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Anabaptist Perspectives for Mission

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I write as a Christian with Anabaptist leanings and hope to outline some of the major missiological contributions of Anabaptist perspectives. I owe my awareness of the Anabaptist tradition to studying under Athol Gill. It was not that he kept referring to the Anabaptists but that his passion was for the Gospel accounts of Jesus and what they mean for discipleship, community and mission today; this passion led him to own the Anabaptist strands in Baptist history and to re-appropriate them in the cause of discipleship. In considering Anabaptist distinctives in mission it becomes clear how much they have influenced the radical evangelical movement of the last quarter of the twentieth century, in which Athol Gill played such a significant role.

It is difficult to characterise Anabaptism because of its great variety. But for the purposes of a brief overview there are certain missiological emphases which are clear.

These emphases follow from the central characteristics of the Anabaptist movement in the sixteenth century, which rejected both Catholicism and Protestantism and insisted that church membership belongs only to adults who choose baptism as believers. As well as being 'believers' churches' Anabaptist groups challenged state control and monopoly of religion and became known (generally, though not without exception) for the 'centrality of the Bible, an apolitical stance, nonresistance to evil and refusal to take part in military operations, a stress on ethics defined in terms of discipleship or following the example of Jesus, and a visible church preserved through systematic discipline'.¹

Such features were not universal. The excesses of the violent Anabaptist minority in the sixteenth century, such as the apocalyptically inspired massacre in Münster in 1535, are well known.²

¹ J Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist: The origin and significance of sixteenth-century Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1987), 23.

² Guy F Hershberger, 'Introduction', in *The recovery of the Anabaptist vision*, ed. Guy F Hershberger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1957), 1.

Recent historical studies have shown that a wide variety of Anabaptist groups existed in the two decades before about 1540, from pacifist to militant, from politically engaged to withdrawn, and positioned on nearly all points of the theological spectrum on many major doctrines.³

Nevertheless there was an underlying unity that became clearer in time. Walter Klaassen argues that we can identify some themes held in common after the movement had crystallised by about 1540, namely salvation involving both divine and human cooperation, the baptism and 'priesthood' of all believers, and a view of Christianity as gathered congregational community rather than a clericalised and territorially-based church.⁴

Over time Anabaptism has become a tradition in which the church seeks to be different from the world, separate and living out its new life in discipleship under the authority of Jesus as seen in the New Testament. It has particularly valued a communal approach and has held high the vocation of peacemaking, most often through pacifism.⁵

In 1944 the Anabaptism tradition was sharpened further by Mennonite historian Harold Bender in his paper, *The Anabaptist vision*, which saw the essence of Christianity in terms of discipleship, the church as a voluntary committed community, and the ethic of love and non-resistance.⁶ *The Anabaptist vision* has inspired a generation of Mennonites to try to live a 'life patterned after the teaching and example of Christ', to use Bender's words.⁷

As this brief summary of Anabaptism shows, it is remarkable for taking seriously the expectation that Christians should live in a quite different way from those around them. Mission flows from aspiring to live as Christ lived.

³ See, for example, James Stayer, Werner Packull and Klaus Deppermann, 'From monogenesis to polygenesis: The historical discussion of Anabaptist origins', *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49 (1975): 83-121; Walter Klaassen, 'Sixteenth-century Anabaptism: A vision valid for the twentieth century?', *The Conrad Grebel Review* 7 (1989): 242; and John Howard Yoder, 'Orientation in midstream: A response to the responses', in *Freedom and discipleship: Liberation theology in Anabaptist perspective*, ed. Daniel S Schipani (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 162.

⁴ Walter Klaassen, 'Anabaptism', in *The Mennonite encyclopedia*, Vol. 5, eds. Cornelius J Dyck and Dennis D Martin (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1990), 24.

⁵ Calvin Redekop, 'The community of scholars and the essence of Anabaptism', *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 67 (1993): 436-437.

⁶ Harold S Bender, *The Anabaptist vision* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1944), 13.

⁷ Bender, *The Anabaptist vision*, 16.

Early Anabaptism and recent Mennonite missiology provide the richest material for analysis. In their enthusiasm for evangelism the early Anabaptists foreshadowed the modern Protestant missionary movement by over two hundred years. For a variety of reasons, however, such as persecution and the growth of separatist and exclusivist theology, the Anabaptists soon lost their missionary zeal and settled down to try and remain faithful and pure, becoming known as the 'quiet in the land'.⁸ Modern Mennonite missiology has recovered the missionary vision somewhat, and is vigorously interpreting the best of early Anabaptist approaches to mission for Christians today.

Several major missiological emphases stand out in examining Anabaptist thought. They can be gathered under the six headings of 'kingdom theology', mission as discipleship, a cruciform mission, peacemaking, mission from the margins, and mission in community.

1. The multi-dimensional commonwealth of God

The most fundamental Anabaptist emphasis with missiological implications is that Christian mission is about co-operating with God in the ushering in of a new order.⁹ The centre of Jesus' preaching was how close the kingly reign of God is. This mysterious reality starts from the small and grows in surprising ways and is an upside-down kingdom. It is 'God's new order of justice, peace, and covenant community'.¹⁰ The church does not build the kingdom but is witness to the kingdom-bringing work of God amongst us.¹¹

The 'kingdom of God' is not a realm but the dynamic presence of God, or God-come-in-strength.¹² In its New Testament use it seems to refer both to God's saving presence and our enjoyment of a new set of relationships in God's creation. In other words, first

⁸ S F Pannebecker, 'Missions, Foreign Mennonite', in *The Mennonite encyclopedia*, Vol. 3, eds. Harold S Bender and C Henry Smith (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1957), 712.

⁹ For a brief outline of sixteenth-century Anabaptist kingdom theology see Robert Friedmann, 'The doctrine of the two worlds', in *The recovery of the Anabaptist vision*, ed. Guy F Hershberger (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1957), 105-118.

¹⁰ John Driver, 'The kingdom of God: Goal of messianic mission', in *The transfiguration of mission: Biblical, theological and historical foundations*, ed. Wilbert R Shenk (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1993), 83-105.

¹¹ Driver, 'The kingdom of God', 100.

¹² Bruce Chilton, 'God in strength', in *The kingdom of God in the teachings of Jesus*, ed. Bruce Chilton (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 121-132.

it's a new reign and, as a result, it's a new order.¹³ It is both 'God present' and the fruit of God present. For this reason, and because monarchical relationships are for many of us anachronistic these days, we could translate the term as 'the Commonwealth of God'. Because we are transformed in obedience to God we enjoy life in God's commonwealth.

What this vision means is that only a holistic view of mission will do. The evangelical preoccupation throughout most of the last century with evangelism in an individualistic setting will not do. The ecumenical tendency at times in recent decades to see the gospel mainly in social and political terms will not do. Even the attempt to treat 'word' and 'deed' as two distinguishable aspects of mission and then try to keep them in balance will not do.¹⁴ All types of Christian mission — evangelism, caring for our neighbours, community development, justice seeking, peacemaking, social action, living in a welcoming community, environmental action, praying in hope for God's kingdom to come, and so on — are facets of the one jewel. They are each only a part of our response to the transforming grace of God. A new order is a whole new order and God's mission should always stretch us as we try to keep the whole vision in view.

Another implication of the kingdom-view (while only implicit in most Anabaptist writing) is that our mission begins with God's action and a cosmic view of God's mission. If the Commonwealth of God is a new set of relationships, they extend not only to our relationship to God and our relationships with each other but to our relationships to other creatures and to the environment itself. An ecological framework insists that nothing is fully transformed until everything is fully transformed. That surely is part of the meaning of the cryptic passage in Romans 8 about the creation groaning to be set free from bondage (Rom 8:18-25). Christopher Marshall sums it up: 'The gospel embraces personal renewal, social renewal and ecological renewal'.¹⁵

According to Jürgen Moltmann, 'embodiment is the end of all God's works'.¹⁶ That is, incarnation is part of the divine dynamic, found in God's presence in creation, in history, pre-eminently in

¹³ Christopher Marshall, *Kingdom come: The kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Auckland: Impetus, 1993), 43-44.

¹⁴ Wilbert R Shenk, *Changing frontiers in mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 28-29.

¹⁵ Marshall, *Kingdom come*, 102.

¹⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in creation: An ecological doctrine of creation* (London: SCM, 1985), 244-245.

the person of Jesus Christ and also in the life of the church. All this puts mission in a large and mysterious context. In a sense our task is only to respond to God's Spirit within us and point to God at work.

Contemporary Anabaptist writers are impressive in the way they keep this multi-dimensional kingdom perspective on mission. Two examples are *The transfiguration of mission*, edited by Wilbert Shenk (1993),¹⁷ and Christopher Marshall's study of the kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus, called *Kingdom come*.¹⁸

2. Mission as discipleship

For Anabaptists the Christian life involves a full-bodied discipleship. Anabaptists all insist that the church is the gathered community of those who freely choose to respond to the call of Jesus to follow him and then are baptised. Mission and discipleship are one.¹⁹ That is, mission is a natural dimension of the lives of ordinary believers in the course of following Jesus. Every Christian is a missionary in the sense that we are all called to live out the gospel and to bear witness to its power in our lives.

Among the early Anabaptists there was no organised missionary program, only the spontaneous and effective expression of the Christian message by educated and uneducated alike, in spoken word and in daily life.²⁰ Harold Bender, endeavouring to encapsulate the Anabaptist vision, said that the key phrase of the Anabaptists was not 'faith in Christ' but 'following Christ'.²¹ Denny Weaver writes:

Discipleship is an assumption that one who accepts Jesus Christ will use Jesus' life and teachings as the norm within which to shape the Christian life. While those assumptions seem obvious, they are not the

¹⁷ Wilbert R Shenk, ed. *The transfiguration of mission: Biblical, theological and historical foundations* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1993).

¹⁸ Christopher Marshall, *Kingdom come: The kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus*, 2nd ed. (Auckland: Impetus, 1993).

¹⁹ Harry Huebner, 'Discipleship', in *The Mennonite encyclopedia*, Vol. 5, eds. Cornelius J Dyck and Dennis D Martin (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1990), 238; Neal Blough, 'Messianic mission and ethics: Discipleship and the good news', in *The transfiguration of mission: Biblical, theological and historical foundations*, ed. Wilbert R Shenk (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1993), 179.

²⁰ J D Graber, 'Anabaptism expressed in missions and social service', in *The recovery of the Anabaptist vision*, ed. Guy F Hershberger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1957), 152, 154, 161-163.

²¹ Bender, *The Anabaptist vision*, 21.

assumptions of the majority Christian theological tradition.²²

This is an incarnational approach to mission, with a strong emphasis on embodying Christ in daily life. The main strategy for mission is to live differently, that is, to point to the new order in all dimensions of life.

We may well blanch at this. Even though we may be committed to growing more Christlike day by day, and although we may believe that the life of the church must present a clear alternative to the world, on the surface this form of incarnational mission seems impossible. Our objection might be summed up in the question: 'What does it mean to be incarnational when we are not the Messiah?'²³

Indeed, Anabaptist writers sometimes seem too simplistic. For example, Lawrence Burkholder, writing in the 1950s, argued that 'Christianity is the concrete and realistic "imitation" of Christ's life and work in the context of the kingdom of God'.²⁴ What does he mean by "imitating Christ"? Is Christ merely our example? If so, we may as well give up, because our human sinfulness, our alienation from God, means we simply can't do it.

Generally, however, we find that grace is important to Anabaptists too, in dialectical counter-balance.²⁵ It is life-changing grace, or the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, which enables and empowers Christians to live changed lives.²⁶ Complementing 'following Christ', concepts such as 'participating in Christ'²⁷ and 'solidarity in Christ' figure in both sixteenth-century and contemporary Anabaptist writers.²⁸

²² J Denny Weaver, 'Which way for Mennonite theology?', *Gospel Herald*, 23 Jan 1996, 3.

²³ Jude Tiersma, 'What does it mean to be incarnational when we are not the Messiah?', in *God so loves the city: Seeking a theology for urban mission*, eds. Charles Van Engen and Jude Tiersma (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1994), 7-25.

²⁴ J Lawrence Burkholder, 'The Anabaptist vision of discipleship', in *The recovery of the Anabaptist vision*, ed. Guy F Hershberger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1957), 137.

²⁵ Alvin J Beachy, *The concept of grace in the Radical Reformation* (Nieuwkoop, Holland: B. de Graaf, 1977).

²⁶ Roelf S Kuitse, 'Holy Spirit: Source of messianic mission', in *The transfiguration of mission: Biblical, theological and historical foundations*, ed. Wilbert R Shenk (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1993), 106-129.

²⁷ John Howard Yoder, *The politics of Jesus: Vicit agnus noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 113.

²⁸ J Denny Weaver, 'Discipleship redefined: Four sixteenth century Anabaptists', *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 54 (1980): 256.

As well as trying to follow Jesus, there is an emphasis on letting go and letting the risen Christ shape our lives. The work of the Spirit is central in Anabaptist discipleship and mission. Incarnational mission involves both following Jesus and being shaped by the risen Christ.²⁹

What does discipleship mean in practice, then? 'Following Jesus' isn't straightforward. Obviously not all Christians are supposed to become carpenters or wear sandals or become itinerant preachers. And our context in the twenty-first century involves many new issues such as nuclear weapons, biotechnology, vast environmental destruction, postmodern ways of thinking and the hectic pace of life in the post-industrial world, none of which are found in the times in which Jesus lived. How do disciples become living signs to the Commonwealth of God?

Anabaptists are prepared to name some radical principles. As John Howard Yoder pointed out in *The politics of Jesus*, we are called to forgive others, love our enemies, suffer for the cause if necessary and generally live in a revolutionary new set of relationships in which the first are last and outsiders become insiders.³⁰ It is truly an upside-down kingdom³¹ and an alternative society. Anabaptists generally argue that Jesus' teaching calls us to a non-violent stance, a non-hierarchical perspective on status and power, the practice of Christian discipleship as a voluntary and serious commitment, and Christian community as a clear alternative to the ways of the world.

Burkholder, writing in 1993, observes that modern ideas of discipleship are becoming diluted:

Mennonites continue to talk about discipleship and Anabaptism almost ad nauseum, but much of it is loose talk. For Mennonite discipleship language is no longer backed up in the communal consciousness by the gold standard of Jesus' sayings as rigorous, sacrificial, 'upside down', extraordinary, impractical Sermon on the Mount presuppositions. Discipleship

²⁹ Ross Langmead, 'The Word made flesh: Towards an incarnational missiology', Thesis (DTheol), Melbourne College of Divinity, 1997, 57-65, 76-94.

³⁰ Yoder, *The politics of Jesus*, 115-126.

³¹ Donald B Kraybill, *The upside-down kingdom*, 2nd ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1990).

language these days generally refers to something between the extraordinariness of Jesus' ethic and the everyday reasonableness of civil righteousness.³²

He invokes Dietrich Bonhoeffer's view of discipleship as involving 'costly grace', combining a sense of overwhelming gratitude to God with a daily and concrete commitment to at least respond to the 'perfectionistic ethic' of Jesus, who refused to qualify either his demands or his radical grace.³³

This raises many questions. While the old social order lasts, will Christians with this approach be confined to being a ginger group on the edge of society? Will they be a small group, more critical than affirming of culture, vulnerable, servant-like and uncomfortable with conventional power? Perhaps Anabaptist mission will tend to attract passionate and uncompromising idealists. Given the impossible demands Jesus seems to place on those who listen to him, most Christians just water them down, whereas Anabaptists are likely to at least have a go. Do we need to be careful, remembering that the higher the standards we set, the greater the fall when we fail? How do we find the path between, on the one hand, overwhelming idealism, which crushes and tends to legalism and, on the other hand, a too-easy rationalisation of Jesus' demands, which lets us off the hook at every turn? There are no easy answers.

One Anabaptist approach to mission, that of providing a withdrawn alternative community, is inadequate to my mind. This was the dominant Anabaptist vision in the sixteenth century. The Schleithem Confession of 1527 declared that Anabaptists will have nothing to do with the wicked world. It saw reality as consisting of two opposite realms of light and darkness, Christ and the devil, discipleship and unbelief; the two opposites are to have no part of each other.³⁴

Most Anabaptists today back away from attempts at complete withdrawal. They recognise that the Schleithem Confession reflected a strongly dualistic view of reality which unconvincingly placed all 'light' within the Anabaptist communities and all

³² J Lawrence Burkholder, 'The limits of perfection: Autobiographical reflections', in *The limits of perfection: A conversation with J Lawrence Burkholder*, eds. Rodney J Sawatsky and Scott Holland (Waterloo, Ontario: Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies, 1993), 42.

³³ Burkholder, 'The limits of perfection', 39-40.

³⁴ John Howard Yoder, ed. *The Schleithem Confession* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1973), 11-12.

'darkness' in 'the world'. Both the church and the world are much more ambiguous than this. In particular, the world is not as dark as this vision suggests. It is still the cosmos and the humanity that God created, entered and cares about.

Nevertheless, exploring the alternative community is still the distinctive Anabaptist contribution to the debate about how the church should engage in mission in the world. On the spectrum between attempts at complete withdrawal and a form of Christendom where church and state live in symbiosis, the Anabaptists today are still closer to withdrawal, even though they spell out ways in which 'the alternative community' directly and indirectly transforms the wider community.

Denny Weaver, for example, argues for a 'socially active alternative community'.³⁵ He asks, 'Is Christian social responsibility expressed primarily through the institutions of society or through the church?' and 'Does the church permeate society or function as a visible alternative to it?'. In both cases he opts for aiming to provide a clear alternative.³⁶ But this alternative is one whose efforts may intersect with the attempts of governments and secular organisations to create a just and compassionate society. Indeed some Christians may work through social institutions. But the church's mission is primarily to be the church and act in ways that point to a new order, not compromising with the old order.³⁷

This important debate on the nature of discipleship and the social dimension of mission continues amongst Anabaptists and other scholars.³⁸ I place myself on the 'more socially engaged' wing of the spectrum, along with others who accept the label of 'radical evangelicals'. My assessment is that Athol Gill would have agreed, given that he urged Christians to incarnate the liberating power of Jesus Christ in the economic, political and cultural processes of

³⁵ J Denny Weaver, 'The socially active community: An alternative ecclesiology', in *The limits of perfection: A conversation with J Lawrence Burkholder*, eds. Rodney Sawatsky and Scott Holland (Waterloo, Ontario: Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies, 1993), 71-94.

³⁶ Weaver, 'The socially active community', 76-77.

³⁷ Weaver, 'The socially active community', 80.

³⁸ See the excellent set of essays in Rodney Sawatsky and Scott Holland, eds., *The limits of perfection: A conversation with J Lawrence Burkholder* (Waterloo, Ontario: Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies, 1993). Also Stanley A Hauerwas and William H Willimon, *Resident aliens: Life in the Christian colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989); and José Míguez Bonino, 'On discipleship, justice and power', in *Freedom and discipleship: Liberation theology in Anabaptist perspective*, ed. Daniel S Schipani (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 131-138.

society, including education, employment, the media, trade, urban planning and human rights.³⁹

Whatever views Anabaptists hold on discipleship as living out a social alternative, there is consensus that mission is discipleship of a full-bodied nature. One of the most important contributions of the discipleship tradition, of which Anabaptism is a major strand, is its radical linkage of faith and action. The call to follow Jesus continually points beyond us, challenging us and our world. Discipleship does not need to be called 'radical discipleship' because there is no other type.

3. Mission shaped by the cross

Precisely because it takes seriously the call to follow Jesus the Anabaptist tradition is a theology of the cross. Because it sees the path of discipleship as cruciform, Anabaptist missiology calls Christians to face issues of suffering, cost and possible death on the path to new life and the experience of resurrection. The Anabaptist experience of persecution and martyrdom in the sixteenth century certainly stamped the movement with a clear understanding of the cost of discipleship, and Mennonite peacemaking today sometimes involves similar dangers and costs.

Mission in this mould finds the resurrection-centred approach which is common amongst Western Christians today lacking in depth and substance. A cross-shaped missiology is not comfortable with a style of mission that emphasises victory, strength, conquest and strategies that centre on power.

Some churches engage in mission primarily through inviting others to join them in praise and ecstatic worship. Those who see mission as praise are right, of course, to want to share the joy and power of the risen Christ and to celebrate experiences of spiritual victory. A missiology of the cross, however, insists that Christian joy be well anchored in the reality of the unfinished task of mission and a yearning for the fullness of the Commonwealth of God. It wants to say that as long as anyone remains lost, hungry and in despair, we should look forward in mission rather than dwell on the partial victories we experience here and now. On this view, it is not that the resurrection is limited but that its promise for the future is even greater than we have experienced so far.

³⁹ Athol Gill, *The fringes of freedom: Following Jesus, living together, working for justice* (Homebush West, NSW: Lancer, 1990), 169-171.

Furthermore, the resurrection is God's 'Yes' to the sacrificial, world-challenging life and consequent death of Jesus. The risen Christ affirms, in a way we do not fully understand, that the secret to transformed life lies in Jesus' self-giving and obedience to God's purposes. The cross was the symbol of all that Jesus stood for and all the resistance the world was able to offer to his radical challenge.

John Howard Yoder expressed this insight well. He reminds Christians that discipleship is a call to take up our cross and follow Jesus (Mk 8:34). He argues that only at one point is Jesus our example, and that is in his cross.⁴⁰ But what does that actually mean today? Yoder embraces the socio-political dimensions of a 'kingdom theology' and argues that the cross must be, for us as it was for Jesus, the price of social nonconformity. It is the social reality of representing in an unwilling world the order to come. It is not unpredictable suffering. It is not primarily our inward wrestling with sin, as Luther thought. It is the end of a freely chosen path after counting the cost.⁴¹ Suffering is not to be embraced but it is to be faced.

This emphasis on incarnational mission as profoundly shaped by the cross is shared by Anabaptists with others such as Bonhoeffer, Moltmann and the Latin American liberation theologians, all of whom remind us of the costly nature of this path. The more our theology leads us to engage with the suffering of those around us the more it has to face the significance of the cross.

A missiology of the cross does not deny the importance of the resurrection. The resurrection is central in all Christian faith as our hope and our power. But as Thorwald Lorenzen often says, the resurrection is the resurrection of the crucified Christ.⁴² The path to the resurrection is through the cross. The Anabaptists remind us that our experience as disciples, even though suffused with resurrection presence and joy, will generally be a costly and demanding commitment, as God's gracious rule is not yet fully present. While the poor remain poor and the lost remain lost, disciples can expect suffering and rejection, and mission always takes the shape of Jesus: that of the cross.

⁴⁰ Yoder, *The politics of Jesus*, 95.

⁴¹ Yoder, *The politics of Jesus*, 96.

⁴² Thorwald Lorenzen, *Resurrection and discipleship: Interpretive models, biblical reflections, theological consequences* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 239-320.

4. Peacemaking

Apart from a few exceptions in the earliest days, Anabaptists have always seen the call to renounce violence as a direct consequence of following the way of the cross.⁴³ Jesus' arrest and death flowed from his decision at every major point in his life to live and teach the way of suffering servanthood rather than to take up the sword.⁴⁴ To follow Jesus, then, means to embrace the way of non-violence and love for enemies.

Taking shape variously as non-resistance, pacifism or non-violent resistance, the call to peacemaking is one of the more distinctive features of the Anabaptist approach to mission, a feature shared with the other historic peace churches (the Brethren and Quakers).⁴⁵

In the sixteenth century non-resistance grew out of a simple response to Jesus' teaching to turn the other cheek and love our enemies (Mt 5:38-45). It developed in a context where violence was used against the Anabaptists and so was closely linked to costly discipleship and the theology of the cross. Non-retaliation was also seen as a powerful witness to the transforming love of Jesus.⁴⁶

From then until the middle of the twentieth century traditional non-resistance was influenced by Anabaptism's strong dualism between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the devil.⁴⁷ It focused more on the purity of the church than on reforming the world. Sadly, it was a feature of withdrawal rather than a dimension of active mission.

Amongst Mennonites in the last fifty years, however, peacemaking has turned outwards and largely changed from passive non-resistance to active non-violent resistance. The whole direction of Jesus' life and teaching is now seen as politically radical and nonviolent in nature.⁴⁸ The biblical concept of *shalom* is now seen to be central to the mission of God.⁴⁹

⁴³ Ronald J Sider, *Christ and violence* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1979), 16.

⁴⁴ Sider, *Christ and violence*, 23.

⁴⁵ John R Burkholder, 'Peace', in *The Mennonite encyclopedia*, Vol. 5, eds. Cornelius J Dyck and Dennis D Martin (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1990), 681.

⁴⁶ Roland H Bainton, *Christian attitudes to war and peace: A historical survey and critical re-evaluation* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1960), 153.

⁴⁷ John Howard Yoder, *Christian attitudes to war, peace, and revolution: A companion to Bainton* (Elkhart, IN: Goshen Biblical Seminary, 1983), 193.

⁴⁸ Yoder, *The politics of Jesus*.

⁴⁹ Perry Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's word for salvation, justice and peace* (London: Spire, 1989); Perry B Yoder and Willard M Swartley, eds., *The meaning of peace: Biblical studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992).

It is now clearly understood that peace involves justice and a positive sense of well-being. The pre-eminence of Christ over all cosmic powers is asserted in such a way that our mission for peace calls all of society to renounce violence and hatred. While acknowledging the separation of church and state, the Anabaptist mission for peace engages in reconciling activities and a prophetic peace witness to secular institutions.⁵⁰

As a result, there has been a flowering of Mennonite peacemaking activities such as conflict mediation, victim-offender reconciliation, peace education, peace rallies, symbolic action in international conflicts, non-violence training, civil disobedience and non-violent direct action.

The clear emphasis on peacemaking is one of the most valuable distinctives of Anabaptist mission. It is clearly integrated with other emphases, particularly being a sign of God's new order, following Jesus and walking the way of the cross. Non-violence is just one facet of love. 'Peacemaking' is another term for the Christian ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-20), which in turn is our co-operation in God's reconciling mission.

5. Mission from the margins

There is a consensus amongst contemporary Anabaptists that solidarity with the poor follows from the incarnation. Apart from liberation theology I doubt that any Christian tradition is clearer on this issue. In Jesus God expresses solidarity with humankind, but particularly with the voiceless and the powerless.

Jesus' own social location and his economic and social teachings are part of our understanding of who he is and what our mission is. John Driver reminds us that Galilee was on the margins of Judaism and that Jesus gravitated toward the disenfranchised, such as the Samaritans, the poor, prostitutes, publicans, lepers, foreigners, women and children. Driver says, as do many writers, that our mission ought to be shaped by Jesus' mission.⁵¹ Ronald Sider takes his own Mennonite brothers and sisters to task for

⁵⁰ Burkholder, 'Peace', 682.

⁵¹ John Driver, 'Messianic evangelization', in *The transfiguration of mission: Biblical, theological and historical foundations*, ed. Wilbert Shenk (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1993), 216.

being materialistic. He says, 'Liberation theology rightly wants to know if the wealthy Mennonite church in North America and Western Europe has any intention of living what the Bible teaches about the poor'.⁵²

The early Anabaptists didn't theologise too much about heading to the margins because that's where they found themselves anyway. Mostly poor (though some were educated), they read the Bible through the eyes of the poor and saw a Jesus who challenged the powers and included the outcast. More importantly, the way they expressed their alternative community, following the teachings of Jesus, led to the inclusion of the poor: They practised the priesthood of all believers; they rejected social hierarchies and titles; they shared goods; and they expected to see Christ in the hungry and homeless. Unfortunately, the early Anabaptists drew a sharp line between their own fellowships and the world outside, and soon (perhaps due to persecution) their care for the poor settled back into extending only as far as their own people.

What does it mean to engage in mission from the margins? To narrow the question, let me particularly address middle class readers in the affluent West. (The responses of those who find themselves already on the margins would differ.) I find Linford Stutzman's suggestions (in *With Jesus in the World*) helpful here.⁵³ He argues that in affluent societies we find the establishment at one end of the spectrum and the marginalised at the other. The middle class in between can either aspire to gain more power and status or can turn its face toward those with less. Social action often arises from the marginalised end of the middle class, from those who have resources but use them for the poor.⁵⁴ To be effective such activists must be in proximity to the poor, however that happens. Stutzman says that's exactly where Jesus located himself for his mission, critiquing the establishment with some power and yet mixing easily with the poorest of the poor.⁵⁵ He issues a challenge to all Christian communities when he writes:

The fact is that churches which consistently proclaim and live out the gospel message, visibly demonstrating the

⁵² Ronald J Sider, 'Mennonites and the poor: Toward an Anabaptist theology of liberation', in *Freedom and discipleship: Liberation theology in Anabaptist perspective*, ed. Daniel S Schipani (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), 85.

⁵³ Linford Stutzman, *With Jesus in the world: Mission in modern, affluent societies* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1992).

⁵⁴ Stutzman, *With Jesus in the world*, 45-57.

⁵⁵ Stutzman, *With Jesus in the world*, 57.

radical hope of the coming kingdom after the manner of Jesus and the early church, are the exception. Churches with a message counter to the tired values of the establishment in modern affluent societies are rare. Churches which are in society in the way Jesus was in his are a tiny minority indeed.⁵⁶

There are many tensions involved in mission from the margins. They centre around the extent to which we are prepared to engage in mission with few resources, from 'weakness' rather than 'strength'. And they uncover our own desire for comfort and standing.

It may be impossible for middle class Christians to genuinely 'identify with' the poor, because we (I include myself) are not really poor no matter what we do. Perhaps we can do what Stutzman calls us to do, that is, to live at the lower end of the middle class spectrum. But does he expect *all* Christians to heed his call, including executives, parliamentarians and others trying to move in so-called 'high places'? We have generally avoided a literal interpretation of Jesus' call to the rich young man to give away all his possessions; must we take Stutzman literally and completely turn our back on middle class and upper middle class existence, with all of its trappings, such as travel, education, communication devices, high technology, holidays, physical comfort, sports and entertainment? For example, is it ever right to fly around the world to achieve things, or should we stay at home? How can we ever move beyond charity to social action if we don't learn the systems of the powerful?

Anabaptists today, like other Christians, differ on these questions. A constructive way forward may be for Christians at various social locations to stay in active dialogue with each other. Those who live in low-income urban areas, staff soup kitchens or sit with the psychiatrically ill are vitally important to those who speak to parliamentary breakfasts or devise social policy in the World Bank. The converse is also true.

Another way forward is to see discipleship as consisting of a downward journey as well as an inward journey and an outward journey. The downward journey means a step at a time towards simplicity or generosity, the giving away of time, power,

⁵⁶ Stutzman, *With Jesus in the world*, 95.

possessions and resources. It is a step at a time towards the poor, a step outside our comfort zone, whatever that may be.

6. Mission in community

Anabaptists see the church as a covenant community living as a sign in the midst of the world. Mission is essentially communal. It is not that *I* partially embody the risen Christ in my life, but that *we* partially embody the risen Christ in our life together. We aspire to living in an alternative society here in the midst of wider society as a sign of God's presence in strength, or the Commonwealth of God.

The Anabaptists again set the bar rather high for discipleship. We noted their call to follow Jesus in all aspects of daily life, their view of mission as cross-shaped, a commitment to overcoming violence, and a call to engage in mission from the margins. And now it's creating and sustaining a counterculture. Larry Miller writes provocatively when he says:

Is it unreasonable to believe that only churches with this particular identity — alternative, voluntary, missionary, pacifist microsocieties — can be instruments of Messiah's transfigured mission? ... Only churches which are alternative societies, transformed in relation to existing society because they are already conformed to Messiah's vision of the future, can demonstrate the nature of life in the coming kingdom.⁵⁷

We can only hope that lesser Christian communities manage to point to the new order as well.

Community means many things, of course. The Anabaptist tradition is known for its communal shape, sometimes forming self-sufficient rural communities with communally-owned possessions and a common purse. Today Christians form all sorts of committed and semi-committed groups and call them communities. Geographical community is not the only sort that thrives in our society, as people meet at work, or from across a city, or even online. But if we take our physical body and the natural rhythms of daily life seriously, then local community will still remain the primary type for the church. We could define

⁵⁷ Larry Miller, 'The church as messianic society: Creation and instrument of transfigured mission', in *The transfiguration of mission: Biblical, theological and historical foundations*, ed. Wilbert R Shenk (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1993), 149-150.

community as that gift of unity of spirit that God gives to all sorts of groups of people who commit themselves to some sort of common life. It's not easy in an individualistic and busy Western lifestyle. Every step from 'me' to 'us' is hard-won in such a culture.

What does this call to community mean for mission? First, on a personal note, a supportive and lively community is great because I enjoy it, at least most of the time. It is part of the vision for the Commonwealth of God that we experience a new life together, encapsulated in the symbol of an open banquet, sharing the good life with others. We can only share in mission what we experience as good news. It's good news that others care how we're feeling, that others share the burdens of the day, that we can do together what we couldn't achieve on our own, and that we celebrate, laugh and cry together. To have all these things is rare in our society and to be treasured. Community fuels our mission because it is a sign of what God calls all people to. It sustains us for the long haul and teaches us our strengths and weaknesses.

Secondly, the practice of community that is open at the edges is probably the most effective form of evangelism. People who won't go to a church service will come to a barbecue. Sharing possessions, minding children, helping to paint the house, praying for each other — all these things are signs of a new set of relationships and are signs of the Commonwealth of God.

Thirdly, only in community can we express the various facets of mission. As Paul said in a slightly different way (1 Cor 12), some are bass players and some cook great pasta. Some can sit with people all night and others can organise a camp. Some are great with the disadvantaged and others great theologians. We all do a bit of each but we need each other. Only together can we pursue incarnational mission, because some are the eyes and others are the hands.

Fourthly, community is the cauldron where we learn what the new order means in day to day life. Community can be ugly, as we fight, freeze people out, play our power games or fail to carry our part of the burden. The forgiveness we experience overflows and is offered in mission to others. In community we learn to include people we would naturally exclude. This is where we learn to be more vulnerable, and learn to get past conflict to reconciliation.

7. Conclusion

The Anabaptist perspectives on mission I've discussed point in one direction, that of living out a clear alternative to the ways of the world, engaging in the world but marching to a different drum.

On the one hand it seems radical and difficult as we 'try' to follow Jesus. On the other hand it often amounts to 'not trying' but rather experiencing the risen Christ in life together; mission is just the overflow of our enjoyment of God's gracious reign, even though it is only partial. Athol Gill used to say that the grace of the gospel call is always greater than its demand.

Anabaptist mission leads to all sorts of expressions. There are Anabaptists doing development work in poor countries and others in church planting and evangelism. There are many who express their alternative values in conventional occupations, in conflict resolution work or in new approaches to victim-offender relations. Anabaptist churches are known for their peacemaking and their distinctive contributions to international relations.

The central shape of Anabaptist mission, however, seems to be discipleship in community. It is a vision of the daily expression of a different life together, one which is missional in character.

There are many forms of mission which are not emphasised in this approach, such as mass media evangelism, large evangelistic rallies and influencing society from positions of power. While there is merit in these types of mission, the distinctly Anabaptist contribution is to remind us that it is Jesus whom we follow. We are called to engage in mission in Christ's way.

Jesus embodied a person-to-person style of communication. He showed a lack of interest in writing books and organising a religion. He lived with a strong sense that there is a reality other than the world around us which pervades this world and claims our total allegiance. This sense of God's reign is both mystical and very practical, both personally transforming and socially revolutionary. Jesus calls us to an almost impossible and yet wonderful alternative existence which doesn't graft too well onto the vine of our existing society but, at the same time, begins here and now where we are. This is the overall vision of Anabaptist approaches to Christian mission.