

Taking the Global Church Seriously

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What does one say to the informed and the converted about taking the global church seriously? As I reflected on that question, I went back to Lamin Sanneh's article in the *Christian Century* of a year ago entitled "Global Christianity in the Re-education of the West." He talked about his disappointment that his Yale Divinity School colleagues are not more interested in the Day Missionary Library in Yale University. He talked about his anxiety that the faculty of the Yale Divinity School were not more interested in the thoughts of the 2/3 world theologians. Then he wrote this paragraph and he is reflecting back upon some things that Andrew Walls wrote:

In calling attention to the failure of western theology to respond meaningfully and in a timely fashion to non-western Christianity, I do not mean to imply that western theology must incorporate Asian and African Christianity into its ascendant framework, but the standard theological sources and the methods have failed to show any awareness of the Copernican shift that has taken place in the religious map of the world. And the meager evidence that there might be glimmerings of an awareness that the entire landscape has shifted is shot through with fear and a sense of threat or with a corrosive sense of guilt, and yet the global transformation of Christianity requires nothing less than the complete rethinking of the church history.¹

We may be in a similar situation. Although informed and converted we still have difficulty taking seriously what Sanneh calls a Copernican shift in the religious map of the world.

One of my special privileges during the past 12 years has been the rich opportunity to interact with this global church in many countries and on all the major continents. I still reflect on the excitement and the pain I felt in East Africa just short of two years ago. We began in Ethiopia spending a week with the Meserte Christos Church where we were shown church building after church building which was inadequate to house all the people who attend those services. This fastest growing

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Mennonite Church in the world simply cannot keep up in providing the most basic facilities.

From Ethiopia we went to South Sudan to discover a church that was still suffering from the ravages of civil war and a kind of military occupation. There we sat in the Presbyterian parsonage which was once the house to several missionary families. The hospitality for the Presbyterian Church among the Neuer people was gracious and generous. Pastor William told us that there are now 70 congregations in his area which ten years ago had only six congregations. We met Mark Nickel, a Church Missionary Society missionary, a former Mennonite Brethren from Reedley, California, who has spent the last decade working in the exploding Dinka Church. During the 1980s and early 90s the Dinka people changed from being 85 percent African traditional religion to 85 percent Christian. Mark has written a doctorate at Oxford on this fascinating development. He's collected over 2000 hymns that were written by the Dinka people during this decade and now he's trying to reduce these to a usable hymnbook.

From South Sudan we went back to Nairobi and on to Rawanda. In Nairobi we learned that the confusion and the despair that Rawanda had brought to the churches of Africa. One element of the demoralization was particularly fascinating, namely the African understanding of how western agencies responded to the Rawanda refugee crises. As you recall tens of millions of dollars were poured into that operation, but nearly all the agency leaders went straight to the Rawanda border and the refugee camps, without stopping to talk to the leadership of the All-African Council of Churches. Not once did they stop to talk to the Anglican bishops who were being torn apart by this civil war in Rawanda. And these church leaders were saying, "Are we so insignificant that you can come to the heart of Africa and do your thing as European and Western agencies and not so much as come and say hello to us?"

We at MCC have made many mistakes in our history, but one time I believe we did it right. We decided that as an agency we did not have connections in Rawanda that would result in any kind of natural invitation and yet the people of Canada and the United States wanted us to respond. We sent an investigating team which toured Burundi and the Rawandan border in Zaire. As expected they picked up a number of invitations to join local churches in responding to the refugee crisis. They found some areas which other agencies were not touching. The investigating team went further and said, "The only way in which you can authentically respond, if you take seriously the fact that Zaire has the second largest conglomeration of Mennonites that exist in any country in the world is to do something involving those Mennonites." It took several months until we were able to get things organized. We had to rethink our personnel policies to include Zairean sisters and brothers in some sort of equitable fashion. Finally we developed the most authentic partnership ever established with an African Mennonite church. Today we are grateful that this has led to a new missionary situation with North Americans supporting a new venture by Congolese Mennonites.

Stories like these from this one particular trip to east Africa can be duplicated

many, many times. Other agencies and mission boards can also point to experiences in taking the global church seriously.

A Copernican shift

I have divided the rest of my remarks into two parts. First I want to talk about what Lamin Sanneh calls this “Copernican shift” in the Christian world order. Then secondly I want to ask how we can take this reality seriously; how we can respond.

Let us look first at the salient points from David Barrett’s, “Status of Global Mission 1996 in the Context of the 20th and 21st Century.”²

	1900	1970	1996	2000	2025
1. Total world population	1,619, 886, 800	3,697,141,000	5,804,121,000	6,158,051,000	8,294,341,000
2. Urban dwellers	232,694,900	1,352,784,000	2,650,326,000	2,926,306,000	5,065,354,000
3. Rural dwellers	1,387,191,900	2,344,,357,000	3,153,795,000	3,231,745,000	3,228,987,000
4. Adult pop. (over 15 yrs)	1,025,938,000	2,310,713,000	3,960,498,000	4,242,897,000	6,229,050,000
5. Christians (total all kinds) (= World C)	558,056,300	1,245,934,000	1,955,229,000	2,119,342,000	3,058,229,000
6. Total Christians as % of world (= World C)	34.4	33.7	33.7	34.4	36.9

Barrett is a missionary researcher who has been producing this kind of material for decades and this is simply to illustrate what we are talking about. There may be some flaws with some of Barrett’s research. We don’t need to concentrate on the numbers, the direction is what is important. You can study this chart at your leisure. I simply want to point out some of the things that help us understand what we mean by this Copernican shift in the Christian world order.

Note item 1 “World Population Figures.” You know about these, but it is a dramatic phenomenon that in our 20th century we’ve had this shift from 1.6 billion people to 5.8 approaching 6 billion. Also note items 2 and 3 because they are very interesting in terms of where this population lives in terms of rural area or urban area. Note the dramatic shift between 1900 when 80 percent of the world’s people were rural and now by the early 21st century the majority of the world’s people will be urban and that’s a significant shift. One other shift that I think is very interesting and the detail is not here is on number 4 “Adult Population Over 15 Years.” One of the most important phenomenon in today’s world is the fact that 40 to 50 percent of the people in Mexico, Liberia, Zaire, Burundi, Somalia, Ethiopia, Palestine are under the age of 15. Central Africa, Mexico, Palestine, under 15 percent and in Eu-

rope, in France, Sweden and Germany only 20 percent of the population is under 15. And so it's not only a division between a poor world and a rich world, but an old world and a young world. I think this is a very, very important phenomenon to keep in mind as we think about the global church. The figures for the US and Canada are quite different since only about 25 percent of the population is under 15.

The really important issue for our topic is line 6. Although the number of Christians has quadrupled from 1900 to 1996; to almost 2 billion today, the relative number in terms of percentage is almost static—33, 34, maybe 37 percent by the year 2025.

The striking change in church membership is not primarily in numbers but rather the location. In 1900 there were 8.7 million Christians in Africa; today 307 million. In East Asia, just as dramatically; the numbers jumped from 1.7 million to 116 million. Europe has doubled during this time, but that's not that much compared to what happened in Africa and east Asia. Latin America has gone up seven times from 60 million to 451 million. North America has tripled. In South Asia the shift is from 16 million to 159 million. Another way of saying it: in 1900 there were approximately 520 million Christians in the world. 430 million of these were in Europe, North America and Eurasia. 90 million were in Africa, Asia and Latin America. In 1996 of the 2 billion Christians only 750 million are in Europe, North America and Eurasia. And over a billion are in Africa, Asia and Latin America. This gap will even get bigger by the year 2025. Three years ago Mennonite World Conference presented us with the statistics that in 1994 the majority of Mennonites were now in the south: Latin America, Africa and Asia. This is a dramatic shift for Mennonites and Brethren in Christ. Lamin Sanneh, Andrew Walls and other people call this enormous shift in location of the Christian masses a Copernican shift.

First of all, it's a numerical shift. The majority of the Christian movement now is no longer in North America or western Europe. Secondly this Copernican shift is a dramatic shift in culture. The cultural base of Christianity was the Mediterranean and northern European world. Now the church lives in a highly diverse cultural setting in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. A third dimension of this Copernican shift is a regression of the church in western Europe and North America. The pain of contraction and downsizing is in sharp contrast to the optimism that is the dynamic in the 2/3 world. There is that kind of spiritual shifting taking place as well. Fourthly, this Copernican shift means that the majority of the Christians in the world today are from the poorer side of the human family. They do not have political or economical or ecclesiastical power. They have been dominated peoples in the world system and frequently they were dominated by the peoples from our societies.

Lest we think that we're the only people that have experienced this, it's well to remember that Walbert Buhlman, a Catholic missiologist, 20 years ago reminded us that there were previous shifts of Copernican proportion. He suggests that already in the New Testament there is a kind of Copernican shift from a Hebraic-Jewish base to a Greco-Roman base. He suggests that in the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries there was another shift from the Mediterranean base to the Northern European and western

European base. Now he talks about the coming of the third church. The first church was Mediterranean based, the second church was European and North American oriented and now the heartland of the third church is in the 2/3 world. It is important to have a sense of history!

Ways of taking the church seriously

Now to the substantive question “How can we take this church seriously?” What does it mean? I surely don’t understand all the implications. I have some hunches. Here are eight suggestions that might help us think about how to take this global church seriously. There are surely more.

First, I think we thank God for this dramatic happening; for this great work of God’s spirit and for the work of Christian missions. In an atmosphere of recession, it would be easy to become despondent. Rather we ought to begin by praising God that this has happened. I believe that this is the most important event or achievement of this century—the development of this global church. This is far more important than the technological change that we’ve experienced in the 20th century; far more important than enduring the great wars and all the other events that we thought were earth shaking during these last hundred years. In 1909 Charles Clayton Morrison and some friends resurrected a magazine that had been dormant that had been called *The Christian Century*. And in 1909 they restarted this magazine, which is still published, with a great deal of optimism about the Christianizing of North America and Europe. They would be shocked if they would be around now to realize how little they understood of what was going to be the real revolution of the 20th century.

In the late 1930’s Archbishop William Temple, archbishop of Canterbury, said that the great new fact of our time is the ecumenical movement. He would be shocked to realize that this ecumenical movement that he was so influential in is truly ecumenical, its much more global than he ever anticipated.

So number 1 is to take the global church seriously. We thank God that this epoch making shift has and is taking place.

Two. At the heart of being church is meeting. If we’re serious about the global church we begin with a systematic, deliberately planned way of getting acquainted with all the dimensions of this new reality. Several years ago I was in Damascus. When you go to Damascus you have to meet three archbishops: the archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church or the Patriarch, the Patriarch of the Greek Catholic Church (Melkites) and the Patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church. And I’ll never forget what Elias IV, the then Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church said, “If you want to know me, you must return again and again and again to talk with me.” And I would add that if we want to know the archbishop and all the other people that are part of his communion we must invite them to come to meet us again and again and again. This will take time and energy and training. Friendship and mutual respect don’t just happen.

Between 1958 and 1988 the Mennonites of North America systematically went about developing friendship with Russian Baptists. We sent group after group on

missionary journeys to visit their churches, to meet their church leaders, to engage them in conversation. We invited them to come here and some of you will remember those missionary journeys on their part as they traversed through the United States and Canada. That it seems to me is a kind of model that we have to adopt if we're going to get acquainted and become friends with the global church. Obviously not everyone can do this but we are privileged that some of us are able to participate in such endeavors. Now we must be very systematic in planning for it in the future.

Third, if we are going to be serious about the global church, we must get ready to **think some new thoughts**. Robert Chambers in his essay on development asks "Whose reality counts? The reality of the few in centers of power or the reality of the many poor on the periphery? These realities differ more than most of us professionals realize. Insight into these differences and their implications will generate a new paradigm and a new and hopeful agenda. To recognize, accept, act on and evolve that new agenda is a personal, professional and institutional challenge demanding deep change in the ways we behave. Chambers adds, "This will require altruism and reverses of much which is now considered normal."³ Chambers is not talking about the global church. He's talking about working as a development worker in Lesoto or Sudan or some other place. But it is equally valid for the church. We have been accustomed to defining reality in Akron, Elkhart, Winnipeg and Newton. And now we have to ask what reality is, how is it defined in Asuncion, Kikwit, Nazareth, Jagdeeshpur and Pati. We need to reconceptualize our sense of history and include Damascus, Bangalore, Addis Ababa, Sao Palo as important centers for understanding the global church.

The global church is a very fragile organization. It's fragile denominationally and ecumenically. There are enormous tensions that can tear it apart. Unless we're prepared to begin to think new thoughts and hear new voices and new answers and to deal with really tough questions—the toughest one, of course, is of economic disparity between the north and the south which cuts right through the church. So, thirdly, to get ready to deal with this new global reality we need to think some new thoughts.

Fourth, if we're going to take the global church seriously, we need to take special effort to **break out of the prisons of an ethnocentric view of the world** that sees the world as a reflection of western culture. Vinoth Ramachandra, a Sri Lankan working with Sri Lankan students, wrote an article that appeared in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, October 1994, "The Honor of Listening: Indispensable for Mission." He noted how the world is forced to respond to CNN what is of interest to the United States and European media. If you want me to become part of your church, he said, then you have to begin to take my reality seriously as well. He urges us to develop a sense of world history in addition to national history. Christian teachers need to confront the parochialism that passes for education. If we're going to practice being a global church, we'll need to transcend the myopia and the ethnocentrism of our own cultures and churches and think in terms of the global church on its own terms.

My **fifth** suggestion is that in the global church we will need to struggle to **tran-**

scend our culture limitations through deliberately structured relationships, learning new languages, taking time to allow these to grow through listening, worshiping and searching for new forms of church life. We will want to develop new structures joining together in common projects in mission, evangelism, Christian education and publication. We will not be able to avoid dealing with economic disparities. We'll have to face the difficulties of resource sharing. The Mennonite World Conference is helping us to use the per capita GNP to develop more equitable church support systems.

The commitments and strategies on the part of agencies like Mennonite Board of Missions with independent churches, Eastern Mennonite Mission and Mennonite Brethren Missions in partnering with Indonesian churches in their mission work in southeast Asia are the mechanising we must expend in order to transcend our existing structures if we are to have new forms of mission.

This will lead us in the **sixth** place to **develop new forms of governance and incorporate peoples with different styles and patterns for getting things done**. One of the hardest things for those of us who are trained with certain kinds of patterns of technological efficiency will be to learn that some people want to be slow in the way they do things; they find that more satisfying than the fast way we are accustomed to. These new forms of governance will deliberately include people from different cultural experiences and perhaps international experiences as well.

It should become a deliberate policy on our part as western agencies and western churches is to take seriously the church that exists in the location before we take any action. In October 1995 I was in Belfast visiting John and Naomi Lederach. They took us to meetings of the Irish Council of Churches and the Mediation Network. The first question, the major question that these people had for me was "How can we be sure that you're not here as the growing edge for planting a Mennonite Church in Belfast?" And I said, "Well, you can't be sure. I don't control what Mennonites do." In a truly global church we must take such concerns seriously.

Some years ago Vernon Ratzlaff wrote in his report from Egypt, "For an agency to begin its programs independently of the local church is to make a statement; that is to the Muslim majority that the local church is not sufficiently competent to be constituted a partner. Not to work with the local church is to reflect negatively on it." Those were Ratzlaff's words of wisdom to us in Akron. They are words of wisdom all of us need to hear.

Seventh, in the global church we have to **become accustomed to diversity**. Of course, the church has always been gloriously diverse. Revelation chapters 1 and 2 demonstrate the generous spirit of the apostle as he dealt with the seven diverse churches of Asia, some of whom had lost some of their initial devotion, enthusiasm, and some were even listening to heretical voices. But John still called them **churches**. John still respected their ministry in the places where they were located. We may tend to forget that we in the West and North are most different societies historically. We have just survived the longest sustained period of prosperity in the history of the church. Our situation has been the exception rather than the rule. We should not feel

that our experience is the model for others. So as we see this global church let's not despair of the problems, but remember the generous spirit of the past and our own unique position in it.

Finally, if we are going to take the global church seriously we will make every effort to **involve our congregations** in this great new fact. Some of us in our agencies now feel as if our congregations are pushing us because they want to be more exposed and connected to Christians and churches of other cultures in other continents. We ought to be grateful for this and should seize the moment. We should encourage and assist traveling members to make the church a primary place to visit for listening and learning. We need to engage international students among us and exchange visitors. We ought to invite overseas business and professional people to tell their stories and to create a network of understanding and compassion. We in the Mennonite world have been uniquely blessed and privileged to experience this global reality with multicultural congregations right in our own midst. We have been privileged to be exposed through a hundred and fifty years of missionary exchange and promotion of this new reality, the global church. We are also privileged to be part of this remarkable institution called Mennonite World Conference which is one way in which we have structured an attempt to make this global church real for the Mennonite family of churches.

There are surely more ways to take the global church seriously. But these eight I think are essential: gratitude, meeting, generating new ways of thinking, breaking out of our cultural ethnocentrism, structuring new forms of church relations, accepting the discipline of new governance patterns, seeing the new family of God through the eyes of faith and in the light of our own unique epoch, using these historic moments to involve our congregations in lively interaction with this global church. To use the words of Philippians "This is truly sharing in the gospel, sharing in the spirit, sharing in giving and receiving." Conrad Riser, the general secretary of the World Council of Churches, has been saying that if the church is to survive into the 21st century, it will need a new face. He reminds us that in spite of this Copernican shift, the church remains a minority in every land. Salt and light will be even more important metaphors for expressing the churchly mission in the 21st century than in the past. And then he concludes, "There is a distinctive form of universality rooted in Biblical faith. This unique universality is rooted in a relational understanding of the worldwide church which starts from the local community in each place." Nurturing these relationships is to take the global church seriously.

Endnotes

¹ Lamin Smith, "Global Christianity in the Re-education of the West," *Christian Century* July 19-26, 1995, p 716.

² Source: David B. Barrett, "Status of Global Mission, 1996, in Context of 20th and 21st Centuries," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (Jan. 1996), 25.

³ Robert Chambers, *Poverty and Livelihoods: Whose Reality Counts* (Brighton, Eng: Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, 1995), 1, 29f.