
Anabaptist Missiology: Leadership Trends¹

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Introduction

Rather quickly after its emergence at the turn of the nineteenth century the modern mission movement adopted a basic model and methods. By 1820 it was assumed that missionary work consisted of a constellation of activities: preaching, education, Bible translation, and publishing. These activities were carried out using certain principles of mission. It was recognized that many questions concerning effective mission work remained unanswered, but this basic model was not at issue. This combination of model, methods, and principles was soon institutionalized as the “mission compound” and became the classical mission model.²

In spite of the fact that the classical model of mission had come under increasing critical scrutiny after 1900, the vast majority of mission boards and missionaries at the end of World War II remained committed to the classical model. A minority of mission leaders, influenced by such critics as Roland Allen (1868–1947), recognized that this model had become a burdensome liability.³ Yet

1 This presentation by Wilbert R. Shenk was one of four papers presented at the inaugural meeting of the Association of Anabaptist Missiologists (AAM) at Techy Towers north of Chicago, IL, in January 2000. It was entitled “Anabaptist Missiology: Leadership Trends” and was later edited and published as “Leadership of Mennonite Mission, 1945–1885” in *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 8 (2000): 43–53. Shenk was a longtime administrator at Mennonite Board of Missions, the editor of *Mission Focus*, and, at the time of the 2000 presentation, had been named the Paul E. Pierson Professor of Mission History and Culture at Fuller Seminary School of World Mission, Pasadena, California.

2 For greater precision I prefer to call this the *modern* mission model, for it is based on the values and ideals of modernity.

3 The institutional weight of the model was considerable. Even though attempts were made periodically to revive conviction for the indigenous ideal, e.g., John Ritchie, *The Indigenous Church Principles in Theory and Practice* (Revell Company, 1946), the basic model remained largely unquestioned.

attempts to reform the system were generally not welcomed—by missionaries, mission boards, and supporting constituencies.

This presentation is limited to the period since 1945 and will be divided into three phases: 1945–1965, *postcolonial*; 1965–1975, *retrenchment*; 1975–1985, *restructuring*.

Postcolonial Phase: 1945–1965

The usual interpretation of North American Mennonite and Brethren in Christ missions in the post-World War II era emphasizes the rapid program development, especially between 1945 and 1960. On these grounds we can justifiably call this the “golden age” of Mennonite missions. From 1945 to 1960 an unprecedented fifty-three new missions were founded with a view to the establishment of viable new churches. The present profile of the worldwide Mennonite and Brethren in Christ owes a great deal to this seminal period.

During this period the conditions for such development were especially favorable, for a number of reasons: (1) sizeable financial reserves had been accumulated during the war years when the sending of new missionaries had to be curtailed; (2) a large number of new missionary candidates were available; (3) the supporting churches demonstrated growing interest in missions; and (4) new opportunities in many countries where Mennonite missions had not worked in the past were opening up. This missionary expansion was linked in a number of instances to Mennonite Central Committee’s relief work following World War II, but the mission agencies were self-consciously attempting to extend into areas where they had not worked in the past.

The argument I wish to make here is that the central issue facing Mennonite and Brethren in Christ missions in 1945 was not how to cope with a new wave of mission expansion. Rather, the most pressing strategic issue was what to do with the now-defunct “colonial mission model.” This was not simply a matter of maintaining existing programs based on the bankrupt classical model. Even more urgent was the question of what the future model would be. The issue was patently clear in geopolitical terms. In August 1945 Indonesian nationalists declared their independence from the Dutch—and won that independence four years later. In August 1947 the British granted political independence to India and Pakistan. This sent a strong signal that the days of the European colonial empires were numbered. Although overshadowed to some extent by the Cold War, this was nonetheless one of the priority concerns on the international agenda for the next two decades.⁴

4 One way to follow the discussion of the “colonial” question is to study the volumes of the *International Review of Missions* during the decade of the 1950s.

No development during this time was more troubling than the so-called “loss” of China. The communists wrested control of China from Chiang Kai-shek’s forces in 1949 and quickly moved to expel all foreign influences, including missionaries, from its soil. It should be recalled that starting with Robert Morrison in 1807 Christian missions had had a difficult time gaining entrance to China in the first place, and when missions finally secured permission to be in China it was under the questionable legal umbrella provided by the unequal treaties forced on China by the Western powers around 1860. The “closing of China” in 1949 inflicted a severe trauma on the missionary movement, from which it recovered only gradually.⁵

Two Mennonite mission leaders of the period from 1945 to 1965 stand out because of their discerning reading of the times and their constructive attempts to develop a new model for their missions. J. D. Graber (1900–1978) and J. B. Toews (1906–1998) were not uniformly successful in their efforts, but they were clear-sighted, courageous, and creative in their leadership.

It might be asked whether Orie O. Miller (1892–1977) does not merit inclusion in this list. He became executive secretary of the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions (EMBM)⁶ in 1935. As assistant executive secretary he led the establishment of EMBM’s first overseas mission in Tanganyika (later Tanzania) in 1934. However, Miller did not have to face in the 1940s and 1950s the same administrative challenges as Graber and Toews. Miller liked to say that he was following J. D. Graber’s administrative lead closely in order to avoid creating the problems in Tanganyika that Graber faced in India. Miller was certainly well informed and sufficiently concerned to stay abreast of the rapidly changing situation in terms of mission strategy.⁷ For example, he attended the periodic assemblies of the International Missionary Council, at his own initiative, in order to stay in touch with developments in the world church, something for which he could not have received formal authorization from his board at that time.

J. D. Graber was elected general secretary of the Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM) in 1944, the first full-time administrator of the board.⁸ Until this time, the administration was handled by the board treasurer, a paid staff position, and the secretary, who served on an honorary part-time basis. With the appointment of Graber, a significant change in administrative outlook was instituted.

5 See David M. Paton, *Christian Missions and the Judgment of God* (SCM Press, 1953), an important, if somewhat stringent analysis of the closing of China.

6 Now Eastern Mennonite Missions.

7 See Paul Erb, *Orie O. Miller: The Story of a Man and an Era* (Herald Press, 1969), chapter 9.

8 So far as I have been able to determine, Graber is the first Mennonite/Brethren in Christ mission secretary to have served as a long-term missionary prior to appointment to administrative responsibility.

He brought to this new position seventeen years of experience in India, where he had followed the rising nationalist movement for political independence and was aware of what this implied for the future of the church. He had been present when a team from the National Christian Council of India conducted a survey and evaluated the Mennonite mission in Madhya Pradesh in 1937 and concluded in their report: “If there is any mission station where this [classical mission] theory has been given a thorough, devoted, intelligent trial, that mission is the American Mennonite, and that station is Dhamtari.”⁹ Nonetheless, the visiting team was highly critical of the results and recommended an overhaul of the mission’s methods.

Graber came to his work with a clear understanding of the times. He was committed to the reform of existing programs but was even more determined to avoid starting new missions based on the classical model. This meant avoiding the founding of large-scale institutions as the basis for missionary work.¹⁰ He emphasized that no mission compounds were to be established in the future. One way he attempted to prevent this from happening was to deploy missionaries more widely, thus discouraging the build-up of large institutional programs in centers.

The major test of Graber’s administration was the mission in India. Here he faced a group of his longtime missionary colleagues who strongly resisted all attempts to change the existing patterns,¹¹ on the one hand, and Indian church leaders, on the other, who were chafing under missionary control and demanded that leadership of the church be transferred to them. With the backing of the Mission Board, in 1948 Graber was able to override missionary opposition and set in motion a multiphase process that eventually resulted in the transfer of all leadership to Indians, dismantled mission structures, and arranged for the disposal of all mission properties. Although the MBM mission in Argentina was not as highly institutionalized, similar steps were followed there under the administrative guidance of Nelson Litwiller, MBM secretary for Latin America until 1967.

Graber’s vision was not simply that of dismantling and closing down a mission. In 1965 at the MBM annual meeting in his keynote address, Graber sketched out his vision for a new stage of “Partners in World Mission,” a call for the development of partnerships between the church in North America and the emerging

9 J. W. Pickett, A. L. Warnhuis, G. H. Singh, and D. A. McGavran, *Church Growth and Group Conversion* (Lucknow Publishing House, 1962; first ed., 1938), 67.

10 Graber took the lead in arranging for William and Marie Reyburn to evaluate the program in the Argentine Chaco in 1954, which led to the dismantling of the conventional institutional program and an innovative approach being set in motion. See William and Marie Reyburn, *The Toba Indians of the Argentine Chaco* (MBMC, 1954). For a summary of this case, see Wilbert R. Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (Orbis Books, 1999), chapter 5.

11 This was not the view of all the missionaries. Younger missionaries embraced Graber’s vision of a new model.

churches in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.¹² In 1965, discussions were underway between MBM and the Mennonite churches in Argentina and Japan to partner in new mission ventures. Before Graber retired in 1967, Japan Mennonite Church and MBM were jointly sponsoring one Japanese Mennonite couple who served a Japanese-language program at HCJB in Quito, Ecuador.

J. B. Toews served on the administrative staff of the Mennonite Brethren Board of Missions and Services from 1953 to 1963, first as promotional secretary and then as general secretary. As a member of the board in 1952 Toews had visited Africa, meeting not only with Mennonite Brethren missionaries but canvassing missions in several countries. He was impressed that “two centuries of colonialism had come to an end and all the colonies of western Europe were crying for independence. Around the world old political structures were being dismantled. . . . A new era in the history of missions was dawning.”¹³ In reporting to the board late that year, Toews recommended a review of all board programs in India, Africa, and South America with a view to introducing basic changes. The following year he was appointed to the staff.

Looking back on that period, Toews observed that “Mennonite Brethren missions in 1953 can be understood only in the context of a colonial system where each missionary or group of missionaries functioned as an independent entity. . . . Mennonite Brethren mission program was still based on the concept of the mission station as the center of operational outreach.”¹⁴ In an address to the Mennonite World Conference in 1962, Toews noted that “we are living in an era of great cultural and national awakening. Man’s spirit is rising to an awareness of his dignity and is demanding freedom.”¹⁵ But the old pattern of mission remained firmly in control. The field mission structure had the final word on administrative decisions. Missionaries answered neither to the mission board nor, more importantly, to the national church. Every attempt Toews made to introduce reform was frustrated by this fact of missionary autonomy. The missionary system efficiently insulated the missionary from accountability to anyone, including the mission board. Toews ended his service as general secretary in 1963 in despair. He saw clearly what needed to be done, both in terms of reconceptualizing the mission task and revising the structures. But even with his considerable leadership skill and moral authority, Toews failed to challenge the system.

In summary, it may be observed that clear vision alone is insufficient. Structures of decision-making and accountability must be in place to support

12 J. D. Graber, “Partners in World Mission,” *Missions 1965* (MBMC, 1965), 11–23.

13 J. B. Toews, *JB: A Twentieth-Century Mennonite Pilgrim* (Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1995), 154.

14 *Ibid.*, 159.

15 J. B. Toews, “The Ministry of the Church in Missions,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 36 (1962): 225.

program implementation. If adequate structures are lacking, the agency cannot implement programs effectively or introduce change as the environment changes.

Retrenchment Phase: 1965–1975

By 1960 the wave of mission expansion overseas by Mennonite and Brethren in Christ agencies had crested. Only ten new missions were launched during the decade of the 1960s. The dismantling of European colonial structures was in full flow and would be largely completed by 1970. In terms of the international economy, 1967—the endpoint of the post-World War II economic boom—has become the official benchmark year for comparing monetary values. By the late 1960s, agencies began to experience the tightening of budgets as inflation eroded buying power and the cost of living in urban centers skyrocketed worldwide.

Throughout this period, geopolitical thinking and relationships were in the firm grip of Cold War ideology. The war in Vietnam was a serious drag on morale and economy. Domestically, the United States was caught up in the Civil Rights struggle and the youth movement that was highly critical of institutions and authority. In terms of Christian mission, it was becoming evident that the mood in the churches was turning inward. Frequently, the question was put to mission agencies: Why are we continuing to spend so much money overseas when we have such urgent needs at home? The OPEC crisis in 1973/1974 further dampened the international economy and reinforced the tendency to look inward. The steady growth in missionary numbers that had become a staple of annual reports from the late forties through the fifties had largely stopped by the mid-sixties. Although the shift was not abrupt or drastic, from 1967 the number of missionaries was in decline.¹⁶

It is difficult to find a compelling idea that focuses the issues facing Mennonite and Brethren in Christ missions during this period. No one spoke of retrenchment, but this was increasingly the reality. When the Nigeria/Biafra war broke out in 1966, it forced the MBM to withdraw most of some thirty workers from that country; MBM was never able to regain the ground lost in terms of worker strength.

For some boards, the shift was precipitated by financial crisis. In 1967 the Mennonite Brethren Board of Missions/Services was half a million dollars in debt and facing a mounting crisis of confidence. Vernon R. Wiebe was appointed general secretary with the mandate to address the situation. He reorganized the board and field programs and retired the debt. With the confidence of the constituent churches restored, the program was gradually rejuvenated. Vernon Wiebe noted that he had largely implemented the plan J. B. Toews had recommended

16 This refers only to mission agency personnel. Mennonite Central Committee's numbers continued to expand into the early 1980s.

to the board a decade earlier. By 1967 the board faced the choice of fundamental reform or going out of business.

Howard Habegger became executive secretary of the General Conference Commission on Overseas Mission (COM) in 1967. As he began his tenure, he led the commission through a major review that resulted in a statement of goals, priorities, and strategies that guided COM over the next decade. Paul N. Kraybill, executive secretary of the EMBM since 1958, resigned in 1969, and Don Jacobs assumed a leading role in that board until he founded the Mennonite Christian Leadership Foundation.

Whereas the closing of China had happened abruptly, the closing of India was protracted. In 1948 Prime Minister Nehru personally took the decision that foreign missionaries would eventually be barred from entering India. By 1960, new visas for missionaries to India were increasingly difficult to secure, and by 1970, only missionaries with specialist qualifications in certain fields stood a chance of getting a visa. Between 1970 and 1975 scores of long-term missionaries left India, including a number of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ workers, thus largely completing the “closing of India” to long-term missionary service.¹⁷

As noted above, the closing of China in 1949 had sent tremors throughout the world of missions. In the heat of debate about the dismantling of colonial mission structures and the call that appeared as the title of a 1964 book, *Missionary, Go Home*,¹⁸ only Donald McGavran seemed to have a grand vision of what ought to be done. He insisted that rather than this being the “sunset of missions,” we were witnessing the “sunrise.”¹⁹ McGavran, of course, cast his vision in terms of making church growth the focal point of all missionary work. All Mennonite and Brethren in Christ missions were influenced, at least to some degree, by McGavran’s vision, but it was appropriated only in a piecemeal fashion.

One innovation pioneered by Mennonite missions, starting in the 1950s, was to work in partnership with indigenous Christian movements, first in Argentina, and then in Africa. Whatever the contribution Mennonites have made to these indigenous movements, this relationship has been of inestimable importance to Mennonites. In the first place, for this relationship to be productive, Mennonites had to rid themselves of all vestiges of the classical mission model and accept the discipline of allowing these indigenous groups to take the lead in setting the agenda. In the second place, it meant that Mennonites had to learn to play their

17 This has not meant the end of various short-term and other alternative forms of Christian service on the part of foreigners. But the old era was brought to an end.

18 James A. Scherer, *Missionary, Go Home* (Prentice-Hall, 1964), a balanced and constructive book not well served by its title.

19 Among McGavran’s most important works are *The Bridges of God* (Friendship Press, 1955); *How Churches Grow* (World Dominion Press, 1959); and *Understanding Church Growth* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1970).

role without benefit of the institutional infrastructure that had been associated with mission methodology in the past. (This was frequently a source of misunderstanding. Some indigenous groups expected that partnering with foreign bodies would open up channels to external financial and other resources.) The approach in each situation has had to be improvised on site.²⁰

One of those who contributed in important ways to this development has been James Bertsche, a longtime missionary in Zaire/Congo and then executive secretary of Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission (AIMM). His training in anthropology and long experience in Africa equipped him to offer sound guidance to missionaries who took up the challenge of serving with African indigenous churches.

In summary, the mood in wider society and constituency between 1965 and 1975 was one of retreat and retrenchment, an attitude reinforced by the tightening financial situation, social unrest at home, and the Vietnam debacle. Missions were still in the shadow of colonialism. The program development that most radically departed from the classical missions period was the ministries begun by Mennonite missions among indigenous Christian movements. The missiological significance of this experiment has not yet been fully explored.

Restructuring Phase: 1975–1985

It is obvious that both the dating and the designation of these stages are somewhat arbitrary. In the absence of adequate empirical data, it is difficult to establish what exactly was happening. By 1980 it was perceived that many of the agency structures were in need of overhaul. Thus, when Paul M. Gingrich became president of the Mennonite Board of Missions in 1980, the board went through a review of its structures that resulted in reorganization. Erwin Rempel, as executive secretary of the COM during the 1980s, led the commission through a careful program review and projection process. Similar restructuring happened in several other boards, including Eastern Mennonite Missions, usually in conjunction with a change in leadership. Boards and agencies need to keep pace with the times, and organizational change is a part of this adjustment process. But the “restructuring” that was needed was as much conceptual as organizational. It was easy enough to see that the time-honored structures and patterns were no longer effective; it was quite another matter to visualize what ought to replace them.

The immediate pressure in the 1980s was to streamline operations, since revenues were not keeping pace with inflation. Only five new missions were launched during the decade of the 1980s (only one of which was sponsored by

20 See Wilbert R. Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (Orbis Books, 1999), chapters 5 and 6; David A. Shank, *What Western Christians Can Learn from African-Initiated Churches*, Mission Insight series, no. 10, ed. James R. Krabill (Mennonite Board of Missions, 2000).

a North American Mennonite agency). A survey of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches carried out by Mennonite World Conference in late 1999, although incomplete, shows that by contrast, fifty new missions were founded in the 1990s, and over half were initiatives by churches outside North America and Western Europe.

From a missiological point of view, however, what is of primary interest is conceptual innovation or restructuring. In this regard, several developments will require further exploration and reflection: (a) multilateral partnerships (e.g., the Indonesian PIPKA); (b) theology of presence; and (c) witness in limited access areas.

Multilateral Partnerships

One of the most surprising developments in the past twenty-five years is the rise of the missionary movement from non-Western churches. Today, there are more than 5,000 Korean missionaries in service all over the world. And churches from various Asian, African, and Latin American countries are joining in this growing movement. Some of these new missions, lacking good historical perspective, are being carried on in a quite traditional—one could say “classical”—mission style, as a mission sponsored from one church with a view to establishing a church in another country. Others are being worked out as cooperative international or inter-agency initiatives.

Mennonite churches and agencies have been a part of this innovation. For purposes of illustration, I will cite here the case of PIPKA (Pengutusan Injil dan Pelayanan Kasih, or “mission and service”), the Indonesian agency related to the (Mennonite) Muria Christian Church (GKMI). Its original purpose was to promote evangelization in the major cities, starting in Jakarta. Gradually the vision grew, and workers began to be deployed more widely. In 1973 the Mennonite Brethren Board of Missions/Services (BOMAS) and PIPKA entered into an agreement whereby BOMAS would work with PIPKA in the Missionary Training Center in Jakarta. Here are key points in the agreement reached by the two bodies:

1. First and foremost, we acknowledge that we are members of the same family (Eph 2:19). Hence it is only natural for us to join hands and work together as equals.
2. Our “partnership” is not to be understood in terms of shareholders but is based on the concept of family members helping one another, of the parts of the body all being essential to the well-being of the whole. The older and stronger are bound to help the weaker and younger.
3. There is room for diversity and differences, but these are not to be interpreted as disunity. Nor is there superiority or inferiority (1 Cor 12:14–26).

4. Any kind of work in our partnership is to strengthen, build, and mature the local churches, so that in turn they are equipped to grow and multiply.
5. The program decisions are to be made on the field (i.e., the Mennonite Brethren Board and/or their representatives are to help implement and achieve PIPKA's goals and not their own).²¹

Subsequently, the EMBM joined with PIPKA also and sent two missionary couples to work with PIPKA in church development in Kalimantan. This is not the only instance of such international Mennonite cooperation, but it is a significant experience and one that ought to encourage us to continue and expand such collaboration.

Theology of Presence

One of the persistent issues during the past fifty years has been how Christian witness might be carried out in situations where there is hostility to the Christian message. For example, the United Mission to Nepal—in which two Mennonite agencies have held membership—as a condition for being allowed to work in the country in 1954 had to agree that its workers would engage in no overt Christian evangelizing activity. This and similar situations elsewhere called for careful thought. The Anglican missionary statesman Max Warren initiated discussion of what he called a “theology of presence” in the 1960s; however, Warren’s proposal was roundly criticized by Donald McGavran, and among evangelicals “theology of presence” became suspect, in spite of the fact that it is a fundamental biblical theme.

In 1979 China began to open itself up to contacts with the West. In this initial stage, foreigners were treated with suspicion and proposed program relationships were met with hesitation. By 1981 it was clear that regular contacts with China might become possible. Goshen College established a Study-Service Trimester program in China, and then five Mennonite program agencies established the China Educational Exchange in 1982. It was evident that a more adequate theological basis was needed for Christian witness in circumstances where overt Christian evangelization was not possible. Under the aegis of the Council of International Ministries, a study was carried out in 1982. From those proceedings, Calvin Shenk wrote the pamphlet *A Relevant Theology of Presence*,²² which has been an important resource to Mennonite mission and service workers who must carry out their work in places where restrictions are placed on Christian activity.

21 Charles Christano, “PIPKA: An Indonesian Response to Mission,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6, no. 4 (October 1982): 171.

22 Calvin E. Shenk, *A Relevant Theology of Presence* (Mission Focus Pamphlet, 1982).

Limited Access Areas

In the 1980s, a number of Mennonite workers were sent into what have been called “limited access” areas. These are generally, but not exclusively, Muslim lands where Christian activity is forbidden. In the nature of the case, these workers and their activities are not publicized in the usual manner in church periodicals. My purpose here is simply to recognize this as an important innovation.

In summary, the period of 1975 to 1985 was a time of further decline in the number of missionary staff for most of our agencies as well as a loss of financial support in real dollar terms. Yet it has also been a period of some innovations. These may prove to be harbingers of the kind of missionary witness that will characterize the future.