
Anabaptist Missiology: Anthropological Perspectives¹

Delores and J. Stanley Friesen

Introduction

It was part of missionary folklore when we arrived in Nigeria in 1965 that you could count on finding two things on the bedside table of missionaries: their devotional material and an issue of *Practical Anthropology*. The mid-sixties was a time of burgeoning interest in the discipline of anthropology and its implications for the missionary enterprise. Four of the most widely recognized Mennonite anthropologists of this era were in their full stride. Each had initially been a missionary serving under of the Mennonite mission agencies prior to their academic specialization in anthropology. Looking back over our own thirty-five years of ministry, Jacob Loewen, Paul Hiebert, Robert Ramseyer, and Don Jacobs have all been mentors, models, and teachers for us, as well as for a whole generation of missionaries.

This presentation is a series of “soundings” into the contributions of Anabaptist Mennonite anthropologists to missiology. The four most widely known Mennonite anthropologists all have had missionary experience with a Mennonite mission agency. Their anthropological roles in relation to the missionary enterprise have been diverse. Jacob Loewen taught anthropology at Tabor College before becoming a worldwide translations consultant for the United Bible Societies. His original missionary experience was among the Waunan Indigenous people of Columbia, and later he served in Panama. He was a frequent contributor to *Practical Anthropology*. Paul Hiebert’s career, after his missionary experience in India, has been more academic, serving as Professor of Anthropology and South Asian Studies at Fuller’s School of World Mission and more recently as

1 This presentation by Delores and J. Stanley Friesen was one of four papers presented at the inaugural meeting of the Association of Anabaptist Missiologists (AAM) at Techny Towers north of Chicago, IL, in January 2000. It was later edited and published as “Anthropology, Anabaptists and Mission” in *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 8 (2000): 55–61. At the time of the initial presentation, the Friesens had finished their assignments with Mennonite Board of Mission in Nigeria and Ghana and were living in Fresno, California, where Delores was Professor of Counseling at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary and Stan was serving as a mission consultant.

Professor of Anthropology and Mission at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Robert Ramseyer was a long-term missionary in Japan, beginning in 1954, and later served as Director of the Overseas Mission Training Center at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries. Donald Jacob's writing comes out of his long association with the Mennonite Church in East Africa, where he served as bishop and developer of theological education. He also served as Director of Overseas Ministries for the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and as director of the Mennonite Christian Leadership Foundation.

Their writings address some of the critical issues of the past, which are still being debated today, such as: (1) the role of the missionary in relation to an emerging church, (2) translation of the gospel into the spiritual language and experience of another culture, and (3) finding structures that are appropriate for partnership in mission between older sending churches and emerging churches. After a brief look at the anthropological contributions of Anabaptist Mennonites, we will identify some of the issues and questions that need ongoing attention. Some areas where more could be done include: (1) appropriation of peace theology and witness, (2) shifts in epistemology, (3) cross-cultural counseling, (4) the place and role of women in the church and society, (5) the church as a hermeneutic community, and (6) the relevance of anthropology to our increasingly diverse congregations and communities in North America.

The Historical Setting

One of the earliest Mennonite ethnographers was Heinrich Voth, a General Conference missionary who lived and worked among the Hopi and Arapaho between 1892 and 1906. According to Cathy Ann Trotta, the Mennonite Library and Archives at Bethel College in Kansas contains over 2,000 negatives and glass slides attributed to Voth.² He collected Native American artifacts for the Smithsonian Institute and exhibited them at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. Jim Juhnke describes Voth as a curious mixture of missionary and ethnographer who offended his mission board by personally profiting from the sale of Indigenous artifacts and offended the Hopi by revealing their ritual secrets to the public.³ In the end, Voth had to give up his missionary career. However, a hundred years later, Voth's reputation as an ethnographer has been somewhat redeemed, because Voth's photographs have been an invaluable asset to the Hopi in their reconstruction of some of their traditional ritual objects.

2 Cathy Ann Trotta, "Crossing Cultural Boundaries: Heinrich and Martha Moser Voth in the Hopi Pueblos, 1893–1906" (unpublished PhD diss., Northern Arizona University, 1997).

3 James C. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America, 1890–1930* (Herald Press, 1989).

The era following World War II witnessed a vigorous interaction between mission and anthropology. It was in this early postcolonial era that Mennonites became serious about the application of anthropological studies to mission. The impetus came from Eugene Nida and the American Bible Society translation teams. Nida's pioneering books *Customs and Cultures* (Harper and Row, 1954) and *Message and Mission* (Harper and Row, 1960), along with the periodical *Practical Anthropology* (1953–1973) edited by William Smalley, became some of the formative instruments shaping missionary anthropology at midcentury.

A number of missionary linguists have played an important part in the development of linguistic and translation theory: H. A. Gleason at the Kennedy School of Missions, Kenneth Pike at the Summer Institute of Linguistics/Wycliffe Bible Translators, and Eugene Nida of the United Bible Societies. It would be instructive to know how many Anabaptists and Mennonites studied or were involved in Bible translation because of these three institutions. Among the best-known Mennonites were Jacob Loewen and Harold Fehderau. Fehderau spent ten years as a missionary translator on the Kituba language project in Congo and produced a grammar, dictionary, and book called *The Origins and Development of Kituba*.⁴ Harold gave another twelve years in Africa as translations consultant for the United Bible Societies.

Overall, it would seem that in the past century contributions have centered around a more applied, pragmatic form of anthropology; that is, it was used to identify better ways of communicating the gospel, or in the training and educating of missionaries and pastors, rather than studying or developing ethnographic and descriptive profiles of cultures and peoples. For example, the skills and resources of linguist and anthropologist Bill Reyburn were utilized in specific Toba language projects and social-structure issues related to the emerging church. It is also instructive that with the exception of Harold Fehderau, Anabaptist anthropologists have not focused much attention on African independent churches or the spiritual church movement in Africa, though Mennonites have had four decades of effective ministries within this large and growing indigenous movement.

Anabaptist missionaries and their boards have been great borrowers of mission theology and strategy from the larger stream of the Christian missionary endeavor. In the field of missionary anthropology, the pattern is no different; in the idiom of anthropologists, we Anabaptist Mennonites are “hunters and gatherers.”

4 See also Harold Fehderau, “The Origin and Development of Kituba (Lingua Franca Kikongo),” in *Linguistic and Literary Studies in Honor of Archibald A. Hill*, eds. Mohammad Ali Jazayeri, Edgar C. Polome, and Werner Winter, vol. 2 (Mouton, 1978), 259–265.

Missionary Roles and Relationships

On the critical questions of how to structure postcolonial relations between sending churches and newly organized churches so that both integrity and autonomy are preserved, Jacob Loewen along with William Smalley and William Reyburn have used role theory to provide insights on the relationships a missionary may have with an emerging church.⁵

When Loewen was writing in the 1960s, many missionaries regarded their calling as long-term. Currently with more short-term and specialized assignments, the question of the roles a missionary plays in relation to a younger church is a vital issue that could benefit from anthropological insight. How does one play a supervisory role with respect to funds sent from the sending North American church, or for a funding agency like the USAID, which gives ASHA grants to a school or hospital? Or what about being an outside resource person who comes in for a short time? This is one of the roles Loewen identifies that seems to be valuable even now for the outsider to suggest and offer options and alternatives that the local churches may not readily think of.⁶

A resource with an outside perspective is a valuable role, particularly as a church learns the conversational process of discernment. There are several present-day examples where one of the missionary's main functions is to be the conduit for communication and fiscal responsibility between a national Mennonite conference and an international Mennonite church agency. It appears that both the Mennonite World Conference and the International Conference of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB) may well play similar roles in the future. Here is another place where anthropological insight is needed.

The roles of women in mission have changed significantly in the twentieth century, and their contribution to missionary anthropology should not be overlooked. Fran Hiebert, Anne Loewen, Anna Ruth Jacobs, and Alice Ruth Ramseyer all played significant roles and assisted their spouses in experiencing, conversing, editing, and compiling anthropological and theological works. Fran Hiebert also wrote several articles about the roles of women in the church, including one on the cultural and ideological influences on the role of women⁷ and another on "Missionary Women as Models in the Cross-Cultural Context."⁸ Fran was willing to take on questions that were being debated and was able to

5 Jacob Loewen, "Roles, Self-Image, and Missionary Communication," *Practical Anthropology* 14 (July–August 1967).

6 Jacob Loewen, "The Missionary Role," *Journal of Church and Society* 3 (Spring 1967): 3–22.

7 Francis Hiebert, "Cultural and Ideological Influences on the Role of Women," *Priscilla Papers* 3, no. 12 (Summer 1998): 2–6.

8 Francis Hiebert, "Missionary Women as Models in the Cross-Cultural Context," *Missiology: An International Review* 10 (October 1982): 455–460.

articulate her own position and critique and respond to alternative views. She often included case studies and personal testimony in her writing. The presence of more women trained professionally in the field of anthropology, like Katrina Poetker and Eloise Hiebert Meneses, may further change the landscape.

Art, Music, Story and Mythology

The most well-known Mennonite writer and contributor to the work of United Bible Societies (UBS) has been Jacob Loewen, who frequently worked in association with his wife, Anne. Jake is a gifted storyteller and a peddler of stories and ideas from one mission station to another in the process of his travels as a consultant for UBS. What makes his narration powerful is his gift of appropriate self-revelation, and the use of self-reflection to draw out from persons of another culture their “innermost.”⁹ Loewen has addressed some of the problems of transition from tribal religion to Christianity. According to Loewen, the study of a people’s myths, rather than leading to syncretism, provides a rich source of vocabulary dealing with religious experience.¹⁰ Loewen commends Don Jacobs, who in teaching biblical theology began with a systematic investigation of the traditional myths and beliefs of his students in East Africa. In spite of Loewen’s advocacy for the value of studying mythology, we are aware of only one published collection by a Mennonite missionary, *African Fables That Teach about God* by Eudene Keidel (Herald Press, 1978). These tales were recorded while the Keidels were AIMM missionaries in Zaire.

However, Mennonites have been more interested in hymnody and music as a means to understand the theology and the religious language of a people entering Christianity from tribal religions. Mary Oyers’s study of ethnic musicology has greatly enriched the hymnody of the North American Church. James R. Krabill’s analysis of Dida Harrist hymnology¹¹ and Mary Anne Isaak’s study of the emerging hymnody of the Mennonite Brethren Church in the Congo¹² are two further examples.

9 Jacob Loewen, “A Mennonite Encounter with the ‘Innermost’ of the Lengua Indians,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 39 (January 1965): 40–67.

10 Jacob Loewen, “Mythology and Missions: Should a Missionary Study Tribal Myths?” *Practical Anthropology* 16 (1969): 147–192.

11 James R. Krabill, “Dida Harrist Hymnology (1913–1990),” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 20, no. 2 (June): 118–152.

12 Mary Anne Isaak, “Zairian Theology in Four-Part Harmony,” *Direction* 22 (Fall 1993): 39–50. This is a summary of her master’s thesis presented to the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary.

Structure of Mission

One of the many solid contributions Paul Hiebert has made is to examine our social structures and their impact on the growth of the church.¹³ In the colonial past, the two models of mission structure have been the denominational mission board and the mission society (e.g., China Inland Mission). Neither structure has been entirely satisfactory in relating to the emerging churches and mutual commitment to mission.

Hiebert's questions identify a number of the major issues that must be addressed. How do we recognize the autonomy and the equality of the church in different countries while still providing organizational structure that permits cooperation in mission? How do we overcome cultural differences, feelings of superiority, inequality of wealth, and national loyalties to become one in Christ? Unity needs both theological expression and articulation as well as the social structures to carry out mission together. The challenge is that the churches of the West still have the major economic resources, the dominant repository of the historical records and archives of the worldwide Christian movement, and access to the most advanced educational resources.

These issues and questions are not new, but they become ever more urgent as the percentage of Christians in the two-thirds world exceeds those in the West. Hans Kasdorf's analysis of the fifteen missiological statements of member agencies of the Council of International Ministries (CIM) points out among his "neglected essentials" in these documents that no one gives an adequate response to the implications that true partnering might have for ongoing mission.¹⁴ How will partnership impact the structure of mission at such practical levels of financial management, missionary methods, and multilinguistic and multinational teams? Jeanine Janzen's recent thesis addresses some of these questions.¹⁵

In the current reshuffling of structures as the merger of the General Conference and Mennonite Church denominations proceeds, Tom Lehman, Chair of the Commission on Overseas Mission, has raised a provocative question: "Is there a role that Mennonite World Conference can play in guiding mission planning and even mission administration in the transformed mission enterprise

13 Paul Hiebert, "Social Structure and Church Growth," in *Crucial Dimensions in World Evangelization*, eds. Arthur F. Glasser, Paul G. Hiebert, C. Peter Wagner, and Ralph D. Winter (William Carey, 1976), 61–74; Paul Hiebert, "The Bicultural Bridge," *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Baker, 1985), 227–253.

14 Hans Kasdorf, "Toward an Anabaptist Missiology for the 1990s: A Missiologists Perspective," in *A Relevant Anabaptist Missiology for the 1990s*, ed. Calvin Shenk (Council of International Ministries, 1990), 3–18. This was an unpublished collection of articles by Mennonite missiologists for the Council of International Ministries.

15 Jeanine Janzen, "Partnership in Mission: A Model for the Global MB Family" (unpublished master's thesis, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 1999).

that we are trying so hard to discover”?¹⁶ Lehman is aware that the era of international mission conceived and directed from North America is coming to a close. Is there a forum where Mennonite leaders from other continents can cooperate with North American agencies to create vision and structures of administration to carry out the mission?

Peace and Justice Issues

Where are we in terms of globalization and of our peace and justice witness? Don Jacobs, as an anthropologist, speaks with the pastoral voice of a bishop. He writes from within the internal life of the East African church and often speaks of the experience of the Holy Spirit in the discerning processes of the East African Revival Fellowship meetings.¹⁷ His descriptions resonate with the joyful and vibrant worship of the Church of the Lord Aladura in Abidjan, Ivory Coast.¹⁸ His pastoral passion comes alive in his article “Ethnicity: Friend or Foe” in the commemorative volume of *Direction*.¹⁹ In this article Jacobs reflects on a “peace-making” ministry in a Tanzanian church torn by a decade-old schism nurtured by fanning a smoldering tribalism.

One of the great tragedies of the church in Africa has been the violence linked to tribalism. The irony is that some of the areas of the continent that have been most responsive to Christian missions and have also been deeply influenced by the East African Revival have experienced some of the most vicious ethnic genocides, particularly in parts of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo. Don Jacobs’s article in *Direction* underscores the need for the anthropological study of conflict resolution in African societies.

But more importantly, a theology of peacemaking that grows out of experiences of the church of Africa must be nurtured. The Revival Fellowships of Kenya and Rwanda during the Mau Mau and Hutu-Tutsi conflict at the time of national independence in the 1960s gave a costly peace witness, at times even to the point of people laying down their lives. Anglican Bishop Festo Kivengere’s message to the Revival Fellowship in Rwanda was: “Use only one weapon, that of Calvary love for all!”

It is Bob Ramseyer’s observation that “with few exceptions, Mennonite Churches founded by Mennonite missionaries as part of the modern missionary

16 Letter from Thomas A. Lehman to Larry Miller, Christmas Day, 1999.

17 Donald Jacobs, “Walking Together in East Africa,” *Concern*, no. 14 (February 1967): 44–48; Donald Jacobs, “The Charismatic in East Africa,” *Concern*, no. 15 (July 1967): 36–39.

18 Donald Jacobs, “Sunday in Africa . . . Let’s Go to Church: Church and Symbol,” *Risk* 7, no. 3 (1971): 36–41.

19 Donald Jacobs, “Ethnicity: Friend or Foe,” *Direction* 28, no. 1 (1999): 73–74.

movement lack a distinct peace witness.”²⁰ This observation needs to be revisited and researched to see what growth there has been in peace awareness.²¹

If our peace witness is to be heard and we are prepared to stand with our Christian brethren in their revolutionary circumstances, Don Jacobs has identified the challenge before us. “The unholy alliance of Christianity, capitalism, and Western culture is plaguing the church. This alliance must be dissolved if Western churches are to be effective in ‘brothering’ with churches in the developing nations.”²² If there is an Anabaptist priority that should shape our missiology, there is no doubt that the peace witness must be integral. But are we prepared to pay the price that Don Jacobs identifies? It should be noted that mediation services have broadened their scope to include cross-cultural perspective and missions to various parts of the world.

Ongoing Issues and Questions

How should mission be done in an anti-colonial postmodern era, characterized by religious relativism and accusations of Christian imperialism? Paul Hiebert provides an instructive guide through the epistemological currents in his book *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts*.²³

Our contemporary world is polarized between the positivism of modern science and the relativism of instrumentalism and idealism. Hiebert helps us see that these are false alternatives, and he sketches the significance of critical realism. Critical realism is grounded in the concept of the hermeneutical community, a concept Anabaptists have affirmed for the interpretation of scripture. The meaning of the scriptures is understood and interpreted most fully only within a community of interpretation. Critical realism affirms a real world that exists independently from human perceptions and opinions, while restoring emotions and moral judgments as essential parts of knowing. Hiebert feels that in an age of theological pluralism and contextualization as churches are planted in different cultures, the conversational process of the hermeneutic community becomes even more essential to our understanding of the Bible and mission.

20 Robert Ramseyer, “Mennonite Missions and the Peace Witness,” *Mission and the Peace Witness*, ed. Robert Ramseyer (Herald Press, 1979), 115.

21 Mennonite professor Tom Lehman, for example, indicates that one of the General Conference partners in Colombia is in the process of articulating a more distinct peace witness.

22 Donald Jacobs, *The Christian Stance in a Revolutionary Age*, Focal Pamphlet no. 14 (Herald Press, 1968), 24.

23 Paul Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts: Affirming Truths in a Modern/Post Modern World* (Trinity Press, 1999).

Robert Ramseyer asked some significant questions from a believers' church and anthropologist perspective in his essay in *The Challenge of Church Growth*.²⁴ A quarter-century later these same questions seem relevant, as Anabaptists evaluate our vision of mission and growth in the current popularity of the "mega" church. Some of Ramseyer's concerns may be summarized as follows: (1) If the minimization of social and cultural upheaval as people become Christians is a high priority, then the assumption is that the more the Christian faith performs the traditional functions in society, the better the church will grow. What does this say about the gospel, the nature of the church, and the role of Christians in society? (2) Is the Believers Church design always a minority? If so, is it similar enough to other churches that it fulfills enough of the same social functions to create growth, or does it have another function in society? How does our theology of church impact our potential for growth?

In addition to the important issues that Ramseyer raises, additional questions might include some of the following:

1. What are the principles and assumptions of Anabaptist missionary anthropology?
2. How can the structures of mission move more fully to a partnership model? How do our cultural values affect the practical matters of short-termers, financial management, missionary methods, and multi-linguistic and multinational teams?
3. How might anthropological insight contribute to our understanding of the growing intercultural and multiethnic nature of our churches and communities in North America?
4. How will the narrative and constructivist approaches of the postmodern world impact our framework and priorities of mission? Should we make a more conscious attempt to go beyond our typical pragmatic focus?
5. What voices have not been heard? How can we strengthen and hear these unheard voices?
6. How do we facilitate discoveries and learning from the visual and creative arts of the church—drama, myth, legend, story, dance, music, poetry, etc.—in our own and in other cultures?
7. Pastoral care and counseling are a growing edge in our seminaries and congregations. The process, methods, and results of healing, illness, and shalom have long been of interest to anthropologists. However, this area seems to be noticeably absent in missiological literature. How might the healing arts be a venue for conversation and dialogue?

24 Wilbert R. Shenk, ed., *The Challenge of Church Growth: A Symposium*, Missionary Studies no. 1 (Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1973).