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New Frontiers in Missiology

Exploring Innovation, Global Shifts, and the Future of Mission



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Chapter 1

The Future of Missiology Is Global

Todd M. Johnson[1]

The most significant trend in missiology for today and into the foreseeable future is the ongoing shift of Christianity from the Global North to the Global South. The Global North is defined in a geopolitical sense by five current United Nations regions (fifty-three countries): Eastern Europe (including Russia), Northern Europe, Southern Europe, Western Europe, and Northern America. Global South is defined as the remaining sixteen current UN regions (185 countries): Eastern Africa, Middle Africa, Northern Africa, Southern Africa, Western Africa, Eastern Asia, South-central Asia, Southeastern Asia, Western Asia, the Caribbean, Central America, South America, Australia/New Zealand, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia.

Table 1 below shows that in 1900, 82 percent of all Christians were in the Global North. By 2025, that number had fallen to 31 percent and, our initial estimates for 2075 project just 17 percent of Christians will reside in the Global North by that year (Ross et al. 2025). In the Global South, the corresponding figures are 18 percent (1900), 69 percent (2025) and 83 percent (2075). According to this estimate, by 2075 there will be an almost complete upending of European dominance in global Christianity.

Today, in 2025, Africa has 754 million Christians—by far the most of any continent. By 2075, nearly half of all Christians will be African (1.8 billion). In that same year, both Asia and Latin America will have more Christians than Europe. Meanwhile, Christians in the Global North are projected to shrink, in raw numbers, from 824 million in 2025 to 636 million in 2075.

Yet, most missiology is still firmly based in the Global North. The simplest reading of the shift's implications for missiology would be to move

1 Portions of this chapter build on two of my earlier works: Johnson (2021 and 2023).

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Table 1. Christians by Continent, 1900, 2025, and 2075

	Christians 1900	1900 %	% all Xns	Christians 2025	2025 %	% all Xns	Christians 2075	2075 %	% all Xns
Global North	**459,901,000**	**95.0**	**82.4**	**823,714,000**	**73.3**	**31.1**	**635,923,000**	**59.1**	**16.9**
Europe	380,647,000	94.5	68.2	551,934,000	74.5	20.9	393,283,000	61.9	10.5
North America	79,254,000	97.1	14.2	271,779,000	70.9	10.3	242,640,000	55.2	6.5
Global South	**98,445,000**	**8.7**	**17.6**	**1,821,603,000**	**25.8**	**68.9**	**3,125,664,000**	**33.6**	**83.1**
Africa	9,640,000	8.9	1.7	754,229,000	49.3	28.5	1,796,331,000	53.4	47.8
Asia	21,966,000	2.3	3.9	416,786,000	8.7	15.8	647,287,000	12.6	17.2
Latin America	62,002,000	95.2	11.1	620,116,000	91.9	23.4	648,698,000	89.1	17.2
Oceania	4,837,000	77.4	0.9	30,472,000	65.3	1.2	33,348,000	51.3	0.9
Global total	**558,346,000**	**34.5**	**100.0**	**2,645,317,000**	**32.3**	**100.0**	**3,761,587,000**	**36.3**	**100.0**

Source: Zurlo and Johnson (2025)

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from a Global North missiology to a Global South missiology. However, I'd like to make the case for global missiology (which should have been the goal even in 1900). The Global South is not monolithic in the same sense that the Global North was. Therefore, global missiology values diversity, considering the perspectives of all peoples, giving equal voice to all. This, as we will see, requires the decentering of Western or Global North missiology.

The Long View: Two Thousand Years

When we take a long view of Christian history, considering two thousand years of Christian growth and decline, the changing demographics of Christians are striking. Utilizing clues from historical records, we can track the numbers of Christians in every continent of the world across the entire history of Christianity (Johnson and Ross 2009, 212–13). Thus, the percentage of Christians in today's Global North and Global South can be estimated for each century. For at least the first nine hundred years (until about 923 CE), Christians in the Global South (Africa and Asia) outnumbered those in the Global North (Europe). Then Christianity in the Global South gradually declined until 1500 when fully 92 percent of all Christians were Northerners. This percentage fell slightly until 1900, when it was 83 percent. After 1900 the percentage declined precipitously (or from the Southern point of view rose meteorically). By 1981, Christians in the Global South outnumbered Christians in the Global North for the first time in over one thousand years. This represents a return to the demographic makeup of Christianity in the early church (predominantly Southern) but also today's vast extension of Christianity into all countries as well as thousands of peoples, languages, and cultures.

The Global View

Most of us realize that belonging to a worldwide Christian family requires the decentering of Western perspectives (long considered the standard) while giving equal status to viewpoints from all cultures, peoples, and languages. While this seems obvious in the areas of Scripture translation, worship, spirituality, and discipleship, it is less so in theology and missiology. In fact, most of the time "global theology" refers to Western theology taught around the world. While Western theology texts, translated and distributed abroad, offer helpful information, they cannot

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represent a truly *global* theology. In fact, global theology experts reveal liabilities of Western concepts, with respect to a world that is inclusive, multidirectional, interlinked, and complex. World Christianity scholar Jehu Hanciles illustrates this well when he writes:

> The truth of the matter is that our captivity to the Western intellectual tradition is debilitating and suffocating. Western theological education has great value and can be adapted to the needs of Christian communities globally. But Western "systematic" theology, like any other body of theological discourse, is heavily contextual and ethnocentric. It is designed to promote knowledge of (and expertise in) issues or topics pertaining to the Western world—along with the language requirements. (Hanciles 2024, 40)

Western theology, seeing these wider realities as an inconvenience, tends to underscore similarities while underestimating differences. For instance, this mindset is manifested in questions such as: "Aren't we all basically the same?" "Aren't others becoming more like us?" "Isn't the world converging toward common standards?" In other words, most Western theologians assume—either directly or by default—that creating theology is not a contextual undertaking. What they don't realize is that Western positions are not neutral in a global context. They can actually cause harm. Theological educator Linda Cannell puts it well:

> A structure formalized in the medieval period, modified to suit the theological shifts of the Reformation, influenced by the scientific methodology of the Enlightenment, shaped by the German research university, deeply affected by modernity, and assumed to define true theological education today is likely not adequate for the challenges of contemporary culture and the education of Christians who have been shaped by that culture. (Cannell 2006, 309)

Allow me to illustrate this further. I was at an evangelical conference in Wittenberg in 2017 to celebrate five hundred years of the Protestant Reformation. I presented our research showing that over 40 percent of all Protestants were Africans. Out of the hundred people at the meeting, only a few were Africans. I was sitting next to a leader from Ghana when someone from the stage said that Africans were welcome at the table in this evangelical movement. My colleague quietly recounted a Ghanaian

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proverb to us. "It is good if you invite me to your table, but it is far better if you invite me into the kitchen." What would it mean to have Africans in the kitchen? Why are Christians from the Global South invited to a Global North table when they should be found with everyone else in the kitchen? Unfortunately, our own global assessment shows Global North dominance in theology, mission, music, and many other aspects of the Christian life. Needless to say, the shift of Christianity to the South should be accompanied by a shift in vision and leadership as well as in theology and missiology.

Having established the demographic landscape of global Christianity and the need for global thinking, there are at least seven facets of the global future of missiology.

1. The Future of Missiology Is Post-Western

As discussed above, Evangelicalism is considered by many to be a Western faith. For a long time, Western perspectives have been considered as the standard form of Christianity in theology, ecclesiology, and missiology. Most theological training today is squarely based in the Western way of thinking—ironically, Global South pastors are now being trained in a highly individualistic Western mindset. New Testament professor Esau McCaulley writes:

> Socially located biblical interpretation is nothing less than the record of the Spirit's work through scriptural engagement among the different ethnicities and cultures of the world. Unfortunately, too often, the sanctification of culture has been confused with the *Westernization* of culture. That lie has done tremendous damage to the church. God's transfiguring work is not done in comparison with the West. Ethnicities do not become more holy as they approach likeness to Europe but to God. (McCaulley 2024)

Fortunately, Western perspectives can be both acknowledged and decentered while global voices increasingly represent who we are. Since all biblical, theological, and missiological studies are contextual, our understanding of the Bible will be greatly enriched by the hundreds of new cultural perspectives Evangelicals represent. In fact, our global diversity strongly encourages new missiological reflection. In his recent book *Why*

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