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HANS KASDORF: MISSIOLOGIST PAR EXCELLENCE

Henry J. Schmidt

Missiologists within the Mennonite Brethren Church are a rarity, but Hans Kasdorf is one. Moreover, he is best described by colleagues within and beyond the denomination as “missiologist par excellence.” In our fifteen years together in the Department of World Mission I have known him in a variety of roles: friend, faculty, colleague, scholar, mission conference speaker, mentor, international student advisor, and articulate mission professor. His legacy as a leading Mennonite Brethren missiologist and as shaper of mission theology can be summarized by four descriptors.

Students describe Kasdorf as a walking data base of information on missiology.

A Global Mission Perspective

Kasdorf is first and foremost a global Christian by background, training and mission perspective. Born in South Russia, he was educated in Brazil, Canada, United States and South Africa. He is a “global” teacher, having lectured in Brazil, Paraguay, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Canada, Scotland, Kenya, South Africa, Romania, Hungary and the CIS. His global ministries have helped to internationalize the Seminary in that students, particularly from South America and Europe, have been attracted to study with him in Fresno.

Kasdorf shifted the mission curriculum at MBBS from a western, mono-cultural enterprise

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in the late 1970's, to its current focus on contextualization, globalization and internationalization. He insists that "the one-way street of mission" is now history, and that the center of gravity in mission has shifted from the Western to the Two-thirds World. For Kasdorf, "mission" is singular, never plural (missions). To him missions (plural) represents fragmentation. From his perspective "mission is neither foreign nor home - it is global. It includes the local and also includes the far away." He has obviously made his point; on more than one occasion students have presented him with a giant eraser so he may correct the term "missions".

A Mission Theology Rooted in Biblical/Historical Scholarship

Kasdorf's academic achievement, scholarship and writing is a modern day miracle. His formal education includes two earned doctorates (one in theology and one in missiology) and three masters degrees (in historical theology; in German language/literature; and in religious education). He speaks English, German, Portuguese and Spanish fluently. His studies have also given him reading proficiencies in Greek, Danish, Dutch, French and Italian. What makes Kasdorf's achievements so remarkable is that his formal education was cut short during his second grade in Brazil by World War II. Even though he didn't own his first book until he was eighteen, and only returned to formal studies when he was twenty-one, he has been a lifelong learner and student.

Perhaps Kasdorf's greatest contribution to missiology is yet to be realized in the untapped treasures of his extensive research and publications. His dissertation, "A Century of Mennonite Brethren Mission Thinking, 1885-1985" (706 pp) is a careful and helpful analysis of shifts in a denomination's mission philosophy and thinking. His writings have influenced missiology world wide. Kasdorf's seven books cover such subjects as conversion, historical and theological perspectives on missions. More than a hundred published journal articles, book reviews, and book chapters represent a strong contribution to the field of missiology. He is currently working on two new books: one, a history of missiology, and the other a biblical theology of mission.

Kasdorf's students describe him as "a walking database of information on the history and theology of missions." "In class without any notes he gives you the dates and events of history," recalls one student. While Kasdorf's research and information have always impressed students, what makes his teaching and writing so powerful is his commitment to scripture and to both "the God of mission" and "the mission of God."

A Missionary Statesman and Churchman

Kasdorf's twelve years of service on the Mennonite Brethren Board of Mission/Services plus his thirteen years as Director of the Church Mission Training Institute have made him a major shaper of global mission theology, vision, training, strategy and policy for the denomination and beyond. At the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary the decade of the 80's became the decade of mission, in large part through Kasdorf's vision focused in the slogan "from maintenance to mission." Mission director Harold Ens describes Hans as "a missionary statesman who has helped our churches to understand the global mission task in a time of major change." In constant demand as a speaker for mission and Bible conferences, his ministry has touched many churches on all continents. His preaching, teaching, and writing have consistently reflected a passion for a biblically based mission theology, and for the missionary nature of the church.

In his involvement with international students, he modeled what he preached by having a biblical perspective, a global mindset, cross-cultural sensitivity, and an ability "to listen more and talk less." His retirement plans, which include relocating his teaching, writing and ministry to the Freie Theologische Akademie in Giessen, Germany, will provide him entree to the state church, to the Umsiedler churches, and to the "mission-of-theology" debate in Germany.

A Model Servant: Grace and Humility

Kasdorf's stature as a missiologist is anchored in a rare combination of gifts: exceptional intelligence, solid scholarship, self-discipline, and a personal grace, humility and piety. His students and colleagues remember him not only for his analysis of mission history, strategies and future trends, but for his humble spirit, modest self-assessment, and a style that "talks less but says more." In his role with international students, he is known as a good listener, a friend and an encourager. Faculty and mission board members remember him not for his outspokenness in meetings, but for his careful and insightful responses to issues. I personally have benefited both from Hans's probing questions about mission philosophy, theology, teaching methodologies and strategies from our prayer times and his brotherly encouragement. While his passion for mission and his convictions about mission theology have always been strong, it is also evident that Kasdorf's love for learning and his ongoing search to better understand both the text and the context in mission, made him an extraordinary student and a humble teacher. He views himself more as a servant than as a leader. Thanks Hans for what you have modelled as a servant of Christ among us as missiologist, scholar, churchman and friend.