

**The Globalization
of
the Mennonite Brethren Churches**

THE GLOBALIZATION OF THE MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCHES

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The success of the M.B. mission outreach, the maturation of young churches around the world, and the changing world scene demand that we reexamine the relationships that link the M.B. churches around the world. I would like to examine this process of globalization in historical and developmental terms, and then explore some models for internationalizing the M. B. conference.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The current relationships between M.B. churches in different countries needs to be understood in terms of our M. B. theology of missions and our actual mission practices. Ideally the second should be tied to the first, but, unfortunately, the realities of our mission work were drawn more often from imitating other mission practices than from our anabaptist theology.

Three basic theological models have emerged during the modern mission era. We need to understand these in order to understand some of the current tensions we face in internationalizing the M. B. churches.

Church in Mission

The first theological model sees mission as the outreach of the church in the world. The church is the structure, mission its activity to the lost, sick and oppressed. The two are inseparable.

When, for example, Ziegenbalg and Plutschau landed at Madras, they knelt on the sand and organized the church of which they were the first members. New converts were added to the church. Native leaders were trained and appointed to offices first held by the missionaries. In time missionaries came to occupy specialized roles under the direction of the

local church just as other church workers. They occupied no privileged position.

In such a setting indigenizing the work was relatively simple. As national leaders took office they assumed power. There was no question of transferring responsibilities from one structure (the missionary structure) to another structure (the church structure) because there was only one structure. Moreover, new churches were incorporated as dioceses or districts within one world church.

The success of this model is seen in the many churches around the world associated with the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches. Because there was a strong ecclesiology, missionaries sent abroad planted churches. Because mission involved the whole ministry of the church, the word was preached, schools were started and hospitals established.

The weakness of this model is the diffusion of missionary zeal and ministry, and the loss of evangelistic outreach. In time an inordinate amount of the missionary and church personnel and resources was spent on maintaining the church and on its expanding institutions.

Church and Mission

A second model of mission based on different theological assumptions emerged in the early nineteenth century, namely the 'faith mission model.' Here a sharp distinction is made between mission structures and church structures. The church is called to worship God, to disciple believers and to minister to those around it. The mission is called to minister beyond the reach of the church and to specialize in cross-cultural evangelism.¹ It

1. Interestingly, the same dualism developed in the colonial world. A special cadre of administrators was trained as foreign service officers by colonial powers to administer their colonies. These officers could not hold office in their home countries. Serving overseas became a profession of its own. The same was true of many businesses who trained personnel for overseas assignments.

is a band of highly committed Christians (a sodality in Winter's terms) supported by those in the church who catch the vision of missions. This model recognizes that many Christians have no real interest in missions or in other lands. Therefore special task forces must be organized to go to the ends of the earth.

In this model, missionaries are not members of the churches they plant. They remain members of their sending churches. Moreover, they organize separate missionary structures - missionary conferences - which are to serve as 'scaffolds' holding up the young church until it is strong enough to stand alone.

The strength of this model was its ability to motivate a dedicated few to sacrifice everything for the sake of the Gospel, and to keep a central focus on evangelism.

The weakness of this model was tied to its weak ecclesiology,² its truncated view of the Gospel and the problems arising out of having two structures. The latter foster segregation between missionaries and national, and a colonial approach to missions. The transference of rights and responsibilities from mission structures to church structures was always full of tensions and slow. There was little agreement when the church was ready to assume full responsibilities for the work, or even what those responsibilities entailed. Ideally a church was to be fully self-governing, self-supporting and self-propogating. Consequently, when missionaries withdrew, they took their finances with them, leaving young, poor churches flounder for lack of resources. Not only did the first national leaders have to take charge of the work, they also had to restructure it from the ground up, finding new sources of money and personnel. The 'scaffolding model' rarely worked as intended - the scaffold was generally the main walls upon which the whole work rested, and when it was removed, the building was

in danger of collapsing.

The Church or Mission?

The Mennonite Brethren, like many evangelical churches that began their work in the late 1800s and early 1900s had a theology that held church and mission together, but when they began work abroad, they imitated the faith mission practices they saw there. In India and Africa, at least, the missionaries form a missionary structure separate from the church they were planting. Because of their strong ecclesiology, the M.B.s did plant churches and begin wholistic ministries. But the tension between their theology of church and their mission practices created a great many tensions. To these must be added all the problems inherent in the faith mission model - segregation between missionaries and nationals, colonial attitudes in which missionaries resisted working under the direction of the church, and difficulties in transferring responsibilities to the church.

A DEVELOPMENTAL ANALYSIS OF CHURCH-MISSION-CHURCH RELATIONSHIPS

A developmental approach to the relationships between parent churches, mission structures and young churches throws further light on the globalization of the M. B. conference. While each mission setting is different, certain basic patterns have emerged as young churches are born, grow and reach maturity.

Dependency

Obviously missionaries entering a new field where they find few or no Christians must take responsibility for the work. In many cases, particularly in the past, when there are converts, they are nonliterate, untrained and theological naive. The missionaries are the role models for new believers of what Christians are like. Moreover, the missionaries

provide the leadership and most of the resources.

Unfortunately, due in part to colonialism and western attitudes of superiority, this stage of dependency was extended well beyond the infancy of the new churches. Leaders do not need to be literate to be effective church leaders in villages and tribes. Nor need the churches and church institutions imitate western practices in order to be effective.

Today we recognize that there will be a time of dependency when new churches are planted, but that this period can be quite short. As soon as groups of Christians are gathered, we need to recognize their natural leaders, and respect the churches' wishes.

Independency

The delay on the part of missions to recognize the full partnership of young churches often created resentments among national church leaders. Some mission leaders call for the independence of young churches, but old practices died slowly. Only with the collapse of colonialism around the world did many churches finally gain their full autonomy.

Unfortunately with independence often came a great many new problems. The call for churches to be self-governing, self-supporting and self-propogating was issued to counter the colonial dependency so prevelant in the mid-nineteenth century. Unfortunately, when missions withdrew, they often implimented these three 'Selfs' with a vengence. Self-support, in particular, became a fetish in itself. In many cases, the sudden and complete withdrawal of financial and missionary assistance dictated by the mission agency hurt the growth of young churches, and created many hard feelings.

Today we recognize that the development of local church automony is a process that must begin early and may take considerable time; that it

requires a great deal of love and listening to one another; and that it should be done in such a way as to strengthen young churches, not harm them.

Interdependence

The final stage of the mission program is not independent churches in different parts of the world. It is the joining together of these churches in a common fellowship and in a common mission to a lost world. We are only now beginning to enter this stage with our M. B. churches in North America, Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe. What shapes can this interdependence take? The answer rests in part on our church and mission history, and the stages of development in our respective churches.

GLOBAL STRUCTURES FOR THE M. B. CHURCHES

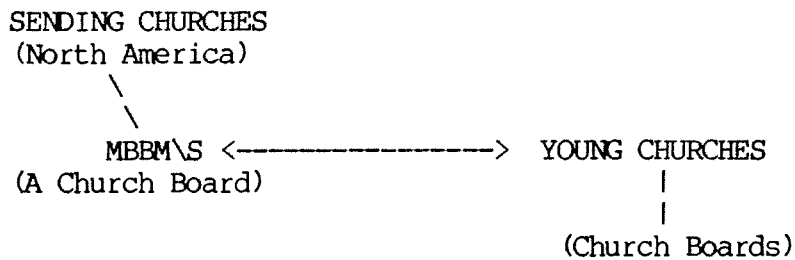
The current structures pointing to globalization are legacies of our mission history. They are playing an essential part in our move towards some type of international M. B. fellowship. But they also embody a stage in our mission history beyond which we must now move.

The Current Structural Problem

Because the MBBM/S was responsible for the mission outreach of the North American churches, it is natural that these churches relate initially to the North American churches through MBBM/S (see Figure 1). As these young churches around the world gain their own identity, however, they see that pattern of relationships reinforcing their dependency on and second-class status to the North American churches. As national conferences, they do not relate to the North American churches directly, but to a board of these churches. Moreover, they relate to a board commissioned to carry out evangelism and church planting, but not authorized to deal with matters of faith and practice, worship or other churchly issues. Moreover, the role of

the missionaries in this pattern of relationships is not clear. At times they speak for MBBM\S, and at times MBBM\S negotiates with the national leaders directly, bypassing the missionaries. In few instances are the missionaries under the direct assignment of the young national churches.

Figure 1
Initial Relationships between Parent and Offspring Churches

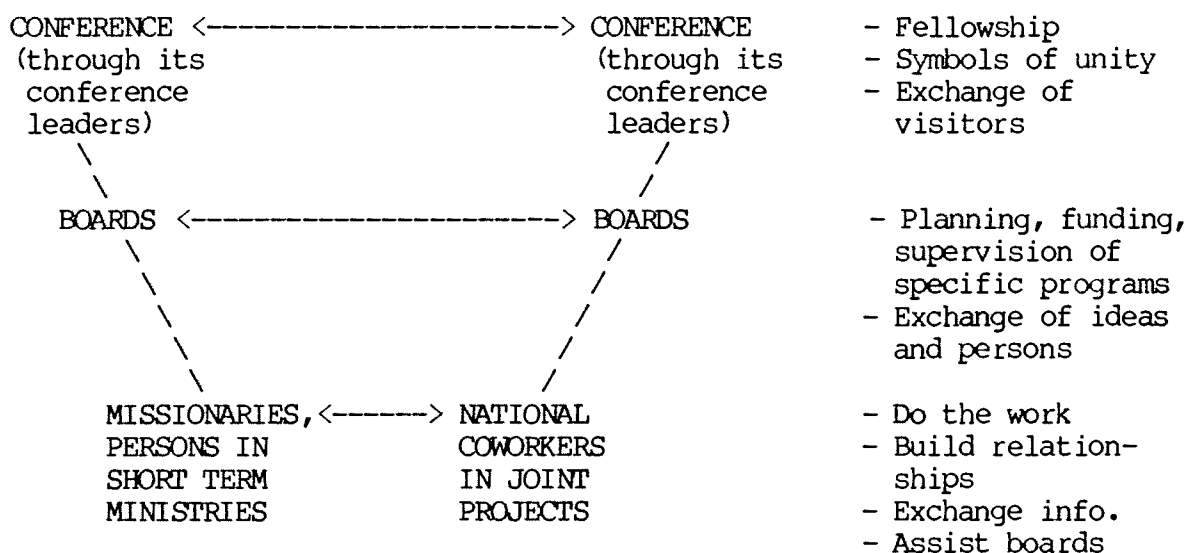


Bilateral Relationships

The simplest step to globalization is to form bilateral relationships between the North American conferences and M. B. national or regional conferences in other parts of the world. Here a full recognition of the equality of the younger churches calls for partnerships on several levels (see Figure 2). On the top level there would be relationships between conference leaders in the different conferences. The purpose of these relationships would be primarily fellowship and symbolizing unity. This can be achieved by visits by leaders, by hosting guests at national conferences, and by organizing bilateral celebrations. On the second level, boards in two or more conferences would negotiate with each other to exchange ideas, to utilize one-another's resources and to help build each other up in specific ministries. It is on this level that finances and personnel are shared, and plans made to carry on particular ministries. On the third level, missionaries and other personnel from one conference would work together with their national counter-parts in another conference. The

assignment of both visiting and local personnel in joint projects would be determined by the program negotiated by the boards of the two conferences

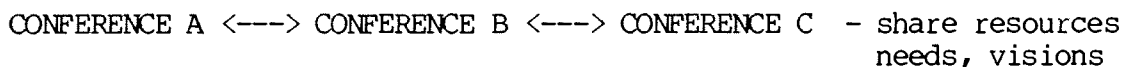
Figure 2
Bilateral Relationships between Two Conferences



Network Unity

A second type of global unity can be achieved through networks.³ Here leaders of a number of national or regional conferences gather together at regular meetings to exchange ideas and plan joint efforts. The autonomy of each conference is affirmed in the meetings, and none is coerced to participate in any one of the joint projects proposed on the floor. However, as one conference shares its plans, needs and resources, other conferences are free to join with it in carrying out joint activities (see Figure 4).

Figure 4
Network Cooperation



3. World Vision is currently exploring this model. Briant Myers is helping WV to conceptualize and impliment the model.

Organizational Unity

A final model for globalization is organization unity. Here another level of denominational organization would be added above the conference structures. This would be on the international level (some might refer to this as the U.N. model, but to do so already prejudices many Christians against it). Conferences would be assessed contributions according to their abilities, and these funds and personnel would be used where the international organization and its board(s) allocated them.

While there are some arguments in favor of this model, it is costly, and at this time in our history, the M. B. conferences would not support it.