

COMMITTED *to World Mission*

A Focus on International Strategy

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from the past. Our value is measured by how we live now and by the direction we set for the future. As we focus on this direction, we must conserve the characteristics of the early Christians, and we must learn from the other members of our worldwide family. This consultation can and must help us to understand ourselves better as Mennonite Brethren.

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Mission in Times of Conflict

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They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated—of whom the world was not worthy. (Heb. 11:37-38)

For those of us from North America, this is a strange mission text. We are not used to thinking of carrying on mission in times of conflict and war or of people being killed for their faith. We think of mission as a peacetime activity. We place a high priority on personal security and comfort and expect our government to protect us. We assume the work we do is limited by the funds we have.

1. Conflict and the Early Church

The picture was far different in the New Testament. The world was in turmoil when God sent his only Son as a missionary. The Roman Empire had conquered the Jews, but they were in constant rebellion. Jewish terrorists like Barabbas ambushed the Roman soldiers who patrolled the streets. Roman secret agents infiltrated rebel movements, and those who were captured were crucified outside Jerusalem. The cross was a sign of political execution.

It was into this world of conflict that Jesus came. His earthly parents were politically displaced people, ordered by a foreign dictator to leave their home. Jesus himself was considered a potential threat to the nation when he was born, so Herod sent troops to kill him. To make certain they succeeded, the troops slaughtered every baby boy in the village. Jesus spent his first years as a refugee in Egypt. When the political situation got better, his parents

moved back to Nazareth to begin life over again.

After he began his ministry, Jesus was accused of being an anti-national and a subversive. Spies followed his movements. Enemies tried to trap him. In the end, he was accused of treason and brought to trial on false charges. He was brutally beaten by soldiers who acted on orders from above. He was publicly shamed and crucified between two political criminals as a terrorist and an enemy of the state. They killed God's first missionary.

The same thing is recorded in Acts. Peter and John healed a lame man and ended up in jail. Stephen, a layman, began to preach and was stoned to death. Paul wrote:

Five times I was lashed, three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. (2 Cor. 11:25-27)

As the Christians spread and the church grew, opposition increased. In A.D. 64 Nero, the emperor, began the first great persecution. He had agents burn the city of Rome and blamed it on the Christians, branding them disloyal to the nation. He had them wrapped in the skins of wild animals and thrown to hungry dogs. He staged contests in great stadiums in which they had to fight tigers with their bare hands. He had them buried up to their necks along his driveway and had fires lit on their heads when he drove by. But the godly suffering of the Christians won the sympathy of the people. They sang hymns in their jail cells; they blessed their persecutors; they praised God as they died in the fires. Many were impressed by their deep faith and transformed lives. Many believed, only to become martyrs themselves.

Between A.D. 64 and A.D. 312 there were some ten major persecutions. The Roman emperors feared Christianity because it was revolutionary—it demanded the ultimate allegiance of the people. So they ordered everyone to bow before the image of Caesar. Christians who refused were branded traitors, imprisoned, and killed. Christians were accused of being

anti-social because they refused to participate in pagan festivals. When a great plague struck the empire in A.D. 251 the Christians were blamed, since they had neglected the old gods.

What lessons can we learn from this? First, the early church grew rapidly in a time of social and political conflict. It grew because the early Christians had a passion for evangelism—a passion that was stronger than their fear of suffering and death. They saw the lostness of humans and the greatness of God's salvation.

Second, the Christians found extraordinary ways to evangelize. Philip witnessed to a foreign diplomat on a desert road. Paul and Silas led their jailer to Christ. Lydia gathered friends in her home. Servants witnessed to their masters. Thomas was sold as a slave to a king in South India. He won the favor of the king and planted a church.

Can mission be carried on in times of conflict? The early church had no other choice. They witnessed in season and out of season, when there was peace and when there was war, when they had money and when they were poor, when they were living and when they were dying.

2. The Wedding of Church and State

The picture changed after A.D. 312. Constantine, the Roman Emperor, was converted, and he made Christianity the official religion of the state. For the next fifteen hundred years the church looked to the state for protection, support and finances. Missionaries followed the soldiers who conquered Europe, and troops often marched the vanquished to the river for baptism. Many who refused baptism were killed. Bishops had armies, bore arms, and administered law and order. The parishes acquired land and ran businesses. In many cases, the church was more interested in acquiring territory and converting the people by means of the sword than by the gospel.

As the numerical triumph of Christianity in the Roman Empire had been completed by mass conversion, encouraged and later enforced by the Emperors, so in these smaller (tribes and peoples) which made up Western Europe in this period, that faith was adopted as the religion of the community, usually at the command or at least with the energetic assistance of the prince.

(Latourette, Kenneth Scott, 1975, A History of Christian. Volume 1, New York: Harper and Row, p.351)

There were exceptions—people who depended on God and not the state. Columba went with twelve companions as a missionary to evangelize the unconquered tribes of Scotland and England; Willibrord evangelized Holland; and Wynfrith evangelized Germany. The Goths were converted through Christians who were captured in raids. Nestorian traders brought the gospel to China and Afghanistan from Persia. The Slavs of Poland were first evangelized by a woman forced to marry a Slavic prince.

The faithfulness of these mission-minded people was not strong enough, however, to keep the world from identifying Christianity with Western power and colonialism. Too often the explorer, the colonial administrator, and the missionary arrived together. Too often the church depended upon a Western government for protection and support.

What lessons can we learn from this period in history? First, because it was wedded to the state, Christianity came to be seen as a Western religion. During the colonial era, this opened the door for missionaries to go to many lands, but it also made the gospel foreign in those lands. In many parts of the world, to become Christian was to become Western in dress and thought. Christians were accused of being anti-Indian, anti-African, and anti-Japanese. This identification of the gospel with Western political and cultural power has done great damage to the missionary outreach of the church.

Second, the church in the West increasingly depended upon Western governments for protection and security. Missions often began after colonial rule had been established and the danger of persecution and violence had subsided. Sending churches came to put their trust in their governments rather than in God.

3. *The Modern Church and Conflict*

Today the picture is changing again. We are entering the third era in the life of the church. Two facts illustrate the transition. First, the West is losing its dominance. There are now more than 160 nations; Japan, China, India, Latin America, and Africa are emerging as new centers of world power.

This political and economic realignment is creating great tensions and conflicts on the world scene. An estimated twenty-four wars were fought from 1900 to 1940, and from 1940 to the present more than 130 have been fought. Presently more than forty small wars are being waged throughout the world, involving more than 4 million soldiers. The cost of these conflicts is high. The world spends more than \$700 billion on wars and military preparations each year—more than twice what it spends on food, and five times as much as it spends on peace. The cost in human terms is even higher. There are more than 20 million refugees, and millions more have been displaced.

There are also religious conflicts due to the rise of Muslim and Hindu fundamentalism. One consequence of this is that almost 87 percent of the world's people live in lands closed to mission work.

Another cause of conflict in today's world is the rapid move of people to the cities. In 1900 only 5.5 percent of the world's population lived in cities larger than 100,000 people. Today close to 33 percent do. In 1900 there were no cities with 5 million inhabitants. By 2000 A.D. there will be sixty-five. Twenty-four of these will have more than 10 million. More than 430 cities will have more than 1 million people.

One consequence of this massive movement of people to the cities is a marked rise in conflict between rich and poor, between ethnic groups, and between religious communities forced to live next to each other. Urban riots and gangs have become ways of life in many parts of the world. Homelessness, poverty, broken families, and fear are all that many know of human existence.

The second fact pointing to a new era in church history is the internationalization of the church. Today whites are a minority in the world church. In A.D. 1900 they constituted 83 percent of all Christians. Today they constitute 45 percent. By A.D. 2000 they will be only one third. The same is true of the Mennonite Brethren. The largest Mennonite Brethren churches are now in Africa and India. For the first time in history, the church is truly transnational.

This internationalization of the church has been accompanied by persecution and suffering. Most Christians live in countries where they cannot turn to the government for protection. In some cases their governments

are among the persecutors.

What lessons can we learn from these churches living in conflict and opposition? First, it is clear that conflicts shake peoples' faith foundations and make them more responsive to the gospel. Throughout history, people have been more open to conversion in times of political and social unrest. Let us look at a few contemporary examples.

In 1960 the church in Indonesia was small and struggling. Then a civil war erupted in which more than 300,000 were killed. The Christians showed nonviolent love and hospitality and provided a refuge for many who were fleeing for their lives. Since then some three to four million Muslims have become Christians; they were won by the faithful, loving witness of the Christians.

A similar story can be told about our churches in Zaire. There was a violent rebellion at the time of independence, and many Christians suffered severe persecution. Among them was Pastor Kasai Kapata, who was captured and buried up to his neck. Three days later he was freed by one of the rebels who had been his Sunday school student many years before. Kasai, like many others, spent months with his family living in the forest. Out of this suffering came a living church.

A third example is Afghanistan. In 1970 Afghani Christians numbered a few dozen. Then the war began and the Afghans fled to Pakistan by the tens of thousands. There many of them heard the gospel in refugee camps and came to Christ. Today there are an estimated ten thousand Afghan Christians—many times more than there would have been had there been no war.

A final example is Korea. The Korean War killed tens of thousands, and whole populations fled to the south as refugees. There leaders such as Dr. Han began to minister to the refugees, and the church was born in cities such as Seoul, Pusan, and Tegu. Out of this conflict and the social disruptions which it created, the church today is reaping a great harvest.

The second lesson we learn is that persecution brings new life to the church. We should not pray for persecution. But when suffering comes, it often purifies the church and gives it new life. For Christians, victory often comes by the way of the cross.

This was certainly true of the early Anabaptists. They committed

themselves to radical obedience to Christ in a time of wars and social instability. Many of them were burned, drowned, and killed by the sword. Their leaders were all martyrs within a few years.

The same thing is happening now in Nepal. When mission work first began in Nepal in the 1960s, Nepali converts were imprisoned and persecuted, but they continued to witness boldly. Today there are more than forty-four cases against Nepali Christians in the courts, but the church has grown to more than 100,000.

We think also of China. When the missionaries had to leave in the early 1950s, there were less than 4 million Christians. Then the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976 brought a reign of terror and persecution. Bibles were burned, religious meetings were banned, and church buildings were converted into warehouses and factories. Most pastors and elders were put in jail, but their wives carried on the work in secret. Out of this persecution came a living church that has grown rapidly. Today there are possibly as many as 30 million Chinese Christians—seven times as many as in 1950. This is the most rapid growth of the church anywhere in all of history.

Similar reports come from Russia and Romania. Hans Kasdorf reports that in Romania Christians are harassed, and religious gatherings are severely restricted. Those caught holding private religious meetings in their homes are fined up to two years' wages. Nevertheless, Christians continue to meet to pray for the conversion of those who rule them; congregations are growing rapidly, and even soldiers and policemen are coming to Christ.

These are general stories, each of which is made of thousands of stories of individual faith and heroism. One such story has to do with our Mennonite Brethren church in Pedda Danvada, India. Some years ago forty families of untouchables in Pedda Danvada became Christians. They sent their children to school and their economic conditions improved. The high caste village leaders became angry because these untouchables were no longer subservient to them. They warned the Christians to return to Hinduism and finally organized a riot in which the Christians were beaten. The elders also forbade the Christians to draw water at the only village well located a half mile outside of town. The Christian women had to go an additional half mile to the river for all their water.

The church gathered to pray. It raised money for a well and got a government loan. The Christians began digging in the middle of the village where many others had failed before. Twice they struck rock and were forced to try again. Again they hit rock, and in desperation they decided to blast until their money ran out. After a few feet of granite, they struck sand, and at thirty feet they found a good supply of water. God had answered their prayers. But then an amazing thing happened. The church sent a delegation to the high caste people saying, "Come and draw water at our well. There is enough for all of us. Why should your women go so far for water?" This was a powerful testimony to many who saw how Christ had transformed the lives of the Christians.

Today, the persecution of Christians is increasing in many parts of the world. David Barrett estimates that 300,000 Christians die for their faith each year—the highest number in all of history!

4. Mission in Times of Conflict

Can we do mission in times of conflict? That is not the real question. The real question is, *Can we retain a vital commitment to mission when we live in peace, plenty and security?* Can we retain a passion to minister to the lost and needy that takes priority over our own security and comfort? The world expects its soldiers to die in battle in defense of the nation. We must expect no less of ourselves in mission.

Closely related to this is a second question: *Do we as Mennonite Brethren have a particular responsibility to minister in places of conflict?* Given our history of suffering, our concern for the whole gospel, peace, reconciliation and nonviolence, and our view of the church as a counter-national community, are we in a unique position to minister to those caught up in wars, racial tensions and class hatreds? Or have we in North America forgotten in two generations the lessons our forefathers learned in Europe? Should we mobilize special teams to live and minister in the great urban slums, in places of racial conflict? Should we bear witness in Lebanon, or Ethiopia, or Central America, or South Africa?

Ultimately, the question is whether we are willing to witness in season and out of season, in times of war and in times of peace, in jail as well

as out of jail, when we are rich and when we are poor, in our deaths as well as in our lives.

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