

# Response to “Building Right Relationships”

ARLI KLASSEN<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In this reflection I will respond to Kim Penner’s article “Building Right Relationships of Shared Power/Mutuality.” While I am neither a theologian nor an academic, I am a practitioner, a sometimes activist, and a power broker. I write this reflection as one who has many privileges, as I am both Canadian and white. In the hope of promoting dialogue and strengthening the church, I will respond out of my own experiences and reflections.

Penner’s central thesis is that mission must take place from the margins and focus on transforming oppressive relationships—especially those defined in terms of gender, sexuality, and relationship to the earth. When transformation fully occurs, she argues, it results in right relationships of shared power and mutuality. This deep transformation is essential in developing a nonviolent theology of Christian mission.

While I heartily affirm and embrace Penner’s central argument, I would like to clarify some points and engage the conversation she has set out for us. I will focus on two primary questions that surfaced as I reflected on this article. First, what is the role of those in power as they engage God’s mission and work in the world? And why is mission here defined as only transforming broken systems? What makes this definition Christian? How do Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the church factor into this definition? I will briefly reflect below on these questions and conclude with some observations from my own life experience.

## Roles and Responsibilities of Those in Power

As I reflect on Penner’s paper, and as a white Canadian who carries individual and institutional power, I find myself asking: What is the role of people in mission who are not living on the margins? What is the role of our powerful Anabaptist institutions? Penner pleads with those of us who have power to share that power. She also highlights that those with power should not pretend

---

<sup>1</sup> Arli Klassen has trouble answering the question “Where are you from?” having lived and served in multiple settings and countries. She hopes to stay for a while in Kitchener, Canada, and is currently a member at First Mennonite Church, Kitchener.

to be powerless. Penner then suggests some important ways forward for those who carry power as they engage mission—suggestions that deserve further reflection and development.

Penner emphasizes the sharing and redistribution of power, and I would like to suggest further that those in power should take direction from and be accountable to those on the margins. However, when this ideal is carried out, it is very difficult to avoid tokenism, and it generally places a high burden on just a few individuals from the margins, who are then expected to represent all the diversity within their own groups.

Penner also highlights interdependence as a key step toward building right relationships. But interdependence does not mean that one group steps aside for another. Rather, interdependence requires that all work together. This interdependence involves listening, accompaniment, and debate. Interdependence must include everyone sharing needs, resources, suffering, and joy—and in all directions. There is no clear divide between “from the margins” and “to the margins.” Oppressive systems are complex, and people who are on the margins in one aspect are often the people with power in another aspect. There are not many people who do not carry any power in our global context, whether that be power due to race, gender, nationality, or sexuality.

Sharing and distributing power and moving toward interdependence are challenges faced by Global North Anabaptist institutions as well as the individuals in them. Power in and of itself is not a bad thing, but how we use it matters. I would like to read more about what people and institutions with power are doing and should be doing. Appointing a few people of color and women to staff and board roles is a start, but it is simply not enough. Penner’s example of women missionaries in our history who sidestepped normative gender roles but did not challenge patriarchal structures is a case in point.

### **What Is Mission?**

Penner not only explores who directs or initiates mission but also considers which activities are included in mission, and names addressing systemic oppression as its primary concern. But why is mission only or primarily about transforming systemic oppression in building up the kingdom of God? What makes this definition of mission Christian? How is Jesus central to this understanding? At what point do we consider individual and corporate transformation brought about by the Holy Spirit? And what is the role of the local congregation in all of this?

Peace and justice building are aspects of addressing systemic injustice and oppression and certainly help build up the kingdom of God, but my understanding of Christian mission includes more than working to change systems

of oppression. Mission is also about inviting people into transformative relationships with God. It is through God’s grace that we experience forgiveness and reconciliation, and not only reconciliation with God but also with those who are harmed through oppression. It is in the practice of following Jesus as disciples that we are enabled to address social injustice. And, penetrating deeper than we can even imagine, the work of the Spirit precedes wherever God might call us. This engagement in God’s mission includes personal transformation through faith in Jesus, and an invitation to others to share in this transformation. This transformation builds up the church as the body of Christ here on earth and includes the active dismantling of oppression around us.

What about the church? Penner understands church planting as one-directional—going “to the margins” rather than coming “from the margins”; she consequently sees it as problematic. Church planting certainly can be something that perpetuates inequality, and maybe even the language itself plays into this. But church planting often also supports initiatives led by people from the margins by building up congregations within their own communities. Supporting indigenous efforts at building up the body of Christ is valuable work that can and should be done by people who carry power.

## Reflection

My aunt Ann Klassen was one of those Mennonite Brethren women missionaries who operated well outside of gender norms. She is the only white adult buried on indigenous land in the Paraguayan colonies. Even though she was a woman, she still carried much power. Rather than treating indigenous peoples as “others,” she instead used her power to help build interdependent relationships. Aunt Ann became friends with the local people, remembering them throughout her life and distributing most of her belongings to them before she died. She had a strong concern for the indigenous women and was an advocate for projects that helped families holistically.<sup>2</sup>

As Penner states, oppressions intersect. For several decades I worked with Mennonite Central Committee in multiple countries, and during this time I learned much about where and when I had power as a white North American and where and when, as a woman, I did not. I learned how accompaniment and advocacy are important roles for people with power. I learned how to intentionally take direction from and be accountable to people with less power. I learned about moving along a continuum toward becoming an anti-racist intercultural institution. And I learned that most of our Anabaptist institutions have a long

---

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.mbhistory.org/profiles/wiens-a.en.html>. Accessed on October 17, 2016.

way to go. These concepts should be included in any theology of mission that considers the roles of people and institutions with power as well as those from the margins.

In recent years I have worn a few part-time hats in Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC) contexts, including that of researching the needs of MCEC congregations, starting up the ReLearning Community program as its first coordinator, acting as a mission associate in supporting church plants, and now sitting on the Executive Council. I too lament the lack of women and people of color in MCEC leadership roles. In the Crossroads Anti-Racism assessment, MCEC is approaching level 3 (representative of symbolic change) on the continuum of moving toward being fully inclusive (level 6).<sup>3</sup> MCEC's three program priorities include extending the peace of Christ, growing congregations, and forming leaders. MCEC is actively involved in discipleship training programs, encouraging local congregations to share their experience of God through action and relationships within their own neighborhoods, supporting church plants that are initiatives mostly by people on the margins, and mentoring and developing incoming leaders from groups on the margins. And, while MCEC is not directly accountable to people from the margins, much of MCEC's mission activity is in direct response to and in support of requests and initiatives with direction provided by people in the margins.

I also currently work with Mennonite World Conference (MWC). Our vision is to foster and strengthen interdependent relationships among Anabaptist churches around the world and collaborative partnerships among MWC members—mission being one of several named networks provided for collaboration. I lament the hesitation North American churches have in understanding that we need our brothers and sisters around the world as much as they need us. I lament that too often North American churches do not take the initiative to collaborate actively with Anabaptist brothers and sisters in the Global South. I lament that some Global South member churches, given their experience of the impact of colonialism and global inequality, see North American Anabaptists as simply a source of funding. In MWC we attempt to make space for interdependent relationships and collaboration, but much growth is clearly still needed.

In 2014, MWC General Secretary César García made a presentation ti-

---

3 Crossroads Ministry, "Continuum on Becoming an Anti-Racist Multicultural Organization," adapted from original concept by Baily Jackson and Rita Hardman, and further developed by Andrea Avazian and Ronice Branding. See [http://www.aesa.us/conferences/2013\\_ac\\_presentations/Continuum\\_AntiRacist.pdf](http://www.aesa.us/conferences/2013_ac_presentations/Continuum_AntiRacist.pdf), accessed October 21, 2016.

tled “A Vision for Global Mission” to the Council of International Ministries (North American Anabaptist mission and service agencies).<sup>4</sup> In this presentation, he called for a new paradigm: “The goal is not simply to flip the power relationships between the agents and assumed recipients of mission, but rather to change the basic assumption of mission altogether—to align with God’s mission of bringing together the diverse cultures from around the world.” He spoke about the role of North American mission agencies in modeling interdependency, holistic mission, intercultural relationships, and leading from below.

I too yearn for interdependent relationships of mutuality and shared power within our faith community. I too yearn for mission activity that transforms the oppressive systemic structures in our world—including those of gender, sexuality, class, nationality, race, and relationship to the land. I hope we can work together on a theology of mission that includes clarity on how people with power and people from the margins might collaborate on mission. I hope we can work together on a theology of mission that includes building up the body of Christ through both personal transformation and systemic transformation of our world. Then we might be able to rejoice with the great multitude described in Revelation 7:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

---

4 César García, “A Vision for Global Mission amidst Shifting Realities,” *Anabaptist Witness* 1, no. 1 (October 2014), accessed October 13, 2016, [http://www.anabaptistwitness.org/journal\\_entry/a-vision-for-global-mission-amidst-shifting-realities-2/](http://www.anabaptistwitness.org/journal_entry/a-vision-for-global-mission-amidst-shifting-realities-2/).