



INTRODUCTION

History can give us a sense of identity — of where we have been and where we are. It can also give us a sense of direction — what today's critical issues are, and what our course of action might be. John B. Toews' history of the Mennonite Brethren mission and church in Africa does both.

As we read of the early pioneers, and of those who followed, we catch a glimpse of a small part of God's work on earth. We see His power at work in the lives of those who sought to do His will. They were human, all too human, caught in the mundane tasks of living and in the tensions of interpersonal relationship. Yet God has chosen to build His kingdom through the lives of people such as these. And in the reading we see a little better our own place in God's work.

But a careful reading of history should do more than warm our hearts. It should give us a perspective by which we can evaluate the present, with its problems, and principles to guide our decisions. This demands that we take a critical look at history, not to detract from those who have gone before, but to learn from their experiences so that we may avoid the pitfalls of the past. We need to remember that people work within the context of their times and cultures, but this should not keep us from critically evaluating their methods and actions.

In this book Dr. Toews shows us from where we have come and where we are headed. The first half of the book traces the history of the mission, starting with the two major beginnings, in which sharply contrasting missionary methods were used. A comparison of these throws a great deal of light on the nature of problems of cross-cultural communication. In the second half the author shows the growth and development of the church in times of trial, which reminds us that the sufferings of the church continue even though we ourselves may not be experiencing them. Throughout Dr. Toews inspires us to renew our commitment to the world wide mission to which God has called us, providing us with insights necessary to make our participation meaningful.

The volume is written as a textbook for use in courses on missions, and consequently does not go into the extensive detail characteristic of a definitive history. But it does provide us with a clear outline of the history of the Mennonite Brethren missions and church in Africa that will be useful both to the student and to the many in the churches who have had a share in the work.

Paul G. Hiebert

General Editor

One might ask, how else could the early missionaries have related to the colonial government so as not to be identified with it? Possibly the missionaries should have identified more closely with the nationalist movements. A more relevant question today is how should missionaries relate to nationalist and popular movements where colonial rule or oppressive governments still exist. Should they side with the people, and face persecution and expulsion? Or should they side with the existing government (arguing that a stable government and peace are necessary to plant churches). Or should they remain neutral (which is to tacitly accept the status quo and alienate themselves from the people)? How should missionaries respond to people's aspirations to be free and self governing? And how should it respond to revolutionary nationalistic movements that seek these ends?

In Zaire this is no longer the question. The question now is, how should the church and mission relate to a strong nationalist government that exercises control in matters of the church. What should they do when the state orders a merger of all Protestant churches into a single organization? Should the church join the new national church and obey orders such as the one that all Christians should take African names? Should the mission send its missionaries and aid to the new united church that may differ doctrinally from the contributing churches? The alternative is to abandon our brothers and sisters.

The question in the future may well be how does the church relate to a government that seeks to control the church organization for nationalist and ideological purposes (as is the case in Russia). At what point does the church cease to go along with the government, and beyond that what alternatives does the church have in its struggle for survival under persecution?

We need a theology of politics that guides the church not only in its relationship to oppressive governments, but also to governments like our own where the danger is the loss of the church's prophetic stance, and the rise of a civil religion.

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Along another line, what about financial aid? Should the wealthier North American churches continue to aid churches abroad to carry out their work? In many cases the mission has built large schools, hospitals and literature programs to provide a solid foundation for the work. At times these overshadowed the evangelistic work, and yet they did serve an important task. But are they needed now, and, if so, who should finance them? It is unrealistic to expect the African churches to shoulder so heavy a burden. Is the answer, then, to restructure these institutions in a way that the churches can operate them?

Finally, when we start a new work today, should we not eliminate the distinction between mission and church? Is it not more biblical and strategically better for the missionaries to be a part of the churches they found rather than a separate body? Indigenization, then, would consist of their being replaced by national leaders who take their offices. There would be only one structure—the church. But this approach would radically challenge our present mission models and call for major changes in the ways in which we view missions.

There is no area more critical in modern missions than that of interchurch and church-mission relationships.

3. Church-State Relationships

The church desperately needs a theology of power. It is not of the world, but it is in the world. Today it must deal with governments ranging from democracies to dictatorships and communism, with political revolutions and unrest, and with the uses of power and leadership of all types.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Protestant missions in Zaire had an equivocal relationship with the colonial government. On the one hand, they were dependent on this government for access to the country and for protection. Moreover, in conflicts with native leaders, they could often count on the support of the white rulers. On the other hand, the colonial government was Catholic and, therefore, did not support their activities. At times it even opposed them.

But we must remember that to the Africans, the missionaries were white, had a western lifestyle, and were able to deal with high government officials—which meant they must be part of the colonial regime. This feeling was reinforced by the cultural gulf between the missionaries and the people.

5. Tribes and Cities

In the early days mission work in Zaire concentrated on reaching the unevangelized tribes. This was for two reasons: first, the missionary motto of the day was "occupation of the whole world in this generation," and second, central Africa at that time was largely rural and tribal. The result, as Dr. Toews points out, was a constant striving to reach out beyond western settlements and mission outposts.

The product of this strategy in Zaire was the widespread birth of the church. Missions did not compete for the same space, but moved on to unoccupied territories. There was little competition between different Protestant denominations for the same converts. And churches sprang up throughout the whole of the land.

Tribal populations have been particularly responsive to the gospel. Often mass movements occur in which whole villages and large segments of a tribe convert to Christianity and seek baptism *en masse*. These movements raise questions of theology. Are all those who come truly converted? Should they be sent back and told to come individually upon personal conviction of sin and the need for salvation—or is this approach a product of the extreme individualism of western cultures? But to send them back is often to close the door for further witness to them. They lose interest in Christianity.

One thing is clear, the most rapid growth of the church has always taken place through such people movements. This is not to say that all those who come are believers, but the community is now open to instruction and further spiritual ministries. The greatest need is for follow-up so that these movements lead to continued spiritual growth and maturity.

4. The Rise of Independent Church Movements

During the colonial era, the goal of Mennonite Brethren missions was generally clear: evangelize and build strong Mennonite Brethren churches. Village evangelism, schools, hospitals and literature programs were all directed to this end. The result was the Mennonite Brethren Church of Zaire.

Today a new opportunity has arisen, and with it a question of mission priorities. Numerous independent religious movements are sweeping central Africa, some Christian and others of varying syncretistic mixes of Christian and traditional beliefs. Together they constitute the most rapidly growing religious movements in the continent.

Many of these independent churches are open to, and, indeed, inviting missionaries who will come and teach them the Scriptures. But they are fiercely independent and not willing to join a denomination based in the west.

The question is, should Mennonite Brethren missionaries be sent to minister to them? The result will not be new Mennonite Brethren churches. But it may well be the most effective way of building rapidly truly biblical churches in Zaire—churches that are culturally adapted and reaching the people.

The question is one of priorities. What really is our goal in missions? Kenneth Scott Latourette, an outstanding church historian writes:

"If we have been at all accurate in analyzing the conditions of the new day, it must be clear that the primary object of the missionary enterprise must be to strengthen the ongoing Christian communities in these lands of the younger churches. This does not mean that the evangelization of the world . . . should be neglected. It does mean that only as vigorous and growing Christian communities exist can this goal be attained . . . The rising spirit of nationalism . . . (demands that) all mission programs must be: 'What will most contribute to an ongoing Christian community?'"

However, we cannot make a decision to work with the independent church movements in Zaire alone, for we have a church there. We need to know how they would respond to such a move, and how they would relate to independent churches we might assist.

Such group decisions need not surprise us. In many tribal societies all important decisions—including marriage, the use of the lands which are owned by the tribe and not individuals, and punishment of offenses—are group decisions. One cannot expect, then, that a decision so important as changing their religion would be made by any single individual alone.

Today a new field is rapidly opening up, namely cities. The growth of cities in Zaire in the past decades has been phenomenal. They are centers of mass education, growing literacy, intellectual ferment and revolution. They are places where people from many different tribes live together, often lonely and desperately searching for a sense of community and identity. Many of them are open to the gospel. And many of the tribal Christians are moving to the city where they are often lost in the anonymity of urban life.

What is our priority? Should we continue to focus on tribal work—on strengthening the churches we already have, and on reaching out to neighboring tribes? Or should we concentrate on the cities—on building a church among the young and educated who will be tomorrow's leaders? But we have not yet developed adequate strategies for planting churches in the cities. There group decisions and communication with tightly knit social communities does not occur. How do we reach the lonely, the individual lost in the masses, the transient of the city?

How also do we communicate these priorities to our home churches? There is something exotic about going to the "unreached," the "uncivilized" where living is hard, even though they may number only a few thousand. This has a strong appeal to many who support the work. There is little glamour to live in a modern city apartment and with the millions of city workers and students. But work in these cities may be more important in the long run in building strong, growing churches.

6. Ministering to the Whole Person

Along with nationalism, one of the driving forces in the world today is that of development. In one hundred thirty countries with three billion people the per capita gross domestic product is less than \$300 per year. Most of the poor in these lands earn less than \$50 per person in a year, less than

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what many in the west spend on recreation or pets. In seven countries, including Canada and the U.S., with less than three hundred million people, the same figure is above \$7,100. The U.S. has less than one fifteenth of the world's people, but it consumes a third of the world's production of such items as gasoline, steel, aluminum and fertilizers.

Alongside the vision for development is the spectre of famine and poverty. Rapid population growth and urbanization are placing ever increasing demands on the world's resources. And all reasonable projections predict famines and wars for resources will multiply. How should the North American churches respond to these needs?

The Mennonite Brethren theological heritage is clear: a stress on a simple lifestyle, a zeal for evangelism and a concern for human needs. We have provided relief and aid around the world. There are questions on the details of its implementation—should rehabilitation take priority over relief? Should aid be given primarily through the local churches, etc.?—but the general commitment has a firm theological and personal base.

But how does development relate to missions? On the one hand, if development is part of the mission program, there is a danger that development will overshadow evangelism and church building. This is because development programs often take large investments of funds and personnel, and these resources are generally available from secular sources (which raises the further question, to what extent and under what conditions should missions use outside funds and personnel?). Whether we like it or not, money does speak loudly, even where people are poor.

On the other hand, to divorce development programs from mission outreach is to fall into the trap of ministering to the divided person. One ministers to the "body," and the other to the "soul," and neither message is complete. Is the Christian and the missionary not concerned about those, including our church brethren, who starve?

Closely related to the question of development is that of institutions. Early missionaries build schools to teach students how to read the Scriptures, and hospitals to help them live. Today the government of Zaire is taking over these institutions. How shall the church in Zaire respond to secular education systems, and how should the mission respond to the government's invitation to send missionaries as teachers under government pay? And to what extent should the church and mission respond to the cry of the young people for aid in getting higher education that will get them jobs in the cities—knowing that the educated elite will become increasingly influential in the future, but also that many of the young people will be lost to the church (at least the rural church) if they get this education?

7. Questions of Leadership

The history of Mennonite Brethren missions in Zaire poses a difficult question. The pioneering work done by charismatic leaders such as A. Janzen and H. Bartch, men who had a vision and began a work on their own. The church leaders and mission board in North America did not support, and at times even resisted, the taking on of the new work. However, in time the field was accepted by the church organization.

This raises a serious question in terms of the sending churches. Should we, in fact, look to independent movements led by charismatic leaders to pioneer new work, and to prod the institution to do its job? Or should the mission board be responsible for charting a course of future action? What happens if our mission outreach is splintered into a great many independent (sometimes called "faith") movements? What happens if the churches and their official agencies lose the vision of missions?

The church in Zaire faces a different question in leadership. Early it looked to missionaries for direction. Today it is autonomous. What about the leaders at the congregational level? Should they be a paid ministry? Many of the churches are poor and can barely afford to support a pastor. Some suggest that the North American churches should continue to help pay their salaries. Should local pastors be highly

educated? If they are too highly educated they no longer fit into the rural congregations, but if they have little schooling they cannot minister to the young who are rapidly becoming educated. Or should congregations turn to lay ministries to meet their local needs? The mobilization of the laity has always played an important role in Mennonite Brethren church polity.

The questions of leadership on the conference level are equally difficult to answer. In much of the developing world, the highest level church leaders must relate to the international church scene on one hand, and on the other, they must retain close ties to their local churches. But the gap between the two, culturally and economically, is staggering. They must be able to travel abroad on jets and handle complex negotiations. This often requires advanced education, and a higher standard of life. But the local churches, who can barely support their local pastors, cannot support the institutional superstructure of the conference. Consequently, these leaders are often supported indirectly through foreign funds. This makes them vulnerable to the vagaries of international politics. At any moment these funds may be cut off, and then they have no place to turn for a livelihood. It also alienates them to some extent from their local churches.

But conference leaders are also expected to live like their rural brethren. They must cycle many weary hours in the hot sun, and live on a local salary. If they fail to keep strong ties to their churches, they are even more isolated when international turmoil strikes, for they no longer can turn for help to their brethren.

We need to realize that the leaders of our national churches, like our missionaries, are marginal persons who have no real home, and often have little job security. The question arises, what is our responsibility to these whom we have educated and drawn into leadership positions? In the long view we must ask, how can the conference leadership be structured so that its primary ties are to the local churches, but so that it can speak for these churches on the international scene?

8. Missions in Times of 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 missions expanded and churches grew with little question of how to handle political instability.

Today this has changed. The turmoil following the independence of Zaire awakened us to the fact that in the future we will have to be increasingly prepared to work in the midst of revolutions, wars and tensions. How should the mission and the church respond?

In Zaire, as in most similar situations, the question facing the mission was, do we leave for the sake of safety, or do we stay to show our identification with the people? If the missionaries leave, would this negate the message of love and brotherhood they preach? When revolution comes, the missionary can leave, but the nationals cannot. Should we leave them to face the difficulties alone? But if the missionaries stay, do they not only accentuate the "foreignness" of the local Christians, and therefore make them even more vulnerable to accusations and attacks?

If some chose or are asked to stay, who should they be? Single missionaries? Men? Married couples with children? And are the sending churches willing to make the same sacrifices they ask of their representatives?

What if some missionaries are captured and held for high ransoms? We are concerned with preserving their lives, but at what cost? The North American conference could raise the money, but to do so would be to invite further kidnappings. It could refuse, but the relatives and missionary's home church might seek to ransom them, and charge the conference with indifference. We need a clear strategy to cope with such situations. More than that, we need a theology that can deal with political violence and threats of death as we carry on the work of the Kingdom.

The question facing the church is how to survive and grow in times of political unrest. How should it face persecution, the imprisonment and death of its leaders, the breakdown of its institutions, and the suppression of worship and witness? How should it respond to persecutors, and when peace is restored, to those Christians who denied their faith in times of stress? The apostolic church and the early anabaptist movement shows that churches can survive and grow in such times. After decades of relative peace in our land, have we lost the theology and coping mechanisms necessary to flourish amidst war and anarchy? This may well become an important question also for the North American churches in the not too distant future.

Churches are called to the mission of proclaiming God's message of salvation and a new life to the world. But the church and its proclamation takes place in the lives of people—of their particular histories, cultures and sociopolitical contexts. This is why the questions of missions are so complex.

We need, again, to hear God's voice as it calls us to minister to people in sin and need. We need to hear not only what we should say, but how we should say it, for this often speaks more loudly than our words. We cannot sit back unconcerned because we have the gospel and live in peace and comfort. We are an international church, and our brethren in all parts of the world are faced with the multitudes who have never heard the gospel, with poverty and disease, and with wars, revolutions and political oppression. We cannot sit back unconcerned because never before has there been so great a need to hear the whole of God's Word to humankind, nor the means and opportunities to do so.

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Paul G. Hiebert
General Editor

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APPENDIX A
A STUDY GUIDE

Paul G. Hiebert

We live in the illusion that somehow our times are absolutely unique—that at no other time have people faced the same problems or uncertainties. This is particularly true of those of us who live in a modern society with its rapid changes. But, as Dr. J. B. Toews points out, our forefathers struggled with many of the problems we now face in missions, while those which are new often have their roots in the past.

Here we will look at only a few of the more critical issues raised by Dr. Toews that have affected the growth of the church in Zaire. We do so in order that we may understand it better in its contemporary setting. We also hope to gain some insight into the processes that affect the planting of churches so that we may learn from the past how and how not to carry out the mission that God has given us today.

1. The Cross-cultural Translation of the Gospel.

God's message of salvation must be expressed in human languages if people are to understand it. Therefore, the early missionaries had to learn to speak and write the languages of the people with whom they worked.

But words in one language do not correspond exactly to those in another. Some languages have words that other languages do not. And even when both have words that refer to the same thing, the connotations they carry may be different.

In translating, we must make a distinction between *form* and *meaning*. The form of a word is what it refers to. For example, "cross" refers to a particular shape of an object. A word's meaning is how the people think and feel about it. To some people, the cross is a symbol of salvation and hope. To others it is a shape to be despised.

The fact that languages differ in form and meaning raises a serious question in translating the gospel in speech and print. Should the translation stay true to the form of the original, or

to its meaning? For instance, how should one translate the word "snow" (as in Ps. 51:7 "whiter than snow") in a Zairian language that has no word for snow? Would it be best to coin a new word, or use the English word "snow" and then try to explain what this means to those who have never seen snow (and find it hard to believe such stuff exists)? Or should the translator stay true to the meaning of the original by using a word in that language that symbolizes pure white, such as "lily"? Is it "snow" that is critical to what the psalmist is saying here, or is it "whiteness"? We cannot stress both, for if we stress "snow" the people will lose the sense of "whiteness", but if we use an object they know to represent "whiteness" we lose the sense of "snow."

To the extent we try to retain the form of a message in translation we are in danger of losing its meaning. The people will not understand the message, and will read into the forms their old traditional meanings. The result is syncretism. On the other hand, if we stress only meaning, what happens to our view of scriptures, particularly to a literalist view of divine revelation?

Like language, most human behavior and products carry meaning. A handshake, a cross, a wedding and the Lord's Supper each take on particular messages within our culture. But when we translate Christianity into another culture, which cultural forms will best express it? For example, is it important that all Christians wear clothes? Or sit on pews in church? Or have only one wife?

Polygamy has been a very critical issue in African mission history. One of the greatest hindrances to the rapid spread of Christianity in central Africa was the fact that most missionaries required that converts with more than one wife get rid of their second and third wives before they were allowed to join the church. Is having one wife essential to salvation, or is it a matter of Christian growth? The Bible requires it of church leaders, but is it binding upon all Christians?

Before we jump to an answer, we need to understand the role of polygamy in African tribal societies. There, as in the Old Testament, it was used as a way of dealing with social crises created by the premature death of a man (a common occurrence in those societies). The death of a husband creates widows and orphans who need to be cared for. Who is to provide for them economically? Who is to be a father to the children, and a partner to the wife? Who will bear more children so that the family name and heritage do not die out? If we look closely at our own society, we will see that we do a poor job of meeting these needs. We are concerned primarily with their economic needs and deal with this through social security and insurance. We, even in the church, do little to meet their social, sexual or religious needs. There is no real place for widows in our society, and they are terribly alone.

In Africa and in Israel, the people solved these problems by making the brother or cousin of the deceased responsible for the widow and orphans. Just as we replace a dead president by a new president, they replaced a dead husband by a new husband. But the new husband often already had a wife.

The point here is not to justify polygamy, but to understand its importance in a society, and to raise the question what happens when we change such a custom among converts. If we require men to give up all wives but one, what should he do with the others? How are they to live? Most of those who were set aside ended up as prostitutes or slaves; they had no other place in their society to go. And what happens to children abandoned by their father for the sake of Christ? How will they respond to the gospel?

On the other hand, should we permit men to join the church with their many wives, but practice monogamy for young converts? In that case polygamy will continue for several generations, but then die out.

There is another facet to this question. If we eliminate polygamy, how will the church deal with the needs of the widows and orphans formerly met by this practice? We cannot simply subtract a custom without creating serious cultural problems. We must find some new way to meet these needs.

Today we face an even more critical question of translation. The gospel must be translated into new languages and new customs. But what about theology? Today many African church leaders are calling for an African theology—a

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theology based on the Scriptures as these are understood in the African setting. Mbiti points out that traditionally Africans have had a belief in a high and distant God, one who did not communicate with the people. Mbiti raises the question whether we should preach that it is this God who has now revealed Himself in Christ (the way Paul does on the Acropolis). Or must we reject this faith in a high god and replace it with a faith in a different high God? The question is also raised whether the African beliefs in demons and good spirits is not closer to the Biblical perspective than our modern, western culture, which has done away with spirits and angels for all practical purposes. Can we trust that the Holy Spirit is as much at work revealing the Scriptures to our African brethren as we assume He is at work within us? This is becoming one of the critical questions in the international church.

2. Mission-Church Relationships

Dr. Toews points out that the Mennonite Brethren mission work began in Zaire during the colonial era. This era had several important characteristics. There was a sharp segregation between the Africans and the foreign whites. The latter came to rule or to serve, but not to immigrate. They expected to return to their "homeland" when they retired, and to marry their children to other whites. The Africans were seen as another kind of people. This segregation was true not only in the church but also in government and business. In some churches it went so far that there were separate Lord's Supper services for the blacks and the whites.

Missionaries also came with a particular model of how mission work should be done. They were part of the "mission" and the mission was different from the "church." It was the task of the mission to start the church, but the missionaries did not then become members of the African church. They retained their membership in their North American church.

This structural division between the mission and the church created several problems. First, how should the missionary relate to the Africans—what was his role? Generally speaking, the missionary was seen as a spiritual father. But this placed the missionary above the African, and reduced fellowship and brotherhood.

Second, what about identification? How should the missionary and his national counterparts live? Should one live in a bungalow and the other, a brother, in a small hut? On the other hand, could the missionary raised in the west survive if he lived on the level of the local people? Where should the missionary children go to school—to local schools, schools for missionary children, or left with relatives to attend schools in North America? The frequent deaths of the early missionaries should warn us here against jumping to a simplistic answer.

Third, when and how should the work be indigenized? It was assumed that at some time the church would be strong enough to take over the work. But when are the people ready to do so? And when the work is transferred, what becomes of the missionaries? And how will the church finance the schools, hospitals and other institutions started by the missions and funded from abroad when the church can hardly support its own pastors? Should these be left to die? The problems of indigenization are accentuated by the fact that there were two distinct structures and the work had to be transferred from one to the other.

Today, we have inherited the structures of the past. But we have moved into a post-colonial era, and the colonial survivals are a great hindrance to the proclamation of the gospel. This poses serious questions we must face in an honest and Christlike way.

What about the role of the missionary? Today he is a guest in the country where he serves. In the church, he no longer can be the superior. He must find his place within the church as an equal and a brother. This means he must be willing to work under the direction of African church leaders. He must be willing to step aside when his foreignness is a hindrance. And he must respect the national and cultural aspirations of the people. His task is not to import a foreign

culture. He must plant the gospel in the local soil and let it take root there. But what does all this mean in the every day life of the missionary, and in the image of the missionary as we know it?

What must happen with identification in the new era? With modern medicines, diseases are no longer the problem they were in the past. Should the modern missionary live closer to the people? Would not his effectiveness be greater as was demonstrated in the case of the John Kliewers(p.)? Should missionaries have cars when the people do not? Should an African leader get the same salary as the missionary for the same task?

What about church-mission relationships? After the work is turned over to the church, is there no place for missionaries? The church is inviting them to come and help. Should the missionary join the national church as his adopted church, or is he always the outsider? What should the mission board do when the church requests that a certain missionary not be sent back to the field? What is the responsibility of the board if a church ceases to be evangelistic, and yet does not want outsiders to come and evangelize? And how do you build relationships between the church and the mission that express the autonomy and yet the brotherhood of both?

Other new questions also arise in our day. Should the Mennonite Brethren Church of Zaire not become a full member of our General Conference, its activities and its boards? Or what should be the relationship between the Mennonite Brethren churches in different countries? What should our response be if one of our sister churches abroad seeks closer cooperation, or even merger, with other churches in that country?

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