

## PILGRIMS FOR THE GLOBAL CHURCH: ECUMENICAL REFLECTIONS ON A BELIEVERS' CHURCH IMAGE

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Christians around the world are finally becoming aware of the historic times in which they live. Christians in the global North<sup>1</sup> have come to this realization slowly and recently, and in similar ways Christians in the South are beginning to comprehend their significance at the epicenter of world Christianity. These momentous times result from relatively recent changes in the global composition of the Church in which the majority of the world's Christians now reside in the southern hemisphere. Although this recent phenomenon underscores the significance of the new southern heartlands for the faith, Christianity is no stranger to the global South.

Christianity first emerged in and from Asia, and it remained a predominately southern faith for the first six centuries of its existence. After 600 CE Christianity's statistical center of gravity moved gradually north and west, so that by 1500 most of the followers of Jesus on earth, approximately 92%, were northerners.<sup>2</sup> This latter period in which Christianity became linked historically and culturally with Europe is the one which has defined the faith for most Christians for five centuries. Indeed, many in the North and South still view Christianity in terms of this period, as a faith in and of Europe.

However, since 1500 a reverse trend has been taking place, although slowly and gradually. From 1500 until 1900 Christianity's center of gravity moved steadily southward, and by 1950 the statistical center of Christianity

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper the terms "global North" or simply "North" refer to the five United Nations regions (55 countries) comprising Europe and North America. The terms "global South" or "South" refer to the sixteen UN regions (185 countries) comprising Africa, most of Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia, and Australia/New Zealand. See United Nations, List of Regional Groupings, <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Host.aspx?Content=Data/RegionalGroupings.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Todd M. Johnson and Sun Young Chung. "Tracking Global Christianity's Statistical Centre of Gravity, AD 33- AD 2100." *International Review of Mission* (April 2004): 166-181.

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moved south of Jerusalem<sup>3</sup> for the first time since Jesus walked the earth. Between 1900 and 1970 the southern shift was sharper and more obvious, and soon after 1980 southern Christians outnumbered those in the North for the first time in a thousand years. By 2005 this southward shift meant that 65% of all Christians lived in the global South,<sup>4</sup> and these trends will continue so that by 2100 the global center of Christianity is projected to be in Northern Nigeria. Yet, even before that time Christianity will have come full circle in terms of its composition and geographical center, out of the South and back again.<sup>5</sup>

This historic inversion of the statistical center of world Christianity is a result of the phenomenal growth of Christianity in the South and the accompanying decline of the Church in the North. The wane of Christianity in Europe is usually understood to be the product of lower birth rates coupled with the impact of secularism and communism. Even though statistics on church attendance don't reveal a marked decline in Christianity in the United States similar to the experience of Europe, it can be argued that a decline has occurred nonetheless, demonstrated in a growing shift away from historic Christianity and towards an emergent form of deism.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of how this ebb is interpreted, however, the statistical decline of Christianity in the North has been clearly demonstrated.<sup>7</sup>

The growth of Christianity in the southern lands has also been well documented and interpreted, at least in general and regional terms.<sup>8</sup> Although at least one scholar foresaw the southern shift of Christianity almost thirty years ago,<sup>9</sup> this trend was largely a well kept secret within the academic community.

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<sup>3</sup> South of 31.8 degrees north latitude.

<sup>4</sup>Lamin Sanneh. *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (New York: Oxford, 2008): 275.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson and Chung, 171-174.

<sup>6</sup> This can be argued using the data on the emergence of "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" in the United States. See Christian Smith and Melinda Denton. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> For example, Johnson and Chung.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see Allan H. Anderson. *African Reformation* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2001); Philip Jenkins. *The Next Christendom* (New York: Oxford, 2002), "Liberating Word" *Christian Century* (July 11, 2006), 22-26, *The New Faces of Christianity* (New York: Oxford, 2006); and, Dana Robert. "Shifting Southward: Global Christianity Since 1945." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (April, 2000): 50-58.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew F. Walls. *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997): 3-15. This chapter was originally published as a separate article in 1982.

More recently, however, a spate of articles and books has popularized the rise of southern Christians to the global majority.<sup>10</sup> These sources recount Christianity's southward spread through tales of triumph over formidable obstacles, internal and external, historical and cultural, religious and political, indigenous and imperial. While the protagonists in Christianity's most recent southern story were initially thought to be Northerners, it is now clear that they have been indigenous southern Christians, men and women who were "the most effective interpreters of Christianity to their own people."<sup>11</sup> The rise of Southern Christianity is a narrative of waning European power and ascendant local initiatives that have resulted, not only in political independence for many, but also in religious and theological autonomy. Consequently, local expressions of Christianity have emerged throughout the global South, many of which are radically dissimilar from their northern correlatives.

#### **A New Ecumenical Frontier**

This re-formulation of the Christian faith has been heralded as both good news and bad. While it is widely acknowledged that the growth of Christianity in the South represents a dynamic spread and revitalization of the faith, it has been argued that a dangerous polarization within the global Church is developing. Philip Jenkins has warned about a growing southern fundamentalism that could prove to be destructive for relations between Christians North and South.<sup>12</sup> The current controversy over homosexuality within the worldwide Anglican Communion is simply one high-profile example of a growing number of North-South tensions within world Christianity. Most Christian communities which have large followings in the global North and South are experiencing internal conflicts directly related to the southern shift of Christianity, and it is likely that these clashes will spread and intensify.

While it can be argued that Jenkins has misunderstood the nature of southern Christianity and that the dangers associated with the prominence of the South within the global Church are exaggerated, still causes for concern are warranted. Given the colossal differences in contexts within the global Church,

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<sup>10</sup> The works of Philip Jenkins, mentioned above, are examples.

<sup>11</sup> Dana Robert, 53.

<sup>12</sup> See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*.

it is not surprising that Christians representing the same denominations yet from different hemispheres misunderstand and even mistrust each other. Minority Christians in the North, formed by affluence and unique historical and cultural experiences,<sup>13</sup> are ill-equipped to understand and engage constructively their poorer and differently formed brothers and sisters in the South. Likewise, majority Christians in the South are largely uninformed of the complex historical and cultural processes that shape contemporary Christianity in the North.<sup>14</sup> This growing polarization within the global Church, with the more affluent North on one side and the less affluent South on the other, represents a new and potentially perilous ecumenical frontier.

This growing ecumenical divide presents fresh challenges to the unity of the universal Church, raising concerns that new waves of Christian schisms might be on the horizon. This time, however, rather than the sacred fabric of the universal Church being rent due to differences in doctrine imposed from a central authority, splits may very well occur over more localized cultural, political and economic issues.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, this growing polarization within the global Church has the potential to alienate from each other Christian communities that are interdependent in ways that have previously been unrealized. Both northern and southern Christians possess resources—spiritual, theological, human—that are desperately needed by their brothers and sisters across the hemispheric divide. Additionally, further rifts in world Christianity would challenge the credibility and effectiveness of the witness of the global Church. In our age of unprecedented religious diversity, and at a time when historic numbers of Christians live among people of other faiths, the inability of Christians to converse and cooperate among themselves seriously threatens the integrity of the Church of Jesus Christ all over the world.

In order to facilitate global ecumenical conversation and partnership across this widening gulf, minority northern and majority southern Christians must discover positive ways to relate to each other. An obvious way to facilitate

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<sup>13</sup> For example, the Constantinian model of church-state relations and the influences of the Enlightenment.

<sup>14</sup> For example, the emergence of “post-modernity” in the West and post-9/11 nationalism in the USA.

<sup>15</sup> I am aware that one can argue that all schisms in Christian history have included these elements. Yet, I am also aware that past divisions were not framed explicitly around these issues.

ecumenism across this global divide is for Christian communities to draw upon their commonalities, and this global ecumenical possibility is particularly significant for the Believers' Church.<sup>16</sup> Throughout its history the Believers' Church has understood itself to have a distinctive relationship with other Christians and with the wider world, and emerging from this relational understanding is the conviction that the Believers' Church is a pilgrim community. This image—the Church as a distinctive or pilgrim community—provides ecumenical possibilities within a global Church that is being stretched and even strained as never before. Building upon this ecclesiological image, the Believers' Church is strategically positioned for ecumenical service across the emerging North-South frontier in world Christianity.

In the sections that follow it will be argued that, by drawing upon a core image in her ecclesiology, the Believers' Church can play a leading role in North-South ecumenism. The ecumenical significance of the Believers' Church image of herself as a pilgrim community will be reviewed, and then examples of global pilgrim ecumenism initiated by segments of the Believers' Church will be presented. Finally, suggestions for bolstering these efforts between Northern and Southern Christian pilgrims will be offered.

### **Pilgrims for the World**

Historically, the Believers' Church has defined herself through eight affirmations,<sup>17</sup> the first and second of which place the Lordship of Christ and the authority of the Word at the center of her identity. From these foundations emerge five convictions about the nature of the Believers' Church herself, articulating the community of faith's relationships within herself and to the world. Central to this ecclesiology is her conviction that the Believers' Church is a separated community of pilgrim people who are *in the world*, yet to some extent

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<sup>16</sup> For ease of expression, throughout I will use the term "Believers' Church" to refer to that body as it exists in North America. I realize that expressions of the Believers' Church exist elsewhere, yet this paper addresses primarily the North American community.

<sup>17</sup> Donald F. Durnbaugh. "Summary of Believers' Church Affirmations." *The Concept of the Believers' Church*. edited by James Leo Garrett, Jr. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969): 322-323.

*separated from the world.*<sup>18</sup> This image of the Church as “pilgrim” is biblical,<sup>19</sup> and it portrays Christians as being on a distinctive journey to announce the Kingdom of God in which they hold citizenship. This Kingdom citizenship is understood to be prior and primary. It is prior in the sense that one’s Christian identity is the first to be considered in all relationships – within the community of faith and to the wider world – and it is thus primary: it takes precedence over all other allegiances, whether to self, family, tribe or nation. Thus, as first and foremost citizens of the Kingdom of God, members of the Believers’ Church are called to relate to the world in distinctive, pilgrim ways.

This pilgrim identity has made the relationships between the Believers’ Church and the world tense and challenging. On one hand, the pilgrim image calls for a distinctive identity, and consequently some members of the Believers’ Church have historically attempted to separate themselves geographically from larger society – whether mainstream secular society or majority Christianity – by forming and living mostly among themselves in isolated communities. Others have understood that the call to be pilgrim is a mandate to remain distinctive or set apart even while participating in wider society. For example, many members of the Believers’ Church have embraced distinctive dress and various forms of civil nonresistance and nonparticipation in order to distinguish themselves from the mainstream. In either case, however, from her origins in the Reformation when pilgrim identities made them targets for persecution from secular and religious enemies alike, members of the Believers’ Church have often been pilgrims on the margins of the social, political, economic and ecclesiastical mainstreams.

But, perhaps ironically, imaging herself as a pilgrim people has also equipped the Believers’ Church to re-engage the world in distinctive ways. In spite of her temptation to become isolated from the world, “in the amazing nineteenth and twentieth-century effort to spread the Gospel throughout the world, believers’ churches have been prominent.”<sup>20</sup> Even though it can be argued

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> *Παρεπίδημος*, translated as “pilgrim,” “stranger,” or “alien” in Hebrews 11:13 and I Peter 2:11.

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette. “A People in the World: Historical Background.” In *The Concept of the Believers’ Church*, edited by James Leo Garrett, Jr. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969): 248.

that this service to the wider world came late and has not been consistent across her broader membership, still the pilgrim image of herself has equipped the Believers' Church to serve the world and the global Church in remarkable ways. Indeed, it has been observed that, rather than hindering the Believers' Church from engaging the world, this self-understanding as a pilgrim community has resulted in distinguished mission service across the multiple frontiers which frequently divide humans. In this, the Believers' Church identifies with the "'new humanity' of the covenant community."

The political novelty which God brings into the world is a community of those who serve instead of ruling, who suffer instead of inflicting suffering, whose fellowship crosses social lines instead of reinforcing them. This new Christian community in which the walls are broken down not by human idealism or democratic legalism but by the work of Christ is not only a vehicle of the gospel or fruit of the gospel; it is the good news. It is not merely the agent of mission or the constituency of a mission agency. This is the mission.<sup>21</sup>

Yoder thus understood that the new covenant community should seek to serve rather than be served; they are to offer selflessness rather than self-promotion through service across the frontiers that divide humanity. The new covenant community called into being by Jesus is thus to be a pilgrim people.

This understanding has formed Believers' Church identity, and so her ecclesiology elaborates upon these distinctive ways a pilgrim people can be *in* and *for* the world,<sup>22</sup> yet two are especially relevant here. Because of their pilgrim status as citizens of the Kingdom of God, members of the Believers' Church often use methods that aren't common, like peace-making, reconciliation and bridge-building across human, ecumenical and geographical divides. Thus, the pilgrim image isn't about being removed or isolated *from* the world. Rather, to be the pilgrim people of God means that the church is to be pilgrims *for* the world, that is, that she serve in the world yet in distinctively different ways. "The church's

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<sup>21</sup> John Howard Yoder. "A People in the World: Theological Interpretation." In *The Concept of the Believers' Church*, edited by James Leo Garrett, Jr. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969): 274.

<sup>22</sup> For example, see the discussions in Yoder, 250-283 and Louis P. Meyer "A People in the World: Contemporary Relevance." In *The Concept of the Believers' Church*, edited by James Leo Garrett, Jr. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969): 284-297.

methods are not of the world,"<sup>23</sup> so pilgrim efforts may lead the Believers' Church to serve the global Church and the world in ways that are neither widely understood nor supported or appreciated.

Secondly, pilgrim ecumenism means that the Believers' Church is well placed to serve those the wider Church often overlooks, suspects, considers insignificant or intentionally neglects. Because pilgrim status places primary importance upon fruitful witness (evaluated by faithfulness) rather than upon successful witness (evaluated by popular response), pilgrim ecumenism is free to serve those within the global Church that are on the margins, who are in the minority, or who may be deemed less "receptive" or open to conversation with the majority Church.<sup>24</sup> Because the Believers' Church has often been so characterized in her own history, she has theological and historical resources to engage constructively these crucial yet often neglected ecumenical challenges facing the global Church.

One principal challenge is to engage ecumenically the growing numbers of similarly formed Christian pilgrims in the global South. For various reasons many southern followers of Jesus understand themselves and their faith communities to be distinctive or pilgrim because they are marginalized within their immediate contexts and within the global Church. For some, it is their spurious origins in indigenous movements rather than mission established or Western affiliated efforts that form their self-understanding as a distinctive people. Members of African Instituted Churches and the burgeoning "new" Pentecostal churches appearing all over the world are examples of such pilgrim communities. For other Christians in the global South, their pilgrim status results from various forms of dissidence with locally established churches. Catholic Pentecostals in Latin American and Christian members of "basic human communities"<sup>25</sup> are examples of this category of southern pilgrims. Still other pilgrims in the global South are that whose very profession of Christianity place them within a minority and identifies them as members of distinctive communities on the margins of society. Within southern lands dominated by Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or other majority religions, Christians practice their

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<sup>23</sup> Durnbaugh, 322.

<sup>24</sup> Specific examples of such pilgrim ecumenism within the global Church are given below.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of these inter-religious communities, see Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008): 139-142.



faith as a pilgrim people, often suffering various forms of marginalization or even persecution. Additionally, many Christians living in southern lands with a significant Christian presence also experience their faith in communities set apart from mainstream churches. Pilgrims gathered in “insider movements”<sup>26</sup> or participants in “Churchless Christianity”<sup>27</sup> are examples of such followers of Jesus who, for various reasons, choose to express their faith on the margins of local Christianity, often even at odds with other Christians.

### **Pilgrims Across the Ecumenical Frontier**

These dynamic and growing yet marginalized pilgrim communities highlight the ecumenical frontiers that are emerging within the global Church. These southern pilgrims are often isolated from the resources of the wider Church to the detriment of all concerned. It is in these contexts and for these communities that the Believers’ Church can fill a crucial ecumenical role in the global Church: through initiating necessary and distinctive yet often unpopular global ecumenical conversations; in serving with besieged and persecuted Christian pilgrims victimized by violence; and, by providing human and educational resources to support southern Christian pilgrims. These efforts in the global South illustrate the ecumenical significance of the pilgrim image in Believers’ Church ecclesiology, and they also suggest fresh avenues for continued service across the new ecumenical frontier in world Christianity.

#### *Initiating Global Conversations on Peace*

Being a pilgrim people at times means taking a controversial stand or initiating a conversation that others would rather avoid. Even though global violence is one of the principal problems facing the contemporary world and people of all faiths, many Christians prefer either not to discuss global violence openly and formally, or to do so only with preconditions. In spite of this reluctance, portions of the Believers’ Church in the North are taking the initiative to engage their Christian brothers and sisters in the global South in conversation

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<sup>26</sup>Some of the implications of these movements for the wider Church are discussed in Jonathan Bonk, “Salvation and Other Religions: Reflections from a Crossroads.” *Mission Focus: Annual Review*, Vol. 15 (2007) 73-93.

<sup>27</sup>For a discussion of these followers of Jesus in southern India, see Herbert E. Hoefler, *Churchless Christianity* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001).

about overcoming global violence. This distinctive effort is an example of pilgrim efforts that bring Christians together across the North-South divide.

Since the World Council of Churches declared the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be “The Decade to Overcome Violence,” a portion of the Believers’ Church often known as the Historic Peace Churches<sup>28</sup> has been leading global conversations focusing on bridging the North-South frontier in order to seek conflict resolution. While this conversation is taking place on lower profile and local levels around the world, three larger conferences have been held in which pilgrim communities from the North and South have participated. The first was a gathering of mostly Mennonites, Brethren and Quakers held in Bienenberg, Switzerland in June 2001. This conference focused on more global and general issues, and the proceedings have been published.<sup>29</sup> The second gathering was organized in Nairobi, Kenya in August 2004. This conference focused on issues more specific to Christian communities of peace in Africa, and these proceedings have also been published.<sup>30</sup> The third event in this series was held December 1-8, 2007 in Surakarta (Solo City), Java, Indonesia. Participants represented Brethren, Quakers, Mennonites, and Brethren in Christ from Aotearoa (New Zealand), Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. The theme was “Peace in our Land,” and the gathering “sought to explore issues of injustice, religious pluralism, and poverty in the most highly diverse and dispersed region on our dangerously threatened planet.”<sup>31</sup>

For our purposes these on-going conversations are significant for at least three reasons. First, these conferences illustrate how shared understandings of the church can bring Christians together from several traditions. Rather than focusing on the more inhospitable and limiting aspects of Christian doctrine (what is believed), these conversations proceed from more hospitable common

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<sup>28</sup> Usually understood to be Mennonites, Brethren and the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).

<sup>29</sup> Fernando Enns, Scott Holland and Ann K. Riggs, eds. *Seeking Cultures of Peace* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing, 2004).

<sup>30</sup> Donald E. Miller, Scott Holland, Lon Fendall and Dean Johnson, eds. *Seeking Peace in Africa* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing, 2007). Also see Donald E. Miller. “The Historic Peace Churches in Africa.” *Brethren Life and Thought* (Summer 2006): 125-186.

<sup>31</sup> Church of the Brethren, *Newsline* (January 3, 2008). <http://www.brethren.org/genbd/newsline/2008/jan0308.htm>

expressions of Christian community (what is experienced and shared with others). While these two dimensions of the faith are ultimately interdependent, the ecumenical possibilities for proceeding from the latter are clearly illustrated.

Second, these conversations around a common ecclesiology are global, including Christians from the minority North and the majority South. Thus, the ecumenical possibilities of shared ways of understanding the church are realized on an even deeper level, as the hemispheric divide is crossed. Even though the usage of a common ecclesiastical image doesn't necessarily mean shared understandings of that image, nevertheless constructive North-South conversations can take place when commonalities in ecclesiology are realized.

Finally, these global gatherings of peace churches also highlight the potential for additional global ecumenical service for the Believers' Church. Because her self-understanding as a pilgrim people resonates across the hemispheric divide that is opening within world Christianity, the promise exists for further ecumenical conversations between pilgrims North and South. In a time when relations between northern and southern Christians are often strained, and when a common theological agenda is often elusive, a common self-understanding as Christian pilgrims holds great promise for global ecumenism.

#### *Aiding Victims of Violence*

Not only does being a pilgrim people lead members of the Believers' Church to initiate perilous ecumenical conversations, it also causes some to take up risky service alongside fellow pilgrims in the South. One such effort is the partnership forming between the Church of the Brethren and the New Sudan Council of Churches. The Sudan Initiative<sup>32</sup> is a project of the General Board of the Church of the Brethren at the invitation of and in partnership with the New Sudan Council of Churches.<sup>33</sup> In 2005 when a truce was signed ending the twenty year civil war in Sudan, the rebuilding of southern Sudan became possible. Because Brethren have been involved in service to southern Sudan since the early 1980's, and because Brethren bring distinctives that have been identified by the Sudanese as being necessary for the restoration of their region, the Church of the

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<sup>32</sup> For more information about the Sudan Initiative visit [http://brethren.org/genbd/global\\_mission/index.htm](http://brethren.org/genbd/global_mission/index.htm)

<sup>33</sup> The wider work of the New Sudan Council of Churches is described at [http://www.insightonconflict.org/organisation/new\\_sudan\\_council\\_of\\_churches\\_n/index.html](http://www.insightonconflict.org/organisation/new_sudan_council_of_churches_n/index.html)

Brethren was asked to expand her role. The new initiative envisions a holistic partnership with the people of southern Sudan, in which Brethren will provide human, theological and financial resources to assist in rebuilding and reconciliation.

This ecumenical service across the North-South divide again illustrates how the Believers' Church self-understanding as a pilgrim people resonates with Christians in the global South, and how because of this shared understanding, the Believers' Church is strategically placed to serve across this global divide. Like other members of the Believers' Church, Brethren are known for their historic understanding of the church as a pilgrim community devoted to peace and reconciliation. This pilgrim understanding that acknowledges prior and primary citizenship in the peaceful Kingdom of God is attractive to the besieged and persecuted Church in southern Sudan. Suffering from the degradation, barbarity and social fragmentation of a twenty year civil war, the New Sudan Council of Churches realizes the need for assistance in peace-making and reconciliation with God and neighbor, so pilgrims from the North are called upon to serve in their distinctive ways alongside their southern brothers and sisters.

Similarly, Mennonite Central Committee is involved in offering service alongside Iraqi Christians traumatized and displaced by violence. MCC first began work in Iraq in 1953, but its most recent chapter of service in that country began in 1998 during the years of international sanctions, and the work has expanded since the occupation of Iraq in 2003. During the past decade MCC has assigned ten workers to the Iraq program which focuses on coordination with partner programs and advocacy. Since 1998 MCC expenditures in Iraq total over US\$15 million including US\$10 million in food and materials.<sup>34</sup>

While violence has taken its toll on all Iraqis, Christians have often been targeted because of their faith. Consequently, Patriarch Zakka of the Syrian Orthodox Church estimates that half of his Iraqi parishioners are either internally displaced or have fled the country.<sup>35</sup> Many take refuge in Jordan, where an estimated 25,000 Iraqi Christians now reside, and in 2002 the Chaldean Catholic Church in Baghdad established a church in Amman to serve their members who

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<sup>34</sup> Janet M. and Rick Janzen, "Iraq: Stories of Hope Amid Despair, Introduction," *Peace Office Newsletter, Mennonite Central Committee* 37:4 (October-December 2007): 1, 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

had fled Iraq for Amman. Through support from Mennonite Central Committee and other partner organizations this congregation of refugees is able to provide a variety of programs to serve and support Iraqi families. These include various youth programs, after-school programs, Sunday School classes, health services and various forms of humanitarian assistance.<sup>36</sup>

These efforts further illustrate the ecumenical significance of the Believers' Church image of a pilgrim people for the global Church. While the plight of Iraqi Christians is commonly unknown in the North, Mennonite Central Committee advocates for and aids these besieged yet ancient communities of faith. To a large extent MCC is able to work across this ecumenical divide because it represents a pilgrim people who understand that service to the Kingdom of God is often low-profile, risky and even unpopular. While members of the Believers' Church are by no means the only ones serving Iraqi Christians, it isn't coincidental that portions of the Believers' Church are offering this service. Serving alongside fellow pilgrims, MCC is continuing the Believers' Church tradition of pilgrim service and is forging a new chapter in pilgrim ecumenism.

#### *Service Alongside the Suspected and Marginalized*

While the above examples of pilgrim service to the global Church represent contemporary efforts, portions of the Believer's Church have been involved in similar pilgrim ecumenism in the global South for fifty years. In 1958 North American Mennonites began service among the booming numbers of African Instituted Churches<sup>37</sup> in Nigeria, and service to these marginalized Christian communities expanded over the years to include two other North American Mennonite agencies working in several African countries.<sup>38</sup> These efforts were later joined by other members of the Believers' Church,<sup>39</sup> and included the establishment of theological colleges and Bible institutes, the

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<sup>36</sup> Gladys Terichow, "Iraqi Refugee Family Recalls Horrors of War in Baghdad," Mennonite Central Committee News and Events, Iraq 2008 <http://mcc.org/news/news/article.html?id=379>.

<sup>37</sup> These indigenous Christian communities have also been known as "African Independent Churches" and "African Initiated Churches." My choice of the term, "African Instituted Churches" reflects their self-understanding; see, George F. Pickens, *African Christian God-Talk* (Lanham, MD: UPA, 2004): 1-7.

<sup>38</sup> The earliest efforts are described in Edwin and Irene Weaver, *The Oyo Story* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1970).

<sup>39</sup> For example, Canadian Baptists and members of the Independent Christian Churches and Churches of Christ from the US.

production and delivery of culturally and theologically relevant training materials and programs, and even the analysis of indigenous Christian hymnody.<sup>40</sup>

For our purposes what is most significant aren't the details of this distinguished service with African Instituted Churches, but rather that it occurred at all. From their beginnings in the nineteenth century and especially during their boom years in the middle and latter years of the twentieth century, African Instituted Churches were widely believed to be irrelevant, insignificant and passing "sects" at best, or "excessive heretics" at worst. Terms like "separatists" and "syncretistic" were often used to describe these communities that were on the front lines of forging an indigenous Christianity for Africa. Even though in the years that have followed African Instituted Churches have become more respectable in the eyes of the global Church—indeed some are now members of the World Council of Churches—when North American Mennonites began service among these communities they were widely held in suspicion by most outsiders. Within missionary communities all over Africa, and even among African members of the established churches, many complained and were irritated or angered by these excessive and embarrassing "sects."

Given this widespread disregard for African Instituted Churches, why is it that certain members of the Believers' Church took them seriously and began to serve alongside them, risking reputation and rapid "results"? When other Christians complained that they weren't even "Christian," what allowed some within the Believers' Church to view members of African Instituted Churches as companions on a shared faith journey? Obviously, the full answers to these questions are well beyond the scope of these reflections. Yet, at least in part, the Believers' Church image of a pilgrim people called to work across frontiers to connect with other Christian pilgrims was formative. In my own service with African Instituted Churches, I soon began to reflect upon the parallels between my own Believers' Church tradition and my African brothers and sisters, and I

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<sup>40</sup> See James R. Krabill, *The Hymnody of the Harrist Church Among the Dida of South-Central Ivory Coast: A Historico-Religious Study* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995); David A. Shank, ed. *Ministry of Missions to African Independent Churches* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Board of Mission, 1987); and, David A. Shank, ed. *Ministry in Partnership with African Independent Churches* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Board of Mission, 1991).

came to view them as fellow pilgrims of the Way.<sup>41</sup>

Even so, others before me had identified similarities between African Instituted Churches and portions of the Believers' Church. As early as 1979 Andrew Walls had compared African Instituted Churches with early Anabaptists. "In some ways, the radical Biblicists among independents may be compared to the Anabaptists in Western church history: the same wild variety, the same strong cohesion as 'the people of God,' the same insistence on following the Word as they hear it."<sup>42</sup> While this shared identity as a pilgrim people set apart for a journey in the direction of the Kingdom of God certainly wasn't articulated by many nor perhaps were many even aware of this shared pilgrimage, still in retrospect it isn't coincidental that people so formed by a pilgrim image would offer such service across ecumenical divides.

#### *Expanding Ecumenical Service as Global Pilgrims*

The above examples of past and contemporary service illustrate how the Believers' Church image of a pilgrim people informs and forms ecumenical service across the North-South frontier. These examples also highlight the strategic position the Believers' Church holds for service alongside fellow pilgrims in the South. In order to enlarge these past and current efforts and to expand her strategic service across the growing North-South ecumenical divide, the Believers' Church needs to build upon this heritage. In the global contexts illustrated above, what resonates across the global ecumenical frontier is a fundamental and historic element of Believers' Church ecclesiology and identity: her self-understanding as a pilgrim people. Indeed, birthed as she was through varying degrees of crisis and marginalization, and understanding herself as a separated community on a distinctive journey towards the Kingdom of God, the Believers' Church can identify with the plight of most Southern Christians. So, as the Believers' Church struggles with the relevance of her past, and even as she experiments with shifts away from distinctives that are believed to have lost their usefulness, the Believers' Church should understand the strategic role she can play in the global Church *because* of our identity, not in spite of it. This

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<sup>41</sup> See Acts 9:2.

<sup>42</sup> Andrew F. Walls, "The Challenge of the African Independent Churches: The Anabaptists of Africa?" *The Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 3 (April 1979): 51.

should encourage the Believers' Church to remain grounded in her historic identities and to build upon them in fresh ways as her distinctives provide further opportunities for global service.

Even so, this is not a license for complacency, rigidity, or any form of historical or theological legalism. Indeed, in order for the Believers' Church to build upon the ecumenical relevance of her image as a pilgrim people, she must cease to be preoccupied with herself and her survival, and take deliberate steps to apply actively, intentionally and globally her distinctives in service to the Church beyond herself. Rather than talking so much about herself within herself, the Believers' Church should seize the opportunities provided by the southern shift in global Christianity to build bridges for conversation with and service to others. The pilgrim image of the Believers' Church includes her orientation towards peace and reconciliation, her high view of scripture, her emphasis on simplicity, and her struggle to remain distinctive in the midst of creeping globalization. All of these elements of being a pilgrim people provide ways of talking about and being the Church that resonate with the contexts of most southern Christians. So, rather than withdrawing within herself or surrendering her historic identity, the Believers' Church must find fresh ways to utilize this strategic position to engage North-South conversation, understanding and partnership.

As the Northern Church becomes more pre-occupied with herself and her comforts, and as the Southern Church becomes more weighed down by the effects of violence and poverty, a crucial need exists for those within the global Church who can provide service across this frontier. Formed and positioned in the North, the Believers' Church understands northern Christianity as only an insider can. Yet, because her pilgrim identity leads her to the margins of Christianity in the North, the Believers' Church is uniquely positioned to understand her fellow pilgrims in the South. As growing numbers of Christian pilgrims emerge within the booming southern Church—"insider movements," "churchless Christians," and followers of Jesus in the contexts of locally dominant religions—an expanding need exists for those within the global Church who are able to serve as advocates and supporters. Because of her historic self-understanding as a pilgrim people, the Believers' Church is well suited for these opportunities for



service. The challenges are real and risky, yet the Believers' Church has always been known for her pilgrim courage. "When opportunity knocks the wise build bridges while the timorous will build dams. It is a new day."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Lamin Sanneh, 287.