Building Right Relationships

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This paper explores, from a feminist postcolonial perspective, the history of Canadian Mennonite women missionaries as well as mission emphases in the work of Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC) and Mennonite Church Canada (MC Canada) leadership. While I engage Canadian contexts primarily, the conclusions I draw should translate across national differences. These case studies will illustrate the need for a nonviolent theology of mission that is good news for all and that will incorporate an understanding of erotic power.[2] Such a theology, I claim, is rooted in a commitment to naming and dismantling colonial theologies of mission and embodying what the World Council of

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2 Feminist theologies and ethics, while diverse, demonstrate a shared commitment to the experiences of the oppressed—particularly women—as a starting point and source of moral insight and theo-ethical discernment. They analyze the function of power in social relations in order to reveal how hierarchical dualism functions to exclude and perpetuate relations of domination and subordination. See, for example, Tracey Ore, *The Social Construction of Difference and Inequality: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 2000) and Letty Russell, *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1987).

The meaning of "postcolonial" in this case requires clarification. In conjunction with Musa Dube in *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2000), I am working with the following understanding of postcolonial as a word "coined to describe the modern history of imperialism, beginning with the process of colonialism, through the struggles for political independence, the attainment of independence, and the contemporary neocolonialist realities…."*Postcolonial subjects*,"on the other hand, describes both the former colonizers and the formerly colonized" (15). Drawing on Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 4, Dube adds that "postcolonial is not about dwelling on crimes of the past and their continuation, but about seeking transformation for liberation" (16). Reading texts through a postcolonial lens means paying attention to interconnected points related to issues of land, race, power, readers, international connection, contemporary history and liberation, and gender.

Churches (WCC) calls "mission from the margins."[3] A theology that is good news for all will also embody Christian ethicist Beverly Harrison's articulation of justice as "rightly ordered relationships of mutuality within the total web of our social relations."[4] Both the WCC and Harrison highlight the potential of the Christian body of oppressed people to imagine and embody what it means to birth the Spirit together in community. Mission work includes, first and foremost, listening for the presence of the Spirit in the experiences of the oppressed, marginalized, and excluded as they struggle for justice.

A Brief History of Canadian Mennonite Women Missionaries

In the twentieth century, missionary work abroad granted Canadian Mennonite women[5] the opportunity to exercise greater leadership and autonomy than Mennonite women who remained in Canada. In her seminal work, *A History of Mennonite Women in Canada*, Marlene Epp writes that strict gender roles at home, which limited women's authority and ability to pursue forms of ministry assigned to men (such as preaching), led many women—both single and married—to sign on for mission work overseas. While some women remained in their local congregations to work for greater inclusion in their church's leadership structures, others "realized they would have to leave home to exercise

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A commitment to peace and an understanding of nonviolence from a feminist perspective seeks the rejection of violence and war. It also seeks equality for women, located in a positive understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God as a gendered being—whichever gender a person identifies with (Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Feminism and Peace," *The Christian Century* 100, no. 25 (1983): 771–76). Adopting a feminist perspective, I claim that peace and justice are intertwined and that nonviolence includes resistance to injustice. Other proponents of this view include, for example, Glen Harold Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1998), John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (New York: Good Books, 2014) and Carol Jean Penner, "Mennonite Silences and Feminist Voices: Peace Theology and Violence Against Women" (unpublished PhD dissertation, St. Michael's College, Toronto, 1999).

3 World Council of Churches, *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013).

4 Beverly Wildung Harrison, "Theological Reflection in the Struggle for Liberation: A Feminist Perspective," in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1985), 253.

5 I use the terms "Canadian" and "Mennonite" as descriptors for women who lived and worshiped in Canada and who identified as Mennonite in some capacity (some as General Conference and some as Mennonite Brethren, for example).

their vocational goals and leadership skills within the church."[6] Additionally, women engaged in mission work abroad were not monitored in the same way as in Canada. "Women could preach and prophesy on the mission field, but only because they were well out of sight, and when male missionaries were fewer in number."[7] As a result, Canadian Mennonite women contributed greatly to mission work and took opportunities to experiment with gender roles outside of the social and religious norms they were accustomed to. Epp notes that "frequently, it was women's organizational work and economic activity that undergirded the successful functioning of local churches, larger denominational institutions, and mission boards."[8] Mennonite women also used their gifts to build long-lasting relationships by remaining in a given community for decades and by addressing the physical and spiritual needs of those they served.[9]

Many missionary women invested significant portions of their lives in a particular community. Helen L. Warkentin, for example, served in India for thirty-six years. She was, however, "involuntarily retired" by representatives from the Mennonite Brethren mission board that oversaw this project.[10] Epp reflects on the positive impact that Warkentin had on the community in which she served. She writes, "Whatever the reasons for her termination, it is clear that Helen's work in India was nevertheless appreciated by people in that country since, after her departure, a village and orphanage were named after her and a school holiday declared on her birthday."[11] Away from the watchful eye of the North American church, Helen was able to act with great authority that resulted in long relationships and lasting impact. Sadly, "most church histories have treated [Mennonite women's missionary] activities as a separate, even incidental, aspect of congregational life."[12]

While there is much to celebrate about Canadian Mennonite women's missionary activities, a significant tension exists within this history. Mission work overseas afforded Mennonite women leadership roles, but these roles did little to dismantle the system of patriarchy and colonialism that informed the theology and the hierarchies of their home churches and of Western society.

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6 Marlene Epp, *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2008), 144.

7 Ibid., 178.

8 Ibid., 163.

9 Ibid., 147.

10 Ibid., 151.

11 Ibid., 152.

12 Ibid., 163.

Missionary work saw Mennonite women as traveling to "foreign lands" to convert the un-Christian, dark-skinned "Other." The work of missionaries was commonly understood to be "expounding the Bible among the 'heathen.' "[13] Furthermore, lands and peoples outside of North America were considered "exotic" and desirable primarily for their ability to be converted to Christianity.[14] A 1958 edition of the *Canadian Mennonite* reveals that something called "colonization evangelism" was promoted as a missionary tactic. This approach encouraged Mennonites to settle in "foreign lands" and evangelize while also working as teachers and nurses.[15] These mentalities, explained in part by the social context of the time, were nonetheless destructive in that they reinforced hierarchies of power over others.

In her efforts to dismantle the colonialism of Christian mission, feminist postcolonial theologian Kwok Pui-lan claims that missionaries were sent abroad in part to Westernize the exotic "Other."[16] Commitments to Christianization and Westernization further reveal the ways in which Christian mission work reinforced patriarchal practices and theologies. Reflecting on the involvements of single women and missionary wives in the field, who were sent to save the souls of "heathen" women, Kwok states:

> These women participated in "colonialist feminism" both discursively and institutionally, by propagating the impression that native women were illiterate, oppressed, and waiting for white women to bring light to them. Judging from the magnitude of women's participation in mission and the amount of money raised to support such activities, the women's missionary movement must be regarded as the largest women's movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As industrialization and urbanization increased the separation of the public and private realms, and women's roles were curtailed by the cult of female domesticity, the missionary movement provided an outlet for women, especially for the graduates of the newly founded women's colleges and seminaries.[17]

While Kwok's research does not focus on Mennonite women missionaries in particular, many of her claims apply to them. Read together, Epp and Kwok reveal that Mennonite women experienced greater freedom in foreign mission work than Mennonite women missionaries at home. The geographical distance

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13 Ibid., 139.

14 Ibid., 146.

15 "Farmer Missionaries," in *The Canadian Mennonite* 6, no. 2 (January 1958): 2.

16 Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 17.

17 Ibid., 17–18.

between home congregations and the mission field meant that women missionaries abroad had the opportunity to take on leadership roles that they were not granted at home—such as preaching. Mennonite women missionaries also experienced greater freedom and increased authority in their work abroad compared to Mennonite women at home, as a result of the heightened dynamics of race, culture, and class in foreign contexts. As white Western women witnessing to dark-skinned non-Western "others" within a patriarchal and colonial system, they had more social privilege than those they witnessed to and more privilege than these social factors afforded them in missionary work at home.

Other scholars respond critically to the work of women missionaries. In *Women in Mission: From the New Testament to Today*, feminist theologian Susan Smith writes:

> Throughout the two thousand years of Christian history, Christian women have participated in the mission of the triune God in a variety of different sociocultural contexts….Almost without exception, male ecclesial leadership in its exercise of authority relied on patriarchal models of governance for the church. Historically, this has meant that in the exercise of their mission, Catholic women [for example] have worked in a way that suited the requirements of a patriarchal church.[18]

Quoting theologian Letty Russell, Smith adds that "'the work of women in mission is not the same as a feminist missiology.' "[19] Dana Robert in her extensive research on the diverse histories of American women in mission makes similar conclusions. Robert writes, "Despite sharing the overall mission theories and attitudes of men of their own eras, American missionary women across the years exhibited common, gender-based concerns and emphases in their mission theory. First of all, women had in common their subordination to the official, usually male-dominated, structures of the church."[20] Robert notes that it was the role of male missionaries primarily to be church planters, for example. Furthermore, "Even when women had their own gender-specific mission societies and separate constituencies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, their lack of rights in the church itself meant that they operated in an ecclesiastical context that was unpredictable and accepted or rejected them

18 Susan E. Smith, *Women in Mission: From the New Testament to Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007), 198.

19 Ibid. Smith takes this quote from Russell's article "Cultural Hermeneutics: A Postcolonial Look at Mission," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20 (2004).

20 Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Mason, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996), 409.

according to its own whims."[21]

In sum, while women were able to "side step normative gender roles," they often embodied the established roles of men rather than reimagining the role of a missionary and their theology of mission. Kwok writes, "Caught in the politically charged colonial space defined by race and class, these white women were not natural allies of native women."[22] Their missionary work depended on relationships of inequality in which white Christian women were above non-white unchristian women.[23] As feminist postcolonial scholar Musa Dube adds: "Women are usually patriarchally oppressed beings, but some women are also imperial oppressors of Other women."[24] This was a danger and a reality for Mennonite women missionaries. Telling the stories of Canadian Mennonite women missionaries and celebrating their achievements is important. It is also important to underscore the ways in which mission work at the time perpetuated relationships of inequality. Whose voices are missing in this history? Who was excluded by the way the Word was proclaimed?[25] By listening to and for the voices of the oppressed, Christians engage in mission from the margins and unleash the potential to transform oppressive relationships into relationships of shared power and mutuality rooted in the example of Jesus.

I turn now to the substance of current theologies of mission, particularly within MCEC and MC Canada, to discern whether these theologies continue to perpetuate social hierarchies and relationships of power over, or whether they promote equality and mission as mutual relationship building for peace and justice.

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21 Ibid.

22 Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 18.

23 Kwok also points out the important fact that during the 1960s second wave, feminism explored relationships of inequality within the church and society in which they lived but "did not pay sufficient attention to how white women had colluded in colonialism and slavery." Thus, some feminist theologians continued to reproduce colonialist assumptions, for example, by homogenizing non-Western women and viewing Western women as superior. In the case of Mennonite women, however, a relationship with feminism did not develop until late in the twentieth century. Today, it is imperative that feminist Mennonite discourses are also postcolonial as they deal with the ways in which oppressive relationships of one kind relate to oppressive relationships of other kinds.

24 Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, 200.

25 Mary Grey, "From Patriarchy to Beloved Community: Exploring New Models of Ministry for Feminist Theology," *Feminist Theology* 1, no. 3 (May 1993): 125.

Current Perspectives on Mission within MCEC and MC Canada

In the spring of 2015, I co-chaired a symposium on mission at the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre (TMTC) in partnership with MCEC titled, "Engaging Women's Voices on the Church, Theology, and Mission: A Task for the Church and the Academy." The purpose of the symposium was to offer a platform for a few women in the academy (students from the Toronto School of Theology) and in the church (MCEC) to engage with key leaders at MCEC (Brian Bauman, MCEC Mission Minister, and Henry Paetkau, Area Church Minister) and to offer their perspectives on the topic of the church, theology, and mission.

In promotional material for the event, I listed possible topics of conversation, including MCEC's focus on discerning what it means to be missional in a post-Christendom context, especially given declining numbers in older Mennonite congregations. In the promotional material for the event, I also shared a reflection from Bauman from a conversation he and I had during a planning meeting for the event, in which he noted that he has not had the opportunity to work with many women because there are not many women overseeing new church plants and church adoption. Why do women make up a distinct minority in new church development in Canada? While Bauman's experience is specific to new church planting, I noted that the absence of women's voices in that particular context raises questions more broadly about women's perspectives on the church, theology, and mission today.

Several key issues were named at the symposium through paper presentations and group discussion periods. A common concern among students was that MCEC's emphasis on the missional church relies on a gendered notion of mission that reinforces patriarchal assumptions. The clearest emphasis in MCEC's missional work appeared to be church planting, which is worth reflecting on. In part two of MCEC's "Moving into the Future" discussion series on "Extending the Peace of Christ," MCEC Executive Ministers state the need for Mennonite understandings of mission to adapt to social change and post-Christendom. Congregations must be places of nurture, they claim, but also missional through community engagement. The emphasis on church planting is clearly named in this discussion series. In part three, "Unity in Diversity," the Executive Ministers emphasize the need for ongoing unity on matters that MCEC churches have historically agreed on. These issues are "church planting, passing on our faith to youth, and wanting to be in mission

together."[26]

A model of mission as church planting incorporates an understanding of mission as one-directional—"to the margins" rather than mission "from the margins." A one-directional relationship perpetuates inequality. According to historian Dana Robert, the subordination of women missionaries to male-dominated norms and structures led women to focus less on ecclesiology and church planting and more on the "the personal and ethical aspects of mission."[27] Stated differently, "women's mission theory focused either on personal witnessing or on working toward the reign of God. Church planting and the subsequent relationship between church and mission was rarely part of women's public missiological agenda."[28] Here, Robert names a potential reason why Mennonite women may not be involved in MCEC's church planting ministries today and why mission understood primarily as church planting ought to include a critical analysis of power, gender, and race, among other topics.

Theologian Susan Smith also considers the correlation between church planting and gender. Smith names church planting as one of five significant definitions of mission. The other four definitions are (1) mission as the work of conversion, so that souls are saved; (2) mission as working toward a more just society as a continuation of the mission of Jesus and living into the reign of God already; (3) mission as interreligious dialogue in order to understand the beliefs and traditions of other religious groups; and (4) mission as inculturating the good news.[29] Smith reflects on the significance of these approaches for women and argues that if mission is understood as church planting, then special attention must be paid to the ways in which church planting might replicate patriarchal structures and relationships of power over.[30] Of the five perspectives of mission, Smith claims that the last three will likely resonate most with women and, in particular, feminist theologians. She writes: "If we understand mission as liberation, as interreligious dialogue at both the formal and informal level, or as inculturation, this points to an understanding of mission that is grounded in an incarnational theology."[31] These understandings of mission focus on "the coming of the reign of God by striving to be part of

26 "Moving into the Future: Unity in Diversity," *Mennonite Church Eastern Canada*, accessed April 29, 2016, https://mcec.ca/mcec-moving-future.

27 Robert, *American Women in Mission*, 410.

28 Ibid.

29 Smith, *Women in Mission*, xviii.

30 Ibid., xix.

31 Ibid.

those movements and struggles that want to ensure that people can live with dignity and respect" and are good news for all, especially women and others whose bodies and experiences have been excluded and marginalized.[32] Church planting does not contain and embody this focus.

Since the symposium over a year ago, MCEC's perspective on mission remains unchanged. MCEC's executive leaders have yet to examine the relationship between gender and mission in their views of mission or to problematize the power relations therein. The social privilege of MCEC's four executive ministers as white, heterosexual, middle-class men living within a society that privileges these social locations increases their risk of theologizing mission from the center rather than the margins of social accessibility and power. Even so, it does not prevent them from modeling relationships of mutuality and shared power. Each person in the community of faith has the ability to be self-critical and to examine their privilege. This is significant since, as theologian Mary Grey reminds us, "Before we can speak of new models of ministry and mission, we have to talk about who the church is currently—who is excluded from the welcome table."[33] Who is living on the margins of our existing congregations? How could their voices be granted greater authority in discerning the leading of the Spirit for the life of the church? How could the positions of the executive ministers of MCEC be outlined to include increased self-reflection and power sharing?

MC Canada also faces challenges with regard to its view of mission. The national church body is currently in the midst of a process to discern the future of its structure and mandate. As part of this process, the Future Directions Task Force (FDTF) was created on the recommendation of Area Churches by the General Board of Mennonite Church Canada to discern future directions in regard to two central questions: (1) what is God's Spirit calling us to in the twenty-first century? and (2) what are the best ways (programs, structures, strategies) for the church to thrive and grow?[34] The FDTF names God's mission as reconciling and restoring the world into God's good purposes. Like MCEC, the FDTF highlights the important role of church planting as a form

32 Ibid.

33 Grey, "From Patriarchy to Beloved Community," 120.

34 Mennonite Church Canada, "Future Directions Task Force Report: Overview: God, Mission, and People: A Draft for Conversations and Testing" (Feb. 2, 2015), accessed April 29, 2016, http://www.commonword.ca/FileDownload/20278/FDTF_-_God_Mission_and_a_People_-_Overview.pdf.

of regional church witness.[35] Unlike MCEC, it views mission within a discipleship framework and connects mission to peace building. The FDTF states, in particular, that "suspicion of authority, widespread loneliness, and a weariness of war are elements of the context today to which historic Anabaptist emphases on mutual discernment, community and peace are relevant."[36] This is an important point to reflect on. In an outward-focused understanding of mission, little attention is paid to how Mennonites are currently practicing mutual discernment, community, and peace themselves. Yet those have been significant areas of concern and brokenness for the Mennonite church, particularly with regard to conversations around sexuality and inclusion. An understanding of mission from the margins conveys the idea that churches themselves are in need of transformation.

Articles from the Canadian Mennonite highlight additional perspectives on mission within MC Canada. Deborah Froese, director of MC Canada's news service, explores Mennonites' mixed feelings regarding evangelism. Reflecting on the Mennonite World Conference address by Hippolyto Tshimanga—MC Canada's Director for Africa, Europe, and Latin American Ministries—Froese highlights Tshimanga's claim that an uneasiness toward evangelism and church planting in Canada is "likely impacted by Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) exposure of the church's role in oppression and abuse of Indigenous Peoples" and that "in the aftermath of those TRC revelations, feeling skittish about mission is understandable."[37] Froese goes on to say that Robert J. Suderman, a former MC Canada general secretary and a past MWC Peace Commission secretary, does not think this uneasiness is warranted. He claims it reflects a "disconnect between what MC Canada is doing and what people in the pews think it is doing."[38] Despite Suderman's claims, Froese concludes with the hopeful suggestion that it may be time to understand mission as "sharing—not imposing—the joy, challenge, delight and freedom we find in Christ, and

35 Mennonite Church Canada, "Future Directions Task Force Report: Final Report Bundle" (Dec. 7, 2015), 1, 25, accessed April 29, 2016 http://www.commonword.ca/FileDownload/21840/FDTF_Final_Report_Bundle_ 2015-12-07.pdf.

36 Mennonite Church Canada, "Future Directions Task Force Report: Overview," 2.

37 Deborah Froese, "What's up with Mennos and Mission?" *Canadian Mennonite* 20, no. 9 (Apr 20, 2016), accessed April 29, 2016, http://www.canadianmennonite.org/stories/what%E2%80%99s-mennos-and-mission/.

38 Ibid.

[time to] be open to the perspectives of God held by others."[39]

MCEC's, and to a certain extent MC Canada's, understanding of mission relies heavily on church planting and/or an understanding of mission *to* the margins rather than *from* the margins. Such an understanding of mission does not suggest or seek to embody a theology of mission as liberation from oppression for all, rooted in the good news of the kingdom of God.[40] Women and those whose voices are disproportionately absent from current conversations about mission within MCEC experience the negative impacts of this reality most heavily. That said, and as history has shown, they themselves are also capable of reproducing these hierarchies and colonial views of mission.

In the next and final section of this paper, I argue that the Spirit empowers believers to participate in God's mission by dismantling systems of oppression and building right relationships of shared power/mutuality that embody God's peace and justice.

Going Forward: Mission with Shared Power/Mutuality[41]

A theology of mission that is good news for all peoples and creation promotes liberation for all from oppression. While Beverly Harrison does not speak of the church's "mission" per se, she constructs a particularly important vision of the gospel for a liberatory Christian ethics that has significant implications for a nonviolent theology of mission. Harrison argues that "genuine experience of transcendence arises in the ecstatic power emergent between those who have

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39 Ibid. For an article that supports Froese's perspective, see Dick Benner, "Of Mission and Politics," *Canadian Mennonite* 20, no. 9 (April 20, 2016), accessed April 29, 2016, http://www.canadianmennonite.org/stories/mission-and-politics.

40 See Iris Marion Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," in *Rethinking Power*, ed. Thomas E. Wartenberg (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 174–95. My understanding and use of the term "oppression" is informed by Young's definition of oppression as structural or systemic; that is, "the inhibition of a group through a vast network of everyday practices, attitudes, assumptions, behaviors, and institutional rules" (180) and its "five faces"; namely, exploitation, marginality, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

41 French philosopher Michel Foucault argues that power is relational, the effect of particular configurations of relations and discourses, rather than a thing that can be owned. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980). My articulation of right relationships as relationships of shared power (i.e., mutuality) is informed by Foucaul's theory of power as relational. It also incorporates a feminist correction to Foucault's work in the form of an analysis of gender and an analysis of inequalities between women and men. For more on feminist corrections to Foucault see Caroline Ramazanoglu, ed., *Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993).

connected with each other, intimately engaged with God, in emancipatory praxis." According to her, "Passion for justice, shared and embodied, is the form God takes among us in our time."[42]

In this section I draw on Harrison's work to articulate a theology of mission that takes seriously the task of believers to adopt a radically relational understanding of justice and peacemaking as that which embodies the kingdom of God and, as a result, includes a commitment to re-appropriating all our social relations, even relations to God, so that shared action toward genuine human cosmic fulfillment occurs.[43] I begin by articulating the necessity of a theology of shared power for a theology of mission. I continue by highlighting the importance of reading scripture from a feminist postcolonial perspective for a theology of mission. I conclude by naming the potential that sexual relationships and relationships with the earth have in mission. These are brief examples of work toward a nonviolent theology and embodied practice of mission.

Relationships of Shared Power

A theology of power indicates the particular relations of power that the Divine models and calls believers to embody. In this article I claim that God calls disciples of Jesus to embody relationships of shared power and mutuality. These are relationships that demonstrate love, justice, and peace toward oneself, God, and all of creation. As Harrison writes: "Like Jesus, we are called to a radical activity of love, to a way of being in the world that deepens relation, embodies and extends community, and passes on the gift of life…We are called to confront power that thwarts the power of human personal and communal becoming—that which twists relationship. Jesus' sacrifice was for the cause of radical love—doing justice; righting relationship."[44] Power is enhanced "when shared, reciprocal, and constructed by the limits that respectful interrelationship imposes."[45]

In her reflections on biblical understandings of power in the Gospel according to Mark, Lydia Neufeld Harder notes that the power of the resurrection is not dependent on status or coercion, and the power of God embodied in human authority is healing, creative, and subversive.[46] It is the role of the believing

42 Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 263.

43 Ibid., 245.

44 Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 19.

45 Ibid., 175.

46 Lydia Neufeld Harder, *Obedience, Suspicion, and the Gospel of Mark: A Mennonite-Feminist Perspective* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1998), 130, 132, 133.

community to name and challenge uses of power to dominate or control.[47] Feminist-Mennonite theologians Dorothy Yoder Nyce and Lynda Nyce reiterate: "Power is an important quality of the divinity"—expressed as power for/to, with, and within the "marginalized…to renew their strength."[48]

Anabaptist Mennonite views of power have varied over time and have frequently lacked an articulation of the ways in which relationships of power operate within faith communities—particularly with regard to sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, age, and ability. Historians Benjamin Redekop and Calvin Redekop note that early Anabaptists distinguished between God's power, vested in the individual will and the community of the faithful in nonhierarchical structures, and state power, vested in the dominating relationships of state and religious hierarchies.[49] They also reveal how this position evolved over time into a distrust of any form of power and an insistence on powerlessness as the ideal within the community of faith. To this day, many Mennonites are not aware of how adopting an identity of powerlessness can act as a "deceptive, benign cover behind which naked power may operate as though invisible…power is renounced yet not in truth forsaken."[50] Mennonite understandings of mission that do not explore how relationships of power operate within and outside of the community of faith are examples of this.

Feminist postcolonial critics explain the significance of examining relationships of power and their overlapping influences.[51] According to Kwok,

> Postcolonial feminist critics have stressed the intricate relationship between colonialism and patriarchy such that the analysis of one without the other is incomplete. Those male postcolonial critics who leave out gender run the risk of overlooking that colonialism involves the contest of male power and that patriarchal ideology is constantly reshaped and reformulated in the colonial process. On the other hand, those feminist critics who isolate gender from the larger economic and colonial context court the danger of providing a skewed interpretation that tends to reflect the

47 Ibid., 139.

48 Dorothy Yoder Nyce and Lynda Nyce, "Power and Authority in Mennonite Ecclesiology: A Feminist Perspective," in *Power, Authority, and the Anabaptist Tradition*, eds. Benjamin W. Redekop and Calvin W. Redekop (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 162.

49 Benjamin W. Redekop and Calvin W. Redekop, eds., *Power, Authority, and the Anabaptist Tradition* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2010), vii.

50 Ibid.

51 The connections between relationships of power are explored within what is typically referred to as a framework of intersectionality. Intersectionality recognizes that relationships and power dynamics between social locations and processes

interests of the socially and economically privileged.[52]

Oppressions are interlocking. For this reason, communities of faith should be suspicious of all relationships of unequal power operating within their theologies and biblical interpretations.

A shift in language and thinking from "mission *to* the margins" to "mission *from* the margins" is the result of this kind of critical analysis of power relations. Reflecting on the WCC's shift in this regard, Athena Peralta reiterates that "mission from the margins" supports the work of peacemaking and justice-making as it empowers, for example, women living in absolute poverty to be part of decision-making processes that impact their well-being or economy of life.[53] Missional actions that include a redistribution of power in this way are embodiments of the kingdom of God.

Use of Scripture

Postcolonial feminist Musa Dube argues that biblical scholarship that does not wish to reinforce patriarchal and imperial relationships must pay attention to themes of land, race, power, readers, international connections, contemporary history and liberation, and gender in interpretations of biblical texts. Questions for the hermeneutical community include: Why have biblical texts endorsed unequal power distributions and racial differences? Which interpretations empower geographic areas and races that have typically been disempowered?[54] In her research on empire and mission in the gospel according to Matthew, for example, Dube lifts up African Independence Churches's (AICs) women's readings of Matthew 15:21–28 as pieces of a feminist, postcolonial vision of mission that celebrates mission as liberating interdependence built on relationships of shared power.[55] She uses the term *interdepence* "to describe and un-

(e.g., racism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, sexism) are linked and can also change over time and differ by geographic setting. Professor of Law Kimberle Crenshaw developed intersectionality originally as "a way of framing the various interactions of race and gender in the context of violence against women of color" but recognized its potential more broadly "as a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics" ("Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 [1991]: 1296).

52 Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 81.

53 Athena Peralta, "Mission Together toward Economy of Life: Feminist Perspectives," *International Review of Mission* 104, no. 1 (April 2015): 62–64.

54 Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, 7.

55 Ibid., 184–95.

derline the interconnectedness of different histories, economic structures, and political structures as well as the relatedness of cultural texts, races, classes, and genders within specific and global contexts."[56] *Liberating interdepence* is built on relationships of shared power, or as Dube states, "relationships that recognize and affirm the dignity of all things and people involved."[57]

The reading strategies of the AICs women enable a view of Israel as an all-inclusive category in Matthew 15:24 for all who believe in God. They also enable a view of Canaan as an important and rich land of value to the Israelites. In such an interpretation, the Canaanites are not reduced to a secondary position or inferior culture.[58] One participant interpreted the Canaanite woman in particular as an example of the spiritual wealth in Canaan and an indicator of what it meant that the land of the Canaanites was a land "flowing with milk and honey" (i.e., a land rich in material and spiritual resources). Dube writes, "This imaginative interpretation highlights the power and will of AICs women to map a vision of liberating interdependence….It decolonizes the imperial strategies that employ the rhetoric of poverty and lack of religious faith among the colonized in order to justify dominating Other nations."[59] Dube demonstrates that a key component of a nonviolent theology of mission is an interpretive reading strategy that reads "mission narratives with the understanding that they are the key biblical texts that authorize international travel and relations in order to interrogate the power relations they advance."[60]

Erotic Power: An Embodied Approach to Mission and Sexual Relationships as Missional

If Christian mission is about building right relationships of shared power, and sexual relationships are an important type of human relationship, then disciples are called to image God to others through sexual relationships of shared power. This is particularly urgent work since women, LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, and Queer), and disabled person's sexualities and bodies have been and continue to be excluded and demeaned by patriarchal impulses in both the church and society. With regard to sexuality, "mission from the margins" means listening to the Spirit as the Spirit speaks through the experiences of people whose bodies and sexualities have been excluded, marginalized, and oppressed as those people struggle for peace and justice through a redistribu-

56 Ibid., 185.

57 Ibid., 186.

58 Ibid., 193.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid., 200.

tion of power.

A redistribution of power enables the church to appreciate sexuality and erotic power as places in which God's love and desire for peace and justice can be shared and received. *Eros* is often viewed with fear, suspicion, and negativity in the church and associated with a fearful view of women's bodies and sexualities. Reclaiming *eros* "as a source of power that puts us in touch with our deepest feelings and allows humans to connect with others"[61] is an important part of a feminist postcolonial theology of mission. *Eros* describes the integral desire for intimacy and relationship (with the divine, with humans, and with creation) that all humans possess and is neither separate from nor less significant than *agape*—the self-sacrificial love most commonly identified with God and lifted up as exemplary by the church. Reclaiming *eros* as a positive source of power that can mediate divine love in our relationships—seeking mutuality rather than self-interest—is important for overcoming the male-female and sexuality-spirituality dualisms in the Christian tradition and is a key part of the missional work that believers are called to embody. As feminist liberation theologian Anne Bathhurst Gilson articulates, "Because women have been associated with *eros*, sexuality, and evil, reclaiming *eros* from patriarchal control has resulted in the affirmation of the power of women."[62] The body, sexuality, and the erotic are thus locations for God's revelation in history. If mission work is about building relationships of mutuality, and sexuality via *eros* is that dimension of us that urges relationship,[63] then sexuality and erotic power are keys to Christian conversations about mission.

Relationships of Shared Power with Creation

The health of the planet is integrally related to conversations about gender and mission. For example, Kathleen Stone, executive for economic and environmental justice for United Methodist Women, highlights the integral connection between mission, colonization, and the confiscation and ownership of land by settlers in North America.[64] Stone aptly names the foundational sin of the colonizers as thinking they were more deserving and more legitimized

61 Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 70.

62 Anne Bathhurst Gilson, *Eros Breaking Free: Interpersonal Sexual Theo-Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1995), 69.

63 Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 115.

64 Kathleen Stone, "Foundational Tremors: Gender, Power, and Climate Justice," *International Review of Mission* 104, no. 1 (April 2015): 73–74.

than the indigenous peoples and lands they encountered and thus justified in dominating these peoples and lands. She writes:

> Men of European descent told themselves, and told everyone else through law, philosophy, and policy, that this was the case. Around the world, people of the "wrong" gender, race, religion, culture were captured and put into fenced-off areas, enslaved, and killed….Once we can speak this humbling, difficult truth of a foundational sin that we've inherited, as an entire human community, we must imagine and birth a vastly different life together—one with foundations of true mutuality, healing centuries of economic and political injustice.[65]

An understanding of mission as that which takes place on the margins will change narratives of domination with regard to all of creation and will appreciate the ways in which God's presence is in and through it. Mission work thus includes partnering with indigenous peoples and creation in relationships of mutuality in which their diverse voices are heard. Believers are asked to consider, what do nonviolent relationships of shared power look like with regard to the earth and its creatures?[66]

Conclusion

Exploring the history of Canadian Mennonite women missionaries as well as current trends in MCEC and MC Canada from a feminist postcolonial perspective reveals the complex and intersectional relationships of power related to gender and mission. It also reveals the absence of a truly nonviolent theology of mission (i.e., one that is liberating for all). In conjunction with feminist postcolonial scholars, I claim the importance of an understanding of Christian mission as that which calls believers to embody radical relationships of shared power/mutuality commensurate with God's vision of justice and peace. Such a theology is nonviolent and enacted when:

- reading Mennonite mission histories while paying attention to relationships of power and privilege.
- celebrating the fact that the Spirit's presence is not limited to the institutional church but is already present in all of creation.
- recognizing that a commitment to mission is a commitment to dialogue, which must begin on the margins and requires a critical analysis of power within the community of faith.

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65 Ibid., 76.

66 I adopt a view of peace and justice as intertwined. Within this view, a commitment to nonviolence is necessarily a commitment to justice-making in all our relationships, including with creation, and at both the personal and social systemic levels.

- recognizing that human bodies are important locations in which believers are called to embody relationships of shared power/mutuality.
- recognizing the earth itself as a partner in mission.

In the words of theologian Irma Fast Dueck, "God invites us into relationship and calls us to build relationships with one another based not on domination and control but rooted in the compassionate love and vulnerability we see in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. A renewed understanding of power, conceived relationally, may help us better understand the nature of God's power, and it may aid us in building our life together as Christian community."[67] If this is a transformative invitation to which we as Christians are called, then it ought to inform our theology of mission. It does so by inviting us to build relationships of mutuality that transform existing relationships of power as we seek to embody the kingdom of God here on earth—developing and embodying a theology of mission from, rather than to, the margins.

67 Irma Fast Dueck, "Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Power in Christian Community," *Vision* 72 (Fall 2014): 78.