

Johannes Megapolensis: Pioneer Reformed Missionary to the Mohawks

By Wes Bredenhof

INTRODUCTION

It is often claimed that the churches tracing their lineage directly to the Reformation have been lacking in missionary motivation and action, particularly in earlier times. Norman Thomas, for instance, claims that “no great missionary impulse” resulted from the theology of the Reformation.¹ Such a claim is commonly found among modern day missiologists and church historians.² However, the historical record bears out plainly that the Reformed churches of the continent were both aware of the mission task and faithful in its execution. Further, we ought to note that this was long before the time of William Carey and the dawn of the so-called age of missions.

The Geneva mission work in Brazil is usually the first witness called to the stand and this is understandable since it does stand out in the Reformation era. However, we should not think that Reformed missions began or ended there. Scott H. Hendrix has pointed out that the Reformation itself can be considered a mission-oriented movement—at the very least, the Reformers regarded themselves as missionaries in some sense.³ Moving on from the Reformation, one might be led to think from the histories of mission that any missionary zeal disappeared with the first or second generation of Reformers. For example, Stephen Neill makes no mention of the fact that the Dutch Reformed were involved with mission work in North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴ From Neill it would appear that no Protestant mission work was done among native peoples in the early days apart from that of John Eliot and David Brainerd. However, this is simply not the case. The Reformed churches in the Netherlands sent out ministers with the dual task of pastoring colonialists and discipling native peoples. This task took place in the context of a cooperative

arrangement between the Reformed Church and the Dutch West India Company.

The West India Company had been founded in 1621 partly with the intent of establishing colonies in North America and so providing a base from which to engage in fur trade with the indigenous peoples. During this time the state exerted a large amount of control over the Reformed Church. In the North American context, the West India Company effectively took the place of the state and so it was assumed that the Company would take care of certain religious matters as well.⁵

Thus it happened that the churches would select ministers and teachers for the colonies, but the financial support for these would come from the Company. It was on these terms that on March 28, 1624, the Directors

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1. *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity*, ed. Norman E. Thomas (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995) 32.

2. For a recent example, see A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 120–121.

3. Scott H. Hendrix, *Recultivating the Vineyard: The Reformation Agendas of Christianization* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), *passim*. Cf. Fred. H. Klooster, “Missions – the Heidelberg Catechism and Calvin,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 7.2 (November 1972): 187. “... the Reformation deserves to be called one of the greatest home missionary projects of all history.”

4. Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (New York: Penguin, 1964). The same has to be said for Ruth A. Tucker’s *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

5. Charles E. Corwin, “Efforts of the Dutch-American Colonial Pastors for the Conversion of the Indians,” *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 12.4 (October 1925), 228.

of the Company passed a number of rules concerning the governance of the new settlement in New Netherland (an area which today includes much of New York state and parts of neighboring states). The second rule is particularly interesting. It reads as follows:

Within their territory they shall only worship according to the true Reformed religion, as it is done within this country at present, and by a good Christian life they shall try to attract the Indians and other blind persons to the knowledge of God and his Word, without, however, committing any religious persecution, but freedom of conscience shall be left to every one (*Efforts of the Dutch-American Colonial Pastors*, 228–229).

From this it is clear that the colonists as a collective entity had a missionary or evangelistic calling and intent, even if this was only in terms of lifestyle. Further, it should be noted that while the Company's many devoutly Reformed backers insisted on facilitating the spread of the gospel, this principle on the home front often met with passive resistance from the front line merchants and traders overseas. For those on the ground, everything was subordinate to business and financial interests.⁶

The head office of the West India Company was within the region of Classis Amsterdam, so it happened that this Classis managed the pastoral work in New Netherland, including whatever mission work was being done. They did this through a committee, *Deputati ad Res Externas*. So, in a sense, this committee became the foreign mission board of the Netherlands Reformed Church, at least insofar as it pertained to North America (*Efforts of the Dutch-American Colonial Pastors*, 229).

The first minister to arrive in New Netherland was Jonas Michaelius (1584–?), a cousin of the better-known professor at Dordrecht, John Michaelius.⁷ Our Michaelius was theologically oriented to the classical side of the Reformed church, rather than the *Nadere Reformatie* or Dutch Puritanism.⁸ After serving for some time in the Netherlands, Michaelius went overseas in 1624 as a

chaplain for a naval expedition against the Portuguese in Brazil. In 1627 he returned to the Netherlands and it was at this point that the West India Company called him to serve as a pastor on Manhattan in New Netherland. With his wife and two children, Michaelius made the treacherous journey on January 24, 1628.

Within seven weeks his wife was dead and the Michaelius family fell on hard times. For almost a year the family had to live on stale supplies from the ship. In spite of these difficulties, Michaelius carried out the duties of his calling. His task was first of all to minister to the colonists, but he was also mandated to give attention to the native peoples of the area. He did this with zeal and great interest. It is worthwhile to consider his perception of the native inhabitants. In a letter to Adrian Smoutius, a pastor in Amsterdam, we find the following remarks:

As to the natives of this country, I find them entirely savage and wild, strangers to all decency, yea, uncivil and stupid as garden poles, proficient in all wickedness and godlessness; devilish men, who serve nobody but the devil.... They are as thievish and treacherous as they are tall; and in cruelty they are altogether inhuman, more than barbarous, far exceeding the Africans.⁹

Nevertheless, in spite of this very negative evaluation (and it does go on and on), Michaelius remained concerned for their salvation. Being vexed himself, he asks the question at one point in the letter: "Now by what means are we to make a salutary breach for the salvation of this people?" (*Ecclesiastical Records*, Volume 1, 58).

He was frustrated and appears to have had little, if any success, in his missionary efforts. For this reason, he reached the conclusion that "It would be well then to leave the parents as they are, and begin with the children who are still young. So be it. But they ought to be separated from their parents; yea, from their whole nation." (*Ecclesiastical Records*, 60). This was not accomplished during the lifetime of Michaelius (nor soon thereafter), but we do find here the seeds of later developments, particularly with respect to residential schools. That aside, Michaelius was only in New Netherland for a period of four years. He then returned to the Netherlands and seems to fall out of sight.

John Backerus succeeded Michaelius in the period 1647–1649, but he does not appear to have done any work among the native people (*Efforts of the Dutch-American Colonial Pastors*, 233). Several years before this, however, we find the man who would be called "the chief apostle to the Indians under the Dutch regime."

6. Donna Merwick, *The Shame and Sorrow: Dutch-Amerindian Encounters in New Netherland* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006) 117.

7. Unless otherwise noted, all the biographical information on Jonas Michaelius is drawn from Charles E. Corwin, "The First Dutch Minister in America," *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 12.3 (April 1925): 144ff.

8. Leendert Jan Joosse, *Geloof in de Nieuwe Wereld: Ontmoeting met Afrikanen en Indianen (1600–1700)* (Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 2008) 239.

9. State of New York, *Ecclesiastical Records of the State of New York*, vol. 1 (Albany: James B. Lyon, 1901) 56–57.

(*Efforts*, 233). That man was Johannes Megapolensis and it is his life and work that we now proceed to survey.

A BRIEF LIFE OF JOHANNES MEGAPOLENSIS

Megapolensis was born to Roman Catholic parents in 1603 in Koedijk, a town in the Dutch province of North Holland. It appears likely that the original form of his surname was Van Meckelenburg, although Grootstadt is also a possibility (depending on whether his family originates from Germany or the Lowlands).¹⁰ At some point he hellenized the surname to Megapolensis, following the example of an uncle who was also a Reformed pastor. It was this same uncle, also named Johannes Megapolensis, who appears to have been instrumental in his conversion from Roman Catholicism to the Reformed faith. This took place when he was 23 and it resulted in his parents literally disowning him (*Ecclesiastical Records*, 602).

We know little about the years preceding or immediately following this event. All we know is that he decided to become a Reformed minister and thus in 1634, we find him accepting a call to the church at Wieringerwaard, just north of Alkmaar. Like Michaelius, he was more oriented to the classic orthodoxy of the Reformed church rather than the pietistic side (Joosse, 252). He remained in Wieringerwaard for four years and then also served churches at Schoorl and Bergen, also near Alkmaar. Sometime during this time period, he also married Machtelt Steengen, the stepdaughter of his uncle, Johannes Megapolensis, Sr. Together with his wife, the younger Megapolensis raised four children: three sons and one daughter.

In 1642, Megapolensis was called to serve in the colony of New Netherland. Having been honourably discharged by Classis Alkmaar, Megapolensis and his family set sail for New Netherland on June 3, 1642, sailing on the ship *De Houttuyn*. They arrived on August 4.¹¹ Megapolensis had agreed to serve as a pastor in a settlement being developed by a diamond merchant and landowner from Amsterdam, Kiliaen Van Rensselaer. Van Rensselaer, under the patroon system, had received a large grant of land in the area of present-day Albany, New York. This patroonship eventually consisted of over 700,000 acres and was known as Rensselaerswyck. Under the patroon system, Van Rensselaer was given certain quasi-feudal rights and privileges with respect to the colonists, and he was also responsible for their spiritual well being. Thus Van Rensselaer was looking for a minister and heard of Megapolensis and his willingness to go overseas. The patroon then put in a request with

Classis Amsterdam and asked them to make the necessary arrangements. So, after conferring with Megapolensis, the Classis brought the two men together and on April 6, 1642, they entered into an agreement.¹²

According to this contract, Megapolensis was going to serve the settlement at Rensselaerswyck for a six-year period, receiving a salary from the patroon. The contract provided a pension for his wife and family in case of death and was otherwise fairly generous. Moreover, the contract also stipulated that Megapolensis was to work “for the edifying improvement of the inhabitants and the Indians.” (*Ecclesiastical Records*, 144). Megapolensis received a similar charge from Classis Amsterdam. In a letter to the Consistory of New Amsterdam (which resembles in many ways an attestation), we read this concerning Megapolensis:

[with Johannes Megapolensis] Rev. Bogardus and his entire Consistory are admonished and exhorted to hold correspondence and communion, so far at least as the circumstances permit; and thus with united hands to proclaim the Word of the Lord, not only among our own nationality, but also among the blind heathen in America. Thus we will all heartily rejoice that the Kingdom of Christ Jesus is more widely extended there. May the Lord bless the labours of both these ministers abundantly, strengthen them by the power of the Holy Ghost, and grant that they may faithfully use their talents to the magnifying of His Holy Name, to the extension of the kingdom of our Saviour Christ, and to the conversion and salvation of men (*Ecclesiastical Records*, 151).

Thus, as Michaelius before him, Megapolensis was sent out with two functions: pastor and missionary.

Having been thus sent out, Megapolensis and his family arrived at New Amsterdam. Seventeen other colonists accompanied them who were likewise bound for Rensselaerswyck. Megapolensis quickly made the journey northward up the Hudson River and preached his first sermon in his new congregation on August 17. This worship service was held in a storehouse, since a church building had not yet been constructed. In fact,

10. Unless otherwise noted, most of the biographical information here was gleaned from Gerald Francis DeJong, “Dominie Johannes Megapolensis: Minister to New Netherland,” *The New York Historical Society Quarterly* 52.1 (January 1968): 7–47.

11. *Ecclesiastical Records*, 152–153. Joosse, 255.

12. “Dominie Johannes Megapolensis,” 9. There is a discrepancy between DeJong and the copy of the agreement found in *Ecclesiastical Records* (143–145). The latter states that the contract was signed on March 6, not April 6. I have not been able to determine which is correct.

during the first several years of Megapolensis' ministry in Rensselaerswyck, the services appear to have been held in his house. Eventually, however, the storehouse was remodeled into a church building.

The congregation in this place was a varied group. Most were of Dutch ancestry, though apparently there were also Scandinavians, Germans, and English mixed in. Some local native people occasionally attended the worship services and most likely some black slaves as well. Most of the colonists were farmers or artisans by trade. They seem to have been a rather lawless and uninhibited group. Many of them refused to pay their tithes to the patroon (as part of the patroon system) and many were given to excessive drinking and dishonesty. At one point, Megapolensis complained that many of the male colonists were fornicating with the local native women. Large numbers of inhabitants in the settlement were fined or reprimanded for stealing, brawling, blasphemy and other crimes. Megapolensis clearly had his hands full.

Besides his regular work of preaching and pastoring, Megapolensis was required to carry out other duties at Rensselaerswyck. These duties "included the witnessing of deeds and contracts, serving as a special advisor to various magistrates of the colony, and acting as an arbiter of disputes." Over top of all this, he also worked zealously among the Mohawk people of the area. In this he was strongly supported and encouraged by Kiliaen Van Rensselaer. In one of the patroon's letters to Megapolensis we read:

We did not fail to join our daily prayers with yours, nor do we fail to continue therein, hoping that as the Lord our God has been your leader and given you a happy and speedy voyage, he will also bless the purpose which I thereby have in mind, extending His blessing over yourself, your wife and family, especially to make your reverence a blessed instrument in His service to establish there a church and community both among the Christians and the blind heathen; for the Christians, that they may see the day of their holy baptism and confession and practise righteousness more and more; for the heathen who live among and alongside us, that their stony hearts may be softened, their blind eyes opened

13. *Van Rensselaer Bowier Manuscripts Being the Letters of Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, 1630–1643*, ed. and trans. A.J.F. Van Laer (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1908) 645.

14. According to Schalkwijk, this catechism was (also?) intended for use among the Mohawks. Cf. F.L. Schalkwijk, *The Reformed Church in Dutch Brazil (1630–1654)* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 1986) 227.

and their deaf ears unstopped by the power of the Holy Ghost, in order that they may see and understand the wonders of His law, recognize their sins and His grace and that they may be brought to the fold of Jesus Christ and go among other heathen bringing forth righteous fruits of confession and gratitude. Amen.¹³

We will look at this work in more detail momentarily.

Megapolensis worked for the six years that he had initially agreed upon. Shortly before the six years were up, he made plans to return to the Netherlands. It is uncertain as to why he desired to return, but in any case he was so eager that he sent his wife and children on before him. He had requested Classis Amsterdam to release him from his duties, but when they took their time, Mrs. Megapolensis appeared before the committee *Deputati ad Res Indicas* and asked them to speed up the process. By this point, Megapolensis had been in New Netherland for over seven years. The decision was finally made on March 29, 1649 and Megapolensis was honourably released from his duties at Rensselaerswyck (*Ecclesiastical Records*, 249).

However, it is not until August of 1649 that we find Megapolensis in New Amsterdam preparing to board a ship for the long journey home. It was not to be. The magistrates of New Amsterdam persuaded Megapolensis to remain in New Netherland. They argued, "if he were to leave, there would be no Reformed minister in all New Netherland and that someone was needed to baptize the children, who at New Amsterdam alone sometimes numbered four at a single presentation." It is intriguing that the argument appears to have centered on the administration of baptism, rather than the preaching of the Word. At any rate, Megapolensis was convinced by their arguments and decided to stay and become pastor of the church at New Amsterdam. Soon afterwards his family joined him once again and he settled into life in his new parish.

The challenges of this new pastorate were in some ways greater than those of his previous. The inhabitants of New Amsterdam were even more badly behaved than those of Rensselaerswyck. Drunkenness was a serious problem, as was brawling. Brandy shops and beer houses were said to make up a quarter of the town.

During his pastorate in New Amsterdam, Megapolensis gave much attention to furthering the spiritual education of the youth. To that end, he had also written a catechetical book entitled, "Examination and Confession for the Benefit of Those Who Are Inclined to Approach the Table of the Lord."¹⁴ A copy of this catechism was submitted to Classis Amsterdam in 1651 with the

suggestion that it receive widespread use in the colonies of New Netherland and Brazil. The Classis did not accede to this request. In fact, they were not at all impressed: "The Assembly judges that it would be more edifying to send thither instead a goodly number of the Netherland catechisms, and the Compendiums of the same." (*Ecclesiastical Records*, 287). The Classis was, of course, referring to the Heidelberg Catechism and the Compendium of that catechism prepared by Herman Faulkelius. The matter came up again five years later, in 1656, and the reply of the Classis was the same. It was inadvisable to print and use such a catechism. The reason given was this:

Such a course would war against the general order and usage of our church, both in this country and in distant churches, planted by and dependent on us. In these churches no other catechisms besides the Heidelberg and the Compendium of the same, called the Short Inquiry, is in use in the catechetical sermons, catechetical classes and schools. Dear brethren, the general Formula, the doctrines which are good, tried and established by long practice...should not be lightly changed (*Ecclesiastical Records*, 349).

Despite this negative judgment, it appears that the catechism *was* published and it was quite likely used in New Amsterdam and elsewhere in the colony.

During this ministry at New Amsterdam, Megapolensis also continued his work among the local native peoples. This will be discussed further momentarily. For now, let it suffice to mention that these efforts were not as successful as those previous.

Megapolensis played a significant role in efforts among the colonists to prohibit the right of public worship to such groups as the Lutherans and the Mennonites. Megapolensis was one of the most outspoken in the colony on this issue, coming down on the side of prohibition rather than tolerance. However, as more and more Jews, and especially Quakers, arrived in New Amsterdam, the Reformed ministers began to feel more and more pressure. At certain points they were even compelled to compromise. The West India Company, for instance, pressured the ministers into changing the liturgical form for baptism to suit the Lutherans. If the change was not made, the Company threatened to allow the Lutherans their own church.

However, all of this became moot when, on August 26, 1664, four British warships commanded by Richard Nicolls appeared in the bay off New Amsterdam. The British had long desired to possess these regions. Some

of the leaders of the colony were intent on fighting to the bitter end, but the ministers, including Megapolensis, advised surrender.

This advice was personally ruinous for Megapolensis. Directly because of it, the West India Company refused to give him his salary (both arrears and what he was presently owed). He appealed to Classis Amsterdam for assistance but his request was rejected until he "shall give further satisfaction concerning the events of the surrender of New Netherland to the English." This was never forthcoming and the end result was that he carried out the last years of his ministry in poverty since the members of the churches could not be persuaded that it was their responsibility to provide for their pastors.

Johannes Megapolensis died in the Lord in January of 1670, though we do not know the exact date. His wife survived him by several years and a son, Samuel Megapolensis, ministered for several years in New Netherland before returning to the Netherlands. In the end, Johannes Megapolensis served 28 years in New Netherland. Though he influenced the spiritual life of the congregations he served, it is especially his work among the Mohawks that strikes our attention. It is that work which will now be more closely surveyed.

HIS WORK AMONG THE MOHAWKS

It has already been noted that Megapolensis was sent out both as a pastor and as a missionary. Over and over again, the extant primary documents emphasize this dual task. Having looked at his pastoral work and its challenges in some detail, we will now look closer at his missionary efforts.

Right from the beginning of his days in Rensselaerswyck, Megapolensis made efforts to learn the Mohawk language. This is evident in a letter written to a friend in 1644. This letter, published during his lifetime without his consent, is the most important primary source for our knowledge of Megapolensis and his missionary work. Some have also regarded this letter as a source of valuable information about the 17th century Mohawk people. However, the reality is that it may say more about Megapolensis than the Mohawks. Megapolensis remarked about his efforts to learn the language are particularly revealing:

This nation has a very difficult language and it costs me great pains to learn it, so as to be able to speak and preach in it fluently... I am making a vocabulary of the Mahakuaas' [Mohawks'] language, and when I am among them I ask them how things are called; but as

they are very stupid, I sometimes cannot make them understand what I want.¹⁵

Rather than seeing the problem as his own, Megapolensis quickly attributed his problems in learning the language to the collective intelligence of the Mohawk people. Needless to say, modern day Mohawks read this with indignation! At any rate, Megapolensis did make efforts to learn the language, though it is not altogether certain whether, as some have claimed, he was able to at some point preach fluently in Mohawk (DeJong, 45). Nevertheless, the fact that he made the effort reveals that he took seriously his responsibility to bring the Christian faith to those who had never heard.

Megapolensis' zeal for the gospel and ability in the Mohawk language are further confirmed in a letter he wrote in Latin to Simon Le Moyne, a French Jesuit missionary. Towards the end of this letter, in a long rambling sentence, Megapolensis upbraids Le Moyne for his failure to preach the Biblical good news to the Mohawks:

For although for twenty years as you have told me, you have traversed the regions of America, and have wandered about in them; have lived among the savages [Latin: *barbaros*], and have baptized very many of them, or rather profaned baptism; since in giving it to non-believers, and to men in the agonies of death, who were not possessed of any proper knowledge of the true God and Saviour, as I have often found out when I have spoken with such savages [*barbaros*] who have been baptized by you or those like you, and how had no knowledge whatever of Christianity, except that according to your custom, they were able to make the sign of the Cross, and to praise those idols of yours which you have in your churches; but who in other respects were thieves, whoremongers, etc. even as other barbarians [*barbaros*].¹⁶

Megapolensis claims to have conversed enough with nominally Roman Catholic Mohawks to know that their knowledge of the gospel was non-existent. If true, such communication would have required a fairly fluent grasp of the Mohawk language.

How exactly did Megapolensis carry out his missionary work as the opportunities presented themselves? From his letter, it appears that there were three particular ways this was done:

We go with them into the woods, we meet with each other, sometimes at an hour or two's walk from any houses, and think no more about it than as if we met with a Christian. They sleep by us too, in our chambers before our beds. I have had eight at once lying and sleeping upon the floor near my bed, for it is their custom to sleep simply on the bare ground, and to have only a stone or a bit of wood under their heads (*Narratives of New Netherland*, 175).

So, the missionary would go out with them into the forest, but he would also welcome them into his home. It appears that it was primarily through these two means that he became better acquainted with the Mohawks and also began to bring them the gospel. But there was also the regular preaching of the Word in a worship service that the Mohawks would occasionally attend:

When we deliver a sermon, sometimes ten or twelve of them, more or less, will attend, each having a long tobacco pipe, made by himself, in his mouth, and will stand awhile and look, and afterwards ask me what I am doing and what I want, that I stand there alone and make so many words, while none of the rest may speak (*Narratives of New Netherland*, 177–178).

Obviously these sermons were preached primarily for the benefit of the settlers and in Dutch. However, it is worth noting that Megapolensis goes on to say that he would explain the sermon to them afterwards in their own language. The Dutch preacher/missionary at this point indicated that he was preaching the law of God to his parishioners and that he would in due time “preach the same to them and come to them in their own country and castles when I am acquainted with their language.” (*Narratives of New Netherland*, 178). The fact that he was able to communicate this much at this point is quite a feat, considering that he had only been in the area for two years. There is no information available as to whether Megapolensis was able to attain his goal of travelling deeper into Mohawk country to bring the gospel in their own language.

Nevertheless, it is quite clear that the missionary was able to establish good relationships with the Mohawks. Those relationships would only have been possible on the basis of effective communication. Another element reinforcing this is found with the story of an old native woman who told Megapolensis the Mohawk creation narrative. The story involves a pregnant woman falling down from heaven, and having a tortoise take her on its back. As the woman sat upon the tortoise, she “groped

15. *Narratives of New Netherland 1609–1664*, ed. J. Franklin Jameson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909) 172.

16. *Reply of Rev. Johannes Megapolensis to a Letter of Father Simon Le Moyne* (New York: the Collegiate Church, 1907) 21.

with her hands in the water, and scraped together some of the earth, whence it finally happened that the earth was raised above the water.” (*Narratives of New Netherland*, 178). While Megapolensis notes this creation narrative, he does not give any indication whether he used this as a point of contact in his discussions with the Mohawks. It was potentially such a point of contact, but whether it was actually capitalized upon must remain a matter of speculation.¹⁷ However, contemporary retellings of the Mohawk creation narrative illustrate that Megapolensis did correctly report the basic elements of the story which confirms that effective communication appears to have been established.

This also becomes evident in the role which Megapolensis played in securing the freedom of certain Europeans who had been captured by the Mohawks. The example most often brought forward is that of Isaac Jogues, a French Jesuit missionary. Jogues was working among the native peoples south of Lake Huron. While returning from Quebec in the summer of 1642, Jogues was captured by several Mohawks and taken to present-day upstate New York. While there he was subjected to various forms of torture, including have parts of his fingers chewed off. Eventually, however, he began receiving kinder treatment. His captors would take him on visits to Rensselaerswyck and other places. On one such visit he had contact with Megapolensis. As a result of French hostility, the Mohawks were preparing to kill Jogues. Through his knowledge of the language, Megapolensis became aware of this fact and advised Jogues to escape. The Dutch assisted Jogues in his successful escape, although this greatly aroused the wrath of the Mohawks. Eventually, however, Megapolensis and the other settlers managed to appease the Mohawks. Jogues returned to France for a time and then came back to North America where he was later recaptured by the Mohawks and killed (DeJong, 20–21).

Thus it is clear that Megapolensis had a good grasp of the Mohawk language and, for his time, a good understanding of Mohawk culture. Did all this result in an effective communication of the Gospel message? Care is required when answering this question since the definition of “effective” can vary. For our purposes, we will enquire as to what sorts of positive results *appeared* from his work among the Mohawks.

The first thing we can note is the hesitancy among the Mohawks to accept the gospel message because of perceived hypocrisy among the settlers who claimed to be Christians. When Megapolensis would tell them that he was admonishing the settlers in his sermons not to

steal, commit lewdness, get drunk, commit murder and so on, then the Mohawks would respond: “Why do so many Christians do these things?” (*Narratives of New Netherland*, 178). From Megapolensis’ letter, it appears that the Mohawks thought it good to say these things, but they could not understand why it made no difference in the lives of those who heard it. Of course, this is a classic example of *ad hominem* reasoning, but one not lacking some validity. Hypocritical believers (including missionaries) on a mission field can do much damage to missionary efforts to bring gospel truths to unbelievers.

However, in this instance, the damage done may not have been too severe. Corwin relates that thirty Mohawks were admitted to church membership after being carefully examined (*Efforts of the Dutch-American Colonial Pastors*, 234). Corwin cites no primary source for this information, nor does he tell us whether these members remained until death. Others have questioned this assertion, especially on the basis of the claims of the directors of the West India Company that it is essentially impossible to convert adult native people to Christianity.¹⁸ It is true that the Company often showed a lack of concern for spiritual matters, being more interested in social control and profits. This lack of concern impacted the effectiveness of the Dutch colonial pastors/missionaries.¹⁹ The results of Megapolensis’ work are thus not entirely clear.

We find more clarity with his work in New Amsterdam among the native people of that area. The native people of the Manhattan area were far less positively disposed towards the white settlers and the message which their pastors brought. DeJong speculates, “Perhaps one reason for this was that the Indians around Manhattan Island had frequently been mistreated by the Dutch and were definitely more hostile than the Mohawks.” (DeJong, 27).

Despite this, Megapolensis still had one potential convert with whom he was working in the hope that he might become a missionary to his own people. However, in the end, Megapolensis had to write the following to Classis Amsterdam concerning this “convert”:

17. See Joosse, 315. Joosse is ambiguous: “This religious account of the origins of the world gave a point of contact [*aanknopingspunt*] in communication.” (Translation mine, WB).

18. Allen W. Trelease, *Indian Affairs in Colonial New York: The Seventeenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1960) 170. Trelease asserts, “By 1649, when he took up a pastorate in New Amsterdam, Megapolensis had almost certainly failed to convert a single Indian.”

19. Laurence M. Hauptman and Ronald G. Knapp, “Dutch-Aboriginal Interaction in New Netherland and Formosa: An Historical Geography of Empire,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 121.2 (April 29, 1977): 174.

We have had an Indian here with us for about two years. He can read and write Dutch very well. We have instructed him in the fundamental principles of our religion, and he answers publicly in church, and can repeat the Commandments. We have given him a Bible, hoping he might do some good among the Indians, but it all resulted in nothing. He took to drinking brandy, he pawned the Bible, and turned into a regular beast, doing more harm than good among the Indians (*Narratives of New Netherland*, 398–399).

So also in New Amsterdam, efforts made at mission work among the native people were not as successful as one might have hoped.

Nevertheless, seeds were sown for the future. This period (1628–1649) has been described as one of the Dutch and the Mohawks getting to know one another. The following years would be ones in which more Mohawks would come to faith and be gathered into small Reformed churches in New Netherland (Joose, 313–320). Though Megapolensis may not have seen much fruit in his lifetime, there were small successes at mission work among the Mohawks in the area surrounding present-day Albany. Godfreidus Dellius pastored at Albany and Schenectady in the period 1683–1699. Within ten years, Dellius had established a native church in the Albany area, a church which was reported to consist of some 200 attendees, of whom sixteen were full communicant members. By the end of his ministry in 1699, he had baptized at least 131 aboriginals, mostly Mohawk.²⁰ Likewise, Peter Tesschenmaeker was able to establish a smaller church of approximately 40 converts in the Schenectady area (*Efforts of the Dutch-American Colonial Pastors*, 244). Thus it was only after nearly 80 years that it was possible for churches to be established among the Mohawks of upstate New York. Megapolensis was among the pioneers and it is only regrettable that he was not able to see some of the blessing that later came upon this work.

However, were these latter-day conversions really a blessing? Or were they a sham? Any consideration of later Reformed successes among the Mohawks also

needs to consider carefully the argument of Mark Meuwese that these conversions were largely pragmatic rather than spiritual. According to Meuwese, Dutch Calvinism eventually appealed to the Mohawks “because it emphasized the written word in evangelization.”²¹ By taking over literacy, the Mohawks were better able to cope with European colonization. There were also political and military reasons that made it expedient for Mohawks to become Reformed during the days of Dellius and Tesschenmaeker. In the days of Michaelius and Megapolensis, the Mohawks were not interested in Dutch Calvinism and the Reformed Church was not all that interested in converting them. However, later political developments conspired to make the Reformed faith more attractive. Meuwese grants that some Mohawks were “drawn to Protestantism to spiritually revitalize their individual lives.” They were interested in obtaining new spiritual power in a time of upheaval (Meuwese, 127). But he does not appear to allow for genuine spiritual conversions to the Christian faith among the Mohawks of this period.

Meuwese’s approach to these issues is interesting and his thesis may well have some elements of truth to it. However, when dealing with the attitudes and motivations of Mohawks from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, there are simply no primary sources on which to base one’s assertions. While becoming literate, the Mohawks did not leave behind written records of their religious conversions and what led to them. We have secondary observations from the colonial Dutch and English, but nothing from the Mohawks themselves. Therefore, one cannot say for certain why 131 Mohawks were baptized by Dellius and received as members of the Reformed church. One can bring theories related to the social, political, military and economic circumstances, but one also cannot rule out theories related to the mysterious and wonderful work of the Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSIONS

It should be clear that the Reformed missions among native peoples in North America are not a recent development. In fact, Reformed missions to indigenous North Americans pre-date William Carey and thus invalidate the thesis that Reformation theology produced no missionary work on its own. The Reformed tradition has a long history of contact with aboriginal peoples in North America. In later times, one could think here also of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA). The CRCNA worked for many years among

20. “Efforts of the Dutch-American Colonial Pastors” 240; Daniel K. Richter, “Some of Them ... Would Always Have a Minister with Them: Mohawk Protestantism, 1683–1719,” *American Indian Quarterly* 16.4 (Autumn 1992): 471.

21. Mark Meuwese, “Dutch Calvinism and Native Americans: A Comparative Study of the Motivations for Protestant Conversion among the Tupis in Northeastern Brazil (1630–1654) and the Mohawks in Central New York (1690–1710),” in *The Spiritual Conversion of the Americas*, ed. James Muldoon (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2004) 119.

the Navaho and Zuni peoples of the American Southwest—this work culminated in the establishment of a classis consisting of the former mission churches. The Canadian Reformed Churches, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church of America have also been committed to gospel outreach among Native Americans and Canadians. While more could have been done and more remains to be done, there is a long history and it is one from which we can learn many valuable lessons.

One of those lessons has to do with the foolishness of the gospel. Allen Trelease speculates that the Mohawks were not “ready to appreciate the introspective and unadorned Calvinism offered by the Dutch Reformed Church.” (Trelease, 171). By ‘introspective’ we can understand Trelease to refer to the Reformed insistence on a religion of the ears (excepting the sacraments), rather than a religion of the eyes. The aboriginals preferred the pomp and ceremony of the Roman Catholics with their multi-faceted rituals, sacraments (and sacramentals), and symbols. In short, their preference was for a religion of the eyes. Given a choice, they would also prefer the Roman Catholic approach to baptism and church membership rather than the rigours of the Reformed. We have to say it was because the Reformed wanted to stay close to Scripture that the ‘success’ was not as great as might have been hoped. The Word was offensive—and what else can be expected? The Word cannot be compromised for the sake of results. Faithfulness to the Word was required of missionaries then and it continues to be required of missionaries today. If we are faithful to the Word in every way, neither adding or taking away, and we do not see abundant fruit, that should not be a discouragement. The Word never returns empty and Reformed missionaries do well to keep that in mind, also when things appear hopeless and seem to be going nowhere.

There are also positive lessons to be learned from the missionary experiences of Johannes Megapolensis. One of these is patience. The seeds were sown in some measure by Megapolensis, but the real harvest did not begin until many years later with men such as Dellijs and Tesschenmaeker. There is much impatience in our modern world and this has the potential to impact how we view mission work. This can be exacerbated when the mission work is done close to home, for instance, among native North Americans. We must be patient—the Lord will do his work in his time.

As we survey Megapolensis’ life and work, we also see the importance of a missionary taking the time to learn both language and culture. Although it was very

time consuming, it proved to be of great value to Megapolensis. It appears that after two years he was able to adequately communicate with the Mohawk people and also testify to the gospel message. Closely connected with language is culture. While the advent of cultural anthropology has placed more emphasis on this than in previous ages, Megapolensis did give some attention to this area as well. In today’s milieu, most North American aboriginals speak English relatively fluently, so language is no longer as much of a barrier. However, this can deceive a missionary into thinking that effective communication will be a given. Culture impacts communication in ways that we often take for granted.²² We may be speaking the same language, but the cross-cultural barrier should not be underestimated.

The gospel of our Lord Jesus must go out to the ends of the earth. Those entrusted with this treasure invariably recognize the great necessity and impulse of missions. Reformed churches around the world continue to be concerned for those lost in the darkness of sin and unbelief. Their concern, growing out of faith in Christ, unites them with Reformed believers in ages past. That concern has always born fruit of one sort or another, sometimes great, sometimes little. Could the Reformed churches in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century have done more for the native inhabitants of North America? Definitely. Could we be doing more today? Even more certainly so. ■

22. See David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991).