

JOHN HOWARD YODER, STRATEGIST FOR MISSION WITH AFRICAN-INITIATED CHURCHES

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Theologian John Howard Yoder's role in developing a strategy for Mennonite ministries with African independent [indigenous, initiated] churches (AICs) is scarcely known or appreciated. The recent volume by his biographer and specialist Mark Thiessen Nation¹ makes no allusion to it whatsoever; the index simply does not include the words *Africa, Independent churches, Nigeria, Uyo, Weaver. The Uyo Story*², Edwin and Irene Weaver's seminal volume on pioneering Mennonite ministries to AICs in southeastern Nigeria, traces those frustrating beginnings in 1959 under the [then] Mennonite Board of Missions [MBM]. But no mention is made of Weavers' crucial correspondence and partnership in dialogue with John Howard Yoder, the young Administrative Assistant to MBM's Executive Secretary, J.D. Graber. Yoder's service at MBM from 1959 to 1967³ fully coincided with that pioneering ministry of the Weavers in Eastern Nigeria. Indeed, the challenges of their novel situation was one of the very first things on Yoder's agenda when he started with MBM at Elkhart in 1959. Quite similarly, Yoder is not mentioned in James Krabill's recent, excellent summary of such Mennonite ministries in West Africa.⁴ And I certainly made no allusion to him

¹Mark Thiessen Nation, *John Howard Yoder: Mennonite patience, Evangelical witness, Catholic convictions* Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006.

²Elkhart: MBM, 1970.

³Yoder's mandates at MBM were as follows: 1959-65 full-time as administrative assistant for overseas missions, MBM (1960-65 part-time instructor at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries); 1965-70 Associate consultant with MBM (1965ff. Full-time professor at AMBS, with occasional courses at the University of Notre Dame after 1967, where I took *The History of the Free Church* in '67-'68).

⁴James R. Krabill, "Evangelical and Ecumenical Dimensions of Walking with AICs," in James R. Krabill, Walter Sawatsky, and Charles E. Van Engen, eds., *Evangelical, Ecumenical and Anabaptist Missiologies in Conversation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006, pp.240-247.

Dr. David A. Shank, retired in Goshen, IN served as missionary with the African-Initiated Church of West Africa (1979-89), supported by Mennonite Board of Missions; his long associations with Yoder included earlier decades of mission work in Belgium and periodic teaching at Goshen College, part of a fraternity of persons shaping the strategy of Mennonite Board of Missions.

in the summaries of our ministries in West Africa.⁵ Indeed, I have consistently spoken or written of the “Weaver strategy” of ministry with AICs.

The Weavers’ further work in Ghana⁶ involved the creation of The Good News Bible Training Institute at Accra, and Ed’s West African study trips led to ministries with AICs in Benin, Côte d’Ivoire and Liberia. They pioneered further in opening up such ministries in Southern Africa: for the African Inter-Mennonite Mission in Botswana, Lesotho, and Transkei, for the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions in Swaziland, for the Mennonite Central Committee [MCC] there as well as in Lesotho⁷, and—most recently—the Mennonite Mission Network in South Africa.

Only by 1980—two decades after the Uyo beginnings—had MBM finally approved a policy statement for such ministries, as summarized and drawn up by MBM Overseas Secretary Wilbert Shenk, Graber’s and Yoder’s successor in 1967. It is he who has recently credited Yoder for this highly significant missiological contribution: “Yoder’s gifts of penetrating analysis, theological acuity, wide acquaintance with both ecumenical and evangelical missions, and awareness of the literature of the day were crucial to the process.”⁸ Missiologist Joon-Sik Park even more recently quoted Shenk and added: “Particularly his understanding of ecumenism was highly relevant to the very conflicting, confusing and fragmentary church situation in that region. In that environment, he argued for Christian unity as a biblical call and imperative.”⁹ Unfortunately, however, Park does not there give the reader a clear understanding that Shenk and he are both referring to a strategy for the relations of Western missions and their mission-planted churches to the more than 225 AICs within a five-mile radius of Uyo. Park’s text simply refers to Yoder as a “mission strategist” who

⁵ “A Decade with God’s Mission Among African-Initiated Churches in West Africa,” *Mission Focus* Vol. 11, No. 23, pp. 85-104, and my more recent “Reflections on Relating Long-Term to Messianic Communities,” in *Evangelical, Ecumenical...*, 149-157.

⁶ Edwin Weaver, *From Kuku Hill: Among Indigenous Churches in West Africa* Missionary Studies Series, No. 3. Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1975.

⁷ See their *Letters from Southern Africa*. Elkhart: Council of [Mennonite] Mission Board Secretaries (S. African Task Force), 1974.

⁸ “Go Slow Through Uyo: Dialogue as Missionary Method,” in *Fullness of Life for All; Challenges for Mission in the early 21st Century*, edited by Inus Daneel, Charles van Engen, and Hendriik Vroom. New York: Editions Rodopi, 2003, pp.329-40. The article has a dozen or so footnotes with references to Yoder’s correspondence relative to the AIC phenomenon.

⁹ See Joon-Sik Park, “John Howard Yoder as a Mission Theologian,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30 (1) January 2006, p. 14.

“developed a new kind of postcolonial mission strategy for southeastern Nigeria”.¹⁰ Indeed he did, but, as noted above, that strategy would reach well beyond that very parochial situation. Several dozen Mennonite missionaries would become involved with long-term assignments in eight other countries in West and Southern Africa. Several graduate theses and dissertations were to emerge from those relationships, as did several all-African conferences grouping other denominations with Mennonites working at such ministries across Africa, along with some of the AIC leaders. A *Review of AICs* for networking and dialogue between those involved in such ministry was published regularly for fifteen years. And Yoder’s strategizing enabled a remarkable development in Benin which emerged out of a series of annual Bible seminars starting with a dozen AIC leaders: the Benin Bible Institute, the Bethesda Clinic, a garbage collection and processing industry—starting with Cotonou and now involving several other important cities, and a small-investment lending program for village women.

The best way to spell-out Yoder’s crucial contribution is to illustrate Wilbert Shenk’s summary of his contribution, by letting Yoder speak for himself through a selection of half a dozen documents from the decade of the 1960s. The first of these is dated November 21, 1961, and was sent to Robert Nelson, General Secretary of the United Christian Missionary Society of the Disciples Church.¹¹ It was written from Boucq, France, near the Swiss frontier, where Yoder was then living with his young family while studying at the University of Basel with professors Barth, Cullman, Jaspers, Eichrodt, et al.

Your letter of the 9th followed me to France, where I am spending a year in a mixture of furlough, ecumenical brainstorming, missions administration¹² and writing. I’ll try to

¹⁰ An earlier publication of Park’s article (*Mennonite Quarterly Review* July 2004 pp. 363-384) did quote Alan Kreider in footnote 9, p. 365, concerning the effect of this ministry of Yoder (“a Mennonite involvement for the first time among Western missionaries in the life of African Independent Churches (whom Yoder saw as having parallels with the Anabaptists) without “seeking to build Mennonite churches or add to Mennonite global numbers.” (Personal correspondence, March 13, 2004).

¹¹ Mennonite Church USA Archives: Hist. Mss. 1-48; 85/37, John H. Yoder (1927-1997): African Independents 1965-69.

¹² JHY was administering MBM’s program in Europe—including our ministry in Belgium, and Algerian ministries, amidst the war for Algerian independence. See Marian Hostetler, *Algeria: Where Mennonites and Muslims Met, 1958-1978* Elkhart, IN: Marian Hostetler Edition, 2003.

answer only the second section, since whatever damage was done by the way the IMC/WCC merger proceedings [sic] were handled is by now irrevocable.

I think my letter to you acknowledged Donald McGavran as the man who directed me to you; I rather expected that meanwhile he would also have shared with you the vision that seemed already more than half-hatched when he visited us some months ago.

The entire dream hangs on the presupposition of a specifically free-church vision of what church unity means, a vision which for historical purposes may be qualified as "anabaptist" but whose most prominent American incarnation has been the Disciples' tradition.

Current gobbledygook about the "organic" nature of the unity we seek only confuses the discussion as to whether it does or does not mean hierarchical polity. Nor does fundamentalist counter-gobbledygook about "spiritual unity" and the virtues of the competitive economy help.

Granted the specificity of the Free Church vision of the Church's unity and mission, we who by heritage represent that tradition must admit that much of our missionary machinery and much of our recent [his underline] ecumenical organizing ignores our tradition if it does not in fact betray it. The McGavran vision presupposes that repentance and renewal are possible at this point.

We now know about what is wrong with the host of autonomous indigenous churches in West Africa; Calabar, where we [MBM] are working with the blessing of the older missions in groups they formerly ignored [i.e. AICs], is the home of some of the most flagrant rackets. Yet what we forget is the extent to which this phenomenon was provoked by the unbiblical, unwise, unanthropological, and un-free-church approach of the dominant missions. Administering from the top down because the local congregational life was thought either not to exist, or not to be trustworthy, disciplined by the rule book without regard for the inadequacy of (e.g.) European marriage patterns, led in worship in post-reformation concentration on the sermon and elimination of the aesthetic, ministered to by paid mission trainees to the exclusions of the multiplicity of native gifts given by God in the local fellowship, these mission churches were asking for what finally came. and [sic] we should be the first to

understand the “independents” without approving of their methods.

The dreams of the major missions and Christian councils, dominated as they are by churches of the pedobaptist and state-church traditions, call for these independents to be brought back into a structurally “united church”. They are willing to be a little more tactful with the discipline, a little more patient with the babes in faith, and a little more permissive with drums and hand-clapping, but basically the pattern has not changed.

I submit that there is another approach, just as honest and responsible as that of the Christian Councils, but more biblical, and incomparably more likely to be helpful. It will take some doing to work out a clear grasp of how it differs from the mine-run ecumenists on the one side and the free-competition free-lancers on the other, but it can be done. **The key is a fundamental respect for the reality and the reliability of the work of the Spirit of Christ in the local congregation, whatever the educational level of the minister or the moral achievements of its members. Serving this reality, and not getting all the churches of a given area into one synod, would be our first concern. This *leitmotif* would permit a co-ordinated program of service to the independent churches, with no effort to line them up as Mennonite, Disciples, or Baptist, and a subsequent economy of the effort usually spent in organizing them, being sure they’re worthy of our dole, and all the rest.**

I just might be in Nigeria sometime in February; do you know anything of the when and where of your trip?
Fraternally yours, John H. Yoder

The second document is a letter also from Boucq, France on March 2 of the following year, to The Rev. H. W. Turner in Oxford, United Kingdom.

Dear Mr. Turner,

I was delighted to receive from Edwin Weaver of Ikot Inyang and Uyo a copy of your essay or article on “The Significance of African Prophet Movements”. It represents a viewpoint which was needed and which I hope can get a full hearing as the WCC Division of Mission and Evangelism studies the same topic.

This particular article refrains from drawing further conclusions which I think might logically follow from it and which you have perhaps discussed elsewhere. The renewal perspective you advocate encourages me to ask what you would think of such a prolongation along the lines you have laid down.

There is the question of normative evaluation. The anthropological sciences can judge whether these independent churches are integrated in their culture or not, whether they make people happy or not, whether they can survive changes in leadership or not: but not whether they are right or wrong. Theological and spiritual analysis such as you call for on the other hand, while seeking to be fair and objective in finding the facts, is not neutral when it comes to evaluating them. Is there then a sense in which one can claim that the independent movements are right? At least as right as Luther, or Knox, or Campbell in their times and places? If you say "the independent movements are to be understood doctrinally and not only politically or anthropologically" without drawing this radical conclusion, then the folks who in the first place pushed the prophets out will agree; this is what they always thought: schism, heresy, spiritual pride ...

What would it mean to say that in the basic issues which were at stake the independents were more right than the missions (not then called churches or operating as such) they seceded from? Here I have only hypotheses for your examination: hypotheses growing out of my study of the spiritual breakdown of the West and not invented to fit Africa.

A. As to the church and social structure. Since before Constantine, but especially since his time, belonging to the Church has been taken for granted: pedobaptism is only the symbol of this. By controlling a whole society, the Church guaranteed her future membership; her moral claims on an individual were not based on her message and his response, but also on her social power as the official religious institution of her society. This is still not essentially different in the more pluralistic pattern of the Anglo-Saxon free churches.

In missions the Western churches sought to follow this same pattern. Whether by mass movements, by negotiating with the chief, or by writing off the old society and building a new one around the compound, they sought a position in which the church would be secure in her own society, with a proprietary

claim on everyone's allegiance. **Against this "constantinian" attitude protest was needed.**

B. As to the spiritual reality of the Church. **The fundamental Christian reality is the charismatic presence of Christ in the gathered fellowship of his disciples.** Doctrinal forms, polity patterns, ethical standards, liturgy are both the normal expressions and the necessary safeguards of this reality; but they are not the reality. Missions, reproducing faithfully the spiritual weakness of the West, have passed on the expressions and the safeguards, whether or not the kernel was still there. **Against this, protest was called for.**

II. There is the general question of "missionary" methods in dealing now with these groups; this is Edwin Weaver's task. If the independents are wrong, then the only change possible is to replace belligerent methods of combat with wiser, more patient and permissive ways of bringing them back into the fold, reuniting them on the level of expressions and safeguards with the mission-true churches. **If, on the other hand, the independents are "right" – not all of them, and not in every way, but at the critical points which led to their expulsion or secession [sic] and which have made them socially viable in their independent existence, then not only our methods, but also our goal will be different. We then need to help them to be more orderly, better educated, more responsible.... But we need just as much to bring the older "churches" (many of which are still not socially viable if they had to run on their own resources) to recognize the legitimacy of the independents' existence.**

This is enough to testify to the importance I attach to the problems you are working with. I should be happy for the chance to meet you should you get to the continent in the coming months; I just got back from Britain and don't know when I can get their [sic] again.

Sincerely yours, John H. Yoder

cc: E. Weaver; J. Graber, Elkhart

A third document is a September 21, 1965 memorandum to Wilbert Shenk, with a copy to J.D. Graber whom Wilbert Shenk replaced as Overseas Secretary, as he did with Yoder's Assistantship. It is entitled "Edwin Weaver Papers: Independent Churches."

This is an effort to begin conversation on the evaluation on the pack of papers which you received from Edwin Weaver regarding the independent churches in East Nigeria.

In much of Edwin Weaver's writing on the subject, I am bothered by a continuing ambiguity in the background. It is hard to be sure of oneself or accurate in describing this problem, which is the reason I am sharing this only in an internal memorandum, rather than continuing to share correspondence with the field.

The two significantly different perspectives which seem to me to be mingled in Edwin's mind may not make an enormous difference in the immediate present interpretation and implementation of our concerns; but in the long run they are nevertheless fundamentally opposed, and I am not sure on which "side" Ed will be found.

The same ambiguity lies behind the relationship of the World Council of Churches and the Theological Education Fund in their attitudes toward these churches. On the one hand there is the position which might be labeled as "traditional but tolerant." This is the perspective taken by the most understanding of the senior missionaries in the older churches. These people would hold with regard to church unity that what is ultimately necessary is one great united church, and with regard to ministry they would hold that the ideal and the ultimately necessary form of ministry was that which was brought by the mission. But then they would look with tolerance and understanding on the inadequacies of the independent churches, being quite ready to admit that the churches growing out of the missionary work are also deficient, and therefore being ready for great patience and fraternal understanding. Yet behind this patience and fraternal understanding, the ultimate goal would still be to lead the independent churches back into an organized unity, and the pattern of ministry which would be respectable according to traditional standards of the older missions. The purpose of efforts related to them such as education would therefore be to make the independent churches more like the older churches, or at least more like what the older churches have been trying to achieve.

On the other hand there would be the perspective which one might call the "Radical Free Church" perspective. From this

point of view one would say that there is no reason to assume that the goals of the traditional missionary agencies are the best goals. There is no reason to assume that the creation of one national unified church organization is the best expression of Christian Unity, and no reason to assume that the pattern of ministries and worship life imported from Europe is, even as a goal, the best.

We would rather begin by recognizing the legitimacy in principle of the independent churches as being just as valid as the claims of the mission-related churches. **The point of our contributing to their work would not be to make them come closer to the idea of ecumenical or missionary agencies, but to help them to find a pattern of greater faithfulness in their own context.**

One of these positions, in some way, would find the independent churches to be basically deficient, and would explain the willingness to work with them as the best strategy to make them respectable. The other **would accept their position as fundamentally valid, and would work with them to help them be more genuinely themselves.**

The first few years of picking up contacts and operating a rudimentary Bible School have been able to go without distinguishing clearly between these two approaches. It is also quite possible that in the future there would continue to be types of activity which could fit in both frameworks. But increasingly, as the effort is interpreted and publicized, as various kinds of support are found and increasing investment of personnel is possible, there will be points where we will need to decide between them.

My impression is that Harold Turner of Nsukka, and I on the basis of doctrinal prejudices, would tend to take the "free church" position, whereas Edwin Weaver is closer to the "traditional" position. Over against the intolerant attitude of some traditional missionaries, Edwin represents the cause of tolerance, which is a great difference; but he would still seem to be interpreting this tolerance as the most effective way to help the independent churches become respectable. He represents symbolically therefore a greater degree of openness to change than he actually would be likely to carry through in detail.

One place where this difference shows through is the language and practice regarding "leaders". By "fully trained",

Edwin assumes the adequacy of the traditional western patterns of ministry as a yardstick, rather than some other pattern of education whose standards would grow more directly out of the independent churches themselves. As a result of this standard of education and support for the recognition of a minister, all of the missions in Africa, including our own, have been [sic] created sub-ministerial categories. Some call them catechists, Edwin calls them “leaders.” These people have the full responsibility of local congregational coordination, but are not given recognition as Christian ministers. The difference shows in that the white “bishop” must come around to give authority to baptism and to make communion be valid. I was quite surprised to observe the extent to which the communion service, partly by being reserved to the foreign “full minister” and partly because of the use of western patterns of administration, was a completely foreign element instead of being the central fellowship experience of the African congregation when it meets in its own right.

Another side of this vision of the ministry is that the idea that ministers might be self-supporting is looked at as a concession or a passing adjustment, rather than a possibility which might be permanently valid for the entire life span of the generation we are now helping to educate. As long as self-support is thought of as a lesser evil we have not freed ourselves after all from the western alliance of the ministry with economic abundance and have not fully absorbed the lessons of the “tent-making” studies.

There would be other points in the Weaver papers where this question of perspective shows through perhaps less clearly. This should be enough to get the matter on the agenda for some talk before you leave.

More than three years later, Shank was still appealing to Yoder—then also part-time professor at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries – for help in determining strategies for the Bible teaching program of Edwin Weaver, who proposed to start with the Old Testament. Shank’s request followed discussions with B. Charles Hostetter, then directing a Bible school for the Church of the Lord Aladura at Lagos, and Paul M. Miller who had spent time in East Africa and had

written on the question.¹³ The latter insisted on starting with the New Testament. The memo referred to Harold W. Turner's recent *Profiles through Preaching* which had examined texts used by Aladura preachers, and discovered the dominance of Old Testament texts. On February 10, 1969, John Howard responded to Wilbert Shenk with a memorandum entitled "Teaching approach in Aladura Bible School".

This responds to your note of February 6, with which you passed on to me Ed Weaver's letter of January 24. There are two questions which I should try to respond to, but cannot do very much this first time around.

The first topic has to do with the Old Testament and has two phases. One is whether the place of the Old Testament has a special significance because of the place of tribal religion in the background of the independent churches. Here it suggests that there is a difference between Sundkler and Turner. To this I cannot try to speak because Ed does not explain what that difference is or what its implications are.

The other aspect of the question is whether the teaching emphasis should begin with the Old Testament or not. My own first leaning would be to feel that this is not a question with a yes-no answer. There is much about the cultural forms within which the Old Testament story is told which are understandable in any other primitive culture; but what really matters about the Old Testament is not the cultural form within which the story happened, but what the message is. Abraham is understandable because he had the conception of the importance of having a large posterity, as does the tribal African, but one must be sure that the story of Abraham is told in such a way as to make it clear that he trusted God and jeopardized his posterity by his migration, by his faithfulness to God at other points, and even by the willingness to give up his Son [sic]. So what matters is not only where you get the source material but what you use it to teach. According to *Hebrews*, Abraham is a type of faith.

But it is certainly not only the Old Testament that fits within the cultural context of a simple society. This is also true of the gospel story, though perhaps not of the Pauline epistles or *Hebrews*. I would certainly think that the teaching concentration

¹³Paul M. Miller, *Equipping for Ministry in East Africa* Scottdale, PA: Herald Press. and Soni, Tanzania: the Vega Press, 1969.

would be upon the gospel stories and Acts and the general epistles to begin with more than on the more “doctrinal” writings of Paul and *Hebrews*.

The other subject is stated by Ed as “difference between mainline reformers and the Anabaptists on their views of faith and works.” Ed is correct in looking for such a distinction. The reformers were strongly in favor of a high level of moral performance for the Christian, especially in the case of Calvin. But they were committed to two other values which had the effect practically of undercutting this concern. One was that they were committed to maintaining within the church the bulk of the population and especially all of the major respectable leaders of their society. This meant that there could be no process of congregational admonition which would come to the point of jeopardizing the prestige of the major powerful persons within a society or which would call into question the membership of any large segment of the population.

The other concern was the strong desire to be protected against self-righteousness and any concept of justification through one’s works. They made no distinction between “good works” in the sense of Christian obedience and “works of the law” in the sense of meeting ritual requirements, so they taught against the real importance of Christian behavior as an essential portion of the Christian life.

I do not feel at all confident in carrying this discussion over from the 16th century to Africa. My impression has been strong that the Africa churches have often fallen into a kind of legalism which is not of the gospel, whether because of their cultural level or some predisposition of their tribal religion, or because of the way the missionaries taught them. I would thus not feel personally right about simply playing this into the hands of this legalistic tendency or about considering it an advantage that Mennonites also have been legalistic.

But the alternative is not to pay no attention to moral standards, nor to set a lower level of moral performance as a target. The alternative is rather to find ways of dealing with Christian obedience in the context not of rules to be learned but of grace to be reflected. What is valuable about the epistles of James and Peter is then that they teach morality in the context of the missionary minority rather than concentrating on the development of rules by which it will be possible to manage a

whole society. They also concentrate less on the sins of poverty and puberty and passion, which are the sins Pharisaism concentrates on, and more on the temptations of pride and prosperity and power.

These first comments are all that I find rising to the surface without having more extended correspondence with Ed or without going back to the tape of the December meeting. I am sure there is more to be said on the question of the Old Testament, but without refreshing my memory I would not be sure to be speaking to the right issue.

cc: Ed Weaver, B. Charles Hostetter.

A quite lengthy document appears to be Yoder's functional last word on the subject, since the administrative ball was now fully in Wilbert Shenk's court, with John Howard Yoder now the president of Goshen Biblical Seminary.¹⁴ It is a memo from that office to Wilbert Shenk, dated February 14, 1970, and entitled "Policy of Mennonite Mission and Service Agencies Toward African Independent Churches."¹⁵ It appears to be at his initiative, both according to the text, and in the light of other correspondence.

We have already exchanged some thoughts about the need for a statement of what Elkhart [MBM] and MCC [Mennonite Central Committee] are doing with independent churches in West Africa and Congo.¹⁶ This is needed partly to explain to ourselves the decisions we might make about the relative priority of such contacts, partly to guide what we actually do, and partly to explain ourselves to other denominations, to traditional mission agencies and to such people as our friends in the World Council.

The following draft is just an indication of the kind of material we might be wanting to gather. I would assume that you and those who receive carbons of this would have some items to add in the first section, and especially that there would

¹⁴Yoder was president of Goshen Biblical Seminary, Erland Waltner president of Mennonite Biblical Seminary - working jointly with one dean in what was then known as Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries - editor's clarification.

¹⁵ Mennonite Church USA Archives: Hist. Mss. 1-48; 85/35. John H. Yoder (1927-1997); West African Policy Study, 1970-1972.

¹⁶ MCC, at my initiative, had placed PAX Boys and persons from the Teachers Abroad Program in Kimbanguist schools and an agricultural project. That is why I received a copy at that time. I later visited and consulted with these people in 1971 when invited by the head of that church for the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of its founding.

be more items to add in the second section dealing with policy directions. This is being circulated only to get thinking started.

I do not assume that all of the same considerations would apply in the same way in East Africa where the Mennonite mission is much older, a Mennonite denomination is well established, and where the particular form of the independent church movements is somewhat different. The best examples for the application of the text which follows here would be a [sic] sizable, second generation independent movements of Kimbangu and Aladura.

POLICY OF MENNONITE MISSION AND SERVICE AGENCIES TOWARD AFRICAN INDEPENDENT CHURCHES

Along several relatively independent lines of development, Mennonite mission and service agencies have come into contact with some of the major independent church movements in West Africa and Congo. Out of these contacts have arisen requests for specific types of relationship and assistance, requests if taken seriously would mean directing to these needs resources in funds and personnel and administrative attention which otherwise would be expended in other ways. There therefore needs to be careful thought about the reasons for and the policy governing such a special investment of Mennonite resources in relation to these independent churches. Is this relationship an arbitrary or chance occurrence? Or is there some intrinsic appropriateness to Mennonite agencies developing such a relationship, as over against leaving to any other particular denominations or to inter-denominational agencies?

This question could be dealt with partly in the form of historical narration, on the assumption that the set of developments which have brought Mennonites into such relationships in more than one place might have some purposive providential meaning, or might be evidence of some pervasive identity, but the present outline seeks only to speak to the question of theological appropriateness.

For our purposes it might be fruitful to distinguish among several ways in which it is possible to relate the institutional identity of a missionary agency to theology. One, which we might label as "sectarian" (seeking to use this term only in a descriptive way), is that which considers the missionary agency as but one arm of a church institution, whose theology and identity are so closely linked that it can perceive of genuine missionary activity only in the form of bringing into being and relating to churches which meet its own description, or in other words as extension of its own identity. This would be the approach of some kinds of fundamentalism, of Seventh Day Adventist

missions, and of Catholic missions. To some extent, perhaps more completely in practice than their theology would tend to justify, this may be the approach of the Southern Baptists and other conservative protestant groups. Then any serious relationship to independent churches would be a contradiction, except to the minor extent to which (as sometimes has happened in West Africa) a given independent church might be willing to join that denomination in return for the institutional support of the mission.

As second style might be termed that of the "denomination", taking this term in the technical sociological sense of a church body which recognizes that it has many sister groups. A "denominational" missionary agency, whether working alone or in cooperation with others of its kind, is not free to have, nor desirous of having a very specific theological identity. It tolerates diversity of theological opinions within its midst. If there be any particular norms concerning theological faithfulness, they are pointed in the direction of moderation and tolerance and mediating positions. From such a perspective it is possible to recognize the validity of the existence of independent churches, if they live up to certain standards of age, size, sobriety, and good manners. Their distinctive existence is recognized and approved of, but it will be nature and intent of the cooperative relationship to tend to lead or move the independent group toward the middle of the spectrum, toward conformity and cooperation. This is the attitude of most protestant groups in WCC and TEF [Theological Education Fund].

It is a peculiarity of Mennonite mission agencies in the last third of this century that they can fit in neither of the above categories. They are without apology committed to a particular theological orientation. They do not seek to enclose within their staff and membership every possible view on theology or church practice, and they feel responsible to steward their very limited resources with a view to a maximum contribution to certain causes which are not carried by other denominations. In this sense, a Mennonite mission agency is "sectarian". Yet it differs from other agencies given as examples under this heading in a number of significant ways:

1. The normative theology to which a Mennonite mission agency is committed is not identified with the institutional existence of a Mennonite constituency. This is the case because the theology which a Mennonite mission agency considers itself to be mandated to propagate is the result of renewal within recent Mennonite experience, rather than being the deposit or the distillate of a recent history or a constituency creed. Mennonite relief and service agencies are committed to a theology of the church's mission which they may designate by the type label "Anabaptist", in the honest awareness that the Mennonite constituent churches which support the effort not only do not fully

realize this vision in their own life, but are not even really committed to it in every way.

2. From the fact that the Mennonite constituency is not a fundamentally adequate vehicle of the "Anabaptist Vision", it follows as well that the outcome of the missionary effort of Mennonites need not necessarily be the creation of churches belonging to the Mennonite denomination. There is a strong concern to propagate the essentials of the Anabaptist vision (such as meaningful membership expressed in baptism of believers and congregational discipline, or personal discipleship expressed in servant-hood and nonresistance) but there is no solid insistence that Christians or churches holding these convictions must necessarily express them by membership in Mennonite polity agencies.

3. It is not enough to say that in point of fact the Anabaptist Vision and the Mennonite institution are distinguishable. There is an empirical, formal, or structural observation, and it might have been otherwise. It must however further be said that the substance of Anabaptist conviction about the mission and nature of the church includes further considerations (which shall be spelled out below) which would further militate in favor of a plurality of possible structures and against the "sectarian" model of commitment to one's own agencies.

A. Why Mennonites Ought to Work Actively with Independent Churches

1. Anabaptist understandings of the church and her relation to society intrinsically *reject colonialism as a model* for the propagation of the church. This comes partly from our insistence on an indigenous congregation as the normal form of the church, partly from the rejection of the support given to the church by the other powers of society, notably the state, partly from the concern for the authenticity of the decisions of faith which underlies the rejection of infant baptism and mass conversions.

Today all intelligent missionary thought rejects colonialist patterns of church planting, on the ground of results and other kinds of considerations both pragmatic and theological. But this rejection does not flow intrinsically from the theological options of the founders of the several denominations as it does from the radical reformation position.

There is a sense in which at least some of the phenomenon of independent churches in Africa can be understood as a valid protest against the colonial patterns of missionary work and structure. They may be rejecting that structure for the wrong reasons, or they may be using questionable forms and methods to dramatize that rejection, but it could be hoped that the sister churches most [sic] be able to help them in formulating this rejection theologically and discovering the

appropriate alternative to a colonial church would be those with the most basic theological commitment to the same critique.

There is in independentism a danger of the wrong kind of over-compensation. In reacting against the way the white man's religion was brought to them as a part of white culture, there is a serious danger of replacing it with a black man's religion too uncritically rooted in black culture.¹⁷ Again it would be hoped that a theological position committed to the critical questioning of the links between faith and culture would be more ready to be critically helpful at this point, than churches who were traditionally, out of theological conviction, less critical of their own acculturation back home.

2. In correlation with this consideration, as a sub-heading which makes it more pointed and visible, the *Anabaptist tradition rejects coercion and war*. War was not the heart of the benevolent intentions of colonialism, but certainly was its confidence in its right to coerce at the center of its effectiveness.

Some of the African independent groups are pacifist. The commitment of Kinbanguist tradition is most clear at this point, both because of its linkage with the fate of the prophet and because of the testing the church has undergone in the last five decades. The Church of the Lord Aladura is much less self aware at this point, but its international character, its transcending of tribal boundaries, and its vision of social wholeness move in this same direction. The dimension of simple biblical literalism which is widespread in the independent churches tends to a kind of naïve pacifism. It is thus fitting that Christian pacifists from the Fellowship of Reconciliation or the Historic Peace Churches should be the most appropriate visiting teaching resources, whereas the advocates of the non-pacifist majority Western tradition might, if serving as teachers, feel obligated to try to win the Africans away from the naïvete of their pacifist commitment. There will be occasion enough in continuing ecumenical encounter, and in struggling with the real problems of political existence, to call that naïve commitment into question; proper fraternal etiquette would ask that those who accept invitations to serve as guest teachers would respect that position.

3. One of the tragic dimensions of the Western-managed missionary enterprise has been the extent to which it has exported to Latin America and Africa the *polarization of American protestantism* between "ecumenical" and "evangelical" forces. Western initiative in setting up councils and anti-councils is no less aggressive now, when we are aware that it is ethically and ecclesiastically questionable, than it was ten years ago when people on both sides were less aware that it could

¹⁷ We, the Shanks, found this to very true [1979-89] in Côte d'Ivoire among the "vieux" Ebréé Harrists, and some-what absorbed by the rising literate generation of "jeunes."

be challenged. Mennonites are among those who believe that this polarization not only is regrettable but was not necessary and still can be rejected and worked against. In point of fact, Mennonites have avoided taking sides in many places.

A number of the distinctive characteristics of Mennonites, partly as a theological position and partly as a cultural experience, which would be congenial to a supportive relationship to independent churches would be:

(a) An affirmative attitude to moral bindingness As expressed in personal and group discipline. Numerous Protestant groups find their dealing with ethical imperatives to be somewhat undercut by a Lutheran concern for dialectic of Law and Gospel, or by a modern relativism about ethical norms, or by embarrassment about naïvete or the authoritarianism with which earlier moral judgment and teaching has proceeded. This makes them less able to cooperate constructively in some modern pluralistic situation; it might also make them less embarrassed about coping with the moralistic tendencies which are rather typical of independent churches.

(b) While not advocating any rejection of leadership structures, Mennonites have generally been the advocates of a less rigidly structured definition of ministerial qualifications than many other denominational bodies. Sometimes this meaning has expressed itself in a preference for an economically self-supporting, sometimes in suspicion of academic meaning of ordination, sometimes in debate about the sacramental meaning of ordination, sometimes in the call for a plurality of ministerial leaders rather than one clergyman. This orientation should liberate Mennonites to deal with the variety of educational and economic patterns of leadership in the independent churches rather than feeling concerned to impose upon them some particular theologically normative leadership pattern imported from the West.

(c) Mennonites have by and large survived and maintained some kind of theological identity without focusing this on any normative teaching institution. When there have been schools, these have been primarily the expression of a position already defined elsewhere, rather than being, as in the more magisterial traditions, the agencies for the definition of proper theology.

The alternative to the normative school, for both Mennonites and African independents, is not to have no theological identity at all, but rather to have it defined and propagated by other patterns. Specifically: (a) by the itineration of specifically charismatic figures and, (b) by informal lay socialization processes in the life of the local congregation, its liturgy and its neighborhood relations.

Resulting from some of the above-mentioned particularities and in a sense summing them up, the Mennonite style of theological

communication is what might be called **lay evangelicalism**. This is not the result of any particular theological insight or wisdom although perhaps a theological case might be made for the advantages of such a position; it is rather a result of culture lags in North American Protestant experience. It is not the same as the militant evangelicalism of some Protestant denominations and independent churches. **But its alternative to fundamentalisms is not liberalism but rather a particular simplicity and lack of sophistication in the articulation of biblical faith. Much the same thing would have to be said (for the present generation) of the theological articulations which are at home in the African independent churches.**

B. Policy Concerning Mennonite Work with African Independent Churches

1. **We affirm the theological *legitimacy of the distinct existence of church bodies which do not stand in any direct juridical relationship to a specific "mother church" in Europe or North America.*** An organizationally structured unity with an older church is a desirable thing but not essential for the recognition of the legitimate existence of a church body. This is not to say that the criteria of formal continuity are to be disregarded; but they must be applied in ways which take account of the failures of the churches and missions, past and present. Among the necessary criteria are the following:

- (a) The affirmation of the saving uniqueness of the work of Jesus Christ;
- (b) The recognition of canonical scripture as a criterion of Christian conviction superior to the confessions, prophecies and practices of later leaders;
- (c) Some recognition of the existence of other Christian bodies and traditions and a desire to learn from them and share with them;
- (d) An awareness that loyalty to Jesus Christ demands choices and sacrifices in daily life, thereby standing in judgment on one's own culture.

These criteria are met by the Kimbanguist and Aladura groups.

2. We affirm the *propriety of a certain tendency to legalism* in the African church. In recent years missionary statesmen have been very concerned about the tendency of national churches to reduce the meaning of Christian faith to a way of life which one attempts to commend to an entire society with all kinds of motivations. Missionaries have been correct in wanting to undo the effects of the imposition of certain ethical patterns by the authority of the missionary, especially where these patterns were culturally foreign. The missionaries have likewise been concerned, as good Protestants, for the safeguarding of the basic

Protestant message of justification by faith. To this is added a substantial element of modern western personalism, with its tendency to discredit any behavior that is not a matter of personal conviction. As valid as are all these concerns, the critique which they exercise must be expressed *within* rather than *against* an acceptance of the tendency of an African culture to deal with morality as a matter of the *life style of the community* rather than focusing only upon the *integrity of personal faith obedience*. We cannot begin by asking of the African a style of individualism in religious experience which would be fitting for a Luther or a Wesley, and which even the Western traditions of individualized religious experience have great difficulty in linking with morality.

It is appropriate that the preoccupations of the independent church should be especially with concerns which the traditional churches did not deal with (healing, prophecy and indigenous forms of worship) and with issues arising out of end of colonialism (nation building, nonviolence, education and institutional development).

Western missionaries will at some points feel good reasons to chide for provincialism or "over correction" or imbalance. It will however not be the responsibility of the visiting churchmen or teachers to concentrate on restoring "balance" except as such maturation is the normal result of deepening insight. The very considerations which call forth the imbalance incapacitate the westerner to correct it.

3. *We affirm the legitimacy of patterns of leadership* growing out of congregational life and continuing to be rooted within the congregation. Theological education must be structured in such a way as to retain this rootage of leadership in local experience or community.

4. *We affirm the necessity of projecting visions* of a Christian life style in which inward piety and the expression of community witness, inviting men to faith and building them up in the faith cannot be dealt with as alternatives.

The above concern for a pattern of leadership and this concern for a pattern of life should [sic] be fitting the Gospel will result in the unembarrassed acceptance of catechisms and patterns of fraternal discipline which lack in theological articulateness and which may in fact need to be propagated by rote learning with no expression at all in a formal ordered polity which would be recognized by Europeans as such.

JHY sab. cc. David Shank¹⁸, Marlin Miller, Paul M. Miller.

¹⁸ See footnote 10 *supra*.

This text tells us, of course, much more about Yoder's thought in 1970 than just his approach to African Independent Churches. It also reports on his appreciation—as new president of AMBS—of the Mennonite Church, its mission agency, and its stance within the Western world of missions, as well as the *sine qua non* of an “independent church” that for him would qualify as “church”.

The final document of this selection is a letter¹⁹ dated—and dictated--October 6, 1970 from Buenos Aires, Argentina where he was on a teaching and lecturing mission; it is addressed to Edwin I. Weaver, then in Accra, Ghana.

Dear Ed,

Wilbert passed on to me a copy of your circular of September 8 with a suggestion that I might comment on it.

I am not acquainted with the book by Mbiti, and you do not actually say much about its contents, so my response will only be to your own thoughts.

One such item is your way of putting the West and Africa in equal or parallel positions. You say that the church in the West has followed the culture of the West and that the newer African movements are following the African prophets, as if that was somehow parallel. But the West that the churches in the West has been listening to is to a great extent the product of centuries of Christian influence. Does conformity to the West, whose patterns are the result of those centuries, stand on the same level either as a value or as a threat, with conformity to African patterns which have no such history? I am clear in criticizing western forms of Christianity but I am not sure that it is not an oversimplification to picture the two kinds of cultural identification as if they were somehow of the same magnitude just in opposite directions. The difference is more complicated than that in that one has centuries of Christian history behind and the other does not.

You notice, I think correctly, that the westerner is often the most zealous to Africanize the church. I do not understand your rapid conclusion that this shows that he is not informed. What the African really wants is often a great degree of westernization, for obvious material reasons. The reasons that *some* westerners are more zealous about Africanization than *some* [sic] Africans is that this particular selected group of westerners has been provided by history and education with a particular kind of cultural perspective which by its very definition cannot be a part of the African culture, because it too is a western product. Precisely because the (western) techniques of

¹⁹ Mennonite Church Archives: Hist. Mss. 1-696,5/1. Edwin & Irene Weaver Collection: Yoder, John Howard, 1965-72.

anthropological understanding are needed in this kind of concern, there is a particular contribution to Africanization which only such qualified outsiders can make. I think this observation speaks as well to your last paragraph.

The place where your outline leaves me waiting for more is on the level of concrete detail. The three requirements which you state: biblical theology, listening to each other, working within the life of the church, are the prerequisites for valid theology in any culture. They apply to Africa because they apply to Elkhart. But what are the specific issues around which this approach will come up with something that is God's leading for a faithful African church?

The concrete example you give at the beginning of the paper is the reference to the church as community. Perhaps experience with Africa helps some of us to see that, but it is not a truth discovered in Africa. Harold Bender and Robert Friedmann were writing this on the basis of historical studies before any Mennonite missionaries started appreciating African culture. Will studying in an African context actually help us to see truths that were not seen before, or will it simply help us to take sides on issues which were already present within the varieties of Christianity in the West?

Another aspect of the same question is to ask also whether there are negative points in African culture which should be challenged by the Bible in a way in which the same challenge is not needed in the West. The concept of the closely knit social group results for instance in scholarship frauds and in nepotism which is bad both for efficiency and for the brotherhood church. Will your approach strengthen our capacity to deal with the judgmental impact of the Bible as well as with the places where it reaffirms pre-Christian cultural values?

One other item of agenda which is hard to handle from this perspective of balancing western and Africana orientations is the fact that Africa will be westernized whether we like it or not by technology and urbanization, which have their own materialistic motivations and mechanisms. While we are in the bush trying to record African music and anthropological ideas before they get lost, the population of Africa is moving to the cities where financial and housing considerations will increasingly break the family down to the nuclear unit, weaken tribal identifications, and create a culture of television watchers. Just at the time we have become very concerned about Africanization in missionary policy, westernization in urban sociology is getting out of hand. Is it possible for the church to find African patterns of community which will create a different kind of cities or a different kind of television watchers than have made western urban man what he is?

The fact that I see questions in your outline does not speak to [and] does not indicate any lack of respect for the effort you are

undertaking. I just hope to hear more about how this vision will take on flesh.

Fraternally yours, John H. Yoder cc: Wilbert R. Shenk, David A. Shank, Marlin E. Miller.

John Howard Yoder is known largely as a Western theologian, working out the implications of the distinctive “free church” type as over against the “constantinian church” type. He is scarcely known as one who related to third-world realities. What is interesting here is the way in which his typology tends to associate the “traditional’ missionary churches” of the colonial period with “constantinianism” and the “independent churches” with the “free church”, thus recognizing their right to be and to critique the traditional mission-planted church, and thus to be taken seriously. Secondly, since the task of the “free church” is to be the “faithful church”, the role of external teachers working with AICs is to help them to grow in faithfulness in their context. Thirdly, and quite significant, is his accent upon ecumenicity from the point of view of the local congregation and the role of the Spirit of Christ in working out its life and the calling out of “leaders” —not missionary “clergymen”. These three Yoderian motifs have certainly been in the forefront of broader Western Mennonite involvement with the African AICs.