

Aspiring to be a three-mile-an-hour people

Jonathan Bonk

Monocultural congregations in a globalized world

As a people, Mennonites seem to reside somewhere on a line between two polar ends of a rural-urban continuum, holding widely divergent political, social, and theological perspectives whose roots can be traced to geography and regional demographics.

Mennonites who live in culturally diverse cities are sometimes quietly condescending toward those who live in smaller, less ethnically diverse, more “isolated” or “insular” communities. Urban Mennonites may think of themselves as being more attuned to the pressing issues of the day, and hence more obviously compliant with popular notions of what it means to be a multicultural church. Their congregations have a better chance—albeit seldom realized—of being racially diverse: They come into natural contact with minorities every day. The refugees they sponsor settle naturally into their cities. University student exchange programs give them opportunity to host young people from around the world. They also tend to be socially and politically self-defined as liberal or progressive.

Rural or small-town Mennonites, on the other hand, are even less racially and culturally diverse than their urban counterparts. Minority groups are the stuff of the news—and, if one is in the United States, that could mean “news” with a xenophobic bent. It is difficult to know how or where refugees from highly urbanized cultures might fit into a racially and religiously homogeneous rural community, with its more limited vocational and employment opportunities. In these settings, there are few universities or colleges to which international students are naturally attracted, and young adults from these communities are often moving away to pursue educational and employment opportunities elsewhere. That such communities tend to be instinctively conservative, or preservative, both socially and politically, is natural.

Thanks to an abundance of Mennonite international nongovernmental organizations such as Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Disaster Service, church members from across the rural-urban continuum

have opportunity to converge through service opportunities at home and beyond. But is this enough to make a local church a multicultural congregation? Probably not, although it can raise an awareness that sees beyond the confines of monoculturalism.

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Global demographics and monocultural congregations

For more than two centuries, Western Christianity's relationship to the rest of the world has been mediated by what Latin American missiologists René Padilla and Samuel Escobar characterized as "managerial missions."

I remember when the long-anticipated *World Christian Trends AD 30–AD 2200: Interpreting the Annual*

Christian Megacensus made its debut.¹ Among the most extraordinary reference works ever published, this impressive supplement to the second edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*—10 inches wide, 12 inches tall, 2½ inches thick, and weighing 4½ pounds—comprises 934 dense, three-column pages of statistics, analyses, forecasts, and maps. Included is a 59-page overview of "1,500 global plans to evangelize the world." This was the distillation of two centuries of Western theorizing about world mission and global Christianity.

Such tools have been a mainstay of Western global evangelization efforts since William Carey published *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens: In Which the Religious State of the Different Nations of the World, the Success of Former Undertakings, and the Practicability of Further Undertakings Are Considered* in 1792.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this way of thinking, of course. We humans seem to require a sense of place, purpose, and direc-

1 David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Trends AD 30–AD 2200: Interpreting the Annual Christian Megacensus* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2001).

tion in order to thrive. As Mennonites, our faith provides this for us. We came from somewhere for a reason. We are going somewhere for a reason.

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Our lives should and can be lived purposefully. Or put another way, our faith answers the three big questions confronting every human being: (1) Who is God? (2) Who am I? and (3) What does that mean?

But the Christian faith is not fundamentally organizational but *relational*, *personal*, and hence *incarnational*. No matter the country, the culture, or the language, these constitute the essential elements of Christian servant encounter with the other.

It is perhaps for this reason that a closer analysis of managerial mission methods reveals a gap between well-intended and energetically applied strategies, on the one hand, and the actual growth of the church worldwide, on the other. According to figures appearing in the January 2018 issue of the *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, between 1900 and 2018 the number of self-confessed Christians increased nearly fivefold: from 557,755,000 to 2,506,835,000. That is remarkable!

But as impressive as such numbers at first seem, and despite the deployment of hundreds of thousands of Christian foreign missionaries over the past two centuries, the numerical growth of the global church has not kept pace with population growth. Whereas in 1900 Christians represented 34.4 percent of the total world population, in 2018 that proportion has slipped to 33 percent. While global annual population growth is projected at 1.18 percent, annual growth trends for Christianity are projected to be 0.11 percent. It is as though we were living in the land of the Red Queen in *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*. Alice has been running as fast as she can for a long time but getting nowhere:

“Well, in our country,” said Alice, still panting a little, “you’d generally get to somewhere else—if you run very fast for a long time, as we’ve been doing.”

“A slow sort of country!” said the Queen. “Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!”

Behind these numbers, of course, is the more encouraging demographic shift that has taken place in the last fifty years. Beyond its old Western heartlands, Christianity is growing at an annual rate of 2.87 percent in Africa, in Asia at 2.13 percent, and in Latin America at 1.20 percent. This is in contrast to Europe (including Russia) where it is creeping along at 0.04 percent, and to Northern America with a growth rate of 0.58 percent.²

How Jesus was multicultural

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It is easy to forget how laughably parochial Jesus was by standards then and now. And yet we’ve been taught from infancy that God so loved the world that he sent his Son to the much-disdained mixed-blood world of Galilee of the Gentiles, as a helpless infant, born to an unwed peasant.

the world that he sent his Son to the much-disdained mixed-blood world of Galilee of the Gentiles, as a helpless infant, born to an unwed peasant mother and carpenter stepfather in an occupied corner of a brutally oppressive empire.

Who was this obscure Galilean? Unlike Caesar, the greatest of his contemporaries—a successful general, an outstanding orator, and one of the most highly regarded Latin prose authors of his day—Jesus left no written report or autobiography. He vanquished no enemies in war. He held no important office. He was not part of the Jewish religious, political, or economic establishment. None of the writings of the

most important chroniclers of his era say anything about him.

Available records are quite skimpy: four Gospels comprising a total of just under 65,000 words—the length of a short novel. Because each Gospel provides an account of the same person, there is understandable

² Todd M. Johnson et al., “Christianity 2018: More African Christians and Counting Martyrs,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 42, no. 1 (January 2018): 25.

duplication and overlap, along with some minor discrepancies. That's all we have. It is from these Gospels that we learn about Jesus and from Jesus, and about ourselves as his followers.

We know little about his growing-up years, when he and his parents finally returned from Egypt to Nazareth (Matt. 2:19–23). We are told that, like any other child, he had to learn obedience (Luke 2:51; Heb. 5:8). We

At the level of everyday life, who determined Jesus's priorities? It was the men, women, and children he encountered, who—according to the Gospel record—hounded and pursued him from place to place, hoping to derive some personal benefit or to at least indulge their curiosity.

also know that Jesus had brothers and sisters, since Joseph and Mary continued to have children. Jesus would have been the eldest son (Matt. 12:46–50; Mark 3:31–35; Luke 8:19–21). Presumably Joseph and his sons worked as carpenters. They were devout, attending the local synagogue (Luke 4:16) and making an annual trip to the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41).

What Jesus was like as a boy growing up with his playmates and friends we do not know. The Gospels mention only his seemingly inconsiderate behavior as an adolescent, when he remained behind in Jerusalem as his parents began their return journey home, thus causing

them consternation. Aside from this, we learn only that “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52, NIV).

We read in Luke 4 that after his grueling forty days of temptation in the wilderness, he visited the synagogue in Nazareth, “where he had been brought up.” There, in his home synagogue, this well-known local young man read from Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (Luke 4:18–19).

When he identified himself as the subject of this passage, his listeners' pride in their hometown boy turned to shock and rage at his audacity: “All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff.” Jesus narrowly escaped the mob and embarked on his three-year mission to save the world.

Even for the last three, eventful years of his life, Gospel accounts provide only selective information on how he busied himself in accomplishing his Father's plans for reconciling the world. But this fact makes what we read even more compelling.

The world is a big place to save in only three years! How did Jesus go about it?

In our managerial world, interruptions are considered antithetical to what we're supposed to be doing. But from a Gospel perspective, it may be these very interruptions that put us in touch with God's purposes for us.

Did Jesus travel to the uttermost parts of the earth? No. He repeatedly insisted that his will was to do the will of his Father in heaven right where he was. But what—exactly—was that will? At the level of everyday life, who determined his priorities? It was the men, women, and children he encountered, who—according to the Gospel record—hounded and pursued him from place to place, hoping to derive some personal benefit or to at least indulge their curiosity.

Jesus was easy to interrupt, because he was usually on foot. Kosuke Koyama

evocatively describes Jesus as our *three mile an hour God*.³

At Yale Divinity School, I used to have students in my evangelism class read the Gospels, locating and removing all instances of interruptions in the life of Jesus and his responses to them. As they read, students would be asking themselves, "How and why did this person see in Jesus the possibility of good news for them in their situation? How did Jesus respond to the person's notion of good news?" Off the students would go. By the time they returned to class the following week—with all interruption-related content stripped from the synoptic accounts of Jesus's life and ministry—the Gospels were in tatters. They began to see with fresh understanding how Jesus lived out the good news. God in Jesus made his priority ordinary men and women with desperately personal needs for acceptance, healing, deliverance, and forgiveness. He responded to each one compassionately and constructively. This was good news!

In the ways and words of Jesus and his community of disciples we uncover the DNA at the core of a local congregation that can love the world


³ Kosuke Koyama, *Three Mile an Hour God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982).

as Jesus loved the world. It is fidelity to Jesus's way of living that makes any congregation, however rural or isolated, a genuinely multicultural church.

In our managerial world—governed by detailed plans, narrowly focused statements of purpose, packed schedules, and precise timekeeping—interruptions are considered antithetical to what we're supposed to be doing. But from a Gospel perspective, it may be these very interruptions that put us in touch with God's purposes for us, by moving us beyond our predictable comfort zones. It is our response to interruptions that ensures that we become what God intended us to be, profoundly multicultural local congregations.

What kinds of interruptions should we expect, and whom should we be prepared to welcome?

If we knew with any precision the answers to the kinds of interruptions we should expect and whom we should be prepared to welcome, we



Loving these religiously, politically, judicially stigmatized neighbors as ourselves—bringing them into the warmth, acceptance, and security of our inner circles of fellowship—is how we love God. It is how we become genuinely multicultural. There is no other way.

would not consider the interruptions interruptions! But based on Jesus's Nazareth manifesto in Luke 4, on his final judgment day portrayal in Matthew 25, and on the priorities characterizing his short ministry, we must surely begin with those marginalized by our culture: strangers, enemies, poor folks, sick folks, prisoners—and other socially, religiously, politically, or judicially stigmatized folks. Loving these neighbors as ourselves—that is, bringing them into the warmth, acceptance, and security of our inner circles of fellowship—is how we love God. It is how we become genuinely multicultural. There is no other way.

We must resist the lie, perpetuated by Caesar and his ilk across the ages, that men and women bear the state's image, and that on this basis they can be legally mistreated, ignored, imprisoned, deported, or destroyed. As Jesus pointed out (Matt. 22:21), Caesar can put an image of his head on a piece of metal or on a self-aggrandizing monument. But Caesar has no ultimate jurisdiction over human beings. They do not bear his image. To render human beings, made in the image of God, to Caesar is idolatry.

How does Jesus come into the church?

It is through the human beings marginalized, stigmatized, and delegitimized by Caesar that Jesus himself visits us—the hungry, the thirsty, the disenfranchised, the imprisoned, the stranger, the enemy. On that day when sheep and goats are separated, Jesus will not be looking for doctrinal statements or church memberships or short-term mission junkets but for practical kindness to these kinds of folks. Nothing more.

If faith, in our congregations, does not mean this, then ours is a hollow, self-serving faith, far removed from the impulses and priorities of the One whose name we bear. Such congregations will never fulfill their purposes in any biblical sense. They will be mere sectarian enclaves of self-protection, self-justification, and self-service, keeping outsiders at bay—the very antithesis of Jesus.

The kind of realistic multiculturalism to which we are called does not require a telescope that enables us to see distant places. It begins and continues with those who are estranged from our own culture, in our own immediate surroundings.

Anytime we think of ourselves as “we,” we are in danger. This is particularly true for comfortable congregations in the richest countries in the world. In Revelation 2 and 3, it is the church in Laodicea that faces the most profound existential crisis that any congregation can face: Jesus is not in the church but outside knocking, asking for admission.


When Jesus urged his disciples to “open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest” (John 4:35),

he had just finished his conversation with a Samaritan women rendered invisible to the disciples by her religion, gender, multiple marriages, and ethnicity.

Open your eyes!

In chapter 2 (“Telescopic Philanthropy”) of *Bleak House*, Charles Dickens describes Mrs. Jellyby as “a pretty . . . woman, of from forty to fifty, with handsome eyes, though they had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off. As if . . . they could see nothing nearer than Africa!” Dickens goes on to write that Mrs. Jellyby, her house, her husband, her children, and her boarders—all showed marked signs of neglect. As Dickens has her explain, with just a tinge of pride: “The Africa project at present employs my whole time [and] involves me in correspondence with public bodies, and

with private individuals anxious for the welfare of their species all over the country. I am happy to say it is advancing. We hope by this time next



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year to have from a hundred and fifty to two hundred healthy families cultivating coffee and educating the natives of Borriboola-Gha, on the left bank of the Niger.” Dickens published this book in serial form in 1852–53, at a time when evangelical missionary zeal in Britain began to flourish. Self-confident, evangelistically assertive Christianity in its various forms was the religious expression of British imperial power.

The kind of realistic multiculturalism to which we are called and for which we have been equipped does not require a telescope that enables us to see distant

places. It goes beyond the esoteric image of peoples of different colors and languages mingling in the same congregations on Sunday mornings! It begins and continues with those who are estranged from our own culture, in our own immediate surroundings. If the racial demographics of our context happen to be diverse, then our multiculturalism will include those from other races and countries of origin. But a genuinely multicultural congregation will always be a three-mile-an-hour church, welcoming the interrupting Jesus, whatever his circumstances, however inconvenient and time-consuming his needs, and whatever his social or racial guise.

About the author

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