

# World Christianity and the Ministry of Expatriate Churches

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Greetings, strategic planners for the American & Foreign Christian Union. Julie Voskuil has been telling me about your ministries among expatriates in Europe, and it is an honor to host you here at Calvin. She asked me to speak about some trends in the Christian faith worldwide, and I am happy to share a few things with you. One headline to my story is this: more than ever before, Christianity today is a great world religion. It has adherents in more cultures than ever before, and Christ is worshipped in more languages than ever before. Two billion people worldwide profess to be Christians. Here is the other headline. Christianity today is predominantly non-Western. The great majority of its adherents live outside of the North Atlantic region, on the continents of Africa, Asia and Latin America, and in the Pacific regions. That, my friends, continues to be news, especially here in North America.

How dramatic is the shift? Let me put it out in a few statistics and stories. In 1900, 80 percent of the world's Christians lived in Europe and North America. A century later, 60 percent of the world's Christians are living in Africa, Asia and Latin America.<sup>1</sup> Christian adherence is waning in the global North, and no doubt you have seen plenty of evidence of that in Europe. Yet it is rising in the South and East. Let me illustrate the contrast. In Great Britain, the historic and spiritual home of Anglican Christianity, only about 1 million out of the 26 million members of the Church of England attend on Sundays. In Nigeria, there are 17.5 million Anglicans, and their churches are packed on Sunday. Half of the world's Anglicans now live in Africa.<sup>2</sup>

The rise of nonwestern Christianity has come as a huge surprise to the secular west. Historian Dana Robert points out that thirty years ago, Christianity outside of the west was thought to be a product of European imperialism, and it was expected to wither and die in the post-colonial era. As Robert wryly observes, one of the great ironies of our times is that Christianity grew much more rapidly after the end of the colonial empires than during them.<sup>3</sup> In 1900, there were only about 9 million Christians in all of Africa. A half-century later, this number had tripled, to about 30 million. By 1970, however, this number nearly quadrupled, to over 117 million. Today, the number has more than tripled again, to an estimated 382 million Christians in Africa.<sup>4</sup>

Even so, the notion that Christianity in Africa, Asia and Latin America is a Western import remains strong. One recent theory is that it is part of some vast, right wing conspiracy: an exported American fundamentalism of either the Pat Robertson or the Opus Dei variety.<sup>5</sup> These views ignore the evidence that shows the new Christianity to be homegrown.<sup>6</sup> Western religious agents, ideas and products surely are flowing freely around the globe, but so is the new Christianity. The United States still leads the world in mission sending, but it also receives the largest number of foreign missionaries.<sup>7</sup>

As Christianity takes root in the south and east, it is being transformed. Never before has the world seen the faith of the Cross expressed in so many languages and cultural forms. Increasingly these facts contradict the assumption that it is a European faith. Lamin Sanneh, the

Yale historian from West Africa, has a delightful little book out, all written in Q & A, self-interview form, titled, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Eerdmans, 2003). Sanneh and other African Christians see Christianity as *their* faith, thus an African religion, not an import. And it is becoming obvious that they do not agree with the more liberal Christian leaders of the North about how the gospel engages culture. What is emerging in our time is a post-Christian West, being challenged by a post-western Christianity. The recent conflict over sexual morality in the Anglican communion is probably only the first of many more such controversies.

If Christianity is becoming predominantly non-Western, then what happens in Africa Asia and Latin America will have a growing influence on what Christianity will be like worldwide. Conversely, what happens in Europe and in North America will matter less. Says Tite Tienou, the West African theologian who now heads Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, “the future of Christianity no longer depends on developments in the North.”<sup>8</sup> Missions historian Andrew Walls concludes that “it is Africans and Asians and Latin Americans who will be the representative Christians, those who represent the Christian norm, the Christian mainstream, of the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries.”<sup>9</sup>

Only a few years ago, such assertions would have seemed vastly overblown, but the tragic events of September 11 and the subsequent wars have begun to awaken us to the “globality” of contemporary life. One of the surprises is its religiosity. Says Peter Berger, formerly a high priest of secularization theory, “the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false.” The assumption that “modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion” has proven to be mistaken. That may be true in Europe but not elsewhere in the world. Globally interactive modernity has proven to be a powerful vehicle for religious interaction and competition.<sup>10</sup> The rising Christianity of the south and east is no longer distant or exotic. It is right here next to us, and is changing the whole church.

I could say quite a bit about how the church is changing, but let me focus on just a few examples. One important indication of change is in who are now becoming leaders in the global church. The Roman Catholic College of Cardinals did not elect an African or Latin American pope this time, but they well could in the future. Nearly 40 percent of the cardinals eligible to vote for the pope now are from the Third World, and their number will grow. At the 1998 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops, Africans and Asians were in the majority, and they reshaped the theological and pastoral agenda. They set aside overtures for ordaining practicing homosexuals and emphasized instead the church’s calling to evangelize, combat poverty, and overcome political oppression. In 1999, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) named Setri Nyomi, an Evangelical Presbyterian theologian from Ghana, as its executive head. Likewise, the Lutheran World Federation is now headed by Ishmael Noko, a professor from Zimbabwe. In August of 2003, the World Council of Churches named Samuel Kobia, a Methodist from Kenya, as its new executive secretary. Kobia leads an organization whose income has been cut in half in recent years. He remarked that one thing he would bring to the World Council in a time of fiscal crisis was an African Christian “capacity to be hopeful” even in critical situations.<sup>11</sup>

I could show you some new trends in Christian theology that reflect the church's global shift too, but suffice it to say that through the centuries, Christian theology eventually reflects the most compelling issues from the front lines of mission. Western theologians, liberal and conservative, have been addressing the faith to an age of doubt and secularity, and to the competing claims of secular ideologies. The new Christianity will push theologians to address the faith to the most pressing issues in its new heartlands: issues of poverty and social injustice; political violence, corruption and the meltdown of law and order, and Christianity's witness amidst religious plurality. They will be dealing with the need of Christian communities to make sense of God's self-revelation to their pre-Christian ancestors. Theologians everywhere will be pondering Christianity's answer to the spiritual hunger and searching in global mass culture.

New patterns of popular religious action add evidence that nonwestern Christianity is rising. Take for example, foreign missions. The great missionary movement is not over, but it has become omnidirectional. There are 400,000 missionaries in the world, and before too long, the majority of them will not be from Europe and North America. I visited Nigeria in 1990 and met with some American and Canadian missionaries. They lamented that instead of the 500 comrades they had in 1960, now there were only 100. Many of the enterprises they had started were fading. The next day the missions director of the Nigerian sister church of this mission, now 2 million strong, told me about its 900 missionaries, serving sacrificially in rural northern Nigeria, and in Niger, Cameroon, Chad, Burkina Faso, and darkest London. Welcome to the new world of foreign missions. Brazilians head to Portugal, Angola, and Boston. Indian Pentecostals are founding rapidly growing churches in Nepal. South Koreans are everywhere.

New churches are springing up in immigrant communities, in Houston, Montreal, Vancouver, Brooklyn, and even in Grand Rapids. You may have noticed this happening in Europe, where you minister. The largest church in London today is Pentecostal, and is led by a Nigerian. The same is true in Kiev. Some researchers doubt that the new southern Christianity will break out from these communities and bring renewed Christian adherence into the resolutely secular native communities of Europe, but it is too soon to tell.<sup>12</sup>

In the United States, a much more assimilative culture, "mainstream" American Christianity is absorbing aspects of the new world Christianity, which has been arriving in force with the new immigrants. More than 60 percent of them come from the global south and east. Demographers predict that in another quarter-century, the United States population will look like that of California, with no ethnic or racial group comprising a majority. Kenneth Prewitt, former director of the U.S. Census, states: "We're on our way to becoming the first country in history that is literally made up of every part of the world."<sup>13</sup> The vast majority of the new Americans are Christians. This fact may seem self-evident when considering the Latinos, but the majority of the African immigrants also is Christian, one half of all Arabs in the United States are Christian, and a disproportionately large minority of the Asians is Christian.<sup>14</sup>

This means that new congregations, with varieties of Christianity rarely seen here before, are growing across the American urban landscapes. West African Pentecostal churches are thriving in Houston, where 80,000 Nigerians reside. Around my former home in suburban Philadelphia, every Protestant church in the township had a Korean congregation sharing the building, and at

nearby Westminster Theological Seminary, a quarter of the students were Korean. The Catholic Church has been the historic haven of immigrant communities in America, and it is being transformed by Latino immigration. Some 3,000 Catholic parishes now offer Spanish services. Catholics also provide communities of faith for other growing groups, such as Filipinos and Vietnamese. In each of these traditionally Catholic immigrant communities, new varieties of evangelicalism—mostly Pentecostal—are growing. About a fifth of American Latinos are now *evangelicos*, many led by missionary bishops and apostles. One is my neighbor down the block, Pastor Antonio Rosario, from the Dominican Republic. He oversees the ministry of three Latino Adventist congregations in Grand Rapids and he teaches in the Hispanic ministry program at an Adventist university nearby.

In sum, the United States is not becoming secular like Europe. It is not being overrun by non-Christian faiths, either. But the nature of its Christianity is changing. As the sociologist Stephen Warner put it recently, “Immigration is creating not so much new diversity in American religion as new diversity within American Christianity.”<sup>15</sup>

But you minister in Europe, where several things are different. First, the dominant Euro-Caucasian population is much more secular and post-Christian than that of the U.S. I take post-Christian to mean that the average person knows that the society has a Christian past, and is probably more able to tell you what went wrong under Christian hegemony than what is the content of Christianity and its Scriptures. Even so, they will tell you that they don't believe the Bible. Witnessing to secular Euros from the premise, “the Bible says,” simply does not engender automatic respect or deference to biblical authority.

Second, you are closer to Asia and Africa, and the immigrant communities are different. They can come and go more easily between Europe and their homelands, so they are less likely to be assimilating host country values. More of them are Muslim or of another great world religion than immigrants in North America. Immigrant communities are typically protective enclaves, but in Europe they seem to be even more committed to cultural separation than in the U.S. or Canada.

Even so, Europe too has millions of people from non-Western Christian backgrounds, so you are likely to find that the natural constituency for your congregations is changing. You are there principally, to serve English speakers, but the majority of the world's English speakers do not reside in the British Isles and North America. English has become a worldwide medium for business, cultural and intellectual exchange, the second language of hundreds of millions of people. In places like Paris, Berlin and Vienna where you minister, there are no doubt many Africans, Asians and Latin Americans who are at work in business, government and NGO posts, who know English and have an interest in, if not a commitment to, Christianity. They should be thought of as a natural constituency of your ministry as much as are Americans, Canadians and Australians.

I had the opportunity to visit an international, Anglophone church, probably much like the ones you support, not long ago. My wife Janis and I were vacationing in Italy, and we were in Rome over the weekend. After two weeks of enjoying Roman and Tuscan art, architecture, food and wine, and visiting and praying in many Catholic churches, we were hoping to worship in a more

Protestant setting on Sunday. In downtown Rome, not far from the train station and the opera, we found St. Paul's within the Walls, a 130 year-old American Episcopal parish, the only non-Roman Catholic church within the central city.

The rector of St. Paul's, Michael Vono, is an American of Italian descent, from New Jersey. His administrative assistant, organist and bookkeeper are all Italians who have lived and worked in either the U.S. or the U.K. Other members of the parish staff include Aldo Erazo, an Ecuadorian who leads an outreach ministry to Latin Americans in Rome. Another, Akbatan Abdullah, is Iraqi. He directs the parish's refugee center. Another, Sister Emy, is an Anglican nun from Alexandria, Egypt, who ministers to the needy. The security guard, Sava Vizir, is from Moldova. The vestry council includes four members from the U.S., two from Italy, two from Ecuador, and one each from Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda. Services are in English and Italian. Parish ministries abound: in addition to Latin American and refugee ministries, there is Alcoholics Anonymous, an Africa Group, Prayer Group, Youth Group, Sunday School, and a strong foreign missions support program.<sup>16</sup>

These are all the rather common components of a lively North American congregation, you might be thinking, but with one important difference: this congregation enjoys a very rich cultural diversity. St. Paul's has seized the opportunity, in a world-class crossroads city, to bring together a microcosm of world Christianity. No doubt that makes parish life more complicated. How do you make church feel like home away from home when members' homes are so different? But what a tremendous opportunity St. Paul's parishioners have to learn and to be inspired. Christianity occupies a very different place in the world these days, and crossroads congregations like yours have a unique opportunity to participate in its mission in ways that the average American small-town or suburban congregation cannot--at least not yet.

But as we have seen, the demography of America is rapidly changing too. Someday soon if not already today, the potential exists for every one of our churches to be a multicultural gathering place like St. Paul's within the Walls. Your churches have the opportunity to be teaching and modeling for the rest of us. The sojourners who worship in your congregations will be eager to apply the lessons they learn there and replicate the blessings they receive from you when they return home. So the strategic planning you pursue this week may be more strategic than you imagined. God is full of surprises.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, "Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 2004," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28:1 (January 2004): 25.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Bowder, "Worship Numbers Fall Again," *Church Times*, found at [http://churchtimes.co.uk/templates/NewsTemplate\\_1](http://churchtimes.co.uk/templates/NewsTemplate_1) ; Ruth Gledhill, "Archbishop Thanks Africa for Lessons on Faith," *The Times* (London), 26 July 2003, p. 20; Charlotte Allen, "Episcopal Church Plays Russian Roulette on the Gay Issue," *Los Angeles Times*, 10 August 2003, M-1; Dianne Knippers, "The Anglican Mainstream: It's Not Where Americans Might Think," *Weekly Standard*, 25 August 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Dana Robert, "Shifting Southward: Global Christianity since 1945," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24 (April 2000): 53.

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<sup>4</sup> Barrett and Johnson, “Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 2004.”

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Steve Brouwer, Paul Gifford, and Susan D. Rose, *Exporting the American Gospel: Global Christian Fundamentalism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> For a sense of the scope and thrust of this work, see (and follow the citations of) three recent overviews: David Martin, *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish* (London: Basil Blackwell, 2002); Paul Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Philip Jenkins, *The New Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Jenkins gives important coverage to Roman Catholicism and the Anglican Communion, while Martin and Freston look at the more “Protestant,” mostly Pentecostal side.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Jaffarian, “What the WCE2 Numbers Show,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 26 (July 2002): 130. He refers to the second edition of the David B. Barrett, et. al., eds., *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Ti ■ nou, “Christian Scholarship and the Changing Center of World Christianity,” 91.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew F. Walls, “Christian Scholarship in Africa in the Twenty-first Century,” *Journal of African Christian Thought* 4 (December 2001): 47.

<sup>10</sup> Peter L. Berger, “The Descularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center, and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 2.

<sup>11</sup> “Kenyan Takes Lead of World Church Council,” *Grand Rapids Press*, 6 September 2003, B-4.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Gerrie ter Haar, *Halfway to Paradise: African Christians in Europe*, Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Joel L. Swerdlow, “Changing America,” *National Geographic* 200:3 (September 2001):42-61, 46 (quote).

<sup>14</sup> R. Stephen Warner, “Coming to America: Immigrants and the Faith They Bring,” *Christian Century*, 10 February 2004, 20-23. On Christianity’s disproportionately large representation among American Asian immigrants, Koreans are a prime case in point. While 25 to 30 percent of South Koreans are Christians, about half of the South Koreans entering the U.S. are Christian. Due to the churches’ vigorous outreach and service to the ethnic community, Christian adherence among Koreans living here reaches 80 percent. See Pyong Gap Min, “The Structure and Social Functions of Korean Immigrant Churches in the United States,” *International Migration Review* 26:4 (1992): 1370-1394.

<sup>15</sup> Warner, “Coming to America,” 20. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 105-113, is insightful on these points as well.

<sup>16</sup> See St. Paul's website: <http://www.stpaulsrome.it/index.html>