

# CENTRALITY INSTEAD OF PRIORITY:

## *An Emerging Philosophy of Mennonite Brethren Missions*

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*Mennonite  
Brethren  
missions  
suffers from a  
confusion of  
understanding  
... misplaced  
emphasis ...*

### *Introduction*

Mission boards and agencies are known for making bold statements about their good intentions, concrete plans, and optimistic goals when they cross the threshold of a decade. The Vision Statement of the Board of Missions and Services entitled *Mennonite Brethren Missions in the 1980s* is but one example, and, I might add, it has proven to be a valuable document for the past seven years in terms of theological direction, policy guidelines, strategic planning, and concrete program implementation.

But now we are not only facing a new decade; we are also approaching the end of a century and with it the entrance of a new millennium of the Christian era. In fact, we already see from a distance the illumined horizon of the dawn of millennium three. Surely, this historical event will cause and help the church reflect seriously what it means to be God's missionary people in the world between the resurrection and return of Christ the Lord.

The Mennonite Brethren are presently much concerned about spiritual and biblical understanding of mission.

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What does world mission mean in the post-foreign-missions era? What is the ever-abiding center of the missionary message of our generation? Are there indispensable priorities in reaching people for Christ or should we rather speak of the unchanging and defensible centrality of the Good News in our mission efforts? I want to address these questions in light of our own denominational pilgrimage, both historical and theological, and then attempt a biblical solution. In doing so, I will restrict myself to the new era of mission which emerged in the vortex of changes unleashed by World War II and its aftermath.

### *Tracing the Process*

Prior to the Yarrow Convention, Mennonite Brethren made their missional statements in propositional formulations which they authenticated by deeds of compassion, but about which they said very little; their deeds spoke for themselves. But suddenly during the late 1950s and on through the 1970s they felt the need to defend their position on social responsibility and to define their mission in wholistic terms.

Several steps can be clearly identified in the development of a Mennonite Brethren mission philosophy since 1957.

#### *NEW RHETORIC FROM YARROW 1957*

Administrators and policy makers have issued a number of revolutionary documents on philosophy of mission, but none as radical as the "Statement of the General Conference of the M.B. Church on the Effects of the Changes of Our Age on the World-Wide Missionary Assignment." Such words as "revision," "change," "adjustment," and "corporate judgment" became standard mission vocabulary in the new administrative policies (GCY 1957: 41-43). What is required, says the document, are "new standards of qualifications of missionaries" and "new methods in some areas of the work. A hesitancy on our part to consider such needed changes may result in a loss which will far exceed the values which we hope to preserve by avoiding the required adjustment" (GCY 1957: 43). The agenda seemed to be clear and the administration determined to carry it out expeditiously.

#### *THE DECLARATION FROM CORN 1966*

The spirit of change was in the air because of "the chang-

ing world of our time,” as the “Statement of Mission: Forward Thrust” put it (*GCY* 1966: 104). Whoever moved in the atmosphere of mission inhaled some of that spirit. Leaders from conciliar and nonconciliar churches alike were redefining their understanding of mission. Thus it was only appropriate that the Mennonite Brethren would take note of these new winds of change which had, as the Declaration from Corn put it, “far-reaching influences on the total missionary outreach of our brotherhood” (*GCY* 1966: 103-104). The Brethren stated:

Much confusion exists today as to what constitutes evangelism and missions, but as a Mennonite Brethren brotherhood we re-affirm our understanding of the missionary mandate as being a ministry to the whole man, with the primary purpose of preaching the gospel, to make disciples, to baptize them, to gather them into churches, and to lead them on in the knowledge of Christ (*GCY* 1966: 104).

Because of the merger of the Board of Missions and the Board of General Welfare and Public Relations, the Corn Convention was of great historical significance for the formulation of an M.B. philosophy of mission. The Board of Reference and Counsel put it succinctly: “The merger of the two boards... represents the conviction that proclamation and welfare ministries ought to be integrated.” Yet “welfare concerns, however necessary, are subsidiary to proclamation” (*GCY* 1966: 23).

Here the Mennonite Brethren articulated for the first time what they had practiced throughout their missionary endeavors, namely, “ministry to the whole man.” But now it became an integral part of their explicit rhetoric in mission philosophy.

#### *COMMITMENT IN VANCOUVER 1969*

In keeping with the spirit of sociocultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, the Conference convened under the banner of “Confrontation.” The ferment of the times, as reflected in the report of the Board of Reference and Counsel, was evident throughout the Convention. (*GCY* 1969: 49-50). In the midst of this, the new General Secretary of Missions and Services challenged the delegates to encourage one another, to rededicate themselves, and to redouble their efforts of confronting the world with Christ. He continued by saying:

We will commit ourselves anew to the people of many nations whom we seek to win, love and serve. We will

concentrate on learning to know them and the settings in which they live. We must be flexible enough to realize that it is God, and not North America, that is building his church with methods appropriate to each generation and each country. We will be careful to create programs that can be naturally assimilated by the national church or that can be cancelled without the disruption of the church... In all that we can do, we will be clear in our top priority: winning people for Christ and the establishment of His church. All other ministries are important, but subordinate to this... So, we have an opportunity in five continents. An opportunity to share the Good News and to help those in need (*GCY* 1969: 49-50).

The commitment in Vancouver was twofold: (a) To the mission of God. It is his work, not that of the Mennonite Brethren. He builds the church and he confronts the world. But he uses M.B. people to do so. (b) To evangelism and social services. The Mennonite Brethren have the opportunity to share the good news and to help people in need on five continents of the world.

### *THE RESOLUTION FROM REEDLEY 1972*

No single statement on record is as explicit on social services as the "Resolution on Proclamation of the Gospel and Christian Social Responsibility" formulated by the Board of Reference and Counsel. Because of its significance, the document merits full quotation:

According to the Scriptures, fallen man can be saved from his desperate plight only through faith in Jesus Christ — a faith which comes by hearing the gospel (John 14, Romans 10). Believers are, therefore, called to proclaim the gospel by preaching, teaching, writing, testifying, confessing, etc. (Mt. 10, Mt. 28, Romans 10).

The effects of man's sinful state are also to be observed in man's misery — sickness, death, hunger, disaster and violence of many sorts. Our Lord's compassion was poured out in ministering to these needs of men as untiringly He healed the lepers, the blind, the paralytic, and the crippled (the Gospels). The hope of redemption at the resurrection includes the body (Romans 8). The significance of ministering to the needs of man in a social-economic order of life finds eloquent

expression in our Lord's parable of the final judgment (Mt. 25). Our saving faith is tested on the basis of our deeds of love to men (Gal. 5-6).

We therefore affirm:

(1) That we recognize Christ's call to His followers to include both proclamation (evangelization) and social action (alleviating human suffering and misery in the world).

(2) That according to Scripture and the example of our Lord, we regard the proclamation of the gospel and social action to be inseparable tasks for the believing community in any location in the world. It is understood that sometimes proclamation, sometimes social action, takes chronological precedence. It is also understood that while both are required by our Lord, without proclamation men cannot be saved.

(3) That the statements of priority should be stated according to the scriptural pattern, "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Mt. 6). This priority (seeking first God's rule and His righteousness in our lives and in the world through Christ) comprises both proclamation and social action and, in Scripture, is placed over against man's preoccupation with selfish concerns (what shall we eat? or what shall we drink? or what shall we wear?).

It was moved, seconded and carried to accept the above resolution (GCY 1972: 8-9).

### *THE SEARCH FOR WHOLENESS IN BUHLER 1978*

Integration of spiritual and social ministries is biblically sound and theologically significant. But during the 1970s a shift in verbal emphasis went a step further. The General Secretary declared at the Buhler Convention in 1978:

*Our Priorities* are an expression of what we believe our mission to be. We have placed the highest priority on evangelism, church planting, and on indigenization of the national churches. We have not always understood when and how to achieve this. Our commitment to leadership development receives support through scholarships for individuals. We seek to be true to our commitment of service in our mission by integrating word and deed. Our ministries in Bangladesh through the M.C.C., in Nepal

through the medical work of The Evangelical Alliance Mission, and in Afghanistan under International Assistance Mission, are small but firm footholds in building the Church of Jesus Christ. Our involvement with Canadian International Development Agency (C.I.D.A.) funds has helped us to strengthen our ministry to people with economic needs.

### *Interpreting the Philosophy*

What is the most evident in Mennonite Brethren theology and philosophy of mission from 1957 to 1984 is the tension between evangelism and social concern. While philosophy/theology statements move in one direction, the "priority" statements which shape policy move to separate again what the theology statements joined.

### *REAFFIRMING PRIORITIES*

It is striking how often the Brethren have felt the need to reaffirm the priority of evangelism, as a quick review of the records will show.

1. At the 1960 Centennial Convention in Reedley the Conference adopted as part of a longer resolution that "in consideration of the great spiritual urgency of our day to complete the assignment of Christ to 'preach the gospel to every creature' ...Mennonite Brethren Church... renew its dedication to the sacred assignment of the world evangelization committed to the Church by our risen and ascending Lord who calls us 'to finish His work'" (*GCY*, 1960: 97).

2. In view of the postwar tendency of institutionalization of foreign mission, the Board of Missions expressed concern at the 1963 Convention in Winnipeg "that the primacy of direct evangelism be not overshadowed by institutionalism or social and cultural concerns in our brotherhood and mission enterprise, important and attractive as they may be" (*GCY*, 1963: 60).

3. When the Board of General Welfare and Public Relations merged with the Board of Missions to form the Board of Missions and Services in Corn, Oklahoma in 1966, the Conference issued a special "Statement of Principles," and affirmed its belief "that the proclamation of the Gospel is the primary task of the church."

4. In 1969 the language was again made stronger. A statement of Conference priorities said: "In all we do, we will be clear in our top priority: winning people for Christ and the establishment of His church. All other ministries are important, but subordinate to this" (GCY, 1969: 50).

5. At the Conference in Reedley in 1972 the General Secretary stated that the Mennonite Brethren were free to reaffirm their priorities. He then added:

We will affirm our priority of church-planting evangelism.

In this hour of mission opportunity we will stick close to the Word that teaches that all men are lost and that there is no other name in heaven or earth than Jesus whereby men may be saved (GCY, 1972: 27).

6. In 1975 the Board of Missions/Services asked the Conference to endorse as mission priority "to evangelize and plant churches" (GCY, 1975: 108). In 1978 the Chairman of the Board reiterated the "highest priority of evangelism, church planting, and indigenization of national churches" (GCY, 1978: 67). Three years later he focused on "telling the good news" and on being agents of reconciliation. (GCY, 1981: 97).

As noted in the documents cited, such phrases as "highest priority on evangelism," "commitment to leadership development of nationals," "integration of word and deed," "telling the good news," and "whole-man ministries" occur with increasing frequency in the denomination's mission rhetoric from the late 1950's onward.

### *THE CONCERN FOR WHOLE-MAN MINISTRY*

The definition of whole-man ministry, to say nothing of its exclusivist language, is striking theologically. It also indicates another step in the shifting paradigm from a salvationistic to a service-orientated theology. *Helping People in Need*, a current pamphlet distributed by Mennonite Brethren Missions/Services states categorically: "Helping people in physical need has always been stressed by Missions/Services as integral to the Church's mission to the world." The rationale cites the example of Jesus, the authenticity such service gives to the gospel, and the prohibition by many countries of an overt gospel witness while welcoming physical and social ministries. Describing the funding of this program, the pamphlet informs the constituency:

Of the total Missions/Services budget (\$5,502,000 in

1982/83), 18.5% is given to whole-man ministries — 9.6% for relief, education and development programs, and 8.9% for medical work. A significant part of these funds come from the Canadian International Development Agency (a federal government program), and from the provincial governments of Alberta and Saskatchewan. All three sources match mission contributions to approved projects on a one-to-one basis; for each dollar given by the church constituency, one will come from the government.

### *Critical Questions*

First, the concept “whole-man ministry” as defined in the promotional literature, is misleading. The introductory statement informs the supporting constituency that the goal of Mennonite Brethren Missions and Services is (a) telling the good news, (b) forming indigenous fellowships of believers, and (c) helping people in need. The last category is then defined as “whole-man ministries.” The entire pamphlet explains and illustrates what that means. But what is really wholistic about helping people in need when it is separated from evangelism and church planting? The pamphlet is correct: “Compassion is part of every missionary’s mandate in each of the 24 countries in which missions/services works.” But to call special development, educational and medical programs “which have been implemented in seven of those countries” “whole-man ministries” is misleading, even if unintentionally so.

Second, the language of prioritization in whole-man ministry is actually the language of polarization. Another current promotional pamphlet entitled, *Telling the Good News*, states that “Mennonite Brethren Missions/Services stresses evangelism as its first priority.” Such language is confusing. If the gospel is central in mission, there is neither a need to prioritize the proclamation of the gospel nor to defend ministries of a social dimension. The *kerygma* of God’s Word for souls and the *diakonia* of good works as service to the body are integral components of whole-man ministry to people in the world. Where, on the one hand, there is only *kerygma* when people suffer from desperate physical hardships or political oppression the missionary message is exposed to emaciation and

thereby placed in jeopardy of losing its credibility (Bosch 203-211). But the reverse is also true: Where, on the other hand, the missionary message is reduced to mere *diakonia* of horizontal concerns without confronting men and women with the claims of Christ for the salvation of their sinful being it is no more than a diluted gospel without the power to save the soul (Bosch 212-220). As soon as one is neglected at the expense of the other, there is no longer whole-man ministry.

In all mission reports and resolutions adopted by the Conference between 1954 and 1984 the focus is on establishing the priority of proclamation over social concern. But why, we must ask, did the Brethren feel the need for repeated defense of prioritization. Were they afraid of losing credibility in the supporting constituency? Or was there an inherent fear that the redemptive message so central in salvationist theology would erode and become diluted by the added emphasis of social ministries? Whatever the reasons may be, the tension between evangelism and social concern is obvious, a tension which the Mennonite Brethren have never been able to resolve.

### *An Attempted Solution*

It appears that the problem lies in the understanding or meaning which the Mennonite Brethren have traditionally attached to the concepts of evangelism and mission. The two terms are not synonymous; they are different, but related. Mission is the total redemptive task for which the Lord has placed the church into the world. That task has to do with crossing frontiers of all types, frontiers that pose barriers between the people of God and the people of the world. Once those frontiers have been crossed, the church witnesses of God's redemptive, healing, and helping grace on the other side of those frontiers. In this sense, "mission means being sent by God to love, to serve, to preach, to teach, to heal" (Bosch 1984: 169). This includes evangelism; but evangelism is a much narrower concept than mission.

Evangelism means to tell the Good News that Jesus saves; it means to invite men and women in the world to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior; it means to inform them of the cost of following Jesus. Evangelism always aims at discipleship, which in turn requires commitment to Jesus as King, a com-

mitment to his purposes of the kingdom in history (Bosch 1984: 172). Bosch states it succinctly:

Evangelism is the *core, heart or center* of mission; it consists in the proclamation of salvation in Christ to non-believers, in announcing forgiveness of sin, in calling people to repentance and faith in Christ, in inviting them to become living members in Christ's earthly community, and to begin a life in the power of the Holy Spirit (Bosch 1984: 170).

There is, then, no mission without evangelism, for evangelism is the heart of mission; it is not the priority of mission. As soon as we prioritize, we also dichotomize; we are left with the impression that we have a choice to make; we can do one and leave the other undone. But when we uphold evangelism as central to mission and the Gospel as its very heart and life, then we have no choice but to evangelize as we missionize.

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