
Challenges for the Missional Task from a Theological Education Approach

A Perspective from Latin America

César Moya

The missional task and theological education are closely related; there is no mission without education and no education without mission. What I mean by this is that, on the one hand, the missional task implies theological education—either formally or informally—through methods appropriate to the culture and context in which the education takes place. On the other hand, the purpose of imparted theological education is to carry out the mission.

My wife, Patricia, and I reached this affirmation through our experiences of carrying out mission in Latin American contexts of violence and exclusion. Our missional work has been connected not only with missionary organizations or the local church but also with educational institutions of other organizations, including theological teaching at the popular and university level. In addition, we were involved in church planting in Colombia through Mennonite Church Colombia (IMCOL—Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Colombia) (1986–1999), and in Ecuador through Mennonite Mission Network in partnership with Central Plains Mennonite Conference (CPMC) and IMCOL (2000–2014).

This article aims to identify the challenges of the missional task as viewed through the lens of our personal experience in theological education in different contexts of Latin America and the United States. To this end, we will highlight the most relevant aspects of our experiences throughout four decades, taking into

César Moya earned a PhD in theology from the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands. He is coordinator of the Latin American Network of Anabaptist Studies (RELEA—Red Latinoamericana de Estudios Anabautistas), and writes for the Latin American Biblical Interpretation Journal (RIBLA—Revista de Interpretación Bíblica Latinoamericana). He served with Mennonite Mission Network in Ecuador between 2000 and 2014 and is the author of several books and articles related to the topics of biblical hermeneutics, reconciliation, and peace. He is currently professor of bible and theology and a researcher at the Reformed University in Barranquilla, Colombia.

account the social and political conjunctures of each era as well as the authors and people—both from Latin America and North America—who influenced our thinking and inspired us in doing mission.

Our journey has led us to rethink some aspects of mission, and we hope this writing will (1) contribute to understanding the significance of the *Missio Dei* in relation to theological education, (2) help as a guide for those who are serving or wish to serve in contexts of exclusion and marginalization, and (3) generate dialogue between Anabaptist theology and other theologies in each missional context.

Our Missional Journey

Our first missionary experience dates to the early 1980s in my hometown of Ibagué, Colombia, during the fervor of Liberation Theology, the end of several dictatorships in Latin America, the political enthusiasm for “perestroika,” the war between Iran and Iraq, the emergence of the so-called Integral Mission,¹ and the confrontation between Christianity and communism. Movements such as the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), in which I participated as a university student, lived through these confrontations. As a Christian missionary movement, the IFES espoused three key principles: evangelize, edify, and send, which included placing “converted” youth in a church—evangelical or Catholic. Theologically, the movement took its cues from René Padilla and the Latin American Theological Fraternity, which endorsed (among others) Juan Mackay’s *El Otro Cristo Español*,² a book that inspired me. This first experience awakened a missionary spirit in both my wife and me.

Then, in the mid-1980s, the Mennonite Church of Ibagué (Colombia), our mother church, received a vision of expanding the Anabaptist testimony to the city of Armenia and invited Patricia and me to go as “workers.” We were to devote part of our time to church planting and working in our respective professions, even though our theological training was rudimentary at that point. During that time, we approached Anabaptist theology more intentionally, especially through a seminar on John Driver’s book *Contra corriente*.³

The ’90s began with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the so-called Cold War, privatizations in Latin America, and the end of the armed conflict in

1 C. René Padilla, *Misión Integral: Ensayos sobre el Reino y la Iglesia* (Grand Rapids-Buenos Aires: New Creation and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). See also C. René Padilla and Tetsunao Yamamoru, eds., *Misión Integral y Pobreza: El testimonio evangélico hacia el tercer milenio; Palabra, espíritu y misión* (Buenos Aires: Kairós, 2001).

2 Juan A. Mackay, *El otro Cristo español: Un estudio de la historia espiritual de España y América Latina*, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: La Aurora, 1988).

3 Juan Driver, *Contra Corriente: Ensayo sobre Eclesiología Radical* (Ciudad de Guatemala/Bogotá: CLARA-SEMILLA, 1998).

El Salvador and Guatemala. During that time, I finished my theological studies at the Mennonite Biblical Seminary of Colombia (SBMC—Seminario Bíblico Menonita de Colombia) and entered the Conflict Transformation Program that Justapaz carried out with Eastern Mennonite University (Harrisonburg, VA), complemented by studies in Conflict Resolution with the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Bogotá). That training included practical actions such as attending military parades to collect signatures in support of conscientious objection; participating in marches for human rights; joining public actions in front of the cathedral of Bogotá in response to the murder of the Alvarado spouses,⁴ who were human rights defenders; and providing pastoral support to communities displaced by violence. In addition, we experienced death threats firsthand against those who led the church; in one of our visits to the Urabá region of Antioquia, we came close to losing our lives at the hands of an armed group.

These experiences along with studies at SBMC drove me to search for connections between Anabaptism and Latin American Liberation Theology. I was especially impacted by the theological teachings of Robert J. Suderman, a Commission for Overseas Mission (COM) worker who served as rector and professor of the SBMC, and Elsa Tamez, one of the most renowned Latin American theologians and professor at the Latin American Biblical University (UBL), San Jose, Costa Rica. Their teachings showed not only the importance of nonviolence but also how to actively confront the violent reality of the context.

But it was the course on “History and Theology of the Radical Reformation” taught by Enrique Dueck, a retired missionary, that awakened a spirit of dissatisfaction within me about the system of injustice and violence in our context as well as the traditional way of being a church. My thinking expanded further through two additional sources: (1) the “Anabaptism and Liberation Theology” course taught jointly by Peter Stucky—Executive Secretary for IMCOL at that time—and the Carmelite priest Hugo Canavan, and (2) a publication with the same name as the course, authored by LaVerne Rutschman, who had served as a COM missionary at SBL and IMCOL.⁵ These sources helped me see the relationships between sixteenth-century Anabaptism, with its emphasis on nonviolence, and Latin American Liberation Theology, with its emphasis on the option for the poor. At the same time they helped me understand the meaning of costly discipleship.

Anabaptist missionaries and other Latin American theologians also played a significant role in our peace training. They influenced our thinking through

⁴ See Daniel Osorio, “En el crimen de Mario Calderón y Elsa Alvarado aún no se conoce a los responsables,” *El Espectador*, May 19, 2022, <https://www.elespectador.com/judicial/en-el-crimen-de-mario-calderon-y-elsa-alvarado-aun-no-se-conocen-los-responsables/>.

⁵ LaVerne A. Rutschman, *Anabautismo Radical y Teología Latinoamericana de la Liberación* (San José: SEBILA, 1982).

theological education and service while modeling practices of active nonviolence, conscientious objection to military service, anti-militarism, and community life and work for the most vulnerable in our society. At the same time they facilitated the dialogue between Anabaptism and the Latin American reality. Their influence prepared me for the task I would face later in life.

At the beginning of 2000, Patricia and I received an invitation from the Mennonite Board of Missions (later Mennonite Mission Network, or MMN), in partnership with Iowa-Nebraska Conference (later Central Plains Mennonite Conference, or CPMC) and IMCOL, to support the biblical and theological training of the indigenous evangelical churches⁶ located in the province of Chimborazo, through the Indigenous Center for Theological Studies (CIET—Centro Integral de Estudios Teológicos).⁷ The Center functioned as a branch of UBL in Ecuador and was strongly influenced by Liberation Theology. The assignment came amid political upheaval and revolts led by social and indigenous movements in the wake of dollarization replacing the Sucre (the national currency), a bank freeze that caused exaggerated inflation, and the loss of savings for hundreds of thousands of Ecuadorians.

A few months after arriving in Ecuador with our three children, we began expanding our theological teaching beyond the indigenous churches—in workshops at the Centro Integral de la Familia (CIF), Bible courses at the Divine Word Bible Center (Catholic), and workshops at the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI—Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias). In addition, the Christian University, which leaned evangelical, invited us to be part of the staff of the Licentiate program in Religious Sciences and Theology. There we taught courses such as “Conflict Analysis and Transformation,” “Political Theology,” and a seminar in ethics for all levels.

At that time of our journey, we found ourselves positioned in our educational work between two theological tendencies: liberationist and evangelical. The former emphasized commitment to and preferential option for the poor, which we came to understand experientially through being part of the struggles of the communities. The latter emphasized moral issues. Of course, both tendencies affected exegesis and interpretation of the Bible. These differing approaches not only showed us the importance of sharing our Anabaptist theological perspective⁸

6 See César Moya, “Mennonites and Theological Education among Indigenous Churches in Ecuador: A Perspective from the Last Two Decades,” *Anabaptist Witness* 1, no. 1 (October 2014): 121–34.

7 Julián Guamán and Peter Wigginton wrote a summary of the work developed by the partnership, titled “The Wind Blows Where It Wants: 30 Years of Walking in the Anabaptist Faith in Ecuador,” *Missio Dei*, no. 30 (2021).

8 Our Anabaptist theological perspective has been significantly influenced by the writings and teachings of John Howard Yoder, John Driver, and John Paul Lederach,

but also helped us see other realities. This confirmed for us the importance of dialogue between the Anabaptist tradition inherited from the North and the Latin American reality of violence and exclusion.

Our theological teaching in a variety of spaces aroused interest in the Anabaptist perspective, especially among those who sought a connection between theology and their individual realities as well as between theology and the social and political realities of the country. After Patricia and I had served in Ecuador for one year, the first Mennonite Church in Quito was planted. This led to the development of several important projects, among them the care of refugees, later supported by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).

While serving in these missionary roles, Patricia and I received further theological training, with each of us completing a master's degree in theology at UBL. My master's thesis, "Social Reconciliation in Latin America,"⁹ led me to learn about the theological thought of Juan (John) Driver and John Howard Yoder, and the experience of John Paul Lederach in the field of transformation of social conflicts. The three of them served as references for the Mennonite churches in Latin America. In my thesis I find relationship between their thoughts and the contents of the truth and reconciliation commissions of several countries.

Thanks to the support of Linda Shelly, MMN Latin American director, our service with MMN also included short periods of teaching and visiting in other countries and institutions:

- In 2002 we taught at UBL in Costa Rica.
- In 2003 and 2004 we taught a course in Venezuela titled "Conflict Analysis and Transformation" with Pentecostal and Mennonite churches at the time of the so-called Bolivarian revolution.¹⁰ In both Costa Rica and Venezuela, some institutions expressed an open attitude toward Liberation Theology and an affinity with Anabaptist theology.
- Between 2005 and 2006 we took the opportunity to visit more than thirty-five of the congregations that made up the CPMC, getting to know them and learn from their tradition.
- In 2008, among the Mennonite churches in Paraguay, we taught a course

among others. Thus, it is important to recognize that our perspective may be in tension with other Anabaptist perspectives that are also engaged in the *Missio Dei*.

⁹ The thesis led to two publications: César Moya, *Conflicto, liberación y reconciliación: Ética teológica para la reconciliación de las víctimas en América Latina* (Quito: CLAI, 2010); and César Moya, *Verdad y ética de la paz: Un diálogo necesario para posibles acuerdos en sociedades divididas* (Quito: CLAI, 2014).

¹⁰ Elisabeth Claus, "La Revolución de Hugo Chávez," *La Vanguardia*, Febrero 1, 2019, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/vida/junior-report/20190201/4696511795/venezuela-revolucion-bolivariana-hugo-chavez-simon-bolivar.html>.

titled “Gender Equity,” based on the book *Mujeres y obispado*¹¹ that I had just published. The book admittedly caused discomfort in some who took the course.

- In 2009 we taught “History and Theology of Radical Reformation” to the Mennonite churches in Chile, which, at the time, were discerning whether to join Mennonite World Conference (MWC).
- Between 2009 and 2010 we taught “Violence and Mission of the church” with the South American Ministerial Seminary (SEMISUD—Seminario Sudamericano). During that period, I was invited to be one of the writers of the *Journal of Latin American Biblical Interpretation* (RIBLA).
- Between 2010 and 2011 we served as visiting scholars at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS). There, during the fall of 2010, Patricia and I joined Professor Walter Sawatsky in teaching the master’s level course “Transformation of Latin American Christianity.” I also gave a few lectures in Professor Gayle Gerber Koontz’s Anabaptist theology courses as well as in several peace colloquiums. At the same time, I was doing my doctoral dissertation¹² and the AMBS faculty became my academic community of reference. This stay allowed us to communicate our theological thought from the South to Mennonite scholars in the North. The resulting North-South exchange generated very good dialogue that helped identify complements between Anabaptism and Latin American theology and, at the same time, to carry out the missional task from the South to the North.

Meanwhile, the coming to power of President Rafael Correa in Ecuador improved the living conditions of many Ecuadorians. This gave us some hope because the president’s vision was very close to the connection we saw between Anabaptism and Liberation Theology. At the same time, the relations we had established over the years with CLAI and the Evangelical Indigenous Peoples of Ecuador (FEINE—Federación de Iglesias Indígenas Evangélicas de Ecuador) led to an agreement with MMN to publish *Booklets of Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Formation*. For this project, indigenous people defined the content and dynamics for teaching based on the needs of their community. The booklets reflected the transversal topics of the indigenous worldview, interweaving with one another: gender, justice and peace, inclusion, social and political participa-

11 César Moya, *Mujeres y obispado: A propósito de Primera de Timoteo* (Quito: CLAI, 2008).

12 See César Moya, “Hacia una Hermenéutica Anabautista Latinoamericana” (PhD dissertation, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2019). There I delved into the Anabaptist Christology of John Howard Yoder and the Liberation Theology Christology of the Jesuit priest Jon Sobrino.

tion, Bible, and theology from a Latin American perspective.¹³ The booklets also helped to integrate the Anabaptist, liberationist, and evangelical perspectives of MMN, CLAI, and the indigenous people of FEINE. And, in the process, the indigenous people became visible as subjects of theology.

Like the heart, which both pumps and receives blood, so was our missional experience in relation to theological education: as we taught, we also learned. And the result of this walk in theological teaching was concretized in the creation of the Latin American Network of Anabaptist Studies (RELEA—Red Latinoamericana de Estudios Anabautistas). Together with other leaders of the Mennonite churches of Latin America, we helped bring into being this new network using the framework of the Latin American Anabaptist Consultation held in Guatemala City in February 2014. RELEA's main objective is to publish once-a-year reflections from the Anabaptist perspective from Latin America.¹⁴

In 2014 we returned to Colombia, during which time dialogue between the government and the guerrilla group FARC-EP began and would later end with the signing of the Peace Agreement.¹⁵ In this context, we taught several courses at the SBMC and visited several territories of the country, supporting reconciliation processes through JUSTAPAZ¹⁶ and using public advocacy as a strategy. Later, the universities became a mission field, especially where I currently work at the Reformed University (UR—Universitaria Reformada) in Barranquilla, Colombia. There, the contribution from an Anabaptist perspective involved organizing two international seminars on “Reconciliation, Nonviolence, and Sustainable Development,”¹⁷ in which several Mennonite scholars from Latin America, Europe, and the United States participated. In addition, the “Biblical

13 See Consejo de Pueblos y Organizaciones Indígenas Evangélicos de Ecuador et al., *Programa de Pastoral Indígena: Cartillas de Formación Bíblica, Teológica y Pastoral* (Quito: CLAI, 2006).

14 RELEA has published several issues in which Mennonites and other Anabaptists from Latin America have written about topics such as People of God and Peace (2017); The Political, Justice and Peace (2018); Migration with Hope (2019); COVID-19 in Context (2021); Church and State (2022).

15 After fifty years of armed conflict, on November 24, 2016, the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-FARC signed the Peace Agreement, which included the following points: 1) comprehensive rural reform, 2) political participation, 3) end of the conflict, 4) solution to the problem of illicit drugs, 5) victims, 6) implementation, verification, and endorsement. For more information, see Special Jurisdiction for Peace, *Acuerdo final para la terminación del conflicto y la construcción de una paz estable y duradera*, November 24, 2016, https://www.jep.gov.co/Marco%20Normativo/Normativa_v2/01%20ACUERDOS/Texto-Nuevo-Acuerdo-Final.pdf?csf=1&e=0fpYA0.

16 Asociación Cristiana Menonita para Justicia, Paz y Acción Noviolenta.

17 The contributions of the first seminar are found in César Moya, ed., *Reconciliation, Nonviolence and Sustainable Development* (Barranquilla: CUR, 2020).

Hermeneutics” and “Contemporary Theology” classes have enabled dialogue on the themes of peacebuilding, reconciliation, and conscientious objection to military service, as well as the orientation of various undergraduate research projects related to peace and reconciliation.

We also traveled beyond the classroom to accompany ex-combatants and signatories of the Peace Agreement in the countryside. In doing so, we gained firsthand understanding regarding the process of reintegrating into civilian life for people who had used weapons for several decades.¹⁸ In addition, we participated in the regional dialogues for the “total peace” proposal by the new national government.¹⁹ In this case, the missional task moved to the political context, demonstrating that missional work continues no matter where we are.

What Does It Mean to Be Missional?

In the Anabaptist perspective there is no church without a missional task, and missional theology has the mandate to contextualize in times of post-Christianity, based on the classical doctrine of the *Missio Dei*: God the Father sends the Son, and God the Father and the Son send the Spirit . . . And all three send the Church into the world.²⁰ James Krabill states: “We will foster a missional understanding of the church. Mission is much more than simply one among many activities of the church, existing alongside Christian education, leadership training, mutual aid, and others. Rather, it is embedded within the very character of the church.”²¹

This understanding of what it means to be missional is related to that of “integral mission,”²² described as follows: “At a minimum, it is preaching the word, healing the sick, making peace, building communities of grace, and helping the poor achieve stability and dignity.”²³ To this should be added the concept of transforming the realities of injustice and oppression in the world. Also, to

18 See César Moya, “The Path to Peace Is Not Easy, but Necessary,” *MMN archives*, accessed December 15, 2022, <https://www.mennonitemission.net/blog/4756/The-path-to-peace-is-not-easy-but-necessary>.

19 In this respect, see Juan Moya, “‘Total Peace’ for Violent Colombia? Mennonite Leaders Reflect on the Hope for Change a New President Brings,” *Anabaptist World* (October 28, 2022), <https://anabaptistworld.org/total-peace-for-violent-colombia/>.

20 See David W. Boshart, *Becoming Missional: Denominations and New Church Development in Complex Social Contexts* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 12–22.

21 James R. Krabill, ed., “Explorando la Obra de Dios en el Mundo: Juntos en Misión; Convicciones, Valores y Compromisos Centrales de la Red Menonita de Misión,” *Missio Dei*, no. 10 (2006): 9, <https://assets.mennonites.org/Downloads/MissioDei10.E.pdf>.

22 C. René Padilla, *Misión Integral*. See also Padilla and Yamamoru, eds., *Consulta Misión Integral y Pobreza*.

23 Krabill, ed., “Explorando la Obra de Dios en el Mundo,” 10.

“recognize that anywhere and everywhere in creation is a mission.”²⁴ And, in the same way, the concept of integral mission is related to participation—that is, cooperation in different parts of the world to respond to the opportunities to carry out God’s mission,²⁵ as we have felt called to do in our missional journey.

Being missional carries with it a number of connotations.²⁶ The first has to do with the vocation and *raison d’être* of the church. The church participates in the *Missio Dei*. Thus, the whole life of the church must be one of witness to the world—witness that is not limited to seeking others to come to be committed to Christ or to live in *koinonia*. Rather, all the actions of the church, both internal and external, testify to the world. In this sense, Patricia and I gave our educational work as a witness of the church to the world. We were sent by the church—first our mother church, Ibagué, then the IMCOL through a partnership with MMN and CPMC to be a witness in Ecuador and other unplanned areas.

The second connotation is related to the context of the church. In a dominant culture where life is not necessarily promoted, or where Christian values are ignored or dismissed, the church should embrace missional work rooted in the promotion of life, dignity, social justice, and nonviolence. Hence, to become *missional* is to proclaim and be a living sign of the gospel; to proclaim the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—the story of Jesus—as normative for Christian ethics. In the various contexts in which Patricia and I served, we used theological education to announce the gospel with its life-giving, life-embracing implications.

The third connotation has to do with a community’s particular ecclesiology. A missional perspective understands that the church is constituted through God’s mission and functions as an alternative community in dialogue with the cultures around it. It does not accommodate to ethics that hinder life but rather follows the path of abundant life exemplified by Jesus Christ. The missional church aims to function as part of the kingdom of God, depending on God’s action not only in the past but also in the present and the future. The missional task must lead to the creation of new communities of faith, as happened in Ecuador with the Mennonite Anabaptist Christian Church of Ecuador (ICAME—Iglesia Cristiana Anabautista Menonita de Ecuador).

The Missional Task Amid Theological Education Challenges

The path Patricia and I have traveled in theological education has left us with teachings that have also become challenges for the missional task. One of these

24 Krabill, ed., 10.

25 Krabill, ed., 11.

26 Lois Y. Barret, “Defining Missional Church,” in *Evangelical, Ecumenical, and Anabaptist Missiologies in Conversation: Essays in Honor of Wilbert R. Shenk*, eds. James R. Krabill, Walter Sawatsky, and Charles E. Van Engen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 177–83.

challenges is the use of the term “missionary,” which seems to evoke images of the invasion, violence, and acculturation by which the gospel was made known in the Global South between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Because of this, we prefer to refer to the educational experiences described in this article as “missional.”

In our teaching experiences over the years, we found that the missional church paradigm is particularly relevant to theological education challenges in Latin America and the Caribbean.²⁷ A recent study by Matías Preiswerk, for example, shows that in the dominant neoliberal context any ecclesial institution with economic resources can open a university and a faculty of theology. While some of these institutions have a solid theology, whether of Catholic or Protestant tradition, others function with a weak theological foundation or lack the professionals to carry out the educational task.²⁸

Another significant challenge of theological education in the Latin American context is confrontation with inequality, exclusion, and injustice that—still in many cases—seeks ideological legitimacy in “Western and Christian” values.²⁹ In addition, as Nicolás Panotto states, theological curricula lack interdisciplinarity, as demanded by today’s world; that is, curricula lack integration and interrelatedness with other topics and concepts, such as social analysis tools.³⁰

These challenges join those identified by Justo González: finances; migration; sectarianism; secularization processes; the diversity of Christianity and theological schools; the lack of official recognition of studies; cognitive rather than practical emphases; the absence of integration into the socio-humanistic discussions and problems of current life; lack of articulation of the biblical, theological, and humanistic sciences³¹ with interculturality; inter-religiosity and ecumenism; human rights; sustainable development; and interdisciplinarity. This situation,

27 As for theological education, we agree that it is “a special dimension of the broader teaching ministry of the church and also as a special place and process for the theological task of the church. Our common fundamental assumption is that we participate in theological education for the welfare of the church in the world in light of God’s reign.” See Nancy R. Heisey and Daniel S. Schipani, eds., *Theological Education on Five Continents: Anabaptist Perspectives* (Strasbourg: Mennonite World Conference, 1999), 9.

28 Matías Preiswerk, *Contrato intercultural: Crisis y refundación de la educación teológica* (Quito: CLAI, 2011), 105.

29 Preiswerk, 174.

30 Nicolás Panotto, “Nuevos aires en la formación teológica latinoamericana: El ejemplo de gemrip,” *Methodist Magazine*, no. 217 (March–April 2016): 11–12.

31 Benjamin Wayman, “Justo González: Seminars Need More Latinos,” *Christianity Today*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/october-web-only/justo-gonzalez-we-need-more-latino-in-seminary.html>.

González notes, risks traditional theological schools disappearing if the vision of mission and ecclesial ministry is set aside.

To avoid this, theological education programs and schools that are open to integrating Christian diversity are required. It is no longer possible, he states, to create theological schools for a single membership. Instead the curricula of theology must be rethought as an integration of studies in the Bible, biblical theology, religion, and a combination of the social and human sciences in an interdisciplinary, ecumenical, interreligious program that respects diversity, cares for nature, and trains church leaders.³²

In each of the above contexts, missional theology would have pertinence and relevance. This was certainly confirmed in our educational experiences, where the Bible was read from the experience of the vulnerable people; the reality of the social, economic, and political context was taken into account; there was openness to dialogue with other beliefs; and the social sciences were taken into account when doing theology. In addition, simple projects were generated that had a positive impact on the community.³³

As we attempted to work within a missional paradigm of theological education in the midst of these challenges, we had to look for alternatives of infrastructure, methodologies, curricula, and partners that would allow us to resist the traditional and exclusive business models. Freire's³⁴ and Piaget's³⁵ pedagogies and the transformative education method³⁶ were very useful tools in carrying out such educational work.³⁷

32 We found the most evidence of such integration in UBL's theological program.

33 Some of these projects in rural areas include The Indigenous Foundation for Development (FUIDE—Fundación Indígena para el Desarrollo) and the Nucanchic Yachay Elementary School (Our Wisdom School). In the urban area are the Project of Education for Peace and the Refugee Project of Quito Mennonite Church.

34 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York/London: Continuum, 2011).

35 On Piaget's pedagogy, see, among others, Pedro J. Saldarriaga-Zambrano, Guadalupe del R. Bravo-Cedeño, and Marlene R. Loor Rivadeneira, "La teoría constructivista de Jean Piaget y su significación para la pedagogía contemporánea," *Dom. Cien.* 2 (Dic. 2016): 127–37, accessed December 9, 2022, <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=5802932>.

36 Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, *Educación Transformadora 1, 2, 3: Una guía para facilitadores de la comunidad*, Primera edición en Español (Ciudad de Guatemala/Bogotá: Clara-Semilla, 1992).

37 Freire's pedagogy is based on the idea that education should be a liberating process that allows people to become aware of their reality and act to transform it. In Piaget's pedagogy, learning must be active, experiential, and constructive.

Learning a way of understanding an Indigenous Theology³⁸ along with their holistic worldview³⁹ was also particularly helpful. For the indigenous peoples, everything is interrelated. Therefore, one aspect of life is affected by another. In this way, missional theology integrates the sacred, socio-political, natural, individual, and community dimensions.⁴⁰

Three Additional Challenges: The Great Commission, Intercultural Dialogue, Redefining the Mission

Three additional theological education challenges include aspects related to (1) the biblical mandate of the Great Commission, (2) intercultural dialogue, and (3) redefinition of the mission.

Let's begin with the text known as the Great Commission in the gospel of Matthew (28:18–20). We have traditionally been taught that this passage communicates an imperative for mission via the phrase “go and make disciples”—in other words, that making disciples is an inescapable mandate for the church. Although we do not doubt the connotations of the text to carry out missionary work, we question the understanding of the text as a mandate. In Greek, while the imperative is “make disciples,” the verb “going” (πορευθεντες) is in the aorist tense, which indicates urgency. This verb, whose root is common—“to go,” travel, walk (πορευομαι)—means movement. We find it several times in the biblical accounts of Paul's travels as well as the texts regarding the journeys taken by Jesus. Something that stands out, however, is that these journeys or movements are almost always related to the way of the cross. So, a better approach from our perspective, which we believe deserves more research, would be to translate such a text “as you go,” “while you go,” or “while you live.”⁴¹ Our preference would be “while going in the way of the cross.” Regardless of translation, however, the verb clearly is not imperative; it does not say “go” in the form of an order. A more natural translation is that the disciples are on their way. Within this understanding, our post-missionary assignment and educational experience continue to be a missional task; that is, our missional work does not end at the completion of an assignment through a mission board.

In intercultural dialogue, which includes the religious, it must be recognized that we not only give to others what we have but we also receive from others

38 See Eleazar López, *Teología India: Antología* (Cochabamba: Verbo Divino, 2000).

39 Victoria Carrasco, *Ñaupá, Ñaupá Pacha: Mitos, tradiciones, memoria histórica, Ritos de los pueblos indígenas* (Quito: INPPI, 1996).

40 See César Moya, “Mennonites and Theological Education among Indigenous Churches in Ecuador: A Perspective from the Last Two Decades,” 127–30.

41 See John H. Yoder, *Theology and Mission: A Believers Church Perspective*, eds. Gayle Gerber Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 75–90.

their wisdom, which brings with it a transformation of thought and therefore of lifestyle, as stated by Romans 12:1. This dialogue leads to the recognition that everything created by God is good (Gen 1), creation is diverse, and God is the God of Life who moves in all peoples, cultures, and religions, with their particularities.

The above thought is in line with that of M. Thomas Thangaraj, whose remarks on how the interaction occurs between followers of the Christian faith and other religions and their followers can be of great help, we believe, in enriching our understanding of mission. Like us, he recognizes that the world is made up of people of different religions (beliefs), which should lead us to ask ourselves how to relate to them and who our neighbors are. He also recognizes the plurality and diversity of humanity and creation not as an error of God but as part of God's plan. Amid this reality, we believe that Christians remain called to testify to God's love in the world through following Christ. We believe as well that the presence of the light of Christ is also in those who profess, with gentleness and reverence, confessions of faith other than the Christian one.

Thangaraj recognizes a range of approaches that Christians can take regarding dialogue with other faiths, including 1) We know and they know not; 2) Perhaps we know, perhaps they know; Who knows? 3) What we have is good for us; what they have is good for them; 4) We know in full, they know in part; 5) We know and know that we know; they know and know not that they know; and 6) We and they together need to know more (partnership).⁴²

Our missional work through theological education helps evaluate these approaches. It is no longer possible for us to say that “we know and they know not” or to doubt the knowledge of different perspectives. On the contrary, our journey through various cultures and encounters with different theological and faith perspectives leads us to recognize that in the missional task both we and those with whom we relate harbor knowledge that has been forged throughout our respective personal, family, ecclesial, and social lives. Therefore, the last statement, “We and they together need to know more,” is most in line with what our experience has been—a partnership that ends up becoming a support network between different institutions, cultures, and people.

Other approaches must be added, such as “We know, and they also know.” In other words, in the missional task, we arrive with knowledge; at the same time, those who receive us also have knowledge. Consequently, for the missional task to be complete, mutual openness is required to know the theology and perspectives of each culture. The partnership built for the work in Ecuador is a good example of this.

⁴² M. Thomas Thangaraj, *Relating to People of Other Religions: What Every Christian Needs to Know* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).

This missional model of being open to dialogue with the other and committed to the dispossessed, the weak, marginalized, vulnerable, and unprotected—the victims—is different from the model carried out in the first centuries in Latin America that attempted to reach people through conquest.⁴³ Quite the opposite, the missional church carries out the *Missio Dei* in a way that respects the unique interpretation of the gospel by each people group, culture, or congregation. It carries out “mission without conquest” by emphasizing the message and teachings of Jesus while allowing the people to beget their own traditions and customs as they understand the Word of God teaching them. In the missional paradigm, the missionary—fraternal worker—must arrive “as a visitor, not as owner, warrior, leader, manager, or leader... [and] respects the owners, shares life, gets to know the customs, knowledge, and abilities of their hosts, and tries to locate themselves properly so as not to cause problems or divisions.”⁴⁴

Changing Theological Education: Following Christ in Solidarity with the People

In this article I have identified challenges for the missional task as viewed through the lens of personal experiences that my wife, Patricia, and I gained through offering as well as receiving theological education over the course of four decades in various contexts of Latin America and the United States. This article provides a “tour” of the most relevant aspects of this experience, considering the social and political conjunctures of each period as well as authors and people—both from Latin America and North America—who were key in this journey.

The identified challenges led to our recognition that the focus of the missional task must change. Today’s mission must correct the mistakes of the past wherein theological education concerned itself more with doctrine than with the carrying out of theology. This led to limited understandings of the biblical text and distortion of the image of Christ; Christ became distant from the social and

43 To take into account the “other” is to recognize otherness. Consequently, individuality must be sacrificed for the benefit of the general, subjectivity must be subordinated to the whole, the particular to the general, and so on. In this sense, whoever justifies war—and I include the use of force—seeks totalization and ignorance of the other, seeks their own happiness, is unable to recognize diversity and difference, seeks to equalize the subjects in a homogeneous and impersonal discourse. This produces violence. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalidad e Infinito*, Séptima edición (Salamanca: Sígueme, 2006). In addition, sensitization by the other is required: “The other is assigned to me and forces me without possible escape to put myself in his place, not to supplant him, but to suffer for him . . . The other imposes himself on me until I awaken my compassion and my love.” See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otro Modo que Ser o Más allá de la Esencia*, Quinta edición (Salamanca: Sígueme, 2011), 31.

44 Willis Horts et al., *Misión sin conquista: Acompañamiento de comunidades autóctonas como práctica misionera alternativa* (Buenos Aires: Kairos, 2009), 69.

political reality and was crucified by God's design rather than as a consequence of his commitment to justice and raising up the poor and the weak.

The mission to be carried out today must abandon a conquering and expansionist spirit and instead walk alongside the poor, the marginalized, and the excluded, offering pastoral action in solidarity with the people's struggles and demands for human rights. It must be a mission that abandons conformity to the systems and assumes conflict with them, resisting through nonviolent means in order to participate in God's work of reconciliation and seek the transformation of negative realities. Contextual realities demand this of us. Following Christ demands it of us.

In other words, the mission carried out through theological education—whether at the formal or informal level, the university or popular level—must provide spaces for listening and learning from other cultures' conceptions and experiences of God. The main temptation in theological education is to believe that we arrive at it with all "the truth" from our Western perspectives—perspectives that have their origins in none other than domination over other peoples, since the time of the Spanish conquest in the early sixteenth century in the case of Latin America. To the contrary, a theological education that resists a conquering approach to doing mission must respect other ways of thinking, living, and acting, even while recognizing a very real struggle with syncretism. We have much to learn from other cultures, perspectives, and peoples, especially from the indigenous peoples.

Missional work, we have learned, continues wherever we are following Jesus's footsteps.