

7 Toward a Global MB Theology of Mission: An Agency Proposal

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Introduction

As Hans Kasdorf notes, in his 1988 *Mission Focus* article, “Toward a Mennonite Brethren Theology of Mission,” Mennonite Brethren “have not yet outgrown the stage of self-theologizing,” neither in North America nor in other regions of the world (evidenced by new confessions of faith in India, Japan and elsewhere), and the challenge of each generation is to be engaged in dynamic conversation with God, the biblical writings and its surrounding context(s). Doug Heidebrecht rightly adds, “The MB theology of mission has emerged through an active engagement with Scripture in the midst of changing contexts and realities.”¹

Charles Van Engen helpfully describes the practice of doing mission theology:

Mission theology helps us integrate who we are, what we know and what we do in mission. It helps us bring together and relate to the cognate



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disciplines of missiology our faith relationship with Jesus Christ, our spirituality, our consciousness of God's presence, the church's theological reflection throughout the centuries, a constantly new rereading of Scripture, our hermeneutic of God's world, our sense of participation in God's mission, and the ultimate purpose and meaning of the church.² Over the past 150 years, MBs have embraced this endeavor, both consciously and subconsciously, in multiple contexts around the globe.

Kasdorf summarizes the development of MB mission theology in the following manner:

1. The early Mennonite Brethren based their *holistic mission theology* of preaching, teaching, helping, and healing on the simple content of the Scriptures, and they demonstrated it by their effort of obedience in faith.
2. In the course of time they ground their *salvationist theology* in the love of God and the cross of Christ.
3. Upon revolutionary times in the world and in mission, they saw Christ as lord and themselves as servants. Thus their *kingdom theology* is rooted in the lordship of Christ and in servanthood ministry.
4. Their *Trinitarian approach* is anchored in God's love for the world, in Christ's obedience to the Father, and in the Spirit's empowerment for mission. Herein lies their most comprehensive theology of mission.³

Today, MB mission theology would draw on all four historic streams, consider what is being discovered in global mission today and suggest some new directions in a number of significant areas affecting theology and praxis.

Trinitarian Theology

Three persons in mission

Contemporary MB mission theology, in harmony with the progression outlined by Kasdorf, begins with an understanding of the triune God. The mandate to reach the world with the love of Christ issues forth from God himself. Engagement in the missionary task is grounded in relationship with the same Father who sent Jesus to earth and the same Holy Spirit who empowered Jesus.

The Father, the great "I AM," passionately desires to see "the knowledge of the glory of the Lord" fill the earth "as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14). As the lover of all peoples, from the first pages of Scripture, he is on a mission to draw all people to himself (Matt. 28:18-20; 1 Tim. 2:4; Rev. 5:9-10). As the ultimate expression of his gracious will for all of creation, He sends his Son Jesus. The Father desires deep, bonded relationships with his children. He wants to be known.

Jesus is the “I AM” revealed. Through the incarnation, the glory and holiness of the Father are unveiled in human history. Although all things have been created through him, Jesus empties himself in order to redeem a fallen humanity that cannot save itself. He is the only way to salvation, the truth that liberates, and the life that makes whole. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus inaugurates the new covenant, between the Father and his children, and shows the way to covenant community for all who desire to follow his self-emptying path.

The Holy Spirit is the evangelist who witnesses to Jesus and leads his followers to wholeness. He enables God’s children to perceive their distance from the Father’s glory and awakens within them a desire for intimacy with the Father. He teaches the truths of the kingdom to followers of Jesus and binds them together in covenant community through his indwelling presence. He transforms God’s children from glory to glory. He is the creative power who equips Jesus’ disciples and empowers them for service.

All three persons in the Trinity work together in perfect harmony to reveal their glory, to serve and to love human beings, and to shepherd their children. Together they reign over all things, communicate the good news and enter into covenant with their people. They invite disciples into a dynamic, loving reality. They want their followers to experience life in its fullness.

Mission application

MB Mission believes the Trinity provides the relational model, creative life and sure foundation for global church planting. The salvation message (holistic gospel) has as its source the Father’s love for the world. This love embraces all people groups. Jesus’ incarnation and sacrificial service determine the model for participating in God’s mission. The gospel is founded on his life, death and resurrection.

The Spirit of God creates, shapes and empowers the church to carry on God’s mission to the least reached peoples of the earth. Through listening prayer and community discernment, MB church planting efforts are a response to God’s calling on MB Mission to participate in the extension of his kingdom among the least reached.

Trinitarian Community

The above summary of the MB Trinitarian understanding serves as a foundation for its newfound emphasis on the Trinitarian community. Not only are the three persons of the Trinity on mission, they are also communal. Father, Son and Holy Spirit exist in an intimate, eternal relationship. Father, Son and Holy Spirit love each other deeply, glorify each other, cede to each other, enhance each other, release each

other for specific roles, share everything, are committed to eternal oneness and always communicate with each other. They work together for the salvation of humankind and the restoration of all things.

Mission application

For this reason, MB Mission seeks to form church planting teams that reflect the Trinity in their relational life and live the shared values of Jesus' kingdom as they cross frontiers to plant churches.

They send teams characterized by shared divine calling, covenantal relationships, strategic team leadership, healthy patterns of conflict resolution, a common philosophy of ministry, and an environment oriented by grace. As ambassadors of God among least-reached people groups, missionaries seek to experience and reflect this glorious oneness as they live community before those who have never heard of Jesus or had the privilege of participating in Christian community.

MB Mission sends out church planting teams, called and equipped to live in community, with complementary gifting (Eph. 4:11-16; I Cor. 12-14), doing life and ministry together so that the least-reached people will experience the presence of God among them through this Spirit-filled community of followers and be inspired to form their own indigenous communities of faith that reflect the presence and glory of God.

Kingdom of God

Holistic Service

Holistic ministry is rooted in the MB understanding of the Kingdom of God, encompassing all of life, and God's eternal desire to see his glory manifest among all the *ethne*.⁴ The apostolic task is to invite the peoples of the earth to form communities of followers around Jesus. Disciples of Jesus are to experience the transforming power of the Holy Spirit on all levels: spiritual, emotional, physical, relational, familial, social, and financial. MB Mission is seeking to transform its "implicit holistic theology" and historic three-priority framework for mission (evangelism and church planting, leadership training, and social action) into a fully-owned, integrative process which reflects the fullness of God.

Churches of the kingdom value medical and educational ministries as much as evangelism and healing ministries. Agricultural and business personnel who follow Jesus walk full of the Spirit and share their faith with those they assist through both word and deed. There is no need for separation. "Holistic church planting that transforms communities among the least reached," the vision statement of MB Mission, should simply emanate from a life of communion with the Triune God.

When the understanding of holistic ministry is grounded in the nature of God, there is no need to separate evangelism and spiritual deliverance from justice and peace initiatives. As the gospel of the kingdom is proclaimed and incarnated, demons are expelled, relationships are healed and communities are transformed. Salvation, peace, and justice are possible because of Jesus' authority over all things. They are seamlessly and integrally connected in God's holiness. They are faces of God's glory revealed in the person of Jesus.

Mission application

Followers of Jesus work for peace and justice in the world. They understand that individual and communal peace is only possible when Jesus himself is their peace, reigning in their lives and healing their communities (Eph. 2:11-22). Our mission candidates are equipped to walk under the authority of God in their homes, the church and the workplace. If they have not learned to walk under God-given authority in these spheres, they will lack wisdom and authority in arming themselves to confront their spiritual enemies and work for lasting peace among the least reached.

As God's kingdom is established among new people groups, missionaries and national believers often encounter resistance and attack from their spiritual enemy. Governments are sometimes hostile. New believers are ostracized by families and the larger society. Mission candidates are being equipped to walk under the authority of Jesus as they share the good news of the kingdom through peacemaking and conflict resolution, spiritual deliverance, inner healing and gospel proclamation.

The challenge is for MB missionaries to understand their primary identity as disciples under the lordship of Jesus who are ready to immerse themselves long-term in the least-reached context, willing to die for the least reached people group out of love for Jesus. His invitation is to walk in the fullness of the Spirit, as lambs among wolves, in the midst of darkness (2 Cor. 4:1-6; Eph. 6:10-20).

Mission Ecclesiology

An understanding of the "who" of God shapes the "who" of the church. If God defines what it means to be alive in the kingdom, then the church is to be the most tangible expression of that kingdom life. If God empowers human beings for service, then the church must be an experience of God's gracious reign and the empowering body that releases its members for mission to the world. If God is present in the world to save and restore, then the church must exist for the redemption of the world and be the community of faith, which ministers healing and radically works for peace. If the Trinity lives in eternal covenant community and seeks to covenant with human beings, then the church should be the human community where covenant values are embodied through the bonding of the Holy Spirit. If God is one who compassionately

cares and shepherds his people, then the church should be the community where the Shepherd's voice is heard and disciples learn to follow his counsel. The church is to be a visible revelation of the Trinity to a watching world. To be seen it must be actively involved in the world.

In essence, the church is to be a reflection of the Godhead on earth. It is to live the reality of God's presence, embody the values of the kingdom of heaven, and make disciples of all people groups. MB Mission believes that the primary agent for kingdom transformation among the world's people groups is the gathered community of Jesus' followers: that is, a planted church in a given context (e.g., ethno-linguistic people group or geographical region).

Mission application

Therefore, MB Mission intentionally trains mission candidates and forms teams under the guidance of the Spirit that will reflect the multiple gifting necessary for kingdom life. The way training is done is as important as the content of the instruction. Our missionary expression naturally flows out of who we are. Who we are and how we live is as important as what we know and what we can do.

MB Mission promotes a transformational training philosophy which facilitates the integration of character change (spiritual maturity), relational growth (conflict resolution patterns, interpersonal communication, etc.), spiritual awareness, cross-cultural sensitivity, and ministry skill development. For transformation to happen on all levels, this learning experience requires the Spirit of God, a cross-cultural context, experience, reflection, and analysis. The learning process takes place in real life.

Servant Leadership

An understanding of the "who" of God is not only transforming the MB understanding of church, it is also fundamentally transforming its understanding of the character and function of leadership. In the past, at times, MB leadership has been largely confined to the pastoral and teaching roles (most often positions). While shepherding and teaching ministries are critical for the pastoral care of the community of faith and the instruction of God's people in the whole counsel of God, they do not fully reflect the fullness of God's design for leadership in his kingdom.

The New Testament provides ample support for a broader definition and experience of leadership. Apostolic ministry carries the glory of God into yet unreached people groups or regions. It lays the foundation for the expansion of the church. Prophetic ministry hears the voice of God and speaks forth his word to the church and the nations. Evangelistic ministry shares the good news of Jesus through word and deed with the world. The teaching ministry instructs disciples in the ways of the kingdom and encourages them to multiply. The shepherding ministry cares for the wounded,

empowers the weak for service and zealously labors for the health of God's people.

Church leadership is not grounded in positional authority. In Scripture, the Father delegates all authority to the Son. Jesus exercises his authority through service (John 13) and eventually makes the ultimate sacrifice for a fallen humanity (John 19). After his resurrection, he delegates all authority to his disciples (Matthew 28). They are to exercise their authority by making disciples of all nations in the power of the Spirit. The first disciples delegate their authority to new disciples.

Leadership exists to empower and equip the members of Christ's body for service so that the mystery of the gospel might be revealed to all peoples—God present among his people (Eph. 4:11-16; 3:7-10; Col. 1:24-29). This empowerment is received as leaders live a life of worship in his presence among the nations. All ministries empowered by the Spirit are essential for the church to mature and experience the fullness of God.

Mission application

Missionaries are trained in church planting contexts where the realities of service to the world demand the emergence of all ministries of the Spirit. Along with training in shepherding and teaching ministries, mission candidates are mentored in apostolic, prophetic and evangelistic ministries. Without these ministries, missionaries become less visionary and hopeful in relation to their moment in history, less perceptive in their understanding of spiritual truth for their time, and less compassionate for those who live outside of Christ. Most importantly, they and the churches they plant fail to fulfill their purpose as the embodiment of God's love on earth.

God and His Immanence

God Speaks

Our God is on mission. He is the initiator who serves, speaks, empowers and sends his followers. As the Father sent his Son into the world, twenty-first century missionaries are sent by the Holy Spirit (John 20:21) to embrace their eternal inheritance among the *ethne* (Matt. 28:18-20). But, as Jacob Loewen rightly notes, many Western missionaries have difficulty hearing the "still small voice" and "often miss strategic directives from him, and when this happens we become hindrances in God's work."⁵ When considering our future, we do not hear God's invitation to participate in his redemptive plan for humanity. When walking among the harassed and helpless of our generation, we do not sense God's heart of compassion. When working among those who have never heard of Jesus, we are not prompted to share the good news of the kingdom. When observing the unfolding of human history, we do not feel called to intercede and act.

Throughout Scripture, however, we find God speaking clearly and repeatedly to individuals and whole people groups (e.g., Gen. 12:1-3; Isa. 6:1-7; Jer. 1:4-10; Acts 13:1-3; Rom. 4:17-21). The advance of God's kingdom, from the first pages of Scripture to the final day of ultimate consummation, utterly depends on the leading of God's Spirit. MB Mission believes that God continues to speak to his people through Scripture, prophetic words and listening prayer. He calls, guides, counsels, teaches, orients and directs.

Mission application

For this reason, mission candidates are taught to listen to God's voice through Scripture, community, prayer, silence, creation and circumstances. God is creative. He is speaking to his people and to the nations. As mission candidates stop to listen, they find that God not only speaks to them, but he shares with them his heart for the *ethne*.

When considering new church planting initiatives among least reached people groups, MB Mission employs an extensive community decision-making process. Team members are mobilized to pray for the people group, intercession teams are sent to the geographical region, local churches of mission candidates are engaged, and leadership teams (Lead Team and Mission Board) provide discernment. Engagement in mission is a response to God's invitation to receive our inheritance.

God the Catalyst

Jacob Loewen rightly suggests that a catalyst needs "to improve his hearing of and his obedience to directives from God's Spirit" if he is to be sensitive to God's work among a chosen people groups.⁶ As Mennonite Brethren are called to participate in God's mission among the *ethne*, they discover that God the initiator is already at work in the International Community of Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB) family. He has catalyzed a process in the lives of individual followers, their families, and their communities of faith. The task of the leadership team is to be sensitive to what God is stirring among his people and hear what he is saying.

Following affirmation and sending, church planting missionaries seek to discern what God is catalyzing among the least reached people group. They are not bound to prescriptive strategies and prefabricated methodologies. They seek to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit. Jacob Loewen referred to the missionary role as a catalytic role, a passing role, where he or she refuses to become a major player in the local context. When missionaries begin to work among a chosen people group, they again recognize that God has been active among them. They attempt to respond in obedience to the directives of the Spirit as they enter the new culture.

Mission application

Following the Jesus model, missionaries seek to incarnate the Word of God by learning the heart language of the new people group, adjusting to cultural patterns and norms, serving the people in a sensitive manner, communicating the salvation message, and above all, cultivating a genuine love for the people. MB Missionaries are taught to serve with an equipping, empowering, and releasing mindset. From the outset, they prepare to leave and transition to new initiatives.

The current MB church planting philosophy equips and empowers new followers of Jesus to lead their communities of faith from the outset. Missionaries are available to equip with biblical training, provide access to alternative models, serve as a mirror to the emerging national church, connect indigenous leadership with the global family of faith and, more importantly, direct them to the Spirit of God as their source for provision and guidance. In faith, they plant seeds of the kingdom.

The goal is a contextually relevant, indigenous church which reflects God's glory, fully embraces its identity in the kingdom, multiplies spontaneously and follows the leading of the Spirit in mission to other *ethne*. As the new family of churches coalesces, MB missionaries continue to serve, as requested, as catalysts in the areas of community development, leadership training, and mission sending (Mission Capacity Building). If they are being invited to come alongside, their role is to nurture those planted kingdom seeds.

God of All Peoples**Christ's Return and God's Eternal Reign**

The missionary passion of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists “sprang from the conviction that the end of the world was near.”⁷ They accepted their call to make disciples of all nations as a sacred trust. In similar fashion, MBs believe they are living in the last days. These “last days” dawned with Christ's death, his resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the first disciples at Pentecost. They will end with his second coming and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth, the establishment of God's eternal kingdom. Between Pentecost and Christ's return in glory, “the church carries out its mission in the world.”⁸ Christ's return is imminent.

Mission application

The imminence of Christ's return shapes life priorities and elevates the urgency of the missionary endeavor. Mennonite Brethren understand that “the gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations (*ethne*), and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14). They believe that Jesus came to

ransom “people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” and to make them “a kingdom and priests” to God so that they might worship God together and reign on the earth (Rev. 5:9-10; 7:9-14). God’s desires “all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4).

Mennonite Brethren believe that all *ethne* are to enter the eternal city reflecting God’s glory through their unique ethnicities and cultures (Rev. 21:22-27). Mission in the “already” (present) anticipates the coming kingdom, the “not yet” (future). To that end, they carry God’s glory to the nations so that all *ethne* might enter into the fullness of salvation through Jesus Christ and fulfill the purpose for which they were created (Ps. 67). “Confident in this hope the church engages in mission until the Lord returns, empowered by the certainty that God will create a new heaven and a new earth.”⁹

The International Community of the Mennonite Brethren (ICOMB)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Jesus’ name is being worshipped around the globe. Mission is no longer from North America and Europe to the Global South. Today, many ICOMB partner conferences are also sending missionaries. The role of MB Mission, as the mission agency of the Canadian and American MB conferences, and the ICOMB partner conferences, is to continue to send missionaries to the least-reached regions of the world. The Great Commission and the Great Commandment are as binding today as they were for the first disciples. Currently, MB Mission has long-term workers among least-reached people groups in West Africa, North Africa, Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia and Latin America. ICOMB partner conferences are also sending missionaries to these regions.

For the ICOMB family to participate more fully in God’s mission, all members must find their identity in Jesus. All must see themselves as full heirs of the kingdom of God—sons and daughters of the Father, sent out under Jesus’ lordship, full of the Holy Spirit, with authority to proclaim and live the gospel among the nations. All must see themselves as a sign of the in-breaking kingdom of God. All members must look with faith to the same God who inspired and led the first followers of Jesus.

Mission application

As the global MB mission networks continue to take form, ICOMB has requested that MB Mission encourage the ICOMB partner conferences in their efforts to embrace their global mission, building their capacity through leadership equipping and community development (Mission Capacity Building service). As part of this service, MB Mission facilitates the church planting and mission sending initiatives of ICOMB partner conferences. From the perspective of MB Mission, the key

questions are those of national or regional vision, ownership, and initiative. It must be remembered that MB Mission's Mission Capacity Building service is an interim step toward the full development of a global mission alliance.

This engagement as an ICOMB family is already leading to the formation of multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multinational teams—a tremendous challenge, but also a wonderful expression of God's glory. As global mission has served to unite the Canadian and American conferences, MB Mission believes that ICOMB partner conferences will be united by participation in global mission together. Walking together in mission, the people groups encompassed by the ICOMB family will more fully reflect the glory and goodness of God to a watching world. As they do this, they will anticipate their worship-filled reunion with all communities of faith, submitted to the lordship of Jesus Christ and united by the Holy Spirit, before the throne of the Father in his eternal kingdom.

Notes

- ¹ Doug Heidebrecht, "Mennonite Brethren and the Gospel: A Theology of Mission on the Way," *Direction*, 42/2 (2013): 207.
- ² Charles Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 21.
- ³ Hans Kasdorf, "Toward a Mennonite Brethren Theology of Mission," *Mission Focus*, 16/1(1988): 1-6.
- ⁴ Paul Hiebert, "World Trends and Their Implications for Mennonite Brethren Mission," *Mission Focus* 16/4 (1988): 75-82.
- ⁵ Jacob Loewen, "Strategies for Cross-Cultural Mission: Past, Present and Future," *Mission Focus* 16/4: 88.
- ⁶ Loewen, "Strategies," 84.
- ⁷ H.W. Meihuizen, "The Missionary Zeal of the Early Anabaptists," in *Anabaptism and Mission*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1984), 90.
- ⁸ *Confession of Faith: Commentary and Practical Application* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2000), 200.
- ⁹ *Knowing and Living Your Faith: A Study of the Confession of Faith International Community of Mennonite Brethren*, eds. Elmer A. Martens and Peter J. Klassen (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2008), 128.

Recommended Reading

Confession of Faith: Commentary and Pastoral Application. Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2000.

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Study Questions

1. The author articulates the individual roles of the three persons of the Trinity in mission, and their united operation as the Triune God in mission. List two individual roles of each person of the Trinity. Also list two operations that the Trinity does together.
2. According to the author, the church is the primary agent of the kingdom of God. What does this mean for mission agencies sponsored by their church? For parachurch agencies? For the kind of mission activity we engage in?
3. Do you agree that the fivefold leadership ministry is valid for today—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers? If not, why not? If so, can you identify people in your circle with these gifts?
4. This chapter was written from a mission agency perspective. Is that why after each theological reflection there is a section of mission application, or should all theological reflection result in mission application? Discuss.