

# **MARRIAGE, MEMORY, AND MISSION: REFLECTIONS ON THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE MCA/UMC MERGER**

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The cover of the September 12, 1938 *Newsweek* magazine heralded the ascent of Europe's most troublesome dictator, Adolph Hitler. On the eve of World War II the attention of the world centered on a German demagogue threatening to destroy the feeble balance of power on the European continent. It is unlikely that many of *Newsweek's* readers took notice of a seemingly insignificant bit of media trivia on page 23 of the religious section:

*Most mergers of Christian sects since 1900 have involved millions of souls, millions of dollars, and thousands of churches. Last week two tiny denominations quietly prepared for a much simpler union. Convening at Fort Wayne, Ind., the Missionary Church Association (3,200 members, 70 churches) voted to exchange guest preachers and plan consolidation with the Mennonite Brethren in Christ (7,600 members, 107 churches).*

This brief article acknowledged a courtship that actually began by 1920 and finally culminated in the 1969 marriage of the Missionary Church Association and the United Missionary Church. There were many suitors during the five decade engagement, including the Brethren in Christ, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the Evangelical Mennonite Church and the Evangelical Methodist Church. Both sides had also suffered painful separations: the MCA in the early 1920's over the doctrine of sanctification and the UMC when the Pennsylvania district broke away in 1952 over church polity to form what later became the Bible Fellowship Church. Thus, the ceremonial tying of the knot in 1969 was the result of a lengthy, thoughtful merger process.

A merger is a marriage full of bright hopes and promises. The new partners, having taken each other's measure for many years, produced a solid and remarkably fruitful union. Numerous churches have been successfully planted since 1969, some now among the denomination's largest. France, Spain, Portugal, Greece, the Middle East, nations from the former Eastern bloc, Thailand, Mexico and Venezuela represent not only new countries touched by Missionary Church outreach, but in most cases whole new approaches and strategies in missions. A North American Hispanic Fellowship has emerged which reaches to Puerto Rico and beyond.

However, a marriage brings perils and difficulties as well. The Biblical mandate to mutual love and submission (not suspicion!) is not always easy to follow. To love, to marry, to merge is to risk much. To succeed, the surrender of those very things dearest to us must often occur or we risk losing far more.

The 1969 merger, like so many marriages, brought with it memories, loyalties, and prior commitments.

Memory is an especially powerful faculty. To be without memory is to be like an adolescent with no sense of history, blindly grasping for perspective and identity, desperate to belong, captive to the whims of peers, or fads and fashion. However, too much memory and we can find ourselves trapped by tradition, stricken by unhealed hurts, feeding useless self-pity or fueling spiteful attitudes. An anniversary is a time to remember, but we must be careful what and how much we remember, or we may spoil the celebration!

The Missionary Church has indeed forgotten much. We are no longer Anabaptists whose discipleship is expressed in the washing of feet and the willingness to suffer persecution rather than taking up the sword of self-preservation. We no longer shout in worship and linger night after night in protracted meetings like old-time Methodists. Healing and prophecy no longer take center stage at our church conferences. We no longer have a small army of socially active women in uniform, preaching in city missions, stalking streets and storming saloons, attacking the gates of hell with the gospel. The Wesleyan ideals of holy living and entire sanctification have for many been all but swept away by the incessant throbbing of pervasive secularism.

But we also remember. District boundaries, like those in the Balkans, reflect more than simple geography. The loss of a great and historic Bible college was perhaps more than anything else the failure of either side to truly envision a new future. Past loyalties loomed too large, overshadowing present realities and future possibilities until it was too late to do anything but let go. It is only by the grace of God that even one school remains in the U.S. at this point. Both nearly collapsed before each was, in its own way, dramatically transformed. The unparalleled renewal of Bethel College is indeed a miracle.

The biggest loss came with the division between the U.S. and Canada, yet there were genuine gains here as well. A 1993 merger in Canada has brought into being the Evangelical Missionary Church, while World Partners has emerged as a powerful force for missions linking the two countries together. Emmanuel Bible College continues to produce church leaders while Mountain View Bible College has found new life in a merger which moved it to Calgary as Rocky Mountain Bible College.

The mission of the Missionary Church always has been and always should be more than missions, though the missionary task is now more urgent than ever. Missions often holds us together in ways that nothing else does. It began with the realization that the wonderful new birth 19th century Mennonites were beginning to experience was for the whole world. These twin truths, the necessity of being born again and the missionary impulse which arises from it, remain at the core of our church, giving us a kind of stranglehold on the obvious which so many other denominations

no longer hold on to in the same way. Publications, higher education, administration, and almost everything else in the Missionary Church either finds their place and purpose in relation to the Great Commission, or they struggle for survival.

From time to time the Missionary Church makes important and unexpected contributions to the larger body of Christ. In the past persons making such have included J.A. Huffman, Jared Gerig, S. A. Witmer, Kenneth Geiger, Clyde Taylor, Vergil Gerber, and R. Gordon Bacon. Today they include the writings of Janette Oke and William L. Craig, the leadership of Paul Robbins and Jay Kesler. They also come in the bold commitments we have made abroad, such as Jamaica Theological Seminary, which also hosts the Caribbean Graduate School of Theology. Striking initiatives could be cited from Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Haiti, India, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, which are more and more becoming genuine partners with the North American Missionary Church in the task of global evangelism, discipleship and church planting.

This 25th anniversary is indeed a time to remember, to reflect on the merger and how we have changed, but also to reflect on our mission and what remains to be done.