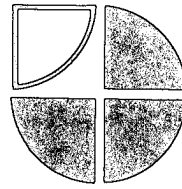


MISSION FOCUS



The Shape of Mission

DAVID A. SHANK

The shape of Jesus Christ's mission for his people in a given place and time emerges out of their understanding of and response to his ministry to them, and out of his work among the nations as he judges them in view of the salvation to which he calls all people. Here is one attempt at such a bifocal discernment for the worldwide mission of the (North American) Mennonite Church for the 1980s if God wills to grant us that time.

What is emerging among the nations that would shape our worldwide mission?

Our worldwide mission has emerged out of a century of church-world dialogues, each with its crisis and its partial resolution. The first was our ethnic and rural confrontation with American society; it was partially resolved through American denominational structures and disciplines and institutions. The second was a crisis of faith in the context of the fundamentalist-liberal polarization of American Christianity; it was partially resolved through the "rediscovery of the Anabaptist vision" (Bender, 1944; Hershberger, 1957). The third was due to our ethnic reshuffling and more active involvement with the larger Christendom. This has been partially resolved through the believers church model (Garret, 1969:250-283) used as a criterion for a self-study (Kauffman and Harder, 1975) and for seminary (Bender, 1971) and Sunday school curricula. We are only now becoming seriously aware of the next crisis before us, our international involvement with macrostructures which have provided us with religious and political freedom, economic freedom and prosperity, and social positions which are perceived by others to be oppressive.

During the first of those crises we began to work among a Hindu population in India, among a Europeanized population in Latin America's Argentina, and among tribal peoples of East Africa in Tanganyika.

During the second crisis after the second world war, as a result of the *pax americana* and an unequalled prosperity from an expanding economy, we participated in a most amazing development of worldwide mission for church building, as well as relief and service. An American presence in Asia permitted our entry into China and Japan; and we began work in Bihar in northern India. As a consequence of the war, we entered Europe in six different countries in view of planting churches in that post-Christian society. Special concerns sent us to Israel and Algeria, also known to be "hard places" of mission. A rapid explosion took us into five African countries and ten Central and South American countries. Increased American presence in Asia took us into Vietnam, Hong Kong, and the Philippines. Relief and service activity in many more countries moved from war relief to crisis relief to development strategies. Without seeking to plant churches, they occasionally

David A. Shank served in Belgium 1950-73 and since 1976 has been assigned to West Africa where he is working with Independent Churches. Both assignments have been with Mennonite Board of Missions, Elkhart, Indiana. He recently submitted his doctoral thesis on the prophet William Wade Harris to Aberdeen University, Scotland. This article is adapted from a paper David provided at the Laurelville Symposium '78 held at Laurelville, Pennsylvania, August 29-31, 1978.

grew out of such work, and relations developed often beyond the scope of relief. Our experiences took us into more than thirty countries in a quarter of a century for church building somewhat along the lines of the Anabaptist vision. It helped to precipitate our third crisis, that of ecclesiology.

Our patterns of involvement were extremely varied: they included many different kinds of "calls" as well as our own "looking out upon the fields white with harvest." Seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we were led intuitively and often creatively in the light of our own special gifts and resources, marrying a strong sense of mission with the appeals and with what we perceived as needs. The pattern that emerged would perhaps appear incoherent from any other perspective; if there was a strategy it appears to have emerged spontaneously from our faith and life and obedience.

From this work have emerged new Mennonite churches in some thirty countries (Horsch, 1978). In 1977 over 300 North Americans were working among these churches, their institutions, and their more than 29,000 members (one North American for nearly one hundred foreign members, on the average). But an additional 250 persons were working in thirty other countries in well-established non-Mennonite structures: churches, schools, governments. During the past twenty years another pattern has been emerging of relationship to movements which are often not organized along Western lines nor well-recognized by Western and mission-planted churches.

We tried in our world mission to be equally sensitive to the double challenges of "into all the world and preach the gospel" and "unto the least of these my brethren." We did not generally seek missionary success measured by numbers, often choosing consciously to go to difficult areas of witness and ministry. As a church we had to learn to relate to sister churches rather than to "mission fields." We shifted to short-term assignments as compared to the long-term missionary, while still keeping a solid core of the latter. We have had to face the awareness of large numbers of the world's populations being urbanized. We have had to learn to deal with the new fact of the worldwide presence of the Christian church and the reality of ecumenicity.

The resolution of our crises in America did not always appear adequate for praxis in situations of world mission. The Anabaptist vision was sometimes felt to be too ethnically oriented; the believers church model often seemed too Western because it assumed—as in sixteenth century Europe—a *kirchliche* backdrop against which the "faithful congregation" stands. Our ethical concerns of nonparticipation in army, magistracy, or the courts often appeared as appendages to the gospel even though we wanted to become a peace church also on the mission field. Leadership roles in the international world of relief and missions were often felt to be much more complicated socially, politically,

and ethnically than in the "simple" contexts of Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ontario, Indiana, Kansas, or Saskatchewan. We appear to have lost our theological and ethical innocence abroad; meanwhile our churches at home were catching up with the foreign workers while retaining elements of each of the preceding crises.

On the other hand an increased awareness of the work of the Holy Spirit contributed to a flexibility and mobility; we learned both to go and to go home to be faithful. The Holy Spirit has also spoken to us through the experiences

December 1980
Volume 8 Number 4

MISSION FOCUS



- 69 The Shape of Mission
David A. Shank

- 75 From Undertone to Dominant Chord?
A Preliminary Snapshot of Mennonite
Witness in the Netherlands
Alle G. Hoekema

- 80 Dialogue or Mission or . . . ?
Robert L. Lindsey

- 84 Chronicle

- 85 In review

- 92 Editorial comment

EDITORIAL COUNCIL

Editor Wilbert R. Shenk

Managing editor Willard E. Roth

Review editors Adolf Ens, Peter M. Hamm

Other member Robert L. Ramseyer

Editorial assistants Rebecca E. Miller

Merlin Becker-Hoover

MISSION FOCUS (ISSN 0164-4696) is published quarterly by Mennonite Board of Missions, 500 South Main, Elkhart, Indiana. Single copies available without charge. Send correspondence to Box 370, Elkhart, IN 46515. Second-class postage paid at Elkhart, IN 46515. Lithographed in USA. Copyright 1980 by Mennonite Board of Missions.

of China, Vietnam, and Somalia. And the Spirit has come in newness of power to many of our people at home and abroad. He is teaching us to take the pre-cross incarnation of Christ as an essential part of the good news. New leadership patterns are emerging with greater recognition of charisma among fellow members.

Out of divergent strands appears to be emerging again a new consensus of thought and practice for the mission of the church; it has been formulated recently in *A Theology of Mission in Outline* (Mennonite Board of Missions, 1978). Appearing to fulfill the Anabaptist and believers church models in a more universal and comprehensive perspective, the outline shows Christian mission as being essentially a messianic movement under the leadership of the risen suffering-servant, in the power of his Spirit, communicating the gospel of peace through messianic communities. The document was intended as an expression of missionary consensus; to the extent which it also expresses a consensus of our North American congregations, we might speak of the presence of a strong biblically oriented and Christological ongoing sense of mission, seen as messianic consciousness. (To the extent that this is only a **missionary** consensus, and not that of the sending congregations, the major task of Mennonite Church leadership at all levels is the overcoming of that duality.) This *sine qua non* of mission seems to be shaping our mission out of our own life under God.

What is emerging among us as a people that is significant for our worldwide mission?

Ultimately, the East-West tensions, the North-South structural inequities, ecological breakdown, techtronics, nuclear power, the armaments race, and racial discrimination and conflict all shape worldwide mission as emergents from an apocalyptic context; but others have been assigned to speak about these and other major questions. Here I draw attention to three major realities which have emerged and are seen to be shaping our mission essentially as fact and as challenge.

Emergence of Christianity worldwide.

The first of these facts is that the Christian church in its many forms is now to be found in almost every geographical region and political entity around the world. This is already a major factor in the reshaping of missionary strategy by Western churches and their missiologists. Since the political independence and decolonization of many nations, we have had difficulty—quite understandably—getting beyond the agenda of redefining authority and structure, patterns of request and response, priority use of resources, and even the agenda itself.

Most of us are not overtly aware of the patterns of the emergence of the world church. Although there are important exceptions, the planting of the church around the world has usually not been because of penetration and conversion of Hindu, Buddhist, or Islamic populations. On the contrary, the expansion of the faith has occurred among the so-called anamist and tribal peoples of the world. Increasingly termed “primal” because of common basic or elemental religious and societal patterns, such peoples have furnished over the centuries the large majority of Christian converts. The Christian faith first swept as a movement among such peoples of the Mediterranean world. Although their culture had become sophisticated, their religion was primal. Their culture

became the carrier of the faith which then moved in a second large wave among the tribes of Europe. In a third wave, the European and Western culture has been the carrier of the faith to the so-called primal peoples of Oceania, Africa, the Amerindians, and among significant groups in areas of India and Southeast Asia.

Dr. Alan Tippet wrote, *It is a fact of global significance that the great animist world is “turning over” like an iceberg in our day and taking up a new position which may be a determining factor in world history for the next century. Whether we like it or not, millions of people are changing from something old to something new . . . culturally and spiritually this is their “fulness of time”* (Turner, 1973:337). Where we Mennonites have touched this reality in our own world mission, we have seen its effects. Seventy percent of non-North American Mennonites come from our mission to Africa. If the classical religious systems of the world still remain essentially intact and have even assumed an aggressive missionary stance in our time, it is the primal peoples worldwide that have turned to Christianity and are making of it a worldwide reality.

Emergence of new religious movements.

The second equally important fact, which has not received the same attention in missiological circles, is the parallel emergence in primal societies worldwide of close to 10,000 new religious movements past and present, involving presently an estimated 10,000,000 people. These movements are spin-offs of Western missionary endeavors and from the cultural crises provoked by the colonial and cultural dominance of the West. Much more than is generally recognized, these groups are a major continuing missionary responsibility of the Western churches; if we had not gone to them, they would not exist as an identifiable phenomenon today.

Though important isolated attempts have been made to understand such movements in view of communicating the Christian gospel, most of the attention given to such movements has been by other (often non-Christian) scholars—anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists, phenomenologists, historians of religion. There have been occasional serious efforts at having Western missionaries work for or within some of the Christian-oriented movements, but one can scarcely say that the challenge indicated by Dr. Harold Turner has been met: *By extending the horizon to the further areas we have mentioned, and especially to the fascinating realm of new religious movements among tribal peoples . . . the Christian world may discover that far from being over, the great age of missions—of missions more varied and complex than we have ever envisaged—is just beginning* (1973).

My summary of our own worldwide involvement does not include the story of our Mennonite relationship to this phenomenon (Shenk, 1975). It would have to start in the 1940s with J. W. Shank’s confrontation with the pentecostal-type movement which had exploded among the Toba Indians in the Argentine Chaco, and Albert and Lois Buckwalter’s new relationship to that reality in 1955. It would include Edwin and Irene Weaver’s involvement in Uyo, Nigeria, after 1959; Mennonite Central Committee’s Teachers Abroad Program (TAP) and the European pacifist service program, EIRENE, involvement with the Kimbanguists in the Congo after 1968; the involvement of Stanley and Delores Friesen, Willard and Alice Roth, and Erma Grove in Accra (Ghana); B. Charles and Grace

Hostetter's work in Lagos (Nigeria) during six years after 1970; and work of Harold and Christine Wenger in Swaziland since 1975, not to mention that of the (Mennonite) Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission. Suffice it to say that Mennonites at the present time probably have a broader and more varied experience of this reality on two continents than perhaps any other group in the West. Our involvement has come at a time when we were not so much bound by the inheritance from the colonial period, since we had been latecomers to the modern missionary scene.

Some observers have too hastily described this particular reality as "modern messianic movements" (Lanternari, 1963; Oosterwal, 1973). Much of it cannot be so easily classified. Most of the movements, however, are engaged in the resolution of the crises created by the brutal confrontation of two cultural and religious systems, one of which was perceived as dominant and oppressive. This is, indeed, the concern of most messianic movements. The connection between these movements and Christianity is not only that the latter has come to them as culturally oppressive—like the rider of a dragon being thrown in a china shop—but that Christianity, at least at the time of its genesis, was itself a messianic movement.

It emerged in response to a religious and cultural clash in which oppression and domination by another culture with its religious and political forces threatened the faith, life, and identity of a small ethnic group which called itself Israel after the head of its tribes. And "in the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son."

Emergence of secular faith.

The third major fact which has emerged and in which we are involved is the faith of secularity and its alliance with political, economic, and techtronic power. The allusion is not exclusively to the two-thirds of the world's populations living under avowed Marxist or Maoist regimes, but—particularly for us—to the same realities as they function in the West. This new secular techtronic culture appears less and less to be a carrier of the Christian faith and more and more that of secularity, itself a major challenge to the Christian faith. Thus among primal peoples, for example, it is possible in one generation to pass from the sacralism of traditional society to the liberation of secularism, and then that projected into the latter's new sacralism without benefit of the liberating power of the gospel of Christ. There is also the deprivation of the freely called-out messianic community with its capacity for a lived-out critique and protest which can offer new and nondestructive patterns of hope in the midst of the new sacral oppression.

In the West itself, likely the pioneering "advances" in the technological restructuring of humanity will continue to be an overbearing super-culture with its own secular faith and **imperium** imposing itself upon a Christian minority, while the center of Christian faith will shift, as it already is doing. The super-culture will likely continue to spread around the world and not limit its imposition to the West. North America and Europe will no doubt continue to be the scene where this culture's "advances" will first appear on the scene of history and where confrontation with this new imperialism must first occur. This is, at least geographically speaking from the perspective of the Mount of Olives, "the uttermost part of the world." We are there.

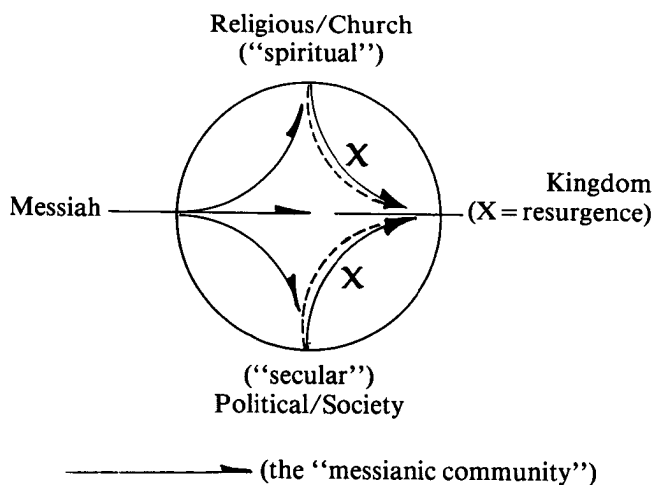
How do these various elements shape our mission at this time?

We have seen four major factors: an awareness that the mission of the church is fulfilled through a messianic consciousness of servant communities of the Servant Messiah, emerging ever anew out of the confrontation of Christ and his Spirit with humankind in its ceaseless ambition and search for happiness; Mennonite existence as a North American Christian denomination in an increasingly oppressive techtronic society with its secular faith and myth of self-fulfillment; the emergence of a worldwide Christianity, much of it planted with Western pressures rather than an indigenous dynamic; and indigenous religious movements among primal peoples—themselves a spin-off of Western and Christian missionary expansion—seen as missionary opportunity.

These are all parts of a whole, and one is forced constantly to stretch to see the whole as a pattern or shape. Where does one find adequate categories for understanding? Such an ordering can come from the phenomenon of messianism, defined as *essentially the religious belief in the coming of a redeemer who will put an end to the present order of things either universally or for a particular group and will install a new order made of justice and happiness* (Kohn, 1933). This on one hand can be seen as an essential universal archetype underlying all human experience (Desroche, 1969). On the other hand it is a unique religious phenomenon, a *sui generis* (Oosterwal, 1973; Desroche, 1969). We are students of Mennonitism and of Christianity—sub-species and species of a genus, if one may be permitted the comparison. But we know much less of the genus—messianism—from which they issue. Sophistication, secularism, and reaction to the extravagances in our own history may in fact immunize against the germ which made the immunization culture grow. But wherever Christianity goes with its Scriptures, it will be a precipitator of messianism, even when it has itself lost the essential thrust.

The basic dynamics of messianism may be described as follows (Desroche, 1973: 141ff.):

1. In the midst of oppression, domination, and injustice, a personality appears as God's instrument promising a new humanity (creation, kingdom, order) seen as a holistic reality of religious, social, economic, and political life.
2. The followers which break with the old order create in so doing new communities, themselves a critique of the old order and a foreshadowing of the new.
3. When the new humanity fails to appear, the initial impetus wanes and the movement "splits up" into a religious and a political (and social and economic) sidetracking away from the original holistic thrust. Each sidetrack becomes in itself a movement which reinterprets the original holistic intent from the new perspective, often continuing with long life.
4. Passage of time, new conditions, inadequacies, and rediscovery of the initial *élan* may lead to a messianic resurgence, from either of—or both—the sides of the sidetracking which is redirected towards the original thrust. Such resurgences are then seen to be points of continuity in the messianic fulfillment.



This is not strictly a description of Christianity but of the dynamics of the messianic genre wherever it appears. Since Christianity—and Mennonites—are of the genre, such dynamics are inherent to our life and faith. Wherever the Christian faith is present a four-directional emergence will usually develop by virtue of its inherent dynamics.

Christianity has, of course, its own specific understandings: Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah, his special kind of suffering-servant messianism, a unique way of dealing with failure, its jubilee and *shalom* understanding of the new creation, and its own answers to perennial human problems of family, sexuality, death, disaster, and personal eschatology. But this does not eliminate the essential dynamics of the four-directional emergence. This is a confirmation of the sixteenth century Anabaptists' production of the believers church model, but places it in a broader context as messianic resurgence. It also suggests that our own rediscovery of the Anabaptist vision, and of the believers church model, was a form of messianic resurgence. It is no accident that our greatest missionary expansion as a North American Mennonite Church was parallel with the renewal of our roots, themselves an expression of messianic resurgence.

In this light, the major question is not, "What is emerging?" Four patterns are emerging: religious affirmation of oppression, domination, injustice, and human cultural establishments; church building seen as a strictly religious way of dealing with **inevitable** problems of human existence now and hereafter; political (and social and economic) shifts in society—both reformatory and revolutionary—which deal with the **evitable**; and messianic holistic re-creating of religious, social, and economic life under political authority of Messiah—present among his people but as a call for all peoples.

The essential question faced by a messianic movement over and over again under new conditions is, "Which emergence shall we pursue?"

For North American Mennonites faced with the phenomenon of our own history, of our own situation in the world today, and the worldwide challenge to mission, the essential question is whether we can affirm unequivocally that we want to identify with the direction of a messianic holistic re-creation, which is not always observable along denominational lines. The Mennonite theology of mission

which describes Christian mission as messianic movement oriented by the coming kingdom could appear to illustrate an additional turning of the helm in that direction.

That kind of resurgence in North America is absolutely crucial to world mission. Whatever success we have in our confrontation with the secular techtronic culture in its imperialism in North America will have crucial meaning for Christians anywhere else in the world who will by virtue of that imperium be forced to confront that same reality. Failure in that messianic confrontation reduces the possibility of a worldwide mission, for we have then only become a part of that indelicate—and riderless—monster.

If the politics and economics of world poverty constitute a major human problem today, we cannot fulfill our worldwide mission by simply exploiting in our country those structures of poverty for others. A messianic community concerned also about economic wholeness would work to reduce in its midst large differentials in personal spending, made possible by the divergencies of demand and supply, based on a culture of affluent self-indulgence rather than on human need. It would work at noninvolvement in production of, merchandising of, and consumption of superficial self-indulgence goods. Such efforts would only be preludes to a possible critique of neo-colonial economic structures which enable such self-indulgent consumption. As long as those structures are perceived to be necessary for the maintenance of a given lifestyle and our resources for world mission, we have no valid messianic mission to people oppressed by those structures.

The recent General Conference Mennonite Church consultation on tax refusal in the light of current armament production and consumption—including preparation for nuclear war—reflects the type of messianic concern which can also validate worldwide Christian mission. Such confrontations can be seen as signs of hope for others as well as patterns of life which can stimulate concern and action in the rest of the world.

This tack in North America at the present time needs to be fulfilled with the help of missionaries of Japanese, African, Indian, or Latin American origins, who from their perspectives must be called to "come over . . . and help us." Such people need to function for extended periods in congregational and institutional contexts. They too can help us better understand and discern our world mission, both at home and abroad. This vision dates back to missionary conferences in the early part of this century; it still needs to be **done** as a part of our world mission.

The messianic dynamics throw light on the movements which constitute a major missionary task in primal societies. Understanding some of these dynamics in this light can also help to discern where and how to respond to such contexts. Each task is different in the light of directions of emergence. The special preparation required for such tasks also calls for missionaries who see their task as lifelong, though models might need to differ from area to area. The present situation of "fluidity" could indicate that the next decade or two, should God grant that time, would be especially important—perhaps unique—because of the openness of such movements. In the current post-colonial reshuffling, many of the Christian-oriented movements may find their way into relations with other Christian churches planted by the missions. Thus the task among primal movements could be more and more among the less Christian-oriented ones. But the need for the North American church to affirm this as a major assignment remains.

The worldwide Christian church, whose structures we often relate to in our sending of people abroad in non-Mennonite contexts, is by definition also caught up in the four-directional emergence. From the messianic perspective which our theology of mission affirms, we need to learn ever anew to discern into what contexts our workers are being sent, and the meaning of this for their understanding of their own tasks. Here, the believers church model—as distinct from the spiritualists, the theocrats, and the “folk church”—is still a valid tool for discernment, particularly when seen in the larger eschatological perspective of Messiah and his kingdom (Congar, 1975:95f; Cullman; Duquoc, 1972: 263ff; Moltmann, 1977, the fullest recent effort to give an eschatological perspective, the suffering-servant stance, in a context of Spirit empowered, messianic communities. His conclusions are not always shared by me, but his writing is instructive, particularly since he comes at it from the perspective of the *corpus christianum* tradition).

References cited

- Bender, Harold S.
1944 *The Anabaptist Vision* Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press
- Bender, Ross T.
1971 *The People of God, a Mennonite Interpretation of the Free Church Tradition* Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press
- Congar, Yves
1975 *Un Peuple Messianique* Paris: Cerf
- Cullmann, Oscar
Christological studies
- Desroche, Henri
1969 *Dieux d'Hommes* Paris: Mouton
1973 *Sociologie de l'Espérance* Paris: Calmann-Lévy
- Duquoc, Christian
1972 *Christologie*, Vol. 2. Paris: Cerf
- Garret, James L., (ed.)
1969 *The Concept of the Believers' Church* Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press
- Hershberger, Guy F., (ed.)
1957 *The Rediscovery of the Anabaptist Mission* Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press
- Horsch, James E., (ed.)
1978 *Mennonite Yearbook, 1977* Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press
- Kauffman, J. Howard, and Leland Harder
1975 *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later* Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press
- Kohn, Hans
1933 "Messianism," *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, Vol. 9 New York: Macmillan
- Lanternari, Vittorio
1963 *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults* New York: Knopf
- Mennonite Board of Missions
1978 *Mission-Focus* Vol. 6 No. 5, May 1978
- Moltmann, Jürgen
1977 *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution of Messianic Ecclesiology* New York: Harper
- Oosterwal, Gottfried
1973 *Modern Messianic Movements as a Theological and Missionary Challenge* Elkhart, Indiana: Institute of Mennonite Studies
- Shenk, Wilbert R.
1975 "Mission Agency and African Independent Churches," *International Review of Missions* Vol. LXIV No. 253, January 1975
- Turner, Harold W.
1973 "A Further Dimension for Missions," *International Review of Missions* Vol. LXII No. 247, July 1973