

# 15 Church Planting Lessons from the Anabaptist- Mennonite Journey

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The 500-year journey of the Anabaptist-Mennonite people from the sixteenth-century Reformation to the twenty-first century included time periods of effective church planting and times of ineffective outreach. In this chapter the writer makes an attempt to assess segments of the Anabaptist-Mennonite five-century journey in terms of church planting effectiveness and Kingdom growth. The scope of this chapter will only permit church planting and outreach observations in broad strokes from the experience of selected European and North American Anabaptist-Mennonite peoples, with special attention to the Mennonite Brethren (MBs). This chapter traces the 500-year Mennonite journey through the different countries of sojourn, makes observations on the conditions for effective church planting, notes the context of each situation and describes the barriers to church planting as perceived through the lens of a church planter.



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## Church Planting Lessons from the Early Anabaptists

We start with assessing the sixteenth-century Anabaptist context for church planting. The sixteenth-century Reformation first erupted in 1517 in the small town of Wittenberg when Martin Luther posted his 95 theses protesting the abuses and failures of the church on the church door which was commonly used as a public bulletin board. Because the public discontent with the state church of the time was so widespread, the Reformation spread with incredible speed. The 1525 Anabaptist movement was much more volatile and radical than the Martin Luther-driven reformation. While Luther was about removing the abuses of the existing state church and refocusing it on faith and grace, the Anabaptists were about challenging and changing the doctrines of the church to be more biblical regarding personal conversion, lifestyle issues, adult faith baptism, peace, and the separation of state and church.<sup>1</sup> The Anabaptists also introduced the application of the Great Commission of evangelism and church planting, which was not practiced in the state church since universal child baptism eliminated the need for evangelism.<sup>2</sup> Anyone challenging the doctrines and practice of the state church at that time was considered a heretic and guilty of a cardinal sin punishable by death.

The severity of the opposition to Anabaptists is obvious from the 1529 Diet of Speyer (Holy Roman Empire assembly) which passed a death sentence upon all Anabaptists and ordered that every Anabaptist and re-baptized person of either sex should be put to death by fire, sword, or some other way to stem the tide of Anabaptist growth. In desperation the authorities sent out groups of armed executioners and soldiers to hunt down the Anabaptists and to kill them on the spot en masse without trial or sentence. After increasing the execution squads from 400 to 1,000 the executioners exclaimed, "What shall we do, the more we kill the greater their numbers become."<sup>3</sup>

The Anabaptists were serious and intentional about sharing their faith. Every member was regarded a missionary and frequently left their homes to go on evangelistic tours. In August 1527 the leading Anabaptist brethren met in a missionary synod (later named the Martyrs' Synod) to give this rapidly growing movement some direction. They divided up the land on a large map and sent out witness teams to the various communities. The end result of this Synod was that within five years 600 churches were established. The reason for the Martyrs' Synod nickname was that within two years all but two of the Synod members had died a martyr's death.<sup>4</sup>

For the Anabaptists the Kingdom of God was more important than their own lives. Martyrdom became the hallmark of the Anabaptist followers. The price of their total obedience resulted in estimates of 4,000 to 5,000 Anabaptists becoming

martyr victims of water, fire, and the sword.<sup>5</sup> In spite of the threat of death of the first generation of Anabaptist leaders, the rapid growth by tens of thousands and the formation of early Anabaptist churches continued in Zurich, parts of Germany and the Netherlands.

In Switzerland, where the Anabaptists have their roots, the new churches or groups emerged under the leadership of Zwingli, Hubmaier, Blaurock, Grebel, and Manz. They organized Bible studies, prayer meetings, held public debates with civic leaders and pressed for a citywide reformation which resulted in a number of city councilors being baptized. When the city of Zurich banned the Anabaptist movement it spread to the countryside, neighboring towns, and villages, east to St. Gall and on to Basel and Bern. Many house churches were established. By 1527 the scattered Anabaptists gathered in the village of Schleithem to craft the Schleithem Confession which recorded the convictions of the Swiss Brethren.<sup>6</sup> This was followed by severe persecution and executions with Catholics usually burning them and the Protestants beheading or drowning them.

The South Germany and Austria Anabaptist movement lacked the cohesion and biblical basis found in Switzerland. Here under the leadership of Denck the focus seemed more about social justice, mystical spirituality and eschatological imminence. Denck is, nevertheless, credited for baptizing thousands and planting Anabaptist churches in major cities, towns and villages across South Germany and Austria. Other notables who contributed to hundreds of baptisms included Hut and Marpeck.<sup>7</sup>

The third region where the Anabaptist movement took root and thousands were baptized was North Germany and the Netherlands under the leadership of Hoffman. It was due to the passionate testimony of thousands of ordinary believers, who considered suffering and death to be normal for believers, that the movement of new churches continued. The early growth of Anabaptism in the Netherlands was phenomenal. One Amsterdam church had 10,000 members and numerous churches had 1,000 members and more. The rapid Anabaptist expansion had the result that in some communities the Anabaptists began to out-number the Catholics and Protestants.<sup>8</sup>

The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century provide a number of church planting lessons. First we observe that they believed and practiced Christ's Great Commission of global disciple-making. All believers were considered witnesses. We observe that a radical commitment to the gospel resulted in power and passion to be effective witnesses. We note also that the Anabaptist leaders worked together and were well-trained theologians and experienced church leaders, making for an advantage in

articulating and leading the Anabaptist movement. Their willingness to die for their faith as first-generation Christians made them fearless and powerful. The general discontent with the historic church made the Anabaptist alternatives attractive. The Anabaptists in many ways resembled the New Testament Church.

By the 1530s and 1540s the persecution in the Netherlands was so relentless and martyrdom so predictable that thousands of Anabaptists began to immigrate or flee to north Germany and Prussia.

### **Lessons from the Prussian Vistula, Danzig Challenges**

By the mid-sixteenth century many of the Anabaptist Mennonites had settled in Northern Germany and Prussia beginning a 250-year stay. They came there to escape persecution and in search of religious freedom. The fervent missionary zeal which had characterized the Anabaptists had almost been stamped out by the relentless persecution. Continued growth and church planting was no longer realistic given that most of the early generation of the Anabaptist leaders were gone due to martyrdom. The main concerns for these new industrious settlers were obtaining their religious freedom, maintaining their own schools, electing their own preachers, starting churches and schools in their own tongue and gaining exemptions from dues and military services. By now Mennonite churches were established wherever they settled—churches being a normal part of their social structure rather than the result of outreach.<sup>9</sup>

There are a number of reasons why the 250-year Anabaptist-Mennonite sojourn in Prussia and the Vistula Delta did not result in church outreach or church planting. They could be summarized as follows:

1. The State put strict conditions on the Mennonites coming to Prussia. They were not permitted to proselytize or propagate their faith and were subjected to strict discipline if they violated the prohibition. The converts who were cited as having converted from the state church to the Mennonite fold were taken to court to give an account of their violations. The civic religious leaders also warned Mennonite ministers not to accept or seek converts from other faiths and were fined for accepting such converts. The Mennonites also suffered serious opposition and persecution from the three state churches: the Catholic, Lutheran and the Reformed churches.<sup>10</sup>
2. The Mennonites were generally considered to be a rogue radical group of heretics. In the sixteenth century being a Mennonite in many parts of Europe was still considered a capital offense which in some regions practically annihilated the Anabaptist-Mennonites. In Prussia, while tolerated, they were considered second-class citizens and were not permitted to have

church buildings for the first 100 years or to operate inside the city limits. Once churches were permitted they needed to be on side streets so as not to have public visibility. Only recognized State religions were permitted inside the city.<sup>11</sup>

3. The church itself was not attractive to outsiders and not oriented toward outreach. The main religious motive at this time was the preservation of their faith which the Prussian government was granting them. The church was part of the Mennonite culture and among the first things to be established wherever the Mennonites moved. The culture of the church was drab in dress and performance. Sermons were read, songs were long, discipline was firm and baptism was required for marriage. The narrow self-centered framing of church faith and life did not lend itself to outreach. Some of the contentious issues involved: shunning, the ban, wearing beards, buckles, collars, pockets, and black jackets. Internal strife and factions were other hindrances to church expansion and growth.<sup>12</sup>
4. Cultural isolation was another reason church planting was not possible. For some 200 years the Mennonites in Prussia maintained the Dutch language and continued their connections with the Dutch through trade and religious exchanges. For some time Dutch preachers including Menno would visit the Prussian churches and in some instances new converts would be baptized in Holland to escape Prussian detection and persecution. They lived in secluded ethnic villages with little connection to the public world. Their cultural isolation and lack of public witness resulted in the designation as being the silent inhabitants or the “*Stille im Lande*” which in turn resulted in little more than biological church growth. By now the first generations of Anabaptist fervor, vision and passion for faith sharing and readiness to die for their faith had all but disappeared.

This period of Mennonite sojourn is rife with conditions and examples that hinder church outreach and church planting.

### **Lessons from the Russian Church Experience, 1789-1860**

When the 250-year faith related sojourn of Mennonite privileges was coming to an end in Prussia and the Vistula Delta, the new destination of religious freedom and promise was Russia. The invitation from Catherine the Great provided a welcomed alternative to the ever-growing threat of losing their Mennonite freedoms in Prussia and also provided a new economic opportunity.

Even though the stated reasons for moving were faith-based, it seemed to be little more than a religious form that was nurtured. Yet the church was one of the first things to be re-established in their new country. They were promised what was important to their faith: open worship, their own local government, schools in the

German language and freedom from military service. The Mennonite Church by now was strongly wrapped in cultural trappings and traditionalism. Every village or group of villages had a church with an elder, minister, song leader and an area bishop. Here too, the understanding by the Russian authorities was that they would not proselytize.<sup>13</sup> By the 1850s the number of Mennonite villages numbered several hundred and the total Mennonite population had reached 120,000 with a church in each village or region to look after the spiritual and business affairs of the village.<sup>14</sup>

On the spiritual front the church was operating at a very low level of Christian commitment. Prosperity over the centuries had choked out much of their spirituality and the mix of social, economic and cultural conditions had paralyzed the institutional church. Church legalism, strife and factions over issues of discipline and church spirituality resulted in several breakaway groups like the *Kleine Gemeinde* (Little Flock) in 1820, the Mennonite Brethren in 1860, and later the *Evangelische Mennoniten-Gemeinden* (or Alliance churches).

A number of church planting observations from the Russian 1789-1860 experience can be made. The Mennonites who immigrated to Russia never completely lost their Anabaptist heritage of evangelism even though for several centuries it remained as smoldering embers. Before the formation of the MB church in 1860 the Mennonite church in Russia had sent out fourteen missionaries to the Dutch Indies of Java and Sumatra.<sup>15</sup>

In terms of church relocation from Prussia to Russia we note that the Chortitza Colony had difficulty developing their church since there were no ministers among the first group of settlers and so they wrote back to Prussia for advice on how to organize a church. They could not find enough committed lay leaders to lead a worship service.<sup>16</sup> The Molotschna Colony on the other hand had more resources and leadership for their church life but the church was inward focused with little effort being made to reach out. Churches expanded as villages were started. So for the first eighty years of Mennonite life in Russia there seems little evidence of church planting for mission purposes.

### **Growth Lessons from the Russian Mennonite Renewal of 1860**

In many ways the Mennonite renewal movement of the 1850s and 1860s that morphed into the formation of the Mennonite Brethren church in 1860 was a recovery of the Anabaptist experience of 1525. In both situations the renewal was from within and involved grassroots leaders. The reasons for breaking away from the mother church were also very similar in that the main church had to a large extent lost its biblical and ethical moorings. Another similarity was that both breakaway groups produced a confession of faith which emphasized biblical lifestyle, conversion

and believers' baptism. Neither the Schleitheim Confession of 1527 nor the Mennonite Brethren document of secession of 1860 had an article about the mission of the church even though for both groups faith-sharing and mission became their main passion. As the Anabaptist movement of 1525 in Zurich became the mission church planting story of Europe, so the birth of the MB church in 1860 became a church planting story that started in Russia and then moved to North America and on to many countries. The difference between these two movements was that the Anabaptists suffered severe persecution and martyrdom while the 1860 renewed Mennonites suffered mostly spiritual persecution and ostracism. Phyllis Martens has aptly stated "that a mission zeal was born with the MB church which was evident by the immediate evangelism fervor of its members, a focus that has continued wherever the MBs settled."<sup>17</sup> The 1860 renewal set a new benchmark of Mennonite spirituality and became a new reference point and measurement on how the church was doing in witness evangelism and church planting.

The fervor and influence of the Anabaptist witness and church planting that started in Switzerland took them to the Netherlands, Germany and other parts of Europe while the Mennonite Brethren witness fervor resulted in church plants in India, Africa, China, North and South America and beyond. As with the Anabaptists it seemed like wherever the Mennonite Brethren went churches were emerging.

Interest in mission in the new MB church was kindled through Bible studies, revival meetings, evangelism events and mission fests. By 1885 the mission fest attendance had grown to 1,000 participants from six main MB congregations. The Einlage MB church, which was the MB headquarters in Chortitza, experienced significant growth through its ten affiliate MB village groups. In Molotschna, the Ruekenau MB church established affiliate stations in Puchten, Hertenberg and in Spat, Crimea. Another significant development was the 1872 conference decision to establish an itinerant ministry for evangelism and church extension with five evangelists doing local evangelism, albeit their converts were mostly referred to Baptist churches. A further mission step was the sending of Abraham and Maria Friesen as missionaries to India in 1890 through the Boston Baptist Missionary Union.<sup>18</sup>

There are numerous church planting lessons from the Russian MB churches. The emphasis on new birth and new life in Christ, while controversial for the mother church, gained momentum in both the Chortitza and Molotschna villages with new groups joining this new movement in spite of church opposition. The restored passion for mission of this newly-formed Mennonite Brethren Church soon resulted in the sending of missionaries. The 1860 MB church had recaptured the Anabaptist vision of making disciples, reaching out and planting churches. The newly-formed MB church was also able to discern and overcome charismatic

extremes known as the “*Froehliche Richtung*” (Joyful Movement) and replace this self-focused experience with outreach efforts. The 1860 renewal set in motion a global church planting movement.

## **Church Planting Lessons from the 20th Century**

The twentieth-century church planting history can be divided into three periods: the early decades of pioneer church planting, the mid decades of mission changes and the later decades of rapid expansion. From the very beginning MB missionaries regarded the founding and planting of indigenous churches as their goal, based on the New Testament. With this in mind they evangelized, baptized, and established local churches with a simple organization.<sup>19</sup>

### **Decades of Pioneer Church Planting**

Pioneer church planting in the early decades included missionaries going to India, China and the Belgian Congo. A common approach to the early nineteenth century mission strategy, as advocated by the Baptist Seminary in Hamburg, Germany where the MB missionaries were taking their training, was the multi-faceted mission station approach. The MBs not surprisingly adopted this Baptist approach in their pioneer ventures. In India the first step was to build a mission station which included a mother church, a boarding school, educational and medical or hospital services. The missionary pastor of the mother church was also the mission station leader. Converts from the immediate villages would attend these station churches. As the work developed beyond the immediate villages, affiliate congregations were organized in distant villages as more conversions were taking place. The station church would oversee these affiliate churches. Each church would have elders to look after the finances and perform all the functions and responsibilities of an organized church. The converts of one or more villages within a radius not more than three miles were organized into new congregations.<sup>20</sup>

The South China church planting strategy among the Hakka people was somewhat similar to that of India. Missionaries F.J. and Agnes Wiens constructed a substantial mission compound consisting of: a missionary residence, a boys' school, a girls' school, a Bible school, a small hospital, several homes for nationals, a small chicken barn and a large 600-seat church furnished with pews and an organ. With the addition of street meetings and village visitation, eleven mission stations were opened counting 450 Christians by 1920.<sup>21</sup>

In the Belgian Congo, A.A. and Ernestina Janzen from Mountain Lake were the first MB missionaries to Kafumba in 1922. They again followed the MB mission



practice of establishing a mission station with a goal of reaching 300 villages. Their approach was: evangelism, educational literacy, medical work and industry. The evangelism was considered a priority for which they trained nationals to do village visitation. In 1933 Henry and Anna Bartsch came as missionaries to Bololo, 600 miles from the Janzens and also used the mission station approach.<sup>22</sup> During the first half of the twentieth century, evangelism and church planting was at the heart of the mission even though a holistic mission station strategy was followed. The missionaries were evangelists with a deep realization of a world lost without Christ. In many ways these missionaries had the fervor and passion of the early Anabaptists.

### **Decades of Restructuring and Change in MB Missions**

The middle decades of the twentieth century saw many mission changes. Because the MB mission enterprise was run by Conference boards from North America they were not always aware of the impact that their decisions were having on the field. There were organizational changes, name changes, administrative changes, and field committee changes, etc. These repeated mission changes by North American Conference decisions had major church planting implications. In 1936 the Board of Foreign Missions was replaced by a five-member board with the office of an executive secretary.<sup>23</sup> Shortly after India achieved independence in 1948 any remnants of colonialism in India were no longer acceptable, prompting the mission board to issue the “New India Plan” which ended the mission era of American missionary dominance and so handed leadership to the nationals.<sup>24</sup> In 1957 a full board and field administration restructuring was approved, creating further on-field ministry changes and uncertainty. In the 1970s, due to a lack of funds, numerous missionaries were called home from their assignments, leaving huge ministry vacancies.<sup>25</sup> Also in an effort to give priority to church planting, some of the support ministries like radio work and translation work were cut back. Other changes at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century included the introduction of the relational funding for missionary support, a new MB missions governance structure and a name change.

Doug Heidebrecht from MB Mission notes several specific turning points in the India church planting experience. A major change during the 1950s and 1960s was changing from a white missionary compound-centered mission approach to the Indian church taking responsibility for the church ministry and church planting.<sup>26</sup> This paradigm shift created significant leadership struggles in an attempt to fill the vacancies left by the missionaries leaving. These changes resulted in the Indian church leaders calling for an orientation on how the nationals were now going to do church

planting. These mid-century decades of mission restructuring and arm's length mission leadership changes, while helpful in the long run, brought uncertainty, instability and some dislocation in the short term.

### **Decades of Rapid Growth**

After the restructuring decades came rapid growth. India in particular made huge advances in church planting in the last three decades of the 1900s. The introduction of the India Church Extension Workers known as the CEWs was a major growth factor of the '80s and beyond. Each CEW worker was assigned five villages to develop relationships and share the gospel. The CEW workers were encouraged to identify five villages and then to spend one day a week in each of these villages which over three years usually resulted in two or three new church fellowship groups.<sup>27</sup>

The other important part of the church planting strategy in India was the involvement of the Canadian Disciple Making International (DMI) teams doing door-to-door village evangelism. Under the leadership of John Shankar Rao, the DMI teams systematically covered all of the places where the CEWs were establishing churches.

A significant number of new churches have been established through DMI in India and in other countries. In the Philippines, under the DMI leadership of Arthur Loewen, several churches have been organized. In Mexico City, under the leadership of Victor Davila, a good-sized church has emerged through DMI and joined the MB Conference. In Malawi, Bonface and Zelita Machewere saw a group of churches come into existence due to the ministry of DMI.<sup>28</sup> Similarly in Ukraine a number of churches emerged from DMI evangelism. In some instances churches were started by individuals who then looked to MB Mission for conference affiliation. The DMI direct team evangelism approach with its confidence in the power of the gospel and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit has resulted in significant church planting and kingdom growth among Mennonite Brethren.

Two further factors enhanced church planting in India. First was the MB Centenary Bible College in Shamshabad that trained evangelists and church planters. The second important church planting principle was the use of national church planters who knew the language, culture, mindset and economics of the country. The end result in India was that between 1970 and 2002 the MB churches in villages and towns increased from 666 to 840 and the baptized church membership increased from 18,933 to 103,488. When the church adherents, family contacts and church members are included, the church family numbered 400,000.<sup>29</sup>

Latin America also experienced significant growth toward the end of the twentieth century. When Harold Ens became the General Director in 1996 he raised the question about continuing to expand into new countries without adequate attention

to church planting goals and effective long range planning. This resulted in a country by country evaluation and the formulation of a new document entitled "Global Mission Guidelines: Vision, Priorities, and Strategies for Century 21."<sup>30</sup> These new guidelines shifted the mission church planting activity more toward the so called 10-40 window of Asia and North Africa with a strategic plan to engage long-term church planting teams, Muslim ministries teams and short term Trek teams.

The strategy was to enter least reached fields with long-term church planting teams of five to seven adults who would learn the language and plant churches. The long-term ten-year teams would be augmented by short-term four-week to eight-month TREK teams. Thailand and Delhi were the first to have such church planting teams. In terms of church planting effectiveness, a team approach has many advantages such as group support and diversity of gifting. The disadvantage is the amount of time spent on maintaining group unity, vision-building and language study.

The twentieth century must be seen as the century where the North American MB Conference focused on aggressive international church planting. It was in this century that the official MB mission agency operated under various names including BOMAS, MBMSI, and most recently as MB Mission. Its strength in church planting has been the prayer base and financial support from the MB churches. The MB colleges and seminaries have also had a major role in training and supplying missionary church planters. The church planting committees from the various partner MB conferences must also be recognized as having had a significant part in the multiplication of churches around the world. Mennonite Brethren have always held to the conviction that more can be accomplished by churches working together as a conference than by churches working independently.

The International Community of Mennonite Brethren Churches (ICOMB) has also been a partner in global church planting. Towards the end of the twentieth century there was an increased emphasis on internationalizing MB missions. The North American MB mission agency general director Victor Adrian was one of the champions for bringing the MB leaders from the various countries together with a view to work more as equals in mission and church planting. The MB World Mission Conference (Curitiba '88) in 1988 was a major step forward in the process of including national churches and national workers in global church planting. This was further facilitated by director Harold Ens and most recently by David Wiebe, the first full time ICOMB director. It is encouraging to see that the various MB national conferences have begun sending out cross-cultural church planting missionaries with the India, Congo, Japan and the Colombian conferences leading the way. The North American MB conferences no longer have a monopoly on sending out missionary church planters.

A number of church planting lessons can be identified from MB conference mission work in the twentieth century. Wherever the Mennonite Brethren established Bible schools or seminaries, church planters emerged that were assigned to new areas. A further factor that has facilitated church planting effectiveness has been the involvement of direct evangelism methods such as the Jesus film and the DMI teams. Another important factor in cross-cultural church planting is the use of national workers who know the language, the culture, the economics, and particularly the native people. The nationals also seem to be more passionate about evangelism and committed to direct gospel sharing while the North American missionaries seem to be more cautious about faith-sharing and more committed to relationship-building and engaging in social issues as foreigners. While the North American mission board in the mid-twentieth century was introducing the idea of nationalizing the mission work and replacing Western missionaries with nationals, it seems that MB Mission has in recent decades again moved more to the engagement of Western missionaries, at least when entering new countries. One of the most important church planting lessons is the observation that national church planters seem to be more ready to do direct evangelism and are more effective in seeing churches planted, albeit North American missionaries are still needed as resource people. The national leadership effectiveness factor may also be related to the fervor of first-generation Christians. It is obvious from the growth decades that the mission passion and zeal passed on from the Russian MB church is alive and well wherever church planting and the preaching of the gospel is continued.

### **Lessons from the 20th Century North American Domestic Church Planting Realities**

In the first half of the 1900s the churches in North America were better at doing foreign missions than doing church planting at home even though they had brought the passion for witness with them from Russia. Domestic church planting for the first half of the twentieth century mostly followed immigration patterns, which meant when enough immigrants arrived a church was organized. The MBs were not well positioned culturally, socially and economically to do outreach church planting in their home communities. They did not feel secure as German speaking Mennonites to mix with other cultures and so stayed very much in their own church communities. During the first decades of the twentieth century the MBs generally exercised their mission vision by doing missions abroad or by doing church planting “at arm’s length,” to use Peter Penner’s term. In Canada, home missions were known as “*Rand Mission*” or church planting away from existing MB churches. So for a

number of decades home mission churches were started in northern or remote regions away from established homogeneous MB churches. The churches were not ready at that time to risk intermarriage with other cultures. Peter Penner cites how church leaders gave lectures on dangers in society and he lists their central concerns as: lack of evangelism, materialism, the collapse of spirituality, divisiveness, and even false doctrine. Others added the dangers of worldliness, cultural assimilation, and a materialistic outlook on life.<sup>31</sup>

This church isolation began to change around the 1940s and 50s when churches began to call themselves “Community Churches,” and welcomed non-Germanic folk to their worship services. They started to feel comfortable for the sake of evangelism to accept outsiders and cross-cultural marriages between believers. It was around this time also that churches were beginning to switch their worship services from German to English in order to attract community people.

The twentieth century is mixed in terms of North American MB church planting lessons. It must be noted, however, that the vision for mission which was birthed with the MB church in 1860 was nurtured and carried as a vision to be implemented wherever these Mennonites settled. It is also notable that the provincial and district church extension boards did a good job of planting churches in their regions once they became outreach-focused. Switching the worship language from German to English was a major element in accelerating church planting. The MB conferences were generous in budgeting funds for church planting. In Canada the past number of decades also included extensive ethnic church planting. One of the recent emphases has been to encourage existing churches to plant daughter churches.

### **The New Millennium Church Planting Movement in North America**

The 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century saw the convergence of a number of factors that resulted in the emergence of the North American Church Planting Movement. The Mennonite Brethren in Canada became major players in this movement. The end of the 1990s came with a rash of church planting books, church planting courses and new church planting organizations. Many Mennonite leaders were significantly influenced first by the Church Growth Movement and then by the succeeding Church Planting Movement of the twenty-first century. This new North American Church Planting Movement had a number of contributing influences.

The Church Growth Movement of the '70s and '80s stimulated by McGavran and Wagner provided optimism and momentum for church planting.<sup>32</sup> Jim

Montgomery with his DAWN (Discipling A Whole Nation) ministry was a further propelling influence in the emerging church planting movement by relentlessly calling upon the Christian world to do saturation church planting. The turn of the century also saw the emergence of new global church planting organizations like Dynamic Church Planting International led by Paul Becker which quickly had a worldwide influence. Then there was the new momentum of the 1990s and the turn of the millennium impact when many mission organizations set new church planting goals to be achieved before the year 2000. The new millennium brought a church planting buzz with denominations also setting new church planting goals, seminaries introducing church planting courses and publishing houses replacing the printing of church growth books with church planting books.

The Anabaptist-Mennonite leaders were also very much part of this church planting scene at the turn of the century and made significant contributions in preparation of the emerging movement with books and lectures on church planting with an Anabaptist focus. Stuart Murray in *Church Planting, Laying Foundations* crafts a foundation for Anabaptist church planting. Walfred J. Fahrner in *Building on the Rock* lays out the building blocks for Third Way church planting. Shenk and Stutzman in *Creating Communities of the Kingdom* outline the essentials for creating biblical believers' churches. Nikkel, in his book *Church Planting Roadmap*, describes the character of a biblical church and outlines the steps and stages in church planting.<sup>33</sup>

In Canada the MBs have been in the forefront of this Church Planting Movement by using diverse methods, models and various networking tools. The new millennium also brought new cross-denominational alignments for the sake of a greater harvest. Gordon Fleming, the Canadian MB director of the C2C Network which was begun in British Columbia, expanded it to include church planting partnerships with other provinces and like-minded denominations. This relatively new church planting agency quickly gained momentum as part of the new Canadian church planting movement that focused on aggressive and creative church planting in Canadian cities. The C2C movement focused on suitable spiritual leadership and on intentional development processes. Church planters were appointed based on: their strong sense of call, church planter assessments, covenant agreements, personal prayer life, apprentice training, coaching relationships and strong accountability.<sup>34</sup> These church planters have a God-sized vision of seeing people come to Christ and to the Lord's church and certainly meet the criteria for successful biblical church planting. Many facets of the C2C movement ([www.c2cnetwork.ca](http://www.c2cnetwork.ca)) resemble the faith, courage, and vision of the early Anabaptist-Mennonite leaders. The church planter's greatest encouragement is the promise that it is the Lord who builds his church.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Grand Rapids: William B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 22.
- <sup>2</sup> Wilbert R. Shenk, ed. *Anabaptism and Mission* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1984), 17, 61.
- <sup>3</sup> Guy F. Hershberger, ed. *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1957), 32-33.
- <sup>4</sup> Wilbert R. Shenk and Peter F. Penner, *Anabaptism and Mission*. (Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld Verlag, 2007), 101.
- <sup>5</sup> Shenk, *Anabaptism*, 67.
- <sup>6</sup> Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist* (Waterloo: Herald Press, 2010), 141.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., Murray, 144.
- <sup>8</sup> Shenk, *Anabaptism*, 69.
- <sup>9</sup> Henry C. Smith, *The Story of the Mennonites*. 4th Edition (Newton: Mennonite Publication Office, 1957), 237.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 25
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 279.
- <sup>12</sup> P. M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia*. Revised Edition (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1980), 31.
- <sup>13</sup> Wally Kroeker, *An Introduction to the Mennonites* (Intercourse: Good Books, 2005), 11.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 15,22
- <sup>15</sup> Friesen, *The Mennonite*, 675.
- <sup>16</sup> John H. Lohrenz, *The Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1950), 19.
- <sup>17</sup> Phyllis Martens, *The Mustard Seed* (Fresno: M.B. Board of Christian Education, 1971), 1.
- <sup>18</sup> J. A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1975), 78-79.
- <sup>19</sup> Lohrenz, *The Mennonite Brethren*, 269.
- <sup>20</sup> Gerhard Wilhelm Peters, *The Growth of Foreign Missions in the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro: M.B. Publishing House, 1952), 195-197.
- <sup>21</sup> Peters, *The Growth*, 131-132.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., 270.

- <sup>23</sup> G. W. Peters, *Foundations of Mennonite Brethren Missions* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1984), 92.
- <sup>24</sup> Paul Wiebe, *Heirs and Joint Heirs*. (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 2010), 137.
- <sup>25</sup> Peters, *Foundations*, 101.
- <sup>26</sup> Doug Heidebrecht, interview by James R. Nikkel. India Church Planting (January 2013).
- <sup>27</sup> Heidebrecht.
- <sup>28</sup> Victor Wiens, church planting information. Personal e-mail, (Abbotsford, 2013)
- <sup>29</sup> Wiebe, *Heirs*, 257.
- <sup>30</sup> Harold Ens, *Mennonite Brethren in Global Mission* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2010), 60.
- <sup>31</sup> Peter Penner, *No Longer at Arms Length* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1987), 41.
- <sup>32</sup> Mennonite Brethren benefited from the variety of seminars offered by the Fuller Seminary School of World Mission on the subjects of church growth and church planting. Donald A. McGavran's book, *Understanding Church Growth*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), and C. Peter Wagner's book, *Leading Your Church To Growth* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1984), had significant influence on MB leaders.
- <sup>33</sup> Stuart Murray, *Church Planting, Laying Foundations* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2001); Walfred Fahrer, *Building on the Rock* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1995); David W. Shenk and Ervin R. Stutzman, *Creating Communities of the Kingdom* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1988); James R. Nikkel, *Church Planting Road Map* (Belleville: Guardian Books, 2004).
- <sup>34</sup> Gordon Fleming, C2C Network Newsletter, 2013, p.24. <https://www.c2cnetwork.ca/wp-content/themes/c2c/pdf/c2cspring2013.pdf>.

### Recommended Reading

- Ott, Craig, and Gene Wilson. *Global Church Planting*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011.
- Estep, William R. *The Anabaptist Story*. Grand Rapids: William B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 1975.
- Garrison, David. *Church Planting Movements*. Bangalore: Sri Sudhindra Offset process, 2005.
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- Murray, Stuart. *Planting Churches in the 21st Century*. Waterloo: Herald Press, 2010.
- Nikkel, James R. *Church Planting Road Map*. Belleville: Guardian Books, 2004.
- Shenk, David W. and Erwin R. Stutzman. *Creating Communities of the Kingdom*. Kitchener: Herald Press, 1988.
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- Stetzer, Ed. *Planting Missional Churches*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006.
- Toews, J. A. *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*. Hillsboro: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1975.

### Study Questions

1. The author contends that “It was due to the passionate testimony of thousands of ordinary believers, who considered suffering and death to be normal for believers, that the movement of new churches continued.” What would you say is considered “normal for believers” today in most churches you know?
2. The first section lists at least six factors of the first generations of Anabaptists that can provide church planting lessons. Review them and discuss their relevance or applicability for modern missions.
3. The section on the 200 years in Prussia and Danzig notes four points concerning the stagnation during this period. Consider what this might mean for church planting efforts in areas today that are highly resistant to the entry of Christianity.
4. The middle decades of the twentieth century church planting missions is characterized by a denominational structure that had high levels of oversight and control from the sending base (North America), resulting in less than favorable results for the missionaries and the receiving churches. Discuss balance between leadership from headquarters with that from the field.
5. The author states: “One of the most important church planting lessons is the observation that national church planters seem to be more ready to do direct evangelism and are more effective in seeing churches planted, albeit North American missionaries are still needed as resource people.” In what ways are North Americans still needed for their resources?