

A Vision for Global Mission Amidst Shifting Realities

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The Anabaptist world has changed since the first global assembly in 1925. One of the changes in the last fourteen years is that Mennonite World Conference (MWC) moved from existing as one event every six years to being a communion of churches. This communion relates in an interdependent way and works on issues of common interest through networks such as the Global Mission Fellowship and Global Anabaptist Service Network, both of which function under the umbrella of the MWC Mission Commission.

This dramatic change has been the result of the missionary movement that has multiplied Anabaptist churches around the world. While the picture of the first global assembly in Switzerland in 1925 shows us only white, Caucasian people, today there are more Anabaptists in Africa, Asia, and Latin America than in countries of the global north. After centuries of following Protestant and evangelical patterns in the sending of missionaries, many churches in the global south have been established and have started to send their own missionaries.

As a result we find ourselves today in a new theological reality shaped by the growth of churches in the global south. Competition among leaders and poor relations between older and younger churches are now the ecclesiastical reality. Our geography has also changed. The classic “fields of mission” are not the same that existed a century ago — we find today missionaries from different cultures around the world going at the same time to the same places. Younger churches have copied northern missiological patterns in their attempt to send missionaries, with the consequence of repeating the same mistakes made by their mother church.

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A first draft of this article was presented at the Council of International Anabaptist Ministries (CIM) consultation in Chicago on 22 January 2014. The Council consists of seventeen North American-based agencies engaged either directly or indirectly in mission and service abroad. According to its guidelines, the council sponsors “an annual consultation on a topic pertinent to international ministries and church partnerships to facilitate communication and understanding.”

The purpose of this writing, after pointing out some of the current realities mentioned before, is to suggest a new missiological paradigm that understands mission, in *addition* to reconciliation, evangelism, and service as God's activity of bringing together diverse cultures as parts of the same body. In this new paradigm North American agencies can have a leading role in the development of multicultural interdependency, holistic mission, multicultural mission, and the practice of a mission from below.

Let's start by exploring some of the current realities for the global Anabaptist community of around 1.7 million members.

Theological Realities

Pentecostalism is a primary influence and is central to the vibrant worship and spiritual life in the global south. In several Anabaptist churches the pentecostal emphasis on a personal relationship with God, dependency on the Holy Spirit, and the practice of the gifts of the Spirit have been welcomed. However, at the same time, there are often problems among strong leaders, who often don't allow the emergence of new leaders, often resulting in church splits. According to Peter Kuzmic, charisma without character leads to catastrophe.² Not all leaders are serving others, and some expect to be served.

Unhealthy conflicts among leaders is one of the reasons why I am concerned about "romantic" views sometimes held in North America that equate global south Pentecostalism with Anabaptism. In Latin America, there are millions of non-Anabaptist Pentecostals, but I am not aware of any who are pacifists. Some varieties of Pentecostalism are identified with consumerism and the prosperity gospel, rather than being known for speaking the message of the kingdom of Christ, justice for society, peacemaking, and Christ crucified. René Padilla argues that these churches have adopted the "mass empire" culture, as they use business strategies and marketing techniques to reach their numerical goals, offering material prosperity, making people feel good, and emphasizing entertainment.³ Pentecostalism does not automatically mean Anabaptism.

On the other hand, we must not reject the many healthy values that Pentecostalism brings to us. Vibrant worship and a life of personal devotion, an emphasis on evangelism and priesthood of all believers through the development

² Peter Kuzmic cited by Samuel Escobar, "The Global Scenario at the Turn of the Century," in *Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue*, ed. William David Taylor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 38.

³ René Padilla cited by Milton Acosta, "Power Pentecostalism: The 'Non-Catholic' Latin American Church is Going Full Steam Ahead — But Are We on the Right Track?" *Christianity Today* (July 29, 2009).

of gifts — and practice of all gifts (including healing, prophecy, and speaking in tongues), among other values, have been crucial for Christians in Latin America. People that face injustice and suffering find in them the strength and inspiration that they need to overcome those situations.

We need to avoid both “Charismania” and “Charisphobia.” We need both Anabaptist and pentecostal values and commitment. I urge North American agencies: in your ministry, don’t forget the Anabaptist values such as community, peacemaking, evangelism, leadership understood as service, and the important role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. Anabaptist values are not cultural attachments to the gospel. They are a very important part of the core of the gospel, thus a real need around the world.

Ecclesiastical Realities

Emerging churches have had relationships with agencies rather than church to church. According to Pakisa Tshimika and Tim Lind,

Many churches have strong historic connections to the churches that were instrumental in initiating and/or nurturing them. But these relationships have almost always been between a church and an agency rather than between the two churches directly. As a result, initiating churches often find themselves with no direct relationship to churches they have supported for many years, and younger churches find themselves linked not to a church but to a specialized agency, which historically mediates relationships with other parts of the denominational family.⁴

This reality began to change in the last twenty-five years. Examples of this progressive change have been the creation of ICOMB (International Community of Mennonite Brethren) and IBICA (International Brethren in Christ Association). These two entities are an attempt to link churches inside of their own constituency. There have also been efforts to develop mission-to-mission relations inside of the Mennonite church and of the Mennonite Brethren Church. However, some of these church plants feel alone for a variety of reasons. Due to the financial reality that they face, the withdrawal of the support that was received from their mother church for many years has left them with the feeling of being abandoned. Additionally, in many of the global south cultures, when suffering or conflict occurs, relationships and global connections are the only tools that they have to overcome difficult circumstances. If a church finds itself without global relationships, the strength and hope that they need to face those

⁴ Pakisa K. Tshimika, Tim Lind, and Mennonite World Conference, *Sharing Gifts in the Global Family of Faith: One Church’s Experiment* (Intercourse, PA: Good, 2003), 99.

circumstances are missed.

The need of interdependency, global relationships, and mutual support may be some of the reasons why MWC has changed during this time from an every six-year event to a “communion” or movement that facilitates connections of churches in order to work on issues of common interest. I think about MWC as an organic movement that supports church-to-church relationships in a global way, in South-to-South relationships as well, rather than always only North-to-South.

Geographical Realities

Looking at the global membership of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches we can see that the large churches are in the global south, with very little presence in the Middle East and North Africa regions. This means that even though several of the Anabaptist agencies are working in the Middle East and North Africa, MWC is lacking the perspective of followers of Christ from these areas. MWC needs the presence of Christians from the Middle East and North Africa. In these places there are many churches that do not have the name “Mennonite.” However, this should not be an obstacle for having them enrich our global communion. We want to be — and need to be — a movement of Anabaptists from the entire world.

Another geographical reality is that the idea of mission is growing in the global south, but the global south does not have the same resources that the global north has. This may be a reason why “a focus on global mission reflects older churches, while a focus on local mission characterizes younger churches,” according to Conrad Kanagy, Tilahun Beyene, and Richard Showalter.⁵

Many of the same mistakes made by our North American agencies that have received criticism are now made by global south agencies: imposing foreign cultures, lack of Anabaptist values, or identity, paternalism, and lack of personal care. William Taylor explains: “We are all familiar with the historic three ‘selfs’ of the church: self-supporting, self-propagating, self-governing. But today’s reality is more complex, richer, and more challenging, for there are really five ‘selfs.’ These include the known three, plus self-theologizing and self-missilogizing.”⁶ Working and walking with younger churches and their mission agencies are crucial parts of the challenge facing North American agencies. Younger churches need to develop contextualized Anabaptist theol-

⁵ 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), 169.

⁶ Taylor, *Global Missiology for the 21st Century*, 6.

ogy and missional principles that are not just a translation of foreign writings but a genuine result of a serious interaction and reflection on the realities of the context in which they live. Although this may be happening in some contexts it is not yet a generalized experience in the global south. The method and process of reaching theological and missiological contextualization can be learned from older churches and agencies from the global north. To learn about the experience of others by serving alongside them will facilitate this process.

Missiological Realities

The way of Jesus needs to be central to the missional task. I encourage leaders and churches to question cultural patterns that don't affirm servant leadership, mutual accountability, or other Anabaptist faith practices that are crucial to a vibrant faith community. And I challenge the mission agencies to communicate, collaborate, and work together for the growth of the church. Taylor mentions the following over-simplifications that have been made in the international evangelical missionary movement:

- The crippling omissions in the Great Commission — reducing it to proclamation alone — which lead to only a partial understanding of the mission of the church, resulting in spiritual anemia and a thin veneer of Christianity, regardless of culture or nation.
- The absence of a robust gospel of the kingdom which calls us to radical commitment and discipleship to Christ.
- An inadequate theology of suffering and martyrdom
- An over-emphasis on short-term missions that minimizes longer-term service, and an inadequate biblical theology of vocation.
- The illusion by some that mass media is the final answer to world evangelization or the suggestion that “the church finally has the technology to finish the Great Commission,” whether the Internet, mass communication, publication, or other media. The danger is obvious, for it disregards the sacrificial, incarnational calling of God into our world of profound personal, familial, socio-economic, cultural, and environmental crises.⁷

A New Missiological Paradigm

Anabaptist agencies need a new paradigm for mission. The goal is not simply to flip the power relationships between the agents and assumed recipients of

⁷ Ibid., 4–5.

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. The call, which Emmanuel Katongole names as the “Ephesian Moment,” is to understand mission, in *addition* to reconciliation, evangelism, and service, as God’s activity of bringing together diverse social fragments — as parts of the same body — so as to realize what Paul describes as the “very height of Christ’s full stature.”⁸

According to Ephesians, the “aha” moment of reaching the full stature of Christ happens when we are sitting at the same table, eating with people from different cultures. In this multicultural environment we see the complete image of Jesus. No single culture sees the complete image. When part of the body is not present, the picture is incomplete. In the same way, the book of Revelation is calling us to live right now according to that vision. We need a new paradigm, which involves sitting together, and finding the meaning of Christ’s witness.

Given the need of a new paradigm that involves the “Ephesian Moment,” what might be the role of our North American agencies in a paradigm that involves a multicultural and interdependent witness? I offer the following suggestions about the future place of North American mission agencies:

A leading role in interdependency

Agencies must speak with each other or the witness is negatively impacted. Some Colombians were surprised that there is something called “Council of International Ministries (CIM)” and that different agencies of different Anabaptist churches (and of mission and service!) are actually meeting together. There are differences, but we love each other and need to talk with each other. Let us be guided by a vision of Anabaptist agencies working together in church planting, peacemaking, health, education, and service. Multicultural and holistic teams working together are a powerful witness. In places where there are separated ministries or agencies, let’s bring those teams together at least to pray and tell the story, making it visible in a global way.

A leading role in holistic mission

The implicitly received message in the South in the past has been that service and mission agencies can’t work together. However, in many places in the global south, churches practice holistic ministry without distinction between word,

8 Emmanuel Katongole, “Mission and the Ephesian Moment of World Christianity: Pilgrimages of Pain and Hope and the Economics of Eating Together,” *Mission Studies*, 29 (2012): 183–200.

deed, and being.⁹

MWC is structured now to facilitate interdependency, multicultural witness, and experiential learning through our networks of agencies — the Global Mission Fellowship and the Global Anabaptist Service Network. We need to avoid the specialization and fragmentation that is typical of modernity and move to practical and relational experiences of holistic ministries that honor specialization without falling into separation.

A leading role in multicultural mission

Some agencies that are hesitant to work with multicultural teams in practice do not celebrate cultural differences, but only tolerate them. I propose testing the “cooperative model” mentioned by Samuel Escobar:

In the cooperative model, churches from rich nations add their material resources to the human resources of the churches in poor nations in order to work in a third area . . . but the model poses some practical questions for which there are no easy answers, one of them being the raising of support for non-Western participants. The traditional Catholic missionary orders such as Franciscans or Jesuits, which are supranational, provide the oldest and more developed example, facilitated by the vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience.¹⁰

What would happen if we looked at the missional monastic roots of Anabaptism? Franciscans influenced the Anabaptist movement in its beginnings. This monastic, missionary Catholic order practiced a multicultural communal way of sending missionaries based on a vow of poverty. Could we learn from Catholic orders about how to structure a multicultural team that bears witness to Christ? Anabaptist agencies have followed Protestant patterns of missions for many years. Could this be a time to turn to monastic patterns to learn from them on issues such as administration, multicultural teams, holistic ministries, and mission from below?

A leading place on the mission from below

Some persons from the South think that if they go into mission, then their lifestyle will be similar to North American missionaries or service workers. According to Taylor,

Before any “practical” training for mission in the use of methods and tools for the verbal communication of a message, it is imperative to form disciples for *a new style of missionary presence*. Mission requires orthopraxis as

⁹ Kanagy, Beyene, and Showalter, *Winds of the Spirit*, 170.

¹⁰ Escobar, “Global Scenario,” 34.

well as orthodoxy . . . This Christological model that was also the pattern under which Paul and the other apostles placed their own missionary practice could be described as “mission from below.”¹¹

What would happen if, following the example of monastic orders, there would be a “vow of poverty” in multicultural teams for everyone? A mission that would invite members to renounce comfort? What would happen if there were more teams — as they are in some agencies — that are called to simple lifestyle and holistic ministry, while respecting and honoring specialization such as church planting, conflict resolution, and service? Some attempts at a cooperative model between North American agencies and South agencies have failed because of huge financial disparities among members of the same team. An Anabaptist emphasis on simplicity as a requirement for each member of the team, regardless of the country of origin, might help us solve many problems.

In conclusion, let me highlight some principles for God’s mission taken from the document “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World” Recommendations for Conduct, developed by the World Council of Churches, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and the World Evangelical Alliance:

- Acting in God’s love.
- Imitating Jesus Christ.
- Christian virtues. Christians are called to conduct themselves with integrity, charity, compassion, and humility, and to overcome all arrogance, condescension and disparagement (cf. Galatians 5:22).
- Acts of service and justice. Acts of service, such as providing education, health care, relief services and acts of justice and advocacy are an integral part of witnessing to the gospel.
- Discernment in ministries of healing. As an integral part of their witness to the gospel, Christians exercise ministries of healing.
- Rejection of violence.

¹¹ Ibid., 43.

I finish here with the words of Juan Martínez and Mark Branson: “We can shape intercultural community in [agencies] not by ignoring particulars but by affirming our accountability and shared missional life.”¹²

May God lead us in this purpose!

¹² Mark Lau Branson and Juan Francisco Martínez, *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), Chapter 3.