

Book Reviews

Walter Sawatsky, *Going Global with God as Mennonites for the 21st Century*, Bethel College, North Newton, KS, 2017. 110 pp. \$8.00. ISBN-10: 1-889239-12-7.

It is a privilege to review Walter Sawatsky's lecture series *Going Global with God as Mennonites for the 21st Century*. As an Indigenous Woman and a Mennonite, my history and experience of North American settlement runs counter to the dominant Mennonite narrative. It is refreshing to experience the invitation Sawatsky makes for inclusion beyond tradition and national boundary; for a shared, lived theology; for an anti-war movement of truth tellers; for worship where we pray for each other across tradition and national boundary. In the sermon "The Nevertheless of Love," which introduces the four lectures that follow, Sawatsky lays out the probing questions that arise for him in stretching toward a global understanding of church. In the sermon, he questions the exclusivity of the Mennonite identity, grounding himself in a fuller Mennonite story that includes participation in wrongdoing as well as the two-thousand-year history of Christendom.

Sawatsky's scope in this series is ambitious; he seeks to reframe the Mennonite ethos in the global imagination beyond one thread among "reformation traditions," questioning its exclusivity and what he terms a trendy shift toward "Anabaptism," and asking for the Mennonite church to abandon the hubris of a "third way" narrative in favor of accepting the entire Christian story. He presents a historical framework that includes the entire church—from its origins described in the book of Acts, through the genesis of the Catholic church and the narrative of reformation—and insists that the global church must include the entire body of Christ, "warts and all" (5).

Sawatsky presents the Russian Mennonite experience, with specific emphasis on Russian congregations during the cold war, as a theological paradigm for the Mennonite global church. He cautions that Harold Bender's *Anabaptist Vision* and Stuart Murray's *The Naked Anabaptist*—in their call to return to original Christianity or even original reform—present theology out of context, unrooted in time and place, building mythos in past martyrs whose consistency may or may not have been lived out in reality. As a historian, Sawatsky calls for a finer-tuned narrative that is informed by historical context, rejecting easy generalities. He identifies adherence to tradition; a dynamic, flexible spiritual tradition; an evolving peace theology; persistent contextual, creative mission; and a theology of church, state, and society that is responsive to changing conditions as the traits he envisions for a global Mennonite church. Sawatsky emphasizes the brilliance in the Russian Mennonites' ability to adapt creatively to an ever-changing world. Rather than

focusing on the exclusivity of the Mennonite tradition or the habitual desire to return to the essence of the differentness of the Mennonite tradition from the rest of Christianity, he emphasizes flexibility and adaptability.

Sawatsky critiques the position of duality where the pure early church—a church toward which the narrative of an Anabaptist remnant strives—is distinct from a “religion of empire,” i.e., the Christianity mainstreamed by Constantine. He finds this duality inherently destructive, as it villainizes other Christian communities, with whom we must find commonalities and unity of purpose. What good comes from finding the majority of the Christian story apostate, he asks, arguing that there has never been a pure church; discord among Christians was present even at the last supper. Sawatsky calls the church to common purpose rather than focusing on division—to *Missio Ecclesia*, the mission of the church, including theologizing together across boundaries, learning about each other and our diverse experiences across traditions, and praying for each other.

Opening the conception of mission to include migration and urbanization, Sawatsky provides a fairly detailed account of Mennonite movement across Europe in the sixteenth century and beyond, including migration to North America. He notes the evolution from an assumption that Mennonite cultural heritage, such as language and separation, was vital to the protection of the faith, to an understanding that inclusion based on ethnic traits and a shared historical narrative excludes people of color. In fact, Sawatsky explains, the body of the Mennonite church is now so diverse that a historical narrative cannot stand as the basis for unity. This analysis is fairly ironic given the emphasis on the European Mennonite story that comprises most of these lectures. Sawatsky goes on to say that if ethnicity and shared history do not provide solid bases for unity, theology does not offer a solid basis, either. He argues, “a relationship does not necessarily presuppose a common theology, but rather a narrative of establishing and sustaining relationships” (80). He criticizes Mennonite Church USA’s call for obedience to the “founding documents,” which he cites as another hollow and ineffective basis for unity, and he urges church leaders to examine past corporate sins, citing Paul’s instructions to the Corinthians to affirm “*semper reformanda*” for the church.

Sawatsky compares German Mennonites’ surrender to Nazi race theories during the third Reich to American Mennonites’ silence about nuclear armament. How can we be proud of global mission, he asks, if we (in the United States) are not willing to speak out about the violence perpetuated by our government? He calls for a movement toward shalom, holding up a slogan coined by the World Council of Churches (WCC) at the most recent General Assembly in Busan, South Korea: “A pilgrimage on the way to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation” (85).

The use of this phrase made me smile wryly—I was present in Busan when this slogan was adopted, with more than seventy Indigenous leaders from around the

globe. We had petitioned the WCC to make an institutional commitment to their own statements repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery, a legal and policy structure perpetuated by the church for centuries that has resulted in the genocide and ongoing discrimination against Indigenous Peoples by governments everywhere, including the United States. The historic peace churches, a constituency group within the WCC that includes Mennonites, rejected our request for their support in our petition. Their spokesman stated to me in a public meeting, “We cannot allow ourselves to be distracted, or our peace witness to be watered down, by focusing on one issue.” The slogan thus rings hollow, as does a call to save souls in the context of profound suffering among the Peoples of earth and creation itself.

Sawatsky introduces the Christian conviction that God is a missionary God, as captured in the Latin phrase *Missio Dei*. He returns to this supposition, claiming that God’s mission is to save the three billion non-Christians in the world, arguing passionately that we must move our thinking and praying to avoid being a hindrance to God’s mission. I advocate for a larger vision of mission than this—one that includes the whole of creation. Like Sawatsky, I believe we must acknowledge the whole history of the Christian Church, including the ill-gotten wealth and power controlled by a tiny minority that includes North Americans and enslaves the vast majority of humanity. This also includes Mennonites, who directly benefit—in land and wealth—from the dispossession of my people. The retirement funds of many churches, including Mennonite Church USA, are fueled by an extractive industry that enslaves vulnerable people around the globe.

Those of us who live in the West by the accident of our birth have the opportunity to make amends, not just symbolically but actually. Beyond Sawatsky’s call to positions of “justified but still a sinner” and “always reforming,” we Western Mennonites can acknowledge that we are on the hook to live justly. As the beneficiaries of injustice, we must resolve to dismantle the systems that perpetuate it. These systems include the whole economic development apparatus that result in decades of debt for developing nations and in displacement, disability, and death for the peoples of indebted nations and especially for vulnerable communities.

It is difficult for me to invest in an analysis of “reformation traditions” when my people are suffering at the hands of the mighty who remove us from our homes and lifeways, separate our families, militarize our communities and steal our traditional lands, and extract fossil fuels, minerals, timber, and other wealth, leaving behind environmental destruction that pollutes our bodies and those of our descendants for dozens of generations. If Christendom’s vision of God’s mission for the world is to convert three billion non-Christians to Christianity, as Sawatsky claims (44), then the Christian Church is just as apostate as he denies that it is. If the focus of mission is not seeking justice in solidarity with the vulnerable, then I have no energy for it.

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Emma Battell Lowman and Adam J. Barker, *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada*, Fernwood, Nova Scotia and Winnipeg, Manitoba, October, 2015. 158 pp. \$18.99. ISBN: 978-1-55266-778-1.

I live on a berry farm in the Fraser Valley in British Columbia. I recall going for a walk around the property a few years ago and standing at one end, looking out over the fields and thinking, “I own this,” and then reflecting on what it must have been like before we moved there. Before we planted strawberries and blueberries. Before the previous owners cleared all the trees and turned it into a gravel pit, extracting hundreds and hundreds of truckloads worth of gravel from the land and then leveling it out again. Before that, when it was forest with a stream flowing through the middle of it, where no stream exists now. And I wondered what it would have been like a hundred or five hundred or a thousand years before.

And then I wondered who had lived or traveled through this area and what would it have been like to be in this place then. And I thought about the Indigenous people who lived and hunted and gathered on the land I now own. And then I reflected on what it means for me today to “own” this land—land that I have helped cultivate and take care of and make “productive.”

This was during the same time that a friend of mine was working for our denomination helping us think about how we might engage in the work of reconciliation with Indigenous neighbors. As he talked about being an Indigenous person, as he tried to help us gain understandings of Indigenous culture and worldview, and as he prepared us for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was coming to Vancouver, I found myself reflecting on “my land,” and I didn’t quite know what to do with that. How did we get here? Who “owned” it before us, or the others before them whose names had been registered in the land title office?

Lowman and Barker’s book has much to say about land, about our relationships to the land, and about folks like me. People whose parents came to Canada to make a new life, who came as refugees and “displaced persons” looking for a new home and some land they could call their own. It also has much to say about how things have gone terribly wrong in Canada and the ways in which we have come to own our land and to settle on it as if it had always been ours.

I’ve appreciated reading this book and being challenged by what the authors have to say about those of us who have settled here. They have helped me unpack the