Formation for Witness

Anabaptist Lessons Learned Far from Home

Robert Thiessen

Way back at the beginning, thirty-five years ago, I had no idea I could be a missionary. No one else thought I could be a missionary, either. I was a new believer (1986) attending the Mennonite Brethren (MB) church in Ontario I had grown up in and then rebelled from as an adolescent. The formation I received that first year was only indirectly about being a witness of God's love and more concerned with knowledge, conduct, and personal devotion. These were all good things, and, despite whatever may have been lacking, I am grateful for the leaders of those days. But I wanted more, not yet sure what that was. Then God opened the opportunity to go abroad.

By spring of 1988 I was living among rural Hondurans for a three-year apprenticeship that led to church-planting missions among the indigenous people of Mexico who were unreached by Christian missionaries.[1] The journey has been filled with mentors, disciplers, authors, and friends who formed me into an ambassador of God's Kingdom. This essay is a personal reflection on how this path helped me to identify increasingly as an Anabaptist, and how much of that came about despite my ethnic and religious background.

Honing Anabaptist Values in Northern Mexico

Thirty years ago, my wife, Anne, and I went to live high in the mountains of southern Mexico. Hundreds of thousands of pre-Columbian indigenous people survive there, far enough away from the aftermath of the Spanish Conquest to be left alone. When we first arrived, the isolation was extreme. In those days we'd hitch a ride to the village in a battered old stake truck along with a dozen locals and a handful of goats and chickens for company. We would stand for six hours, accumulating layers of chalky dust stirred up over the journey on harrowing roads that dropped off on either side for hundreds of feet into churn-

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1 The Roman Catholic church sent missionaries there in subsequent years.

ing rivers. Or we'd shiver in the relentless rain, wondering if the muddy tracks would prove too much for the bald tires.

Our invitation to spend the rainy summer in these mountains came from some locals we had met in northern Mexico in the agricultural fields of Sinaloa. They were part of the very first evangelical church in the entire region. None of the various North American mission agencies, including Wycliffe Bible Translators, had known they existed. Our research indicated that this was the area of Mexico most unreached by Christian missionaries, with no known believers and deep animism and steadfast resistance to outsiders. Yet time after time these were the people we were meeting in the migrant camps as we searched for where God was leading us. So we accepted the opportunity and pursued relationships and understanding and the Kingdom among this particular people group—the Metlatonoc Mixtecs—for the next fifteen years. It was among them that we honed our Anabaptist values as new leaders formed among the local people, but it was not where we first learned them.

My Anabaptist Formation Journey

I didn't learn much about Anabaptism as a young believer, even though I was raised in a Mennonite Brethren church. I deeply appreciate the leaders and friends of that era, and they are still my "home church"; however, very little of my experience then is what I now think of as distinctly Anabaptist. It was more akin to evangelicalism. In most ways, my upbringing and early formation were more Baptistic than anything else.

Perhaps this doesn't matter to most of the church. But for those of us who identify as Anabaptists, I think our ideology can bring a deeper spiritual witness and formation. Of particular importance to me is how we "do" cross-cultural missions when cultural "DNA" is often unwittingly exported. I believe the Anabaptist distinctives about the Kingdom of God, the centrality of Jesus, focused canon, shared leadership, community hermeneutic, and eschewing power can help us avoid many missteps. These are the areas that I believe identify our uniqueness.

Ironically, my formation as an Anabaptist started with a Baptist missionary, George Patterson, who mentored my mentor, another Baptist missionary. Patterson pioneered in the sixties and seventies what mission thinkers like Venn, Anderson, and Nevius had proposed a century earlier, and Roland Allen had called for in *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours* (1912).[2] These giants' ideas promoted local leadership that was fully capable of reproducing itself and of reflecting local cultural patterns and local abilities. Nevius, in *The Planting and*

2 Rolland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours; A Study of the Church in the 4 Provinces* (London: Robert Scott, 1912).

Development of Missionary Churches (1899),[3] developed Venn and Anderson's ideas from thirty years previous into the idea of an indigenous church that is "self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating"—sometimes called the Three Selfs.

These concepts had begun to be implemented, haltingly and with much Western baggage, yet gaining traction. But by the end of the nineteenth century, a rising tide of reassertion of colonial pride eroded most of those advances. R. P. Beaver alludes to this: "Almost immediately after Venn's termination . . . (other leaders) took the view that the African was of inferior quality and could not provide ministerial leadership. . . . The African middle-class businessman and intellectual was despised. . . . Growing devotion to the theory of 'white man's burden' . . . reduced the native church to a colony of the foreign planting church."[4]

Ralph Winter further lays fault at the feet of the Student Volunteer Movement—the most influential group in missions from 1888, when it started among Princeton and Harvard students, until the inter-war period of the 1900s. He says that "the fresh new college students . . . did not always fathom how the older missionaries . . . could have turned responsibility over to national leaders at the least educated levels of society. . . . New [college-trained] missionaries . . . [who] assumed leadership over existing churches . . . in some cases . . . caused a huge step backward in mission strategy."[5] This renewed emphasis on the superiority of Western educational norms and forms had little space to value local leaders except to the extent that those leaders conformed to the expectations of Western academia and ideals.[6]

When Patterson went to Honduras to teach in a Bible College in the mid-sixties, the Three Self ideas of the previous century were nowhere to be found. He only knew one way of formation—the way most were doing it everywhere: find young men (the only ones free enough from family obligations) to attend the schools run by foreigners, subject them to two or more years of

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3 John L. Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches* (New York: Foreign Mission Library, 1899).

4 R. Pierce Beaver, "The History of Mission Strategy," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 3rd ed., ed. Stephen Hawthorne, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999), 248–49.

5 Ralph Winter, "Four Men, Three Eras, Two Transitions," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 3rd ed., ed. Stephen Hawthorne, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999), 258.

6 I use "Western" and its variants to mean European peoples—including their colonial outposts—and all us descendants of them, who were formed by the Enlightenment, the protestant reformation and counter-reformation, and the scientific and industrial revolution.

rigorous learning (easily characterized as rote and narrow), instill patterns of spirituality the sending church was comfortable with (like private devotions, antiquated versions of the Bible, external forms of prayers and praise, three-point sermons), and then assign them to rule in churches made up of people older than themselves.

Patterson soon saw what so many others had seen as well—that this was a recipe for many types of problems. (*La fama, la dama, la lana* is a common Spanish refrain, meaning "fame, women, and money." It is a saying in church circles because so many young male pastors committed ethical violations in these areas.) He began to understand how these patterns hindered witness to God's goodness and Kingdom.

What makes him a pioneer, though, is that he changed things. Drastically. He shut the school down after two years of teaching there and began to work with middle-aged family men. He trained them in basic church practices that they could adapt, helping them find basic spiritual ideas in the Scriptures that they could ponder together. And, perhaps most importantly, he expected and gave them freedom to continue this formation with whomever God put in their path.

These new leaders, excited by the way Good News was transforming their lives, eagerly witnessed about their new faith in nearby villages to cousins, uncles, or friends. As soon as there was some response, they helped those people become new leaders in their own context. Patterson and all the subsequent regional leaders never kept power to themselves. In a distinct break from evangelical tradition, locals, who were not formally trained, led ordinances like baptism and communion. In twenty years, by the time I came on the scene, more than a hundred churches, all led by the locals, were utilizing their own resources and reproducing easily. Their holistic Kingdom witness and practice spread freely, unencumbered by outsiders. Just like Venn, Anderson, and Nevius had hoped for.

Here, promoted by a Baptist, the distinctives of focused canon, plural leadership, and community hermeneutic were forming church life, witness, and extension. Central to the Hondurans' ideology was simple obedience to Jesus Christ, and so the here-and-now Kingdom of God made up more of their life than any perception of themselves as participating in a Church Age with an other-worldly focus. Patterson, while remaining within his Baptist denomination, broke with many traditions (formal education requirements for leaders, titled pastor as primary congregational leader and teacher of Scripture, concentration on Pauline theology, dispensational perspective) and didn't use Anabaptist language, nor would any of those churches. His drive was to see churches born healthy, witnessing about the Kingdom and unhindered by baggage of their Western "parents." His relationship with locals and new readings of Scripture gave him the needed justification for such bold moves.

I didn't meet Patterson till after my three-year apprenticeship, when I was already engaged to his daughter, Anne. I have had the privilege of his insight and guidance for all these intervening years, till his death this past February 2022.

This training in Honduras began my formation as an Anabaptist, though I did not use that terminology. It gave me freedom to pursue a ministry of witness and formation among the indigenous people of Mexico who had not been reached by Christian missionaries.

I bring my experiences and opinions forward here not so much to promote Anabaptism as to encourage those of us who are Anabaptists to embrace our inherent strengths. The lessons Patterson learned in Honduras often opposed the patterns and theology of his denomination, and many of his struggles in implementing them were made more difficult by his background. Anabaptists have so much to draw on, and we don't have to "fight" our heritage and ideals; I could take to Mexico with me the Anabaptist values I learned in Honduras without being any less MB (in ideals if not in practice).

Applying Anabaptist Distinctives in Mexico

By the early nineties, Anne and I were starting life among the Mixtecs of Guerrero (and later, Oaxaca), where we sought to form local, plural, and untitled leaders that could reproduce their gifts in surrounding areas. We were focused on simple obedience to Jesus Christ, using a framework George Patterson had given us with Jesus at the center that included (1) the Three Levels of Authority—we obey Jesus always, we pay attention to Apostolic practice, we hold lightly to Church tradition—and (2) the Seven Commandments of Jesus, summarized as Repent and Believe, Baptize, Love, Give, Pray, Gather in Communion, and Disciple.[7] Living among the poorest people of Mexico at their socioeconomic level wasn't daunting, since Jesus, who gave up everything, was sending us there and we'd had some experience of living among the poor during our separate ministries in Honduras. Also, we were already comfortable with the *LAMP* (*Language Acquisition Made Practical*) approach to language learning developed by Tom and Elizabeth Brewster, which famously states: *Community Is My Classroom*. We prayed daily that God's Kingdom would come to earth as it is in heaven, and we acted accordingly.

Of course, and it does need saying, we made mistakes, had blind spots and baggage, could be petty or imperious, and had only begun our learning. We still do all of that. And following Anabaptist distinctives was no magic wand leading to significant growth. But along the way, as we applied Anabaptist dis-

7 George Patterson, "Spontaneous Multiplication of Churches," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, ed. Stephen Hawthorne, 3rd ed. (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999), 601.

tinctives (although we didn't call them that with the locals), we learned so much among the indigenous people.

For starters, we learned about animism, which, for the Mixtecs, meant that fear drove much of their behavior. As per their own assessment, shared with us as we tried to be good anthropologists not assuming anything from the start, we came to understand that theirs was a malevolent universe controlled by capricious spirits. The new believers constantly thanked Jesus for his power over those forces.

We also participated in communal living, where no party is complete without everyone present. We learned that, because of the village's efforts to equalize income, individual betterment wasn't necessarily a way out of poverty. This people group shared communal leadership, rotating elders in their villages through a somewhat democratic process that was initially adopted in the church as well.

And we had opportunities to see Scripture through non-Western eyes, realizing, for example, that the woman at the well in John 4 might not have been a "fallen" woman but a young girl treated poorly by the system around her, forced into an arranged marriage by age twelve and subsequently abandoned over and over. We began to interact with God's Word without reading it, through group discussions and storytelling, as we realized that no local believer would ever have private devotions utilizing the printed Word.

Watching peoples' lives redeemed and changed helped us see God's mercy much more widely than I had been raised to accept and also helped us understand that Divine initiative is the beginning of the story, not an add-in at the middle. The reading of Paul that concentrated on the end-point of salvation gave way to hearing him express how redemption also occurs along the way, as a journey.

We also had many opportunities to help other Westerners join this endeavor, both *anglo* North Americans and Mexican *Latinos*. The simplicity of initial training that formed life-long learning and witness was naturally reproduced with the apprentices that joined us. These fellow laborers then also passed on to others, from within their own resources and economies, what they had received (2 Tim 2:2).

Mennonite Brethren and Anabaptism: My Observations

Halfway through our time in Mexico (2003), we joined the mission agency of the Mennonite Brethren denomination in Canada and the United States. This is when I began to learn the language of Anabaptism. I had read Jacob Loewen and Paul Hiebert (famous missiologists with MB backgrounds), but neither really refers to Anabaptist distinctives. Loewen's last book, written in his seventies and after a stroke, was about being Anabaptist but not so much about missions, and he regrets not expounding on Anabaptism earlier. Hiebert (and Donald

McGavran) is known for the "Fourth Self," that of self-theologizing—encouraging contextualization and new expressions of the church. That perhaps corresponds to the Community Hermeneutic distinctive, but I am not aware that he identifies it as such.

These two thinkers are highly esteemed by fellow missiologists of their era and continue to significantly influence the field of missiology.[8] They both call for much the same things I outline here but without appealing to the built-in strengths of their theological family. I believe this highlights again that much has been eroded in we who identify as Evangelical Anabaptists. Like Patterson, they too "flew in the face" of established patterns, but they shouldn't have had to.

Through conversations with various agency and denominational leaders (including international ones), and some related readings, I came to understand that the missiological ideas I was discovering were supposed to be central to the whole Anabaptist endeavor. These people helped me understand this better, but I found only limited real-life applications. Unfortunately, our Mennonite Brethren family does not always adhere to its own Anabaptist roots.[9] For example:

- Our mission agency still requires postsecondary formal study (with some exceptions).
- We still have trouble living Incarnationally in poor fields (not so hard in Europe but more so in America, Africa, and Asia).
- We still, thankfully less and less, restrict the leadership of rites like baptism and communion to the "ordained," but even in our newest endeavors there are leaders borrowed from other denominations who make it difficult for new believers to share in leading these basic activities.
- We still encourage private devotions focused on reading the Bible and journaling—practices that are difficult for much of the rest of the world. By default, the missionary receives little practice of devotional habits useful for discipling communal and oral people.
- We still tend to form pastors instead of elders. We still tend to send them to institutes of higher learning (less high as we try to adapt) to become so titled.
- We still expect these "pastors" to preach with little consultation within their communities, and we still send our dollars so that this can happen in "*templos*" or whatever the set-aside places of worship get called.

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8 See the introduction to Jacob Loewen's *Culture and Human Values: Christian Intervention in Anthropological Perspective; Selections from the Writings of Jacob A. Loewen* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000).

9 Despite my critique in this section, we are a great group of dedicated and sacrificial servants, and I am glad to serve in this agency.

Within our agency we have widely differing understanding around these things. What is striking, though, is how little we appeal to our Anabaptist beginnings. Although there is some level of recognition that these patterns I identify are problematic, many do not regret how we do things. We have a couple of great books that point us differently (*Global Church Planting* by Ott and Wilson,[10] for one) that the agency recommends, but field practitioners rarely read them. We have strategy maps and vision statements that should guide us more clearly. We have good people all over the globe, most of whom want things to be different but are constrained by inertia, patterns, expectations, and existing molds.

On the other hand, we have grown over the decades, and some things that used to be normal aren't anymore: We used to expect new missionaries to have postgraduate formal education; now it is only postsecondary. There are far fewer cases of restricted leadership, and we're a little less likely to use titles (but in honor cultures, that value is easily eroded). We throw around a lot less money and other resources than we used to. We're better about sending servant leaders that function under (and never more than beside) local leaders. But somehow we still get maneuvered into too many situations where the "white" outsider has outsized influence. We often don't know how to resist that.

My exposure to the rest of the Anabaptist world is limited, mostly to other groups that identify as Evangelical Anabaptists. I've not seen or heard that their practices around this are much different. We all seem to suffer from the same malady of syncretism, the Westernization of the church (admittedly started a long time ago, long before Menno Simons walked the earth). And our formation to be witnesses of God's Kingdom is much more evangelical than Anabaptist.

Anabaptist Distinctives: Foundation for Best Practices

I propose we further develop theology and practices that strengthen our capacity to be Kingdom ambassadors. We could overtly draw on our Anabaptist distinctives as foundation for missiological "best practices," teaching new missionaries to work from our strengths. We could have fully field-based apprenticeships that emphasize Incarnational living, group faith-building practices, communal elder leadership, and simplicity in requirements and patterns. We could offer rigorous guidance in avoiding the many and common pitfalls Westerners face because our default position as privileged is so ingrained, widespread, and strong.

I reflect here, and offer my opinion, with the hope and prayer that we all will welcome conversations with anyone in our church family (Anabaptist or

10 Craig Ott and Gene Wilson, *Global Church Planting: Biblical Principals and Best Practices for Multiplication* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

otherwise) who wants to pursue a community hermeneutic around pathways that embrace our heritage, our ideas, and our possibilities.

I write this as well for people like the Mixtecs, wherever they are "hiding" all over the globe, evading the effects of colonization. Anabaptist witness, which so easily can hinder, has even greater possibility for good when it joins with indigenous peoples to discover the freest and fullest pathway in the Kingdom that God wants for us all.