

Afterword

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This Missiology Reader comes at an important juncture in the life of ICOMB—the International Community of Mennonite Brethren. The global Mennonite Brethren movement itself is just over 150 years old. The first ICOMB meeting was held in 1990, meaning that the year of the Reader’s publication coincides with ICOMB’s 25th anniversary.

I represented the Canadian MB Conference at ICOMB’s annual summits for ten years, and now have served as ICOMB Executive Director for four. From this vantage point I might make a couple of observations.

Our identity is forged along three lines: community, confession and mission. They are like a three-legged stool. If one is missing or shortened, the stool doesn’t serve nearly as well.

ICOMB as an organization was formed to facilitate community among our national church bodies. At first the continents were represented, but soon enough each national church sat at the table. More and more, these representatives were national leaders, replacing missionaries from North America. The fellowship at Annual Summits is warm. There is personal sharing, foot-washing, and taking the Lord’s Supper together. Community is expressed in church life too. When the German churches suffered damage under flooding in 2002, the African church, struggling as it was to manage meagre resources, sent money as a gesture of care and solidarity.

Secondly, ICOMB invested in creating an international Confession of Faith. An international committee wrote the first draft. Right away “East met West” in creating a two-part confession: one a more narrative (eastern) approach describing the larger story of God and his work in our world; the second part a series of points outlining our core conviction-set (west). All national bodies discussed, suggested improvements, and otherwise had input in subsequent drafts. Since acceptance in 2004, and the 2006 release of the commentary-lesson book to study the Confession, almost all national church bodies have translated the Confession and commentary into their heart language.

Mission is the final leg that forges identity. Classic forms of mission have included evangelism and church planting, but also services: relief, community development,

medicine, education, and more. ICOMB leaders are thrilled to have a part in this Reader, as it is an expression of our missional character in action. ICOMB is the result of mission—the missionary effort brings people to Christ and into churches, which form an association that ultimately becomes a member of ICOMB. Thus while ICOMB is different than a mission agency, we are inextricably linked.

Currently MB Mission is working in forty or so countries. The future membership of ICOMB will surely grow out of the work of this “mother” mission agency based in North America.

But the circle is not complete until our national church bodies themselves form capacity to go beyond church planting within their cultural confines to making the leap into cross-cultural mission. Healthy national churches are already reproducing significantly. It’s that next step we pray and long for. And there are signs that it’s coming.

Just prior to the ICOMB Annual Summit in Peru, 2013, the Latin American leaders caucused for a day. They analyzed themselves as individual national churches, but also as a whole. In their report to the Summit delegates, they asked if there would be room for a mission sending agency based in Latin America—something to stand parallel to MB Mission. Since then Brazil has launched a mission agency to send workers overseas.

Elsewhere India is working on a mission training institute within the MB Centenary Bible College. The German churches are beginning to sit on the board of MB Mission in Europe, taking responsibility for the direction of that part of the work.

A second observation: we could divide the global family into four broad contexts. Churches live in *poverty*, *plenty*, under *persecution* and under *political challenge*. So which setting is the most fertile for mission and the growth of God’s kingdom?

In the past we might have said *plenty* because most missionaries came from the wealthy countries of Europe and North America. But that’s not the case anymore as recently we see more than 50% of the global missionary force comes from Asia, Africa and Latin America. Besides, while it’s the source of much funding, the Global North church can be spiritually bound by materialism.

Is it *persecution*? Our Anabaptist history—and all church history itself—tells us there is incredible spiritual power released in martyrdom. But it carries the danger of losing too many good leaders to really develop well. And the trauma carried by members can undermine their development.

Is it *poverty*? Mennonite Brethren could look to our own movement to make a positive case. The three largest national churches—India (200,000 members); Congo

(100,000) and Khmu Mission (almost 50,000)—are found in countries with some of the lowest per capita income indexes in the world. They say that need mobilizes other people's gifts. The problem is those "other people" may not hear the call of that need and thereby miss the chance to participate in freeing up gifts already residing in the poor... leaving the poor where they are.

Is it *political challenge*? This factor usually presents itself in war or conflict, or more benignly, neglect. C.S. Lewis in his book *Screwtape Letters* thought that war was the devil's tool to distract the church through fear or super-patriotism. The Mennonite Brethren story from the twentieth century is filled with witness and mission even during the conflict and terror in Russia. But the toll on leaders and members was severe. Today, the Panama church, made up entirely of indigenous people, suffers from political neglect. Their land rights are often overlooked, leaving them scrambling for justice at times, displacing focus for mission.

One unique political challenge in our global family is that facing the USA Mennonite Brethren. Like the Christians living in Rome in the first century, Christians living in the USA have to figure out how to prioritize the kingdom of God in the "most powerful nation on earth." No one else has quite the same environment as our American church family. How do they live out their peace conviction? How do they address hidden assumptions from the position of power that inevitably affect mission practice and missiology? Is it possible to take an authentic learning posture in order to hear what the rest of the global family has to say about mission?

It may not be possible to discern which of the four contexts has a particular advantage. We all have major challenges to overcome in the call of the Great Command and Great Commission.

Finally, one personal yearning. Wouldn't it be wonderful if publishing a Missiology Reader like this would provide a key to help unlock the potential of our movement to reach some of the more difficult parts of our world, where the major religions are powerful; where the thousands of unreached people groups reside? Most poignant for me as a Canadian is the yearning to reach the "First Nations" in Canada and the United States. Besides all the years of prejudicial public policy, the church itself inoculated the First Nations population to the gospel by operating residential schools and abusing children's rights. So far, over 100 years of attempts by Mennonite Brethren has yielded no standing church among the First Nations. Could this Reader contain keys to unlock this gate shut tight?

It's a lot of weight to put on one book. But it's not really the book. It's the people from our global family, historical examples and present-day writers, who are the key. May God be glorified and his kingdom extended through this intercultural sharing around the Great Commission.