

MENNONITE MISSION NETWORK IN EUROPE

J. Robert Charles

Mennonites in the United States and Canada, most of whom today still trace their historical and spiritual roots to the Europe from which they fled or emigrated in significant numbers for several centuries beginning in the early 1700s, have been involved in a variety of mission activities across Europe over the past half-century. Beginning in the years immediately following the Second World War, several Mennonite denominations in North America have carried out this mission work through agencies such as Mennonite Board of Missions, Eastern Mennonite Missions, Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions, Mennonite Brethren Mission and Service International, Rosedale Mennonite Missions, and Mennonite Mission Network.

This mission work in Europe followed on the heels of relief work done under the umbrella of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), the inter-Mennonite body that came into being in response to the plight of Mennonites in the Ukraine in the civil war and famine of the early 1920s. Soon after the outbreak of war in 1939, MCC relief work began in Poland, France and England—where assistance was given to refugees from the continent and children evacuated from the cities. At the end of the war in 1945, work began in Belgium, Holland and Italy, and in the following year in Germany, Denmark, Austria and France.¹

Already during the war, North American Mennonites had become convinced that, as a 1942 study put it, “our present peace testimony in the form of relief work should result in the opening of a great door and effectual in the way of conducting mission work in Europe and Asia.”² As Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM) examined the possibility of post-war mission work in England, Belgium and Germany, it did so with the conviction that “we owe a positive, evangelistic testimony to Europe, the continent which produced our

¹ For this story and a sampling of documents, see C.J. Dyck, ed., *The MCC Story*, Vol. II: *Responding to Worldwide Needs* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1980), 28-55; also John Unruh, *In the Name of Christ: A History of Mennonite Central Committee* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1952), 102-123, 144-164; and the memoir of Peter and Elfrieda Dyck, *Up from the Rubble* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1991).

² Guy F. Hershberger later would note four major implications of World War II for North American Mennonites: a new awareness of the theological contribution it could make to the modern world; a larger vision of its missionary task; a new social conscience; and a new vision for the role of young people in the work and mission of the church. See Hershberger, *The Mennonite Church in the Second World War* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1951), 285-287.

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forebears.” By the early 1950s, serious thought was being given to the form and content of a missionary approach to Europe’s “dechristianized” society.³

Today most of these North American mission agencies, as well as Mennonite Central Committee, continue their activities in Europe, although in quite different conditions and also in different countries than those of the early postwar years. With the fall of communism in 1989, new possibilities opened up in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; in west European countries where mission presence has continued and broadened over a half-century, the nature and style of the work has experienced change as well as continuity.

A fuller survey and critical analysis of all this North American mission activity in Europe—including how this activity has been viewed and received by others, including European Mennonites—remains to be done, indeed should be done.⁴ This article, however, has a more limited scope. Attention focuses on the work of Mennonite Mission Network, the official mission agency of Mennonite Church USA, which came into being in February 2002 as one of the successor agencies to Mennonite Board of Missions, whose work in Europe goes back to 1950 in Belgium.⁵ In many ministry locations in Europe today, Mennonite Mission Network cooperates with Mennonite Church Canada Witness, as well as with Eastern Mennonite Missions and the Mennonite Central Committee. Working in close consultation with European partner churches and organizations also is an important part of Mission Network’s style of work in Europe, as well as elsewhere in the world.

At present, Mennonite Mission Network supports ministries—either through placing North American workers or providing grants to local partners—in 14 countries. Listed alphabetically they are: Belgium, England, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Kosovo (still officially part of Serbia), Lithuania, The Netherlands, Russia, Spain, Sweden and Ukraine. Approximately 40 North American workers are either partially or fully supported by Mission Network in a dozen of these countries, and program grants to Mennonite centers in London, Paris and Brussels help make it possible to engage local personnel in these projects. Some of these workers are on long-term assignments—three

³ David A. Shank, “A Missionary Approach to a Dechristianized Society,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 28 (1954): 39-55.

⁴ For a brief overview of this activity, see J. Robert Charles, “North American Mennonite Agencies in Europe Since World War II,” *Mission Focus* 16 (1988): 48-52. Neal Blough, long-time Mennonite Mission Network mission worker in France, will contribute a chapter on this same subject in the upcoming volume of the Mennonite Global History Project focusing on Europe. For France, see Alan D. Koop, *American Evangelical Missionaries in France, 1945-1975* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1986), 48-49; and Neal Blough, “The Anabaptist Vision and its Impact Among the French Mennonites,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 69 (1995): 369-388.

⁵ See Alan Kreider, *Anabaptist Christianity: Revived and Relevant. MBM Celebrates 50 Years of Faithful Witness in Europe*. Mission Insight 16. (Elkhart, Indiana: Mennonite Board of Missions, 2001). For perspectives on Mennonite Board of Missions work in Europe from the 1980s, see Larry Miller, “Europe: Signs of Renewal Amid Decline,” *Sent* 30, No. 4 (July 1984): 3; and Joseph Liechty, “Muppie Missionaries: North American Mennonites Go to Europe,” *Gospel Herald*, November 8, 1988: 765-768.

couples have served more than 20 years in their current locations—while others are serving as associates or interns for one- or two-year terms.

Through these North American workers and European partner organizations, a broad variety of Christian ministries are carried out, reflecting Mission Network's commitment to "holistic witness to Jesus Christ in a broken world." These ministries include: Anabaptist-oriented Bible teaching and theological education in congregations and schools; Christian mediation and reconciliation training and resources; evangelism and church planting; Anabaptist literature and training resources; the afore-mentioned Mennonite centers in a number of major cities; providing pastoral leadership in young congregations; relating to and working with Christians in the fine arts; counseling and caring for senior adults; and Christian higher education. This last ministry is most notably the case in Klaipeda, Lithuania, where six Mission Network workers are administrators or professors at Lithuania Christian College, a four-year Christian liberal arts college founded in the early 1990s on the model of Mennonite colleges in North America.

Speaking to a Mennonite Mission Network Europe consultation in Paris in May 2004, Alan Kreider, who along with his wife Eleanor was a long-term Mission Network worker in England until 2000, identified seven methods that Mennonite missionaries from Mennonite Board of Missions and Mennonite Mission Network have used in Europe over the past half-century. His presentation is worth reporting at length, as he has captured well both the style and content of these Mennonite mission efforts down to the present.⁶

Kreider noted that the general approach has been to call committed persons to mission, to inspire them with a theological and missiological vision and "to trust them to find ways in various countries to incarnate the vision." The result had been, as the survey in the above paragraph bears out, "varied programs" using a "variety of methods," with "a commitment to a long-term approach" undergirding them all: "long-term missionaries, in Europe for decades if not for life, have been crucial to the Mennonite contribution," Kreider emphasized.

He identified a first method as engagement in *practical ministries*. "Mennonite workers have tried to see what needs to be done in a given culture, and to bring Mennonite resources and new thinking to the task." This service orientation grounded in the conviction that "mission must be rooted in something that makes a visible difference to people." This had led to involvement in such things as sheltered workshops for the mentally handicapped, providing housing for foreign students, work with addicts and prisoners, counseling people caught up in new religious movements, teaching English classes, providing mediation training and skills, and ministries in the arts and drama.

⁶ Alan Kreider, "West Europe in Missional Perspective: Themes from Mennonite Missions, 1950-2004," publication pending.

Second, Mennonite missionaries have *worked in churches and founded churches*, participating as “leaders and as supportive members in lives of existing congregations—both Mennonite and free church.” In addition, they have “planted” new Anabaptist congregations “as an expression of Christian theology, especially in the Anabaptist tradition. When men and women are introduced to Jesus Christ, they must be incorporated in a body of believers in which worship, nurture, common life and evangelism can take place.” The aim was to establish churches “that would be distinctive—different from other churches in Europe, where the decline of Christianity was often a repudiation of church culture; also different from Mennonite churches in North America.” Wanting to “do the church right,” Kreider noted, “was the heavy burden of the Anabaptist vision. So the way some of us to do church was both attractive and demanding—and at times may have involved the export of North American cultural values in ways that we didn’t sufficiently examine.”

A third method has been to *establish study centers*. This has happened most notably in London, Paris and Brussels, but also in several other locations. “The work of the centers has varied, and at times has been catalysts for change,” Kreider said, but they “have not attempted to turn everyone into Anabaptists or Mennonites; they have hospitably put their resources at the disposal of others who may appropriate much or little while remaining in their own denominations. This non-threatening approach has enabled significant Europeans to experience a profound reorientation of their thinking so that they in turn change the thinking of others.”

A fourth method has been to *encourage the recovery of Anabaptism* in contemporary Europe. Whereas fifty years ago “Anabaptism was simply not on the radar screen of scholars or church people in Europe,” today it has reemerged because of its relevance in addressing issues and needs of community, violence and the centrality of Jesus. “In all these areas of relevance, Anabaptist understandings are gradually making inroads into the minds of European Christians.” These ideas have spread “as people discover the need of a theology of marginality for churches that have become marginal,” but also have “made sense in communities active in primary evangelism.” Kreider emphasized that “in post-Christendom the church will survive only if it is evangelistic. I believe that Anabaptism’s future lies not least in its practical consequences and its evangelistic efficacy.”

Fifth, Mennonite missionaries have *reclaimed peace as a theme* for European Christians. “Working with others, they have reclaimed peace in many ways: they have inspired and supported conscientious objectors; they have worshipped outside of nuclear bases; in wartime they have debated and demonstrated and in peacetime have been awkward in reminding people that the gospel of Jesus Christ is ‘the gospel of peace’ (Eph. 6:15) which is to shape every aspect of Christian life.” While at times they may have focused too much on peace, on the whole “Mennonite missionaries have played an important role in putting peace back on the agenda of European Christians, especially evangelical Christians.”

Sixth, Mennonite mission work in Europe has been *committed to networking*. From the very beginning there has been an eagerness to work together with other local Christians and with Mennonites in countries with historic Mennonite communities going back to the sixteenth century (The Netherlands, Germany, France and Switzerland). As a still-lively example that dates back to the 1970s, Kreider pointed to the Colloquium, a biennial “church conference in which mutually supportive and powerfully affective primary relationships [has] developed among European and North American adults and youths which [has] led to much visiting, befriending and encouraging.”

As a seventh method, Kreider noted that Mennonite missionaries in Europe have been *resolutely ecumenical*. “They have associated with, and learned from, Christians who are evangelical and liberal, Protestant and Catholic, contemplative and charismatic.” As a result, “relationships have broadened—even converted—the Mennonite workers, giving them a breadth of sympathy, and perhaps instilling in them a degree of humility.”

Kreider concluded by asking “whether we missionaries would have been more productive if we had had a simpler, more focused approach. But I believe not. I think it is precisely the holism of our approach, which grows out of our Anabaptist-colored Christian faith and possibly our upbringing as Mennonites, that has been our best contribution to mission in Europe.”

A series of recommendations for the future of Mennonite Mission Network ministry in Europe came out of the May 2004 Paris consultation attended by 30 persons—Europe mission personnel, representatives of European Mennonite partner organizations and staff from Mission Network offices in the United States. A major part of the consultation focused on the growing presence of immigrant churches from the South and how Mennonite mission might interact with them.

Among the affirmations and recommendations were the following:

- We affirm a clearly holistic approach with the careful management of the complexities it implies. We reaffirm the importance of the integrative approach to gospel work and the flexibility by which the work has responded to opportunities.
- We affirm both working with established churches and working with new bodies of believers with a hope that the convergence will offer renewal for established churches. We perceive this as a high priority for the next ten years.
- Peace witness continues to provide a clear opportunity for historic Anabaptist, biblical values to converge with perceived societal needs.
- North Americans need to grow in awareness of European issues, and we recommend intentional invitation for Europeans to come and consult and relate to the churches in North America.
- In light of the urgency of the migration phenomenon, we recommend exploring with European colleagues and churches what forms of response are appropriate. We solicit and receive with gratitude the gifts of Mennonite churches in Africa and

other southern continents to enable collaborative immigrant ministries, church planting and church renewal in Europe.

- We reaffirm continued cooperation with and openness to other Christian bodies. We should collaborate to encourage Anabaptist networks, develop Mennonite centers and plant Mennonite churches.
- We remain committed to long-term worker presence as a foundation for meaningful ministry.

To be sure, there are a number of factors that will have an impact on how these recommendations can be carried out in the coming years, not the least of which is the continuing availability of human and financial resources from Mennonite churches in North America for carrying on international work. But the vision and intent is clear: in 2004, no less than a half-century earlier, post-Christendom Europe will remain a significant area of mission activity for Mennonites from North America.