

Can Mennonite Brethren Be Missional?

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What is the missional church? This question is being asked by churches across North America. Is it a new fad? The latest “new and improved” technique for attracting a younger generation? An innovative program for evangelism? Or is it a new way of doing mission work? The word “missional” is used in many different ways: some people understand its historical and theological origins, and others flippantly use it as a label for a new marketing scheme. The purpose of this essay is to answer the question by first examining twenty-first-century North American cultural shifts, then by locating the place of the church within those shifts, and finally by identifying some ways that Mennonite Brethren might resonate with and learn from the missional conversation.

Today's missional church movement is animated by the conviction that it exists not for itself but for the world.

FEAR AND LOATHING

There is much contention among Christians regarding current “post-modern” North American culture. Some argue that it is an increasingly secular, unambiguously evil culture of compromise and syncretism—and, as such, something to be fiercely opposed. A growing camp of Christian authors, speakers, and personalities resist the onslaught of postmodernity as they would an invading army. In a 2006 issue of *Christianity Today*, a cadre of mostly Evangelical fundamentalists sponsored a four-page ad for a youth initiative called BattleCry. The advertisement was placed strategi-

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cally as a centerfold in the issue and declared in huge white capital letters against a black background, "CHRISTIANITY IN AMERICA WON'T SURVIVE ANOTHER DECADE." Then further down the page in smaller text, "UNLESS WE DO SOMETHING NOW."

The ad went on to describe a leadership summit using militant language such as, "a call to arms," "generals unite," "save a generation," "take action," and "fight." The reason for the alarm? "This generation of teens is the largest in history—and currently trends show that only 4 percent will be evangelical believers by the time they become adults. Compare this with 34 percent of adults today who are evangelicals. We are on the verge of a catastrophe." Ted Haggard, then president of the National Association of Evangelicals, reported, "Imagine an America with 4 percent of the population as evangelical. That means we'll lose all the values and all the things we've been fighting for for over 200 years."¹

How has such a large and influential segment of the church in North America come to this place of fear and anxiety? A brief discussion of the shift from a modern to a postmodern culture may help us better understand the church's place in society and the alarm many North American Christians feel at the turn to postmodernism.²

MODERNITY AND AFTER

In *Cosmopolis*, Stephen Toulmin presents an historical survey of the era of modernity, a period roughly comprising the mid-sixteenth to mid-twentieth centuries.³ He suggests that the rationalist philosophy of this period is now deeply embedded in the Western worldview. He proposes that modernity ended in the mid-twentieth century resulting in the urgent struggle to understand our current post-rational condition. He writes:

If an historical era is ending, it is the era of Modernity itself. Rather than our being free to assume that the tide of Modernity still flows strongly, and that its momentum will carry us into a new and better world, our present position is less comfortable. What looked in the 19th century like an irresistible river has disappeared in the sand, and we seem to have run aground. Far from extrapolating confidently into the social and cultural future, we are now stranded and uncertain of our location.⁴

North Americans are fearful because the "modern" way of thinking, working and living that has functioned well for hundreds of years seems increasingly irrelevant. Throughout modernity philosophers, scientists, mathematicians, and even theologians sought eternal and universally valid foundations for knowledge. They "promoted theory, devalued practice,

and insisted equally on the need to find foundations for knowledge that were clear, distinct, and certain.”⁵ Immutable and infallible dogmas took the place of speculative and debatable doctrines. Theologians had no regard for the open-minded tolerance and moderation of sixteenth-century humanist skeptics.⁶ Theirs was a “quest for certainty” found in axioms, laws, and rigid systems of belief.

It was during this time that the modern framework of control, predictability, stability, and certainty was established and it is this framework that has dominated European and North American thinking for three centuries. Individualism, natural law, and the primacy of the nation-state have been our reigning paradigms, and they have become part of the consciousness of North American Christians. The modern “imaginary”⁷ had more subtle, negative dimensions as well. Truth and reason were objectified, universalized, and systematized without regard for history or context. Knowledge became a product of rational procedures as opposed to an ongoing communal activity. Modern life was fragmented and atomized as a sense of the organic whole in nature and society was lost. Spiritually, people became more attentive to personal needs and less connected to the religious rituals primarily found in the public, communal sphere. Modernity fostered disenchantment and a rapidly diminishing awareness of the transcendent, the mysterious, and the supernatural.⁸

Now, however, the West has entered a postmodern era in which modernity, along with its ideals of control, predictability, stability, and certainty, is being repudiated. The result is a society reeling from continual change and in a state of disequilibrium as the philosophical, scientific, and theological foundations of modernity are being eroded. And as this occurs, many Christians whose conceptualizations of faith have rested on those foundations are left fearful, uncertain, and anxious.

THE CHURCH IN NORTH AMERICAN CULTURE

The challenges of living in a postmodern culture that has jettisoned old, reliable truths are amplified by the fact that the North American church seems increasingly irrelevant. Kennon Callahan suggests that while the church was comfortable and prosperous in the churched culture of modernity, it no longer occupies a significant place of influence in a largely unchurched society. Three conditions characterize the attitude of postmoderns toward church: (1) the church is not among their major values, (2) they do not seek out churches on their own initiative, and (3) they do not see that the church is helpful.⁹ In sum, the church is a matter of indifference for the vast majority of westerners. The very foundations of Christendom have crumbled along with those of modernity.

The church therefore struggles to understand its role in culture. Alan

Roxburgh recognizes this and discusses the marginalized position of the church in *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, and Liminality*.¹⁰ He describes the tunnel through which the church is traveling as “liminality,” a concept borrowed from Victor Turner to describe the transitional process accompanying a group’s change of social position. In this liminal state there is considerable confusion and uncertainty about what is happening as roles and positions are redefined into something not yet discernable.

This is an appropriate response to the church’s current crisis—a crisis of marginalization, dislocation, and disequilibrium. As the church moves from a privileged position into post-Christendom, it experiences chaos, living on the edge of oblivion. Nostalgia is a natural reaction, as is panic. It is not surprising that the church is working hard to defend the foundations of rationality, control, and centrality as it fights for survival. But Roxburgh offers this warning:

A return to a remembered Christendom or the old detente with modernity is impossible. Those doors are closed. The only meaningful way forward lies in understanding and embracing our liminal existence. We must live with its confusion and humiliation, as a hopeful people ready to discover the new thing the Spirit will birth.¹¹

In *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles*, Walter Brueggemann similarly admonishes the church to take its radically changed cultural situation seriously. He brilliantly applies the concept of exile to the church’s present condition, arguing that what the church is going through parallels the experience of Jews during the time of Isaiah. The exile, he says, was more than geographical; it was also social, moral, and cultural.¹² Exiles experienced the loss of all that was familiar, structured, and reliable as they were dislocated and cut off from their life-giving symbols of faith. They were dislodged from a place of centrality and control to a foreign land on the edge of chaos. The pain of their displacement could be heard in their laments and was manifested in their worship. The North American church, too, has now been stripped of its role as a dominant intellectual and cultural force in society. Abandoned and isolated, the church is experiencing an exile of its own.

LESSLIE NEWBIGIN AND THE MISSION OF GOD

The missional church movement has taken these kinds of analysis of the church’s situation to heart. Refusing to abandon the society that now ignores it, the missional church has found encouragement and inspiration in the writings of Lesslie Newbigin. In 1974, Newbigin returned to England from India after more than thirty years of missionary work to find

the church in its newly exiled condition. Europe had become thoroughly post-Christian, thoroughly secular. Everything had changed with one exception: the churches, pastors, and seminaries all functioned as they did in the modern era. As a retired missionary, Newbigin was particularly adept at analyzing culture and critiquing Christendom, and—in such works as *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (1978), *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (1986) and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (1989)—called the church to be true to the *missio Dei* (mission of God) and become a missional church.¹³

Newbigin urged it to do so, however, in a way that took proper account of the cultural conditioning that molds all rational articulations of the story of salvation. Indeed, the story is the essential thing: “The dogma, the thing given for our acceptance in faith, is not a set of timeless propositions: it is a story.”¹⁴ Moreover, this “story” is not in the first place one that concerns the individual believer. By declaring oneself a follower of Christ, the believer enters into a story that spans time and place and becomes situated in the grand narrative of God’s redemptive work throughout history and specifically revealed through the smaller stories of the Hebrews and early Christians. While this story of redemption is wide enough to include all local contexts, propositional theology is not. European and North American Christians have unwittingly been guilty of imperialism, colonialism, and coercion in their global witness when they made belief in a particular Western theology the essence of faith.

Newbigin’s concept of story is essential to his concept of “mission.” To understand his concept, three broad, related categories must be distinguished: mission statements, missions, and mission. Mission statements are technical documents crafted to give an organization a centeredness. The statement loosely answers the question, “What is the purpose of this place?” In the 1980s and 1990s churches clambered aboard the “purpose driven” movement and, following the business world, added mission statements to their charters. Mission statements have moved from being a business practice into the big business of mainstream Christianity, yet they do not convey the richness of the concept of the *missio Dei*.

“Missions” (note the plural) is used intentionally to distinguish it from “mission.” Newbigin writes that the church both “does missions” and “is a mission.” Missions are “those specific activities which are undertaken by human decision to bring the gospel to places or situations where it is not heard.”¹⁵ Success is measured almost exclusively in numbers. How many souls were saved? What was the attendance? Did membership increase? In this sense, projects in missions are something that we *do*, and something that, if successful, will achieve quantifiable results. While missions activities will be a part of all healthy churches, they do not adequately describe

the fullness of God's work in the world.

The concept of the *missio Dei*, however, best captures Newbigin's idea of "mission." The mission of the church is not so much about obedience to a "missionary mandate" as it is participation in the ongoing work of a redeeming God. The *missio Dei* is not the *believer's* mission—it is *God's*. It is the grand story of fall and redemption through countless epochs and geographic locations. As Newbigin says, "The Church is not so much the agent of the mission as the locus of the mission." He continues, "It is impossible to stress too strongly that the beginning of mission is not an action of ours, but the presence of a new reality, the presence of the Spirit of God in power."¹⁶ This mission is not something to be either commenced or completed in distant places. It is the ongoing work of God in which all believers are invited to participate. Much more than a project *out there*, it is a posture *right here* where we live.

The church therefore becomes the place where story is lived and mission is practiced in the real world. Newbigin identifies six characteristics of a missional community: (1) it practices corporate praise, thanksgiving, gratitude, and grace; (2) it declares truth that challenges the reigning plausibility structures; (3) it establishes relationships within a local neighborhood; (4) it encourages mutual service in the priesthood of all believers; (5) it expects mutual responsibility rather than individualism; and (6) it nurtures hope and a re-imagined vision of the future.¹⁷ A church that understands itself as part of God's story and a partner in God's mission will strive to realize these ideals. It does not live in a holy huddle seeking retreat from, or planning militant opposition to, society at large. This community exists for the sake of those who are not part of their community, that they might be a "sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's redeeming grace for the whole life of society."¹⁸ Today's missional church movement is animated by the conviction that it exists not for itself but for the world.

THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

Though not formally associated with the Emergent church, the missional church movement has been *emerging* as more and more churches find themselves at the margins of culture and society, looking to respond in creative ways to postmodernity. It is patterned after the theology and practices of missionaries but finds its locus on the mission fields of North America and Europe. Its growth reflects the church's interest in new ways of bringing the gospel to a new culture.

What does a missional church look like? This is an appropriate but notoriously difficult question to answer precisely because of the nature of the movement. Ambiguity arises because the missional church is more representative of a process than an outcome; hence, programs and practices

of individual churches might look very different from one another. The missional movement is not a formal association of churches that all look and operate the same, nor is it a new denomination. Reflective of New Testament churches, and unlike the recent Church Growth coalition in North America, there is no one style, pattern, or polity that guides the formation of a missional church. No conference or seminar will offer a ministry model that can be stamped indiscriminately on inquisitive congregations. Missional communities spend time together discerning and defining what it means to be missional in their own contexts.

There are, however, some assumptions that link the missional conversation and give missional churches some points of commonality.

Joining the *missio Dei*. Missional churches understand first and foremost that they are doing something *with* God, not *for* God. The *missio Dei* is God's mission and purpose for the church; engaging the *missio Dei* means joining God's story and making it ours. The challenge is to see God at work and then discern what opportunities there are to partner with him in bringing God's kingdom to all people. This requires the unlearning of old habits that position American churches as authoritarian structures colonizing the culture for God, and de-emphasizes dependence on lavish programs and facilities in favor of modest, local, and contextually relevant endeavors. The missional community is always asking, What is God doing in our midst and how can we join him?

An incarnational presence. Missional communities believe that they are an extension of Christ's work and ministry and function as his hands and feet. There is a desire to bring the gospel to the lost in holistic ways. Evangelism is not reduced to individual personal confession but includes addressing all needs of God's people in all their various contexts. Individual belief in Christ is just one dimension of salvation. Missional churches take seriously Jesus' message in Luke 4 to preach good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoner, recovery of sight for the blind, and release for the oppressed. As Darrell Guder reminds us, incarnationally representing Jesus in a missional community means that evangelism "can no longer be regarded merely as a set of methods and programs for recruiting church members. Nor can it be just a program of a denominational office or parachurch evangelistic organization. It cannot be reduced to 'twelve steps to soul-winning' or 'four spiritual laws.'"¹⁹

Church as the *sent-ones*. The missional church movement is, at least in part, a reaction to the attractional movement of the 1980s. For three decades Church Growth planners have strategized, targeted populations, and built programs and facilities with the intention of attracting unchurched individuals. This has typically resulted in changing worship styles, stripping sanctuaries of symbolism, and investing major funds and resources in

the Sunday morning worship service. Missional communities focus not on attracting the unchurched but on training and equipping believers to go out into the world and engage all levels of society. While the weekly gathering remains important, it is seen as just one point of entry into the kingdom of God. The missional community is called out of the world for mutual edification and then sent back into the world to testify in word and deed to the reign of God.

The Spirit of God is among God's People. Most Christians have a theological belief that God's Spirit inhabits all believers but many do not have a functional practice to match this belief. In contrast to CEO-styles of church polity, missional congregations understand that all believers are vessels of the Holy Spirit and, therefore, all believers have significant contributions to make to the church. The missional movement emphasizes active participation in vision setting, decision making, and facilitation of ministry. There is a keen recognition that each member is gifted for service and edification in the community. The role of the leader is to listen for and discern the voice of the Spirit and to help believers join what God is doing in their midst. A peripheral result might be disagreement or even argumentation, but this too is valued in the course of community discernment. At the core of this process is a deep commitment to studying and living in the Scriptures together in an effort to hear what the Spirit is saying.

MISSIONAL CHURCH PRACTICES

Having addressed some basic assumptions common to missional churches, we now consider some of their shared practices. While the programs and activities of missional congregations will be defined by their context, they have in common some formative practices.

Worship. Worship wars are raging across North America. Usually these confrontations revolve around style, typically centering on the advantages and disadvantages of traditional and contemporary forms. Churches routinely move toward a contemporary style in an attempt to attract more people, while at the same time alienating congregants who prefer the traditional. Missional worship subverts this discussion by its indifference to style; the form of worship is irrelevant. The weekly worship service functions as a gathering space for church members to come for nurture, communion, and fellowship, all centered on the character and mission of God rather than on the need for a personal therapeutic experience. The only inappropriate worship style is one that raises the needs of the individual above the desire to serve and know God. Whether Baptist, Episcopal, or Mennonite Brethren, regardless of its contemporary or traditional style, the worship of missional churches is diverse and practiced in many shapes and forms.

Leadership. Shared leadership is critical within the missional move-

ment. There is an inherent understanding that all believers are host to the Holy Spirit and are adequately gifted to enhance and edify the church as it seeks to share God's kingdom. In missional churches the role of lead pastor shifts from CEO and architect to that of discerner, nurturer, and equipper. This will be threatening to pastors who enjoy power and thrive in controlling situations. The typical activities of the modernist pastor—preaching, pastoral care and counseling, and administration—are replaced by activities aimed at cultivating people, forming mission-driven congregations, and engaging local contexts.²⁰ Missional leaders surrender control and encourage participation in governance. They encourage involvement, empower people to imagine what the kingdom might look like, and invite others to join God's story. "The role of leadership is to create environments that release this missional imagination of the people of God so that they can discover God's plan and put it into action in their local contexts."²¹

The Bible. The Bible is the starting place for all discussion and discernment. It is not treated as an historical document or as a propositional treatise but as a source of revelation. The Bible contains the grand story of God's creation and redemption of humanity along with the smaller stories of individual interaction with his people. As such, the Bible is much more than a collection of nice morals or prescribed creeds and theological formulations. It is not simply a handbook for living—it is God's living word for the church. And it is not just a book for individuals; it is to be read in community. The pastor's job is to orient and guide biblical study, but the hard work of interpretation and application falls to the brothers and sisters. As Darrell Guder insists, "Rigorous biblical learning must be the missional congregation's priority. The congregation intentionally commits most of its time together to biblical study—which takes place in many different ways. It encourages and equips its members to continue biblical study individually."²² Members of the missional church will dialogue with one another in a Bible-centered community which is patiently guided by those among them who are gifted as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and teachers.

Community. The local community of believers is where mission begins and essential spiritual formation takes place. Christians in North America largely experience their faith as individual and pietistic. The missional movement provides a corrective by emphasizing interdependence, diversity, and a shared life.

... [T]hese emerging churches are not clones of existing ones, a process that characterized so much of the church planting endeavors of past decades. Rather, they are based on a missional understanding of church that emphasizes an incarnational, servant approach and sees church not as a once-a-week gathering but as a community to which one

belongs that relates to the whole of life. It is a community in which each person makes an active contribution ...²³

And membership in this type of community is not gained simply by including one's name on a roster, nor is it coercive. Though welcoming to all, membership is considered sacred and is reserved for those who commit voluntarily to sharing life together. Patrick Keifert suggests a two-year, seven-step process of membership, mirroring that of the early church.²⁴ Many communities will not require such an extreme practice but most missional churches understand that membership signifies a commitment to something larger than any one individual.

Engaging the World. The locus for mission and ministry is the world, and a community's local context is the place in which the gospel will be fleshed out. This is the primary reason why there should not be a single model of the missional church. Each church's local context will help contour and define what that church will look like. "Regardless of the actual shape and name adopted, the local congregation is the basic unit of Christian witness if we understand witness incarnationally. The gospel is always to be embodied by the people of God in a particular place. The sent-out community is sent out into the specific context in which it is located."²⁵ In a typical North American attractional church, members believe it is their job to bring nonbelievers to church so that the pastor can preach to and convert them. Not so in missional churches. These congregations understand that they are to leave the worship gathering as missionaries to the culture, incarnationally representing Christ and his kingdom. And a believer's engagement with the world does not happen in isolation. The believer belongs to an alternate society which stands in opposition to those things that conflict with the reign of God. Indeed, as Greene and Robinson suggest, "the very act, or process, of the creation of community is part of what it means to live counter-culturally as a Christian in the West."²⁶ The role of the local congregation is to be a witness to and a foretaste of God's kingdom.

Missions. Though much of the missional conversation revolves around the concept of the *missio Dei* and ministry in the local context of a church, it in no way excludes the practice of traditional foreign missions. On the contrary, a congregation might discern together to commit significant resources to outreach projects in distant lands. The problem with most North American approaches to foreign missions lies in their tendency to reduce the church's mission as a whole to a simple program or committee of the church. Guder warns against the "mission-benefits" dichotomy that most churches unknowingly subscribe to: "The benefits of salvation are separated from the reason for which we received God's grace in Christ: to empower us as God's people to become Christ's witnesses. This fundamental dichotomy between the benefits of the gospel and the mission of the gospel

constitutes the most profound reductionism of the gospel.”²⁷ The mission and witness of the church should not be relinquished to a few select people who measure their success against predisposed outcomes. The ministry of a missional church is a natural outflow of all members as they together form a community that may, indeed, imagine and facilitate exciting and practical endeavors in foreign missions.

MISSIONAL AND MENNONITE?

Churches of Anabaptist descent, and especially Mennonite Brethren churches which were mission-focused from the beginning, would do well to understand and perhaps even learn from the missional church. Let me suggest nine similarities between the Mennonite Brethren and the missional church movement.

A distrust of creedal and dogmatic formulations and a reliance on the biblical witness. Neither Mennonite Brethren nor missional congregations are inclined to give allegiance to any formal creed or statement of dogma. They are, however, solidly grounded in the biblical text and seek to honor the original meaning of the text as well as its contemporary application. The missional movement pushes the church to understand the Bible as the source for the *missio Dei* and the revelation of God’s grand story. It is the starting place for all conversation.

A corporate hermeneutic that honors the local community rather than an institution. In both the missional and Mennonite Brethren traditions the ministry of the word is not solely left to trained professionals. Without minimizing the gifting of certain individuals for biblical instruction, the community as a whole takes on the responsibility—normally with the guidance of trained leaders—of interpreting and applying Scripture. Hermeneutics is not the job of a few individuals but of the entire community.

A holistic witness incarnated as a liberating gospel in both word and deed. Mennonite Brethren have always understood that the life of Christ provides the pattern for living. The concept of *Nachfolge Christi* has spurred on the church to live as “followers of Christ.” The missional church affirms this and suggests that any attempt to follow Christ must include an incarnational representation of his life and teaching, both in what is said and what is done. Mennonites have long practiced a holistic presentation of the gospel both in local contexts and through formal organizations like Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Brethren Missions and Services International.

The “priesthood of all believers”—the belief that all followers of Christ are active participants in God’s mission. Members of the missional church, like the Anabaptists, believe that every individual has a role to play in the church. Ministry is not the responsibility of pastors and church leaders, but

of all who belong to the community. Indeed, inclusion in the community implies active participation based on one's Spirit-given gifts and abilities. This sense of ministry and priesthood fosters an ethos of egalitarianism and breaks down the traditional pastor/laity dichotomy.

Loyalty to the kingdom and the grand narrative of God's story rather than to an earthly nation-state. Anabaptists share this common understanding with missional churches because both see themselves as displaced groups on the margins of society. Pursued from territory to territory, Mennonites often found themselves opposing national governments. Historically, they have shunned oaths of loyalty. Both Anabaptist and missional churches believe that their allegiance lies with a kingdom that transcends national and geographical boundaries; both see themselves as belonging to the larger story of God's redemptive plan for creation.

The ability to live and worship in a place of exile, persecution, and dislocation. Missional congregations understand that the church has been relocated to the periphery of society. Mennonites have a long history of being persecuted and displaced, and of adapting theologically to their context. Doing "theology on the run" has helped each group to be flexible, imaginative, and creative in theory and practice. The postmodern North American church must also learn to be nimble and generative, cautiously adapting to its new location in the world.

The congregation as the place to live a life of witness and service while being a counter-cultural visible presence engaged with the world. Though missional churches understand the need to adapt to culture, they are also wary of syncretism. Mennonite Brethren in similar ways should guard against cultural compromise while remaining "in but not of the world." Both movements are committed to being the visible presence of Christ in ways that will counter prevailing ideologies that stand in opposition to God's reign. A Spirit-led church will always experience the tension of being a community that lives in, yet is set apart from, its culture.

A community ethic of love and accountability. Brothers and sisters in missional churches will find a strong parallel with Mennonite Brethren commitment to a shared life. While most North American Christians are content with a private spirituality, these two movements believe that the Christian life cannot be lived apart from other Christians. Spiritual formation does not happen in isolation but when burdens are shared, communion is celebrated, and Scripture is studied together. The links between community members are inextricable and essential for the common and individual good.

Voluntary, non-coercive membership in the church community. Membership in both of these groups is closely tied to adult confession of faith and baptism, and often involves an intricate process of commitment. In-

tegration into a church does not have as much to do with attendance as with active participation. Joining a local body means committing oneself to something that is larger than the individual. A member is voluntarily committing to a group of people for mutual support and edification. In both missional and Mennonite Brethren congregations, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and membership is a decision that cannot be coerced by intimidation, manipulation, or compulsion.

CONCLUSION

It should be obvious by now that the missional church movement is not a “church growth” strategy, a new program for evangelism, a set of innovative activities, or the latest fad. It is not comprised primarily of people who dislike tradition and despise the established church. It is not a marketing gimmick for bolstering attendance at Sunday morning services and on-campus programs. It is, however, an organic movement of people who believe they are *called* to live in community together—sharing life, interpreting Scripture, and listening for God—and then *sent* with a story of good news into a searching world.

In a post-Christendom society, the church must embrace its exile by resisting the temptation to be isolationist or militant and by creatively rethinking and reimagining the church’s role in the world through lament, praise, and prophecy. If the church can re-envision its role as a missional one, identifying with the *missio Dei*, offering a vibrant, holistic alternative to the modern condition, it may yet find purpose, even if supremacy remains permanently out of reach. And if the missional movement is indeed an ongoing process of joining God in what God is already doing, responding with love and compassion to an ever-shifting culture, it is not too far-fetched to imagine that our Mennonite Brethren forebears would be pleased to see us join the conversation.

NOTES

1. “Battle Cry,” *Christianity Today*, July 2006, center pull-out advertisement. Also see the BattleCry website at <http://www.battlecry.com>.
2. The above example is obviously from the Evangelical movement in the United States. The fears and concerns, however, are common in many other denominations and mainline churches throughout North America, while the strategies used to address these uncertainties often differ.
3. Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990). There is a great

deal of contention about the exact dating of modernity. Toulmin includes the sixteenth century Renaissance in his dating scheme as this is foundational to his argument that the “received understanding” of modernity is actually a counter-Renaissance. He goes on to suggest that the current era of postmodernity has come full circle and is in fact a re-renaissance, in which North Americans are much more open to broad discussions and alternate worldviews.

4. Ibid., 3.
5. Ibid., 70.
6. Renaissance skeptics argued that it was a mistake to think of theology and theory as timeless and universal. They were deeply suspicious of the rationalists who claimed that truth could stand outside of time and context and that truth could be known in intellectually definitive and provable ways.
7. The term is Jacques Lacan’s and refers to a particular society’s set of values, institutions, laws, and symbols. Charles Taylor makes use of it in his *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), where he defines specifically social imaginaries as “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (23).
8. On these and related points, see Taylor’s *Modern Social Imaginaries*.
9. Kennon L. Callahan, *Effective Church Leadership: Building on the Twelve Keys* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 19–20.
10. Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership & Liminality* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1997).
11. Ibid., 46–47.
12. Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster, 1997), 2, 115.
13. In using the term *missio Dei*, Newbigin employed a concept that had great currency in missiological thought already in the 1950s.
14. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 12.
15. Ibid., 121.
16. Ibid., 119.
17. Ibid., chapter 18, “The Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel.”
18. Ibid., 233.
19. Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 205.

20. See Alan Roxburgh, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), especially chapter 6, "Missional Readiness Factors and the Nature of Leadership."
21. Alan Roxburgh, *The Sky is Falling: Leaders Lost in Transition* (Eagle, ID: ACI, 2005), 172.
22. Guder, 160.
23. Roxburgh, *The Missional Leader*, xiii.
24. Patrick Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 100–107.
25. Guder, 148.
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27. Guder, 120.