

Possible Treatment for the Allergy to Missions

Hippolyto Tshimanga from Mennonite Church Canada began his session at Mennonite World Conference with an anecdote about a friend who has an "allergy to missions." I have to admit I found myself getting a little irritated just listening. Indeed, I was having an allergic reaction. Having recently returned home from Mennonite World Conference, I saw a link to an article on the *Anabaptist Witness* blog by J. Nelson Kraybill in my social media news feed. The link had the following quote from his article: "it is hard for North Americans to hear or value the global church if we believe that the whole mission enterprise was a mistake." By that time I had broken out in a rash. Please excuse me, but I can't help but scratch it.

Tshimanga went on to say that "there is no such thing as a church without mission; mission is the DNA of the church." In many ways this statement should find broad if not complete acceptance. The question, though, is whether we should accept what has motivated missions for most of its history, and if we cannot, we must ask if we have the theological understanding and collective will to identify this strand as harmful and reconfigure our DNA. While the term "mission" can get used to refer to any number of Christian practices, I would argue that the dominant referent for the term in the larger Anabaptist context is what J. Nelson Kraybill cites as "conversionary Protestants"; that is, those who "actively attempt to persuade others of their beliefs," emphasize "lay vernacular Bible reading," and believe that "grace/faith/choice saves people, not group membership or sacraments."¹

From Tshimanga's statement and this definition of missions I take the church's DNA to include the belief that those outside of its belief system are by definition insufficient and inferior. Regardless of how layered this logic of missions is with "cultural sensitivity," appeals to the motivation of love, and quantitative studies showing the "improvements" made by missionaries, I simply cannot accept that logic. That logic is by definition supremacist.

I fully admit that I do not have a handle on global perspectives on missions in the Mennonite church. I do not have years of diverse experiences speaking with churches and individuals about their experience of mission. I am not a social scientist and cannot commend or critique quantitative analyses of the "impact" of missions. My point is quite simple. If the motivation for mission comes from a conviction that a group, prior to contact, is deemed insufficient (why else would we try and convert a group we have never met) then this is a supremacist logic and anything deemed "good" that might come out of it comes in spite of or in opposition to this logic. That is, the good comes in opposition to the "heart" of missions.

And so, yes, to answer Kraybill's question quoted above, I condemn the enterprise of missions. I can hear some of the reactions. *But this is too broad a generalization, this does not take into account the complexity and messiness of history and humanity, this discounts the good that has come from missions.* No this is not a broad statement, it is precise. It attempts to focus with precision on a fundamental logic that needs to get disentangled from other theologies and expressions so that it can be removed; so that the work of the church and the gospel can continue.

This statement or approach is not unprecedented. I make this claim in the same way that I need to say that I grew up in a racist, sexist, and homophobic context, despite there being many good people and many good things that happened in my childhood in spite of this. Or how else can we take the many claims of the prophets where either Babylon, Rome or Israel are condemned roundly. Don't you think there were good people in all those places? Don't you think evidence could be brought forward as to the benefit these nations brought to people? There is a time and place to condemn the guiding logic of particular social expressions, and conversionary missions as it is informed by a supremacist logic is one of them.

I understand that advocates of conversionary missions will point to a particular biblical calling, but this is a partial or selective reading of the Bible (as all theologies necessarily are). The "Great Commission" will simply not bear the weight of making conversion the heart of the church's message. We can celebrate what is good in the church while condemning supremacist logic in all its forms (the church in North America still has a lot of work to do in this area). I mean, it's not like I am saying we shouldn't *love* each other but that is a very different "enterprise" than modern missions. I am not saying that the Gospel doesn't make certain calls and claims on the church but these need to be engaged apart from a posture of supremacy.

This is also not an appeal for a "tolerant liberal" church, as that term gets kicked around. The church is called to make bold claims and intervene courageously in situations but this must emerge from a mutually understood response to suffering and the powers of death and bondage. As Christians we remain as vulnerable to these powers as any others and I am convinced that the message of the Gospel only becomes clear when we meet others on level ground: willing to give and receive blessing, willing to be persuaded and changed in as much as we might hope for others to be changed.

The Gospel calls us but first we may need to lie still long enough, and get second, third, and fourth opinions on our current condition from the resurging indigenous populations and marginalized communities that have found their bearings after the impact of our missions. And after the procedure has been completed, our supremacist strand identified for treatment, and we have committed to an ongoing schedule of check-ups with these professionals, maybe after all this I hopefully won't have a reaction to the word missions.

David Driedger is Associate Minister at First Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

1) J. Nelson Kraybil, "The Global Church Challenges North Americans to Move beyond Negative Associations with Mission"
<http://www.anabaptistwitness.org/2015/08/the-global-church-challenges-north-americans-to-move-beyond-negative-associations-with-mission/>. Kraybill himself is citing an article by Robert D. Woodberry, "The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (May 2012): 244–74.