

STORIES FROM THE GLOBAL MENNONITE CHURCH

Mennonites' reluctance to share the gospel

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, the United Pentecostal Church International (UPCI) sponsored a mission workshop in Bourbon, Ind., not far from my home in Goshen, to train lay evangelists for witness to a newly targeted “unreached people group.” My interest was piqued. I was aware Pentecostal churches were among the fastest-growing Christian groups in the world, and that many of the growing Anabaptist-Mennonite churches in Africa, Asia and Latin America were influenced in one way or another by Pentecostal theology and worship practices. So I probed a bit more.

To my astonishment, I discovered that the primary focus of the UPCI workshop was to train attendees in “strategies for reaching the Amish-Mennonite people” with the message of the gospel so that Mennonites, too, might “become part of the family of God.” We were the “unreached people group” who were the target of the seminar.

Unfortunately, I was not able to attend the sessions. But a telephone conversation with the then-director of the church’s Multicultural Ministries program, himself a former Mennonite, led to an extended conversation in my office several months later. The picture of Mennonites that emerged was a caricature, to be sure—revealing no awareness of the ethnic diversity of Mennonites today or the fact that most Mennonites in the world do not live in North America. But the image is one that many of us would likely have recognized nonetheless.

Mennonites, the UPCI

spokesperson said, are good people, but they have been badly misled. They are burdened by tradition, they think good deeds will save them, and they are generally uninterested in the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. Even worse, he continued, Mennonites don’t have a sense of Christian joy and are embarrassed to talk about their faith. “They just don’t seem to have a sense of urgency about their witness,” he concluded.

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I am convinced that the UPCI was wrong to target Amish-Mennonites as “an unreached people group.” But as I travel throughout our global church, I am often struck by the joyful confidence I see among other Mennonite brothers and sisters as they openly share their faith.

As North Americans, we are rarely hesitant to express our personal convictions—sometimes with great fervor—about political matters, dietary revelations, cell phone companies or environmental concerns. Why then should we assume it to be inappropriate, or somehow inherently coercive, to talk openly with others about our faith?

The gospel is as simple as it is profound. We are loved fully and unconditionally by God; indeed,

God loved us while we were still “enemies of God” (Romans 5:8, 10). As recipients of that gracious act of love—the gift of “preemptive forgiveness”—we are called to reflect that same kind of love to others, including our enemies. Having received healing through Christ, we are invited to participate in the healing of the broken world around us.

This simple message—at the core of Anabaptist-Mennonite faith and practice for nearly five centuries—is good news. Such good news, in fact, that we should not be silent.

This does not mean we reduce our faith to a sales pitch, a clever argument or a simplistic series of verbal agreements. But we have been entrusted with a wonderful treasure, one meant to be shared that is the source of great joy, even in the midst of the world’s pain.

What would happen if you decided to be bolder in speech, witnessing to others in word as well as in deeds? What would happen if you would embrace the good news with a new sense of urgency? What would happen if it were said of North American Mennonites, as with Peter in the days following Pentecost (Acts 4:20): “They cannot help but speak about what they have seen and heard”?



John D. Roth is professor of history at Goshen (Ind.) College, director of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism and editor of *Mennonite Quarterly Review*.