

Reclaiming Mission: Reflections on Mission as Global Interconnectedness and Spirit-Empowered Evangelism

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I enjoyed participating in the panel “Perspectives from emerging leaders” at the Council of International Anabaptist Ministries 2018 plenary meeting. Here, I offer a selection from some of my actual responses to the questions asked by moderator Jamie Pitts, as well as some additional responses I had prepared but did not share at the time.

Share a significant experience that has given you perspective about global mission partnerships.

As the daughter of parents who worked as missionary Bible translators in Papua New Guinea, I spent part of my childhood living on a large, fenced compound where several hundred expatriate missionaries lived alongside a few hundred more Papua New Guinean employees. I relatively often heard expatriate missionaries justify the task of Bible translation through appeal to an eschatological vision of many peoples, tribes, nations, and languages praising God together. They argued that making the Bible available to new people groups had value because it helped to bring this vision to fruition—essentially saying that Bible translation contributed to the fullness of the global church. However, this discourse about a global and multicultural church contrasted with the almost completely segregated worship that took place on Sunday mornings, where missionaries and Papua New Guineans worshipped separately for the most part. The incongruity I felt then has stuck with me ever since and has played a big part in leading me to theological studies that focus on ecclesiology.

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I tell this story not because the segregated church in Papua New Guinea is that different from segregated churches in many other contexts, but as a way to focus our attention on the very basic question of what the church is and why it exists. To put it simply, I think there is something very important about how we define the church in relation to aspects of our human identities—cultural, racial, and political—and in relation to our concrete, everyday practices. Does the universal church consist of a set of culturally homogeneous groups that exist separately side by side until they finally get to rub shoulders in front of God’s throne at the end of time, or are those cultural boundaries supposed to be transcended on earth at the most local level? Talking about mission really means nothing more or less than talking about what the church is, what it should look like, and how it relates to our human identities and practices. A definition of mission I like to use is that mission is about the church crossing boundaries in a way that leads to the formation of a new and universal humanity. This means that crossing the boundary from unfaith to faith for the first time, and overcoming boundaries and divisions that separate us inside the body of Christ, are both part of the same process of mission. Therefore, as we think about mission, it is essential to pay attention to the way we relate to other members of the body of Christ outside our own local context.

As the center of gravity for the global church and global mission has shifted from north to south, what are roles that north agencies and workers can play in this new reality?

I have recently begun to gently question the discourse that frames the southward demographic shift of world Christianity, by using terms such as “new heartlands” or “new centers of gravity.”² This is not because I question the reality or significance of this demographic shift but because I wonder if equating a demographic change simplistically with a change in patterns of influence runs the risk of overlooking ongoing power inequalities. Robert Wuthnow has argued in a 2009 book that a truer narrative of global Christianity would recognize the numerical growth of Christianity in the Global South while also noting the ongoing influence of the Western church, the challenge of economic

² One of the most dramatic presentations of this demographic shift as a new “Christendom” was made by Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2002). However, Wilbert Shenk became one of the earliest voices in the academy calling attention to the new demographics of world Christianity and to the implications of this new reality for historiography. Others were Dana Robert and Lamin Sanneh. See Wilbert R. Shenk, “Toward a Global Church History,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20, no. 2 (April 1996): 50–57; Dana L. Robert, “Shifting Southward: Global Christianity Since 1945,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24, no. 2 (2000): 50–58.

disparity in the world church, and the ongoing vitality of the Western missionary movement.³ While I think there is much value theologically in emphasizing the importance and the gifts of sister churches in the Global South, this should not depend on their numbers. I think it is important to keep on following what is happening sociologically by using a global church lens. This includes tracing the flows of money, people, and information inside the global church in order to explore what global interconnectedness looks like concretely and what role transnational networks play in the world church. In short, I think it can be useful to frame what is happening in terms of new kinds of interconnectedness on a global scale while recognizing much continuity with the past.

I would encourage us all—north and south—to be creative about new forms of relational interconnectedness. Mutually transformative relationships between Mennonites in north and south have been developed over decades through the work of long-term missionaries as well as in Mennonite World Conference (MWC) assemblies, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) service work, the International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP), and church-to-church connections. As we move forward, I hope to see more and not fewer of these kinds of connections, further and deeper ecclesiological reflection on the global church, and more jointly created and owned transnational structures of collaboration.

How do you see the institutionalization of mission and how that might be different in the future?

My biggest hope is that we can develop something that is more jointly owned. The word “ownership” is all about power. Sometimes I wonder if power-sharing in mission means moving toward a more centralized approach that helps to transcend nationalism. Let me give a historical example from the Catholic Church.

During the sixteenth century, Spain and Portugal had strong control of missionary efforts occurring in “their” new territories. This meant they could make sure that missionaries working in these areas did not do anything to undermine their agenda of exploitation and profit. This led to disastrous results in places like Latin America, Congo, and the Philippines. When *Propaganda Fide* was created in 1622, it provided a way for the pope to try to take back control over missions and make them less nationalistic. Richard Gray is a historian of the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century papacy, who argues that this centralization of power in the papacy was shaped by the appeals of Ethiopians and Kongolese Christians. Through letters and envoys, they helped the pope become conscious of the slave trade, and appealed for missionaries that were

³ Robert Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith: The Global Outreach of American Churches* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

not appointed by Portugal.⁴ Gray also argues that the Propaganda, which was a little like a centralized mission board for the entire Catholic Church, played a role in supporting liberation from colonial rule in Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Centralizing the control over mission so that it did not get tied up with nationalist goals was a key move that the Catholic Church discerned back in the seventeenth century.

We are not Catholics, we don't have a pope, and Mennonites were concerned when MWC was formed that it not become a "super-church."⁵ Nevertheless, I sometimes wonder if an organization like MWC could have the potential to play some kind of coordinating, centralizing role in mission among Mennonites. MWC played an important role in sponsoring the Global Mennonite History project. Part of the church's mission is to tell its story accurately. Now perhaps it's time for MWC to take another step forward. What would it look like if MWC became the carrier of international missionary efforts by all Anabaptist member churches? Could this be a way to avoid the power disparity that dogs the churches when powerful, well-funded mission and service organizations from one region continue to control the mission agenda? As Jeanne Jantzi pointed out in her presentation, currently MWC seems to be a place where we are all insiders in a way because we all own MWC equally.⁶ I think the name for that structure that allows us all to be insiders is simply *church*. Is the current organization, structure, or even existence of our agencies preventing us from experiencing church, and, by extension, from participating in its mission?

How should mission institutions engage the perceived "religious relativism" of the younger generations?

Let me begin by describing the admittedly stereotypical relativistic young person I have in mind when answering this question. I'm thinking about people in their 20s and 30s (I'm 38)—people who are my age or, more likely, a decade younger, and who tend to equate mission with colonialism and to see it as something bad, embarrassing, or passé. They are very sensitive to power inequities and use the language of sin to name structural, corporate sins of sexual abuse, militarization, and nationalism. They feel uncomfortable with the idea of conversion because it seems to be linked to coercion and colonialism. They

⁴ Richard Gray, *Christianity, the Papacy, and Mission in Africa*, ed. Lamin O. Sanneh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012).

⁵ John A. Lapp and Ed van Straten, "Mennonite World Conference, 1925–2000: From Euro-American Conference to Worldwide Communion," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77, no. 1 (January 2003): 7–45.

⁶ See in this issue Jeanne Zimmerly Jantzi, "The Mission of God and Global Partnerships."

have gotten a heavy dose of postcolonial theory in their undergraduate studies, which has taught them that missionaries were closely connected to the colonial enterprise in the past. However, they know very little about what mission work looks like in the present. How should members and representatives of mission institutions engage these people? It's tricky. I have eight ideas about what to try, not necessarily in order of priority:

1. Recognize the problematic aspects of Mennonite mission and mission in general. Missionaries have often, probably always, communicated a gospel tainted by their ethnocentrism. They regularly took for granted and benefited from the violence of a colonial nation-state. This was the case for Mennonite missionaries in much the same way as it was for other Protestants. Postcolonial theory has made a major contribution in helping to identify the conversion narrative that helped drive the colonial enterprise and in showing how and why this constituted an abuse of power in many cases. I like the way Congolese philosopher Valentin Mudimbe puts it. He argues that Westerners—be they colonial administrators, anthropologists, or missionaries—were strongly driven in their relationships with Africans by a paradigm of conversion. This means they continually assumed the need for the evolution or conversion of the African from a primitive or pagan to a civilized or Christian state.⁷ It also meant that African choices to convert were embedded in a subtly coercive matrix.⁸ This is a powerful analysis that helps with understanding how many Westerners—missionaries or not—have interacted with others while holding to the subtle assumption that they are out to improve them somehow, to change them into something else. One can see this paradigm at work still, in many ways, including in the academy as Western scholars interact with non-Western ones. It is helpful to recognize this. No young person should get the impression that today's North American Mennonite missionaries are ignorant of the power imbalances in the world. Even if a missionary is sure she knows this much better than the young upstart, take the time to say it; be humble. I think this is a necessary starting point. But don't stop here!
2. We also have to insist that those from the Global South who converted to Christianity as a result of missionary work did so because they wanted to. Yes,

7 V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, African Systems of Thought (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).

8 Achille Mbembe, *Afriques indociles: Christianisme, pouvoir et État en société postcoloniale*, Collection Chrétiens en liberté (Paris: Karthala, 1988), 40; Karen E. Fields, *Revival and Rebellion in Colonial Central Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 101.

human experience is a complicated mix of coercion, appropriation, domination, and resistance. But within this mix, if we want to respect the agency of Christians from the Global South, we must recognize their conversions as real. The bulk of the growth of the church in Africa, Asia, and Latin America has happened since decolonization.⁹ If the younger generation wants to throw around critiques of mission that claim missionaries were forcing conversion onto others, we can gently remind them to be ready to listen to the voices of those who chose to convert. And those voices are insisting on the agency of Christians in the Global South and on the authenticity of their decisions. The way we tell the story of mission subtly communicates or denies this agency. If we narrate the story of mission as one of Western actors transmitting the gospel to others, we are falling into the trap of denying the agency of non-Western Christians or relegating it to false consciousness. One of the most famous analyses of missions and colonialism was that of Jean and John Comaroff, who argued in relation to nineteenth-century southern Africa that missionaries were the “vanguard” of the imperial presence through their inculcation of the “everyday forms of the colonizing culture,” and that African conversion to Christianity represented false consciousness in response to missionary and Western hegemony.¹⁰ Many African Christians vehemently deny this analysis and find it deeply offensive. Lamin Sanneh, for example, says the Comaroffs make Africans into “double victims” by insisting on denying both their agency and their consciousness.¹¹ In his revisionist perspective of mission history in Africa, Sanneh constantly reminds his readers of the ways in which the power of the gospel affected not only the Africans but the missionaries as well, leading to “intercultural breakthrough” in ways that problematize any simplistic casting of missionaries as villains and continually call for new intercultural partnerships across boundaries.¹² Along with many other historians, he insists that the story of mission has to focus on appropriation rather than transmission, so as to do justice both to the agency of those who chose to convert and to the ways

9 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 70.

10 Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 5, 308, 251.

11 Lamin O. Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity*, Oxford Studies in World Christianity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 137–38.

12 Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations*, 149.

- that mission changed those who participated in it.¹³
3. We must help young people to not adopt an attitude of superiority toward the past. Studying history, or maybe just getting a little older, helps us see that people in the past are not that different from us. Just like us, they were aware of some structural inequalities and tried hard to address them. Just like us, they were blind to some aspects of their privilege and power. Just like us, they tended to believe that others needed to change to become more like them. It's important to educate the younger generation about the fact that certain strands of the mission of the Mennonite church over the past one hundred years have been explicit responses to the same concerns that young, missionally ambivalent Mennonites hold today. For example, as Steven Nolt's research shows, the role of MCC in the second half of the twentieth century developed as a form of resistance to nationalist and Cold War narratives about American identity. It was about rejecting narratives of empire, not only by refusing to participate in warfare during the Korean and Vietnam wars but also by creating alternative patterns of relationship that concretely disrupted those nationalist boundaries.¹⁴ Young Mennonites today may be able to relate to this. This is just one example. Mennonite missionary methods with African Independent Churches in western and southern Africa are another.¹⁵ And such examples do not exist only among Mennonites. In Southern Africa, missionaries were often hated by white settlers because they continued to recognize gospel equality of white and black.¹⁶ Protestant missionaries developed anti-racism dis-

13 Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations*, 131. See also Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450–1950*, Oxford History of the Christian Church (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); Elizabeth Allo Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa: From Antiquity to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995); J. F. Ade Ajayi and E. A. Ayandele, "Writing African Church History," in *The Church Crossing Frontiers: Essays on the Nature of Mission; In Honour of Bengt Sundkler.*, eds. Peter Beyerhaus and Carl F. Hallencreutz, Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia, 11 (Lund: Gleerup, 1969), 90–108.

14 Steven M. Nolt, "Globalizing a Separate People: World Christianity and North American Mennonites, 1940–1990," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 84, no. 4 (October 2010): 487–506.

15 See David A. Shank, "Anabaptists and Mission," in *Mission from the Margins: Selected Writings from the Life and Ministry of David A. Shank*, ed. James R. Krabill (Elkhart, IN; Scottdale, PA: Institute of Mennonite Studies; copublished with Herald, 2010), 269–94; and David A. Shank, "Qualities that Enable Mennonites to Relate to African-Initiated Churches," in *Mission from the Margins*, 337–38.

16 Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity*, 145; Richard Elphick, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South*

course before anyone else did. Edmund Soper, who wrote a book in the 1940s that is widely acknowledged to herald the beginning of the recognition of the systemic nature of racism, was a mission professor at Garrett Biblical Institute.¹⁷ In fact, as careful research by Dana Robert has demonstrated, missionaries played a major role in launching and disseminating postcolonial consciousness in the first place!¹⁸ It might be comforting to the younger generation to become aware that they are not the first people to think about how to resist imperialism and nationalism effectively.

On the flip side of recognizing the value of missionary work in the past, we can also help young people recognize that their valid critiques of the past also often apply to the present. They might be right to point out that early missionaries were powerful enough to dictate the terms of relationship with local people and that this distorted relationships. They might be right when they point out that the old mission structures helped to perpetuate a significant power imbalance. But do they think things are any different today? At worst, our tendency to write off mission can cause us to fall into the same ethnocentric trap of the early missionaries—we only want to have relationship when it can happen on *our* terms. This dilemma has come up recently for Canadian Mennonites, as they have moved toward a much smaller national church structure following the recommendations of the Future Directions Task Force.¹⁹ Some have predicted that within the new structure there will be less funding for international witness, and fewer long-term workers.²⁰ If this turns out to be the case, Mennonite Church Canada's international partners could legitimately ask, "If you are withdrawing from the relationship now because you don't have a lot of money anymore, then is that all that kept you here before?" When Canadian Mennonites withdraw

Africa, Reconsiderations in Southern African History (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2012).

17 Edmund Davison Soper, *Racism: A World Issue* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1947).

18 Dana L. Robert, "Missiology and Postcolonial Consciousness," in *Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of Christian Theology*, eds. Sarah Coakley and Richard Cross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), Part 1.c.

19 For more information about the Future Directions process that began in 2012 within Mennonite Church Canada, please see <http://home.mennonitechurch.ca/fd/about>.

20 "Witness Workers Bring Forth Concerns about 'Future Directions,'" *Canadian Mennonite* 20, January 27, 2016, <http://www.canadianmennonite.org/stories/witness-workers-bring-forth-concerns-about-future-directions>'.

- from relationships with international partners because they have less funds, are they not communicating that they only want to relate when they have enough power to steer the relationship in a certain direction?
4. Just get people together as much as possible. Pour as much money as possible into connections and facilitating relationships, MCC- and MWC-style. People are affected for life by formative experiences and exchanges during young adulthood. Those relationships contribute to the development of a new kind of people in the world, one with a confused identity that transcends nationalism.²¹ Also, get people together across the boundary of time by educating them about the past. Help them examine and analyze real historical situations and case studies. There is, to some extent, a suspicion of mission that comes directly from ignorance. Young Mennonites often have no idea what North American Mennonite mission agencies are actually doing on the ground or have actually done in the past. They do not get confronted with the thick messiness of actual relationships.
 5. Confront them with the question, “If mission is such a mess, what are you going to do about it? How are you going to relate differently to people on the other side of the world?” My challenge to the young people is to say that you cannot critique mission as colonial without being prepared to do something different—and once you try to do that, you will recognize how Mennonites have been trying in various ways to resist imperialism and nationalism over the past century, just as you will recognize how northern Mennonites in both past and present have been complicit with imperialism. Those who are teachers: help young people read and engage with voices from the Global South. Help them see that just using postcolonial discourse is not as effective in creating equitable relationships as actually relating to the real ideas being expressed by sisters and brothers in the Global South.
 6. Get to the pain point. Once young, relativistic Mennonites from North America start relating to brothers and sisters from the Global South, they might struggle with feeling unrelated to these Mennonites because of different theological convictions about things like sexuality, atonement, or demon possession. But they might also be surprised to find out what they do have in common. The Global Anabaptist Profile surveyed a representative sample of worldwide Anabaptist churches between 2013 and 2015, asking questions about members’ adherence to the seven shared convictions of

²¹ Emmanuel Katongole, *Mirror to the Church: Resurrecting Faith after Genocide in Rwanda* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

MWC.²² When I showed some of these results to my students in a required mission class—students whom I would consider to be ambivalent about mission—they were fascinated. Their preconceived ideas about what divided northern and southern Christians and what they had in common were very different from what the data showed. This is a good example of how a little bit of interaction with data can go a long way for those who remain ignorant about much of what is actually happening in the global church.

7. Don't stop using the word mission, but use it in ways that emphasize the convergence that is emerging between Anabaptist ecclesiology and Anabaptist missiology. There is no other word that will do. We need to claim this word with its world church connotations, based in an Anabaptist ecclesiology. As Wilbert Shenk argues, there has been, for historical reasons, a disconnect between Mennonite peace theology and ethics that burgeoned in North America from the 1920s onward, and specifically Mennonite mission theology that only developed after the 1970s.²³ Yet there is a major overlap between the two. An older generation of Mennonite scholars, such as David A. Shank, John H. Yoder, and Wilbert Shenk, have repeatedly made the point that the mission of the church is to be the church.²⁴ Yoder is one of these older scholars who explicitly spelled out this connection between Anabaptist ecclesiology and mission in global church terms. In his lectures on mission at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in the 1970s, he connected the missionary movement and the global church as two stages in a larger narrative of mission as boundary-crossing. Yoder reminded his students that inviting others to cross boundaries from unbelief to belief is just a first step, “a way to get the concern for relationship started.” The same mission of the church, marked by the same conviction that “all peoples . . . are one in Christ” calls for ongoing links, exchanges, and connections between Christians around the world.²⁵ Today, a younger generation of MWC leaders is making these kinds of arguments in relation to a global Menno-

22 Conrad Kanagy, Elizabeth Miller, and John D. Roth, *Global Anabaptist Profile: Belief and Practice in 24 Mennonite World Conference Churches* (Goshen, IN: Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism, 2017).

23 Wilbert R Shenk, *By Faith They Went Out: Mennonite Missions, 1850–1999* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2000), 65.

24 Anicka Fast, “The Earth Is the Lord’s: Anabaptist Mission as Boundary-Crossing Global Ecclesiology,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 90 (July 2016): 303–14.

25 John Howard Yoder, *Theology of Mission: A Believers Church Perspective*, eds. Gayle Gerber Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 169–74, 179.

nite church. They are arguing that participating in the global church offers opportunities to experience a kind of transnational citizenship and to unlearn patterns of participation in empire. They are saying that a focus on the congregation as the most important manifestation of church is a heresy and that being the church in a way that transcends nationalism means entering into global church relationships.²⁶ If the mission of the church is to be the church, then escaping from nationalist idolatry means being church globally. This is something I would expect to resonate with a younger generation, and I would encourage them to recognize the contribution of older scholars in bringing them to this awareness.

8. Invite them to conversion! Since the 1960s, the church has been exploding in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In no way can this phenomenon be interpreted as the spread of an imperialistic, Westernized form of Christianity. If we believe there is only one Spirit and only one God, we cannot ignore that this Spirit is being poured out over Asia, Africa, and Latin America, stimulating the vibrant growth of a movement that looks a lot like the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement that we are so proud of claiming allegiance to, especially in terms of its strong focus on the Holy Spirit and its strong evangelistic zeal.²⁷ If we in the Global North isolate ourselves from what God is doing in the rest of the world, it's not that the church will die—it is alive and well elsewhere—but we might be withdrawing from it. Maybe don't start with this point, but do get to it! In the global relationships into which missionaries entered so imperfectly lay, against all odds, their only hope of experiencing the good news. Much as we might want to distance ourselves from the whole enterprise, the same truth applies to us.

26 César García, "Human Rights, the State and the Global Mennonite Community," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 32 (2014): 11–21; César García, "A Vision for Global Mission amidst Shifting Realities," *Anabaptist Witness* 1, no. 1 (October 2014): 27–36; Larry Miller, "Some Thoughts about a Well-Entrenched Mennonite Assumption," in *What Mennonites Are Thinking, 1999*, eds. Merle Good and Phyllis Pellman Good (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1999), 168–69; Nolt, "Globalizing a Separate People," 495–96; John D. Roth, "What Hath Zurich To Do with Addis Ababa? Ecclesial Identity in the Global Anabaptist Church," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 31, no. 1 (2013): 32, 34–35.

27 Conrad L. Kanagy, Tilahun Beyene, and Richard Showalter, *Winds of the Spirit: A Profile of Anabaptist Churches in the Global South* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2012), 228. See also the essays in Wilbert R. Shenk, ed., *Anabaptism and Mission*, Missionary Studies No. 10 (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1984) for research demonstrating the evangelistic outreach of early Anabaptists.