
Book Reviews

Review Essay

Thomas A. Oduro, Jonathan P. Larson, and James R. Krabill, eds.,
Unless a Grain of Wheat: A Story of Friendship between African Independent Churches and North American Mennonites, Langham Global Library, Carlisle, Cumbria, 2021. 240 pp. \$7.95. ISBN: 978-1-83973-271-3.

On a visit to Botswana as a young Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) administrator, I received the laying on of hands. This blessing, offered only once in my more than forty years of service in church-related leadership roles, was completely unexpected yet has resonated in my memory ever since. Hosts of Mennonite Mission in Botswana had chosen my attendance at this Sunday service to share a first-hand experience of their participation with one of the African Independent Churches (AICs) with whom they were involved.

I don't know if my Mennonite hosts were expecting what happened; I certainly was not. My work had made me comfortable with being called on to lead public prayer, or even to preach on short notice. But to be called forward by the bishop and offered such a benediction both shocked and amazed me. The memory is brief and fragmentary but suffused with sunlight; I cannot forget a sensation of electric peace—so different from the frenetic pace of a normal MCC administrative visit.

That event rushed to center-front as I read Oduro, Larson, and Krabill's collection of reflections and experiences from over sixty years of interaction between leaders and members of AICs and North-American-appointed Mennonite mission and service workers. The editors, veterans of this interaction, have organized the chapters in the collection with themes drawn from the title: tilling, sowing, germination, growth, pollination, weeding, watering, and harvesting. Their introduction asserts that this book is "not an exhaustive history" (2), although it is helpfully foregrounded with a historical overview by premier Mennonite missiologist Wilbert Shenk (d. 2021), under whose leadership important parts of this story emerged (9–21).

While I could not always discern why a particular episode appeared in a particular chapter, I valued the chance to observe the editors working with the diversity of anecdotes and reflections from thirty AIC colleagues and more than forty North American workers. The cover blurb asserts that *Grain of Wheat* is "an excellent resource for lovers of story," an idea that had also come to me as

I read, imagining preachers and teachers drawing out accounts to share with their audiences.

Inserted among these personal, often poetic, stories are observations of “professional” missiologists, including Dana Robert (Boston University), Miriam Adeney (Seattle Pacific University), Darrell Whiteman (Asbury Theological Seminary, emeritus) and Jehu Hanciles (Candler School of Theology). The insights of Nicta Lubaale, general secretary of the Organization of African Instituted Churches, provide a formal, continent-wide African consideration of the stories (186–89).

North American storytellers describe struggling to stay awake during long (often overnight) services, encountering strange prayer and healing practices, and experiencing an overwhelming sense of community in the midst of difference. Jon Rudy recounts waking in pain while on a home stay in Swaziland:

In my agony that night on the homestead, my Western logic screamed, “Get me to a doctor!” Yet *Babeb* continued his prayers for my healing. . . .

As I pondered *Babeb*’s insistence on prayer before the doctor visit, I was reminded that my Swazi father caught sight of things I could not see. (81)

More formal activities aroused similar reflections. Rachel Hilty Friesen, who wrote a history of the Spiritual Healing Church, describes her interviews with one elderly leader:

My thoughts strayed from the track of historical scholarship. . . .

. . . Could I open my mind and heart to manifestations of God’s power and grace which seemed so foreign to my own experience? (91)

AIC women and men from Benin, Botswana, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, and Swaziland recount a variety of ways that they learned about and from North Americans. Hortense Assah of Benin described her leadership in *Le groupe des handicapés* after meeting and being helped with her wheelchair by Lynda and Rod Hollinger-Janzen (74–75). Motibe, a local Bible teacher in Botswana, remarked as he concluded a visit with the family of B. Harry Dyck, “This was the first time that I have ever received a drink in a white man’s real teacup” (56).

One of the book’s “outside observers,” Casely Essamuah, secretary of the Global Christian Forum, comments: “In an increasingly polarized world, missionary activities from the Western world are usually either uncritically celebrated or unfairly vilified” (148). Essamuah’s observation suggests that experiences portrayed in *Grain of Wheat* avoid either extreme.

As one who hears more often from those who question mission enterprises as “postcolonial,” I wondered at times whether the accounts were too simplistic, or protective of the North American perspective on AIC life and witness. The

collection, however, does include critique. Bruce Yoder describes “two Nigeria stories,” one of which concerns North American agencies that interpreted Nigerian churches as part of the AIC movement—while Nigerians were deeply dissatisfied that Northerners dismissed their desire to be Mennonites (136–38). Enole Ditsheko, a younger Motswana¹ leader in the Spiritual Healing Church, indicts North American Mennonites for their unwillingness to involve themselves in the “internal politics” of AICs. As a result, he observes,

These older folks have now died with whatever skills they acquired. . .
[and the] sad reality of not investing in youthful people. (140)

Grain of Wheat does not outline what, if any, commitment North American Mennonite agencies have in the twenty-first century to friendships like those described in its pages. The book’s editors, as am I, are at the later stages of our mission-related careers. Still, it was enlivening to read Jonathan Larson’s description of his ordination, which took place at the end of his Mennonite assignment in Botswana at the request of leaders from “The Head Mountain of God Holy Apostolic Church in Zion, The Spiritual Healing Church, The Holy Banner Mission Church of Africa, The Eleven Apostles Healing Spirit Church, and the St. Michael’s Apostolic Church.” Consultation had taken place with North American administrators, who approved this unusual credentialing. Yet later, “the paperwork formally documenting this event . . . disappeared from the archives of the Mennonite Church USA” (176–78).

Could it be that the long-ago Botswana blessing I received was all the credentialing I needed for my life’s work? If so, what might that mean for the witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ—in Africa, in North America, and elsewhere, who are now in the thick of the task?

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¹ Motswana (plural Batswana) is the name for a person from Botswana.