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Seminar Paper: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM OTHER MISSION STRATEGIES?

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Introduction

The underlying assumption of this paper is that we who are gathered here are willing and able to learn from others. When I say "willing," I mean that Mennonite Brethren Missions/Services (hereafter MBM/S), and indeed all of us here, recognize that our strategies are not the only nor necessarily the best ones and that we are humble enough to admit this and teachable enough to learn from others. When I say "able," I mean that other mission societies have insights and experiences from which we can in fact learn. That is to say, not only are we teachable but we recognize that others have strategies that can augment our own and hence make us more productive. Before we identify "other mission strategies," we ought first to remind ourselves of our own, and here I am thinking of MBM/S strategies, since I do not presume to know the strategies of all the national conference represented here these days.

I. WHAT ARE OUR OWN STRATEGIES?

There are several ways in which we can ascertain our strategies. On the one hand, we can move from country to country and worker to worker and describe all the different ways in which we seek to achieve our goals, such as the following: conduct Bible studies, distribute literature (Bibles, tracts, devotional books), do surveys, begin correspondence courses, sell cassettes or radios, produce radio/TV programs, teach in Bible schools, utilize TEE, conduct Christian camps, officiate at weddings/funerals for the non-churched, hold evangelistic rallies, show Christian films, conduct health clinics, engage in preventive and promotive health care, operate curative health centres, engage in development work, be a Christian presence through teaching English, etc.--and we do all of the above and more. The difficulty with such an approach is that we are thereby simply describing what different

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workers do, rather than defining the over-arching, intentional strategy of the mission. On the other hand, we can in fact define rather closely the intent of our mission by referring to two of its recent documents: the Mission Principles and Policies (hereafter MPP), 1977, and the Mennonite Brethren Missions in the 1980s (hereafter MBM'80s), the latter adopted in April, 1980. On the basis of these official statements, we can identify at least five primary strategies employed by MBM/S.

A. Evangelism and church planting have been given a high priority. The MPP states, "Our primary task is to build living churches that are a glory to God and a witness to His kingdom. Since entry is by conversion, evangelism is an essential part of this activity." And the MBM'80s directs us to give high priority to evangelism and church planting among unreached people, including:

1. giving priority to unreached peoples in regions where we presently live (for example, in India we would extend the work to the Telugu-speaking people in Bombay);

2. reaching a limited number of new regions of unreached peoples outside areas where we presently work (for example, the Baluchi people of Karachi, Pakistan; the sub-urbanites of Lisbon, Portugal; or those helped by relief ministries in Sullana, Peru);

3. giving priority to urban evangelism and church planting (such as Tokyo, Kinshasa, Madrid, Sao Paulo, Guadalajara, etc.).

B. Leadership training and nurture ministries also become very important. Again, as part of our primary task of building churches, according to the MPP, we add, "But it also includes nurturing the believers and ministering to their needs and building them up, so that they may become God's church in their land in witness and deed, and a glory to His name." Moreover, in the MBM'80s, we list "leadership training and nurture" as a second objective in which MBM/S assists younger churches to facilitate their indigenous maturation. In some countries this becomes the primary task of MBM/S, such as in India and Zaire where the national conference does most of the evangelizing.

C. Ministering to human needs is part and parcel of our wholistic understanding of the gospel. The MPP indicates such ministries to be essential both in areas where we are planting and nurturing churches, as well as in areas where there is less potential for church growth, although MCC is seen as a related agency in regards to the latter. The MBM'80s emphasizes

~~the~~ balancing ~~the~~ proclamation with ~~the~~ social, medical, and development ministries, and also ~~the~~ encouraging ~~the~~ the peace witness. Such significant programs by MBM/S are carried on in Afghanistan, Nepal, Pakistan, Panama, Peru, and Zaire.

D. Increasingly, partnership relations with national conferences are being developed. The MPP document includes in its church building strategies the establishment of a self-propogating, indigenous church from the outset, rather than transferring responsibilities from one structure (the mission) to another (the church). While this has not occurred with the same degree of success in all countries, increasingly MBM/S has internationalized its structure to enable it to include non-North American workers in its program, and it is beginning to negotiate regional participation in order to become partners at the decision-making level. The plan for the 1980s<sup>also</sup> included ~~also~~ the formation of a world MB fellowship, such as is assembling here in Curitiba these days.

E. Participating in supporting mission ministries continues to be necessary. As the MPP indicates, in order to carry out its programs, MBM/S cooperates with churches and other mission agencies to accomplish specific tasks that contribute to its programs, such as Bible translation, publication, radio, Christian education, Bible school and seminaries, and administrative services and transportation. In addition, MBM/S involves itself in Bible teaching among independent Christian movements without necessarily seeking to incorporate them into an MB fellowship, such as in Botswana and Indonesia.

## II. SOME OTHER MISSION STRATEGIES

~~Needless to add,~~ This is not intended to be an exhaustive review of mission strategies. My intent is to identify very different over-arching mission strategies as controlling principles for doing mission. Hence, I will not survey the many differing methodologies, as I began to do above. The initial strategies that follow concern themselves with the very nature of the mission activity; the latter have to do more with the structural dimension, that is, affecting the church/mission relationship.

### A. Focusing exclusively on evangelism

An illustration of an agency which very deliberately focuses its activities on one form of evangelism is Campus Crusade for Christ International. Begun in 1951 by William R. Bright, this interdenominational

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sending agency describes itself as a movement of students and laymen who have united to help change the world in this generation. Based upon the three-fold strategy of winning, building, and sending, it seeks to work cooperatively, as an evangelistic arm, with churches of all denominations. It strongly emphasizes personal evangelism and has widely used the "The Four Spiritual Laws" and the survey approach as tools to confront individuals with the Good News. As part of its training program for such one-to-one evangelism, it further emphasizes the importance of the Spirit-filled life. Training sessions involve participants in the actual practice of witnessing to unbelievers. Moreover, pastors and Christian leaders are urged to model such personal evangelism and equip their congregations in the same. The twelfth edition of the Mission Handbook: North American Protestant Ministries Overseas, 1979, reports 500 North Americans to be serving overseas, not including the five non-North Americans and an administrative staff of 84 North Americans and 77 short-termers.

The strength of this approach is precisely its deliberate focus upon personal evangelism and its encouragement and training of lay persons for the same. Its emphasis upon a Spirit-filled life is an important feature. Its alleged intent to be an arm of the church could be a great strength. The weakness of the program is in its mechanistic manner of confronting persons with the "four spiritual laws" and prematurely urging a decision and leaving the person without follow-up and nurture in a church. The danger is evangelism without church planting, like bringing babies into the world without providing nurture. Moreover, its survey approach is sometimes questioned for its integrity, since the intent of the survey is usually not statistical analysis but simply an attempt to get the foot into the door to witness. Finally, in its overseas program it remains rather foreign in its method and fails to cooperate with the indigenous conference.

#### B. Providing predominantly nurture

Whereas some mission societies intentionally serve as the nurture arm of the church to supply teachers for Bible institutes and seminaries, such as Bible and Medical Missionary Fellowship (BMMF), other missions, by default, become known for maintenance ministries, rather than ~~to~~ engaged in evangelism or church planting directly. Here one could identify several large denominational missions representing especially the mainline churches and missions. Structurally, such missions have frequently integrated with the national church and minister under the direction and control of the national



church. Such fusion of church and mission has sometimes resulted in the loss of the mission dimension. To guard against such total domination by the national church, some missions have adopted a completely opposite stance in which they have totally kept separate the mission and the church. Such a dichotomous structure, however, results in the failure of the mission to help the fledgling church in its nurture task.

In assessing such a nurture approach to mission, one must keep in mind both the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy. It is good not to abandon a newly-established group of believers and struggle with them in their maturation process. Such a concern for a fledgling church surely is in keeping with Paul's own model, for he said, "Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches" (II Cor. 11:28).

Moreover, it is surely in place for the affluent mission to help the struggling and frequently impoverished young church. Yet, one must guard against developing dependencies which will be hard to terminate. Moreover, the mission must guard against establishing institutions which are too big for the national church to sustain without perpetual help from the mission. Finally, if most of the mission resources within a given country are applied to maintaining institutions, rather than helping the church in its expansion program, the mission may have lost its primary purpose for being: its mandate to share the gospel with the unreached.

#### C. Ministering to social needs

There are such church agencies, as MCC or MEDA, whose primary goal it is to help the church in its social, economic, and developmental tasks. At the same time, they seek to speak to issues of justice in an unjust world. Since this concern becomes part of the whole gospel to the whole man, it finds ample biblical support, especially when the same churches have other mission arms to engage in church planting and nurture ministries. Such a strategy of mission can be questioned when it has social and political change as its principal goal and uses a theology which is not biblical or a methodology which is in fact violent. Here I am thinking of the liberation theologians. In order to be fair to these, I must further qualify this approach.

Again, one must recognize both the strengths and the weaknesses of such a strategy. The liberation theologians can help sensitize us to the hurts of people and the systematic structures that are the cause of injustice. Moreover, they can make us more sensitive to the biblical concern for

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making social needs so strongly to generation theology is partly stealing, for it colours it too negatively. The generation ago the same suit would have been similarly linked to 'Social Gospel'. A real limitation of this method, even our own Mennonite approach, is that often outsiders are involved in social change apart from the local church. The focus of such action must be the church, but the resources we want to bring to bear on these situations of need are far out of proportion to the resources of the local church.

justice. Indeed, they remind us that the prophets of the Bible have been God's spokesmen for justice. And they emphasize the role of God's people in bringing about justice. At the same time, however, one must caution against their unbiblical approach. Although one needs to contextualize theology, one does not root that theology in the human situation, but in revelation. Moreover, one must remain faithful to the biblical text and not become selective and interpret all of history from the Exodus motif. Further, one must not fail to keep Christ at the heart of redemption, rather than political and social liberation. While a strategy of mission may legitimately address social needs, it must remain biblically sound and see its task as part of a total ministry to the spiritual and material needs of humans.

#### D. Witnessing through Christian presence

Increasingly the context for mission in today's world is shaped by neo-pagan secularism, political authoritarianism, and ideological world views intolerant to the Christian faith and its propagation. Whether in a climate of atheistic Communism or militant Islam, the only tolerable witness will be "mission by presence." Such a theology of presence is based on the incarnate model of our Lord in which Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Such a Christian presence authenticates both words and actions and the witness becomes credible. Two recent mission endeavors which utilize this strategy are China Educational Exchange and Frontiers Mission. The former, consisting of five Mennonite missions (of which MBM/S is one partner), sponsors teachers of English in Chinese universities and schools of technology in exchange for hosting Chinese professors in American Christian colleges. Most recently several exchange programs of doctors, nurses, and agronomists have also been arranged. Eloquent testimonies of the effectiveness of such witness can readily be documented. The latter mission has coined the slogan to send out 200 teams of 10 by the year 2000 to Muslim countries, otherwise closed to the gospel. Very carefully disguised by becoming professionals or engaging in business ventures, these teams work in the most impenetrable places under various non-mission organizations to hide their real identity. In the end their Christian presence opens appropriate doors of opportunity for witness and support of underground or house churches.

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Such a mission strategy, necessitated by the circumstances mentioned above, is frequently misconstrued to be a cowardly and weak witness in which otherwise unqualified missionaries can serve. It is viewed to be a witness

of silence and nothing more—and anyone can presumably do that. It is further misconstrued to suggest that it is unnecessary for people to hear the gospel. Moreover, some see it as a means of displacing action by being, that is, a passive presence, and that mission occurs only through a centripetal attraction of believers. Such a view of mission by presence is much too narrow and certainly limits authentic witness. Instead, authentic Christian witness by presence incorporates all aspects of witness possible, functioning as light, salt, and leaven (although it may necessitate more being than doing). It calls for listening sensitively, experiencing solidarity, self-emptying and sacrifice, and living transparently with people. It is in fact very demanding, for such presence carries implicit proclamation. And in some countries today this is the only witness possible. For further information, see A Relevant Theology of Presence, by Calvin E. Shenk, published by Mission Focus, 1982.

#### E. Cooperating with the state church

As a result of unfruitful church planting efforts in areas where there are dominant state churches, some evangelicals have recently concluded that North American missions should not plant churches of their own denominations separate from the state churches. Instead, they should work for renewal of the state church. Arthur Glasser of the School of World Mission at Pasadena, California, for example, identifies several models of North American missions which attempt to plant churches in Germany. The first model is parochial in which denominational missions extend their North American structures to Europe and by-pass the state church and expect Europeans to become members of this imported model. The second model is that of the "independents" of the nondenominational faith missions who frequently specialize in particular youth, discipleship training, or evangelistic ministries, but exert their foreign influence in their endeavor to help European evangelicals. As a result of the above, the Overseas Crusades in Germany, for example, have committed themselves to work within the Lutheran church and reject "unbiblical separatism" (see Church Growth Bulletin, 23:2).

The merits of this strategy are its optimism to believe that in the sovereignty of God one can in fact reform the state church from within. Pragmatically, this is where the masses of the people are which need to be evangelized. Moreover, to work within the state church would greatly encourage the evangelical remnant. Further, one would then work towards Christian unity rather than fragment the body of Christ. The difficulty with

*You make it sound like "presence" is something else? Is it that or something else? Is it a kind of "presence" which we should exist. Advice for Christian workers that they can take a 9-12 week intensive training in their new culture. They would not be "our" workers, yet we could help them be much more effective.*

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is harmful.

this approach, however, is precisely its naive optimism. Will new believers in fact find the needed nurture in a secularized church, especially where the pastor lacks spiritual life? What about the increasing number of those who have left the church entirely and no longer are eligible for even the life-cycle events that the pastor normally conducts—christening, marriage, and burial? And does not a free church or believers' church provide a stimulating alternative to those who are alienated from the church? Is there not a legitimate sectarian viability in such a believers' church, even at the cost of being a minority? Is this not the model of sixteenth-century Anabaptists?

#### F. Supporting national workers

In recent years several new mission agencies, based in North America, have almost entirely used North American funds to support national workers in other countries. One such agency is Christian Aid Mission, with offices in Fort Erie, Ontario, and Charlottesville, Virginia. This mission very persuasively argues that North Americans cannot evangelize the world, and that is true. It alleges that 90% of all missionary giving is being used to send out 10% of the total number of missionaries. Yet, it argues, native missions accomplish ten times what traditional North American missions are doing at less than 5% of the cost. Based on arguments of efficiency and cost productiveness, such missions support indigenous workers in non-North American countries. Help is sent to completely independent ministries which are free of control or affiliation from outside. The above agency supplies native missions with bicycles, buildings, medicine, food, clothing, and disaster relief. In a similar vein, Christian National Evangelism Commission supports national evangelists in other countries.

The advantages of such an approach to missions are seen in the following appeal to North Americans, taken from one of their promotional pieces: native ministries are more effective, cost less, have less overhead, need less training, and can operate in any political climate. Whereas one might question each of the above arguments for some situations, we need to recognize the merits of such an approach in other political or religious environments. However, one must not lose sight of the following:

1. For affluent North Americans to send their money instead of their missionaries is to do missions by proxy. Interest could soon wane and the church would lose its direct contact with the field through its own members. Missions would remain alien.

2. Despite the alleged safeguards for financial accountability, should national Christians not first encourage stewardship and accountability of their own resources before becoming stewards of others' resources? If the former has happened, the latter is a different matter.
3. How authentically missionary is a church through others' financial resources? In addition to giving its personnel, must it not also give some of its means? *Assuming it gives what it can, should that free it to accept unlimited external resources*
4. Why emphasize the independence from foreign churches, when such support develops a new dependency? Is the partnership arrangement with an international church body not more in keeping with biblical brotherhood? Is there not more opportunity to learn from one another in such a setting as this?

#### G. Encouraging emerging missions

While the term "emerging missions" is not quite accurate, since this is not entirely a recent phenomenon, the term serves our purposes better than either "Third-World" or "non-Western," since "Third-World" excludes Japan and Europe, and "non-Western" excludes Latin America. In any event, Lawrence Keyes maintains there are some 20,000 non-Western missionaries today, and if the decadal growth rate (from 1972 to 1982 being 448%) averages only 225%, there will be some 100,000 non-Western missionaries by the year 2000. A 1980 study revealed 368 agencies sending 13,000 missionaries, projecting 15,249 by 1981 (see Lawrence Leyes, The Last Age of Missions, 1983, 65). These emerging missions are largely indigenous, since 91% of the total budget comes from their own churches. Why then do we need to encourage these missions? Emerging missions and Western missions need each other in developing better training programs, support bases, organizational structures, and overall fruitfulness. Yet, one needs to guard against paternalistic control with the help being offered.

In assessing this emerging movement in world missions, the Western church must not view these missions as releasing the West from its own missionary responsibility. Neither should these emerging missions be deemed to be more blessed, successful, or efficient than their Western counterparts, since they often lack in experience. Moreover, it may be more difficult for a Brazilian to enter Morocco or a Japanese to enter Pakistan, than for a North American. Larry Pate and Lawrence Keyes have identified five forces which need to be combined for effective missionary activity by any church (see International Bulletin of Missionary Research, October, 1986). These

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dialogue as we  
develop theology &  
methodology, & a  
structure & a  
sense of unity.*

*good point*

are as follows: i) a sufficient number of pastors and church leaders who have a vision to evangelize the lost of other cultures; ii) organizational structures which manage the missionary enterprise; iii) adequate missionary training programs; iv) adequate information to plan effective strategy; and v) raising financial support and maintaining missionaries on the field. Perhaps our own best example of partnering in such a manner with an emerging mission is that of PIPKA (mission agency of the Mennonite Muria Synod of Indonesia) and MBM/S, in which for ten years we facilitated (iii) and (v) above, presently gradually phasing out (v). As a world MB fellowship, we need to help each other in such task-oriented partnerships.

### III. A SUMMARY OF LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

We learn from both positive and negative example, from both strengths and weaknesses of others. And so in our summary, we briefly call attention to what we can learn from both aspects of other mission strategies.

1. From focusing exclusively on evangelism, we learn:

- that it is of crucial importance that both church leaders and lay persons be trained in personal evangelism;

- that evangelism without church planting is unproductive and irresponsible.

2. From providing predominantly nurture, we learn:

- that it is advisable to help a fledgling church in its nurture program;

- that in the process, a mission must not abdicate its responsibility for evangelism.

3. From ministering to social needs, we learn:

- that it is theologically sound to keep word and deed together and to be sensitized to the needs and injustices of other people;

- that we must guard against an emasculated social gospel which fails to take seriously the redemptive work of Christ.

4. From witnessing through Christian presence, we learn:

- that it is demanding and requires sacrificial self-emptying, and that it is implicit proclamation;

- that one should avoid the view of a theology of presence which suggests it is easy, passive witness, not requiring the gospel.

5. From cooperating with the state church, we learn:

- that it is always in place to work towards renewal in a nominal church;

- that the believers movement appears to have a place in a neopaganized country in order that new believers find nurture.

6. From supporting national workers, we learn:

- that it is indeed important to encourage national workers in their ministries and even provide occasional assistance;

- that one must not create new dependencies through such help, nor encourage mission by proxy at the expense of authentically indigenous participation.

7. From encouraging emerging missions, we learn:

- that it is important for all of us to help each other in achieving the five essential forces for effective missionizing;

- that the emerging missions by themselves are not necessarily more fruitful in their mission efforts.

May God grant each of us a teachable spirit and a perceptive understanding of our own needs, so that we might learn those lessons from other mission strategies which will make us more productive in our joint responsibility to extend His kingdom.