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The changing face of global missions

When the church's center shifted south it began a domino effect in missions

THE CENTER OF GRAVITY OF THE CHRISTIAN church has shifted south. The two largest Mennonite Brethren conferences are not the United States and Canada but India and Congo. The largest Mennonite conference is in Ethiopia. Other denominations have similar statistics. The mother church is no longer the largest, and the face of global mission has changed.

For most of the past 200 years missionaries flowed in one direction—from North America and Europe out to Africa, Asia and Latin America. Now a global map that tracks missionaries would display lines originating in all regions and heading in all directions. For instance, churches in Colombia send missionaries not only to other parts of Colombia but also to other countries in Latin America and other parts of the world including North America. African countries send almost as many missionaries as they receive. The U.S. still sends the most Protestant cross-cultural missionaries, but India and South Korea are close behind. Rather than listing specific implications of this shift we will simply observe that many of the other trends in this article stem directly or indirectly from this one.

TREND: SIBLINGS RATHER THAN PARENT AND PARTNERS RATHER THAN BOSS

Churches in other regions, missiologists and many missionaries have called for the North American church to change its perspective from parent or boss, to sibling and partner. This is a step beyond a previous approach that saw the final goal to be an independent self-sustaining national church. Advocates of partnership in mission argue that once a national church is strong enough to survive on its own, it should not be left alone but be invited to join the global mission task as a partner. This includes, for instance, working in partnership with the Congolese church not only in ongoing work in Congo but also in partnership with them in church planting efforts in other regions.

Implications and challenges:

■ When going to a place where a national church already exists we should allow them to discern how they

Representatives to the International Committee of Mennonite Brethren 2006 gathering included these leaders from the DR Congo and Japan.

might benefit from receiving missionaries, and then work alongside them under their leadership.

■ North America has abundant economic resources; too often money equals power. Equality, under these circumstances, is an illusion. We must work deliberately to diminish the power our wealth gives us. The “weaker” partner is not seeking equality, but mutuality, comprehension of its different situation, and respect.

■ The cultural diversity of a mission team with members from different countries is strength, but also an added challenge.



Now, however, as the daughter churches become adults and MBMSI wants to move on to parent other new churches, the church in North America and churches in other parts of the world have the opportunity and the challenge of forging direct church-to-church relationships.

TREND: CHURCH-TO-CHURCH RELATIONS

When the center of Christianity was in North America and Western Europe and churches in other regions were seen as daughter churches growing under the guidance of missionaries sent from the North, mission agencies, like MBMS International, were viewed as the connection to the rest of the world. And churches in the rest of the world view mission agencies as the representative of the mother church. Mission agencies mediated the relationship both ways. Now, however, as the daughter churches become adults and MBMSI wants to move on to parent other new churches, the church in North America and churches in other parts of the world have the opportunity and the challenge of forging direct church-to-church relationships.

Implications and challenges:

■ This allows church leaders from different conferences to relate directly to their peers in conferences in other countries and thus helps all to be viewed as siblings and spreads the richness of relating with the global family beyond missionaries. This same positive also has a negative as we may now have people with little cross-cultural training dealing with complex and important cross-cultural relationships.

■ After years of the mission agency handling the relationship, including receiving and dispersing funds, the North American churches may not pick up this role, and conferences in other parts of the world may feel abandoned.

TREND: GROWTH OF SHORT-TERM MISSIONS

Over the last 15 years, the short-term missions movement has grown from about 22,000 in 1979 to 1.6 million “missionaries” that have traveled outside the U.S. in 2004 to do some kind of mission work. Many believers want to be

involved directly in what mission is all about and are willing to spend time and money in order to be in direct touch with the mission field.

Implications and challenges:

■ Short-term missions have increased the number of Christians who have had direct involvement with God’s work in other cultures and thus potentially increases the number of people who can be motivated to support long-term mission efforts and to maintain relationships with Churches in other regions.

■ STM clearly have a significant impact on those who go. We must, however, more honestly evaluate the impact, positive and nega-

tive, on those on the receiving end. When short termers from North America come to other parts of the world they must be aware that the Holy Spirit has gone before them, and that there are churches in many places with local leaders who should not be overrun by the enthusiastic and all-knowing “missionaries” from the North. The visitors should be willing to work under local leadership and respect the local agenda.

■ Visitors must be aware that their one-week trip often uses more funds than the local church has in its annual budget. Within the existing economic disparities it is hard not to become paternalistic or to enter into a patron-client relationship.

■ We have to ask the tough question if these trips are worth the time and the money spent on them. Example: in 2005 one church from the U.S. spent almost \$500,000 for a team of 200 persons to go to Lima, Peru for one week to do an evangelistic circus. That is more money spent on one activity than all theological educators from Peru earn in one year.

TREND: CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE GOSPEL

To some degree missionaries have always worked at contextualizing the gospel—even if just at the level of working at a translation that people will readily understand. Over the last 50 years, however, more and more missionaries returned to an approach to contextualization practiced in the New Testament. The gospel is like a diamond with many faces. Rather than simply looking for culturally appropriate ways to communicate one face of the diamond in all places, missionaries committed to contextualization seek to discern what facets of the gospel will most connect with people in a given context and also what are ways they most need to be confronted by the gospel diamond. As the church in Asia, Africa and Latin America has grown and matured they have helped us see that all theology, not just gospel presentations, becomes richer and more relevant through contextualization.

Implications and challenges:

■ Cross-cultural evangelism requires more than translating a gospel presentation from one language into another.

■ Theological understandings can be greatly enriched by conversing with Christians from different settings who may have seen different facets of the gospel.

TREND: A RETURN TO HOLISTIC OR INTEGRAL MISSIONS

Through practicing what was described in the previous paragraph in a context of extreme poverty a number of Latin American pastors and evangelists came to see the gospel as dealing not only with individual spiritual salvation but also offering salvation from physical, economic and social bondage and suffering. In 1974 they challenged those gathered at the Lausanne Conference on World Evangelism to return to the holistic gospel seen in the Bible. Although work remains in helping Christians understand, proclaim and live out a gospel that integrates spiritual, physical, economic and social aspects, the ripples from their challenge at that event have led to significant changes in the evangelical world. This holistic approach is, for instance, evident in MBMSI's new motto: "Holistic church planting that transforms communities among the least reached."

Implications and challenges:

■ To be open to other things we might learn from Christians in other regions

■ To continue to work at ways our mission efforts can be more holistic

TREND: NEW WAYS OF DOING MISSIONS

The last decades have seen an increase in new methods of doing mission. A century ago mission was done by a professional missionary on a mission compound in some isolated place on an exotic continent. Especially the countries with restraint access (such as many ruled by Muslim governments) have challenged the creativity of the new missionaries. For some time the bi-vocational missionary was the solution to evading the government's scrutiny. Many of these missionaries did not feel at ease pretending to come as a computer specialist or language teacher while the real goal was to do mission work. The bi-vocational missionary, still supported from his home country, "evolved" into the tent-maker movement.

Tentmakers are missionaries whose professional and commercial expertise is good enough to not depend on financial support from their home countries. They have more freedom in living in a different country and alongside their professional activities proclaim the gospel. One of the newest trends is the Business as Mission (BAM) movement that had the biggest group of participants at the Lausanne Conference in Pattaya (Thailand) in 2004. The goal of many Christian businesspeople around the world—not just from the North—is to establish a business with a holistic emphasis that is at the same time profitable. Employees and clients can be reached with the gospel, while the community, the country and the owner benefit from the business activity.

Implications and challenges:

■ It is exciting to see businessmen and women around the world getting into a field that used to be reserved for professional missionaries. The BAM movement has the possibilities—much more than traditional mission models—to offer a holistic gospel to the people. It is able to provide jobs, economic growth and stability to a community while proclaiming the gospel.

■ The BAM movement requires much less financial support from churches.

■ Because of not needing the financial support of churches, if those involved in BAM go independently of churches and mission agencies they will not receive training, or oversight, and their work may lack connection with other churches.

TREND: MISSIONS AS GOD'S MISSION

Building on theologian Karl Barth's work that articulated mission as an activity of God, over the last 50 years missiologists have come to understand mission as being derived from the nature of God. Rather than basing the biblical mandate of mission solely on the great commission in Matthew 28, we observe the missionary intent of God throughout the Bible. In relation to mission the church rather than being the sender is first and foremost the sent people of God. There is church because there is mission, not vice versa. The missionary activity of the church is therefore not just sending a group on a short-term trip, or supporting individual missionaries in another country, but for the church itself to be an instrument of God's mission.

Implications and challenges:

■ Churches should evaluate and then act on ways they can be a corporate witness in their own setting.

■ Missionaries need to work at planting churches that are not just a collection of converted individuals that will send some out to convert other individuals but a body of believers that witnesses through corporately being an alternative culture as well as evangelizing individually.

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