

The Shape of Missions to Come

*Mennonite Brethren Missions/Services
1978 Annual Report*

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2. Reaching the unreached peoples: 3. Responding to rising nationalism:

Where are we headed in missions in the 1980s? Not long ago there was no living witness to Jesus Christ in many parts of the world. The task of missions seemed almost impossibly great. Today the church is found in almost every country. Much of the Pacific Islands is Christian. Congregations in South America and South India are growing rapidly. And the church in sub-Saharan Africa will soon be one of the strongest on earth.

Why then missions? What is our task and what shape will it take?

1. Strengthening young churches:

Our task, in part, arises out of the success of missions in the past. Had there been no converts, there would have been no church. But we do have Mennonite Brethren churches around the world, and many of them need assistance. Some are just starting and need help building meeting places. Many are self-supporting but need aid to run Bible schools and to train their ministers. Most of them are in countries where Christians are few and therefore need help in evangelizing the people around them. One of the primary goals of the missionary enterprise must be to strengthen the ongoing Christian communities in these lands of the younger churches. Only as vigorous and growing Christian communities exist can we evangelize the world.

During the last hundred years the international church has grown more rapidly than ever before. So has the world's population. Between 1880 and 1980 the number of people on earth will have grown from 1.3 to 4.4 billion people — an increase of more than 330 percent! Today there are an estimated 222 million active Christians and 1,023,000,000 are within the Christian tradition but hardly qualify as committed Christians. Another 467 million people live in sub-cultures and societal groups in which there is a living Christian witness. These are the people whom the churches must evangelize, for they are the people with whom church members come into close contact. This means that there are 2,411,000,000 non-Christians who are culturally so distant from existing churches that witnesses must be sent to them — missionaries who have the training and ability to cross cultural barriers. Over one half of these have never yet heard the Gospel. The day for new mission outreach is not past!

One of the rampaging floods of our time is the spirit of nationalism. With devastating swiftness it has wiped out worldwide colonial empires and leveled nations. In missions it means we must recognize what we should have recognized from the beginning: the dignity, equality and brotherhood of our fellow Christians around the world. The colonial models of missions must go. We need true partnership in missions. But nationalism also threatens to divide the church along national lines. The church is indeed one body — an international body that transcends all the differences that separate people. We must learn what it means to become one international church in mission.



4. Integrating cultural diversity:

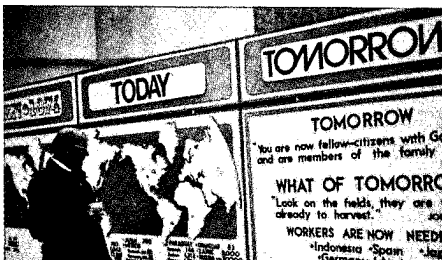
People speak different languages, eat different foods, dress in different kinds of clothes and have different customs. If the church is to be one, how is it to deal with this cultural diversity? Clearly, the answer is not to make everyone else conform. God has put a great deal of diversity into the universe, and to His church He has given many different gifts and tasks. We are only now beginning to learn how to bring together into one body people from all nations and cultures. And with this, we will have to learn how to deal with theological diversity, as people from these cultures gain unique insights into God's revelation as they read the Bible from their own points of view. We must listen to what God has to say through all of the churches.

5. Facing political turmoil:

The colonial era, for all its faults, did provide a measure of peace and stability in many parts of the world. The result was that missions expanded and churches grew with little question of how to handle political instability. Today this has changed. In country after country, terrorism, revolution, racial tensions, and wars threaten the church, or dictatorships or Marxist governments suppress the church. Elsewhere governments seek to control the church for nationalistic or ideological purposes. The church must learn how to survive and to minister and grow in times of political turmoil.

6. Cooperating in world mission:

The fastest growing mission movements today are those among the young churches. Churches in India, Japan, Korea, Africa and South America are sending out missionaries across cultural boundaries to unreached peoples. This adds greatly to the mission outreach of the Church. It also means that we must increasingly work together with our churches around the world in planning a world strategy for proclaiming the Kingdom of God and planting the church among all peoples. Our task in missions is not ended — in some senses it has only begun.



Left: Singing praise to God

Center: Looking at tomorrow's needs

Right: Resource persons Heinrichs, Jacobs, Martens at BOMAS workers retreat