

## Perspectives on Mission

--responding to queries--

### What, to you, is mission?

To begin, this basic question prompts the following little summary:

1. The mission of God is to restore the earth to the reign of God, i.e. to its wholeness, the harmonious interrelatedness of its grand diversity, and its acknowledgement of God as the loving Creator. The church of Jesus is the movement among peoples of the earth who are willingly being reconciled to God through the death and resurrection of Jesus; liberated from powers of death, addiction, division, and domination; and formed to express and celebrate the restoration and integrity of creation set free from its bondage to decay.
2. In creating the universe, God manifested God's own blessed diversity and community through the created order, one evidence of which is the wondrous variety among the peoples of the earth. In some manner and measure, God is present to and revealing God self in nature, but also in every people through their particular culture and history. There are no peoples "unreached" or untouched by the God of all creation. (Rom. 1:19-20; Acts 17:24-28; Gen.10:31-32)
3. Mission in the Christian context, directed toward the redemption and reconciliation of all things to God through Jesus, includes the redemption of all peoples, which means the preservation and purification of their distinctive cultures, not their homogenization. The reign and mission of God finds unique expression in the world through the Jesus movement, of which the church is an imperfect but nonetheless visible sign and parable. The mission belongs to God and the church belongs to Jesus as his "body"; neither belongs to us. (1 Cor. 15:28, Col.1:20, Rev. 5:9 & 7:9)
4. We join ourselves to the mission of God by joining ourselves to Jesus, as followers and friends. We give expression to the mission of God by being messengers and witnesses of the reign of God, calling attention to every hint of its presence, whether explicitly present in contexts of worship and Christian discipleship or implicitly present in indications of compassion, intelligence, justice, and integrity.
5. The authenticity of God's mission in human practice is dependent on the willingness of its messengers and witnesses to live as "exiles" in the empires of the day. This implies a commitment to live in society without being in charge; to nurture community that is alternative and voluntary, minority but inclusive, noncoercive but sustainable, honoring the authority of the Word of God communally discerned; to be oriented toward the local, the weak, and peripheral; to work in hope in spite of failure and suffering.

### With whom do you work?

The "people with whom we walk" are, for the Mennonite Team in the Argentine Chaco, three ethnic groups whose languages are related: Toba, Pilagá, and Mocoví. For all three groups, their name for themselves is "Qom". These groups were widely evangelized in the 30's, 40's, and 50's, largely by grass-roots movements that found nurture in several traditional, evangelical missionary efforts (one of which was Mennonite), but even more in spontaneous pentecostal preaching-healing campaigns among the surrounding non-indigenous population. As a result of this history, our accompaniment is among people who now largely identify themselves as Christian, though there is a growing number of younger indigenous persons, especially in urban settings, who do not identify with Christian faith and may even be hostile to it.

### Why do you do what you do?

We do "what we do" here in Argentina, beginning as guests and learners, and becoming, when invited, accompaniers, interlocutors, witnesses, and even brothers and sisters, because it seems to us to be the way that respects the prior presence of God among the people with whom we walk. It seems to be the way that recognizes that God's truth was here long before we came, and that this wisdom is for our liberation and wholeness as much as our "truth" is for their restoration. It seems to be the way that

might yet contribute to the renewal of dignity and self-esteem that will increasingly liberate an oppressed people to contribute the peculiar gifts that God has given to them, as a people and as individuals.

For our accompaniment to be respectful of the prior presence and work of God among the Toba, for it to value the wisdom that God has given this people, for it to hope for the restoration of ethnic dignity and self-respect, we follow these guidelines:

- Getting to know indigenous persons, churches and communities, and not establishing churches of our denomination.
- Affirming the use of indigenous languages, and making an effort to learn the language.
- Not offering material aid (food, clothing, money, etc.), and responding to requests only when the need is unusual or urgent.
- Refusing roles of leadership within indigenous affairs, events, and institutions, but rather affirming indigenous leadership and initiative wherever possible.
- Preferring contexts of dialogue and mutual exchange to those of explicit instruction in indigenous settings, avoiding the creation of dependency or false expectations (e.g. of employment or role).
- Valuing indigenous oral culture (wisdom, histories, legends, myths) that relates to recent history and that reaches behind the Christianized experience of recent history.

### Why is this approach successful?

It's hard to know when such a judgment (about "success") could reasonably be made; maybe in 50 to 100 years? And in any case, there is so much working against this approach, so many forces at work to essentially neutralize the substantial and peculiar values and gifts of a subsistence, hunter-gatherer society: all the way from denominational, evangelical mission efforts, to the provincial government, to television and the global economy. Frankly, we have been quite cautious about promoting partnerships and mission visits and work projects in the indigenous contexts, because of the fear these only contribute to the demise of self-reliance by fostering a certain dependency and imitation of dominant cultural styles or patterns. Such "exchanges" are seldom equal and disinterested, from an indigenous perspective. Of course, our caution doesn't keep other groups (NGO's, Catholic and evangelical churches, tourist agencies) from doing it.

### How have folks come to Christ or been transformed because of your way of working?

You ask for specific examples of the effectiveness of accompaniment style mission. In fact, one might postulate that the evidence of the "success" of our style would be that no one would identify either us or our style as the reason for their transformation. Success would rather be measured by discipling and discipleship that happens largely by and among indigenous people, churches, and means, without adverting to accompaniers who might have encouraged such indigenization. I believe this is, in fact, largely the reality. There certainly are indigenous persons who, over the years, have deeply appreciated the friendship, the companionship, the spirituality of various Mennonite workers, and who have been influenced by them. As with all personal qualities and relationships, here too the influence has probably been more a factor of peculiar qualities and gifts than of a style or type of ministry. In any case, here are a few testimonials from indigenous believers that in a small way corroborate our style:

"You folks (of the Mennonite Team) can enter the door of any (Indian) church without any problem, because you don't offer anything. You don't bring things that may cause us to fight." (i.e. create competition) --Dionisio Moreno, Toba pastor

"We don't want you to come and teach us the Bible. We want you to come so that we can read the Bible together." --Hugo Díaz, Toba zonal pastor

"You don't bring clothes (used clothing to distribute). You bring the Word of God, and nothing more." Luis Mendoza, Toba pastor

"Missionaries ought to come to stay. I'm not in agreement with the 'transcultural experience' model (i.e. short-term visits). It doesn't matter much to us what you do; what matters is that you stay." Orlando Charole, Toba civic leader

Keith Kingsley, November 2005