

KNOWING AND LIVING YOUR FAITH:

A STUDY OF THE CONFESSION OF FAITH

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY OF MENNONITE BRETHREN

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CHAPTER 11

People of Mission and Hope

Nzash Lumeya (Democratic Republic of Congo) and P. Menno Joel (India)

The Confession of Faith affirms the commitment of our global family to everyday witnessing of God's love. As the Confession states: "Confident in this hope the church engages in mission until the Lord returns." The Anabaptists in the 16th century were the most missionary of the Reformation. From its beginnings in 1860, the Mennonite Brethren Church has had a strong emphasis on outreach, already to the neighboring Russians and soon (1890) by sending a missionary couple, Abraham and Maria Friesen, to go overland to India to work in the Nalgonda field.

TWO STORIES

Deevanamma was poor, lived in a small house with her son, and had no status in society.

From India: J. H. Pankratz, a missionary, went to a remote Indian village to preach the gospel. After hearing this message, the widow Deevanamma accepted Jesus Christ as her Lord. She was poor, lived in a small house with her son, and had no status in society. In subsequent visits, the evangelist noticed the plight of this boy who could not go to school; he saw a future in the boy and took him to a mission school. Later, this young man, Joshua, became a pastor.

In his visit to many villages, Pastor Joshua saw numerous boys and girls working for rich landholders but deprived of basic education. This young pastor, having experienced a similar childhood but now educated and transformed by the gospel, had hope for these kids. With the promise "the truth will make you free" (John 8:32) in mind, the pastor took these boys and girls to a Christian hostel where

they might be educated and hear the gospel. The pastor faced much opposition, threatenings, and accusations of child traffic from the children's former employers and even from the children's own families. Some cursed this pastor, wishing him death. But the pastor retained hope and was zealous to participate in the mission of the church to uplift the poor.

After their studies were over their lives were changed spiritually, socially, and economically.

Over the years these young women and men accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior and found real freedom. After their studies were over their lives were changed spiritually, socially, and economically. Some became nurses, teachers, pastors, or entered other professions. Shantamma became a Mennonite Brethren school teacher and lady evangelist in the villages of Manchala, Khanapur and Agapally of the Hughestown field. P. Simon and B. John became pastors; now their sons P. Dayanandam and B. Joseph have also become pastors, serving the Lord.

From the Democratic Republic of Congo (D.R.C.). The 1990s were years of testing for the Democratic Republic of Congo and its growing Mennonite Brethren Church. The Congolese socio-political and spiritual landscape had changed greatly. Politically, thirty-two years of dictatorship had ended. In 1997 the name of the country was changed from Zaire to the Democratic Republic of Congo. A year later an invasion by foreign military destroyed the national economy. Thus the times were uncertain. The Mennonite Brethren were challenged to rethink their missionary identity. The sense of Christian mission was renewed. A newly-realized theology of mission mobilized the church to use its spiritual and human resources to spread the good news of Jesus Christ at home and also abroad.

The practice of compassion and the proclamation of Christ across the world derives from their reading of the Old and New Testaments.

The Mennonite Brethren created a school of mission, a national mission office, and a sending mission agency. Their missionaries are now serving in seven countries in Africa, Europe, and North America. Their ministry is holistic—both spiritual and social. In the DRC and in South Africa their assignment is to plant churches, whereas in Quebec and the USA, they are involved in social and spiritual ministries. In France, they emphasize discipleship. The practice of compassion and the proclamation of Christ across the world derives from their reading of the Old and New Testaments.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

God Is a Missionary God

The idea of mission, reaching out to others, is not a human invention. God himself reaches to people for the sake of their own welfare. God's mission to the world is like a dove: it has two wings, spiritual and socio-cultural. The spiritual wing deals with the inner life, intimacy between God and our souls, interpersonal bonds between God and his people.

The relationship between the creation and the Creator needs to stand strong and well.

The socio-cultural wing relates to social, cultural, and environmental transformations. The Bible also emphasizes the development of the physical world/milieu/life. The relationship between the creation and the Creator needs to stand strong and well. For example, in the beginning God commissioned Adam to work in the garden and to maintain it (Gen. 2:15).

But when the relationship between God, Adam, and Eve broke down and death affected the whole creation, the missionary task of God moved to a spiritual plane to seek for their restoration. He rescued them by inviting them back into communion with himself. The evil one was denounced and disobedience was judged severely (Gen. 3:1-24). Transformation and hope in God are core to God's mission (Gen. 3:15). The prophets explained that mission had a spiritual focus (Isa. 1:18) and that it included attention to the homeless, the hungry, and those treated unjustly (Isa. 58:6-7). The socio-cultural situation cannot be ignored. God's mission is one but it embraces two activities: spiritual restoration and activities on the socio-cultural plane.

The socio-cultural situation cannot be ignored.

Hearing the Missionary Overtones in Israel's Story

God chose Abraham to be a blessing to all people. In God's covenant with Abraham may be found the root of the missionary calling to God's people (Gen. 12:1-3; 17:7-15).

Stories such as Isaac's interaction with Abimelech, the Philistine, show how in everyday life an individual can have a positive impact through his peaceful behavior with others (Gen. 26:12-33). A servant girl gave testimony to her God, and before long Naaman,

a Syrian military general, became a God-worshiper (2 Kings 5:1-14).
Jonah is an example of God reaching out to the Assyrians (Jonah 1-4).

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Prophets portrayed Yahweh as controlling and governing all the nations. The whole universe belongs to God, the Maker and Provider (Isa. 6:3b; 13-23; 45:23-24; 66:19; Jer. 1: 5). It is God's intention that his "way be known upon earth, [his] saving power among all nations" (Ps. 67:2). God is not a national god, but one who calls out: "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth!" (Isa. 45:22). The prophets announced the coming of Yahweh, who was anointed to build the new community of peace (Isa. 9:6-7; 11:1-9; 35:1-10; 42:1-6; 61:1-4). Jesus was the fulfillment of that announcement (Luke 4:18-21).

Hearing Jesus and the Apostles on Mission

In the New Testament, mission is based on the person, life, work, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He came to inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth. The kingdom of God is deserving of cost (Matt. 13:44-46). It starts in the heart and leads to the transforming of behaviors (Mark 2:5). It requires obedience to Christ as Savior and Lord.

Jesus accepted total humiliation. On the cross, he took upon himself our sins, suffered and defeated Satan and all evil powers and authorities in order to give new life and hope to those who believe in him (Heb. 2:14-16). His resurrection from death gives hope to the nations (1 Cor. 15:20-24). The last Adam (Christ) sends his people to proclaim the good news with words and deeds, with passion and compassion, with power and humility.

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Our Lord, in keeping with his mission, reached out to others (Luke 4:18-21). The gospel was central. His was first and foremost a spiritual mission: He preached repentance and urged his audiences to enter the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15; John 3:3-16). His outreach was also social in nature. He healed the sick and extended help to the poor and disadvantaged (Mark 1:40-44; 2:1-12). He sent his disciples to do the same: to preach (spiritual ministry) and to heal (social work) (Luke 10:1-9). Jesus Christ sent those who believed to make disciples locally and globally (Matt. 18:18-20).

The early apostles witnessed to Jesus even when forbidden by the authorities (Acts 4:18-20). The deacon Philip shared about Christ in the city of Samaria (Acts 8:5). Peter went to the Roman centurion in Caesarea (Acts 10:1-48) where he was "preaching peace by Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all" (Acts 10:36). His testimony about going to a non-Jew (even within the same city) opened the Jerusalem church to missionary activity (Acts 11:18).

Paul's conversion experience included a call to missionary activity: "He is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15; see 26:16-18). When on his missionary journeys the Jews failed to respond, he cited Isaiah 42:6; 49:6 and announced, "We are now turning to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46).

The Book of Acts describes the missionary expansion to places as distant from Jerusalem as Rome. Telling the world about God's love and letting it transform our milieu through our personal and family story characterizes God's people. To be a follower of Jesus goes hand in hand with giving oneself away for the salvation of our neighbors in Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand—everywhere. Because we, the Mennonite Brethren global family, confess that Jesus Christ is coming back soon, we profess this spoken word of care and hope to our global village.

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LIVING WITH THE BELIEF

1. **Mission Motivation.** In Mennonite Brethren history, obedience to Christ's farewell words has been a primary motivation for mission (Matt. 28:18-20). Christ's pattern of ministry as recorded in Luke 4:18-19 was the model which N.N. Hiebert (ca 1900), the first American Mennonite Brethren missionary to India, cited as his motivation. In North America in a 1975 convention, the theme of preaching the gospel of the kingdom (Matt 24:14) stirred the delegates. After the Lausanne Conference (1974) the theology of the kingdom of God was something of a driving force. A frequent mission text was Acts 1:8. The Spirit of Christ, it was understood, comes to energize, encourage, and enable the people of God as they share the good news with their neighbors at the market place, public

arena, and private places so that men and women can be saved. More recently, the urgency of missionary activity has been understood as arising out of the very nature of God, who is a missionary God. Christians derive their motivation for mission from the Old and New Testaments. To become a follower of Jesus Christ is a choice, but once we belong to his family everyday witnessing for Christ is our way of life.

More and more, in a global society where tolerance and respect of differences are major values, voices are claiming that each religion is sufficient in its own way and that there is no need for a conversion experience to Christ.

2. Christian Mission and other Religions. Some consider that bringing the gospel to peoples of the world is an affront to people who already have a religion. In Christian mission history there have been those who claimed that there was "good" in certain religions, but that the message of Christ was still necessary for these persons to be saved. More and more, in a global society where tolerance and respect of differences are major values, voices are claiming that each religion is sufficient in its own way and that there is no need for a conversion experience to Christ. The discussion has been framed around two key words. "Exclusivism" means that only through Christ and in hearing about Christ is salvation possible (Acts 4:12). "Inclusivism," as used by some, means that there could be instances where devout seekers in other religions are saved without hearing about Christ. An even broader meaning of "inclusivism" is that sincere devotees of any religion are acceptable before God. In this debate, Mennonite Brethren, while acknowledging that God is not limited in his methods, have historically sided with the "exclusivists."

3. The Meaning of Mission. The term "mission" has a wide range of uses. To be missionary, as in "missionary conferences," used to mean for the church to be involved in overseas evangelism. Another interpretation of "mission" was wholistic mission, which referred to the need for repentance (spiritual) but also the help given to the poor. "Mission" meant "evangelism" and "service" as incorporated in the name "Mennonite Brethren Mission and Service International." A witness to peace is also key (Acts 10:36). At its core "mission" is sentness.

The recent use of the word "missional" means, in short, that the local church sees itself as "sent" into the (immediate) community by being engaged in the life of the community. This may mean tutoring

adults in literacy, assisting single mothers in apartment blocks with car repairs, and/or supporting certain candidates for local government. This understanding of mission does not exclude "sending" missionaries to places elsewhere.

Is yours a "mission-minded" church? Explain and illustrate your answer.

4. Mission and Injustice. Because of the suffering of the Servant, several Mennonite Brethren local churches in Congo accepted imitating Christ as their model (Isa. 42:1-6; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). The theology preached in the pulpit motivated listeners to take risks in daily life. In the presence of organized socio-economical national injustices at home, prophetic voices spoke up. Tangible social actions were taken. Teams were formed to collect looted goods and give them back to different owners that lost their businesses in 1991 and 1993. The degradation of the national system of education had left many classrooms without benches; some pupils sat on floors under a roof which leaked during a rain. A corporate Mennonite effort was made against this waste of mind and encouraged local churches to participate in prayer for reconstruction and for a triangular collaboration between parents, church, and teachers in order to help pupils gain knowledge in a healthy environment.

A public health care campaign led by Mennonite Brethren in Bandundu province reached out to the capital city and south Kivu through the National Mennonite Brethren Medical Department activities. Poor urban and rural neighborhoods in Kinshasa—Kitambo, Kanzombi, and Kiri—received medical assistance in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Missional local churches such as Kitambo released their health-related members to offer free medical consultation to needy people. Compassion was practiced towards both refugees and local population. Dispensary bills of some patients were paid by social church funds in the name of Jesus Christ.

Financial and food cooperatives were initiated in order to give hope to local people. Those in need had access to financial and nutritional help. A careful reading of the scriptures in a context of hardship encouraged some Mennonite Brethren intellectual leaders to serve the Lord in the public arena of provincial and national government. *How would these kinds of ministries translate in your situation?*

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THINKING IT OVER

1. What is God's mission in the Old and New Testaments?
2. Is the mission mandate given by God relevant to us? Why?
3. Who are the missionaries today, and where is their mission field located?
4. How is your church, or how is your family, or how are you personally, involved in God's mission?
5. How might the emphasis on "mission" be improved in your church?
6. Is the ICOMB Confession of Faith sufficiently clear on "mission"?



FOR FURTHER STUDY

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000. 101 pp. Reviews the pertinent texts in Genesis, Isaiah, etc.