

The Forgotten People

ANNE THIESSEN¹

Remember the story in the Bible about the woman who had been hemorrhaging for years and her health care had run out?² And she didn't have anywhere else to go or any new alternative medicine to try? And she was mopping up blood with rags and hoping no one noticed because a woman's blood was deemed especially shameful? Remember how she kept low to the ground so as not to call attention to herself? Do you remember how "church folk" wouldn't let her in the door?

Remember how she had just enough courage to reach out from her position on the ground to touch a new doctor's hem with her fingers? And she knew? She knew it had finally, instantly, stunningly worked?

Remember the doctor looking back over his shoulder? Who . . . ? Remember his apprentices' annoyance. . . . "There is no one there! It could be anyone!"

Exactly. It could have been any of us. But it wasn't. It was this one nameless, shamefully bankrupt, and bleeding woman. The invisible one. The forgotten one. Remember?

I recently attended the International Community of Mennonite Brethren (MB) gathering in Thailand. The theme was mission, and the spirit was much about remembering the forgotten. A German Mennonite spoke of his family's heart-searing exile by train from the Ukraine across Russia, and a recent return to war-torn Ukraine, where he witnessed Christians reaching out to one another across enemy lines. A Turk spoke of joining Armenians in their somber memorial for those lost in genocide a century ago. A Malawian refugee spoke of his ministry in his camp, which he had chosen over being sponsored in North America. Two white men—a Canadian and a Brazilian—called us to address white privilege. Finding the forgotten and seeing the invisible takes

¹ *Anne Thiessen grew up in Honduras in an American missionary family. After graduating from Wheaton College, she served as refugee camp coordinator under World Relief and as mission mobilizer under Artists in Christian Testimony. She now works alongside her husband, Robert, to establish the authority of Christ among Mixtec indigenous people in the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca, Mexico. She serves under Mennonite Brethren MBMission.*

² See Mark 5:25–34 and parallels. I am imaginatively expanding on the biblical account.

intention, and we all witnessed a fresh will among MB leadership to tackle what sets some people aside.

My husband and I, MB missionaries, have experience working among such set-aside people. When we began exploring where we might work among the unreached Indian groups of Mexico, seasoned missionaries suggested we begin our search in the migrant camps in the north of the country where workers and their families were housed in stalls separated by tin or cardboard, under one long, low roof. The structures reminded us of chicken barns. We spent months meeting migrant workers in these camps, painstakingly learning the rudiments of their tonal language and building relationships.

Indian groups in Mexico are semi-autonomous, and often it is necessary to obtain permits from Indian authorities to enter or live in their towns. Often, outsiders are unwelcome, especially evangelists or missionaries, who are perceived as threats to the local customs and identity. We were advised to gain entrance to an area where there was no gospel presence, by earning the trust and invitations of migrant workers before choosing a specific Indian town where we would live.

This we did, and it led us to one of the few Mixtec towns that still had a Mixtec name (many other such towns had been renamed by Indian or Spanish conquerors). The village—nestled in the crack between two mountaintops that blocked out the sun till mid-morning and again in the late afternoon—was called *Yuvi Nani*, Forgotten People. Legend has it that these people were outcasts and refugees from their hometown in Oaxaca. But even the name of the hometown is lost.

If you had looked (as we did) on a government map that plotted towns and roads in the state, you would have seen that the entire portion covering Yuvi Nani was barren. There seemed to be nothing there. Some years later, a United Nations study claimed that Yuvi Nani and the towns surrounding it composed the most destitute of all municipalities in Mexico. In some ways, they were forgotten even by their own government. When we did some research on this particular linguistic group, we were informed by the most knowledgeable mission agency in the area that there were no known Christian believers or workers there and that it was the most neglected of all unreached fields in Mexico. So in we went.

And how glad I am that we did. Because out of this marginalized, forgotten group of people comes a marvelous story, one as close to the original story of Pentecost that I have seen in Mexico. One of the migrant workers named Philip had overheard some evangelical worship in one of the camps and was overwhelmed by how it communicated the power of Christ. Philip was (and

still is) quite monolingual. But he caught these things from the evangelical songs: Jesus rose from the dead and will raise me too. He hears me when I pray. He loves me and heals me.

Philip took this good news back to his village. After two years of Philip's witness, his brother-in-law Juan came to faith. Juan, a town authority, made use of the town's public speakers to gather everyone into the town square and preach good news. "You all know that we are far from God! We must turn back! We must follow Jesus in a New Way!" The entire village came to faith. That night, half recanted out of fear of reprisal, but the rest stayed true and formed a church. They wrote songs in Mixtec. They stopped the abuse of alcohol and the beating of wives. They stopped the practice of loan sharking and selling their daughters in marriage for profit. God had gotten ahold of them.

Then one day, before a year had passed, an assassin stepped out from behind a truck at noon and shot Juan dead in the middle of the street in a nearby city. Juan had been buying materials to build a church.

Soon after Juan died, Latino pastors visited the new church, persuading the worshippers that their language was unacceptable to God and that all worship must, for propriety's sake, be conducted in Spanish. The Mixtec prayers stopped. The Mixtec songs were lost. These church members—whose founder had been martyred, who suffered the threat of death every day and yet remained faithful—were now, by their own brothers in Christ, caused to suffer shame for their birthright as Indians. Like the hemorrhaging woman who had reached out to the Healer, they, as Indians, were invisible.

Those of us born into white privilege have difficulty even seeing the suffering of marginalized people and their resulting invisibility. We do not understand the shame of being forgotten. But through relationships and intentionality, we can learn, like the disciples did, to see those reaching out to touch the hem of Jesus from positions of powerlessness. With love, we can lift shame and restore dignity and identity when we honor invisible people in the name of Christ.

A few years ago, we found one of our brothers of the Forgotten People working as a migrant in Alabama. We stayed at his apartment for four days. He took us out to dinner at his favorite spot—McDonald's. When we were about to leave, he asked his son to take a picture of him and my husband, Robert. "You are my best friend," he said. This remains one of the highest honors Robert has ever received.

Another rural, marginalized Indian group in which we hold friendships is the Waunán of Panama, who came to Christ through Anabaptist witness. They, too, have a fascinating story of redemption as entire villages dedicated

themselves to Jesus when their leaders spoke the gospel to them with great faith. Where in Western culture today do we see such childlike trust and immediate obedience to Jesus? Recently when Robert was visiting these friends, they commented on a church conference they had held the year before. The visiting Latino preacher had spent hours persuading them of the need to be nourished through the study of God's Word. At the end of the conference, an elderly Woun had stood and said, "Brothers, I must prepare to die. I cannot read, and I am too old to learn. So I cannot receive sustenance." This man, an oral learner, was invisible to the literate, credentialed Latino pastor.

As I think about this story, I wonder how much of God's very nature is invisible to me and to all my Western kin—and even to that Latino pastor who was using a Western preaching style—because we are so careless with the life and wisdom of elderly Indian oral learners such as this nameless, suffering man who, if not hemorrhaging blood, was certainly hemorrhaging self-worth. How brave he was to articulate his pain. Few Indians do. They often merely accept it as their lot in life and keep silent. This is our loss, too.

Mexico. Panama. These two stories highlight the marginalization of rural Indian groups with stories to tell, who we ignore to our loss. But Indians are not the only marginalized groups in this hemisphere. We are surrounded by invisible people, by forgotten people—migrants, refugees, minorities, women, the poor, homeless, and disabled. My next two stories highlight rural, poor Latinos from Honduras and Peru. Often the powerful in one context are marginalized in another. It's hardly possible to find pure victims.

My husband and I were apprenticed by Honduran church planters in rural Honduras. The model they use for church reproduction and pastoral training has inspired hundreds of baby congregations all over the world, and their training materials—Train & Multiply—are offered through organizations like Project WorldReach. Yet few people know their struggle to be recognized by leaders within their own denomination because, as rural poor *campesinos* (farmers), they were perceived as improperly educated (none held formal, recognized credentials of any kind) and incapable of managing their own church structure. I was at a church conference where a Honduran city pastor with a US seminary degree made a power play to put the 200 or so rural churches under the authority of his own significantly more wealthy church in the country's capital. I was greatly relieved when one of the rural pastors, Oscar (one of my husband's mentors), with that familiar gentle courtesy and calm discernment we all knew so well, said, "For many years you have dismissed the extension training that qualifies all of us as *campesino* pastors. How would placing ourselves under your administration now help us?" And the power play dissolved. Managing

their own training had raised the *campesino* pastors' confidence in their own leadership.

These Honduran church planters gave us the best training possible for our work among the marginalized of Mexico. Nowhere else could we have found more wisdom, more simple obedience to Jesus, more tools of the trade, more practical models, or more humble teachers than among these *campesino* pastors like Oscar. Yet in many ways, since they don't publish in our mission journals or speak at our conferences, they are invisible, forgotten. Sometimes when I try to tell their story as a counter to missiology that disparages non-formally trained leaders, I feel like Rhoda of Acts, who had something incredible to tell but was dismissed because she was a servant girl. Somehow, in those instances I also lack the credentials to make myself heard.

I eventually find ways to speak, however, even as a woman, because I am formally educated and white. But how often do we hear an Oscar guiding us through church planting principles or gently chiding us for complaining when he was slighted by a fellow missionary? How often do we hear a Juan of Yuvi Nani preach? Or let a Waunán elder model oral storytelling? What voices do we listen to? Are we intentional about looking around for those invisible, dignity-hemorrhaging people who live around us?

My final story is about another group of church leaders I met in a marginalized rural area of Peru. In a visit there, I heard a bit of their history. My understanding of it goes something like this: After a natural disaster struck some thirty years ago, an Anabaptist agency arrived on the scene with relief aid. Relationships were made, and people came to Christ. The agency sent missionaries to pastor these believers, for about ten years. The missionaries, knowing that nationals should lead these churches, invited credentialed pastors from outside the denomination and paid them to lead the churches. When funding faded, the pastors left and the churches were again left leaderless. The agency adopted a new strategy, choosing a number of local leaders and sending them to a seminary in another Latin country on full scholarships. After four years, the graduates returned and pastored for a time, but soon they deemed it too difficult to remain in such poor congregations, and all but one left the movement. The strategy was deemed by the agency as a flop, the people too poor to make it work.

This is a familiar story to me. But when I arrived in this new place, I recognized such strong similarities to northern rural Honduras—where I had witnessed a church-planting movement among very similar people—that the missed opportunities for the Peruvian churches wounded my heart. The leadership potential of so-called “lay leaders” was invisible to the mission agency, as

was the potential for reproducing churches without a foreign credentialing system or foreign financing. In some ways, it was a modern telling of James 2:2–4, except that rather than a poorly dressed person entering the meeting and being told to take a seat on the floor, it was a poorly educated one. It was a different set of resources taken into account, but the same result. I know the people involved intended good. But misguided actions have unintended consequences.

The following are a few lines from an evaluation of the work in Peru, published by the agency in the 1990's and on which the agency acted.

In 1992 the mission decided to reorient its work with the purpose of strengthening the national work. From the outset, they had worked in marginal urban and rural centers. But after almost a decade of work they were not successful in becoming self-sustaining and the future was not promising. Furthermore, the approaches to missionary work that were born in the hearts of the local congregations became increasingly difficult because of the condition of the members. . . .

The national leader, including the president, did not have the training in administrative duties that are required by these kinds of associations. They were, therefore, dependent on the work of [the] missionary . . . [whose] departure in 1998 left an enormous vacuum . . . because he offered efficient and wise leadership that could not be replaced. . . .

What I understand from these words is that the ability of local elders to pastor their own churches was invisible to the seminary-credentialed evaluator. I also gather that responsibility for failure was placed not on the missiology of the white missionaries and formally educated pastors but rather on the “condition of the members.” The inference for me is that the spread of the gospel is hindered by poverty and its attendant lack of formal training.

I am relieved to say that the agency that started the work in Peru has since revisited its missiology, asked forgiveness of the local workers, and released them for ministry as it should have done thirty years ago. Several of the Peruvian leaders described to me their plans to begin new work, wondering at their newfound freedom. “We were always told before that we couldn’t do this,” one of them said. The church slowly learns its true nature.

I end with the song of one of Scripture’s most marginalized characters—a poor Middle Eastern girl, wearing a veil, carrying a “bastard” child, suffering labor pains on the road with nowhere to go, soon to be a hunted refugee in a foreign country:

Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.
 How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!
 For he took notice of his lowly servant girl,
 and from now on all generations will call me blessed.
 For the Mighty One is holy,
 and he has done great things for me.
 He shows mercy from generation to generation
 to all who fear him.
 His mighty arm has done tremendous things!
 He has scattered the proud and haughty ones.
 He has brought down princes from their thrones
 and exalted the humble.
 He has filled the hungry with good things
 and sent the rich away with empty hands.
 He has helped his servant Israel
 and remembered to be merciful.
 For he made this promise to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and his children forever.

(Luke 1:46–55 NLT)

It is the worship by the marginalized that most awakens us all to the coming of the King. It is the joy of those whose shame, whose bleeding, whose degradation has been healed that opens our eyes to his presence. May we as Anabaptists—rich and poor, powerful and marginalized—go to him “outside the camp,” and join him there, identifying with and bringing redemption to the Forgotten People.