

Guest commentary for the September 1997 *ILLINOIS MENNONITE HERITAGE*

THE MISSIONARY CHURCH:

FROM RADICAL OUTCASTS TO THE WILD CHILD OF ANABAPTISM

by

Timothy Paul Erdel

Making sense of the Missionary Church has never been an easy task for outsiders. Perhaps it is our diverse roots: Amish, Mennonite (name the group, and someone who knows us well will probably find a link), River Brethren, and the “German branch” of the Christian Alliance. Perhaps it is the generational shifts in experiential emphasis and doctrinal allegiance: from Anabaptism, to Pietism, to the Keswickian and Wesleyan-Holiness movements, to Evangelicalism, with minorities from each generation flirting with elements of Pentecostalism and Calvinism (both officially *verboden*). Perhaps it is the 19th century penchant for pragmatic innovation: from four part harmonies and the use of English; to hundreds of women ministers (now largely forgotten and all but forbidden); to protracted meetings, prayer meetings, camp meetings, and Sunday schools; to sending overseas missionaries; to turn of the century inner city ministries and aggressive church planting. Missionaries introduced changes to foreign cultures, but their cross-cultural experiences changed them just as profoundly, and ultimately transformed their sending churches as well. The urgent missionary impulse has led in astonishing directions, such as serving as catechists in the last decade for the Roman Catholic Church in France. The drive to evangelize and start new churches meant there would always be a steady stream of new converts who lacked a heritage of Anabaptist acculturation, but who brought with them heavy doses of American patriotism and popular culture. Then there is our habit of founding tertiary institutions (one sparsely populated district started at least eight such schools), often with the paradoxical purpose of protecting young people from the evils of higher education. Certain signals were so puzzling that we have been variously classified as a premillenarian perfectionistic sect

akin to Bishop Alma White's Pillar of Fire (by Elmer T. Clark), as one of two principal Keswickian holiness groups (by J. Gordon Melton), as fanatical fundamentalists (by two of my professors at the University of Chicago--one sympathetic, one not), and as next to the Jehovah's Witnesses (by catalogers at the Library of Congress).

The universal trademark of the small, Anabaptist bands who "all went Methodist" in the 19th century and ultimately coalesced into what is now the Missionary Church was the testimony of having *experienced salvation* in a way which transcended their previous understandings of tradition-bound religious conformity. This radical new birth prompted emotional expressions and activist lifestyles which their home congregations soon found too threatening to tolerate. Two very different understandings of what it meant to become a Christian led to repeated confrontations of the sort Theron Schlabach refers to as "Gospel versus Gospel." So these new believers, who insisted everyone must personally experience the second birth, including older, well-established church members, were expelled from the immigrant churches of society's marginal outcasts (to paraphrase H. Richard Niebuhr), and thus became outcast outcasts, doubly alienated from the world they knew. Within a generation, sometimes sooner, *sanctification* and *healing* became additional *experiential* pillars, and these proved no less divisive for some groups, causing further splits as well as precipitating new alliances. Finally, these bodies were nearly all fascinated by prophecy and driven by the notion that the *Second Coming* of Jesus Christ was linked to the urgent task of the *Great Commission* (see Mt. 24:14 & Mk. 13:10): hence the *Missionary Church* identity.

At first believers within [forerunners to] the Missionary Church thought of themselves as more genuinely Anabaptist than the Mennonite churches which had removed them from fellowship. They rehearsed their anguished stories at length in defense of their Mennonite legitimacy. They languished in prison during WWI, and they later helped lead the way in appealing for government recognition for conscientious objectors. They even initiated unsuccessful efforts toward pan-Mennonite reunion,

proposing to combine missionary programs and sending agencies as the first step toward wholesale denominational mergers. Practices such as foot washing continued regularly for many decades. To this day the basic thrust of the Missionary Church *Constitution* makes no sense apart from such traditional Anabaptist emphases as believer's baptism, rigorous discipleship marked by holy lifestyles purified and empowered by the Holy Spirit, radical biblicism, a strong sense of Christian community, sacrificial missionary outreach, an abhorrence of war, and the separation of church and state.

But bitter memories of expulsion from Mennonite bodies or the sense of betrayal fostered by growing up in church without truly hearing calls for conversion, *the gospel*, rapidly led to fraternal relations with very different church groups which showed greater interest in their religious experiences. From the rather jaundiced perspective of Missionary Church members, when Mennonites did finally begin to abandon sterile traditions, their leaders all too often stepped directly into the arms of theological liberalism. For, while the Missionary Church never participated directly in the liberal-fundamentalist controversies, neither was there any doubt where her allegiance would lie if the issues finally reduced to a stark choice between the two. To this day any Mennonite institution which teaches biblical criticism remains suspect, while the apparent openness on the part of some within Mennonite circles to non-traditional sexual practices is taken *prima facie* as a sign of liberal apostasy.

Nevertheless, there were always some within the Missionary Church who remembered their original roots and who were so bold as to believe Ron Sider's twin theses: first, that consistent Anabaptists should be Evangelicals and that consistent Evangelicals should be Anabaptists; and second, that failing agreement over the first thesis, it is still true that Anabaptists need Evangelicals and Evangelicals need Anabaptists.

Critical steps toward developing historical awareness of Anabaptist roots were taken in 1979 with the founding of the Missionary Church Historical Society under the

leadership of Dr. Wayne Gerber, longtime academic dean at Bethel College, Mishawaka, IN, and the subsequent establishment of the Missionary Church Archives and Historical Collections at Bethel, as well as the historical journal *Reflections*. In the Summer of 1994 personnel from Bethel College and the Missionary Church headquarters met for informal discussions with leaders from the Mennonite Church and Mennonite World Conference for the first time in memory. A formal request was then made by the General Board of the Missionary Church to once again be included in the *Mennonite Yearbook* and MWC publications. As a preliminary response, an invitation was extended to Missionary Church leaders to join the Council of Moderators and Secretaries, and representatives have been sent each year since then. In such a setting the Missionary Church seems particularly close to the Brethren in Christ, the Evangelical Mennonite Church, and the Mennonite Brethren Churches. During the same time period Mennonite Mutual Aid made several generous overtures to the Missionary Church pastors and their congregations, which suddenly opened up the possibility of very practical links between the Missionary Church and other historic Anabaptist bodies.

In 1997 the Missionary Church in India, which had always carefully maintained its Mennonite connections (each national church is autonomous), helped host Mennonite World Conference, and the Missionary Church, Inc. sent *official* delegates for the first time in as many as four decades, certainly the first since the merger of the Missionary Church Association and the United Missionary Church (formerly the Mennonite Brethren in Christ) in 1969. Missionary Church members have served with the Mennonite Central Committee, while MCC and various Mennonite mission agencies have cooperated in a number of ways with our World Partners missionaries, sometimes working together very closely.

Trustees, faculty, staff, students, and friends from Mennonite and other peace church traditions continue to make crucial contributions to Bethel College. Numerous classes from Bethel College have made field trips to *Menno-Hof*, and some observers

wryly note there are more bonneted Mennonites at Bethel than at nearby Goshen College. Bethel College is a co-sponsor of the upcoming Evangel '97 in Atlanta. The Michiana Anabaptist Historians are one of several groups to invite presentations about the Missionary Church from Bethel faculty. Talks continue at various levels. Each such exchange has been marked by extreme courtesy and graciousness, whatever our historical differences.

It would seem that the Missionary Church, which began her existence rather tenuously as a radical outcast, has once again appeared on the Anabaptist scene, but has stumbled into view after having grown up, at least from the Mennonite perspective, as the wild child of Anabaptism, in a wilderness of other church traditions, far from the nurturing, peaceful communities where she was born. She no longer speaks the language of her forebears, but utters savage cries or mutters incoherently. It may still be some time before she is truly welcomed back again, or before she feels fully at ease in such unfamiliar surroundings.

*Timothy Paul Erdel is Archivist & Theological Librarian at Bethel College, Mishawaka, IN. An MK from Ecuador; he formerly served with his wife, Sally, and three children, Sarah Beth, Rachel, and Matthew, at the Jamaica Theological Seminary and the Caribbean Graduate School of Theology in Kingston, Jamaica.*