

Six Decades in the Making

A Story of Friendship and Ministry Partnership between African-Initiated Churches and North American Mennonites

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In 2019, Mennonites and African-initiated churches (AIC) will celebrate sixty years of building relationships and cultivating partnerships with each other for ministry. The story begins in the late 1950s when Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM) received a letter of invitation to visit a group of African independent, unaffiliated congregations in eastern Nigeria who had heard *The Mennonite Hour*—an MBM internationally transmitted radio broadcast—and were interested in learning more about Mennonites.

MBM workers Ed and Irene Weaver were appointed in 1959 to begin a ministry with these churches and soon discovered scores of other similar churches scattered throughout Nigeria and all along the coast of West Africa in Dahomey (now Benin), Togo, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.

For six decades now, Mennonites have nurtured relationships with, and explored ways to walk alongside, these and other independent African-initiated movements in their faith journey between the ancient traditions of their ancestors and the newer claims of Christ on their lives. The story of these relationships is a most fascinating pilgrimage in partnership, lined with potential land mines and pitfalls, but in the end largely fruitful and mutually rewarding to the many and varied parties involved.

To mark this important milestone, I have joined Jonathan Larson¹⁸ and Thomas Oduro¹⁹ in soliciting and assembling the reflections of two dozen AIC colleagues and over thirty North American Mennonite workers concerning the significance and impact of these long-standing relationships. It is our hope

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that these reflections—along with several additional contributions from various outside observers of African church life in fields of missiology, church history, education, women’s studies, and worship trends—can be published during this celebrative period and made available to persons interested in global church developments.

The following pages represent a beginning sampler of the broader research we are undertaking. For starters, missiologist Wilbert Shenk will provide a historical overview of how Mennonite-AIC relationships took root and expanded in some ten sub-Saharan countries. Several illustrations will then be offered from both AIC and Mennonite perspectives describing how the relationships that emerged over the years were formative in shaping the faith and cultural understandings of the participants. In the last section, Jonathan Larson will relate a “generous insight” from an Afrikaaner scholar that captures well the humble attitude and patient posture required in such initiatives to watch a seed fall into the ground, die, then eventually grow and begin bearing fruit.

Historical highlights on the road to partnership

WILBERT R. SHENK²⁰

In 1959 few people in Europe and North America had heard the term “separatist churches.” Anthropologists had studied the exotic Cargo cults in the South Pacific and the Peyote religion practiced among Native Americans. But mission scholars saw no reason to devote time to the study of nativistic, syncretistic, or other new religious movements reacting to Christianity. Such phenomena was generally not recognized as being of direct relevance to Christian missions. In this brief reflection, I will describe in broad strokes some important steps in the first phase of what was to become an initiative that continues to the present.

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Research Begins

In the 1920s the *International Review of Mission* carried two reports on these movements: “The Prophet Movement in the Congo”²¹ by P. H. J. Lerrigo on Kimbanguism, and from South Africa “The Separatist Church Movement”²² by C. T. Loram. In 1936 Karl Aldén reported on the continuing development of Kimbanguism²³ and raised questions about how to relate to it. The next year, R. H. W. Shepherd surveyed “The Separatist Churches of South Africa.”²⁴ He highlighted the continuing struggle to understand these movements. Twenty years later, J. W. C. Dougall reported on “African Separatist Churches” as a continent-wide phenomenon that called for careful consideration of these movements.²⁵

Wherever these movements cropped up in Africa, they were almost sure to be either ignored or dismissed as exotic and unworthy of serious study. The full extent of these indigenous initiatives and their locations remained largely undocumented. Most missionaries and missiologists failed to appreciate their significance. Fortunately, other scholars—anthropologists, historians, and sociologists—had been researching these new religious phenomena in various parts of the world.²⁶

Bengt Sundkler’s study *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, first published in 1948, was a major step forward. This book included a twenty-one-page appendix: “A List of Native Separatist Churches as on August 1, 1945,” naming 845 churches. Sundkler added a note reporting that in May 1947, after work on the book was completed, another list had been sent to him identifying an additional 123 churches that had not been incorporated in his original list. The *International Review of Missions* reviewed this book.²⁷ But its pathbreaking significance became apparent with the publication of the revised edition in 1961.

21 *International Review of Mission* 11 (1922): 270–77.

22 *International Review of Mission* 15 (1926): 476–82. About the same time, an inquiry was conducted by the Union Government’s Native Churches Enquiry Commission in 1925, and its findings were reported in Allen Lea, *The Native Separatist Church Movement in South Africa* (Cape Town: Juta, 1927).

23 *International Review of Mission* 25 (1936): 347–53.

24 *International Review of Mission* 26:4 (1937): 453–63.

25 *International Review of Mission* 45:3 (1956): 257–66.

26 See Gottfried Oosterwal, *Modern Messianic Movements* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1973), 49–55, which includes extensive notes and references to scholarly writings available by 1970. Most of this scholarship was produced after 1950, primarily by anthropologists and sociologists.

27 See *International Review of Mission* 58, no. 2 (1949): 230–33. Strangely, Efraim Andersson’s *Messianic Popular Movements in the Lower Congo* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1958) went unreviewed. But see Harold W. Fehderau, “Review of *Messianic*

In that version, Sundkler added a substantial new chapter—“Developments, 1945–60”—indicating his own change of stance toward these movements: they were Christ-ward movements, he said, not bridges back to pre-Christian religion.²⁸

Starting Over

When Mennonite missionaries Edwin and Irene Weaver disembarked at Lagos, Nigeria, in November 1959, they had never heard of “independency,”²⁹ as it was then called. Neither did they know their new assignment would put them in one of the “hot spots” of religious innovation in Africa; i.e., southeastern Nigeria. Their sponsoring mission agency was equally unaware of these circumstances.³⁰ But it would quickly become clear to the Weavers that their twenty years of service in India had not prepared them for what they were encountering in Nigeria.³¹

The conflicting messages the Weavers got as they attempted to become acquainted with mission and church leaders in the region intensified their confusion. The missionaries and local leaders of the mission-established churches whom they consulted refused to relate to these “independent” groups. Indeed, relations were fraught with conflict and ill will. Missionaries working in southeastern Nigeria spoke with one voice: “You are not needed here. Find another place to work!” By contrast, the “independent” churches were clamoring for assistance. This was as puzzling as it was discouraging.

After several months of struggle, the Weavers realized they had to “die” to the patterns, methods, and knowledge they had depended on in their previous

Popular Movements in the Lower Congo,” in *Practical Anthropology* 7, no. 6 (Nov.–Dec. 1960): 279–83.

28 The 1961 edition also included a “Special Bibliography” of forty-four items, primarily articles, published between 1902 and 1961 about these movements. Again, Andersson’s book, n7, is not mentioned.

29 Terminology has evolved. “Separatist” could be construed as a pejorative term, implying these churches had broken away from the mission-founded churches, but this was not true for many of these churches. In the 1960s, these movements were referred to as “African Independent Churches” (AIC). Soon some writers began to use “African Indigenous Churches” (AIC). Since the 1990s, the term “African Initiated Churches” (AIC) has gained acceptance.

30 Sketched briefly in my essay, “Go Slow through Uyo,” in *Fullness of Life for All*, eds. I. Daneel, C. Van Engen, and H. Vroom (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2008), 329–40.

31 See Edwin and Irene Weaver, *The Uyo Story* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1970), which gives an account of the Weavers’ experience in finding their way in this new situation.

missionary work. The conventional methods and patterns would only reinforce the status quo and must be resolutely abandoned. Yet it was becoming clear that the situation in which the Weavers were commissioned to work in southeastern Nigeria was a God-given assignment. Lacking a blueprint to follow, they would have to depend on the Spirit to disclose new paths of ministry.

Confirmation of this new approach came when the Weavers providentially encountered Harold W. Turner at a guesthouse in Lagos in 1961. They quickly discovered their mutual interest in these new African religious movements. Turner, a lecturer in Old Testament at Fourah Bay College, Sierra Leone, first encountered this phenomenon on Lumley Beach, Sierra Leone, in 1957. His intrigue with what he observed led to a major research project that focused on one of these groups, the Church of the Lord (Aladura). He was now four years into this study, which would be published in two volumes as *African Independent Church* (1967).

Other initiatives were also under way. The Study Department of the World Council of Churches' Commission on World Mission and Evangelism convened a consultation at Mindolo, Zambia, in 1962. Harold Turner and Edwin Weaver were invited to participate.³² About the same time, a continent-wide research project was being launched by Anglican missionary researcher David B. Barrett, based in Nairobi, Kenya. The results of his macro-study were published in 1968, entitled *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements*.³³ The trigger for this large-scale study was the secession of sixteen thousand members from the Western Kenya Diocese of the Anglican Church in 1957.³⁴

A Strategy Emerges

The Weavers brought a particular gift to this ministry; they were passionate about relating to AICs at the grassroots and devoted their energies to improving training programs for newly literate leaders who wanted to study the Bible. At the same time, they worked to build bridges of understanding and relationship between the older churches and the AICs. Much of the “bad blood” between the various church groups stemmed from mutual ignorance. All were guilty of spreading negative and misleading information about other

³² Weaver was unable to attend but Turner made a substantial contribution based on his extensive research and theoretical and methodological innovations in the study of these phenomena. See conference report published as *African Independent Church Movements*, ed. Victor E. W. Hayward (London: WCC Department of Missionary Studies, 1963).

³³ David B. Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa: An Analysis of Six Thousand Contemporary Religious Movements* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968).

³⁴ Barrett, *Schism and Renewal in Africa*, Preface, xvii.

groups. Bringing people together to *listen* to the other was a necessary first step in fostering constructive relations.

During the period 1963 to 1965, relations began to improve as a result of regular meetings of the Inter-Church Study Group, comprised of leaders of the full spectrum of churches. Here people learned to know one another, nurturing respect and friendship.

In addition, an extensive survey of churches in southeastern Nigeria was conducted in order to learn to know the churches and leaders. A Bible school for leaders with only basic education was established, and scholarships were awarded to individuals with adequate academic background to do theological study at higher levels. But the Nigerian Civil War, 1966–1969, disrupted the work the Weavers had started in Nigeria, and all foreign workers were forced to leave the country.

Nevertheless, Mennonite engagement in Nigeria had one more phase. Harold Turner had listened for several years to the leader of the Church of the Lord (Aladura) dream about establishing a seminary where leaders might be trained. What was lacking was qualified faculty. Turner urged Mennonites to respond to this opportunity. In 1970, B. Charles and Grace Hostetter began a six-year stint assisting the Church of the Lord (Aladura) in establishing its seminary in Lagos, Nigeria. The Theological Education Fund provided financial support for operating costs.

Seed Sown in Central Africa

The largest African-initiated church on the African continent is the fruit of the ministry of Simon Kimbangu. Kimbangu was refused ordination by the Baptist Mission because of his lack of education. Nonetheless, convinced he was called of God to preach and heal, he began his public ministry in 1921. Between March and September of that year, Kimbangu made enormous impact through his ministry of preaching, healing, and deliverance. In September, the Belgian Colonial Government arrested and imprisoned Kimbangu on grounds of inciting civil unrest. He was held in prison until his death in 1951. It served the purposes of the colonial authorities to keep the focus on Kimbangu and The Church of Jesus Christ through Simon Kimbangu as a threat to public order into the 1950s.

Efraim Andersson's *Messianic Popular Movements in the Lower Congo* (1958) helped mitigate this hostility through careful scholarly analysis of these movements, of which Kimbanguism was only one. Harold Fehderau, Mennonite Brethren Bible translator in the Congo, not only wrote an appreciative review

of Andersson's study³⁵ but also later published several articles on Kimbangu and his ministry.³⁶

During the academic year 1962 to 1963, James E. Bertsche, Mennonite missionary with the Congo Inland Mission, wrote a 355-page master's thesis in anthropology at the Graduate School of Northwestern University, entitled, "Kimbanguism: A Separatist Movement." The tenor of Bertsche's conclusion was respectful, insightful, and empathetic. He concluded:

There is in the history and nature of this offspring of the encounter between Christian missions and Bakongo culture much food for thought for the missionary and not a few lessons that he would do well to learn. In view of the fact that the movement has from its earliest days grown and flourished precisely in areas which have been evangelized by both Catholic and Protestant missions, there is the clear implication that while the Bakongo have found the Christian faith, as such, to be meaningful, there has been a failure on the part of Christian missions to effectively penetrate and appreciate the cultural and religious needs of their people and a failure to significantly adapt the Christian message to these same needs. It seems obvious that the Kimbanguist Church today is attempting to do what Christian missions have not done; i.e., to interpret and adapt the Christian faith to the cultural needs and realities of the Congolese people.³⁷

Subsequently, in the substantial article "Kimbanguism: A Challenge to Missionary Statesmanship"³⁸ Bertsche presented the missiological implications of his anthropological study. His sympathies were clearly with the Africans who had struggled to achieve a *contextually appropriate* understanding of the gospel and thus overcome the inadequacies of what the missionaries, in spite of their sincere efforts, had offered.

The efforts of Fehderau and Bertsche did not, however, immediately translate into positive interest on the part of Congolese Mennonites in relating to AICs. Over time, attitudes changed. The process by which Kimbanguists and

35 Andersson, *Messianic Popular Movements*, n7.

36 "Concerning a Culturally Relevant Witness in Congo," *Practical Anthropology* 8, no. 2 (Mar.–Apr. 1961): 71–76; "Enthusiastic Christianity in an African Church, *Ibid.*," 8, no. 6 (Nov.–Dec. 1961): 279–80, 282; "Kimbanguism: Prophetic Christianity in Congo," *Ibid.* 9, no. 4 (July–Aug. 1962): 156–78.

37 James E. Bertsche, "Kimbanguism: A Separatist Movement" (master's thesis, Graduate School of Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, 1963), 340.

38 *Practical Anthropology* 13, no. 1 (Jan.–Feb. 1966): 13–33. We can only conjecture as to why Bertsche made no overt use of his thesis subsequently. Perhaps it was because Kimbanguism remained controversial in the eyes of most Protestants into the 1970s. His study clearly informed his later executive leadership of Congo Inland Mission/Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission.

Mennonites “discovered” each other started in Europe. In 1966 the director of the Belgian Fellowship of Reconciliation contacted David and Wilma Shank, who were then serving in Belgium, and asked them to host two Kimbanguist leaders who were returning to Congo from a meeting of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation in Denmark. The Belgian Protestant Churches declined to receive these pacifist Kimbanguists whom they regarded as “sectarians.” The Shanks helped facilitate further Mennonite contacts that led to the placement of Mennonite Central Committee and Eirene—European service agency—volunteers in Kimbanguist schools and with the church’s experimental farm over a period of years. In 1971 Kuntima Diangienda, senior leader of the church, invited David Shank to attend the Golden Jubilee of the Kimbanguist Church, which drew four hundred thousand people to their holy city, Nkamba, Congo.³⁹

The Vision Spreads in West Africa

Unable to get a visa to enter Nigeria on their return to West Africa in 1969, Ed and Irene Weaver made Accra, Ghana, their base. For the next eight years, the Weavers played a “John the Baptist” role, sharing the vision and passion that had emerged during their short six years in Nigeria with colleagues, first in other West African and then southern Africa countries. Wherever they went, the Weavers planted the seed of a vision of what could happen when Christians of all stripes met together to study the scriptures, listen to one another’s history, and discuss distinctive convictions and theological vision. Everyone must approach the study of the scriptures as learners, they said, open to gaining insight as people share out of their particular experiences.

In West Africa, the Weavers made contact with AICs in Liberia, Ivory Coast, Ghana, and Benin.⁴⁰ In each of these countries, programs emerged. No two programs were alike, but all found their focus in Bible study and training leaders. In Ghana and Benin, multiple AICs joined together in sponsoring and participating in organized Bible study. The Good News College and Seminary in Accra today is the outgrowth of the Good News Training Institute organized in 1970.⁴¹ Ed Weaver met Harry Henry, Protestant leader from Benin, at the All-Africa Conference of Churches in Abidjan in 1969. Ed and Irene then visited Benin in early 1970. Bible-study seminars were held several times

³⁹ David A. Shank, *Mission from the Margins* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2010), 50–51.

⁴⁰ These explorations and program developments up to 1974 are reported in Edwin and Irene Weaver, *From Kuku Hill: Among Indigenous Churches in West Africa* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1975).

⁴¹ From the beginning, various Protestant groups participated in staffing GNTI. The Lutherans provided staff for the institute on a continuing basis.

in the next several years. But a Marxist faction seized control of the country, and for nearly a decade no further contacts were feasible.

In 1983 David and Wilma Shank renewed contact with churches in Benin. The Inter-confessional Protestant Council proposed that a seminar for church leaders be held in December of that year. The success of this seminar resulted in an annual five-day seminar organized around themes selected by the IPCB.

Although the seminars continued as an annual event, the AICs increasingly felt the need for a pastoral training program. Eventually, Benin Bible Institute was established. Mennonite workers Dr. Daniel and Marianne Goldschmidt-Nussbaumer from France and Rod and Lynda Hollinger-Janzen from North America located in Benin. A medical program serving people without access to healthcare was developed, now known as Bethesda Hospital. Rod Hollinger-Janzen taught in the Bible Institute. Some Protestant churches supported this effort to provide theological education for AICs.⁴² The theme running through all of these ministries in Benin was, and still is, *partnership*.⁴³

The initiative in Liberia was cut short by the civil war that started in 1989. Mennonite workers Peter and Betty Hamm and Steve and Dorothy Wiebe-Johnson withdrew as war broke out.

Although Ed Weaver made a preliminary investigation into Ivory Coast in 1969, he was limited by his lack of French. Marlin Miller, director of a Mennonite student center in Paris that served primarily Africans, met Ivoirian students from the Harrist Church who expressed interest in continuing relationship. Subsequently, he visited Ivory Coast several times to get acquainted with the Harrist leadership.

In 1972 Mennonite Board of Missions decided to respond to this opportunity. David and Wilma Shank and James and Jeanette Krabill invested several years in preparatory study in Aberdeen, Scotland, and Paris, France, before moving to Ivory Coast in 1978 in response to the call from the head of the Harrist Church, John Ahui, to “help me water the tree.”⁴⁴ The two couples worked in Bible teaching and leadership training with Harrists for over a decade and continue relationships with Harrist churches as of this writing, in Ivory Coast and Paris, France.

42 Rodney Hollinger-Janzen, “A Biblical Teaching Program by the Interconfessional Protestant Council of Benin with Mennonite Cooperation,” in ed. David A. Shank, *Ministry in Partnership with African Independent Churches* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Board of Missions), 161–70.

43 Nancy Frey and Lynda Hollinger-Janzen, *3-D Gospel in Benin: Beninese Churches Invite Mennonites to Holistic Partnership* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Mission Network, 2015).

44 D. A. Shank, *Ibid.*, 55–82, summarizes these developments.

The Vision Moves South

In 1968 Mennonite program agencies agreed to explore possible opportunities in southern Africa. Veteran Mennonite mission workers in Africa—Donald Jacobs, East Africa, and James Bertsche, Congo—were appointed to lead this effort. Their exploratory trip took place in April 1970 during which they visited Swaziland, Lesotho, Botswana, and Zimbabwe. With full awareness that apartheid had cast a pall over the entire region, the team recommended that Mennonite agencies find ways of serving there nonetheless: “We finish this investigation, analysis, and report with the clear conviction that we must begin to participate in life south of the Zambesi. May God give courage and wisdom . . . infinite patience, and compassion as we roll up our sleeves and take up the challenge for Jesus Christ and His kingdom.”⁴⁵

Specific action recommendations were few. Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) had already placed teachers in Botswana in 1968. In 1971 Eastern Mennonite Missions sent a missionary couple and Mennonite Central Committee sent three teachers to Swaziland. Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission (AIMM) planned to send workers to Lesotho the following year. The question of placing workers in the Republic of South Africa proved perplexing. In view of a meeting planned for the following year, James Juhnke prepared a series of study papers. At the Maseru Consultation April 30–May 1, 1972, Juhnke urged Mennonite agencies to “grasp the nettle” and send people to South Africa.⁴⁶

There were also developments on other fronts. The AIMM executive secretary proposed to his board that “given the vigor of the Swaziland independent churches and the expressed desire of at least one Swazi church leader for a structured training program for independent church leadership in that country, we recommend that someone be invited to visit Swaziland to attempt to determine the receptivity of these leaders to dialogue.”⁴⁷

Eventually, Edwin and Irene Weaver were enlisted to help work out a strategy for Mennonite agencies to work with AICs in southern Africa. Weavers were based in Gabarone, Botswana, from January 1975 to May 1977.⁴⁸ But there was no grand strategic blueprint. The culture of each country was

45 Don Jacobs and James Bertsche, *Southern Africa Study* (N.p., n.d., 1970), Foreword.

46 James Juhnke prepared nine papers for the consultation, reproduced in Vern Preheim, ed., *A Collection of Writings by Mennonites on Southern Africa* (N.p., 1972), 1–53.

47 Jim Bertsche, *CIM/AIMM: A Story of Vision, Commitment and Grace* (Elkhart, IN: AIMM, 1998), 446.

48 Bertsche, *CIM/AIMM*, 469–590, narrates this founding phase and subsequent development.

unique—shaped by its history, ethnic groups, languages, natural resources, economy, and political system.

Through experience, a cluster of guiding principles emerged that have shaped Mennonite response to AICs. These include:

- Mennonite agencies go only where they are invited into a working relationship with AICs.
- Having heard AIC leaders in west, central, and southern Africa call for assistance in equipping their people to understand the Bible more adequately, Mennonites regard their main contribution to be encouraging and enabling study of the scriptures.
- Mennonite workers will focus on equipping church leaders through training appropriate to the background of the leaders and the needs of their churches.
- Workers will facilitate constructive interchurch relations, both among AICs and between AICs and the traditional denominations.
- Mennonite agencies will avoid providing subsidies for capital projects or supporting operating budgets for churches or institutions.
- It is not the goal of Mennonite agencies to establish Mennonite churches alongside AICs. If such churches should emerge, it will be the result of local initiative, not the foreign agency.

Conclusion

The experiences Mennonites have had with African-initiated churches over the past sixty years can be summarized in a general observation: Wherever Mennonites have encountered AICs, they have been received with open hands and warm hearts. AICs have been eager to share out of their experiences and were ready to learn from others. They wanted to be treated with respect as fellow disciples of Jesus Christ. Journeying together has been a mutually enriching experience.

The Mennonite journey with AICs is a journey for which no map was available. Perhaps a better way of describing this experience is to see it as wanderings on uncharted paths. The reflections being compiled are rich in insight into what it means to engage in a multicultural ministry. There have been failures and disappointments but also successes and achievements. Looking back on what has been attempted one is filled with gratitude for the opportunity to be a part of this faith venture.

“Wanderings on Uncharted Paths”

A Few Testimonies on the Journey

The primary objective of this collection of reflections was not to present an exhaustive history of the initiative. Neither was it to recount every activity or project that was undertaken in every location where Mennonites and AICs partnered together. Rather, we were more interested in soliciting materials from both African and North American colleagues that could “cast light on the nature, texture, and significance of the experience.” It was in this way that we described the project to potential contributors, asking them to submit 500- to 700-word essays as “personal accounts of events, experiences, conversations or discoveries arising from the encounter between Mennonites and AICs.”

Many of the reflections in the collection tilt toward highlighting positive rather than negative or challenging features of the relationships that developed. In reality, fostering respectful partnerships across cultural divides is not easy work. The sixty years of relationship-building have seen their fair share of *faux pas*, of misunderstandings, missteps, and miscalculations. That is the nature and risk of venturing down uncharted paths with no clear roadmap to guide the journey.

Dr. Dana L. Robert⁴⁹ is one of the “outside observers” who has followed the Mennonite-AIC encounter over many years. She reminds us in her contribution to this volume of one of the unforeseen outcomes and unanswered questions arising from the partnership relationships described in this collection. She writes:

Even as the Mennonites avoided founding their own churches, Christianity was growing rapidly throughout the continent. In solidarity with their friends and partners, some African Christians wished to be called “Mennonites.” One of the questions raised by this splendid history of faithfulness is at what point does dying to self require giving up the “rights” even to one’s own name? What if one’s friends wish to call themselves Mennonites? And what if the meaning of “Mennonite” changes because it has been adopted by “others”? Perhaps the Mennonite-AIC relationship has changed not only the AICs, but the very definition of what it means to be a Mennonite.

Aware of these realities and many others, we offered contributors open-ended topics from which they could choose in reflecting on their intercultural

⁴⁹ Dr. Robert is the Truman Collins Professor of World Christianity and History of Mission at Boston University School of Theology.

encounters and experiences. Possible themes for their essays included the following:

- personal growth, healing, and transformation
- clearer vision of leadership, of service and its demands
- fresh insight into the Scriptures
- new understanding of tradition, culture, and history
- reworking of theology or spiritual priorities
- vivid awareness of the Holy Spirit’s power and work
- new ministry, worship practices, or customs
- deepened mission calling and discipleship
- discovery of new kinship
- challenges to received wisdom, values, or supposition

Several contributors have submitted two or more essays, so the total number has exceeded fifty to date. These are being arranged in chapters by themes using eight categories of agricultural activity: “tilling,” “sowing,” “germination,” “growth,” “pollination,” “weeding,” “watering,” and “harvesting.” An “Additional Resources” section will accompany the essays, featuring relevant books, articles, media productions, and a few unpublished manuscripts, for people desiring a fuller account of the AIC-Mennonite relationships that have developed over the years.

What follows here, then, is a small sampling of the essays submitted so far. Selections include both men and women, Africans and North Americans, with some attempt to offer geographical diversity in representation.

Testimony #1: “My training is for the purpose of training others”

ESTHER MANYEYO TAWIAH, GHANA

I grew up in the Ghanaian Presbyterian Church but loved the music in the African-initiated churches and would sneak away from the formal liturgy to attend their services. When my parents would find out about this, they were very upset and would beat me. But I was more attracted to AIC worship and eventually left the Presbyterian Church in the early 1970s and joined the Universal Prayer Fellowship.

I joined Good News Training College, now Good News Theological College and Seminary, as a copy typist in the late 1980s. I was a member of the World Evangelism Ministry from 1984 till February 2005. I joined the college from this church. This church at that time was a member of the PAG, Pentecostal Association of Ghana, later CAIC, Council for African Instituted Churches, Ghana. I am now a member of the Immanuel Believers Ministry.

When I went to my first Good News seminar I was fascinated by the way the teachers approached Bible and theology. This was about the same time that

two new teaching couples arrived at Good News: Ed and Lorraine Spruth from the Presbyterian Church and Phil and Julie Bender from the Mennonites.

I was asked by Good News to play a secretarial role at the school. This gave me an opportunity to listen in on some of the discussions, to take minutes, and to prepare handouts for the various professors. Occasionally I would read through the handouts and became more and more interested in what was being presented. When professors would ask me to make 20 copies for their class, I would make 21 and take the extra one home to read on my own. The next day in the office I would ask different professors questions about things I had read though they had no idea where I was coming up with all these questions! Eventually I was encouraged to take the three-year program myself, which I did.

I joined classes in 1989–1992 when the school was still meeting on the beach location. During this time I became very close to Phil and Julie Bender. Philip taught me Old Testament and Julie taught me Shepherding and Counseling. I learned a lot from sitting in their classes, and I have not regretted one bit for being their student. The Benders loved to work with the indigenous churches in Ghana. They honored most of the invitations from these churches such as harvest and thanksgiving services, funerals, and naming ceremonies. I was invited to go with the Benders to do interpretation from English to local languages when they were asked to teach or preach. I speak three Ghanaian languages fluently, and so one of my jobs anytime that there is joint service is to serve as an interpreter.

I was new in the faith and peppered the Benders with all kinds of questions. Some of the names and terms in the Bible are very strange, you know, and I had no idea what they meant. The Benders often invited me into their home for meals, and when they traveled to teaching assignments outside of Accra, they would ask me to house-sit their home. I did this at least a half dozen times. I was so impressed that they would entrust their place to me. That shows you how deep our relationship had become! There was a special bond between the couple and me such that I was able to go to them at any time for clarification if I did not understand what they taught. I enjoyed going out with them because I learned many things that I did not fully understand in the classroom.

Julie and I became like sisters. We sometimes went out shopping and did cooking together—Ghanaian dishes and American cookies. I spent so much time with the Benders. My passion for African indigenous women began in my association with Phil and Julie. I saw that the church I belonged to and other indigenous churches needed to study the Bible more seriously. Julie was often invited to teach church leaders as well as women. So, I have been very much involved with women in such studies for more than ten years. The purpose has been to train women to lead Bible studies in their own congregations.

After my job as a secretarial assistant at Good News and my graduation in 1992, I took a job as the school librarian. Then I was invited to further my

studies at Daystar University in Nairobi, Kenya, 1993–1997. From there, I attended Bethel Seminary in Minneapolis, 1997–2000, and worked in the seminary library. I returned to Good News to teach, lead women’s Bible studies, and work in the library. We have a great collection of books at Good News, around 25,000 volumes, one of the best of any theological seminary in all of Ghana. My desire is to continue on and get my master’s in Library Science. The accrediting agency in Ghana is requiring it.

All I can do is to offer a very big thanks to Phil and Julie Bender and to the Mennonite churches who have assisted Good News College and Seminary in providing the training we need so that we as local leaders can also train others.

Testimony #2: “An offer of prayer”

JIM SHENK, SWAZILAND

It was a simple request that my young Swazi neighbor friend Amos conveyed to me in the wee hours of the morning as I struggled to stay awake in my first all-night church service. “Preacher Mambo is asking if it is OK for him to pray for your wife.”

We had arrived in Swaziland several months earlier. After formal language study in town and periodic visits to this rural community in the center of the country to help the community build our house, we had moved to Gilgal.

Our house was located next to the local Christian Catholic Apostolic Holy Spirit Church in Zion. As a follow-up to the Bible teaching ministry of Harold and Christine Wenger and an earlier contact with Ed and Irene Weaver, the Mennonite team in Swaziland had asked whether this church community would like a couple to live among them. The response was positive with suggestions for our involvement to include developing a water supply, a community garden, and a medical clinic.

A central part of our assignment was to develop a close relationship with this congregation. Our training and philosophical orientation encouraged us to fully immerse ourselves in the local culture and life of this community. So we were prepared to spend many a night in these all-night celebrations filled with preaching, testimonies, choirs, and prayers for healing.

Yet as I watched the dancing, singing, frenzied praying, and sometimes vigorous shaking and poking of persons being prayed for in the center of the congregation, I was not so sure I wanted to subject my wife to this. “Why does Preacher Mambo want to pray for my wife?” I whispered to Amos. Somewhat embarrassed, he replied, “Preacher Mambo thinks she is sick because she doesn’t have any children.”

I remembered one of the first questions our neighbors in Gilgal asked: “Where are your children?” When we said that we did not have children, they

assumed we had not heard them correctly and politely asked with whom we had left our children when we came to Africa. Married three years and no children! It was a concept that was difficult in a society where traditionally a man wanted to make sure a woman was fertile before investing in bride wealth.

It was now clear that the community assumed something was wrong with Donna. What should I say to Amos? The assumption that Donna was sick was so off base, I thought. If I said it was alright to pray for her, how would my wife feel? Agreeing would simply reinforce the local male-dominated patterns. There was no chance to check signals with Donna; she was seated with the women, and I with the men.

Rarely had I been so conflicted. I wanted to fit in, but this didn't seem right. My embarrassment was concealed by the dim light from two pressure paraffin lanterns hanging over our heads, but suddenly I felt quite sweaty under my white robe. I leaned into Amos and whispered in his ear that Donna was not sick. We simply were too busy to have children while in college and wanted to wait until we could be settled in Swaziland, I explained.

Amos nodded with understanding, but I sensed disappointment as he left to deliver my response to Preacher Mambo, who was seated on the platform. I have often wondered about that incident and what my response really said about me. Was I worried about the potential response from my wife or was this really about my need to be in control? Did I want the benefit of proving my manhood rather than giving God all the credit? Might our relationship with this congregation have been enhanced had Preacher Mambo prayed for Donna?

The community was indeed overjoyed when our daughter was born over a year later. Our Swazi mother and pastor's wife, Makeh Fakudze, not surprisingly named her *Lindiwe*—"the long-awaited one."

When Makeh Fakudze and the women of the church asked whether they could perform a traditional "coming-out" ceremony for Lindiwe, we did not know what it would entail, but without hesitation readily agreed!

Testimony #3: "A prophet in the land"

RACHEL HILTY FRIESEN, BOTSWANA

... They shall know that a prophet has been among them.

—Ezekiel 33:33

Memories of the Prophet Mokaleng, founder of the church, was what I was seeking during a year-and-a-half of questioning, listening, recording, as I prepared to write the history of the Spiritual Healing Church in Botswana.

Members of the church who had witnessed the prophet's healing ministry in the 1950s were still around, but they were aging and memories were on the

verge of being lost. And so I traveled around the country, seeking the persons whose stories could fill in the gaps in the emerging picture of a great prophet, Jacob “Mokaleng” Motswaosele.

Five times I traveled to the simple home of Benjamin Moilwa, manager of a construction company in the capital city of Gaborone, and *moruti* (minister, teacher) in the Spiritual Healing Church. Like those of so many others whom I had interviewed, his stories were, frankly, incredible. The matter-of-fact tone of his voice contrasted sharply with the amazing events he was recounting. What was I to make of all this? On one visit, he told me:

I went to Matsiloje [the village where Prophet Mokaleng lived] as a teenager because I had a problem, but the prophet told me to stay. So I stayed with him for ten years. I was one of about ten teenagers who worked for Mokaleng, helping him in the treatment of the sick. I saw many people healed in startling ways—bones straightened, the blind able to see. He did many miracles in front of my own eyes. Mokaleng used a variety of methods—usually prayer, but not always. He sometimes used water, salt, ashes, or mud.

One crippled man was there for three weeks before he was healed. Suddenly one day the prophet told those supporting this man as he entered the church to let go of him. They feared he would fall, but suddenly he could walk, and started to sing happily. I saw such things not once but many, many times.

When interviewees communicated to me what was most important to them, they made themselves vulnerable to being treated with disbelief and skepticism. My North American church life had little experience of dramatic outpourings of the Holy Spirit. In my theological studies, we sought to find argumentative, descriptive words and propositions to express the nature of God. In the AICs, I was learning, the nature of God is communicated in story, mythic language, narrative, and communal memory.

My thoughts strayed from the track of historical scholarship as I listened to Moruti Moilwa’s voice and watched his eyes. I sensed that he was searching his memory for recollections of those events that had changed the course of his life. How many lives, I thought, had been changed as they put their trust in Jesus under the influence of Prophet Mokaleng’s ministry?

While I waited, I searched my own heart as well. Could I open my mind and heart to manifestations of God’s power and grace that seemed so foreign to my own experience? At the conclusion of the interview, I knew that I, also, was being changed. I turned to Mr. Moilwa. “Moruti, you have been blessed to witness these things.”

And so it went, as I soaked in the memories told to me by others who had been part of the story—Moruti Wright, Archbishop Israel Motswaosele, Moruti Molake, Mrs. Marumo, and many more. All of these stories came together, along with other research, into a printed history, *Ditso tsa Spiritual Healing Church mo Botswana*, for the use of the congregations and members of the church. Published in 1992 under the auspices of Mennonite Ministries in Botswana, the written account marked a quarter century of fruitful relationships between Mennonites and the Spiritual Healing Church in Botswana.

Testimony #4: “We are deepening the river of God’s people in Africa”

ALPHONSE GODONOU, BENIN

We can do nothing but give glory to God for what has happened at the Benin Bible Institute (BBI) in the past few years. What began as a small seed has grown into an enormous tree. The prophet Hosea in Old Testament times said that the destruction of God’s people will come through lack of knowledge.

It has often been said that the spirituality and biblical knowledge of the rapidly growing church in Africa is like a river “one mile wide and one inch deep.” That was true in Benin for many years and would still be true without the important ministry of the Benin Bible Institute, which grew up as a collaborative effort between the Mennonites and the church leaders of the many denominations here in Benin.

The most important thing that Mennonites did nearly four decades ago was refuse to found their own church and instead give themselves to training the hundreds of church leaders who already existed here in Benin, but with virtually no biblical formation. Today we see the result of that incredible insight of a commitment to building up the people of God across denominational boundaries.

I, myself, am a fruit of that important initiative, first as a student in the very first graduating class at BBI, and now for many years as the director of the Systematic Bible Training Program. Who would have ever believed that such a thing would happen? I can only thank God for his blessings in giving me the opportunity to serve the church in this important way. We are deepening the river of God’s people in Africa for many generations to come!

In Conclusion: A Compelling Gospel Image from Jesus

The working title we are using for this collection of essays is *“Unless a Grain of Wheat . . .”: A Story of Friendship between African-Initiated Churches and North American Mennonites*. Chapter titles, as already mentioned, will build on and

group around the agricultural themes of "tilling," "sowing," "harvesting," and so on to describe the wide range of experiences and relationships that have developed between Mennonites and AICs over the past sixty years.

The inspiration for this particular title and imagery came to us from Jonathan Larson, one of the editors of the collection, when he recounted for us the following story:

A distinguished Afrikaaner theologian with wire-rimmed glasses and a shock of white hair sat facing me at supper the first night of a conference on partnership with African-initiated churches. The gates of Nelson Mandela's prison had yet to swing open, and Mennonites were still *personae non gratae* in apartheid South Africa. Little wonder then that I should be studied so warily as a suspect guest.

When table chatter finally eased, the question came. Clearing his throat, the professor put it to me, "So, you're a Mennonite?" as though addressing some endangered species. I groped for a coherent response, mumbling something about "trying my best to be one."

And then the conversation took a wholly unexpected turn. "I have traveled all over southern Africa," he said, "and heard speak often of Mennonite workers, though never had the pleasure of actually meeting one. What's more, though you seem to have left footprints everywhere, I have yet to see any signboard, church, or institutional name with the label 'Mennonite' attached to it. It's extraordinary. You must be the last people on earth who still believe the saying of Jesus, 'Unless a grain of wheat fall in the ground and die, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.'"

I remember thinking at the time that I wished his generous thought were entirely true of me or my colleagues. But his striking observation threw a shaft of light onto something quite rare in the practice of mission, or even church history: self-giving to kingdom pursuits without regard for sectarian credit or advantage. And that from this point of departure, there flowed a bracing freedom.

And what is more, the willingness to run those risks of loss was matched by the indigenous faith communities Mennonites encountered in various corners of Africa. In almost every case, individuals of prophetic bent and leaders within these movements faced off the misgivings of the time, the suspicions about more Western aggrandizement, to say that trustworthy friends had been sent by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit with whom honest partnership was yet possible. They, too, cast some seed in the ground in faith that something exquisite and bountiful might result.

The generous insight of an Afrikaaner scholar, with that compelling gospel phrase of Jesus, aptly catches what lies at the heart of the stories we are

collecting from both North American Mennonites and the African-initiated churches.

“Unless a grain of wheat fall in the ground and die . . .”

In Africa today, changes are happening so rapidly that it is difficult, nearly impossible, to keep up. What this means for the future of the church on the continent is not certain. But what is clear is that new and fresh global partnership relationships will be required. It would be our hope that the lessons of earlier endeavors might contribute to correcting past mistakes and strengthening the body of Christ as it grows, both on African soil and—with increased assistance from African sisters and brothers—in the parched and thirsty land we call North America.