

THE STATE OF WORLD MISSIONS TODAY (& THE UNFINISHED TASK)

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The two Indonesian provinces of Papua and West Papua are centered on the island of New Guinea, 2000 miles east of Jakarta where we are meeting for the AMA 14th Convention. With vast area of cultural and biological diversity, these province's rainforests and mountains are inhabited by indigenous Melanesian tribes. Since the end of WWII, concerted pioneering efforts have been made to engage and evangelize the more than 250 interior tribes, the majority of which were previously untouched by the outside world.

Because roads to the island's rugged interior were non-existent (and mostly remain so today) the principle means of reaching the tribes was by small single-engine planes. Today, as back then, it is imperative that each plane be equipped with state-of-the-art navigational instruments because of the quickly changing weather conditions that can in an instant dangerously hinder visibility and flight stability. Even when "the weather closes in," trained pilots, relying on these instruments, can calculate where they are and safely navigate the terrain to either a remote outstation destination, or back to their home base.

So too we, when considering the state of missions today, can understand where we are and have confidence in navigating the mission terrain, by looking at indicators available to us. There is no time in this presentation to look at all prevailing factors, but the following are the most important to understanding where the global Church presently is, and to understanding the unfinished task that remains ahead.

WORLD CHRISTIANITY IS UNDERGOING A SEISMIC SHIFT

The Church is more global and more diverse than ever before. As recent as 1970, seventy percent (70%) of Christians in the world lived in the West. As such, it was a Church identified as "west, white, and rich." Fast-forward to today and we see the Church comprised of 70% non-western peoples. As such it is generally characterized as south, of color, and generally poor. The most accurate portrait of a Christian today is that of an African female living in subsistence living conditions. Today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in Africa, Asia and Latin America. And the largest churches in Europe consist of recently migrated majority-world believers from those areas.

The Church's trajectory took a dramatic turn in the 1970's, with the statistical center gravitating to the African nation of Mali, with projections of

it continuing to slide to southeastward toward northwestern Nigeria by 2100. Accordingly, Christianity is on its first-ever southeastern trajectory.¹

What does the seismic shift in Christianity's statistical center mean for the growing church in Asia? This reality presents Asians with increased opportunities in missions. Where the Church is firmly planted, Asian churches are larger and wealthier than ever before. God has strategically placed them close by to the majority of remaining unreached peoples. Where the church is not found in Asia, is precisely where the most unreached peoples are found as well. When it has the vision and the will, Asian churches have the unique opportunity to reach out to their unreached neighbors.

THE GLOBAL MISSIONS MOVEMENT IS LARGER AND BROADER THAN EVER BEFORE

Related to - and a logical outgrowth of the previous point - is the identity of the majority of today's missionaries. Forty years ago the majority of missionaries looked a lot like me. Two-thirds were from the North Atlantic region of the globe - Western Europe and North America. Today it's just the opposite. "Majority world missionaries" from all over the globe are dominant, making up two-thirds of the global missionary force.

Research conducted by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary reveals that many of the top missionary sending countries are now in the Global South. The United States still sends the largest number of missionaries, but per capita, several nations in the Global South are gaining quickly.

Globally, missionaries are marching forth from such countries as: Brazil, South Korea, India, South Africa, the Philippines, Mexico, China, Colombia, and Nigeria, to mention a few. And it is noteworthy that Southern missionaries go not only to other Southern countries but also to Northern countries, in a reverse direction of what was the case over much of the past two centuries.²

Many of these countries have initiated "back to" movements, taking the gospel back to the country from where it originally came. Modern transportation paths have opened the opportunity for this phenomenon. The once dominant Western colonizers are being re-evangelized by their former

1. <https://www.abwe.org/blog/world-christianity-undergoing-seismic-shift>

2. Andrew Walls. Cited in: "Seeking God's shalom in South African cities through a new global togetherness," 2017.

colonies. Imagine this: Indonesians are taking the gospel back to Holland, Nigerians back to England, Brazilians back to Portugal, Filipinos back to the USA. As one missiologist has observed, the periphery of Christianity is evangelizing back to its former center.

According to theologian and missiologist Dr. Bong Rin Ro, the breakdown of cross-cultural missionaries from Asia in 2021 was:³

Country	Missionaries	Number of Agencies	
India	30,000	250	60% serving in India 1000 missionaries from mainland China
Korea	28,039	273	
Singapore	2,000	60	
Chinese	3,000		
Philippines	600		
Japan	600		
Taiwan	560		
Hong Kong	500		
Thailand	60		

A common descriptive phrase used in recent years that you no doubt have heard is, “From everywhere to everywhere” or variations of it. And this phenomenon is true. A companion term that has gained traction is “poly-centric missions,” (promoted strongly by the WEA Mission Commission) which is the reality that there are now multiple sending centers throughout the world, with missions happening from any location and going to all locations.

Being connected to one another is now seen as crucial if the remaining task is to be completed. Strategic partnerships and collaboration are now the norm. As a result, there has been an unprecedented upsurge in the formation of country-wide, regional, and global networks. “We serve the Lord better when we serve together” has become today’s mantra in missions.

Accordingly, since the early twenty-first century, the profile of the average missionary has changed. Today it is not unusual to meet a missionary from Kenya sent by a church in Nairobi, funded by a mission organization in Colorado Springs (USA), who is serving in Canada within an ethnic Chinese church that speaks English. This is one example of the connections that are taking place in this new era of partnerships.

CHURCH AND MISSION ADVANCE HAS BEEN UNPRECEDENTED IN RECENT YEARS

There are cynics who are of the opinion that through the years mission societies/agencies along with missionaries haven’t made that much of an impact. Seemingly, as the world population has exploded, the Church has been losing ground. Our strategies haven’t worked that well, and much of our money has been wasted, it is asserted.

As an example, look at the Middle East. According to the World Christian Encyclopedia, the most alarming shrinking of Christianity is this West Asian region, which includes Iraq, Syria, Israel, Palestine, and Turkey. This region has experienced a precipitous

3. Bong Rin Ro. Missio Nexus webinar, 2022.

drop in Christian population, from 12.7 percent to 4.2 percent in 2020. In Iraq the Christian community has dwindled by 83 percent in less than twenty years, from around 1.5 million in 2003 to just 250,000 today. Turkey was 22 percent Christian in 1900 and is only 0.2 percent Christian today.

But before you succumb to pessimism and cynicism by allowing one world region color your missiological outlook, I encourage you to “lift up your eyes and see that the fields are white for harvest” (John 4:35). The growth of the global church is unbound! Consider what is happening in various continents:⁴

Africa: Numerically Africa is the most Christian continent today. The evangelical church has grown from 1.6 million in 1900 to 685 million in 2021. At the current rate of growth, by the year 2050 the church in Africa is expected to exceed an astonishing 1.3 billion believers. There will be more Christians in Africa than the next two continents combined!⁵

Latin America: The evangelical church has grown from seven hundred thousand in 1900 to ninety-one million in 2010. Between 1960 and 2010, Peruvian evangelicals increased forty-fold in the midst of violence and social breakdown, despite 750 evangelical leaders being martyred and many others imprisoned. Over the same fifty years, the evangelical church in Brazil has grown from 3 percent of the population to an impressive 30 percent.

Asia: Christianity in Asia has experienced phenomenal growth over the past hundred years. In 1900 there were approximately 21 million Christians scattered across the continent/region, the most populous region in the world. By the year 2000 the number of Christians had increased to 280 million. More than half of the world’s 8 billion people live in Asia, which is now home to some of the world’s largest Evangelical mega churches. Here are a few examples:

The Calvary Temple in Hyderabad, India has a gathering space that is able to seat some 35,000 worshippers. The worship center is filled to capacity five times each Sunday beginning with a service at six o’clock in the morning. In Indonesia more than 140,000 worshippers attend Bethany Church of God in Surabaya each Sunday, while there are evangelical churches in Bali and in Jakarta with weekly attendances that exceed 8,000. Then there is the largest congregation in the world, the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, which has around 480,000 members.

Also consider North Korea. A Forbes article in 2016 estimated there were between 300,000 and 500,000 believers in that repressive country despite decades of massive, sustained persecution. Mainland China is the biggest story of all. The World Christianity Encyclopedia reported that there were about 80 million Christians in China in 2000 and estimated numbers will exceed 200 million by 2050.

4. Many of these statistics are from: “World Christianity and the Unfinished Task,” by Lionel Young, 2021.

5. Yaw Perbe & Sam Ngugi Africa To The Rest, 2022.

Europe: Evangelicals are growing at an annual rate of 1.1 percent, matching the global population growth rate. Today, the three largest Protestant churches in Paris are Afro-Caribbean evangelical megachurches of a charismatic or Pentecostal bent. A study last year examined Chinese churches in Britain that were experiencing exponential growth, sometimes doubling or tripling in size in a few years. Last April, the Italian Chinese Theological Seminary opened in Rome to train Mandarin and Cantonese-speaking pastors. Some of the largest megachurches in metro London are led by Africans, including Kingsway International Christian Center, which is led by a Nigerian, Matthew Ashimolowo, and is most likely the largest church in Europe.⁶

Regardless of what is observed in any particular region of the world, overall God's global church is growing faster, both in terms of individual believers and diversity of people groups, than at any point in history. Jesus told his disciples the "gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations" (Matthew 24:14, ESV). Regardless of one's eschatology, we are witnessing the continued fulfillment of this prophecy by the on-going growth of the Church across the globe.

THERE REMAINS AN UNACCEPTABLE NUMBER OF UNENGAGED AND UNREACHED PEOPLE GROUPS

The number of unreached peoples around the world is growing. There are now more than 3.2 billion people (more than one third of the world's population) who have little if any access to the gospel. Furthermore, many of those people are adherents to religions or worldviews that are hostile to the name of Jesus.

Steve Richardson in his book *Is the Mission Still Great*, states, "Our generation has access to a wealth of ethnographic information about the peoples of the world. Missions-minded Christians have built databases identifying whether each group has been engaged by a church planting team, if they have the Jesus film, if there are any known believers, how much Scripture they have in their language, and other important markers. Such tools are very helpful as we identify needs and send out workers."⁷ However, let's be realistic about how far along we really are.

The country of Vietnam is a good example of a country that contains multiple people groups, many who remain unreached. Within that country of 98 million people, 118 distinct people groups our found. Sadly, of these, 79 remain unreached. This situation holds true of most countries across southeast and central Asia.

Worldwide, there are a total of 17,468 people

6. Tish Harrison Warren. "The Global Transformation of Christianity Is Here." *New York Times*, March 26, 2023.

7. Steve Richardson, *Is the Commission Still Great?: 8 Myths about Missions and What They Mean for the Church*, Moody Publishers, 2022. Kindle location 2221.

groups. But of these 7,419 remain "unreached" (41%), containing 3.2 billion people. These are not only people who don't believe in Jesus, these are people that do not know there is a Jesus to be believed in.

And then there are the completely unengaged, a subset of the unreached. These peoples are also labeled "Frontier Peoples." It is commendable that in recent years there has been an acceleration in giving gospel access to unengaged people groups. According to the Finishing the Task Coalition, between the years 2005 and 2020, 3,158 people groups were engaged for the first time by 5,159 missionary teams.

Of those that are still unengaged, according to the just completed research conducted by the Vision 5:9 Network, 1700 people groups remain unengaged. Breaking them down according to religious blocks, Vision 5:9 delineates the following: 600 are Tribal, 500 Hindu, 400 Muslim, 100 Buddhist, and 100 non-religious. Vision 5:9's aspiration is to see every unengaged group engaged by December 31, 2025.

In summary, the unreached need not remain unnoticed. Our passion should be to expose their gospel deprivation to gospel privileged communities, bringing awareness of those who still have no gospel access.

THERE REMAINS A DISPARITY IN BOTH THE MISSION FORCE AND MISSION FUNDING FOR ACCOMPLISHING THE REMAINING TASK

The responsibility of reaching the unreached was not lost on past generations. Samuel Mills, who was instrumental in propelling America into missions, at the famous "Haystack prayer meeting" in 1806, challenged a small band of fellow students with the now famous words, "We can do it, if we will."

Today, we have all the resources at our disposal to finish the remaining task. We have more and better-educated people, more financial resources, more material resources, more diverse global missionary force participating, and more advanced technology available to us than any previous generation. However, the one thing most lacking, the thing in which many today seem most deficient, is the will to act. Flipping Mill's statement: We can't do it if we don't have the will to do it!

Disparity in Mission Force

Although we have at our disposal all those resources noted above, there is a woeful disproportion of them not allocated to reaching the unreached. According to the newest edition of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*⁸, the total number of missionary workers globally is estimated at 425,000 (this includes all traditions). Now, on the surface, that seems like a lot of message bearers crossing cultures with the Good News. But the deeper question is "What percentage of these workers are laboring among the unreached?" And that's where it gets sticky. Here is what the

8. Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zuro, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3rd edition, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019.

research tells us.

As mentioned, globally there are 425,000 missionaries. With the proliferation of the Majority World Church coupled with its sending, missionaries today are being sent from most any nation in the world. But the disparity of where they minister remains. Those who minister in places that have “full access” to the gospel is 326,060 or 77%. Those ministering in areas where there is “some access” is 87,000 or 20%. But inexcusably, those who are ministering in unreached, “no access” countries are a mere 11,940, or 3% of the total missionary force. Does that not sound like a disparity to you?

Disparity in Mission Funding

We can also consider the matter of mission funding. The amount of dollars that is given to all of missions annually is about US\$45 billion. It is estimated that approximately \$450 million of that is utilized to reach the unreached. That amounts to 1% of all mission giving. Given the vastness of the task of reaching the remaining unreached, that’s a minuscule amount.

ADJUSTING TO A DE-GLOBALIZED WORLD

Finally, there is one more big-picture global trend that needs to be considered: it appears that the era of globalization has come to an end. Some posit that globalization is already dead (having died with the onslaught of COVID-19), and that we are presently living it its wake.⁹

Simply defined, globalization is the increased connectedness and interdependence of world cultures and economies on a worldwide basis. The past roughly 30 years – 1990 (fall of Soviet communism) to 2019 beginning of the COVID pandemic) – were the golden years of global interconnectedness. During that period more people rose out of poverty, especially in mainland China, than in any other era in human history.

Deglobalization, on the other hand, is the process of diminished interdependence and integration between world cultures and economies on a worldwide basis. One of the main indicators of deglobalization is the demographic implosion of major world populations. It is projected that this will most acutely be felt in Asia’s two largest countries, China and India, but with most of Europe highly affected as well. The signs of deglobalization can be categorized in three areas:

- Reshoring: the transfer of a business operation that was moved overseas back to the country from which it was originally located.
- Strengthening of Regional Blocks: ASEAN, NAFTA, EU, AfCFTA, (African Continental Free Trade Areas), MERCOSUR (Latin America).
- Shorter supply chains of goods between countries.

9. Much of this information is a summary of Dr. Ted Esler’s Missio Nexus webinar: “The End of Globalization,” presented February 13, 2023.

Implication for missions:

1. Globalization accelerated missions from 1990 to 2019. Mission workers were creatively able (“CAN”) to access all parts of the world with very few restrictions. Will protective governmental restrictions now curtail that access?
2. Globalization allowed for the advancement of Business As Missions (BAM). Foreigners were welcomed to come and bring their money with them. Will there be a curtailment of BAM workers because of new protectionism by countries that no longer want foreign workers in their countries?
3. Globalization permitted world access for “majority world” missionaries. As already mentioned, missions “from everywhere to everywhere” became a heartening reality! The question now is: will deglobalization bring about a corresponding global deceleration of majority world missions because of prejudicial limited access? Especially concerning is the probable curtailment of visas of missionaries from the “global south.”

CONCLUSION

Just as the mission planes in Papua are equipped with state-of-the-art navigational instruments so pilots can know how to navigate the treacherous terrain, so too we, when considering the state of missions today, can understand where we are and how to navigate the missional terrain by pondering the six mentioned indicators. Now that it is understood where the Church presently is, let’s wisely ponder where we need to be heading as we step into the future while on mission with Christ.

As we do that, a good reminder comes from mission executive Steve Richardson who concludes his book with these words of wisdom:

Whether we find ourselves encouraged or discouraged by the present status and momentum of global missions, our bottom-line responsibility is to faithfully pursue the work that Jesus has given each of us. Our job is to be the best stewards of our lives and resources that we can be. Don’t yield to cynicism or apathy.”¹⁰

10. Richardson, *ibid.* Kindle location 2374.



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