

The mission field next door

GOD HAS BROUGHT THE PEOPLES OF THE WORLD TO OUR DOORSTEP

BY PAUL G. HIEBERT

Twenty years ago the Mien lived in Laos. To evangelize them we had to send missionaries to Bangkok by plane. There they had to take the local bus to Chang Mei, a jeep into the mountains, and climb the last miles on foot. Today many Mien live a few minutes' drive from our homes. They were driven out of Laos by war, and now more than 15,000 live in Fresno, Visalia, Oakland and San Jose in California. The cost of evangelizing them in dollars has dropped more than 90 percent, but they may remain more unevangelized as our neighbors than as a distant tribe because we do not see them. Or maybe we do not want to see them for that would upset our comfortable lifestyles. To minister to them would cost us the most precious things we have, our own time and energy.

Today many such people are finding their way to North America. Take Los Angeles, for example. It may be exceptional in its diversity, but it reflects a trend taking place in all major North American cities. In the public school system of L.A., classes are taught in 67 lan-

guages. Forty percent of Beverly Hills's kindergarten children are enrolled in English-as-a-second-language classes. The majority speak Farsi as their primary language because their parents were migrants from Iran. KSCI, channel 18, broadcasts in 14 languages, including Tagalog, Samoan and Rung Hee Rung Zaidi, an Indian dialect. In addition to 6 million Anglos (of various ethnic identities), 1 million blacks and 2 million Mexicans, greater L.A. has 200,000 Salvadorans, 50,000 Guatemalans, 44,000 Cubans and 36,000 Puerto Ricans. There are 130,000 Arab-Americans, 200,000 Iranians, 150,000 Armenians and 90,000 Israelis. But the fastest-growing groups are the Asians who came from Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Burma, India, Guam, Samoa, Pakistan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Afghanistan and various ports in between.

Los Angeles is the Vietnamese capital of America, the second largest Korean city in the world, the second largest Hispanic city in the Western hemisphere and the second largest Salvadorian city in the world.

This diversity, however, is not unique to

Los Angeles. Chicago is the second largest Polish city in the world, Miami the second largest Cuban city, and New York the second largest Puerto Rican city. Detroit has more than a quarter million people with Arabian ancestry, and Vancouver and Toronto have large populations of Indians, Chinese and American Indians. This pluralism is seen in the following table:

Ethnic Population in the United States
(in thousands of people in 1980)

White (various ethnic groups)	188,372
Black	26,495
Hispanic	14,608
Puerto Rican	3,051
Cuban	2,014
American Indian	1,420
Chinese	806
Filipino	775
Japanese	701
Asian Indian	362
Korean	354
Vietnamese	262
Other Ethnic	7,000

Moreover, the nonwhite population is growing more than twice as fast as the whites.

This mixing of peoples is a result of the growing internationalization and urbanization of the world. Never in history have

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so many people been on the move — from one country to another, and from the countryside to the city with its ethnic and social pluralism. In 1900, one quarter of a billion people lived in cities, 68 percent of them were Christians. Today more than two billion people are city folks. In 13 years more they will number three billion, only 44 percent of them will be Christians.

Along with this movement to the cities there is as never before a movement from one part of the world to another. Wars, famines, political instabilities, and migration are mixing people in many parts of the world. Add to this the networks of business, governments, universities, kinship and private associations, and the flow of people and communication through our communities from around the world is staggering.

New challenges. What purposes does God have in bringing people from all parts of the world into our neighborhoods? If God is indeed the God of history, then certainly he is at work in these migrations.

The new international world with its giant cities is a place of tremendous problems. Race relationships, economic exploitation, wars of nationalism, and masses of refugees (more than 18 million) and poor are hallmarks of our time.

This world is also a place of great opportunities. Migrants have been torn from the traditional settings that bound them in the past, and many of them are responsive to the gospel. People once far away are now our neighbors, and through them we can reach the world. And God has given us the resources needed to evangelize the world. Christians of all kinds make up one third of the world's population, but they own two thirds of its resources!

What does all this have to do with us Mennonite Brethren? Traditionally we have been a rural people, living in our own communities and afraid of the cities and their ethnic and cultural diversity. But that is changing. Within another generation most of us will live in multi-ethnic communities. We may move to the suburbs in order to maintain our homogeneity, but even here we find people from around the world. Like it or not, we live in an increasingly pluralistic world. The danger we face is to withdraw into our ethnic enclaves,



and to lose the opportunities God has given us to minister to other people around us.

We, like many other churches, are beginning to see the need and opportunities for evangelism that arise out of the growing ethnic diversity in North America. But what unique contribution can we make? More than most American Christians we understand the blessings and the curse of ethnicity, and struggles new migrants face. We know they need a sense of cultural identity, but we also know that this identity can become a barrier that walls them off from others. We have experienced the problems of assimilating into a new land — problems that many of the migrants are now facing as their children are born and raised in North America. Above all, we have a missionary vision that can motivate us as we see the opportunities around us.

Ministering to our new neighbors. How can we minister to other ethnic communities in our neighborhoods? Here are only a few basic principles.

Passion. First, we must see our neighborhoods. We drive the familiar roads of our towns and cities a dozen times a week. As we do, we see and we don't see. To really see a community we must get out of our cars and walk the streets. We need to look in the homes and schools. We need to examine the prices in the small neighborhood shops where the poor must shop because they have no cars and credit. We need to eat in the local restaurants.

Most of all we need to see the people — not as "Hispanics," "Vietnamese," and "Mien," but as Jovita Samudio, Se Hi Chan and Mary Mutua. It is easy to ignore strangers when they belong to impersonal

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categories, but not when we relate to them as persons. Ministry must begin in a passion born out of seeing others as truly human like ourselves.

Prayer. Passion must lead to prayer, and prayer, in turn, renews our passion. We need to pray corporately, as congregations, for other peoples in our neighborhoods. And as we pray, we must listen before we ask, for in prayer we not only seek God's help, we also give God the permission to use us and our resources. We ourselves may be God's answer to the prayers we pray.

Planning. The task is greater than we as individuals or local congregations can do alone. Yet, as Frank Tillipauh points out in his book, *The Church Unleashed*, we need to give freedom and support for people and congregations to carry out the ministries they believe God has given them. Planning for missions in our own

neighborhoods will, therefore, take various forms. In some situations we will need district home missions boards to organize ministries beyond the immediate reach of our local churches. In other cases local churches will coordinate programs in their immediate communities. Overarching these, as Ray Bakke points out, we need networks of relationships and informal meetings to coordinate different activities, to avoid costly duplication, and, above all, to detect needs to which we have been blind.

Planning for missions to ethnic communities in our neighborhoods is not easy. We have come to associate missions with esoteric. It is not hard to raise money for missionaries who go on foot through snake-infested forests to minister to headhunters. It is harder to sustain interest when the missionaries serve in cities with electricity, running water and modern restaurants. But today cities are where the people are, and if we want to minister to people, we must not forget the cities.

People oriented. In our planning, we must keep people, not programs, in the center. There is a tendency whenever we organize to shift our attention from people to programs and property. We begin a young people's program to meet the needs of our youth. In the end we make young people attend because we have a program, even though it no longer meets their needs. We build a beautiful church for worship and ministry, but become afraid to let others use it lest the carpets become dirty and the pews worn. Effective ministry focuses on people and resists the temptation to make program-building the goal of our activities.

One area in which this shift in emphasis can be seen is in our use of church members. We put our most gifted members on committees and reward them with important titles. We give our ushers little honor. Elmo Warkentine used to remind us that we needed to choose and train our ushers with great care, for it is they who first meet newcomers to our church.

Pliability. Cultural differences in ethnic ministries require that we be extremely flexible. We must learn to live with change and to tolerate ambiguities in our lives. The model of Christ's incarnation demands that we meet people in their own settings,

but this means that it is we who must make the cultural adaptation. Like Christ, we need to eat their food, visit in their homes, invite them to ours, and accept their customs.

In our churches, too, we need to be flexible. We have the right to worship in familiar ways, but for the sake of the gospel we need also to encourage other worship forms so that new converts feel at home. Our human response is to say that this is "our church," so if others want to come here, they must adopt our ways. They must dress and behave in ways that do not offend us. But this turns Scripture on its head. We are the older brothers and sisters, and it is we who must take care not to offend the new believer. There is little chance that anything will cause us to reject Christ, but there is a very real possibility that these newcomers will be driven away from the gospel. We must be careful lest our rigidity and our traditions keep others from salvation.

Participation. To minister to people in other ethnic communities is one thing, to accept them as equals in our denomination, congregations and circles of friendship is another. Our natural tendency is to feel superior, and remain apart. But as the older siblings it is we who must hold out the hand of fellowship to them and to include them in the activities of the family. As new believers they may want to have their own services for a time, but they must always be welcome in ours.

At the conference level, the voices of our Hispanic, Black, Chinese and Indian Christians must be heard, their cultural ways respected, and their leadership affirmed. There are no second-class citizens in the kingdom of God.

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What is God doing in our North American towns and cities? Why has he given us this opportunity to reach out to people who once lived tens of thousands of miles away? This is a question we as Mennonite Brethren can no longer ignore. ■

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