



# Global Trends and the North American Church in Mission: Discovering the Church's Role in the Twenty-First Century

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## Abstract

Change has always been a part of human experience in history, but perhaps never at the accelerated rate that we are witnessing in the early twenty-first century. It may be easier to identify change than to assess the implication and its effects. This is certainly true of the modern missionary enterprise. The center of Christianity, in terms of growth and vitality, has moved outside of North America to South America, Africa, and parts of Asia. A new set of trends now characterize missions from North America. These changes require new responses in order for the North American church to fulfill a new role.

## Keywords

globalization, Global South, mission shift, contextual theology

The gulf between academia and the church is often broad, to the extent that the contribution of scholars to the church in mission lacks the impact it could or should have. One example of this paucity of influence is found in the topic of globalization. This term has been used to describe and explain nearly everything by popular media. Nevertheless, the local church has too often ignored the cause and outcomes of global trends on its mission. Frequently, globalizing references are not defined in context, and

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implications are not described. As a result, there is little understanding of the source and implications of globalizing trends on the mission of the church.

In this article I briefly describe the manner in which two important industries have been globalized and then demonstrate that a similar process has also occurred in the mission engagement of the North American church. I further argue that local churches and the agencies with whom they partner must engage in mission with a planned response to these global trends, rather than with a conditioned reaction.<sup>1</sup>

Globalization—“the multiple ways in which the local is connected to and impacts the global”<sup>2</sup>—is a complex phenomenon, with multiple manifestations that touch seemingly every aspect of life. The effects of globalization are often obscured by its very pervasiveness. With globalization, the world is rapidly becoming a whole in which the parts interact and relate to each other independent of geography. What happens in one part of the world affects people and events in other parts of the world through a global web of interconnectivity, including travel, communication, and commerce.

Globalization has become one of the primary agents of change in the twenty-first century, with the world becoming increasingly interconnected and interdependent. The changes are occurring at such a rate that industries often lose their capacity to adapt. The following two sections give a synopsis of how two industries have been globalized and the consequences of their inadequate adaptation to change. They share three characteristics of globalization—rapid change, the inability to adapt to change, and the dire consequences of failing to adapt.

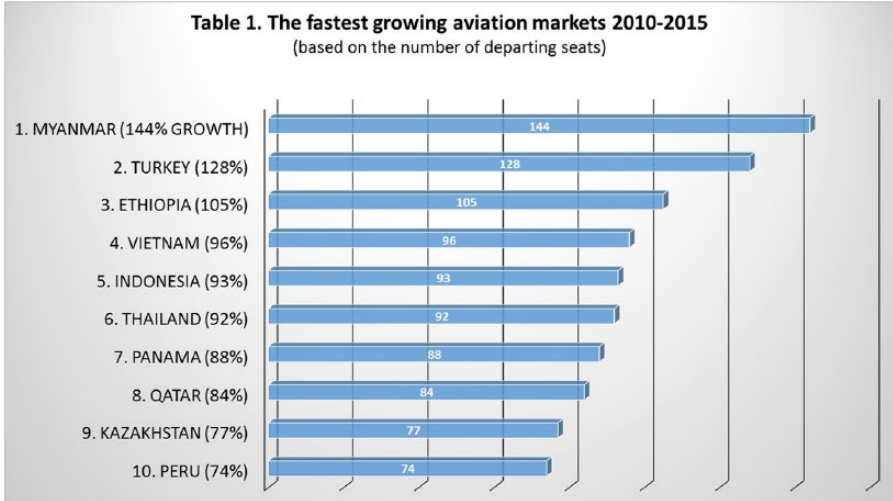
## **The globalization of the airline industry**

The airline industry has been a primary player in the acceleration of this process. Nations and locations are connected through international airports. Air travel is relatively cheap and widely accessible to people of modest income. A passenger can board a plane and be anywhere in the world within twenty-four hours.

The expansion of the global airline industry has been fueled by emerging markets in the Global South. The largest growth in the world aviation industry has occurred in parts of Asia, the Middle East, and South America (see table 1). The airline industry has been an integral component of globalizing trends, yet ironically, it has been globalized in the process.<sup>3</sup>

Malaysian Flight 370 took off from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on March 8, 2014, en route to Beijing with 239 passengers and crew on board. The jetliner disappeared from radar one hour after takeoff. An intense international search-and-rescue operation ensued, which found no debris or evidence of the flight’s ultimate path. Sixteen months later, on July 29, 2015, a portion of Flight 370’s wing was found on the beach of Réunion Island in the Southern Indian Ocean. No other remains of the plane or passengers have been found to date.

Modern airliners, such as Malaysian Flight 370, are tracked with ground-based radar. Jetliners disappear from radar over large bodies of water for extended periods of time. GPS technology is available to track airliners, even over wide expanses of



Source: *Airline Weekly*, September 28, 2015, no. 544, p. 6.

ocean, yet the implementation of this technology has failed to keep pace with the growth of the industry. In the wake of the disaster of Malaysian Flight 370, the National Transportation Safety Board has recommended that the Federal Aviation Administration and the International Civil Aviation Organization adopt new technologies for tracking commercial flights.<sup>4</sup> The modern aviation industry has been affected by three characteristics of globalization: Rapid change has taken place through the accelerated growth of the industry. The industry has not adapted to this change by replacing obsolete tracking technologies. The disappearance of Flight 370 is an unfortunate consequence.

### The globalization of the American health-care industry

The Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is a leader in international health-care and disease prevention. The mission of the CDC is “to protect America from health, safety and security threats, both foreign and in the U.S.”<sup>5</sup>

Historically, Americans have witnessed the outbreak of epidemics through media reports on television. Such reports have galvanized fund-raising to aid populations in remote places that many observers might not be able to locate on a map or even pronounce. These events have not caused any personal danger for the American public. But now, globalization has changed this scenario.

The recent Ebola epidemic began in December 2013 in West Africa, in Meliandou, Guinea, a remote village bordering Liberia and Sierra Leone.<sup>6</sup> It was initially contained to Guinea but soon spread to bordering countries. Not until January 14, 2016, did the World Health Organization declare Africa to be clear of the virus. The toll from this epidemic was 28,637 cases and 11,315 deaths. It became clear that this West

African epidemic was different. Now, what happens in a remote West African bush village has consequences globally. The danger was that this regional epidemic threatened to become a pandemic.

For example, Thomas Duncan, a Liberian, boarded a plane in Monrovia en route to Dallas, Texas, to join his family. Duncan had assisted in the transportation of a sick pregnant woman to a hospital in Monrovia prior to his departure. The woman later died from Ebola. Duncan became ill upon arrival in Dallas and went to the emergency room at Presbyterian Hospital. He was diagnosed with sinusitis and discharged. Five days later he returned to the ER, was diagnosed with Ebola and was admitted. Duncan died the following week. Two nurses contracted Ebola while caring for him.

Globalization has affected the manner in which disease is spread. Epidemics are not limited by national borders or bodies of water. The CDC and the American health-care system had the capacity, but they were unprepared to deal with local manifestations of this epidemic. Three globalizing characteristics have impacted this industry. Rapid change has occurred with increase in travel to the United States from all parts of the globe and the subsequent introduction of new diseases. The U.S. health-care system was not prepared to deal with the local impact of distant epidemics. The consequence was the failure to diagnose Duncan when he was admitted to an emergency room in Dallas, and the failure to prevent the infection of two nurses with Ebola. What happens in Meliandou doesn't stay in Meliandou.

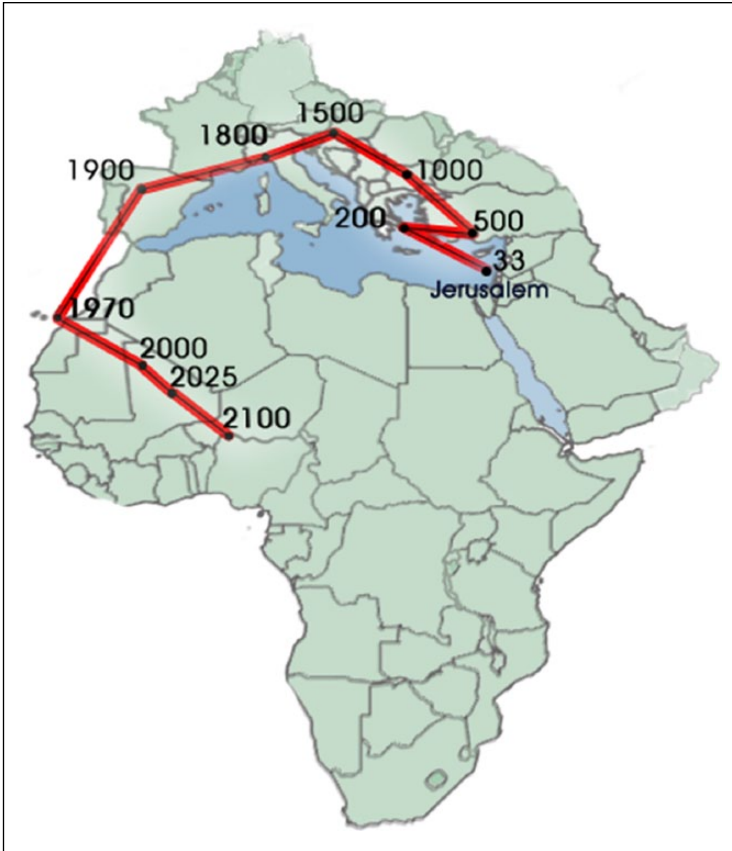
## **The globalization of the missions industry**

### *A new center*

Just like the airline and health-care industries generally, so the missions industry has been deeply impacted by globalization.<sup>7</sup> “The ever-accelerating and intensifying phenomenon of globalization has been radically reshaping lifestyles and redefining our understandings of culture and ethnic identity. Furthermore, Christianity has become a truly global faith with globalization increasing the interconnectivity among Christians worldwide.”<sup>8</sup>

One of the primary ways in which the North American church has been affected by globalization is through the shift of the center of Christianity. “The center of Christianity today, in terms of both numbers and vitality, has shifted south into Africa and Latin America. But the center of material wealth and power remains in North America, Europe, and parts of Asia.”<sup>9</sup> This reality has created a new set of dynamics by replacing old paradigms. Like the airline and health-care industries, mission agencies and churches have struggled to identify these global changes and have been slow to respond appropriately.

The map in figure 1 demonstrates the growth of Christianity from the time of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2 and projected, based on current trends, to the year 2100. Each point on the map represents the statistical center of gravity for global Christianity from AD 33 to AD 2100. At each point on the timeline, “one half of all Christians in the world live north of this point, the other half live south of the point. In the same way, one half live to the east of the point, and the other half to the west.”<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 1.** Statistical center of gravity for global Christianity, AD 33–2100.  
Source: Sun Young Chung and Todd M. Johnson, "Tracking Global Christianity's Statistical Centre of gravity, AD 33–AD 2100," *International Review of Mission* 95 (2004): 167.

The starting point is the inauguration of the church in Jerusalem. The church grew in a northwesterly manner. The statistical center rested in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) during the first century, where the early church councils convened. A dramatic turn to the northwest occurred during the second half of the first century, reaching its furthest northern point in 1500. The statistical center was in western Europe between AD 1500 and 1800, which corresponds with the Reformation. The trajectory then took a southwesterly course. The modern missions movement occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when churches in North America and western Europe were sending missionaries to all continents. Adoniram Judson, William Carey, Hudson Taylor, Lottie Moon, Robert Moffat, and a host of others took the Gospel to Asia and Africa during this time.

The trajectory took a dramatic turn in 1970 and presently is in the country of Mali, with a projected statistical point in northwestern Nigeria by 2100. This is the first

time in the history of the church that the statistical center of the church has been moving consistently and rapidly on a southeasterly trajectory. Churches planted during the modern mission's movement have matured and are now planting other churches. The movement of modern mission from Western nations has resulted in church planting movements in Southern and Asian nations.<sup>11</sup> We have seen that the threefold pattern of globalization begins with rapid change. This has occurred in the mission enterprise through the exponential growth of the church in the Global South. This shift in the center of Christianity has dramatically altered the modern mission paradigm. Missionaries used to report to their churches saying, "We're going to the mission field to work our way out of a job." This has now occurred in many parts of the world. The slogan for the missionary enterprise is no longer "From the West to the rest" but is now "From everywhere to everywhere." The paradigm has shifted from paternalism and pioneer missions to partnering with nationals. A missional task for the North American church in a globalized world is to identify its new role and fulfill that task in light of global changes.

The second characteristic of globalization on industry is the challenge of adapting to change. The nature and speed of the shift of global Christianity has presented the North American church with unique challenges. This global shift of Christianity has been largely ignored by the North American media and academia, yet it may have been the most significant religious event of the twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

Research conducted by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity reveals that half of the top missionary sending countries are in the Global South. The United States still sends the largest number of missionaries (currently 127,000), with Brazil second (34,000). However, if we consider the number of missionaries sent per capita, the United States ranks only ninth.<sup>13</sup> The Global South is not simply the statistical center of Christianity in terms of numbers; it has also become the strategic center of mission. Modern mission strategy must account for this shift in its center. Mission-sending efforts are developing across the Global South at a time when North American mission sending agencies are facing attrition in their missionary force. Samuel Escobar states that "missionary organizations do not find as in the past a regular flow of volunteers willing to be trained and sent as missionaries."<sup>14</sup> This decline reflects lower recruitment and higher attrition rates among U.S. mission agencies. Mobilization has become a primary goal for mission agencies as they seek to fill vacant positions because of retirement and resignation. New mission-sending nations are emerging and surpassing North American churches and mission agencies in the recruitment and sending of career missionaries.<sup>15</sup> The United States and Canada have a long and storied history as mission-sending nations. A new critical role is to come alongside churches in the Global South to assist them in the development of mission-sending structures when we are invited to do so.

Christian missions is now a global task. Rapid change has challenged the ability of North American churches and mission agencies to adequately assess and appropriately respond to global shifts in mission. Another example of this challenge is seen in the demographic shift of the population in the United States, which now is host to the largest percentage of immigrants in the world. Table 2 breaks down the per capita percentage of immigrants for ten countries.

**Table 2.** Trends in International Migrant Stock, 2015 (top ten migrant-recipient nations).

Country	Total population	Number of immigrants	Percentage of total number of immigrants in the world	Immigrants as percentage of national population
<b>1. United States</b>	324,118,787	46,627,100	19.1	14.4
<b>2. Germany</b>	80,682,351	12,005,000	4.9	14.8
<b>3. Russia</b>	143,439,832	11,643,030	4.7	8.1
<b>4. Saudi Arabia</b>	32,157,974	10,185,900	4.1	31.7
<b>5. United Kingdom</b>	65,111,143	8,543,100	3.5	13.1
<b>6. United Arab Emirates</b>	9,266,971	7,828,981	3.3	88.4
<b>7. Canada</b>	36,286,378	7,835,500	3.2	21.6
<b>8. France</b>	64,668,129	7,784,400	3.2	12.3
<b>9. Australia</b>	24,309,330	6,763,700	2.7	27.8
<b>10. Spain</b>	46,064,604	5,583,000	2.3	12.7

Source: <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/wallchart/docs/MigrationWallChart2015.pdf>.

Cross-cultural missions have often been defined as crossing national, geographic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. Distinctions were made between home and foreign missions. Immigration and migration, however, have changed the way missions is defined. The Other has become my neighbor. The United States currently has the second largest Spanish-speaking population in the world: 51 million (more than in Spain), or 16 percent of the population.<sup>16</sup> And between 2000 and 2010, there has been a 43 percent growth in the U.S. Asian population.<sup>17</sup> These facts have significant ramifications for the church in mission, for now the world is coming to North America. This shift has inverted, to some extent, the mandate of Acts 1:8, for the “ends of the earth” can now be found in our “Jerusalem.” North America is changing and will never be the same. The task of missions may involve crossing cultural boundaries, but it does not necessarily require crossing geographic and linguistic boundaries. Delineations between international and domestic missions can create false dichotomies that hamper the church in fulfilling its purpose in mission. The church needs to have a biblical, missional response to this change.

A second role of the North American church in mission, in light of global change, is to develop a strategy to reach immigrants and diaspora groups among us. Many immigrants who come to North America have a vibrant Christian faith.<sup>18</sup> The Pew Research Religious Landscape Study in 2014 found that 68 percent of immigrants to the United States identify as Christian.<sup>19</sup> The immigrant church is shaping the future of Christianity in North America. North American churches need to define their role in assisting the immigrant church in this process.

### *A new orientation*

We all recognize change as it is happening. The challenge is not simply identifying change but accommodating to it. We need an informed response rather than a



**Figure 2.** The “Blue Marble” Picture of the Earth.

Source: Al Reinert, “The Blue Marble Shot: Our First Complete Photograph of Earth,” *Atlantic Monthly*, April 12, 2011.

conditioned reaction. “We are no longer dealing with incremental change but . . . *deep change* in that it is both exponential and irreversible.”<sup>20</sup> We need to do more than identify the change around us. We need to identify what needs to change within us.

On May 25, 1961, President Kennedy announced before a joint session of Congress that the dramatic goal of sending a man to the moon would be achieved before the end of the decade. This initiative was in response to the Soviet Union beating the United States into space when Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human in space on April 12, 1961. The Apollo Space Project began in January 1967 with Apollo 1 and terminated with Apollo 17 in 1972, with six of the seventeen Apollo flights landing on the moon.<sup>21</sup> Apollo images of the earth in space popularized the idea of globalization and the earth as a community.

The most famous of these images is the *Blue Marble*, taken by astronaut Harrison Schmidt during the Apollo 17 flight. (See fig. 2.) This was the first photograph of the whole earth and the only one ever taken by a human being.<sup>22</sup> Christopher Riley suggests that it is the most reproduced image in human history. Ironically, the original picture was taken of the earth in what strikes us as an upside-down orientation; reproductions have been inverted to align with expectations.<sup>23</sup> These expectations are based upon social orientations established within Western society. The geographic orientation of the North in a superior position has implications for the church in mission.

Cartographic representations of the earth have been linked by some to Western colonialism and European enlightenment identity, in which maps are drawn in deference to Western purposes.<sup>24</sup> The superior position of the North on the map, compass,



and images of the earth in our solar system may have an effect on the way North Americans view and relate to those in the Global South. The perception and projection of one's identity have implications for the manner in which the Gospel is presented and received. The perception of a dominant position and the superior value of North America by North Americans is the result of a process of enculturation—that is, the process through which individuals learn their group's culture through experience, observation, and education. This is very similar to an infant learning to speak. It's a natural process that occurs without much thought. We North Americans have been educated through media, public education, and personal experience to think of ourselves as superior in relation to the rest of the world. We have become ethnocentric in ways that escape our awareness. Our perceptions may require a new orientation so that the North American church can fulfill a new role in the mission enterprise. Frankly, a practical consequence is that we should expect to be marginalized in the future of global missions, apart from adapting a new orientation.

### *A new method*

“Partnerships have become the primary method in which churches and organizations engage in global missions,”<sup>25</sup> and short-term missions (STM) is the manner by which North American churches connect with their global partners. Over 2 million people travel abroad every year on STM trips from North America.<sup>26</sup> The surge in STMs may be a result of the shift of the center of Christianity from North America and Europe to the Global South. The numbers of Christians and churches have multiplied in the Global South, which has created an opportunity for churches, Christian universities, and individuals in North America to assist these churches on a short-term basis. The twenty-first-century North American church does not want to be involved in missions simply by proxy but wants an active role, and STM trips fulfill this desire. STMs, however, present unique challenges in the mission enterprise. Construction teams can inadvertently disenfranchise local laborers,<sup>27</sup> recipients may have differing expectations from STM participants,<sup>28</sup> and relational dynamics between rich guests and poor hosts can be strained.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, many positive outcomes from STMs have been well documented; the ministry purposes of hosts are often enhanced by the presence of STM teams.<sup>30</sup>

STM trips have changed missions from North America in three fundamental ways. First, it is the current trend through which the North American church conceptualizes and engages in missions. Second, it has resulted in changed perceptions about missions. International missions was an abstract concept in the local church prior to STMs. Short-term participants have become familiar with ministry in foreign contexts. The myth of the missionary hero has dissipated. The idea of international missions has shifted from an exotic ideal to a familiar reality. Third, the church has a changed approach to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. More than just a current trend or fad, STMs reflect a new philosophy.

There is a popular notion that STM leads to career missions; however, there appears to be no correlation between the two. STMs have grown exponentially over the past

two decades as the career missionary force has declined. Potential career missionaries often find fulfillment in serial STM trips without making a commitment to career missions. “Not long ago, few gave much thought to any pattern of missionary tenure other than long-term service. Now the scene is dominated by mission-trip participants, most of whom serve for two weeks or less at a time.”<sup>31</sup>

The philosophy that the Great Commission is fulfilled through STMs is reflected in church budgets. Support-raising dynamics have also changed as a result of the STM phenomenon. Churches include STMs in their annual budgets in response to the growing participation by youth groups and church members, leaving less money for career missions. Budget restraints result in career missionaries now raising more support from individuals than from churches. Mission organizations now refer their career personnel to agencies for training to raise support from individuals.<sup>32</sup> This new dynamic could raise questions about the centrality of the local church in mission and who is sending the missionary (see Acts 13–14).

The establishment of partnerships through STMs has great potential and holds the greatest promise for the future of STMs. Partnerships are providing strategic opportunities for both developed and emerging nations to work together in cooperative equality to further the Gospel. The paradigm of partnership has emerged in response to changing trends in which the statistical center of the church has shifted to the Global South.

A challenge for the church in mission is gaining the ability to cross geographic, linguistic, and cultural boundaries with wisdom. Improving cultural intelligence is one component in this process.<sup>33</sup> Recognizing that STMs are not a replacement for career missions is another.

### *A new message*

The discussion of a new message is not a reference to the Gospel. The Gospel is unchangeable (1 Cor.15:1–8; Gal.1:6–9; Jude 3). However, there is a need for new theologies. Theology answers life’s questions—but not everyone is asking the same life questions. Many of the questions we ask are culturally determined, which limits our ability to interact deeply with people of different cultures. Before we can speak into another’s experience, we must understand not only what they believe but why, not only the questions people are asking but the reasons these questions are important. In a traditional culture, “a bereaved mother whose child has died from malaria will not be satisfied with the scientific explanation that a mosquito carrying parasites stung the child and caused it to suffer and die from malaria. She will wish to know why the mosquito stung her child and not somebody else’s child.”<sup>34</sup> This is a nonsensical question to a North American, but it is a critical question that addresses the sovereignty of God, the problem of evil, curses, and the role of the demonic in daily life. “Without a basic comprehension of other’s beliefs, our encounters will be characterized by prejudice, paternalism, and pride.”<sup>35</sup> The Global South needs contextual theologies that address their lived experience, theologies that address witchcraft, polygamy, ancestors, injustice and oppression, tribalism, and poverty, to name a few. These theologies

need to be written from an insider perspective to provide a way forward for the Majority World church. This is a role that the North American church can facilitate. Yet, it is one that requires great wisdom, since “no group of Christians has . . . any right to impose in the name of Christ upon another group of Christians a set of assumptions about life determined by another time and place. . . . All churches are culture churches, including our own.”<sup>36</sup>

This role for the North American church relates to what Paul Hiebert has described as self-theologizing.<sup>37</sup> Churches in the Global South need the encouragement and assistance to write biblical theologies that address their lived experience. By helping to facilitate such work, the North American church can pass the baton of mission to the new emerging church in the Global South.

“Christians of the southern continents are now the representative Christians, the people by whom the quality of twenty-first and twenty-second century Christianity will be judged, the people who will set the norms, the standard Christians. And the quality of twenty-first century Christianity will depend on them.”<sup>38</sup> The door has not closed for North America in missions; this is no time for a moratorium. The opportunities to have a greater impact than at any time in the past may well be present by investing resources in wise partnerships with a vibrant church in the Global South.

## Conclusion

The mission enterprise of the North American church has been globalized. Three characteristics of globalization have contributed to this result. First, rapid change has occurred, producing outcomes that have not yet been fully grasped. The shift of the center of Christianity to the Global South is a primary example. Second, the church has been slow to adapt to this change in missional strategy. Finally, it has been difficult at times for the North American church to resist retaining old paradigms of mission or avoid the temptation to secure a privileged position in the task of global missions. What is the role of the North American church in this globalized world, where the center of Christianity in terms of numbers and vitality has shifted from the North to South? There has been a two-century history of cross-cultural missions from North America. Mistakes have been made, much has been learned, and God has honored faithfulness. This historical experience is of value to the church in the Global South as they seek to develop sending structures. A primary role of the North American church is to model incarnational mission for new sending nations by partnering in their endeavors.

The North American church can discover and fulfill its new role in mission in the twenty-first century. Consider the following suggestions:

1. Recognize that the North American church is no longer at the center and that this is part of God’s purpose.
2. Discover the innate ethnocentric patterns culturally and personally that inhibit cross-cultural ministry.
3. Accept a new role in global mission as facilitator and servant.

4. Evaluate the contributions and limitations of short-term missions and make improvements for greater missional outcomes.
5. Engage in cross-cultural partnerships that are sustainable and based upon equality and reciprocity.
6. Encourage and assist the churches of the Global South to develop theologies that address their lived experience.

The church has been buffeted by the same challenges that have been affecting other industries in society. It struggles with understanding rapid change, adapting to this change with a studied response, and avoiding the consequences of a conditioned response to global change. These are all important in understanding the role of the church in mission. Identifying the outcomes of globalization on the mission enterprise is a place for the North American church to start in a quest to fulfill its role in a rapidly changing world.

### Funding

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### Notes

1. A conditioned response is simply a reflex action to change without understanding why the change has occurred and what implications it represents.
2. Manfred B. Steger, *Globalization: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), 2.
3. I use the term “globalized” to refer to a negative effect of globalization by which an industry fails to keep pace with globalizing changes, from which it suffers negative consequences.
4. [www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/01/22/379226542/u-s-safety-agency-outlines-stronger-airline-tracking-proposals](http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/01/22/379226542/u-s-safety-agency-outlines-stronger-airline-tracking-proposals).
5. [www.cdc.gov/about/organization/mission.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/about/organization/mission.htm).
6. [www.livescience.com/48527-ebola-toddler-patient-zero.html](http://www.livescience.com/48527-ebola-toddler-patient-zero.html).
7. Here I describe Christian missions as an industry for the sake of drawing parallels and making comparisons with other industries, for Christian missions also offer a product and a service.
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18. See the cover article of *Time* April 10, 2013, "The Latino Reformation: Inside the New Hispanic Churches Transforming Religion in America."
19. [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/19/growing-share-of-u-s-immigrants-have-no-religious-affiliation](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/19/growing-share-of-u-s-immigrants-have-no-religious-affiliation).
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