

# Dare to become a global church

Gilberto Flores

**F**or early Christian believers, following Jesus' imperatives to "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15) and "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19) entailed facing certain risks and cultural difficulties. The disciples had to live through the painful experience of change to understand the scope of the gospel. They also had to recognize the limitations of their cultural boundaries. The church that obeys the commission to go to every part of the

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## The other Mennonites

Cornelius receives the gospel. An Ethiopian is baptized. A church grows in Samaria. Christian communities flourish in Asia Minor among people of Greek ancestry. Antioch and Ephesus become missionary centers. The "others" have become part of God's family and heirs of the same commitment to mission.

What does this mean for Mennonites?

After the missionary fervor of the early Anabaptists waned, Mennonites turned

inward. Some churches stayed alive only by the grace of biological growth. When they eventually decided to open the curtains and unlatch the windows, they found many people were open to the gospel. These others embraced Anabaptist faith with enthusiasm and devotion.

However, these new Mennonites are children of a different reality. They live in different conditions, their search reflects other

questions and worries. Violence, poverty, lack of opportunity, and political instability mark the experiences of many of these Mennonites. Their faith and practice, ethics and values often differ from that of their spiritual parents. Brothers and sisters of these cultures take on the life-giving values of the kingdom of God: active pacifism, a prophetic voice, involvement with the social realities of the communities in which they develop their ministry, a productive evangelism, and dialogue with other faiths. There is a spirituality that walks in the profane, a faith that becomes flesh in order to become the bread of life.

The consequences of this kind of faith have been both good and bad. These Mennonites have had an impact on society and have been heard by governments. They have contributed to peace talks and lived the ecumenical experience. They have been persecuted and suffered violence and death.

Perhaps this explains why Mennonites of the South feel closer to their Anabaptist ancestors who suffered persecution than to Mennonite churches in North America today. Mennonites in the South have had fruitful discussions about the Bible and Anabaptist history. The conversation with North Americans has been mainly a business conversation, and an administrative relationship. This uncomfortable situation has many asymmetries:

- political power in the North, political weakness in the South;
- economic power in the North, weakness in the South;
- a church that supports the system in the North, a church in conflict with the system in the South;
- a church inside the dominant culture in the North, a marginal church in the South;
- a church that does not evaluate itself critically in the North, a church that is evaluated critically by the South;
- an established church in the North, a church in progress in the South.

The church in North America has been a blessing to the South, but these unresolved asymmetries frighten the South even as we walk together.

### **North American tribalism**

Mennonite identity in North America has strong connections with tribal paradigms. This identity reflects strong family ties and European Anabaptist inheritance, in both a genealogical and a

cultural sense. In the North, one speaks about frugal Mennonite lifestyle, Mennonite dress, Mennonite negotiation styles (involving countless committees). North American Mennonite identity is evident in musical traditions and in resistance to contemporary worship.

Mennonite identity also has roots in monastic traditions: simplicity and asceticism are not cultural in a social sense but

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express the spirituality that drives the Mennonite church and becomes Mennonite culture. Emphases such as peace, justice, and service are part of the traditional Mennonite profile but are not reflected in the church's walk.

Mennonites of other countries cannot appeal to their Anabaptist genealogy; their identity has come from different paths. Their walk as a church has forced them to rethink Mennonite theology and the nature of the church. This is why these brothers and sisters often appeal to diverse traditions of sixteenth-century Anabaptism to confirm their ideas and actions. Perhaps the best place to reread Anabaptist history and theology

now is in the South. North American Mennonites, with some exceptions, have turned Anabaptism into an honorable but archaic subject to study in seminary.

In the South, Anabaptism sets a course for the practice of faith in daily life; it becomes an evangelization that disturbs the social conscience. Mennonites in the South use different words to name traditional emphases: they express peace in an aggressive way, and they describe themselves not as pacifists, but as peacemakers. They view solidarity with the poor as a signal of justice, and evangelization is a political voice in certain circumstances. Hans Denck, Dirk Philips, and other rebels of the Anabaptist movement become notable figures. These radical reformers emphasized conversion of the sinner, and they invited new believers to become part of the great project of God.

Worship should be a celebration of life, not a ceremony that came from the North. Both sides of the world agree on a common

faith, with roots in the gospel of Christ, and in the sense of a global family. They need each other to inspire change and they can support each other in doing better the things that concern faith and mission in the world. Their Anabaptist legacies, inherited from the same source but interpreted in different ways, should inspire unity. Asymmetries that cannot be changed immediately can be softened, and we can seek to abandon ways of working that have created these asymmetries.

### **What is a global church?**

The term *globalization* is used to indicate a world economically united for production and consumption. Globalization connects the owners of the economies of poor countries with those of rich countries and allows greater control of unstable countries. The poor are pawns that serve the global economy.

Why should the Mennonite church in the North move toward globalization? How do we do it without following the oppressive patterns of the system within which the church exists?

Globalization for the church involves generating hope in a world that gets smaller and at the same time more complex and asymmetric, a world where contradictions make social communities more defensive and skeptical.

For the church, globalization means being vulnerable in order to learn from others, and at the same time teaching the best we have. It means listening to what the Spirit is saying through different voices. It means cooperating, being accountable to others, and being flexible organizationally, as demanded by relationships with partners who live in a world where revolutionary changes occur from day to day.

Globalization means searching for common objectives with the church in the South, not fulfilling needs that North Americans perceive, as has been the custom. Globalization means working in a spirit of humility and adopting approaches that depart from previously established responses. Humility does not use the power of money, education, or race to set the terms of the relationship. Humility understands that others also have vision for a global church.

Mennonite World Conference is making efforts to value the resources of a global Mennonite church, but the United States

and Canada continue to be great islands. The church in North America has given the impression that it can survive without other Mennonites. It believes it has the resources and knows how to use them. Though this belief is only partially true, it influences the way Mennonites around the world see the church in the North.

A globalization worthy of the church must ensure that the maturity of the church in other parts of the world is recognized. It should ensure greater fluidity in exchanging resources that already exist in all the churches. Churches outside North America can make valuable contributions in evangelism, church planting,

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opening missionary borders. They also offer examples of suffering and witness for peace. The church in North America can offer education, opportunities for service, economic resources, and global strategies to help the other churches understand globalization and bring a systematic approach to church work.

Listening to the church in the South has always been difficult for the North. The same missionary errors continue to be made, with the North's insistence that dependence and subsidy are essential to mission. The churches in the South want a relationship with the churches of the North and the North has sent administrators. The churches in the South have asked not to be used as folkloric

curiosities or missionary trophies; they demand to be seen as adults in a common faith.

### **A new incarnation**

Globalization favors a new incarnation of the church in the world. The church is in the world as a witness of the kingdom; its identity is missional. Globalization is not a matter of sending missionaries. People who come as missionaries do not come from the North or from the South. They come to a local church and that congregation introduces them in the real context where the church is incarnated. The local church helps that missionary to

embrace the new realm with the same passion Christ shows us from the cross. In the theological sense of mission they are no longer strangers, but part of the missional act of the church that receives them.

I believe that we need to remove the appearance that the church's globalization is a purely functional or structural process. Instead, we need to think more theologically and courageously about being a global church.

### **About the author**

Gilberto Flores is a Guatemalan pastor and church leader who now serves in Newton, Kansas, as Denominational Minister in the Office of Ministerial Leadership of the Mennonite Church, USA. He brings cross-cultural experience and a global perspective to North American churches and ministry. This essay is adapted from his address to the annual assembly of Mennonite Church Canada, Lethbridge 2000.