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Who is an Apostle?

“...How can people have faith in the Lord and ask him to save them, if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear, unless someone tells them? And how can anyone tell them without being sent by the Lord? The Scriptures say it is a beautiful sight to see even the feet of someone coming to preach the good news.” (Romans 10:14-15)

When I arrived in Korea 15 years ago, a new culture shaped the way I looked at things. I discovered that I needed a title so people would know who I was, what I did, and how to relate to me. Despite futile attempts to suggest that my existing name was sufficient, I was dubbed a “son-gyo-sa,” a missionary— an apostle.

To this day, many of my Korean friends address me as “son-gyo-sa,” and I still struggle with it. In part, because I had previously understand personhood more by name than by title, but even more so because the shoes of an apostle seem awfully big to fill.

I have continued to reflect on the identity bestowed upon me. Paul—who was also an apostle—wrote, “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...” (Eph. 4:11-12).

In our understanding of church today, we readily identify pastors and teachers but prophets and evangelists are less recognizable. Perhaps least familiar are apostles. Who are they? Where are they? What does an apostle look like in today’s church?

As obscure as apostles may be, they are present among us as gifts from Christ—just like teachers, pastors, prophets and evangelists—to equip God’s people for serving God’s mission and for building the body of Christ. Apostles come in many different forms. I know a physician, a contractor, a granite countertop specialist, a Ph.D. student, an electrician, a Harley Davidson motorcycle salesperson, a biblical scholar, a lawyer, a doula, a university professor, and others whom I would consider apostles. They include men and women, young and old, people in Canada and people beyond Canada, and they have several characteristics in common.

Call. Apostles have a sense that they are “called to be sent” from the church, and to bring others into the church. Recently, I told a sister in my church that I considered her an apostle in our congregation. And she nodded: “I know.”

Catalyst. Apostles are able to attract and mobilize individuals to envision and engage in what mission might look like. A Mennonite pastor told me the story of an after school program initiated by one woman in the congregation. Her idea inspired the congregation and soon more than 20 people had signed up to help.

Connect. Like Paul, apostles have the desire and ability to connect diverse communities, from bringing together congregations from different locales and engaging marginalized people or groups, to connecting the world and the church.

Communicate. Apostles are blessed with the ability to creatively communicate God’s love in word and deed. Whether it involves sharing cookies, offering prayer, being a good listener, or sharing one’s own experience of God and the faith community, apostles actively engage the world around them.

Christ centred. Jesus was the original apostle, the “sent one.” Apostles are shaped and inspired by Jesus’ words, his deeds, his way of life, his death and his resurrection, all expressed through the shared table and the members of his body, the church.

May we look for, bless and affirm the apostles Christ has given us, and may we fully engage them in the life of the church both near and far. May we also be willing to be sent ones.

Tim enjoys connecting with congregations, mission workers, and with international church representatives. He has lived and served in Brazil and Panama and was Director of the Korea Anabaptist Center in Seoul prior to becoming the Executive Director of International Ministries for Mennonite Church Canada Witness. Currently Executive Minister, Witness, Tim gives leadership to a staff team that focuses on International Ministries and Indigenous Relations. Tim is interested in sharing stories, pictures and challenges about what God is doing in Canada and around the world. He is available to speak in English, Korean, Portuguese or Spanish.