

“Setting a Course: The Missionary Engagement of the Bible Fellowship Church 1989-2019.”

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I must begin by confessing my limitations and my bias. Though I have been associated with the Bible Fellowship Church all of my life, first as the son of a family who went out as missionaries from the BFC, and then as an envoy in my own right, I have always lived and worked at the outer rim of our denominational world. In July 2014, upon retiring from my field of service, I became the Director of the Board of Missions for our Fellowship and I am learning a culture and a web of relationships and traditions that are common knowledge for those who grew up with it, but are acquired knowledge for me. I ask for patience where my knowledge of the intricacies of our Fellowship is deficient, and I ask for an open mind where my interpretation of what I do understand lands outside the proverbial box. Please be willing at least to consider my perspective.

As for bias, I am at heart a missionary whose passion is to make the Gospel accessible to all while remaining true to its core. Because of that, I have found I am more willing than most to challenge tradition and institution in the pursuit of what I understand to be God’s ultimate purpose which is the reconciliation of all of creation to Himself. I believe that the primary purpose of the church cannot be realized within the four walls of any sanctuary, but that our proper place as the people of God is in the streets, summoning those who are yet outside the faith to be reconciled to God.

Destructive criticism is never my aim but I do not fear to challenge the status quo.

The nature and purpose of history

“A good historian is one who gets the facts right and gives us guiding principles and universal concepts from the facts.” www.allabouthistory.org/history.htm

In this paper, I will attempt to do both.

A. BEGINNINGS

"The Past is Prologue" (Shelly p. 71) The Evangelical Mennonite Society, forerunner of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ, was established in 1858 as an association of revivalists and traveling preachers. Persuaded that Christ's commission to preach the Gospel to all nations was not limited to the Apostles, but applied to them as well, these itinerant evangelists, at their 11th semi-annual conference, even before they had agreed on a confession of faith and rules of order governing their own congregations, drafted a constitution for what was to be called The Home and Foreign Missionary Society of the Evangelical Mennonites. It was conceived as "a society within the preachers' society within the larger Christian church." (Shelly, p.71) The founding declaration, dated November 3, 1864, reads as follows:

"We, as a small branch of the Christian Church, feel in duty bound to render obedience to the precepts of our Lord and Savior, who offered up His life out of love towards us, in order to redeem us from eternal death; Since He has commanded His Apostles, as well as all who love Him, to go into all the world to preach the Gospel to every creature, and to preach repentance and remission of sins among all nations, we, as a small division of the Mennonite Society feel it also our duty to organize a Missionary Society to contribute our mite to the great work of our Lord. May the Lord grant willing hearts and open hands, besides His rich blessing." (What Mean These Stones p.41, Yearbook 1990 p.97)

This new initiative was a natural extension of the evangelistic fervor of those early preachers whose "first priority was to proclaim the Good News wherever they had opportunity." (Shelly, p.71)

"Twice each year the preachers gathered to report their comings and goings. They recounted families visited, miles traveled, sermons preached. They preached to each other, exhorted and worshipped together; they renewed their enthusiasm to persevere in their spiritual activities until the next conference." (Shelly p.72)

Foremost among the participants were Eusebius Hershey and Jonas Schultz, both experienced travelling preachers and missionaries.

It is said that when Schultz preached, "God's Spirit permeated the meeting so that joyful visions were flowing." When Hershey described the trials and struggles of his travels, "there was encouragement and comfort as well as joy in the meeting." (Shelly p.72)

And no wonder. Hershey had been commissioned by the Society to preach in Potter county, a highly strategic initiative considering that in the 1860's its population had nearly doubled from 6,000 to 11,500. Hershey bought a \$150 horse and set off. In a period of 7 months he had travelled 2550 miles, visited 640 families and spoken in public 605 times, an average of 20 times per week.

In 1863 Hershey and Schultz were joined by Levi Jung. These three preachers, known as the *Pennsylvania Trio* set out on a missionary journey to Ontario.

They returned from that voyage with a burning conviction that the Lord's command to go into all the world had not expired with the Apostles, and it was they who persuaded the Conference to create a missionary society for that purpose and that is how *The Home and Foreign Missionary Society* came to be.

Two Societies

Shelly comments that from this point "there appears to have been two societies: one for elders, preachers, deacons and congregations, and one for traveling preachers and evangelists." (Shelly p.74) It seems inevitable that those associated with the first society would find themselves increasingly taken up with caring for their congregations and the internal affairs of the church while leaving outreach to the society of missionary preachers. This seems to be born out by Shelly's observation that,

"About this time a new wave of Mennonite immigrants began to arrive in North America from Eastern Europe and Russia. The Evangelical Mennonites discussed their plight, but did nothing in response to the opportunity. They missed a tremendous opening. The General Conference Mennonite Church, on the other hand, supported the migration and grew rapidly as a result." (Shelly P.82)

It also bears mentioning that, though *The Home and Foreign Missionary Society* had been explicitly created to carry the Gospel to the nations, and though it was very active on the home front (Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Kansas, Nebraska and Ontario) it would be 36 years before the first foreign missionary would go out.

Though Eusebius Hershey was extremely busy on the home front - he visited Ontario 13 times during these years - his heart was far away, first in India, then in Africa. Several times he brought the matter of foreign missions to the Conference floor and received warm encouragement, only to find the initiatives pushed once again to the back burner by the time-and-energy-consuming business of organizing the new denomination.

Finally it was Hershey himself who broke the logjam by announcing that he would go to Liberia with or without the authorization of the Society; He went without, having been deemed too old to withstand the rigors of life in Africa. Indeed, he succumbed to Malaria 6 months after his arrival in Liberia. In that short time, he did lead one person to Christ from Islam - reputedly the first Muslim to be brought to Christ by a Mennonite. But perhaps most strategically, he wrote 88 letters home to Pennsylvania. These letters had a significant impact on the church back home. In 1915, the year of his death, Henry Weiss, missionary to Chile, the Society's most fruitful early field, wrote that it was Hershey's courage and death in Africa that had been one of the major factors in his own missionary call. (Shelly p.189)

Henry and Kate Weiss

A word concerning the remarkable ministry of Henry Weiss and his wife Kate is in order. Both Henry and Kate were ordained (That is the word they used) by the Conference as missionaries and sent to Chile in 1897. Like all envoys of The Mennonite Brethren in Christ (as the Pennsylvania conference of the Evangelical Mennonites was now called) they served under the direction of the *Christian and Missionary Alliance*. Upon their arrival in Chile, they encountered a group of German-speaking immigrants who had undergone a spiritual revival 5 years before. They welcomed Weiss and begged him to minister among them. He immediately confronted them with the

missionary challenge before them and persuaded them to organize the *Evangelical Mission Society of South America*. Then together, they began to extend the work to native Spanish-speaking Chileans in southern Chile. Within a year they reported 60 conversions, 60 baptisms, and 190 members.

When the president of the *Christian and Missionary Alliance*, Albert B. Simpson, visited the work in Chile, he wrote, "First of all there is our Brother Weiss, the leader of the mission, a man of profound spiritual experience, a sweet and large Christian spirit and peculiarly trained and fitted for this work, with his beloved wife and three dear children..." (Shelly p.199) Steven L. Bishop, author of *The History of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Chile* writes, "Weiss lacked many of the gifts normally associated with a successful missionary or pastor. He spoke Spanish in a terrible way. Nor was he an outstanding speaker or singer. But he was a man of much prayer and fasting, a man whose faith was as great as all Chile." (Shelly p.200)

Another remarkable characteristic of Weiss which surely contributed to the success of the mission to South America, was his willingness to work across institutional lines. He served under the *Christian and Missionary Alliance*. He was supported by the *Evangelical Mennonites of Pennsylvania*. He collaborated fully with the German community he encountered in Chile and challenged them to develop their own missionary-sending structure which fielded 14 missionaries to Argentina, Venezuela, and Chile and sponsored 11 indigenous Chilean workers. His greatest contribution was his ability to persuade so many diverse parties to work together for a common purpose.

The result is telling: By 1990, the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Chile counted 10,903 baptized members and 31,074 inclusive members in 101 organized churches and 18 other preaching points. (Shelly p.200)

Henry died suddenly during the Weisses' second furlough in 1915, having served 18 years in Chile.

Two Mission Boards

Hitherto the mission arm of the Evangelical Mennonites was called the *Home and Foreign Mission Society*. As interest in foreign missions grew, and now that there were actually missionaries going out, the Society's workload increased to the point where it was decided in 1896 to replace the single body with two. Missionary outreach

within the United States which, up until now had been the most active component of the Society's activities, would now be overseen by the *Home Mission Board*, and missionaries going overseas would now come under the oversight of a new department called the *Foreign Mission Board*. The *Foreign Mission Board* was not intended to be a sending agency, but rather it was an administrative body charged with promoting foreign missions, examining and appointing missionary candidates and collecting and allocating funds for their support. Missionaries on the field continued to be sent in partnership with dedicated mission agencies, primarily the C&MA. The intention was excellent: to coordinate giving, to defend the missionary priorities of the Society, and to give the foreign mission initiatives the oversight and leadership they deserved. There is cause to wonder however whether giving foreign missions its own distinct department did not contribute to distancing it from the heart of what the larger body was about.

The United Missionary Society

The Evangelical Mennonites were composed of a handful of regional Conferences: Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Nebraska and Ontario being the most prominent. In the sending of missionaries, the Pennsylvania Conference proved the most zealous. In 1900, the combined Conferences had nine missionaries of which six were supported by Pennsylvania. By 1904 there were eighteen missionaries, ten of which were supported by Pennsylvania. With the exception of the mission to Armenia, composed of 4 missionaries, all missionaries at this point were sent out through the *Christian and Missionary Alliance*. For whatever reason, there were increasing calls to create an in-house sending agency, and in 1921 the *United Missionary Society* was chartered as the official sending agency of the Evangelical Mennonites. The Pennsylvania Conference did not officially join in this initiative as they were already sending all of their missionaries through the C&MA and they wanted to keep their options open. Nonetheless, they did support nine missionaries sent by the *United Missionary Society* to Nigeria. (Shelly p.207)

The Missionary Call

The Evangelical Mennonites were born of a mystical, some would say charismatic, openness to the moving of the Holy Spirit in the individual believer. One of their

distinguishing features was the home prayer meeting marked by tears, shouts of joy and visions of glory. They preached and spoke to each other "by inspiration of the Holy Ghost" (Shelly, p.5) and successfully roused the skepticism of the bishops of the larger Mennonite community, resulting in their excommunication. There is no doubt in my mind that they would have roused the suspicion of many of the leaders of today's Bible Fellowship Church.

This enthusiasm permeated their missionary initiatives: their envoys volunteered and went to far-flung fields with an overwhelming sense of God's call and enablement. There was no looking back.

Eusebius Hershey memorialized many of the significant events of his life in poetry. As he was preparing to leave for Liberia, he wrote *The Missionary's Farewell*:

Let me go, I cannot stay.

'Tis the Master calling me.

Let me go, I must obey.

Native land, farewell to thee.

*And if I die on Afric's soil,
Dearest friends for me don't weep.
For Jesus I go forth to toil.
If true to God, in Heaven we'll meet.*

At their interview, Henry and Kate Weiss spoke in these terms: "We are "ready to go to the foreign field to live, labor, or die for the lost as God may chose."

It is my impression that it was Kate's words that persuaded the Conference to commission them. She said, "Go we must, and go we will, and if the Holy Ghost does not lead you to send us we will go anyhow. I am spoiled forever for Pennsylvania."

The secretary of the conference commented, "The Holy Ghost made an intensely deep and, we trust, lasting impression upon the audience, moving nearly all to tears." (Shelly, p.191)

Like the early preachers, those who went out seem to have had very little formal theological education - at most a year or two at the New York Missionary Training Institute, later known as Nyack College. But they knew how to pray. They knew the Word through and through, and read it as God's personal message to them.

They seriously believed that people could come to repentance by the preaching of the Word, and there was no doubt that they were Christ's Ambassadors, and to proclaim his Word to the lost was their primary function as missionaries.

B. 1989 to Present

The missionary enterprise of the Bible Fellowship church grew and evolved in many ways from the beginning of the 20th century until 2014 when I came to the position of Director of the Board of Missions.

As Roy Hertzog has already recounted that history up to 1988 in his report given to this committee in November of that year, I will skip ahead to that point.

My main resource for this period was the Report of the Board of Missions published each year in the Yearbook of the Bible Fellowship Church

The first thing I noticed was that the reports were devoted primarily to the movements of missionaries during the year, to the number of new recruits and appointees, and to retirements and resignations.

There was very little explanation of vision or strategy, but the Board was very active in promoting the work of Foreign Missions in general, and the initiatives of individual missionaries in particular.

I note that there was an annual missions seminar for Pastors, Missionaries, and key lay missions leaders. I never had the opportunity to attend one of these, and they had been dropped by the time I came to the directorship. No reason is given.

Instead of one unified event, Missions Rally was a regional event with 3 or 4 Rallies scheduled each year.

Annual Reports from the Missionaries were published each year in a separate book.

Missions Week at Pinebrook was a highlight for any missionaries who ever had that experience, but it fell by the wayside as rising costs of sponsorship became prohibitive.

Statistics

In 1991 it was reported that if every member of the Bible Fellowship church would give just 15¢ a day, all of

the support needs of all of our missionaries would be covered.

In 2019, that figure would be \$1.78.

In 1990, one out of 69 members served under the Board of Missions, and the average given towards their support was \$152 per member.

In 2018, we had 7468 members, and one out 58 served under the Board of Missions, and the average given towards their support was \$247 through the Board of Missions office.

I have been told that I should use the number of regular attenders, 14,362, rather than the number of members. In that case, one out of 106 served under the Board of Missions and the average given towards their support was \$129 per attender.

The total declared support need was \$4,848,000, of which the BFC contributed \$1,849,590, or approximately 38%. (Figures from BOM office)

Much more could be said, but at some point a conclusion must be drawn. This is that point.

C. Yesterday's solutions / today's challenges

I don't know who first made the remark that yesterday's solutions tend to become today's challenges, but that certainly is the case when it comes to Missions, and not just for Missions within the Bible Fellowship Church. Here are a few relics of the past which, in their own time served a useful purpose, but which now are raising issues that the Board of Missions is wrestling with as we attempt to preserve, clarify and project our Fellowship's passion for the Great Commission into the future.

1. We began as a Society of preachers with a passion for reaching the Lost at home and abroad: both aspects of that passion were called "mission." Our forebears, desiring to ensure and maintain that emphasis, created *The Home and Foreign Missionary Society* which Shelly characterizes as "a Society within a Society of preachers." (Shelly pp.71,74) One cannot help wondering if this society, existing for the express purpose of outreach at home and abroad, did not have the unanticipated consequence of introducing a distinction

between the church and its mission to the lost. Instead of *having a mission*, it has allowed us to have a *missions program*. Even though many of our churches are sponsoring missionaries abroad, how many churches are actively equipping and engaging their own people to do here at home what our foreign missionaries are equipping and engaging people to do around the world?

In response, the Board of Missions has endorsed the message that, even as we send missionaries abroad, we must be actively equipping the members of our churches to make disciples within their own spheres of influence. We believe that this emphasis lies squarely within the original vision of our founders.

2. In the early days, the meaning of the word "missionary" was clear: it was someone whose primary responsibility was to find and engage lost people and to preach the Gospel to them. Their support and administrative needs were largely assured by an unsalaried committee of pastors and willing volunteers. The increasing complexity of managing an international workforce now requires a large staff of specialized and salaried workers. As we ourselves require the services they provide, we also help to support them - but are these administrative people *missionaries*?

Until now, we have not made that distinction. The result has been that today only half of those we send out are actually personally engaging with lost people. This tends to weaken the meaning and the mandate implied in the word "missionary."

Additionally, the purview of the Board of Missions was enlarged little by little to include "anyone serving in a ministry outside of the Bible Fellowship church who needs support." These too were called "missionaries," even if their ministry was primarily to people who were already believers. This also tended to weaken the meaning of the word "missionary."

As of 1997 the Board recognized 7 categories of people serving under the Board of Missions:

- career missionary
- short term missionary
- associate missionary

- affiliate missionary
- professional associate missionary
- tentmaker missionary
- summer missionary

None of the categories related to what the people actually did, but only to how long they intended to be on the field and how they were to be financed. They were all called "missionaries" and again, this tended to weaken the definition.

It is no wonder that the Handbook that year stated without ambiguity that the word "Missionary" was undefined.

The Board of Missions has clarified the meaning of the word as it is used within our Fellowship, saying:

"A Missionary is a person who has been sent out by their home church with the purpose of actively engaging in initiatives that are

- outwardly focused,
- aimed at proclaiming Christ to those who have the least opportunity to know Him,
- leading them to follow Him wholeheartedly in community with other believers,
- and equipping them in turn to propagate the Gospel by making disciples themselves."

The Board has also defined two other categories of service: the *Practical Missionary Partner* and the *Administrative Missionary Partner* in recognition of those who work in support of our missionaries.

3. There is a lingering belief that we live in the Christian world and that "Mission" is over there. The early writings are full of terms like "Offerings for the Heathen" and "Heathen Soil."

As someone who has lived outside of the United States for 35 years, it is painfully evident that we ourselves now live in Heathen Land. If I were a disciple of Jesus from another land looking for a people who need the Gospel, I would need to look no farther than the United States. Our inner cities, our immigrant

communities, our college campuses, our homeless people, our nursing homes... All of these, were they located in another country, would be seen as proper mission fields by our American Church.

I have been told that these people groups are not the responsibility of the Board of Missions. They are the province of the evangelistic outreach of the Local Church. But I ask "What is the local church doing about it?"

It can be said with confidence that if any of these people would happen to wander into one of our sanctuaries on a Sunday morning, they would hear a solid Bible-based message. But what are the odds of that happening?

In any case, the Great Commission is not an invitation to the lost to step into our world to hear what we are saying. It is a command to us to step into their world, to introduce them to Jesus, and to invite them to join us in following him.

Our forebears understood this when they created the *Home and Foreign* Missionary Society.

It is a heritage that the Board of Missions intended to honor when it adopted the slogan: "*Making a difference There and Here.*"