

David Wiebe Plenary talk at Thailand 2017
“The Church On Mission Through Prayer”
Tuesday, March 7, 2017, PM Session

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to God – in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Introduction

I come to you with great excitement and hope for this historic gathering. And yet, I have burdens also that come with it. I hope we can draw strength from considering both the burdens and the hope.

The Mennonite Brethren global family began in Ukraine. Mennonites had settled there since the late 1700s. But “the light of the Gospel [had] been obscured in...many folk.”¹ Through the evangelistic and charismatic ministry of German leaders, a Holy Spirit- led revival entered the region. In 1860 eighteen men with their families signed a declaration of separation from the main Mennonite group to form the Mennonite Brethren Church. We, gathered in Thailand, are their spiritual descendants: Mennonite; renewal oriented; and mission minded.

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Less than 30 years later, the MB church commissioned Abraham and Maria Friesen to leave Ukraine for Nalgonda, India, near Hyderabad. They planted the first church in 1889. Now it has grown into the MB Church of India, with 200,000 members.²

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Meanwhile, Mennonite Brethren who migrated to the USA commissioned Heinrich and Sara Voth to evangelize people living in central Canada. The first MB congregation in Canada was organized in 1888 – the year before Nalgonda, India. It grew into the MB Church of Canada with 35,000 members.³ From our beginnings we heard God’s call to mission. We, gathered in Thailand, are their missionary descendants.

These brief historical notes help identify why we are here. We face many major challenges in mission today as the international Community of Mennonite Brethren – ICOMB. Some of us – 21 churches – are members representing 3000 or more local congregations. Others of us are in associations that will officially join ICOMB in the future. We are a small denomination, yet we have a community history, a theological identity, and a mission.

Thailand 2017 is set up to ask, after 130 years of mission activity: where is God leading us now as a global family?

The book of Ephesians is the central text for Thailand 2017. In it we see who the church is, why it is on mission, and what its character must be like while on mission. For this moment, I hope to tie the words of our theme together: church, mission and prayer. My text is Ephesians 1:15-23.

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Mission Begins with the Triune God

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.” (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37)

¹ John B. Toews and Abe Dueck, “Mennonite Brethren Beginnings” in *The Mennonite Brethren Church: Celebrating 150 Years*, Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2010. p. 16 ff. This article tells the story of the MB Church origins.

² Op. cit. I.P. Asheervadam, “The Mennonite Brethren Church in India”, p. 106 ff.

³ Op. cit. Abe Dueck and Bruce L. Guenther, “The Mennonite Brethren Church in Canada, p. 50ff.

“...my prayers that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him....” (Eph. 1:17)

“...far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come.” (Eph. 1:21)

The first chapter of Ephesians outlines the great plan of God for the world and the church. This plan is founded upon the Trinity (Eph. 1:17). We learn its beginning in Creation and the calling of the people of Israel. It is revealed in the life and work of Christ. The Church lives it out in the power of the Holy Spirit...

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It grounds our identity and mission in community. Ray Harms Wiebe, former missionary and Global Program director for MB Mission has championed this for us.

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“Engagement in the missionary task must be grounded in relationship with the same Father who sent Jesus to earth and the same Holy Spirit who empowered Jesus⁴,” he says.

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I might add the voice of Richard Twiss, American indigenous theologian:
“Trinitarian theology points to the radical communal nature of God. This communion overflows into an involvement with history that aims at drawing humanity and creation in general into this communion with God’s very life.... *It is not primarily about the propagation or transmission of intellectual convictions, doctrines, moral commands, etc., but rather about the inclusion of all creation in God’s overflowing, superabundant life of communion.*”⁵

The essential community of the Trinity is a hallmark of our theology. We confess that the church as community is a hermeneutic – the way we interpret Scripture.

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(It’s impossible to know God)

But let us not think casually about the Trinity. This doctrine is not so easy to understand. First, it took Israel centuries to discover the One God. Then it took the early church 300 years to establish this doctrine. We may be surprised that the doctrine of trinity even declined after the Reformation. Martin Luther didn’t like it. Some Anabaptists couldn’t see it in the Bible and rejected it. In the 1700s some leaders favored a religion of reason and considered the trinity a relic of a superstitious past.⁶

Israel’s history and the church’s struggle tells us that God is like nothing at all that exists. God is not in rivalry with anything, or merely greater than other powers. God is “a different other” – he cannot be compared. God is the “I AM:” As Creator, and as Holy Spirit, God is everywhere present, filling all things.⁷
So, it’s impossible to know God...

⁴ Ray Harms Wiebe, “*The Global Mennonite Brethren Mission Movement: Some Reflections and Projections,*” in *Renewing Identity and Mission: Mennonite Brethren Reflections After 150 Years*, eds. Abe J. Dueck, Bruce L. Guenther and Doug Heidebrecht (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2010), 223.

⁵ Richard Twiss, *All My Relatives: An Indigenous Manifesto for Biblical Justice*, *Journal of north American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies*, Volume 8, 2010, p. 88. Italics mine.

⁶ Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and Vancouver: Regent Press, 2000), pp. 56-65.

⁷ Stephen Freeman, *Everywhere Present: Christianity in a One-Storey Universe* (Chesterton, IN: Conciliar Press, 2010)

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...But you have to know him to know that.

That's the gospel!! Jesus is the I AM revealed. If God is a "different other" so is Christ, the foundation on which the gospel is laid. Jesus Christ bore the identity of the people of God who taught us everything about monotheism forged in the fires of faithfulness, unfaithfulness, exile and repatriation. Then he "died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, he was buried, he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve." (1 Cor 15:3-5). This gospel in a nutshell was a formula used by the apostles, then cemented in the creeds of old.⁸ We learn to know God through Jesus.

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The difficulty of the Trinity should make us humble about our understanding of mission.

Harms-Wiebe confesses our difficulty in living our Trinitarian belief:

"The incarnation of the Son of God, his loving identification with humanity and his self-giving sacrifice are the model for the missionary church. From a confessional perspective, mission is also the mission of the Father and the Holy Spirit, but Mennonite Brethren have had difficulty articulating the Father's active engagement and have been even more guarded...trusting and facilitating the loving work of the Spirit."⁹

The "I AM" cannot be captured by any group for their ideals. I AM is a voice which can only be heard through humility. I AM must be *discovered*.¹⁰ History shows that when the people of God have not discovered him in humility, they think God is on their side. They think their culture is especially approved by God, giving permission to spread Christianity violently.

Richard Twiss laments how Christianity came to America with colonialism. He asserts that his ancestors had visions of people who would come with the gospel. They were already monotheist. But the church imperiously joined the government agenda to destroy native Americans. The suffering among North American indigenous people is testimony to a mission effort charged with pride and power, and not humility. Even as a modern Christian, Twiss, says it took him years to learn not to accept interpretations of the Bible that said "...old things have passed away; behold all things have become white."¹¹

If mission "draws humanity and creation into communion with God's very life," cross-cultural mission must include helping people find their cultural identity under God in Christ. If mission doesn't have this vision, missionaries assume their culture is supreme. Consider this: North American missionaries went out for many years from a culture of oppression against the indigenous. Did that help us validate the cultures we went to? Was it even possible? Have we evaluated this? Have we repented where we went wrong? Do we know where we went right?

My friends, the Trinity must inform *and judge* our mission endeavors.

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The Church is on Mission

A new command I give you: love one another as I have loved you. By this, all will know you are my disciples (John 13:34-35) ...the church, which is his body (Eph. 1:22-23)

⁸ Scott McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, e-pub 2016) chapter 4 details his thesis that 1 Cor. 15:3-5 was the original summary of the gospel.

⁹ Ibid. 224.

¹⁰ James Alison, *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the scene of a break-in*. New York: Continuum Press, 2006, 30.

¹¹ Twiss, *ibid*.

John 1:14 is charged with unique meaning: The Word became flesh (not paper, not a download).¹² The incarnation models the way God is revealed, and how Truth is revealed. In John 14:6 Jesus stated, “I AM the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Jesus is the Way we see God who is impossible to know. Jesus is where truth is found. The Truth said to his disciples, “Love one another as I have loved you.” And Jesus is the Life. Despite being God, the Life submitted to the path of humility, even death (Philippians 2: 5-11). His resurrection shows he trampled down death by his death.

Further, Jesus has incorporated all believers into his body. Ephesians 1:22-23 give us a glimpse of what this means: “And he [God the Father] put all things under his feet [God the Son] and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”

PPT

The church is the Divine Community. Christ is the head; the church is his body – the fullness of Christ in bodily form. If Christ is the fullness of God dwelling in the world, then the church is mysteriously the fullness of God in the world. If God is “another other”, and if the Church is the Divine Community in the world, then the Church is truly “another other” kind of thing.

The Church is *the Way* God is revealed to the world. The Church expresses *the Truth* of God contextualized in relationship. The Church shares *the Life* Christ gives to a world dying of its sin.

This radical truth must be discovered as a *felt reality*. It must be discovered through a revelation to our hearts. In my experience it began with reading this truth, stated in a new way. I intentionally meditated on texts like Ephesians; Philippians 2; Colossians. I allowed the writing of Early Church leaders penetrate my heart. Yet I can only lay this vast truth before you in weakness.

This is partly because western Christianity has been taken over by modernist values. The average Christian and even the typical pastor sees the church as a collection of individuals, not the divine community. The individual is supreme. The western church obsesses on relevance because it is marketing the gospel. It degrades the church from “Divine Community” to a business. Modernism has led us to devalue the identity and power of the church. This has not been addressed for many decades, so western missionaries have spread this low ecclesiology world wide.

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(But) the church is what salvation looks like. The international Confession of Faith declares we are *People of a New Way of Life*. The church is where we are disciplined and renewed. Individualist Christians focus on “vertical” forgiveness. Anabaptists have emphasized “*both* horizontal and vertical” forgiveness. We confess the spiritual necessity of the church as the cradle of salvation, discipleship and renewal.¹³ Cesar Garcia observes that Mennonite Brethren are tempted to define the church by function, either limited to the announcement of the good news, or working for service and social change. But, he notes, the Anabaptists conceived of church in terms of the kingdom. The church proclaims the Kingdom, and is the community of the Kingdom.¹⁴

¹² Alfred Neufeld, *What We Believe Together: Exploring the “Shared Convictions” of Anabaptist-Related Churches*, pp. 77. Many others use this concept to call the modern church to see truth in a person more than in ideas, even biblical ones.

¹³ Palmer Becker, *What is an Anabaptist Christian?*, *Missio Dei: Exploring God’s Work in the World*, Number 18, (Elkhart, IN; Mennonite Mission Network, 2008), 22-23.

¹⁴ Dueck, Guenther and Heidebrecht. P. 187

Our Confession declares we are *People of the Covenant Community*. Anabaptists discern the voice of God within the church, even as many other Christians emphasize individual interpretation, or rely on media specialists for “real” discipleship. Our majority world members show us the way: discipleship happens within the local church more naturally in collective cultures.

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(Thus) the church is the center of Mission. If the church is the fullness of God in bodily form here on Earth, this locates mission within the church. The *church* proclaims the Kingdom. The individualism of the west causes us to lose sight of this. Instead of the church, people place the *mission agency* at the center of the mission enterprise. Mission agencies and their workers sometimes lose sight of the church that sends them. Let’s not forget that we are a *specific church – Mennonite Brethren* - with a Confession of Faith, and a history in mission. MB Mission is the agency of the MB Church. Interestingly, our view of MB mission is shifting. MB Mission is the global mission agency that birthed ICOMB in 1990. As ICOMB matures, we start to see MB Mission as the North American agency among others developing in Europe, India, Congo, Brasil, and others. Glory to God!

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Ray Harms-Wiebe ties all three points together: “...The Mennonite Brethren...has at times, been characterized by evangelical activism and individual vision rather than by a communal understanding of a God-given identity and mission.... Mennonite Brethren...will need to...define their ecclesiological identity...articulate their vision of holistic ministry and contemplate the implications of being a global family called to mission.”¹⁵
Thailand 2017 is about contemplating the implications of being a global family called to mission.

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Our Mission must have a Global Character
Love your neighbor as yourself. (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:39 et al)
...so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Eph. 3:10)

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The character of mission is about communion. It comes from the radical communion of the Trinity. God loved the world (John 3:16) by coming. The church loves God; the members of the church love one another; and the church loves the world like God by going to the world in love.

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Our identity will shape our mission, like every denomination. Our international Confession of Faith is loved and used by all ICOMB members. Unfortunately, the western Mennonite Brethren have a low identity culture that goes along with the low view of the church. A recent survey showed Canadian Mennonite Brethren are least likely among evangelicals in Canada to identify strongly with our own denomination. They are least likely to emphasize denominational distinctives, falling well below other groups.¹⁶ I have observed that this weakens our mission effort.

There are unfortunate instances of missionaries in the past who did not clearly emphasize our confessional identity. Then when they left, the church’s identity left with them. We should be more intentional. I believe we can love our confession and love the world in mission endeavor.

¹⁵ Ray Harms Wiebe, op. cit. 217-218.

¹⁶ Sam Reimer, A Culture of Faith, Mennonite Brethren Herald, December 2015, 9.

PPT

Our mission needs an “everywhere to everywhere” gospel. We need a biblically whole gospel no longer hemmed in by North American, modernistic, individualized culture. Let us communicate a holistic gospel, relevant to many contexts.

What is the gospel? Palmer Becker notes many Christians emphasize justification by faith. Anabaptists emphasize transformation of life as a result of being reconciled to God.¹⁷ Orthodox writer Stephen Freeman, who grew up Southern Baptist, casts it more simply: The problem of sin is not, at its core, a legal problem. The real problem of sin is that it kills us. The gospel is captive to American legal culture.¹⁸

A gospel that teaches guilt and the legal satisfaction of God is suited to the west, but it is not an everywhere to everywhere gospel *by itself*. The majority world populations are community oriented where honor and shame are the main cultural drivers. We must proclaim the gospel of the exalted Christ who gives honor. Elsewhere people are trapped in fear of the unseen realms and powers. The gospel of the victorious Christ must also impact power-based cultures with a power encounter.

That means we must *define the gospel with input from our global family*. Thailand 2017 is a wonderful occasion for this.

But for that to happen we must name the elephant in the room: white power.

PPT

Our mission must be shaped by a new humility and a new kind of unity. The white western church has a problem with power. African theologian Rothney Tsaka observes that black theology first developed as an attempt to validate blacks as human. As black theology emerged, *western ways of thinking* ruled that there’s no way to include *African ways of thinking* and of producing knowledge. It’s taken a long time for those in power to validate the voices from receiving cultures. Thankfully the issue of whiteness is now on the table. People are admitting whiteness is a factor in theological discussions.¹⁹ Today many writers of different ethnic backgrounds address this topic.²⁰

While this is good, we are just peeling off a few layers. Tsaka observes when African theologians offer critique, the white pattern is first to say “be quiet; don’t assert yourself; learn your place and stay there.” “Let those *in power* think on behalf of those *outside of power*.” When the indigenous theologian insists on speaking, then whites withdraw, saying “keep the peace; avoid conflict and confrontation.” This maintains the gulf between white power and the indigenous.²¹

Richard Twiss adds his American Indian voice in *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys*: “We must *genuinely appreciate all cultures as being capable of reflecting biblical faith*. We must move away from ‘American Christian mythology,’ which undergirds colonization and its resulting paternalism in Indigenous communities.”²²

¹⁷ Palmer Becker, What is an Anabaptist Christian?, *Missio Dei: Exploring God’s Work in the World*, Number 18, (Elkhart, IN; Mennonite Mission Network, 2008), 22-23.

¹⁸ Stephen Freeman, The Church is What Salvation Looks Like, podcast, Ancient Faith Radio.

¹⁹ Dion Forster, Black Theologies, African Theologies and the challenge of whiteness VLOG 34 18 August 2016.

²⁰ For example, Jackson Wu on www.patheos.com blogs on the topic, referencing a variety of others.

²¹ Dion Forster, Black Theologies, African Theologies and the challenge of whiteness VLOG 34 18 August 2016.

²² Richard Twiss. *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys: A Native American Expression of the Jesus Way*, Downers Grove: IV Press, 2015, pp. 15-16. Italics mine.

Learn from the pictures of Christ in the book of Revelation. In Chapter 1 he is exalted and powerful. In chapter 5 he stands as a slain Lamb. When the scroll with 7 seals is to be opened, it's the slain Lamb that's worthy to break the seals. The church is built in suffering and humility, not power. Christ himself gives meaning and purpose to suffering and weakness. Can we who are in power humble ourselves and truly unite with one another in this great global family? Can we respect one another, learn from one another; learn *with* one another? I am grateful for the constant position of humility expressed by MB Mission leadership. But is there more? Is God calling us to new levels of humility and collaboration? The MB movement is Anabaptist, which gives our mission a unique perspective. The Anabaptists caught a vision of mission from weakness and death. In 1527, 60 leaders mapped out Europe to spread the gospel. Some started churches within a few hours. Most died martyrs' deaths. A report on this period reads: "They are daily beheading... four or six, and at times ten persons."²³ Really, our mission is "another other" too, if it's from weakness and vulnerability.

Let's build on our heritage. Let's not be fooled and tempted by power. It is my hope that by being together in this consultation we will fulfill the vision of Twiss and Tsaka. I hope for new theological perspectives, emerging from leaders native to their cultures. I hope we learn from and learn with each other. I hope we shape – together – the Mennonite Brethren church on mission. This vision will inform our guiding principles *beyond* meeting needs and winning souls. On mission, we *live* the kingdom we proclaim, resulting in a biblical, discipling, liturgical, and peacemaking community.²⁴

PPT

The Church on Mission is our Prayer

And that leads me to a few comments on what it means to be the church on mission through prayer. I used to think, "I need to improve my prayer life" until a Christian leader said, "Your life is your prayer." Mission is the prayer of the church.

The way we do mission reflects the indwelling Way, The Truth and The Life.

The Way showed us how the life of prayer prepares us for danger. The Way stood with perfect calm before Pilate, before Herod, before the Sanhedrin. The Way showed us how to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit to stay calm, grounded and well-resourced as a person. A spiritual warrior is tender-hearted and brave; self-aware and attuned to others.

Paul wrote repeatedly about Christ in us. "Christ in us" teaches us that it takes time in prayer, fasting, and waiting on God to develop our missional heart. Christ in us longs to pray. Christ in us longs to fast. Christ in us longs to pursue the lost with the gospel. This is how prayer and mission of another order come together.

²³ Hege, Christian and Harold S. Bender. (1957). Martyrs' Synod. *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. Retrieved 28 December 2016, from http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Martyrs%27_Synod&oldid=128581.

²⁴ Ibid. Garcia proceeds to explain and expand these four ideas in subsequent pages.

Conclusion

The new reality is that the church is global. The statistical center of gravity of the church is in Africa. The cross cultural missionary force is increasingly non-western.

We Mennonite Brethren are a small stream flowing into the larger river of Christ's body. But we take responsibility to have a 'family conversation.' We did this in 1988 at our first mission consultation. The missiology reader released in 2015 ("The Church in Mission") by Vic Wiens is a conversation in writing. Thailand is a more "live" conversation. This is a great opportunity to meet face to face to listen to one another and God for signals and direction.²⁵



Mission emanates from the Triune God, making it radically communal in nature.

The church is on mission. As Mennonite Brethren have a 150-year history of community. We have a confession that gives us a practical theological identity and binds us together. It is something to value; to learn and teach; to be our Guiding Principles for Mission.

Finally, we love the world as Christ did, and reach out to other people groups and locations. We commit to humility and even weakness. We commit to learn *from* and learn *with* one another. This will impact our character as **a church on mission** locally, nationally and globally.

As we move into our week, there are questions I'd like you to keep in mind:

What is God saying to us as leaders – personally?

What is he saying to your national church bodies/associations?

What is God saying to ICOMB?

Let us pray that God will speak, and that we will truly hear what he wants to say.

²⁵ Victor Wiens, ed. *The Church in Mission: Perspectives of Global Mennonite Brethren on Mission in the 21st Century*. Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2015, p. 12.