

Conrad L. Kanagy, Tilahun Beyene, and Richard Showalter. *Winds of the Spirit: A Profile of Anabaptist Churches in the Global South*. Harrisonburg, Waterloo: Herald Press, 2012. 260 pp. Book review by Robert Martens

Christianity is a faith that was born in Africa and Asia, and which, in our own lifetimes, has decided to go home. (Foreword, Philip Jenkins, 11)

In the 1980s, Conrad Kanagy was living among Quichua peasants in the highlands of Ecuador. Curious about their mass conversion to evangelical Christianity which had occurred in the 1960s, he questioned them on it, and what he learned surprised him. Many contemporary scholars have regarded evangelical forces as the imposition of Western values. On the contrary, Kanagy writes, the Quichua had abandoned the Catholic Church which only visited them on such major occasions as marriage or death, and had made a rational choice to form their own evangelical community oriented church. The Protestant model, more egalitarian and more concerned with economic development, better matched what the Quichua needed. Kanagy concludes: "Far from being victims of neocolonialism, they were savvy religious entrepreneurs who, in coming to Christ, had found spiritual freedom, retained their cultural identity, and strengthened their community autonomy. Far from being Marx's 'opiate of the masses,' religious conversion became for the Quichua an 'engine of hope'" (19).

Winds of the Spirit is a survey and study of the rapidly expanding Anabaptist* churches of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, or what the authors call the Global South. This well researched profile is almost unique; previous studies have been based primarily on membership lists, and consequently information so far on Global South churches has been meagre. The authors speculate that Western scholars, believing that Christianity would wither away and was no longer worth studying, have largely ignored the churches south of the equator. *Winds of the Spirit* has a limited scope, confining its inquiry to twelve churches (including, for comparison, one northern one, Lancaster Mennonite) that are all connected with Eastern Mennonite Mission. Even with those limitations, however, the profile that emerges is an eye opener.

The churches of the Global North, that is, North America and Europe, are the result of several thousand years of history, and are showing signs of age. Their membership is getting older, their numbers have generally plateaued or are in decline, and they have little sense of evangelizing to encourage their own growth. Meanwhile, the churches of the Global South are expanding at an unprecedented rate, appeal to the young as well as the old, and seem bursting with a passion for their communities and the world. The authors of *Winds of the Spirit* suggest that Global South churches benefit by not having the historical baggage of those in the north. First, they have "leapfrogged" the formalized Christendom of the West that began when the emperor Constantine incorporated Christianity into the structures of the Roman Empire. Official Christendom, led by the Vatican, then persisted for centuries. Churches in the Global South, however, never experienced Christendom, and are more like the Early Church, fluid, self-sustaining, and localized. Second, the Global South did not live through the Enlightenment period of Europe, when individual freedoms and a free economy became the norm. Consequently, they are non-individualistic, nonrational, and charismatic; religion is not "privatized". Third, the Global South did not experience the divisiveness of North American denominationalism, and value their local congregations far more than any denominational structure.

What, then, do Anabaptist churches of the Global South, so different from ours, look like? The authors propose that they are "contextualized", that is, adapted to local conditions, so that congregations may often differ greatly from each other. This happened, they suggest, only *after* Western missionaries left the area, and the membership was free to create its own local church structures. Global South churches, although a few are urbanized, are mostly rural, impoverished, and uneducated; the church becomes a centre of community self-support and economic advancement. Beliefs are overwhelmingly orthodox. Typically, alcohol, tobacco, divorce, premarital sex, and homosexuality are strongly condemned. On the other hand, in Global South churches, belief and behaviour are regarded as natural partners, and service to the community, such as work with HIV sufferers, is paramount. Quite naturally, as these churches draw their membership from the marginalized, there is an eager commitment to social justice. For this reason, the Old Testament, with its stories of liberation, is strongly prized. Global South churches affirm that accepting the Christian life should lead to prosperity and health; paradoxically, they do this in complete awareness of their current poverty. Finally, and perhaps most importantly to the authors of this study, Global South churches have embraced Pentecostalism, with charismatic services, healings, and speaking in tongues. Despite the fact that many Mennonites in the North feel uncomfortable with this, the authors of *Winds of the Spirit* suggest that this Pentecostalism is in fact much closer to original Anabaptism than are North American churches today.

This brings us to the central thesis of this study. According to general sociological theory in the West, institutions begin with charismatic individuals, but in time lose their energy, become more and more structured, and finally end up imprisoned in bureaucracy, "an iron cage of rationality" (72). At that point, depleted of energy, they plateau, decline, and eventually die. This, the authors say, may quite possibly happen to Global South churches as they age.

But not necessarily so. Perhaps the churches of the South possess a more durable energy than those of the North. Perhaps, as the authors write, the Anabaptist Vision as expressed by Harold Bender in 1944 emphasized social values that were acceptable to a Western educated middle class, and inexcusably ignored the pietistic and mystical aspects of early Anabaptism, "the heart religion of renewal movements" (180). In following Bender's one-sided vision, they say, North American and European churches may have become victims of the "iron cage of rationality". Further, the authors agree that liberation theology, intended to empower the poor through Jesus' prophetic teachings, was a creation of Western rationalist elites that condescendingly assumed the marginalized of the "Third World" are helpless on their own. The new "Pentecostalist Vision" of the South appeals to an individual, emotional, charismatic conversion, but in the context of social commitment and of economic mobility. Members of Global South churches learn entrepreneurial skills together, with a more egalitarian standpoint than is common in the North, and this may have a more long lasting impact than the social and political work of liberation theology. The Anabaptist Pentecostalist Vision brims with energy and confidence; it does not believe it is helpless; and its fluidity, spontaneity, and lack of hierarchy may just spare the Global South the doom of the "iron cage". It is a provocative thesis. As Mennonite membership stagnates in the Global North, will the Global South in fact, as the authors suggest, have the last word?

* The term "Anabaptist" is used far more commonly than "Mennonite" in the Global South.

Winds of the Spirit can be borrowed from the MHS library, or ordered from a local bookstore or online from Herald Press.