

## **MENNONITES AND MISSION IN EURO-CENTRAL ASIA**

David W. Shenk

Mennonites in mission have touched Euro-Central Asia in quiet and remarkable ways often formed by much suffering. Johann and Hedi Matthies, now living in Korntal, Germany, are one example. In Soviet times, Johann's Mennonite family lived in the Caucasus; his grandfather died in a Soviet forced labor camp in the so called Far North of the country and his grandmother and three young daughters were placed in a boxcar with others and sent into the GULAGs of Kazakhstan. The baby died enroute; the oldest daughter (13) died in a blizzard on the co-operative dairy where she was placed; the middle daughter (7) became a servant in a Kazakh home; the mother distraught in deep grief wandered into the path of a truck and her body was broken, never to fully recover. After some years the mother was released from the work camp and was able to rejoin her middle daughter; that daughter is Johann's mother - a woman who with her mother have been persons of incredible faith and fortitude.

### **Pioneer Church Planting**

When the Soviet system collapsed Johann and his wife, Hedi, who were Umsiedler (ethnic Germans who moved to Germany from the Soviet Union) went back to the Northern Caucasus as emissaries of Jesus Christ, to the same regions where his father was an elder of a small MB church in the seventies. Although their lives were often under threat in this troubled Islamic area, they planted the first national church of the region. When visas were finally revoked, they returned to Germany where Johann gave his efforts in helping to develop Licht im Osten, which produces massive amounts of Christian literature for distribution across Euro-Central Asia and commissions missionaries. He now teaches missions at the Academy for World Missions in Korntal, equipping missionaries especially for outreach in Euro-Asia.

It is not only in the post-Soviet era that Mennonites are significantly involved. Even in pre-Soviet times, Mennonites were pioneers of evangelical church formation within Central Asia and in Eastern Europe, such as Uzbekistan and Romania. One of the very earliest evangelical missionary commitment was in 1888 when Johann Thielman with his wife and a small team migrated to Kyrgyzstan to share the Gospel among the Kyrgyz Turkic Muslims. Thielman and team were pioneers, and especially significant because of their commitment to cross-cultural evangelism. During the next century Baptists and Mennonites

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who located in Central Asia, often forcefully by the Soviets, formed congregations wherever they settled, but few had the vision for cross-cultural evangelism that Thielman and team modeled. Many of the Baptist leaders and church planters have been Mennonites, as for example, Frantz Tissen, who is President of the Kazakh Baptist Union.

In the current post Soviet era many of the Baptist/Mennonite congregations in Central Asia are developing commitments to the cross-cultural evangelism that Thielman pioneered well over a century ago. Massive Russian or ethnic German immigration out of the region means that only congregations that evangelize will survive; an example is the Mennonite congregation in Karaganda, Kazakhstan, where the entire congregation migrated, except for the pastor couple who remained to evangelize; today there is a thriving congregation of 200 comprised of Kazakhs.

### **The Umsiedler**

Although 100,000 Mennonites left for Germany when the Soviet Union collapsed, many of these Umsiedler are committed to mission back to the lands they have come from, just as is true of the Matthies mentioned above. For example, when I was in Samarkand, Uzbekistan recently, the Baptist pastor told me that Mennonites were the first believers in Samarkand during the Soviet era. Then I learned that an Umsiedler Mennonite mission called the First Motherland had just sent a large short term team to Samarkand who had built a new church building, evangelized, organized camps for children, and taught discipleship classes. Although German, they knew both Uzbek and Russian, and were a great encouragement to the Samarkand churches. Their “first motherland” name means that these Umsiedler German Mennonites consider Samarkand to be their original home—this is a mission back to their homeland.

### **Lithuania Christian College**

Lithuania Christian College has its roots within the Umsiedler missions movement. During the last two decades of the Soviet Union, Baptists and Mennonite Brethren migrated to Lithuania to await exit permits to enter Germany. Some learned Lithuanian as they waited; some shared the Gospel and those seeds bore fruit in the Free Christian Churches in Lithuania. In 1989 Umsiedler youth returned to Lithuania hosted by the Free Christian Churches for evangelistic meetings with high school students. The leaders of the independence movement in Lithuania took note, and opened conversation with the leaders urging that they form a Christian university that would form the next generation of Lithuanian leaders with Christian values.

A Mennonite Brethren Canadian business entrepreneur, Art DeFehr, learned about this invitation; he was keenly interested for at 18 years of age his mother had escaped from the Soviet Union to Canada via China after her parents were sent to Siberia. He marshaled resources and vision for the college, especially within the Mennonite constituencies in

Canada whose historical memory was formed by Soviet persecution of their parents and grandparents. Today Lithuania Christian College is a North American style liberal arts college thriving within its adequate and growing campus facilities in Klaipeda with 550 students enrolled from about 20 countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and it is fully accredited by the Lithuanian government. Although the college is diversely ecumenical, the ethos has been significantly formed especially by North American Mennonites whose lives had been shaped by their families' Soviet experiences. The graduates are already helping to shape the societies and countries they come from.

#### **Saint Petersburg Christian University**

A similar development is the Saint Petersburg Christian University in Russia, a theological school founded by Logos, a mission agency formed by Umsiedler for mission into the former Soviet Union. That university trains pastors, evangelists, missionaries and church planters, and the graduates are now serving across the entire region.

#### **Multiple Ministries**

Like the college in Saint Petersburg, the reach of Mennonite Umsiedler missions back to the regions they have come from is significant and widely present. The Ray of Hope or Licht im Osten are other agencies committed to sending missionaries, developing literature, equipping leaders, organizing camps, providing material aid, establishing schools, and proclaiming the Gospel. Some of these movements are salted by or originally formed by Mennonites, but are not predominantly Mennonite today.

#### **Theological Education**

Theological education is a significant way that Anabaptists are influencing church and mission in the Euro-Central Asia. Noteworthy is the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek, Croatia. During the Marxist era, Gerald Shenk taught there. He and others have profoundly shaped that seminary with Anabaptist commitments. Peter Kuzmic, the founding president of the seminary, has found in Anabaptist kingdom theology centered in the cross and resurrection, spiritual and theological foundations for authentic mission in societies decimated by conflict and secularist visions of utopia. As a witness to its Anabaptist commitments, the upstairs prayer room of the seminary is named The Mennonite Room, with paintings of key leaders of the early Anabaptist movement on the walls.

Likewise Mennonite missiologist Peter Penner at the International Baptist Theological Seminary (IBTS) in Prague has helped to form that key institution with Anabaptist commitments. One department is Anabaptist studies, and in 2006 the annual missiology consultation, that attracts leaders from the entire Euro-Asia region, will focus on Anabaptists and Mission. An occasional voice at the IBTS is the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) missiologist, Walter Sawatsky, who through his writing and

teaching is shaping theological thinking within the region. These are only a few of multiple ways that Anabaptists are helping to shape the direction of theological formation in the region.

### **Anabaptists and Islam**

In modest ways I have become engaged in helping to form approaches to Islam especially in Central Asia. A key forum has been the College of Theology and Education (CTE) in Chisinau, Moldova. This seminary gives special attention to Muslim background persons from the Caucasus and Central Asia. Each year I teach courses related to Christian witness and Islam, and in those classes touch emerging leaders from all countries in the region. Sometimes this is followed up with invitations to teach in other venues within the region.

Complementing these teaching involvements are publications. Bibles for All has just released the book, *A Muslim and A Christian in Dialogue* by a Muslim, Badru Kateregga and myself. Also a Bible study course, *The People of God*, is now available in a variety of languages within the region. This is a course that I, with a team in East Africa, had developed for contextually sensitive witness among Muslims. This kind of confessional yet irenic approach to witness is an Anabaptist contribution that is well received.

### **Multiple Anabaptist Ministries**

Within Central Asia the Umsiedler engagement is substantive; these people know the languages and the culture of formerly Soviet republics. However, non-Umsiedler Mennonites and Anabaptists are also serving with gentle distinction. One considers the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Richard Penner who was recently killed in an air crash in Uzbekistan; this family served for over two decades—at the time of his death he was directing the World Concern program within Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. Another such witness is that of Herbert and Ruth Friesen who are legendary. In 1969 they were the pioneers of Mennonite involvement in Afghanistan, and invested over three decades in developing eye clinics. A few months ago Dr. Herb went to his heavenly home, but the signs of the kingdom that they developed across the land live on.

Many agencies serving within the region have international Mennonite involvement, some serving in key leadership roles; most serving in low profile servant ministries. For example, when I met with a Latin American Central Asia Outreach team in Tashkent, they told me that two members of their team in Uzbekistan are Latin American Mennonites. In Tajikistan I learned that Christian Aid (a North American conservative Mennonite aid organization) is providing significant financial and material support for a variety of commitments. Occasionally a delegation of Mennonite men with black hats and bonneted women come in teams to help with projects and to make sure that their provisions are well invested. In Kabul I spent an afternoon at a school for exceedingly poor children

that is developed and administered by a French Mennonite couple.

Korean Anabaptists who have special concerns for peacemaking are serving in Afghanistan. They organize peace camps and seminars on peacemaking. Much of the effort within the region is development oriented. However, these Korean Anabaptists are raising the banner of a complementary sign of the Kingdom: peacemaking. This creative Korean ministry in peacemaking is touching an area of deep need within societies that have been profoundly wounded by several decades of conflict.

In regions that have experienced much conflict and repression by secularist visions of utopia, Anabaptist presence and witness to the presence of the Kingdom in Christ is often welcome, providing it is a witness given in the Spirit of the Suffering Servant. One example of that welcome is a Mennonite – Iranian Shi'ite Dialogue. In 2004 eight Mennonite theologians were invited to Iran in the context of the commemoration of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Iranian Muslim revolution. We were then invited to Qom for a couple days of dialogue on Revelation and Authority. Why were these Anabaptists invited? As I listened and participated, it seemed to me that these were some of the reasons for the invitation: we do good; we do not have political power; we seek to bring every area of life under the authority of the kingdom of God; our story includes suffering and martyrdom (This is a theme that Shi'a Muslims identify with.); we are a People of the Book; we represent a community of faith committed to faithfulness to God; we are committed to non-violent peacemaking.

### **Conclusion**

This essay provides only glimpses into the rich diversity of Mennonite-Anabaptist ministries within Euro-Central Asia. We, with others, make many mistakes. Yet, as the Spirit proclaimed in regard the church at Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7-13), the Lord has opened a door, and the Spirit outlines the reasons this door is opened: good deeds, little strength, committed to the Scriptures, do not deny Christ, endurance, obeying the commands of Christ (Sermon on the Mount Christians), patience in suffering. And then the Spirit commands: hold on to what you have! Anabaptists serving in Euro-Central Asia are called of God to emulate the church in Philadelphia, and as that happens, a door is open that no one can shut.