

Cross-cultural perspectives on the call to ministry

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Mennonite Church Eastern Canada (MCEC) is becoming increasingly multicultural as people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds across the globe come to Canada, form congregations, and join our area church. Each Sunday across MCEC worship is conducted in twelve languages.

MCEC is also called on to bestow credentials (licensing or ordination) on pastoral leaders in these congregations. In the process we engage them in conversations about what it means to call people into ministry in this way. Some pastors with Asian origins come from within the Christian church; some have come out of the spiritual traditions of Buddhism or animism. As Christians they have experienced life, faith, Christian vocation, and

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ministry in denominations such as Alliance, Baptist, Church of Christ, and Presbyterian, to name a few. So we draw from a rich and diverse heritage as we develop the ministerium in MCEC.

In 2010 MCEC offered a program called Growing in Faith Together (GiFT), in which five English as a second language (ESL) pastors¹ and an elder were paired with six Caucasian pastors for five Saturdays of

sharing, study, and fellowship. This was a modest attempt to begin breaking down cultural barriers and learning how these pastors with their congregations are gifted people and gifts to one another in MCEC.

In the final session five pastors were invited to share with the group their experiences of call to ministry. The presentations of several pastors in this setting, augmented by interviews, form the anecdotal base for this article. Out of these stories we can see the blessings and the challenges of coming to a common mind about

the meaning of call to ministry and the credentialing process that follows.

The Mennonite Church has a polity statement that may form a helpful backdrop against which to discuss our multicultural experience of call to ministry. According to this statement, “As a church committed to God’s vision of reconciling all persons in Christ and breaking down all dividing walls of hostility (Eph. 2), we affirm that God bestows ministry gifts and God calls persons to leadership ministries without regard to gender, race, ethnic/cultural origin, or social standing. We, as the community of God’s people, call out persons in the same manner.”²

As we sought out pastors for the GiFT program, we discovered that the congregations of Asian origin did not have female pastors. (The Hispanic congregations would be more open to women’s leadership.) Thus we paired one Caucasian woman pastor with an ESL female elder to enrich the conversation. Could this move contribute to future openness to calling women to ministry in these settings?

Mennonites often invoke the phrase “the priesthood of all believers,” as Arnold Snyder says, “to extol the virtues of an idealized Anabaptist priesthood of all believers—all members are pastors, it is said, and minister in a variety of ways.”³ The concept *priesthood of all believers* is not understood or applied consistently. It originated with Martin Luther, who challenged the notion that believers need a priest to dispense grace to them. In that sense, each Christian is his or her own priest, receiving grace by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

The key issue of the Reformation era was the question of authority. Who has the authority to “dispense” grace in the church? In the place of apostolic succession (from Christ through Peter to the bishops of Rome), the Reformers pointed to scripture as the ultimate authority. But that move doesn’t resolve the matter; it raises another question: who then is vested with the authority to interpret scripture? The mainline Reformers said this authority is given only to those who had been called by a legitimate political authority.

Anabaptists rejected this link between church and state. When pressed, they stated that their authority came from God through the Spirit. And thus we see something like a “priesthood of all

believers” emerging in early Anabaptism. But as Snyder notes, “this ‘spiritual democracy’ was not destined to last.”⁴ Soon the “office” of pastor was instituted among Anabaptists and their spiritual descendants, the Mennonites. Snyder notes that the Schleithem confession (adopted by Swiss Brethren in 1527) and finally Menno Simons himself were clear that the only true pastors would be those chosen by the elders and/or the congregation. So the priesthood of all believers was rendered functionally obsolete, though compared to mainline Protestant churches, the surviving Anabaptist groups allowed for a much higher participation of the laity in church life.⁵

Our current *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* holds to an understanding of the priesthood of all believers that recognizes that “the Holy Spirit gives gifts to all believers and empowers them for service in the church and in the world,” even as it recognizes “that God calls particular persons to specific leadership ministries and offices.”⁶ Mennonite congregations today may emphasize one or the other of these perspectives on Christian vocation.

Often the debate is between those who think in terms of the pastoral *function* and those who support a pastoral *office*. The former perhaps more closely admits the notion of priesthood of all believers and the suggestion that “all are ministers,” as many church bulletins in the 1960s and 1970s declared. The latter recognizes that in the middle of the list of spiritual gifts in Ephesians 4 comes the statement “and some are pastors.” A unique place is reserved for pastors as called-out leaders in the congregation. Yet one of the chief roles of the pastor is to call out the gifts of the people and ensure that they are used for building up the body (Eph. 4: 12).

The aforementioned ESL congregations join MCEC for a variety of reasons. A common theme is that they have found a basic affinity with Anabaptist thought, and especially with the gospel of peace. Is there also an affinity with Anabaptist understandings, beliefs, and practices of call to ministry?

Repairing broken walls, resisting hierarchy

Bock Ki Kim reflects on the hyphenated identity he acquired in coming to Canada. He describes himself as Korean-Canadian-

Christian-Anabaptist-Mennonite. When asked to speak about his call to ministry, he is quick to note that he was first called by God to be a follower of Jesus Christ. This is the Christian vocation that stems from baptism.

Eventually he realized that becoming a pastor is another way of following Jesus. He had been working toward a doctoral degree but then embarked on theological studies. He studied for seven

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years in Mennonite settings, beginning in Winnipeg. He remembered that for the love of Rachel, Jacob served seven years. He decided that for the love of God and Jesus Christ, he could study theology for seven years!

In 1999, before Bock Ki applied to study at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana), some friends pointed him to Isaiah 58:11–12: “You will be called Repairer of Broken Walls” (NIV). Bock Ki realized that many people have been hurt:

how will they heal themselves? He understood that people might find life and healing through the gospel, as he would present it.

When he was invited to work in Korean ministry in Toronto, Bock Ki struggled with the sense that he was the pastor “wearing the big hat.” He identifies with Jonah: He kept asking God why he was there. And after four years in the Toronto ministry, he ran away. But God spoke to him again. The pastor of Vision church at that time met with him and suggested that Bock Ki might succeed him in ministry there. That is the Korean way: you name your successor. Bock Ki felt the best way to minister is as a lay minister. He thought perhaps translation work might be his call. But various people, including the missions minister at MCEC, kept nudging him to accept the call to ministry.

Bock Ki reflects that initially the call came from outside himself. His father, a Presbyterian minister in Korea, always hoped that one of his sons would become a pastor. That Bock Ki gradually came to an inner sense of call he says was God's work, not his own initiative.

He accepted the call to ministry in MCEC because he values the Anabaptist way, which does not promote a hierarchical view

of the pastor's place. While he values much of what Anabaptism has to offer, he is less inclined to identify strongly with the "Mennonite" dimension of his "hyphenated self." So many cultural trappings are linked to Mennonite identity that he cannot feel totally at home with that designation.

Bock Ki says there are many pastors in Korea now. He notes that many people call themselves "pastor" without having had that call confirmed by a congregation; indeed, many of them have no pastoral placement. In reaction to this trend, Bock Ki's inclination was to hide his identity as pastor, especially if it implied a certain personal status within a hierarchical system. He did not wish to follow the mainstream way, and he sees Anabaptism as following a different path in this respect. He concludes that whether one is ordained or a lay person, God's call, our Christian vocation, is what ultimately matters.

"I don't hide myself"

Chinda Kommola, a native of Laos, came to know Christ from an animist/Buddhist background. He is profoundly aware that we are what we have been given. As 2 Corinthians 5:18 says, we who

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have been reconciled to God through Christ have been given the ministry of reconciliation. He considers himself a servant: "I serve God any time, any place. I don't hide myself." In Laos, a communist country, this declaration could put one in jail.

Nonetheless, in a refugee camp in Laos he served as a youth pastor and evangelist among his people. He identifies with Moses on several levels. First was his disclaimer about his call to ministry—"Who am I, that I should go?" Then he began to realize that it is God's mission that we are on, not ours. We should not try to take things into our own hands, as Moses did when he struck the rock instead of speaking to it to call forth water for the people. Chinda sees a metaphor here. It is the word of God that speaks to people; his role as pastor is simply to love.

Like many of his compatriots, Chinda once thought that Christianity is all about being Western. Then he learned from

Acts 15:14 that from the gentiles God was calling out a people. The notion of a people separated to God was a shift for him. He had tried various churches in Canada, and in at least one felt uncomfortable with the group's politics. He realizes now that not all Christians are the same, and that Canada is not necessarily a Christian country—a perspective consonant with Anabaptist understandings. He senses some affinity with Anabaptist-Mennonites. He is pastor of the Lao Canadian Evangelical Mennonite Church and president of the Lao Mennonite Conference.

As an evangelist, Chinda feels a strong call to plant churches back in Laos. He finds that being identified as Mennonite facilitates this conversation, in a context where all too often Christianity is identified with the Central Intelligence Agency. Here too he feels an affinity with Moses: when Chinda speaks to the Laotian government, he feels like Moses speaking to Pharaoh.

In Laotian culture, family values are important. Often leaders lack the support of their family. So in addition to the support of the congregation, as a locus for clarifying and owning the call, Chinda sees family support as critical. He says: “Be faithful to God, your family, and people around you.” He adds: “And know your mission, as pastor, evangelist, and Mennonite.”

God calls people like you

Brian Quan is a Chinese Canadian who pastors the English-speaking portion of Toronto Chinese Mennonite Church. His pastor noticed how much Brian served the congregation, and he kept asking him: “You are going to seminary, aren't you?” But Brian was reluctant. One day when a new pastor was installed at Toronto Chinese Mennonite, a guest speaker spoke about the call of Samuel (1 Sam. 3:8–21). He said: “God calls people like James, and like Brian.” Needless to say, Brian felt singled out, but he was relieved that nobody else seemed to take note.

He attended a dinner for Christian professionals at which the guest speaker was a financial planner. Brian expected him to talk about economics. Instead he shared about his life as a Christian, and portrayed himself as a father and a Christian with a seminary degree. He spoke on the importance of being authentic about how God calls us and uses us. The door prize of the evening went to Brian. Was this another gentle reminder that God had been

speaking to him? That night he resolved to enter full-time seminary studies at Tyndale in Toronto.

Brian entered ministry in the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church, where it was expected that within two years he would be ordained. He postponed ordination for six years. After ordination

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he lived a bit uncomfortably with the Chinese honorific titles given to him and his wife. He experienced much discomfort when youth called him “pastor,” and he felt somehow displaced from being “friend” in his relationships in the congregation. Honour and respect are strong Chinese values.

When he left the Mennonite Church, it seemed like the right thing to do. But during the ten years of his service in the Alliance

church, people from the Mennonite Church kept asking him to come back. So now he feels he has indeed come home and is reconnecting to his spiritual roots in the Mennonite Church.

A strong sense of God’s call

Trakoon Yoel Masyawong, pastor of Grace Lao Mennonite Church in Kitchener, Ontario, grew up in a pastor’s family in Thailand, in a small Baptist church near the dormitory where he lived during school terms. He routinely assisted his father in music ministry. After completing high school he did a ministry internship for one year to test his call.

Yoel attended Bible school in Bangkok. On weekends he went out to serve in various churches. In his third year of study he did a nine-month internship in a Pentecostal church, followed by a fourth year of study toward a bachelor’s degree in theology, accredited by the Asian Theological Association.

In 2001 Yoel came to Canada through the Mennonite Central Committee International Visitor Exchange Program (IVEP), working half time at Shantz Mennonite Church and half time at House of Friendship, a social service agency in Kitchener.

He returned to Thailand for two years to assist in student ministry in the Tao-Poon Mitrijit Church (Church of Christ) in Chiang Mai, located next to the university in the second largest city in Thailand. The congregation desired that he be licensed, so

they sent his name to the denominational office, from which he received his license by mail. There was no special service of licensing as is conducted in MCEC.⁷

Yoel was called back to Canada to serve at Grace Lao, where he had preached several times when he was there through IVEP. He was licensed for this ministry in MCEC in 2004, and ordained in 2008. Yoel was surprised that he was invited to be ordained at such a young age. In Thailand one could serve for decades before being ordained, and would probably be at least forty-five years of age. Thai Christians have the same attitude about this role that Brian Quan reports: ordination is a high honour. Or as Bock Ki Kim puts it, the ordained person wears a big hat.

Yoel, in reflecting on call to ministry in Thailand, suggests there is perhaps a stronger sense of God's call, and less emphasis on the call of the church or community. Of course, if you are called by God, you are committed to the church. As in our MCEC context, ordination is for the wider church, not just for service in a specific congregation. But the call is highly personal.

Learnings

In hearing these testimonials from people with origins in the Christian churches in the Asian context, one cannot easily separate denominational emphases from what has cultural overtones in that context. One could perhaps summarize the call to ministry in an Asian context in this way: God *calls* a person to ministry, and the congregation *receives* that person as their pastor.

Several of the pastors interviewed for this article are beginning to understand that Anabaptism not only emphasizes the gospel of peace but also reflects a somewhat different sense of what it means to be gifted and called into ministry. "The priesthood of all believers" suggests that ministry belongs to the whole people of God, with less emphasis on the special status of called-out pastors. These men are still sorting out what this idea means in practice as they own their particular call to ministry. Several of them are relieved to discover that perhaps status and high honour no longer need to be so much a part of ordination.

One challenge some of these pastors face is the financial constraints confronting many immigrant congregations. Yoel Masyawong drives school bus to augment his income. Chinda

Kommola is trained as a toolmaker and has worked in building machinery, gauges, and tools for automotive and aerospace applications. He works four days a week as a tradesman, then does pastoral work Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Bo Ki Kim's quarter-time salary is supplemented with honoraria for his translation work with Anabaptist materials for the Korean context. Brian Quan is employed full time in the English congregation of Toronto Chinese Mennonite Church.

Another challenge for these pastors is coming to terms with their hyphenated identities as Laotian/Korean/Chinese/Canadian-Christian-Evangelical-Anabaptist-Mennonites. They want to fit in in the Mennonite context without losing their identity. Some see the "Mennonite" designation is too culture laden; they prefer to be adopted into the Anabaptist vision. But Chinda notes that being known as Mennonite serves a practical function in his witness in Laos. In any case, the old cultural emphases are ever present, even in the process of doing theology and being the church, and they affect how we understand what it means to be gifted and called into ministry in the church.

Notes

¹ The designation *ethnic* does not adequately distinguish the people of whom we are speaking, since we often refer to the original Mennonite groups as ethnic Mennonites. In any case, we are all ethnic, rooted in various cultural backgrounds and maintaining various cultural distinctiveness. "English as second language" (ESL) thus seems to be a more helpful and acceptable way to designate the groups under consideration in this article.

² *A Mennonite Polity for Ministerial Leadership* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1996), 19.

³ C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: Revised Student Edition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1997), 418.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 417.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 418.

⁶ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995), 59.

⁷ Yoel's brief account seems to indicate that the evangelical churches in Thailand, though from various denominational backgrounds, readily invite movement of leaders and credentials between churches.

About the author

Maurice Martin has been a pastor since 1974; most recently (until his retirement in 2010) he served as regional minister in Mennonite Church Eastern Canada. At present he is teaching Anabaptist history and thought as part of a certificate program for pastors in Canada who have come from a variety of countries and denominations.