

Introduction

Victor Wiens

“**W**e live in the most amazing time in the history of humanity when it comes to fulfilling Christ’s Commission to make disciples of all nations!” That’s quite a statement—is it true?

Consider: ... never before has our missionary God used so many resources through so many Christ-followers from so many churches in so many lands! The resources available today for global mission—such as well-informed intercession, multiple technologies, facility of travel, and global wealth—are simply unprecedented. The number of those who consider themselves followers of Jesus (some may not use the term “Christian”) is also unprecedented; however, what really is amazing is the outstanding growth of those committed to obeying the Great Commission, spreading the evangel, and making disciples. Some call these Great Commission Christians, others call them born-again believers, and still others simply evangelicals.¹ The promise Jesus made to his disciples, “I will build my church ...” is more fulfilled today than ever before, yet his church is built with a creativity of styles and structures heretofore unknown. From secret cells of believers in small Chinese homes, to fully functional church



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assemblies within Paraguayan prison walls, to singing congregations under African trees, to storefront meetings in Western cities—these too are the church of Christ in the twenty-first century. In years past there were efforts to list denominations, at least by country. In our day, that would be a useless effort in many countries, since by the time the census was finished, a dozen more Churches will have emerged. Furthermore, these resources, Christ-followers and churches are present in all lands. “There is no country without a Christian witness or fellowship of indigenous believers (although in a very few cases, they must remain secretive).”² Indeed, this is an amazing time to be alive and active in mission.

Yet before we drift toward a false triumphalism, we do well to consider some other sobering realities. While we can be confident that Christ is indeed building his church, we can also be sure that “the night is coming” and “the days are evil.” The paradox of generations past is also the paradox of our generation: While it is “sunrise in world mission,”³ there are storm clouds on the horizon! The wars and rumors of war appear to be not only endless, but increasing. International terrorism, usually hostile to Christians, occupies our daily news. Thirty million people, mostly women and children, live in slavery. One in six people lacks access to safe drinking water. Within the larger Christian community, historical convictions such as the uniqueness of Christ for salvation and the authority of Scripture are being debated, if not denied. While some used to speak of nominal Catholics and Protestants, we must now also speak of nominal evangelicals (a chapter is devoted to this matter).⁴

As to our mandate to make disciples of all nations, we also dare not relax into an immobilizing triumphalism. Nearly one in four people on this planet has not had the good news of Jesus presented to them in a way that they could truly comprehend and respond to (almost two billion people). World religions, especially Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, are growing as fast as or faster than general Christianity. Roughly forty percent (6,645 in 2010) of the known ethno-linguistic people groups are considered unreached, that is, there is no viable indigenous community of Christians able to evangelize their own people without outside assistance.⁵ Truly our task is unfinished.

Within this paradox of mission realities the global Mennonite Brethren Church seeks to be faithful, to enter God’s open doors, and to join with all true believers in completing the unfinished task. The Mennonite Brethren are a renewal movement with origins in the Anabaptist renewal of sixteenth-century Europe. One tributary of the Anabaptist river, the Mennonites, by the nineteenth century found themselves spread far and wide from North America to Russia, even while a substantial population remained in western Europe. Not unlike the dispersion of Acts 8, the Mennonites relocated due to religious persecution. As is usually the case with renewal movements, over time the temperature cools, institutionalism becomes the norm, and

mission turns to maintenance. In the case of the Mennonites, they became known as “the quiet in the land.” This was also the story of the Russian Mennonites who began immigration to Russia from Prussia (modern Poland) in 1789 upon Empress Catherine the Great’s invitation to them. The generous invitation was offered to the Mennonites (and other German-speaking peoples) so they would develop farmland recently regained in the Russo-Turkish War in the region northwest of the Sea of Azov near the Dnieper River (modern Ukraine).

By the mid-nineteenth century the Russian Mennonites enjoyed a relatively peaceful and prosperous existence. Yet overall their spiritual condition was at a low ebb. At this time winds of spiritual renewal were blowing elsewhere in Europe. Especially influential among German populations in southern Russia, including some Mennonites, was German Pietism. Elements of Pietism, such as personal conversion, a sincere discipleship, holy living, prayer, Bible reading, evangelism and even foreign mission festivals were highly attractive to some Mennonites desirous of renewal. For a time, the renewed Mennonites attempted to remain in fellowship with the “old church.” Upon being denied in their request of an elder to have separate and more frequent commemorations of the Lord’s Supper, they went ahead and conducted this ceremony on their own. Although their intentions were pure and without intent to rebel, their understanding of the implications of this act was limited. They were forced to leave the old church and on January 6, 1860 eighteen family heads drew up a “document of secession”⁶ and at once formally left the old church and began a new one which came to be called Mennonite Brethren.⁷ In it they declared their loyalty to God, to Scripture, Anabaptist principles, and to Menno Simons.

A new Anabaptist stream had emerged, one characterized by renewal and mission. Over the last 150 years these “personality traits” have been evidenced time and again (albeit imperfectly to be sure), but also have been the focus of self-examination and reflection.⁸ Given the missiological nature of this volume, we shall focus hereafter more on the Mennonite Brethren (MB) as a missionary movement.

Evidences of the outworking of this inner DNA were soon noted. In Russia, already in 1862, some MB leaders were called before Russian courts facing charges of attempting to convert their Russian laborers. Their motto became “every MB a witness.” In 1872, at their first conference assembly, a main concern was mission (i.e. the selection, support and sending of itinerant preachers). By 1889, after continuously supporting local mission workers and workers in foreign lands through other agencies, the small 1,800-member MB Church sent their first foreign missionary to India (see the section on India in the Asia chapter). Similar evidences came through in North America following a wave of immigration in the 1870s. In their first assembly (1879), specific resolutions were passed to express their commitment to missions (i.e. weekly offerings, missions committees, itinerant evangelists). At the 1882 conference

assembly in Kansas, one third of the love offering was designated for missions in India. When the conference was legally registered in 1900, it was called the American Mennonite Brethren Mission Union – the rallying point was worldwide missions.⁹

Further evidences came forth on other continents. In the direst circumstances in the Paraguayan Chaco, within five years of their arrival, MB and other Mennonite immigrants had organized a mission structure to bring the love of Christ and the message of salvation to their indigenous neighbors (see Paraguay section in the Latin America chapter). Similarly in Brazil, within seventeen years after their arrival the MBs in Brazil were working with North American missionaries to begin an orphanage to reach out to their Latin neighbors. Many church plants would soon follow. In Africa, early setbacks tested both the missionaries' and their sending churches' missionary resolve. Of the first team that went to Cameroons, three of four died within two years on the field—the fourth had already left. The first MB missionary husband to the Belgian Congo, Aaron Janzen, buried his only two children and his first wife, Ernestina, on the mission field. Their service began in 1912; however, their support was irregular, thus requiring them to often be self-sustaining (the MB Conference finally adopted this field in 1943). Janzen once declared: "It is necessary for us to go; it is not necessary for us to come back."¹⁰

In light of these evidences and many other stories that follow in this anthology, not a few have reflected on the MB Church as a missionary movement. Among these are:

- J.B. Toews: "The Mennonite Brethren Church was especially called into existence, from among the larger Mennonite community, as a missionary church."¹¹
- Paul Hiebert: "To be sure, matters of theology, church polity, education and publications have united the churches in concerted action, but none of these has so encapsulated the vision and the energies of the Mennonite Brethren as has mission."¹²
- G. W. Peters: "This group ... became the seedbed for a missions enterprise that soon germinated, then grew and flourished with surprising vigor"; "... Mennonite Brethren missions was an attitude, a way of life, a product of the general biblicism of the brotherhood ... far from being a 'department,' missions was a central motivation of prime importance."¹³
- Hans Kasdorf: "As the product of a revival movement within the larger Mennonite community, the Mennonite Brethren have from the very beginning in 1860 sensed a missionary responsibility towards the world."¹⁴

As mentioned in the Editor's Preface, the present volume is a continuation of sorts of an earlier compilation from 1967.¹⁵ Mission for MBs looked very different

at that time than it does now. Primary leadership in most fields still came from the missionaries. Organized conferences of churches existed in five or six countries; today there is an International Community of Mennonite Brethren Churches (ICOMB) composed of twenty-one conferences. MB Mission missionaries then were serving in ten countries; today they serve in about thirty countries. Issues in focus then were the global tensions of the Cold War, the changes coming in recently emancipated colonies, the impact of the western social revolutions on missions, and the primacy of evangelism over social ministries. The concept of least-reached people groups was hardly known, communication via cell phones or internet was unheard of, and no one was speaking of postmodernism or “post-Christian” countries. Some of the challenges we face today are introduced above in the third and fourth paragraphs. Of course there are many more.¹⁶ Yet there are very encouraging developments in our world, in the world of missions, and in MB mission efforts worldwide. In sum, a new generation requires a new set of reflections, even as they value and build on the former. To that end the present compilation is offered. The title points to, we hope, a merger of the earlier missional reflections and those required for a new generation of mission workers in a new century.

The Church. Mennonite Brethren understand that the *missio dei* is carried out primarily by the *missio ecclesiae*; it is God’s mission and it is God who sends the church to accomplish his mission. The church only sends because she has been sent. The primary agent of the kingdom of God is the church of God. Someone has popularized this by saying that the church are God’s hands and feet in this world. In this they are aligned with an Anabaptist understanding of church-centered mission.

Far beyond the notion of a denomination on a mission, MBs understand themselves as a church within the universal church on God’s mission. We are a movement that is part of a much larger world Christian movement, a stream flowing into a river. From our beginnings, MBs have been more eclectic than exclusive in terms of evangelical influences. We are beneficiaries of Anabaptism, of German Pietism, of North American Evangelicalism and of aspects of the charismatic movement. MBs have also contributed to other “churches in mission” and to the larger world Christian movement by sharing gifts that they have received so that the *missio dei* could be accomplished. Some of those gifts are writers in this volume.

In Mission. Each generation of Christians must understand and embrace the mission of God and the mission to which it has been called for its time. What is non-negotiable is that we are called to be a people on a mission. The outworking of that mission will have different applications according to each generation, but the essence remains the same since Abraham’s call (Gen. 12:1-3). God is about restoring humanity from the Fall; about blessing the nations; about seeking and saving the lost; about redeeming the enslaved; about healing broken lives; about reconciling the

estranged to himself, to each other, and to his creation. The people of God are called to the same mission ... “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). The well-known catchphrase of Emil Brunner bears repeating: The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning!

Perspectives. Following the model of the enormously influential *Perspectives* reader (now in its fourth edition),¹⁷ this reader also presents four perspectives: 1) Biblical/Theological, 2) Historical, 3) Cultural, and 4) Strategic. These perspectives are also near and dear to who the MBs are as a global family. We are a “people of the Book”; we are a people who want to learn the lessons of history, our own and that of others, on the way to a brighter future; we are a people with ethnic origins, who have broken down barriers, embraced other cultures and languages, yet still need anthropological insights for the missionary journey; we are a people of practice who are always in search of better means and methods to accomplish our God-given tasks (the number of chapters in the Strategic section may well be indicative of who the editor is as much as who the MBs are).

Global. This is perhaps the most welcome feature to this sequential volume. The new reality for Christians in general and MBs in particular is that the church is global, the majority church is once again non-Western, and a new generation of global church and mission leaders has been raised up to serve at all levels. The cross-cultural missionary force is increasingly non-Western.¹⁸ How exciting! How challenging! If we are to walk and work together in mission, we need to listen to and understand each other’s perspective. Every attempt has been made to call writers from the global MB family.

Mennonite Brethren. As mentioned above in comments under *The Church*, the MB family highly values the larger world Christian movement of the global church of Christ. We also sense the need to have a “family conversation.” Yet we want to have this conversation publicly so that we can both share our story and lessons with others, but also receive input and critique from friends and families beyond this particular denomination. Thus, this is a round-table discussion from and for MBs, but with the door wide open and chairs available for others to join us.

21st Century. With the exception of the writer of the Foreword, Elmer Martens, all the writers in this compilation are absent from the original compilation of 1967. That is by design. In the following pages are perspectives *of* this generation and *for* this generation (and hopefully the next). As with the men of Issachar who joined David in his mission, our prayer is that the men and women who have contributed to this band are those who “... understood the times and knew what Israel should do” (I Chr. 12:32).

That said, it would be altogether presumptuous to leave out a smaller band who mentored us and taught us to love God, his church and his mission. We really do

stand on the shoulders of giants. Therefore, we have included reprints of a small group of MB missiologists that have had an enormous impact within and beyond the MB family. They have passed on to their eternal reward, yet their voices still speak to us today.

The following perspectives are then offered as an instrument to be used globally, in formal and non-formal training settings, for workers in training, for missionaries, mission leaders, and for all who embrace the missional call of God; also for all who embrace the family of God and long to see further global advance of the church in mission.

Notes

¹ “Evangelical” is used here according to the following definition: “All who emphasize and adhere to all four of the following: The Lord Jesus Christ is the sole source of salvation through faith in Him, as validated by His crucifixion and resurrection. Personal faith and conversion with regeneration by the Holy Spirit. Recognition of the inspired Word of God as the ultimate basis and authority for faith and Christian living. Commitment to biblical witness, evangelism and mission that brings others to faith in Christ.” From Jason Mandryk, *Operation World: The Definitive Prayer Guide to Every Nation*, 7th Edition (Colorado Springs: Biblica Publishing, 2010), 958.

² Ibid., 21.

³ The title of a vision-casting booklet written by a mentor in mission, Hans Kasdorf. *It's sunrise in world mission: A vision statement from the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary* (Fresno, CA: Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 1984).

⁴ These disturbing global trends, and many others, are listed in Mandryk, *Operation World*, 10-18.

⁵ Ibid., 21-27.

⁶ “Document of Secession (Mennonite Brethren Church, 1860),” accessed February 6, 2015, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Document_of_Secession_%28Mennonite_Brethren_Church,_1860%29#Secession_Document

⁷ A recent and fuller summary of this history is in John B. Toews and Abe Dueck, “Mennonite Brethren Beginnings,” in *The Mennonite Brethren Church Around the World: Celebrating 150 Years*, ed. Abe J. Dueck (Winnipeg and Kitchener: Pandora Press and Kindred Productions, 2010), 13-30.

⁸ The recent 150-year anniversary produced considerable conversation around these themes, some of which is contained in a compilation of reflections found in Abe Dueck, Bruce Guenther, Doug Heidebrecht, eds., *Renewing Identity and Mission: Mennonite Brethren Reflections After 150 Years* (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2011).

- ⁹ This was not the name of the mission board or agency. The MB mission agency was originally the Committee for Gentile Missions (1885), then the Committee for Foreign Missions (1896). By 1909 it had again changed to the Directorate of Foreign Missions. In 1936 the same became the Board of Foreign Missions. In the same year the Board of General Welfare and Public Relations was created to oversee matters relating to relief, peace, and colonization. The Board of Foreign Missions dropped the designation “Foreign” in 1960, and in 1966 the Board of Missions and Services (BOMAS) resulted from the merger of the Boards of Missions and General Welfare. In the following years the use of the board name (BOMAS) diminished and the agency name (MB Missions/Services, MBMS) increased. In 1998, with a growing international missionary force, the name changed again to MBMS International. In 2011, the current designation, MB Mission, was adopted. For purposes of simplicity and clarity, “MB Mission” will be used throughout this text, even when referring to the board or agency of earlier years.
- ¹⁰ J. B. Toews, *The Mennonite Brethren Church: A Missionary Movement*. A history of foreign mission work in the Mennonite Brethren Church told by veteran church leader J. B. Toews to a live audience in Winnipeg, MB. Burton Bueller, ed., 1988. VHS videocassette.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Paul Hiebert, introduction to *Foundations of Mennonite Brethren Missions* by G.W. Peters (Hillsboro: Kindred Press, 1984), 1.
- ¹³ G.W. Peters, *Foundations of Mennonite Brethren Missions* (Hillsboro: Kindred Press, 1984), 9, 44.
- ¹⁴ Hans Kasdorf, “A Century of Mennonite Brethren Mission Thinking” (Th.D. diss., University of South Africa, 1986).
- ¹⁵ A.J. Klassen, ed., *The Church In Mission: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to J. B. Toews* (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, Mennonite Brethren Church, 1967).
- ¹⁶ For an excellent summary of current political, social, demographic, environmental and missionary challenges, see Mandryk, *Operation World*, 10-23; and Patrick Johnstone, *The Future of the Global Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, 2011), 1-20.
- ¹⁷ Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, eds., *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, 4th Edition (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009).
- ¹⁸ According to veteran researcher Patrick Johnstone, sometime between 2000-2010 the cross-cultural missionary force from Africa/Asia/Latin America actually surpassed that of Europe/North America/Pacific. See Johnstone, *Future*, 228.