

“BUT IF IT DIES, IT BEARS MUCH FRUIT” - A WORD FOR NORTH AMERICAN MENNONITE MISSION AGENCIES?

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During the 1990s the Conference of Mennonites in Canada chose as themes for its annual delegate assemblies the cycles of a plant's life: “Rooted in Christ,” “Growing in Faithfulness,” “Abide in me, Bear much Fruit.” But it avoided the phrase which completes the cycle: “Falling to the ground, dying and bearing fruit.” Presumably the conference, like any other organization, had difficulty contemplating for itself the theme of “falling and dying,” - even if this would be in continuity with the preceding themes of its assemblies, even if this is an inevitable stage in the normal life cycle of a plant and even if there is a word from Jesus Christ which speaks of it quite explicitly: “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). A denomination's leaders are expected to maintain it and even to expand it, and certainly are not expected to present its members with the prospect of dying.

Yet the stages of a plant's life, including that of dying to bear fruit, provide a metaphor for understanding the developments in North American Mennonite mission agencies over the past decade. The following are some reflections drawn from personal experiences within several mission agencies.

A TIME TO DIE: COMMISSION ON OVERSEAS MISSION

The Commission on Overseas Mission (COM) died along with the General Conference Mennonite Church in 2002 after an existence of almost 150 years and a century of overseas mission activity. There was a strong perception among COM staff as the integration of the General Conference Mennonite Church with the Mennonite Church approached, that COM was giving up its life voluntarily for the sake of new fruit. We anticipated that the legacy of COM would be the least visible in the new mission agencies of the two new national Mennonite denominations: Mennonite Mission Network and Mennonite Church Canada Witness. COM was the final structural configuration within the General Conference whereby it had engaged in international missionary service since 1899. Mission had been one of the foundational purposes for the General Conference established

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in 1860. Most of its endeavours had been faithful and diligent, some of them had been flawed, and some heroic. Now COM was being buried for the sake of the two new churches and their mission agencies, and for the sake of future cooperation and effectiveness, rightly but with some grieving.

A TIME TO CHANGE: AFRICA INTER-MENNONITE MISSION

Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission has just changed itself from an agency with its own programs into a network of mission partnerships. This change has involved extensive deliberations among its staff, mission workers, council members, alumni and African partners.

AIMM began as Congo Inland Mission (CIM) with an improbable mix of groups and characters:

- two Mennonite conferences: the Central Conference of Mennonites and the Defenceless Mennonites, later Evangelical Mennonite Church and now Fellowship of Evangelical Churches, which emerged from renewal movements among the Amish in Illinois and Indiana with a desire to engage in mission in heathen lands,

- a German Lutheran woman from Chicago who animated them and directed their attention to the Belgian Congo;

- a black Presbyterian mission leader who advised them in their selection of a specific area, and

- as the first missionaries: graduates of Moody Bible Institute and an American Mennonite Brethren couple from Minnesota.

That this mission agency became an Inter-Mennonite agency linked to six North American Mennonite denominations is amazing.

Congo Inland Mission began with the resolve to plant a church which would be part of a non-denominational African church. Gradually CIM became more Mennonite in its stance:

- In the 1940s the General Conference joined the partnership because it was seeking a mission field to replace China which became closed in the 1930s and it thereafter took over the role of one of the founding conferences;

- In the 1970s CIM declared its Mennonite orientation and renamed itself Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission (AIMM);

- Several other Mennonite conferences joined AIMM: Evangelical Mennonite Brethren (later Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches), Evangelical Mennonite Conference [Canada], Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference and the Mennonite Brethren;

- The Congolese churches planted and nurtured by CIM: Communauté Mennonite au Congo (CMCo) and the Communauté Évangélique Mennonite (CEM) - chose to identify themselves as Mennonite and to relate to the worldwide Mennonite fellowship.

- Eventually the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren withdrew from CIM simultaneously with distancing themselves from their original Mennonite identity. The Evangelical Mennonite Church has followed the same course, along with its re-naming as the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches.

In Burkina Faso and Congo, AIMM works closely with Mennonite churches, but the readiness of AIMM to work across denominational lines still operates in southern Africa where AIMM decided to relate to and to teach among “African Indigenous Churches” and not to plant Mennonite churches. The mission effort in another West African country in which AIMM partnered with Mennonite Board of Missions and Community Fellowship seems to be leading toward a “generic” evangelical church, rather than a Mennonite church, especially since there has been progress recently in cooperating with a non-denominational mission.

AIMM is in the midst of another transition. Three of the NA partners in the former AIMM (Evangelical Mennonite Conference in Canada, Mennonite Church Canada Witness and Mennonite Mission Network) together with the three Mennonite conferences in Congo (including the Communauté Frères Mennonite au Congo) and the Evangelical Mennonite Church of Burkina Faso have formed a coordinating International Central Council. The AIMM ministries and relationships in Botswana, South Africa and Lesotho, Burkina Faso, and DR Congo have been transferred to Partnership Councils for each consisting of African and North American partners committed to the specific ministries. Decisions about the direction of the ministries will be made in the African context rather than by a North American-based staff and board.

This drastic transformation is impelled by several trends. In response to financial challenges the denominational mission agencies now have fewer funds available for cooperative inter-Mennonite missions. So contributions to AIMM have declined, and some conferences have withdrawn from AIMM because of financial limitations. A reduction in NA-based administrative and governance costs became imperative.

Furthermore, out of a felt need to be more visible in their constituencies as primary channels for mission, the denominational mission agencies want to identify and treat workers with AIMM primarily as workers of their denominational mission. This seems to require a diminished visibility for AIMM. This diminished visibility of an inter-Mennonite mission entity is regrettable from one perspective. I believe that our constituencies and our Lord want Mennonite agencies to work together in mission and to show that we work together across denominational lines. Personally, my inclination is to highlight partnerships and the inter-Mennonite cooperation. On this level I would wish for less anxiety on the part of mission agencies about their visibility, so that the fruit of partnership could show.

Another trend is to be embraced whole-heartedly. It is high time that African partners participate at the governance level for Mennonite mission efforts in Africa. The new partnership councils include them, as well as invite other Mennonite entities from North

America and other continents engaged in mission in Africa. Responsibilities for specific ministries will shift from a central AIMM council to the partnership councils. On the other hand the central AIMM Council will be mandated to give overall direction and missiological orientation for the ongoing ministries in Africa.

The decision-making and administration of ministries are to be re-located to Africa close to the action and close to the people involved and affected. This calls for a reduction in staffing in North America. The AIMM infrastructure in North America, which is precious to many of its supporters, will be diminished – there is grieving here because AIMM's supporters have become attached, quite understandably, to the AIMM headquarters located in Elkhart, Indiana.

There is also anxiety within our partner churches in Africa. The Communauté Mennonite au Congo (CMCo) regards AIMM as its parent who has sustained it morally and financially over decades. At first its leaders were inclined to regard the plans for changing AIMM as leading to the death of their parent and patron, or at least abandonment by their parent. Two years ago I faced a roomful of about sixty church leaders in Kinshasa and was asked to explain the perceived disappearance of their parent. In response I linked their perception of AIMM as parent and our feeling that they regarded AIMM as the cow which yielded nourishment and then invited them as the matured children to respond positively to their aging father's request for counsel and assistance in caring for the cow. Hopefully the new Partnership Council will become a channel for more and better gift-sharing among all of the partners: the three Congolese conferences and the two NA mission agencies.

A TIME TO BUD: MENNONITE CHURCH CANADA WITNESS

In 2002 Mennonite Church Canada assumed new responsibilities in international missions with much enthusiasm and confidence. It was impelled by the awareness that it was inheriting relationships and ministries hitherto carried by the Commission on Overseas Missions (COM), Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM) and the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. This budding was a time of optimism.

But there would also be a dying associated with, indeed attributed to, this new plant. Some of its new buds would soon wither. When the financial contributions to Mennonite Church Canada in its first year of operations fell far short of the amount expected and needed, the budget for international ministries had to be reduced substantially. So momentum in the existing ministries was lost almost immediately and the pursuit of visions for new ministries had to be postponed.

In order to support its new overseas ministries, Mennonite Church Canada had to relinquish a significant resourcing/funding role within Canada for church planting, programmatic oversight of voluntary service, and of Native Ministries personnel placed in native communities. These ministries died at the Canadian level in the face of lower

financial resources than anticipated, and perhaps because Witness took on too big a share of the international missions bequeathed by COM and MBM.

However, gradually Mennonite Church Canada is discerning its role in relation to other Mennonite missions and attracting and placing a new generation into international mission. As it comes to a better measure of its capacities, it is also being called upon by emerging Mennonite churches in other countries for partnership and sharing.

A TIME TO PLANT: THE GLOBAL MISSION FELLOWSHIP

The Global Mission Fellowship (GMF) was inaugurated during the Mennonite World Conference Assembly in Bulawayo in 2003 but its establishment had been initiated by the Global Anabaptist Missions Consultation held in Guatemala in 2000. The planting of a structure which has a global reach is an inspiring, but also daunting, task.

The purposes of the Global Mission Fellowship are expressed in its Vision Statement:

- Anabaptist-related churches and mission groups desire consultation and cooperation in order to increase capacity, mutual accountability, collaboration, and stewardship of resources for cross-cultural mission.
- Mennonite World Conference (MWC) will facilitate a Global Mission Fellowship where Anabaptist-related churches and mission groups can meet for encouragement, vision-sharing, networking and cooperating in mission.

The GMF Planning Committee, formed to nurture the growth of the GMF, has elaborated some more specific ideas at subsequent meetings:

- initiating the formulation of guidelines for consultation and cooperation in mission among Anabaptist-related churches and mission groups;
- planning the triennial gathering;
- facilitating one mission exchange between regions annually
- establishing a website with information on Anabaptist-related missions;
- provide access for all GMF members to the *MennoLink* area mission groups;
- reviving the mission prayer network started by under the GAMCo Continuation Committee;
- conducting a survey of Anabaptist-related missions
- researching and reporting on one frontier for Anabaptist-related missions annually;
- distributing one practical resource for mission workers annually;
- encouraging more international writers for the journal *Mission Focus*.
- relating to inter-denominational mission networks on behalf of the Anabaptist-related churches, and
- encouraging the formation of regional mission fellowships which could focus with more frequency on missions within and to particular regions.

The purposes and goals of the GMF imply the prospect of including input from partners in other countries in the decisions about mission goals, priorities, strategies and partnerships from North American boards and offices. Based on their knowledge of the local context and on their considerable spiritual gifts and fervour, the churches and mission agencies of the South have a great deal of wisdom and personnel to share for mission efforts. We in North America may have to adjust our goals and methods and even our missiology accordingly.

The GMF and the related regional mission fellowships will cost money. Much can be done through modern communications but face-to-face meetings will still be crucial. Based on the numerical and economic share of North American-based Mennonite agencies, they will bear 90% of the costs of the Global Mission Fellowship. We will need to find or shift funds – perhaps from our significant travel budgets - and then relinquish exclusive control over these funds. Will North American mission agencies need to die – or at least recede somewhat - in order to bear fruit? So that Mennonite missions can grow globally?

In North America the entity most likely to be profoundly affected as the Global Mission Fellowship and its related regional mission fellowships emerge is the Council of International Anabaptist Ministries, an association of North American Mennonite mission agencies and mission training centers. CIM which has focused on mission FROM North America to other continents has encouraged the formation of a NA mission fellowship which addresses mission WITHIN and TO North America. If the new regional mission fellowship embraces missions FROM North America to other continents as envisaged in the GMF Vision Statement the role of CIM will come under scrutiny.

Even as we nurture these new plants - GMF and regional mission fellowships – we do this with humility, cognizant of their temporality. We want the GMF to bear much fruit – so in time it will need to change too.

REFLECTING ON DEATH AND REBIRTH OF MINISTRIES

With this overview, I hope to have given glimpses of the life cycles of Mennonite mission agencies. Dying to bear fruit has been and is an element in each of the stages. Indeed the readiness to die must be present if a mission agency is to fulfill its mission of bearing fruit for the Kingdom of God.

There is another change in the role of the mission agency which should be noted: deferring to the local congregations for generating and guiding international ministries. There is a widespread perception that local congregations want to be directly involved in international mission. They are no longer content to send their money to a denominational mission agency and then participate only indirectly or at a distance in the decisions and relationships related to the denominational mission. This has been supported by the argument that the local congregation is the primary expression and form of church. Hence

missional church means that any and every local congregation can, indeed should, initiate and carry out mission, including international mission.

In response to this perception North American mission agencies, have tried to re-configure themselves as agencies for facilitating the mission efforts of the congregations. This involves letting go of control and initiative on the part of the mission agencies. Some of the rhetoric of mission agencies, combined with the trend toward “relational funding,” implies that the denominational mission agency will henceforth administer and facilitate only that which local congregations initiate and specifically fund. Is this a dying in order to bear fruit?

What fruit do we hope for? One way it has been stated is “the whole church bringing the whole gospel to the whole world.” This global vision places our denominational divisions into question. How shall our denominationally oriented mission agencies contribute to this purpose?

Already denominational barriers are falling: individual Mennonites are serving in mission with other denominations or with inter- or non-denominational missions, Mennonite congregations are donating to missions other than Mennonite denominations, mission agencies are already cooperating with or supporting other missions. Our partner churches in other countries are related to other denominations and para-church missions.

In view of the actual cross-denominational mission activity already happening, but also in view of God’s will for one church so that the world may believe, Mennonite mission agencies need to reflect on our relationships beyond the Mennonite denomination. We have had lots of praxis and but not much theological reflection on the role of denominational missions.

There are opposite notions about the role of the Mennonite mission agency in relationship to other churches: Sometimes we say: “The church is God’s primary instrument of mission. We Anabaptists are convinced of the rightness of our ecclesiology, so we should plant Mennonite churches everywhere.” Other times we say: “God is present working in the existing churches in this location. We hold the same basic theology as other missions and churches. There are already too many denominations. So we will subordinate the Mennonite identity in our evangelism and church planting and we will build the existing churches rather than plant Mennonite churches.” There do not seem to be deeper theological rationales or historical factors prompting Mennonite missions to take a consistent position in the numerous settings and over the extended period in which they have faced this issue. There does not seem to be a common direction emerging either.

There are some suggestions in print. In an unpublished thesis completed in 1969, Arnold Nickel made the following statement:

It may be that the Mennonite churches in Africa, India, Japan, South America and Taiwan will teach the General Conference [Mennonite Church] the need for belonging to the larger ecumenical movements and

for the larger fellowship to bear a common Christian witness to the world. The traditional missionary pattern will undoubtedly change in the years ahead and perhaps will eventually become discontinued. New forms will be introduced and a new kind of primary missionary thrust will possibly see Christian men and women moving across national boundaries in growing numbers to make their listening and loving witness through their presence in the world. When such a time comes, it will be mandatory that the Mennonite churches identify with Christian churches everywhere. Inter—Mennonite cooperation will not reach out far enough, but a much broader ecumenical and inter-denominational position will need to be taken.¹

In their *Final Report: Mennonite International Study Project* (1990), Nancy Heisey and Paul Longacre state their belief “that North American Mennonites are called to and have the gifts for supporting church renewal movements in many places, and for working with other local and outside denominations to build churches in the challenging parts of the world where they are needed.” (p. 43.).

Mennonites need to reflect on these challenges in a more systematic and broad-scale way than we have heretofore. The statement on the goal of church unity accepted by the World Council of Churches in 1961 would merit deeper contemplation by the Mennonite fellowship:

We believe that the unity which is both God’s will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who are at the same time united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people.

A recent publication by American theologians presents a proposal for renewed commitment and effort toward this goal, and names the problem of upholding one distinct identity as undermining mission:

If [through missions] we seek to intensify and extend loyalty to our traditions, in order to enhance international connections and to ward off internal schismatic pressures, we risk emphasizing precisely those distinctive features ... that divide us from others. Thus, we run the danger of enhancing denominational loyalty by “boasting” of something

¹Arnold Nickel, “General Conference Mennonite Service and Mission Personnel in Overseas Ministries,” (San Francisco Seminary, 1969, pp. 56-57.

more unique than the gospel of Jesus Christ.... [N]o matter how we understand the roles, structures, or status of our churches, denominations, and fellowships of faith, we must incorporate the imperative of unity into our mission.²

CONCLUSION

In all human endeavours, including those of North American Mennonite missions, we need to be cognizant of their temporality and to contemplate the eventuality of their demise. Eventually even the most stable of organizations will fall to the ground and die. But the saying from Jesus reminds us that the grain of wheat will not just die and vanish but it will bear much fruit. This notion need not – should not - be at the forefront of our minds as we nurture plants, even less when we start new plants, but an awareness of temporality should keep us humble about our efforts and our institutions and should prepare us to accept the diminution, even disappearance of an institution once it impedes fruit-bearing. The challenge for us in agencies and institutions is to recognize and to accept the time for a grain of wheat to fall to the ground, the time for a grain to bear new fruit. In every change toward newness, something old falls away.

The origin of organized Anabaptist-Mennonite missions at the gathering of Anabaptist leaders in Augsburg in August 1527 may give us a lesson in dying to bear much fruit. Here Hans Hut, the most dynamic of Anabaptist evangelists, agreed to cease promoting his militant eschatological teaching and to instruct his followers to cease promoting it. He gave up his freedom to proclaim one of his theological convictions for sake of the unity of the mission of the new movement. Thereupon the council devised a strategy for mission and assigned each leader to a region of southern Germany and Switzerland. Most of these missionaries were captured in carrying out this mission and died within a few years.

The Schleithem Council held six months earlier in 1527 had yielded a common set of convictions about the nature of the church. The Augsburg Council gave the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement a model for commitment and cooperation in missions and its participants set an example in giving up homes, then the proclamation of personal theological convictions, and finally earthly life in order to bear fruit for eternal life. Are we to follow their example? In our personal lives? In our mission agencies? In our denominations?

²Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds. *In One Body Through the Cross*. (Eerdmans, 2003, pp. 35, 36-37.)