

## PARADIGM SHIFTS IN MISSION TRAINING AT AMBS

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The first director (and essentially founder) of the OMSC (now Mission Studies Center (MSC)) Robert Ramseyer wrote a letter in response to his reading of *Mission Focus* and the essays in *Evangelical, Ecumenical and Anabaptist Missiologies in Conversation*. That led to his paper reviewing the story of mission training at AMBS, from 1972-1987, and his expectation that I would “write an account of its subsequent development and reasons for change.” Here is my preliminary attempt, intended as is Bob’s, to offer a “way of looking at rather profound changes in thinking about mission in our churches, in our mission agencies, and at AMBS.”<sup>1</sup> So it is intended as more than a focus on AMBS, possibly a way to help set the stage for the projected participation of two Mennonite seminaries, EMS and AMBS, in the Allelon Project, a multi-year study involving two dozen seminaries on how to teach from a missional perspective.

**Plotting Changing Views**

As I read Ramseyer, he sought to underline three major issues: 1) close cooperation, even integration, of the seminary with the mission agencies; 2) training leaders who understand mission as identifying with and bonding with the people among whom they are to live and work, that is, making long term commitments, becoming linguistically and culturally fluent; and 3) that cultural studies, or social studies in general, are vital to all seminary training. Or, in Ross Bender’s words, to “detritalize us” and “foster cultural flexibility”. More implicitly he was asking thereby, 1) is close cooperation between seminary and mission agencies still possible? 2) will long term workers come forward? and will the church commit to long term support (financial and spiritual)? and 3) will global inter-church commitments to each other reach greater maturity as we ‘detritalize’?

Current realistic indicators tend toward answering those questions in the negative, yet that is not for want of trying. Is it the captivity to north American culture, decried by many, that is the real problem behind the present crisis in mission? Is it the way in which Mennonite denominations in USA and Canada, when proposing new national church structures, were speaking of being a “need meeting church” in contrast to a “radical commitment church”, and ended with “network model of being church”? What view of church, what ecclesiology must we affirm, teach, and live out, if *missio Dei* and *missio ecclesiae* are to be integrated?

<sup>1</sup>Ramseyer to Sawatsky, June 15, 2006. In what follows I will rely largely on materials from MTC files such as this letter and my response dated August 3, 2006, noting that we have also consulted several times since.

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As the writers in the Shenk Festschrift confirm, current missiological thinking has not backed away from a strong emphasis on the need for close integration of church and mission for it to be holistic. Also clear is firm agreement with Ramseyer’s stress on the necessity that mission must be a people ministry for it to be authentic. It is people in constant communication with each other across the barriers of race, culture and denomination, that keep alive the reality of being a Christian family. So also has our realization grown, that God’s church is now living in a state of diaspora almost everywhere, so the mutual obligation to bear common witness “so that they may believe” (John 17:21) demands even more mutual accountability.

The creation of OMTC marked a major shift, where in addition to Ramseyer’s points, it is worth noting what was meant by not merely creating a School of Mission as was trendy in 1970. The concept of working so closely with denominational mission boards meant that the model of outfitting seminarians with a set of skills so they could join whatever faith mission society they chose, did not fit. That was a way of saying that a new self-conscious integration of Anabaptism and Mission would set the tone for the kind of mission training to do. That was complicated by another emerging pattern, the indigenous churches (fruit of 70+ years of mission effort) were developing their own identities, wrestling with the theological legacy of their missionary mentors and increasingly with the question of what Christian identity must mean in their national context. Contextualization of mission was the theoretical word, but in practice it meant coming to meaningful terms with diversity. OMTC at AMBS was also part of a deliberate joining of at least two Mennonite traditions who had interacted remarkably seldom through the centuries. Not only did AMBS launch some tentative cooperation in 1958 with some joint classes on campuses in Goshen and Elkhart, but before they got to a combined campus for two seminaries in 1964, the seminary leaders and mission leaders were already talking about joint training for mission. As later reflections on that era have shown,<sup>2</sup> what was at stake, and why it still remains a challenge, was the need to integrate at least two diverse polities within AMBS. What needed to happen, but remains an even larger outstanding challenge, was to learn more appreciatively each other’s history and mission history, including the sister conferences around the world.<sup>3</sup>

**Crucial Changes and Continuities Since 1987**

Ramseyer’s first term at AMBS (1972-78) was also the most successful period for OMTC, thanks no doubt to Ramseyer’s personal role, but also to other things that were happening. The Mennonite Mission Study Fellowship, organized by Wilbert Shenk from his

<sup>2</sup>See faculty comments in Erick Sawatzky, ed. *The Heart of the Matter. Pastoral Ministry in Anabaptist Perspective*. (Telford: Cascadia Press, 2004), pp 15-17, 52-54 and fn. 22 & 24 on p.59.

<sup>3</sup>In March 2001 as the joint mission boards accepted an integration plan, there was frequent reference to the “perception problem”, namely that one mission’s habits, legacies and style would dominate.

position at nearby Mennonite Board of Mission, became an important annual event for fostering missiological reflection. It became part of the MTC in the mid 1980s when its energy was dissipating. Part of the agenda of two seminaries coming together was to foster joint work through the Institute of Mennonite Studies, long headed by C.J. Dyck. Dyck had long years of experience with MCC in Europe and Paraguay, and was in 1972 completing his work as secretary of Mennonite World Conference, to be succeeded by the first partially paid executive secretary, Paul Kraybill. Sherk's own involvements in MCC made the twice annual inter-Mennonite consultations on mission, first started as COMBS, later CIM ever more inter-Mennonite.<sup>4</sup> One explicit change was the addition of MCC to the Mission Training Center coordinating committee in the mid 1980s.

In its 35 years, the Mission Training Center had four directors. The mutually shared notion of regular rotation of directors, in order to insure recent mission experience, continued in some fashion through 1991. Ramseyer was succeeded by Roelf Kuitse in 1978, who then went on assignment with MBM during Ramseyer's second term (1982-86), then resumed his role till his retirement when he was succeeded by Wilbert Sherk. Yet the teaching focus did shift. Ramseyer taught courses heavily focused on anthropology, intercultural communication and contextualized theology. Kuitse, trained in theology and mission specialization in Islam, offered a theology of mission emphasis plus courses on Islam. Other AMBS faculty contributed to the program with specific courses and by the fact of their own mission/service experience abroad. When Sherk began teaching, his main courses were re-designed to fit his training in history and social science. Upon his departure for Fuller, it took several years to clarify succession. In the end a newly appointed professor of Mission and Evangelism, Art McPhee offered courses leaning heavily toward anthropology. Walter Sawatsky became director of MTC and editor of *Mission Focus*.

When *Mission Focus* was first initiated by Wilbert Sherk in 1982, it served inter-Mennonite concerns but was financed by MBM. On his move to AMBS, *Mission Focus* became a publication of the MTC of AMBS. Yet within a year, because of growing financial uncertainties, *Mission Focus* was terminated. In response to demand from many circles, it was resurrected as *Mission Focus: Annual Review*, in a new format and with reduced budget. Sawatsky's editing of *Mission Focus* since 1996 illustrates both the continuities of structure and the continuity of mission agency-seminary mutual interest in missiology.

The directors of MTC and its associates tended to travel internationally fairly regularly due to assignments from the agencies, but it was through the regular participation at CIM meetings of mission executives and the director's participation in board meetings that the sense of truly being "associate staff" or "liaison" (after 2000) was realized. Minutes of the Coordinating Committee over the years also reveal how one part of the meeting

<sup>4</sup>Wilbert R. Sherk's *An Experiment in Interagency Coordination*, (CIM pamphlet, 1986) and *God's New Economy: Interdependence and Mission*. (Mission Focus pamphlet, 1988) remain a crucial source of documents and historical analysis.

involved discussing the director's report, often its remarks about low mission studies enrolment (after the 1974-76 peak), and how often larger project ideas floated here began to take on program reality. For example, the concern for fostering theology in context was of long standing, several years before the consultation on global Mennonite historiography, (1995), that idea had been discussed. Sherk, who found funding for it, stayed for a summer consultation with new director Sawatsky, and Larry Miller of MWC, where the design of what became the global Mennonite history project was developed. The project itself, drawing on John Lapp as volunteer coordinator following his retirement from MCC (having participated on the coordinating committee for over a decade), became an MWC project. Thereafter, nevertheless, MTC contributed well over \$20,000 for hosting one of the writers' seminars and continued to regard it as a project integrating mission and seminary concerns.

#### **From Self-Study Promised (1988) to Self-Study Completed (2001)**

There were signs by 1988 that the vision for the MSC needed to be reviewed. So a self-study was promised before the next ATS accreditation visit. It failed to happen in time, though there was much creative rethinking. When it was resumed it became a useful reference point for likely re-structuring after the denominational integration of 2001.

One important shift was the growing concern for seminary trained church planters in North America, to respond to denominational growth plans. The concern was added to the MTC agenda as early as 1982, and by 1986 Gary Marten was teaching courses in that area on a part-time basis. He was followed by Daryl Climenhaga, another part-time pastor, who had a D Miss degree and had been a missionary in Zimbabwe. When Climenhaga took a position at Providence Seminary, this field declined, until Art McPhee began offering courses on "turn around churches" for example, or on the "missional church". A persistent theme was the plea for such courses, yet low enrolments when offered.

Three other initiatives, one so far largely a failure, also emerged during this period. Wilbert Sherk introduced a change to the MTC mandate in 1993, adding the task of missiological research and publications. He soon secured major funding from Pew Foundation for the gospel in our culture project, which meant he was on leave in Britain for six months of the following three years. His absence from campus mattered, but the profound results of that work associated with Nesslie Newbigin mattered more. As noted above, another initiative was the global Mennonite history project. As active member of the organizing committee from the beginning, I could utilize my role as chair of the Mennonite Historical Society (till 2000) to keep the historians informed and contributing. We had anticipated a similar involvement and support from the mission agencies, but aside from regular and consistent support by MCC, this became a casualty of cutbacks.

Preceding the joint assemblies of MC and GC Mennonites in St. Louis in 1995, the MTC coordinating committee held an extended meeting with MWC representatives on the theme of leadership education. By the time of a gathering of educators in Calcutta 1997, the

leadership training issue was named the highest priority globally. It surfaced again at a special seminar organized by Merrill Ewert of Fresno Pacific at Zimbabwe 2003. In the interval through the activism of former MBBS seminary president Elmer Martens, a list of faculty available for short term teaching assignments around the world did indeed lead to a handful of mostly Mennonite Brethren faculty offering their services. But the idea for a virtual global seminary, perhaps with initial focus on Asia (Indonesia) and utilizing teachers from around the world, has not yet materialized. For a time it was part of a strategic plan to free up AMBS faculty and foster exchanges, but the grant to pay for it did not come through.

The most important financial surge for mission training came as a result of a seminary funding campaign, where one of the earliest endowments was for a position in mission/evangelism plus a further grant for program expenses, to be drawn down over the course of a decade. This funding became available in 1996, but how to spend it well was the bigger challenge. As Shenk had pointed out in a published article as he was leaving, a strikingly low percentage of pastors, when completing the information form sent out when job hunting listed mission a priority. Soon after McPhee arrived a new two year degree in mission/evangelism (MAME) was established, but enrolments remained low and no Mennonite student from North America has graduated from it yet. So the more immediate task was to foster missional concerns through other means. Dean Willard Swartley (1996) proposed a summer mission institute, alongside the seminary's summer school, to which workers on North American leave could come more easily, as well as pastors wishing to pursue specific courses. It made possible bringing in specialists to teach from abroad. The funding also made it possible to attempt conferences. One in 1998 on proselytism and mission was positioned on a weekend between courses as a way to attract some attendees to stay for a course.

Most significant in the long run was the flexibility the funding provided to take a stronger initiative in putting together scholarship packages for leaders sent by their church from sister churches abroad, mostly for the two year MA degrees. MTC staff negotiated agreements with participating agencies (MCC and mission boards), and with the sending church, often working in a local hosting congregation in order to foster long term relationships. Through other funding formulae EMS and MBBS were following similar policies. By 2006 what many leaders in the Meserete Kristos Church of Ethiopia, whether at their college or denominational headquarters had in common, was the study time and relationship building in those seminaries, as well as attending CIM meetings.

### Uncertain World of Missional Church

Soon after the principled commitment to union (1995) the mission boards began meeting jointly. By 1997 they had taken the lead in appointing a team to oversee the transition, and committed themselves to focus on missional church thinking. Over a two year period as well, around 200 individuals were involved in depth discussions organized around

four foci.<sup>5</sup> In the process these mission staff persons and board members, including the MTC director as "associated staff", developed a sense of team. This culminated in a consultation on mission in Harrisonburg in March 2000, with the intent of devising primary program structures and emphases (with the help of consultants from Church Innovations) for the new MC USA and MC Canada denominations.

Revisiting those days, now that the patterns have become partly evident, serves to draw attention to the promise and failure of becoming a missional church. It was a time of strain on the close cooperation between agencies and seminary, that Ramseyer had spoken of so positively from the early years. My comments here are only one reading of possible ones, constructed here to focus on the still current task of how best to teach mission in praxis and theory. I will therefore use the personal tense.

Coming from experiences of international ministry in Europe, and for a time as MCC Europe director with a heightened mandate as "church ambassador", I and my colleagues had learned the importance of listening, too aware how often MCC was perceived as the elephant who could dominate with people and program. At the Harrisonburg consultation my most visceral impression was of highly energized ministers of evangelism from the numerous regional conferences dominating with voice and suggestions, and the visitors from abroad speaking when asked in private conversations. A year later when the joint boards met for the last time, the USA caucus discussed numerous strategy papers, including one called "vision strategy paper". It spoke of framing mission as four core ministries: 1) engaging people and culture with the Gospel, 2) start missional congregations, 3) cultivate missional congregations, 4) foster missional identity in the denomination. After I voiced a concern that this was very heavily a "home mission" focus, the global issues (in light of the two year study process) seemed to come through at the level of small print, one area program administrator remarked to me in private that existing programs were very hard to place into one of the four core ministries. There was also a heightened assertion that "Mennonite theology views the local congregation as the primary locus for discernment and implementation of God's work on earth", where I noted at the time that such an emphasis could undermine "a sense of accountability before the broader Christian community".<sup>6</sup>

At a faculty workshop in May of 2001 where MTC's self-study report was a focus, what surfaced was a realization that the Mission Transformation team seemed to have developed a strategic plan for the new united Mennonite Church denominations, whereas other "transformation" teams (as they were then called) had not participated in "missional

<sup>5</sup>They were 1. Emerging context in mission, 2. Emerging trends in North American mission agencies - an external perspective, 3. A guiding theology of mission, 4. Emerging trends in Mennonite congregational and conference-district level missions.

<sup>6</sup>Sawatsky report to AMBS on Joint Mission Boards, March 29-31, 2001. The 1963 MC confession of faith had long been criticized as fostering a local congregational definition of church, the 1995 *Confession of Faith in Anabaptist Perspective* attempted a corrective that mission leaders, so I thought, were urging, and was more in keeping with the longer historic tradition.

church” discourse in order to appropriate some common understanding for the denomination as a whole. When the formal “integration” took place at Nashville and Abbotsford respectively in July 2001, there was strong delegate affirmation for becoming a “missional church”, but that did not mean common understandings.

The implications for a changed role for MTC began to emerge. A refrain, often repeated in subsequent meetings of the coordinating committee was that the seminaries are expected to provide leadership in scholarly work on mission, to help guide theological reflection. Given the renewed impetus, we organized a two day gathering at AMBS in December 2001. Two page statements by AMBS faculty on how they were seeking to teach missionally were discussed for an afternoon with mission and MCC administrators, and with several faculty invited from EMS. That was followed by faculty attempting a theological assessment of a broad assortment of “missional church” materials soon to be distributed to the congregations in USA and Canada. It may well be that participants remembered the critiques more than the affirmations, since no such conversation has taken place since! A more likely explanation for a decline in conversation had to do with the uncertainties created by the new structures. Thereafter, the MTC director was no longer invited to board meetings, which were now smaller events in following the Carver management model,<sup>7</sup> so it was deemed more effective for him to arrange meetings, at least annually, at the head offices of MMN, Witness Council and MCC. After a series of scheduling attempts failed, the effort has been abandoned.

The uncertainties became a persistent climate for the reduced coordination between teaching mission (seminaries) and praxis (mission and MCC), quite in contrast to the ongoing personal goodwill between staff at the seminary and the agencies. My earlier remarks about the close cooperation of individuals across structures remains key to how Anabaptist-Mennonite self-understandings about ministry still function. But major structural and staffre-arrangements certainly added to the challenge, and giving patterns have scarcely begun to recover. One emerging pattern of fund raising, increasingly widespread across the Mennonite mission spectrum, with individual workers expected to raise their own support plus agency administrative costs, is simply difficult to square with the church accountability commitments, that the originators of the Mission Training Center sought to realize. It still remains a commitment of mission leaders, do local churches really want to reject the *missio ecclesiae*?

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<sup>7</sup>The Carver model, a business management theory whereby a board of directors would focus on broad policy, not micro-manage, and all staff reporting was fed through the CEO to the board, was introduced late in 2001 to MC USA without broad discussion in the transformation team process.