

# Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology

## **Proclaiming Christ in a pluralistic context**

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# Editorial

Mary H. Schertz

There is a certain luxury in goodbyes, so I ask you to indulge me when I say that this topic may be the most important theme *Vision* has addressed in the eighteen years that we have been publishing the journal. Since this is my last editorial for these pages, I will be so bold as to make that assertion. This work has been dear to my heart, and I look to the past with gratitude. I also look to the future with gratitude, curious and hopeful about what my beloved colleagues will bring to the work ahead. I am confident



**In these pages you will not see anyone arguing that we need to tone down our proclamation of Christ in order to avoid offending our dialogue partners. Yes, in all cases, we must be respectful. Yes, in all cases, we must listen—even more than we speak. But we need not deny the strength of our convictions.**

that those who carry on the work of publishing *Vision* will continue to address important questions for the church and those who love it to think about and discuss. But there may be no subject more important than the one that is the focus of this issue: why and how we proclaim Christ in a pluralist context. It is fundamental to who we are as Christians and what we do as Christians.

You will find in these pages a rich assortment of experiences and perspectives. You will find a diversity of opinion and a variety of answers and suggestions. There is also something, I am gratified to say, that you will not find. You will not see anyone arguing that we need to tone down our proclamation of Christ in order to avoid offending our ecumenical or interfaith dialogue partners. Yes, in all cases, we must be respectful. Yes, in all cases, we must listen—even more than we speak. But we need not deny the strength of our convictions. We must, as did the early Christians, speak boldly of Christ. Just as we would wish others to do to us, we must honor differences as well as commonalities. Both are significant.

The issue begins with four articles that set the stage for discussion and understanding. They also embody the four aspects of this topic—pastoral,

theological, missiological, sociological—that echo in the rest of the issue. April Yamasaki writes about engaging in interfaith and ecumenical conversation as being akin to conversing with a friend or co-worker or family member who does not share our faith. Such conversation nurtures the spirit, our own spirit and the spirit of our congregations. Karl Koop helpfully describes three views of the relationship between Christian faith and other religions, and then considers a variety of perspectives on the subject that are present in the biblical text. He closes with a challenge to see interfaith dialogue as a Christian imperative for all of us. Walter Sawatsky reflects on some of the pluralisms he has encountered in recent decades, in settings ranging from Mennonite World Conference assemblies to times of worship and fellowship in the Soviet Union and later in post-Communist Russia and Georgia. Juan Martinez describes and reflects on the demographic changes that offer challenges and opportunities for the church in the United States as it becomes majority nonwhite. He asks whether we are ready to follow Jesus together as the church becomes browner.

The next four articles are written by practitioners, people who have developed their perspectives on pluralism and multiculturalism from work in the field. With affection and insight, Brad Roth dispels the myth that rural communities are places of bucolic homogeneity. He notes that the small towns that are growing are becoming increasingly diverse, ethnically and religiously. Roth encourages pastors and other church leaders to recognize the special identity of rural places and to embrace the particular challenges of rural life, and he reminds us that proclamation of the gospel in rural communities requires us to assume a stance of advocacy in their behalf.

Byron Pellecer, who works with and for Hispanic Mennonite congregations, invites us to think with him about what it means to proclaim Christ in the contexts he encounters. Taking account of recent developments in technology, he addresses the problem of keeping an open mind and a willingness to learn without renouncing one's theological identity. It is an age-old and ever-new dilemma for which Jesus gives light for the path. Donna Kampen Entz has spent her adult life living in relationship with Muslims, first in Burkina Faso and more recently in Edmonton, Alberta. She speaks forthrightly and sensitively to what such relationships offer: they can help break down stereotypes; they can develop into spiritual friendships through which people become better Muslims and better Christians; and they can create openings in which one can invite others to experience the power and love that following Jesus brings. Matthew

Cordella-Bontrager writes engagingly of the challenges of addressing difference when it gets up close and personal—in this case, on the campus of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. He notes that our tendency is to keep the peace and minimize disagreement, especially when it involves friends. But is that really a healthy approach? Disagreements matter for relationships, and the grace to deal with them with honesty and integrity is a gift but also a skill that can be learned.

The last two articles are written by a team of retiring professors. My dear colleague Daniel Schipani and I shared many wonderful retirement festivities this spring, and it seems fitting that we should share the pages that occupy the end of this issue. Daniel's article is the fruit of important work he has been doing on spiritual caregiving across faith traditions. Spiritual health can be nurtured and toxic spirituality challenged across faiths. At the same time, Christian caregiving across faiths is done in the manner and with the spirit and faith of Jesus. My article contends that the early Christians in Acts, who proclaimed Christ in their pluralistic context, provide guidance for us in our witness to Christ in a multicultural world. I give particular attention to the way they used power in challenging abuses of power.


As we look to the past and the future mission of this journal, and to the past and future mission of the church—God's mission—no issue is more at the heart of the matter than proclaiming Christ in a pluralist world.

# Venturing beyond my faith community

## A pastor's musings on interfaith engagement

April Yamasaki

For the last two years, I've been invited to participate in an interfaith forum hosted by the local Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at.<sup>1</sup> "As people of faith, I feel we should have some kind of relationship," the president explained



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when he first called me. He suggested fasting as an aid to peace as a topic that I and several other speakers could address from our different faith traditions. What's more, he offered to arrange the venue and publicity. We would both invite people to attend, and his group would provide a meal for everyone to share. All the arrangements went well, and it turned out to be such a wonderful evening that I readily agreed to take part the following year.

Last January, I spoke for the first time in a Catholic church, as part of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Instead of a week of services hosted by different congregations, the planning committee decided on a Sunday afternoon joint time of worship. The Catholic priest led the opening liturgy. A United Church of Canada minister read the invitation to confession. The choir director was from the Anglican church. Those who gathered for this unity service included members of churches of various denominations and no denomination, people who were regular churchgoers and those who were simply curious.

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1 The Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at (AMJ) describes itself as an international revival movement within Islam. Founded in 1889, it spans 200 countries and has millions of members. See <https://www.alislam.org/library/ahmadiyya-muslim-community/>.

I felt both challenged and honored to preach the sermon on reconciliation, our chosen theme.

Apart from my pastoral ministry, I blog regularly on spiritual growth and Christian living, and I connect with many different people through social media. Some proclaim Christ and readily identify themselves as Christian. Some may be Christian but wear that label reluctantly or uneasily. Some have left the church, deeming it unnecessary or irrelevant. Some are from other religions, or no religion, or say they are spiritual but not religious. The religious plurality of the online world stretches as far as my Internet connection can take me.

But with my next sermon looming, an urgent call from a church member who is being evicted, a council meeting to prepare for, and other pastoral responsibilities, why engage in these other contexts at all? I have emails waiting from my sisters, and a day's worth of dishes on my kitchen counter, so why not simply attend to these matters close at hand? Church and household and a personal life with family and friends can fill every moment and more. Yet for me, the time spent in these other contexts is time well spent, both for my congregation and for me personally.

### **Nurturing the spirit of the congregation**


The week before my first interfaith forum, I got a phone call from someone in our wider Christian community concerned that the event might somehow represent a watering down of Christian faith. "How can you be part of this?" she asked. "They don't believe in the same God."

I tried to explain that instead of watering down my faith, this was an opportunity to share it. "Whenever we talk with someone who doesn't share our faith, that's actually a form of interfaith dialogue—whether that person is a neighbour, a co-worker, or even someone in our own family," I said. This event was simply an opportunity to do that in a more deliberate and formal way. "Will you be attending?" I asked her.

"Oh no," she said. "I'll be on my knees praying."

As I continued to prepare for the event, I prayed too—for God's leading and for clarity about what to say, for a readiness to listen with respect, for grace and authentic relationship among those who would be present. That evening, I spoke to the group of Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and others who had gathered. I focused on our theme of fasting and peace, because that was our common ground for the evening. As part of that presentation, I shared Jesus's experience of fasting, his way of peace, and what it means to follow him as a Christian.

Among those gathered, I counted about twenty-five people from my congregation who came to listen and stayed for the meal that followed. Some had previous cross-cultural experience and were very much in favor of interfaith conversation. Some came with more caution and questions. But all of us appreciated the hospitality of our hosts, who provided water and appetizers for us, even though their Ramadan observance meant that



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they were waiting for sundown to break their fast, which had begun at sunrise. The atmosphere of welcome and mutual respect encouraged us to listen well and to be authentic in expressing our own faith.

I can't say this one event changed us as a congregation. After all, only a fraction of our church members attended, and it was just one evening. But I believe it did help to nurture our spirit—by providing a good example of proclaiming Christ in a plural context, in helping us reflect on and articulate to someone unfamiliar with the Christian faith what it means to follow Christ, in raising good questions about our identity as Chris-

tians, and in encouraging us to reflect on how to relate to people who do not have the same commitment.

"It's too bad that the woman who phoned you earlier didn't come," said one of the members of my congregation who attended the event. "She would have seen how this was an opportunity to share Christ in a positive way."

I wished she had been there too, and the next week I was pleasantly surprised when she called me to find out how the evening had gone. "And no one interrupted you or harassed you for speaking about Christ?" she asked. "No," I assured her. "It was all very respectful."

Then she told me that one evening she had been at a Bible study at her church when a Muslim couple had come looking for help. She had invited them in, introduced them to her pastor, and said to them, "We don't believe the same, but I love you."

I had to smile at her story. In spite of her reservations about the interfaith forum, when she actually met a couple from another faith, she had



found her own way of expressing God's love. I couldn't help but think that her prayers and mine had both been answered.

### **Nurturing my own spirit**

A few years ago, I wrote an article on my twenty-two best practices in twenty-two years of pastoral ministry.<sup>2</sup> Many of these also apply to my experiences in contexts of religious plurality:

- *Do what you love*—which for me includes meeting a variety of people
- *Have a great support system*—including members of my church who pray for me regularly
- *Pray and read scripture*—for these provide good grounding for all of life and ministry
- *Invest in ongoing learning*—like talking to a pastor with more experience in interfaith dialogue, and turning to resources like the Religion Communicators' Council<sup>3</sup> and *A Journey Together: A Resource for Christian Muslim Dialogue*<sup>4</sup>
- *Experiment*—like being involved in my first interfaith forum, speaking at a unity service, starting a blog
- *Develop a thick skin*—so I am not undone when there are questions or disagreement
- *Run to Jesus*—in times of doubt and discouragement, when all my best practices fail me, and any time

To these and other best practices, I would now add

- *Interact with people of other church, religious, and nonreligious backgrounds*

While my own congregation takes priority in my pastoral ministry, interacting with others beyond the congregation adds another dimension that helps keep me fresh. It keeps me asking what I mean when I say I'm a Christian, and it keeps me humble when I meet people who have never heard the good news of Jesus or who were once part of the church and

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2 April Yamasaki, "My 22 Best Practices in 22 Years of Pastoral Ministry," *April Yamasaki: Writing and Other Acts of Faith*, April 6, 2015, <https://apriyamasaki.com/2015/04/06/my-22-best-practices-in-22-years-of-pastoral-ministry/>.

3 See their website at <http://www.religioncommunicators.org/>.


4 Gerard Forde, comp., *A Journey Together: A Resource for Christian Muslim Dialogue* (Wilton, Cork, Ireland: Cois Tine, 2013), <http://www.coistine.ie/images/stories/journeytogether/a%20journey%20together.pdf>.

have found it wanting. The faith and way of life that have become so precious to me are seen by many as odd, old-fashioned, and irrelevant. Their response reminds me never to take faith for granted but to treasure it, give thanks, celebrate, and share it where I am able.

A number of years ago I went to a city-wide gathering of pastors and other Christian leaders. I hadn't met the pastor of a neighboring church, although both he and I had been serving our congregations for some time. "Is Pastor \_\_\_\_\_ here?" I asked one of the other pastors. "We haven't met, and I'd like to introduce myself."

"Oh no," was the reply. "He's not here. You'll never see him outside of his church."

I was taken aback by the comment, but I suppose it was warranted, because to this day, we've never met. I've never seen him outside of



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his church, and I never have gone there to introduce myself. I have no idea why he stays so consistently within his own church, but I know how prone I am to stay within the comfort zone of my own congregation. After all, that's where I am known and loved, where my gifts are received gladly, where even when we disagree we speak the same language of faith.

Venturing beyond my community of faith can be challenging and downright scary. Yet it also nurtures my spirit in healthy ways: reconfirming and reinforcing my identity as a Christian, helping me grow in humility and thanksgiving, reminding me that God so loved not

just the church but the whole wide world. I'm energized by that awareness, and as I seek to engage the world around me, I also find many new connections between what I read online and what I preach, between the concerns of my church and the concerns of people in the broader community. This exposure too nurtures my spirit.

### **Nurturing the broader community**

In a world that is fractured in so many ways, where there is violence on a national and international scale, and a drive-by shooting on the street I

pass by every day on the way to my church, it is clear that many communities are bruised, broken, and in need of healing. Fostering interfaith dialogue and relationships is one way to work at that healing.

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I appreciated the opportunity to speak at my first interfaith forum, but for me the highlight was visiting afterward over the meal. The local Sikh temple had done a fine job in preparing rice, chicken, dal, and other foods, with plenty for everyone. I sat at a table with our emcee for the evening, who was both a member of the local Ahmadiyya Muslim

Jama' and also an officer with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. He pointed out his wife and daughters, who were busy helping with the meal, and we compared notes on some of the challenges of being a family of faith in a secular society.

Several other members of his group joined our conversation, and I learned that they were a minority group within Islam and had experienced persecution. Their concern for peace and interfaith dialogue had emerged out of that painful history. "Love for all, hatred for none," they said.

"The Anabaptist-Mennonite church is also a minority, in the Christian faith," I told them. "We also have a history of being persecuted and a deep concern for peace. We also believe that God calls us to love everyone and hate no one."

As we conversed around our little table, I felt that we were no longer strangers but neighbors in the same community, with common concerns for our families and for peaceful relationships. Even the concerns we had for our respective faith communities seemed remarkably familiar: How do we pass on faith to our children? How do we live out faith in our world today?


And yet we clearly had our differences. My understanding of Jesus as Saviour and Lord was foreign to them. They did not read the Bible, and I did not know the Quran. They had been fasting all day for Ramadan and only broke their fast when the sun had gone down—after 9:00 that night. In contrast, I had eaten breakfast, lunch—and even supper, because I knew that our shared meal wouldn't start until late.

Yet for all our differences, we all still live in the same city and we could nurture our sense of community by eating together, by sharing our

stories and our lives. Even if only for one evening, our time together was a sign of hope: instead of fear and suspicion there was listening and mutual respect.

### **Growing in witness**

I confess that I've never gone knocking on doors to share my faith, and apart from one brief stint with Campus Crusade for Christ when I was a university student, I've never spent much time handing out tracts. I often read a book instead of striking up a conversation with the stranger beside me on the plane. And yet I'm convicted by Jesus's great commission, which still stands for us today: "All authority in heaven and on earth



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has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20, NRSV).

I rely pretty heavily on that last part of verse 20. Jesus is with me—with us—"to the end of the age." That means Jesus is with us in the church and beyond it, among brothers and sisters in the family of Christian faith and in contexts of religious plurality. His presence gives me the courage to move beyond my own

church context, to reach out when I'd rather stay at home. His presence gives me the assurance that I'm not alone, that I don't have to make things happen, for all authority has been given to him.

I can't say that I've made any new disciples by participating in interfaith forums or speaking at a unity service or through my blogging and online presence. My job isn't to count the sheep, and that's a good thing! Yet I know from comments I've received that by God's grace I've had a small part in encouraging those who are struggling, in lifting up the weary, in teaching those who are wanting to learn and grow along with me.

That's why I wrote *Sharing Faith Stories*, a six-week Bible study recently released by Herald Press. I did not write it because I always share my faith easily. I wrote it because I'm wanting to grow in doing so, and I hope to

encourage others too. Early in this Bible study series, I recount this opportunity to proclaim Christ in a plural context: “One Friday afternoon, two young women came to my church and asked if they could see inside. Both were visiting from India, and they were so excited because they had never been inside a church before. They loved the red carpet, they loved the pews, they loved how big the sanctuary looked. And then one of them said, ‘But we have a question. Can you tell us the story of Jesus?’”<sup>5</sup> What a surprise and an absolute delight to share my faith with them!

Opportunities abound for proclaiming Christ in plural contexts—from interfaith forums to more personal interactions like this one, from real life encounters with people from other Christian denominations to virtual encounters online with people from various backgrounds around the world. I don’t know what other opportunities may come my way, but I hope to continue to grow in this witness.

Next year I would love to be involved again in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and my congregation has already indicated a willingness to host. I plan to continue blogging and interacting informally with people online, and I’m open to taking part in another interfaith forum, should the opportunity arise. And who knows? Perhaps I’ll meet other strangers seeking to hear the story of Jesus. Whatever and whenever opportunities come my way, I plan to be ready—because God so loves the world, because Jesus commissions us and is with us, because proclaiming Christ nurtures my spirit and the spirit of my congregation, and because it helps build healthy community.

### **About the author**

April Yamasaki serves as lead pastor of Emmanuel Mennonite Church, Abbotsford, BC. She is the author of *Sharing Faith Stories* and other books on Christian living, and blogs regularly at *Writing and Other Acts of Faith* (<https://apriyamasaki.com/>) and *When You Work for the Church* (<https://whenyouworkforthechurch.com/>).

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5 April Yamasaki, *Sharing Faith Stories* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2017), 8.

# Interfaith interaction— integral to Christian proclamation

Karl Koop

For more than twenty-five years, Mennonite Christians have been engaged in interfaith dialogue with Shi'a Muslims.<sup>1</sup> The conversations grew out of a tragedy: in the early morning hours of June 21, 1990, the area of northern Iran between the towns of Rudbar and Manjil experienced a massive earthquake that killed some forty thousand people, injured sixty thousand more, and left half a million homeless. The event was catastrophic, and the resulting economic hardship for Iran was extreme.

Then something unexpected happened. After Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) sent material aid and assisted in reconstruction projects alongside the Iranian Red Crescent Society and the Housing Foundation of Iran, Mennonites and Muslims began talking with each other. Soon, both sides wanted to interact at a deeper level. By the mid-1990s, exchanges were organized, making it possible for students from the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute (IKERI) in the city of Qom to study in Toronto; at the same time arrangements were made so that North American Mennonite students could study in Qom.

In the meantime, MCC and IKERI began planning formal dialogues involving Christian and Muslim scholars. The first of these took place in October 2000 in Toronto and focused on the challenges of modernity. Eventually, other dialogues were held, in Waterloo (Ontario), Winnipeg, and Qom. The conversations centered on issues related to revelation and authority, spirituality, peace and justice, theological anthropology, and religious ethics.

Since then, Muslim students from Iran have attended the Summer Peacebuilding Institute at Eastern Mennonite University (Harrisonburg, Virginia) and the Canadian School of Peacebuilding at Canadian Mennonite University (Winnipeg). Several Mennonite scholars have also presented lectures in Iran, and Muslim scholars have given presentations in

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1 Variations of this essay have appeared elsewhere. See “Das Christentum und die Religionen,” in *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch 2002* (Lahr: Arbeitsgemeinschaft Mennonitischer Gemeinden in Deutschland, 2001), and “Christianity and the Other Religions,” in *Mission Focus: Annual Review 9* (2001): 86–91.

North American settings. Learning tours have also enabled Mennonites to travel to Iran to become better informed about the country and its religion.<sup>2</sup> Much organizational effort has gone into these exchanges, and planning for further interaction continues.

What are we to make of these efforts? What are Mennonites' aims and objectives, when they are involved in planning exchanges of this nature? What assumptions do planners and participants make about the relationship between Christianity and Islam or other world religions?

### **Christian responses to world religions**

In the past, Christians living in the West have typically been able to ignore the existence of other world religions. In recent times, though, we have


**In the past, Christians living in the West have typically been able to ignore the existence of other world religions. As tensions have intensified between Western and Muslim countries, Christians have begun to ask what it means to live alongside Muslim neighbors.**

found it harder and harder to sustain a posture of ignorance or obliviousness. The world has grown smaller as a result of increasing global communication, travel, international trade, immigration, and other factors, and Christians are now regularly in contact with people of other faiths. As tensions have intensified between Western and Muslim countries, Christians have begun to ask what it means to live alongside Muslim neighbors, acquaintances, and friends. Perhaps with greater seriousness than ever before, they have also been compelled to ask theological questions about the salvation of those outside Christianity and about the relevance of Christian proclamation in light of the religiously pluralistic context in which we now find ourselves.

A prevailing theological assumption throughout much of Christian history has been the view that only Christians will experience salvation. The official teachings of churches have often concluded that “outside the church there is no salvation” (*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*). Today many

2 For additional background information on the history of the Mennonite-Shia exchanges, see Harry J. Huebner, “Mennonite-Shi’a Engagement: Proclamation, Friendship, Peacebuilding,” *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 47–59, <http://www.directionjournal.org/45/1/index.html>.

Christians find this view troubling, because they are aware that the religion that one adheres to often has more to do with happenstance than with decision. As John Hick has observed, “When someone is born into a devout Muslim family in Pakistan or Egypt or Indonesia, it will nearly always be a safe bet that he or she will become a Muslim, either observant or



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nonobservant. When someone is born into a devout Christian family in Italy or Mexico, it will nearly always be a safe bet that he or she will become a Catholic Christian, again either observant or nonobservant.”<sup>3</sup>

Already in the seventeenth century, during the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48), French philosopher René Descartes was aware of how culturally conditioned and geographically dependent religious beliefs are. Today his point of view is hardly questioned, and many Christians find it difficult to believe that God would

consign billions of people to eternal punishment because of their adherence to another religious faith. Many Christians argue that this kind of judgment would contradict the very character of God, who is first and foremost loving and just. Some point out further that Christianity does not appear to be a morally superior religion; compared to people of other faiths, Christians do not necessarily exemplify a higher morality. An observation often made by Christians who have come into contact with people of other faiths is that the moral character of a Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist may be equal or even superior to that of a Christian.<sup>4</sup>

### **Christian faith and other religions: Three views**

How then should Christians understand the place of the world religions in the context of salvation history—in the light of the mercy and the judgment of God, both of which have their place in the scriptures? Among

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3 John Hick, “Theological Challenge of Religious Pluralism,” in *Introduction to Christian Theology: Contemporary North American Perspectives*, ed. Roger Badham (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 25.

4 Ibid.



Christians, attitudes toward other religions vary widely, but those who study the subject commonly recognize at least three general views.<sup>5</sup>

**The exclusivist position** has been widely held in the past. Christians holding this view argue that only those who hear the gospel proclaimed and explicitly confess Christ as their Savior will be saved. This perspective emphasizes that God sent Jesus Christ to bring salvation to the world, and that salvation in Christ is available only through faith, which comes from hearing the gospel. Some proponents of the exclusivist view would add further elements to their position, such as the necessity of repentance, baptism, embracing a new life in Christ, discipleship, and so on.

Many exclusivists admit that the reality of eternal damnation for those who have not made an explicit Christian confession is a horrifying

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thought, but they would argue that because of the inherent sinfulness of humanity, human beings simply do not deserve redemption. Those who hold this view stress that God in his mercy has provided salvation for those who choose to believe and live by faith. (Or, in the case of a Calvinist perspective, God in his infinite mercy has provided salvation for those whom he has elected.) Instead


of finding incomprehensible the notion that God would consign billions of people to eternal punishment, the exclusivist argues that one ought to be thankful for God's infinite love that has been expressed in Jesus, who died on the cross for a world that only deserves damnation. One ought to be in awe of God's willingness to save those who enter by the narrow door. An obvious implication of the exclusivist position is that Christians should be greatly concerned about missions, and should support every effort to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

A very different Christian response to the world religions is **the pluralist position**. This view has emerged primarily in the modern period,

<sup>5</sup> It is probably the case that most Christians do not fit neatly into any one category, but the effort to describe general postures is still helpful. For the following summary, I am mostly drawing from an article by Gavin D'Costa, "Christian Theology and Other Faiths," in *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology* (London: Routledge, 1995), 291–313. Another helpful summary that outlines seven typologies delineating various ways of understanding the relationship between Christian faith and other religions is found in Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 319–28.

although traces of it can be found in early Christian history as well. Those holding the pluralist view argue that all religions are equally valid, and Christ is one revelation among other equally important revelations. Religions may take on a variety of historical manifestations, but they all have a common core or essence, or a common belief in the transcendent (personal or nonpersonal), or a common experience of salvation or liberation.

Without making any special claims for Christianity, Christians may view the history of religions as a story of God's activity. According to



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this perspective, Christians should not try to convert others to Christian faith, and they should not claim superiority. Instead, they should exemplify a willingness to grow together with other religions toward the truth. Missionary energies should be carried out jointly throughout the world, not aimed at converting people of other faiths to one's own religion. Christians should find

ways of cooperating with other religious bodies and focus on common concerns and goals, for the good of all.

A third response to religious pluralism has come to be known as **the inclusivist position**. Inclusivists are similar to exclusivists in upholding the view that Jesus Christ is the normative revelation of God and that salvation is only found in Christ. However, they also hold that salvation is possible for those who are outside the Christian faith. There may be people who do not explicitly confess Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord who will nonetheless experience salvation, for God's grace is present throughout God's creation and throughout history. Grace can be mediated through a non-Christian religion, even if that mediation is incomplete. While Christ is the sole cause of salvation in the world, this grace may be mediated historically, socially, and through creation.

The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner is probably the most influential inclusivist of the twentieth century and is known for the terms "anonymous Christian" and "anonymous Christianity," by which he means that believers in other religious traditions may experience salvation in Christ, whether or not they know Christ. Inclusivists argue that it is important to tell others about Christ and to hope and pray for the conversion of all people to the Christian faith. At the same time, most holding this view are open to the possibility that God works in other religions and that

Christians can learn from other religious traditions. The Roman Catholic Church has taken this position, as reflected in documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), especially *Nostra aetate* (Declaration on the

**Inclusivists uphold the view that Jesus Christ is the normative revelation of God and that salvation is only found in Christ. They also hold that salvation is possible for those who are outside the Christian faith.**

Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions) and *Ad gentes* (Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church), and more recently in its declaration ‘*Dominus Iesus*’: *On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (2000).

### **Biblical perspectives**

From a biblical perspective, the question of the relationship between Christianity and other religions is not easily resolved. Cultural and societal understandings and assumptions often govern our bibli-

cal exegesis. Our confessional backgrounds, the families and churches we come from, and our personal prejudices shape our belief systems and often determine which biblical texts we give greatest attention and priority. This is true, regardless of which point of view we gravitate toward.

Without question, some passages in the Bible suggest that salvation is possible only through an explicit confession of and commitment to Jesus Christ. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is recorded as saying: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6).<sup>6</sup> For many Christians, this text (among others) is the definitive answer to the question of the status of the world religions outside Christianity. These Christians would say there is no need for further discussion, because the Bible is clear on the matter.

According to other biblical texts, however, salvation may be experienced through other faiths. In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter comes to the realization that “God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:34–35).<sup>7</sup> Many Christians see this and other texts as an indication that non-Christian religions have value and contain elements of the truth.

Unfortunately, Christians often gravitate to one set of Bible passages or another. We are tempted either to try to refute the possibility that God

6 See also Matt. 11:27; Acts 4:12; 1 Cor. 3:11; Phil. 2:9–11; 1 Tim. 2:5.

7 See also Acts 14:16–17; Acts 17:22–31; Rom. 1:18–2:11; Rom. 2:12–29.

may be at work among people of other faiths or to idealize the religions of the world as a whole.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to resolve these tensions present in the biblical writings, and in any case perhaps we should be content to leave unresolved the question of the final destiny of those outside the Christian faith.<sup>8</sup> As far as Israel is concerned, the scriptures are fairly clear that Israel, as God's chosen people, has a special place in salvation history

**Some passages in the Bible suggest that salvation is possible only through an explicit confession of and commitment to Jesus Christ. According to other biblical texts, however, salvation may be experienced through other faiths.**

(Rom. 9–11). While the Bible speaks of a “new covenant” and a “new Israel,” biblical tradition is also clear that God has not rejected his people, and his promises continue to accompany Israel into the future. Several Christian theologians, especially since World War II, have emphasized that to speak of the new covenant as the fulfillment of the old (a theology of fulfillment) is implicitly to point to the theological extinction of Judaism, and historical attempts at liquidating the Jews is an inevitable corollary. They suggest that “Jews, in remaining Jews rather than becoming

Christians, are being faithful to their covenant with God—the same God who forged a further complementary covenant into which the Gentiles were grafted.”<sup>9</sup>

As far as the world religions in general are concerned, it is evident that a range of New Testament texts support the belief that God is present in other cultural and religious contexts. While the Bible does not say that all religions should be viewed equally, it does make clear that among people of varying religious traditions and worldviews God is present and at work. How God will ultimately judge these people is not discussed in any

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8 For Mennonite perspectives, see, for instance: George R. Brunk III, “The Exclusiveness of Jesus Christ,” in *Jesus Christ and the Mission of the Church: Contemporary Anabaptist Perspectives*, ed. Erland Waltner (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1990), 33–55; John E. Toews, “Toward a Biblical Perspective on People of Other Faiths,” *Conrad Grebel Review* (Winter 1996): 1–23; Duane K. Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2000), 259–78, 290, also published as an article entitled “The Discernment of Wisdom in the Encounter between the Christian Faith and People of Other Religious Faiths,” in *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 8 (2000): 119–37.

9 D’Costa, “Christian Theology and Other Faiths,” 305.

detail, and perhaps this is a signal that we should not presume to stand in God's place with our own judgments.

In a broad sense, love of God appears to be what is essential in order to have true knowledge of God. "Whoever does not love does not

**While the Bible does not say that all religions should be viewed equally, it does make clear that among people of varying religious traditions and world-views God is present and at work.**

know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:8). Beyond this, the biblical witness recognizes that goodness, wisdom, and moral integrity are found among people of other nations, and where these virtues are present, God sees these nations in a favorable light. At the same time, the central message of the New Testament is that in Jesus Christ, God has begun a new work, and in Jesus Christ we encounter the presence of God most completely (Heb. 1). This is the gospel that

we have been called to proclaim and to live out, in harmony with the life and teachings of Jesus. Clearly it would be irresponsible for Christians to withhold this message and witness from others.

### **Dialogue as imperative**


In the North American context, the intermingling of religious cultures currently under way is relatively new. In times past, Christians have not always been convinced that there is value in cooperating with people of other religious traditions. Certainly one did not expect to learn from people of other faiths. In medieval Spain, there was a period of time when Christians, Jews, and Muslims lived together, but if there ever was a golden age of cooperation, it did not last. Unfortunately, the relationship between Christianity and other world religions has often descended into bitterness and bloodshed. And while Christians have often exemplified a zeal for proclaiming Christ, they have not always paid attention to contextual matters, nor have they always been attentive to the means by which their proclamation takes place.

Will the mistakes of the past be repeated? Some years ago, Manfred Kock, then president of the council of the Evangelical Church in Germany,<sup>10</sup> noted that "anyone who is concerned with developing peaceful

<sup>10</sup> Formed in 1948, the Evangelical Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland [EKD]) is a federation of twenty Lutheran, Reformed, and United regional churches and denominations; the vast majority of Protestants in Germany are part of it.

relations among people of differing cultures will certainly understand and take seriously the responsibility of religion for peace in the society.”<sup>11</sup> Even though Christians have lived with people of other faiths, knowledge of others’ religious beliefs, customs, and practices is inadequate. Kock went on to say that “peace in our society in the years to come will depend on how well we have practised living together as neighbours in respect for one another.”<sup>12</sup>

The religious conflicts that have emerged in Eastern Europe and in many parts of Africa and Indonesia in recent decades, and the tensions that have mounted in the last years between the Christian and Muslim



**To opt not to interact with our neighbors of other faiths is not really an option, then. It is a constitutive dimension of Christian proclamation and an integral aspect of what it means to be human.**

worlds on a global scale, suggest that the question how Christians relate to people of other faiths is not hypothetical or inconsequential. We now live in a single interdependent world, and if we do not find ways to promote positive interaction among the cultures and religions of the world, we may well succeed in bringing life on earth to an end. For the sake of the planet, people of different faiths must find ways of living in harmony with one another. Yet encountering the other is not just about saving the planet;

it may also be a means by which we come to new, profound experiences of the presence of God.

Christians might be able to list several reasons why interfaith dialogue has merit, but perhaps we should think of such activity not simply as an interesting pursuit for a special interest group but as an imperative, an activity incumbent on us all. In his article on Mennonite-Shi’a engagement, Harry Huebner notes that dialogue—in the general sense of including all our engagements, not just the formal dialogues—“can promote mutual understanding, enable appreciation of differences, break down stereotypes, and it can help to clarify one’s own faith.”<sup>13</sup> Yet Huebner believes that thinking of interfaith engagements as justified by some larger end is a

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11 Manfred Kock, “For a Climate of Active Tolerance,” *Ecumenical Dialogue* 4 (2000): 3, <http://www.kirchegeld.de/english/1645-4188.html>.

12 Ibid.

13 Huebner, “Mennonite-Shi’a Engagement,” 49.

problem. When we dialogue, he says, we should “see where the dialogue itself takes us, the vistas it opens up. In other words, dialogue is its own justification. The reason is our shared humanity. . . . Choosing not to speak with another person requires justification—to engage in dialogue does not.”<sup>14</sup>

To opt not to interact with our Muslim (and Jewish and Buddhist and Hindu and secular) neighbors is not really an option, then. It is a constitutive dimension of Christian proclamation and an integral aspect of what it means to be human. As our neighborhoods continue to evolve, increasingly reflecting a landscape with many religious faiths, the need for dialogue will likely increase. Will we see this kind of conversation as integral to our proclamation of Christ?

### **About the author**

Karl Koop is professor of history and theology and director of the Graduate School of Theology and Ministry at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

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14 Ibid.

# Where in our pluralist world will the *Missio Dei* take us?

## Pondering mission encounters in pluralist societies

Walter Sawatsky

Christians in the West tend to think Christianity had a bicultural beginning: we see it as a Jewish-Christian reality that early on became more philosophically Greek. Then, following the conversion of the emperor Constantine in the early fourth century, and Jerome's translation of the Bible into idiomatic Latin in the late fourth century, the faith—so



**The *Missio Dei* brought to the fore the conviction not only that the trinitarian God is the initiator of mission but also that the gospel is intended “for all the nations.” Hence, the context for Christian mission from the beginning was multicultural and multilingual.**

we think—spread monolingually until all Christendom learned to worship in Latin. By this account, the shift toward a multilingual reality came with the Reformation, with Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press (circa 1455) and the appearance of English, German, and Dutch translations.

But a closer look reveals indicators of a multilingual beginning throughout the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> And evidence of a multilingual reality also appears in recent histories of early Christianity, not only at Pentecost, but also in the relatively rapid spread of the faith eastward from Antioch in Syria into Persia, Armenia, Georgia, India, and also into

Arabic-speaking Africa. We have lost sight of the fact that Western Christianity only rose to prominence after 1300.

The *Missio Dei*, a missiological recovery widespread since 1970, brought to the fore the conviction not only that the trinitarian God is the initiator of mission but also that the gospel is intended “for all the


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1 Nancy R. Heisey, “The Non-Pauline Mission in the New Testament,” and “Thinking Again about Paul's Mission,” *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 13 (2005): 5–17, 18–30.



nations.” Hence, the context for Christian mission from the beginning was multicultural and multilingual.

As we have learned, when you translate you engage in a creative act. The translator seeks “dynamic equivalence,” as in the *Good News Bible*, not the word-for-word “translation” that Google has offered. Further, the bridging person—a definition of a missionary—has learned to live and



**The word pluralism has become a commonplace in North American society in recent decades, but in itself it conveys little. Here I can only ponder, by means of a few anecdotes, some of the pluralisms I have encountered.**

think in more than one culture, and has been changed thereby. A few years ago, Lamin Sanneh observed with a sense of awe that whereas for Muslims everywhere the singular word for God is Allah, in the Jewish and Christian traditions this revealed God submitted to the vulnerability of having God’s name translated into all possible languages. That observation points to the vulnerability within which mission in pluralist societies happens.

The diversity of perceptions of who God is, of what Jesus should look like, or how each Christian must live, in order to truly claim the name, seems infinite. The word *pluralism* has become a commonplace in North American society in recent decades, but in itself it conveys little. Here I can only ponder, by means of a few anecdotes, some of the *pluralisms* I have encountered.


### **In post-Christian Europe**

As a teaching assistant in graduate school at the University of Minnesota, sharing an office with a dozen other TAs, I was one of only three or four who professed some form of Christian allegiance. The rest had little use for religion, in either personal life or academic study. That experience helped me later, when I would travel in Western Europe on behalf of Mennonite Central Committee. Sometimes I would strike up a conversation with a seatmate on a plane or train. Eventually he (or she) would ask about my work. I would say that I was a historian of Christianity, particularly of the USSR, and an administrator of MCC programs in Europe. He would express surprise. “You are clearly well educated and widely read. How can you live in post-Christian Europe as a believer?” That was when the conversation got really interesting for both of us. Often the seatmate

would talk about Christian hypocrisy that had turned him off. Often he would express regret that he had not noticed enough alternatives to those negative experiences to allow himself to consider a deeper spirituality.

### **“Christ is risen”**

I first traveled to the USSR in the spring of 1973 as a student in a Canada/USSR cultural exchange program. On Easter Sunday, I was invited to the apartment of a university professor in Leningrad, someone my doctoral adviser knew. The night before my visit, I had pushed my way through a circle of volunteer militia wearing red armbands. They were seeking to discourage young people in particular from entering the Orthodox cathedral, where Metropolitan Nikodim would lead the Easter midnight liturgy. With sweating bodies all around me, I waited for four hours for the service to start. Finally, around 11:40 p.m. the liturgy began with a speedy recounting (from scripture) of the Last Supper, Gethsemane, the trial—and the crucifixion, with Jesus’s lament, “Why have you forsaken me?” Then all the lights went out.



**Soviet friends told of reading the easily accessible atheist literature; it contained scripture passages for the sake of refuting them, but that limited exposure to scripture had sufficed to start some readers on a journey toward and with God.**

Just after midnight one little candle flickered into flame, and within a few minutes the flame had been passed from one candle to the next until all the candles held by all those present were lit. We began to sing a simple, repetitive song, proclaiming “Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.” Metropolitan Nikodim led the priests out onto the balcony surrounding the cathedral. He shouted “Christ is risen” to the mass of people inside the fence, loud enough so that the unbelievers heard it too.

When I found my way back to my dorm room at about 3:00 a.m., the refrain “Christ is Risen” had entered my bones, my whole body. Later that morning, Baptist worshipers on the edge of the city, beside the woods, held their predictable worship service. But they also sang that song, and they too could not seem to decide when to stop. By midafternoon I was at the professor’s apartment, with a few Soviet friends. Supper lasted a long time, because after we ate each little delicacy, someone would rise to

offer a toast. Each time, the toast would end with the speaker saying, “So therefore, Christ is risen.” And we shouted back, “He is risen indeed.”

Did those celebrating that day mean it? If so, what did they mean? They surely didn’t want to lose their jobs. Gradually I learned about the murky ways in which even well-educated people were beginning to search for Christ. Mikhail Bulgakov’s convoluted allegory, *The Master and Margarita*, was a text that had brought members of the intelligentsia to Father Dimitri Dudko to be baptized. Still others told of reading the easily accessible atheist literature; it contained scripture passages for the sake of refuting them, but that limited exposure to scripture had sufficed to start some readers on a journey toward and with God.

### **“What good is a road if it does not lead to a church?”**

Later, in 1989, I met a prominent scholar from the Institute for US and Canadian Studies, which was then providing numerous experts who were fostering Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s policy of perestroika (“restructuring”). We talked about what was happening. As a young sociologist, he had come to the US with a Church of the Brethren exchange program. So he had encountered Christians, and he had joined forces with them in efforts to find a peaceful way to end the Cold War. But he remained an atheist, convinced of Marxist ideals.

Now (in 1989) his married daughter was a member of the Communist Party, had a good job, and was successful. In contrast, his son had recently been baptized as a Christian and assumed he would be harassed and never have a good career. It was his son this scholar was proud of: the authentic morality the son was seeking to live by reminded his father of the Brethren he had known. Then he said, “You know, I would like to be like my son, to take that leap of faith, but so far I have not found the capacity to believe and trust.” We parted with some sadness, after more conversation about so many who were finding their way to a church. Six months later I learned that he had died of a heart attack.

That “on the way” theme had been talked about everywhere in 1987, when the previously banned film *Repentance* was being shown in the cinemas.<sup>2</sup> The movie ends with this exchange, in which an old woman asks the central female character, “Is this the road to the church?” She responds,

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2 *Repentance*, directed by Tengiz Abuladze and set in Georgia, was made in 1984, but it was initially banned in the Soviet Union because of its semi-allegorical critique of Stalinism.

“This is Varlam Street. It will not take you to the church.”<sup>3</sup> The old woman replies, “Then what’s the use of it? What good is a road if it does not lead to a church?” That final question became a headline of many newspaper and journal articles.

### **“Been there, done that”**

Around 2007, after I gave a lecture in Moscow at one of the newly established theological colleges, a close Russian friend teaching at Moscow Theological Seminary (which trains Baptists and other Evangelical Christians), took me to a distant suburb for a prayer gathering. All present were pastors in the twenty to thirty suburban Moscow congregations that had formed after 1990, so many of them were pastors of people who had converted after 1990. The topic for the morning was local evangelism.

As they went around the circle, their reporting began to convey to me the depth of inner dismay, even depression, these young pastors were experiencing. No longer were people begging for a Bible to read, as had happened in 1989. Now there was no interest. “Been there, done that” was the phrase they kept repeating. Even church members had gone back to spending Sunday morning polishing their cars, going shopping, etc. A de facto atheism—acting as if God is irrelevant, though it is nice to go to worship once in a while—had reached even to Russia’s cities, thanks in part to Western missionaries of various stripes, with too many of whom I found it difficult to find common ground.

### **Seeking a bridge**

The moment when mind-boggling pluralisms confronted Mennonites came especially for those able to attend the 1997 Mennonite World Conference Assembly in Calcutta, India. At that assembly, I was a volunteer overseeing workshops held during the second part of the morning. We were just in the process of organizing the Global Mennonite History Project, and were learning about other settings in Asia and in Africa. As a volunteer, I was assigned a cot in a room large enough to sleep at least fifty people, with some cold water showers nearby. Almost all of the fifty staying there were pastors from the Mennonite Brethren world of Hyderabad.

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3 The movie deals with the rise to a position of power and terror of Varlam Aravidze (his surname means “every man” or “no man”); as mayor, he had destroyed the church, and the street was thus no longer called Church Street.

They spoke Telegu, and only a few knew English. So we communicated in minimal English.

It is only more recently, through historian I. P. Asheervadam's chapter in the Asia volume of the global Mennonite history series, that I learned more of the background of the Dalit (untouchable) people—those who had become leaders in the Indian Mennonite Brethren church—and about the emerging Dalit theology, which is at the center of Asheervadam's dissertation. Why had so many of them responded to the gospel, and converted as entire villages? This happened often enough in northern India that missiologist Donald McGavran had made it a key issue for missiology as early as the 1960s.

When I talked with Indian leaders from Hyderabad present at the Calcutta assembly, they told me about the many people in their region who had been Muslim for several generations. Now these Mennonite Brethren believers were exploring ways of conversing with their Muslim neighbors, seeking to find a bridge that would enable such people to take more seriously the Jesus they could read about in the Quran. This issue was the area of church growth they were concerned about then.

When nightfall came, and most of the foreign visitors had been bussed to their hotels, we settled down in our room full of cots. The glassless windows let in charcoal smoke from fires over which big pots of rice were cooking. Often I went for a walk at dusk. Surrounding the campus where we were meeting were many small shops which sold small goods, bottled water, and the textiles tourists were interested in. Shopkeepers pulled down barred shutters as they closed up for the night, but they often huddled in the doorway for a meal and to complete their religious rituals. As I walked around the area, I could easily recognize Hindu symbols, and Buddhist, Muslim, and Sikh ones, but there seemed to be more than a hundred other religious markers that I could not identify. Even in a context where Hindu and Muslim politicians competed for political power, India was a world of many other religions too.

### **Fitting into context**

The week before the Mennonite assembly in Calcutta, about fifty educators from around the Mennonite world had gathered in the college that William Carey had founded,<sup>4</sup> to seek common ground for better fostering

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4 Serampore College was founded in 1818 by Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward.

theological education for our churches around the world. On New Year's Eve, we were invited to a Catholic parish nearby for midnight mass. The bishop, representing another minority expression of Christianity in that Indian setting, welcomed us as fellow believers, and spoke a prayer of intercession for us and our upcoming world conference.

Once again I found myself pondering the ways my learned stereotypes were not working. I thought about William Carey (1761–1834), that cobbler who dedicated himself to bringing the Christian gospel to India, starting in 1793 in the place where we were. A few other missionaries eventually joined the work, but the walls of incomprehension were high. If in 1997 most of the Christian colleges and seminaries in India were legally registered via Carey's college, it was because it had set a pattern for fitting into the context. What is still remembered about Carey, and others like him, was their persistence in getting to know their world. It was language learning and publishing dictionaries to help others that became the legacy.

Eventually there were large Baptist communities. They lacked staff, so Baptists offered Mennonite Brethren missionaries from Russia to live and work in that Telegu-speaking region. Paul Hiebert (1932–2007), grandson of one of those missionaries, became the go-to teacher of anthropology in mission at Fuller Theological Seminary (Pasadena, California) and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield, Illinois). When he spoke to a gathering of North American mission administrators and missiologists a few years before he died, he challenged our conventional theologies again, by deeply probing what transformed worldview—what thoroughgoing conversion—is necessary in a globalized context.

### **Recent encounters with post-Communist societies in Russia and Georgia**

Just as Russia was using surrogates in late 2014 to undercut Ukrainian independence from the old Soviet Union, Mykhailo Cherenkov in Kiev issued a call for more serious missional engagement with the culture.<sup>5</sup> The book he and British missionary Joshua Searle published in English and Russian assessed, twenty-five years later, what their frantic evangelism and mission efforts since 1989 had achieved. Too focused on salvation of

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5 Joshua T. Searle and Mykhailo N. Cherenkov, *A Future and a Hope: Mission, Theological Education, and the Transformation of Post-Soviet Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014).

the soul, too reliant on the evangelism strategies introduced from abroad, they had failed to remember sufficiently why it was, for example, that at a 1989 gathering of 10,000 in the Zaporozhe stadium—which Mennonites from Kazakhstan had organized to celebrate 200 years of Mennonite sojourn in Russia—that everyone was asking for a Bible, and so many made commitments to Jesus Christ.

In spite of decades of aggressive atheist propaganda and persecution, these converts and listeners had been watching local evangelical believers with growing respect. Further, Cherenkov kept stressing integration of faith and action, a living out of the gospel for all people. The book is peppered with references to writings of people in the West—not only John Howard Yoder and James William McClendon Jr., but also people Cherenkov and Searle know: Peter Penner, Johannes Reimer, Mark Elliott, and me. Moving further, Cherenkov and Searle urged evangelicals to take more responsibility for social ministries. Above all, they lamented their inattention to manifestations of corruption emerging again, now under the new order.<sup>6</sup>

Meantime, in Georgia, finally an independent nation in 1991, Baptist leaders were becoming more active and more critically reflective about their life and witness. Georgia has been Christian since the fourth century. Its Bible dates from those early beginnings, and a modern translation appeared only in 1989. One of the translators was a Baptist with a doctorate in Semitic languages. That young man, Malkhaz Songulashvili, would become leader of the Evangelical Baptist Union of Georgia a decade later, following in the footsteps of his parents and grandparents in ways that began to frighten leaders in the Euro-Asian Federation of Evangelical Christian Baptist Unions; around 2006, his union was expelled.

Songulashvili's thorough history of Baptists in Georgia (2015) was much more a missiology for everyone than a chronological narrative about an obscure minority in Georgia.<sup>7</sup> He argues that if Christianity is to take context seriously, then Georgian Baptists must own that they are indeed Georgians, that they share that culture, and that they embrace Orthodoxy in its best renewed sense. He encouraged adoption of Orthodox

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6 For more detail, see my review in *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 35, no. 3 (July 2015), online at <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol35/iss3/5/>.

7 Malkhas Songulashvili, *Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia: The History and Transformation of a Free Church Tradition* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2015). See my detailed review (citing other reactions) in *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 37, no. 2 (March 2017), online at <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol37/iss2/5/>.

liturgy, with icons, vestments, and hierarchy. Renewal-seeking Orthodox priests and bishops encouraged these developments, until a new catholicos (patriarch) resisted. By then, too, the role of women (from the first convert who was a woman forward) had shifted toward recognizing greater equality of gifts, until a few women had been ordained as priests, and one as regional bishop of the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia.

Songulashvili also became an active advocate and practitioner of non-violence. Soon his public intervention in behalf of other minorities, including homosexuals in Georgia and even Uganda, caused part of his own union to express concern. So he resigned as archbishop but remained bishop in Tbilisi while also teaching on religious and interfaith subjects at the state university. Songulashvili's commitment to mission in context must cause all of us to ponder where the *Missio Dei* in our pluralist world is happening in ways we must join.

### **About the author**

Walter Sawatsky is professor emeritus of church history and mission, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. He attended Mennonite World Conference Assemblies in 1997, 2003, and 2009 as director of the Mission Studies Center at AMBS. From 1973 to 2010 he worked part-time for Mennonite Central Committee as East-West researcher and consultant; in that capacity he made semiannual teaching and research trips to the former Soviet Union.



# Imagining browner churches

## Being faithful Christians in a changing society

Juan Martinez

Demographic shifts and the secularization of white America are creating Christian churches that are increasingly minority and immigrant. Can white Christians see these browner Christians as an asset to Christian faith in the United States? How will churches work together through this shift toward browner churches?

### Preparing for 2040—or 2030

The Association of Theological Schools, the accrediting agency for seminaries in North America, developed a program for member schools, called “Preparing for 2040.”<sup>1</sup> The basic premise was that, according to current estimates by the United States Census Bureau, sometime in the decade of 2040 the majority of people in the US will no longer be of white European background.<sup>2</sup> Seminaries were invited to participate in a three-year process in which they could analyze various aspects of their work and develop plans for their institutions to better prepare their students for ministry in this changing demographic reality.

As we worked through the learning and planning process, it became clear that some of the demographic changes were going to have an impact on churches and seminaries earlier than 2040. For example, given that “whites” are more secular and minority groups more religious than the general population, it is likely that the “2040 shift” will happen during the 2030s in the churches. It is already the case in places like southern

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1 I participated in this program as a member (and chair) of the ATS Committee on Race and Ethnicity (CORE). I also served as a coach for one of the groups of almost forty seminaries that participated in this process.

2 Although my focus here is on realities in the US, some ATS seminaries are in Canada, where significant demographic shifts are also under way. Statistics Canada estimates that “together, immigrants and second-generation individuals could represent nearly one person in two (between 44.2% and 49.7%) in 2036, up from 2011 (38.2%).” Jean-Dominique Morency et al., “Immigration and Diversity: Population Projections for Canada and Its Regions, 2011 to 2036,” <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91-551-x/91-551-x2017001-eng.htm>.

California that on any given Sunday the majority of people actually in church might be nonwhite. Because seminaries include international students, it is possible that the majority of students in ATS schools will be nonwhite by the middle of the 2020s decade.

### Reflecting society's diversity

How are Christian churches adapting to this changing situation? One response has been to develop intentionally multicultural churches. Since



**Sometime in the decade of 2040 the majority of people in the US will no longer be of white European background. How are Christian churches adapting to this changing situation?**

the US is increasingly racially mixed, should not Christian churches reflect the diversity of their communities? Michael Emerson, who has done some of the most extensive research on these types of churches, uses the 80/20 rule to determine whether a church is multicultural.<sup>3</sup> The logic is that if at least 20 percent of a church's composition is from a specific minority group, that group is more likely to influence change in the church.<sup>4</sup> By this standard, only about 14

percent of churches in the US today are multicultural. According to Emerson, Mosaix Global Network's goal is to have 20 percent of US churches reach the 20 percent mark by 2020.<sup>5</sup>

Another place where change is happening is among denominations that have made a strategic commitment to attract people of different ethnic groups, usually through developing churches and ministries focused on those groups. Currently about 66 percent of the US population is white. Denominations consisting of at least one-third nonwhite members clearly have made the commitment to racial ethnic diversity within

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3 See Michael O. Emerson, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), chapter 2.

4 Given the realities of power and change dynamics in the church, a congregation with an 80/20 reality may indeed be on its way to becoming more multicultural, but it is also possible that the 20 percent community may see itself as having a very limited role in the leadership and direction of the congregation.

5 Mosaix Global Network identifies itself as "a relational network of pastors and planters, denominational and network leaders, educators, authors, and researchers alike, that exists to establish healthy multiethnic and economically diverse churches for the sake of the gospel in an increasingly diverse and cynical society, throughout North America and beyond." See <http://www.mosaix.info/>.

their denomination. Currently, the Christian denominations that have a diverse membership or at least come close to reflecting US demographic realities are Seventh-day Adventists, Roman Catholics, Assemblies of God, Church of God (headquartered in Cleveland, Tennessee), and the Churches of Christ. All other denominations are predominantly white, except for historically black denominations and other smaller groups of Latino, Asian, or Native American denominations or church networks.

### **Black and white**

Historically, immigrant groups from Europe formed many of the churches and denominations in the US, and these have maintained their predominantly white makeup even as they have expanded beyond their specific immigrant origins. Structural racism—including slavery and segregationist policies and attitudes—has led to the development of separate black and white churches, the background against which Martin Luther King Jr. famously observed that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in the nation.

The US in which MLK made that statement was predominantly white, with African Americans and other minority groups being a small percentage of the population. During the 1960s most people assumed the US would look like this into the foreseeable future. Race relations in the US have undergone many changes, but the fundamental divisions caused by racism have not healed. Nonetheless, changes in migratory patterns after the 1965 Immigration Act have altered the demographic makeup of the US. The current situation is still deeply affected by the black-white divide, but the US is much more diverse than Dr. King might have imagined it would be.


This increasing ethnic and racial diversity is reflected in US Christianity. Overall, the ethnic diversity of Christian churches in the US reflects the diversity of the population, with minority groups slightly overrepresented. That increasing diversity is seen in the denominations previously mentioned, and in multicultural churches. But overall, US churches and denominations are still largely organized around a predominant ethnic or racial group.

### **Profound challenges**

The 2016 elections exposed how divided our country is and how our political divisions largely reflect our racial divisions. In the midst of a politically and racially divided country, how can churches be agents of change?

How can churches reflect the unity of the body of Christ in the midst of the nation's growing diversity? Will churches merely reflect our divisions, or will they be able to transcend them?

Clearly the challenges are profound. We have a multiplicity of churches because of linguistic, ethnic, cultural, social, and theological differences. But some of our separations are also reflections of our sins, nationally, as specific churches and as individuals. Some of our separate churches and denominations are the result of the legacy of racism, mixed with



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issues of privilege, power, and control. On top of that, the very real differences between us sometimes make even the best intentions to work together go awry. One wishes that we could easily separate out the first set of issues from the reality of our human sin. But they are often mixed together.

### **The work of unity**

It is clear that the work of unity has to happen at several levels. At the congregational level, several things can be done. Intentionally intercultural churches and multicongregational churches are models that can provide concrete ways forward. Of course, these models will only provide spaces for all if they seriously work at intercultural relations and regularly speak into the issues of sin that mar efforts to work together.

Local churches of all types can also develop projects to work together with sister congregations that are significantly different. These types of relationships will also need to account for the issues already mentioned, because often ethnic and/or working-class congregations are the only setting in which otherwise marginalized people find a place where they can use their gifts for the glory of God and the service of others.

One thing that stands out when looking at the most diverse denominations in the US today is that those denominations are growing, while those that are predominantly white are shrinking. Clearly, ethnic diversity is not the only reason this is so. But these denominations and churches may be pointing us toward one of the futures. Not all individual churches should become intentionally multicultural, but churches can work together across ethnic and cultural lines.

## Sharing power

Multicultural churches and denominations that are diverse have the challenge of creating spaces for sharing power and authority so that all voices

**Multicultural churches and denominations that are diverse have the challenge of creating spaces for sharing power and authority so that all voices are heard and accounted for.**

are heard and accounted for. As non-whites become a larger percentage of the membership in churches and denominations, leaders have to address what it means to give power to those who have not had a voice in the past. This is particularly crucial because whites have held power in most of these structures. We have yet to see how they will respond.

The growth of nonwhite congregations means that browner voices will need to be at the center of many of the

intercultural conversations among churches and within churches. No longer will the only significant conversation be the one about how white Christians create spaces for others. Minority churches will need to think about how they interact with other minority congregations. Some of these immigrant churches have a mission mindset toward the US. Are we ready for a mission effort toward secularized whites that is led by nonwhite congregations?

## Developing multicongregational networks


These changes also call us to broaden our sense of how to express the unity of the churches in the midst of our increasing diversities. The most diverse denominations are already showing us the way. They are, in a sense, developing multicongregational networks. Churches of various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds are working together toward a broader vision. We need to be more intentional about developing these types of networks. Some churches will link under a common theology and others under a common mission, while still others will come together because they share geographical space. Some of them will look like denominations, while others will cross denominational lines and still others will be looser networks.

Minority and immigrant churches are showing us other models of networking. Some of these networks cross national boundaries, following the lived experiences of the people who are a part of them. These networks are expanding the mission of the churches, but also the sense of

the church as a global network. These types of connections will usually be dynamic and may not have a strong structure to support them. But they will help expand the way that churches in the US look at mission.

### **Stepping aside and stepping up**

Building these types of networks will be difficult for many of the reasons already mentioned, not the least of which are issues of power, authority, and control. Given the power differentials in our society, white leaders will tend to take positions of leadership as intercultural relationships develop. People who are part of cultures that naturally defer to others, those who



**For those who are ready to participate in these types of intercultural relationships, there will need to be an intentional process of empowerment in which those who are finding a space will be encouraged and those who easily take leadership will need to consciously take a secondary role.**

do not have as much education, who do not speak English as well, who are bi-vocational, or who are part of smaller movements will find it hard to create a space for themselves at the table. There will need to be an intentional process of empowerment in which those who are finding a space will be encouraged and those who easily take leadership will need to consciously take a secondary role. The book of Acts shows us that this will not be an easy process. But we believe in the power of the Holy Spirit and know that God is doing new things.

Those who are ready to participate in these types of intercultural relationships will need special training and special grace. In *Churches, Cultures and Leadership*,

Mark Lau Branson and I invite readers to address the complexities of intercultural life, but always within the realities of grace and sin.<sup>6</sup> It is only as we recognize that we live between these realities that we can begin to take steps toward that browner church that is our common future.

### **Seeing with other eyes**

Part of the solution will point us toward looking at our current reality through different eyes. For example, many—if not most—US Latino and

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6 Mark Lau Branson and Juan Francisco Martínez, *Churches, Cultures and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

Asian-American churches are multicultural, though they are usually not seen in that frame because of how we think about “minority” groups in the US. A growing number of traditionally African American congregations include immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean as well as other peoples of African descent. Outsiders might look at these churches and assume that they are monocultural. But they are also working at crossing important divides within communities that have been placed under a common umbrella by the US census.

These demographic changes are also changing how we think about race and the future of the US. On the one hand, the majority of children born in the US today are no longer white. Also, the number of intercultural marriages with intercultural and multiracial children is changing how we define races in this country. The five “race” categories used by the US census bureau are starting to blur into each other and into something new.

### **Changing the face of the church**


As we look toward the future, it is clear that our current categories for thinking about intercultural church life are quickly changing. The churches in the US will continue to diversify. That does not mean that each individual church will reflect the ethnic diversity of the country or even

of its own community. It will mean that denominations and church movements will address the increasing diversity successfully or they will slowly fade away. Also, local churches of various ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds will need to find new ways to work together.

Minority and immigrant groups are changing the face of Christian churches. But there is also a sense in which they may be the salvation of Christian churches in the US. Some white Christians fear that the US is losing its Christian

core. What it is losing is its white Christian majority. Minority and immigrant Christians may help the US keep its Christian core.

Given current patterns, we can anticipate that the churches that will be thriving in ten or fifteen years will have learned to navigate these changes, and many more that are coming, in creative ways. Various types



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of intercultural and multicongregational models will continue to develop. The newer and growing minority and immigrant churches will need to find new ways to interact with churches outside their ethnic communities.

But the demographic changes will only make some of the existing challenges more acute. Will we finally be able to break the chains of the legacy of slavery and racism that continue to bind churches in this country? Will we make peace with being a multilingual church in the US? Are we ready to see ourselves as part of the global church that is much larger than our nation-state? Are we ready to follow Jesus Christ together as the church in the US becomes browner? That is our challenge and the opportunity that God has placed before us.

### **About the author**

Juan Francisco Martínez is professor of Hispanic studies and pastoral leadership at the School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California.



# Called to become the household of God

## Proclaiming the gospel among rural diversity

Brad Roth

Those of us who live in rural communities know people, and people know us. More than population size or relation to agriculture, “rural” is a way

**“Rural” is a way of seeing the world, an internal landscape defined in part by knowing and being known. When rural communities experience demographic change, they also experience disruption of their fundamental social fabric and their identity.**

of seeing the world, an internal landscape defined in part by knowing and being known.<sup>1</sup> As a result, when rural communities experience demographic change, they also experience disruption of their fundamental social fabric and their identity.

When this happens, the rural church is called to reclaim the ancient vision of Ephesians 2 and proclaim the gospel to those who are near and those who are far. Proclaiming the gospel to the near—those who already belong to the body of Christ—will mean renewing a commitment to the broad and gener-

ous peoplehood envisioned in the scriptures. Proclaiming the gospel to the far—those who have not yet embraced Christian faith—will mean reclaiming the gospel practice of neighboring.


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1 The United States Census Bureau defines rural as communities with a population of less than 2,500, while the USDA uses a continuum based on density and nearness to urban areas. See “Urban and Rural Areas,” [https://www.census.gov/history/www/programs/geography/urban\\_and\\_rural\\_areas.html](https://www.census.gov/history/www/programs/geography/urban_and_rural_areas.html); “Rural-Urban Continuum Codes,” United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes.aspx>. My understanding of rural comes from what sociologists call the “social-constructivist approach”; see David Brown and Kai Schafft, *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century: Resilience and Change* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), 4.

## **“You live in the old Krehbiel house”: Fitting people into the community story**

Rural communities often plot relationships across time and space by pinning identity to address. “You live in the old Krehbiel [or Galle or Schrag or Kaufman] house” is the sort of statement one commonly hears here. Such an observation is a way that rural people evoke continuity with the past and also fit newcomers into the community’s story. One rural pastor I talked to chided his congregation, saying, “Folks can name who lived in the house fifty years ago, but they can’t name who lives there now.”

Researchers Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas experienced this reality when they set out from big-city Chicago to explore the intricacies of small-town life through an immersive sociological study. They rented a house in rural Iowa and began interviewing local people and observing life in the community. The two sociologists faced suspicion from some residents, but



**The known community prized by many in rural America has been disrupted as new populations come to make their homes there. This growth has brought opportunities for rural congregations to engage their neighbors with the gospel. But it’s also brought challenges.**

they discovered that one way they could build trust was by dropping the name of the owners of the house they were renting: they lived in the old Daugherty house. “We realized that the Daugherty family name almost always granted us safe passage.”<sup>2</sup> If the house is known, or if at least the provenance of the house can be traced, then the person living in the house is in some way known too.

Seeking to interpret the differences between rural and urban communities, German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies in the late 1800s formulated a distinction between two kinds of social groupings, which he labelled *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Tönnies described the way rural communities are structured and regulated by trust, relationships, and social boundaries (*Gemeinschaft*), in contrast with an urban social order defined by institutions, contracts, and prescribed roles (*Gesellschaft*).<sup>3</sup> The distinction is a simplification, but the paired concepts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*

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2 Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 13.

3 David Brown and Kai Schafft, *Rural People and Communities in the 21st Century*, 37.

serve as a convenient shorthand for summing up some basic characteristics of rural and urban. For rural communities, the structure of relationships, built up over the years through blood and friendship, is key.

And yet, the known and knowable community prized by many in rural America has been disrupted as new populations, often attracted to plentiful work in meatpacking plants, come to make their homes in rural places. While some rural communities have faced decades of population decline, many towns hosting large meatpacking operations have grown. This growth has brought with it opportunities for rural congregations to engage their neighbors with the gospel. But it's also brought challenges, for the new neighbors aren't necessarily interested in fitting into the old web of community relationships. They don't particularly care about the provenance of their house. They might not even speak the same language.

### **The new rural migration**

Many rural communities have experienced profound demographic change in recent decades. Beginning—in many instances—in the 1980s farm crisis, many people left agriculture, and in some cases they left their rural communities and small towns to seek work in cities and suburbs. Further changes have been spurred on by the meatpacking industry's need for an abundant labor force to do the grueling work of slaughtering, processing, and packaging meat, primarily for human consumption. Small towns and rural communities across the Midwest of the United States have been transformed as immigrants from Latin America, Africa, and Asia have moved to town.

A May 2017 *New York Times* article details the demographic transformation that has taken place in the small town of Storm Lake, Iowa, as immigrants and refugees have arrived to fill jobs at a large meatpacking plant. Less than half of the community is non-Hispanic white, and as many as eighteen languages are spoken in the halls of the public schools. This is in Iowa, a state that remains overwhelmingly white.<sup>4</sup>

Schuyler, Nebraska, a community located in Omaha's orbit, also underwent rapid demographic change beginning in the late 1980s with the arrival of a large Cargill beef processing plant. Kem Cavanah, economic director in Schuyler, describes how his community—long made up of people of Czech, Bohemian, German, and Irish descent—became majority

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4 Patricia Cohen, "Immigrants Keep an Iowa Meatpacking Town Alive and Growing," *New York Times*, May 29, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/29/business/economy/storm-lake-iowa-immigrant-workers.html>.

Hispanic with an African restaurant located downtown, a Congolese congregation worshipping in the Lutheran church, a Guatemalan congregation worshipping in the Methodist church, and a mosaic of some ten languages spoken in the school system, including Sudanese and Somali dialects. Cavanah describes Schuyler as “an international community competing in a global economy.” Says Cavanah, “We aren’t all white and Christian. You might see a woman in a burka.”<sup>5</sup>

These population shifts have in many cases simply accelerated changes already under way across rural America, as well as accenting existing rural diversity. While rural America has often been perceived as largely white, the picture has always been more complicated. For instance, Native American groups make up the majority, or a large minority, in many small towns in Alaska. Some rural communities in the United States have been on a long arc of transitioning to majority Hispanic, minority white. These include communities along our border with Mexico, but also in places such as North Carolina and Washington State.<sup>6</sup> Warden, Washington, the small town where I previously served as a pastor, was 75–80 percent Hispanic—mostly folks from Mexico who had arrived in waves after the Grand Coulee Dam brought irrigation and agricultural jobs to the Columbia Basin. When they played with their friends, our sons—to our delight—were more likely to speak Spanish than English.

Some people have welcomed these demographic shifts in their rural communities as the antidote to declining schools and workforce. Timothy Friedrichsen, pastor of St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Storm Lake, says that many people have accepted the changes: “This is who we are now.”<sup>7</sup> Pat Norris, pastor of Christ United Methodist Church in Schuyler, says people in her congregation value the new life that immigrants have breathed into their community. “We just embrace what’s here,” says Norris. “There are a lot of small towns that are diminishing. We, on the other hand, are growing.”<sup>8</sup>

But in many rural communities, rapid demographic change is perceived as a threat. When a large poultry processor made plans to locate to

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5 Phone interview with the author, May 20, 2017.

6 Housing Assistance Council, “Race and Ethnicity in Rural America,” Rural Research Brief, April 2012, [http://www.ruralhome.org/storage/research\\_notes/rrn-race-and-ethnicity-web.pdf](http://www.ruralhome.org/storage/research_notes/rrn-race-and-ethnicity-web.pdf).

7 Cohen, “Immigrants Keep an Iowa Meatpacking Town Alive and Growing.”

8 Phone interview with the author, June 5, 2017.

another Nebraska town, the community put up stiff resistance, no doubt because residents were aware of the changes that had occurred in nearby communities. Mused one concerned citizen: “I’m worried about the type of people this is going to attract.”<sup>9</sup>

In Schuyler, Kem Cavanah describes the “white flight” that occurred as the community’s population was transformed. Moreover, Cavanah speaks of challenges that arise when middle-class people, with their built-up social, financial, and leadership capital, move to other communities or choose not to settle in Schuyler, despite working in town.

### **Baptized near and far: The new community in Christ**

I’m convinced that the gospel contains within it the ingredients we need in order to address contemporary rural demographic change. Rather than

**The gospel contains the ingredients we need in order to address rural demographic change. Rather than lifting up a community identity rooted in blood ties and knowability, the gospel vision points toward a transcultural household based on communion in Christ.**

lifting up a community identity rooted in blood ties and knowability, the gospel vision points toward a transcultural household based on communion in Christ. In understanding how the gospel uniquely positions the church to walk with rural communities facing demographic transformation, we take our cue from Ephesians 2 and look to the ways the gospel disrupted and transformed the social order of the Roman Empire in the first century.


In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, this new community is established in baptism. The “one baptism” (Eph. 4:5) marks our entrance into the one church. The “washing of water by the word” makes us

holy (Eph. 5:26, NRSV). According to the vision of Paul’s letter, baptism marks the transformation of unrelated people into the new community in Christ.

In Ephesians 2, Paul unfolds the meaning of this baptismal transformation. “By grace you have been saved through faith,” he writes (2:8). Among the saved are Gentiles (2:11), formerly estranged from the Jew-

9 Scott McFetridge, “Tiny Nebraska Town Says No to 1,100 Jobs, Citing Way of Life,” Associated Press, May 2, 2016, <https://www.abqjournal.com/766752/tiny-nebraska-town-says-no-to-1100-jobs-citing-way-of-life.html>.

ish people and from peoplehood in God (2:12). In the emerging peoplehood, those “who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (2:13). In Paul’s context, the Gentiles are those who were far off, and the Jews are those who were near (2:17). Both groups have been brought together by the sacrificial death of Christ (2:16), which established a relationship based not on where either group came from but on



**According to Paul, it is no longer possible to locate those baptized into Christ according to their Gentile or Jewish origins. It doesn’t matter which house—Jewish or Gentile—they lived in before; now they belong to the household of God.**

where they’re headed: toward the Father, through Christ, in the one Spirit (2:18). It’s an identity that flows from baptism. Those who belong to this identity are “citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (2:19).

According to Paul, the gospel has transformed the old, reliable structure of community in Ephesus and beyond. For those baptized into Christ, it is no longer possible to locate people according to their Gentile or Jewish origins. It doesn’t matter which house—Jewish or Gentile—they lived in before; now they belong to the household of God (2:19).

Near and far have been baptized into a new community in Christ and given a new identity. They have a new address: the household of God.

While Paul’s letter to the Ephesians gives us a glossy theological overview of what he envisioned, we know from Acts that his gospel project proved exquisitely disruptive. Not only did Paul’s message threaten the stable division of Jew and Gentile; it also called into question the place of the Roman pantheon, whose patronage was understood to be vital for upholding the structure of the Roman Empire and whose worship supported a vast industry of veneration encompassing temple complexes, sacrifice, statue artisans, and more (Acts 19:27). In Ephesus, proclaiming this disruptive gospel led to a riot (Acts 19:23–41), much as Paul’s teaching among the Jewish people led to a riot in Jerusalem (Acts 21:26–30). The gospel, one concerned citizen was quoted as saying, was “turning the world upside down” (Acts 17:6).

With the advent of Christendom and the European colonization of North America, the disruptive gospel seemed to be tamed, more likely to play a socially useful, cohesive role than to threaten the established order. Yet the power of the gospel is subtly disruptive in the context of

rural North America. The church, in faithfully proclaiming the gospel, challenges structures of alienation and forms people in a new identity—a new *polis* or peoplehood—one at least suggestive of a generous openness to newcomers and immigrants.

### **Proclaiming the gospel to the near**

The church's proclamation begins with those Paul calls the "near" (Eph. 2:17). In his context, the near were the Jewish people, heirs to "the covenants of promise" and "the commonwealth of Israel" (2:12). They were those with deep familial and affective connections within the faith of Israel. They were part of the structure of their community. But their identity, deeply rooted in history, shared scriptures, and blood ties, would no longer define them in the new order of the church that Paul lays out. The near and the far have been reconciled "in one body through the cross" (2:16). Jesus "is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one" (2:14). The Gentiles have been made a part of the household of God that has "Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone" (2:19–20).


The unity Paul describes is of a different order from the *e pluribus unum* of the democratic *res publica* or the unity around the idea of diversity that is cultivated by academia. It is the unity of *ekklesia*—a hard-won unity made possible only by Christ's self-sacrifice. It is a unity held together by common belief, sacrament, worship, and communion with the body and leadership of the church. We do not manufacture this unity, but we are invited to participate in it by our baptismal vocation.

By proclaiming this baptismal vocation, the church walks with rural communities experiencing demographic change in contemporary North America. In this way, we proclaim the gospel to the near. It will mean we keep the center of gravity of our preaching firmly on Ephesians 2. It will mean our leaders model unity by reaching out to newcomers in town. It will mean we form partnerships with newer residents, especially when they come from other cultures. And it will mean authentic, noncondescending patience with those struggling with an influx of newcomers.

Going from a predominantly white community where people know and implicitly understand one another to a mixed-race community where not everyone speaks the same language is no small transformation. This change can make people feel that the rug has been pulled out from under them. Carlos Barcenas, a community organizer with the Center for Rural Affairs in Lyons, Nebraska, guides communities to have "comfortable uncomfortable conversations" about diversity and demographic change.

He asks community leaders to complete an intercultural development inventory and then develops a plan that guides participants through activities and reflection that build intercultural competence. In this process he helps them both recognize differences and also discover commonalities. He asks, “How do our differences help us make our community a better place?”<sup>10</sup>

The power of the transcultural gospel to address changing community demographics arises from the gospel’s subtle radicality. We dare to



**Proclaiming this baptismal vocation will mean we forge partnerships with newer residents, especially when they come from other cultures. And it will mean authentic, noncondescending patience with those struggling with an influx of newcomers.**

proclaim that Christ draws together people from all tribes and tongues (Rev. 7:9). Christ sends the church to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19). Indeed, the fullness of the kingdom will only come when the gospel has been proclaimed “throughout the world” (Matt. 24:14). It’s the broad and generous peoplehood envisioned in the scriptures, promised in God’s covenant with Abraham, in whom “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). It’s the peoplehood glimpsed in stories like those of Naaman (2 Kings 5:1–19), Ruth, Jonah, and others. In the simple proclaiming of this message in word and

deed, we challenge other visions of the rural polis that are built on family ties and shared history.

One recent study reported in *The Atlantic* would seem to confirm the power of the gospel to form people in this alternative polis. The study found that while conservative people who leave the church often become more tolerant of same-sex marriage and legalization of marijuana, they simultaneously “become intolerant in different ways.” For instance, a correlation can be drawn between church attendance and sentiment toward immigrants. Summarizes *The Atlantic*: “The less you attended church, the more anti-immigration you were.” One theory suggests that the church’s message of “universal love” breaks down prejudices toward the other, in-

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<sup>10</sup> Phone interview with the author, May 2, 2017.



cluding immigrants and refugees.<sup>11</sup> While the study did not specifically target rural communities, the conclusions would seem to hold true among

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rural people, many of whom hold conservative views on a range of issues.

At the same time, we have to keep in mind that in our suburbanizing age, rural people have become a poorly understood tribe. There are those who admire rural communities as a mythical source of the nation's moral fiber. There are those who pity rural communities as backwaters left behind in the march toward an urban future. But there are few who value rural people and places as they are.

Rural has come to represent a unique facet of contemporary North

American diversity, and proclaiming the gospel in rural communities requires us to assume a stance of advocacy on their behalf. We learn to cherish rural people and places. We testify to their goodness. We love rural communities as God loves them. A commitment to speak on behalf of and not just into rural places helps shield us from becoming pedantic outside experts who fail to recognize the special identity and challenges of rural life.

### **Proclaiming the gospel to the far**

Proclaiming the gospel to “the far”—those who have not yet embraced Christian faith—will mean sharing our faith among newcomers to our communities. We will not be able to invite people into the unity that Paul describes in Ephesians 2 without inviting them to Christ, the source and author of that unity. Sharing the good news—the *evangelion*—that far and near have been made one in Christ will not be possible without evangelism.


Whatever our aversion to the misuses of evangelism, we must remember that not all evangelism starts with a tract, just as not all proclamation happens in the pulpit. In our rural communities, and especially among

11 Peter Beinart, “Breaking Faith: The Culture War over Religious Morality Has Faded; in Its Place Is Something Much Worse,” *The Atlantic*, April 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/04/breaking-faith/517785/>.

people from other cultures and languages, evangelism begins in love, and love looks like becoming neighbors.

To become a neighbor means relating to people in the love of Christ. It's working on behalf of the whole community, not just within the community. By becoming neighbors, we learn to see people not as mere targets for evangelization or as projects that we seek to fix up, but as human beings worthy of our concern, care, and friendship. The neighboring approach requires patience and prayer. We take the time to listen. We learn to proclaim the gospel with our lives before we proclaim it with our mouths.

Yet we do proclaim it with our mouths. At some point, with the gentleness and respect urged by Peter, we share our hope in Jesus (1 Pet. 3:15–16). We listen to the other's story, but we also speak our story. We respect where people are coming from, but we also point them toward Christ.



**In our rural communities, and especially among people from other cultures and languages, evangelism begins in love, and love looks like becoming neighbors.**

In my ministry in Warden, Washington, I thought proclaiming the trans-cultural gospel mainly came down to us proclaiming the gospel to them—but in Spanish. I thought it was mainly a translation issue. But somewhere along the way, I began to realize that the challenge

of forming the new community in Christ went much deeper. There were long histories of racism, resentment, and distrust that ran both ways between white and Hispanic cultures. I came to understand that my first task was to build trust—within my congregation and beyond it. Singing a song or two in Spanish during worship or having the sermon translated into Spanish for folks to hear it through headsets did not exactly usher in the kingdom. We were still us. They were still them. Where my wife and I eventually gained traction was in simple practices of neighboring, such as friendship and listening—practices that made space for the new community to form.

I had to grow into this approach. My wife and I hosted a Spanish Bible study in our home, but it was thinly attended. We crafted bilingual worship services but never managed to scale the language barrier. We invited two vanloads of our Hispanic pastor friends from Oregon to come up, canvas the community, and lead an outreach service in the park, but we didn't make any new converts.

It was not until I had notched up several years of attending *quinceañeras* and birthday parties that I received an invitation to come and lead a Spanish-language Bible study in the home of a large Hispanic family we had gotten to know. Mom and dad and the kids and the uncle from next door were there. I sat down on a swivel chair and taught. In the winter months, when they had the heat cranked up, I would remove a layer of clothing for every fifteen minutes of study. It was good work—maybe even kingdom work—exactly the kind of thing I had wanted to do all along. It started with the patient work of becoming neighbors.

### **Taking the long view**

Paul saw the formation of the new community in Christ in terms of a movement from death to life, the reception of God's kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:4, 7). Paul took the long view, knowing that his work was both pressing and patient, and only realized in fits and starts. Christ had laid the foundation, but the vision was ongoing as the new peoplehood was being built together across time and space (2:20, 22). Paul faced setbacks, but he did not lose heart, for the new polis was guaranteed in eternity by Christ's calling to humanity to become the household of God.

### **About the author**

Brad Roth serves as pastor of West Zion Mennonite Church, Moundridge, Kansas. He blogs on encountering God in the everyday at *DoxologyProject.com*. His book, *God's Country: Faith, Hope, and the Future of the Rural Church*, was published by Herald Press in September 2017.

# A Hispanic Mennonite perspective on proclaiming Christ in pluralistic contexts

Byron Pellecer

In Hispanic circles in the Mennonite-Anabaptist tradition, Christology holds a central place. We highlight belief in Jesus Christ as the Word made flesh and as the Son of God who is Lord and Savior of the world.

Our community is convinced that God in Jesus Christ has prepared a new covenant. We believe that through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, Christ's followers enter a covenantal relationship with the Triune God and with one another. In the context of this covenantal relationship, we live out God's peace.

This community affirms that in Jesus Christ, God reveals himself to humankind and becomes accessible. Through Jesus, God entered a reconciling dialogue with humanity by calling all to repentance, announcing the coming of the kingdom of God, and creating a new community of faith. We also believe that this Jesus, through the incarnation, experienced human life and human reality in all its complexity.

We affirm that, by and through Jesus Christ, God calls and commissions this new community of faith to continue his ministry of reconciliation. Responding to this call means a life of discipleship. In addition to experiencing a relationship with Jesus Christ and newness of life, Jesus's followers follow his example in engaging in God's mission, proclaiming that the kingdom of God is near.


## **Paying attention to God's activity**

On the one hand, Hispanic Mennonite congregations sustain a missional approach and practice founded in the affirmation that the Father sent the Son, Jesus, and the Son sent the Holy Spirit, who empowers the church for God's mission in the world. As God's sent people called to reach out to others, we must be attentive to God's activity in this world. We are compelled to hang out in places where God is already hanging out.

Hispanic Mennonites see public places where social life happens as opportunities to connect and develop relationships that somehow will

open the door to witness to Jesus. The challenge ahead is to find ways to engage and build social life beyond the church buildings. To do this, Hispanic congregations rely on the presence and instruction of Christ's Spirit, on scripture and prayer.

On the other hand, Jesus's instruction is to go everywhere, including local neighborhoods and marketplaces. Our purpose is to see and hear



**Hispanic Mennonites see public places where social life happens as opportunities to connect and develop relationships that somehow will open the door to witness to Jesus.**

what God is already doing and join in. In the midst of daily life and ordinary conversation, we discover that Jesus is already hanging out in our neighborhoods.

### **The challenges of secularism**

This proclamation of the kingdom today occurs not only in the middle of cultural and religious pluralism but also in a secular and atheistic context. Religious pluralism is about as old as humanity, and

today it is a real challenge not only for Christianity—whether the individual or congregation is theocentric or Christocentric, Evangelical or Protestant or Mennonite-Anabaptist, Anglo or Hispanic—but also for other religions. And the challenge is heightened where religions articulate their beliefs in exclusivist terms, with a sense of superiority and even arrogance.

Today, because our world has seen recent rapid advances in technology, especially in the field of electronics, the phenomenon of pluralism has affected human existence at all levels, including religious life.

### **Effects of globalization and religious pluralism**

In recent years, developments in transportation have allowed greater access even to some of the most remote parts of the planet. Human mobility is increasing now. Displacement of peoples—whether voluntary, or forced because of politics or violence or economic need—is comparatively common. And the pervasiveness of digital devices and social media has made the effects of globalization widely felt. A global awareness is no longer reserved for travelers who use ground, air, or sea transportation. In order to travel to distant parts of the globe, one just needs to use a smartphone with access to cyberspace. These changes, in conjunction with innate human curiosity, have increased our awareness of the politics, economies, cultures, and religions of other places.

We can see the effects of globalization on a worldwide scale as well as in the places we shop, in our neighborhoods, and even in our churches. For Anabaptist-Mennonite Hispanics, these effects include cultural and religious pluralism in our own backyards. Our culture has been influenced by other cultures, and also by other religions, though in our case the effects of other Christian traditions have been greater than the influences of non-Christian faiths. While it is true that religious pluralism is nothing new, it is also true that now there is no need to travel to the other side of the world to encounter other religions. Cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity is not limited to certain regions of the planet. Now this diversity can be experienced anywhere in the world, in rural and in urban contexts.

Cultural and ethnic diversity, besides offering the richness of folkloric festivals, gastronomic delights, and Indigenous practices and customs, also sometimes offers us particular spiritual expressions and experiences that are presented as ultimate and salvific. Adherents encourage a personal relationship with their deities.

### **Theological identity and dialogue amid difference**

For Hispano-Latinos who profess Christian faith of a Mennonite-Anabaptist variety, this interrelationship of cultural, linguistic, and religious factors, this pluralistic context, makes it more challenging to reach out and proclaim the risen Christ. As Harold Coward asserts in his introduction to pluralism in the religions of the world, “Strange religions have become a part of everyday life, and we experience them as a challenge to the truth claims of our own faith.”<sup>1</sup>

A healthy approach to religious pluralism would help us understand the diversity of faith traditions that other people bring to our communities. However, every religion also claims to have the truth, and that makes dialogue across religious difference almost impossible. The experts of various religious traditions may be able to sit at the table and engage in theological dialogues, but does such theological conversation produce anything concrete in terms of coexistence without a sense of superiority?

I contend that an open mind and willingness to learn are crucial in a pluralistic context. That does not mean that individuals and communities should renounce their theological identities. I concur with Coward that


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1 Harold Coward, *Una Introducción al Pluralismo en las Religiones del Mundo* (Mexico: Oceanos, 2000), 12.

imposing religious pluralism can be not only threatening but harmful. Only when religious pluralism is open to a dialogue that welcomes those who embrace a theological identity might it be possible for different faith traditions and their adherents not only to know and understand one another but even to learn from the others' religious faiths. Only then, as in an economy of reciprocity, can individuals and groups decide in healthy ways what to believe and whom to follow.

### **Pluralism and Hispanic Mennonite-Anabaptists**

As I noted at the outset, Hispanic Mennonite-Anabaptists have their own theological identity, which unfolds through a Christ-centered approach. An understanding of the phenomenon of religious pluralism in our context starts by acknowledging how crucial religion—especially Christiani-



**An open mind and willingness to learn are crucial in a pluralistic context. That does not mean that individuals and communities should renounce their theological identities.**

ty—is for Hispanics. Therefore, any approach and potential relationship with other religions should assume an understanding and practice of Christian faith within that cultural framework.

The vast number of Hispanic Mennonites do not see pluralism apart from their culture and religion. For this group, Jesus is at the center of God's mission. Religious pluralism, instead of becoming a threat to our Christ-centered faith, becomes a good field for Christian mis-

sion that is characterized by respect and invitation. An exception would be where the theological influence is other than Anabaptist; then the approach could be somewhat less invitational.

And we may need to consider the possibility that religious pluralism might somehow contribute to the evolution of the Christian faith, not necessarily to dilute it, but to engage us in self-examination and contemplation of new approaches to the challenges pluralism presents. Also important is the view that “not all religious beliefs and their values are compatible with others but it is likely that many perspectives will be complementary to one another.”<sup>2</sup>

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2 Alan Race, *Thinking about Religious Pluralism: Shaping Theology of Religions for Our Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 86.

## **Openings for reflection**

As part of this reflection, we need to consider several questions and their implications: Who is Jesus? Where is God in all this? What does it mean to be a Christian? How do we understand the nature of the church? What does Christian mission mean today? How does God reveal himself to the world? What is the difference between syncretism and pluralism? Is religious pluralism good for humankind or God? Surely many more questions could be posed, but these questions can serve as an opening for reflection and conversation about our understandings of Christology and ecclesiology.

Our church is increasingly aware that in our neighborhood are people who confess a creed and a religion different from ours. We have also discovered, little by little, that some of these people are deeply and sincerely committed to their religious traditions. My own reality impels me to recognize that even within the same Christian tradition, there are many spiritual currents and theologies that provide spiritual care for their adepts. By this I mean that even within Christian circles and traditions, there are a vast number of creeds. Perhaps here too, amid this Christian pluralism, people of each tradition believe they have a message of salvation, a unique truth.

## **A faith centered in Jesus Christ**

Even in the midst of this diversity of Christian traditions, a common denominator seems to be a conviction that Jesus is directly identified with God. In Jesus, God's redemptive action toward humanity is embodied for all time. In other words, the saving act of God through Jesus is central and crucial to these various Christian traditions.

Hispanic Mennonite congregations assert that within Christian faith, Jesus does not appear just as a prophet within Jewish tradition and culture. On the contrary, Jesus is presented as God incarnate. His messianic identity and his divinity lead him to make faith claims about his person: whoever has seen him, he says, has seen the Father. Moreover, he forgives sins as the Father would. And according to the New Testament testimony, the church experiences the resurrected Christ's presence through the presence of the Holy Spirit in its midst.

It is in and through this Jesus, the young prophet of Nazareth who has been transforming the hearts of humans with his revolutionary and fresh understanding of the kingdom of God, that individuals and multitudes can see and have access to that God who is also Father. In Jesus, people



and nations who listened and received him experienced the Divine as never before. Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God. That is, in Jesus, God has not only become incarnate but has also become tangible and present, and lives the human reality.

**Jesus, who confronted individuals and systems that dehumanize people, was respectful even of those with whom he disagreed. The life and teachings of Jesus are true light for the path of life.**

Jesus is the full incarnation and the ultimate revelation of God.

Jesus, who confronted individuals and systems that dehumanize people, was respectful even of those with whom he disagreed. The life and teachings of Jesus are true light for the path of life. His followers have no other course but to accept the challenge of being imitators of him and becoming a healing community that testifies to his good

news, even knowing that it may cost us everything. Hispanic Mennonites understand that the call is to join in God's mission, both individually and collectively, to be a sign of the kingdom characterized by God's love and by his redeeming grace.

### **Witness shaped by scripture and Spirit**

So then, from the perspective of the Mennonite Hispanic congregations, Christology is of the utmost importance. In our mission we proclaim—amid religious and cultural pluralism—Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior of the world. Likewise, we assume the responsibility and cost of living a transformed life. In addition, we are committed to living as an alternative culture amid a society that suffers and dreams of a better tomorrow.

In scripture, and especially in reading the book of Acts, one notices how the Holy Spirit moves and leads people and groups to be missional. In both personal and communal experience, we hear the Spirit's call to us to reach out beyond the four walls of our church buildings. Hispanic Mennonite congregations understand that witnessing is marked by knowledge of scripture, by the Spirit's guidance, and by obedience. We are convinced that God will find ways and vessels through which to make himself known to the world.

Our congregations understand that we are guests in the communities in which we attempt to reach out. We are challenged to know these communities and their reality, in order to proclaim in a compassionate way

that God's kingdom is at hand. Hispanic Mennonite congregations firmly believe ourselves to be called and empowered to be witnesses.

**About the author**

Byron Pellecer is associate conference minister for Western District Conference (Mennonite Church USA) and works from Dallas as he supports congregations and pastors in Texas and plans for the annual assembly when it is in Texas. He works with the Church Planting Commission to nurture emerging congregations and sister church partnerships, and he advocates for intercultural transformation, undoing racism, and Hispanic ministries across WDC.

# Sharing the light of Jesus in a multifaith world

Donna Kampen Entz

## I am the light of the world

“I am the light of the world!” Jesus proclaimed (John 8:12; 9:5).

Light? What did he mean? His hearers would have recognized the reference to the Prophets’ writings found in their scriptures (our Old Testament). In the Old Testament, salvation and light mean much the same thing: the offer of complete well-being, as intended by the Creator. Light is the antithesis of darkness, disorder, and chaos, and salvation is the antithesis of oppression, exploitation, and despair.<sup>1</sup> God says, “It is too light

**The constant in everything Jesus did was that what he offered was life-giving in some way. Everything we do as Jesus’s followers should share his life-giving light with others.**

a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light of the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa. 49:6, NRSV).

In the New Testament, Simeon blesses Jesus, the infant messiah, as he is being presented in the temple. Simeon prays, “My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to

the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:30–32). This servant/messiah is for the Gentiles and for Israel—for everybody, including our neighbours of various faiths.

So how did Jesus go about being the light in the diverse world of first-century Palestine? The Gospels tell us that he healed the sick, whether their ailments were physical or spiritual. Jesus literally brought people back to life; he raised the dead. He confronted corruption in the politico-religious establishment and spoke out against religious fanaticism. He

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1 Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

called people back to the spirit of their faith. He told parables using images familiar to common folks, and the heroes of his stories were often people at the margins. He taught his followers how to live according to upside-down kingdom values that stretched them to think and act outside the expectations of the status quo. He engaged seekers and kept them scrambling to catch what he was saying. He even earned a reputation as one who partied, who associated with tax collectors, sinners, publicans, and prostitutes.

What is the common thread in the various ways Jesus related to people? Interestingly, he didn't tell everyone about the kingdom of God. Nor did he reveal his identity and purpose to most people. To me, it seems that the constant in everything Jesus did was that what he offered was life-giving in some way. Everything we do as Jesus's followers should share his life-giving light with others.

### **You are the light of the world**

So now Jesus addresses us: “*You* are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:14–16). To live in this way means that we acknowledge God as the source of the life transformation happening in and around us, as we are becoming that human agent (servant) spoken of in Isaiah.

### **A posture of humility**

As a basis for how to connect with others in a multifaith world, let's start by remembering our problematic history with the Indigenous peoples of North America. It is abundantly clear that European settlers' engagement with native peoples was not life-giving but literally life-destroying. This interaction devastated the culture and identity of Indigenous peoples by suppressing their languages and the practice of their powerful spiritual rituals. We were also deeply mistaken in thinking that compelling assimilation is an effective way of doing mission work.

I am grateful that the church in North America has been humbled before the Indigenous community, because we now know what terrible harm we cause when we act out of a sense of religious and cultural superiority. Humility is the only appropriate stance for us to take in relation to people of other faiths. Though we as individuals and as a faith commu-

nity can readily testify to Jesus's powerful transformation in our lives, we should absolutely avoid imposing our faith on others or compelling their conversion.

Only when we support others' identity and culture can we share the light of Jesus with them. Honoring their traditions as a source of strength is a way of enhancing the well-being the Creator intends for all humankind. At the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in Canada, I heard many stories of Indigenous people who overcame addictions only when they returned to their traditional rituals and practices. They

**Humility is the only appropriate stance for us to take in relation to people of other faiths. Though we can readily testify to Jesus's powerful transformation in our lives, we should absolutely avoid imposing our faith on others.**

reclaimed their identity. And religious practice was often a key aspect, a critical marker of identity. If North American Mennonites of European descent reflect on our experience, we will realize that we have also thrived when our faith and our ethnic identity have strengthened each other.

### **Lessons learned during years in Burkina Faso**

What does calling people to a deeper relationship with God mean when the people addressed are those of another faith community? How can our impact

in a person's life be truly life-giving? My experiences with these questions have most often been in a Muslim context. I trust that as I recount some of them, you will see ways of making broader applications.

As Mennonite workers, our family lived in a village among people of a small Muslim ethnic group. Even after we had been there for twenty years, there were no other Christians in the village, and there was no church building. But we had shared stories from the Old and New Testaments and wisdom from Proverbs and poetry from the Psalms, and the villagers loved these offerings. The impact of the Bible message was strong, and it transformed individual lives. One man's bitterness was taken away, and another learned to be a stronger leader with deeper integrity. Another result was change in religious practice in the village, from a more pluralist African religion to a clearer monotheism. As a result, we were often seen as a renewal movement within Islam.

In no way could the people of this small Muslim village think of becoming Christian, because that would have felt like giving up their whole identity. I respected their choice in this matter, so we put much effort into preserving the proverbs, songs, fables, and stories of their very fragile language. As our lives were enriched by immersing ourselves in a new cultural environment, we slowly developed a style of relating as Christians to Muslims that sought to be respectful and life-giving.

Meanwhile, just down the trail, our Wycliffe colleagues lived in a neighbouring village of the same ethnicity. There a small group of linguists who were Bible translation workers became followers of Jesus, and a church was established. Their personalities were transformed by the work of Jesus in their life, and the Holy Spirit inspired them to compose songs for worship. Some family conflicts arose at the time of their “conversions,” but those eventually resolved. These believers have a new identity “in Christ,” but they constantly reaffirm that they belong to their ethnic group, and they are accepted because of their contributions to the village’s language and music.

### **Creating spaces of diversity**

In the English as a second language (ESL) program that I coordinate now with a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), our main aim is teaching English. But to better help newer immigrants integrate into Canadian culture, I encourage formation of deep ties between the volunteers (long-time Canadians) and the newcomers. Many English language learning programs stay away from religious content. I prefer instead to set an example of mutual respect between the faith communities. In fall 2016, I used a Divali story from the Hindu tradition.<sup>2</sup> A shy Hindu student with multiple sclerosis suddenly found she could contribute meaningfully in class. Then when the beginning of Advent and Mohammed’s birthday fell close together on the calendar, we focused on both. I was moved to see the pride on Muslim students’ faces that day. I believe that the integration of newcomers occurs more easily and more fully when people of the dominant culture celebrate others’ religious identities and validate them in doing so. As Mennonite old-timers with strong religious identity, we have a role in welcoming newcomers, many of whom also have strong religious identities.

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2 Divali is a Hindu festival of lights.

## Encouraging faith of whatever kind

A young couple with a plot in our community garden came to Canada from Colombia. Before immigrating to Canada they converted from weak Christian background to Shia Islam. They were struggling here with identity issues and with the negative media attention given to Muslims and

**The integration of newcomers occurs more easily and more fully when people of the dominant culture celebrate others' religious identities and validate them in doing so.**

Islam. Spanish is not a language spoken by others in their Edmonton mosque, and they felt that they had no place to belong. A year ago I challenged the father of the family to get involved in his faith community. More recently, I participated in an event at their mosque, and I saw how they and their children were at ease with the place and its people. The youngest, a girl four years old, carefully rolled out the women's prayer cloth in preparation for prayer, and at the end

she rolled it all up and put it in its proper place. The family had an increased sense of well-being, and I felt such joy in witnessing it. Might it be our calling as followers of Jesus to help people grow closer to God in such ways? Am I increasing their well-being when I encourage these Muslims to be a better Muslims?

A friend who is a Muslim military chaplain told me of a serviceman who came to him and said he wanted to become a Muslim. The chaplain asked him what his current faith was. The man said he had grown up Christian but wasn't practising. The chaplain told that man to go and learn all he could about Christianity. If after he had done that he still wanted to become Muslim, they could start talking again. That, in my view, is a response with integrity.

## Interfaith dialogue

I sought interfaith dialogue as a means to break down stereotypes between peoples, especially with Muslims who feel they are misrepresented in the media in the US and Canada. As I've helped plan and participated in Christian-Muslim dialogues for the past four years, I have come to see this conversation as a valid and respectful way to give witness to important aspects of my Christian faith.


At one dialogue, the speaker told the parable of the Prodigal Son. That was all he did, yet it clearly set many listeners thinking. In other

years, Christian speakers have told stories of how Jesus related to people: he often shocked them but always gave life. This kind of verbal testimony arising from engagement with Christian scriptures seems to me to be one way to be faithful in witness. More recently, we were able to realize a longstanding goal to spend more time in facilitated table discussion than in listening to speakers. We hope this discussion will be a way of helping people get used to talking about their faith with those of another faith.

### **Spiritual friendships**

In my view, these conversations are only really successful when people begin to develop spiritual friendships at their own initiative. It seems evident that the most effective way for people to lose their prejudices against those of other faiths is to develop personal relationships across these religious differences.

In reaction to faith-sharing techniques we do not endorse, many Anabaptists feel that verbal witness is disrespectful of others, so we stay away from spiritual content in our interactions with those of other faiths. To



**Friendships grow deep when our conversation is genuine. If I am a person of faith, authentic sharing needs to include spiritual sharing.**

me, that reticence doesn't seem faithful to how Jesus interacted with those he encountered, and it deprives us of some rich experiences. I have felt sad when Muslim friends have told me about how disappointed they are when Christians do not reveal their faith; they long for us to be real and open about our spiritual identity and practice. These friends have shown me, by pulling me into their lives,

that reciprocity in spiritual sharing is enriching for all of us. We know friendships grow deep when our conversation is genuine. If I am a person of faith, authentic sharing needs to include spiritual sharing.

To deepen our ties as Christians and Muslims in Edmonton, we meet as book clubs and also to study the Bible and the Quran together in a process called Scriptural Reasoning.<sup>3</sup> Regular meetings increase our mutual understanding and deepen our friendships. One member of the book club is a leader in the Bosnian community. About a year ago, I spent an afternoon with her. During the Bosnian War (1992–95), her husband and father were killed, and she was finally forced her to leave home with her

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3 For more on Scriptural Reasoning, see <http://www.srnetwork.org/sr-basics/>.



four-month-old baby. In the subsequent flight, lasting several months, she hid in a series of more than sixty basements as she sought to save her son's life. No wonder she now suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder. As she talked about those times of fearing that her child's death was imminent and told me of the angels who had intervened to save his life, I remembered that I too had several times lived with fear that the life of a child of mine was in peril. Our common experiences as mothers bonded us in a shared humanity. I long for this woman to find healing from her trauma. I believe that Jesus could transform her life in some way.

My cousin Telita Janzen lived in northern Alberta and volunteered in a thrift store. Also living there, working on contract, was a Canadian engineer who had married a Muslim woman from Indonesia. When he was at work, she was alone all day in a motel room. She didn't know anyone in town. Finally, she prayed to Allah to help her meet a friend. As it happened, that day she left the motel, and she ended up at the thrift store. As Telita was finishing an exchange with another customer, she felt a strong urge to greet this new customer. In their encounter, the woman saw how Allah had answered her prayer. At the time of Telita's funeral this past January, her husband, Peter, reported how this woman expressed appreciation for Telita's kind, continued, and supportive friendship. This story should remind us to pay attention when the Holy Spirit nudges us to engage others.

I have been privileged to find close friends within the Shia Muslim community, which has a strong sense of martyrdom and suffering, something they have in common with Mennonites. Some Shia friends joined us at a Mennonite church for a Good Friday service, and together we focused on the suffering of Jesus. A Shia friend stopped in Jerusalem after her pilgrimage to Mecca. She told me how she cried as she walked the Via Dolorosa that Jesus himself had walked in suffering. On another occasion, I was asked to do a presentation on Karen Armstrong's *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* for a group of forward-thinking Shia women.<sup>4</sup> As I met with them that evening, I soon realized that these were deeply spiritual, mature women. I felt as close to them as if they were Christian sisters. I learned that we share a common commitment to live nonviolently in all areas of our life. Because such friendships emerge somewhat


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4 See Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2011).

unexpectedly and feel like a special gift from God, I treasure the way they bridge our two faiths.

### Thoughts on conversion and proselytism

In the Edmonton Muslim community, I have heard, firsthand and second-hand, stories of people who converted to Islam. I have heard people talk about feeling closely connected to God for the first time. But worldwide, we are witnessing for the first time unprecedented major movements of Muslims embracing Jesus openly and forming communities of Jesus followers.<sup>5</sup> In fact, many Christians have been praying that Jesus will reveal himself to Muslims, and many Muslims have had dreams of Jesus. Now that the Bible is available in many languages spoken by people in Islamic societies, people are being nourished in small groups that meet to study the Bible and pray together.



**Muslims have tried to convert me, and other Muslims have said that they do so only because they love me so much. That is precisely why I long for my close friends to know Jesus.**

As a young adult, I underwent a life transformation. It changed how I related to people, gave me a deep relationship with Jesus, and led me to years of service. But I feel a tension on these issues. I have been told that if someone in the Muslim community would convert to Christianity because of me, my interfaith efforts would not continue. That is

frustrating and a real challenge. Muslims have tried to convert me, and other Muslims have said that they do so only because they love me so much. My response is that that is precisely why I long for my close friends to know Jesus.

In Edmonton, I recently heard that many Syrian immigrants are now converting to Christianity. Mennonite church people have also told me that young people among newly arrived Syrians are interested in Christianity because of all the evil they have encountered in Syria at the hands of Muslims. Is it proselytizing when sponsors (who simply want to show Jesus's love) invite vulnerable newcomers to follow Jesus? Or is it the height of true friendship and caring?

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5 V. David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God is Drawing Muslims around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2014), <http://windinthehouse.org/>.

The director of a Christian-sponsored English program here has said that although the program curriculum is not openly Christian, the testimony of love is strong, and a few East Africans have become followers of Jesus. But he added that the church has not supported them, and they are not doing well today. Identity and belonging seem to be the issues, and perhaps the cultural gap has been too great for true friendships to emerge. In all of this, we need the Holy Spirit's guidance, if we are to avoid creating generation gaps as we seek first of all the well-being of newcomers, as we learn from and are enriched by our encounters with them, and as we share our lives and our faith.

### **Our commission**

Our chastened awareness of practices that have discredited Christianity may now put us at risk of being so respectful of other faiths that we fail to offer the power and love that following Jesus brings and which people long for. We can go beyond that. After all, we are charged with being the light of Jesus in this needy world, with sharing his love and bringing people to know his life-enhancing presence. Of course we refrain from judgment and reject bigotry. Of course we are respectful and seek to understand

**Our chastened awareness of practices that have discredited Christianity may now put us at risk of being so respectful of other faiths that we fail to offer the power and love that following Jesus brings.**

the faith traditions of others. Of course we acknowledge the problematic history of Christian engagement with people of other faiths and cultures. Of course we seek to be self-aware about our own flaws and limitations.

On the other hand, we need to be open to the nudging of the Holy Spirit to engage the other. We need to live out our faith to the full and stop being reticent about giving an account of the hope that is in us. We need to share easily and openly how Jesus has helped us or

called us or spoken to us. We need to draw alongside people in need, with compassion and respect. We need to join with those who pray for Jesus to reveal himself to seekers. We need to support our new brothers and sisters in Christ, even across cultures. We need Jesus's patience, bravery, and grace as we encounter strangers and learn from them. A tall order, but with Jesus's Spirit empowering us, a realm of exciting possibilities opens before us: we can be vessels through which Christ's light reaches others!

### **About the author**

Donna Kampen Entz, originally of Fiske, Saskatchewan, spent much of her adult life as a Mennonite mission worker in Burkina Faso, where she tried to live with integrity in a Muslim village. Since 2010 she has been supported by Mennonite Church Alberta as she seeks ways to be a faithful witness in her engagement with Muslims in Edmonton, home to the oldest Muslim community in Canada.

# Matt's declassified seminary survival guide

Matthew Cordella-Bontrager

I arrived at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana) in 2015 and learned that I was a conservative. This was news to me! I had entered the Mennonite world because of my interest in its beefy peace witness, by way of a Mennonite Voluntary Service placement focused on restorative justice. Not unlike Mennonites, Roman Catholics—the headwaters of my Christian experience—treated “peace and justice” as a churchly

**I can hold forth with confidence on Christian objections to war, but when it comes to any number of other concerns, I am utterly backward and troglodytic.**

**I unwittingly outed myself as a troglodyte early in my seminary career, and the label stuck.**

idiom for a particular species of religious progressivism. I was (and remain) firmly in support of peace as well as justice.


Yet my peace-and-justice self-concept did not (and does not) impress among my peers at AMBS. I can hold forth with some confidence on Christian objections to war, but when it comes to any number of other concerns—among them the centrality of evangelism, the morality of abortion and contraception, biblical authority, divorce and remarriage, the importance of the ecumenical creeds, participation in state politics, church discipline, the legitimacy of various forms of nonviolent direct action,

and my less-than-unquestioning embrace of women's ordination—not to mention the all-significant question of my attitude toward gender and sexual minorities, which (in my circles, at least) is treated as an ultimate index of progressivism or conservatism—I am utterly backward and troglodytic.

I unwittingly outed myself as a troglodyte early in my AMBS career, and the label stuck. Apart from a smattering of international students from the Global South and a motley bunch of American ex-evangelicals,

I often feel an island unto myself, a “clod . . . washed away by the sea,”<sup>1</sup> whose cloddishness is every day more apparent.

My hope is that these reflections will be edifying regardless of whether one is a so-called conservative at AMBS, or a Pink Menno<sup>2</sup> at a gathering of the Evana Network.<sup>3</sup> In other words, although these comments are born out of my personal situation, my intention is *not* to advance conservative opinions (whatever that means) over and against liberal opinions



**Openly articulating our level of investment in a particular truth claim enables us to be considerate of one another. I believe this courage and honesty will be rewarded with the possibility of deep and authentic relationships, if not with full Christian unity.**

(whatever that means). Rather, I intend to share some general reflections on my experience of living, moving, and being in a setting where many of my own deeply held convictions are not shared and are sometimes even met with firm resistance. This is to say that my intention is to write for Christians who live in the world.

### **Honesty in the open forum**

One of the tricky dynamics that I first needed to address during my time at AMBS was the tendency to minimize the significance of disagreement. I encountered this tendency in myself as

well as in the people around me. I needed to come to grips with the reality that, at the very bottom, I hold some things to be true, to the exclusion of others. Disagreements about what is true, especially in the weighty areas named in our confession of faith, have correlatively weighty implications. Some disagreements might even compromise our Christian unity.

My intuition is that the temptation to trivialize the importance of disagreement is strongest in settings that purport to be nonexclusive, i.e., in

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1 John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1959), 108.

2 Pink Menno exists to “to make the Mennonite Church an open and welcoming place for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people.” See more at <http://www.pinkmenno.org/history-vision/>.

3 The Evana Network is a fellowship of evangelical Anabaptist churches. A presenting issue for the formation of the Evana Network was increasing acceptance of same-sex relationships in Mennonite Church USA. See more at <https://evananetwork.org/about/vision>.

settings whose mission it is to be a kind of “open forum.” By minimizing the stakes of disagreement, the custodians of the open forum aim to encourage participation from a wide range of ideological camps, extending thereby the possibility of unity to the widest range of individuals.

The generous spirit of this approach notwithstanding, it yields questionable outcomes. Most obviously, the low-stakes framing of the conversation discourages full, honest participation from individuals who believe that the subject of the conversation is, actually, a matter of high stakes. The temptation to minimize the stakes of our disagreement is compounded, in my experience, by a general tendency among Mennonites toward conflict aversion. We want to get along, and we pride ourselves on the ability to get along with people who are different from us. The open acknowledgment that disagreement bears social consequences has the potential to shipwreck our ambition to be in loving relationship with a diverse cast of characters.

We owe it to ourselves and to our peers to be honest about the stakes of our disagreements. Squaring up to the possibility that our disagreements might really matter for our relationships demands of us a measure of courage. But openly articulating our level of investment in a particular truth claim also enables us to be considerate of one another. I believe that this kind of courage and honesty will be rewarded with the possibility of deep and authentic relationships, even friendships, if not with full Christian unity. Full-orbed honesty of this kind may not ultimately guarantee unity, but I suspect it to be a prerequisite.

## **Yielding the space**

When I am outnumbered, one of my first impulses is to insist on my own rights. After all, rights are supposed to protect the interests of minorities! Freedom of speech protects unpopular speech, and freedom of religion protects unpopular religion, even if these freedoms do not shield us from the consequences of our expression. In the pursuit of justice, it has been important for marginalized voices to strategically insist—at times, forcefully—that their rights be honored. The book of Acts tells us that the apostle Paul strategically invoked his rights as a Roman citizen.<sup>4</sup> But Paul also wrote that not everything that is lawful edifies.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Acts 22:25.

5 1 Cor. 10:23.

The operative word here is “strategic.” We do well not to be carried away by our first impulse to assert our rights, or to run with our own (often over-exaggerated) sense of personal victimization. We need to be discerning. When faced with the impulse to insist on my rights, I have made

**When faced with the impulse to insist on my rights, I have made it a discipline to ask: Where is this coming from? Am I seeking validation? Am I simply being oppositional? Or does injecting my opinion where it is not welcome serve the interests of Christ and his kingdom? Does this edify?**

it a discipline to ask: Where is this coming from? Am I seeking validation? Am I simply being oppositional? Or does injecting my opinion where it is not particularly welcome genuinely serve the interests of Christ and his kingdom? Does this edify?

As I began to consistently ask these questions of myself, I noticed a shift in my posture at AMBS. Instead of struggling against the governing consensus, I yielded my claim on the space. Instead of jockeying for the power to host the conversation, feeling personal responsibility for outcomes, I assumed the posture of a guest. I accepted the fact that I was not in control. This yielded posture opened up new possibilities for relationship.

The late, great Mennonite missionary Alan Kreider preached that the heart of Christian mission is entering into places where we are not in control.<sup>6</sup> Yielding control, we open ourselves to the possibility of being surprised. Serendipity and spontaneity become possible again.

In his assessment of Reinhold Niebuhr’s ethics, John Howard Yoder criticized a controlling, violent concept of responsibility—a kind of “responsibility” that lends itself to engagement in warfare.<sup>7</sup> John Nugent argues in *Endangered Gospel* that the social ethic of the early church was not accompanied by an absolute sense of responsibility for broader out-

6 “Alan Kreider leading worship,” YouTube video, 7:53, from Mennonite Church Saskatchewan delegate session, February 26–27, 2010, posted by Dick Benner, March 1, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2T7yb3WQ3G8>.

7 John H. Yoder, “The Theological Basis of the Christian Witness to the State,” John Howard Yoder Digital Library, 1955, <http://replica.palni.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15705coll18/id/2294>.



comes in society.<sup>8</sup> I have come to believe that the yielded posture I have cultivated through my time at AMBS is an expression of characteristically Anabaptist insights into Christian faith and practice.

## Rounding home

Yielding up my claims at the seminary gave me a sense of spiritual relief. It was a breath of fresh air and freedom. Yet even with this burst of fresh air and freedom, my desire to be around like-minded Christians did not dissipate. I had grown to see that the seminary—by virtue of its

**While we are called to enter spaces of difference—spaces where we are not in control, where our vision is contested in the encounter with others, and where we challenge in turn—it is also essential to have spaces where meaningful similarities are acknowledged and celebrated.**

mission to be a kind of open forum—was not an appropriate place for me to seek to meet this need. But I came to believe even more confidently that the desire for fellow travelers is healthy and holy. The New Testament does indeed countenance the value of unity of mind,<sup>9</sup> although not in the verses cited regularly by the custodians of open forums. All Christians need a home base, a sending community, solid ground from which to launch into the unknown, unmanaged, and uncontrolled.

I found that the church I was attending—a fantastic, loving group of people with an open forum mentality—was not able to provide me with the kind of sup-

port I needed as I navigated the open forum at AMBS. We parted on good terms, as I began attending a church whose convictions aligned more precisely with my own. While I believe that we are called to enter spaces of difference—spaces where we are not in control, where our vision is contested and challenged in the encounter with others, and where we contest and challenge in turn—it is also essential to have spaces where meaningful similarities are acknowledged and celebrated.

A word of caution: Trash-talking is an easy habit to develop, especially if our home base is populated with other people who are longing to have

8 John C. Nugent, *Endangered Gospel: How Fixing the World Is Killing the Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), e-book locations 1657–59.

9 1 Pet. 3:8, 1 Cor. 1:10.

their perspectives validated after a difficult week spent engaging with difference. It is important to have places where we can let off steam, but it is also important to remember that it is unhealthy to live in a sauna. An outward-looking mission focus is an important quality to look for in any home base. Mission offsets our tendency to turn inward, nursing resentment and disapproval. A good home base prepares us to engage graciously with the rest of the world as ambassadors of Christ.

With a home base to provide validation and a sense of shared identity, I no longer felt the need to seek these things in the open forum. I experienced greater freedom from compulsion in my time at AMBS. It suddenly seemed less dire to me that I convince others of the merits of my views. I was better able to resist the goading of some of my more pugnacious peers, and I felt greater liberty to decline invitations from well-meaning professors when they asked me to contribute a token conservative opinion.

**My cup runs over with opportunities to develop faculties of self-criticism, resilience, and generosity. My time at seminary has prepared me well to function as a minister of the gospel in the actual world—a world where the proclamation of the gospel meets with actual resistance.**

Far from being a bunker to which I could retreat and hide from competing ideas, I found that Sunday mornings at my new church left me more willing to engage the wide spectrum of opinions at AMBS in healthy, fruitful ways.

### **Take it as a gift**

Assigning these purposes to my congregation and to the seminary not only freed me from a compulsiveness and anxiety; it also helped me to see past the quiet resentment that had clouded my vision. I believe that I now see AMBS for what it most fundamentally is: a revolving door of quirky, well-intentioned people in various degrees of error, who

are, for the most part, trying their best to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with their God. In this, I fit right in, and I consider it a remarkable privilege to associate myself with the AMBS community. Are our differences often substantive? Of course. In fact, I have grave concerns about the fact that some of my peers will be pastors one day. But I am left with little doubt that the feeling is mutual!

Having candidly acknowledged these differences, I cannot help but believe that we are all benefitting from the discomfort of bumping up

against one another in these awkward ways. In fact, I suspect that I am a greater beneficiary of this discomfort than most. As I sit in class at AMBS, I imagine myself as a Mennonite equivalent to the Shinto monk meditating under a waterfall. I am being polished in the buffeting stream. Even in cases when I am not actively engaged in discussion with a contrary viewpoint, I am showered with opinions that push me, internally, to critically reassess and reformulate my own beliefs. My cup runs over with opportunities to develop faculties of self-criticism, resilience, and generosity. I have grown familiar with strong formulations of arguments—arguments that are persuasive, and so too enjoy great popular currency—with which I still ultimately disagree. I have honed my responses in turn.

My time at AMBS has prepared me well to function as a minister of the gospel in the actual world—a world where the proclamation of the gospel meets with actual resistance. In these ways and more, my time at AMBS has been a tremendous gift. I pray that these reflections will help others who feel themselves mired in similar situations understand their situation as gift and opportunity.

### **About the author**

Matthew Cordella-Bontrager is a third-year student in the master of divinity program at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. He attends Yellow Creek Mennonite Church.

# Many faiths, one human spirit

## A Christian contribution to spiritual care in multifaith contexts

Daniel S. Schipani

The content of this article stems from my work as a practical theologian engaged in teaching and research and in caregiving practice. The first part focuses on a way to understand and talk about human spirit and spirituality. The second part makes a case for the place and role of an interdisciplinary approach adaptable across faith traditions and in multifaith contexts.<sup>1</sup> The essay concludes with four normative claims about interfaith spiritual care from a Christian perspective.

### A tridimensional anthropology

I work with a theological anthropology that has biblical—especially Pauline—grounding.<sup>2</sup> Viewed anthropologically, humans are embodied, animated, spiritual beings always to be understood within the contexts of family, community, and society at large. A tridimensional anthropology of body, psyche, and spirit can be pictured structurally (see figure 1).

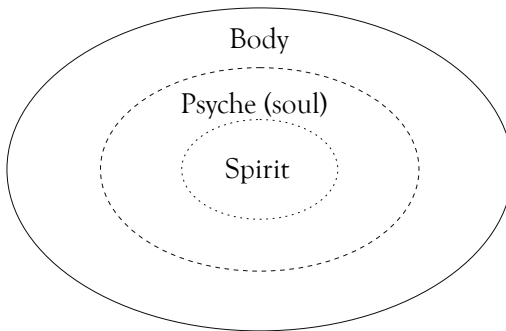


Fig. 1. A tridimensional view of the self (within family, social, global, cosmic contexts)

1 “Multifaith” is here used descriptively to denote the presence of a plurality of faith traditions (religious and nonreligious—such as humanism) in a given social context; it should not be confused with “interfaith,” a term that connotes dynamic interaction between persons of different faith traditions.

2 James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 51–78.

The solid outside line symbolizes the self's bodily separateness; the other two lines represent the close connection of body-psyche (as so-called psychosomatic pathology and psychosomatic medicine noted long ago), and the inseparable relationship of psyche-spirit. The psychological dimension of the self and the spiritual dimension of the self are integrated and inseparable, yet they are also distinct and distinguishable.

### **A model of the human spirit and spirituality**

Simply stated, we are humans because we are spiritual beings. The spirit is the essential dimension of being human—hence the Judeo-Christian claim about being created in God's image, according to the words of Genesis 1:26–27. In light of this model, spirituality can be understood as how our spirit manifests itself in ways of searching for, experiencing (“inner” sense), and expressing (“outer” manifestations) in three interrelated domains: (1) meaning-truth (wisdom, faith); (2) relatedness and communion with others, nature, the Divine, oneself; and (3) purpose–life orientation. The claim that these three dimensions of spirituality—meaning, communion, and purpose—name fundamental experiences and expressions of our human spirit is based on consistent and converging confirmation stemming from various sources: analysis of sacred texts and their function over centuries, cultural anthropology, comparative studies (including literature in the fields of pastoral and spiritual care and spiritual direction in particular), and my clinical work and supervision. The reference to “searching for” connotes a process of deep longing—that is, a fundamental need as well as potential.

With those notions in mind, we can identify a wide and rich variety of religious and nonreligious spiritualities, including diverse streams within a given tradition. For example, in the case of the Christian tradition, a plurality of spiritualities can be identified, such as contemplative, evangelical, charismatic, prophetic, and others.<sup>3</sup> The construct of spirit is therefore inseparable from that of psyche, so the content of the former's “longing” or “searching for” must be always considered in continuity with ongoing psychological process and content.

It should be clear that I intend this to be a transcultural model of the human spirit, one that is non-culturally specific in structure and in dynamics. In other words, “transcultural” here means universal. My ex-

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3 Richard J. Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Essential Practices from the Six Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1998.)

plicit anthropological claim is that, considered at their (spiritual) core, human beings demonstrate (contextually and particularly, to be sure) the need and potential for meaning, communion, and purpose. At the same time, we must recognize that the human spirit expresses itself uniquely within specific sociocultural contexts and (religious and nonreligious) faith traditions in particular. Further, we must also keep in mind that the spirit is always in process (as implied with the emphasis on “longing” and “searching for”).

In the case of Christian theology, this model can be understood in light of Trinitarian anthropological conceptions of the human person developed through the history of Christian thought. From a theological perspective, we can also posit a direct connection between these facets of the spiritual self and the spiritual gifts of faith, love, and hope (see figure 2). I believe that caregivers from other traditions, including humanism, can also broadly consider the categories of (religious and nonreligious) faith, love, and hope, as potentially helpful to name three main sets of existential experiences or conditions concerning spirituality. Such consideration can especially illumine the tasks of spiritual assessment, setting goals, and evaluation of caregiving processes.

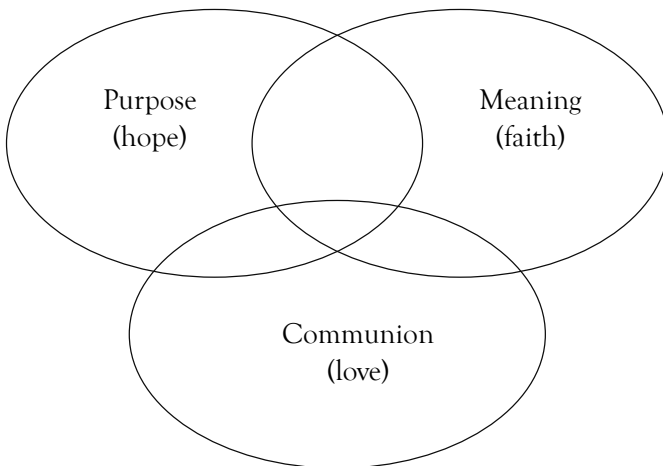


Fig. 2. A transcultural model of the human spirit (within family, social, global, cosmic contexts)

### **Mental and spiritual health “connection”: Intra-self dynamics**

As asserted above, the psychological and spiritual dimensions of the self can be viewed as integrated and inseparable, but they are also distinguish-

able. The following claims are therefore assumed to be applicable across religious and other traditions.

The condition of mental health, emotional maturity, and wellness makes it possible to experience spirituality more freely (for example, less fearfully, compulsively, or obsessively) and to express it verbally and otherwise more authentically than in the case of mental illness. Mental disorders and emotional immaturity always affect the subjective experience as well as the visible expressions of spirituality and spiritual health in some way and degree.<sup>4</sup>

However, mental health and emotional maturity are necessary but not sufficient conditions for spiritual health and maturity. Progress in treatment or the restoration of mental health does not automatically enhance

**Progress in treatment or the restoration of mental health does not automatically enhance people's spirituality and spiritual health; the spiritual self must be engaged intentionally.**

people's spirituality and spiritual health; the spiritual self must be engaged intentionally. This claim is analogous to the one applicable to the possible connection between "natural" psychosocial development and spiritual (including moral) development in the course of our life cycle. The fact that psychological development occurs in the natural flow of our life does not ensure that spiritual (and moral) growth will take place as well. Nevertheless, such psychological


development has the effect of opening broader and more complicated worlds to us, thus increasing the range and complexity of our spiritual self; hence, the range and complexity of our spirituality (in terms of deeper awareness of one's existential situation, sense of life orientation, connectedness with others, transcendence, etc.) and ways to nurture it (contemplation, meditation, prayer, compassionate service, etc.) tend to increase as well. Development can thus bring with it enhanced intentionality in and responsibility for both the personal ("inner") experience of spirituality and its visible expressions or manifestations.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth I. Pargament, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred I* (New York: Guilford, 2007); and James L. Griffin, *Religion That Heals, Religion That Harms: A Guide for Clinical Practice* (New York: Guilford, 2010). For a popular version, see Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006).

Toxic spirituality—for instance, in the form and content of sternly judgmental religiosity—can seriously undermine mental health. And the healing of the spiritual self—also known as inner healing—by the experience of grace and forgiveness, for example, always positively affects the psychological self. Therefore, even though pastoral and spiritual caregivers are not mental health professionals strictly speaking, their work always engages the psychological self in ways that can contribute significantly to improved mental health and emotional maturity.

### **On the contribution of pastoral and spiritual caregivers**

The unique contribution of pastoral and spiritual caregivers in any health-care team is that they can view and work with the care receivers holistically while primarily engaging them psychologically and spiritually. To do so, spiritual caregivers must develop the core competency of “bilingual proficiency”:



**Toxic spirituality—for instance, in the form and content of sternly judgmental religiosity—can undermine mental health. And the healing of the spiritual self by the experience of grace and forgiveness always positively affects the psychological self.**

understanding the languages and resources of psychology and spirituality/theology (or nontheological worldviews) and employing such understandings and resources in spiritual assessment and all other verbal and nonverbal (rituals, for example) caregiving practices.<sup>5</sup>

The main task of pastoral and spiritual caregivers, including chaplains, is to connect people in crisis to their spiritual resources and community. That task requires professional and ministerial wisdom with a profile of competency that will not be discussed in this essay because of space constraints.<sup>6</sup>

Given the plurality of sociocultural and religious variables at work, caregivers will normally face situations that present either commonality, complementarity, or contrast and even conflict. Dagmar Grefe helpfully refers to this issue with the aid of three concentric circles of interreligious spiritual care. She discusses the following three categories of situations

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5 Deborah Vandeußen Hunsinger, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling: A New Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

6 See Daniel S. Schipani, “Pastoral and Spiritual Care in Multifaith Contexts,” in *Teaching for a Multifaith World*, ed. Eleazar S. Fernandez (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 134–44.



that can be addressed: (1) “common (universal) human experience,” in which the caregiver functions primarily as companion; (2) “interconnected spiritual practice,” in which the caregiver functions as representative of the sacred; and (3) “particular religious spiritual practice,” in which the caregiver functions primarily as resource agent who relates (and often refers) care receivers and their families to their spiritual communities and resources.<sup>7</sup> My take on this challenge is represented in figure 3.

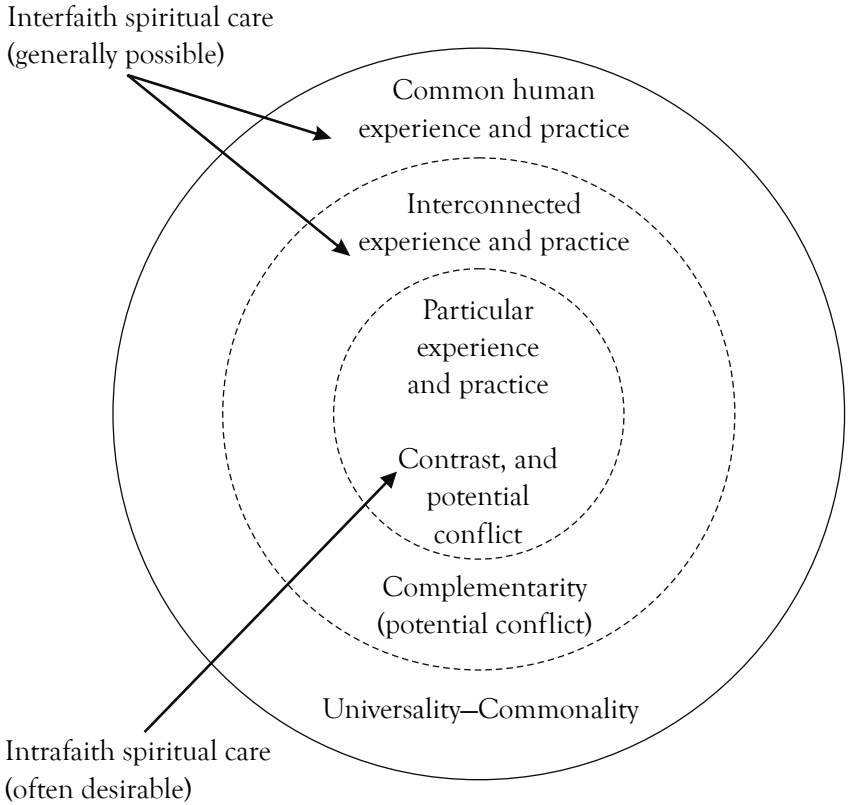


Fig. 3. Three circles of spiritual care

### Guidelines for spiritual assessment

One way of exploring the question of healthy and toxic spiritualities consists in studying them with an interdisciplinary approach that includes psychological and theological norms, as suggested in the charts that follow. The examples are illustrative rather than exhaustive.

<sup>7</sup> Dagmar Grefe, *Encounters for Change: Interreligious Cooperation in the Care of Individuals and Communities* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 138-45.

	<b>theologically adequate</b>	<b>theologically inadequate</b>
<b>psychologically functional</b>	1. life-giving, community-building spiritualities	2. spiritualities connected with “Prosperity Gospel,” or with fundamentalism
	3. spiritualities that see the self-limiting Divine as a benevolent, partner in one’s suffering and in one’s healing process; God is closely present with compassion, in solidarity  <i>Positive religious coping:</i> emotional-spiritual comfort; strength, peace	4. spiritualities that see a micromanaging God as one who “knows better . . . has a plan for my life . . . is testing me. . . I suffer here but will be compensated in heaven. . . I’ve been chosen for this test”  <i>Positive religious coping:</i> meaning and purpose clarified; “blessings in disguise”
<b>psychologically dysfunctional</b>	5. prophetic spirituality confronted as antipatriotic	6. spirituality of People’s Temple that led to mass suicide
	7. spiritualities that see God as “just and wise, and has made us free. . . . We face the consequences of that freedom [accident, illness]”  <i>Negative religious coping:</i> increased sense of vulnerability, weakness, diminished hope	8. spiritualities that see a micromanaging God as one who “is punishing me . . . has abandoned me. . . I’m not worthy of God’s love”  <i>Negative religious coping:</i> increased angst, guilt, isolation, despair

Depending on the epistemological place given to theology in connection with psychology,<sup>8</sup> theological criteria and judgment may determine a priori that some spiritualities can never be healthy even if they are psychologically functional (integrating), as in the case of options 2 and 4. Conversely, theological norms may determine that certain spiritualities are healthy (faithful, from a certain theological perspective) despite their being psychologically dysfunctional, as in options 5 and 7. Pastoral and

8 Hunsinger, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling*.

spiritual care providers must be able to assess spirituality and help people access their spiritual resources in the direction of healthy integration—for instance, by moving beyond negative religious coping.

**Interdisciplinary understanding of a spiritual care (or “pastoral”) practice**

We can apply the same kind of analysis to spiritual care (or pastoral) practices. Let’s consider, for instance, the case of praying during a hospital visit, and let’s assume that prayer was either requested by the patient or gladly welcomed when offered by the spiritual care provider. Of course, there are many different ways of praying wisely for a care receiver in a health-care center. We might simply say that, in all instances, such prayer should be a source of blessing; it must communicate a deep spiritual-theological truth (for example, the sustaining presence of grace, however understood or defined, in all circumstances). At the same time, such prayer must be mentally and emotionally helpful (for example, by fostering trust and hope in the face of anxiety and fear, by including the health-care team and the family, etc.). Regretfully, there are also harmful ways of praying for those hospitalized, as suggested below with several examples (which again are illustrative rather than exhaustive): see cases 2, 3, and 4.

	<b>theologically adequate</b>	<b>theologically inadequate</b>
<b>psychologically functional</b>	1. prayer that elicits a sense of grace and activates emotional and spiritual resources of the patient and family	2. prayer that momentarily alleviates anxiety and fear by persuading one that quick healing is available
<b>psychologically dysfunctional</b>	3. prayer that focuses on human fragility or vulnerability, while failing to alleviate present anxiety	4. prayer that associates one’s medical condition with God’s judgment and condemnation

## **Conclusion: Normative claims for interfaith care**

In recent years I have had the opportunity to converse and in some cases collaborate with colleagues representing diverse faith traditions and nonreligious humanism.<sup>9</sup> Our interactions have been mutually enriching in several ways, and I have had to revisit a number of my theological assumptions along the way. The following interrelated normative claims suggest the kind of reflection necessary to engage in interfaith care from a Christian perspective, not only with professional competency but also with faithfulness and theological integrity. Again, the list is illustrative rather than exhaustive.

1. We approach caregiving work as a form of ministry that sees care seekers and ourselves in the light of God who is Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver, without exceptions. We have been created in God's image, we stand in need of redemption and reconciliation, and we are promised new humanity and abundant life by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit. These three aspects of our humanity must be always kept in creative tension, regardless of the spiritual condition, religious convictions, and theological or philosophical views of the care receivers.
2. We engage in caregiving ministry primarily as a special competent practice of love of neighbor. And love is the only gift we can actually offer! We do so in the manner and with the spirit (and the faith) of Jesus. While practicing such therapeutic love, we must be open to encountering Christ anew in those we serve. Therefore, by loving the neighbor therapeutically, we are simultaneously doing sacred work and serving and loving God. And all this is happening, again, regardless of the spiritual condition, religious convictions, and theological or philosophical views of the care receivers.
3. Our caregiving work must be inherently and thoroughly evangelical. It must communicate good news of human wholeness, peace, hope, and ultimate healing (glimpses of salvation). And it must do so in presence, word, and action. In other words, therapeutic love thus offered consists in relating to care receivers evangelically. Thus our motivation and goal is not to evan-

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<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Daniel S. Schipani and Leah Dawn Bueckert, eds., *Interfaith Spiritual Care: Understandings and Practices* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2009); Daniel S. Schipani, ed., *Multifaith Views in Spiritual Care* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2013).

gelize (understood as fostering religious conversion) those vulnerable care receivers who represent other faiths and religious traditions. Our call is to be a blessing by becoming mediators of divine wisdom and grace.

4. Caregiving situations optimally become sacred spaces for manifestations of divine wisdom and grace pertinent to the specific circumstances faced by care receivers. Our ministry presents unique opportunities to partner with the Spirit of God together with the care receivers themselves. Hence, caregiving relationships must be viewed and experienced as collaborative and always “triangular,” regardless of care receivers’ view and/or sense of the Holy Spirit’s participation in that relationship. Pastoral and spiritual caregivers can acknowledge a connection “Spirit to spirit” that sustains and guides their ministry work, including especially the confrontation with manifold expressions of evil.

### **About the author**


For more than thirty years, Daniel Schipani has taught pastoral and spiritual care and counseling at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. He is currently studying toxic spirituality across faith traditions and partnering with the Holy Spirit in pastoral and spiritual care practice.

# “This was not done in a corner”

## Lessons on proclamation from the book of Acts

Mary H. Schertz

In Acts 26, Paul is defending himself before King Agrippa. He is arguing for his freedom, his life, and his mission. He starts with his biography, describing his earlier violence against the saints and then his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, which changed his trajectory conclusively. As Paul is telling this story, Festus interrupts with a scathing charge:



**For Paul, evangelism begins with biography—and ends in the courts of empire. It begins with the personal, with experience, with an encounter with Jesus. It ends with the public, with proclamation, with the good news of God’s love for the world.**

Paul’s great learning has made him lose his mind. Paul’s retort to “most excellent Festus” asserts that he is indeed rational and that news of these events cannot have escaped the notice of the great King Agrippa, “for this was not done in a corner.”

For Paul, evangelism begins with biography—and ends in the courts of empire. It begins with the personal, with experience, with an encounter with Jesus. It ends with the public, with proclamation, with the good news of God’s love for the world. Following in Paul’s footsteps—modestly, as befits one reared as a Mennonite Christian—I also begin

with biography. I make no predictions about the ending, although I know well where that ending needs to go.

### The quality of a vision

My great-grandfather stowed away in a ship to get to Chicago. He was escaping the draft in Germany not because of pacifist convictions—according to my grandmother, who refused to let us think of him as a hero—but because he didn’t want to go to war. At this distance, I can wonder with more sympathy about what was going on in his head and heart, imagining many reasons besides pacifist convictions why a young German man—a

boy really, living at the turn of the twentieth century—might not want to be drafted. But for my grandmother, the moral edges were clear. She was the one who experienced the drunk and the sober man, the abusive one and the woodworker who lovingly crafted for her a small doll dresser with a little mirror that is now among my keepsakes.

Life was difficult for the young family who lived at the corner of 18<sup>th</sup> and Morgan. Alcohol played too large a role in their lives. There were too many children too soon, and food was in short supply. Baby Grace died. Pregnant with yet another child, my great-grandmother sought a back-alley abortion and died in consequence. My great-grandfather married again, and the new stepmother did her best for the surviving little ones. But Lena (my grandmother) had to leave school after third grade to become a housemaid in one of the rich homes along the lake. Only on Sunday afternoons was she given time off to see her family. Her sister Elsie, a year or so older, went to work in a department store.

In 1893 Mennonites in Illinois founded the Chicago Home Mission at 639 West 18<sup>th</sup> Street. It made the difference. My step great-grandmother became one of the mission’s early converts. The kind people at the mission also found a way to help my great-grandfather stop drinking. It took some time. Lena remembered how she and Elsie would hold hands and run through the dark, dangerous streets singing songs they had learned at the mission, on their way to fetch their father from the bar. But over time, and with patience, the family was saved, in a spiritual and a physical sense. My grandmother invariably ended her Chicago stories with the question “Where would this family be without the Chicago Home Mission?”

Robert Tannehill, a Methodist scholar specializing in Luke-Acts, contends that “the quality of the vision that a missionary group serves will finally determine whether it is a blessing or a curse in human history.”<sup>1</sup> The holistic ministry with which the Chicago Home Mission served my family was good news for the souls and the bodies of my people. It was a blessing and not a curse in our family’s history.

### **Proclaiming Christ in a multicultural world**

The Chicago Home Mission wasn’t just a holistic ministry; it was also an example of proclaiming Christ in a multicultural world. According to the

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1 Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 2: *The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 18.

*Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, by 1956 people of twenty nationalities were participating in the Sunday school.<sup>2</sup>

The Christian church began in a multicultural context. As Walter Sawatsky observes in his article in this issue, we often think of the world of the early church in New Testament terms as Jewish and Greek. In terms of Western history, we often refer to it as Greco-Roman. In reality, the cultures of the early church as depicted in Acts were more complex. In Acts 2:9-11, Luke identifies people of more than a dozen language groups who after the descent of the Holy Spirit heard the gospel in their native tongues. Moreover, this crowd was just made up of pious Jews from “every nation under heaven” who were living in the city of Jerusalem (Acts 2:5).

No doubt the language and people groupings on the Greek side were just as complex, if not more so. In this multicultural environment that Luke describes, the gospel takes shape in a distinctive way. In this milieu, the gospel takes form in three ways that both support and challenge our contemporary sense of God’s mission in the world. First, the mission emerges from experience, from an encounter with God that may be less dramatic than Paul’s conversion but that is no less real. Second, the mission takes on the human dilemma holistically. People who respond to the mission of God in Acts don’t just respond with their heads. Nor do they just respond with their hearts. The mission in Acts addresses people, embodied people, people in their daily lives and commitments, whole people. Third, God’s mission deals with power. It grows and spreads throughout the disciples’ known world in part because the early missionaries speak to power, its uses and abuses. They do so both within the body of believers and in the world in which they move. They do so with courage; they do not let fear stop them from speaking the truth to power. Furthermore, the missionaries speak boldly to power through the power of the Holy Spirit. They are speaking not only to power but also with power, the power of the unpredictable, values-reorienting Holy Spirit. These things did not happen in a corner, Paul says. King Agrippa has heard of them.

### **The mission of God begins with an encounter with God**

The first time evangelism as a concept began to make sense for me was in a classroom at Goshen College when professor of religion C. Norman Kraus asked quite simply: “If you know about something good, why

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2 Earl Lehman, “Mennonite Home Mission (Chicago, Illinois, USA),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1957, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite\\_Home\\_Mission\\_\(Chicago,\\_Illinois,\\_USA\)](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Home_Mission_(Chicago,_Illinois,_USA)).



wouldn't you want to tell your friends about it?" It was the moment when my notions swiveled from associating evangelism with awkwardly handing out tracts on Sunday afternoon to people who didn't really want them. I began to understand evangelism as telling stories like my grandmother's.

**My notions swiveled from associating evangelism with awkwardly handing out tracts to people who didn't really want them to understand-ing evangelism as telling stories like my grandmother's. That moment was a turning point for me in claiming my own faith in the risen Lord.**

And although I didn't recognize it at the time, that moment was a turning point for me in claiming my own faith in the risen Lord. It was a faith handed down to me, yes, but it was also my salvation. Evangelism began to take root in me as the conviction that trust in Jesus matters.

In Acts, all the missionaries had encounters with Jesus. These experiences were the root of their acts of bold proclamation in the intensely multicultural world in which they found themselves. Of the two main characters Luke develops most fully, Paul's was the most dramatic encounter. Peter's encounter with Jesus extended over a longer period of time, with a more gradual learning

curve. It certainly had its dramatic moments—think of walking on water—but it also entailed the more mundane reality of living with Jesus and the other disciples over the course of Jesus's ministry.

Then there are the minor characters who encountered Jesus through the work of healing and proclamation undertaken by Peter and Paul as well as Philip and the other disciples. Luke's point is that telling people about Jesus starts with knowing Jesus and experiencing his power for oneself in transformation of one's body and soul. Proclamation begins in praise and thanksgiving that arises from meeting Jesus.


### **The mission of God is holistic**

As Luke tells the story of how the church came into existence after Jesus died, it is clear that the group of believers was made up of those whose lives had been changed. It wasn't just that they now believed. Their actions and their daily routines took on newness as well. In Acts 2, after Peter had preached the good news, those who were persuaded—pierced to the heart—asked him what they should do. Peter told them to repent,

be baptized, and receive the Holy Spirit. About three thousand people accepted Peter's challenge that day.

But the following paragraph is even more interesting, because these three thousand people did not return to their lives as usual the next day. Instead they spent their time learning from the apostles and sharing fellowship, food, and prayer. What is more, they began pooling their resources, selling off property and distributing the profits so that all the people had what they needed.

Christians are saved sinners, of course, and very human. Within a few chapters of Luke's narrative, this impulse toward common sharing runs into trouble, with the duplicity of Ananias and Sapphira (chapter 5) and unfair treatment of Greek-speaking widows (chapter 6). But it is worthy of note that the religious rituals of repentance, baptism, and reception of



**In Acts, the religious rituals of repentance, baptism, and reception of the Spirit erupt first and most decisively in the impulse to care for one another.**

the Spirit erupt first and most decisively in the impulse to care for one another. Paul may have owned the most dramatic conversion story of the early Christians, but all the people who joined the church changed their behavior.

Having their goods in common is only one way the early church cared for body as well as the soul. In Acts 3:1–10, the apostles continue Jesus's ministry of healing. A lame man approaches Peter and John asking for money. The apostles tell him they have no money but instruct him in the name of Jesus to stand up and walk. Philip, in addition to effectively breaking down the social barriers isolating eunuchs, also healed people, intervening not only in behalf of those with mental illnesses and those oppressed by evil spirits but also for those suffering from lameness and paralysis (Acts 8:4–8). Peter heals again in Lydda, and also raises Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9:32–43). And, at the end of chapter 11, the believers in Antioch send famine relief to the Jerusalem church by way of Barnabas and Paul.

The book of Acts provides ample evidence that repentance, baptism, and the reception of the Holy Spirit bore fruit in acts of healing and compassion. Compassion is not only the great need of the lost souls of the world; it is also one of the best bases for ecumenical friendship, service, and dialogue. In her book *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong has made the point that compassion is at the heart of the three great religions of

the book.<sup>3</sup> What better way to proclaim the good news in a multicultural world than to act together in extending compassion to people in need?

### **The mission of God speaks to power with power**

We rarely speak of power and evangelism in the same breath. We sometimes describe evangelists as powerful speakers, but that barely gets at the breadth of the issues of power evangelism we encounter in the early church. The early believers recognized power and forthrightly contested abuses of power. That was part of their message. In that sense, the apostles demonstrated the old feminist maxim that the personal is political. The story of Jesus and his love could not be told without putting into bold relief the difference between human uses and abuses of power and the power of the Holy Spirit. Importantly, this confrontation took place both within the new community and in the interactions between the new community and the world.

Acts 8:9–24 is a story about confronting a misuse of power within the community of believers. Simon, a practitioner of magic, had enjoyed

**We rarely speak of power and evangelism in the same breath. The early believers recognized power and forthrightly contested abuses of power. That was part of their message.**

the attention—even provoked the awe—of the people in Samaria, until Philip arrived, forced into the region by the persecution that followed the execution of Stephen. With many of his fellow townspeople, Simon got caught up in Philip’s teaching and healing ministry, and he believed and was baptized. But then his old values reappeared. When they heard the news that so many in Samaria had been baptized, Peter and John came from Jerusalem to lay hands on the

believers so that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Simon, when he saw what was happening, wanted to buy the power to do what the apostles were doing.

Simon’s request was a problem for several reasons. He was wrong to think the laying on of hands was the way the disciples bestowed the Spirit. The laying on of hands invoked the Spirit’s coming, but the Spirit was not a magical power Peter and John controlled. Sometimes in Acts, the de-

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3 See Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1993).

scent of the Spirit was invited by the laying on of hands. But by no means was that true in all instances. The disciples never held the power of the Spirit in their hands in that sense. But Simon's real offense was trying to buy this power. To reduce the power of the Spirit to a sum of money, any sum, was unacceptable, and Peter let Simon know that in no uncertain terms. To his credit, Simon asked for prayer.

In Acts 16:16–21, Luke presents a story that parallels the story of Simon the magician. This kind of pairing is typical of Luke's narrative style. The second story has a female lead, and it is a story of worldly exploitation rather than skewed values within the community. Paul and Silas are in Philippi in Macedonia. As they make their way to the place of their daily prayer, they are bothered by a slave girl who is possessed by a spirit that enables her to tell the future. This "gift" makes a nice profit for

**The stories of Simon and the slave girl give Luke's readers a sense of how abuses of power—within the community and in the relations between the community and the world—are a natural arena for evangelism. The disciples don't avoid confronting abuse of power; they turn these occasions into opportunities to introduce the gospel.**

her owners. She doesn't tell the apostles' fortune; in fact, she advertises for them—"These men are servants of the Most High God!" she hollers. But her outburst is inauthentic, and in a moment of pique Paul commands the spirit to come out of her. It does, and the girl's angry owners come after Paul and Silas in a confrontation that leads to the story of the Philippian jailor. This story, in Luke's hands, has a touch of humor, but it is nevertheless a story of the gospel confronting the power of economic exploitation, and the consequences for the disciples are dire.

The two stories, taken together, give Luke's readers a sense of how abuses of power—within the community and in the relations between the community and the world—are a natural arena for

evangelism. Confronting abuses of power is not something the disciples try to avoid. Indeed, they turn these occasions into opportunities to introduce the gospel and clarify what it's about.

Finally, the disciples in Acts do not confront abuses of power with powerlessness. We sometimes make the mistake of thinking we should respond to misuse of power by renouncing the use of power. But the good

news is not advanced with a show of powerlessness; it is advanced with the show of a very different kind of power. This power is not the power of money, nor is it power over others. Rather it is the unpredictable and volatile power of the Holy Spirit. It is a power that can possess but not be possessed. It is a power that can be invoked but is not biddable. It is not powerlessness. It changes lives and circumstances.

### **The proclamation of Christ in a multicultural world**

Sorting through the values of gospel and culture is never easy. It is never problem free. But it is always necessary, because the gospel is not the gospel if it is hoarded for ourselves and those like us. Peter and the rest of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem understood that. Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles, understood that. The people at the Chicago Home Mission understood that.

But sorting through the values of gospel and culture, even multiculturalism, can be guided by what we learn from Acts. What matters in our sorting are stories: stories of transformation, both personal and structural; stories from our faith and culture of origin; other peoples' stories of transformation.

What matters, in our sorting, is the whole person. Whether the person in question is a person who has lost her way, a person of another faith, a neighbor, or a stranger, the whole person matters. The gospel ministers to body and soul. Evangelism and justice cannot be separated.

What matters in our sorting is that we attend to issues of power. Uses and misuses of power are the very stuff of the mission. The human dilemma is bound up with lust for power. The gospel confronts that lust and provides a very different way to think about, experience, and use power. It is, after all, the power of the Holy Spirit that brings us out of the corner to proclaim Christ to slave girls and kings alike.

### **About the author**

Mary H. Schertz is a retired professor of New Testament at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana. She attends Fellowship of Hope in south-central Elkhart.