

THREE KINGDOMS

The origins of the missionary impulse among the Swiss-Volhynian Mennonites

By Rich Preheim

Like any historical account, the story of Swiss-Volhynians, or Schweitzers, and mission work has been shaped by geography, specifically by three places. The first is cosmic. Without going into theology or missiology, it is safe to say that the Kingdom of God is central to the missionary enterprise. The other two locations are earthly. One is the Middle Kingdom, the nickname the Chinese had given themselves, believing they were at the center or middle of the world. China was the first field for Schweitzer missionaries. The other location is Salem-Zion Mennonite Church, which has been sometimes called the Northern Kingdom. Following their migration to southeastern Dakota Territory in the 1870s, the Schweitzers organized themselves into two congregations, Salem and Zion. When Zion's meetinghouse was destroyed in a storm, the two congregations started worshiping together as Salem-Zion Mennonite Church. According to lore, members in the southern part of the community wanted a closer church, and so in 1907 the Salem Mennonite Church was begun two and a half miles south of Salem-Zion. The two are commonly called the South Church and the North Church, or, sometimes borrowing from biblical history, the Southern Kingdom and the Northern Kingdom. The first Schweitzer missionaries came from the latter.

But our story is not restricted to those three places. Also playing significant roles in the development of Schweitzer missions are places such as Berne, Indiana; Chicago, Illinois; Cleveland, Ohio; and Mountain Lake, Minnesota. We are not Middle Kingdom-type people. The rest of the world does not revolve around us. Rather, our history is intricately connected with that of others.

Missions is a curious topic in the history of Anabaptism. When the movement started in the sixteenth century, Anabaptists were fantastic evangelists, but persecution squashed that within decades. Even when not imprisoned or exiled or martyred, the Anabaptists were often prohibited from proselytizing. Subsequently, they became the *Stille in Lande*, or "quiet in the land," for the next 300 years or so. But missionary interest was re-ignited among European Mennonites in the nineteenth century, thanks to influences from broader Christianity such as revivalism and pietism. Among those affected were the Russian Mennonites of Low German ethnicity, who sent missionaries to Indonesia and India and elsewhere in Europe and also supported European mission organizations, both Mennonite and non-Mennonite. The Russian Low Germans even had representation on the Dutch Mennonite mission board.

Such interest, however, was not the case with the Swiss-Volhynians. According to Schweitzer historian Martin Schrag, their religious life remained largely traditional, emphasizing moral living, the pitfalls of pride, and separation from the world. But once the Schweitzers relocated to the Great Plains of the United States, they, like many of their fellow Mennonite immigrant neighbors, joined the fledgling General Conference Mennonite Church.

A major impetus for creation of the GCMC was missions. In 1859, a group of unaffiliated Swiss-German Mennonites who had recently immigrated to southeastern Iowa issued an invitation to all Mennonites in North America to create a general conference to do together what they could not do individually, such as missionary work. These newcomers had brought a missions emphasis with them from Europe. Also deeply interested in missions was John Oberholtzer, the eastern Pennsylvania progressive who led a split from Franconia Conference of the Old Mennonite Church in 1847. Old Mennonites saw missions as an outside influence and thus suspicious. But missions became a cause championed by Oberholtzer and his followers in Pennsylvania. In 1860, representatives from two Iowa congregations plus Oberholtzer met at West Point, Iowa, and created the General Conference Mennonite Church. Developing a mission program, however, took time. Finally in 1880, Samuel S. and Susanna Hirschler Haury went to Indian Territory (Oklahoma) as the first GCMC missionaries. The first overseas workers, Peter A. and Elizabeth Dickman Penner, went to India in 1900.

Schweitzers, as part of the GCMC, not untouched by all this. In 1890, Salem-Zion hosted the twelfth triennial sessions of the General Conference Mennonite Church. Much of the assembly program was devoted

to mission work, according to conference reports. Participants discussed building projects in Oklahoma; chose not to explore a new mission field in Palestine, directed the mission board to issue annual, rather than quarterly, reports in both English and German; and were introduced to Rodolph and Maria Petter as missionary candidates. Rodolph would go on to become a leading Cheyenne linguist, spending most of his time in Montana.

Jonathan J. Schrag

But no Schweitzer became a missionary until Jonathan J. Schrag in 1907. Schrag, from Salem-Zion Mennonite Church of rural Freeman, South Dakota, had long struggled with his faith. He described “dark times where I had terrible struggles in my soul and thus led a wilderness life for 10 years, with ups and downs, victory at times at times and then again defeat. ... It is almost necessary to say that this long struggle was on account of not being fully surrendered to God. To make a full consecration was so hard for me because I knew it meant to go where the Lord would send me.” Once he did surrender, however, Schrag said his family and congregation didn’t understand his decision. But he was undeterred. In 1902, he said, “the Lord clearly showed me that my next step was to go to the Light and Hope Bible School” in Cleveland. There he was baptized by founder John A. Sprunger.

Sprunger and Light and Hope are fascinating and crucial interlopers in the Swiss-Volhynian mission story. Sprunger was born in Switzerland in 1852, and came with his family to Berne, Indiana, two years later. He was a cousin of S.F. Sprunger, who spoke at the dedication of Salem-Zion’s new church building in 1880 and at the cornerstone laying of Bethel College’s Administration Building in 1888. John, meanwhile, became a successful businessman. But after the death of his only child, in 1888 he devoted himself exclusively to church work. During the following decade, Sprunger started an orphanage, publishing house and deaconess program in Berne. In 1902, he moved his ministries, named Light and Hope, to Cleveland.

Light and Hope drew support from a wide range of Mennonites. Sprunger worked closely with the founders of the Missionary Church Association, a splinter group with Berne-area Amish origins but much more evangelical; its beliefs at the time included baptism of the Holy Spirit and divine healing. The MCA is now part of the Missionary Church. Among those who served with Light and Hope were Henry C. Bartel, a member of the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren from Hillsboro, Kansas, and Nellie Schmidt, from Avon, South Dakota, who had joined the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren. Like the Schweitzers, Schmidt’s family came from Volhynia but was Low German.

Henry and Nellie met while working at Berne, got married, and went to China in 1901 with an independent missionary organization. They formed the China Mennonite Mission Society in 1905, supported by the Mennonite Brethren, Evangelical Mennonite Brethren, Krimmer Mennonite Brethren and Missionary Church Association - all more evangelical and revivalist than the General Conference Mennonite Church and certainly more than the Old Mennonite Church.

Among the early missionaries with the Bartel mission were Jonathan J. Schrag and his wife, Louise Stark Schrag. After studying at Light and Hope, Jonathan studied at the Mennonite Bible school at Mountain Lake, Minnesota, and then at the MCA-affiliated Fort Wayne Bible College. Schrag then returned to Light and Hope to work for two years, where he heard his call. He was cleaning at the school when he heard God say to him, “Away to China.” Soon afterward he found a partner when he met Louise, a Detroit woman who was working in the orphanage. They married and went to China in 1908.

Maria Miller

Meanwhile back in South Dakota, Schrag’s cousin Maria Miller heard her own call to missions. She was influenced as a girl by hearing a missionary by the name of Duerksen from Sumatra and P.A. Penner speak at church. Duerksen was probably one of a number of Russian Mennonites serving with the Dutch mission board in Indonesia, which was a Dutch colony at the time. Penner and wife, Elizabeth, were the first GCMC overseas missionaries. Shortly after Penner’s visit, Miller was plowing and pondering her desire to do overseas mission work. It seemed unlikely she would be able to do so because her help was needed on the farm. She hadn’t even gone to high school. While plowing a field one day, Miller was wrestling with her

situation when she stopped and took out a New Testament that she carried with her. It fell open to John 20, the chapter on Christ's resurrection. According to her memoirs, Maria read the passage, was struck by Mary's love for Jesus and prayed, "Lord, give me such a love to Thee that nothing may keep me back from following Thee and Thy bidding."

After her experience in the field, Miller's parents allowed her to attend the Mountain Lake Mennonite Bible school. After three years in Minnesota, she considered where to go next to prepare for mission work. She dismissed the newly opened Freeman College in her home community as well as Bethel College. Education at those two institutions would have been in German, and Miller wanted English. Thanks to a connection through an instructor at Freeman, she went to a Methodist missionary training school Chicago. The GCMC mission board had already sent there one prospective missionary worker by the name of Anna Braun.

Miller was a spunky gal, who turned down many marriage proposals. None of her suitors were inclined to do foreign mission work. According to Preheim family tradition, she dated my grandfather, Peter P. Preheim. But they felt different calls to missions, Maria overseas and Peter to home missions. They parted ways. (Preheim briefly attended Moody Bible Institute to prepare for urban ministry before he was called back to the farm.) Miller and Braun had hoped to go together to India, the only GCMC overseas mission field at the time, but the mission board had enough money to send only one, and Anna Braun was chosen.

Remaining stateside, Miller met Henry Brown from Mountain Lake. He was a traveling Mennonite evangelist but also felt a call for foreign missionary work. Maria and Henry started courting and began searching for a mission field. They wanted to go with the GCMC mission board but kept finding themselves rebuffed. First there were too many applicants for service and not enough money. Then an invitation to a mission board meeting was lost in the mail, so they didn't get appointed again. Some of their supporters accused the board of passing over the couple because Henry didn't attend Bethel but rather a Baptist school in New York. Because of the condition of the mission board's coffers, Brown took it upon himself to raise funds while itinerating with the purpose of turning the money over to the mission board. But he was chastised by the board for unauthorized fund raising and instructed to return all the money.

So Maria and Henry finally made their own plans. They originally assumed the GCMC mission board would send them to India, but they then realized they didn't have to go with a Mennonite organization or to India. Brown was thinking about Sudan with an interdenominational mission agency. Miller suggested China, influenced at least to some extent by cousin Schrag. Marian and Henry decided to go to China independently but with good support from their home communities. On October 31, 1909, Maria was commissioned at the North Church in the morning, married Henry in the afternoon, then had a farewell service in the evening. The newlyweds arrived in China in December.

Jonathan and Louise Schrag hosted the Browns their first year in the country. It is unknown why they not join Bartel mission, although the Maria and Henry still harbored hopes of coming under the GCMC mission board. They struck out on their own and in 1914 finally realized their goal when they were brought into the GCMC fold.

Kansas colleagues

While denizens of South Dakota's Northern Kingdom were the first Schweitzers on the mission field, they would soon be joined by a couple of Kansans. Edmund G. Kaufman from Eden Mennonite Church, Moundridge, also felt a call to church work as a vocation. One influence was Maria Miller Brown, a cousin to Kaufman's father and whom the family helped support. Ed maintained correspondence with Henry while a Bethel student, which further strengthened his desire to serve. Ed's maternal and more conservative grandfather Jacob Schrag tried to convince Ed to go with the Bartel mission. He failed, and Ed and his wife, Hazel Dester Kaufman from Oklahoma, went to China in 1918 under the GCMC.

The Schweitzer presence in China was bolstered in 1919 with the arrival of Sam and Pauline Miller Goering. He was from Hopefield Mennonite Church, Moundridge, and she was a sister of Maria Miller Brown, from the North Church in South Dakota. In 1919, 14 missionaries in China under the GCMC mission board, four of whom were Swiss Volhynians and related to each other: the Goerings, Maria Miller Brown and E.G. Kaufman.

Of course, their arrival in China was just the beginning of their stories. Jonathan J. Schrag died 1930 of meningitis in Jerusalem on way back to the United States from China on furlough. He was 56. It took two months for his body to arrive in Freeman, where the funeral was held at the North Church. More than 5,000 people attended, most of them listening to the service outside on speakers. Jonathan's widow, Louise Stark Schrag, returned to China alone. She was interned by the Japanese during World War II and finally forced to give up her work in 1951. She retired to Freeman, where she died in 1952.

Maria Miller Brown and her two children evacuated the country in 1926 amid threats of civil war, while Henry stayed behind. They were reunited a year later. In 1937, the Japanese invaded China and in 1941 women and children were encouraged to evacuate. The Browns' youngest child, Roland, went to live with his aunt and uncle Pauline and Sam Goering in Kansas, and Maria stayed with Henry. (The Browns' older daughter, Jessie, was already living in the United States.) The Browns were interned by the Japanese until 1943, when they were part of a prisoner exchange and returned to the United States. They went back to China in 1946. But as Communist control was tightening, they left the country in 1949 and settled in Freeman.

The Kaufmans missed what the Browns experienced. Ed and Hazel were already on furlough when the 1926 evacuation occurred and never returned. The Kaufmans officially resigned from the China mission field in 1931, in part because the country was in political and social turmoil and in part because the Mennonite mission was beset by theological differences. Ed entered a career of academia and eventually became Bethel president.

Sam and Pauline Miller Goering returned to the United States in 1935 and settled in Newton. Sam's work record would go on to include serving as Bethel's business manager and Mennonite Central Committee's relief director in Asia and Europe during World War II. Sam was killed in an auto accident in 1962, and his funeral service was conducted at Bethel College Mennonite Church by Russell Mast, who had also officiated Louise Schrag's funeral in the North Church ten years earlier.

Comparatively speaking, the China chapter of Mennonite history has been pretty short, as the GCMC mission program there closed in 1951, due to the turmoil of World War II and the Communists ascendancy. But it's a notable story. Two well-known Chinese church members were Stephen Wang and James Liu, who in the early 1930s studied at Bluffton (Ohio) College and at Bethel, thanks to E.G. Kaufman, who taught at Bluffton before going to Bethel in 1931. Wang's father was one of the preachers at the Browns' mission while it was still independent, and Wang's mother was baptized by Henry Brown. Liu's father worked at the GCMC mission and eventually converted to Christianity.

After discontinuing work in China, the GCMC mission board turned to Taiwan in the 1950s, having inherited MCC's post-war program on the island. Roland Brown, son of Maria and Henry, and his wife, Sophie, spent four decades in Taiwan, where Roland, a physician, was the founder and driving force in the development of Mennonite Christian Hospital, an important and well respected provider of medical services. Roland, now living in North Newton, was honored by Taiwan's president for his work.

Schweitzers may be a small part of the kingdom, at least numerically. But just as there are no unimportant parts of the body, as Paul tells us, there are no unimportant parts of God's kingdom. Swiss-Volhynians have joined with other parts, large and small, to do kingdom work.