



International Conference, Mennonite Brethren Church of the World

Curitiba, Brazil

February 17-21, 1988

Seminar Paper: PRINCIPLES OF INTERNATIONALIZATION IN THE MENNONITE BRETHREN
MISSION

Harold Ens (United States)

For more than a century the Mennonite Brethren have been active in foreign missions. Already in Russia, the cradle of our identity as a denomination, there was interest and a sending of workers in obedience to the Great Commission. But the very term "foreign missions" brings with it a question, "foreign to whom?". Jesus had given the command to go to the uttermost parts of the earth, and for Mennonite Brethren that quickly came to mean some place outside of North America. North America became the center of our own corner of Christendom. It became the base for our own expression of missionary zeal, moving out in ever-widening arcs to finally include workers in more than twenty countries.

But as Beaver says in "The Christian Mission, A Look into the Future" - "Christendom is no longer existent, and the base for world mission is found in every land where there is a community of Christians, and fundamental thought about mission must be in terms of the entire church." (1) p. 186 We as Mennonite Brethren have only recently come to realize that this is indeed true for us. At the centennial celebration of our mission efforts in Reedley in 1984 we saw dramatic proof of the international nature of our denomination, as delegates from many countries marched to the platform carrying their national flags. And the statistics were perhaps even more startling for some as we heard that both Zaire and India have conferences of Mennonite Brethren churches which have more members than all of North America. Worldwide membership today totals more than 150,000 of which only about 40,000 are in North America.

And so, as we look at the reality of the internationalization of the Mennonite Brethren church, how does that affect our understanding of

"foreign" missions. That understanding was based on the fact that most of our membership was in North America. We all knew what was meant by the Third World, that group of countries outside the power bases of Europe and North America. But today, even as for the population in general, so too for our own membership; the Third World has become the Two-Thirds World. The Lord has blessed the mission efforts of the North American Mennonite Brethren and indigenous M B churches have been established in more than a dozen other countries around the world. We have often referred to them as the "national churches." They too are called by our Lord to be obedient to the task of the Great Commission. But how are they to respond?

In the work of our missionaries sent from the North American conference, evangelization has always had a high priority. True, at times we have asked with Donald McGavaran, "Have we lost our way in missions?" (5) p.9 We have engaged in so called "deviations" from our primary task of winning people to Christ and multiplying churches. But we have seen the planting of believers' churches as our primary goal. For several decades now we from North America have even entered into an interdependent partnership with other national conferences for new outreach and the multiplying of churches in the countries where these conferences exist. In so doing we have agreed with Warren Webster who states, "In the Biblical interdependence of both younger and older churches lies the future of the church's mission to the world." (13) p.99

This concept of partnership with national conferences has been refined over the years. We began a pattern of Field Consultation Visits every two years. During these visits, mission administrators sit down with national executive committees to discuss program, budgets and vision for expansion. These consultation visits have been useful in building bridges of understanding between mission administrators and national leaders. But in the crucial areas of planning and resources, the initiative has usually come from North America. As R.L. Ramseyer has stated, "How can we truly be partners when one side is so strong and wealthy and the other is so poor and weak?" (7) p.32 yet some positive outcomes for evangelization have resulted from our efforts at partnership. Let us look at a few.

1. India - The mission has provided funding to the India Conference for village evangelism. The India Conference has provided personnel in the form

of graduates from the Shamshabad Bible School to serve as village evangelists. The result has been an increase in conversions and the multiplying of churches.

2. Panama - The Panama church proposed a program of "United Campaigns" to reach all of the sixty or so jungle villages of the Darien province with the Gospel. The campaign team consists of an evangelist, an agriculturalist, and a health worker. Personnel includes missionaries at times, but most are indigenous. Funding comes largely from mission sources but local churches also contribute. Many conversions have resulted and several new churches have already been planted.

3. Zaire - With the tremendous increase in membership in the Zaire M B Conference in the past decade, there has been a tremendous lack of adequate facilities for worship. A plan was devised whereby walls for a church building were put up through local initiative. The mission has provided funding for putting a roof on these buildings. Through this partnership arrangement, many congregations have obtained a suitable place for worship.

4. Brazil - In 1985, the Brazil convention began planning for a major mobilization of the churches for outreach and expansion. The initiative for this plan came from Brazilian leadership although North American missionaries were also a part of the process. The ambitious plan which projects an increase from 1,500 to 50,000 members by the year 2000 was presented to mission administrators during a consultation visit in early 1986. Mission funding and personnel will both increase for a time but increased giving by local members and increased training of national leaders is the major thrust of the plan. This new example of partnership brings to mind the matter of national church initiative in the planning process to a greater degree.

We must work to improve our partnerships in the countries where Mennonite Brethren churches exist today. We must continue to move toward a more Biblically responsible partnership. Plueddemann states, "There are two principles for accomplishing this task; the mission should more fully let go, and the mission must look for supportive, nondirective ways to stimulate maturity in the church." (6) p.50

But is even partnership as we have experienced it enough? Christ told His disciples to take the Gospel to the uttermost parts of the world. How are the growing M B churches of the Two-Thirds World to respond in obedience to that command? Are they not also to become involved in "foreign" missions?

Webster states, "The establishing of indigenous churches is no longer seen as an adequate end and goal of Biblical missions unless such churches become "sending" churches in, and from, their own milieu." (13) p.104

What for us in the past was the challenge of "foreign missions" has indeed today become the challenge of "world missions" for all the conferences of Mennonite Brethren in the world. This movement toward a broader base for involvement in the missionary task has been defined by MBM/S as follows:

"Internationalization of Mennonite Brethren missions means engaging in multinational cooperation of Mennonite Brethren conferences for planning, organizing, and carrying out world mission, as well as cooperating with other mission agencies and conferences. Such cooperation has in view the performing of specific missionary tasks in different areas of the world...The ultimate in internationalizing Mennonite Brethren Missions/Services would be to form a missionary board structure with equitable representation from all countries that would be ready to cooperate. Short of that ideal, there are many levels of cooperation we need to pursue in order to make best use of the various resources the Lord is giving to us in carrying out the Great Commission." (4) p.1

For some of us in North America, such a far reaching definition and suggestions for changes in present structures are almost overwhelming. Can we indeed relinquish the power base for missions to which we have become so accustomed? Taber suggests that we may need to become functionally poor and weak in our dealings with Third World churches. He asks, "What would we have to renounce in a very concrete way to free these churches from our overwhelming combination of powers which oppress them: the history of colonial relations, our financial affluence, our technological expertise, and our assumption—which they are in no position to deny effectively—that these powers give us the right to determine their destiny?" (11) p.10

But we must face the need for internationalization and work to bring about its effective implementation at various levels. We must pray together, plan together, and work together. The call for an international consultation on the mission of the Mennonite Brethren church in the world in Curitiba is certainly a step in this direction. The fact that it was called for by an international group of delegates meeting in Reedley in 1984 is especially encouraging.

The missionary task is not complete. Based on cooperative consultations in 1986, MBM/S has put out the call for 100 new missionaries in

the next three years. That call really comes from our M B churches around the world. Should we limit the response to North America? I believe not. Already a sister from Japan has responded to serve in Pakistan. More are needed from other countries to carry out the challenge before us. Our present administrative structure may serve for the present. Already guidelines are in place for sending non-North American missionaries into overseas assignments under MBM/S. But these structures must also change to reflect true internationalization. We are a worldwide brotherhood called to world mission. Lara-Barud states, "Although the Christian community is now worldwide, it is not truly world-encompassing. More than half the population of the earth has yet to hear the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. That fact has graver missionary significance because the same "unreached peoples" are the poorest of the poor. There can be no greater concern than that in planning for the future of the missionary enterprise. The question is whether the responsibility for that enterprise belongs to the whole Christian community, or only to those who can afford missionary personnel, training, transportation, and technology." (3) p.2

Our answer must be that the mission of the Mennonite Brethren church in the world is the responsibility of the whole Mennonite Brethren brotherhood. May Curitiba '88 be another positive step toward a fuller understanding and implementation of internationalization in the Mennonite Brethren mission.

LIST OF REFERENCES

1. Boberg, John T. and Scherer, James A.
1972 Mission in the 70's: What Direction?, Chicago, 1972
2. Fernando, Ajith
1981 "Rich and Poor Nations and the Christian Enterprise" in Missiology, July 1981, Vol. 9, 287-298
3. Lara-Braud, Jorge
1983 "The Role of North Americans in the Future of the Missionary Enterprise" in International Bulletin of Missionary Research, January 1983, Vol. 7, 2-5
4. MBM/S
1985 "The Internationalization of Mennonite Brethren Missions" Definition in Five Year Plan, Hillsboro, October 1985
5. McGavaran, Donald
1960 "The Indigenous Church, A Report From Many Fields", Chicago, 1960, Moody Press
6. Plueddemann, James E.
1983 "Beyond Independence to Responsible Maturity", in Evangelical Missions Quarterly, January, 1983, Vol. 19, 48-55
7. Ramseyer, R.L.
1980 "Partnership and Interdependence" in International Review of Missions, January 1980, Vol. 69, 32-39
8. Samuel, V. and Sugden, C.
1983 "Mission Agencies as Multinationals", in International Bulletin of Missionary Research, October 1983, Vol. 7, 152-155
9. Samuel, V. and Sugden, C.
1982 "The Two-Thirds World Church and the Multinational Mission Agencies", in Missiology, October, 1982, Vol. 10, 449-454
10. Stransky, T.F.
1980 "Mission Power in the 1980's", in International Review of Missions, January 1980, Vol. 69, 40-49
11. Taber, Charles R.
1978 "Structures and Strategies for Interdependence in World Mission", in Mission Focus, September 1978, Vol. 7, 3-10
12. Toews, John E.
1978 "Biblical Foundations for Interdependence", in Mission Focus, September 1978, Vol. 7, 1-3
13. Wagner, C. Peter
1972 "Church/Missions Tensions Today", Chicago, 1972, Moody Press
14. Wagner, C. Peter
1971 "frontiers in Missionary Strategy", Chicago, 1971, Moody Press