

What the Majority World Is Saying about Mission Today

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With the centre of global Christianity shifting to the Majority World, what do church and mission leaders in the Global South think mission should be about today? This article describes the situation through the eyes of some prominent mission leaders from across the globe.

The centre of gravity of global Christianity has shifted, with about 66% of all Christians now living in Asia, Africa and Latin America. This figure, up from 43% in 1970 and projected to reach 75% by 2050,¹ stands in marked contrast to the demographics of the Christian faith a century ago. Before 1910, four times as many Christians lived in the Global North as in the Majority World.² Since 1910, not only has global church growth shifted to the Majority World,³ but that growth is also overflowing into the West as a significant number of refugees and migrants are either Christians or becoming followers of Christ.⁴ Africa and Latin America are now sources rather than only recipients of mission activity.⁵

The legacy of Protestant missions is mixed at best. Colonialism, which facilitated access to the mission field for many missionaries, has had a damaging impact across the world, the residual effects of which are still evident in numerous countries and their cultures, especially amongst their indigenous populations. The recent discovery of hundreds of graves of children at residential schools for indigenous students in Canada exemplified the extent of the abuse and destruction of these peoples and cultures.

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1 G. Bellofatto and T. Johnson, 'Key Findings of Christianity in Its Global Context, 1970–2020', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 37, no. 3 (2013): 157–64.

2 Pew Research Center, 'Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population' (2011), <https://worldidea.org/yourls/46301>.

3 I will use the terms Majority World and Global South interchangeably, though there are distinctions between the two.

4 Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 113–15.

5 Ebenezer Yaw Blasu and Joshua Settles, 'The "Surprise" in Mission History: Prospects for African Cross-Cultural Mission to the West', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 45, no. 4 (2021): 346; Alberto Arce, 'A Surge of Evangelicals in Spain, Fueled by Latin Americans', AP News, 4 January 2022, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/46302>.

Despite the heavy criticisms of colonial missions voiced by contemporary post-colonial narratives, a significant number of Protestant missionaries were not part of the colonial enterprise and its exploitation.⁶ Although these missionary initiatives, particularly in education and medical services, have often been reinterpreted and dismissed as tools of the colonial powers to control local populations,⁷ other voices provide a compelling counter-narrative. Sri Lankan theologian D. Preman Niles writes that most early missionaries to South Asia came from the working class—craftsmen, small traders, shoemakers, printers, ship builders and schoolteachers. He says of William Carey, the father of the modern missionary movement, ‘It was his social background and his identification with people of his class in countries to which he went that influenced his attitude and shaped his theology.’ Niles contends that missionaries were never part of the colonial enterprise at home and rarely aligned with people in power: ‘A missionary movement arose with the desire not to exploit nations but to take to them a divine treasure.’⁸

The shift of global Christianity to the Majority World has been accompanied by a distinct realignment of missionary efforts and investments. While there were still 121,000 active American missionaries in 2015, the top 20 countries sending missionaries included Brazil, the Philippines, China, South Korea, India, Nigeria and South Africa. These Majority World countries combined to account for 101,000 international missionaries.⁹ And this number does not take into account the efforts of indigenous churches and mission agencies within their own countries. Mission has become increasingly polycentric, as the title of Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali’s book *From Everywhere to Everywhere*¹⁰ so aptly indicates.

Nevertheless, a commonly expressed refrain among many Christian leaders in the Majority World is that Western worldviews, theological frameworks, strategies and funding still dominate most discussions and literature on mission, evangelism and theological education.

We need to understand the dynamics driving the growth in missions within the Majority World. Ghanaian theologian Lamin Sanneh stated that a commitment to mission looks very different for people from outside the West:

To a surprising degree, third-world Christians, or ‘majority-world’ Christians in the language of political correctness, are not burdened by a Western guilt complex, and so they have embraced the vocation of mission as a concomitant of the gospel they have embraced: The faith they received they must in turn share. ... Christianity came to them while they had other equally plausible religious

6 Jione Havea, *Religion and Power* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Academic, 2018). A theme throughout most of the essays is Christianity’s role in decolonization and resisting empire.

7 See Robert S. Heaney, *Post-Colonial Theology: Finding God and Each Other Amidst the Hate* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019).

8 D. Preman Niles, *From East and West: Rethinking Christian Mission* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 74.

9 Cheng-Tozun, ‘What Majority-World Missions Really Looks Like’, *Christianity Today*, 26 August 2019, <https://worldia.org/yourls/46303>.

10 Michael Nazir-Ali, *From Everywhere to Everywhere: A Worldview of Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1991).

options. Choice rather than force defined their adoption of Christianity; often discrimination and persecution accompanied and followed that choice.¹¹

The handful of voices of the colonized peoples from the Global South at the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh (just 20 of 1,215 delegates came from outside the West¹²) were prophetic as they spoke about the need for the church and mission to be rooted in the local context. It would take almost another century before this vision started to materialize. The world of mission has changed and we need to listen to what Majority World voices are saying about the future of missions.

Listening to mission leaders in the Majority World

The seismic shift in the demographics and geography of the Christian movement is not the result of any strategy by mission agencies. It can only be attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit. The growth has not been coordinated and it crosses denominational lines. No master plan, blueprint or standardized methodology has been instrumental in this growth; rather, a variety of factors have influenced the growth in different countries and different regions.

Having worked with missions in the Majority World and related to them in different capacities for much of my life, I have had the privilege to witness this global shift taking place. My own experience influences my perspective. Argentinian theologian Jose Miguel Bonino states that any theologian belongs to a specific culture, a social class or group, and a tradition, and as a result writes from within that context, influenced by human, social and historical realities.¹³ I am ethnically South Asian and have lived in 11 countries since childhood, making me a global nomad—that is, someone who feels comfortable anywhere in the world but has roots nowhere. While I straddle multiple worlds and cultures, I often find myself an outsider in all of them. As a result, it is hard for me to embrace any one ethnic or cultural identity because I view myself as a mosaic of identities.¹⁴ My mixed background has given me the unique ability to listen to local voices through multiple cultural filters and see issues from a variety of perspectives.

Over the past few decades, I have intentionally listened to what Global South mission leaders were saying. I also read the writings of emerging voices from the Majority World. Prior to composing this article, I interacted with 38 individuals from 19 countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. Most of these were living in their home countries, but some were based in Europe, the UK or Canada, in diaspora communities, theological institutions and mission organizations. This group of people spans the denominational spectrum in the Global South; all would

11 Quoted by Saba Imtiaz, 'A New Generation Redefines What It Means to Be a Missionary', *The Atlantic*, 8 March 2018, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/46304>.

12 Francis Anekwe Oborji, 'Edinburgh 1910 and Christian Identity Today: An African Perspective', *Missiology: An International Review* 41, no. 3 (2013): 302.

13 Jose Miguez Bonino, 'Doing Theology in the Context of the Struggle of the Poor', *Mid-Stream* 20, no. 4 (1981): 369–70.

14 A person's reactions, mode of thinking and intuition depend on the context in which the matter is presented, or 'what evolutionary psychologists call the "domain" of the object or event. ... We react to a piece of information not on its logical merits, but on the basis of which framework surrounds it, and how it registers with our social-emotional system.' Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House, 2010), 53.

qualify as theologically evangelical, though some might not use that label. A few were representatives of Western mission agencies and churches. I encountered these informants in such contexts as Baptist World Alliance member churches, Canadian Baptist Ministries, the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE), Overseas Council, the Majority World Christian Leaders Conversation (MWCLC),¹⁵ Tyndale University in Toronto, the Navigators in India (Shishya Sabha) and Thailand, and the United Bible Societies (UBS). I have limited my focus to the Protestant world; the Catholic Church would require a separate article.

Theologian Ivan Illich, writing about the growth of the Christian church into new peoples and beyond social and linguistic boundaries, described the church as marvelling at ever new images and experiencing the church as surprise.¹⁶ Indeed, 'ever new images' and the 'church as surprise' probably best describe my own journey as I tried to discern my colleagues' understanding of God's mission, the concerns that weighed on their hearts, their missiological priorities, the challenges of developing missional leaders in their contexts, the complexity of partnerships with Western mission agencies and churches, and what the work of mission looks like to them. I have tried, where possible, to connect what I was hearing from my informants with existing literature, seeking to discern specific insights and recurring subjects and themes.

In spite of a growing trend to deconstruct and reinterpret the history of the modern missionary movement and to establish distinct non-Western voices, most leaders maintained a deep appreciation for what historical missions have contributed to the church and society. As one Asian church leader put it, there would be no church in his country and he would not be a Christian if not for Western missionaries. At the same time, he and others did not gloss over the abuses and malpractice that media coverage and post-colonial literature have often highlighted. They recognize the continuing damage these abuses have caused. There is a general agreement that some Western attitudes and practices are wrong and need to change.

The following discussion summarizes my findings under six headings: theology in context and biblical narratives, missiological concerns and priorities, missional leadership, partnerships, the work of mission, and overall conclusions.

Theology in context and biblical narratives

The church in the Majority World has moved beyond the days when there was an unquestioned acceptance of the theology, ecclesiology, and forms of worship and ministry delivered to them by Western missionaries. In spite of its foreignness, the church did take root across the world. However, while Christians became a distinct minority in the cultural and religious mosaic of many countries or established a

15 The MWCLC enables voices from the Global South to speak about Christian mission. 'The MWCLC is not in opposition to anybody. The movement is not identified, not defined as anti-western but is an attempt at finding our own voice and speaking for ourselves. We believe that in itself, this is a major step toward decolonization of mission, but not by creating a new centre or by avoiding cooperation or partnership with agencies across the world who purport to be into the *missio Dei*.' Nico A. Botha and Eugene Baron, eds., *Majority Perspectives on Christian Mission* (Johannesburg: UJ Press, 2022), vii.

16 Ivan Illich, *Mission and Midwifery* (Gwelo, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1974), 7.

cultural Christianity in others, the message of Christ generally did not penetrate local cultures.¹⁷ Christ was perceived as either a foreign god, irrelevant, or a cultural icon.

A new generation of emerging theologians is seeking to interpret what Christ and Christianity mean within their local cultural and social contexts.¹⁸ One pioneer among evangelicals was the late Kwame Bedaiko, along with his colleagues at the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission, and Culture in Ghana.

All theologies are contextual. The history of contextualization is complex and replete with success, mistakes and pitfalls which have provided insights into the relationship between Christ and culture.¹⁹ Contextualizations of the gospel fall into one of two categories: *inculturation*, where the gospel is expressed using different philosophical frameworks and cultural norms, or *liberation theologies* that use social analysis of a local context as the starting point for Christian reflection and praxis.²⁰ A number of streams of missional spirituality and strategy in the Majority World have their roots in liberation theology; amongst the most notable are Dalit, African, and Palestinian versions.²¹ These have found fertile ground among specific marginalized and oppressed communities as they interpret the gospel within their own context as a way to respond to oppression.

Attempts at inculturation of the gospel have resulted in considerable writings on cultural conceptions of God and how they relate to biblical revelation.²² These works explore differing worldviews and how they influence hermeneutics, soteriology and

17 'With two-thirds of sub-Saharan Africa professing to be Christian it should be a concern to all Christians that the biblical worldview has had little impact on the shaping of contemporary African culture.' Jack Pryor Chalk, *Making Disciples in Africa: Engaging Syncretism in the African Church through Philosophical Analysis of Worldviews* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2013), back cover.

18 Amongst the many publications from the Majority World grappling with contextual theology and missiology, I would note these works published by the Langham Global Library in Carlisle, UK: Rodney L. Reed, *African Contextual Realities* (2018); Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue and K. K. Yeo, *Jesus Without Borders: Christology in the Majority World* (2015); Timoteo G. Gener and Stephen T. Pardue, *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives* (2019); Martin Heisswolf, *Japanese Understanding of Salvation: Soteriology in the Context of Japanese Animism* (2018); Samuel Waje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Theology* (2012).

19 H. Richard Niebuhr's taxonomy of the interface of Christ and culture is probably the best framework by which to understand the richness of theologies emerging from the Majority World. See Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

20 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Missions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 420–56.

21 Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities* (London: Routledge, 2010); Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); Naim Stifan Ateek, *A Palestinian Theology of Liberation: The Bible, Justice and the Palestine-Israel Conflict* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017).

22 Archie C. C. Lee, 'God's Asian Names: Rendering the Biblical God in Chinese', SBL Forum, 2005, <https://worldia.org/yourls/ert463rd5>; Rodney L. Reed and David K. Ngaruiya, *Who Do You Say That I Am? Christology in Africa* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2021); Samuel Escobar, *In Search of Christ in Latin America: From Colonial Image to Liberating Savior* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2019). On the controversy over the use of familial language in Arabic to describe the relationship between Jesus and the Father, see WEA Global Review Panel, *Report to World Evangelical Alliance for Conveyance to Wycliffe Global Alliance and SIL International* (2013).

ecclesiology.²³ The challenge many face in developing contextualized theology is to avoid syncretism with local traditional religions and practices.²⁴ They grapple with their own history of Christian mission;²⁵ struggle with trying to find an indigenous identity rather than being agents of a foreign religion;²⁶ and seek to address sociopolitical issues such as corruption,²⁷ authoritarian governments,²⁸ oppression, persecution, living as a minority,²⁹ relating to other religions,³⁰ conflict,³¹

23 On hermeneutics, R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Challenging the Interpretations* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); Elizabeth Mburu, *African Hermeneutics* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2019). On soteriology, Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K. K. Yeo, eds., *So Great a Salvation: Soteriology in the Majority World* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2017). On ecclesiology, some leaders are experimenting with John Travis' spectrum to describe Christ-centred communities as a way to define new forms of being the church in religiously pluralistic contexts. John Travis, 'The C1 to C6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of "Christ Centered Communities"', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (October 1998): 407–8. I was involved with Shishya Sabha (the Navigators) in India in the 1980s when they were using this approach amongst Hindu and Muslim followers of Christ.

24 David Chung, *Syncretism: The Religious Context of Christian Beginnings in Korea* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); David Lindenfeld and Miles Richardson, *Beyond Conversion and Syncretism: Indigenous Encounters with Missionary Christianity, 1800–2000* (New York: Berghahn, 2011).

25 Willem Saayman, 'Christian Mission History in South Africa: Rethinking the Concept', *Missionalia* 23, no. 2 (1995): 184–200; Eraston Kighoma, 'Rethinking Mission, Missions and Money: A Focus on the Baptist Church in Central Africa', *HTS Theological Studies* 75, no. 4 (11 April 2019).

26 Kwame Bedaiko, *Jesus in Africa: The Christian Gospel in African History and Experience* (Akropong-Akuapem, Ghana: Regnum Africa in association with Paternoster, 2000); James Treat, *Native and Christian: Indigenous Voices on Religious Identity in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 1996); David Kirwa Tarus, *A Different Way of Being: Towards a Reformed Theology of Ethnopolitical Cohesion for the Kenyan Context* (Carlisle: Langham Monographs, 2019).

27 Martin Allaby, *Corruption and the Church: Voices from the Global South* (Oxford: Regnum, 2018); Alfred Sebahene, *Corruption Mocking Justice* (Carlisle: Langham Monographs, 2017).

28 Melba Padilla Maggay, *Dark Days of Authoritarianism* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2019).

29 Leaders of the Lebanese Baptists in Beirut speak about how Christians (especially evangelicals) can thrive as a minority in Lebanon. See also Sunday Bobai Agang, *God of the Remnant: The Plight of Ethnic Minority Groups in Africa* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2021).

30 Moses Parmar, 'Missiological Challenges for Hinduism', in *Majority World Perspectives on Christian Mission*, ed. Nico A. Botha and Eugene Baron (Johannesburg: UJ Press, 2022), 33–43. Martin Accad has written on Christianity's relation to Islam in *Sacred Misinterpretation: Reaching across the Christian-Muslim Divide* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019); Martin Accad et al., *Christian Presence and Witness among Muslims* (Cuxhaven, Germany: Neufeld Verlag, 2005); Martin Accad and Jonathan Andrews, *The Religious Other: A Biblical Understanding of Islam, the Qur'an and Muhammad* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2020).

31 African authors who have reflected missiologically on conflicts in their own countries include Eraston Kambale Kighoma, *Church and Mission in the Context of War: A Descriptive Missiological Study of the Response of the Baptist Church in Central Africa to the War in Eastern Congo between 1990 and 2011* (Carlisle: Langham Monographs, 2021); Mipo E. Dadang, *A Cry for Help: A Missiological Reflection on Violent Response to Religious Tension in Northern Nigeria* (Carlisle: Langham Monographs, 2022).

“peacebuilding”,³² and certain cultural values and rituals.³³

Although Western theologians since Augustine have contemplated a theology of the state as an institution, some Majority World theologians have had to grapple theologically with issues of political power by non-state actors because as minorities they are often victims of the abuse of such power.³⁴ As critical as inculturation and contextualization of the gospel are, African theologian Emmanuel Katongole writes that as Africa continues to change, the key issues facing Africans are hunger, disease, poverty and violence. There is a need not only to respond to these systemic problems, but also to develop a theological framework to make sense of their prevalence.³⁵

As important as these theological discourses are for the maturing of indigenous churches, they have mainly stayed within seminaries and among theologians. Based on my observations, they have not yet found traction in church life nor influenced missional strategy on a wider scale, even though these issues affect the daily lives of Christians. The understanding of mission amongst most Protestant (including evangelical) Christians in the Majority World focuses on the redeeming work of God through the death and resurrection of Christ, the uniqueness of Christ, his offer of forgiveness and reconciliation, and new life offered through the Holy Spirit. Out of these emphases, the work of mission occurs largely in the form of evangelism, church planting, discipleship, training leaders, and ministries of compassion.

One recurring theme among the mission leaders was that a missional theology must encompass all of life and creation and not be limited to reconciliation with God and reaching the world for Christ.³⁶ Rene Padilla understood integral mission as integrating faith and the gospel with life, not just pairing evangelism with social action.³⁷ In my conversations and in the emerging literature, the term ‘Kingdom of

32 The work of Salim Munayer and of Musalaha in the midst of the Israel-Palestine conflict provides an excellent example. Salim J. Munayer, *Journey Through the Storm: Lessons from Musalaha—Ministry of Reconciliation* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2020). Rula Khoury Mansour’s work on peace studies at Nazareth Evangelical College is another example; see Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, ‘News from Nazareth Evangelical College: An Award for Rula Mansour’, n.d., <https://worldia.org/yourls/46306>. Also see Levi Lukadi Noah, *Reconciliation and Peace in South Sudan* (Carlisle: Langham Monographs, 2012); Sunday Bobai Agang, *No More Cheeks to Turn* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2016).

33 Hann Tzuu Joey Tan, *The Beasts, the Graves, and the Ghosts: A Study of Contextualized Preaching during Chinese Festivals* (Carlisle: Langham Monographs, 2020).

34 William A. Dyrness, ed., *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 14; Havea, *Religion and Power*.

35 Emmanuel M. Katongole, *A Future for Africa: Critical Essays in Christian Social Imagination* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 153–84. Katongole sees the role of the church as foundational in theologizing. He writes, ‘The church’s own existence and way of life can be the site from which Africa’s social and material needs might be analyzed, mobilized, and shaped in a definite manner’ (p. 169).

36 For example, see Joanne Beach, ‘Is Our Gospel Too Small?’ The Alliance Canada, 2020, <https://worldia.org/yourls/46307>. Beach told of pastors at a conference in East Africa who spoke about their country, which is over 80% Christian, as beset by corruption, poverty, environmental degradation, ethnic strife and poor governance. They bemoaned the fact that Christianity has not had much impact on social values and commented that ‘the missionaries brought us too small of a gospel.’

37 C. Rene Padilla, *Mission between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 83. I also was privileged to participate in conversation with Padilla during a two-day visit to his home in Buenos Aires in July 2007.

God' is frequently used to describe this all-encompassing focus on mission and ministry. This understanding of the Kingdom of God in the Global South as a missional framework, broader than the salvation narrative of God's redemption and forgiveness, subsumes the issue of forgiveness and eternal life within the larger context of entering the Kingdom.³⁸ For example, at the 2017 MWCLC in Malaysia, many participants expressed the need for a greater understanding of what it means to be a citizen of this kingdom, since they live in non-Christianized societies that may be hostile to the Christian faith and its values. The defining biblical narrative for these leaders is the Kingdom of God and the lordship of Christ, rather than just the salvation story.

One mission leader whom I taught and who now works in Pakistan spoke about the need for a theology of persecution and suffering after the bombing of a church that killed 81 people. In light of the COVID-19 crisis, Mani Chacko, General Secretary of the Bible Society of India, wrote about the need for a theology of death because of the devastation the virus has wrought on families.³⁹ Not much literature in the Western evangelical tradition has addressed the question of how to live a godly and Christ-centered life in the midst of pervasive evil, persecution, hardships, suffering and death.⁴⁰ There is even less on how one can be a witness to the reality of God revealed in Jesus Christ in such a world.

Foundational to any theology emerging from the Global South is the understanding that their cultures use a different epistemology from Western cultures. Without denying the rational, their epistemology includes the miraculous, the supernatural, signs, wonders, dreams, intuitions and feelings as an integral part of how people perceive truth.⁴¹ Many of the leaders with whom I interacted described appearances of the supernatural in their own lives and ministries.⁴² In contrast, for the Western world, only human reason can provide the knowledge of reality and eternity. Modern Western philosophy has an inadequate explanation of the metaphysical because it devalues the supernatural and the non-material. We have

38 Bill Houston from South Africa refers to the Kingdom of God as the missing framework in theological curricula, in 'The Kingdom of God and Theological Education in Contemporary Africa', *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* 12 (2007): 1–14.

39 M. Mani Chacko, 'Toward a Theology of Death', *Bible Society of India E-Newsletter* (October 2021), <https://worlddea.org/yourls/ert463rd8>.

40 J. Bryson Arthur, *A Theology of Suffering* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2020); Rodney L. Reed, *Christianity and Suffering: African Perspectives* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2017).

41 Ethnoepistemology is a growing but controversial discipline. For an in-depth understanding of how the poor in the Global South are encountering Christ through a non-Western epistemology, see Rupen Das, *The God That the Poor Seek: Conversion, Context and the World of the Vulnerable* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2022). Many converts from Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism have described the role of the supernatural in their conversion. Kelly Michael Hilderbrand, 'What Led Thai Buddhist Background Believers to Become Christians: A Study of One Church in Bangkok', *Missiology: An International Review* 44, no. 4 (2016): 400–415; J. Dudley Woodberry, Russell G. Shubin and G. Marks, 'Why Muslims Follow Jesus: The Results of a Recent Survey of Converts from Islam', *Christianity Today*, 24 October 2007, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/46309>; Joshua Iyadurai, *Transformative Religious Experience: A Phenomenological Understanding of Religious Conversion* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015).

42 Bishop Emeritus Hwa Yung of Malaysia referred to miracles and dreams as part of their congregational life, a view that Western visitors have had a hard time appreciating.

much work to do in this regard, because most Western missions and academics do not acknowledge value in any non-Western epistemology.⁴³

A few mission leaders from Asia and the Middle East spoke about the need for a better theology regarding the role of women in the church and society. At present, many Christian cultures in the Global South do not affirm God's calling in the lives and ministries of women. Nevertheless, women continue to play a vital role in the life of the church and in missions.⁴⁴

Significant theological reflection is occurring in the Majority World with regard to the church, its mission, and the place and role of Christians in society. As Christians there look at their own faith history, they grapple with the reality of social and institutional evil (not just personal sin), wondering how Christ's followers should respond. Amongst the leaders I listened to and interacted with, theological reflection was a highly practical part of mission and evangelism, not just an academic exercise.

Missiological concerns

It is important to note what was missing in the leaders' comments. Phrases such as 'reaching the world for Christ' and 'transforming communities and society' were rare. These terms assume that one has the power, resources, and social and political capital to make such things happen. They tend to overlook the presence of sin and evil embedded in society that resist change.

There can be no doubt of the vibrancy of Majority World Christians' witness, as evidenced by the church's growth. But what is the vision that energizes such vibrancy? What do the Great Commission and the Great Commandment look like when Christians are minorities, often marginalized and lacking the resources to look beyond their community?⁴⁵ With mission still widely perceived as a Western enterprise, these questions have not been seriously considered.

Nico Botha of South Africa asked at the 2017 MWCLC what it means to be followers of Christ and citizens of the Kingdom in the midst of empire.⁴⁶ In the early church, the challenge was to follow Christ in the context of the Roman Empire. The choice was not just between worshipping the Creator God as revealed in Jesus Christ and worshipping Caesar; the early Christians lived in a culture steeped in debauchery, injustice, violence and idolatry and hostile to everything that Christians believed and valued. Those Christians had to choose how they should live. In

43 Other than among Pentecostals, the acknowledgement of the supernatural by Western evangelicals is fairly recent. See Harold A. Netland, *Religious Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022); Travis Dickinson, 'Religious Experiences Are Common. Which Ones Should We Trust?' *Christianity Today*, 14 February 2022, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/46310>.

44 Julie Ma, 'The Role of Christian Women in the Global South', *Transformation* 31, no. 3 (2014): 194–206.

45 Emerging examples are Christian housemaids from Philippines and Ethiopia working in the Middle East, who express their mission as being witnesses to the families of the middle class, the rich and the elite.

46 Nico A. Botha, 'Church and Mission: Unavoidable Issues Defining the Relationship', in *Majority World Perspectives on Christian Mission*, ed. Nico A. Botha and Eugene Baron (Johannesburg: UJ Press, 2022), 48.

contrast, Protestant missions that brought the gospel to the Majority World originated in Christendom and did not understand Christians as minorities living in hostile and alien cultures.

Western evangelical Christianity is very Constantinian—that is, it tends to view the church and state as working together in an alliance to achieve mutual goals, and it assumes a cultural context in which being a Christian carries positive social and political value. This tendency is reflected in Western teaching and training materials on discipleship, ethics and Christian living, which overlook the pressing question of how to be followers of Christ as religious and social minorities. Nor do these materials address issues of violence, poverty, and social and economic injustice, which pervade the life contexts of many Global South Christians. As a result, they produce what Emmanuel Katongole refers to as a disembodied spirituality,⁴⁷ where most people adhere to the Christian faith yet that faith does not permeate society or transform social values and cultural practices.

A number of leaders spoke about finding their place as a community within the social and cultural fabric of their countries. As minorities, they often face the stigma of not belonging to the mainstream of society.⁴⁸ They often wonder how they can contribute to their country's well-being or participate in nation building.⁴⁹ Contributing to the well-being of their nation while being a minority establishes their group's claim to be an integral part of their country and can also protect them.⁵⁰ They draw inspiration from Jeremiah's exhortation to the Jews in exile: 'This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon ... seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper' (Jer 29:5, 8).

Despite the considerable talk about integral mission, I heard various leaders express surprise that Western evangelicals were trying to find a place for social concern within the gospel. The term 'integral mission' was coined by Rene Padilla, a theologian from the Global South. Understanding the mission of God holistically is natural for the church in the Majority World. Their worldview does not differentiate the spiritual from the physical and social. Unfortunately, the evangelical Christianity they had been taught and inherited denied this wholeness and focused only on the spiritual and eternal, ignoring the social dimensions of their faith as evidenced by evangelistic tools such as the Bridge Illustrations, the Four Spiritual Laws and the

47 Katongole, *A Future for Africa*, 175. Katongole states that the African church has remained captive to a Western understanding of the church as a spiritual enclave or an agency for pastoral care.

48 For instance, a Protestant denomination in Turkey wrestles with being Christians within a hostile political and religious context. While they assert their Turkishness, they struggle with how closely they should align themselves with the ruling political party for their own protection.

49 Gideon Para-Mallam, 'The Role of Christians in Nation Building', in *Majority World Perspectives on Christian Mission*, ed. Nico A. Botha and Eugene Baron (Johannesburg: UJ Press, 2022), 88–113; Hwa Yung, 'The Gospel and Nation Building in Emergent Nations: An Evangelical Agenda', in *Majority World Perspectives on Christian Mission*, 172–95.

50 A Baptist leader in Lebanon, in personal conversation, said that the small Protestant minority in their country, by contributing to social well-being through their schools, hospitals, humanitarian programs and specialized human services, make themselves invaluable to the country.

Roman Road, and discipleship materials such as the Design for Discipleship. Christians in the Global South are having to rediscover this wholeness of their faith.

From my own experience of working with World Vision and church-based agencies, for most Western evangelicals integral mission means responding to disasters and addressing poverty through community development along with spiritual ministry. These responses mostly take the form of time-limited projects with specific budgets. Although there is a legitimate place for such activity, holistic or integral mission as described by many Majority World leaders is much more than that. It is a way of living and being that encompasses concern for the environment,⁵¹ peace⁵² and addressing social conflict.⁵³ It addresses ethical business practices (especially corruption)⁵⁴ and good governance.⁵⁵ These strategies depart from the traditional reliance on time-bound projects with specific outcomes.

Some leaders expressed concern about many people's inability to see God at work in the broader world. The model that the Global South received from Western missions implied that God works only through the church to reconcile the world to himself. But some, consistent with the theological idea of common grace, see God's hand in social reform movements outside the church that attempt to make society more equitable and safer so that everyone can be blessed.⁵⁶ They understand God's mission, the *missio Dei*, as redeeming, reconciling and restoring all creation. God's mission is greater than anything that Christians and the church can envisage, and he invites his people to partner with him in it.

Also, some leaders felt that Western evangelicals and mission agencies do not acknowledge or appreciate the growing contribution of indigenous missions in the Majority World unless they were funded or resourced by Western churches or

51 The Africa Brotherhood Church (ABC) in Kenya, through its Agricultural Resource and Technology Center in Kibwezi, trains farmers in sustainable agriculture and water conservation to reduce negative impacts on the environment. See also Jean-Pierre Ibcwca Lipanda, 'Congo's Christians Confront a Climate Crisis', *Plough*, 17 May 2022, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/46311>; Ken Gnanakan, *Responsible Stewardship of God's Creation* (New York: World Evangelical Alliance, 2014).

52 Paul N. Alexander (ed.), *Christ at the Checkpoint: Theology in the Service of Justice and Peace* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012). Christ at the Checkpoint conferences are hosted by Palestinian Christians living in Israel.

53 The work of Rev. Gato Munyamasoko of the Association des Eglises Baptistes au Rwanda (AEBR) in Rwanda and other parts of East Africa, stressing peace-building and reconciliation as an integral part of the church's mission, offers a significant model of addressing needs in areas affected by war and civil conflict.

54 Christian leaders with whom I spoke often referred to corruption because it affected their lives and ministries. See Inter-Religious Council of Kenya, *Breaking the Chains of Corruption: A Christian Approach* (Nairobi: Inter-Religious Council of Kenya, 2019); Vinay Samuel, 'Business and Corruption', paper presented at Integrity in Business in the Central European Context, 11–16 March 1994, Kástiel Kocovce, Slovakia, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/46312>.

55 T. Pacho, 'African Churches and Good Governance in Africa', in *Anthology of African Christianity*, ed. I. A. Phiri, D. Werner, C. Kaunda and K. Owino (Oxford: Regnum, 2017), 110–11. There are a surprising number of articles in general publications and blogs on the role of the church in ensuring good governance, in such diverse countries as Singapore and Nigeria.

56 One example is an open letter written by Muslims to Christians to foster dialogue and social harmony. See 'A Common Word Between Us and You', 2007, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/46352>. Other examples rooted in the Global South are indigenous land rights movements and the movement against apartheid in South Africa.

mission agencies. For example, a bishop of the Africa Brotherhood Church (ABC) in Kenya mentioned his disappointment that their North American partners showed no interest in their church planting and evangelism activity but only in their agriculture and orphans' programs and in theological education. The ABC was particularly excited about having grown beyond their own ethnic community in Kenya and having planted new churches in Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Missional leadership

Many of my respondents felt that Western models of leadership were not always appropriate in their contexts. These models focus more on management and results rather than on the pastoral needs of people and communities. Some leaders and theological educators in India and parts of Africa expressed the need for a more biblical model for leadership that highlights the character of the leader, the spiritual disciplines, and the needs of people.⁵⁷ Peter Tarantal of South Africa, who provides leadership to the MWCLC, argues that Global South leaders must have qualities not often emphasized by the Western church, such as being prophetic and having cultural awareness.⁵⁸ From their perspective, Western missional leadership is primarily managerial and the spiritual dimension is secondary.⁵⁹ Many participants at the 2017 MWCLC said that most conversations with Western mission leaders are all about strategy, results and accountability and rarely about spiritual issues. Some expressed with sadness that they yearned for leaders committed to holiness, prayer, listening for the voice and leading of God, fasting and being rooted in the Word. I would observe generally that mission has become too anthropocentric; the fact that it is *God's* mission is only given lip service and the practical implications of this conviction are rarely understood.

Almost all leaders expressed a huge need for leadership development, as research by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity suggests that only 5% of pastors globally have received formal training from a recognized theological institution. Unfortunately, there are very few non-Western models for training and nurturing leaders. The model of theological training that the missionaries brought initially was developed in Germany by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) in an effort to professionalize Lutheran clergy. But other models have since been developed that are

57 This issue surfaced in discussions when I was involved in a project with the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE) on connecting theological curricula with the context of the graduates. The pilot phase involved ten seminaries in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East. New models for theological training being implemented by African institutions are described in Bill Houston, 'The Future Is Not What It Used To Be: Challenges and Choices Facing Theological Education in Africa', in *Handbook on Theological Education in Africa*, ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri and Dietrich Werner (Minneapolis, MN: 1517 Media, 2013), 108–16.

58 Peter Tarantal, 'Global South Christian Leaders: An African Perspective', in *Majority World Perspectives on Christian Mission*, ed. Nico A. Botha and Eugene Baron (Johannesburg: UJ Press, 2022), 1–16.

59 Missiologist Samuel Escobar used the term 'managerial missiology' as one approach to missions. Escobar, 'A Movement Divided: Three Approaches to World Evangelization Stand in Tension with One Another', *Transformation: An International Journal of Holistic Mission Studies* 8, no. 4 (1991): 7–13.

more relevant and sensitive to local contexts and cultures.⁶⁰ Only recently has training specific to mission in the Majority World been introduced.⁶¹ Very few books or resources from a non-Western perspective exist on developing and nurturing church leadership outside Bible colleges and seminaries.

The criticisms are not limited to Western leadership models. For example, Peter Tarantal spoke about the 'idolatries of power' among Christian leaders in Africa who seem to imitate secular political leadership.⁶² There was concern (especially among Indian evangelical leaders) that some segments of church leadership in their own countries follow unethical local practices, politics and discrimination based on ethnicity, caste or tribe. Such behaviour has compromised the church's witness.

Partnership

Even though the centre of global Christianity has shifted to the Majority World, the basic premise of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference that mission was primarily a project of the Western church still infuses most discussions on partnership.

What does partnership mean?⁶³ Is it a contractual obligation between two parties, defined by terms and conditions imposed by the funding party? A different model, more relational and based on values of Global South cultures, describes accountability in partnerships as based on trust and mutually defined roles.⁶⁴ However, this model must also factor in the reality of sin, which can cause misunderstanding, undermine trust and poison relationships. Because of this challenge, partnership models tend to default towards being managerial and legal in nature.

60 Re-Forma (see <https://worldea.org/yourls/46313>) is an initiative that seeks to upgrade pastoral and theological training by providing recognized benchmarks for informal and non-formal, biblically based ministry knowledge. Also see Rupen Das, *Connecting Curriculum with Context: Handbook for Context Relevant Curriculum Development in Theological Education* (Leicester, UK: Langham Global Library, 2015), 12–21 for six models of theological training. Access to theological training and upgrading non-formal training are critical concerns for ICETE. Theological Education by Extension (TEE) is having a significant impact as it tries to meet the need for theologically trained pastors. See Hanna-Ruth van Wingerden, *TEE in Asia: Empowering Churches, Equipping Disciples* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2021).

61 Some organizations including Operation Mobilization and Youth with a Mission (YWAM) have been training leaders in the Majority World for some time. Other examples include the Missionary Training Institute in South Korea and the Asian Center for Missions in the Philippines. Leaders in the Philippines are starting a unique lay mission training program for Filipinos going abroad as overseas workers.

62 Tarantal, 'Global South Christian Leaders: An African Perspective', 2–4.

63 Patrick Fung's paper 'Mission Partnership in a Polycentric World', presented at the Global South Leaders Conference, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2017, explores the different dimensions of partnership in mission from a Global South perspective.

64 There is emerging interest in developing cross-cultural partnerships with churches and organizations in the Global South. See Beth Birmingham and Scott Todd, eds., *Shared Strength: Exploring Cross-Cultural Christian Partnerships* (Colorado Springs, CO: Compassion International, 2010); Mary Lederleitner, *Cross-Cultural Partnerships: Navigating the Complexities of Money and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010); Werner Mischke, *The Beauty of Partnership* (Scottsdale, AZ: MissionONE, 2010); Daniel Rickett, *Building Strategic Relationships: A Practical Guide to Partnering with Non-Western Missions* (Spokane, WA: Partners International and WinePress Publishers, 2003).

A second issue in any partnership is how the two parties relate to each other. Many Majority World mission leaders feel wounded by the treatment they receive from Western evangelicals and mission leaders. They often feel talked down to and not trusted. Their opinions are not valued. Some spoke of instances when their thoughts and ideas were not heard, even while similar ideas shared by Western mission leaders in clear, articulate English were embraced.

Many spoke about the problem of *managerial missions*. They felt that the management systems required for funding proposals, reporting, evaluations, rigid implementation schedules and personnel management were too onerous and of questionable value. How, they wondered, is this information ever used—if at all? I heard numerous stories of instances where the reports were merely filed away and the comments and lessons learnt were not even acknowledged.⁶⁵ Given the complexity of all these requirements, many wondered if there are other ways to manage missions. While supporting the importance of management systems and accountability, they were not convinced that what Western mission agencies required of them was always appropriate in terms of content.

The underlying question in any partnership is how the collaboration begins. A funding relationship is almost always the driving force behind the collaboration. For an indigenous mission to receive funds, it must accept the strategy and the ways of doing ministry prescribed by the funding partner. Quite often, other than a needs assessment, little effort is made to understand the local context, culture and challenges. When consultation occurs, it usually involves the funding partner assessing the capability and trustworthiness of the local partner.⁶⁶ There is no opportunity for the indigenous partner to assess the trustworthiness, integrity and cultural awareness of the funding agency! The strategies developed by the funding partner take priority over everything else, including local strategies. When I was with the Canadian Baptists, leaders of partner churches in East Africa and India proposed first engaging with people involved on the front lines, rather than developing a strategy and then engaging the local partner. There should be an understanding of how God is already at work and an attempt to discern how and where he wants the donor organization involved.

One leader summarized the challenge of collaborating by stating that although, in a healthy partnership, both parties should gain, a biblical partnership must also involve sacrificial service.

The work of mission

As mentioned earlier, the growth of the church in the Majority World is not the result of strategic decisions, but a work of God. Ghanaian theologian Kwame Bediako provided an insightful perspective in this regard: 'Missionaries did not bring Christ

65 This was not only cited by the ABC and the African Christian Churches and Schools (ACC&S) in Kenya about their North American partners, but also by churches in Syria and Lebanon when receiving funding from overseas donors. One UK charity funding projects in Lebanon used subtle threats to withhold funding if they did not receive reports of a certain quality.

66 I developed an assessment toolkit for Canadian Baptist Ministries that assessed the ministry and capacity of their international indigenous partners and alignment with CBM's values and objectives.

to Africa—Christ brought them.⁶⁷ His comment challenges the idea that mission is a Western enterprise and instead offers a divine perspective on God’s mission and how he works. The growth in indigenously funded mission in recent decades is significant. One leader called it ‘a great mess’ because the growth is dependent on locals’ own resources and is often not coordinated. However, several specific issues concerning the work of mission arose frequently.

The first is the concept of closed or restricted-access countries, a Western construct with which some church leaders in the Middle East, North Africa and central Asia struggle. To them, the construct implies that if a country is closed or restricted to foreign missionaries, it is closed to the gospel. But this is not the case! It may be difficult or illegal to be a Christian in such a country, but in every case, a remnant of local believers meets as their circumstances permit. Television and the Internet can and do penetrate through barriers for evangelism and training. In many of these countries, the church continues to grow in spite of restrictions, challenges and persecution. Some leaders in these countries said they want the global church to pray for them, encourage them and walk with them. Few are looking to leave their homelands or emigrate to the West.

Second, many indigenous movements, such as the Friends Missionary Prayer Band⁶⁸ in India, are rooted in significant prayer and fasting. Many leaders spoke of these spiritual disciplines as foundational to attempting any mission.

Third, there is growing concern about theologies and church models that have originated in the United States. Many African leaders mentioned the so-called prosperity gospel and some megachurches that have caused significant damage by giving the poor false hope of financial blessings while, in the process, enriching a select handful of people.⁶⁹ The lifestyle of many megachurch leaders has damaged the image of Christians in their countries.⁷⁰ One general secretary of a Latin American Bible society described other divisive theologies from North America that are gaining traction in Latin America. With large amounts of funding to train leaders and influence congregations, these interlopers often tend to alienate anyone who does not believe as they do.

Finally, based on the history of missions in their countries, some observed that the gospel does not seem to trickle down from the elites and leaders to the rest of

67 Kwame Bediako, “‘Missionaries Did Not Bring Christ to Africa—Christ Brought Them’: Why Africa Needs Jesus Christ”, lecture presented at the Annual School of Theology of the African Institute for Christian Mission and Research (AICMAR), Butere, Kenya, 1–4 August 2006.

68 On this organization, see Friends Missionary Prayer Band, ‘Background’, <https://worldia.org/yourls/46314>.

69 ‘The “Prosperity gospel” leads to a false sense of wellness, security and, ultimately, false hope. It is exploitation and often adds pain to the sufferer. In African culture, prosperity was linked to work ethic and communal co-existence.’ African Institute for Contemporary Mission and Research, ACNS Anglican Communion News Service, 2006, <https://worldia.org/yourls/ert463rd15>.

70 On the other hand, Jared Wilson cautions that we should not dismiss God’s desire to bless us. He writes, ‘The spiritual dysfunction of this theology [the prosperity gospel] is largely about pragmatism, a turning of biblical principles into dubious formulas for wealth and accumulation. It is one thing to think of riches and material possessions as God’s blessings. It’s another thing entirely to think of them as God’s debt to our faithfulness.’ Jared C. Wilson, ‘In Our Rejection of the Prosperity Gospel, Are We Missing God’s Provision?’ *Christianity Today*, 2021, <https://worldia.org/yourls/46316>.

society. Although leaders felt very proud that evangelical Christians had been elected as president in Guatemala and Malawi, these victories had done little for a greater openness to the gospel, as they did in historical instances in earlier times when a king in Europe or Central Asia converted and declared his country Christian. Others involved in campus ministries such as InterVarsity, Evangelical Union, or Campus Crusade said that university graduates rarely had a spiritual impact beyond their family, church or immediate community. Their spiritual impact did not reach the poor. In contrast, leaders affirmed that in their experience, that the gospel trickles up. Where the elite and leaders have been reached, the gospel tends to stay with them; when the poor are reached by the gospel, within two or three generations, they start moving up economically and socially in society and exert influence around them.⁷¹

Conclusion

These insights represent only a sampling of the diversity of voices in the Majority World. But if any single overriding issue was evident in all the conversations, talks, presentations and literature, it is that mission in the Majority World must be *rooted in the local*—local worldviews, local mission strategies, local funding, locally contextualized theologies and local understanding of what the Bible says to address moral and social issues. This because Scripture is read and Christ is perceived through the lens of a person's culture and life experiences.

Despite the deep appreciation of the positive value of historical mission from the West, God's people in the Majority World recognize that they now need to assume responsibility for mission and grow in maturity to handle all that it entails, even if they struggle to fund everything they would like to do. They wish to redefine the relationships with the Western church and mission agencies so that the conversations and partnerships are between mutually respecting equals.

Majority World mission leaders know that much work is needed to develop local missional theologies and strategies, understand local models of leadership and training and equip missionaries accordingly, and gain a greater awareness of how God is already working in the Global South. These then need to flow to local congregations. Much more thinking and research are needed on how to live as minorities who glorify God in countries that are hostile to the Christian faith. Locally rooted discipleship must inform what it means to be a disciple and follower of Christ in each place.

Probably the greatest challenges from listening to these leaders are their sense of Christ's sovereignty over the nations and their deep desire for mission to be rooted and grounded in prayer and fasting until God's Kingdom comes and his will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

71 There is anecdotal evidence for these observations, but no research has been done to prove them. Research on the social mobility of Christian converts indicates a complex set of factors that facilitate upward mobility, with access to education being the primary one.