

Janel Kragt Bakker, *Sister Churches: American Congregations and Their Partners Abroad*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2014. 298 pp. \$31.95. ISBN: 9780199328215.

I recently met with a pastor and church planter from Pennsylvania who challenged me with the following question: “What are ethnic Mennonites willing to give up in order to welcome into their community people who self-identify as Anabaptists?” From his position “peering over the fence” in southeastern Pennsylvania, he felt a theological and ecclesiological kinship to Anabaptists but was constantly faced with the challenge of ethnic conformity and a lack of hospitality due to cultural difference.

It is with this view toward cultural difference as a theological value for ecclesiological renewal that I turn to Janel Kragt Bakker’s *Sister Churches*. In this book, Kragt Bakker undertakes a thorough study of twelve congregations around Washington, DC, that engage in sister church relationships with congregations in the Global South. Through the process of interviewing pastors and parishioners from these twelve congregations, which represent four denominations, she hopes to show how sister church relationships can represent “shifting patterns of global religious engagement and a new paradigm in the theology and practice of mission. Attempting to break free from the outmoded and patronizing metaphor of the mother/daughter relationship, northern and southern Christians who participate in these relationships seek to encounter one another in a relationship of equals—both churches contributing to a common mission of serving each other and the world” (18).

In order to demonstrate that sister church relationships offer a new paradigm for religious engagement across the denominational and theological spectrum, Kragt Bakker chose to study mainline churches that represent the theological and racial diversity of North American congregations. Among the congregations represented in this survey were Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches with sister church relationships that were at least two years old. In each case, she interviewed not only the North American pastor, who often carried the primary relationship with the sister church, but also parishioners who were involved in the relationship to varying degrees.

Her approach to analyzing the data collected as part of these case studies employed a phenomenological method in that she “sought to illuminate the lived experiences of my respondents by analyzing the stories they told and the reflections they offered” (9). Narrative analysis was also useful for deciphering the attitudes that respondents brought to their understanding of the sister church relationships, as well as for comprehending the meaning that they assigned to these relationships. These research methods enabled her to gauge whether or not the participants in these sister church relationships experienced a renewal in their congregations as well as in their personal lives as a result of these engagements.

She discovered that even among the theological and ecclesiological diversity represented by the congregations surveyed, there was a common commitment to building and sustaining these relationships. Most of the congregations placed a high value on the relationship, irrespective of the significant cultural and theological differences that emerged during the relationship. For example, reflecting on the relationships developed between Living Faith Anglican Church in Washington, DC, and Murambi Parish in Rwanda, a member of the North American congregation noted that the relationship “gives us a sense that the Christian faith isn’t only an American faith, and that we are part of something much larger. That gives us a mission and a drive that is a lot stronger than in so many other churches I’ve been in” (175). Kragt Bakker reported many of these sentiments from members of the congregations she studied.

Sister church relationships are most effective when the relationship is sustained for a long period of time. Over the long term, parishioners from these congregations come to know each other in a way that enables the sharing of stories and practices that begin to inform the theology of the other. Reflecting on this phenomenon, Kragt Bakker writes, “The congregations involved in sister church relationships were strengthened by incorporating their experiences into their collective biographies. Sister church relationships allowed congregations to craft their self-understanding around stories of generosity and reconciliation” (175). Without these deep relationships, the power dynamics of paternalism can override the best intentions of the partner from the north.

A criticism of the methodology employed in this book is that all the congregations that Kragt Bakker surveyed were long-standing, established churches with annual budgets near or exceeding \$500,000. What might we learn from small churches that have established international sister church relationships? If a church is unable to bring financial resources to bear within the relationship, how might that change the power dynamic that is inherently present when a relationship is initiated by a wealthy North American congregation to a congregation with fewer financial resources? This is especially relevant considering that resource-rich congregations are more prone to prioritizing projects over relationships, as Kragt Bakker documented in two of the twelve cases (149).

Surveying a smaller North American congregation may have opened up other possibilities for how sister church relationships might be conducted with greater mutuality. However, smaller churches rarely have the financial or relational capital to devote to establishing and maintaining international sister church relationships. As such, these congregations often work toward establishing ties to nearby local congregations. These relationships may offer a more sustainable model while still celebrating the theological and ecclesiological diversity present in this age of globalization when the church of the Global South has in many ways come to North America.

Despite the reservation noted above, I believe that sister church relationships offer a helpful way forward in theology and mission for the twenty-first century. In an Anabaptist framework, sister church relationships offer a tantalizing opportunity for witness in a world at war. Could Mennonites build sister church relationships with congregations in Iraq, Iran, and Syria as a witness against the totalizing power of war? We could offer a powerful witness of a concrete way of rejecting “othering” in favor of seeing our global counterparts as true brothers and sisters in Christ.

Lutheran pastor David Kline notes that “we no longer understand ourselves as keepers of the Great Commission for the sake of the world but as companions on a shared journey with a shared commission” (139). As Kragt Bakker has shown, sister church relationships offer intriguing possibilities for increased theological engagement and an expansion of our vision for mission. For the Mennonite church, these intentional engagements can move us beyond the cultural fortresses we have been tempted to build around our theological and ecclesial engagements, and can open possibilities to new life as our partners around the world share their gifts with us and as we receive them with humility, grace, and gratitude, and give of ourselves in return.

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Steven P. Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2014. 221 pp. \$24.95. ISBN: 9780199777952.

During the 2004 American presidential campaign, candidate George W. Bush sought his second term with overt appeals to the evangelical electorate. At one campaign stop in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, President Bush was received by a local religious group and presented with a quilt embroidered with the statement, “I Love America.” This stitched sentiment was presented not by the head of the local patriotic megachurch or by Lancaster’s family values activists but by members of the local Amish community. The fact that Bush was able to capture the minds and hearts of these pastoral pacifists in the midst of the war on terror is one of the many novel pieces of evidence for what historian Steven Miller calls *The Age of Evangelicalism*.

The overarching argument of the book is that evangelicalism is at the *center* of American history since the 1970s. Typically understood as a subculture or sect, evangelicalism according to Miller is actually constitutive of American culture and politics themselves. The claim is not so much that periodic evangelical gusts fanned certain flames in American society but that evangelicalism was actually the air being breathed—or in some cases, choked on.

Miller is not giving a simple account of the rise of a “Christian America,” via either