lame" were brought in for the feast.

John Dominic Crossan does a very helpful analysis of this parable. He says that this parable is a simple, absolute "situational reversal." The invited are absent and the uninvited are present. Parables like this "shatter the deep structure of our accepted world....They remove our defenses and make us vulnerable to God."<sup>5</sup>

He diagrams the parable in this way:



"Read: one expects a host to have his friends at dinner and not strangers, but in the story strangers are present and friends are absent, all quite plausibly."<sup>6</sup> In the story this reversal is unexpected and very thorough.

While Crossan's identification of the reversal is helpful, his concluding that the

parable shatters the structures of our world does not go far enough. This parable contains a clear social and political message that goes far beyond the personal, spiritual realm. Whose world is being shattered? Whose defenses are removed? Who is made vulnerable to God? Is it the homeless victim of domestic violence with three pre-school children? Is it the family of five with an annual income of \$14,000 who know no English and their only wage earner is fired from a job because of speaking Spanish instead of English?

I do not think so. These are the folks for whom the parable comes as good news. They are now being invited to the banquet, and not by just any host. It is Jesus who is doing the inviting.

Those whose world was being shattered were those in power and control. According to the parable, Jesus went to those in religious and political power with the invitation. They rejected the invitation.

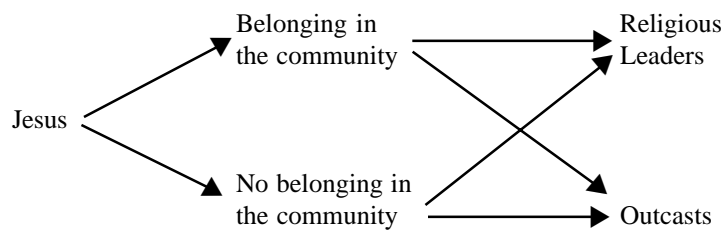
I think Jesus, by using the parable, made it very clear to whom he was directing his ministry. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza claims that Jesus opened the faith community for three specific groups of people: 1) the destitute poor; 2) the sick and crippled; and 3) tax collectors, sinners, and prostitutes. She describes each of these groups in some detail and concludes: “sinners, prostitutes, beggars, tax collectors, the ritually polluted, the crippled, and the impoverished—in short, the scum of Palestinian society—constituted the majority of Jesus’ followers.”<sup>7</sup> In this way the last have become first. Jesus was not neutral; he took sides. It was not his intent, however, to turn society upsidedown by creating a new included group and a new excluded group. Rather, his effort was to include all.

Jesus’s invitation to dinner was a show of hospitality. It was a way of inclusion, of making the rejected outcast be a part of the accepted community. Belonging in the community resulted from the participation in the banquet.

These folks from the under side of society are often the victims of oppression. The Bible makes a direct connection between poverty and oppression. One hundred twenty-two texts indicate that oppression is the cause of poverty.<sup>8</sup> The Bible comes to us with a biased perspective.

Relationship with the poor reflects “God’s special concern” and our own faithfulness to the gospel.<sup>9</sup> John Perkins’s recent book on Christian community development gives many examples of authentic relationships with the poor.

To understand the banquet parable in its social, economic, political, and religious context, another diagram of double reversal is needed:



Read: one expects Jesus to join the religious and political leaders in their vision of community and in their socio-economic class and shun the outcasts, but in the Gospels the outcasts, not the religious and political leaders, make up the kingdom about which Jesus preaches.

The unexpected reversal, where power is used fairly, where economic resources benefit the entire community, and where the societal outcasts can belong, is what community-based development is all about. At its best community-based development holds the tension of the opposites within the community in a healthy way. The unexpected ones, those who have not been part of the process nor benefited from it, are invited into the development process along with the power people.

This theological context of alternative consciousness and reversal has nurtured and guided my involvement in community development over the past nine years.

The “alternativeness” of this perspective is not to be understood as separateness. One of the primary traditional Mennonite understandings of alternativeness has been marked by a physical and geographical separateness such as Mennonite dress and Mennonite community. Its purpose has been to preserve and protect the Mennonite faith and tradition. The kind of alternativeness to which I refer leads one to direct and often intense engagement with the society around us. Its purpose is not to preserve the faith; we can confidently leave that in God’s care. It is rather to work for justice, equity, fairness, and wholeness within the human community.

### **Biblical texts about community development**

The undergirding of church involvement in community-based development is supported in the Bible. Numerous texts and stories need to be examined in light of the above theological context. I will comment on a few.

With our history of service and giving, we have often heard about charity. The role of the faith community in providing immediate charitable help is clearly spelled out in the Bible. Numerous texts like Matt. 6:1-4; Matt. 25:31-46; I John 3:16-17; and James 1:27 make it incumbent upon the believer to give to the poor. The Old Testament frequently calls the faith community to care for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger.

In the last generation or so we have also heard a great deal about advocacy. The role of the faith community as an advocate for the poor and the marginal is also very clear in the Bible. Texts such as Ps. 12:5 and Luke 1:51-53 show God taking sides with the poor, or being their advocate and protector.

Each year at Advent I read Mary’s Magnificat with amazement: “The hungry he has satisfied with good things, the rich sent empty away.” (Luke 1:53) There are thousands of people that sing these words every year and most probably do not know what they are singing, and if they did, would not agree. Mary’s claim is a powerful statement for equity and fairness. Our role as advocates grows clearly out of our faith as Mary expressed it. The Hebrew prophet Jeremiah said that to know God is to do justice. (Jer 22:16)

Jesus' response to the woman accused of adultery (John 7:53-8:11) is another example of advocacy in the New Testament.

The Mennonite Central Committee Peace Section office in Washington, D.C., established 25 years ago, symbolizes the emergence of the role of the Mennonite church as a advocate for the marginalized. Delton Franz has an excellent small article in the *Peace Section Washington Memo* entitled "Advocacy: A Biblical Calling."<sup>10</sup> He lists advocacy "on behalf of those unable to petition our government officials" as one of the three principle functions of the Peace Section Office.

Advocacy work done by community-based development organizations includes dialogue not only with federal government officials, but also with state and local government, banks, and other providers of economic and social services.

Advocacy means both interceding on behalf of one person in a situation of injustice, abuse, or deprivation, and also working for systemic change so that situations of injustice, abuse, and deprivation do not occur.

While charity and advocacy are clearly the resulting activities of a faithful church, the church must go beyond those to a more comprehensive approach which includes economic and social development. Investment of the church's time and dollars in community-based development is a legitimate, faithful response.

The following four texts are examples of community-based development. The themes of self-development and inclusion of the marginal are addressed in these texts. A thorough analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

### **Leviticus 25**

The jubilee theme in Leviticus 25 has been explored by a number of scholars as the basis for social and economic justice efforts. Its use by the prophets and Jesus is well known.

A more complete analysis would include looking at Jubilee as the conceptual basis for community-based development. What clues are there to guide a neighborhood or a church in revitalization of its community?

Much of community development is concerned with creating ways for low-income people to build assets. Usually poor people do not overcome poverty by **earning** their way out. Rather poverty is overcome by building assets over a period of time, assets like a home, a small business, or an education. A relatively new legislative movement is forming at both the federal and state levels which is proposing mechanisms for asset-building for low-income people.<sup>11</sup> LaCasa is in the beginning stages of creating mechanisms as part of our on-going programs that enable low-income people to build assets for future use. Jubilee is about how the marginal, poor people can retain control of economic assets. Many texts in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy deal with the fair and equitable distribution or redistribution of land and property.

Many churches have huge assets in their buildings, pension funds, and retirement accounts that could be "socially invested" toward the Jubilee goal of assisting low-income people and neighborhoods to retain or maintain control of assets, such

as housing and small businesses.

### **II Kings 4:1-7**

The terse, yet powerful story in II Kings 4:1-7 is about a nameless woman with two sons and many debts.<sup>12</sup> The creditor threatens to take the sons for payment of the debts. The woman pleads with the prophet Elisha for help. He tells her to borrow lots of pots from the neighbors and shut herself in her house with the pots, her two sons, and her only possession of worth, a jar of oil. Elisha told her to fill all of the pots with oil. When they completed the task as instructed, Elisha told her, “Go, sell the oil and pay your debts, and **you and your sons can live on the rest.**” (Emphasis added.)

The prophet not only met the immediate need of preventing the sons from being sold off to slavery, but provided a means based on what she already had to maintain her life. Common results of poverty are debt and no way to provide for the future. In this story the prophet addresses both problems.

### **Isaiah 58**

This chapter sets a worship context. It says that worship without relationship is not acceptable to God. God is looking for worshippers who free the oppressed, feed the hungry, house the homeless, and clothe the naked. (vs. 6-7) God will accompany or look out for those worshippers. (v. 8) The relationship between worship and justice, faith and action is an integral part of Christian tradition. Other texts like Amos 5:21-24 also make this same point.

The chapter moves on to make a direct connection between faithful worship and rebuilding the ruins.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in. (v. 12)

The rebuilding was more than handing out goods to desperate people, although it may have included that. It was more than being an advocate with the powers in control, although it included that, too. Rebuilding meant developing an entire community including the physical, social, economic, and religious structures needed for healthy life.

### **Nehemiah**

Nehemiah, of course, was the leader of the rebuilding, of which Isaiah spoke. While scholars legitimately debate the religious impact of the work of Nehemiah and his cohort, Ezra, clearly there was a massive rebuilding of the temple, the city wall, and the entire city of Jerusalem. It is an example of community development.

There was a profound commitment to rebuilding, there was clear leadership, and the task at hand was crucial to the survival of the community. The task was very difficult, with many opportunities for failure.

One writer says, “the Book of Nehemiah is a story about the total transformation

of a rundown settlement suffering from economic exploitation and community apathy.”<sup>13</sup> The Book of Nehemiah contains all of the economic, social, political, and religious intrigue that community-based development practitioners face today in the United States.

### **The art of hope**

The whole notion of community-based development is predicated on the hope that change and wholeness are worth striving for. Our faith, our Anabaptist roots, invite us to be hopeful people looking for change in our communities as well as in ourselves.

The early church theologian Augustine said that hope is the greatest, not love, as the Apostle Paul said in I Corinthians.<sup>14</sup> We are created for hope. This advent theme is a year-around one. Augustine maintained that faith only tells us that God **is** and love only tells that God is **good**, but hope tells us that God will effectively carry out God’s will. God’s will is justice for all and God will accomplish what God has set out do. HOPE is the awareness that God will do what God has promised.

Augustine goes on to say that hope has two lovely daughters: anger and courage. Anger, so that what can not and must not be, may not be. Courage, so that what must be, will be. Or to say it another way, anger at the way things are and the courage to change them.

Hope must be the foundation of our work. Not to hope is deadly. Community-based development practitioners see the underside of life and society. We see the way things are stacked. We know our own feebleness. We know how hard it is to change ourselves and the structures around us. Hope for change and justice provides us the motivation for our work.

Hope comes through serious analysis of the social, economic, and political realities around us. Development done in a vacuum, ignorant of the realities of a given community, is worthless.

Analysis will ask the simple questions which are so fundamental to doing the most helpful development in the best possible way. The questions are simple, but revealing.

1. Who makes the decisions?
2. Who benefits from the decisions?
3. Who bears the cost of the decisions?<sup>15</sup>

The analysis generated by these questions provides us a tested and honest basis through which hope emerges. Hope is the solid foundation for community-based development.

Hope on the part of faithful people is possible even when the dominant culture says that the situation around us is hopeless. Careful analysis from an alternative perspective reinforces hope. A profound statement of hope in a negative political and economic situation comes from Jeremiah 29. Jeremiah the prophet, contrary to conventional wisdom, says the future of the Jewish community at that time was with the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar instead of the Jewish kingdom. The prophet

encouraged Jews to move to Babylon, build houses, start businesses, and settle in with their families. "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." (v. 7) Hope and development are closely tied together in this text.

Community-based development is an expression of faith, faith that change can take place. Community-based development practitioners are on the front-lines of mission, creating alternative structures in housing, small business, the arts, and other areas. Our work is undergirded by a faith tradition which empowers marginal people and neighborhoods toward wholeness and justice. Numerous Biblical stories are ripe for further exploration. Hope propels us into the future.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophet Imagination*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1978, pp. 36-37.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, pp. 46-47.

<sup>4</sup> My analysis of this parable is drawn from my paper entitled "The Allegorical Coup" written for a Greek Exegesis class on the Parables at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in 1984.

<sup>5</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story*, Allen, Texas: Argus Communications, 1975, pp. 120-122, and *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*, New York: Harper & Row, 1973, p. 73.

<sup>6</sup> Crossan, *The Dark Interval*, p. 118.

<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, New York: Crossroads, 1983, p. 122-129.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Hanks, "Why People Are Poor," in *Sojourners*, January, 1981, p. 19-22.

<sup>9</sup> John Perkins, *Beyond Charity: The Call to Christian Community Development*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993, pp. 64-67.

<sup>10</sup> Delton Franz, "Advocacy: A Biblical Calling," in the *Mennonite Central Committee Peace Section Washington Memo*, September/October, 1993, vol. XXV, no. 5, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Sherraden, *Assets and the Poor: A New American Welfare Policy*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1991.

<sup>12</sup> I first heard this use of this text from Old Testament Professor Millard Lind in chapel at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in the early 1980s.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth D. Tollefson, "Social Transformation in Nehemiah" in *Transformation*, Jan/Mar, 1989, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon Cosby, pastor of Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., quoting Dorothy Soelle, a feminist theologian, "The Biblical Basis of Hope," a sermon at Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., December 16, 1990.

<sup>15</sup> Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books and Washington, D.C.: Center of Concern, 1983, p. 28.

## **Church and Mission in Europe 1988 - 1994: A Reflective Assessment**

*Hansulrich Gerber*

### **Introduction**

**T**his presentation is what its title suggests: a reflective assessment, a collection of observations in various spheres of European society. It is an attempt to name various developments and phenomena. The first part of this assessment will be a headline-style overview of the preoccupations of the years in question, and then we will glance at the development in terms of various fields, culture, economy, church and mission, Mennonites.

### **Headlines over the 5-year period:**

1989 - The fall of the Berlin Wall: the power of non-violent spiritual revolution and the major role of church as people.

1990 - After the wall: reunification of East and West in Germany and what it means for the church; the EKD (Evangelische Kirche Deutschlands) behaves parallel to the state; West swallows East; collapse of East European regimes.

1991 - European Community: preparing the move from a common market to a common society.

1992 - Yugoslavia: after almost 50 years, outbreak of war on European soil

1993 - Crisis in Europe: genocide again; worst economic crisis since WW II; Russia threatens to tumble into violence and chaos.

### **Culture**

The question of a European culture is sometimes asked. Moving towards a unified Europe has demonstrated with increasing force that while there are precursors and pioneers or heralds of a European culture (Comenius, Sattler, Rousseau, de Rougemont, to name a few), one can hardly speak of a European culture. The ideal of the free exchange of goods, ideas, and people across borders of the European community is in question. Europe (or what was assumed to be Europe) has experienced an unexpected expansion. Europe is often thought to equal with Western Europe. For West Europeans, Eastern Europe has until recently been as far away or further than Africa. European unity is also in question because the old partners have

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great difficulty in agreeing on common terms. What appeared as the biggest handicap for unity in 1990 through 1992, namely agriculture, has been somehow resolved and was immediately replaced by an even bigger threshold: culture in general. In 1993 protesters, many from the fields of film and music, marched the streets in France with the words “We shall not let our agri-CULTURE be destroyed by GATT” (General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs). For once, and perhaps the first time since the revolution, farmers, artists and intellectuals were united. Some old social boundaries fade while others are renewed and strengthened. At the same time as the Chunnel (direct train connection between France and Britain) opens, there is discussion in France about banning Anglicisms from language. American influence and domination is welcomed in some instances and is deplored in other instances. Still, generally it is true that a new European self-consciousness is growing, in Europe, both East and West.

Forty-five years after World War II the re-emergence of ultranationalism and of fascism across the continent, is cause for much concern and debate. Fundamental questions arise: Has the idea of federalism failed? Is it adequate to try to convince the East to use a system that is crumbling at our hands? What has gone wrong with democracy and freedom? Has Europe ever sincerely addressed the issues of racism?

The youth cultures—Teddis, Punks, Rockers, Skinheads, Rappers—are relevant forces in business and culture. Their exponents are teenagers and younger, and belonging often takes a quasi-religious significance. Movies reflect a sense of nihilism, no-future and disgust of everything invented by the adult world. At the same time, polls claim that for two generations the desire to marry and have a family has not been as popular as it is among teenagers now. For decades, American programs have dominated television; now EuroNews is attempting to provide a European counterpart of CNN (less biased); and a European version of MTV (more brutal) is keeping thousands of youth in front of the screen.

Add to that the chain businesses swarming over from North America: you can find our favorite restaurant or shop wherever you go. Walking out of the underground pass from the Budapest train station, you face MacDonaldis, Dunkin Donuts, Pizza Hut, KFC, all on the same block.

**Conclusion:** The most adequate adjective for Europe’s culture of the late 80’s and early 90’s is “contradictory.” The Missiologist and World Council of Churches pioneer Willem Visser’t Hooft pointed out in the seventies that the debate of European culture floats between three forces: Christianity, scientific rationalism, and neo-pagan vitalism. The nineties make it amply clear what Visser’t Hooft was talking about, except that “Christianity” would now be replaced or complemented with “Religiosity,” and that neo-pagan vitalism has gained the bulk of power.

### **Economy**

Europe has entered the most serious economical crisis since WW II. Unemployment and homelessness are at a peak. Switzerland, which has not known unemployment rates above one percent for decades, is faced with the quadrupling of unemployment

and a threatening collapse of the social security system. In the Western countries the “new poverty” was a shocking reality, and in the East the lost job security became a rude awakening. The loss of mighty markets in the Eastern bloc has meant meager times for many companies. Business needs markets, but in order to create markets, there has to be buying power. Buying power is made possible by business. Western market economy apparently has made its calculations without considering the other side should become real partners. Banks and corporate structures in the West have crumbled under the burden of such change and blind investment over the past several years.

### **Church and Mission**

State and official Churches are facing an accelerated decline of resources and membership. Secular and church papers speak of mass exodus from these churches. At the same time, religious groups and many free churches seem to be blossoming. The house church movement is one major area of growth, although little of it is visible in public. Contemplative spirituality is sought by many so that in many churches you find brochures about opportunities for retreat and spiritual edification. Articles appear with titles such as “Was kommt nach der Volkskirche?” (What will replace the people’s church?) The term Volkskirche can hardly be translated adequately. Often Volkskirche is identical to or derives from State Church.

One of the striking observations after our return to Europe after several years in North America was the complete absence of the notion of church in anything that deals with the issues and problems of people’s lives. Although according to polls, a majority believe in God’s existence and power, only a very small faction has active church involvement.

This indicates a striking irrelevance of church as a force in society and as a factor in life. Counselors on finance, marriage and education, for the most part seem to ignore the presence and potential of church in the concerns they address. Yet the church is capable, often involuntarily, of making headlines: celibacy of priests, ordination of women and appointment of bishops have generated heated public discussions in society at large which suggests that the church is, in spite of herself, still a functioning social factor.

Books and discussions, for example by Hans Kung and Eugen Drewermann, both Catholic theologians in some dissent with Rome, have caught the attention of large audiences on topics related to ethical issues and to the role of the church. It appears that while the main Protestant churches are struggling with loss of members and decreasing resources, the Catholic church is faced with a growing mass of increasingly frustrated members. How long will it take until the distance between the constituency and the hierarchy causes the structure to collapse?

In Eastern Europe, the Orthodox church might be facing a similar challenge, although sanctuaries are full. Fragmentation and loss of traditional authority occur in a time when people feel attracted to Orthodox spirituality—increasingly so in the West. When the Eastern countries opened up for traveling and activities, there was

much talk of the spiritual and moral vacuum there. Taking a closer look, however, revealed amazingly the quantity and quality of spiritual and community movements. One such movement is the Bokor movement in Hungary, with an unknown number of house cells, meeting weekly or bi-weekly for Bible study and prayer. The Bokor people have been committed to tithing and to conscientious objection to military service for about 40 years. Thus practically all male members of Bokor had been in prison under communist rule.

A new theme for the church at large is the encounter with and challenge of a growing Islamic community in Europe. The difficulty of this is not only in the historical distance between Christianity and Islam but also in the differing Christian approaches. For those who use caution and call for renewed efforts in evangelism, the call for dialogue and understanding by others is seen as compromising. London is reported to have a larger number of mosques than churches. In parts of France, the Islamic communities outnumber the Christian ones by far. There are reports of women in Switzerland converting to Islam, because it gives them more security in terms of community.

In the church media, particularly of the mainline churches, there is an increasing prominence of peace and justice issues. During the crisis in Somalia and Bosnia, the media appeared to be cynical about the peace and justice movement, even within the churches, because of their perceived silence, protesting the West's military involvement during the Gulf war.

The Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the first European Protestant Assembly, held in Budapest in 1992, both stress the importance of a strengthened Christian witness in Europe in responding to the trends of exclusivity along the lines of national, racial, economical, and religious status. The first European Ecumenical Assembly "Peace in Justice," Basel, 1988 spelled out in its final statement several house rules for coexistence in Europe. Its main points are:

- the principle of equality of all inhabitants, strong or weak;
- the recognition of values such as freedom, justice, tolerance, solidarity, and participation;
- an open attitude towards members of other religions and world views, in other words, personal contacts and exchange;
- resolution of conflicts through dialogue rather than by violent means.

The underlying assumption in the efforts of CEC and the Protestant Assembly is that Europe needs to be rebuilt after the fall of the Berlin wall, and that the churches' responsibility in this is to encourage justice and the overcoming of social boundaries, based on the reconciling gospel of Christ. The theme for the second European Ecumenical Assembly, to be held in 1997, will be "Reconciliation—Gift of God and Source of New Life."

While churches involved in the ecumenical movement focus on contributing their part to the Common European House, a term coined by Michail Gorbachev, evangelical free churches tend to draw ideas and resources from the North American church growth movement. If there has been progress in inter-church or ecumenical

movement, the breach between self-preoccupied evangelical churches and the wider ecumenical churches is as deep as ever. In my town, when the churches invite each other for common services twice a year, there are usually Reformed, Catholic, Mennonite and Salvation Army leaders and some of their members. The other more than a dozen congregations remain unrepresented. This seems to be a pattern across the country, with Methodists and Baptists participating in some places. There is much diversity in the church in Europe. Whatever the differences are, and however much the old denominational divisions still dictate much of the debate, the single deepest division is between evangelical and ecumenical Christians.

In conclusion I would say that the church in Europe is challenged to: consolidate Christian cooperation; resist the temptation of fragmentation; become a reconciling and prophetic body.

### **Mennonites**

Is there a European Mennonite Church? A European Mennonite Regional Conference was held in 1988 and again in 1993. There is no European Mennonite church umbrella or structure, except for the European working committees on peace and on mission. The missions committee EMEK, however, decided to dissolve within one year's time, with its responsibilities going to the country committees.

Conference chairs decided at MERK (European Mennonite Regional Conference) in 1993 to get together annually for sharing and comparing notes. Simultaneously with the call for better structures which allow European Mennonites to encounter and share, one can observe the trend towards localized initiatives for relief, peace and service. IMO might prove itself as a platform for pooling certain projects, where the lead often is taken by a specific regional or local body.

The influx of Aussiedler, although important in numbers, has so far been small in how it affected existing Mennonite churches. It is often thought that the Aussiedler are a unified mass *vis-a-vis* the other Mennonite churches. To divide Mennonites in Europe into two groups, Aussiedler and traditional, is quite inaccurate. For one reason, Aussiedler are no more unified among themselves than are the other Mennonites. In fact, a rather large proportion of Aussiedler churches which were expected to be identified as Mennonites have grown into their own independent groups. Some have chosen to be affiliated with the Baptist denomination. Actually, the term Aussiedler is most accurate when speaking of people who migrated to Germany within the last couple of years.

It is important to note that among the many newly established churches in Germany, the characteristics that distinguish them from traditional churches are not only in theology but also in sociology: size of families, leadership patterns, understanding of self and of community, economical potential. Perhaps these are the strongest factors in making the difference. It then also indicates that within the next generation, profound change within these now relatively homogeneous communities is to be expected. As an example, in Neuwied there is a new neighborhood which people call "Little Moscow." It has new, large family houses, well built, and a church

center nearby. A visit to this area gives an insight to a world foreign in modern individualistic society. In church life, independence seems to be a common trend, not only for congregations or clusters of congregations, but also for agencies. TABEA and LOGOS, the two largest agencies initiated from among Aussiedler can be identified as independent organizations.

In drawing a map of Mennonites in Europe, one could at least identify the following Mennonite denominations: German Mennonites as under the umbrella of AMG (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Mennonitischer Gemeinden in Deutschland), Dutch Mennonites as under ADS (Algemene Doopsgezinde Societeit), Swiss and French Mennonites under their respective conferences, European Mennonite Brethren under BEMB (Bund Europaischer Mennoniten-Brudergemeinden), and the British Anabaptist-Mennonites who have developed a distinct identity. In Britain and Ireland you find the Anabaptist Network that demonstrates the missionary potential of the British Mennonites. It seems to me that there is a significant indication of future directions for an Anabaptist vision and mission in Europe. The rider that one immediately needs to add here is the fact that the language barrier seems to be an effective factor.

Mennonites in Europe face a multi-layered challenge: one that has to do with the profound change in their own ranks, the enormous confusion and turnover in European political, economical and cultural spheres and the question of what the mission of the church in such a context might look like.

## Reflections on Church, Mission and Society in the Former Soviet Union Today

*Walter W. Sawatsky*

### Key features of the transformation

**A**lthough it is a widespread truism that the stages of metanoia include repentance, conversion and then new personhood (2 Cor. 5:17), it is not common for free church persons to think of applying those stages to a people, a nation, a country. That is due, no doubt, to the fact that the believers churches emerged in the modern era, as an expression of the democratic impulse and the steadily increasing focus on the human individual. But metanoia for a people is a common theme in the Old Testament; indeed the new peoplehood themes of Ephesians and I Peter are more communal than our usual spiritualizing tendency allows.

The former USSR (FSU) has been passing through such a massive moral and spiritual transformation. What we say about the churches, the mission agencies and the social/political developments there would be too easily analogous to North American notions, were we not to remind ourselves of the earthshaking national proportions of their transformation. Their own rhetoric has been self-consciously spiritual. For us therefore, to consider that process primarily in the popular western categories of GNP, living standards based on our cost of living codes, or on electoral prospects of a handful of politicians, is to trivialize a process of transformation that has become quite overwhelming.

The Perestroika era made it possible for the people of the FSU to experience national repentance. Solzhenitsyn long ago had spelled out what such a repentance should be about—a rejection of the grand lie, of one's own personal participation in the lie. It meant a specific renunciation of Stalinism and even Leninism, and it meant that the church leaders needed to acknowledge their complicity or their failure of nerve. There is by now a short list of significant writings telling the story of how those renunciations of past deeds have been attempted. The magnitude of repentance still carries the day, even though the voices demanding a reassertion of national pride, power and dominance were unexpectedly strong in the Russian Federal elections of December 12, 1993. The later reaction should be seen over against

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of the fact that there has been no serious self-examination by Western society—rather a spirit of triumphalism quite out of keeping with the moral pretensions of what had been presented to the Soviets as Christian nations.

In any case, I still find it necessary to think of the widespread screening of the movie, “Repentance,” in 1986-7 as the graphic moment of learning to see, to enter into the pain of those who suffered, to feel the starkness of the question—“what good is a road that does not lead to a church?” That represented a profound collapse of commitment to the theory of materialist progress. It represented an acknowledgement of Marxism’s poverty of spirit for which some religious option or at least a broad cultural recovery must offer hope.

Some conversions are sudden and datable, others gradual. Among the possible stages of Soviet societal conversion that truly marked the way, the aborted coup of 1991 was the moment of euphoria, especially for those who crowded around the Moscow White House and dared to conquer their fears, the way fellow East Europeans had lighted the night and rekindled their souls in the autumn of 1989. When the USSR ceased to exist at the end of 1991 and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) came into its amorphous existence, Russians, Ukrainians and other peoples began to think of the new beginning.

In 1991 the Soviet public was deeply concerned about, even excited, to discuss the question of what the New Russia was to be like. Now in 1994 it is a more troubling question. The “civil war in a teapot” (around the White House and Ostankino TV station in Moscow) in October 1993 lacked the energizing power that the early Perestroika beginnings and the 1991 nonviolent revolution had attained. No one cared who won the standoff, except that Yeltsin’s group was respected a bit more than Khasbulatov and Rutskoi.

Since the general Christian and mission trends of the past five years within the FSU have been shaped so strongly by the drastically changing context, it is imperative that we seek to understand at least the most major societal preoccupations, namely the state of the economy, and the state (or states) and the law. Once the barriers to the practice of faith and Christian mission had collapsed by late 1989, it became common to speak of a spiritual harvest field, of opportunities to be seized. Soon an unseemly race was on to be known to have mission and relief projects in the FSU, the Mennonite press revealing a similar penchant to be seen to be active. What needed to be done was deemed to be simple-to help establish a free market, to establish democracy and to preach the Gospel. The naiveté of expectations for all three has been especially striking.

Instead of making a quick switch to free enterprise, what is now most easily visible is the truly catastrophic economic collapse of the FSU. (Instead of “perestroika” the black humorists now talk of “katastroika” or “destroika.”) Joint ventures between Soviet and Western companies were introduced, mainly in the food service industries, but high taxes caused most such ventures to fold soon after. Governmental reform attempts to link prices of goods with the cost of production resulted in catastrophic inflation. So far, the highest inflation rates were recorded in the fall of

1993. By the summer of 1994 the Russian inflation rate was listed at only four percent per month. The national bank's lending rate was down to 150 percent and the many new investment "banks" were offering a bit less interest on short term investments than they had in the winter. Now the banks were advertising gains of 50 to 500 percent per annum, depending on whether one invested for one month, three months or six months. Many people made quick fortunes, as has been true in most postwar settings, whereas the millions of people who invested in the MMM pyramid scheme for selling unsupported and unregistered securities saw their shares drop overnight in early August 1994 from 120,000 rubles per share to 900 rubles. Many pensioners had hoped to supplement their rapidly declining monthly pension by such investments now had nothing.

In the big cities of Russia everyone was buying and selling, much of the trade being the surplus products from Western Europe. But trading in foreign goods is no solution for the production and sale of local products. Production, however, has entered into a drastic decline, 40 percent less than a year ago when the decline was already catastrophic. The new bankruptcy law of the summer of 1994 and the further privatization effort by presidential decree will result in an autumnal massive wave of bankruptcies of major state industries and truly widespread unemployment. Major single-industry cities in the Ural region, for example, will be the worst-hit. Some companies that had converted from military to civilian products, such as producing video recorders, were unable to compete with the quality products coming from Japan. The human toll was also expressed in new statistics showing a drop in male life-span by three years, and the most drastic decline in births per thousand people ever.

If the Russian Federal revealed widespread poverty and hardship, incomes of average wage earners slipping from close to the equivalent of \$150 per month a year ago to only \$100 per month, the situation was much worse in the Ukraine and most other former republics of the USSR. For example, the rector of a university in the Ukraine with whom I traveled now earned the equivalent of \$34 per month—the highest salary in his institution—and his only travel now was to Kiev to try to extract more money from the government or industry to meet his monthly salary obligations.

The demagogic speeches of V. Zhirinovsky attracted a quarter of the voters, and in general the voices of the old order were regaining a hearing. Still, some sense of political stability could be noted by the summer of 1994. The new Russian Duma (parliament) was badly divided; nevertheless, political groupings were learning to function. In the Ukraine and Belarus the people elected presidents now more ready to negotiate political and economic arrangements with Russia.

Less publicity is given to the bloodshed caused by ethnic wars in the FSU than if that in for Bosnia, but given the large population and large geographic area, the suffering experienced dwarfs that of the south Slavs. Granted, some individuals have become successful entrepreneurs, but there is a widespread belief that financial success is only possible through paying protection money to the Mafia. The generally

reduced need for outright material aid evident during the winter of 1994 (as compared with the previous two winters) shows how much citizens have learned to work out a new networking system not dependent on money. Nevertheless, the countries as a whole, and the Orthodox and Protestant churches within them, are falling into excessive financial dependency on foreign currency. This is new, for both government and the churches had been notable for their independence, when contrasted with their East European neighbors.

There are two areas of concern that make it difficult to see the economic collapse as merely a temporary phase. The political culture of the FSU lacks a good reference point for strength. Gorbachev had openly complained about the absence of a healthy culture of political discourse, of people merely waiting for orders to come down from the center. Presently, visitors to the country are struck by the lack of confidence in any politicians, by the widespread conviction that in the capitals the politicians merely give speeches and avoid action. No longer fearing the once powerful KGB, the police, or the army, the average citizen feels little respect for the structures. What they do see and respect are the numerous private security forces that enforce protection with guns and bombs.

Less immediately evident to the outsider, but probably the most intractable of problems, is the total disarray of the legal system. When the Supreme Soviet was dissolved and Yeltsin called for new elections, the head of the Supreme Court was also dismissed as politically compromised. Russia became subject to the legal edicts of a president and his advisers. The new constitution provided some point of reference, but a host of related legal revisions have not yet followed, and the supreme court itself was only beginning to resume duties in the autumn of 1994.

More fundamental is the collapse of the structure of values that supported the laws created by the Soviet Union. Following the revolution of 1917, the new Soviet authorities had rejected tsarist legislation as class-biased and slowly set about creating a new concept of proletarian law. In practice the new people's courts and local soviets were making laws on the spur of the moment. That experience was particularly difficult for the churches whose understanding of legality was dismissed as bourgeois. This reliance on laws that followed the shifting winds of political change persisted till the 1970s when there was a more concerted effort to establish a sense of "Soviet legality." The latter was an effort to assure the citizens of their rights, of beginning to expect due process.

Before a stable society can function, what will be needed is a reconstruction of some basic moral or societal points of reference for legislation. In the absence of a common law tradition, and having followed the natural rights thinkers of the Enlightenment (in its socialist variation rather than the American individual rights direction), and finding it wanting, it is difficult to imagine what the building blocks for a legal tradition might be. What is needed is a period of re-education in jurisprudence, and only then can one hope for the kind of due process taken for granted in much of Western society.

This also means, among other things, that most of the Christian organizations

functioning in the FSU today are still unable to leave a paper trail that bears public scrutiny. Some time in the future those Christian agencies will need to recover a legality that now seems imprudent to insist on. Since the state is seeking to finance itself by the taxes it is able to collect, it has resorted to excessive tax demands but without the necessary tax police to enforce the legislation. So tax avoidance is widespread. Church and mission agencies are also engaging in numerous contracts (from rent payments to payment for services) by paying in cash and with minimal reporting. These habits of paying to get things done will be very difficult to unlearn later.

### **Recent trends for western evangelical protestant missions**

Since 1990 there has been a massive invasion of evangelical missionaries. One encounters their publicity on the street regularly. One is handed tracts and invitations to meetings at the metro stops. The most grandiose and public effort has been the CoMission project to teach school teachers how to teach Christian morality. The idea evoked vigorous criticism from Orthodox spokespersons during the acrimonious encounters between June and October 1993 when legislation to restrict mission work was proposed by the parliament that Yeltsin finally dismissed. The Orthodox wanted to know American Protestants should have the right to work so closely with state educational institutions, when any move by the Russian Orthodox to claim state church status was immediately denounced.

Tens of thousands of short-term teachers have traversed the country, virtually none of them arriving with any background in language or culture. At a meeting of religious leaders in June 1994, one Orthodox bishop complained about missionaries who said they were Seventh Day Adventists who walked into an Orthodox worship service in progress and accosted the worshippers, telling them their faith was false and that they should come to the Adventist service. Protestants would like to dismiss such stories as bizarre episodes, but the attitude of denominational disrespect seems widespread.

The missionary invasion that has both Orthodox and Protestant churches in the FSU concerned, is the many independent groups who seek no counsel from their Soviet counterparts. Before it dissolved in June 1994, the Moscow Christian Resource Center (CRC) (World Vision-supported) had developed a data base of over 2000 such Western mission groups. One interesting trend emerging from the first phase of mission invasion has been the fact that some missionaries, after encountering problems, were beginning to ask questions about the culture and about the older Slavic religious traditions.

That has included some quite modest efforts at dialogue with Russian Orthodoxy. Leonid Kishkovsky, ecumenical officer for the Russian Orthodox in America, was invited to a weekend conference at Fuller Institute in Pasadena in late 1993 in which he found prominent evangelical mission leaders asking probing questions with apparent sincerity about the essence of Orthodox faith. The Moscow-based CRC organized a small consultation in May 1994 on Protestant and Orthodox dialogue. It illustrated the problem representative speakers and of finding an appropriate vehicle

for dialogue.

Heads of churches met in June 1994 at the Orthodox hotel in Moscow under the theme, "Christian Faith and Human Enmity." The purpose of the meeting was to publicize the fact that resort to violence could never be justified by appeals to Christian faith. The participants struggled to design some regular forum where complaints about proselytism and worse violence in the name of religion could be reported and dealt with. In order to meet as cooperatively as they did, they had decided not to invite those Protestant missionaries they so freely denounced, nor did they include the Uniates who constitute the problem between Catholic and Orthodox churches.

The latter conference was notable for involving representatives from the many different confessional groups who had not met since the Soviet Union collapsed. Some participants saw that as the most significant positive fact—they were starting to seek each other out again. What makes this so difficult currently is the near total collapse of an information exchange. Not only are individual church denominations unable to carry on regular information exchanges within their ranks, including simple things such as keeping an accurate list of the number of churches and clergy, there is no reliable source to check on the other churches. The CRC had sponsored regular publication of a Russian language survey of the Russian press on religion, and an English news service, even if the material was episodic and of uneven quality. With the collapse of that service in June 1994, there is now no organized effort at information gathering. With the widespread ignorance of each other's history, plus the fact that Orthodox publishing houses have been reprinting pamphlets against the sects, (based on the flawed materials from the Tsarist era when the Orthodox helped send Protestants into prison and exile), it is hardly surprising that the inter-Christian tensions are so high.

### **Trends within the former soviet evangelical communities**

There have been many, many new converts and many new congregations established since 1989. There are now mission congregations in areas of the FSU where there had been neither Orthodox nor Protestant witness heretofore. The nature of the influence of these new converts, many of them better-educated than the average evangelical sectarian during the Soviet years, is still not easily apparent. Three larger developments—emigration, denominational collapse and financial dependence—are however the cause of current widespread anxiety.

Between 1987 and 1993 most religiously active Mennonites (and Mennonites within the All-Union Congress of Evangelical Christian-Baptists (AUCECB) and Council of Churches of Evangelical Christian-Baptists (CCECB) evangelical unions) had emigrated to Germany. Some of those who emigrated helped sustain serious mission projects in Karaganda, Kazakhstan and Bishkek, Kirgyzstan. In Omsk region and in the Slavgorod region of Western Siberia formerly unregistered and independent groups are now somewhat better-organized and calling themselves Mennonite Brethren.

The *Friedenstimme* Mission, an arm of the Reform Baptists that had its base in

German Umsiedler churches of ethnic Mennonite origin, had developed a major program of relief even before Perestroika made this easier. That mission still exists, in spite of a recent split, but both sides are now quite restricted to working with the Reform Baptists in the FSU who have become a highly separatist church. *Friedenstimme* no longer has much linkage to the larger evangelical world, although some accidental links with Beachy Amish and Holdeman Mennonite groups have occurred.

Some young, theologically-educated emigrants (Umsiedler) established LOGOS Mission which experienced an explosion of growth after 1989. Its current support base and linkages with indigenous groups in the FSU probably needs to be re-assessed in light of its long-term potential. Aquila Agency and other less-organized Umsiedler mission support for ministry in the FSU are also becoming regularized. We lack information for a detailed overview.

More alarming for Russian/Ukrainian evangelicals has been the spreading emigration fever. Thousands of Ukrainian and Russian evangelicals have come to the USA, largely for economic benefit, even if some of them claimed entry on the grounds of past persecution. Even students at Western theological institutes, once they have become accustomed to American ways, have been reluctant to return and put their families through the hardships. Emigration has also been aided by the sense that these Slavic people did not feel at home in their own countries.

Yet, on the other hand, their emigration made it even more difficult to counter the spreading sentiment that only the Orthodox are truly indigenous. How could they demonstrate that they are not an alien element? What they sense they need is a better understanding of their history, and a way of making that history known and understood to the general public. Several related efforts at beginning Slavic evangelical history projects have emerged. Yet serious funding will have to come from abroad during the initial phases till there is a broader recognition that without knowing one's past one cannot seriously plan for the future.

At its congress in March 1990, the All-Union Congress of Evangelical Christian-Baptists, the largest most integrated evangelical Protestant body, reorganized its structure and its name. Each republic now created its own union with a "president" as chief administrative officer, and the central union also received an administrative president with three vice-presidents assigned special responsibilities in theological education and international relations, in evangelism, and in finance and administration respectively. For the first time a Ukrainian, Grigorii Komendant (only 45 years of age) was the leader of the whole. Long-time general secretary, Alexei Bichkov, continued as one of the vice-presidents till he retired in 1993. But Komendant suffering from ill health, soon moved back to Kiev, and increasingly the primary leadership fell to the administrative vice-president and treasurer, Alexander I. Firisiuk of Belarus.

Further restructuring after the collapse of the USSR followed. The union now was renamed Euro-Asiatic Federation of ECB Unions. In March 1994, following the death of long time Ukrainian leader Jacob Dukhonchenko (replaced by Komendant)

and the retirement to Odessa of Russian leader (and former AUCECB president) A. E. Logvinenko (replaced by the unknown Peter Konovalchik) and the departure of A. I. Firisiuk to head the Belarussian ECB Union in Minsk, it was time for yet another change. Walter A. Mitskevich, a long-time regional senior presbyter near Moscow, suddenly became the executive secretary of what was left of the Euro-Asiatic Federation, Komendant remaining as president with two other vice-presidents to assist.

Since March that central union has struggled to meet its monthly financial commitments to a minimum of staff. It continues to debate whether it can afford to maintain its bimonthly journal *Bratsky Vestnik* and monthly magazine *Khristianskoe Slovo*. Although officially responsible for two new seminaries in Moscow and Odessa, it has been unable to send any funds since January 1994. Indeed, the Odessa seminary received no funds from any of the participating unions since the beginning of 1994.

From the beginning (1990 and 1993) those two seminaries received major support through grants and the supply of foreign professors, particularly from the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board and the Baptist World Alliance, also some faculty services from Mennonites. By the summer of 1994 both schools were almost totally dependent on foreign aid. Virtually all publication and evangelism planning efforts were being done together with a Western partner. Leaders were also saying that virtually all of the unions would not survive unless current foreign funding would increase. The Euro-Asiatic Federation seems to be on the shakiest financial foundation of all, often turning to Compassion Ministries (an independent relief program with offices next-door headed by Michael Zhidkov) for facilitating communication with the regions.

The autonomous ECB churches which were the most aggressive in evangelism and charitable work in 1989-90 continue to be active. Nevertheless common planning structures remain weak. Instead individual key leaders and their mission/charity structures are functioning by means of a series of unrelated partnerships with Western groups. LOGOS College, now in St. Petersburg, and Donetsk Bible College (now less directly an arm of the Svet Evangeliiia—(Light of the Gospel)—mission) are becoming known as training places for missionaries and some pastors for the independent churches. Most of the teaching is still done by visiting professors, the Donetsk school functioning almost like a branch of the Conservative Baptist Seminary in Denver (augmented by Western Baptist Seminary). The LOGOS school is beginning to refer to itself as St. Petersburg Christian University, although accreditation considerations are only beginning and the liberal arts offerings are quite limited.

The Pentecostals have been slower to organize. Bible schools were started in the fall of 1993 in Kiev and Moscow, in both cases also with the aid of teachers and financial support from the West. There are now independent Pentecostal unions and former ties with the Evangelical Christian Baptists have broken down almost completely. Since many of the new missions are charismatic or pentecostal in orienta-

tion, the diversity of Pentecostalism in the FSU will likely increase.

### **What is happening to orthodoxy?**

Orthodoxy has never believed in a controlling central structure that would compare to the Vatican. Russian Orthodoxy is even less tightly-structured because it had been controlled from 1721 through 1918 as part of the tsarist governmental administration, and during the Soviet era the entire structure collapsed before being rebuilt under Soviet state control. That is, current structures lack popular support, the Patriarchate having more the prestige of old tradition than the ability to administer a modern church. It is probably safe to say that Orthodox leaders are more interested in worshiping than in managing structures. There is still a keen sense of the resurrection of faith, since the demand for baptisms of new converts has not yet abated.

Within those parameters, however, there are quite intense countervailing forces evident within the central hierarchy. Patriarch Alexey II is still regarded as a moderate. He is not seeking state church status for Russian Orthodoxy, but he is speaking out more aggressively against Protestant evangelical and Roman Catholic proselytism. His political vacillations during the stand-off between Yeltsin and Khasbulatov have left him with an image of being closer to the anti-Westernism of the conservatives in the new Duma than with the political reformers now in power. The differing Orthodox forces include anti-semites, and liberally-oriented types seeking common ground with the intelligentsia and with Protestants (although one of the most prominent, Gleb Yakunin, was defrocked by the Patriarch in December 1993 because Yakunin would not obey the new decision to keep clergy out of running for election to parliament). There are also differing lay Orthodox movements, the brotherhoods (which foster right-wing nationalism), and others that meet for fellowship, Bible study and other social service activities, who evidence charismatic and Taizé influence.

The Orthodox leaders have exerted quite heroic efforts in theological education. That has included expansion of the correspondence school system, linking this with a catechization program for lay people engaged in children's education. New seminaries have emerged. Diversity of Orthodox visions is evident also in the emergence of other forms of theological education. They include a four-year program of evening school (half the students are women) in Moscow; an Orthodox university (St. John the Theologian) with theology, philology and history faculties; a free Orthodox university (Alexander Men) holding classes in a downtown parish; a free Orthodox university in Petersburg; and a graduate school of religious studies that has an Orthodox section. In most cases the fact that the schools completed a year of studies and planned another one, relying on guest professors from the existing universities, was quite remarkable, given the absence of money and minimal administrative structure.

Monasteries are proliferating, including those for women. Common programs and rules seem to be lacking. Some lay retreat centers have emerged. Nevertheless, there is still a quite desperate shortage of clergy and considerable uncertainty about

how the church is to engage modernity. Most of the ideas for modernizing the church are associated with reform movements that were compromised during the earlier years of the Bolsheviks or those ideas are unknown to current leadership. That includes ideas for more democratic parish structures (still the weakest link in Russian Orthodoxy) and even women preaching!

Ethnic Orthodox conflict has remained intense. Relations between the Russian Orthodox, the Ukrainian, Belorus, Georgian and Armenian Orthodox churches are all under strain. In the Ukraine two schismatic groups plus the legalized Ukrainian Greek Catholic (Uniate) church continue to compete for buildings and allegiance.

Because of the weakness of Orthodoxy abroad, the task of helping the best streams within Russian and Ukrainian Orthodoxy to gain ground should be a challenge to all who care about the growth of Christian faith in the FSU. In early 1994 an American-based agency called International Orthodox Christian Charities Organization established an office in Moscow. Headed by Mary Hennigan, who formerly worked with CARE and Catholic Relief Services, they have launched a two-million-dollar relief program.

Mennonite efforts at building relationships with the Russian Orthodox, as well as continuing with Protestant partnerships, are still modest, but there has been some progress. That has included creation of a registered Mennonite Central Committee branch office in Moscow, new staff learning Russian and becoming acquainted with some of the leaders of theological schools, assisting in providing Bible commentaries, as well as participating in dialogue with Orthodox representatives in the West. Mennonite Brethren continue to support a radio ministry, now in the process of being indigenized under the leadership of Leonid Sergienko working from a Moscow studio. Mennonite agencies have also contributed to a variety of educational efforts involving the Christian College Coalition or independent exchanges. More vital than high-budget relief shipments or funding of the highly publicized summer evangelism projects that many independent agencies offer, will be the creation of a core of trained staff committed to long-term relationships and a constituency that remembers its long history of commitment to helping keep Christian faith alive in the FSU.

## Christian Witness in Eastern Europe Since 1991<sup>1</sup>

*N. Gerald Shenk*

In the years following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, how much has really changed? When we pay attention to news coverage of political and economic developments of the region, can we also discern the meaning of these times for churches? In what ways should we seek understanding and partnership with followers of Christ who are rooted in these various cultures?

For many of our brothers and sisters in faith, the crucial question is no longer how to survive communism and its collapse, but how to survive the recovery from communism in state socialist societies. Even at a great distance, we have all sensed the force of the maelstrom which hit these lands during communism's demise. Morality, civility and basic human dignity were all at risk. In the worst cases, they failed. We must acknowledge that the tests were extreme. People were provoked beyond the capacity of ordinary mortals to resist the fear, the hatred and rage.

Their failures are not only their own. We too are complicit as fellow humans when tragedy and devastation engulf an entire region. We share the burdens of ignorance and ineffectiveness, of responses not delivered in time, of futile paralysis in debates over intervention.<sup>2</sup>

Yet we also share strange confidence that the story of the churches in post-communist Eastern Europe is more profound than daily journalism or economic analysis alone may indicate. Our first observation on this brief interval is that there are now more changes, more churches, and more tragedy and grace than anyone could have imagined in the wake of the Cold War. Anchored in a reality deeper than the discredited political frameworks, faith communities and their leaders have been able to respond to urgent needs when all else fails around them. Proving faithful in small things, many are now expected to move into major responsibilities far beyond the scope of their training or expertise. A seminary director, long regarded as beyond the pale of civil society, now is invited to become the Rektor (Dean) of the regional university. A local pastor, previously barred even from visiting local institutions of social welfare, may be asked to take over the hospital, the orphanage, or the care of juvenile delinquents.

More broadly, Christians in every vocation long accustomed to discrimination

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due to their religious identity now find that faith and moral character are highly sought after, as morale and basic morality plummet around them. Society and all its ordinary rewards are almost literally up for grabs. Stately trees lining the roads of Albania fall prey in winter to the ravages of a local populace left shivering for lack of imported fuel and foreign exchange. The trees and shrubs of Sarajevo were sacrificed in an even more deadly siege, along with nettles that barely served to stave off starvation.

We quickly realize that the collective sigh of relief at the passing of the Cold War has not translated into much enduring comfort. Tides of economic migration surged into flood stage, cresting with hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the unspeakable horror and atrocities of genocide (from the Balkans to the Caucasus and beyond). A fortress mentality shifted into open hostility toward the influx of aliens seeking asylum.

How much devilry is at work in this weary world, when inhumanity inspires such a response of inhospitable incivility? Yet how many righteous are required to save a city, to redeem the vestiges of humanity in a crumbling society, to retrieve the possibilities of dignity and integrity from the debris of calculated wickedness run rampant in destructive frenzies?

The gathering gloom of civilizations imploding makes even faint glimmers of hope seem like beacons in the night. Solitary acts of courage and compassion begin slowly to outweigh the hollow despair of violence. Promises kept and commitments honored can turn fragility into new strength, weaving gossamer trails of individual character into a fabric that stretches across the gaping wounds, bridges the ancient divides and extends with promise toward livable futures.

Early projections for the recovery from communism anticipated economic shake-down and restabilization stretching over a period of five to ten years. Hard times are now new in Eastern Europe. Millions of ordinary citizens have shown again their capacity to endure privation, resisting the lure of demagogues who vainly promise shortcuts to affluence. "Serbia has the resources to be just like Switzerland," trumpeted its leader, Slobodan Milosevic. Lotteries and criminal schemes of fraud alike tend to flourish in this climate of no confidence in economic solutions. Banks (in Moscow and Belgrade) and factories (everywhere) collapse, after offering impossible returns on investments to hedge against hyperinflation. Organized banditry thrives in every field, including customs, taxation, protection and other rackets formerly the monopoly of the state. The trappings of success, no matter what their origin, are more and more properly viewed with suspicion.

"Recovery from communism was bound to be difficult," people wryly observe. "But how are we ever to recover from this 'post-communism'?" This is all part of the background against which we must try to evaluate the work and witness of the Christian churches in Eastern Europe.

After residing in what was then Yugoslavia for most of the decade prior to 1989, and numerous visits elsewhere across the region during and since that time, I have had more than passing acquaintance with the churches and the choices they face. Last year I was even able to round out the observations with a brief visit to Albania, which had long been the most inaccessible of closed lands.

With frequent returns, both for teaching a course each year at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek (Croatia), and for ties to an emerging peacemaker movement, I have sought testimonies on the power of God's people to meet the tests of these critical times. It has been a privilege to be the bearer of my church's concern for other Christians and to convey some of our intentions for solidarity with them in decisive moments like these. Partnership in the Good News during hard times is most rewarding, especially when it is rooted in trust built up over previous decades shared far from the limelight of world crisis.

Perhaps the most productive interaction for my own further reflection has been the parallel I sometimes sense when intense and somewhat isolated sectarian communities of faith are drawn into a larger sense of social responsibility. Although frequently overshadowed by noisy debates about church and state (a discourse necessarily political), this dynamic is more social in character, defined in local and regional interactions. Not confined to the strictures between a handful of government and churchly bureaucrats, it is more like the cumulative impact of thousands of neighbors acting decently as citizens. They reach out and care for someone in need, having little incentive other than the reward of character and the hope for God's shalom. By caring for war's victims, for the displaced, unemployed and disabled, they undo the deadly poison of ethnic hatred and militarist propaganda: human community can be restored and people who are different can live together after all.

It is intriguing to note that the churches have virtually no competition in this task of restoring human community. Secular and separatist ethnic solutions have been discredited. Christian hope, it turns out, must run deeper than political or ideological optimism about the management of human evil.

In 1993 we set out to document accounts of peacemaking efforts undertaken by people of faith in the conflicts of the former Yugoslavia.<sup>3</sup> By providing significant early attention to these scattered activities, we hoped to draw them into a supportive network for mutual reinforcement. After many inquiries and journeys throughout contested areas, we gathered a select group in a neutral location for roundtable discussion of religious efforts to end the violence and overcome the legacy of hostilities.

What distinguished the participants in this initial venture was like a litmus test for Christian response: prayer for enemies. Those who lit up with recognition at this question exhibited a quality of care for the victims that did not stop at boundaries; they were not consumed only with the losses of their own side. These were the folks who could be counted on to give shelter also to refugees from the wrong ethnic group, to speak out against wrongful evictions, to maintain ties of faith that bridge across political and military divides. By these acts of conviction and at some risk to themselves, these Christians modelled the only sure cure for virulent nationalism.

As children of God, we are privileged to have siblings like these. Their discoveries in the ethics of Christian response to extreme situations are a precious resource to us as well. We rejoice in the authentic character of a young Serbian soldier who refuses to join the attack on innocent civilians in Croatia. We delight in the courage of a Franciscan who crosses fresh battle lines to defuse the fear and arrange a cease-fire. We grieve with him in the murder of his father and many other close relatives

when that same region is later engulfed in the larger conflict and dragged into the abyss despite a year of diligent and effective peace process at the local level.<sup>4</sup>

Even while delighting in these witnesses against genocide, we do not deserve to take comfort in the fact that others have found appropriate responses unless we too are moved to compassion. The multitudes of real victims from these several years of turmoil require more than appreciation from us. I dare not bring these reports as a shortcut for consumers of international news coverage to move from indifference through exaggerated helplessness to mere relief that a handful of struggling Christians have found the right responses to immediate crises in Eastern Europe.

True compassion will oblige us to extend our partnership with the faith communities across Eastern Europe. Confessing our own share in the failures of the past, we can work together for the reconstruction which must follow years and generations of devastation. Urgent needs include millions of refugees and other victims of war. This aid should be unconditional, in a principled refusal to exploit the vulnerability of displaced populations. All who can be reached should benefit from it.

In the longer term, to resist the ethos of hatred, violence and revenge, we will seek to build a culture of peace. Much has been lost during the horrors of war, and not only in the Balkan region. More than the destruction of buildings and ruin of territories, the traumas have etched deep disfigurement on our capacity to trust each other. Merely to tolerate minorities will not be sufficient to redress the wrongs. Acceptance and embrace of the other are essential, urges Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf.<sup>5</sup>

It is wearisome to monitor the scramble of opportunist mission and other outside agencies rushing like carpetbaggers to take advantage of media attention when a region is in crisis. Market niches are clearly crowded with those who would cash in on temporary compassion. But local churches and their longterm partners will have virtually no competition when they take up efforts to restore basic trust, character and dignity for all the peoples of the region. It would be a crisis in our own civility if they could not count on us for partnership in this cause. In the welfare of these cities (Sarajevo—and Beirut, Belfast, Bogota, Jerusalem, Kigali, Los Angeles) we will pray to find our shalom as well.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This updates my earlier article, "Churches, Changes and Mission in Eastern Europe," *Mission Focus*, 19:4 (December 1991), 49-52.

<sup>2</sup> Essential reading: Roy Gutman, *A Witness to Genocide* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> See the Research Report #15, *God With Us? The Roles of Religion in Conflicts in the Former Yugoslavia*, by Gerald Shenk and David Steele (Uppsala: Life and Peace Institute, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> These and other accounts are presented in the video by Mennonite Media Ministries, "Beyond the News: Hope for Bosnia."

<sup>5</sup> See, Miroslav Volf, "Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflections in the Wake of 'Ethnic Cleansing,'" *Religion in Eastern Europe* (December, 1993). This journal is exceptionally valuable for regular coverage of church life in the region.

**Kimbanguist Beliefs Taught in Zambia:  
Law, Jesus Christ, Simon Kimbangu**  
*A Study of the Lusaka Congregation*

*Rhoda M. Schrag*

“**I**adore Simon Kimbangu.”  
 “You need to talk to Prince Zako (Simon Kimbangu’s grandson) so that you will have no more doubts that Simon Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit.”  
 “If you follow the Ten Commandments, you follow Jesus Christ because he followed God’s law. The Ten Commandments are the key factor in the whole Bible. They contain everything a man should do to be saved.”

Such statements from pastors and members of the Kimbanguist Church in Lusaka, Zambia, caused me to ask questions and discuss theology with these church people. Do Kimbanguists today believe that “Jesus alone is Savior and redeemer of mankind,” as their profession of faith states? Do they see Jesus, during his ministry here on earth, as the Son of God who shows us the Father? If Jesus is central, then what role does Simon Kimbangu have? And what is the relationship of our faith to the law?

I came to Lusaka, Zambia, in 1990 under the auspices of Mennonite Central Committee with an assignment to teach English to pastors and leaders of the Kimbanguist congregation in Lusaka, the headquarters of this church in Zambia. I have lived among the people, worshipped with them, and listened to sermons from various pastors for the past 18 months. As a preparation for this assignment, I spent one term (Oct. - Dec. 1990) at Selly Oak Colleges, U.K. There I studied new religious movements, especially African Initiated Churches (AICs), and I read every document in the Interact collection concerning the Church of Jesus Christ on Earth through the Special Envoy Simon Kimbangu (commonly know as the Kimbanguist Church). I was eager to meet and learn from these African Christians.

An English teacher by profession, I am a lay theologian by interest. I am not a sociologist or a researcher. But I am a Christian who desires to report as accurately as possible what I am hearing, and so to further our understanding as we dialogue/communicate with each other.

**Procedure**

Sermons in the Kimbanguist church are important. They are preceded by choir num-

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bers, prayers, Scripture reading, offering; and they are followed by welcome to visitors, announcements, reports on work of the church, and the long Sunday afternoon **nsisani** (competitive offering). Sermons always follow the same outline:

- comments on the opening reading from a Psalm
- comments on Exodus 20:1-17 (the Ten Commandments, read every Sunday)
- comments on a text selected by the preacher.

I wrote down near-verbatim notes from the translator for 27 sermons that I heard over a period of 18 months. To compile a 22-item questionnaire, I then selected some statements from those sermons, along with several statements from more orthodox Christian teachings which I found missing in the sermons. People were asked to circle **Yes** if they agreed with each statement, and **No** if they disagreed.

The 62 adults who answered the questionnaire were those enrolled in my English classes, those who sing in one of the five church choirs, those who attend women's meetings and church executive committee meetings. Persons could elect to read/respond in their most familiar language: Bemba, Chokwe, or English.

For those who had difficulty with reading, two women in the advanced English class read the questions individually to them and noted their responses. All adults in the congregation were welcome to give their responses. (See demographic compilation.)

Among the 22 items on the questionnaire, I included three that attempted

(1) to ascertain people's belief in magic/witchcraft:

You get sick because some person hates you. **Yes** 16% **No** 84%

(2) to check assumptions that Jesus was a white person's God:

Jesus did not understand the suffering of black people because he was white.

**Yes** 18% **No** 82%

(3) to express certainty about being a Christian:

I have no doubt. I am sure that I am a Christian. **Yes** 95% **No** 5%

In this congregation, then, some still fear the power of magic/witchcraft and some still see Jesus as associated with white people.

In addition to sermon notes and questionnaire results, the students in English classes have used the Good News translation of the Bible, since it is one of the few available and affordable English-language books in Zambia - thanks to the Bible Society. Discussions of theology have accompanied the readings of the Gospel of Luke, Acts, and Galatians. Some of what follows was reinforced in those sometimes heated debates.

### Limitations

Certainly there are limitations and possible miscommunications in a study of this sort, especially where the precise language use of a literate culture meets the fluidity of oral-culture language. In addition, I recognize the problems posed by the following:

(1) All sermons came to me via translation from the Bemba language, so it is possible that the preachers' viewpoints were distorted. Similarly, I recognize that the

translation of theological terms in my questionnaire may have resulted in language-specific interpretations of a given question.

(2) Although worship is conducted in the Bemba language to accommodate people from many tribes, this is not the first language of many of the preachers. Consequently, these men and women who preach may repeat what is easy for them to say or what they have heard frequently. Thus sermons may not reflect new spiritual insights of pastors.

(3) Even though many items came from sermons and many people chose to have statements read to them, yet my questionnaire was definitely a literate tool, which may have been quite confusing, and perhaps intimidating, to some of the respondents.

(4) I gave only two choices of response: “yes” or “no.” Though I realized that this gave little room for ambiguities of uncertainties, I felt that the respondents would be further confused by a “maybe” or “not sure” category. However, a few persons wrote in qualifications to their Yes responses; these are reflected in my reporting.

(5) Many people said “yes” to all but one or two statements, even if two contradicted each other. Had I anticipated their cultural preference to agree with me—their teacher—I would have perhaps had a more complete picture of beliefs if I had phrased some statements to solicit “no” responses.

(6) Singing is very important to Kimbanguists. All songs used by congregation and choirs in worship are original compositions by Kimbanguists in their short 70-year history, rather than translations of missionaries’ songs. Even though many songs are sung in Zairean languages (Kikongo, Lingala, French) and thus are not understood by many Zambians, nevertheless their message needs to be studied alongside sermon content to get a more complete picture of worship emphasis. I regret that I was unable to include song lyrics in my study.

In spite of these limitations, my hope is that what follows will reflect, albeit imperfectly, what this one Zambian congregation is saying about its faith.

### **Scope**

In this study, I center on three questions that keep recurring in sermons and in conversations with people:

(1) What must a person do to be saved, to inherit eternal life? Along with this, a corollary: What place does the law (Ten Commandments and Kimbanguist prohibitions) have in the life of the Christian?

(2) What do Kimbanguists say about Jesus Christ?

(3) Who is Simon Kimbangu, apart from the historic founder of this church?

I hope to compare sermon statements in this Zambian congregation with the official statements of belief found in Diangienda-Kuntima’s, their leader’s, “Essence of Theology.”<sup>1</sup> And I want to check whether church members affirm the beliefs of local church leaders, and whether church leaders themselves agree. I limit my study to this one congregation, which officially lists membership at 924, but on a typical Sunday has 200-300 in attendance. Since the Legal Representative of the Kimbanguist

church in Zambia, Rev. E. M. Kangonga, resides here and has authority in this country, what I hear is probably representative of the teachings in all the Zambian churches.

### **Grace and Law**

One very prominent teaching of the pastors in this congregation is that Christians must follow the law—both the Ten Commandments and the Kimbanguist prohibitions (no buying or selling on Sunday, no drinking alcoholic drinks, no dancing, no smoking, no taking drugs, no polygamy or adultery, no bathing or sleeping naked, no eating pork, no praying with money in your pockets, no shoes on where people meet for prayer, no short skirts or uncovered heads for women, no long hair or beards for men). In the 27 sermons, people were admonished 134 times to follow/obey the commandments, and in addition they were warned of punishment for failure to obey 100 times. Such punishments included imprisonment, slavery, not entering the Kingdom of heaven, God's refusal to forgive, God's displeasure, death in the wilderness. In addition, people were told 33 times to obey their leaders and 25 times to obey Christ's command to love each other. And specific ones of the Ten Commandments were cited 100 times.

By contrast, God's love for us was mentioned seven times; God's mercy, two times; God's forgiveness, six times. Of these 15, two were conditional on our following the commandments/living according to God's desires. The word **faith** or **believe** was mentioned 12 times; in 5 of these instances, a Christian's faith depended on keeping the Ten Commandments.

But sermon texts which pastors chose themselves in addition were often taken from the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> Readings from Psalms and Exodus 20:1-17 in each worship service are mandated by headquarters in Kinshasa.) Even when texts speak of God's grace and love, often law was added to that love by the preacher. For example, Romans 8:12-14 speaks of Christians being children of God and freed from fear; the sermon emphasis was that as children of God, we must obey God's rules in order to make God happy.

Of course, many selected texts called for repentance or gave consequences of sin or used Jesus' words about commandments to support emphasis on the law. Also, often the text was not used in its context, or only a fragment of an idea was used.

What do Kimbanguists believe is necessary for our salvation? If we look at Diangienda's writing, we see major emphasis on the great love of God:

God's design since the creation of Adam and Eve has always been to save all human beings....By the death of his son Jesus Christ he has accorded grace potentially to all mankind....God's love for the human race is immense. Is it not written that the Eternal is slow to anger but prompt to forgive? What Kimbanguist theology does not accept is the assertion that this love has no limits. [He cites punishment for sin in the Old Testament.]....The Kimbanguist church does not conceive of God as grim and vindictive....The believing human being experiences God's

patience and love day by day.<sup>3</sup>

However, using the concept of covenant, Diangienda also asserts that we are not saved by grace alone:

For Kimbanguist theology, man is saved if, and only if, the following three conditions are fulfilled: divine grace, faith in God and his Messiah, good works....Man must make his contribution to the mechanism of his own salvation; for this it is sufficient, since grace is provided by God, for him to give proof of faith in the Holy Trinity and then to put into practice the commandments of God.<sup>4</sup>

While Diangienda's equation for salvation is grace + faith + good works, the church leaders in Zambia use a different set of three: love + Ten Commandments + work for the church.<sup>5</sup> It seems that this second set of three could all be placed in Diangienda's equation under the "good works" portion, rather than substitute for the whole equation. When the Zambian preachers use love + Ten Commandments + good works, their emphasis moves from what God has done to what humans must do. In that transition, grace and faith seem to be replaced by admonishment to increase human effort to be good, to try harder. Noticeably absent from this congregations's sermons are the Apostle Paul's "by observing the law no one will be justified" (Gal.2:16) and "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." (Gal. 2:20) Instead, in our discussion of Galatians, people kept returning to the list of sins and the warning that "those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." (Gal.5:19-21) Consequently, salvation for many here seems to be based on their "works" righteousness, not on "the just shall live by their faith."

The priority of the Ten Commandments was affirmed by responses to several questions:

The way to become a Christian is to obey the Ten Commandments and the church rules. **Yes 92% No 8%**

Exodus 20:1-17 is the most important part of the Bible.

**Yes 85% No 15%**

The Ten Commandments tell you all you must do to be saved.

**Yes 95% No 5%**

Alongside these three questions, there was also wide-spread support for Biblical teaching of faith and forgiveness:

You become a Christian because of your faith in God. **Yes 98% No 2%**

Jesus Christ died so that our sins could be forgiven. **Yes 100% No 0%**

But there was less support for God's unconditional love for us:

God does not love a person who sins.<sup>6</sup> **Yes 64% No 36%**

It seems then, that for salvation, people here combine faith, forgiveness of sins through the death of Jesus, and following the Law. This would be consistent with Diangienda's writing; however, their uncertainty about God's love is not found in Diangienda.

Of the three things that are believed to be necessary for salvation (love, Ten Commandments, work for the church), laws and rules get by far the most attention. Such

emphasis on law seems to be supported by the authority given to church leaders and to the Bible, even if leaders make mistakes sometimes and even if the Kimbanguist prohibitions are not stated in the Bible. Responses to these two statements show this:

Good Christians will always do what church leaders tell them to do. **Yes**

90% **No** 10%

The Bible says that you should not drink alcoholic drinks (beer or wine).

**Yes** 87% **No** 13%

From conversations with leaders of other Christian churches in Zambia, from what I've read about African culture, and from my own rather strict upbringing, I am aware that emphasis on law is not unique to the Kimbanguist church. Perhaps legalism is a necessary step in our human moral development, a stage that young Christians and young churches must pass through before we learn to base our ethics on our relationship with God. Perhaps as we mature, we can do good works as our response to God's great love for us, rather than out of our fear of God's punishment. My experience of worship in this church, however, leaves me feeling that the Ten Commandments, rather than Jesus Christ's portrayal of divine love, have become the central focus.

### **Jesus Christ**

In Sunday morning sermons, the name of Jesus is heard more frequently than is the love of God. In fact, there has been a marked increase in the use of the name of Jesus during the months I have worshipped here - perhaps in part due to my questioning its sparsity. Here is a rough compilation of the 104 references to Jesus in the 27 sermons which are noted:

- 20 times - Jesus told us to follow the Ten Commandments.
- 16 times - Jesus promised Simon Kimbangu, who completes the work of Jesus.
- 12 times - Jesus came from God.
- 7 times - Jesus was rejected.
- 6 times - Life of Jesus (preparation by John the Baptist, flight to Egypt, baptism, temptation, death on a cross)
- 4 times - Interactions with people (Zaccheus, the adultress, rich young ruler, disciples in a storm at sea)
- 6 times - Parables (soils, narrow path, foundations, likeness to child, salt and light, Lazarus and the rich man)
- 12 times - Jesus said: (a one-sentence quotation)
- 1 time - Jesus died for our sins.
- 1 time - Jesus gives eternal life.
- 6 times - Jesus will come again; be ready - confess your sin.
- 8 times - Follow Jesus.
- 5 times - "in the name of Jesus" (a formula)

If we set aside those times that Jesus was quoted to support following the law and to talk about the founder Simon Kimbangu's coming, we have left 68 references to

Jesus, as compared to 334 references to the Ten Commandments/punishment. In other words, a church member hears one mention of the name of Jesus for every 5 references to the law.

It may also be interesting to note what is **not** said about Jesus. Most significant, of course, is the failure to mention the resurrection. And while the rejection of Jesus<sup>7</sup> is talked about, neither the accounts of Jesus' passion and death nor the meaning of his sacrificial death have been used as bases for sermons. In fact Holy Week, Good Friday, and Easter were not celebrated or mentioned at all in the Kimbanguist church here in Lusaka, and I have been told that the Eucharist has never been celebrated in Zambia.

Perhaps also significant to note is how seldom an account of Jesus' interaction with people is given in its entirety. Often a story is cited to make a point about something else. For example, Jesus' dealing with the woman who was taken in adultery (John 8:1-11) was used to show how Jesus tamed his tongue: he stooped and wrote in the dust rather than talking. Statements from the teachings of Jesus are also likewise truncated and thus the text may be used to say something very different from what the context seems to infer. Interesting also is the lack of the many healing stories where Jesus responded in compassion to those whose faith was evident. Furthermore, Jesus is not talked about as one who shows us in his interactions and teachings what God is like.

Diangienda in his "Essence of Theology" speaks about Jesus Christ many times and quotes many Scriptures that refer to Jesus. Here is an overview:

God the Father commands his Son Jesus Christ to come to redeem humanity. Christ in obedient submission joyfully accepts this mission....Not only does Jesus submit to his Father and obey him but he constantly humbles himself before him and ceaselessly glorifies him....The Holy Spirit in turn recognizes and submits to the authority of Christ....Jesus promised his disciples and the world the coming of the Holy Spirit....God sealed a covenant with mankind in the blood of his Son Jesus Christ....By the death of his Son Jesus Christ, (God) has accorded grace potentially to all mankind.... Jesus Christ is the king of kings whose dominion is eternal....Jesus will come again and receive the faithful into his kingdom.

In his section on baptism, he contends that Jesus did not baptize anyone with water, but with the Holy Spirit. (Thus Kimbanguists do not use water in baptismal services. Instead, the applicant kneels before a pastor whose outstretched hand symbolizes the laying on of hands; the person's baptism is by the Holy Spirit.) In explaining the meaning of baptism, he says this sacrament "makes us members of the people of Christ....We receive the Holy Spirit and thereby become one with Christ....The individual binds himself to live a new life in Jesus Christ." Similarly in the Eucharist, "the Lord Jesus Christ humbles himself by coming to dwell in the being of the communicant, and (that person) is united with Christ."<sup>8</sup>

As is indicated by the Kimbanguist sermons in the Lusaka church and by the

writings of Diangienda, Jesus is seen chiefly as one who makes possible our salvation, sends the Holy Spirit, is now in heaven and will return again as judge.

Few respondents disagreed with these statements:

Jesus Christ died so that our sins could be forgiven. **Yes 100% No 0%**

Good Christians will follow Jesus and do what he taught. **Yes 97% No 2%**

Thus, assent is given to these more orthodox beliefs about Jesus, but important themes such as these are not central in sermons here. Perhaps Jesus is seen as too far removed and too holy to be approached directly. One sermon comment was that if you say you are following Jesus Christ, you are making yourself “big,” i.e., not humble.

The church has no teaching program for children or adults, so I wonder where people learn about Jesus, if indeed they do. Some of my adult students say they learned most in Religious Education classes in public school. Some were taught these stories at home. But many, I fear, have only memorized statements of who Jesus is, rather than a picture of a compassionate human being who showed us what God is like. Often then, “Jesus died for our sins” may hold little real meaning for many. And Jesus’ teachings are reduced to “believe in God, don’t sin, and love each other”. Certainly from the dramas performed every year to celebrate the beginning of Simon Kimbangu’s ministry (April 6) and his suffering and death (October 12), this church recalls much more vividly the life of Simon Kimbangu than the life of Jesus Christ. Fervent emotional responses seem to be reserved for Simon Kimbangu.

### **Simon Kimbangu**

Miracle stories abound about Simon Kimbangu. As a child he changed feathers into a bird and made palm nuts edible. He was put in burning oil while in prison, but he came out with no burns on his body. He was tied to a big rock and thrown into the river in an attempt to drown him, but when missionaries took a snapshot of this site, the picture showed him freed and sitting with Jesus atop the rock in the middle of the river. When he died in 1951, African doctors refused to do an autopsy, so they asked missionary doctors to do it; when they operated they found no heart, no stomach, no liver. (Therefore, he was God.) In 1951 he was buried near the prison in Lubumbashi; when his body was exhumed 8 years later in order to move it to N’Kamba, it had not decayed at all.

The documented facts about his life are sparse. (He left few written records, since he did not read or write well.) He was born in 1899 in N’Kamba, near Kinshasa, Zaire; a Baptist catechist; called by Christ to preach and heal; began his ministry 6 April 1921; told people to throw away fetishes and trust God alone; arrested six months later by Belgian colonial government because they feared an uprising; sentenced to death for sedition; as a result of appeals by Protestant missionaries, was instead imprisoned in Elizabethville (Lubumbashi); died of heart problems in 1951.

So what are Kimbanguist preachers saying about their founder? In the 27 sermons, Simon Kimbangu was named 135 times. Again, here is a rough compilation:

- 42 times - Simon Kimbangu is spoken of in God-language. He is the Holy Spirit (14); existed from the beginning (4); gave us the Ten Commandments (2); knows everything (1); has all power (1); promised by God/Jesus (9); like God, he is our Father (6); the Holy Spirit's coming as a black man is an offence to many (5).
- 34 times - Simon Kimbangu is spoken of in Jesus-Language. He left glory and came as a man (1); shows us what God is like (2); suffered for us (2); will rise again when all Kimbanguists follow the Ten Commandments (3); completes the work that Jesus began (2); will meet us at the end of life (3); will reward those who follow the rules (1); brought life to us (1); gives us freedom (2); leads us to happiness (2); empowers us to do right (5); all people will believe in him in the end (3); we must give our hearts to him (1); we must praise/follow him (3); doubting him is from the Evil One (2); said "God has put everything in my hands" (1).
- 34 times - Simon Kimbangu is seen as an apostle or prophet. He did the same work as Jesus (5); was filled with the Holy Spirit (1); was reluctant to follow God's call (3); followed the Ten Commandments (3); is an example of humility (2); included everyone, unlike the missionaries (5); suffered (4); teaches us (10); said "Black will be white, and white, black" (1).
- 25 times - Believers are admonished to tell others about Simon Kimbangu. We must teach everyone to please/respect him (6); give money and build a house for him (3); tell the world that he is the Holy Spirit (9); make all recognize him through our good deeds (7).

People here in Zambia are convinced Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit. They say he was with God in the beginning. He was without sin. Jesus promised in John 14 that he would send the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit was sent to Africa in Simon Kimbangu. We know that because Kimbangu did the same work that Jesus did. Also, Jesus said that not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" will enter the Kingdom of heaven. By this he meant that many people in the world know about Jesus, but they don't believe that Simon Kimbangu was the Holy Spirit.

Using Matthew 24:15, one pastor pointed out that 'the abomination that causes desolation' is that a black man, an African, is the Holy Spirit; many Christians refuse to believe that. According to the head of the Zambian church, Christians who know Jesus have a secondary school level of knowledge, but Kimbanguists have a university-level knowledge because they have the added understanding that the Holy Spirit is Simon Kimbangu. The Kimbanguist mission is to tell all Christians about Kimbangu.

On 17 April, 1991, I had the privilege of conversing with Zako Kiangani of Lubumbashi, Zaire, one of the grandsons of Simon Kimbangu and the first family member to visit the Zambian church. He explained that the church made a change in 1989 from calling Kimbangu a prophet (a white man's word) to calling him a special envoy (Simon Kimbangu's own word). And he affirmed that what I had been

hearing is the new Kimbanguist position: that Kimbangu was with God from the beginning, that he was the Comforter Jesus had promised, that he was without sin. God revealed Himself through a man Jesus Christ, so Jesus must reveal himself through a man, who was Simon Kimbangu. I pointed out that this view is not in agreement with what has been officially written by Diangienda, neither in the catechism nor in the theology. He replied that he himself has written this new teaching but he has as yet been unable to get the funds to have it printed (though the church has rather sophisticated headquarters in Kinshasa).

Diangienda's statements about the Holy Spirit do leave open the possibility of a one-time incarnation of the Holy Spirit. When discussing theological views of a trinitarian God, he has this to say:

For the Kimbanguist church, the Holy Spirit is far from being a sort of magnetic or electric current which provides energy for the accomplishment of some particular task. God created man in his image and likeness. That has been confirmed by the fact that Christ, God, lived here below in human form. From this it may readily be inferred that the third person in God, the Holy Spirit, also has a human likeness, whose body is spiritual and consequently invisible to living men. God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are three persons clothed in spiritual bodies (I Cor.15:44), but existing in the image and likeness of man, himself created in the image of God.<sup>9</sup>

However, in both the catechism and the theology, Diangienda states that his father Simon Kimbangu is the exemplary Christian who leads us to Christ and who encourages us to follow Christ. He includes Kimbangu alongside Christ's apostles, Old Testament heroes, and the faithful who now surround Christ, the king of kings, and comprise his court. In this position, Simon Kimbangu can be—if we choose to solicit his help—"an advocate on our behalf with Christ so that the Lord may answer our prayers as quickly as possible".

From the writings, then, Diangienda did not say that his father is the Holy Spirit. The reason he did not state this clearly, according to Zambian church leaders, is that it is never proper to elevate yourself or your family members. Therefore, even though Diangienda knew that his father was the Holy Spirit, they say, he has left it to succeeding generations and to those outside his family to recognize this.

What the Kimbanguist church as a whole believes about the relationship between Simon Kimbangu and the Holy Spirit is not at all certain. Dr. Marie Louise Martin, a Swiss theologian who worked for two decades to train theologians in the Kimbanguist seminary near Kinshasa, Zaire, maintains that Diangienda and some Kimbanguist theologians still hold strongly the classical doctrine of the Trinity and the view that Simon Kimbangu's function was prophetic. She reports that Diangienda remains tolerant and for some reason seldom admonishes the believers.<sup>10</sup> Others who have worked with this church suspect that the appearance of orthodoxy was maintained only to keep from offending other Christians and to gain acceptance in World Council of Churches. This may be the case, for in Diangienda's instructions

to church members shortly before his death in July 1992, he includes Simon Kimbangu in the usual place of the Holy Spirit. He says: "Before asking forgiveness of the sin committed by our ancestors ADAM and EVE, it's advisable that everyone makes the true fasting that is accepted by GOD or Father, our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Father - Simon KIMBANGU." (Capitalization is his.)<sup>11</sup> Kimbangu's grandson teaches clearly that his grandfather is the Holy Spirit. And Zambian church leaders in sermons in the Lusaka congregation also promote this view.

Most church members agree with the divinization of their founder, as questionnaire results indicate:

Simon Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to send.

**Yes** 97% **No** 3%

Simon Kimbangu was with God in the beginning at the Creation.

**Yes** 93% **No** 7%

Simon Kimbangu never sinned. **Yes** 74% **No** 26%

Our bodies decay when we die, but Simon Kimbangu's body has never decayed. **Yes** 97% **No** 3%

Kimbanguists must tell other Christians that the Holy Spirit came to Africa in Simon Kimbangu. **Yes** 97% **No** 3%

Kimbanguists pray to Simon Kimbangu in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Yes** 95% **No** 5%

Simon Kimbangu carries the prayers of black people to God. (Two people changed "black" to "all".) **Yes** 82% **No** 16% Not answered 2%

A believer is one who knows that Simon Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit.

**Yes** 77% **No** 20% Not answered 3%

Simon Kimbangu was powerfully filled with the Holy Spirit in the same way as church leaders like Peter and Paul in the book of Acts.

**Yes** 77% **No** 31% Not answered 2%

There seem to me to be some inconsistencies in the answers given to these questions. The first and the last were planned to be mutually exclusive: If Simon Kimbangu is filled with the Holy Spirit, then the Spirit is different from the man. Also, the first and the third do not show logically related results: If Kimbangu is seen as God, then it would follow that he never sinned. For some reason, people were more comfortable with the idea of Simon Kimbangu being the Holy Spirit than with his being sinless. Again, "Simon Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to send" may be an often-repeated formula whose meaning is not probed very deeply. But many of the members whom I conversed with are adamant that Simon Kimbangu is not to be seen as equal to the apostles, but above them, in spite of the belief that he and the apostles all did the same miracles as Jesus did: raised the dead, gave sight to the blind, made paralytics walk and healed all sorts of illnesses. These works are cited as proof of Simon Kimbangu's being the Holy Spirit. Yet people here proclaim their founder superior to any others who have been powerfully used by God's spirit in a similar way.

### Other writer's reports

Many of the people who have written about the Kimbanguist church, especially before 1980, have emphasized the orthodoxy of Kimbanguist beliefs. Perhaps most willing to support this view was Dr. Marie Louise Martin.<sup>12</sup> Rev. James Bertsche, a Mennonite missionary, reported that "never, either before or after his imprisonment, did Simon Kimbangu lead people to believe that he regarded himself as anything whatsoever but a Christian whom God had called to preach the Word of Life to his people."<sup>13</sup>

A Mennonite Central Committee delegation who met with Diangienda in 1967 gave enthusiastic response to this church and suggested we work in partnership with them to communicate their message to the world.<sup>14</sup> *The Ecumenical Review* in 1967 reported that the church "has never tried to break away from Christian tradition at any point" and "has no intention of modifying the content of the Christian Trinity, nor of identifying the person of the prophet with the Person of the Holy Spirit."<sup>15</sup>

These intentions are borne out in the writings of Diangienda, both in the catechism of 1963 and in the theology of 1977. This view is what Susan Asch<sup>16</sup> has called "official Kimbanguism." By contrast, the head of the Zambian church, most preachers and members of the Lusaka congregation hold, in Asch's terms, a Kimbanguism of the Kimbanguists (the popular Kimbanguist religion).

Some people who have written since 1985 have been more cautious about affirming this church as in the mainstream of Christianity. Heinrich Balz, who taught at the Kimbanguist seminary in Lutendele for two years, says that defenders of the Kimbanguist church, who saw in the African Independent Churches the true future of African Christianity, are more cautious now, and less vocal. Dialogue is difficult. Though in 1984, Diangienda denied that Simon Kimbangu was the Holy Spirit, he maintains a careful silence on this. And when questioned later, he implied that yes, Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit. He had his own reasons for not writing that in 1984 and letting others proclaim it.<sup>17</sup> Werner Ustorf has also written about this church, and though I was unable to locate his recent work or converse with him at Selly Oak, W. S. Hollenweger comments that Ustorf's research probably proves that the "official" version of Kimbanguism is legendary. The rural Kimbanguists are closer to African traditions and values, though present leaders in Kinshasa have rejected rural beliefs as heretical. He goes on to point out some of the problems in clarifying Kimbanguist theology: contradictions in sources and unauthentic sources, changing views about Simon Kimbangu over the years, interaction between the message and the situation.<sup>18</sup> Balz also, on this latter point, says, "The leaders, it seems to me, adjust their behavior to the needs of the many, the simple people."<sup>19</sup>

Among my English students are several young men from the Kimbanguist Church in Zaire. They do not as heartily endorse the pervasive Zambian view that Simon Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit. One poignantly commented to me recently, "The Kimbanguist church here in Zambia is a sect." For many of the young and educated (perhaps especially if that education took place in Zaire; see Table of Questionnaire Results), whether or not Simon Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit is still open to discus-

sion. But the young and educated pose a threat. In the hierarchical structure of this church and society, they must defer to the older, less literate church leaders. So the Zambian church, isolated by difficulties in communication with headquarters in Kinshasa and by education/language barriers from other Christian churches in Zambia, has cherished its uniqueness and its African-ness in its declaration that Simon Kimbangu is the Holy Spirit.

### **Syncretism?**

The concern of many who relate to African Initiated Churches is the amount of syncretism present in the teachings of a given church. Have these churches mixed cultural traditions with Christian truths to the extent that the message of salvation in Jesus Christ as found in the Biblical record is obscured?

In view of the fact that it is impossible for humans to ever give up cultural ways of viewing the world<sup>20</sup>, churches in every country do well to step back and ask themselves this question from time to time. And all of us who follow Christ are called to critique cultural practices/values in the light of Jesus' teachings and example.

Certainly there are elements in the Kimbanguist church that, given my Western / scientific/democratic culture, cause discomfort for me. The hierarchical understanding of the Trinity where God the Father commands the Son Jesus and Jesus commands the Holy Spirit is not my way of thinking about God in three Persons. And while this understanding can be derived from Scripture and corresponds to tribal chief-spokesman-elder form of governance, I believe that it is not consistent with Jesus' teaching that "the greatest among you will be a servant". Moreover, this hierarchical arrangement is carried over into church structures and family relationships, again with support from African culture, with resultant abuses of power at times. Is this the style of our Servant-Leader Jesus?

Another emphasis that sounds strange to my ears is the prayer for the forgiveness of Adam and Eve (a special emphasis in 1992). Their original sin, so it is stated here, was never forgiven and as a consequence the world is full of trouble and war. If Kimbanguists pray enough this year, then the forgiveness of Adam and Eve will result in peace on this earth. Many local church members concur:

When we pray enough for the forgiveness of Adam's and Eve's sins,  
then trouble and war will stop on earth. **Yes** 92% **No** 6%  
Not answered 2%

Diangienda has stated in his theology that each individual must work out his salvation, that each will be judged according to his works. So this call to prayer seems to fit neither with Kimbanguist theology nor with Jesus' call to individuals to leave all and follow him. Is this solution to the sins of our age an attempt to manipulate God by magic? Or is it faith?

Holy water is used by Kimbanguists, but seldom in the public worship. Instead, members carry small vials with them which they use—by sprinkling, rubbing onto injuries, or drinking—to bring healing or provide protection. Such uses are always accompanied by prayer. The water is brought from N' Kamba, the birthplace of Simon

Kimbangu, which is called the New Jerusalem, where all nations will gather when Jesus returns. Is such use of water a fetish? Or is it only a symbol that reminds us of God's care? Perhaps in each of these three cases—hierarchy, prayer for Adam and Eve, holy water—what matters most is whether they lead people to faith in God, or to faith in the object/structure itself. Even though I would not follow/trust these practices myself, I do not feel that these obscure or radically distort the Christian message for many of these church people.

However, I feel differently about the emphasis on law in this church and the divinization of Simon Kimbangu. In my view and from my analysis of sermons, both of these set aside Jesus Christ as the one who is worthy to receive our greatest praise and adoration. People who depend on what they receive auditorially have heard much more about laws and Simon Kimbangu than about Jesus Christ. Both emphases can easily give rise to a sense of self-righteousness and superiority on the part of Kimbanguists: We're better than other Christians because we follow the laws; we know more than other Christians; our founder is more powerful than other church leaders; heaven will be filled with people from every nation who will have become Kimbanguists and will wear the green and white uniforms. (This scene is shown as background for a portrait of Diangienda.) Perhaps some of this is compensation for the years of oppressive church rule by missionaries in collusion with colonial governments.

I recognize that Africans do need to affirm themselves, to internalize the fact that white is not better than black. But to make an idol of a legal code or of a human being does not solve the problem, in my estimation. Nor does it even the imbalance of power. Instead it shows a lack of knowledge/regard for God's powerful work through many Spirit-filled leaders in positions equal to Kimbangu's in the history of the Christian church. Furthermore, it erects barriers in creating unity with other Christian groups, a unity frequently spoken of in Kimbanguist circles. Many Zambian Christians from other churches question whether Kimbanguists are Christians after they have attended worship services in the Lusaka church.

### **Conclusion**

How then do we from other Christian traditions relate to this church? My stance has been to let Scripture speak for itself, to bring the Word to my students. I also try to help students get a glimpse of church history, especially that of my own sixteenth century Anabaptist origins, so that they can begin to understand that their church is not alone in "being persecuted for righteousness' sake". And I consistently hold up Jesus Christ as my Lord, my model, the One who is worthy to receive my adoration.

As Heinrich Balz<sup>21</sup> has said, there is too much good and spiritual in this church to dismiss it as merely a syncretist movement in H. W. Turner's typology.<sup>22</sup> Even if their reasons for following a strict moral code is to earn their salvation, yet the results have been less stealing, less adultery and promiscuity, more honesty than in their surrounding communities. They do have some effectiveness in freeing their people from the fear of witchcraft. And they speak of a holistic gospel that meets

human needs for health care, education, agricultural development, jobs (although sometimes here in Zambia these may be more a promise than a reality). They see women as equal with men in being spokespeople for God, so women serve as pastors and deacons (but few of them sit on the decision-making executive committee). They do acknowledge that Jesus Christ died for our sins, and they call all to confess and leave a life of sin. They teach that we must love each other, regardless of race or creed—a vital message for Africans with deep tribal and familial loyalties.

Gamaliel's words are still of help today: "If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is of God, you will not be able to stop these people; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." Acts 6:38-39.

Who are we to judge? God is probably a lot more tolerant than many of us.

### Demographic Information

#### Persons answering questionnaire: 61

Women: 29                      Men: 30

#### Place of birth:

Zambia: 51                      Malawi: 3                      Angola: 5  
Zaire: 1 + 5\*                      Zimbabwe: 1

#### Ages: 60 years or older: 7

50 - 59 years old: 7  
40 - 49 years old: 7  
30 - 39 years old: 11  
20 - 29 years old: 18  
Below 20 years : 9

#### Educational level:

no formal schooling: 13  
completed up to 5 years: 7  
completed 5 to 7 years: 17  
completed 8 years: 5  
completed 1-3 years of secondary school: 12  
graduated from secondary school: 4  
studied in college/university: 3 + 5\*

Those who preach: 30

Those who do not preach: 31

#### Age when attendance at Kimbanguist Church began

a baby: 12  
a child: 4  
a youth (ages 12 - 17): 16  
an adult (over age 18): 29

**Church attended previous to Kimbanguist**

Christian Missions in Many Lands:	21
United Church of Zambia/Methodist:	8
Roman Catholic:	9
Seventh Day Adventist:	1
Faith Apostolic:	4
Full Gospel African Church:	2
None:	4

\*Some respondents failed to complete all demographic questions. Thus totals may be less than 61. Included in the data for Educational Level are five Zairean students' responses. Since they are recent visitors to the Zambia church, their responses are not included in the other data, at Rev. Kangonga's request.

**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Diangienda-Kuntima, English translation of his "Essence de la theologie kimbanguiste," 1977, published in Lutheran World Federation, *Christian Theology and Strategy for Mission*, (Geneva 1980), pp. 224-250.

Diangienda-Kuntima was the third son of Simon Kimbangu and named by his father to head the church. He died 08 July 1992. He was instrumental in pulling together various groups under his leadership and nonviolently forcing the colonial Belgian government to recognize and legalize the church in Zaire in December 1959.

<sup>2</sup> The following have been used as sermon texts. (Some pastors chose more than one Scripture as text.)

Genesis	1:26-27	Matthew	4:1-4	Acts	27:9-11
	4:5-9		5:13-15	Romans	5:12-14
	8:6-10		5:43-48		8:5-8
Haggai	1:3-8		7:13-14		8:14-16
Zechariah	13:1-5		7:21-23		11:33
Malachi	3:1-3		7:24-28		13:11-14
			13:1-9	Galatians	4:8-12
			18:1-3	Colossians	1:20
			19:16-22	Hebrews	12:12
			24:15	James	3:1-12
		Luke	8:24-26	I John	3:1
			12:54-59		4:4-6
			13:6-9		5:1-5
			21:25-28	Revelation	22:14-16
		John	1:10-15		
			14:15-17		

<sup>3</sup> Diangienda-Kuntima, "Essence de la théologie kimbanguiste," in the section entitled "A Conditional Salvation."

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> These same three key words are cited by Marie-Louise Martin in her last circular letter (27 February 1990) before her death, and she expresses her concern that a lot more theological work must be carried out so that "Love is given its full New Testament meaning, then commandments and good works will follow in their biblical position." This letter was translated by Ralph Woodhall and printed in *Review of AICs*, Volume 1, Number 2 (May 1990), Centre for New Religious Movements (Birmingham, UK).

<sup>6</sup> The negative way of stating this may have confused some people. However, since such a statement is often made in sermons, I feel that quite a few people believe that it is true as stated.

<sup>7</sup> The suffering of Jesus is mentioned in some of the Kimbanguist songs. However, those songs that have been translated for me remind us that Jesus' suffering is like that of Simon Kimbangu's or like ours who suffer in this black skin.

<sup>8</sup> Diangienda-Kuntima, op.cit., in the section entitled "Sacraments."

<sup>9</sup> Diangienda-Kuntima, ibid., in the section entitled "A Trinitarian God."

<sup>10</sup> Marie-Louise Martin, last circular letter, op.cit.

<sup>11</sup> Diangienda-Kuntima, "Preparing for Fasting" (instructions to churches), Kinshasa, 17 May 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Marie-Louise Martin, *Kimbangu: An African Prophet and His Church*, Friedrich Reinhardt Verlag (Basel 1971) and in English by Basel Blackwell (Oxford 1975). See also Beguin, W. and Martin, M-L *Study Reports on the EJCSK: Its Present Situation and its Ecumenical Relations*, 1969.

<sup>13</sup> James Bertsche, "Kimbanguism" in *Nouvelles missionnaires du Congo*, July and October (Kinshasa 1965)

<sup>14</sup> Harold Fehderau and Clarence Hiebert, "A Report on Kimbanguism: a visit to some Kimbanguists in the Congo," Jan. 29 - Feb. 5, 1967.

<sup>15</sup> *Ecumenical Review* 19 (1), January 1967, pp. 29-36 (composite authorship)

<sup>16</sup> Susan Asch, *L'Eglise du Prophete Kimbangu, de ses origines a son role actuel au Zaïre*, 1983. Cited by Marie-Louise Martin in "Certain Aspects of Kimbangist Theology: Appreciation and Questions," Ministry in partnership with African Independent Churches, David A. Shank, editor (Mennonite Board of Missions, 1991)

<sup>17</sup> Heinrich Balz in *Zeitschrift fur Mission* (Basel) 15:2, 1989, pp. 92-99 "Simon Kimbangu and the Holy Spirit" translated by Dr. A.S. Worrell

<sup>18</sup> W. J. Hollenweger, "An African Independent Theology?" 198-.

<sup>19</sup> Balz, op.cit.

<sup>20</sup> See Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, Baker Book House (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1985)

<sup>21</sup> Balz, op.cit.

<sup>22</sup> H.W. Turner in *Mission Focus*, 9 (3), Sept. 1981, p. 49



## The New Jerusalem as Paradigm for Mission

*J. Nelson Kraybill*

The book of Revelation has generated so much mischief in the history of the church that modern readers are wise to be wary of using it for inspiration in mission. The radical church leader who put pen to paper on the island of Patmos late in the first century scarcely could have imagined the long trail of eccentricity his vision would precipitate. From Montanists in second-century Asia Minor to Branch Davidians in modern Texas, Revelation has fed the fevered imagination of countless enthusiasts—sometimes with bizarre or tragic results.

It is unfortunate that such abuse turns many thoughtful readers away from Revelation, since no book of the Bible has a more comprehensive and hopeful vision of salvation. The author of Revelation was a pastor and evangelist who was convinced that the kingdom of God someday would stretch beyond the small congregations he knew in Asia Minor to embrace all of creation. Modern readers who appreciate the genre and context of his work will find a church leader calling the church to faithfulness in the face of social and political pressure to compromise. Identification with Jesus-centered Christian community—a place of healing and welcome—is the missiological strategy of Revelation.

### The author and his genre

Modern students of Revelation generally agree John of Patmos was an otherwise unknown Christian Jew who served as prophet and overseer among scattered congregations in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). John apparently was an evangelist, in exile “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). His imagination soared to envision a time when the “eternal gospel” would reach “every nation and tribe and language and people” (14:6).

John skillfully harnessed the most vivid poetry and imagery of his Jewish heritage to make a devastating critique of Roman imperial society. His genre was apocalyptic, a Jewish literary tradition replete with heavenly journeys, end-time catastro-

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phes, and beasts representing political powers.<sup>1</sup> Although only two full-fledged examples of this genre appear in our canon today (Daniel and Revelation), dozens of others survive from the heyday of Jewish and Christian apocalypticism (200 B.C.-A.D. 200). These ancient works are the literary palette of basic word pictures that John used to depict political and spiritual realities of his day. Modern readers are not free to assign arbitrary meaning to Revelation's symbols, since key images of Revelation already had well-understood significance when the author used them.

Gloom and doom feature large in John's world view, since that was how he and other marginalized people often experienced life in the Roman empire. Beyond the storm clouds and violence in Revelation, however, stands the brilliant picture of creation renewed and God dwelling among mortals. This hope for cosmic redemption is the theological foundation of John's world view. The contrast between dread and hope in Revelation might suggest ways modern Christians can deal with ghastly events in suffering nations today. Understanding the social and political critique in Revelation also might open the eyes of Christians in powerful nations to the spiritual rot that pervades empires in every generation. John of Patmos primarily wrote about events and institutions of his era, but the book is God's word for us today as we become alert to twentieth-century parallels.

### **Reading Revelation in cross-cultural context**

A few years after Uruguay emerged from 15 years of military dictatorship, I spent two weeks in Montevideo studying the book of Revelation with 25 students from that country. Many in the class already had some exposure to the pop eschatology and crystal ball hermeneutics often associated with Revelation. The class resolved, however, to spend much of our time exploring what this cryptic book meant **in the first century** before discussing what it might mean today. We looked at first-century political, economic and religious realities that may have shaped vivid panoramas of John's apocalypse. A vision of the cosmic throne room (Rev. 4) reminded us that God is in control of history, even when human rulers claim presumptuous authority (as did the "divine" Roman emperors); a great multitude of worshipers in heaven from "every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (7:9) underscored the world-wide nature of God's kingdom. Students in Montevideo generally accepted the majority opinion of recent scholarship that the first beast of Revelation (13:1-10) represents the Roman empire. We noted that Rome controlled virtually all of the world known to John. Millions of first-century people—including Roman subjects in distant provinces—rejoiced that Caesar Augustus and his successors at last had brought order, prosperity, and unity to the Mediterranean world. Spontaneous gratitude from Roman subjects, particularly in the East, crystallized into the exaggerated patriotism of emperor worship. Our class examined political and economic structures of the Roman empire, including evidence that priests of the imperial cult came to be powerful figures in the military and commercial networks that emanated from Italy. This blend of pagan religion and market economy might explain John's statement that no one could "buy or sell" who did not have the mark of the beast (13:17).

So long as our study focused on the ancient world, I was comfortable reading Revelation with fellow Christians from Latin America. When the group in Montevideo turned to consider modern circumstances that might parallel political and economic realities in John's day, however, the classroom atmosphere became a bit more charged. If Rome was the beast in the first century, what is the equivalent today? There was a moment's hesitation, as students pondered how honest to be with their North American lecturer. For some people living in Uruguay during the past generation, only the great power to the north comes close to fitting the profile of Babylon (Rome) as an entity that "rules over the kings of the earth" (17:18). Just as Rome ruled much of the ancient world by proxy through quislings such as Herod, Washington exercises decisive power around the globe by making "friends" of virtually any ruler who serves North American interests. Some military police in Uruguay, who earlier had imprisoned and tortured a member of our class, received their training in the United States. If the "mark of the beast" was related to blasphemous honors given to Roman emperors in the first century, the United States makes its own dubious claims today. "In God we trust" appears on every American coin. "Americans don't really trust in God," one student commented, "you trust in the dollar and your armies." That student did not mean the United States is uniquely demonic among nations of the world. Rather, empires of every generation produce blasphemous propaganda and make demands on subjects that raise serious questions of allegiance for followers of Jesus.

### **Insights for mission**

I have a new understanding of Revelation after reading the book alongside believers from a nation that is economically and politically marginal. Revelation deals with themes of power and loyalty, both of which matter a great deal to people on the receiving end of a world empire. Mission work, whether in biblical times or the modern era, often includes building relationships between people on different levels of world-wide political and economic structures. John of Patmos graphically sets out issues of faithfulness that cross-cultural gospel-bearers must consider, including the following:

#### **1. Mission is about calling people to a new political and spiritual allegiance.**

Time and again John calls our attention to the sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Twenty-four elders around the throne sing, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power" (4:11). It was important for John to highlight this, because Roman imperial society was excessively honor-conscious. Anybody who mattered in the Mediterranean world was part of a patronage pyramid that linked the humblest slave at the bottom of society to the emperor at the top. Loyalty of client to patron was paramount, so important that millions came to view the supreme patron as divine.<sup>2</sup> About the time Jesus was born, loyal subjects of Rome in Asia Minor left the following inscription:

In the third year from the twelfth consulship of the Emperor Caesar Augustus, son of a god . . . the following oath was taken by the inhabitants of Paphlagonia and the Roman businessmen dwelling among them: "I swear by Jupiter, Earth, Sun, by

all the gods and goddesses, and by Augustus himself, that I will be loyal to Caesar Augustus and to his children and descendants all my life in word, in deed, and in thought, regarding as friends whomever they so regard . . . that in defense of their interests I will spare neither body, soul, life, nor children . . . .”<sup>3</sup>

That startling oath is typical of the spontaneous loyalty Roman subjects gave to the emperor who brought stability and prosperity to cooperative subjects. The seven churches of Revelation were in the province where emperor worship formally started. By the time John was on Patmos, Asia Minor had dozens of temples or altars to the emperor. As the imperial cult gained momentum, emperors claimed titles such as “son of a god” and “savior of the world.” Some followers of The Way recognized that no one can serve two masters; the emperor made demands of loyalty and obedience that could not coexist with allegiance to Christ.

Relatively few modern governments demand the sort of obsequious loyalty that was common in John’s day. When Christians call others to faith, however, it may be important to point out that following Jesus could put one at odds with political powers. Some believers in John’s time suffered martyrdom (Rev. 2:13; 6:9-11; 20:4). Christians in modern El Salvador or China could tell recent stories of similar persecution. Most countries of the world have armies or government agencies that expect utter loyalty from participants, including a willingness to engage in violence or other actions contrary to the Gospel. Christians who refuse to take part, who refuse to show the expected level of patriotism, may suffer dire consequences.

**2. Geopolitical realities matter when we speak the gospel.** As a North American living in Great Britain, I must recognize that I view the Gospel and the world from the perspective of someone living in “Babylon.” John used the name of that ancient Mesopotamian capital as an epithet for Rome (cf. 1 Peter 5:13). This was not a code name to evade detection by imperial authorities. Rather, “Babylon” symbolized the worst imperial power that Jews had ever known, a corrupt place of violence and greed. Just as Babylon destroyed the Jerusalem temple in 587 B.C., an Italian “Babylon” devastated the holy place in A.D. 70. Late first-century Christians and Jews who refused to accept Roman rule as legitimate found themselves without political, social and economic power.

Both the United States and Great Britain have experience with far-flung empire; both have enormous economic and military clout. Things look different in the client states than they do in a world capital. People living in Rome were so close to the military and economic nerve center of the world, so close to prestige and glamor, that they could not see the price other peoples paid for imperial grandeur. Christians from wealthy nations today who carry the Gospel elsewhere in the world would do well to learn from believers like John, who know that one nation’s opulence may be at the expense of tyranny or poverty elsewhere (see Rev. 18). Christians in economically powerful nations might decide to invest some mission energy in calling their own governments to pursue just relationships with other countries around the world.

**3. The Gospel seeks to transform both individuals and institutions.** The Roman empire as a whole had a spiritual personality that John describes as a “beast” or as “Babylon.” Institutions are not spiritually inert or neutral; some function as part of God’s creative order while others ally themselves with death and chaos. Walter Wink gives helpful insight by describing institutions in rebellion against God as being part of a “domination system.” Such entities use force and deception to protect self interest. They subscribe to the notion of “redemptive violence,” a belief that coercion can achieve positive ends.<sup>4</sup> Wink notes that it is rare for any given human agency, whether secular or religious, to be utterly in the service of God or wholly captive to the domination system. Most institutions are a mixture of good and evil. A government, for example, might organize a creative school system at home while engineering death in a distant war.

A generation before John was on Patmos, Paul the apostle had a cautiously optimistic view of the Roman empire (Rom. 13:1-7). Even Paul, however, yearned for the day when “creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19). We who speak the Gospel to individuals also declare that many institutions of society some day will be set free from violence, greed and the need to dominate. A few human structures are so corrupt and malignant that God will allow them to self-destruct. John says “the beast” (the empire as a whole) eventually will come to hate “the whore” (the city of Rome), devouring her flesh and burning her up with fire (Rev. 17:16). This, apparently, is the fate John anticipated for the world capital of his day.

**4. Suffering is a normal element of faithful Christian witness.** Whenever governments or other institutions of society make demands that run contrary to the Gospel, faithful believers will suffer. It is important to note that many Christians in Asia Minor compromised enough with pagan society that they sensed little or no conflict. The church at Laodicea boasted, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.” (3:17). While some believers were comfortable, John apparently was in exile and a few others suffered martyrdom (2:13; 6:9-11; 20:4). John rebukes the church at Pergamum because they “have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam” (2:14). Balaam’s sin, in Jewish tradition, was a compromise with pagan religion. Apparently Christians in John’s day who made some show of idolatrous allegiance to Rome were able to escape harassment.

In many countries of the world it is possible for Christians to live in comfort if we are willing to make a few compromises: spiritualize or individualize the meaning of salvation; avoid speaking to the greed and violence that allow some nations or some sectors of society to live in luxury while others suffer; push Sermon-on-the-Mount living off to some future dispensation so we don’t have to make hard choices today. These short-cuts gut the Gospel of the very transforming power that makes it good news.

**5. Peacemaking and vulnerability are integral aspects of mission.** Despite his manifest rage at the oppression and violence of Roman imperial society, John never imagines Christians taking up weapons or personally serving as agents of divine retribution. In the middle of his portrait of the Roman empire as a bloodthirsty beast, the author reminds readers “if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed. Here is a call for the endurance and faithfulness of the saints” (13:10; cf. 14:12). John calls for faithfulness to a Lamb who had been slaughtered (5:6), for loyalty to a “Lord of lords” who wears a robe dipped in (his own) blood, who conquers only with the sword of the word of God (19:13-16; cf. 1:16).

Few modern ambassadors of the Gospel ally themselves with military might the way Europeans 500 years ago joined church and army to conquer the Americas. But countless churches or mission organizations have discovered the material advantages of courting the favor of political and military powers. “God and country” patriotism is widespread in the United States, and in England the monarch officially is “Defender of the Faith.” It is virtually impossible to maintain such comfortable relationships and be faithful to a Lord who loved his enemies, washed feet like a servant, and taught his follows not to “lord it over” others as the Romans did (Luke 22:24-27).

**6. Economic issues affect the integrity of Christian witness.** It is no accident that words of Christ to the seven churches of Revelation have an economic correlation: churches that were poor or who had “little power” won approval (2:8-11; 3:7-13), while a rich congregation came under censure (3:14-19). More is at issue here than the usual spiritual hazards of wealth, though the New Testament has a lot to say on that question. Wealth in Revelation is related to the fact that no one could “buy or sell” who did not have the mark of the beast (13:17).

There is a new body of evidence suggesting that, by the end of the first century, priests of the imperial cult became pivotal figures in the merchant associations, shipping guilds, monetary institutions, and municipal governments.<sup>5</sup> People who held any level of office in the imperial hierarchy, and those who were part of trade associations or the shipping industry, routinely took part in professional meetings that included worship of the emperor. Even coins of the empire carried inscriptions proclaiming the emperor’s divinity. Christians who refused to participate in the imperial cult could not attain economic or political power. Thus when John speaks of kings “fornicating” with Rome (18:3, 9), and notes that merchants of the earth gained wealth from the harlot city (18:15), he is not referring to mundane sexual relationships. Rather, he is following the precedent of classic Hebrew prophets who used language of “fornication” as a metaphor of illicit relationship with pagan powers.

The imperial cult provided ideological grease for commercial and political wheels of Roman imperial power. Powerful nations today also will cite some ideology—such as free-market capitalism or state-controlled socialism—to justify military, economic and political intervention around the globe. The United States and England both recently joined in war against Iraq, ostensibly for the cause of freedom. In

reality, both countries wanted to protect economic and political interests in the oil-rich Persian Gulf region. If the Gospel is going to be good news in an international context, those who profess the Lordship of Christ must speak up to political and economic institutions that exploit the weakness of smaller nations.

**7. Worship and symbol are basic ingredients of the mission task.** Worship of the emperor and adulation of imperial power saturated the Mediterranean world in the first century. Poets sang praises to Rome, public ceremonies focused popular imagination, and patriotic symbols penetrated the consciousness of Roman subjects. John of Patmos countered this pervasive propaganda with a wealth of Christian symbol and liturgy: if pagan society had the “mark of the beast” (probably symbols of the imperial cult), Christians had a “seal on their foreheads” (7:3; perhaps a reference to baptism). While loyal Roman subjects in many cities organized choral societies to sing praises to the deified emperor, John anticipated the time when every creature in the universe would sing “blessing and honor and glory and might” to God and to the Lamb (5:13).

Much of Revelation reads as liturgy, with praise and confession woven throughout. John describes an alternative patronage system that turns the Roman pyramid of power on its head. Christians may be in mortal struggle with the beast, but they give loyalty to a Lamb who was slain. In the short term this is surprising, since the beast and its city of Babylon look so strong. But John knows that in the end Babylon, with all its greed and blasphemy, will fall (Rev. 18). Underlying his view of society is a confidence that he will see the day when “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah” (11:15). Powerless to act because he is in exile, John awaits divine intervention and counsels his readers to “wake up,” to remember what they have heard about Jesus, to “obey it, and repent” (3:2-3). This is a call to radical, daily discipleship.

**8. Salvation means being part of community.** Images of a New Jerusalem coming down to earth at the end of Revelation remind us that some day God’s reign will be “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). The visible starting point of God’s sovereignty is the faithful **community**, not merely the hearts of individuals. As if to counter any tendency toward Gnosticism, John emphasizes that the New Jerusalem is coming “down out of heaven from God” (Rev. 21:2, 10). The last chapters of Revelation describe an emerging physical reality on earth, not a place where pious people go when they die.

Paul says the Christian has “citizenship in heaven” (Phil. 3:20), and John of Patmos shared the conviction. While some early Christian writers described a commonwealth in heaven (e.g., Heb. 12:22-24), John stood in the classic Hebrew prophetic tradition of expecting God’s reign to appear on earth (cf. Isa. 11:9). What John describes in Revelation 21 is a city free of pollution with fabulous wealth **shared by all**. This is the economic and spiritual community of Acts 2 projected across the entire surface of the globe. Angry as he is at Rome’s oppression and idolatry, John

goes out of his way to mention that “kings of the earth will bring their glory” into the new city (Rev. 21:24). This signals redemption on an enormous scale, since “kings of the earth” in Revelation are regional quislings who cooperated with Roman rule and “fornicated” with harlot Babylon.

John envisioned a world-embracing community of people changed by their loyalty to Jesus, and this remains the central focus of mission. People who know the love of Christ will care about physical need and human rights around the world. Mission work involves awakening believers to the practical joys of sharing resources and thinking globally. John emphasizes that the city of faith has gates on all sides, and the gates “will never be shut” (21:9-27). This is the mark of an open community, a place of invitation and refuge for people from north, south, east and west.

Vision for building Christian community today most likely will come from nations or peoples who feel relatively powerless, rather than from individualistic and wealthy societies. Modern Christians should expect to find the most hopeful models of witness among *comunidades de base* in Latin America or in churches of the inner city. John of Patmos reminds us that authentic mission involves calling people to hard choices of loyalty. Following Jesus may mean abandoning the comfort and security of modern “Babylon” to join the New Jerusalem community that some day will cover the earth. Far from signaling isolationist withdrawal, this alternative community nurtures the tree of life whose leaves some day will bring a healing of the nations (22:2).

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**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> See D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), and Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> See Richard P. Saller, *Personal Patronage Under the Early Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Cited by Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold, editors, *Roman Civilization* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), vol. 2, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Power: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> See J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr-Paul Siebeck, 1995).



## Why Being Mission-minded Is So Important for Us

A sermon based on Acts 10:9-16

*John R. Friesen*

### Introduction

Our mission as Christians, whether as individuals or as local congregations which relate to the larger church and other denominations, is to reflect God to the world. As the Apostle Peter learned, we cannot let our culture or the details of daily living deflect us or our churches from the purpose of bringing the message of Christ to all people from all cultures.

God is the ultimate missionary, a view sometimes called *missio dei* by missiologists and theologians. Therefore, if we are to be true missionaries, God should be uppermost in our minds.

To truly reflect God is a two-way process. We Christians, who want to reflect God to the world, should do more than share our faith. We should also listen to and learn from our fellow human beings regardless of their culture.

This article on being mission-minded will deal with three major themes: defining what the church is, both the local and the larger church; God as the ultimate missionary; and the Christian's mission of sharing and receiving.

### Defining the church

The proposed Inter-Mennonite Confession of Faith (1994), Article 10, *The Mission of the Church*, provides this definition of the church:

We believe that the mission of the church is to proclaim and to be a sign of the reign of God. Christ has commissioned the church to be the witness of his resurrection, making disciples of all nations baptizing them, and teaching them the Gospel of peace.

The article expands this definition with five paragraphs.

1) Here «the church is called to witness to the reign of Christ by embodying Jesus' way in its own life and by patterning itself after the reign of God. Thus it shows the world a sample of life under the lordship of Christ.»

2) In a local sense «the mission of the church is to respond to Jesus' call to make disciples, bringing people to the point of commitment to Christ and also teaching

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them to observe all things Jesus has commanded.»

3) In the international sense this means that «God calls the church to direct its mission to people from all nations and ethnic backgrounds.»

4) This results in the belief that «the mission of the church does not require the protection of any nation or empire. Christians are strangers and aliens within all cultures. Cultural practices need to be tested in light of the Gospel.»

5) The «mission reconciles differing groups, creating new humanity and providing a preview of that day when all the nations shall stream to the mountain of the Lord and be at peace.»

This definition and explanation place Christ's mission squarely with the church. The statement «the mission of the church is to proclaim and to be a sign of the reign of God» is pivotal. This means that the church not only does something, it is something. The church is «a contrast society» to the surrounding culture making individuals in the church aware of relating differently to non-Christians as well as the Christians: through peace, love and forgiveness.

### **The local church and the larger church**

It is also important for us to define more precisely the local church and the larger church. The two differ not only in size but in function. The total church can and must do many things in the world such as carry out projects for justice, provide relief in time of urgent physical need, do theological thinking, educate and train our leaders, to mention only the most obvious.

The **local** church does many of those same things as well but also has several unique functions. It baptizes and serves communion.

The church invites non-believers into the believing community through **baptism**. The local church helps people who have no faith in Jesus Christ to experience faith, joy and the fellowship and love of God.

In the **Lord's Supper or communion**, the church maintains fellowship with God and with believers. Whereas baptism is an individual experience and practice, the Lord's Supper is always communal. We do it together. Baptism is passive—I receive it, communion is active—we do it. We share the bread and the cup with one another in reverence to God and to one another. Whereas baptism suggests that I have experienced forgiveness from God and live in fellowship with God, communion suggests that I live in fellowship with others in the church because we forgive one another.

The **local** church is not only identified by **baptism** and **communion**. It also worships regularly and teaches the elements of the faith. The local church is pivotal because it is the entry point of people from non-faith to faith in God through Jesus.

The work of the total church in organizations like MCC, COM and Native Ministries is also significant. These organizations are doing significant work “In the name of Christ,” MCC's motto.

Since these organizations are made up of people who are members of a local church, they frequently function as a church in terms of fellowship and worship. They differ from the local church in that they do not baptize people into their fel-

lowship. They have a service mandate rather than a “calling to faith” mandate.

Does this mean that the local church has priority over the larger church? Not exactly. If we look at this situation from the point of finances, we are quickly aware that the local church is the basic unit for raising the funds to operate schools, relief organizations, publishing houses and the like. And yet there is no essential difference between the local church and the larger church. Whatever difference there is, it is not one of superiority

The local church I serve provides an example. It has a church office with space, equipment and staff. It also has paid ministers and a custodian. Was there always a church office here? No. Was there always a secretary or custodian? No. Was there always a paid minister? No. Are these additional elements required for being the church? No. These components help the local church to do its work, but First Mennonite Church could be a church without them.

In spite of its human elements, the local church and the larger church transcend their human components. David Bosch has said,

We now recognize that the church is both a theological and sociological entity, an inseparable union of the divine and the dusty. Looking at itself through the eyes of the world, the church realizes that it is disreputable and shabby, susceptible to all human frailties; looking at itself through the eyes of the believers, it perceives itself as a mystery, as the incorruptible Body of Christ on earth. We can be utterly disgusted, at times, with the earthliness of the church, yet we can also be transformed, at times, with the awareness of the divine in the church. (Bosch, *Transforming Mission, Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (1991) p. 389.

### **God is the ultimate missionary**

In the discussion so far the emphasis has been on people and the institutions of the local and the larger church. However, the continuing challenge of the church is not only the mission it is already doing in a vast number of ways. It is not so much the work of the church in a local setting or in its projects, such as our relief drive for Rwanda, or in negotiating peace and working for justice. The real priority of the church’s mission is God.

God is the ultimate missionary. We see God as reaching out to the world from the beginning of time to the present: through Abraham, through Israel and now through the church. So our mission as a church is not so much what we do, but how we display “an attribute of God. God is a missionary God“ (Bosch, p. 390).

Mission in the larger sense of the word is “a movement from God to the world, the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission. There is church because there is mission, not vice versa. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God’s love toward people” (Bosch, p. 390).

God also works in ordinary human history quite outside the church. In the Old Testament God used not only the people of Israel but also foreigners to do his will. That recognition by some of the prophets should make room in our theology for

God to work the organizations that we recognize.

God's mission may be summarized in many ways. One biblical term is the word salvation. God wants to save the world and its people from death and destruction. God wants to save the world and its people for life, abundant life, for justice, joy and peace.

### **Our particular mission includes both sharing and receiving**

Having acknowledged that our mission as a church is both local and wider-reaching, and having recognized God as the ultimate missionary, we can now look at a third aspect: sharing and receiving.

In the local and total church we need to be aware of our two-fold mission. The church's purpose is to share the Gospel including our views on peace, justice and relief, but the purpose is also to listen to those with whom we share this gift. It is a two-way street from us to them and from them back to us.

When we are involved in mission, it is not like giving to the United Way or paying our taxes. That's a one-way system. We, as a church, are not the Haves who are sharing with the Have-Nots. We do have an important message in the Gospel that we need to share continually: God's love, God's justice, God's care, and God's judgment. Yet we must always be open to what God wants us to learn from and through other people we reach.

For example, every large commercial company has two signs to guide truckers: **shipping** and **receiving**. A company can't ship goods away without also receiving goods. It would soon have nothing left to ship. Similarly a company can't only receive goods without shipping. It would run out of storage space. It must do both. That is what the church is all about: shipping and receiving, making deliveries and making pick-ups.

Often, before we can be ready to receive and learn from other people, we have to clear ourselves of interfering clutter and baggage. The very culture that forms our human identity can interfere with the expansion of our spiritual identity.

The Bible passage, Acts 10:9-16, illustrates that perfectly. God taught Peter that his cultural background, although important, wasn't necessary for faith in God. That was a new revelation to Peter.

How could someone, Peter must have thought, believe in God and not follow the dietary laws? How could someone eat pork, reptiles, shell-fish, shrimp and still believe in God?

How could someone...? Well, God showed Peter such a someone. His name was Cornelius.

Cornelius was a good man morally, although a soldier by profession. Cornelius was a good man religiously. He attended synagogue. He was also a good man because he was generous. In our time he would be like a non-Mennonite who gives large sums of money to MCC.

Although the Christ he followed had demonstrated a type of fellowship with "sinners," Peter did not want to abandon his position and belief, and he thought he knew

what that meant. He, a Jewish-Christian, would definitely not associate with a Gentile. Furthermore, Cornelius was a Roman soldier, a man of political and military power and a man of economic influence over Jews.

In this example God leads the young church into a new dimension. God wants to expand the church's understanding of itself and its purpose in the world. It is quite clear that God wants this Jewish Christian church to include others, not just those of their own background.

Peter was to be the instrument, but first he had to drop some cultural baggage, that of diet and lifestyle. To be sure, it was part of every other Christian of that time because they were all Jews, but still it was not part of being uniquely Christian.

Peter wasn't the only one in the Bible who had to learn difficult lessons in the school of faith. Paul, the thinker, theologian, and missionary also received some shock therapy.

In Acts 15 Paul discovers that Gentiles without connection to the synagogue come to faith in Jesus, albeit in a church made up of Jews. In Jewish culture circumcision was a crucial issue. Not to circumcise the male off-spring meant nothing less than being cut off from the people of God. Paul had to learn from the Gentiles that circumcision was no longer necessary as a sign that someone belongs to God.

Thus both Peter and Paul, while bringing their message of the Gospel to non-believers, expanded and extended their belief system through their encounters with non-Jews. In other words we who claim to be the bringers of the Good News of God must also be open to receiving further Good news that enhances the Gospel's meaning.

That is part of our on-going faith journey. We as Christians or Mennonites in a small community may do what is religiously and culturally acceptable there, we may not realize that what we are doing, although good in itself, may not be part of the Gospel of Jesus.

Theological reflection and insight don't follow spiritual trade routes. In other words, we as Christians or as missionaries, or as MCC or MVS workers don't bring with us a totally finished product. The product is God's presence among us, and that can't be packaged.

The 1989 100-page study, *Mennonite International Study Project* by the husband and wife team Nancy Heisey and Paul Longacre, sponsored by MCC and four North American Mennonite mission agencies, shockingly underscored this point. They noted that the recipients of the Gospel, as well as those receiving relief and development, had a lot to share with the giving community.

One group of church leaders, (COM), found the challenge of freeing money for the foreign church leaders to use at their own discretion a difficult one. As this continues, hopefully, greater trust can be established between the giving and receiving communities. Much more listening needs to take place.

The people out there are the Corneliuses. We are the Peters and Pauls. As Christians we must not only bring the Gospel to others. We must recognize that those Corneliuses, and cultures, can give us new biblical understandings vital for the total Gospel.

**Conclusion**

In exploring our mission as a church, both as it relates to God and to people of all backgrounds, it is clear that the Gospel is a treasure we can't control. It is one we must handle with care and serve with love. The basic purpose of the church today is the continuing challenge of the Gospel itself, the Gospel of salvation.

We are always just part of the larger picture, either as active members in the local church or as contributing partners in the larger church.

This is God's mission and we are privileged to be involved in it. God is the primary and ultimate missionary.

This message of the Gospel, as we understand it, is vital. However, it is incomplete until we share it with others, learn something about from them in their context, then apply what we learn to our faith.

Such an understanding behooves us to share and live the Gospel in love, humility, service and gratitude.

May the mysterious and the miraculous Gospel continue to challenge us. Amen.

## Toward a Mennonite/Brethren in Christ Missiology for Thailand

*Mark Siemens*

I have always been interested in mission theology and practice, in previous assignments in Africa and the Middle East as well as in my current involvement as Thailand co-representative for Mennonite Central Committee. During my time in Thailand, I have befriended a number of missionaries, observed current mission practice, and tried to understand how Thai people become Christian and what implications this has for mission work here.<sup>1</sup>

Following are a few observations about how mission in Thailand can be formed on a Mennonite/Brethren in Christ theological base, together with three illustrative stories of Thai people grappling with Christian faith.

Thai culture carries strong influences from at least three religious streams (see cultural backgrounds below). The cultures of other groups in Thailand, such as ethnic Lao people or indigenous hilltribe people, are different from the culture of the majority Thai group. But I suspect there are enough similarities, particularly when one considers the primal religion (animist) base that pervades these two as well as the Thai group, that the observations here may apply in significant ways to them as well. That is a subject for further study.

*Rahim, a Thai man of around 25, came to our office one afternoon. He lived in the house next door to our house/office. From his name I could tell that his faith background was Muslim: rahim in Arabic means merciful.*

*He asked about the office and the work of MCC. But he was especially interested in our Christian faith. He spoke some English; I spoke some Thai. With a lot of help from him, I managed to communicate some of what it means to be a Christian.*

*Rahim had a Bible, given to him by a missionary in south Thailand where he grew up. So he was somewhat familiar with the Bible as a whole, but the Bible was in English, and it was a bit beyond his comfortable reading ability.*

*Rahim was interested in reading the Bible in Thai language. I loaned him our office copy, and we had several sessions where I attempted to express to him what the Bible is about and how it is organized. I encouraged him to start his reading in Mark as the shortest and easiest to understand of the Gospels.*

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*He took the Bible to his room in the neighboring house, where he lived as a boarder with a large Muslim family. One day he brought it back and explained that he could no longer keep it in his room, since one of the women in the household had discovered it while she was cleaning in his room. But he could continue to come and talk.*

*As we talked, I reflected on my previous experience in the Middle East, where I had learned that it was very difficult for a person of Muslim faith to become a Christian. I expressed this to him one day, and he readily agreed. He was quite sure his family would cut him off, or maybe threaten him physically, if he converted to faith in Jesus Christ.*

*Over time our talks about the Christian faith kind of faded away. Rahim struck me as an incredibly curious person, interested in faith questions and willing to explore another faith far beyond what most of his peers would do. He never told me he had made a faith commitment; I never pressed him for a decision.*

*The best I can say about my role is that some seeds were sown, perhaps to come to maturity later in another context.*

### **1. Cultural backgrounds**

As I attempt to understand Thai culture, I have found it helpful to remember an aphorism I learned during a previous assignment in the Middle East: “If you scratch a Palestinian Christian, you’ll find a Muslim underneath.” But here, while 95 percent of Thai people are at least nominally Buddhist, the religious underpinnings of culture are more mixed than in the Middle East.

From the Buddhist mainstream, Thai people learn of prohibitions on killing, stealing, lying, “unchaste or sensual” behavior, and use of alcohol or drugs (von der Mehden 1986:68). Followed strictly only by monks, these tenets nevertheless form a bedrock of ideals for Thai society, honored perhaps more in breach than in observance. The well-known Thai gentleness and moderation are undoubtedly related to these Buddhist principles.

One of the major religious shrines in Bangkok is the Erawan Shrine, where there is a representation of the Hindu god Shiva. Many Thai people “make merit” by bringing to this image an offering in the form of flower garlands, carved wooden elephants, or payments to the dancers at the shrine. It is common to see Thais wai-ing the statue, showing respect by pressing the hands together and bowing the head. The Erawan Shrine illustrates the influence of Brahmanism on Thai culture, producing especially a strong belief in reincarnation and the necessity to live a good life of respect for one’s betters if one is hoping to live again as a person at a higher level. This belief provides obvious incentives for stability in society, and discourages revolt against ruling classes who are presumed to be better by right. It is also a significant disincentive for major disagreement with one’s parents.

The spirit houses in front of many Thai houses provide an example of the animism that pervades Thai belief, most strongly among hilltribe people but also held quite firmly among even the most secular residents of Bangkok. All beings, objects, and places have spirits, and the spirits of a place that are disturbed when a house is

built must have a place to reside—thus the tiny spirit houses, where many Thais place food each morning. When a person dies prematurely, the spirit is not at rest in its assigned place, and may continue to disturb people in the place where the death occurred.

When the grandfather of a friend of ours became a Christian many years ago in a village in northern Thailand, he wanted to get rid of the sacred objects he had used as a spirit medium. He packed them in their wooden box and threw the box into the middle of the river. Many villagers were watching as the box floated upstream out of sight. Incidents of this type illustrate the pervasiveness of spirit belief in Thai culture.

An additional challenge in grappling with Thai culture, beyond its mixed character, is that it is constantly changing, not least as a result of its encounter with western materialism and commercialism. Changes are occurring rapidly not only in large cities but in every village, connected with the cities by an excellent transportation infrastructure, and with the west by television and movies. The challenge for mission is two-fold: (1) to understand a culture that is a constantly moving target, and (2) to avoid bringing our cultural baggage in a way that would further this corrosive impact of the West.

Thai culture borrows from three major religious streams. It is flexible and adaptable, and places a high value on social harmony, maintained more by submission to one's betters and by prevention of conflict than by assertive conflict resolution. Just as Thai monarchs and political leaders have maintained Siam's independence for centuries through a sophisticated and supple negotiating ability, so Thai people tend to be open to other religions while maintaining a quiet autonomy and a profound commitment to their own status quo. And while there are significant contributions from Brahmanism and animism, Thai culture remains strongly identified with Buddhism.

*"Kanchana" was my teacher during my fourth month of language study. Right away in the early days of the module I could sense a deep gentleness in her that went beyond the Thai cultural style. There also seemed to be hints as we discussed various topics in class that she might be among the minority of Christian teachers at the language school.*

*Tutoring sessions were available each afternoon at 1:00. One day I worked up my courage to ask Khru Kanchana whether I could come that afternoon to talk with her about religion. She said, "You can, of course!" As we talked that afternoon, I was amazed to find out that just in the past month she had decided to become a Christian.*

*She told of how she had been reading the Bible for many years, how her husband (a member of the border police who spent weeks at a time on the Cambodian border) and family would not approve of her decision but would not oppose it and would not be surprised, and how she was being disciplined by an American missionary. I was humbled when she asked me how to pray; I could only mumble, in my limited Thai,*

*that I thought the Lord's Prayer was the model we should follow.*

*What was it like when she actually made the decision? She felt that there was a struggle in her between the Spirit of God and evil spirits. She had intense headaches and heard loud voices, painfully loud. She was afraid to turn off the lights at night, especially the first night or two. There was pain--the pain of relinquishing the hold of her former spirit system, the pain of new birth which few of us westerners experience who grow up in Christian contexts.*

*I was awed to have a glimpse, albeit flawed and filtered by my limited language, of the heart of a very new Christian. I was impressed that her faith decision had occurred after significant contact with an expatriate missionary and after considerable reading of our Scriptures. Her demeanor and her witness convinced me that the decision was part of a process, one that would undoubtedly continue for years or for a lifetime.*

## **2. The encounter with Christian faith**

How do Thai people become Christian? A facile answer is that not many of them do. After 160 years of Protestant mission activity in Siam/Thailand, less than one percent of the current Thai population is Christian.<sup>2</sup>

When Thais do decide to become Christians, they begin a process that takes a significant amount of time. One missionary estimates that a Thai person choosing to follow Christ typically takes 10 years to become completely Christian. I suspect it is an even longer process than this, as it is for all of us who never completely live up to our Christian ideals. But the point is clear: Christian faith is so different from the faith experience of most Thai people that an enormous amount of reorientation must occur over time if the person is to identify fully as a Christian and experience a full measure of living in discipleship.

A more significant barrier to Thai acceptance of Christian faith is to be found in the strong identification of ethnic Thais with Buddhism. Thai society is made up, broadly speaking, of ethnic Thai people, who comprise the vast majority; Chinese Thais, descendants of traders and business people who came here from China in the last 100 years or so; and people of other ethnic minorities, such as hilltribe (indigenous) people, people of Malay descent, and people of Indian descent. Of these groups, the one least likely to respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ is the ethnic Thai group. Part of the reason is that the others tend to be marginalized, and therefore have less at stake as they contemplate changing religions. Another reason was provided by a fellow singer after Messiah rehearsal who responded, when I asked him if he is Christian: "No, I am Buddhist—to be Thai is to be Buddhist!" In Thai schools, the day begins with a recitation of loyalty to the king, the motherland, and Buddhism—another manifestation of the close link between ethnic Thais and Buddhism.

One of the key factors in this remarkable resistance to the Gospel is the great flexibility of Thai culture, the suppleness that has also enabled successful Thai diplomacy. Like a palm tree that bends in the monsoon winds but will eventually return to its original angle, Thai people tend to be open and accepting of new ideas

on the surface, while underneath remains a seamless cultural and religious reality—which for most Thai people has strongly Buddhist content.<sup>3</sup>

Another barrier is the emphasis on respect for elders, linked to Brahmanist belief in reincarnation, which combines with strong family solidarity to make it extremely difficult and unlikely for young family members to break from the past by changing religious faiths. And older family members tend to be set in their ways, even less likely to consider breaking away from their faith of origin.

Until about seven years ago, there was no significant peace church mission presence in Thailand. There have been a number of missionaries, particularly under the Church of Christ in Thailand, who have been oriented toward peace theology. Whether mission grounded in a shalom theology will be more effective remains to be seen.

### **3. Mennonite/Brethren in Christ connections with Thai culture**

Observing the points of contact between Mennonite/Brethren in Christ theology and Thai culture encourages us to consider mission to Thailand grounded explicitly in peace theology.

#### **a. Emphasis on ethics**

Thai people consider their behavior and specifically their treatment of other people to be religiously important. The fact that one can “make merit” by performing acts of mercy or devotion suggests an emphasis on “works righteousness.” Fred R. von der Mehden (1986:67) states that “Buddhism has been described by some as not a religion at all, but a code of life, the teachings of one of the world’s greatest spiritual leaders.” Ethical behavior is specifically emphasized also by the Brahmanist stream in Thai culture, though not particularly by that of animism.

Mennonites and Brethren in Christ believe strongly that our faith must be matched by our works, and a strong emphasis on ethical and moral behavior is part of our heritage and practice. The Thai disposition to see their religious commitments in terms of specific behavioral expectations is thus consonant with one significant emphasis of our theology. Moreover, the ethical thrust of Buddhism (see paragraph 2 in “Cultural backgrounds” above) is parallel to that of the Sermon on the Mount, the bedrock of Mennonite/Brethren in Christ moral and ethical commitments.<sup>4</sup>

#### **b. Emphasis on peace**

Partly because of the importance of Buddhist concepts, and partly because of a strong commitment to social order and stability, Thai people tend to place a high value on peace, particularly at the interpersonal level. Thai ways of dealing with conflict are significantly different from Western modes in that Thai people tend to emphasize conflict prevention rather than using resolution techniques after a conflict has escalated. Also, confrontation is usually avoided, so that conflicts tend to simmer slowly, to be dealt with in indirect ways. Still, the ideal of social harmony should be a natural bridge to Mennonite/Brethren in Christ theology of peacemaking.

This is not an attempt to play out this theme fully. But one obvious direction for

further missiological work would be to explore how in other settings the connection is made between a commitment to interpersonal peace and the need for peace with God, a parallel perhaps to Christology “from below” rather than “from above.”

### c. Mutual aid

Family solidarity built on respect for elders is very strong among Thai people. In traditional Thai society, the community is viewed as having great importance, and one is just as likely to take action on behalf of the community as in pursuit of individual agenda. (Individualism, abetted by Western ideas, is making strong inroads into this communitarian commitment, but the latter remains strong in Thai society.)

Mennonite/Brethren in Christ theology includes an emphasis on helping those in need, both inside the family of faith and in the broader community around the world. It does not seem a large leap to envision Thai people broadening their family and clan commitments to embrace all humankind. This project could be worked on together, since many Western Christians have not “arrived” in this regard either.

These three examples point toward the possibility of a unique Mennonite/Brethren in Christ witness in this country. They encourage an explicit “peace theology” approach in mission to Thai people. While this approach will not necessarily bring a greater stirring toward Christian faith on the part of Thai people, it seems theologically more honest than adopting a generic evangelical theology. The latter would likely lead to further results along the lines already observed.

*“Jit” has been a Christian for eight years. She became a Christian while a teenager, struggling to make meaning of her life at a time when her parents were separating and her own future was in doubt. As a university student, she was befriended by a Thai Christian who shared her faith with Jit. She began attending church regularly and studying the Bible, and when she announced her decision to become a Christian to her cousins with whom she was living at the time, her uncle made a special trip to Bangkok to try to convince Jit not to do it and to tell her that as a Christian she would have to move out of the house.*

*She felt very much alone in the world, but her decision was affirmed when a missionary couple offered to let her stay with them. Meanwhile, the couple met Jit’s cousins and worked toward her reconciliation with her family, which happened within the next year.*

*Jit is a thoughtful and active member of a Southern Baptist congregation in Bangkok. She has been a leader in the youth group, where she met her husband, and she invited her sister, six years younger, to come to church and youth group meetings with her. It took several years, but eventually her sister followed her example in deciding to become a Christian.*

*Soon the two of them were working on their mother, who had gotten back together with their father after much mediation, pleading, and prayer by Jit. It was a big event when Mother came to church with them for the first time. Before long she was attending regularly, and in less than a year she professed faith in Christ. But when*

*she returned for a visit to her family in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, she not only stayed away from church but attended a Buddhist service with them. It took nearly another year before she was strong enough in her faith to attend church in Chiang Mai. There have been relapses but it seems that Mother is firmly on the path of Christian discipleship.*

*The three female family members are praying that Jit's father will follow them into the family of Christian faith. He has visited church once, but it will probably take a lot more time before he will be open to this life change.*

*Jit says a big part of her witness to her family has been her desire to show Christ's love to them in many ways. It is a constant challenge for her to represent Jesus Christ faithfully in her life.*

#### **4. Toward a Mennonite/Brethren in Christ paradigm for mission in Thailand**

Here I propose a few modest building blocks of a mission paradigm that might be specially suited to Thai culture. But first, a theological observation. The first three parts of this article have assumed a narrowly defined concept of mission, almost equating it with evangelism and church planting. A full-orbed gospel and ecclesiology are not limited to evangelism as the sole activity of the church. The discussion of this point will begin our exploration of what an explicitly Mennonite/Brethren in Christ missiology for Thailand might look like.

##### **a. Mission addresses all needs**

Faithful mission in the name of Jesus Christ must be faithful to Christ's life and teachings, and indeed to his mission goals and methods. There is no disagreement with the fact that Matthew 28:18-20 is a key programmatic element of mission theology. But if we take the life of Jesus seriously as we define mission, we cannot claim that evangelism as "preaching to convert others" was Jesus's exclusive priority. That would exclude the healing and feeding that he did. Nor can we assert that the meeting of physical needs was only an adjunct to conversion, since there are many examples of Jesus's healing or feeding which were not accompanied by a call to conversion.

When we explore the question, "What was Jesus sent to do—that is, what was Jesus's mission?"—we are forced to conclude that Jesus was sent to preach, teach, and heal. Jesus's mission was not limited exclusively to calling for conversion, nor to healing only as a means of encouraging conversion or of supporting those already converted. The result of Christ's mission was a community where preaching, teaching, and healing (as well as sharing) are the norms.

I suspect few mission agencies in Thailand focus on evangelism to the utter exclusion of addressing social and material needs. A more subtle error is to tack on a social ministry or two as a mere adjunct or annex to the "real work" of evangelization—which comes close to the long discredited "rice Christian" approach. Genuine integration of evangelism and service—addressing the whole person—is not easy, and indeed is a continuing challenge to the faithfulness of every mission agency and

every missionary.

**b. The purpose of the church is to be the church**

A biblical ecclesiology will observe the fantastic growth of the early church in the context of faithful sharing of resources, works of mercy, and ethical decision-making. The church of the first century was well-rounded enough and confident enough to recognize that its primary task was to be faithful to its Lord—in other words, to be the church. To be a part of such a radically faithful church was indeed good news that demanded to be shared.

It is a truncated ecclesiology that suggests that the only, or even the primary, task of the church is to reproduce itself. Such a reductionist conception is dangerously close to “evangeliolatry.”

We all can think of examples of congregations that were not growing numerically, but were deepening their faith commitments in ways that later became manifested in visible growth of various kinds, including membership increases. We also know of situations where congregations grew larger by unethical means—by encouraging members of other churches to leave and join theirs, for example. These illustrations challenge the adequacy of setting numerical growth as the only goal of the church, or evangelism as the only activity of the church.

A missiology for Thailand must be built on a whole ecclesiology, and it must have the goal of assisting Thai people in building a whole church in which evangelism takes its place in the context of a faithful community with many functions and ministries.

**c. Missionaries to Thailand must be thoroughly incarnational**

Because Thai culture is flexible and will bend to new winds while maintaining its essential character, mission to people in Thailand will be ineffective if it attempts to move immediately to confrontation. Thai society and interaction are built on indirection, and only an “indirect” approach has a chance of long-term impact. By “indirect” I mean commitments such as the following: to spend years, perhaps many years, learning the culture before attempting to evangelize; to talk about faith matters as Thai people talk about a sensitive issue, that is, by subtly approaching the subject over the course of many conversations, and by backing off if the time is not right; to understand the Buddhist-Brahmanist-animist roots of Thai culture so thoroughly and sympathetically that the missionary could almost become a convert, and is able to articulate in Thai language what these religious and cultural roots means to the Thai people.

To say that a missionary to Thailand must enter fully into Thai culture is to state the obvious, applicable to any context. But it is crucial here, where there are many barriers to immersion in the culture. One’s appreciation of the apparent openness on the surface gives way over time to a feeling that Thai people really may not want them to enter fully. The barriers may be soft and smooth, but they also prove to be tough and possibly impermeable. One can only do one’s best and pray that over time

sincerity will be recognized and accepted where cultural fluency fails.

The only hope for effective mission by foreigners in Thailand is to incarnate as completely as possible the Good News and the person of Jesus Christ. This is of course impossible and forces the missionary to depend utterly on God's grace.

#### **d. Emphasize peace theology**

As observed above, Mennonite/Brethren in Christ theology has unique connections with Thai culture. In one case of mission to Lao ethnic people in northeast Thailand, that I am familiar with, the commitment by the missionaries to peace theology seems to have been one factor in the steady growth of their church in maturity, appreciation for their own Lao culture, relationships, and numbers.

Mennonites and Brethren in Christ can do no less than share with Thai people the joy we've experienced in relationships, vertical and horizontal, when they have been ordered by our understanding of Scripture.

#### **e. The best missionaries in Thailand are Thai people**

Our experience in this country, and the reflections summarized above, convince me that no foreigner will ever be as effective a missionary in Thailand as a committed, vibrant Thai Christian like "Jit."

Why then do we have foreign missionaries in Thailand? "Because there are Thai people who have not yet become Christian" does not provide a full answer. I suspect a large factor is the inertia of the mission establishment in this country, which maintains foreigners here in spite of the priority of supporting Thais to do the work of growing their church. It is relatively easy to place missionaries in Thailand, which also makes it easy to keep on doing so.

A more serious and valid reason to place expatriate missionaries here is to provide training for Thai church leaders. I believe this need remains, though the goal should be to work oneself out of a job through a planned program of raising the training level of local leaders.

But I suspect another reason for the continuing existence of the foreign mission establishment in Thailand is impatience by Westerners at the perceived slow pace of growth in the Thai church. Some of this sense is conveyed by Maarten van der Werf in another context:

Our western culture infuses us with an extreme addiction to the success process: I plan; I carry out; it works. We seldom look at side effects. This quick process motivates us. But history [and Thai culture!] operates at a different speed and is unpredictable. Things escape our personal fix-it spiritual power. Resources for sustained motivation then become necessary (van der Werf 1994:5).

We feel we can bring about faster growth—despite the 160 year history of gradual growth and the unlikelihood that expatriates can be as effective as Thai people in mission here. A Thai-driven pace of church growth is more likely to be culturally appropriate and is more likely to result in solid long term expansion in faithfulness,

ministry, and membership. Can we accept the possibility that God will build the church here in a Thai way and at a Thai pace?

### Conclusion

Whatever paradigm is adopted by groups involved in mission in Thailand, they can be assured by history and cultural factors that it will probably continue to be a difficult field of work. I have suggested that an approach built on peace theology might be consonant with Thai culture in some powerful ways. But no one should expect that a new approach will necessarily bring stronger results by any measure.

Mission in Thailand will continue to involve the hard, deep work of being the church and opening windows for others to see into that portion of society that has already been claimed by God's kingdom. Mysteriously, like the seed growing at night (Mark 4.26-29), that church will continue to grow in this amazing Thai land.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Is my current work with MCC "mission"? I certainly regard it as part of the work the church is sent to do in the world, and therefore within the concept of mission. I am not involved in evangelism as a program or in church planting, but as will be seen later, I do not think mission is properly reduced to these activities.

<sup>2</sup> The first Protestant resident missionaries in Thailand were Carl Friedrich Augustus Gutzlaff and Jacob Tomlin, arriving on August 23, 1828. Previous Roman Catholic mission to Thailand beginning in 1511 was effectively curtailed with the execution of a Catholic government minister and the banishment or imprisonment of priests in 1688. (Smith 1981:14,9)

<sup>3</sup> Alex G. Smith summarized a missionary's 1915 account of Thai response as follows: "Evangelists and missionaries are often frustrated at the impassive, lethargic inactivity of Thai in response to the Gospel, though the people may have long listened with apparent interest. This good natured indifference bends under the touch of the Gospel 'only to spring back into place a moment later' secure of Buddhism." (Smith 1981:275)

<sup>4</sup> From the notes of my second conversation with "Kanchana," December 13, 1989: "I asked her reaction to the Sermon on the Mount, which I had encouraged her to read the last time we talked. She said simply that it was very parallel to Buddha's teachings....She said she did not think it impossible to live out, but that she knew she could not always obey and was in regular need of forgiveness."

## **Dilemmas of a Mennonite Program Agency** **Mennonite Central Committee Seeks to Find Its Niche in Cambodia**

*Jonathan and Ruth Keidel Clemens*

**M**ennonite Central Committee (MCC) has worked in Cambodia since 1981. MCC's role in Cambodia has evolved over the years, along with the ever-changing political and social situation.

From the beginning of MCC's presence in Cambodia, it has been necessary for program administrators to make difficult decisions as to MCC's appropriate role and profile. These decisions dealt with a large variety of issues. Cambodia's specific situation of having been devastated by years of bombing and the rule of the Khmer Rouge as well as by continuing war, and left isolated by the West, drove much of what MCC did during the early years. Other factors that were weighed as decisions were made over the years were MCC's identity as a Christian/Mennonite organization coupled with Cambodia's being a Buddhist society. To some, it appeared that MCC's decisions involved too many compromises. Others, while acknowledging the unusual nature of the situation, felt nonetheless that the decisions were prudently made, and appropriate for the circumstances.

Our term as MCC Country Representatives in Cambodia (1988-1993) coincided with intense political changes. Much of MCC's identity in Cambodia had already been established, and our challenge was to respond appropriately to the changing times in ways that were fitting for MCC. Decisions about MCC's role were often made in an ambiguous climate, an environment of constant socio-political change and shifting conditions, at times bordering on the chaotic. These changes were reflective of the larger, and increasingly ambiguous, world-wide geo-political picture, as the USSR dissolved and the Berlin wall collapsed.

MCC programs are viewed by the constituency as, by and large, being personnel intensive, relatively low-budget, working at the village level in a "person to person" way, and working to a large degree through church structures. During the 1980s, however, this did not define the MCC Cambodia Program. It was not until around 1990 that significant political changes began to take place in the country, which in turn began to allow for gradual changes in MCC Cambodia's program as well.

MCC Cambodia's history and the way it dealt with dilemmas faced in the Cambo-

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dian setting may be instructive to other program agencies in similar situations. Following are a number of themes that have affected MCC's presence and decision-making in Cambodia since work began in 1981. The interaction of these themes with MCC Cambodia's course is evident as one traces the program's history. The interdependence of these themes must be emphasized, since it would be misleading to consider them in isolation from one another.

### **MCC Cambodia programs beginning at Cambodia's "Year Zero"**

In 1979 Cambodia was truly left "flat on its back." As a result of the disastrous rule of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge in which an estimated 20 percent of the population died, the country's infrastructure was shattered and the population thoroughly traumatized. Most of those Cambodians who had some professional training had either died or fled to the border. The term "Year Zero," commonly used to describe what things were like then, gives a sense that the country was starting from scratch.

On top of this Cambodia was denied the international development assistance and access to credit that would have been essential to getting it back on its feet again. To add to this impossible situation, the ongoing war against the Khmer Rouge-led guerrilla insurgency continued to sap what few resources the country had.

Because of the Western aid embargo in the 1980s, MCC's profile in Cambodia was fairly high, as was that of other non-governmental organizations (NGOs). MCC, having comparatively modest resources, nevertheless represented to the Cambodian government a significant chunk of the country's access to Western development assistance. For example, MCC's contribution to the Forestry Department's reforestation program was in the same neighborhood as what was being allocated by the national budget for reforestation.

These factors encouraged NGOs in the early years to develop uncharacteristically large-scale programs. The acute needs at the central infrastructural level determined the direction of NGO resources and attention. MCC Cambodia's budget was larger than MCC programs in most other countries (while having a comparably small expatriate MCC presence), primarily because the program was addressing such large-scale and capital-intensive needs that would not have been addressed otherwise.

To summarize, MCC Cambodia's programs have roughly evolved in the following manner and sequence:

**1980-87:** Relief assistance, including large shipments of rice seed, soap, canned beef, school and health kits, and clothing.

**1982-1991:** Addressing large infrastructural needs: building and repairing institutional buildings such as schools and hospitals, refurbishing soap factories, providing vehicles, providing large quantities of medicines and equipment.

**1987-present:** Training emphasis in all programs. Health staff are sent to India for training. Indian doctors and other expatriates came to work in Cambodia with training emphasis in mind. Cambodians from various sectors are sent to other countries in the region to receive further training and exposure.

**1991-present:** Working at a community level, with a participatory approach, as that

has been allowed.

**1992-present:** Working towards Cambodian-initiated and Cambodian-led activities as trained and experienced Cambodian staff became more a part of MCC programs.

### **MCC's identity as a reconciliatory presence in the face of the western aid embargo**

As mentioned above, Cambodia was subjected to an intense US-led international embargo on aid and commerce through most of the 1980s and into the early 1990s. In essence, the embargo was an indirect attempt to punish Viet Nam, which was backing the Cambodian government during the 1980s. The government of Cambodia, and the Cambodian people, were non-entities in the eyes of all Western governments. Through the 1980s, MCC's presence, along with only a handful of other such organizations, comprised the sum total of Western aid coming to Cambodia.

Thus, from the beginning, MCC's presence in Cambodia was a symbolic act of reconciliation. MCC's identity as an American NGO in a country that the US was ignoring made a statement to the Cambodians and to the US government. To Cambodians it said we were standing with them in spite of our government's policies. To the US government it said that in spite of the harsh policy of embargo, resulting in difficult licensing procedures to discourage program activities in Cambodia, MCC would not ignore the Cambodian people. It said that our government's policies do not determine our Christian sense of service. During those years of embargo, MCC Cambodia tried to take an active role in raising awareness among MCC and other constituencies about Cambodia's isolation.

The recent changes in Cambodia have altered the context for this symbolism. The embargo has ended. There is now a recognized government in place. MCC is now one of a more than 100 foreign aid agencies in Cambodia.

The symbolic importance of MCC's presence in Cambodia has become less relevant, while opportunities for MCC Cambodia to define itself in other ways have multiplied.

### **Working with government restrictions placed on foreigners**

The centrally organized and controlled nature of Cambodia during much of the 1980s, following the Marxist-Leninist model, caused the working environment for foreigners and Cambodians to be oppressive. Government restrictions on foreigners severely curtailed connections foreigners could make with Cambodians.

Apart from occasional stilted encounters, expatriates were not allowed to have meaningful contacts with rural Cambodians. Conversations with Cambodian civilians, apart from official ministry contacts, were viewed with suspicion. Secret police could periodically be seen across the street from the MCC office, keeping track of the comings and goings. Cambodians with no official role with NGOs were harassed by the secret police if seen associating frequently with foreigners.

All Westerners were restricted to living in three designated hotels, to ensure that

they would have as little unmonitored contact with Cambodians as possible.

Official government permission had to be obtained for any travel outside of Phnom Penh. This permission sometimes took up to two weeks to procure. Trips to the provinces could be made only with a guide from one of the ministries, who was required to make a report of each trip. Until 1988, foreigners were not allowed to drive their own vehicles.

Westerners were not permitted to study the Khmer language full-time in-country, and were obligated to get official government permission to study with a Khmer tutor even part-time.

During the early years of MCC's presence in Cambodia, the only NGO workers allowed resident visas were the country representatives. This put great restriction on how personnel-intensive MCC could be in Cambodia, putting yet another crimp in the supposedly "personnel-intensive" nature of MCC. Not until 1988 were long-term expatriate field workers allowed in Cambodia.

These restrictions resulted in a paucity of relationships between MCCers and Cambodian civilians and made some constituency wonder why MCC was in Cambodia in the first place.

The tight conditions described above have changed rapidly since 1990. As a result, possibilities for MCCers relating meaningfully with Cambodians at all levels have opened up tremendously. This relaxation of restrictions on foreigners has made it easier for MCC to work in a relationship-intensive manner, and to work through and with local initiatives. These relationships with Cambodians from all walks of life/all sectors of society now provide the grounding for MCC's presence and work in Cambodia.

### **The position of NGOs, including MCC, in relation to the Cambodian government**

MCC's obligation during the 1980s to work entirely through government channels raised eyebrows among some of the MCC constituency. Being so entirely beholden to and dependent on the power structures in the country did not seem right to many. This was a legitimate concern, and one that has led to some soul-searching among MCCers over the years.

In the face of Cambodia's isolation, and in the absence of the possibility of meaningful contacts with Cambodian villagers, some of these government officials became valued friends, and in this way relationships were always a priority for MCC representatives.

At the same time, it seemed MCCers were not always getting a clear picture of what the real needs were in the countryside, something essential for MCC's approach to development. Because MCC had consented to work through the government, we approached development in a rather „top-down“ fashion. We depended primarily on government officials to define the needs of Cambodian people.

It was never entirely clear how much of MCC's assistance was being used to repay political favors or to satisfy other biases. Nor could MCC workers be entirely

sure how much of the funds and materials provided were actually getting to where they were intended.

As political conditions in Cambodia have changed, MCC workers have adjusted their relationships accordingly, with a process of disengagement—moving away from the center. This process hasn't always been easy.

The arrival of more and larger outside aid agencies has decreased the previously ready access MCC had to high officials. Thus some of this progression of moving from the center has happened automatically. MCC has moved toward the periphery, toward programs involving local and indigenous non-governmental initiatives, a more comfortable and „MCC-like“ position. Decisions about program have increasingly involved local people.

### **MCC's identity as a Christian/Mennonite NGO**

In the early 1980s, MCC was one of only 15 NGOs working in Cambodia. All NGO workers were housed in one hotel. The isolation imposed on Cambodia provided NGOs with a strong sense of common purpose. These factors served to make the community close-knit, albeit quite segregated from the average Cambodian.

The restrictions on how NGOs were allowed to work, coupled with the immediate needs at the central levels that weren't being addressed because of the aid embargo, served to give all NGOs a fairly uniform and „mainstream“ profile in Cambodia. In terms of their approach to the needs that they faced, and in spite of diverse orientations and mandates, NGOs blended together. There was no significant difference between the work of ones that were church-based and those that were not. All worked primarily with the central structures, usually through high government officials and in a high-profile way. All NGOs spent large budgets (by usual standards), and had limited access to relationships with Cambodians. There was no possibility to place field workers in project areas. Therefore country representatives monitored projects by frequent visits. Overarching all of this was a sense of solidarity in the common symbolic reason for being in Cambodia.

MCC representatives during this period undoubtedly reflected what MCC as an organization tries to stand for. However, the space within which the MCC representatives could maneuver was extremely confined, and this limited correspondingly how fully MCC's character could be expressed.

Now, with the political changes in the country the NGO numbers have exploded. Living in hotels is a thing of the past, and the NGO cohesiveness has greatly decreased. In this context, MCC is trying to find and redefine its niche. This task hasn't been an easy one, and MCC's history in the country, while providing a firm basis from which to work, has sometimes felt like an impediment to finding this niche. Certain expectations and relationships, rooted in over 10 years of work, do not change readily.

What should be our unique character as a Christian development agency representing the Mennonite and BIC constituency, „In the name of Christ“? Issues brought to mind by such a question include MCC's relationship with the Cambodian church,

how to express and share our faith, what a „ministry of presence“ means in the Cambodian context, moving from working primarily with government officials to working with those who are more marginalized, etc.

### **MCC's relationship with the Cambodian Christian church**

MCC's relationship with the Cambodian Christian church was, until 1990, mostly nonexistent. The Cambodian church was legalized only in 1990. Any kind of meaningful contact with the church was difficult and, in fact, illegal before this time. Although legalization of the church didn't change things overnight, since 1990 there has been a gradually increasing access to the church on the part of foreigners.

The church in Cambodia has had a history of being strongly influenced by foreigners, to the detriment of developing its own unique brand of Cambodian Christianity. MCCers have also been mindful of the disproportionate influence outsiders with access to financial resources can wield, particularly in a church as young and small as the Cambodian church. MCC has tried to play a supportive role to Cambodian Christians, while encouraging them to be guided by their own reading of scripture and by God as they seek out their identity as Cambodian Christians.

MCCers are actively seeking out relationships with Cambodian Christians and finding ways to encourage believers in several Cambodian churches. At the same time, MCCers have chosen not to take a leadership role in the worship services. MCC has only recently begun providing modest financial support to various activities of the church, including leadership development seminars and church-initiated social welfare projects.

### **MCC's relationship with the local Buddhist culture and structures**

Because Cambodia is a predominantly Buddhist society, the Buddhist structure and rhythms of life form an integral part of the life of local communities. The influence of Buddhism varies from person to person in Cambodia (as does the influence of Christianity in a «Christian country») from being merely a cultural accoutrement for some to being a cherished belief system and profoundly-felt way of life for others. Either way, its practices have a penetrating influence on the rural communities, and this influence is a fact of life in Cambodia. It has therefore been necessary to reflect on, adapt to and develop an appreciation for the role of Buddhism as MCC works with the communities.

MCC Cambodia, in principle, is committed to working with both Christian and Buddhist organizations and individuals whose concerns for the welfare of Cambodians mesh with ours. But in reality there has continued to be disagreement on the MCC team about how this principle should or should not be implemented in the MCC Cambodia programs.

Schools are often in the pagoda compound. The pagoda often provides the most logical central gathering place in the community. The monks are generally well-respected by the community, and provide leadership in community projects. In some

cases, therefore, MCCers have made cooperation with local Buddhist leaders a priority for their work.

Other MCCers elect to steer clear of the pagoda systems, choosing, for example, not to install wells in the pagoda area so as not to project the image that MCC is legitimizing Buddhism. They reason, too, that there are many other equally-deserving and appropriate areas where wells can be constructed.

### **Summary and reflections**

To summarize, these have been some of the dilemmas MCC has had to face in the Cambodian situation:

Prior to 1990, were MCC administrators being irresponsible as they worked in a situation that required such striking modifications of MCC's usual mode of operating? Or was there a deeper level of faithfulness, to the MCC vision and ultimately to God, in deciding to work in such a setting and in such a way?

Should MCC have refused to work under the restrictions the Cambodian government placed on us, and therefore sacrificed the possibility of working in Cambodia until such restrictions were lifted? When is it necessary and appropriate to alter MCC's usual mode of operating for the sake of being a reconciliatory presence? What might these «alterations» mean for MCC's role and how MCC is perceived in Cambodia in the future?

How has MCC's presence during the 1980s indicating some support of the previous government, affected our image in the current situation?

How involved should MCC be in providing financial assistance to the activities of the Cambodian church, given the potential to offend the Buddhist majority by perceived favoritism to adherents of a «foreign» religion, and the potential to create dependencies at a crucial point in the young church's maturation?

How involved should MCC be in supporting activities centering on the Buddhist pagoda, in light of its centrality to the life in most Cambodian villages? Should we take our cues primarily or solely from Cambodian Christians?

These kinds of dilemmas are undoubtedly faced by program agencies elsewhere, and must be evaluated squarely and honestly. Given the deepening ideological, social, and class divisions prevailing in the world, Christian agencies such as MCC shouldn't shy away from these dilemmas. Rather they must be prepared to make the necessary difficult decisions and to move ahead in their programs in spite of the ambiguities, seeking to breach the political, cultural and social barriers that divide people.



## **Becoming a Missiologist of the Road: Personal Recollections and Reflections**

*Hans Kasdorf*

**W**hen I was a child my family escaped Stalin's regime, from the Kolundian Steppes of Siberia in the Asiatic Soviet Union we came to the subtropical jungles of Santa Catarina in southern Brazil. More than 150 of us Mennonite families were part of thousands of refugees leaving Russia. We found "a place to feel at home" in the thickly forested valley of the Alto Rio Krauel. The terrain was rugged, the erosion massive, the soil unproductive. As far back as I can remember, our main preoccupation was to provide food for the family table and gather fodder for a few farm animals.

### **Family atmosphere**

I was the youngest of nine children, growing up under the influence of devout and godly Mennonite parents of peasant stock. Through their experiences in the Soviet Union and the hardships of pioneering in Brazil, they learned how to survive. Industriousness was considered a virtue, idleness a vice. Daily Bible reading and prayer were indispensable. I saw in my parents "faith, hope, and love" personified long before I became a follower of Christ by personal choice. I treasure the legacy of their example for my own spiritual journey.

With only two years of elementary schooling and no books to read until I was 19, my spiritual and theological horizon remained as narrow as the valley where we lived.

While lying critically ill during a typhoid epidemic I entertained the thought of becoming a medical doctor to heal and help the sick and afflicted. Since this was impossible, my interest shifted to barter and business at the peasant level. I applied myself diligently to learning arithmetic, thinking that adding and subtracting, multiplying and dividing would be a helpful tool. But my greatest aspiration was to go to school to become a church worker.

### **First steps in church work**

When I was eighteen-years-old, a man of our village was killed by lightning, leaving his widow alone with four small children. Yet God used this tragedy to set in motion

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Fresno, California, June 6, 1994*

a revival in which scores of adults became Christians, were baptized, and joined the churches. I was one of them. I was seeing authentic church growth, though I had never heard the term.

Two of our leading ministers offered elementary Bible instruction to help young converts mature. When they asked me to preach one Sunday, I spoke on Heb. 13:8, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” I said everything I knew in five minutes. People complimented me, surely more for brevity than profundity.

The more active I became in the church, the more clearly I sensed an inward calling which intensified my ambition to study. But how? When? Where? World War II had made opportunities in Brazil nonexistent for my generation of stateless aliens. It appeared that my academic achievements would remain at the level of family experience. My only hope was hope itself.

### **The road to books and to the book**

It seemed like a dream, but it was real. God had opened a door! By June 1949 I was on my way to Canada for Bible school. There I spent four years at PNIEL, as the Winkler Bible Institute in Winkler, Manitoba, was then known, then three years at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College (MBBC, now Concord College) in Winnipeg. I haven't the space here to relate how I got there. Suffice it to say that in addition to the sacrifice of my parents, the Mennonite Brethren Youth Conference of Manitoba advanced the money for my ticket from Rio to Toronto.

The journey began with a two-day trip with my parents from the Krauel to Curitiba where my oldest sister lived. As we said our farewells at the train station, Mother cited portions from the Sermon on the Mount, concluding with Matt. 6:33, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” She died before I returned to Brazil eight years later. But her last words to me live on.

Father read 1 Timothy 3:1-13, with special emphasis on the imperatives, “Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus”; “the things you have heard me say...entrust to reliable men who will be qualified to teach others”; “endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus”; and “remember Jesus raised from the dead.” Those farewell words remain central to my worldview and philosophy of service.

### ***Experiences at PNIEL***

The principal, Mr. H. H. Redekop, took me on a tour of the school, including the library. There must have been close to a thousand books shelved along two walls in a small room with table and chairs in the center. I was mesmerized. Never had I seen so many books! Up to that point I had read only two, one on revivals in Europe and America, the other on David Livingstone's work in Africa. Now there was a whole library at my disposal, restricted only by my limited reading ability and the total foreignness of the English language. But I was determined to learn both. And I did.

Some of the first books I read left me confused and disappointed—five volumes of the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau and *Life on the Highest Plane* by

Ruth Paxson.

I also walked through a time of feeling painfully lost and lonely. As the only foreign student in a school of some 130 Canadians I experienced profound culture shock that neither I nor my peers understood. It was a rough piece of road, shaking my spiritual and emotional well-being. Little did I realize then that this experience would one day be valuable to me as foreign student advisor.

Another instance still makes me blush, perhaps also caused by culture jolt. I was at a point in my spiritual journey when I considered nearly everything to be sin, including the folk lyrics I had learned, sung, and recited as a teen-ager. One gloomy day I took radical action and burned my hitherto cherished notebook with over 200 handwritten songs and poems in High German, Low German, and Portuguese. When I saw this irretrievable treasure go up in flames I went to my room, fetched my diary and a Grimm's fairy tale book and submitted them to the same fate.

Shortly thereafter, as Providence would have it, I received a letter from my cousin-aunt, Katherine Nickel, author, artist and teacher in Reedley, California. Without being aware of my dilemma she gave me some sound advice. In addition to studying the Bible, she wrote, I should read secular books on literature, art, history, and science, lest I become so narrow and pious to be of little earthly good. Her wisdom helped to correct my foolishness. She provided a sense of balance for my spiritual and academic pursuits which I continue to treasure.

What I have come to appreciate most about PNIEL is that it was true to its name: it was a Bible school. I didn't learn **about** the Bible; I simply learned its content. Critical questions were never raised and theological issues rarely, if ever, discussed. That was not considered to be the school's mission.

Equally important was the focus on such practical work as visiting the sick and lonely and teaching Sunday school in surrounding villages. This was a valuable introduction to pastoral ministry in later years.

One thing that was positively discouraged was dating. Yet young people did fall in love, even at PNIEL. I did too. What seemed to make my case tolerable and within the limits of the school's rules was that Frieda Reimer of Yarrow, British Columbia, graduated a year sooner than I, and that though we did not actually date on campus, we corresponded from a distance. We were married in the summer of 1953 and in the fall went to Winnipeg for further studies.

### ***Foundations in missiological formation***

My favorite subjects at MBBC were evangelism, world mission, Bible courses, and homiletics. My early mission philosophy was formed by such texts as Scarborough's *With Christ After the Lost*, Glover's *Progress of Worldwide Missions*, Edman's *Light in Dark Ages*, and Brown's *The Foreign Missionary—Yesterday and Today*. Their philosophy called for life-long commitment, not short-term experiment; it demanded obedience regardless of convenience.

In homiletics I learned to analyze and exegete biblical texts and to make sermon outlines, a simple technique that has proven immensely helpful in graduate school

for writing papers, theses, and even dissertations.

My early theological training was shaped by Evan's *Great Doctrines of the Bible* and Strong's *Systematic Theology* supplemented by Thiessen's *Lectures in Systematic Theology*. What interested me most was their stress on making known the claims of Christ to all peoples in the world.

Throughout those years at PNIEL and MBBC I was greatly impressed by the life of my teachers. They were intellectual and spiritual giants, top leaders in the denomination with a high view of Scripture and a passion for evangelism and mission. They personified values and ideals I had come to appreciate deeply.

### **On the road of missionary experience**

After seven years of studying and one year teaching in Canada, Frieda and I went to Brazil with our first child. While my theological orientation at the time was more missional than dogmatic, my ecclesiology had remained denominationally confined, leaving little space for ecumenical and global thinking.

### ***Historical events in the larger world***

Our missionary work during the late 1950s and early 1960s coincided with historical events of such magnitude that the course of mission and theology was permanently changed.

The election of Janio Quadros and John F. Kennedy to the presidencies of Brazil and the United States respectively unleashed vigor and hope on the American continents, especially in the Roman Catholic Church which stood at the dawn of Vatican II during the pontificate of John XXIII. Kennedy was particularly supportive in launching the gigantic undertaking known as the Catholic Inter-American Cooperation Program which included an appeal for 40,000 missionaries to Latin America.

Thousands of trained missionaries from Europe and North America were commissioned to go to the Latin American continent. On one occasion in the city of Blumenau we worked with these missionaries side by side in the evangelistic crusades, they in their church, we in ours, and even exchanged Christian films as means of presenting the Gospel. Their commitment to church reform on the one hand and socio-political change on the other become the groundwork for what in the late 1960s emerged as theology of liberation.

The United States government initiated the Peace Corps program to create a reservoir of skilled volunteers to serve in developing countries. These endeavors had the support of the Commission of World Mission and Evangelism formed in 1961 when the International Missionary Council and World Council of Churches joined hands and hearts. Of course, the sixties also gave rise to new mission forces in nonconciliar evangelical circles.

### ***In the immediate context***

My spiritual life and theological position were impacted as much by conditions at the local level as by global events. For the first time in my life I worked together with

Lutherans and Baptists, Brethren and Presbyterians. Here were brothers and sisters with spiritual depths that paled my spirituality; their confessional acceptance of each other made me look intolerant; their evangelistic passion put me to shame.

#### ***A vision for my denomination***

The Mennonite Brethren in Brazil consisted of a number of quasi-independent congregations, situated in the four southern states of that vast country. While some were missionarily active, there was little evidence of commitment to a common cause of missional vision for peoples beyond the frontiers of Mennonite folk. Each local church seemed to live in its own small world.

How could these independent congregations gain a sense of interdependence? I drafted a vision statement and tested its validity with several leaders. Their response was only positive. The time was ripe. Within a few months the Mennonite Brethren had established an association of churches, using the vision statement as a founding document in which mission was the central controlling idea.

This pioneering venture was not only rewarding; it was also a unique opportunity to learn to walk together with the churches on the road of the missionary dimension and missionary intention in Brazil before I was forced to seek medical help in Canada.

#### **Fifteen years of detour**

I interpreted my cancer surgery at St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver, British Columbia, and subsequent recovery as an interruption of my journey, a detour in the road I travelled. While in the hospital I reflected on Psalm 23 and related my thoughts in a letter to Waldo Hiebert, then pastor in Reedley, California. Hiebert used some of the ideas to preach a sermon entitled "Blessed Interruptions," not knowing that only a few weeks later he would lose his twin brother Lando in an automobile accident.

He shared his grief with me. His letter said essentially, "There are, indeed, interruptions in life's journey. Some are fatal, painful, and devastating from a human perspective. Others we simply do not understand. Still others God can turn into blessings. What really matters is knowing that our Good Shepherd is in control. He leads us in the right path for his name's sake. And that's enough."

#### ***A map with paths unmarked***

As the mouths of recovery extended I began studies at Western Washington State University in Bellingham and by correspondence from the University of Wisconsin to prepare more adequately for further mission work with the ultimate goal of training evangelists and missionaries for the same task. But I had no idea what form this would take. I walked by faith.

Due to major restructuring of most mission endeavors during the late 1960s, it became clear that we would not be able to return to Brazil, at least not soon. That meant charting a new course and finding new direction on an unmarked road.

While studying at Tabor College I served as circuit pastor in rural United Methodist churches of central Kansas. Studies in anthropology and German under the

eminent missionary linguist, Jacob A. Loewen, and sociology under the late Roy Just, then president of the college, were most fascinating. I was intrigued with the potential of the social sciences for communicating the Gospel in missional contexts. But I also discovered that languages are equally important and that the Indo-European languages, especially those from within the Romance and Germanic groupings, are not too difficult to learn.

This discovery seemed like a sign from heaven through which the Lord was saying to me: "This is the way, walk in it." My detour now had a purpose and a new direction was emerging: I would go to graduate school, apply myself to the study of modern languages and the best teaching methods, secure a position in a college where I could teach to support the family and, on a part-time basis, engage in theological and cultural studies with a focus on missiology. I did that for fourteen years.

Graduate studies at the University of Oregon in Eugene stand out as a turning point in my academic pursuits. I learned to think critically and reflectively. Its language department was superb and the library holdings outstanding.

I was able to develop a study program suited to meet family needs and work schedule. First, I immersed myself in Germanic, then in Romance, philology and literature, focusing simultaneously on the latest methods of foreign language learning and teaching. This led to a three-year teaching assignment at the University, including one quarter of supervising student teachers of foreign languages in the Lane County high school system.

There were also surprises. One of them was the encounter with intellectual and religious history of Rationalism, Protestant Orthodoxy, Pietism, and the Enlightenment. I had not anticipated finding in the tomes of secular literature such a wealth of insightful principles relevant to missiological and theological studies. The writings of men like G. F. Leibniz, F. G. Klopstock, G. E. Lessing, and J. G. Harder, to mention only a few, brought me in direct contact with early missional thinking, though from an entirely new angle.

Moreover, the secular setting was what I needed. It challenged me to think independently and critically; it forced me to define my evangelical position over against liberal and rational theologies; it also taught me to express my Christian worldview in unapologetic terms without feeling threatened or being defensive. I found the injunction of the Apostle Peter very helpful at this point: "in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15).

Then, too, the study program was quite flexible, covering a wide spectrum of issues, particularly at the doctoral level. No discipline can be studied in isolation. In seminar papers and directed study courses I took advantage of academic freedom to deal with religious and ecclesiastical issues in the context of language and literature. Sometimes my ideas were challenged, occasionally corrected, now and then rejected, often confirmed.

At the University I became acquainted with Alan R. Tippett. He had interrupted

his missionary service in the Fiji Islands in order to work on his Ph.D. degree under the renowned anthropologist, Homer Barnett. While there, he teamed up with Donald A. McGavran, founder and director of the Institute of Church Growth which was operating at Northwest Christian College next door to the University. Soon thereafter the humble Institute was moved to Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena where it became the famous School of World Mission with McGavran as its first dean and Tippett its first professor of anthropology. These contacts in Eugene became a vital stepping stone toward missiological studies in Pasadena ten years later.

The years in Oregon also provided for us as a family a positive church experience. On our first Sunday in Eugene we met Orval and Bertha Johnson of the United Brethren in Christ. When they told us about their vision for ministry, we decided to join and assist them in a church planting venture in Springfield. We experienced both joy, when women and men were converted and became responsible members of the church, and pain, when we saw social evils ruin individuals and families and undermine the moral fabric of our society.

These experiences in the realities of life within the American social context provided not only a sound balance between academic theory and ecclesiastical ministry; they were also a missiological reminder that the mission of the church is always in the fallen world (which is not only Africa or Asia or Latin America). That is when I began to think more in terms of worldwide mission rather than home missions and foreign missions.

#### ***A subtle temptation***

At the end of three and a half years I was faced with a difficult question: Should I write a dissertation and pursue a secular career within the university context in which I felt comfortable and secure? Could I not be a witness for Christ in that setting as much as anywhere else? Rationally, I answered each question with an emphatic yes. But what about my commitment to seek first the kingdom of God? And what about my goal to teach languages at the college level while simultaneously pursuing theological studies toward missiology? No matter how hard I tried, none of my rationalizations was as convincing (not to say convicting) as these words of Jesus: "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the service in the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:62) I had my answer and knew which road to take. I accepted a position for one year teaching German and Spanish at Huntington College in Indiana. For the next decade I taught languages at Pacific College, situated adjacent to the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California. Here I took every opportunity available to study theology, evangelism, and missiology including the social sciences and world religions first at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, then at the School of World Mission in Pasadena, and later also at the University of South Africa.

#### **The detour ends but the road goes on**

During one of our service leaves in Paraguay where I was teaching at the Instituto

Biblico Asuncion, I received a letter of invitation to join the seminary faculty in Fresno. About two years later I was teaching in its Department of World Mission. That marked the realization of my long-range goal and the end of a fifteen-year long detour.

### *Rewarding years of teaching*

Fifteen years of teaching world mission and related subject have been rich and rewarding. It has been an exceptional privilege to rise early and face each day with a sense of anticipation in matters of routine and with a sense of suspense in matters of the unexpected, be they pleasant or perplexing.

My first coronary bypass surgery (I am currently recovering from the second) taught me that life is not to be taken for granted. I accept it as a treasured gift from God and repeat at the dawn of each day the praises of the prophetic age: "The LORD's compassions never fail. Every morning they are as new as the day before sunrise. Great, O LORD, is your faithfulness." (cf. Lam. 3:22-23)

Frieda and I have come to the rite of passage which in our culture is called retirement. That means we have reached three score years and five and are entitled to be awarded social security payments. We have decided to volunteer our time and energy to serve God and his people in the European context perhaps fifteen more years fully aware that our time is in his hands and that each day of life and health is a gift of grace only he can grant and sustain.

### *Converging missiological currents*

My reflections would be incomplete without a note about my missiological formation within various international, cross-cultural and trans-denominational contexts. Three distinct theological currents have converged in the process of becoming what I like to call a hybrid missiologist of the road.

The first is my Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage. Bible scholars like David Ewert, D. Edmond Hiebert, and Elmer Martens have helped me to read my Bible as the primary missionary book. Historical theologians like J. A. Toews, A. J. Klassen, and J. B. Toews have enhanced my understanding of history which in turn has led me to interpret church history as mission history. Years of studying and teaching in Mennonite Brethren schools have not only shaped my ecclesiology within the Believers' Church tradition, but also given me a biblical understanding for the mission of the church and a basis for denominational appreciation and loyalty.

I have also embraced certain aspects of Reformed theology. The writings and teaching of such esteemed mentors as Arthur F. Glasser of the School of World Mission and the late David J. Bosch of the University of South Africa have deepened my appreciation for the grace and goodness, glory and greatness of our sovereign God as a missionary God. These attributes are focused more sharply in the Reformed than in my own tradition, adding a distinct dimension to my missiological understanding and spiritual formation.

A third current is the Lutheran influence, especially its stress on repentance and

faith, the power of the Word of God at all levels of life, and the biblical emphasis on the Holy Trinity. The most fertile resources have been the writings of Philip J. Spener, founder of Lutheran Pietism; my studies of Gustav Warneck, father of modern missiology; books by Georg Vicedom, eminent missiologist of Neuendettelsau; and ten years of personal correspondence with Arno Lehmann of the Martin-Luther-Universität in Halle, the cradle of Lutheran missiology.

I am profoundly grateful that the road is going on. I have not yet arrived. I am still becoming in terms of missiological development. The journey is ongoing.

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