

## "Methods and curriculum for teaching missions from an Anabaptist perspective"

As I look at the issues of teaching Christian mission, a very basic challenge is to invite students to discover God's mission, and to get on board with what God is doing and wants to do in the world. The basic prayer Jesus taught his disciples was in fact a call, an imperative, which might be expressed thus: "Father in heaven, make your name to be honored. Come here on earth to reign; make your will happen here as in heaven." These words are echoed in the last words of Revelation: "Maranatha, come, Lord Jesus!"

The New Testament is peppered with lively visions of God arriving to reign in grace, peace, justice and healing, and the call to participate with God in this dawning reign. Jesus himself, according to the Gospel of John, has a lively sense of collaborating with his Father. He says things like, "These works of power that you see me do, they are not my works; I only do what I see my father doing." "And these authoritative words you hear me speak, they are not my words; I only say what I hear my father saying."<sup>1</sup>

Then Jesus goes on to explain his oneness with his Father: "Don't you believe that I am one with the Father and that the Father is one with me? What I say isn't said on my own. the father who lives in me does these things (John 14:10). And then he immediately proceeds with "I tell you for certain that if you have faith in me, you will do the same things that I am doing. You will do even greater things, now that I am going back to the Father" (verse 12).

This is the background for the remarkable words of Jesus in chapter 15: "I am the true vine, and my father is the gardener. He cuts away every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit. but he trims clean every branch

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<sup>1</sup> The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise (John 5:19). Then Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine but his who sent me (John 7:16). "So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him" (John 8:28-29). "For I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak" (John. 12:49).

that does produce fruit., so that it will produce even more fruit.... Stay joined to me and I will stay joined to you. Just as a branch cannot produce fruit unless it stays joined to the vine, you cannot produce fruit unless you stay joined to me. I am the vine and you are the branches. if you stay joined to me and I stay joined to you, then you will produce lots of fruit. but you cannot do anything without me.... "Stay joined to me and let my teachings become part of you. Then you can pray for whatever you want, and your prayer will be answered" (parts of verses 1 to 7).

Jesus expects his disciples to carry on his ministry after he departs from them. He expects that his disciples will be doing the very kinds of things, and speaking with the same kind of authority after he departs. The key for them will be similar to Jesus' own key, to stay connected to Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, which he will send them. In this way they too will be doing things that are not simply their own deeds. They will be speaking things that are not just their own words. They will be doing the very work of God, and speaking the very words of God.

An alert reading of Acts and the letters reveals to us just how conscious the apostles and others were of operating in the presence and power of God as they carried on their ministry. In so doing they were carrying on Jesus' own work in the world.

When I consider what happened in the Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century, I believe that they too had a lively sense of participating in God's action, his arriving reign in the world. The fact that clusters of Anabaptists were discovered by authorities in upwards of 500 locations within four years of the formation of the first cell of the movement in 1525 seems incredible if they did not have a lively sense that they were collaborating in something much greater than they themselves were able to accomplish. Surely they strategized, as Linford states, but the realities accomplished went beyond their strategies.

Perhaps the clearest glimpse of their sense of the presence and action of Jesus among them is in the accounts of their martyr deaths in which they came to know for certain that Jesus was present with them in their suffering and dying, a witness that had powerful impact on many people.

How does this bear on how we teach mission today? To me a crucial element is for students to begin to experience things in which they have a sense of participation with God, of collaborating with God in what God is doing. I want to mention briefly three areas in which I try to create opportunities for students to experiment with the kind of discipleship in

which they experience a sense of collaboration with God. These are in teaching evangelism as initial spiritual guidance, participant observation transcending frontiers, and in healing ministry.

#### A. Disciplemaking Evangelism

The concept of evangelism as initial spiritual guidance, as Ben Campbell Johnson speaks of it is that God is already at work in the life of every person, whether they know it or not, whether they like it or not, whether they understand it or not, whether they are reconciled to it or not. In fact most people in this culture, at least, have some sense of God being at work in their lives, but they may not like it, they may be fearful of it, they misunderstand it, they resist it, or they try to ignore it. The work of the evangelist as initial spiritual guide, borrowing from the classic model of Christian spiritual direction, is to connect with people in terms of God's presence and action in their lives, to help people to understand the truth about God's presence and action in their lives, and to become reconciled to it. Indeed it is to help them become yielded collaborators with God in their own lives and in the world around them.

In my Disciplemaking Evangelism class, and to a lesser extent in my Church in Mission class (which is an M.Div. requirement) I ask the students to experiment with seeking to connect with persons they suspect to be disconnected from the church. Their basic assignment is to try to connect with them on a personal, human level, showing interest and care for who they are. Conversations might even develop to the point of discussing with them how God is at work in their lives. But the main point is experiment with expecting the presence of Jesus to facilitate these kinds of encounters. I further underline that making disciples is an impossible thing for us to do alone. "Without me you can do nothing," says Jesus. We can only do it in collaboration with God, with the Spirit of Jesus. But we can expect that presence and guidance of Jesus as we seek to transcend barriers and frontiers with people and love and care for them first of all as humans.

My experience is that this assignment is one of the most challenging I give. It also received the most resistance. But it is also one of the most rewarding, in the sense that numbers of students come through it with a sense of having seen God at work, indeed having collaborated with God in God's plan to be reconciled to all humankind. This would be a time for some stories. But an important part of our class work is to spend time in small groups sharing with one another about what we have experienced. In this way the plusses and minuses of the experience benefit everyone.

## B. Participant Observation/Ethnography:

In preparing people for Cross-Cultural Church experience I try to teach my students the basic skills of the classical Anthropological discipline of participant observation. In its current academic form this discipline often has a profound impact on the lives of its practitioners. As I prepare students to experiment with this discipline, I go to great lengths in trying to help students to sense the kinship between the work of the ethnographer and the work of Jesus' people. The ethnographer's job is to find her way into strange and different communities, to build relationships there and become a student of those people and those communities, valuing their uniqueness as humans, and treasuring the uniqueness of their way of life together. The task of the ethnographer is also to empathize with the people and the culture they are studying, seeking to get in touch with the special values, convictions, beliefs, knowledge, aesthetics and joys of a culture, as well as the strains, pains and traumas of life in the community concerned.

For followers of Jesus much in this picture is the same. In fact we could readily depict the life and ministry of Jesus as a whole series of steps or initiatives that Jesus takes to reach across one chasm after another, to transcend some frontier after another, both within the Jewish community and beyond it. Often these boundaries and frontiers were painful markers of exclusion for groups of people--sick people, the "people of the land," poor people whose work rendered "unclean," people of mixed blood, and foreigners. Not only is Jesus constantly reaching across such frontiers to humanize persons who have been dehumanized by exclusion and misunderstanding of who God is, he makes manifest God's grace in amazing and powerful ways.

When I send people out on a Cross-Cultural Church Experience assignment, I tell them to expect to sense in their efforts the presence and power of the Spirit of Jesus as they seek to find connections with the community they want to study. Jesus by the presence and power of his Spirit enables us to love these people, to build bridges, and make connections in ways that go beyond our normal inclinations and perceived abilities. I teach them to pray for, look for and expect the openings the Spirit provides as they seek to build relationships. I further encourage them to expect to find signs of God's presence and action in the community they are studying.

A part of the ethnographic assignment is to study a church in the community and to observe how it interacts with its surroundings, engaging (or not) the realities of everyday life there. In addition I always ask my students to keep a personal journal, separate from their field notes. Regular entries in this personal journal provide a place to reflect on personal dynamics of cross-cultural experience, as well as the spiritual dynamics.

But the key element of these assignments is to provide opportunities and encouragement to experiment, without determining what the outcome should be. The idea is that God is at work with every person and in every community. Jesus wants to work through his disciples to build bridges, make connections, transcend barriers, treasure strangers and aliens, and make peace.

### *C, Healing/Gestalt Pastoral Care:*

It took some very painful family struggle with illness for me to realize that no instruction to his disciples was more prominent than Jesus' instruction in the synoptic proto-commissions to heal the sick as they announced the arrival of God's reign. I teach a course called *Healing Ministry in Christian Mission*. It is premised on my conviction that we must not allow dispensationalism of any sort to drive a wedge between things which in Jesus' ministry were inseparable. There are many things I could say about this course. I will point to one thing. If Anabaptists are people who obey Jesus, even when the instruction is bizarre or impossible, then we cannot ignore Jesus' command to heal the sick. For me personally it has been my struggle with this instruction, impossible as it is, that has driven me to focus so strongly on the idea of a spirituality of collaboration with Jesus in all areas of mission and ministry.

This course is a hands-on course. We try to minister healing to sick people--to students themselves or to others they or I bring for ministry. I know of no kind of learning experience that has the potential for dramatic change in people's lives than to be encouraged to place your hands on someone who is sick, or to anoint them with oil, in the expectation that what we do will be part of what God is doing.

I have also facilitated a special course, not an official seminary course, taught by Tilda Norberg, which she now calls *Gestalt Pastoral Care* (formerly *Gestalt Psychotherapy and Healing Prayer*). A major focus of that course is to teach students to get on board with what is going on in the life of the person receiving ministry and at the same time seek to help them get in the flow of what God wants to do in their lives.

There could be some stories here. Suffice it to say that my hope is that through the experiences of these classes students develop a hunger and thirst for continuing partnership with God in God's mission in the world.