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# Eradicating Neocolonialism in Anabaptist Mission

A Radical Two-Way Mission for Missional  
Partnership Between American and Latin  
American Anabaptist-Mennonites

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American Anabaptist-Mennonites—that is, “Anglo-American” or “Euro Anglo-American” Mennonites in the United States—have been questioning for some years now the traditional unidirectional notion of mission that begins in North America and Europe and goes to the rest of the world. In an attempt to move away from this colonial model of mission, they now emphasize within their missional partnerships a two-way mission, which is understood as a multidirectional and relational approach that highlights the learnings that American missionaries gain from their partners abroad in the mission field. This two-way approach, while a step in the right direction, is not radical enough to eradicate neocolonialism in the American missional partnership with Latin Americans.

The notion of “neocolonialism” has been described in multiple ways. According to Oseni Taiwo Afisi, the term “generally represents the actions and effects of certain remnant features and agents of the colonial era in a given society.”<sup>1</sup> Joerg Rieger underscores that neocolonialism is present in Christian mission, particularly in the patronizing intellectual attitudes and resulting structures still in place after colonialism, which configure the relationship between the Global

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1 “Neocolonialism,” by Oseni Taiwo Afisi, *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://iep.utm.edu/neocolon/>.

North and the Global South.<sup>2</sup> As I will argue, neocolonialism is still present in the American Anabaptist-Mennonite missional partnership with Latin Americans. To shift out of this neocolonialist model, it would be necessary to practice a truly multidirectional two-way mission, one that not only focuses on what American missionaries learn from Latin American partners abroad but also includes receiving Latin American missionaries in the US.

The following three sections—referencing the work of Mennonite Church USA’s missionary agency, Mennonite Mission Network (MMN), and its missional partnership in Latin America<sup>3</sup>—will argue for such a radical two-way mission in Anabaptist-Mennonite partnership:

(1) The first section will present the current Anabaptist-Mennonite understanding of “two-way mission” and describe a specific case of such in Latin America. I will also show that this current two-way model of mission is limited to one particular understanding of reverse mission.

(2) In the second section, I will argue that the current American practice of two-way mission is insufficient for eradicating neocolonialism in the Anabaptist-Mennonite mission. Hence, I will claim that a radical two-way mission is required to overcome the neocolonialism still present in the Anabaptist-Mennonite witness.

(3) In the third section, I will describe a specific missionary work in the US that could be considered a precedent of a radical two-way mission partnership. I will also mention the benefits of a radical two-way mission for American and Latin American Anabaptist-Mennonites alike.

## I. American Anabaptist-Mennonite Two-Way Mission as Reverse Mission

### A. Current American Anabaptist-Mennonite Two-Way Mission

In 2002, Mennonite Mission Network (MMN) was founded explicitly to be a partner in mission with other ministries around the world.<sup>4</sup> Such partnerships are now common between American Anabaptist-Mennonites and churches, organizations, and institutions abroad. But what does it mean to partner in

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2 Joerg Rieger, “Theology and Mission: Between Neocolonialism and Postcolonialism,” *Mission Studies* 21, no. 2 (2004): 201–227.

3 Although there has been extensive missionary work in Latin America within missional partnership between other American and Latin American Anabaptist denominations, those experiences go beyond this essay’s scope and are not considered in the main argument.

4 “Frequently Asked Questions About Mission Network,” Mennonite Mission Network, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://www.mennonitemission.net:443/info/3219/Frequently%20asked%20questions%20about%20Mission%20Network>.

mission? Anne Thiessen explains that the term “partnership” is currently used “to describe organizations and institutions where they hope allies of unequal power, of different cultures and values, can work together as equals.”<sup>5</sup> Cesar García defines partnership as “the kind of relationship that can be found among the people of God when we serve together interdependently in the mission of God.”<sup>6</sup> For him, “partnerships require a solid relationship and a shared purpose that fosters joint plans and the sharing of resources.”<sup>7</sup>

For American Anabaptist-Mennonites, the various experiences of partnership in mission have resulted in awareness that their missionaries are not only giving to but also receiving from the people in the mission field. For John F. Lapp, former Senior Executive for Global Ministries of MMN, mission has always flowed in many directions, never just “from the West to the rest.”<sup>8</sup> For example, Lapp mentions that MMN mission workers who have retired in the US usually continue their relationship with the ministries abroad in which they were involved during their international careers. For this reason, within the American territory they become the voice of their former mission partners and continue sharing in their home settings what they have learned abroad.<sup>9</sup>

In a postcolonial world, says Lapp, “Western Christians must be more conscious of what we have to learn from our fellow believers in other lands who have much to teach us.”<sup>10</sup> This awareness of what missionaries receive and learn from their missional partners abroad has led American Anabaptist-Mennonites to use the term “two-way mission” to describe and promote some of their missional initiatives. American missionaries highlight that they are not only working with partners abroad but are also open to learning from them, paying special attention to those in the Global South due to the power imbalance between North and South.<sup>11</sup>

This understanding of mission as two-way has permeated MMN’s work for some years now. According to Lapp:

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5 Anne Thiessen, “Where Are Our Nightmares?,” *Anabaptist Witness* 5, no. 2 (October 2018): 77.

6 César García, “The Mission of God and Global Partnerships: Lessons from the Past, Possibilities for the Future,” *Anabaptist Witness* 5, no. 2 (October 2018): 18.

7 García, “The Mission of God and Global Partnerships,” 18.

8 John F. Lapp, “Mission Flows in Many Directions,” Mennonite Mission Network, May 2019, <https://www.mennonitemission.net:443/resources/publications/Extending%20Beyond/518/Mission%20flows%20in%20many%20directions>.

9 Lapp, “Mission Flows in Many Directions.”

10 Lapp, “Mission Flows in Many Directions.”

11 For the issues and stakes involved in Anabaptist global mission partnership see Alain Epp Weaver, “Global Mission Partnerships: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future,” *Anabaptist Witness* 5, no. 2 (October 2018): 11–13.

Mennonite Mission Network has been promoting two-way mission for more than half a century, starting with Edwin and Irene Weaver, who took lessons learned in India to test a new mission-stance in West Africa. The Weavers often wondered who was the learner and who was the teacher as they studied the Bible with African believers. About the same time, mission workers in South America were moving off mission compounds to seek more culturally appropriate ways of engaging with communities around the good news of Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

An example of American Anabaptist-Mennonite two-way mission in Latin America is the Ross Richer family's missionary work with MMN in Ecuador from 2014 to 2023.<sup>13</sup> In 2015, after receiving an invitation from the Iglesia Cristiana Anabautista Menonita del Ecuador (Christian Anabaptist Mennonite Church of Ecuador) and the Fundación Sobrevivencia Cofán (Cofan Survival Fund), the Ross Richer family embarked on a mission that was not only dual-located—in both Ecuador and the US—but also understood as a two-way mission in partnership between MMN, Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Colombia (Christian Mennonite Church of Colombia), and Central Plains Mennonite Conference, which is part of Mennonite Church USA (MC USA).

During winter and spring of each year, the Ross Richers' assignment was to accompany indigenous Cofán people in Zábalo, a village in the Cuyabeno region in Sucumbíos Province and surrounded by the Ecuadorian Amazonian rainforest. During summer and fall, they returned to the US to work as educators in their home context, sharing what they had learned from their work with Cofán and Ecuadorian people.<sup>14</sup> As they explain, their goal in Ecuador was “not to go and impose a North American version of Christianity . . . but to literally walk alongside our indigenous sisters and brothers, and together discover what it means to follow Christ in their unique context.”<sup>15</sup>

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12 Lapp, “Mission Flows in Many Directions.”

13 The Ross Richer family served as International Service Workers with MMN for nine years (three three-year terms), beginning with presentations to North American churches in 2014 and ending with the last presentations in 2023. They spent six years (2014–2020) going back and forth between the US and Ecuador until their work was interrupted by the COVID-19 global pandemic. See also “The Ross Richers Return to Ecuador,” Mennonite Mission Network, accessed January 26, 2025, <https://www.mennonitemission.net/news/the-ross-richers-return-to-ecuador/>.

14 “Jerrell and Jane Ross Richer,” Mennonite Mission Network, accessed June 27, 2022, <https://www.mennonitemission.net:443/workers/Latin%20America/Ecuador/Jerrell%20and%20Jane%20Ross%20Richer>; Ross Richer, “About,” [twowaymission.net](https://twowaymission.net), December 26, 2014, <https://twowaymission.net/about/>.

15 Katie Hurst, “From Goshen to Ecuador and Back: GC Professor and Family Straddle Two Worlds,” News & Events—Goshen College, December 11, 2014, <https://>

## B. Two-Way Mission as Reverse Mission

What American Anabaptist-Mennonites identify as “two-way mission” is often described as a specific form of reverse mission in missiology.<sup>16</sup> As Eric Morier-Genoud mentions, the term “reverse mission” is equivocal. That is, it has several meanings.<sup>17</sup> According to Matthew Krabill, “reverse mission” includes two main notions:

(1) On the one hand, it refers to what I’ve described as two-way mission—that is, a missional approach underscoring that missionaries not only give to but also learn from their partners abroad and from the people they minister to, particularly from those on the margins.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, it is possible to describe the Ross Richers’ missionary work in Ecuador, and other Anabaptist-Mennonite two-way mission initiatives, as a specific form of reverse mission.<sup>19</sup>

(2) On the other hand, the notion of reverse mission could also refer to the shift in global Christianity whereby historically traditional “receiving countries of mission” are now sending missionaries back to the original senders themselves.<sup>20</sup> Matthews A. Ojo suggests that the notion of “reverse mission” refers specifically to the sending of missionaries to Europe and North America by churches and Christians from the non-Western world, particularly from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. It aims at re-evangelizing regions that were once the heartlands of Christianity and the vanguards of missionary movements. In this respect, within reverse missional practice, traditional mission fields have now become the mission bases of renewed efforts to re-evangelize the now secularized societies of Europe and North America.<sup>21</sup>

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[www.goshen.edu/news/2014/12/11/goshen-ecuador-back-gc-professor-family-straddle-two-worlds/](http://www.goshen.edu/news/2014/12/11/goshen-ecuador-back-gc-professor-family-straddle-two-worlds/).

16 See Matthews A. Ojo, “Reverse Mission,” in *Encyclopedia of Mission and Missionaries*, ed. Jon Bonk (New York: Routledge, 2007), 380–82.

17 Eric Morier-Genoud, “‘Reverse Mission’: A Critical Approach for a Problematic Subject,” in *Bringing Back the Social into the Sociology of Religion* (Brill, 2018), 169–88.

18 Matthew Krabill, “‘Reverse Mission’? Some Implications for Anabaptist-Mennonite Bodies in North America,” *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 19 (2011): 19–20.

19 Another MMN two-way mission initiative is La Casa Grande in Benin, West Africa. See Lapp, “Mission Flows in Many Directions.”

20 Krabill, “‘Reverse Mission’?,” 19–20.

21 Matthews A. Ojo, “Reverse Mission,” 380. Ojo is not considering Latin America as part of the “Western world.” However, whether Latin America is part of the “Western world” or not is an ongoing discussion. See Alfredo Toro Hardy, “Latin America: Between the Western World and the Global South,” *Global Policy*, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/04/04/2024/latin-america-between-western-world-and-global-south>; and Glauco Ortolano, “The Misappropriation of the Term ‘Western

Within this second meaning, the goal of reverse mission, as Paul Freston highlights, is more than a mere geographical inversion; it also points to a mission “from below.” That is, it is about reversing the direction of missionary-sending as well as reversing the direction of colonization by sending missionaries from former colonies to the nations that colonized them.<sup>22</sup> The proposal of “reversing the direction of colonization” should be understood not as a call for colonized people to colonize former colonizing nations but for missionaries to go against colonization in any mission whatsoever. As Faye Y. Abram and Ashley Cruce explain, “The ‘reverse’ in ‘reverse mission’ refers to a change in the traditional, unidirectional nature of classic mission work. In this sense, reverse mission may perhaps be best understood as an alternative approach to what is generally, widely, and historically thought to be classic mission work.”<sup>23</sup> For Abram and Cruce, this form of reverse mission is a reaction to and a critique of the classic missional model that focuses on the conversion of a foreign country or community to the Christian faith.<sup>24</sup>

As I have mentioned, the current American Anabaptist-Mennonite two-way mission relates to the first meaning of reverse mission. However, as the next section will show, it is necessary to embrace and practice both meanings of reverse mission in order to eradicate neocolonialism in the missional partnership between Americans and Latin Americans. That is, it is necessary to hold a more radical reverse mission, a radical two-way mission.

## II. Toward a Radical Two-Way Mission in Missional Partnership

### A. Anabaptist-Mennonite Neocolonialism in Mission

The two-way mission in Ecuador described above is certainly a step forward from the colonial missional enterprises developed in Latin America in the past. The Ross Richers’ missionary work, as they described it, evidences their aim to overcome forms of colonial mission by being open to learn and “receive” from their Latin American partners in the mission field. However, no matter how good the intentions of the Ross Richers and other American missionaries in Latin America,

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World’,” *Global Policy*, accessed June 4, 2025, <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/02/07/2024/misappropriation-term-western-world>.

22 Paul Freston, “Reverse Mission: A Discourse in Search of Reality?,” *PentecoStudies* 9, no. 2 (October 2010): 155.

23 Faye Y. Abram and Ashley Cruce, “A Re-Conceptualization of ‘Reverse Mission’ for International Social Work Education and Practice,” *Social Work Education* 26, no. 1 (February 2007): 5.

24 Abram and Cruce, “A Re-Conceptualization of ‘Reverse Mission’,” 6.

individual initiatives are not enough to eradicate the neocolonialism embedded in the Anabaptist-Mennonite partnership between Americans and Latin Americans, because this two-way mission is still limited to Latin American territory. In this respect, both mission partners—Americans and Latin Americans—are responsible for changing this neocolonial mindset.

In the Anabaptist-Mennonite imaginary, Latin America is a mission field that needs resources for ministry—from human to financial, and therefore also institutional collaboration—but the presence of Latin American Anabaptist-Mennonite missionaries in the US is deemed unnecessary. Put another way, American Anabaptist-Mennonite missionary work in Latin America is deemed useful and necessary, even though there is an extended presence of local Anabaptist-Mennonites on the continent, but the reverse is not considered to be true by either Americans or Latin Americans.

In the US and Canada, the Gospel and Our Culture Network and the missional church movement have grown out of the recognition that the US and Canada are mission fields. Anabaptist-Mennonite missiologists like Wilbert Shenk, Lois Barrett, and Paul Hiebert were among the leaders who started those networks/movements.<sup>25</sup> However, institutional collaboration between American and Latin American Anabaptist-Mennonites for the mission occurring in US territory is not on the table. This lack of institutional collaboration for mission in the US indicates that a paternalistic dichotomy is still at play and that the neocolonial patronizing attitude has not been completely eradicated from Anabaptist-Mennonite mission.

The American Anabaptist-Mennonite missionaries who work in Latin America could certainly embrace a two-way mission as they accompany their partners and learn from them, as is the case with the Ross Richer family in Ecuador and other MMN missionaries. However, if American Anabaptist-Mennonite institutions, such as MMN and conferences and local congregations of MC USA, do not consider the US as a mission field in need of institutional collaboration, the paternalistic dichotomy between the people who “have and give”—the Americans—and the people who “need and receive”—the Latin Americans—will still be present. Regarding this neocolonial paternalism, Jim Schrag’s poignant questions, quoted by Matthew Krabill, are pertinent: “*Do Christians in the West really believe that God has given other parts of the church gifts—gifts we need to be*

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25 See Michael Clawson, “Missional Church Movement–Timeline Movement,” The Association of Religion Data Archives (the ARDA), accessed April 9, 2025, <https://www.thearda.com/us-religion/history/timelines/entry?etype=3&eid=24>; “History of Missional Church,” Missional Church Network, accessed April 9, 2025, <https://www.missional-churchnetwork.com/history-of-missional-church>.

*complete? . . . Or have we implicitly decided that we are in need of nothing and therefore, are simply gift-givers?”*<sup>26</sup>

The difference between the two notions of reverse mission described in the previous section seems to be attributable to the different cultural and geographical contexts: For Americans, reverse mission points to not only what they give but also what they receive as agents of mission. But for the people in the Global South, as Krabill mentions, reverse mission usually points to recognizing the Global North as a mission field, since people in the South have recently begun perceiving themselves as agents of mission.<sup>27</sup>

If social location permeates the way reverse mission is understood and practiced, it is not a surprise, as Krabill notes, that considering the US territory as a mission field will be very difficult for American Anabaptist-Mennonites, requiring a significant paradigm shift on their part.<sup>28</sup> In this respect, Krabill finds it ironic that Mennonite Church USA has adopted “missional church” language and identity yet manages for the most part to ignore non-Western missionary agency in the US.<sup>29</sup> This last element is evident in the international exchange programs offered by MMN and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Although American Anabaptist-Mennonites have been inviting non-Western young Christians to serve in the US, including young Latin Americans, the MMN and MCC programs usually focus on what these young foreigners could learn in the American setting instead of the benefits that Americans receive from their service.<sup>30</sup>

As I mentioned above, people in the Global South have recently begun perceiving themselves as agents of mission. However, it is difficult for Latin American Anabaptist-Mennonites to consider the US territory as a mission field in need of their gifts. After all, the general perception is that the US is a Christian territory, and, as such, it does not need missionary work. In this sense, it is believed that Latin American Anabaptist-Mennonites have nothing to offer to their North American siblings.

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26 Jim Schrag, “Theology of the Body,” *Beyond Ourselves*, v. 9, quoted in Krabill, “Reverse Mission?”, 26. As I mentioned above in footnote 21, it is an ongoing debate whether Latin America is part of “the West” or not. Schrag’s quote is used here to illustrate the neocolonial mindset prevalent in mission. Therefore, I am not necessarily claiming that Latin Americans are not “Christians in the West.”

27 Krabill, “Reverse Mission?”, 25.

28 Krabill, “Reverse Mission?”, 26.

29 Krabill, “Reverse Mission?”, 26.

30 See “Serve,” Mennonite Mission Network, accessed June 27, 2022, <https://www.mennonitemission.net:443/Serve>; “Serve with MCC,” Text, Mennonite Central Committee U.S. (Mennonite Central Committee U.S., April 30, 2014), <https://mcc.org/get-involved/serve>.



As the next section will show, to overcome neocolonialism in the American Anabaptist-Mennonite witness and partnership, it is imperative to expand the notion and practice of two-way mission by embracing both notions of reverse mission. Hence, a radical two-way mission is necessary—that is, one that considers the US as a mission field just as the Latin American territory and sees Latin American Anabaptist-Mennonites as partners in mission in the US.

## B. A Radical Two-Way Mission to Eradicate Neocolonialism within the Anabaptist-Mennonite Partnership in Mission

Regarding the possibility of considering the US as a mission field for Americans and Latin Americans alike, forty years ago missiologist Orlando Costas asked two important rhetorical questions: “Can the nation with the greatest missionary presence in the world be regarded as a ‘mission field’? If so, can the sector of the world which represents the habitat of the have-nots and the oppressed of the earth have anything to contribute to the missionary situation of the United States?”<sup>31</sup>

Answering his first question, Costas stated that the US qualifies as a mission field because many Americans are alienated from God and neighbor, and the consequences of this alienation are fear, anxiety, and distrust at the personal level as well as racism, classism, and sexism at the social level.<sup>32</sup> Addressing the second question, Costas affirmed that the “third world” has a responsibility to the US: “For how can there be a truly global mission if a partner fails to come to the aid of the other when a situation of crisis arises? . . . Third world Christians are the keepers of their American brothers and sisters!”<sup>33</sup>

Leaving aside the outdated language of “third world Christians,” Costas’s call for a Latino/a mission to the US remains pertinent for Anabaptist-Mennonite witness today. On the one hand, the US is still in need of receiving Christian mission—that is, in need of divine/human reconciliation in opposition to the current alienation within American culture—and, therefore, it is indeed a mission field, as the missional church movement in the US has also recognized. On the other hand, as Costas indicates, in a proper partnership both partners should be responsible for each other and able to help each other. In this respect, Costas’s call for a Latino/a mission to the US could help American Anabaptist-Mennonites recognize that partnership in mission should imply opportunities for mutual support in mission between Americans and Latin Americans.

I envision a radical two-way mission where both partners are responsible for each other and able to help each other, whether in Latin America or the US

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31 Orlando E. Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982), 71.

32 Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate*, 72.

33 Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate*, 81.

territory. In this respect, both American and Latin American Anabaptists will have to point out the specific ministry needs in which cooperation in mission is required and invite each other to work together to supply that need in their respective territories.

In 1982, Costas already perceived the needs and challenges that the US was (and still is) facing as a nation of immigrants and issued a missional call for Latin Americans to share suitable missionary personnel to minister effectively within the American ethno-cultural diversity. Although many immigrants in the US were engaged in ministry among ethnic minorities, said Costas, they usually were not trained for missionary work, nor were they carefully and prayerfully selected and sent to the US. The time had come, claimed Costas, for Latin American churches and missionary organizations to enter partnership with their American counterparts and send missionaries to help meet this missional need.<sup>34</sup>

Costas's early perception of the US as a mission field needing the help of Latino/a missionaries continues to reflect today's reality, certainly among American Anabaptist-Mennonite churches and ministries. Therefore, if American Anabaptist-Mennonites want to break with the neocolonial paternalistic dichotomies within their missional partnership with Latin Americans, they must incorporate a mission in reverse that includes both of its meanings. They could embrace this radical two-way mission by continuing their missionary work in Latin America while also inviting Latin Americans for institutional collaboration in the US. That is, to eradicate American Anabaptist-Mennonite neocolonialism in mission, American Anabaptist-Mennonites must recognize the needs in the US territory that require institutional missionary collaboration with Latino/a Anabaptist-Mennonite churches, conferences, and mission agencies. In that way, a mutual collaboration in mission will take place, one that overcomes the neocolonial patronizing attitude evident in the paternalistic dichotomy between the people who supposedly "have and give" and the ones who supposedly "need and receive."

To practice this radical two-way mission embracing both meanings of reverse mission, it will also be necessary for Latin Americans to overcome the neocolonial mindset embedded in many of us. However, if Latin Americans do not recognize that American Anabaptist-Mennonites indeed have needs that Latinos/as could solve, and that God has given specific gifts to us that we must use for the benefit of our siblings in the Global North, neocolonialism in mission will not be challenged.

For eradicating neocolonialism in the Anabaptist-Mennonite mission, it will also be necessary for Latin Americans to embrace both meanings of reverse mission and discard the prevalent and classic notion of missional work that focuses on conversion. Rieger calls the classic unidirectional conversional

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34 Costas, 72–75.

missional model “mission as outreach,” and adds that what is missed is the ability to learn from the other in ways that lead to self-knowledge.<sup>35</sup> “What if,” he asks, “the question is not first of all, What can we do? but, What is going on? and, How might *we* be part of the problem? Unless these questions are raised in the encounter with people on the mission field, nothing will change.”<sup>36</sup>

Hence, if the re-evangelization of the Global North by Latino/a missionaries is understood from the conversional missional model—having the wrong idea that secularized US society requires “re-conversion” and that there is nothing that Latino/s could learn from American Anabaptist-Mennonites—it will maintain a paternalist mindset and therefore will be neocolonial, even if it is practiced by formerly colonized people. In other words, if Latino/a missionaries come to the US to “re-moralize the US,” “bring the gospel back,” or “revitalize the decayed spirituality and convictions of American Christians,” neocolonialism in mission will not be challenged and eradicated.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, Americans and Latin Americans alike must connect both meanings of reverse mission in order to respond to the neocolonialism still present in their Anabaptist-Mennonite missional partnership.

### III. A Precedent and Some Benefits of a Radical Two-Way Mission

#### A. Precedent of an Anabaptist-Mennonite Reverse Mission in the US

A former partnership between American and Latin American Anabaptist-Mennonites in a reverse mission in the US territory could be viewed as a precedent toward a radical two-way mission between Anabaptist-Mennonites. As the Mexican spouses Rebeca González and Fernando Pérez state, in 2014 the Conferencia de Iglesias Evangélicas Anabautistas Menonitas de México (Conference of Evangelical Anabaptist Mennonite Churches of Mexico, or CIEAMM, its Spanish acronym) aimed to develop a new form of mutual support with other conferences abroad, especially with MC USA conferences, since CIEAMM was founded in 1958 thanks to the efforts of missionary workers sent by mission boards in the United States and Canada.<sup>38</sup> Mountain States

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35 Rieger, “Theology and Mission,” 213.

36 Rieger, “Theology and Mission,” 214.

37 Neocolonial discourses coming from Global South missionaries are present in many reverse mission enterprises in the US. For a particular example, see Rebecca Y. Kim, *The Spirit Moves West: Korean Missionaries in America* (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

38 Fernando Pérez and Rebeca González, “Building a Relationship of Mutuality between Two Conferences,” *Vision* (Winnipeg, Manitoba) 19, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 14.

Mennonite Conference—part of MC USA—responded to CIEAMM’s invitation. Although neither conference had a clear understanding of what they would do together, they knew they wanted to develop a fraternal relationship of open dialogue between South and North Mennonites.<sup>39</sup>

As a result of this partnership, in 2016 González and Pérez were sent to the US to work for Mountain States Mennonite Conference. They served in several different areas of ministry in the US, such as Casa de Paz (Peace House)—a multi-service ministry for immigrants in Denver, Colorado. They also participated in the Beloved Community in Englewood, helping with worship services and sharing their experiences with the community. They visited many Mennonite congregations in New Mexico and Colorado, leading Bible studies, challenging members to engage with the needs of immigrants and refugees in the US, and encouraging these churches to support Casa de Paz. For González and Pérez, their assignment in the US entailed more than just the practical work mentioned above; it also involved building an intercultural relationship—based on mutual respect and equality—between CIEAMM and Mountain States Mennonite Conference.<sup>40</sup>

The assignment of González and Pérez to collaborate with Mountain States Mennonite Conference could be understood as a first attempt toward a radical two-way mission, where conferences in Latin America and the US work together to solve their missional needs within their own territories. However, there are two elements that must be incorporated in order to practice an actual radical two-way mission. First, in González and Pérez’s recount, there is no mention of mutual institutional recognition by both conferences of their “official” missionary status. This official recognition is necessary for overcoming a patronizing attitude, and, therefore, to eradicate neocolonialism. Second, although González and Pérez indicate that mutual respect and equality were part of their values in their missionary work in the US, there is no mention of the learning they gained from the partnership with American Anabaptist-Mennonites.<sup>41</sup>

This omission of the missionaries’ learnings underscores the importance of incorporating both meanings of reverse mission before any attempt to send Latino/a missionaries to the US. Latin American Anabaptist-Mennonites must incorporate what American Anabaptist-Mennonites have already learned—that is, that any practice of reverse mission must entail a recognition of the fact that missionaries also learn from their partners abroad and from the people they minister to. In this respect, it is necessary to remember that God is already at work in the US through American and Hispanic Anabaptist-Mennonite churches that have established missional initiatives to serve Latino/a people, as is the case with

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39 Pérez and González, “Building a Relationship of Mutuality,” 14–19.

40 Pérez and González, “Building a Relationship of Mutuality,” 14–19.

41 Pérez and González, “Building a Relationship of Mutuality,” 14.

Casa de Paz and others.<sup>42</sup> A reverse Latin American mission in the US will merely join God's ongoing mission.

I have no knowledge of a plan to continue this reverse mission between CIEAMM and Mountain States Mennonite Conference, nor any indication that this pilot experience will be replicated in other MC USA conferences. In this respect, implementing similar programs between American and Latin American Anabaptist-Mennonites—especially with Latin American conferences that currently host MMN missionaries—must be the first step to eradicate neocolonialism in the Anabaptist mission.

## B. Benefits of a Radical Two-Way Mission between American and Latin American Anabaptist-Mennonites

This proposed radical two-way missionary work would benefit American and Latin American Anabaptist-Mennonites alike. First, it is important to mention the obvious benefits. Having missionaries contribute their particular gifts for specific situations and needs in the US and Latin America could improve missionary work in those territories. Both American and Latin American Anabaptist-Mennonites have something to offer the global church, and both also have needs that the gifts of the global church could effectively address.

A radical two-way missionary work would also benefit American and Latin American Anabaptist-Mennonites by underscoring the fact that the whole globe is a mission field since there are no Christian territories, including the US. As mentioned earlier, Costas's notion of mission entails the work of reconciliation with God and neighbor, and although the American territory has been considered one of the heartlands of Christianity and the American church the vanguard of missionary movements extending outward, the current fear, anxiety, and distrust at the personal level as well as racism, classism, and sexism at the social level, are evidence that many Americans are still alienated from God and neighbor. In this regard, although reverse mission entails the notion of re-evangelization—that is, spreading the gospel in regions that were once considered Christian—a two-way mission within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition is more radical because it discards the very notion of re-evangelization. For Anabaptist-Mennonites, there are no Christian nations or territories; it is therefore not possible to consider a specific place already “evangelized” in the past and in need of re-evangelization today.

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<sup>42</sup> See Casa de Paz, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://www.casadepazcolorado.org/>. Another organization related to MC USA is La Posada, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://www.laposadaaid.com/>, and also Mennonite Central Committee's work to support immigrants in the US. See Mennonite Central Committee, accessed June 6, 2025, <https://mcc.org/what-we-do/initiatives/disaster-response/support-immigrant-neighbors>.

Finally, a radical two-way mission that includes both notions of reverse mission highlights the need for mutual learning between American and Latin American Anabaptist-Mennonites in a more compelling way. Americans can certainly learn from their Latino/a partners in Latin America, but they can also learn from them in the US context. Americans could certainly improve their missionary work directed to Latino/a people in the US, but they can also learn about other forms of living and expressing Anabaptist-Mennonite convictions that are not exclusively permeated by American culture. Broadening the American Anabaptist-Mennonite experience regarding the faith and practices of Anabaptists from other cultures can help Americans gain a more global and culturally diverse perspective on Anabaptism. This experience could help Americans see their cultural “blind spots” and rethink and improve their own Anabaptist faith and practices.

It is important to highlight again that the same must happen with Latino/a Anabaptist-Mennonites in the US. Latin Americans can also learn from their American and Latino/a partners while doing missionary work in the US, because the US Latino/a context is different from the Latin American one. In the US, it is possible to find many “Latino” cultures living together and doing ministry and church together. A Latino/a missionary from Latin America does not necessarily understand the context of diverse Latino/a immigrants in the US. Hence, Latin Americans could also gain a more global and culturally diverse perspective on Anabaptism that should allow them to see their cultural “blind spots” and rethink and improve their own Latino/a Anabaptist faith and practices as well.

## Conclusion

As I have shown, the two-way missional approach emphasized by American Anabaptist-Mennonites until now has not radically challenged the neocolonialism present in the current missional partnership between American and Latin American Anabaptist-Mennonites; rather, it has perpetuated a paternalistic dichotomy between the two groups. Therefore, a radical two-way mission is needed to challenge neocolonialism within Anabaptist-Mennonite witness in this partnership. That is, a mission that embraces both notions of reverse mission: (1) missionaries receiving as well as giving and (2) sending missionaries to both America and Latin America in missional North-South partnerships. In this respect, it is imperative to set a new model for missional partnership between American and Latin American Anabaptist-Mennonites—a model that can support missionaries in both geographical settings at the same time and that will benefit Americans and Latin Americans alike.

Although I have focused on neocolonialism present in the missional partnership specifically between American and Latin American Anabaptist-Mennonites, neocolonialism is a common problem in all missional settings where mission

is conducted from contexts of privilege. In this sense, what I have mentioned in this article could also serve as a warning for the incipient missional partnership between Latino/a Anabaptist-Mennonites living in the US who are part of MC USA and Latino/a Anabaptist-Mennonites living in Latin America.<sup>43</sup> In this regard, Latino/as could also present a paternalistic mentality that evidences forms of coloniality toward others within missional partnerships. Hence, this article's critique of neocolonial missional partnerships should be taken as a warning and a challenge to neocolonial tendencies everywhere.

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43 One example of this kind of missional partnership is the relationship between MC USA's Mosaic Mennonite Conference, which includes a significant presence of Latinos/as, and conferences and local churches in Latin America. In an article in *Anabaptist World*, Mosaic Mennonite Conference Executive Minister Stephen Kriss says: "Including international partners, we are more than 10,000 people, with a lot of that in Mexico." He adds: "The long-term and emerging partnerships within Mosaic in Latin America have sometimes been a challenge to navigate within the current denominational system. Mosaic's history in Latin America, particularly in Mexico, goes back several generations through Franconia Conference." See Tim Huber, "Mosaic Conference Board Proposes Withdrawal, Partnership with MC USA," *Anabaptist World*, August 23, 2024, <https://anabaptistworld.org/mosaic-conference-board-proposes-withdrawal-partnership-with-mc-usa/>; "Mosaic Mennonite Conference," Mosaic Mennonites, accessed April 9, 2025, <https://mosaic-mennonites.org/>.