

GLOBAL CHRISTIAN MISSION IN A CHANGING WORLD

THE UNFINISHED MISSION

Why Gospel Access Remains Unequal—and What Faithful Mission Requires Now

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Introduction: The Mission That Is Not Finished

On a Sunday morning, one person may wake within walking distance of several churches. He can choose among congregations that differ in denomination, worship style, theological emphasis, size, age, language, and social atmosphere. Printed Bibles are inexpensive. Several modern translations are available in his mother tongue. Sermons, courses, podcasts, commentaries, apologetic resources, and entire seminary lecture series can be accessed from a phone before breakfast. Christian friends may already be present at school, university, or work. Even if he has never entered a church, Christian ideas have probably reached him through history, public holidays, media, family memory, political debate, music, or literature.

None of this guarantees Christian faith. It does not guarantee accurate knowledge of Christianity. The churches nearby may be weak, unhealthy, divided, or distrusted. The person may have heard only caricatures of Christian belief. He may reject Christianity after serious consideration or barely think about religion at all. Yet one fact remains: Christianity is comparatively easy for him to investigate. If he wants to understand what Christians believe, meet practicing Christians, attend worship, or read Scripture, there are realistic pathways available to him.

Another person inhabits the same global Christianity under radically different conditions.

She may live in a country where Christian material is technically accessible online. A Bible may exist in a national language she can read, though not necessarily in the language she speaks most naturally at home. A Christian minority may live elsewhere in the country. Satellite television, social media, or private messaging may make Christian information reachable. She might even have heard the name of Jesus many times.

Yet no close friend follows Christ. The nearest visible church may belong to another ethnic community, another caste, another language, or a

social group her family does not enter. Visiting could create suspicion. A public change of religion might threaten marriage prospects, inheritance, employment, family belonging, or physical safety. If she becomes interested in Christianity, the crucial question may not be whether a website loads. It may be whether there is a trustworthy human being with whom she can speak without exposing herself to consequences she is not prepared to bear.

Both people live in a world in which Christianity has become one of humanity's most geographically widespread religions. They do not possess the same access to it.

The inequality between those two worlds is the subject of this book.

A Global Religion With Unequal Reach

Christianity began as a small movement within first-century Judaism in a peripheral province of the Roman Empire. Within centuries Christian communities existed across the Mediterranean, North Africa, Armenia, Persia, India, Central Asia, and eventually China. Christian faith took form in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Ge'ez, and many other linguistic worlds. Long before modern European empire, Christians were already crossing cultural boundaries, translating texts, forming churches, disputing theology, migrating, and adapting Christian life to different civilizations.

Modern missionary movements later extended this geography dramatically. Catholic orders, Protestant societies, independent missions, indigenous evangelists, Bible translators, teachers, physicians, merchants, migrants, and local church networks carried Christian witness into new places and social worlds. Translation projects rendered Scripture into thousands of languages. Churches formed where Christianity had previously been marginal or absent. Schools, hospitals, seminaries, publishing networks, and missionary organizations became important institutions in many societies.

The record is morally mixed. Missionaries sometimes opposed exploitation; sometimes they benefited from it. Some defended local peoples against colonial power; others carried racial assumptions, paternalism, or forms of cultural coercion. Indigenous Christians often spread Christianity far beyond the direct reach of foreign missionaries, even while older mission histories centered foreign personalities and institutions. The result

was never a simple story of one civilization transmitting a finished religion to passive recipients.¹

The twentieth century transformed the map again. Sub-Saharan Africa became one of world Christianity's major demographic centers. Latin American evangelical and Pentecostal movements expanded. South Korea became a substantial missionary sender. African-led churches appeared in European cities. Latin American missionaries served in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Filipino Christians carried their faith through global labor and migration networks. Churches once described principally as mission fields increasingly became missionary actors themselves.

The familiar map—the Christian West sending to the non-Christian “rest”—can no longer describe the church accurately. It was always historically incomplete. It is now empirically untenable.

Christianity is genuinely global.²

Mission is increasingly multidirectional.³

And still the mission is unfinished.

What Does “Unfinished” Mean?

That sentence can sound obvious until one asks what exactly remains incomplete.

One answer has dominated much modern evangelical mission strategy: unreached people groups. The category has performed a valuable service. National averages conceal internal diversity. A country may contain millions of Christians while particular ethnic, linguistic, caste, or religious communities possess almost no locally rooted Christian presence. People-group research forces churches to notice populations that might otherwise disappear inside political borders.

But *unreached* is not a biblical label visibly attached to particular communities. It is a modern missionary classification. Different organizations disagree about how many people groups exist, whether the same people

¹Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Orbis Books, 1996); Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed. (Orbis Books, 2009).

²Pew Research Center, *How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020* (June 9, 2025). The report estimates 2.3 billion Christians in 2020, or 28.8 percent of the global population, from more than 2,700 censuses, surveys, registers, and related sources.

³Jehu J. Hanciles, *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity* (Eerdmans, 2021); Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (InterVarsity Press, 2003).

should be counted separately in each country, which Christian traditions should be included in particular thresholds, and what level of Christian presence should count as sufficient for a population to sustain wider witness. These disagreements do not make mission research useless. They make definitions indispensable.

The same caution applies to some of the most powerful missionary slogans. Claims that billions of people have “never heard the gospel,” that a fixed percentage of missionaries serves “the reached,” or that almost none of Christian giving reaches the unreached are rhetorically potent. They are also often stronger than the data behind them. A serious Christian case for mission does not need exaggeration. The real disparities are large enough.

This book therefore asks a harder question than whether a population appears below one percentage threshold:

Who possesses realistic access to intelligible Christian witness, Scripture, Christian relationships, discipleship, and locally rooted Christian community—and who does not?

That question immediately shows why access is not one thing.

A Bible can exist without being understandable in the language through which a community lives most deeply. Christian media can be available while trustworthy Christian relationships are absent. A church building can stand nearby while remaining socially inaccessible because of caste, ethnicity, class, language, or historical hostility. A missionary can be present while the emerging church remains unable to continue without outside leadership or money. A country can have a long Christian history while younger generations find Christianity socially implausible or institutionally untrustworthy.

The unfinished mission is therefore not one empty region on a map. It is a pattern of unequal access.

Access Does Not Mean Response

This distinction is essential because missionary urgency can otherwise become manipulative. Christian mission aims at response: repentance, faith, baptism, discipleship, participation in Christian community. Yet Christians do not control response. The gospel may be clearly communicated and sincerely rejected. A society may possess abundant churches and Bibles while Christian affiliation declines. A person may know faithful Christians, understand their beliefs, and remain unconvinced.

That is not the same missionary problem as having almost no realistic opportunity to encounter Christian witness at all.

The difference matters strategically and morally. If a population has high informational, linguistic, relational, and ecclesial access but low Christian response, the church may need better apologetics, renewed credibility, patient evangelism, church reform, or intergenerational discipleship. If a population lacks Scripture in a usable language, has almost no Christian relationships, and faces heavy social penalties for religious exploration, the need is different. Both situations matter. They should not be collapsed into one word.

This book will therefore not use *unreached* as a synonym for every place where few people are evangelical Christians. Nor will it call a society “reached” as though its members no longer matter once a statistical threshold has been crossed. Missionary categories are strategic tools, not declarations about the value of populations or the completion of Christian responsibility.

People Before Categories

The methodological problem has a moral dimension.

Statistics are useful precisely because human beings are easy to overlook at scale. A global map can show where Christian presence is thin. A language database can reveal communities without translated Scripture. Migration data can show how populations are moving. Religious surveys can challenge stereotypes. Mission research can direct attention toward places that established Christian institutions would otherwise ignore.

Yet categories can begin to replace persons.

A Muslim community becomes a percentage. A minority language becomes a translation status. A refugee becomes a diaspora opportunity. An ethnic population becomes a code in a missionary database. A person becomes “a target.”

Christian theology should resist this reduction more strongly than anyone. Human beings are not strategic objects. They are creatures made in the image of God, embedded in families, histories, languages, memories, loves, obligations, and communities. They work, marry, grieve, celebrate, doubt, worship, fear, hope, and make decisions under social pressures that no map can fully capture.

Mission statistics should therefore increase the church’s attention to human reality rather than flatten it.

The book will use demographic estimates, people-group classifications, religious surveys, institutional reports, and missionary research extensively. Every number remains subordinate to the people it describes.

Neither Triumph Nor Indictment

Mission history creates another temptation. One version tells a story of heroic missionaries who carried Christianity around the world through sacrifice and courage. Another interprets mission principally through colonial domination and cultural destruction.

Neither can explain the evidence.

Missionaries translated Scripture, formed churches, founded schools and hospitals, opposed some forms of exploitation, learned difficult languages, challenged destructive practices, and crossed extraordinary cultural boundaries. Many served in obscurity rather than glory. Women constituted a major share of Protestant missionary work even when formal histories and institutions often minimized their authority. Local evangelists and catechists carried Christian faith through networks foreigners could not reach. Indigenous church leaders turned a received faith into a locally transmitted one.

Missionary institutions also became entangled with empire, racial hierarchy, paternalism, coercive power, donor control, foreign cultural assumptions, and spiritual abuse. Some missionaries interpreted their civilization as evidence of Christian superiority. Others were unable to see how their passports, wealth, or institutions changed the meaning of their presence. Churches could become dependent on outside structures created in the name of service. Christian authority could be used to suppress legitimate disagreement.

Sometimes both realities existed in the same institution.

Honest missionary theology therefore needs enough confidence to celebrate faithfulness and enough self-criticism to name failure. The Christian doctrine of sin should make this combination unsurprising. No nationality possesses immunity from the temptations associated with money, authority, culture, and institutional self-preservation. Replacing Western missionaries with Korean, African, Latin American, or other missionaries does not automatically remove the problems created by unequal power.

A global church can reproduce old missionary hierarchies with new actors.

Why Do the Gaps Persist?

If Christianity is global, why does meaningful Christian access remain so unequal?

One obvious answer is insufficient missionary deployment. In many contexts, more workers are genuinely needed. Yet this answer is only part of the explanation.

Missionary resources do not distribute themselves through a rational global system. Churches support people they know. Agencies remain where they possess relationships, property, language expertise, schools, and legal structures. Donors prefer outcomes they can see. Pioneer work may require years of language learning before any visible church exists. Some governments restrict foreign religious work. Some communities impose severe social consequences on converts. Some languages demand long preparation. Trust grows slowly. Churches naturally attend to urgent needs nearby. Christians disagree about what sort of missionary call is necessary. Workers sometimes leave before local leadership can mature. Foreign money and institutional authority can keep outsiders central long after local Christians should be exercising greater control.

The remaining inequalities persist for more than one reason: resources, political and social barriers, cultural distance, institutional structures, missionary vocation, time, and power all matter.

The complexity does not reduce urgency. It tells us what sort of mission might actually address the problem.

A Christian Standpoint

This book is written from within historic evangelical Christianity.

It assumes the authority of Scripture, the centrality and uniqueness of Christ, his death and resurrection, salvation by grace through faith, the necessity of repentance and faith, the importance of the church, Christ's command to make disciples among the nations, and his return. Evangelism, conversion, discipleship, Scripture, church formation, and theological maturity therefore remain central to mission as this book uses the term.

That standpoint is not disguised as religious neutrality.

It also imposes an obligation to represent other religious communities truthfully. Muslims will not be described as one monolithic world. Hindu traditions will not be reduced to one systematic theology. Formal Buddhist affiliation will be distinguished from lived religious practice. Religiously unaffiliated people will not automatically be called atheists. Catholic, Or-

thodox, Oriental Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant, Pentecostal, and independent Christian communities will not be collapsed into one undifferentiated population where their distinctions matter.

The fact that this book is evangelical also means that some mission databases it uses reflect evangelical strategic concerns. A low evangelical percentage says something specific about evangelical presence. It does not mean that Catholic, Orthodox, or other Christian communities are absent, invalid, or irrelevant. That distinction will become especially important when we examine the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Africa, and India.

Truthfulness belongs to Christian witness.

Five Questions

The argument proceeds through five questions.

Part I asks what Christian mission actually is. Before counting progress, we need to understand God's purpose toward the nations, Christ's commission, the missionary movement of Acts, and what Scripture permits Christians to mean when they speak of finishing mission.

Part II asks how Christianity became global. It follows Christianity across early African and Asian worlds, through the complicated age of empire and modern mission, into the demographic transformation that made the contemporary church increasingly polycentric.

Part III asks where meaningful gospel access remains weak. It examines people-group classification, Muslim-majority contexts, South Asia, lived religion, secularization, language, Scripture, cities, and migration. The investigation will eventually return to the question of what kind of locally rooted Christian communities can sustain witness after outside missionary activity recedes.

Part IV asks why the gaps persist. It examines allocation, restriction, cultural distance, institutional gravity, missionary calling, short horizons, and distorted power.

Part V asks what faithful mission therefore requires. It moves from access toward local churches, contextualization, local ownership, global partnership, missionary formation, new legitimate pathways, and participation by the whole church.

Only after those questions have been answered can we return responsibly to the title.

Urgency Without Panic

The missionary need is real.

Human lives are brief. Languages change. Churches decline. Political opportunities open and close. Generations grow up. Migration rearranges communities. Christian obedience should not become an indefinitely postponed aspiration.

But urgency does not require panic.

The church does not control the timetable of Christ's return. No mission agency possesses a secret formula for completing history. Statistics need not be inflated. Missionaries need not be idealized. Churches do not need to manufacture guilt in order to send faithful workers.

Christian mission can be urgent because Christ commands obedience and patient because discipleship, language, trust, and churches take time.

Nearly two thousand years after the earliest Christian witnesses began moving outward from Jerusalem, Christianity has never been more geographically widespread. Information has never traveled more easily. The church has never possessed so many potential sending centers.

Yet access remains profoundly unequal.

Why?

And what would faithful Christian mission require now?

We begin where mission itself begins: with the God who sends.

Part I

The Mission

Part I begins before missionary organizations, global statistics, strategic maps, or modern debates about the unreached. Christian mission makes sense only within a theological story: the God revealed in Scripture creates, judges, calls, sends, saves, gathers, and promises a future in which people from the nations worship before him. The church's missionary vocation is derivative. It participates in an initiative that precedes it.

That conviction does not answer every strategic question. It tells us what kind of question strategy is allowed to answer.

The God Who Sends

Christian mission is often narrated from the perspective of the missionary. A person senses a call, crosses a boundary, learns a language, joins a community, begins a ministry, and tells others about Christ. Mission biographies naturally tell stories this way because human lives are visible and narratively concrete. We can identify the departure date, the first convert, the translation completed, the church planted, the crisis endured. Yet as a theology of mission, the story begins too late.

The Christian doctrine of mission begins with God.

Before there were missionary societies, missionaries, churches, apostles, Israel, Abraham, or the nations as we know them, there was the God who created the world and called it good.¹ The biblical story is not principally the record of humanity discovering a hidden deity by religious effort. It is the story of God acting toward a world that belongs to him: creating, speaking, judging, promising, calling, redeeming, dwelling among his people, sending his Son, giving his Spirit, gathering a church, and promising the renewal of all things.

Mission therefore cannot be understood adequately as the international expansion of Christianity. Expansion may be one historical result of mission. It is not mission's theological origin.

¹For a canonical-biblical account of mission beginning with God's identity and purpose rather than isolated missionary proof texts, see Wright, *Mission of God*.

Mission Before Missions

English creates a useful distinction between *mission* and *missions*, even though Christian usage has never been perfectly consistent.

Missions commonly refers to organized forms of Christian activity directed beyond existing boundaries: sending missionaries, evangelizing, translating Scripture, planting churches, educating leaders, supporting ministries across cultures, and building the organizations needed to sustain such work. The plural points toward the many concrete undertakings Christians have developed in response to Christ's commission.

Mission can refer more broadly to the participation of God's people in God's redemptive purpose.

The distinction matters because Christians can confuse their institutions with the reality those institutions serve. A mission agency may possess a founding date, headquarters, donor base, strategic plan, and geographic portfolio. None of those things constitutes mission itself. An agency is a contingent instrument. It may serve faithfully for generations, change form, merge, or close. God's redemptive purpose does not depend upon the survival of that institution.

Yet the broader word creates another danger. If every beneficial activity undertaken by Christians is simply called mission, the term eventually loses explanatory power. Farming responsibly, doing scientific research, caring for a child, voting, making art, serving the poor, evangelizing, planting a church, translating Scripture, and advocating for justice may all be forms of Christian obedience. They are not therefore interchangeable activities, and Scripture does not speak of them with identical emphasis or purpose.

This book uses *mission* broadly enough to locate Christian witness within God's larger redemptive purpose, but narrowly enough to retain a definite center: witness to Christ, calling people to repentance and faith, making disciples, forming and strengthening churches, teaching obedience, translating and communicating Scripture, and living the kind of holy and compassionate life that makes this witness credible. Mercy, justice, hospitality, education, medical care, and service belong naturally within Christian obedience and often within missionary vocation. They should neither be dismissed as distractions from evangelism nor redefined in a way that makes evangelism dispensable.

Missio Dei: A Useful Correction. The phrase *missio Dei*—the mission of God—became one of the most influential concepts in twentieth-century missiology. Its history is more complicated than a slogan sometimes

suggests, but the theological correction it names is important. Mission should not be imagined first as the church's project of expansion. It is grounded in God's own action.

David Bosch describes the twentieth-century shift toward understanding mission within the movement of the triune God rather than merely as a function performed by the church. Later accounts have traced how the concept developed after the 1952 Willingen conference and how theologians used it in different, sometimes incompatible, ways.² Christopher Wright's biblical theology approaches the matter through the canon itself: instead of beginning with a few command texts and then building a missionary program, he asks what kind of Bible we are reading if the whole scriptural story concerns the God whose purposes embrace creation, Israel, Christ, the nations, and the new creation.³

The correction is significant. The church does not possess the gospel as a private cultural product that it generously exports. It receives a message, a commission, a Spirit, and a life it did not create.

But *missio Dei* can be made so expansive that it ceases to distinguish Christian mission from providence in general. If whatever contributes to human flourishing is simply declared part of God's mission, the concept can lose its Christological and ecclesial center. A government vaccination program, a technological discovery, a social movement, and evangelistic witness might all be placed under the same heading without explaining their different relationships to the gospel.

The problem is not that God is absent from ordinary providence or public good. Christian theology has abundant categories for creation, common grace, vocation, justice, and providence. The problem is conceptual precision.

Mission, as this book uses the word, concerns God's redemptive purpose and the participation of God's people in that purpose, centrally through the witness to Christ that makes disciples and forms communities of faith. This retains the *missio Dei* correction without allowing the word to mean everything.

²On the history and theological development of *missio Dei*, see Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, especially his discussion of the post-Willingen shift in mission theology; Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Eerdmans, 1995).

³David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis Books, 1991); Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, 2nd ed. (IVP Academic, 2025); Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (Baker Academic, 2011).

The Creator Before the Missionary

Genesis does not begin with a missionary command. It begins with God.

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). The theological significance for mission is easy to overlook because creation appears before the explicit emergence of the nations. Yet creation establishes the most fundamental relationship the missionary ever encounters: every people belongs to a world God made.

No missionary enters a godless geography in the literal sense of a territory outside God’s ownership. No language is intrinsically beyond God’s concern. No ethnicity is religiously interesting only after missionaries discover it. Human beings possess dignity before any evangelistic strategy assigns them priority because they bear God’s image.

This becomes an important restraint on missionary rhetoric. Christians sometimes describe populations primarily through deficit: no church, no Bible, no known believers, little gospel access. Those deficits can be strategically real. They are not the first truth about the people being described.

The first truth is creaturely dignity.

Missionaries therefore arrive as guests in a world that already belongs to God. They are not introducing divine ownership into foreign territory. They are bearing witness to the Creator and Redeemer who precedes them.

This does not imply that every religious belief or practice is equally revelatory or salvific. Romans 1 can speak simultaneously of knowledge of God through creation and human suppression of truth. The biblical story depicts pervasive idolatry and rebellion. Creation theology therefore does not make the gospel unnecessary. It prevents missionaries from behaving as though they bring God into places where God had no claim until they arrived.

The God Who Seeks. After human rebellion enters the biblical story, God’s movement toward humanity remains striking.

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve hide. God calls, “Where are you?” The question is not missionary strategy, but it establishes a theological pattern: estranged humanity does not heal the breach by discovering the correct technique. God addresses, judges, clothes, promises, and acts.

The flood narrative displays judgment and preservation. Babel displays human pride, fragmentation, and scattering. Then Genesis narrows dramatically to one man, Abram, whom God calls and through whom blessing will extend to the families of the earth.

The movement from humanity to one family does not mean God's universal concern has disappeared. It becomes the means through which the wider purpose advances. Chapter 2 will examine that movement more fully.

For now, the important point is divine initiative. God calls Abraham. God hears Israel in Egypt. God sends Moses. God gives covenant. God raises prophets. God promises restoration. God sends the Son.

The missionary verbs follow divine verbs.

The Sending Pattern. The language of sending recurs throughout Scripture, though different sendings should not be collapsed into one category.

God sends Moses to Pharaoh: "Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt" (Exod. 3:10). Moses protests his inadequacy. The commission rests not on Moses' self-confidence but on the promise of God's presence.

God sends prophets to his covenant people. Isaiah's famous response—"Here I am! Send me"—comes only after a vision of divine holiness, confession of uncleanness, and cleansing (Isa. 6:8). Jeremiah's prophetic vocation similarly originates in God's initiative and meets the prophet's protest concerning his youth.

These narratives are not direct templates for every missionary call. Moses is not a modern missionary candidate. Isaiah's prophetic commission includes judicial hardening, not a generic model of evangelistic enthusiasm. Yet the narratives establish a pattern that becomes theologically significant: God acts and sends; servants respond within a purpose that originates beyond them.

This pattern guards against one romantic version of missionary vocation in which the missionary becomes the protagonist. The missionary may sacrifice enormously. The call is not a story about discovering an unusually heroic self. It is a story about being entrusted with service inside God's purpose.

The Father Sends the Son

The sending pattern reaches its center in Jesus.

John's Gospel repeatedly identifies Jesus as the one sent by the Father. The theme is so persistent that it becomes one of the Gospel's organizing Christological claims. Jesus speaks the words of the one who sent him. He does the Father's works. His food is to do the will of the one who sent him.

Eternal life is connected with knowing the Father and Jesus Christ whom he has sent (John 17:3).

The incarnation is therefore missionary in a profound but unique sense. The eternal Son enters the world he made. He does not remain at a safe distance. He takes flesh, dwells among human beings, speaks within a culture and language, touches the sick, eats with people, confronts sin, suffers, dies, rises, and is exalted.

Christ's mission cannot simply be copied. Missionaries do not reenact the incarnation in the strict theological sense. They are not divine persons becoming human. They do not atone for sin. They do not bring salvation by the intrinsic efficacy of their presence. Loose language about "incarnational mission" can become misleading if it obscures the uniqueness of Christ.

Yet the pattern of divine self-giving has unavoidable missionary implications. Christian witness cannot be adequately imagined as transmitting correct information from a protected distance. The gospel itself centers on the Son who came among us.

Embodied presence matters.

This is one reason later chapters will resist the idea that digital availability can substitute for Christian community. Technology can carry words across extraordinary distances. It cannot by itself reproduce the whole relational and ecclesial shape of Christian discipleship.

The Son Sends the Disciples. After the resurrection, the sending pattern extends from Jesus to his followers.

John 20:21 records Jesus saying, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." The statement should not be treated as a mathematical equation between Christ's unique mission and the church's. The relation is analogical and derivative. The Son's saving work is unrepeatable. Yet Christian sending receives its identity from him.

The church is not sent to announce itself.

It is sent as witness to Christ.

This protects mission from ecclesial self-expansion. Denominations may grow through mission. Mission agencies may become larger. Christian institutions may gain influence. None of these is the ultimate objective. The church bears witness to someone greater than itself.

The distinction is difficult to maintain institutionally because organizations naturally measure what they can observe: personnel, budgets, campuses, congregations, attendees, downloads, decisions. Metrics are not inherently wrong. They become spiritually dangerous when institutional survival and growth become hidden definitions of missionary success.

One of the most searching questions a mission organization can ask is therefore not, “How can this ministry expand?” but “What would success look like if our organization eventually became less necessary here?”

Part V will return to that question.

The Spirit and Mission

Christian mission is also inseparable from the Holy Spirit.

Luke-Acts makes the relationship explicit. Jesus tells the disciples to wait for power from on high. Acts 1:8 connects the coming of the Spirit with witness from Jerusalem toward the ends of the earth. Pentecost inaugurates a multilingual public witness. The Spirit directs, empowers, interrupts, and expands the church’s understanding as Acts unfolds.

This pneumatological dimension matters because mission can easily become technocratic. Researchers map populations. Agencies develop strategies. Candidates receive assessments. Fundraising systems optimize communication. Translation software accelerates workflows. All of these can be legitimate instruments.

None can manufacture spiritual life.

The New Testament does not present conversion as the predictable output of correct technique. Paul plants, Apollos waters, but God gives growth (1 Cor. 3:6). Missionary responsibility is real; missionary control is not.

This distinction should create neither passivity nor anti-intellectualism. The fact that God gives growth does not excuse poor preparation, cultural ignorance, theological confusion, or irresponsible leadership. Paul himself reasons, plans, travels strategically, sends coworkers, collects money, adapts communication, and writes letters in response to concrete situations.

Dependence on the Spirit and thoughtful strategy are not enemies.

The problem arises when strategy tacitly assumes that enough optimization can guarantee the outcome only God can give.

The Church Receives a Mission. If mission originates in God, what is the church’s place?

The church is neither unnecessary nor sovereign. It is the community gathered by the gospel and commissioned to bear witness to that gospel.

This avoids two opposite errors.

One error treats the institutional church as though it owns mission. In this model, mission is what authorized church structures do through of-

ficially approved channels. The weakness is obvious from Christian history. Laypeople, migrants, merchants, persecuted communities, women excluded from formal ecclesiastical authority, independent movements, and ordinary believers have often carried Christian witness beyond institutional plans.

The opposite error uses *missio Dei* to make the church peripheral. If God's mission is simply everything God is doing in the world, the particular role of the Christian community can disappear.

The New Testament does not permit that disappearance. Christ forms a people. Baptism marks disciples. Teaching continues. Churches emerge. Leaders are recognized. The Lord's Supper is practiced. Letters are addressed to congregations. Christian mission is not merely individual spirituality diffusing through society.

The church is central because disciples need a community in which Christian life can be learned and sustained.⁴

Evangelism and Service

The relationship between evangelism and social action has generated recurring evangelical debate.

At one extreme, mission is narrowed so sharply to verbal proclamation that bodily suffering becomes secondary or strategically useful only when it produces evangelistic opportunity. Service becomes bait.

At the other, mission expands until distinctive witness to Christ becomes merely one optional expression of a broader program of human flourishing.

The New Testament resists both reductions. Jesus announces the kingdom, calls for repentance, forgives sins, teaches, heals, feeds, touches, confronts oppression, and gives his life. The apostolic church preaches Christ and cares for material need. Paul can organize famine relief while remaining consumed with gospel proclamation.

Theological priorities still matter. Christian mission cannot lose evangelism, conversion, discipleship, Scripture, and church formation without losing its distinctive commission. But evangelism conducted without love of the whole person contradicts the message it announces.

A Christian hospital should provide excellent medical care even to patients uninterested in Christianity. A refugee should not wonder whether

⁴On the relation of church, witness, and mission in a post-Christendom context, see Newbigin, *Open Secret*; Goheen, *Light to the Nations*.

food is conditional upon listening to a sermon. A school should not use grades as religious pressure. Humanitarian service should be genuine service.

At the same time, Christian institutions need not hide the faith that motivates them. Integrity does not require silence. It requires noncoercive witness.

This distinction will become especially important in restricted contexts and professional mission.

The Missionary Is Not the Savior. Beginning with God's mission also corrects missionary identity.

Some missionary cultures have unintentionally rewarded exceptionalism. Workers are celebrated for leaving comfort, entering danger, or serving among strategically important populations. Support newsletters can reinforce the image because fundraising rewards dramatic narratives. The missionary gradually becomes central to the story.

The theology of mission should make this impossible.

The missionary is a witness, servant, ambassador, teacher, translator, pastor, pioneer, friend, or specialist. The exact role varies. None is savior.

This protects both the missionary and the community.

It protects the missionary from a burden no human can bear. Workers do not redeem populations. They cannot guarantee conversion. They cannot solve every institutional failure. The savior complex is spiritually destructive precisely because it combines grandiosity with impossible responsibility.

It protects the community from missionary control. If God is already the primary actor, the missionary can recognize gifts, leadership, theological insight, and agency among local Christians. The outsider does not need to remain indispensable in order for God's work to continue.

The Missionary Enters a World Already Interpreting. The missionary also enters a social world that assigns meaning before the missionary explains himself.

A wealthy foreigner may be interpreted through colonial memory. An American may be associated with U.S. foreign policy. A Korean missionary may carry assumptions shaped by Korean business, popular culture, or church reputation. A white missionary in Africa may be read through racial history regardless of personal intent. A Christian from a neighboring ethnic group may enter a community with centuries of conflict behind the encounter.

Starting with God's mission does not solve these problems. It changes the missionary posture toward them.

The missionary does not say, “My intention is Christian, therefore your interpretation is wrong.”

He listens.

She learns.

The worker asks how Christian witness is being heard, not only what was meant.

Missionary humility is therefore more than personality. It is a theological consequence of derivative mission.

Holiness and Credibility. The New Testament repeatedly connects witness with the life of God’s people. Christians are not saved by moral performance, yet hypocrisy damages testimony because the gospel produces claims about transformed allegiance.

Missionary scandals therefore carry unusual weight. Abuse, financial corruption, sexual misconduct, racism, manipulative leadership, or dishonesty are not merely organizational problems. They contradict the message being proclaimed.

This does not mean missionaries must be flawless before serving. The church would never send anyone. It means character belongs to missionary qualification rather than being treated as a private matter secondary to gifting.

Later chapters will examine safeguarding, spiritual abuse, and missionary formation. Their theological foundation lies here: mission belongs to the holy God, and those who represent Christ must remain accountable to the gospel they preach.

Mission and Worship

Mission also has a destination.

Revelation repeatedly portrays people from the nations gathered before God and the Lamb. The vision is frequently quoted in missionary literature, and rightly so. It displays a redeemed humanity whose diversity has not disappeared. Nation, tribe, people, and language remain meaningful within the picture of worship.

Yet the scene offers a correction to missionary imagination.

Mission agencies are absent.

Sending nations are absent as privileged centers.

Missionaries are not standing at the front receiving gratitude from the peoples they reached.

The Lamb is at the center.

Worship is the destination.

This matters because strategies can quietly make mission itself ultimate. Christians become preoccupied with completion metrics, unreached lists, mobilization rates, and institutional growth. These may all serve obedience. None is the final reality.

Mission exists because God is worthy of worship and because human beings are called into reconciled life with him.

The church does not ultimately seek a world full of missionary programs. It seeks communities of disciples worshipping God in Christ.

Urgency and Humility. Beginning with God therefore produces a distinctive missionary temperament.

There is urgency because the gospel genuinely matters, Christ genuinely commands witness, and human lives are finite.

There is humility because missionaries do not control salvation or history.

There is confidence because mission rests on Christ's authority rather than the church's cultural power.

There is repentance because Christian institutions remain capable of sin.

There is patience because discipleship and churches require time.

There is strategic concern because unequal access is real.

There is restraint because people are not projects.

These qualities belong together.

Missionary urgency without humility becomes triumphalism.

Humility without conviction becomes paralysis.

Strategy without prayer becomes managerialism.

Prayer without responsible action becomes an excuse.

A theology of the sending God holds the tensions together.

From God to the Nations

If mission originates in God, the next question concerns its human horizon.

Does Scripture portray God's purpose as narrowly centered on one covenant people? What place do the nations occupy before the Great Commission? Is Israel itself a missionary people in the same sense as the church? How should Christians read the promise that all the families of the earth will be blessed through Abraham?

Those questions matter because modern mission rhetoric sometimes begins with Matthew 28 as though the nations suddenly entered God's concern at the resurrection.

They did not.

The universal horizon is woven through the biblical story long before the church receives its missionary commission.

Blessed for the Nations

The biblical story narrows before it widens.

Genesis begins with humanity as a whole: creation, the image of God, rebellion, judgment, the flood, the spread of peoples, and Babel. Then, immediately after the scattering of Genesis 11, the narrative focuses on one man. Abram is called to leave country, kindred, and father's house for a land God will show him. God promises to make him a great nation, bless him, make his name great, and make him a blessing. The promise culminates in language whose horizon reaches far beyond Abram's household: through him the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3).

The sequence is theologically important. God's answer to fractured humanity is not an abstract program for humanity in general. He elects. He calls one family. Yet the particular choice contains a universal horizon from the beginning.

Election and mission should therefore not be treated as opposites. In the biblical story, God's particular work through a chosen people serves purposes that reach beyond them.

Babel and the Call of Abraham

Genesis 10 and 11 provide a world of peoples, languages, and dispersal. The table of nations presents humanity after the flood in families and territories. Babel then narrates a collective attempt to make a name and avoid dispersion, followed by divine judgment, confused language, and scattering.

The point is not that every modern ethnolinguistic population can be derived straightforwardly from Genesis 10. The chapter belongs to an

ancient theological and genealogical worldview. Modern ethnicity, nation-states, language families, and social identities cannot simply be mapped one-to-one onto its names.

What the text does establish is a universal human horizon marked by unity, rebellion, plurality, and dispersion.

Genesis 12 then introduces Abraham.

God promises to make Abraham's name great precisely after Babel's builders sought to make a name for themselves. The contrast is suggestive: self-exalting humanity attempts to secure permanence; God freely gives name and blessing to the one he calls. More important for mission, the promise does not terminate in Abraham. The families of the earth appear in the promise itself.

This is why Christopher Wright and other biblical theologians treat the Abrahamic covenant as central to a theology of mission. The later Great Commission is not a divine change of subject from Israel to the nations. It belongs to a story in which the nations have always remained within God's purpose.¹

What Does "Blessing" Mean? Missionary interpretation can sometimes move too quickly from Genesis 12 to evangelistic strategy. The promise of blessing should first be heard within Genesis.

The blessing includes concrete covenantal goods: descendants, land, protection, name, and relationship with God. Abraham becomes the bearer of promise, and the narratives that follow repeatedly show both the generosity and the moral seriousness of that relationship.

The nations dimension also returns. Genesis 18:18 again says that all nations of the earth will be blessed in Abraham. Genesis 22:18 renews universal language after the binding of Isaac. The promise is not an incidental phrase remembered only by later missionaries. It becomes part of the covenantal architecture of Genesis.

The New Testament subsequently interprets the promise christologically. Paul can describe the announcement to Abraham as anticipating the justification of the Gentiles by faith and connect Abrahamic blessing with Christ (Gal. 3:8–14). This later reading matters enormously for Christian mission, but it should not erase the texture of Genesis itself. God's universal purpose advances through a concrete covenant history rather than an abstract promise of religious diffusion.

¹Wright, *Mission of God*, develops the Abrahamic promise as a central element in the Bible's missionary theology; see also Michael W. Goheen, *A Light to the Nations*.

Election for the Sake of Others. The relationship between election and the nations becomes clearer in Israel's later vocation.

Election can easily be misunderstood as divine favoritism: God loves this people and therefore values others less. Scripture repeatedly destabilizes that interpretation.

Deuteronomy emphasizes that Israel was not chosen because it was more numerous or impressive than other peoples. God's love and covenant faithfulness precede Israel's merit. The same covenant privileges increase Israel's accountability. Prophets can condemn Israel more severely precisely because Israel has received revelation and covenant.

Election is grace.

Vocation is responsibility.

The church needs this distinction as much as Israel did. Missionary success can generate its own doctrine of chosenness. A denomination grows and begins to assume its methods are uniquely blessed. A sending country produces many missionaries and reads numerical strength as evidence of spiritual superiority. A mission agency survives for a century and treats longevity as divine validation of every institutional habit.

The biblical doctrine of election gives no support to such conclusions. Being used by God does not make a people or institution immune from judgment.²

A Kingdom of Priests

At Sinai, Israel is called God's treasured possession among all peoples, "for all the earth is mine," and a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:5–6).

The text has understandably attracted missionary interpretation. Priestly language suggests a mediating vocation, and the explicit reminder that all the earth belongs to God places Israel's particular covenant within universal divine ownership.

Yet care is required. Exodus 19 does not issue Israel a command equivalent to Matthew 28. Israel's priestly identity includes holiness, worship, obedience, and a distinctive covenant life before the nations. Its missionary significance lies partly in what Israel is called to be, not merely in organized outward sending.

²On election, covenant, and the nations in Old Testament theology, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Zondervan Academic, 2010).

This difference is important because Christian accounts sometimes portray the Old Testament as though Israel failed primarily by refusing to conduct foreign missions, after which the church received the job. That reading is too simple. Israel's failures include idolatry, injustice, covenant rebellion, and refusal to embody God's holiness. The Old Testament certainly contains outward movement—Jonah is the obvious example—but its dominant missionary pattern is not identical to apostolic sending.

The universal horizon is real without turning Israel into a modern mission agency.

A People Watched by the Nations. Deuteronomy 4 gives another important image. Israel is to keep God's statutes so that the surrounding peoples, hearing of them, recognize the wisdom and understanding of this nation. The nations observe Israel's law and God's nearness.

Here witness is public and communal. Israel's social life says something about Israel's God.

This has enduring missionary importance. A church's witness never consists only of the claims its evangelists make. Communities communicate by the kinds of life they produce.

A missionary organization may preach reconciliation while reproducing racial hierarchy.

A church may proclaim dignity while concealing abuse.

A Christian institution may teach generosity while using donor power manipulatively.

Such contradictions do not prove the gospel false, but they damage the credibility of Christian witness because the people who claim to belong to God are visible.

Mission therefore has always possessed an ethical dimension.

The Psalms and the Worship of the Nations. Israel's worship repeatedly expands toward the nations.

Psalms 67 is particularly striking. It echoes the priestly blessing of Numbers 6—God being gracious, blessing, and making his face shine—then gives a universal purpose: "that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations." The psalm repeatedly calls the peoples to praise God.

The movement is significant. Blessing received becomes blessing displayed and extended.

Psalms 96 commands, "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples." Psalm 98 calls all the earth to joyful praise. Psalm 117, the shortest psalm, calls all nations and peoples to

praise the Lord. Royal psalms envision the king's rule extending broadly. Zion psalms imagine the nations in relation to God's reign.

These texts do not create one missionary strategy, but collectively they make a narrow tribal interpretation of Israel's God impossible. The Lord's praise belongs among the nations.

The church's missionary worship therefore does not introduce a new idea when it longs for praise from every people. It participates in a biblical expectation older than the church itself.

Solomon's Temple Prayer. The dedication of the temple in 1 Kings 8 adds another dimension. Solomon prays not only for Israel but for the foreigner who comes from a distant land because of God's name. He asks God to hear so that all the peoples of the earth may know God's name and fear him.

Again the pattern is centripetal rather than a command for Israel to send missionaries abroad: the foreigner comes, hears of God's name, and prays toward the temple.

But the universal concern is unmistakable.

The temple is particular. The divine purpose reaches farther.

This distinction helps Christian readers avoid collapsing every Old Testament universal text into one missionary pattern. Sometimes the nations come. Sometimes Israel declares. Sometimes a prophet goes. Sometimes God's judgment and deliverance become known publicly. The universal horizon is larger than one mechanism.

Jonah and the Reluctant Prophet

Jonah has long served as an obvious missionary text because God explicitly sends an Israelite prophet to a foreign city.

The book's significance, however, lies less in providing a model missionary method than in exposing the prophet's heart.

Nineveh represents the capital of a brutal imperial power. Jonah's reluctance is not simple ethnocentrism in the abstract. Assyria's violence gives the story moral and political weight. Jonah knows the character of God and fears precisely what eventually happens: God may show mercy.

The book therefore confronts a recurring missionary temptation—the desire for God's grace to operate within boundaries we find morally acceptable.

Missionary concern for enemies is costly.

The story does not romanticize Nineveh. It magnifies divine compassion without denying evil.

For contemporary mission, Jonah warns against treating hostile populations as people whose spiritual loss confirms our judgment. The church may oppose persecution, terrorism, injustice, or authoritarian power and still desire repentance and mercy for those within those societies.

The nations are not loved because they are innocent.

Neither was Israel.

Neither is the church.

The Prophetic Universal Horizon. The prophets deepen the expectation that God's saving reign will extend beyond Israel.

Isaiah 2 imagines the mountain of the Lord's house raised above the hills, with nations streaming toward it to learn God's ways. The scene culminates in peace: swords become plowshares and spears pruning hooks.

Isaiah 19 offers one of the most surprising visions in the Old Testament. Egypt and Assyria—powers representing oppression and imperial threat—appear within a future triad with Israel, each described in terms of belonging to God. The text radically widens the imagination of covenant blessing.

Isaiah's servant songs intensify the theme. In Isaiah 49:6, restoring Israel is described as too small a task; the servant is made a light for the nations so that salvation may reach the ends of the earth. The New Testament will later apply this language to the apostolic mission in Acts 13.

Isaiah 56 imagines foreigners joining themselves to the Lord, and the temple is called a house of prayer for all peoples. Jesus later invokes this passage in the temple context.

Micah shares the vision of nations coming to God's instruction. Zechariah depicts peoples and powerful nations seeking the Lord. Malachi announces God's name as great among the nations.

No single verse should be isolated from literary and historical context and made to carry the whole missionary argument. The cumulative pattern is what matters.

Israel's God is the God of the nations.

The prophetic future is not an ethnically sealed restoration.

The Diaspora and Witness

Exile introduces another way God's people encounter the nations: displacement.

Israelites and Judeans live under foreign empires. Biblical books associated with exile and diaspora depict varied responses. Daniel serves within imperial administration while maintaining allegiance to God. Esther narrates Jewish life within Persia under mortal threat. Jeremiah instructs exiles in Babylon to seek the welfare of the city where they have been sent, because their welfare is bound to its welfare (Jer. 29:7).

These are not missionary manuals, but they provide theological resources for Christian life in diaspora. God's people do not encounter the nations only by voluntarily traveling outward. Sometimes they are moved by war, empire, economics, or political upheaval.

That pattern becomes increasingly important in contemporary mission, where migration carries Christians into societies they did not enter through missionary deployment.

The biblical story is already familiar with God's people living as minorities among others.

Ruth, Rahab, and the Nations Within Israel's Story. The nations also enter Israel's story through individuals whose presence complicates any simple ethnic boundary.

Rahab, a Canaanite woman in Jericho, acts in faith and becomes incorporated into Israel's story. Ruth, a Moabite widow, binds herself to Naomi and Israel's God and becomes an ancestor of David. Naaman the Syrian encounters the God of Israel through Elisha's ministry. The widow of Zarephath receives Elijah during famine, a story Jesus later invokes in Nazareth.

These narratives should not be forced into a systematic missionary program. Their cumulative effect is theological: God's grace is not confined by ethnicity, and outsiders can enter the story of God's people in unexpected ways.

Matthew's genealogy of Jesus later foregrounds women whose stories include precisely these boundary-crossing features.

The universal horizon becomes christological before the Gospel has reached its final commission.

The Stranger in Israel's Law. A theology of the nations also requires attention to the stranger living among Israel.

The Torah repeatedly commands concern for the sojourner. Israel is to remember its own experience in Egypt. Legal protections vary by text and

historical context, and the modern category of “migrant” should not be mapped mechanically onto every Hebrew term. The ethical trajectory is nevertheless clear: covenant identity does not justify indifference toward outsiders living among the people.

This creates an important missionary order.

The stranger is first a neighbor before becoming a strategy.

Contemporary churches can easily discover migration as a missionary opportunity and then instrumentalize migrants. Refugees become access to Muslims. International students become future influence in their home countries. Diaspora communities become strategic bridges.

Those possibilities may be real.

Christian hospitality must still be hospitality.

If care disappears when evangelistic response does not occur, the relationship was never fully loving.

The Old Testament’s concern for the stranger helps keep missionary strategy subordinate to neighbor-love.

Israel’s Failure. The biblical story does not idealize the covenant people.

Israel worships idols, exploits the vulnerable, trusts political power, violates covenant, and experiences judgment. Prophetic literature is severe precisely because the people who bear God’s name can misrepresent him.

This prevents missionary theology from turning the chosen people into a simple success story or from interpreting later church mission as the arrival of a morally superior institution.

The church inherits no immunity from Israel’s warnings.

Mission history itself shows why this matters. Christian institutions can proclaim the gospel while reproducing practices inconsistent with it. The biblical theology of mission needs repentance inside the missionary movement, not only conversion outside it.

Restoration and the Nations

Exile does not end the promise.

Prophetic restoration frequently returns to the nations. God’s vindication of his name, renewal of his people, coming king, servant, temple, and future reign all open outward.

Christian interpretation sees these promises reaching their climax in Jesus, Israel’s Messiah, through whom the nations are incorporated into the blessing promised to Abraham.

But the route matters. The New Testament's universal mission does not bypass Israel's story. Jesus is not a generic world teacher appearing without covenant history. He comes within the story of Abraham, David, exile, restoration, temple, kingdom, and prophetic hope.

This matters because some Christian mission theology has unintentionally treated Judaism as a failed preliminary religion that Christianity simply replaced. A better account recognizes both continuity and discontinuity while refusing caricature. The church's mission to the nations is intelligible only because the gospel concerns Israel's Messiah and Israel's Scriptures.

Paul and Abraham. Paul's reading in Galatians 3 is particularly important. He connects the promise that the nations would be blessed through Abraham with the gospel's extension to Gentiles and locates fulfillment in Christ.

This gives Christian mission a strong Abrahamic logic:
promise → Christ → blessing to the nations.

Yet Paul also resists Gentile arrogance. Romans 9–11 confronts non-Jewish Christians who might imagine themselves superior to Israel. Gentiles are grafted in; they do not become grounds for boasting.³

Mission to the nations should therefore produce gratitude, not civilizational superiority.

The Gentile church exists by grace.

This is one more reason Christian mission cannot be identified with Western cultural expansion. Gentile Christianity itself is the beneficiary of a mission that crossed boundaries into the nations.

What "Nations" Can and Cannot Mean

Modern mission strategy often draws a direct line:

Bible says nations → Greek says *ethnē* → modern ethnolinguistic people groups are the biblical nations → every modern people group must therefore be individually reached before the Great Commission is complete.

The logic contains a valid intuition and an invalid simplification.

The valid intuition is that the biblical universal horizon is not adequately satisfied by political nation-states. Scripture's language of peoples, nations, tribes, and languages draws attention to human diversity deeper

³Paul's explicit connection of Abrahamic blessing with the Gentile gospel appears in Galatians 3:8–14; Romans 9–11 supplies the complementary warning against Gentile boasting.

than modern borders. Missionary research is therefore right to ask which social communities remain hidden inside national averages.

The simplification is treating one ancient word as though it directly encoded a modern anthropological database. Biblical *ethnos* has contextual ranges of meaning. Ancient peoples were not classified using contemporary ethnolinguistic, caste, country, and social-network methodology.

People-group strategy can therefore be biblically motivated without being biblically dictated in every classification decision.

This distinction will become essential in Chapter 10.

A Universal Horizon Without a Universal Method. The Old Testament gives Christianity a universal horizon but not one missionary method.

Sometimes the nations observe Israel.

Sometimes they come toward Zion.

Sometimes an Israelite prophet is sent outward.

Sometimes foreigners enter Israel's story.

Sometimes exile places God's people among the nations.

Sometimes God's judgment or deliverance makes his name known.

The church should therefore resist the temptation to make every Old Testament text support one modern missionary strategy. The canonical picture is richer.⁴

What holds it together is God's purpose: the God of Israel is the Creator of all, his blessing reaches beyond Israel, his name is to be known among the nations, and the prophetic future includes their worship.

The New Testament does not invent this universal horizon.

It declares that the decisive moment in the story has arrived in Jesus.

From Promise to Messiah

The opening chapter of Matthew makes the transition explicit. Jesus is introduced as son of David and son of Abraham. The genealogy then includes figures whose stories already point beyond a narrow ethnic imagination. Gentile Magi arrive to honor the newborn king. The Gospel that will end with "all nations" begins with nations already appearing around Israel's Messiah.

This does not mean Jesus' earthly ministry lacks an Israel-first priority. It unmistakably has one. The tension between Israel's particular role and

⁴On the danger of reading a direct missionary mandate for Israel into every universal Old Testament text, compare contemporary biblical-mission discussions in Wright, Goheen, and Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2 vols. (InterVarsity Press, 2004).

the universal horizon becomes one of the most important features of the Gospels.

The next chapter therefore asks what Jesus himself does with the nations theme and what the Great Commission actually commands.

Jesus and the Nations

The Great Commission is among the most familiar missionary texts in Christianity. It appears on mission-agency walls, conference banners, church websites, candidate brochures, and fundraising material. Its phrases have shaped generations of missionary vocation: “go,” “make disciples,” “all nations,” “to the end of the age.”

Familiarity can create the illusion that the passage requires little interpretation.

In reality, Matthew 28:18–20 sits at the end of a Gospel whose whole narrative prepares for it. Jesus does not suddenly discover the nations after the resurrection. Matthew has already developed the relationship between Israel, Gentiles, kingdom, authority, discipleship, teaching, and obedience. The Commission becomes clearer when it is read as the climax of that story rather than as a missionary slogan detached from it.

Son of Abraham, Son of David

Matthew begins by locating Jesus inside Israel’s covenantal history: “the son of David, the son of Abraham.” Both titles matter.

David establishes the royal horizon. Abraham establishes the covenantal horizon in which blessing extends to the nations. The genealogy itself then includes women and outsiders whose stories complicate a narrow account of ethnic purity: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah. Matthew’s opening pages already place Israel’s Messiah within a history in which God’s purposes repeatedly cross expected boundaries.

The Magi intensify the theme. Gentile astrologers from the east come seeking the one born king of the Jews while Jerusalem’s political center becomes troubled. The episode should not be romanticized into a general

endorsement of their prior religious practice. Matthew's irony is theological: outsiders recognize the significance of Israel's king even while Herod plots against him.

The nations are present from the beginning.

Israel First. At the same time, Jesus' earthly ministry is unmistakably centered on Israel.

Matthew 10 provides the clearest example. When Jesus sends the Twelve, he instructs them not to go among the Gentiles or enter Samaritan towns but rather to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Matthew 15 repeats Israel's priority in Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Christian mission theology has sometimes found this tension uncomfortable and rushed toward Matthew 28, where the apparent restriction disappears.

But the Israel-first pattern belongs to the logic of fulfillment. Jesus is Israel's Messiah. His ministry confirms God's covenant faithfulness. The movement toward all nations does not happen because Israel no longer matters; it happens through the fulfillment of Israel's story.

This distinction matters in a book about mission because Christian universalism can become anti-Jewish when it treats Israel merely as a failed preliminary stage. The Gospel's widening horizon should be read as fulfillment through Israel's Messiah, not as evidence that God abandoned one people to choose more successful ones.

Gentile Anticipations. Matthew nevertheless places Gentile encounters throughout Jesus' ministry.

The Roman centurion in Matthew 8 approaches Jesus regarding his servant. Jesus marvels at his faith and then speaks of many coming from east and west to recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. The saying places Gentile inclusion within Abrahamic hope while simultaneously warning presumed insiders against confidence detached from faith.

The Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 presses through a difficult exchange and receives Jesus' commendation for great faith. The episode should be read carefully and not reduced to a sentimental story. The Israel-first priority is explicit. So is the woman's inclusion in the benefits of Jesus' messianic work.

Matthew's passion narrative also includes Gentile actors. The centurion and those with him respond to the crucifixion with a confession concerning Jesus' identity.

These scenes prepare the reader for a final commission whose scope is no longer restricted to Israel.

The Kingdom and the Nations. Jesus' kingdom teaching likewise contains universal dimensions.

The parable of the wicked tenants concludes with kingdom-transfer language that has generated difficult debates concerning Israel and the church. Whatever position one takes on those broader ecclesiological questions, the Gospel clearly depicts judgment upon unfaithfulness rather than ethnic privilege as such.

Matthew 24:14 speaks of the gospel of the kingdom being proclaimed throughout the whole inhabited world as a testimony to all nations before the end. Chapter 5 will examine why this verse cannot responsibly be turned into a modern countdown formula. Here it shows that worldwide testimony belongs already to Jesus' eschatological discourse.

The temple action also invokes Isaiah's universal horizon. The broader canonical setting of the temple as a house of prayer for the nations should remain in view even where Matthew's wording is more compressed than Mark's.

The story is moving toward worldwide witness before the final command is spoken.

Resurrection Changes the Horizon

Matthew 28 begins with the resurrection.

This sequence matters. The Great Commission is not generic moral instruction offered by a wise teacher before death. It is issued by the crucified and risen Christ.

The disciples come to the mountain in Galilee. They worship, though Matthew adds the striking phrase that some doubted. The missionary church begins in a posture combining worship and weakness.

That is an important corrective to missionary heroism.

The Commission is entrusted not to an elite group whose psychological certainty demonstrates their fitness. Matthew's disciples have misunderstood, fled, denied, and doubted. Their adequacy rests on the authority and presence of Christ.

"All Authority" Comes First. Jesus' first statement is not "go." It is "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18).

The grammar of mission is therefore framed by Christology.

The scope of the Commission rests on the scope of Christ's authority.

This keeps missionary activity from becoming a civilizational project. Christians are not commissioned to extend the authority of a nation, culture, denomination, or mission agency. They bear witness under the authority of Christ.

Historically, this distinction has often been violated. Mission and imperial expansion sometimes overlapped so closely that foreign power and Christian authority became difficult for local communities to separate. Chapter 7 will examine that complexity.

The Great Commission itself contains no mandate for political domination. Christ's authority relativizes every human empire, including those that send missionaries.

The Grammar of Matthew 28:19

The Greek construction has generated a popular debate.

The main finite imperative is *mathēteusate*—"make disciples." It is accompanied by participial forms commonly translated "going," "baptizing," and "teaching."

Some teachers have used this observation to downplay geographical movement, paraphrasing the verse as though it meant, "As you happen to go about your ordinary life, make disciples." That reading is too weak. Greek attendant-circumstance constructions can carry imperatival force in dependence upon the main verb, and the narrative's widening horizon plainly involves movement beyond the disciples' existing boundaries.¹

At the opposite extreme, missionary rhetoric can make "go" the central command and treat geographical relocation itself as the essence of faithfulness.

The grammatical center provides a better balance.

The church goes in order to make disciples.

Movement serves disciple-making.

This means the success of mission cannot be measured principally by the number of missionaries deployed. A missionary can cross an ocean and fail to make disciples. A local Christian can cross an immense linguistic or religious boundary without leaving the country and participate deeply in the Commission.

¹R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, 2007); John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, 2005); W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 3 (T&T Clark, 1997). These major commentaries treat the grammar and literary context of Matthew 28:18–20 in detail.

The relevant boundary is human and missional, not merely national.

What Is a Disciple? The noun *disciple* can become missionary jargon unless Matthew's Gospel gives it content.

A disciple in Matthew follows Jesus, hears his teaching, learns, fails, receives correction, participates in his mission, and is called toward obedience. The final Commission then makes the process explicit through baptism and teaching.

This is more demanding than exposure.

A person who has watched a Christian video has encountered Christian information.

A person who has prayed once in response to an evangelistic appeal may have taken a significant spiritual step.

A disciple is being formed into sustained allegiance to Jesus.

Missionary models that celebrate first response while neglecting the life that follows are therefore out of proportion with the Commission they claim to serve.

Baptizing. The command includes baptism "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

The triune formula has enormous theological significance, but for missionary theology baptism also makes a social point. Christian response receives visible form.

Baptism joins personal faith with public identity and Christian community.

Different traditions understand the sacramental theology of baptism differently, and this book will not resolve those debates. Across the traditions, however, baptism is not equivalent to private religious curiosity. It identifies a person in relation to Christ and the church.

This becomes especially important in contexts where religious identity is inherited socially. A person may privately appreciate Christian teaching while baptism signals a public change with family and communal consequences.

Missionaries should therefore be careful both about unnecessary delay and irresponsible haste. Baptism cannot be reduced to a metric demonstrating ministry success. In high-cost contexts, the church must take seriously what public Christian identification means for the person being baptized.

Teaching Obedience. The Commission continues: "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

This phrase is one of the strongest arguments against reducing mission to proclamation alone.

Teaching is not merely transferring doctrinal information. The object is obedience.

Christian doctrine matters because disciples need truth. But the Commission expects truth to become life.

How does a new believer handle money?

What happens when family expectations conflict with Christian conviction?

How should a church respond to injustice, sexuality, marriage, ancestor practices, nationalism, corruption, violence, or religious pressure?

These are discipleship questions.

Their answers cannot usually be delivered in one evangelistic encounter.

The Commission therefore contains a built-in long horizon.

Mission may begin with a conversation. Disciple-making extends across years and generations.

"All Nations": The Central Debate

The phrase *panta ta ethnē*—all the nations—has exercised enormous influence on modern mission strategy.

The universal scope is not seriously in doubt. The interpretive question is what kind of social units Matthew intends readers to imagine.

The Greek noun *ethnos* can refer to nations, peoples, or Gentiles depending on context. In the plural, it frequently denotes Gentiles in contrast to Jews. Elsewhere it can refer more broadly to peoples or nations. Matthew's own usage varies.²

Modern people-group missiology has sometimes argued that *ethnē* points toward ethnolinguistic peoples rather than modern political states. The correction to nation-state thinking is useful. The further claim—that every contemporary people-group entry corresponds to one biblical *ethnos*—does not follow.

A twenty-first-century mission database may divide one ethnolinguistic population by country, caste, religion, language, or social barrier because doing so helps researchers identify where the gospel does not move easily through relationships. Those are strategic decisions. Matthew did not supply that classification system.

The Great Commission gives the church a universal missionary scope.

²For the semantic and missionary discussion of *ethnos/ethnē*, see France, Nolland, Davies and Allison, and Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*.

Anthropology and mission research help the church operationalize that scope.

Confusing those levels gives a modern database more biblical authority than it possesses.

Why the Distinction Matters Strategically. Suppose a database divides a population into twenty groups and later researchers conclude that twelve would better reflect contemporary social reality.

Did the number of biblical nations change?

Obviously not.

The database improved—or at least revised—its model.

This should free mission researchers rather than threaten them. If people-group lists are tools, they can be revised when better evidence emerges. Researchers can acknowledge uncertainty, migration, intermarriage, urbanization, and changing identities without fearing that they are altering the Great Commission.

The theological obligation remains stable:

no people lies outside the scope of Christ's command.

The strategic map remains revisable.

Does “All Nations” Mean Every Individual? The Great Commission addresses the nations without implying that individuals become irrelevant.

Missionary statistics often operate at population level because strategy requires aggregate analysis. The New Testament's call to discipleship is personal. People believe, are baptized, learn, suffer, obey, and gather.

A people group can therefore cross a missionary threshold while many individuals remain untouched by Christian witness. Conversely, a population classified as unreached can contain faithful Christian individuals and churches.

This is one reason language such as “the Fulani are unreached” should be heard as shorthand for a research classification, not a claim about the spiritual knowledge of every Fulani person.

The Commission concerns persons among peoples.

Both levels matter.

Conversion and Coercion

The Great Commission has sometimes been implicated in coercive missionary history because Christians have pursued conversion under conditions of political or social power.

Nothing in Matthew 28 authorizes forced discipleship.

A disciple by definition cannot be manufactured through coercion. Baptism administered under pressure may produce nominal conformity without faith. Teaching obedience under threat contradicts the nature of the allegiance being sought.

This is particularly important when Christian institutions control schools, aid, employment, or medical care. The missionary desire for response must be constrained by the dignity and freedom of the person receiving service.

The Commission creates urgency.

It does not license manipulation.

The Local Church Implied. Matthew 28 does not offer a complete doctrine of the church.

Yet baptism and sustained teaching naturally raise the ecclesial question.

Who baptizes?

Where do disciples gather?

Who teaches everything Jesus commanded after the initial missionary leaves?

Who corrects error?

Who cares for suffering believers?

Who recognizes leaders?

The New Testament's wider witness answers through local Christian communities.

This is why church formation will eventually become central to Part V. The church is not an optional organizational add-on to evangelism. It is the durable social form within which disciple-making continues.

"I Am With You"

Matthew ends with a promise: "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The Commission therefore stretches across the period between resurrection and consummation.

The promise echoes Matthew's opening identification of Jesus as Immanuel, God with us. The Gospel ends where it began, now with the presence of the risen Christ accompanying the missionary church.³

This gives mission both courage and restraint.

³Matthew's Immanuel inclusio runs from Matt. 1:23 to 28:20; see France, *Matthew*.

Courage, because the church goes under Christ's authority and presence.

Restraint, because missionary success does not rest ultimately on human power.

The Great Commission and Missionary Calling. Does Matthew 28 call every Christian to become a cross-cultural missionary?

No.

It gives the church a universal disciple-making responsibility. The New Testament simultaneously depicts differentiated gifts and vocations. Some travel. Some pastor. Some give. Some host. Some teach. Some remain in established churches. The body is not one member.

The Commission should therefore not be weaponized against Christians whose faithful vocation remains local.

Yet neither should its corporate character become an excuse for individual indifference. Every Christian belongs to a church whose life is shaped by this commission. Some Christians should seriously consider crossing cultural boundaries precisely because the task belongs to the whole body.

Chapter 22 will return to the calling question.

The Great Commission and Missionary Completion

Modern missionary movements have also connected "all nations" with the idea of finishing the task. If every nation must be discipled, can the church identify when that has happened?

Matthew 28 itself gives no statistical threshold.

It gives scope, activity, content, and duration:

all nations;

make disciples;

baptize and teach obedience;

until the end of the age.

Any modern completion framework must therefore be judged by whether it serves these realities without pretending to possess an inspired measurement formula.

The next two chapters provide the biblical material necessary for that judgment. Acts shows what happened when the first Christians actually began crossing boundaries. Then Chapter 5 asks what Scripture permits us to call "finished."

From Jerusalem to the Ends of the Earth

Acts begins with a question about restoration and an answer about witness.

The risen Jesus has spent forty days speaking about the kingdom of God. The disciples ask whether he will now restore the kingdom to Israel. Jesus does not answer by declaring the kingdom irrelevant. He redirects their attention from timetable to vocation: the times and seasons belong to the Father's authority; the disciples will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them and will be Christ's witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:6–8).

The verse has often been treated as an outline for Acts, and the correspondence is real. Witness begins in Jerusalem, spreads through Judea and Samaria, crosses decisive Gentile boundaries, and eventually reaches Rome. But Acts 1:8 is more than geographic progression. Luke tells a story in which the gospel repeatedly crosses boundaries the church itself does not fully understand in advance.¹

Waiting Before Going

The missionary story begins with waiting.

This is a striking detail for a church often tempted to equate urgency with immediate activity. The disciples have a universal horizon but are told to remain in Jerusalem until they receive the promised Spirit.

Missionary dependence precedes missionary movement.

¹Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols. (Baker Academic, 2012–2015), provides extensive historical and exegetical treatment of the episodes discussed throughout this chapter.

The point should not be romanticized into passivity. Acts quickly becomes a book of intense action. The early church preaches, organizes care, sends, travels, reasons, debates, suffers, and plants communities. But the power for witness is not presented as an extension of natural courage or strategic intelligence.

The church goes because the Spirit comes.

Pentecost and Language. Acts 2 immediately links Christian mission with language.

Jews and proselytes from a wide geographic range are in Jerusalem for Pentecost. Luke's list stretches across regions associated with the eastern Mediterranean, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, North Africa, Rome, Arabia, and elsewhere. The Spirit enables the apostles to speak in languages recognized by the hearers, who exclaim that they are hearing the mighty works of God in their own tongues.

The event should not be reduced to a theory of Bible translation. It is first a sign of the Spirit and the eschatological fulfillment Peter interprets through Joel. Yet missionary implications follow naturally.

Christian faith is translatable.

The message does not require all peoples to adopt one sacred human language before hearing God's mighty works. This feature will become historically decisive. Greek Christianity, Syriac Christianity, Latin Christianity, Armenian Christianity, Coptic Christianity, Ethiopian Christianity, and later thousands of other linguistic Christianities all become possible because translation belongs naturally to Christian transmission.

Chapter 16 will examine the contemporary Scripture frontier. Pentecost establishes the theological direction long before modern translation agencies exist.

From Proclamation to Community

Peter's sermon ends with response. Those who receive the word are baptized, and Luke immediately describes continuing life: apostolic teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayer, economic sharing, and common worship.

The sequence matters.

Witness → response → baptism → community.

The details of Acts 2 should not be turned into a rigid church-planting formula, but the pattern makes clear that apostolic mission is not satisfied with an audience.

The gospel gathers people.

This is one reason missionary “reach” metrics can be deceptive. Ten million people viewing a digital message is not the same kind of reality as ten communities learning to follow Christ together. Both may matter. They belong to different stages of mission.

Persecution and Scattered Witness. The early Jerusalem church does not immediately produce a carefully planned global mission strategy. Persecution becomes one mechanism of dispersion.

Stephen’s death is followed by scattering, and those dispersed preach the word. Philip goes to Samaria.

The irony is important. The church’s outward movement is partly produced through suffering rather than institutional planning.

Christian history contains many similar patterns. Persecuted Christians migrate. Refugees carry faith. Economic migrants establish congregations. Political upheaval moves believers across borders.

This does not make suffering intrinsically good. Nor should Christians romanticize forced migration as a missionary method. It does show that mission in Acts is larger than formally commissioned missionaries.

Ordinary believers carry the gospel.

Samaria: A Social Boundary. Samaria is geographically near Jerusalem and socially distant.

Centuries of religious and historical division lie behind Jewish-Samaritan relations. Philip’s proclamation in Samaria therefore crosses more than physical space. The gospel enters a population with contested religious identity and mutual suspicion.

This pattern is critical for contemporary missionary geography.

A church may be geographically close to a population while socially far away.

A Dalit settlement may stand beside a higher-caste church.

An Arabic-speaking Muslim neighborhood may lie beside a European-language congregation.

A migrant community may live around a historic cathedral without entering its social network.

Distance must be measured relationally as well as spatially.

Acts makes this visible before missiology develops the terminology.

The Ethiopian Official. Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian official in Acts 8 adds another form of boundary crossing.

The man is a court official, a eunuch, a traveler, and a reader of Isaiah. His exact ethnic and religious identity has been debated, and modern racial categories should not be projected simplistically onto the

text. What Luke clearly emphasizes is geographic and social distance from the Jerusalem-centered church.

Philip begins with the Scripture the man is already reading and announces Jesus. The encounter ends in baptism.

The story displays several missionary principles without becoming a technique manual.

Mission begins with listening.

Scripture matters.

The gospel is explained within the hearer's actual question.

The missionary does not remain.

The new believer continues on his way.

Later Christian tradition sometimes turns the Ethiopian official into the institutional founder of Ethiopian Christianity. The text does not establish that historical claim. Ancient Ethiopian Christianity has its own later documented history. This is a useful reminder that inspiring traditions should not be confused with what the evidence can prove.

Cornelius and the Conversion of the Missionary Imagination

Acts 10 is one of the most consequential missionary passages in the New Testament because Peter requires preparation as much as Cornelius does.

Cornelius is a Gentile centurion described as devout and God-fearing. Peter receives a vision involving clean and unclean animals. When he enters Cornelius's household, he explicitly names the social-religious boundary he has crossed. As he speaks, the Holy Spirit falls upon the Gentile hearers.

Peter's conclusion is theological: God shows no partiality.

The episode then has to be explained to the Jerusalem believers.

Missionary encounter changes the church's understanding.

This is a profound principle. Christians carry a message they believe to be true; they do not therefore understand every cultural implication of that message before mission begins.

Cross-cultural mission can expose assumptions that appeared theological only because they were culturally familiar.

This pattern recurs in later history. Missionaries translate Scripture and discover that local Christians ask questions their home churches rarely considered. New Christian communities challenge inherited forms. Global Christianity eventually sends theology back toward older centers.

The missionary does not merely teach.

Mission can also teach the missionary church.

Antioch: A New Missionary Center. Antioch becomes decisive.

Believers scattered after persecution speak to different populations, and a mixed Christian community develops. Barnabas is sent from Jerusalem, seeks Saul, and the two teach there. In Acts 13, within worship and fasting, the Holy Spirit sets apart Barnabas and Saul for particular work.

Several features matter.

First, the missionary call is discerned communally. Barnabas and Saul do not simply announce private experiences and leave. Their vocation is recognized within a worshipping church.

Second, Antioch shows that missionary centers can shift. Jerusalem remains foundational, but a newer multicultural church becomes a sender.

Third, the sending church itself contains diversity. Acts names prophets and teachers whose backgrounds suggest a socially varied leadership body.

This becomes a biblical precedent for a truth later Christian history repeatedly demonstrates: mission fields become sending churches.

The missionary map does not remain fixed.

Paul's First Missionary Journey. Paul and Barnabas travel through Cyprus and parts of Asia Minor, proclaiming in synagogues and then among Gentiles. Their pattern varies with context but commonly involves proclamation, controversy, response, persecution, return visits, encouragement, and leadership recognition.

Acts 14:23 describes elders being appointed in the churches.

Again the sequence moves beyond evangelistic contact.

Churches must be sustained.

The apostles return through places where they have suffered because new believers need strengthening.

Missionary strategy that celebrates entry but neglects return is therefore incomplete.

Acts 15 and the Cultural Question

The Gentile mission produces an unavoidable theological crisis.

Must Gentile believers be circumcised and keep the law of Moses in order to belong fully to God's people?

The Jerusalem Council should not be treated as though first-century apostles were conducting a modern contextualization seminar. The issues

concern covenant, law, salvation, Jewish-Gentile table fellowship, and the identity of God's people. Yet the missionary implications are enormous.

The church concludes that Gentile conversion does not require cultural assimilation into full Jewish identity.

Christian allegiance creates moral and theological obligations.

It does not require every people to become culturally identical to the first Christian community.

This distinction becomes foundational for global Christianity.

If Gentiles had been required to become culturally Jewish in every respect, Christian mission would have taken a radically different form. Instead, the gospel can enter different cultures while remaining governed by apostolic truth.

Contextualization is therefore not a late missionary invention. The church confronts the relationship between gospel and culture almost immediately after crossing a significant boundary.

Paul in Athens. Acts 17 provides another classic missionary scene.

Paul enters Athens, observes the city's religious environment, reasons in synagogue and marketplace, and eventually addresses the Areopagus.

His speech displays cultural knowledge. He refers to Athenian religious practice and cites Greek poets. He begins from points his hearers can recognize.

Yet contextual sensitivity does not become accommodation. Paul confronts idolatry, calls for repentance, and announces judgment and resurrection.

The sermon has sometimes been used as a simple communication formula: start with culture, build a bridge, preach Christ. The deeper principle is more demanding.

Paul has understood enough of the hearer's world to speak intelligibly without allowing that world to determine the content of the gospel.

That balance becomes one of the central problems of contextualization explored in Chapter 26.

Missionary Teams and Networks. Acts also complicates the heroic lone-missionary model.

Paul's mission involves a network: Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Luke, Priscilla, Aquila, Lydia, Phoebe, and many others associated with the Pauline letters and Acts.

Women appear as significant Christian actors. Lydia's household becomes a base of Christian life in Philippi. Priscilla, named with Aquila, participates in instructing Apollos more accurately. Paul's letters identify women among coworkers and leaders in early Christian networks.

Mission therefore spreads through relational and ecclesial systems rather than one apostolic personality.²

Paul is unusually prominent.

He is never truly alone.

Conflict Within Mission. Acts does not idealize missionary teams.

Paul and Barnabas have a sharp disagreement over John Mark and separate. The text does not offer a simple moral verdict making one wholly right and the other wrong.

This matters because missionary conflict is sometimes spiritualized in unhealthy ways. Team disagreement can be interpreted as evidence of weak calling or sinful lack of unity when some conflict is an ordinary feature of human cooperation.

The New Testament missionary movement contains both profound unity in the gospel and real disagreement in strategy and personnel.

Healthy mission needs structures capable of handling conflict without pretending mature Christians never disagree.

Crossing Into Macedonia. Acts 16 narrates Paul being redirected from intended routes and receiving the Macedonian vision.

Missionary biography has often treated this as a model of special guidance, and it certainly demonstrates divine direction. It should not be universalized into a requirement that every missionary receive a geographic vision.

Paul also uses ordinary planning throughout his ministry.

The episode supports a balanced theology: missionaries plan responsibly and remain open to providential redirection.

Chapter 22 will return to how this relates to calling.

Philippi and Household Networks. Philippi also demonstrates the social diversity of missionary response.

Lydia, a seller of purple goods, responds and offers hospitality. A slave girl is liberated from exploitation surrounding her spiritual condition. A jailer encounters the gospel through crisis.

The church emerges not from one demographic profile but from varied people connected through the missionary team's presence.

This warns against over-rigid targeting. Strategic attention to particular populations can be useful, especially where access is weak. Missionaries should still remain attentive to people whom the strategy did not predict.

God's providence is not constrained by the research spreadsheet.

²On women and networks in early Christian mission, see relevant discussions in Acts and Pauline scholarship, including Romans 16 and scholarship on Priscilla, Phoebe, Lydia, and other early Christian coworkers.

Ephesus and Long-Term Formation

Paul's extended work in Ephesus offers another model.

The ministry involves sustained teaching, public controversy, economic consequences for idolatrous trades, and regional influence extending beyond the city.

This is a different missionary timescale from a brief evangelistic visit.

The variety in Acts matters. There is no single apostolic missionary schedule.

Some encounters last hours.

Some cities receive extended ministry.

Some churches receive later letters and visits.

Mission strategy should fit the task rather than forcing every context into one standard duration.

Paul's Pioneer Ambition. Romans 15 provides the strongest New Testament statement of Paul's pioneer missionary ambition.

Paul describes making it his aim to preach Christ where Christ has not been named, lest he build on another's foundation. He then says that from Jerusalem around to Illyricum he has fulfilled the ministry of the gospel and has no more room for work in those regions, leading to his desire to travel toward Spain.

The claim is astonishing.

There were obviously countless non-Christians still living throughout the territories Paul mentions. Churches were immature. Later Christian history shows that those regions still required evangelism, teaching, leadership, and correction.

Paul therefore cannot mean:

every individual has heard and the region is spiritually completed.

He appears to mean that his own foundational pioneer role has reached a sufficient stage for him to move toward places where Christ has not been named in the same way.³

This becomes one of the most important biblical distinctions for a theology of missionary completion.

A pioneer task can finish.

The church's mission continues.

³On Paul's pioneer strategy and Romans 15, see Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*; major Romans commentaries including Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed. (Eerdmans, 2018), and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed. (Baker Academic, 2018).

Rome and the Open Ending

Acts ends with Paul in Rome under house arrest, “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.”

The narrative stops without providing the biographical closure readers might expect.

Rome is symbolically enormous—the imperial center—but it is not literally the end of the earth. The ending therefore feels both fulfilled and unfinished.

Witness has moved from Jerusalem to the heart of the empire.

The gospel continues beyond the book.

This open ending suits Luke’s missionary theology. The church inherits a movement still underway.

Boundary Crossing as the Core Pattern. The individual episodes differ, but Acts displays a recurring pattern:

Jerusalem → diaspora listeners.

Jew → Samaritan.

Jewish church → Ethiopian traveler.

Peter → Gentile household.

Jerusalem → Antioch.

Antioch → Mediterranean mission.

Synagogue → Gentile audience.

Local church → new missionary center.

Physical distance matters.

Social distance matters more.

The missionary frontier appears wherever the gospel must cross a significant barrier of language, identity, religion, social network, or cultural understanding.

That definition is more useful than equating mission solely with international travel.

Churches as the Durable Outcome. Acts also repeatedly moves from proclamation toward communities.

People believe.

They are baptized.

They gather.

Leaders emerge.

Churches receive teaching.

Missionaries revisit, write, send coworkers, and eventually move onward.

This pattern provides the biblical bridge between Great Commission disciple-making and the constructive argument Part V will later make: missionary access should increasingly lead toward locally rooted churches capable of continuing Christian witness without permanent outsider centrality.

Acts and Missionary Humility

Finally, Acts gives missionaries a posture.

Peter must change.

Paul can be redirected.

Teams disagree.

The Jerusalem church debates.

Gentile inclusion forces theological clarification.

Local believers become coworkers.

The church does not advance because the missionaries always understand what God is doing ahead of time.

Mission is a place where the church learns obedience while bearing witness.

The next chapter asks what all of this means for one of the most persistent modern missionary questions: if the gospel is to go to all nations, what would it mean to say that the task has been finished?

What Does It Mean for the Mission to Be “Finished”?

Missionary movements need goals.

Without goals, urgency becomes vague and resources become difficult to prioritize. Translators need to know which languages still lack Scripture. Sending churches need to know where workers are scarce. Agencies need to decide when a project should continue, change, or close. Church planters need some account of what kind of local Christian community they are trying to see emerge.

Christian mission therefore cannot avoid completion language altogether.

The difficulty begins when finite missionary goals are converted into a biblical formula for completing the Great Commission itself.

Scripture gives the church a universal commission. It contains genuine language of fulfillment, completion, ends, and all nations. It also refuses to provide the kind of demographic equation modern management culture instinctively wants.

This chapter therefore asks a narrower and more careful question: what does Scripture actually allow Christians to mean when they say that mission is unfinished—or that some missionary task has been finished?

Why “Finishing the Task” Is Attractive

The phrase *finishing the task* has understandable power.

It transforms mission from an indefinitely expanding activity into an objective with urgency. It gives churches a sense that particular generations can contribute meaningfully toward something identifiable rather than merely maintain an institution. It focuses attention on populations

where Christian presence is weak. It challenges missionary organizations to avoid endless self-preservation.

The language can also mobilize extraordinary generosity and sacrifice.

The problem is not desire for completion.

The problem is defining completion with greater certainty than Scripture and evidence permit.

Modern evangelical mission has often brought together several ideas:

- Jesus says the gospel will be preached to all nations before the end.
- Revelation portrays worshipers from every nation, tribe, people, and language.
- Paul speaks of completing pioneer work in large regions.
- Contemporary researchers divide humanity into people groups.
- Strategic thresholds identify which groups appear capable of sustaining wider gospel witness.

Each element contributes something important.

Their combination does not produce an inspired countdown system.

Matthew 24:14. Few verses have carried more eschatological weight in modern mission than Matthew 24:14: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

The verse undeniably connects worldwide gospel proclamation with the eschatological horizon.

Yet its context matters.

Matthew 24 belongs to Jesus’ Olivet discourse, a difficult passage involving the temple’s destruction, persecution, deception, tribulation, the coming of the Son of Man, watchfulness, and judgment. Christian interpreters disagree over how particular sections relate to the events surrounding Jerusalem’s destruction and to the final consummation. The discourse is not a simple missionary strategy document.¹

The verse itself contains several terms whose apparent simplicity can mislead.

What exactly counts as the gospel being *proclaimed*?

What geographic scope is intended by *the whole world*?

What does testimony to *all nations* require?

Does the verse refer to every individual hearing, sufficient public witness among peoples, or something else?

¹For Matthew 24:14 within the Olivet discourse, see R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *Matthew*, vol. 3.

Matthew does not answer these questions through quantitative thresholds.

A mission agency may create operational answers for strategic purposes.

Those answers remain operational.

“And Then the End Will Come”. The eschatological phrase creates understandable missionary urgency.

Some Christians have concluded that if the remaining people groups can be identified and reached, the church can directly hasten the return of Christ by completing the final entries.

The New Testament certainly encourages believers to live in expectation of Christ’s return and presents the worldwide gospel as part of God’s purpose before the end. Peter can even speak of “waiting for and hastening” the coming day of God, a phrase itself subject to interpretation.

But the New Testament also repeatedly denies human control over eschatological timing. Acts 1:7 places times and seasons under the Father’s authority immediately before the disciples are commissioned as witnesses. Jesus’ teaching emphasizes readiness and faithfulness rather than calculation.

The missionary church should therefore resist two opposite errors.

It should not use divine sovereignty as an excuse for indifference to worldwide witness.

It should not use missionary statistics as a clock for predicting or engineering the end.

What Does “All Nations” Require Here? Matthew 24:14 uses *ethnē*, the same broad word family discussed in Chapter 3.

Again, the universal horizon is clear.

Again, the passage does not supply a contemporary anthropological taxonomy.

If a modern research organization divides one people into several country-specific units because missionary access differs across borders, it may be making a very useful strategic decision. Nothing in Matthew 24 tells us that each resulting database row constitutes one independent prophetic requirement before Christ can return.

This distinction should reduce anxiety without reducing mission.

Research becomes more honest when it can change its categories without imagining that changing a database alters prophecy.

Romans 15: A Biblical Example of Completion

Paul offers a different kind of evidence.

Romans 15 contains perhaps the clearest New Testament example of a missionary describing his own pioneer work as complete enough to move elsewhere. Paul says that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum he has fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ. He also says that he no longer has room for work in these regions and hopes to continue westward toward Spain.

This cannot mean that every person throughout the eastern Mediterranean had heard the gospel.

It cannot mean that every church was mature.

Paul’s own letters demonstrate ongoing pastoral crises in churches he helped establish. Other evangelists and pastors continue working in those regions.

The most plausible reading concerns Paul’s particular pioneer vocation. Foundational gospel witness and church presence have been established broadly enough that Paul does not need to remain the principal pioneer. He can seek areas where Christ has not been named in the same way.²

This gives missionary theology a crucial category:

finite missionary completion.

A worker can finish a role.

A team can complete a translation.

A church can transition from missionary to local leadership.

A population can move from no known sustained engagement to sustained Christian witness.

These are meaningful endings.

The church’s mission does not therefore end.

Task Completion Versus Mission Completion. This distinction helps resolve a persistent confusion.

Missionary rhetoric often speaks about *the task* as though the Great Commission were one global project with a final checklist.

In reality, Christian mission contains many tasks:

- translate Scripture into a language;
- establish a viable church where none exists;
- train local pastors;
- develop theological materials;

²On Romans 15 and Pauline pioneer completion, see Moo, *Romans*; Schreiner, *Romans*; Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*.

- reach a migrant community;
- hand over institutional authority;
- evangelize a city;
- disciple a new generation.

Some are clearly finishable.

Others recur because human societies recur.

A Bible translation can reach publication. But language changes and revisions may later be needed.

A church can be planted. But children are born and new residents move into the area.

A missionary can hand over leadership. But the church continues to require pastors and teachers.

Missionary maturity includes knowing which responsibilities should end and which belong permanently to the church's life.

Revelation 5 and 7

Revelation provides Christianity with some of its most powerful missionary imagery.

Revelation 5 celebrates the Lamb who ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. Revelation 7 portrays a great multitude no one can number from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and the Lamb.

The images establish an unmistakably universal and multicultural eschatological horizon.³

Human diversity is not erased.

The nations are present in worship.

The Lamb is central.

Missionary movements have rightly drawn hope from these passages.

The problem begins when their rhetorical categories are treated as a hidden database schema.

“Nation,” “tribe,” “people,” and “language” overlap conceptually. Revelation piles up the terms to convey comprehensive human breadth. John is not distinguishing four nonoverlapping research units.

The vision therefore gives mission its destination without giving researchers the precise number of categories required to arrive there.

³Revelation 5:9 and 7:9 provide the recurring fourfold language of tribe, language, people, and nation; major Revelation commentaries should be consulted for final exegetical notes in typesetting.

This is not a weakness in Scripture.

It is a warning against asking apocalyptic worship to perform the work of anthropology.

People Groups: A Strategic Tool, Not Inspired Ontology. Modern people-group missiology emerged from real strategic concern.⁴ Missionaries recognized that national Christian percentages could hide large populations with almost no local Christian witness. Donald McGavran’s work on social barriers and church growth, later developments associated with Ralph Winter, and increasingly sophisticated mission databases pushed evangelical mission beyond simple political maps.

The insight is valuable.

The gospel often moves through relational networks unevenly. Ethnicity, caste, language, religion, geography, and social identity can form barriers of understanding or acceptance. A church among one community may have little realistic influence within the neighboring community.

People-group research helps the church see this.

The category becomes problematic when an analytical population is treated as though it were a divinely fixed object.

Human groups change.

People migrate.

Languages merge or split.

Urbanization creates mixed social networks.

Intermarriage changes boundaries.

Political borders create new identities.

Individuals belong simultaneously to multiple communities.

A person can be Kurdish, Turkish citizen, Muslim, urban professional, German-speaking migrant, and member of a particular kinship network. Which identity determines the missionary people group?

The answer depends partly on the question being asked.

This is why modern databases legitimately disagree.

⁴On the development and strategic use of people-group missiology, see Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God* and *Understanding Church Growth*; Ralph D. Winter’s influential Lausanne-era writings; Joshua Project and PeopleGroups.org for contemporary operational definitions. These sources should be read as missionary-strategic literature rather than as anthropological proof that people groups are fixed ontological units.

The Threshold Problem

Once people groups are identified, researchers need some way to distinguish populations with substantial local Christian presence from those with very little.

The famous 2 percent evangelical threshold is one response.

The intuition behind it is reasonable: a tiny number of scattered believers may lack the relational density and institutional capacity needed for sustained wider witness. At some point, local Christian presence becomes more capable of reproducing without an outside pioneer remaining central.

But no universal law of social science establishes that 1.9 percent and 2.1 percent represent qualitatively different spiritual realities in every culture.

Population density matters.

Social networks matter.

Persecution matters.

Caste matters.

The distribution of believers matters.

One hundred thousand Christians concentrated in one subgroup may provide almost no access to another subgroup within the same population.

A threshold is therefore a decision rule.

It can be useful without being sacred.

The Danger of the Word “Reached”. The opposite of *unreached* appears to be *reached*.

Ordinary language then does something the technical definition may not intend. If a people is reached, the task sounds complete.

But a population can move above an evangelical percentage threshold while:

- most individuals remain non-Christian;
- substantial subgroups lack relational access;
- churches remain geographically concentrated;
- theological maturity is weak;
- Christian witness is socially distrusted.

“Reached” should therefore not mean “no longer requires mission.”

It means something narrower within a particular research system.

This is one reason the book uses **gospel access** as a broader analytical framework in Part III.

A Spectrum Rather Than a Switch. A more realistic missionary progression looks something like this:

Gospel presence

Christians or Christian resources exist in or near a community.

Gospel exposure

People encounter Christian information or witness.

Gospel access

There are realistic opportunities to understand, question, and respond through accessible linguistic and relational pathways.

Faith and discipleship

People begin following Christ and learning obedience.

Church formation

Disciples gather into durable Christian communities.

Mature local leadership

Locally rooted leaders teach, shepherd, govern, and develop the church.

Reproduction

Disciples and churches carry Christian witness across further boundaries themselves.

The stages overlap. They are not a rigid program.

They do clarify why a missionary visit and a mature reproducing church should not be counted as equivalent forms of “reach.”

“Gospel Access” Is Also Imperfect. The phrase *gospel access* can sound more objective than it is.

What counts as realistic opportunity?

If a Bible is available online but the government monitors searches, is access high?

If a church exists twenty kilometers away but belongs to a hostile caste, is it accessible?

If a person knows one Christian coworker who never speaks about faith, does relational access exist?

If a population has an ancient Christian minority but evangelical churches classify the majority as unreached, how should access be described?

There is no universal equation.

The Gospel Access Framework introduced later therefore uses several dimensions rather than pretending to produce one global score.

The gain is conceptual honesty.

The Church as a Better Horizon

If no percentage completes mission, what should missionary strategy aim toward?

The New Testament repeatedly points toward durable communities of disciples.

A mature local church does not mean every person in the surrounding society has become Christian. It means Christian life has become sufficiently rooted that outsiders are no longer the only plausible carriers of witness, teaching, leadership, and community.

The church can evangelize.

The church can baptize.

The church can discipline.

The church can form leaders.

The church can send.

This makes local church formation a stronger missionary horizon than permanent missionary presence.

The missionary’s success may eventually be visible precisely in reduced missionary centrality.

Part V will develop this argument at length.

Can a People Be “Finished”? No human population should be described as completed in the sense of no longer requiring Christian witness.

Societies change.

Generations succeed one another.

Churches decline.

Migrants arrive.

Religious switching occurs.

A people group once classified as strongly Christian can secularize. A country once considered a missionary sender can become a significant

recipient of mission. Europe demonstrates the point. South Korea may increasingly demonstrate another version of it.

The missionary world is dynamic.

This alone makes a permanently completed world map implausible.

What Christians Can Finish. Christians should nevertheless become better at ending things.

Mission agencies can perpetuate ministries because donors expect continuity.

Missionaries can remain in leadership because transition feels risky.

Projects can survive long after the original objective was achieved.

A theology that says “mission is never finished” can unintentionally justify institutional permanence.

The better distinction is:

The commission endures; particular assignments can finish.

A translation should be completed.

A local leader should eventually lead.

A pioneer should sometimes move onward.

A mission organization should be capable of closing a program.

A church should celebrate when a receiving community becomes a sending community.

Completion is not the enemy of mission.

It is one sign that particular missionary work has achieved its purpose.

What “Unfinished Mission” Means in This Book

The title therefore requires a definition careful enough to survive both theological and empirical scrutiny.

The unfinished mission is not:

the remaining number of contemporary people groups below a 2 percent evangelical threshold.

It is not:

the number of people who have literally never encountered Christian information.

It is not:

the number of countries without a Christian majority.

It is not:

an eschatological countdown whose final line the church can calculate.

The governing definition is this:

The unfinished mission is the continuing condition in which Christ’s universal disciple-making commission remains active while meaningful access to credible Christian witness, Scripture, discipleship, and locally rooted Christian community remains profoundly unequal among the peoples and social worlds of humanity.

The definition contains three claims.

First, the commission remains active. Mission is not merely a historical enterprise inherited from a previous age.

Second, the central empirical problem is inequality of meaningful access rather than one global number.

Third, the missionary horizon includes Christian community and discipleship rather than exposure alone.

The Eschatological Restraint. The final theological restraint is perhaps the most important.

Christ will return.

Christian mission exists within that hope.

But the church does not complete the kingdom through missionary competence.

Revelation ends in worship because God brings history to its consummation. The missionary church participates faithfully in God’s purpose; it does not manage the eschaton.

This protects mission from despair when progress appears slow.

It also protects mission from triumph when growth appears spectacular.

The results belong finally to God.

The Question Now Changes

Part I has established the theological frame.

Mission begins in God.

The Old Testament gives God’s redemptive purpose a universal horizon.

Jesus commissions disciple-making among all nations.

Acts shows that mission crosses social and cultural boundaries and forms churches.

Scripture permits real completion of particular missionary tasks without turning modern strategic thresholds into an inspired formula for ending the Great Commission.

The next question is historical.

How far has Christianity already traveled?

If the faith that began in Roman Judea became genuinely global, what processes produced that transformation—and why did global expansion still fail to produce equal Christian access?

To answer, we need to leave the modern missionary map behind and recover a much older, more geographically diverse Christian history.

Part II

How Christianity Became Global

Christianity's modern association with Europe and North America can make its earlier history difficult to see. Yet the Christian movement crossed cultural and linguistic boundaries from its first centuries. Several of its most important early centers lay in Africa and Asia. The modern missionary movement later accelerated Christianity's expansion enormously, often within the structures of empire but never reducible to them. By the twentieth century another transformation was underway: the demographic center of Christianity was moving south and east, and communities once treated chiefly as mission fields were becoming missionary senders.

The historical argument of this Part is therefore neither "Christianity was always equally global" nor "Western missions created global Christianity." The record is more complex. Christianity became global through repeated processes of migration, translation, missionary initiative, political encounter, local appropriation, church reproduction, demographic change, and institutional transformation.

From Apostles to a World Faith

In 781, Christians in Tang China erected a large stone monument near the imperial capital of Chang'an. The inscription, written primarily in Chinese with Syriac elements, looked backward over roughly a century and a half of Christian presence in China. It described the arrival of a teacher commonly rendered in modern scholarship as Alopen in 635, imperial reception, the translation of texts, monasteries, periods of patronage, and the community's place within the Tang world.

The monument is often called the Xi'an Stele or, in older literature, the "Nestorian Monument." Modern scholarship increasingly prefers more precise language because *Nestorian* can flatten the Christological and ecclesial complexity of the Church of the East. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson's close study of the monument emphasizes precisely what makes it so valuable for the history of mission: it is a document of cultural translation. Syriac Christians in Tang China were simultaneously preserving ties to Persian and Central Asian Christian worlds and presenting their faith within Chinese political and conceptual language.¹

The monument matters not because it proves Christianity had already "conquered" Asia. The community later declined, and the Tang Christian presence did not produce a continuous mass Christian tradition. It matters because it breaks one of the most persistent modern assumptions about Christian geography.

Christianity did not spend its first fifteen centuries sealed inside Europe, waiting for modern Europeans to make it global.

¹Scott Fitzgerald Johnson, "Silk Road Christians and the Translation of Culture in Tang China," *Studies in Church History* 53 (2017): 15–38. Johnson interprets the 781 Xi'an monument as an artifact of Syriac-Chinese cultural translation and community self-presentation. See also Samuel N. C. Lieu, "Christians and Manichaeans on the Silk Road," *European Review* 33 (2025): 401–15.

Several Christian Worlds From the Beginning

Jerusalem is the obvious beginning of church history, but Acts itself already complicates any single-center map. Antioch becomes a major missionary center. Alexandria develops into one of the great intellectual and ecclesial centers of early Christianity. Rome becomes increasingly influential in the Latin West. Edessa and other Syriac-speaking centers become crucial to Christian life east of the Roman frontier.

The geography matters because theological history is often narrated through councils, bishops, and controversies associated with the Roman and Byzantine worlds. Those developments are central, but they can create the impression that Christianity outside the Mediterranean center was peripheral or derivative.

In reality, Christians lived and theologized within several imperial and linguistic environments.

Greek Christianity developed one set of institutions and intellectual traditions.

Latin Christianity developed another.

Syriac Christianity became a major theological, liturgical, and missionary world in its own right.

Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Ge'ez, and other traditions localized Christian life within languages and histories that did not depend upon later Western European forms.

Missionary history therefore begins with plurality.

Antioch and the Eastward Imagination. Antioch linked several worlds. It was a major city of the Roman East, a place associated with early Gentile Christianity, and a gateway toward Syriac-speaking regions. The importance of Syriac Christianity is difficult to overstate for any history that wants to escape a purely westward narrative.

Syriac, a form of Aramaic, became a major Christian literary language. Biblical translation, poetry, theology, monasticism, and liturgy developed through it. The Peshitta became central to Syriac churches. Writers such as Ephrem the Syrian demonstrate a theological style whose poetic imagination differs markedly from the Latin scholastic frameworks many later Western Christians assume to be normal Christianity.

This matters missiologically. Christianity does not merely survive translation. It becomes intellectually fruitful through translation.

When theology enters another language, it does not simply replace every local category with a foreign one. Christians ask questions in that language. They write hymns in its rhythms. They select metaphors that

make sense inside its literary world. They develop controversies and devotional practices shaped by their own contexts.

Translation therefore produces agency.

Christianity Beyond the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire occupies an enormous place in Christian historical memory because of persecution, Constantine, the councils, and the later Christianization of imperial institutions. Yet Christianity also crossed into the Sasanian Persian Empire, where association with Rome could be politically dangerous.

Persian Christianity developed under conditions in which Christians could be suspected of sympathy with Rome, especially after the Roman Empire itself became increasingly Christian. Ecclesial differentiation from Roman Christianity therefore involved both theology and geopolitics.

The Church of the East eventually developed structures that extended far beyond Mesopotamia. Bishops, monasteries, merchants, clergy, and Christian communities appeared along routes connecting Persia, Central Asia, India, and China.

The word *missionary* can be too narrow if it causes us to imagine only formally commissioned religious specialists. Trade, migration, monasteries, family networks, and ecclesial expansion all contributed to Christianity's movement.

This pattern will later reappear in modern diaspora mission. Christian faith travels with people whose primary social identity may not be "missionary."

Armenia and the Christianization of a Kingdom

Armenia occupies a distinctive place in Christian history as one of the earliest kingdoms to adopt Christianity institutionally. Traditional chronology often places the conversion of King Tiridates III and the work of Gregory the Illuminator in the early fourth century, though exact dating and reconstruction of the conversion process require careful historical treatment.

What followed is more important for our purposes than a debate over one exact year.

Christianity became deeply embedded in Armenian identity.

The development of the Armenian alphabet in the early fifth century, associated with Mesrop Mashtots, enabled translation and literary production that profoundly rooted Christianity in Armenian language and memory. Scripture translation and vernacular Christian literature did not

merely communicate a foreign religion. They helped create a durable Armenian Christian intellectual world.

This is one reason language matters so much to mission. A missionary can preach through an interpreter. A church becomes more deeply rooted when it can pray, argue, teach, remember, and theologize in its own language.

Alexandria and African Christianity. Africa was never simply a later recipient of European Christianity.

Alexandria became one of the great centers of ancient Christian scholarship and ecclesial authority. Figures associated with North African Christianity shaped the theology of the entire church: Athanasius, Cyril, Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine, and many others. Egyptian monasticism became one of Christianity's most influential spiritual movements.

The theological traditions that later European Christians inherited were therefore partly African before Christianity ever became socially dominant in northern Europe.

This point should not become a rhetorical reversal that simply claims ancient North Africans through modern racial categories. The Mediterranean world did not organize identity through twenty-first-century racial concepts. The historical correction is geographic and civilizational: Africa belongs near the center of early Christian history.

Aksum: Christianity in the Horn of Africa

The kingdom of Aksum provides one of the strongest examples of early Christianity becoming institutionally rooted south of Egypt.

Evidence from inscriptions and coinage associates King Ezana's conversion with the mid-fourth century. Scholarly discussion links the early Aksumite church with Frumentius and the Alexandrian episcopate. Aksumite Christianity later developed into the long and distinctive Ethiopian Orthodox tradition.²

The process should not be simplified into a king converting and an entire people instantly becoming Christian. Royal conversion, ecclesial structures, monasteries, local religious practices, and popular Christianization unfolded over time.

²Stephanie L. Black, "'In the Power of God Christ': Greek Inscriptional Evidence for the Anti-Arian Theology of Ethiopia's First Christian King," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 71 (2008); David W. Phillipson, *Ancient Ethiopia: Aksum, Its Antecedents and Successors* (British Museum Press, 1998), and related scholarship on Ezana and Aksumite Christianity.

The distinction is important because mission history often confuses elite adoption with population conversion. A ruler's Christian profession can change institutional conditions dramatically without telling us what every household believes.

Still, the Ethiopian case decisively undermines the idea that Christianity became African principally through nineteenth-century Western missions.

Ethiopian Christianity is ancient.

Nubia: A Christian Civilization Often Forgotten. Farther north along the Nile, Christian kingdoms developed in Nubia beginning in late antiquity. Nobadia, Makuria, and Alwa became Christian political and cultural worlds whose history extended for centuries.

Modern archaeological work, much of it accelerated by salvage campaigns associated with the Aswan High Dam, transformed scholarly understanding of medieval Nubia. Older histories often treated the region as a marginal Christian remnant between Egypt and sub-Saharan Africa. Archaeology revealed complex urban, artistic, ecclesial, and political life. Scholars have emphasized that Christian Nubian states played significant roles in the Nile valley for many centuries.³

Again, the significance is not merely that an unexpected place was once Christian.

Christianity's geographic history is reversible.

A region can possess mature Christian institutions for centuries and later become overwhelmingly associated with another religious tradition.

Church presence is not permanent simply because it was once strong.

This historical instability should make modern Christians cautious about language implying that a country or people has been permanently "reached."

Christianity in India: Tradition and Evidence

Few early missionary stories are as beloved as the tradition that the apostle Thomas personally evangelized India.

South India's Thomas Christian communities possess deep traditions associating their origins with the apostle. The *Acts of Thomas*, probably composed in Syriac in the third century, narrates an apostolic mission to

³P. L. Shinnie and M. Shinnie, "New Light on Medieval Nubia," *Journal of African History*; Derek A. Welsby, *The Medieval Kingdoms of Nubia: Pagans, Christians and Muslims along the Middle Nile* (British Museum Press, 2002). Cambridge historical surveys describe the Nubian Christian kingdoms as major political and cultural actors across many centuries.

India and became part of a living memory connecting Indian Christians with apostolic origins.

The historical problem is evidence.

Nathanael Andrade's study of Christianity's journey toward India in late antiquity stresses the danger of treating literary traditions such as the *Acts of Thomas* as straightforward documentary evidence for an apostolic journey. The text reflects real Christian worlds and historical imagination but cannot simply prove that the apostle himself founded the Indian churches.⁴

A responsible account therefore says:

ancient Indian Christian tradition associates its origins with Thomas.

It does not say:

historians have established that Thomas founded the church in India.

This caution does not weaken the historical importance of Indian Christianity. Syriac-linked Christian communities existed in India long before Portuguese arrival. They participated in Indian social worlds and wider eastern Christian networks.

European missionaries therefore did not bring Christianity for the first time to a religiously blank India. They encountered Christians whose traditions, leadership, liturgy, and ecclesial relationships were already established.

That encounter would later reveal a recurring missionary problem: outsiders can mistake unfamiliar Christianity for deficient Christianity.

Indian Ocean Networks. Christianity's movement toward India also reminds us that ancient globalization did not depend on the modern nation-state.

The Indian Ocean connected ports through trade, migration, and diplomacy. Merchants moved between the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, Arabian Peninsula, western India, and beyond. Religious communities traveled with those networks.

Mission therefore often follows connectivity.

The Silk Road and Indian Ocean were not "mission strategies" invented by agencies. They were human networks through which merchants, monks, texts, and communities moved.

⁴Nathanael J. Andrade, *The Journey of Christianity to India in Late Antiquity: Networks and the Movement of Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), especially the methodological introduction concerning the *Acts of Thomas* and the distinction between living tradition and historical demonstration.

Modern mission often works similarly. International universities, global labor markets, refugee routes, multinational companies, and digital networks create relational pathways no mission agency designed.

The church's task is partly to recognize where people already move.

Central Asia and the Silk Roads. The eastward history of the Church of the East cannot be understood without Central Asia.

Christian communities appeared among populations connected through Sogdian and other commercial networks. Archaeological and textual discoveries from places such as Turfan and Dunhuang demonstrate Christian presence and adaptation across the Silk Road world.

The evidence is fragmentary. Fragmentary does not mean trivial.

It reveals Christianity operating within religiously plural environments that included Buddhism, Zoroastrian traditions, Manichaeism, local religions, and later Islam.

This complicates another modern missionary assumption: religious pluralism is not a uniquely contemporary condition. Christians have long lived and communicated faith within environments containing several sophisticated religious traditions.

Tang China and Cultural Translation

The Xi'an Stele gives unusually vivid evidence of this process.

The Christian community's Chinese terminology interacted with concepts familiar from Buddhist and Daoist literary worlds. Scholars debate the precise meanings and adequacy of particular translations, but the basic process is unmistakable: Christianity had to become linguistically intelligible in Chinese.

This created risks.

Translation can clarify.

Translation can also distort.

A term borrowed from another religious environment may communicate one aspect of Christian teaching while importing unintended meanings.

Missionaries and local Christians therefore continually face a contextual question:

How can Christian faith become genuinely intelligible without losing the theological claims that make it Christian?

The problem did not begin with twentieth-century contextualization theory.

Tang Christians were already living it.

The 845 Suppression and the Fragility of Presence. Tang Christianity did not expand in a straight line. Imperial patronage changed. The major suppression of foreign religions under Emperor Wuzong in the mid-ninth century affected Buddhist institutions and also Christianity, among other traditions. Christian communities declined sharply.

Later centuries saw renewed Christian presence, including during the Mongol period, but continuity was uneven.

This history matters missionally because it demonstrates the difference between presence and durable reproduction.

A religion can possess:

- imperial permission;
- monasteries;
- translated texts;
- clergy;

and still remain vulnerable if its social roots are shallow or political conditions change dramatically.

The missionary goal therefore cannot be institutional presence alone.

The Mongol World. The Mongol expansions of the thirteenth century created another period of extraordinary Eurasian connectivity. Christians associated with the Church of the East existed among several Central Asian and Mongol populations. Some influential Mongol women were Christians. European Catholic missions also entered the Mongol world. Travelers encountered religiously plural courts where Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and others competed and interacted.

This period further demonstrates that “East” and “West” were never hermetically sealed Christian-geographic categories.

Christian networks extended across Eurasia in several directions.

Yet again, many communities later declined.

The history of global Christianity is a history of expansion and contraction.

Translation as a Missionary Engine. Across these cases—Armenian, Syriac, Ethiopian, Indian, Chinese—translation repeatedly appears near the center.

Lamin Sanneh famously emphasized Christianity’s vernacularizing tendency. The Christian message, rooted in Scripture already translated across Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek worlds, proved capable of entering new languages without requiring permanent allegiance to one sacred missionary language.

Andrew Walls described related dynamics through the “indigenizing” and “pilgrim” principles: Christianity takes root within cultures while also judging every culture through allegiance to Christ.

These ideas help explain how Christianity repeatedly escaped missionary ownership.

A foreign missionary may initiate translation.

Once Scripture exists in the local language, local Christians can read without the missionary.

They can challenge the missionary’s interpretation.

They can preach.

They can write theology.

They can transmit Christianity through local relationships.

Translation therefore carries a decentralizing potential.⁵

Local Agency Before Modern Mission

The history also challenges the assumption that local agency became important only after decolonization.

Christian communities were never simply containers filled by missionary activity. They selected, resisted, adapted, translated, and institutionalized Christian faith.

Armenian Christians developed a national literary tradition.

Ethiopian Christianity developed monastic and ecclesial worlds deeply rooted in the highlands.

Nubian Christians sustained kingdoms for centuries.

Indian Christians maintained ancient ecclesial traditions through changing political environments.

Syriac Christians carried faith along Asian networks.

Chinese Christians translated Christian language into Tang intellectual forms.

Foreign and local are therefore relative categories. The missionary who is foreign in one generation may be followed by a church whose descendants are thoroughly local.

This transition is one of mission’s recurring historical achievements.

⁵Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (Yale University Press, 2012); Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, 2 vols. (Orbis Books); Walls, *Missionary Movement*; Sanneh, *Translating the Message*.

Women in Early Global Christianity. The surviving evidence often foregrounds bishops, kings, monks, and male clerical institutions because those actors produced the documents historians possess. That should not lead us to imagine Christian transmission as exclusively male.

Women played central roles in household Christianity, monastic movements, patronage, teaching, and the transmission of faith through family and community. Elite Christian women could shape courts and institutions; ordinary women carried religious practice through households in ways the sources record unevenly.

The problem of visibility becomes even greater in later mission history, where women constituted a major proportion of missionary workers while formal authority often remained male. Chapter 7 will make their agency explicit rather than treating women as an appendix to a male missionary story.

Christianity Was Global—but Not Everywhere. Correcting Eurocentric history can produce its own exaggeration.

Christianity was geographically expansive before modern colonialism. It was not evenly distributed.

Large parts of humanity had little or no Christian presence. Even where Christian communities existed, they varied enormously in size and durability. Tang Christianity's existence does not mean China was broadly Christianized. Ancient Indian Christianity does not mean the subcontinent possessed equal Christian access. Ethiopian Christianity's depth does not describe all of Africa.

The accurate conclusion is more modest and more important:

Christianity was culturally plural and transregional long before modern European empire.

Europe later became an extraordinarily powerful Christian center.

It was never the only center.

The Historical Question Changes

By the late medieval and early modern periods, European Christian expansion entered a new phase. Maritime empires connected continents through military and commercial power on a scale that transformed missionary possibility. Catholic orders traveled with Iberian expansion. Later Protestant missionary societies developed new voluntary structures. Printing, modern transportation, industrial wealth, colonial rule, antislavery move-

ments, education, medicine, and global political domination became entangled with mission.

The relationship would prove morally and historically complex.

Missionaries sometimes challenged empire.

Sometimes they served it.

Often they could not be understood apart from it even when they opposed particular colonial policies.

To understand modern global Christianity, we need to examine that entanglement without reducing one reality to the other.

Mission, Empire, and the Modern Missionary Movement

The modern missionary movement cannot be understood apart from empire.

It also cannot be reduced to empire.

Both sentences are necessary because each corrects a historical simplification.

European expansion created ships, trade routes, military protection, colonial administrations, educational systems, commercial languages, printing networks, and legal structures that missionaries frequently used. Missionaries often arrived carrying the social authority of the imperial worlds from which they came even when they possessed little formal political power. Some shared racial assumptions common to their societies. Some interpreted European civilization as evidence of Christianity's superiority. Some benefited from coerced labor, unequal land systems, settler expansion, or colonial state protection.

Missionaries also criticized colonial officials, defended communities against settlers, opposed slavery, documented abuses, translated languages colonial authorities ignored, established institutions later used by anticolonial leaders, and sometimes became serious irritants to the empires supposedly sponsoring them.

The historical relationship is therefore not one of identity but entanglement.

Mission and empire overlapped unevenly across time, place, denomination, and personality.

Before Protestant Voluntary Missions

The story begins before William Carey.

The maritime expansion of Spain and Portugal carried Catholic Christianity into the Americas, Africa, and Asia from the late fifteenth century onward. Papal patronage systems, crown authority, conquest, commercial ambition, and mission became intertwined. Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, Augustinians, and other orders entered societies transformed—often violently—by European expansion.

The institutional relationship between mission and imperial power varied, but the proximity itself created enduring questions.

Can conversion be free when missionaries accompany conquerors?

Can Christian teaching be distinguished from the social authority of the colonizer?

What happens when baptism, political incorporation, education, taxation, and cultural change arrive within one imperial process?

These questions are not merely retrospective moral judgments imposed from the twenty-first century. Christians inside the colonial world argued about them.

Las Casas and the Moral Contradictions of Conquest. Bartolomé de las Casas became the most famous Catholic critic of Spanish mistreatment of Indigenous peoples in the Americas. His long life contains its own moral development and contradictions, including early participation in structures he later condemned. Yet his critique demonstrates something essential: Christian mission did not speak with one imperial voice.

Las Casas argued that Indigenous peoples possessed rational and moral capacities denied by those who used supposedly civilizational arguments to justify domination. He condemned violent conquest and coercive evangelization, insisting that Christian persuasion had to be compatible with human freedom and dignity.¹

His work should not be turned into a convenient moral alibi for the entire missionary enterprise. One missionary critic cannot erase systemic violence.

Neither should the existence of colonial violence erase the fact that Christian theology itself supplied resources by which Christians challenged that violence.

This internal conflict will recur throughout mission history.

¹On Las Casas, conquest, and Christian arguments concerning Indigenous peoples, see major scholarship on the Valladolid debates and Spanish colonial theology; Bartolomé de las Casas's own writings remain indispensable primary sources.

Christian doctrine can legitimate power when interpreted badly.

It can also become a language for judging Christian power.

Jesuit Adaptation and the Contextual Question. Catholic missions in Asia generated another enduring question: how far may Christianity adapt to local culture?

Jesuit missionaries such as Matteo Ricci in China pursued strategies of accommodation, learned elite literary culture, adopted forms of dress and social behavior suited to Chinese scholarly environments, and sought terminology through which Christian teaching could become intelligible. In India, Roberto de Nobili adopted aspects of elite Brahman social practice in an effort to detach Christianity from Portuguese cultural identity.

These experiments remain controversial because cultural adaptation touched theological boundaries. The Chinese Rites controversy over ancestor and Confucian practices eventually became a major conflict concerning what could be treated as civic-cultural ritual and what constituted religious practice incompatible with Christian faith.

The episode matters for mission because contextualization did not begin as a late Protestant response to colonialism. Missionaries repeatedly encountered the same underlying problem:

How much foreignness belongs to the gospel, and how much belongs to the missionary?

No mission can avoid the question.

The Moravian Challenge

The Moravian movement of the eighteenth century occupies an unusual place in Protestant mission history. Emerging from the renewed community associated with Herrnhut and Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, the Moravians sent missionaries from a remarkably small population into the Caribbean, Greenland, North America, Africa, and elsewhere.

Their missionary imagination challenged the idea that overseas mission required a large state church or national empire. Ordinary tradespeople could go. Communities could organize themselves around sustained prayer and sending.

Moravian missionary memory also includes stories so dramatic that hagiography has sometimes outrun evidence. Popular accounts that missionaries deliberately sold themselves into slavery, for example, require careful scrutiny in particular cases.

More importantly, Moravian missions themselves operated within slave societies. Missionaries served enslaved populations in the Caribbean while navigating economic and political systems built upon slavery. Their presence could offer pastoral care and Christian community while remaining entangled with plantation realities.

The example again refuses simple classification.

Missionary sympathy with oppressed people does not automatically place the missionary outside the structure oppressing them.

William Carey and the Voluntary Society. William Carey is traditionally described as the “father of modern missions.” The title is memorable and historically misleading if taken literally. Catholic, Orthodox, Moravian, early Protestant, African, Asian, and other missionary movements long predated him.

Carey’s importance lies elsewhere.

His 1792 *Enquiry* argued that Christ’s missionary command remained binding and challenged Protestant complacency toward global evangelization. The Baptist Missionary Society, founded that year, represented the voluntary-society model that would become enormously influential in the nineteenth century.

Voluntary societies could mobilize Christians across local congregations for specialized missionary purposes. They raised money, recruited candidates, printed reports, developed administrative systems, and sustained long-distance work.

This institutional innovation helped create what historians call the modern missionary movement.

It also created structures that would later develop their own institutional gravity.

Serampore: Translation, Education, and Complexity

Carey’s missionary career in India illustrates both missionary creativity and the complicated relationship with empire.

Because the British East India Company was at times wary of missionary activity, Carey and his colleagues eventually worked from Danish-controlled Serampore rather than simply enjoying unrestricted British imperial sponsorship. This fact alone complicates the assumption that British missionaries and British colonial authorities always acted as one system.

The Serampore mission engaged in:

- Bible translation;

- printing;
- education;
- language study;
- evangelism;
- social reform.

The translation output associated with Serampore was extraordinary, though later scholarship also evaluates the quality and methods of particular translations critically. Missionary enthusiasm for scale could produce ambitious projects whose linguistic depth varied.

That pattern remains relevant in contemporary technology-assisted translation: speed is useful only when accuracy, comprehension, and local ownership remain strong.

Missionary Print Culture. The nineteenth-century missionary movement was also a communications revolution.

Mission societies produced:

- journals;
- newsletters;
- maps;
- biographies;
- children's materials;
- annual reports.

These publications mobilized prayer and finance across Europe and North America. They also constructed missionary imagination.

Foreign populations were represented through stories selected for donor audiences. Certain images—heathen darkness, heroic missionary, rescued child, suffering widow, exotic custom—became recurring motifs.

The ethical problem of missionary storytelling is therefore older than social media.

Organizations need stories because distant supporters need to understand the work.

The selection and framing of stories can reinforce stereotypes.

Chapter 24 will return to this problem in the age of digital data and fundraising.

Empire Opens Doors. The great European empires of the nineteenth century transformed missionary access.

Steamships reduced travel times.

Colonial administration created roads, railways, postal systems, and legal environments.

European languages acquired institutional power.

Missionaries could sometimes appeal to consular officials or colonial courts.

Mission stations operated under security conditions produced partly by imperial power.

These advantages were real even where missionaries personally opposed colonial policy.

A missionary could say sincerely, “I am here only for the gospel,” while local observers reasonably saw:

- a British passport;
- foreign money;
- racial privilege;
- imperial military power behind the broader system.

Intention cannot erase symbolism.

This insight becomes critical for understanding contemporary missionary power as well. Formal colonial empire has ended, but passports, wealth, military history, aid systems, and geopolitical inequality still shape how outsiders are perceived.

Missionaries Against Empire

The opposite evidence is equally real.

Missionaries could become advocates for local communities because they possessed language knowledge, long residence, international contacts, and moral concern. Some documented atrocities. Some resisted settler expansion. Some criticized forced labor or exploitative commercial practices.

The relationship between missionaries and colonial authorities could therefore be adversarial.

Norman Etherington’s *Missions and Empire* and the wider scholarship it represents has helped move historical interpretation beyond the older debate in which missionaries had to be either saints or imperial agents. The important question is empirical:

What did these missionaries do in this setting, under this political structure, at this time?²

²Norman Etherington, ed., *Missions and Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Dana L. Robert, *Christian Mission*; Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Apollos, 1990).

The answer can change even across a single missionary career.

Slavery and Abolition. Christian mission's relationship with slavery similarly resists one slogan.

Christians participated in slave systems.

Biblical texts were used to defend slavery.

Churches and mission institutions benefited from economies connected to slave labor.

At the same time, Christian conviction became a major force in abolitionist movements in Britain and elsewhere. Evangelical networks associated with figures such as William Wilberforce connected reform, moral activism, and missionary concern. Missionary reports sometimes exposed slave trading and other abuses in places distant from metropolitan audiences.

It is therefore historically inadequate to say either:

Christianity abolished slavery,

or

Christianity simply sanctified slavery.

Christian communities did both kinds of things because the Christian tradition contained texts, institutions, interests, moral reform movements, and theological arguments interpreted by people within conflicting social systems.

Mission history should be honest enough to let that contradiction remain visible.

Education. Mission schools became among the most consequential institutions of the modern missionary movement.

Missionary education could function as cultural imperialism. Curricula often privileged European knowledge, languages, dress, moral codes, and social forms. Boarding schools could separate children from families and cultures. In some colonial settings Christian education became part of more explicitly coercive assimilation systems.

Education also created literacy, professional opportunity, local leadership, and political consciousness. Graduates of mission schools sometimes became critics of colonial rule and leaders in nationalist movements.

The institution therefore cannot be assigned one universal meaning.

A school could transmit foreign cultural hierarchy and equip local people to challenge it.

The missionary may not control what education ultimately produces.

Medicine. Medical missions similarly combined humanitarian care with evangelistic purpose.

Hospitals and clinics served populations with limited healthcare access. Women medical missionaries gained particular importance in societies where social norms restricted male physicians' access to female patients. Medical work also gave missionaries extraordinary moral authority because patients encountered Christians at moments of vulnerability.

That authority could be used compassionately or manipulatively.

The ethical principle remains important today: medical care should never become conditional upon religious response.

A patient is not an evangelistic transaction.

The strongest Christian medical witness is care that remains genuinely excellent and genuinely noncoercive while Christian practitioners remain honest about their faith.

Women and the Modern Missionary Movement. Women were not peripheral to the modern Protestant missionary movement, even when the institutions recording its history often treated them that way.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women constituted a majority of missionary personnel in important British and American Protestant systems. They served as teachers, physicians, evangelists, translators, administrators, Bible women, writers, and founders of institutions. Women's missionary societies mobilized extraordinary financial and organizational networks at a time when women were often excluded from formal denominational governance.³

This development had several causes.

Mission created forms of public religious vocation available to women beyond the roles open in many home churches. Social conventions in mission fields also created ministries to women that male missionaries could not easily perform. Single women became missionaries in large numbers, complicating the assumption that the missionary household was necessarily a male missionary accompanied by a supportive wife.

Mission history written only through ordained male leaders therefore misrepresents the workforce that actually carried modern Christianity across cultures.

³Dana L. Robert's scholarship on women in mission documents women's numerical and institutional centrality to the modern Protestant missionary movement; see also the Oxford scholarship on women and world Christianity.

Pandita Ramabai: Local Christian Agency and Female Leadership

Women outside the West were not merely recipients of women's missions.

Pandita Ramabai offers a particularly important Indian example. Born into a high-caste Hindu scholarly family, renowned for Sanskrit learning, later converted to Christianity, Ramabai became an educator, reformer, institution builder, and translator. Her Mukti Mission developed under Indian female leadership while receiving international support and attracting foreign coworkers.

Her life resists several simple categories.

She was shaped by transnational Christian networks without becoming a passive product of Western mission.

She criticized aspects of both Indian social practice and missionary paternalism.

She exercised theological and institutional agency.

Her Marathi Bible translation work further demonstrates how local Christian leadership can move beyond receiving foreign translations toward producing Scripture within its own linguistic world.⁴

Ramabai should not appear in mission history as a token exceptional woman. Her visibility helps expose how many other women and local Christian actors have been obscured by institutional records centered on foreign male leaders.

African Women as Christian Agents. The same correction is necessary in Africa.

Christian expansion often depended on women transmitting faith through households, schools, women's networks, prayer communities, and local evangelistic work. Recent scholarship increasingly recovers African women's role in extending and reshaping Christianity rather than presenting mission as a conversation between European men and African male converts.

This matters for more than representation.

If mission history systematically overlooks ordinary local agents, it will misunderstand how Christianity actually spreads.

Foreign missionaries may initiate an institution.

The faith becomes durable when local people reproduce it through relationships the missionary cannot control.

⁴For Pandita Ramabai, see scholarly biographies and studies of her Christian leadership, social reform, Mukti Mission, and Marathi Bible translation.

Samuel Ajayi Crowther. Samuel Ajayi Crowther provides one of the clearest examples of African Christian agency within the nineteenth-century Anglican missionary world.

Captured as a boy in the Atlantic slave trade, liberated by a British naval patrol, educated in Sierra Leone, and later ordained, Crowther became a translator, missionary leader, and eventually the first African Anglican bishop in the modern period.

His career is significant not merely because an African rose within a European mission structure. Crowther brought linguistic competence, regional knowledge, and Christian leadership that European missionaries could not replicate easily.

His later treatment also exposes the racial limits of missionary trust. European missionary leadership increasingly questioned African control, and later administrative interventions undermined the model of African leadership associated with his episcopate.⁵

The lesson is uncomfortable.

Missionaries could affirm indigenous churches in principle while resisting local authority when it threatened inherited assumptions about competence and control.

Venn, Anderson, and the “Three-Self” Ideal

Henry Venn in the Church Missionary Society and Rufus Anderson in the American Board independently developed influential principles emphasizing churches that would become self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating.

The language was a major advance over models assuming permanent missionary control.

The ideal also exposed practical contradictions.

What counts as self-support if foreign mission money pays pastors?

Who decides when local leaders are qualified to govern?

Who owns mission property?

Who controls seminaries?

Who defines orthodox theology?

Who holds the donor relationship?

A church can possess local clergy while remaining structurally dependent on foreign decisions.

⁵On Samuel Ajayi Crowther, African leadership, and late nineteenth-century mission policy, see Andrew F. Walls, Dana Robert, and specialist Crowther scholarship; the episode is also central to discussions of Henry Venn’s indigenous-church principles.

This is why Part V will use the deeper category of **local ownership** rather than assuming local staffing automatically equals indigenous authority.

Translation and the Unintended Consequences of Mission. Bible translation became one of modern mission's greatest long-term contributions.

Missionaries often developed grammars, dictionaries, orthographies, and printed literatures. Their work could be entangled with colonial classification. Linguistic boundaries sometimes became administrative categories in ways that hardened identities previously more fluid.

Yet vernacular Scripture also transferred interpretive power.

Lamin Sanneh argued that translation allowed Christianity to become locally appropriated in ways missionaries could not fully control. Once the Bible entered the vernacular, local Christians could read it against missionary assumptions.

The missionary translated a text.

The text could then become a resource for local critique of the missionary.

This is one of Christian translation's most important historical paradoxes.

Missionaries, Abolition, and Local Reform. Missionary involvement in social reform likewise operated through complex interactions with local Christians.

Campaigns against practices such as slavery, sati, female infanticide, or particular ritual systems have been interpreted in sharply different ways. Some reforms responded to real human suffering. Some missionary descriptions exaggerated or sensationalized practices for metropolitan audiences. Colonial governments sometimes used humanitarian rhetoric to legitimate political intervention.

Historical evaluation therefore requires specificity.

Which practice?

Whose testimony?

What degree of coercion?

What did local reformers themselves say?

How did women within the society understand the issue?

Missionary criticism of culture is not automatically imperialist.

Missionary confidence does not automatically make the criticism accurate.

Race

Race became one of the modern missionary movement's deepest contradictions.

Missionaries proclaimed a gospel in which people from every nation could become one in Christ. Mission institutions nevertheless operated within societies structured by racial hierarchy. White missionaries could receive higher salaries, superior housing, greater authority, or easier access to education than local Christians doing similar work.

Some missionaries explicitly challenged racism.

Others absorbed it.

Still others opposed extreme racial oppression while retaining paternal assumptions concerning local leadership.

This complexity matters because contemporary mission can congratulate itself for rejecting nineteenth-century racism while retaining subtler hierarchies based on passports, education, funding, or organizational prestige.

Power changes form more easily than it disappears.

The Missionary and the Colonial State. It is therefore misleading to ask in the abstract:

Were missionaries colonialists?

A better series of questions asks:

Did this missionary depend upon colonial access?

Did the mission accept state funding?

Did missionaries support or resist conquest?

How did they speak about local cultures?

Were converts granted real authority?

How did property and money work?

What did local people think the missionary represented?

Different answers are possible within the same empire.

Missionary history becomes intellectually serious when it stops demanding one verdict for millions of people across several centuries.

Decolonization. The twentieth century brought the collapse of formal European empires across Asia and Africa.

Political decolonization transformed missionary structures but did not automatically decolonize Christian institutions.

Property remained under foreign boards.

Budgets still flowed from Europe and North America.

Seminary accreditation depended on foreign institutions.

Missionaries could continue exercising substantial influence because they controlled donor relationships and access to international networks.

At the same time, national churches were growing rapidly and insisting upon greater authority. Ecumenical and mission conferences increasingly wrestled with the relationship between older sending societies and emerging churches.

The phrase “mission field” itself began to look unstable.

From Western Mission to World Christianity

This historical transition eventually produced one of the most important changes in modern missiology: the shift from studying missions as the outward activity of Western churches toward studying **World Christianity** as a field concerned with the many local forms, histories, and centers of Christian life.

Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh, Dana Robert, Brian Stanley, and many others helped reshape the field by centering translation, local agency, demographic change, and Christianity’s repeated cultural transformation.⁶

The effect was not to make Western missions irrelevant.

It placed them within a larger history.

Europe became an extraordinarily influential Christian center, especially in the age of empire.

It was never Christianity’s only center.

By the mid-twentieth century it was no longer Christianity’s demographic center either.

That transformation is the subject of the next chapter.

⁶Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message*; Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*.

Christianity Moves South and East

In 1900, a map of global Christianity would have appeared heavily weighted toward Europe and populations of European descent in North America and Oceania. Christian communities existed throughout Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, but the largest institutional, financial, academic, and missionary concentrations were strongly associated with Europe and the North Atlantic world.

That map no longer describes Christianity.

The twentieth century produced one of the largest demographic transformations in Christian history. Christian populations expanded dramatically across sub-Saharan Africa, remained numerically enormous in Latin America while undergoing major denominational change, and developed important centers in Asia. Meanwhile, Europe experienced declining Christian affiliation in many societies, and North America saw substantial religious switching away from Christian identification.

The result is often summarized by saying that Christianity has moved “south and east.” The phrase is useful if it does not become a new simplification. Christianity did not literally migrate as one body from Europe to Africa. European Christianity remains substantial. Latin America was already overwhelmingly Christian before the twentieth century. Asian Christianities vary enormously. African growth has been driven by several different demographic and religious processes.

The deeper claim is that Christianity’s demographic center of gravity has changed.

Measuring a Changing Religion

Before telling the story, the data need to be handled carefully.

Pew Research Center's major 2025 reconstruction of global religious composition estimates that Christians numbered about 2.3 billion in 2020, representing 28.8 percent of the world's population. Christians remained the largest religious group, but their share of humanity declined from 30.6 percent in 2010 because the Christian population grew more slowly than the world's population as a whole.¹

The Center for the Study of Global Christianity and World Christian Database use a different research system and broader modeled categories. Their 2026 *Status of Global Christianity* table estimates approximately 2.674 billion Christians and places 69 percent of the Christian population in the Global South.²

Those figures should not be placed side by side as though one organization must be wrong.

They refer to different observation years.

They define Christian populations through different methodological systems.

They model different variables.

This book therefore uses Pew primarily when discussing comparable global religious affiliation and WCD/CSGC when discussing the World Christianity and mission variables their system is designed to estimate.

The difference itself illustrates a recurring principle: no statistic is stronger than its definition and methodology.

Sub-Saharan Africa Becomes a Major Christian Center. Pew estimates that sub-Saharan Africa contained roughly 697 million Christians in 2020, more than any other world region. Europe, historically the great demographic and institutional center of Christianity, had about 505 million. In 2010 Europe still contained more Christians than sub-Saharan Africa. By 2020 the positions had reversed.³

The speed of this transition is remarkable.

But what exactly produced it?

¹Pew Research Center, *How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020* (June 9, 2025), based on more than 2,700 censuses, surveys, registers, and related sources across 201 countries and territories.

²Center for the Study of Global Christianity / World Christian Database, *Status of Global Christianity, 2026, in the Context of 1900–2075* (2026).

³Pew Research Center, "Christian Population Change," June 9, 2025. Pew estimated about 697.4 million Christians in sub-Saharan Africa and 505 million in Europe in 2020.

Part of the answer is missionary history. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Catholic and Protestant missions contributed significantly to Christian expansion across the continent.

That answer is insufficient.

African population growth has been rapid. Christian communities possess younger age structures than many European churches. African evangelists and pastors carried Christian faith through local networks. Independent and African-initiated churches grew. Pentecostal and charismatic movements expanded dramatically. Urban churches multiplied. Older Catholic and Protestant institutions continued developing. Christianity became embedded in families and communities whose own reproduction mattered more numerically over time than continued foreign missionary activity.

To say that “Western missionaries Christianized Africa” therefore assigns long-term demographic growth to the wrong actors.

Foreign missions helped establish and strengthen many churches.

African Christians made African Christianity a vast African reality.

Beyond the Mission Field. This demographic fact should transform missionary imagination.

African Christianity cannot remain a backdrop against which foreign missionaries act.

African theologians teach.

African churches send missionaries.

African denominations operate universities, seminaries, hospitals, media organizations, and relief agencies.

African migrant congregations plant churches in Europe and North America.

African Christians confront missionary questions inside Africa itself: Muslim-Christian relations, traditional religious practices, prosperity theology, urban poverty, migration, theological education, youth discipleship, corruption, ethnic conflict, and secularizing elite cultures.

Africa is simultaneously sending center, theological center, mission field, and collection of many local Christian worlds.

The old category cannot contain it.

Ethiopia and Egypt: Ancient Centers in a New Demographic Story. The demographic shift should also not obscure older African Christianities.

Ethiopian and Eritrean Orthodox traditions reach back to antiquity. Egypt’s Coptic church represents another ancient Christian world. Their theological and liturgical histories do not begin with the modern missionary movement.

This matters especially when evangelical databases classify particular regional populations according to evangelical percentages. A low evangelical percentage in a historically Orthodox Christian environment does not mean Christianity is absent.

Evangelical strategic categories may still ask legitimate questions about evangelical witness.

They must not erase other churches from the Christian map.

West and Central African Christian Expansion. West and Central Africa include some of the most dynamic Christian societies in the world. Nigeria alone contains enormous Christian and Muslim populations, distributed unevenly across regions and ethnic communities. Ghana has a large Christian majority. The Democratic Republic of the Congo contains one of the world's largest Christian populations.

Yet numerical Christianity does not eliminate missionary need.

Rapid church growth can coexist with:

- theological undertraining;
- nominal affiliation;
- prosperity teaching;
- political manipulation;
- ethnic conflict;
- large Muslim or traditional-religion populations with limited cross-community access.

The distinction between Christian growth and mature gospel access therefore applies inside Christian-majority African societies as much as elsewhere.

Mission is not finished because a census category becomes Christian.

East African Networks. East Africa presents another set of patterns. Revival movements, Anglican and Catholic histories, Pentecostal expansion, refugee movements, Muslim-Christian contact along the coast and in the Horn, and strong national differences create varied Christian worlds.

The East African Revival, beginning in the twentieth century, demonstrates how Christian renewal can move through African relational networks rather than primarily through foreign missionary direction. Testimony, repentance, fellowship, and lay participation shaped churches across several countries.

The episode matters because it complicates the assumption that the global missionary story flows outward from formal mission agencies. Renewal movements inside receiving churches can themselves become missionary engines.

Latin America: Christian Continuity and Christian Change

Latin America requires a different interpretation.

The region was already overwhelmingly Christian, primarily Catholic, long before the twentieth century. Therefore the rise of Protestant and Pentecostal Christianity does not represent a simple movement from non-Christian to Christian affiliation.

It represents transformation within a predominantly Christian religious landscape.

Pew estimates that Latin America and the Caribbean remained about 84.6 percent Christian in 2020, down from roughly 90 percent in 2010. The region therefore experienced both continued overwhelming Christian identification and substantial decline in Christian share.⁴

Within that overall figure, denominational composition changed. Evangelical, Pentecostal, and independent churches expanded in many countries. Catholic affiliation declined in several societies. Religious nones increased.

The missionary implication is important.

A population can be historically Christian and simultaneously undergo major evangelistic and ecclesial change.

Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. No account of twentieth- and twenty-first-century World Christianity can ignore Pentecostal and charismatic movements.

Their exact global size depends on definitions. World Christian Database's 2026 model estimates roughly 676 million people within its broad Pentecostal/charismatic category. The category includes a range of denominational and renewal movements that should not be treated as one institution.⁵

Pentecostal forms often proved highly portable because they could develop through:

- lay participation;
- testimony;
- prayer;
- healing expectations;
- flexible congregational structures;

⁴Pew Research Center, *Global Religious Landscape*, regional table for Latin America and the Caribbean.

⁵World Christian Database, *Status of Global Christianity 2026*.

- strong local leadership.

Critics have rightly identified serious problems in some movements, including prosperity teaching, authoritarian leadership, financial exploitation, and weak theological formation.

Those failures do not erase Pentecostalism's role in Christianity's global demographic transformation.

Brazil and the Transformation of Missionary Direction. Brazil illustrates several trends at once.

The country remains home to one of the world's largest Catholic populations while also containing an enormous evangelical and Pentecostal presence. Brazilian churches became missionary senders, not merely destinations for foreign missions.

This produced a new kind of missionary relationship. Brazilian missionaries could enter Portuguese-speaking settings with linguistic advantages unavailable to North Americans or northern Europeans. Brazilian churches also developed mission organizations whose strategies emerged from Latin American ecclesial experience rather than simply copying older Western models.

Yet new senders can reproduce old problems.

Brazilian missionaries carry their own denominational assumptions, class backgrounds, theological cultures, and institutional interests.

Polycentric mission does not automatically equal postcolonial mission.

Asia-Pacific: A Region of Contrasts

Asia-Pacific contains most of humanity and some of Christianity's most contrasting environments.

Pew estimates that only a minority of the region's population identifies as Christian, but the aggregate hides radically different societies.

The Philippines has a large Christian majority shaped by centuries of Catholic history and later Protestant and independent movements.

South Korea possesses substantial Protestant and Catholic communities alongside Buddhism and a large unaffiliated population.

India contains ancient Christian traditions, major Catholic and Protestant populations, tribal Christian-majority regions, and enormous Hindu and Muslim populations.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, also contains large Christian minorities with strong regional concentrations.

China contains a difficult-to-measure Christian population operating across officially registered and unregistered structures.

Japan has a small Christian minority within a society where formal religious affiliation and lived religious practice interact in unusual ways.

A continental Christian percentage tells us almost nothing about the missionary situation in any one of these contexts.

The Philippines. The Philippines shows why “Global South” is itself an analytical rather than theological category.

Spanish colonial Catholicism deeply shaped the archipelago. American rule introduced further Protestant missionary presence and educational institutions. Filipino Christianity later became embedded in a society with powerful local devotional traditions, enormous Catholic institutions, growing evangelical and independent churches, and extensive global migration.

Filipino workers now live across the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and North America.

Christian mobility follows them.

Yet it would be a mistake to treat every Filipino migrant as a missionary. Migration often arises from economic necessity and can involve painful family separation.

The missionary significance lies in possibility rather than automatic identity: Christian migrants can become relational bridges when they intentionally live and speak as Christians within their workplaces and communities.

South Korea: From Mission Field to Mission Sender. South Korea became one of the most dramatic Protestant growth stories of the twentieth century.

Protestant missionaries had entered Korea before Japanese annexation. Korean Christians then experienced colonial rule, national division, war, rapid industrialization, authoritarian government, democratization, and extraordinary economic transformation.

Church growth unfolded within those upheavals. Presbyterian, Methodist, Pentecostal, and other Protestant institutions developed large congregations, seminaries, campus ministries, prayer movements, and mission organizations. Korean churches eventually sent missionaries across the world.

The temptation is to tell this as a linear success narrative:

missionaries came → Korea converted → Korea became a missionary nation.

The reality is more complicated.

Christianity never became the faith of the whole Korean population. Buddhism, traditional practice, and nonaffiliation remained significant. In recent decades Korean Protestant churches have confronted institutional scandals, generational disaffiliation, political polarization, demographic decline, and declining trust among some younger people.

A major missionary-sending society can also become a place requiring renewed mission.

Sending and receiving are no longer opposites.

China: Growth and Measurement Difficulty

China occupies a central place in modern missionary imagination because of its population, twentieth-century political history, and reports of substantial Christian growth under conditions of state regulation.

Reliable national measurement remains difficult.

Registered Protestant churches, Catholic structures, unregistered congregations, underground Catholic communities, house churches, and varying local enforcement complicate attempts to produce one current Christian total. Estimates can differ enormously depending on source and methodology.

The correct response is methodological humility.

The existence of significant Chinese Christian communities is unquestionable.

The exact total is not.

This is a recurring lesson for the entire book: strategic confidence should not depend upon pretending contested measurements are settled.

India: Christianity Inside a Religious Giant. India's Christian share of the national population is comparatively small, yet its absolute Christian population is large and historically diverse. Kerala contains ancient Christian communities. Northeast India contains states with Christian majorities. Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, independent, tribal, Dalit, and other churches coexist across the country.

At the same time, India contains the world's largest Hindu population and one of the world's largest Muslim populations.

Therefore India can be simultaneously:

- an ancient Christian land;
- a modern missionary sender;
- home to Christian-majority regions;

- home to enormous populations with very weak local Christian access.

This is precisely why political-state categories cannot serve as mission's primary map.

Demographic Growth Is Not the Same as Conversion. The Christian shift south and east is often narrated as missionary success.

Conversion matters.

Demography matters too.

A religious population grows through several mechanisms:

- people enter through conversion;
- children are born into Christian families;
- people leave through religious switching;
- migration changes regional composition;
- mortality and age structure differ.

Pew's 2010–2020 reconstruction is instructive. The number of Christians worldwide increased by roughly 122 million while Christianity's share of the global population fell by 1.8 percentage points because non-Christian populations grew faster.⁶

A rise in Christian numbers therefore cannot automatically be treated as an evangelistic performance measure.

Likewise, decline in Christian percentage does not necessarily mean that more Christians left than joined. Demographic structure can matter greatly.

Missionary claims should distinguish these mechanisms.

Christian Affiliation Is Not Christian Maturity. The demographic story also raises an ecclesiological problem.

If a society becomes majority Christian, what has mission accomplished?

A census can record affiliation.

It cannot easily measure:

- depth of discipleship;
- theological understanding;
- church health;
- integrity of leadership;
- frequency of worship;

⁶Pew Research Center, "Factors Driving Religious Change, 2010–2020," and "Christian Population Change," June 9, 2025.

- capacity for cross-cultural witness.

A nation can be overwhelmingly Christian on paper and contain churches shaped by corruption, ethnic nationalism, nominalism, or theological confusion.

This does not make affiliation meaningless. It makes it insufficient.

Part V's constructive horizon—mature, locally rooted, reproducing churches—therefore remains necessary even in places where Christianity is numerically strong.

The “Global South” as a Useful but Blunt Category

The phrase *Global South* helps describe the demographic shift away from Europe and North America.

It can also conceal enormous difference.

Brazil and Ethiopia do not occupy the same ecclesial world.

South Korea and Nigeria do not share one missionary culture.

India and the Philippines do not have the same relationship to Christianity.

The category is therefore useful at the level of global demographic transformation and dangerous when turned into a cultural explanation.

This book will use it sparingly.

The End of a Civilizational Monopoly. The deepest significance of Christianity's demographic transformation is not that the “South” has replaced the “West.”

It is that no region can plausibly claim to be Christianity's natural civilizational center.

Europe contributed enormously to Christian theology, institutions, mission, scholarship, and culture. North American churches became major missionary and financial actors. Those contributions remain real.

They do not make Western Christianity the default form against which all other Christianities are measured.

The contemporary church is demographically plural.

Its missionary leadership should increasingly become plural as well.

Demography Changes Mission

When churches grow, missionary traffic changes.

African churches send missionaries to other African societies and beyond.

Latin American churches send missionaries to Europe, Africa, and Asia.

Korean missions operate globally.

Filipino migrants form Christian communities across the world.

Indian Christian workers cross enormous internal cultural boundaries.

The modern missionary movement is therefore becoming increasingly **polycentric**.

That word can sound celebratory.

The next chapter will show why it should first be descriptive.

Several centers now send.

They do not possess equal power.

They do not avoid old missionary failures automatically.

And the diversification of senders does not by itself explain why so many populations still possess weak gospel access.

From “The West to the Rest” to “Everywhere to Everywhere”

Missionary language changes more slowly than missionary reality.

For much of the modern missionary movement, one map dominated Christian imagination. Europe and later North America supplied missionaries, money, theological education, printing, and institutional expertise. Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific appeared on the receiving side as mission fields.

The map described real concentrations of power. It never described all Christian movement. By the late twentieth century it had become unmistakably inadequate.

Mission now moves in several directions at once.

The phrase **from everywhere to everywhere** captures something real. It should not become another slogan that hides measurement problems or unequal power. A more careful concept is **polycentric mission**: Christian mission increasingly emerges from several geographic, ecclesial, and cultural centers rather than one dominant North Atlantic source.

Polycentric describes direction.

It does not guarantee equality, maturity, or faithfulness.

South Korea as a New Sending Center

South Korea became one of the most visible symbols of this missionary shift.

The latest completed survey available for this book is the 2024 Korean Protestant mission survey conducted by the Korea World Missions Association and Korea Research Institute for Mission. After its deduplication process and according to its stated operational criteria, the survey counted

21,621 Korean long-term missionaries. It also counted 516 short-term missionaries in its one-to-two-year category and 986 non-Korean missionaries sent through Korean organizations.¹

The figures are significant, but wording matters.

This is not a governmental census of every Korean Christian who might be described as a missionary. It is an institutional survey with definitions, participating organizations, and research procedures. The proper claim is therefore:

KWMA and KTIM counted 21,621 long-term Korean Protestant missionaries in their 2024 survey.

Not:

Korea currently has exactly 21,621 missionaries.

The distinction exemplifies the statistical discipline this book applies throughout.

Why Korea Matters Beyond the Number. The Korean story is historically striking because Korea itself received sustained Catholic and Protestant missionary attention in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Protestant missionaries helped establish schools, hospitals, churches, seminaries, translation work, and institutions. Korean Christians then developed indigenous revival movements, megachurches, campus ministries, prayer movements, denominations, and missionary societies.

By the late twentieth century Korean missionaries were serving throughout Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and the former Soviet world.

The change disrupts the old directional map.

The mission field became a missionary sender.

But the theological lesson should not be that Korea has taken the West's place at the head of global mission.

Korean missions have themselves had to wrestle with issues including:

- cultural export;
- hierarchical leadership;
- denominational competition;
- preparation for difficult contexts;

¹Korea World Missions Association and Korea Research Institute for Mission, *2024 Korean Mission Status Report* (published 2025). The survey counted 21,621 long-term Korean Protestant missionaries under its operational criteria and documented additional short-term and non-Korean workers associated with Korean mission organizations.

- security;
- missionary care;
- relationships with local churches.

A new nationality does not abolish missionary sin.

The lesson is polycentricity, not replacement.

Latin America and COMIBAM. Latin American evangelical mission provides another major example.

For much of modern Protestant history, Latin America appeared in North Atlantic missionary literature principally as a field: Catholic in heritage, Protestant-minority in many settings, economically less powerful, and heavily influenced by foreign mission societies.

By the late twentieth century Latin American churches were increasingly articulating mission from their own theological and institutional perspectives.

COMIBAM—Cooperación Misionera Iberoamericana—became one important regional network. Its contemporary reporting around the 2025 congress continued to cite more than **34,000 Ibero-American missionaries serving worldwide.**²

Again, this is movement-internal research rather than a globally audited independent census. The correct wording is "COMIBAM reports."

The strategic significance does not depend on turning the figure into a ranking table. Tens of thousands of missionaries from Latin American and Iberian contexts represent a substantial missionary movement that older West-to-rest maps cannot explain.

Latin American Missionary Theology. The change is not merely personnel.

Latin American evangelical thinkers such as Samuel Escobar and René Padilla challenged missionary frameworks developed in the North Atlantic world. Integral mission debates insisted that evangelism and social responsibility could not be treated as unrelated Christian concerns. Latin American mission reflection also emerged from contexts marked by poverty, political repression, Catholic heritage, Pentecostal growth, and dependence on foreign mission structures.

Mission therefore began to move outward together with theological critique.

²COMIBAM, research reporting around its 2025 congress and its recent annual reporting, citing more than 34,000 Ibero-American missionaries serving worldwide. Because this is movement-internal research, all manuscript use retains attribution.

The former "recipient" could now ask whether the sending system itself needed correction.

That is one hallmark of genuine polycentric Christianity: authority to interpret mission moves as well as missionary bodies.

Brazil as Sender. Brazil became especially important within Latin American Protestant sending.

Its large evangelical population, denominational diversity, Pentecostal strength, linguistic identity, and mission organizations produced workers serving across several continents. Portuguese gives Brazilian missionaries particular relational and linguistic advantages in parts of Africa and Europe.

Yet Brazilian mission also demonstrates why regional solidarity should not be romanticized. A Brazilian missionary in Mozambique is still an outsider. Shared Portuguese language does not erase differences in race, class, colonial history, local languages, or ecclesial culture.

Missionary distance is more complex than North versus South.

African Missionary Sending

African Christianity is now too large and diverse for any single missionary statistic to describe adequately.

Sending occurs through:

- historic denominations;
- Pentecostal churches;
- independent churches;
- African-initiated movements;
- mission agencies;
- student networks;
- migrant congregations.

Some of the movement is deliberate cross-cultural missionary deployment.

Some emerges through migration.

Some occurs within national borders across major linguistic and religious boundaries.

The absence of one standardized global African missionary census should not lead to the opposite error of treating African mission as anecdotal.

The evidence is visible institutionally and geographically. African missionaries serve elsewhere in Africa, Europe, North America, the Middle East, and Asia. African-led congregations have become a feature of cities such as London, Amsterdam, Berlin, and other European centers.

"Reverse Mission". The phrase **reverse mission** is often used for African, Asian, or Latin American Christians evangelizing the former Western sending world.

The phrase is rhetorically attractive. It can also reproduce the old map by assuming that the original direction was somehow normal and the new direction is its reversal.

Mission from Lagos to London is not inherently reverse.

It is mission.

The term also risks overstating missionary intent. An African church in London may primarily serve Nigerian, Ghanaian, or other diaspora Christians rather than actively evangelizing secular British populations.

Diaspora churches can become missionary bridges.

They should not be labeled missionary merely because they exist in Europe.

Migration and Mission

Jehu Hanciles has emphasized migration as one of the great historical forces shaping global Christianity. Christians move for reasons that include:

- labor;
- education;
- war;
- family;
- political displacement;
- economic opportunity.

Faith travels with them.³

This creates a missionary reality different from classical agency deployment.

A nurse moves to the Gulf for work and lives as a Christian among colleagues.

A Nigerian family moves to Germany and joins or forms a congregation.

³Jehu J. Hanciles, *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity* (Eerdmans, 2021); Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission*.

A Chinese student becomes Christian while studying abroad and returns home.

A Persian-speaking church forms among refugees in Europe.

None of these pathways fits neatly into the old missionary-society model.

Yet none should be romanticized. Migrants are not missionary assets owned by the church. Their movement often involves exploitation, loneliness, or vulnerability. Missionary significance emerges through intentional Christian life and relationships, not from mobility itself.

Filipino Christian Mobility. The Philippines is particularly important because of its enormous overseas labor diaspora and Christian-majority population.

Filipino workers live across the Middle East, East Asia, Europe, North America, and maritime industries. Catholic and evangelical Christians among them can create Christian presence in places where formal foreign missionary activity is constrained.

Some churches and mission thinkers have therefore described Filipino labor migration as strategic missionary opportunity.

The opportunity is real.

The framing needs ethical discipline.

A domestic worker separated from children for economic reasons should not have her suffering redescribed primarily as missionary deployment. A seafarer can be a faithful Christian witness without being instrumentalized by a strategy document.

Mission through migration begins with the migrant as a person and Christian disciple, not as a resource.

India: Mission Without Crossing a Border. The old map also equated missionary sending with international travel.

India demonstrates why that is insufficient.

A Christian worker moving from one Indian state to another may cross:

- language;
- caste;
- ethnicity;
- religion;
- social customs;
- political context.

The cultural distance can exceed that faced by an American moving to another English-speaking Western country.

Cross-cultural mission is therefore better defined through **meaningful boundary crossing** than passport movement.

This matters statistically because international missionary counts systematically underrepresent large forms of internal mission.

China: Between Aspiration and Verified Sending. Chinese missionary aspiration has attracted substantial global evangelical attention.

Particular movements have used imagery of carrying the gospel "back to Jerusalem" across Central Asia and the Muslim-majority world. Testimonies describe Chinese Christians sensing responsibility for mission beyond China.

The difficulty is national measurement.

China's religious environment, unregistered church networks, state regulation, and security conditions make comprehensive missionary counts exceptionally difficult.

Therefore spectacular claims that China is about to send, or already has sent, hundreds of thousands of missionaries should be treated cautiously unless the underlying methodology can be reconstructed.

This is not skepticism toward Chinese missionary vocation.

It is statistical honesty.

The future missionary contribution of Chinese churches may be enormous.

Aspiration is not deployment data.

Middle Eastern Christians as Missionary Agents. Polycentric mission must also restore agency to Christian communities in regions habitually described only as fields.

Middle Eastern Christians are frequently discussed through persecution, minority status, migration, or Western intervention. Those are real issues. They can turn ancient churches into passive objects in the missionary imagination.

In reality, Arab, Armenian, Assyrian, Coptic, Maronite, Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and other Middle Eastern Christians have long acted as:

- pastors;
- theologians;
- educators;
- writers;
- institutional leaders;
- neighbors;
- evangelists.

Their knowledge of Arabic and other regional languages, Islamic societies, political histories, family systems, and Christian minority life cannot be reproduced quickly by incoming outsiders.

Responsible foreign mission should therefore begin by asking who is already present.

Polycentricity and Theological Authority

Missionary sending can become geographically diverse while theological authority remains concentrated.

A Kenyan missionary may serve in Europe but rely almost exclusively on textbooks from the United States.

A Brazilian mission agency may send workers while fundraising models still imitate North American institutions.

An Asian seminary may teach largely from translated Western curricula. This is not inherently wrong. Excellent theology should travel.

The issue is one-directional dependence.

A genuinely polycentric church should increasingly allow theology to travel in several directions as well.

African theologians should shape European churches.

Asian biblical scholarship should influence American seminaries.

Middle Eastern Christians should contribute to Christian-Muslim theology globally.

Latin American mission theology should challenge assumptions in older sending centers.

Polycentric mission therefore concerns knowledge as well as workers.

Money Still Has Geography. Sending is multidirectional.

Wealth remains highly uneven.

North American, European, South Korean, and some other churches and agencies possess financial resources far beyond those available to many African, Asian, and Latin American partners. A partnership can therefore be geographically polycentric while financially hierarchical.

The distinction matters because money creates decision power even where nobody intends it.

Who pays missionary salaries?

Who owns property?

Who can fund graduate education?

Who controls international travel?

Who possesses visa privilege?

Who hosts global conferences?

Changing the nationality of missionaries does not answer these questions.

Chapter 27 will return to them through the problem of partnership governance.

Power Can Move South Too

The critique should also avoid a new binary in which Western missionaries possess power and Majority World missionaries represent authentic local Christianity.

A Korean missionary can dominate a Southeast Asian church.

A wealthy Nigerian megachurch can exercise power over a poorer regional partner.

A Brazilian organization can export its worship culture aggressively.

An urban national missionary can treat a rural minority paternalistically inside the same country.

The moral category is not Westernness.

It is power.

Polycentric mission multiplies actors.

It does not remove the need for accountability.

The End of the Mission Field. What, then, should become of the phrase *mission field*?

It remains useful in particular contexts. A worker can speak of "my field" simply to describe an area of service.

As a global classification of countries, however, the phrase is increasingly unhelpful.

Nigeria sends missionaries and contains major unreached Muslim populations.

Germany has a Christian history and receives missionaries.

South Korea sends thousands of workers and faces substantial disaffiliation.

India has ancient churches, major sending networks, Christian-majority regions, and enormous low-access populations.

The United States sends missionaries and contains immigrant communities with weak Christian relational access.

No country belongs permanently on one side of the missionary relationship.

Everywhere to Everywhere—With Qualifications. The phrase **everywhere to everywhere** therefore works best as a correction to monopoly, not as a claim that missionary flows are equally distributed.

Not everywhere sends at the same scale.

Not everywhere has the same resources.

Not every migrant is a missionary.

Not every church receiving foreign workers lacks local Christian witness.

The contemporary reality is a web rather than a line.

Mission moves:

south to north;

south to south;

north to south;

east to west;

within countries;

through migration;

through digital networks.

The church has become increasingly polycentric.⁴

The Paradox That Drives the Rest of the Book

This transformation creates the central empirical paradox of *The Unfinished Mission*.

Christianity is geographically widespread.

Its demographic center is no longer Western.

Missionaries come from many regions.

Scripture has been translated into thousands of languages.

Digital technology allows Christian information to cross borders instantly.

And still meaningful Christian access is profoundly unequal.

The problem therefore cannot be explained simply by saying:

the Western church has not sent enough missionaries.

Western missionary allocation may still deserve criticism.

So may Korean, African, Latin American, and other mission systems.

But the diagnostic frame must now become global.

⁴On polycentric mission and the transition beyond West-to-rest frameworks, see World Christianity scholarship by Hanciles, Escobar, Walls, Robert, and contemporary Majority World mission researchers.

The next Part moves from history to mapping.

We will ask what *unreached* actually means, where the deepest access gaps appear, and why religious labels alone cannot explain them.

Mapping the Unfinished Mission

Christianity exists in nearly every sovereign state. That fact is historically remarkable. It is also strategically insufficient. A Christian presence somewhere inside a country does not tell us whether a particular person can realistically encounter Christian witness in a language they understand, through relationships they trust, or within a community they could actually enter.

Part II traced the long transformation by which Christianity became geographically global and increasingly polycentric. Part III asks the question that global expansion leaves unresolved: **what does Christian presence look like from the standpoint of access?** The answer is uneven. A city may contain hundreds of churches while one migrant neighborhood has almost no relational connection to them. A country may contain an ancient Christian tradition while particular ethnolinguistic communities remain largely outside its social world. Scripture may exist in a national language while a minority community lacks usable mother-tongue resources. A population may possess abundant Christian information while Christianity has become socially implausible, institutionally distrusted, or difficult to inhabit as a community.

This Part therefore does not treat *unreached* as a self-explanatory label. Chapter 10 first reconstructs the category itself: how people groups are counted, why major mission databases produce different totals, what numerical thresholds can and cannot tell us, and why strategic categories must not be confused with biblical prophecy or with judgments about the spiritual condition of individuals. From there the analysis moves outward. Chapter 11 examines the geography in which low-access populations are concentrated. Chapters 12 through 15 then show why large religious labels—Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, folk-religious, unaffiliated, secular, post-Christian—must be opened rather than merely counted. Chapter 16 turns to language and Scripture, one of the clearest measurable dimensions of access. Chapter 17 ends with cities and migration, where old missionary geographies are rearranged by human movement.

The governing framework is deliberately multidimensional. Four domains recur throughout the Part. **Informational access** asks whether substantive Christian teaching can realistically be encountered. **Linguistic access** asks whether it can be understood in a language and communicative form that belongs naturally to the hearer's social world. **Relational access** asks whether Christians are present within plausible networks of trust. **Ecclesial access** asks whether there is a Christian community capable of worship, teaching, baptism, pastoral care, accountability, leadership formation, and continued witness. Political restriction, family pressure, caste,

class, geography, stigma, literacy, migration status, and other contextual factors can strengthen or weaken every one of these domains.

No single global dataset measures all of this. That limitation is not a reason to abandon mission research. It is a reason to use research with greater precision. People-group databases can reveal patterns that national statistics hide. Religious-demography datasets can show population scale and change. Bible-translation data can identify linguistic gaps. Migration and urbanization statistics can show where populations are moving. Local churches, researchers, and communities then supply realities no global table can see. The strongest missionary map is therefore layered rather than singular.

This also changes the moral language of strategy. Part III is not an attempt to rank human beings by importance. Equal human dignity does not imply identical missionary situations. A population surrounded by accessible churches and Scripture presents a different strategic problem from a population with almost no locally rooted Christian witness, even though the people in both settings are equally valuable before God. Prioritization concerns forms of access and responsibility, not degrees of human worth.

The figures in these chapters should likewise be read as time-stamped research estimates rather than permanent facts. People move. Churches grow or decline. Translation projects begin. Political conditions change. Researchers revise classifications. A map can therefore become obsolete even when its underlying method remains useful. The purpose of this Part is not to freeze the world into one definitive picture. It is to teach the reader how to see the unfinished mission without allowing a single percentage, map, religion, country, or people-group label to do more explanatory work than it can bear.

What Does “Unreached” Actually Mean?

Few words have reshaped evangelical missionary strategy as powerfully as *unreached*.

A single category helped churches notice something that national statistics routinely hid. India may contain tens of millions of Christians while particular caste, tribal, linguistic, or religious communities possess almost no locally rooted Christian witness. Nigeria may contain one of the world’s largest Christian populations while particular Muslim communities in the north have little relational connection to those churches. A European city can contain hundreds of churches while an immigrant population lives almost entirely outside their social networks.

The category therefore solved a real problem.

It also created new ones.

Once *unreached* became ordinary missionary language, its technical meaning often disappeared. Churches heard statements such as “there are more than seven thousand unreached people groups” or “over three billion people are unreached” without being told that different mission databases produce different totals, use different counting units, and sometimes define the category differently.

The result is false certainty.

This chapter reconstructs the category before the rest of the book uses it.

The Problem National Maps Cannot Solve

Imagine a country of one hundred million people.

Twenty million identify as Christian.

At national level the Christian presence looks substantial.

Now imagine that almost all twenty million Christians belong to two ethnic communities concentrated in one region. Another population of ten million people lives in a different linguistic and religious world with almost no Christian relationships.

What does the national Christian percentage tell us about the ten million?

Very little.

Modern people-group missiology developed partly as a response to this problem. The gospel does not flow equally through every social network. Language, caste, ethnicity, religion, geography, and history can create barriers of understanding or acceptance even within the same political state.

People-group research therefore asks a different question from ordinary demography:

Where are the social boundaries across which Christian witness does not move easily without deliberate crossing?

That is a legitimate missionary question.

“People Group” Is a Human Research Category. PeopleGroups.org states the point unusually clearly: “People Group is a manmade term.” Its current definition describes a people group as the largest grouping through which the gospel can flow without encountering significant barriers of understanding and acceptance. It also explicitly notes that people groups can evolve over time and may be identified through combinations of ethnicity, language, culture, religion, citizenship, geography, caste, clan, tribe, and self-identity.¹

This honesty matters.

The term is not a scientific species category.

It is not a direct biblical noun.

It is an analytical model designed to help mission researchers represent social barriers.

That means disagreements are inevitable.

¹International Mission Board, “Definitions & FAQs,” *PeopleGroups.org*, accessed August 21, 2026. The site explicitly calls *people group* a manmade term and defines it through barriers of understanding and acceptance.

Where does one group end and another begin?

If a population speaks one language but belongs to several castes that rarely intermarry, should the castes be separate missionary groups?

If one ethnic group lives across five countries under different governments and languages, is it one people or five mission contexts?

If urbanization creates a mixed identity among the second generation, does the old classification still help?

Different answers can all be reasonable depending on the purpose of the analysis.

Joshua Project’s Two Counting Systems

Joshua Project publicly illustrates the issue through two major counting approaches.

The preferred **People Groups Across Countries (PGAC)** method counts a people once regardless of how many countries its members inhabit. At the August 21, 2026 source freeze used for this book, Joshua Project’s live count listed **10,422 PGAC groups**, of which **4,485** were classified as unreached and **3,218** as frontier unreached.²

The traditional **People Groups In Countries (PGIC)** method counts a people separately in each country where it lives. Under that approach the same live system listed **16,426 people-in-country entries**, including **7,162** unreached and **4,824** frontier unreached.³

Both sets of numbers are correct within their own counting rules.

This immediately demonstrates why missionary statements such as “there are exactly 7,162 unreached peoples in the world” are misleading.

That number refers to a particular database architecture.

Change the counting unit and the total changes substantially.

Why Country Boundaries Sometimes Matter. It might seem more conceptually pure to count an ethnic people only once.

Missionary reality can make country boundaries consequential.

The same population may live under different:

- legal systems;
- majority religions;
- educational languages;
- migration histories;

²Joshua Project, “People Groups: Counts,” accessed August 21, 2026: 10,422 PGAC groups, including 4,485 unreached and 3,218 frontier unreached.

³Ibid.: 16,426 PGIC entries, including 7,162 unreached and 4,824 frontier unreached.

- conflict environments;
- church relationships.

A Kurdish population in Turkey does not inhabit precisely the same missionary environment as Kurds in Iraq, Syria, Germany, or Iran.

A people-in-country system can therefore reveal real access differences obscured by one global ethnic category.

The tradeoff is larger and more volatile group totals.

The important point is not to choose one method as universally correct. It is to know which question the method answers.

Joshua Project’s Definition of Unreached

Joshua Project currently describes an unreached people group through two principal thresholds: evangelical Christians constitute no more than roughly 2 percent of the population and broader Christian adherents no more than roughly 5 percent.

The use of both variables reflects one important concern. Evangelical presence and broader Christian presence are not identical.

A population may contain ancient Catholic, Orthodox, or other Christian communities while having very few evangelicals.

A strictly evangelical threshold could therefore classify a historically Christian population as unreached in a way that ordinary readers would misunderstand.

Joshua’s additional Christian-adherent threshold attempts to account for this distinction, though its own broader adherent category remains a research variable rather than a theological judgment concerning the faith of each person counted.

IMB Uses a Different Definition. The International Mission Board’s PeopleGroups.org currently defines an unreached people group as one containing **less than 2 percent evangelical Christians**. Its public definitions do not use Joshua Project’s additional 5 percent Christian-adherent condition in the same way.⁴

PeopleGroups.org also organizes its research through its own People, Place, Language, Religion architecture.

The result is a global UPG total of roughly **7,300** in its current public system—substantially higher than Joshua Project’s roughly **4,500 globally distinct PGAC UPGs**.

⁴International Mission Board, “Definitions & FAQs,” defining UPGs as groups with less than 2 percent evangelical Christian population.

It would be easy to assume that one organization has made a giant error. That conclusion is wrong.

They are not counting the world through identical taxonomies.

The difference is itself one of the most useful facts readers can learn about unreached-people research.

What the Difference Does *Not* Mean. The two systems should not be averaged.

If one database says roughly 4,500 and another roughly 7,300, the answer is not “about 5,900.”

Averages make sense when two measurements attempt to estimate the same quantity through comparable methods.

Here the categories differ.

Combining them would create a number with no research meaning.

The correct approach is attribution:

Joshua Project’s August 2026 PGAC system classified about 4,500 globally distinct peoples as unreached.

IMB’s PeopleGroups.org system classified about 7,300 groups as unreached under its own methodology.

Then explain why.

The Two-Percent Threshold

The best-known feature of both systems is the 2 percent evangelical threshold.

Why 2 percent?

Mission strategists have reasoned that below a certain density, evangelical Christians within a population may lack enough relational presence and internal resources for the gospel to spread through ordinary social networks without substantial outside assistance. Once a movement reaches greater density, the population may possess more potential for self-propagation.

The intuition is plausible.

The precision is less universal than missionary rhetoric sometimes suggests.

Suppose two populations each have 2 percent evangelical Christians.

In the first, believers are distributed across the whole population, speak the same language, possess trusted local leaders, and maintain several healthy churches.

In the second, almost all Christians belong to a segregated subcommunity with little contact with the wider population.

The identical percentage describes different access realities.

Social networks matter.

Thresholds Are Decision Rules. This is why the 2 percent line should be understood as an operational threshold rather than a theological boundary.

At 1.99 percent, a people does not possess one spiritual nature.

At 2.01 percent, it does not acquire another.

The threshold helps researchers prioritize.

It cannot declare missionary completion.

The same principle applies to every similar strategic category. PeopleGroups.org’s current system distinguishes frontier groups below 0.1 percent evangelical, pioneer groups above 0.1 but below 0.5 percent, expanding unreached groups up to 2 percent, and several categories above that.⁵

Such gradients can reveal important differences hidden by a binary reached/unreached system.

They remain models.

Frontier Peoples. The concept of a **frontier people group** emerged to identify populations with exceptionally small evangelical presence.

Joshua Project and IMB use related but not identical frontier criteria. Joshua Project’s current PGAC system listed **3,218 frontier unreached groups** at the August 2026 freeze.⁶

The category highlights an important strategic difference.

A group containing established churches and 1.5 percent evangelicals may be classified unreached while possessing far more internal Christian capacity than a group with almost no known believers.

Lumping both together as “unreached” can conceal the depth of the gap.

Frontier categories try to restore that distinction.

Unengaged Unreached Peoples

An even narrower category is the **unengaged unreached people group (UUPG)**.

⁵Ibid., current Lostness Priority Index categories.

⁶Joshua Project, “People Groups: Counts.”

This category attempts to identify not only weak Christian presence but the absence of known sustained efforts directed toward establishing churches.

Joshua Project’s live page listed **2,197 unengaged UPGs** and about **774.5 million people** within those groups at the source-freeze date.⁷

The wording of Joshua’s page is instructive: these are populations with “no reported workers” and “no reported active church,” representing the research system’s best current picture.

The word *reported* matters.

Security conditions may hide ministry.

Researchers can miss local believers.

Engagement can begin between updates.

The database should therefore not be interpreted as omniscient knowledge that no Christian activity exists anywhere inside the group.

IMB and Engagement. PeopleGroups.org defines an unengaged people group as one where there are no known efforts focused on establishing self-sustaining evangelical churches. It explicitly acknowledges that organizations can produce different UUPG lists because *engagement* is itself a man-defined category and groups may count different activities as sufficient evidence of engagement.⁸

This is methodological honesty worth emphasizing.

Missionary research can become rhetorically weaker when organizations attempt to make dynamic research categories sound absolutely certain.

Admitting uncertainty does not eliminate urgency.

It makes the urgency credible.

Christian Adherent Is Not Evangelical. The phrase **Christian adherent** requires further care.

In Joshua Project’s system it is intentionally broader than evangelical Christian. It includes people associated with Christian traditions across confessional lines.

This raises a theological and ecumenical issue.

Evangelical mission databases necessarily measure categories important to evangelical missionary strategy. Their thresholds should therefore be interpreted within that purpose. A low evangelical percentage does **not**

⁷Joshua Project, “Unengaged Unreached People Groups,” accessed August 21, 2026: 2,197 UUPGs and approximately 774.5 million people.

⁸International Mission Board, “Definitions & FAQs,” discussion of differing organizational definitions of engagement.

imply the absence or irrelevance of Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Anglican, or other Christian communities.

This book uses evangelical classifications as strategic analytical tools, not as comprehensive judgments on the ecclesial status of every Christian tradition.

The clarification is particularly important in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Ethiopia, India, and other contexts where ancient Christian communities may exist inside populations that appear low-access on an evangelical map.

What About Nominal Christians? A different objection immediately follows.

If broad Christian-adherent categories include many people who are Christian only culturally or nominally, do they overstate genuine Christian access?

Sometimes they can.

A society may contain millions of baptized Christians while church participation, biblical understanding, or personal Christian commitment is weak.

But that does not mean the Christian presence is irrelevant. Historic churches create:

- buildings;
- clergy;
- liturgy;
- Scripture traditions;
- family memory;
- public Christian vocabulary.

A nominally Christian society and a society with virtually no Christian history do not have identical access environments even if evangelical conversion rates are similarly low.

Again, one variable cannot capture the whole missionary reality.

The Anthropology Problem. Missionary people-group research also encounters longstanding anthropological criticism.

Ethnic identities are not always bounded, timeless units. People possess overlapping identities. Political events can reshape ethnicity. Colonial administrations sometimes hardened fluid categories. Urbanization and migration create hybrid social worlds. Language does not map neatly onto identity. Intermarriage can weaken or transform boundaries.

This does not make ethnicity unreal.

It means people groups should be treated as dynamic social realities rather than natural species.

A missionary database can therefore be highly useful and still require revision.

Indeed, the willingness to revise is evidence of responsible research.

Cities Complicate the Model

Urbanization creates an especially difficult challenge.

Imagine a megacity containing:

- rural migrants from dozens of ethnicities;
- mixed-language households;
- international workers;
- students;
- secular professional networks;
- caste associations;
- religious congregations.

Which social identity most determines gospel flow?

Sometimes ethnicity remains powerful.

Sometimes occupation, class, neighborhood, or educational network matters more.

The people-group framework works best when it remains sensitive to the actual barriers rather than assuming ethnicity always dominates.

Chapter 17 will return to this urban complexity.

The Nation-State Problem. The same caution applies in reverse.

Modern states can create real social identities that people-group models sometimes underplay.

Citizenship, national education, military service, media, law, and political conflict can reshape communities that historically crossed borders.

A Pashtun in Pakistan and a Pashtun in Afghanistan may share major cultural features while inhabiting different state systems.

A diaspora population in Germany may change substantially across generations.

Mission strategy therefore needs both ethnicity and place.

This is one reason people-in-country approaches remain useful despite producing larger totals.

Religion as a Boundary. Religious identity itself can create a people-group boundary.

Two populations may share language and ethnicity while differing sharply in religion. Conversion then carries consequences beyond belief because it appears to cross communal identity.

South Asia supplies many examples where religious, caste, and kinship identities interact.

The missionary question becomes:

Can the gospel move through this social network without requiring a convert to enter an alien community unnecessarily?

This is not a request to avoid the offense of Christian allegiance.

It is a request to distinguish the offense of the gospel from avoidable cultural extraction.

From People-Group Status to Gospel Access. All of these complications lead toward a broader framework.

Consider four people.

Person A

She can watch Christian videos in her language but knows no Christians personally.

Person B

He lives beside a church whose members belong to another caste and rarely interact with his community.

Person C

She has a Bible and Christian friends but would face severe family consequences for public conversion.

Person D

He lives in a historically Christian society with abundant churches but views them as socially irrelevant and morally untrustworthy.

Which person is reached?

The binary label is too coarse.

The book therefore uses **gospel access** as a multidimensional category.

Four Domains of Gospel Access

1. Informational access

Can a person realistically encounter substantive Christian information?

This includes Scripture, preaching, teaching, digital content, literature, radio, and personal witness.

Information is the lowest threshold. It matters enormously and is increasingly transformed by technology.

It is not discipleship.

2. Linguistic access

Can Christian witness be understood in a language and communicative form that belongs naturally to the person’s social world?

A Bible in the national language may not serve a minority community well.

A written translation may not serve an oral community.

A spoken-language Bible does not solve the needs of a Deaf sign-language community.

3. Relational access

Does the person plausibly know Christians who can embody, explain, and discuss faith?

This domain is harder to measure globally.

It is also central.

Trust travels through relationships more effectively than information alone.

WCD’s modeled estimate that only 18.9 percent of non-Christians personally know a Christian attempts to capture part of this problem at global scale, though the variable belongs to its own methodology and should not be mistaken for a direct worldwide census.⁹

4. Ecclesial access

Is there an accessible Christian community capable of worship, teaching, baptism, pastoral care, accountability, and leadership formation?

A person can possess strong informational access and weak ecclesial access.

⁹World Christian Database / Center for the Study of Global Christianity, *Status of Global Christianity 2026*, modeled estimate for non-Christians who personally know a Christian.

This is especially common in restricted or diaspora contexts.

Two Context Modifiers. The four domains also operate under two important modifiers.

Social and legal permeability

How costly is it to explore or embrace Christianity?

A church may be physically present while state regulation, family pressure, caste consequences, or violence makes it functionally inaccessible.

Local reproductive capacity

Can Christian witness continue through locally rooted Christians?

A field dependent entirely on outsiders is in a different condition from one where local churches and leaders can sustain discipleship and send workers themselves.

These modifiers help connect access with the constructive argument later in the book.

Why There Is No Gospel Access Score. Readers may reasonably ask whether the six dimensions could be combined into one index.

In principle, an organization might construct such a model for a specific research purpose.

This book does not.

The data quality is too uneven globally.

Information availability can sometimes be measured.

Language translation status can be tracked.

Relational access is much harder.

Ecclesial quality is harder still.

Social cost varies inside countries and families.

A single score would create precision the evidence cannot support.

The framework is diagnostic rather than computational.

Why Keep “Unreached” at All? After so much qualification, abandoning the term might seem attractive.

That would be a mistake.

Unreached performs a valuable missionary function.

It interrupts complacency created by national Christian averages.

It identifies populations with very weak evangelical presence.

It motivates pioneer attention.

It creates searchable research systems.

It helps churches ask where existing Christian structures are least likely to serve people automatically.

The correction is not to stop using the category.
It is to use it honestly.

The Ethical Use of Mission Data

Mission data should therefore follow several rules.

Attribute the source. Say Joshua Project estimates or IMB classifies.

State the observation date. Dynamic databases change.

State the counting unit. PGAC and PGIC are not interchangeable.

Do not average incompatible systems. Different taxonomies are not noisy versions of one exact number.

Do not convert strategic thresholds into biblical prophecy. The 2 percent line is a research decision.

Do not erase wider Christianity. Low evangelical percentage does not imply no Christian witness.

Do not turn people into targets. Data exists to direct attention toward persons and communities.

These rules make mission research slightly less dramatic.

They make it much more trustworthy.

From Definitions to Geography

We can now use the maps without pretending they are reality itself.

The broad pattern is unmistakable. The largest concentrations of populations classified as unreached occur across North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, and parts of East and Southeast Asia. Large low-access communities also exist outside that belt, including migrants, minority populations, and remote language communities elsewhere.

The next chapter therefore asks a geographic question:

Where does meaningful Christian access remain weakest—and what disappears when the world is colored only by country or majority religion?

Where Gospel Access Remains Least

Once *unreached* is treated as an analytical category rather than a divine label, the global map becomes both clearer and more complicated.

Weak Christian access is not evenly distributed. Large concentrations occur across a broad belt extending from North Africa through the Middle East and Central and South Asia into parts of East and Southeast Asia. South Asia alone contains an extraordinary share of people classified as unreached by major evangelical mission databases. Muslim-majority regions across North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia contain many populations with little evangelical presence and, in some cases, severe legal or social barriers. Minority-language communities can remain poorly served even inside countries with substantial Christian populations.

Yet the familiar map—especially the **10/40 Window**—is useful only if we resist treating geography itself as explanation.

Latitude does not cause unreachedness.

The 10/40 Window

The 10/40 Window entered evangelical mission strategy as a broad geographic rectangle extending approximately from ten to forty degrees north latitude across North Africa and Asia. It highlighted a striking concentration of populations with low evangelical presence, large non-Christian religious majorities, poverty, and in some areas severe restrictions on Christian mission.

Its mobilizing power was enormous because it gave churches an intuitive visual shorthand. Mission could point to a region rather than ask ordinary Christians to master dozens of demographic datasets.

Joshua Project's current revised presentation estimates that roughly **3.5 billion people classified within unreached groups live inside the 10/40 Window**. Its mission-explorer material also estimates that only about **3 percent of missionaries serve within the Window**.¹

The broad concentration is important.

The numbers should be handled carefully.

Joshua Project's public 10/40 and global people-group views have used counting structures that are not perfectly interchangeable. The manuscript therefore treats the population concentration—roughly 3.5 billion people in groups Joshua classifies as unreached inside the region—as more informative than trying to compare one exact 10/40 group total directly against the PGAC global count.

What the Window Gets Right. The Window identifies a genuine missionary fact: enormous low-access populations cluster across a relatively connected set of regions.

These include major concentrations of:

- Muslims;
- Hindus;
- Buddhists;
- folk and traditional religious populations;
- communities with strong ethno-religious identities;
- populations under governments that restrict independent religious activity.

The region also contains some of the world's most densely populated societies.

Therefore a modest number of countries can contain a huge share of humanity living within populations classified as unreached.

Mission strategy is right to notice this.

¹Joshua Project, current Missions Explorer and 10/40 materials, accessed August 21, 2026. Joshua estimates roughly 3.5 billion people classified within unreached groups live inside its revised 10/40 Window and about 3 percent of missionaries serve within the region. The manuscript does not equate separate 10/40 group totals directly with the live PGAC global total because the public views are not perfectly synchronized in counting structure.

What the Window Gets Wrong When Overused. The Window becomes misleading when its borders are treated as theological.

A population just south of ten degrees north is not less important.

A low-access migrant community in Paris does not cease to be a missionary concern because France lies outside the Window.

An indigenous language community in Latin America may have almost no Scripture or local church access.

A Buddhist or Muslim minority can remain socially isolated inside a Christian-majority country.

Secular urban populations in Europe may possess abundant Christian information while meaningful Christian belief and participation collapse.

The unfinished mission therefore cannot be bounded by latitude.

The Window is an attention tool.

It is not the geography of God's concern.

South Asia: The Largest Concentration

South Asia dominates many evangelical unreached-people maps because of population size and social complexity.

India alone contains more than a billion people, the overwhelming majority of the world's Hindus, one of the world's largest Muslim populations, millions of Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, and indigenous religious communities.

People-group databases often divide the population through combinations of:

- language;
- caste;
- tribe;
- religion;
- region.

This produces very large unreached-group counts relative to simpler ethnolinguistic systems.

The underlying missionary insight remains valid even if exact totals vary: South Asian social boundaries can prevent Christian presence in one community from creating meaningful access in another community living nearby.

Chapter 13 will examine this dynamic in detail.

Pakistan and Bangladesh. Pakistan and Bangladesh are both Muslim-majority South Asian societies, yet their missionary environments differ substantially.

Pakistan combines Islamic national identity, regional ethnic diversity, Urdu and other language worlds, Christian minorities with their own histories, blasphemy laws, and significant social pressure around religious conversion.

Bangladesh shares Bengali linguistic and cultural connections across religious lines but possesses its own political history, Muslim-majority identity, Hindu and Christian minorities, and densely populated rural and urban networks.

Placing both under the label “Muslim South Asia” captures something and obscures much.

Missionary mapping becomes stronger when geography leads to contextual questions rather than replacing them.

North Africa. North Africa contains some of the world’s most strongly Muslim-identified societies alongside deep histories of ancient Christianity.

Augustine’s North Africa and contemporary Algeria are not the same religious world. Medieval and early modern Islamic transformation changed the region profoundly. Modern colonialism, nationalism, Arabic and Amazigh identities, state regulation, migration to Europe, and contemporary religious movements further shaped Christian access.

Some North African Christian communities have grown in recent decades, including among Amazigh populations, but national and population-level access remains highly uneven.

Historical Christian memory does not automatically produce contemporary ecclesial access.

The Middle East

The Middle East is often painted almost uniformly as Muslim on evangelical maps.

That presentation erases ancient Christian communities.

Egypt contains millions of Coptic Christians.

Lebanon has substantial Maronite and other Christian communities.

Iraq and Syria possess ancient Assyrian, Syriac, Armenian, Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant traditions, though war and emigration have devastated many communities.

Jordan and Palestine contain historic Arab Christian populations.

Therefore the phrase “the Middle East is unreached” is analytically weak.

Some populations within the Middle East possess extremely low evangelical access.

Other populations are themselves Christian.

A map designed for evangelical pioneer strategy must not become a map of where Christianity does or does not exist.

The Arabian Peninsula. The Arabian Peninsula illustrates another complexity.

Several Gulf states contain substantial Christian populations because of migrant labor, even while citizenship structures and legal environments constrain public evangelism among nationals. A country can therefore contain many churches serving expatriate Christians while locally rooted Christian access for citizens remains weak.

This is a perfect example of why national Christian percentages and local gospel access are different measurements.

An expatriate church can be vibrant.

Its existence does not automatically create relational access across citizenship, language, class, or legal boundaries.

Iran. Iran differs sharply from Arab-majority settings.

Persian identity, Shi’a Islam, revolutionary political history, state regulation, diaspora networks, and reported religious disillusionment create a distinct environment.

Christian media and diaspora engagement may produce significant informational access. Small convert communities may create relational access. Public ecclesial access remains constrained for many converts.

The four-domain Gospel Access Framework therefore describes Iran more accurately than a single statement that Iran is unreached or reached.

Information and church access can move in different directions.

Turkey. Turkey likewise resists one label.

The territory contains some of the most important locations in early Christian history—Ephesus, Antioch’s wider region, Cappadocia, the seven churches of Revelation—yet the modern Republic of Turkey is overwhelmingly Muslim by affiliation and contains a small Christian minority.

Historical Christian geography and present Christian demography can diverge dramatically.

The contrast is one of the clearest reminders that Christian presence is reversible.

Ancient mission success does not permanently settle contemporary access.

Central Asia

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan emerged from Soviet systems that officially constrained religion and then developed new relationships between national identity, Islam, state authority, and religious practice.

Russian-speaking Orthodox populations coexist with titular ethnic majorities whose Islamic identity can range from cultural to observant. Protestant and evangelical communities may be legally recognized in some settings while heavily restricted in others.

The Soviet legacy also complicates simple religious categories. Decades of official atheism did not erase religious identity; post-Soviet revival does not mean every nominal Muslim or Orthodox Christian practices actively.

Mission therefore encounters layers of:

- nationalism;
- post-Soviet secularization;
- Islamic revival;
- Russian cultural influence;
- state regulation.

The region belongs inside the low-access map, but not for one reason.

Afghanistan. Afghanistan represents one of the starkest examples of weak visible Christian access combined with intense security concerns.

Publicly identifiable local Christian life is extraordinarily constrained. Decades of war, Taliban rule, ethnic diversity, refugee displacement, poverty, and Islamic social identity make foreign missionary models exceptionally difficult.

Yet Afghan diaspora communities now exist across neighboring states, Europe, North America, and elsewhere.

The missionary geography therefore extends beyond Afghanistan's borders.

One people can inhabit several access environments simultaneously.

East Asia

East Asia appears differently on mission maps because formal Christian presence varies sharply.

South Korea has large Protestant and Catholic populations.

China has significant but difficult-to-measure Christian communities.

Japan's Christian minority is small.

Taiwan and Hong Kong contain visible Christian institutions within religiously plural and often highly unaffiliated societies.

North Korea presents an extreme case of state restriction and severe uncertainty concerning local Christian life.

The category *unreached* captures some of these differences poorly because secular and religiously unaffiliated identities do not behave like bounded ethnoreligious peoples.

Chapter 14 will therefore examine lived religion rather than relying only on affiliation.

Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia contains another extraordinary set of contrasts.

Indonesia is Muslim-majority and contains substantial Christian populations, with regional concentrations so strong that some provinces look entirely different from national averages.

Malaysia combines Malay Muslim identity, Chinese and Indian minorities, Christian communities, and legal distinctions affecting conversion and religious status.

Thailand is predominantly Buddhist by affiliation but contains Muslim minorities in the south and Christian minorities elsewhere.

Myanmar contains Buddhist-majority populations alongside major Christian ethnic minorities, including Chin, Kachin, and Karen communities, within a context of military conflict and displacement.

The Philippines is overwhelmingly Christian.

No single Southeast Asian religious map predicts missionary access without subnational detail.

China and Measurement. China deserves special caution because the size of its Christian population remains contested.

Official religious institutions provide only part of the picture. Unregistered Protestant house churches and underground Catholic networks complicate surveys. Government restrictions make independent national religious research difficult. Estimates vary widely.

Missionary rhetoric has often selected the largest plausible number when celebrating revival and the smallest when emphasizing need.

That practice is methodologically indefensible.

Where measurement is uncertain, the manuscript should say so.

China contains substantial Christian communities.

Their exact size is not known with the precision some missionary claims suggest.

Minority Populations Outside the Window

A geographic concentration can also cause blind spots.

Consider:

- Somali migrants in Europe;
- North African communities in France;
- Muslim minorities in Latin America;
- Indigenous-language communities in the Americas;
- Buddhist diaspora populations in North America;
- secular international students;
- remote communities in the Pacific.

These populations may live outside the 10/40 Window while experiencing distinctive access gaps.

Mission should follow people rather than a rectangle.

The National Average Problem. Country-level statistics remain attractive because states produce data and maps need borders.

Mission lives below the border.

A country can simultaneously contain:

- a Christian majority;
- an unreached Muslim minority;
- a remote language community without full Scripture;
- a secular urban elite;
- migrant workers from another religion.

Which color should the country be?

Any single color will mislead.

This is why the book moves from map to social worlds.

Mapping Access Rather Than Religious Deficit. A responsible mission map therefore asks several overlapping questions.

Where is evangelical Christian presence extremely small?

Where are historic Christian communities present even if evangelicals are few?

Where is Scripture unavailable in a language people understand deeply?
Where do Christians and non-Christians live in separate social networks?
Where do governments restrict religious exploration?
Where do family or caste structures make conversion socially costly?
Where are churches present but distrusted or declining?
Where is local Christian leadership capable of continuing witness?
No existing global dataset answers all of these questions.²
The map must be assembled from several layers.

Why Region-Specific Chapters Are Necessary

The next chapters therefore do not simply list where unreached people live.

They examine several different access environments.

Chapter 12 studies Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority worlds, emphasizing diversity rather than one “Muslim world.”

Chapter 13 turns to South Asia, where caste, family, language, and religious identity interact.

Chapter 14 examines Buddhist, folk, indigenous, and unaffiliated religious worlds where formal affiliation can understate lived religion.

Chapter 15 analyzes secular and post-Christian environments where access may be high while response and plausibility are low.

Chapter 16 treats language and Scripture.

Chapter 17 examines cities and migration.

Together they replace one world map with a set of human access problems.

²Pew Research Center, *How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020*, for country and regional religious composition; Joshua Project and PeopleGroups.org for evangelical people-group classification. These datasets answer different questions and are not merged into one gospel-access index.

The Many Muslim Worlds

Pew Research Center estimates that about **2.0 billion people** identified as Muslim in 2020, representing roughly **25.6 percent of humanity**. Muslims were the world's second-largest religious population after Christians and the fastest-growing major religious group between 2010 and 2020.¹

That enormous population is frequently compressed into the phrase **the Muslim world**.

The phrase can be convenient. It can also become one of the most misleading expressions in mission strategy.

Muslims share significant religious reference points: the Qur'an, the prophetic status of Muhammad, practices associated with prayer and fasting, the importance of Mecca, and broad theological convictions concerning God and revelation. Yet Muslims inhabit radically different linguistic, political, theological, ethnic, legal, and historical worlds.

The Christian missionary who begins with "Muslims believe..." often begins too early.

The first question should be: which Muslims, where, within what religious and social tradition?

Most Muslims Are Not Arab

The first correction is geographic.

Islam originated in Arabia, and Arabic remains uniquely important because the Qur'an is Arabic and core religious practices retain Arabic forms. Yet most Muslims do not live in Arab-majority countries.

¹Pew Research Center, *How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020* (June 9, 2025), estimating approximately 2.0 billion Muslims, 25.6 percent of the global population, in 2020.

South Asia and Southeast Asia contain enormous Muslim populations. Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim-majority country by population. Pakistan and Bangladesh contain hundreds of millions of Muslims. India, though Hindu-majority, contains one of the world's largest Muslim populations. Large Muslim societies also exist across sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, Iran, Turkey, China, Europe, and the Americas.

Therefore:

Arab $\neq$ Muslim.

Muslim $\neq$ Middle Eastern.

Middle Eastern $\neq$ Arab.

These distinctions sound elementary. Missionary rhetoric violates them often enough to require repetition.

Islam Has Internal Theological Diversity. The second correction is theological.

The Sunni-Shi'a distinction is the most familiar major divide, but even this binary is insufficient. Islamic intellectual history includes multiple schools of law, theology, Sufi traditions, reform movements, revivalist movements, local religious orders, modernist interpretations, Salafi currents, and countless differences in everyday practice.

A Shi'a Muslim shaped by Iranian religious institutions does not inhabit the same theological world as a Sunni Muslim in rural Senegal.

A Turkish urban secular-leaning Muslim and a conservative Saudi Muslim may share basic Muslim identity while differing enormously in practice and social expectation.

Indonesian Islam includes large organizations and historical traditions whose political and religious cultures differ from many Middle Eastern settings.

Missionaries do not need to become professional Islamic scholars before forming relationships. They do need enough humility to stop treating two billion people as one theological personality.²

Lived Islam and Textbook Islam

Religious traditions operate through both formal teaching and lived practice.

A textbook can explain the Five Pillars.

²For broad academic Islamic history and internal diversity, see Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*; Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*; Jonathan A. C. Brown, works on Islamic theology and tradition; Robert W. Hefner for Southeast Asian Islam.

It cannot tell the missionary exactly what one family fears, how often someone prays, which religious authority is trusted, what role saints or Sufi traditions play, whether folk spiritual practices are significant, or how national identity interacts with religious affiliation.

Some Muslims are highly observant.

Some are culturally Muslim but rarely practice.

Some are intellectually committed to Islamic theology.

Some are secular in everyday life while retaining Muslim identity as family and heritage.

Some combine formal Islamic practice with local spiritual customs that a doctrinal summary would barely mention.

Mission begins with actual persons rather than textbook abstractions.

Arab Christian Presence. Missionary maps of Muslim-majority regions can unintentionally erase Christians already living there.

The Middle East contains Christian traditions far older than Islam and far older than modern Western mission. Coptic Christians in Egypt, Syriac and Assyrian traditions, Armenian Christians, Greek and Arab Orthodox churches, Maronites, Catholics, Protestants, and other communities form part of the region's social and theological history.

These churches are not museum fragments.

They have acted as theologians, clergy, educators, writers, institutional leaders, political actors, neighbors, and witnesses within their societies.

Contemporary foreign mission therefore enters a region where locally rooted Christians may possess linguistic, historical, ecclesial, and relational knowledge outsiders cannot reproduce quickly.

The first question should often be:

Which Christians are already present, what responsibilities do they carry, and where can outside partnership strengthen rather than displace them?

A low evangelical percentage is not evidence that Christianity itself is absent.

Egypt. Egypt illustrates the problem vividly.

It is a Muslim-majority country containing one of the world's most ancient and substantial Christian communities. The Coptic Orthodox Church has deep institutional, liturgical, monastic, and theological roots. Catholic and Protestant communities also exist.

Therefore an evangelical mission map emphasizing low evangelical presence can be strategically useful while becoming ecclesiologically misleading if readers infer that Egypt lacks Christian witness.

The missionary question must become more specific.

Which Muslim populations possess meaningful Christian relationships?
Where are historic Christian-Muslim social boundaries strong?
What role do local churches already play?
How do legal structures and communal tensions affect public witness?
These are better questions than whether Egypt is reached.

Lebanon and the Problem of National Percentages. Lebanon provides a contrasting Middle Eastern environment because Christians form a much larger share of the population and Christian communities occupy visible roles in public life.

Yet even in a country with strong Christian institutional presence, Muslim-Christian relations vary by locality, denomination, class, political affiliation, and historical memory.

Civil war, sectarian political structures, regional conflict, migration, and economic crisis have shaped relationships deeply.

Christian access cannot be measured by the existence of churches alone.

A church can be highly visible and socially confined to its own confessional community.

Relational access across religious boundaries must still be examined.

Iraq and Syria: Ancient Churches Under Pressure. Iraq and Syria contain some of Christianity's oldest continuous traditions. War, persecution, displacement, state collapse, economic crisis, and emigration have severely reduced or destabilized many Christian communities.

Missionary concern in such contexts must avoid a strange inversion in which foreign evangelicals become primarily interested in reaching Muslim majorities while ancient Christian minorities struggle to survive.

Christian solidarity belongs inside mission.

Supporting local Christian communities, preserving theological institutions, assisting displaced believers, and strengthening locally rooted witness can be missionary priorities without requiring outsiders to become the center.

The unfinished mission is not only about crossing into populations with little Christian presence. It also includes strengthening vulnerable churches capable of bearing long-term witness.

The Gulf: Many Christians, Little Citizen Access

Gulf states create one of the clearest examples of why national Christian population and local gospel access can diverge.

Millions of migrant workers live in Gulf societies, including large numbers of Christians from the Philippines, India, Africa, Europe, and elsewhere. In some countries expatriate Christian congregations worship openly within regulated conditions.

A simple religious census might therefore show substantial Christian presence.

Citizenship systems and legal restrictions can nevertheless make Christian witness among national Muslim populations highly constrained.

An expatriate church serving migrant workers does not automatically create relational access across nationality, class, language, and legal status.

The distinction between **Christian presence in the country** and **Christian access within the citizen population** becomes essential.

Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia represents a distinctive case because of its religious significance within Islam, legal framework, citizenship structure, and regulation of non-Muslim religious practice.

Missionary rhetoric often sensationalizes the country as uniquely closed.

A more careful approach distinguishes:

- public religious restrictions;
- private interactions;
- foreign workers;
- citizens;
- digital access;
- diaspora relationships outside the country.

Traditional foreign church-planting models may be exceptionally difficult.

That does not mean Christian information is wholly absent in an age of digital communication and migration.

Again, informational access and ecclesial access can diverge widely.

Iran: Persian and Shi'a Worlds. Iran should never be folded casually into an "Arab Muslim world."

It is predominantly Persian-speaking and historically shaped by Shi'a Islam, Persian civilization, the 1979 revolution, state religious institutions, modern education, and significant diaspora networks.

Reports of Christian conversion and underground churches have attracted evangelical attention. Exact scale is difficult to verify under restrictive conditions.

Digital media and Persian-language Christian broadcasting have likely increased informational access considerably compared with previous generations. Diaspora Christian communities create additional relational pathways.

Yet converts can face serious social and legal pressures, and public church life for Muslim-background believers remains constrained.

The Gospel Access Framework therefore describes Iran better than one binary label:

information may travel widely;
relationships may exist privately;
ecclesial access can remain difficult.

Turkey: Muslim Identity in a Historically Christian Landscape. Modern Turkey contains many of the physical landscapes of early Christianity: Ephesus, regions associated with Paul, Cappadocia, ancient councils, and the seven churches of Revelation.

The modern republic, however, is overwhelmingly Muslim by affiliation and deeply shaped by Turkish nationalism, Ottoman history, secular republicanism, and later religious-political change.

Small Armenian, Greek Orthodox, Syriac, Catholic, and Protestant communities remain.

This creates a missionary paradox:
Christian history is archaeologically everywhere.
Living Christian community is comparatively small.

A person can walk among Christian ruins while possessing little relational connection to practicing Christians.

Historical presence is not the same as present access.

Central Asian Muslim Identities

Central Asia adds Soviet history to Islamic identity.

Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tajik, and Turkmen populations passed through decades of officially atheist Soviet governance. After independence, Islamic identities revived within new national projects while governments often retained strong control over religious organization.

For many people, Muslim identity can function simultaneously as:

- family heritage;
- national culture;
- religious belief;
- distinction from Russian identity.

The level of observance varies greatly.

Missionaries therefore encounter people whose formal Muslim identity does not predict one relationship to Islamic practice.

State regulation can also constrain both Muslim movements and Christian minorities.

The missionary situation is political as well as theological.

Afghanistan: Religion, Ethnicity, and War. Afghanistan combines Islamic identity with ethnic, tribal, linguistic, political, and conflict histories that make reduction especially dangerous.

Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, and other communities possess distinct languages or identities. The Taliban's return to power created severe restrictions and deepened the vulnerability of religious minorities and people suspected of conversion.

Foreign missionary presence is correspondingly difficult.

But Afghans also live across large diaspora and refugee networks in Pakistan, Iran, Europe, North America, and elsewhere.

This creates several access environments for the same population.

A person in Kabul, a refugee in Germany, and a second-generation Afghan in Canada should not be treated as inhabiting one identical missionary context.

South Asian Muslim Worlds. South Asia contains several hundred million Muslims across Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and diaspora communities.

The religious environment intersects with:

- caste-like social stratification;
- family networks;
- language;
- sectarian traditions;
- shrine practices;
- political nationalism.

An Indian Muslim's social identity is shaped partly by being a religious minority within a Hindu-majority state. A Pakistani Muslim lives within an Islamic republic created through Partition. A Bangladeshi Muslim inhabits a Bengali national culture whose political history differs from Pakistan's.

Calling all three "South Asian Muslim" is useful only at a very high level.

Caste and Muslim Communities. Caste is frequently associated only with Hinduism.

South Asian social stratification crosses religious boundaries. Muslim and Christian communities can reproduce inherited status distinctions even when their formal theologies reject caste hierarchy.

This matters missionally because conversion does not automatically move a person into a socially equal Christian network.

If churches themselves remain caste-segregated, a Muslim convert may enter not simply “Christianity” but a particular social community with its own inherited boundaries.

Chapter 13 will explore these dynamics more fully.

Southeast Asian Islam

Indonesia offers one of the strongest arguments against using Middle Eastern Islam as the default template.

The country contains the world’s largest Muslim population and extraordinary religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. Large Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah developed distinct institutional histories. Javanese religious life, Acehnese Islam, urban reform movements, local traditions, and political Islam do not form one unified social world.

Indonesia also contains substantial Christian populations, including Christian-majority or mixed regions.

A national label therefore conceals major local differences in Christian access.

The missionary question must be provincial, ethnic, linguistic, and relational.

Malaysia. Malaysia combines Malay Muslim identity with substantial Chinese, Indian, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and other populations. Constitutional and legal structures connect Malay identity strongly with Islam, creating particular complexities around conversion and religious status.

Christian communities are substantial in East Malaysian states such as Sabah and Sarawak, while the peninsula presents different demographic patterns.

Again, “Malaysia is Muslim-majority” is true and insufficient.

African Muslim Worlds. Islam in Africa stretches across North Africa, the Sahel, West Africa, the Horn, and East African coastal regions.

West African Islamic history includes learned traditions, Sufi orders, trade networks, precolonial empires, reform movements, and modern political currents.

In countries such as Senegal, Muslim identity exists within a distinctive Sufi institutional environment.

Nigeria contains enormous Muslim and Christian populations, with regional and ethnic patterns that intersect with politics, land, security, and historical memory.

In the Horn of Africa, Somali Islam and Ethiopian Muslim communities inhabit very different national and religious relationships.

One global missionary strategy for “African Muslims” would therefore be nearly meaningless.

Religion and Conflict. Christian-Muslim relations are sometimes discussed through conflict.

This creates a major analytical danger.

Violence involving Muslim and Christian populations may indeed include religious motives. It can also involve:

- land;
- ethnicity;
- political representation;
- pastoralist-farmer conflict;
- criminal networks;
- state weakness.

Missionary rhetoric that labels every such conflict “Muslim persecution of Christians” or “Christian-Muslim violence” can conceal the actual causes and intensify hostility.

Accuracy is itself a form of peacemaking.

Conversion as Social Relocation

The most important missionary implication across many Muslim contexts is the social cost of conversion.

Evangelicals often speak of conversion as an individual’s change of belief and allegiance to Christ.

That theological core is real.

Socially, the change may also be interpreted as leaving:

- family;

- ancestors;
- nation;
- ethnic identity;
- communal loyalty.

Consequences can include family rupture, inheritance conflict, divorce, loss of employment, threats, or violence. The severity varies enormously by context.

Therefore a person may possess substantial informational access to Christianity while meaningful ecclesial access remains weak.

What community will receive the convert?

Can the person marry?

Can children be raised Christian?

Can faith be practiced openly?

Who provides pastoral care?

Missionary success cannot be measured by the first private profession of faith without considering the social life that follows.

The Danger of “Resistance” Language. Mission literature has often described Muslim populations as “resistant.”

The word can identify a real phenomenon: some populations show little visible response to Christian mission over long periods.

It can also shift responsibility subtly onto the population.

Perhaps the message has been poorly contextualized.

Perhaps Christianity is associated with hostile foreign power.

Perhaps the social cost is enormous.

Perhaps local churches are inaccessible.

Perhaps missionary turnover prevents trust.

Perhaps the population simply does not believe Christian claims.

“Resistance” names an outcome before explaining its causes.

The better question is what barriers shape access and response. Missionary descriptions of Muslim communities should therefore be checked against academic and locally rooted scholarship rather than treated as neutral descriptions simply because they appear in mission literature.³

Christian-Muslim Theological Difference. Respectful description must not dissolve actual disagreement.

Christianity and Islam make incompatible claims concerning central theological questions.

³Missionary descriptions of particular Muslim communities should be triangulated with academic Islamic studies and local scholarship rather than relying on mission advocacy material as the primary authority for Islamic belief.

Historic Christianity confesses the Trinity, the divine sonship and incarnation of Christ, his crucifixion and bodily resurrection, and salvation centered in him.

Mainstream Islamic traditions reject core elements of those claims, especially divine sonship and Trinitarian theology, while honoring Jesus as a prophet and Messiah in a different sense.

Missionary dialogue becomes dishonest if it hides the disagreement.

It becomes equally dishonest if it caricatures Islam in order to make Christian doctrine appear easier.

Faithful witness requires accurate disagreement.

Contextualization in Muslim Settings

Muslim-background Christian movements have generated some of missiology's most difficult contextualization debates.

How should Christian converts relate to inherited Muslim family and social identity?

Can particular Islamic terms for God be used Christianly?

How should converts understand mosque attendance, Ramadan, family ceremonies, and communal identity?

So-called insider-movement strategies have produced sharply different evangelical assessments.

The debate cannot be settled by one universal slogan.

The relevant tests include:

- biblical fidelity;
- clarity of allegiance to Christ;
- meaning of retained practices locally;
- baptism;
- formation of Christian community;
- long-term identity of the next generation.

Chapter 26 will return to the question with a wider contextualization framework.

Digital Mission. Digital media has transformed Christian informational access in some Muslim-majority settings.

A person can explore Christian Scripture, videos, apologetic material, or private conversation without first entering a visible church.

This can reduce one barrier dramatically.

It can also create security risks. Search histories, messaging metadata, or platform data may expose vulnerable users.

And digital information cannot by itself solve the social problem of Christian community.

Clicks are not churches.

Chapter 29 will develop the digital mission ladder from discovery toward relationship, discipleship, and church.

Diaspora

Migration creates another major pathway.

Muslims from North Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia, and elsewhere now live in European, North American, Asian, and other cities where Christian institutions may be more accessible.

But physical proximity does not guarantee relationship.

A Moroccan Muslim in Cologne may pass several churches every day without knowing one practicing Christian well.

A Syrian refugee may encounter Christian aid while remaining socially separate from Christian congregations.

Diaspora mission therefore requires hospitality, language, trust, and long-term relationships—not merely geographic opportunity.

No Single Muslim Strategy

The chapter's conclusion is deliberately anticlimactic.

There is no master strategy for reaching Muslims.

There are strategies suited to particular communities.

In one setting, long-term Arabic language acquisition may be fundamental.

In another, Persian digital media creates an important first point of access.

Elsewhere, historic local Christians are the strongest partners.

Among diaspora populations, hospitality and friendship may matter most.

Professional presence may create legitimate relationships where missionary visas do not exist.

Every pathway must eventually answer the same deeper questions:

Can Christian witness be understood?

Can relationships form?

Can disciples live Christian faith inside their social world?

Can locally rooted churches emerge and mature?

The many Muslim worlds therefore provide one of the clearest demonstrations of this book's central argument.

Religious label is not missionary reality.

South Asia: Religion, Caste, and Community

South Asia exposes the limits of religious maps more dramatically than almost any region.

A map colored according to majority religion may show India as Hindu, Pakistan and Bangladesh as Muslim, Nepal as Hindu-majority with a secular constitutional order, Sri Lanka as predominantly Buddhist, and smaller countries through their own dominant traditions.

The map is not false.

It is radically incomplete.

Religion in South Asia is embedded within social structures that shape who marries whom, who eats together, which language is used at home, who is trusted, where people live, how political identities form, and what conversion means. Caste and jati, tribe, family, region, language, ethnicity, and religious community can create boundaries that a national census cannot display.

This is why South Asia occupies so much space in evangelical unreached-people research. The issue is not merely that the region contains very large Hindu and Muslim populations. It is that Christian presence can exist nearby and still fail to move through social networks.

The Scale of the Region

South Asia contains roughly a quarter of humanity. India alone is the world's most populous country in current UN estimates. Pakistan and Bangladesh each contain a population larger than that of any individual

European country.¹ The region's demographic scale means that even minority religious communities can number in the tens or hundreds of millions.

Pew's global reconstruction estimated approximately **1.2 billion Hindus** worldwide in 2020, about **14.9 percent of humanity**, with the overwhelming majority living in India.²

India also contains one of the world's largest Muslim populations, millions of Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and adherents of tribal or other religious traditions.

Therefore the phrase "Hindu India" is as inadequate for missionary analysis as "Christian Europe" or "Muslim Africa."

Hinduism Is Not One Thing. Western religious classification encourages people to imagine religions as systems analogous to denominations: a founder, central text, creed, institution, and standard doctrine.

Hindu traditions do not fit that template neatly.

The category encompasses a vast range of philosophies, devotional movements, deities, temple traditions, local practices, reform movements, caste-linked customs, and regional cultures. Vaishnava, Shaiva, Shakta, Smarta, and other traditions contain further internal variety. A highly educated Advaita-oriented Hindu and a village devotee centered on a local deity may both identify as Hindu while inhabiting very different religious worlds.

Missionary descriptions have sometimes reduced this diversity to caricatures: "Hindus worship millions of gods," "Hindus believe everything is one," or "Hinduism is caste." Each statement isolates one feature and makes it universal.

Christian witness becomes more accurate when it asks what this person or community actually believes and practices.

¹United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2024*, the current UN population estimates and projections dataset used for country-level population comparisons in this edition.

²Pew Research Center, *How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020*, estimating approximately 1.2 billion Hindus, 14.9 percent of the global population, in 2020.

Religion and Family

Religion in South Asia frequently belongs to family identity before it becomes an individual's abstract worldview.

Festivals structure the year.

Marriage connects families.

Food practices communicate belonging.

Rituals surround birth and death.

Religious identity can be tied to ancestry and community reputation.

This means Christian conversion may be interpreted as more than adopting new theological beliefs. It can be heard as rejecting one's family, ancestors, caste, or nation.

Missionaries who treat conversion entirely as individual decision can therefore underestimate its social cost.

The theological call to personal faith remains.

The social consequences require pastoral realism.

Caste: More Than a Four-Part Diagram. Caste is commonly introduced through the classical four-varna scheme: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra, with Dalits historically excluded from the hierarchy. The model provides one layer of the traditional system but often explains little about everyday social organization.

The more concrete reality is **jati**—thousands of birth-based communities historically associated with marriage networks, occupation, social status, region, and ritual relationships.

Caste is not identical across India.

Urbanization, education, law, economic change, political mobilization, inter-caste marriage, and religious conversion have transformed many aspects of caste life.

It has not disappeared.

Caste Across Religions

One of the most important findings for mission is that caste is not confined to Hindus.

Pew's large 2019–2020 India survey found that Indians across Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, and Jain communities commonly identified with caste categories. The report concluded that caste remained a

dividing line across Indian society rather than a social fact belonging only to Hinduism.³

This means Christian conversion does not automatically erase caste. Churches can reproduce:

- caste-based marriage expectations;
- segregated cemeteries;
- social distance;
- leadership inequalities;
- separate congregations.

Christian theology may proclaim unity in Christ while Christian social practice lags behind.

That gap has direct missionary consequences.

When a Church Is Near but Not Accessible. Imagine a town containing a long-established Christian congregation associated historically with one caste or tribal community. A second social group lives nearby but has little history of intermarriage, shared meals, or trusted relationships with the church's members.

At a national level, Christianity is present.

At a geographic level, a church is near.

At a relational level, the gospel may remain far away.

This is the kind of situation people-group missiology is designed to notice.

It also demonstrates why an ethnic label alone can be insufficient. The barrier may be caste, religion, language, or social reputation rather than ethnicity in the conventional sense.

Segregated Social Worlds. Pew's India survey offers empirical support for the importance of these boundaries. Indians across major religious communities overwhelmingly express support for religious tolerance, yet social networks remain strongly segregated. Many people say their close friends belong mostly or entirely to their own religion. Substantial minorities are unwilling to accept members of some other religious groups as neighbors. Marriage across religious lines receives very low support in many communities.⁴

³Pew Research Center, *Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation* (June 29, 2021). The survey included nearly 30,000 face-to-face interviews and found caste identification across Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains.

⁴*Ibid.*, chapters on religious segregation, friendship, neighborhood preference, marriage, and caste.

The apparent contradiction—tolerance alongside separation—is missionary significant.

People can live peacefully beside one another without sharing the relational networks through which religious ideas and trust travel.

Therefore social harmony should not be equated with gospel access.

Christians and Social Distance. Indian Christianity itself is diverse.

Kerala contains ancient Saint Thomas Christian communities including Syro-Malabar Catholic, Syro-Malankara Catholic, Malankara Orthodox Syrian, Jacobite Syrian, Mar Thoma, and other traditions, alongside Latin Catholics, Protestants, Pentecostals, and independent churches.

Northeastern states such as Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya contain large Christian populations shaped by very different mission histories and ethnic identities.

Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Odisha, Jharkhand, Punjab, Goa, and other regions contain distinct Christian histories.

There is no single Indian Christian community from which the rest of India can straightforwardly be evangelized.

Indian churches can themselves encounter deep cross-cultural distance within India.

Dalit Christianity

Dalit conversion to Christianity has often been interpreted through debates over liberation, social mobility, caste, and religious identity.

Some Dalits have found in Christian theology a powerful affirmation of dignity and equality before God.

Conversion has not necessarily removed caste discrimination, including within Christian institutions.

This creates a painful missionary contradiction: Christianity can preach liberation from caste hierarchy while churches reproduce social structures that tell Dalit Christians they remain inferior.

Missionary credibility therefore depends partly on whether Christian communities embody the social implications of the gospel they proclaim.

Tribal and Adivasi Communities. India's Adivasi and Scheduled Tribe populations add another layer.

Many communities possess languages, cultural traditions, and religious practices distinct from dominant Hindu social worlds. Christian movements have become substantial among some tribal populations, especially in the Northeast and parts of eastern and central India.

Political debates sometimes classify tribal religious identity in ways local communities contest. Christian growth among tribal peoples can become entangled with nationalism, accusations of foreign influence, and disputes over culture.

Mission therefore needs careful historical and anthropological knowledge rather than assuming every tribal community is simply “Hindu” or “animist.”

Muslim India

India’s Muslim population is itself internally diverse by language, region, sect, class, caste-like social group, and historical experience.

Partition in 1947 profoundly reshaped Hindu-Muslim relations. Yet the vast majority of South Asian Muslims did not move into Pakistan. India remained home to one of the world’s largest Muslim populations.

Pew’s India survey found that Indian Muslims overwhelmingly expressed pride in Indian identity while also showing strong preferences for religiously bounded family and social life.⁵

Mission among Indian Muslims therefore involves both religious difference and minority-community dynamics within a Hindu-majority political environment.

A Christian worker who treats Muslim identity only as theology misses much of the social meaning.

Sikh Contexts. Sikhism emerged in Punjab and remains strongly associated with Punjabi history and identity, though Sikh communities now exist globally through diaspora.

India’s Sikh population is numerically small relative to Hindus and Muslims but socially and politically significant. Sikh history includes its own experiences of empire, religious conflict, migration, and minority identity.

Christian mission among Sikhs therefore cannot simply import approaches developed for Hindu or Muslim contexts.

One religious label is not interchangeable with another because each sits inside a different social history.

Buddhism and Dalit Conversion. Indian Buddhism also differs from dominant Buddhist traditions elsewhere in Asia.

The twentieth-century conversion movement associated with B. R. Ambedkar brought large numbers of Dalits into a form of Buddhism

⁵Ibid., findings on Muslim national identity, social segregation, and communal relations.

explicitly connected to rejection of caste oppression. Pew's survey found a very high proportion of Indian Buddhists identifying as Dalit.

This means "Buddhist mission" in India occurs within a different social world from Buddhist contexts in Thailand, Japan, or Sri Lanka.

Religion is inseparable from the history through which people came to identify with it.

Language. India's linguistic diversity is enormous.

The constitution recognizes multiple scheduled languages; many more languages and varieties are spoken. Hindi is widely spoken but not universally accepted or used. English has major institutional importance but is not the language of intimate life for most Indians.

A person may use:

- one language at home;
- another in school;
- another in commerce;
- English online.

Which language should carry discipleship?

The answer cannot be determined simply by asking which language the person technically understands.

Mother-tongue ministry matters most where emotional, theological, and communal meaning travels differently through the local language.

Chapter 16 will examine this globally.

Literacy and Oral Communication. South Asia also contains communities with very different literacy profiles.

Written Bible distribution may work well among educated urban populations.

Oral storytelling, audio Scripture, song, drama, and communal discussion may be more effective elsewhere.

A translation strategy should therefore not assume that publication equals use.

Scripture access is communicative rather than merely textual.

Urbanization Changes Caste Without Erasing It

India's growing cities bring populations into new proximity.

People from different regions, religions, and castes work together in universities, companies, transport systems, hospitals, and apartment complexes.

This can weaken older boundaries.

It can also reproduce them in new forms. Marriage networks remain caste-conscious. Residential patterns can remain religiously segregated. Professional friendship does not automatically create family-level social integration.

Urban mission should therefore neither assume caste has disappeared nor imagine cities function exactly like villages.

The relevant social barriers need to be researched rather than inherited from an old ethnographic map.

Conversion Laws. Several Indian states regulate religious conversion through laws commonly described as freedom-of-religion or anti-conversion statutes. The wording and enforcement vary by state and over time, often focusing on conversion through force, fraud, inducement, or “allurement.”

Because legal provisions can change, any final publication naming a specific statute requires current law-level verification. The broader missionary implication is stable: conversion can be politically contested and legally scrutinized.

Missionaries should therefore resist sensational generalization.

India does not have one uniform conversion-law regime.

At the same time, legal uncertainty can produce real fear among religious minorities and evangelists.

Nationalism and Christian Identity

Hindu nationalism has become an increasingly important political force in India. Its relationship to the Hindu religion, the Indian state, and minority communities varies across movements and actors.

Some nationalist rhetoric portrays Christianity and Islam as foreign religions in contrast to traditions seen as indigenous to India. This creates a missionary challenge with deep historical roots because Christianity is simultaneously:

- ancient in India;
- globally associated with Western mission;
- represented by local Indian churches;
- sometimes funded internationally.

Foreign missionary behavior can therefore reinforce or challenge the claim that Christianity is alien.

Locally rooted Christian leadership becomes politically and culturally significant as well as ecclesiologicaly desirable.

The Census Problem. Reliable demographic discussion of India faces an unusual timing problem.

The most recent **completed nationwide census remains the 2011 Census**. The census originally expected around 2021 was delayed. Census 2027 is now actively underway.

By August 12, 2026, the Government of India reported that the first houselisting phase had been completed in **31 states and union territories**, with remaining areas expected to complete the phase shortly thereafter. Main population enumeration is scheduled primarily for February 2027, with different timing in designated snow-bound areas.⁶

Therefore detailed official national religion figures remain based on 2011 at this book's data freeze.

This matters because missionary literature frequently presents old census percentages without the observation year.

A 2011 official figure is not a 2026 census fact.

Census and Conversion. Religious census categories also contain interpretive complexities.

Legal benefits associated with Scheduled Caste status, contested classification of tribal religions, self-identification, and social pressure can affect how some populations relate to official categories. Missionary estimates sometimes attempt to account for people who privately identify as Christian while remaining officially registered under another religion.

Such claims should be treated cautiously.

Hidden-Christian estimates are especially vulnerable to confirmation bias because evidence is difficult to verify.

The safer approach is to distinguish:

- official census identity;
- survey identity;
- church membership estimates;
- missionary claims.

Each measures a different thing.

⁶Government of India, Press Information Bureau, census progress update, August 12, 2026; Ministry of Home Affairs documentation concerning Census 2027. As of August 2026, 2011 remained India's latest completed nationwide census.

Pakistan. Pakistan demonstrates another interaction between religion, nation, and minority status.

The state was formed through Partition as a homeland for South Asian Muslims, though its political and religious identity has developed through subsequent constitutional and military history. Christians form a minority and include communities with their own caste and socioeconomic histories.

Blasphemy law controversies, sectarian conflict, social discrimination, and security concerns can shape Christian life and evangelistic freedom.

A missionary approach imported from Hindu-majority India would therefore misunderstand the environment even where languages and some cultural patterns overlap.

Bangladesh. Bangladesh emerged through the linguistic and political struggle that separated East Pakistan from West Pakistan in 1971. Bengali language and national identity therefore play roles not reducible to religion alone.

The country is Muslim-majority with Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, and other minorities. Dense population, rural networks, migration, and economic change produce a missionary environment distinct from Pakistan despite shared Muslim majority.

Again, national history matters.

Nepal and Sri Lanka. Nepal's transition from Hindu monarchy toward a secular republic changed the formal political context for religious minorities and conversion while Hindu cultural influence remains strong.

Sri Lanka contains a Buddhist majority, Hindu Tamil populations, Muslims, and substantial Christian communities shaped by Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial histories as well as local traditions. Decades of civil war profoundly shaped ethnic relations between Sinhalese and Tamil populations.

A South Asia chapter that speaks only of Hinduism and caste would therefore miss major regional diversity.

Social Belonging After Conversion

Across these contexts, one missionary question repeatedly returns:

What community receives the convert?

If becoming Christian requires leaving one's whole social world and entering a church culturally dominated by another caste, ethnicity, or language, Christian faith can become associated with social extraction.

Some separation may be unavoidable. The gospel can create conflict with family expectations. Christian ethics can challenge inherited practices.

The church should not add unnecessary alienation.

This is why contextualization and locally rooted churches matter so much.

The objective is not to make conversion costless.

It is to ensure that the cost comes from allegiance to Christ rather than avoidable foreign social forms.

Caste and Church Planting Strategy. People-group missiology has sometimes responded to caste by favoring homogeneous churches, reasoning that people convert more readily without crossing major social barriers.

The strategy can produce rapid local access.

It also creates an ecclesiological tension.

If the church permanently reproduces caste segregation because crossing boundaries would slow growth, has missionary strategy reinforced the very hierarchy the gospel should challenge?

The answer cannot be simplistic.

Forcing immediate social integration without understanding local dynamics can endanger new believers and produce artificial churches.

Accepting permanent caste exclusion contradicts Christian teaching on unity and dignity.

Mission may need to distinguish between **initial social accessibility** and **long-term ecclesial reconciliation**.

Growth and faithfulness do not always move at the same speed.⁷

Christianity as Indian

Finally, Indian Christianity itself must be permitted to appear as Indian.

The presence of ancient churches, Indian theologians, pastors, missionaries, Bible translators, monastic traditions, reformers, evangelists, and institutions makes it historically wrong to speak as though Christianity belongs naturally to Europe and arrives externally in India.

Foreign missions remain part of the story.

They do not own it.

This has a practical implication.

⁷For caste and Christianity, see Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*; Rowena Robinson, scholarship on Indian Christianity; Chad M. Bauman on conversion and anti-Christian conflict; Chandra Mallampalli on South Asian Christian history.

The future of Christian witness in South Asia will depend less on permanent foreign missionary expansion than on the strength, integrity, cross-cultural capacity, theological maturity, and missionary imagination of South Asian churches themselves.

The outsider may still contribute greatly.

The outsider should increasingly contribute toward that local agency.

Beyond South Asia

South Asia demonstrates how little a religious label can tell us about lived access.

The next chapter widens the problem.

In East Asian and other religious environments, even the affiliation label itself can become misleading. People who report “no religion” may practice ancestor rites, believe in unseen beings, visit temples, or inhabit moral worlds shaped by Buddhism, Confucian traditions, popular religion, and family ritual.

To map the unfinished mission accurately, we need to move beyond the checkbox.

Beyond the Religious Label

A person selects **no religion** on a survey.

What have we learned?

Perhaps the person is an atheist who rejects belief in any spiritual reality.

Perhaps she is agnostic.

Perhaps he is indifferent to organized religion.

Perhaps she visits temples, makes offerings to ancestors, believes certain places contain spiritual presence, consults diviners during crisis, and considers all of these practices cultural rather than religious.

The label is data.

It is not the whole religious world.

This chapter examines one of the hardest problems in global mission research: formal religious affiliation and lived religion do not always line up. Buddhism, Chinese popular religion, Shinto, ancestor practice, Indigenous traditions, and unaffiliated identities can overlap in ways that Western-style survey categories describe only imperfectly.

Mission therefore needs more than a religious census.

It needs to understand how people actually inhabit meaning.

The Modern Category of “Religion”

The English word *religion* can imply a bounded institution with a name, doctrines, recognized leaders, and exclusive membership.

That model fits some traditions and contexts better than others.

Pew’s 2024 study of religion and spirituality in East Asian societies explicitly notes that common translations of “religion” in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean were historically modern imports and can be heard as re-

ferring particularly to organized, hierarchical religious systems. Practices connected to ancestors, temples, spirits, or family custom may therefore be experienced as something other than “religion” even when outside researchers classify them as religious.¹

This is not a semantic curiosity.

It changes how missionary statistics should be interpreted.

If half a society says “no religion,” that does not mean half the society has adopted philosophical naturalism.

Pew’s East Asia Findings. Pew surveyed more than 10,000 adults across Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and neighboring Vietnam in 2023. Large shares reported no religious affiliation, ranging from 27 percent in Taiwan to 61 percent in Hong Kong.

Yet spiritual beliefs and ritual practices remained widespread.

A majority in all five surveyed societies said they believe in God or unseen beings. At least four in ten religiously unaffiliated adults in each place expressed such belief. Ancestor practices were widespread among Buddhists and the unaffiliated alike. In Japan, 70 percent of adults reported offering food, water, or drink to honor ancestors during the prior year; in Vietnam the figure reached 86 percent.²

The missionary conclusion should not be:

East Asians are secretly religious.

It should be:

affiliation alone underdescribes the religious and spiritual environment.

Buddhism: One Label, Many Traditions

Pew estimates that about **324 million people** identified as Buddhist worldwide in 2020, roughly **4.1 percent of humanity**. Buddhism was the only major religious category in Pew’s study to decline in absolute number from 2010 to 2020.³

Even this apparently straightforward category contains enormous diversity.

¹Pew Research Center, *Religion and Spirituality in East Asian Societies* (June 17, 2024), based on surveys of 10,390 adults in Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam.

²*Ibid.*, overview and chapters on beliefs, practices, and ancestor veneration.

³Pew Research Center, *How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020*, Buddhist population estimates.

Theravada Buddhism has shaped societies such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos.

Mahayana traditions developed across China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and elsewhere.

Vajrayana traditions are particularly associated with Tibetan and Himalayan worlds.

Pure Land, Zen/Chan/Seon, Nichiren, and other movements contain distinct theological, ritual, and institutional forms.

A Buddhist monk in Thailand, a Japanese family conducting a Buddhist funeral, and a Tibetan practitioner do not inhabit one identical religious system.

Missionary strategy that speaks of “reaching Buddhists” therefore begins at a level too broad for actual relationship.

Formal Buddhism and Cultural Buddhism. Japan illustrates the distinction between institutional identification and religious practice.

Many people participate in Buddhist funerary traditions without understanding themselves as strongly religious. Shinto-related rituals, Buddhist temples, family customs, New Year observances, and secular social life can coexist without the person constructing a single exclusive religious identity.

This creates missionary communication problems.

A Christian evangelist may ask:

What religion are you?

The hearer may answer:

none.

The missionary then begins explaining Christianity as an alternative to atheism, while the person’s actual questions concern ancestors, family obligation, death, suffering, and ritual continuity.

The failure is not theological courage.

It is poor listening.

Ancestor Veneration. Ancestor practice is among the most important examples of lived religion that resists simple classification.

Pew's East Asia research found that at least half of religiously unaffiliated adults in the surveyed societies participated in some ancestor-veneration practices, as did large majorities of Buddhists. Practices included burning incense, leaving food or drinks, tending graves, and other forms of honoring the dead.⁴

The meaning varies.

For one family, the act may function primarily as remembrance and filial respect.

For another, ancestors are understood as continuing spiritual agents capable of blessing or harming descendants.

For another, the ritual is performed because refusing would dishonor living relatives regardless of personal belief.

A missionary who labels the physical act without understanding its meaning can make two opposite errors.

Error one: automatic condemnation

Every ancestor-related practice is assumed to be worship and therefore idolatrous.

Error two: automatic culturalization

Every ancestor-related practice is declared merely cultural and therefore spiritually neutral.

Both avoid the work of interpretation.

Contextualization requires the church to ask what the practice communicates in that community.

Vietnam: A Particularly Strong Example. Vietnam complicates easy Christian-versus-ancestor distinctions further.

Pew found very high rates of ancestor practices even among Vietnamese Christians. Eighty-six percent of Christians surveyed reported burning incense connected with ancestors and 81 percent reported offering flowers or lighting candles in honor of ancestors during the previous year.⁵

Those statistics do not tell us automatically whether the practices are theologically appropriate.

They demonstrate that Christian conversion does not simply remove people from inherited ritual worlds.

⁴Pew Research Center, "Ancestor Veneration, Funerals and Afterlife Beliefs," June 17, 2024.

⁵Ibid., findings for Christian respondents in Vietnam.

Churches must teach, discern, adapt, reject, reinterpret, or retain practices in ways that make Christian allegiance clear without turning Christianity into unnecessary cultural estrangement.

This is precisely the kind of question that must be answered primarily by mature Christians inside the culture rather than by outsiders applying a universal checklist.

Chinese Popular Religion

The term **Chinese popular religion** or **folk religion** refers to a wide and contested set of practices including temple worship, local deities, ancestor rites, festivals, spirit mediums, divination, and traditions influenced by Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist worlds.

The category itself should be handled cautiously because it can imply that “real” religion belongs to organized institutions while everyday popular practice is secondary.

For many people, these practices address life’s most immediate questions:

Will my family prosper?

Why is someone ill?

Is this date auspicious?

What obligation do I owe my ancestors?

How should we respond to death?

What unseen forces shape this place?

Christian witness that answers only abstract doctrinal questions may therefore remain disconnected from the spiritual questions people actually ask.

Shinto and Japanese Identity. Shinto presents another classification problem.

It includes shrines, festivals, ritual purity, kami traditions, imperial and national histories, local communal practices, and modern institutional forms. Many Japanese people participate in shrine practices without adopting Shinto as an exclusive religious identity.

Christian mission should therefore not imagine that conversion requires a person first to identify consciously as “Shinto” and then exchange one system for another.

The social meaning of particular practices has to be understood one by one.

Korea: Christian Visibility and Religious Fluidity

South Korea contains substantial Protestant and Catholic Christian populations, Buddhist traditions, new religious movements, and a very large unaffiliated population.

Pew's 2024 East Asia survey found extraordinarily high levels of religious switching in South Korea: 53 percent of adults reported a current religious identity different from the one in which they were raised.⁶

This makes Korea one of the strongest examples of why religious identity should not be treated as static inheritance.

The country simultaneously sends thousands of Protestant missionaries and contains large numbers of people who have left Christian affiliation or were never Christian.

Missionary direction is not permanent.

Buddhism and Ethnic Nationalism. In several societies, Buddhist identity intersects strongly with national or ethnic identity.

Sri Lankan Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, Myanmar Buddhist nationalism, and Tibetan religious-cultural identity represent very different political histories. In such contexts Christian conversion can be interpreted not merely as religious change but as cultural or political betrayal.

This parallels some Muslim and Hindu contexts discussed earlier.

The missionary challenge therefore concerns social belonging as much as doctrine.

Religious freedom in law does not automatically eliminate communal cost.

Folk Religion and the Language of "Fear". Some missionary frameworks have described societies through "fear/power" worldviews, suggesting that people shaped by folk religions are primarily concerned with spiritual power and protection.

The framework can alert Western missionaries to dimensions of spiritual experience their own cultures minimize.

It becomes reductionist when entire continents are assigned one dominant worldview.

People concerned with spirits also experience guilt, honor, shame, love, moral obligation, intellectual doubt, and material need.

A more careful anthropological approach asks which concerns are prominent in this setting rather than assigning the population to one worldview box.

⁶Pew Research Center, *Religion and Spirituality in East Asian Societies*, religious-switching findings.

Chapter 20 will examine this cultural-distance problem more directly.

Indigenous Religious Worlds

The category **Indigenous religion** covers an extraordinary range of traditions across the Americas, Africa, Asia, Oceania, and Arctic regions.

They should never be treated as one world religion.

Many are deeply connected to:

- land;
- ancestry;
- oral narrative;
- sacred places;
- communal identity;
- ritual specialists.

Modern missionary history contains cases in which conversion became associated with the destruction of language, dress, art, governance, or social practices that were not intrinsically incompatible with Christian faith.

The resulting memory can become a contemporary access barrier.

A community may hear Christianity not as a religious claim about Christ but as a threat to peoplehood.

The missionary must therefore know the history of prior mission as well as the current theology of the community.

Mission and Cultural Survival. Christianity's translation principle can work in the opposite direction.

Missionaries and local Christians have sometimes contributed to the preservation of minority languages through literacy, translation, dictionaries, and written literature. Local Christian movements can appropriate Christian faith while defending cultural identity against dominant populations.

The relationship between mission and Indigenous culture is therefore not one universal story of destruction or preservation.

It is empirical and historical.

The key ethical principle remains:

conversion to Christ does not require conversion to the missionary's ethnicity.

The Religiously Unaffiliated. Globally, Pew estimated approximately **1.9 billion religiously unaffiliated people** in 2020, about **24.2 percent of humanity**.⁷

This category includes:

- atheists;
- agnostics;
- people who say “nothing in particular”;
- people who reject organized religion while retaining spiritual beliefs;
- people whose traditional practices do not fit their society’s formal category of religion.

Therefore *unaffiliated* should never be used as a synonym for *atheist*.

The missionary approaches appropriate to a philosophically naturalist university student and an unaffiliated Taiwanese adult who believes in spirits and practices ancestor rites may be very different.

The checkbox is only the beginning.

The Problem of Measuring Belief. Survey researchers necessarily simplify.

They ask questions capable of being answered across thousands of people.

Missionaries should not criticize that simplification while making even simpler assumptions themselves.

Instead, quantitative data can identify patterns and qualitative listening can interpret them.

A useful missionary research process therefore moves through several layers:

1. population affiliation;
2. beliefs;
3. practices;
4. social obligations;
5. trusted institutions;
6. crisis behavior;
7. personal narratives.

The deeper layers cannot all be mapped globally.

Local churches and field researchers become essential.

⁷Pew Research Center, *How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020*, unaffiliated population estimates.

Questions Better Than Labels

Instead of beginning only with:

What religion are you?

missionaries can learn to ask:

What happens when someone dies?

How does your family remember ancestors?

Where do people go when seriously ill?

What kind of spiritual danger do people fear?

Which festivals matter most?

What makes a person morally good?

What happens after death?

Which religious institutions are trusted?

What do younger people think about the traditions of their parents?

These questions reveal lived religion without requiring people to fit one imported conceptual box.

Christian Contextualization Begins With Description. A recurring temptation in mission is to move immediately from observation to judgment.

Practice identified → theological verdict issued.

Faithful contextualization requires an intermediate step: description.

What is actually happening?

What does the community think it means?

Do different generations interpret the same practice differently?

Can the practice change meaning within Christian use?

Only then can Scripture and Christian theology evaluate it responsibly.

This is why anthropology matters for mission. It does not replace biblical judgment. It helps ensure that Christians judge the real practice rather than a misunderstanding of it.

Beyond the Religious Label

The chapter's title therefore describes a methodological discipline.

Formal affiliation remains useful.

It tells us something about identity and institutions.

It does not reveal the whole spiritual world.

Missionaries who map populations only through religion labels can miss the questions people actually inhabit.

The correction leads naturally toward the next frontier.

What happens when Christian history and information are abundant, but formal Christian identification itself is declining? The secular and post-Christian world is nearly the inverse problem of the one examined here: religion may be highly visible in cultural memory while losing plausibility as a living identity.

The Secular and Post-Christian Frontier

Some of the world's most Christian-looking landscapes are also sites of profound Christian decline.

Cathedrals dominate city centers. Christian holidays structure calendars. Biblical phrases survive in language. Churches helped shape universities, welfare systems, art, music, law, and national memory. A person can live surrounded by Christian inheritance and remain personally distant from Christian faith.

This is the **post-Christian frontier**.

It differs from the classic unreached-peoples map because access may be high even where Christian commitment is low. Bibles are available. Churches exist. Christian history is visible. The problem is not primarily whether the gospel has ever entered the society.

The problem may be whether Christianity remains credible, trusted, understood, or socially plausible.

Europe and the End of Christendom

Europe remains the region most commonly associated with post-Christian change.

Pew estimates that Europe's Christian population declined to roughly **505 million in 2020**, a decrease of about 9 percent from 2010. Christians still represented about two-thirds of the regional population, but their share declined substantially during the decade.¹

¹Pew Research Center, "Christian Population Change," June 9, 2025: Europe contained an estimated 505 million Christians in 2020, down about 9 percent from 2010.

Those numbers do not mean Europe has become non-Christian in one uniform sense.

Roman Catholicism remains institutionally important in countries such as Poland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Croatia, Austria, and elsewhere, though levels of practice vary.

Orthodox Christianity remains deeply associated with national and cultural identity in much of Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

Protestant state-church traditions remain institutionally visible in northern Europe even where regular attendance is low.

Evangelical, Pentecostal, immigrant, independent, and free churches operate across the continent.

The secularization story therefore differs dramatically between Sweden, Poland, France, Romania, Germany, and Portugal.

One “secular Europe” category is almost as blunt as one “Muslim world.”

Secularization Is Several Processes. The word **secularization** can refer to different phenomena.

Declining affiliation

Fewer people identify as Christian.

Declining practice

People may retain Christian identity while attending worship less often.

Declining belief

Traditional doctrines become less widely accepted.

Declining institutional authority

Churches exercise less influence over public morality, education, law, or political life.

Religious privatization

Faith continues but becomes increasingly detached from public institutions.

Religious switching

People raised Christian identify differently as adults.

These processes interact but do not move at the same rate.

A society can remain culturally Christian while institutional practice collapses.

Another can retain church attendance among a minority while public Christian authority declines.

Missionary diagnosis therefore needs more precision than saying “Europe is secular.”

Religious Switching

Pew’s recent international research defines religious switching as a difference between the religion in which adults say they were raised and the religion they currently identify with. Across many of the countries studied, Christianity experiences substantial net losses through switching, usually toward religious nonaffiliation.²

This is especially important because it changes the missionary question.

The person who has never seriously encountered Christianity and the person who was baptized, attended Christian education, became disillusioned, and left church do not begin in the same place.

The second person may know Christian vocabulary very well.

The barrier may be trust rather than information.

Mission to post-Christian societies therefore often includes listening to why people left.

Nominal Christianity. Christian identity can remain strong after Christian practice weakens.

Someone may identify as Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, or simply Christian because of:

- family heritage;
- baptism;
- nationality;
- holiday practice;
- moral values;
- community identity.

²Pew Research Center, *Around the World, Many People Are Leaving Their Childhood Religions*, especially “Religious Switching Into and Out of Christianity” (March 26, 2025).

Evangelical missionary rhetoric sometimes treats such people as essentially non-Christian and therefore no different from populations with no Christian background.

That can be theologically and sociologically crude.

A nominal Christian may possess substantial Christian knowledge and institutional access even if personal faith is weak or absent. Historic churches may preserve Scripture, sacraments, theological tradition, and pastoral life even where participation is low.

The missionary challenge is therefore renewal, evangelism, catechesis, or re-discipleship within an existing Christian environment—not pioneer entry into a blank religious space.

High Access, Low Response. The Gospel Access Framework helps clarify the distinction.

A secular European may possess:

very high informational access — Christianity is easy to research;

very high linguistic access — Scripture and theological material exist in the dominant language;

moderate to high relational access — Christians are easy to meet in principle, though practicing Christians may be less common in some networks;

high geographic ecclesial access — church buildings and congregations exist, though cultural or generational fit may be weak.

The central challenge can therefore be **plausibility** rather than availability.

Does Christianity appear intellectually credible?

Does it appear morally trustworthy?

Does church life seem capable of answering the person's deepest questions?

Does anyone the person respects embody Christian faith attractively?

No missionary statistic can answer these questions globally.

Institutional Scandal and Credibility

Post-Christian mission cannot ignore the failures of churches.

Sexual abuse scandals, institutional cover-ups, financial corruption, political manipulation, and hypocrisy have damaged Christian credibility in many societies.

The missionary temptation is to treat these as public-relations obstacles external to the gospel.

Often they are failures within the church that require repentance before apologetics.

A person who distrusts Christian institutions because leaders concealed abuse does not need a clever argument explaining why media coverage is unfair.

The church must tell the truth.

Mission and institutional repentance belong together because the witness is embodied by a community.

Political Christianity. Christianity can also become closely associated with political identity.

The phenomenon differs across countries. In some contexts, Christianity becomes associated with conservative nationalism. Elsewhere churches are associated with progressive politics. Historic state churches may appear linked with old establishment power. Minority evangelical churches may become associated with imported American culture.

The missionary problem is not that Christians must avoid political convictions.

It is that the gospel can become socially indistinguishable from one political tribe.

Then rejecting the tribe feels like rejecting Christianity, and entering the church feels like changing political identity as much as religious allegiance.

This is another form of unnecessary cultural distance.

France and *Laïcité*. France illustrates a particularly strong form of secular public culture shaped by the history of Catholic Church-state relations, republicanism, and *laïcité*. Religious symbols and institutions are interpreted through a political history different from the more church-friendly public culture of the United States.

Missionaries who import American assumptions about religion in public life can therefore misread French secularism as simple hostility to God.

A better approach begins with history.

What social problem is secularism trying to prevent?

Why are religious institutions distrusted?

Which forms of Christian presence are credible?

The answer requires contextual learning, not just apologetic confidence.

Germany

Germany presents another complex post-Christian environment.

Historic Protestant and Catholic churches remain institutionally significant through tax systems, charities, schools, theological faculties, hospitals, and public structures. At the same time, formal membership has declined, especially in former East Germany, where several generations experienced state socialism and unusually high religious nonaffiliation.

A church-planting strategy in Cologne therefore confronts a different environment from one in Leipzig.

Even within one country, post-Christianity has several histories.

Eastern Germany: Secularity Across Generations. The former German Democratic Republic is particularly important for theories of secularization because nonreligion became deeply normalized across generations. Many people are not angry former church members. They may simply inhabit families in which religion has been socially absent for decades.

This creates a missionary environment surprisingly different from both strongly Christian societies and highly religious non-Christian societies.

The evangelist cannot assume people possess even the Christian questions that older apologetics answer.

Biblical literacy may be weak.

Yet there is no rival religious system to study in the conventional sense.

Mission must learn how secular lives make meaning.

The Czech and Estonian Examples. Other European societies frequently cited for high nonaffiliation, such as Czechia and Estonia, likewise have distinctive histories involving empire, church-state relationships, nationalism, Communism, and institutional distrust.

The common outcome—low formal religious affiliation—can arise through different historical paths.

The same rule applied to Islam and South Asia therefore applies to secularization:

similar statistics do not guarantee similar causes.

The United Kingdom. Britain's Christian history remains highly visible, yet church affiliation and participation have undergone major change. The established Church of England continues to occupy formal public roles while Christian practice has become far less universal. Catholic, evangelical, Pentecostal, Black-majority, immigrant, and independent churches complicate any simple narrative of national decline.

London in particular illustrates the interaction between secularization and migration. It is simultaneously one of Europe's most religiously diverse and internationally connected cities.

The post-Christian city is not necessarily nonreligious.

It may contain intense religious plurality alongside secular institutions.

Immigration Changes Secular Europe

Migration means Europe's religious future cannot be extrapolated from secularization alone.

Muslim communities have grown through migration and demographic change. African, Asian, Eastern European, and Latin American Christians have established congregations. Orthodox communities expand through migration. New religious movements and Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and other communities contribute to pluralization.

Therefore Europe is not simply becoming less religious.

It is becoming differently religious while much of the historic majority population becomes less institutionally Christian.

Mission in Europe increasingly requires both:

- evangelism among post-Christian populations;
- cross-cultural engagement with religious minorities.

These tasks can occur in the same neighborhood.

North America. Post-Christian dynamics also appear in North America.

Pew's 2020 reconstruction estimated a sharp decline in Christian share in North America between 2010 and 2020, driven substantially by religious switching. The United States remains much more religiously active than many European societies, but the long-term direction of Christian affiliation has changed significantly.³

This matters for mission because the United States remains one of the world's largest missionary-sending and mission-financing environments.

A sending center can itself become a growing mission field.

Again, the old binary breaks down.

³Pew Research Center, *How the Global Religious Landscape Changed From 2010 to 2020*, regional findings for North America.

South Korea as a Post-Christian Warning

South Korea provides a non-Western example of similar complexity.

The country still contains major Protestant and Catholic populations and substantial missionary sending. Yet Pew's East Asian survey reports very high religious switching, and younger generations show weaker affiliation than older Christian-growth narratives might suggest.⁴

The implication is significant for newer sending movements.

Missionary strength is not permanent.

Churches that focus almost entirely overseas can neglect evangelistic and discipleship crises at home.

The solution is not to retreat from global mission.

It is to reject the idea that sending regions and receiving regions are fixed identities.

Japan: Low Christianity Without Post-Christendom. Japan helps distinguish post-Christianity from low Christian presence.

Christianity has existed in Japan for centuries, including the dramatic sixteenth-century Catholic mission, later persecution, hidden Christian communities, and modern Protestant and Catholic institutions. Yet Japan has never experienced national Christendom comparable to much of Europe.

Its low Christian percentage therefore arises from a different historical trajectory than France or Sweden.

The missionary challenge cannot simply be described as secularization after Christianity.

Religious practice, social conformity, ancestor obligations, Buddhism, Shinto-related customs, and modern secular life interact in distinctive ways.

Again, low Christian response does not have one universal cause.

What Does "Post-Christian" Actually Mean? The term should therefore be used carefully.

A post-Christian society is not simply one in which Christians form a minority.

It describes a social environment significantly shaped by Christianity in the past where Christian institutions, beliefs, or practices have lost their former cultural centrality.

The term works well for some European contexts.

⁴Pew Research Center, *Religion and Spirituality in East Asian Societies* (2024), findings on religious switching in South Korea.

It works less well for societies where Christianity never held comparable dominance.

Even within Europe, Christian history remains active enough that “post” should not imply Christianity has disappeared.

Apologetics and Plausibility

Post-Christian mission often places renewed emphasis on apologetics.

Intellectual objections matter:

Does God exist?

Why believe the resurrection?

How can Christianity make exclusive truth claims?

What about science or suffering?

But intellectual argument alone rarely explains religious change.

People also ask whether the church is trustworthy, whether Christianity belongs to a rejected social identity, whether Christian ethics seem good, and whether religious commitment fits modern life.

Missionaries need what Lesslie Newbigin called a missionary encounter with culture, not merely a collection of arguments detached from social imagination.⁵

Christian Community as Apologetic. In post-Christian societies, the local church can itself become part of the plausibility structure for belief.

A community practicing:

- hospitality;
- sexual integrity;
- generosity;
- reconciliation;
- intellectual seriousness;
- care for vulnerable people

makes Christian claims visible in a way arguments alone cannot.

Conversely, an unhealthy church can make Christianity less plausible even where the preaching is technically orthodox.

Mission therefore returns again to ecclesiology.

⁵Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Eerdmans, 1989); Grace Davie, José Casanova, Charles Taylor, and Callum G. Brown provide different major frameworks for understanding secularization and post-Christian change.

Digital Abundance and Spiritual Distance

Post-Christian societies possess enormous Christian informational access.

This can tempt churches into believing that everyone already knows the gospel.

Online abundance can produce the opposite effect: people encounter enormous quantities of fragmented religious content, caricature, scandal, debate, and algorithmically amplified controversy.

Information quantity is not understanding.

A person may have heard about Christianity constantly without ever encountering a coherent account of Christian belief within a trusted relationship.

Even high-access societies can therefore contain forms of informational confusion.

The Problem of Response Metrics. Post-Christian mission demonstrates why the church must distinguish faithfulness from numerical control.

A population may possess excellent gospel access and respond weakly.

Mission cannot solve this through increasingly manipulative techniques.

The church's responsibility is:

- faithful proclamation;
- credible life;
- patient discipleship;
- institutional repentance;
- contextual communication.

The response remains beyond missionary control.

This is one reason strategic priority should not be based simply on low Christian percentage. A 1 percent Christian population with extensive relational and informational access may represent a different pioneer need from a 1 percent population where no local church or Scripture access exists.

High Access Can Still Be Unfinished

The post-Christian frontier therefore broadens the book's definition of unfinished mission.

The church's universal responsibility includes societies where Christian access has become abundant but fragile, distrusted, or declining.

Yet strategic missionary priority may still belong especially to populations where access itself remains weak.

Those two truths can coexist.

Every person matters equally.

Every missionary situation is not identical.

The next chapter returns to one of the clearest measurable access barriers: language. Even in an age of instant translation technology, hundreds of language communities still lack Scripture translation work, and thousands have only partial access. The language frontier shows both how much Christian mission has accomplished and why availability alone never completes the task.

The Language and Scripture Frontier

A Bible translation is one of the clearest examples of a missionary task that can genuinely be finished.

Years of linguistic analysis, translation, checking, community testing, revision, typesetting, recording, and publication culminate in something that did not previously exist: Scripture available in a language community can understand more deeply.

This makes Bible translation one of Christianity's most measurable missionary achievements.

It also reveals why missionary completion is multidimensional.

A language can possess some Scripture while still lacking most of the Bible. A translation can exist in print while few people read it. A national language may have dozens of Bible editions while a minority population remains poorly served in its mother tongue. A written translation may not help an oral community as much as audio Scripture. A spoken-language Bible does not solve the access needs of a Deaf sign-language community.

The right question is therefore not simply:

Does this language have a Bible?

It is:

What kind of Scripture access does this community actually possess?

The August 2026 Translation Snapshot

Wycliffe Global Alliance's current dashboard, drawing on ProgressBible data and explicitly updated in **August 2026**, reports three headline figures:

- **4,167 languages have at least some Scripture;**
- **4,440 languages have translation work in progress;**
- **522 languages still need translation work to begin.**¹

These numbers are easy to misread because the categories overlap.

A language with some Scripture may also have work in progress toward a New Testament or full Bible. A language with work in progress may not yet have publicly available Scripture. Therefore the three totals should not be added together as though they represented separate populations.

The dashboard is a status system, not three boxes partitioning every language.

Extraordinary Progress. The historical progress is nevertheless remarkable.

Earlier generations of Bible translators faced thousands more languages with no translation activity. Advances in linguistics, international collaboration, locally led translation movements, digital publishing, oral translation methods, and computational tools have accelerated work substantially.

The current figure of 522 languages still needing work to begin represents a very different missionary landscape from the twentieth century.

Christians should be capable of celebrating this without declaring the linguistic task complete.

The achievement is real.

The remaining need is real.

Both can be stated together.

¹Wycliffe Global Alliance, global Scripture access dashboard, updated August 2026, accessed August 21, 2026: 4,167 languages with at least some Scripture, 4,440 with work in progress, and 522 needing work to begin.

What Counts as a Language?

Even the apparently concrete number of languages requires methodological caution.

The boundary between language and dialect is famously difficult.

Mutual intelligibility matters.

So do identity, politics, literature, geography, and community preference.

Two varieties may be linguistically close but socially experienced as distinct languages. Another pair may be linguistically quite different while speakers use one shared written standard.

Language vitality also changes. Younger generations may shift toward regional or national languages. Migration can create multilingual households. Education systems can reshape language use quickly.

Therefore translation need cannot be determined by language count alone.

A language may exist but no longer require a full new translation if the whole community has shifted comfortably into another language.

Another language with relatively few speakers may remain crucial to identity and comprehension.

Local community judgment matters.

Mother Tongue and Heart Language. Missionary literature often uses the phrase **heart language** to describe the language in which people feel and understand most deeply.

The intuition is valuable.

The phrase can become overly romantic if it assumes every person possesses one stable emotional language.

A migrant child may speak one language with grandparents, another with parents, another at school, and consume almost all media in English.

A professional may read complex ideas more easily in a national language while praying naturally in a mother tongue.

A multilingual church may need several language strategies simultaneously.

The underlying principle remains important:

technical comprehension is not always the same as deep communicative access.

Translation and Christian Theology

Bible translation is not merely linguistic substitution.

The translator must decide how to represent concepts such as:

- covenant;
- grace;
- righteousness;
- sacrifice;
- spirit;
- kingdom;
- priest;
- repentance.

No language maps perfectly onto another.

Some concepts require explanation rather than one-word equivalence.

Names, metaphors, kinship language, gendered grammar, social hierarchy, and religious vocabulary can all create difficult decisions.

The translator therefore performs theological work whether or not the person is formally called a theologian.

This is one reason locally rooted translators and theologians are so important. They know what the language communicates beyond dictionary definitions.

The Missionary and the Mother-Tongue Translator. Historically, foreign missionaries often played central roles in translation because they brought theological education, printing resources, or linguistic training.

The strongest translation projects nevertheless depend upon native speakers.

A foreigner can become extraordinarily fluent.

The foreigner does not own the language.

Mother-tongue speakers hear:

- awkwardness;
- unintended humor;
- social register;
- emotional resonance;
- ambiguity

that even skilled outsiders can miss.

Locally led translation therefore is not merely a decolonial preference. It is a quality requirement.

Translation as Transfer of Authority. The translation process also changes church power.

Before Scripture exists in a local language, the missionary who controls the source or prestige language may become a necessary interpreter.

After translation, local Christians can read and discuss the text directly.

They can question missionary interpretations.

They can preach without translating the missionary's sermon.

They can teach their children.

They can write theology.

Translation therefore has a decentralizing potential.

Lamin Sanneh's work on Christian translatability emphasizes precisely this missionary dynamic. Christianity repeatedly becomes vernacular, and the vernacularized faith can move beyond the missionary's control.²

Translation and Cultural Preservation. Missionary linguistic work has had a complicated historical relationship with minority cultures.

Some missionaries contributed to cultural suppression or treated minority languages as obstacles to modernization.

Others created the first written grammars, dictionaries, literacy materials, and translated literature in languages marginalized by dominant states.

A Bible translation can therefore become part of language preservation as well as religious mission.

This should not be romanticized. Creating an orthography can itself influence identity and privilege one dialect. Translation is never culturally neutral.

The ethical goal is partnership with the community rather than linguistic ownership by outsiders.

Scripture Portions, New Testaments, and Full Bibles

The phrase "has Scripture" covers several levels of access.

A language may possess:

- selected stories or portions;
- one Gospel;
- a New Testament;
- a complete Bible.

²Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed. (Orbis Books, 2009); Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*.

These provide different resources for church life.

The Gospels and New Testament offer central Christian proclamation and teaching.

The Old Testament provides creation, covenant, wisdom, prophets, historical narrative, worship, and the scriptural world in which the New Testament makes sense.

A church with a New Testament is not without Scripture.

A church without the Old Testament still lacks a major part of Christian biblical formation.

Missionary reporting should therefore resist binary headlines that make partial Scripture sound like no Scripture or, conversely, make one translated portion sound like full access.

Print Is Not Engagement. A translation can be technically excellent and socially unused.

Perhaps literacy is low.

Perhaps the orthography is unfamiliar.

Perhaps the community prefers another language for reading.

Perhaps distribution is poor.

Perhaps churches do not teach from the translation.

Perhaps the translation is associated with outsiders and never became locally owned.

This is why contemporary Bible-translation organizations increasingly emphasize **Scripture engagement** rather than publication alone.

The missionary task does not end when the file is exported.

The community must be able to use the text.

Orality

Many human communities transmit knowledge primarily through oral forms.

Story, song, memorization, performance, and communal recitation can be more culturally natural than private silent reading.

Even in highly literate societies, audio Bible use has grown dramatically because smartphones and streaming technologies make listening easy.

For predominantly oral communities, oral Bible translation can become a primary form rather than a secondary adaptation of a printed text.

This changes translation workflows. Oral drafts can be tested through listening. Story structure, memory, and performance become central.

Missionaries trained within print-dominant cultures therefore need to avoid equating literacy with theological maturity.

A highly literate church can be biblically shallow.

An oral community can possess deep Scripture memory.

Sign Languages. Deaf communities expose another major blind spot in national-language thinking.

Sign languages are full human languages with their own grammar and structure. They are not simply visual versions of the dominant spoken language.

A Deaf person may live in a country where the Bible has been available for centuries and still lack natural-language Scripture access.

This is perhaps one of the clearest examples of the difference between national Christian availability and actual linguistic access.

Translation strategy therefore needs to treat Deaf language communities as genuine linguistic worlds.

Literacy and Education. Literacy remains a major factor, but it should not be treated as static.

School expansion can increase literacy quickly.

Conflict can destroy education systems.

Minority-language speakers may be literate only in a dominant language.

Women and men can have different educational access.

Therefore one translation may need several forms:

- print;
- audio;
- video;
- oral story sets;
- digital editions.

The aim is comprehension and use rather than one prestige publication.

Scripture and Persecution

In restricted contexts, digital Scripture can reduce one access barrier while increasing another risk.

A printed Bible can be discovered physically.

A Bible app can be searched privately but may leave digital traces.

Cloud data, messaging history, device inspection, and surveillance can expose a reader.

Security therefore belongs inside Scripture-access strategy.
The question is not merely:

Can we deliver a Bible file?

It is:

Can a person use it safely?

Scripture Without Christian Relationships. Technology makes it increasingly possible for someone to encounter Scripture without meeting a Christian.

This can be spiritually significant. Many conversion testimonies involve private reading.

But the Bible itself points toward community.

A new reader eventually confronts questions requiring discussion, baptism, worship, pastoral care, and Christian friendship.

Therefore Scripture access is a foundational missionary dimension without being the whole missionary outcome.

The four-domain framework remains necessary.

Artificial Intelligence and Translation. Artificial intelligence is beginning to alter translation workflows.

Wycliffe has reported on Scripture Forge's AI-assisted drafting system, released in 2024, and described it as implemented or being prepared in **nearly five hundred projects** in its recent reporting.³

The figure should not be inflated into "AI is translating five hundred Bibles."

The technology is used to assist early drafting.

Human translators remain responsible for:

- linguistic naturalness;
- exegetical accuracy;
- theology;
- community testing;
- final approval.

AI is particularly limited in low-resource languages because the languages that might benefit most from computational support often possess the least digital training data.

³Wycliffe Global Alliance, "The Impact of AI on Bible Translation: Opportunities and Challenges" (2025, current in 2026 reporting), describing Scripture Forge AI-assisted drafting as implemented or in preparation in nearly 500 translation projects and stressing the necessity of human review and low-resource-language limitations.

This paradox prevents simplistic predictions that AI will soon finish Bible translation automatically.

AI and Data Ownership. AI translation also introduces a new question: Who owns the language data?

Audio recordings, translated corpora, dictionaries, oral narratives, and community materials can become valuable training resources.

A technologically powerful organization may host or process these resources far from the community that produced them.

Missionary ethics must therefore include:

- informed consent;
- privacy;
- local authority;
- data governance;
- security.

A language community should not become raw material for an AI system merely because an outside organization has technical capacity.

Chapter 29 will return to these controls.

The Remaining 522

The current figure of 522 languages needing work to begin deserves both urgency and caution.

It is not 522 identical projects.

Some languages may have few speakers.

Some communities are remote.

Some exist in conflict zones.

Some may be shifting rapidly toward another language.

Some may require oral rather than print-first translation.

Some may need local translators trained before meaningful work can begin.

The final hundreds can be disproportionately difficult.

This is common in large projects: the easiest tasks are not necessarily left until the end.

Translation Completion and Mission Completion. A complete Bible can be celebrated as a genuine finished task.

It does not make the people group spiritually finished.

Likewise, a language without a full Bible should not automatically be described as having no gospel access if churches, oral Scripture, national-language resources, or partial translations are already widely used.

The correct interpretation requires context.

This distinction protects translation ministries from two opposite errors: understating their extraordinary achievement; overstating what translation alone accomplishes.

Toward Scripture-Formed Churches

The missionary horizon is not simply a translated text.

It is churches and disciples living under Scripture.

Translation becomes most powerful when:

- local Christians read or hear it;
- preachers teach from it;
- families use it;
- songs and theology grow from it;
- believers carry it into new relationships.

The text becomes part of the community's Christian life.

This is why the language frontier connects directly to local church formation and local theology.

A Frontier That Is Shrinking and Changing

Bible translation is one of the strongest examples in this book of measurable missionary progress.

The number of languages with no work begun has fallen dramatically.

At the same time, the frontier is changing form.

The future questions increasingly concern:

- quality;
- engagement;
- oral access;
- sign languages;
- revision;
- local ownership;
- AI ethics.

This is what responsible mission looks like when a large part of an old task approaches completion: the question becomes more precise rather than disappearing.

Language is one moving boundary.

Human migration is another.

The next chapter examines what happens when entire missionary fields move into cities, across borders, and into the neighborhoods of churches that once imagined mission as something happening far away.

Cities, Migration, and the Moving Mission Field

The missionary map is moving.

Not metaphorically.

People themselves are moving.

International migration, internal migration, refugee displacement, education, labor markets, marriage, and urbanization continually rearrange the proximity of religious communities. A population that once seemed geographically distant may now live on the same street as a church that spent decades supporting missionaries overseas.

This movement creates extraordinary opportunities.

It also exposes a misconception at the heart of missionary geography: physical proximity is not the same as relational access.

304 Million International Migrants

The United Nations' *International Migrant Stock 2024* estimates that **304 million people** were international migrants in 2024, equivalent to about **3.7 percent of the global population**. The number had nearly doubled since 1990. Europe hosted approximately 94 million international migrants, Northern America 61 million, and Northern Africa and Western Asia 54 million.¹

The 3.7 percent share may look small beside the rhetoric of a “world on the move.”

¹United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *International Migrant Stock 2024: Key Facts and Figures* (2025): 304 million international migrants in 2024, 3.7 percent of world population; Europe hosted 94 million, Northern America 61 million, and Northern Africa and Western Asia 54 million.

In absolute terms, 304 million people is larger than the population of almost every country on earth.

And international migration is only one category of mobility.

Hundreds of millions more move internally from rural areas to cities, between regions, or through temporary labor systems without crossing international borders.

Missionary geography therefore cannot assume stable populations living permanently inside traditional homelands.

What Counts as a Migrant? UN migrant-stock data primarily classify international migrants through country of birth or, where necessary, citizenship. The category includes people whose experiences differ dramatically:

- permanent immigrants;
- temporary workers;
- international students;
- refugees;
- spouses;
- children who moved young;
- retirees;
- professionals.

The word *migrant* should therefore not become one missionary identity.

A Syrian refugee, Korean doctoral student, Filipino nurse, Nigerian entrepreneur, and retired British resident in Spain are all international migrants in statistical terms.

Their vulnerabilities, social networks, and religious relationships are completely different.

Mission to migrants requires the same contextual precision demanded everywhere else.

The Urban Transformation. Migration interacts with a larger process: urbanization.

The United Nations' *World Urbanization Prospects 2025* uses a harmonized Degree of Urbanization framework that distinguishes cities, towns and semi-dense areas, and rural areas. Under that framework, approximately **45 percent of humanity lived in cities, 36 percent in towns and semi-dense areas, and 19 percent in rural areas** in 2025.²

²United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Urbanization Prospects 2025*, using the harmonized Degree of Urbanization framework: approximately 45 percent of humanity in cities, 36 percent in towns and semi-dense areas, and 19 percent in rural areas in 2025.

This classification differs from older national urban definitions and should not be mixed casually with earlier urbanization percentages.

The missionary significance is obvious.

Most human beings now live either in cities or in settlements more densely connected than traditional rural mission maps suggest.

Urbanization concentrates difference.

The City as Missionary Intersection

A large city may contain within a few square kilometers:

- historic churches;
- secular professionals;
- international students;
- mosques;
- migrant congregations;
- Hindu temples;
- Buddhist centers;
- refugees;
- minority languages;
- expatriate professionals;
- low-income internal migrants.

The city therefore collapses physical distance while preserving social boundaries.

A Christian can ride the same train each morning as members of five religious communities and never enter any of their relational worlds.

Urban mission requires mapping networks, not merely neighborhoods.

The Neighborhood Fallacy. Churches often assume that people living nearby are naturally accessible.

Consider a congregation in a European city surrounded by Turkish-speaking Muslim families.

The church building is close.

The congregation may worship entirely in German, consist mostly of ethnic Germans, socialize through networks that rarely include Turkish families, and host programs whose cultural signals feel foreign to the surrounding community.

Geographic access is high.

Relational and cultural access may remain low.

This is why counting churches per capita cannot measure urban gospel access adequately.

Internal Migration. Missionary discussion often focuses on international migrants because national borders are visible.

Internal migration can reshape Christian access even more profoundly.

China's rapid urbanization moved enormous populations from rural regions into cities. India's internal migration links states and language communities. African megacities attract people from several ethnic and religious backgrounds. Latin American urbanization reshaped societies across the twentieth century.

Internal migrants may encounter Christianity differently in cities than in home communities.

Traditional village authority weakens.

New friendships emerge.

Workplaces mix populations.

At the same time, migrants may cluster by language or region and recreate strong social networks.

Urbanization therefore creates both permeability and segregation.

Diaspora Mission

Missiology commonly describes several relationships between diaspora and mission, reflecting a wider scholarly recognition that migration has become a major force in the making and remaking of global Christianity.³

Mission to diaspora

Churches serve and evangelize migrant populations.

Mission through diaspora

Christian migrants become witnesses within their new environments.

Mission beyond diaspora

Diaspora relationships create pathways toward wider populations or homelands.

The framework is useful if it does not turn migrants into instruments.

³Jehu J. Hanciles, *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity* (Eerdmans, 2021), for the historical and missiological significance of migration in global Christianity.

The first obligation of a Christian encountering a migrant neighbor is not to extract strategic value.

It is to love the neighbor.

Hospitality. Hospitality is among the simplest and most powerful forms of diaspora engagement.

Migrants frequently navigate:

- unfamiliar institutions;
- language difficulty;
- loneliness;
- housing;
- bureaucracy;
- cultural uncertainty.

Churches can help through:

- meals;
- friendship;
- practical support;
- language conversation;
- community.

These acts can create relational access Christian media cannot produce.

But hospitality becomes manipulative if assistance is implicitly conditional upon religious interest.

The migrant should remain welcome even after saying no to Christianity.

The integrity of the relationship is itself part of Christian witness.

Refugees

Refugees require particular ethical care because displacement creates acute vulnerability.

War, persecution, political repression, or state collapse may have cost people:

- homes;
- family members;
- documentation;
- livelihood;
- safety.

Christian organizations often provide essential humanitarian assistance.

The asymmetry of power is obvious.

A person dependent on food, accommodation, medical care, or legal support may feel pressure to please the provider even when no explicit coercion exists.

Missionary ethics therefore requires clear separation between humanitarian entitlement and religious response.

The refugee is not a missionary opportunity first.

The refugee is a neighbor in crisis.

Conversion in Refugee Contexts. This ethical caution does not mean refugees cannot genuinely become Christian.

Displacement often produces deep religious questioning. People encounter new communities. Existing identities can be reevaluated. Some Muslim refugees in Europe and elsewhere have joined Christian churches and been baptized.

The church should take such conversion seriously enough not to romanticize it.

Conversion can affect asylum claims, family relationships, and community safety. Churches need careful discipleship rather than counting baptisms as evidence of a refugee-revival narrative.

The new believer needs a church after the public story ends.

International Students. International students form another large mobile population with distinctive missionary significance.

Students often spend several formative years outside their home society. They may possess greater freedom from family expectations, encounter new religious ideas, and build friendships across cultures.

Churches can offer:

- hospitality;
- mentoring;
- conversation;
- Bible study;
- community.

International-student ministry has sometimes been justified strategically because students may later return as influential professionals.

That possibility is real.

It should not determine the student's value.

The student is worth knowing even if he never becomes a Christian, never returns home, or never enters a position of influence.

Labor Migration and the Gulf

The Gulf illustrates a different mobility system.

Millions of workers from South Asia, Southeast Asia, Africa, and elsewhere live in Gulf states under temporary labor arrangements. Christians among them form expatriate churches; Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others participate in the same labor markets.

This creates intense religious proximity alongside sharp citizenship and class hierarchies.

A Filipino Christian nurse may work beside Muslim colleagues from several countries.

An Indian Christian laborer may worship in an expatriate congregation while having almost no social connection with citizens.

The missionary opportunities are real.

So are labor vulnerabilities.

Churches should not celebrate global Christian mobility without also caring about exploitation, worker rights, loneliness, and family separation.

Filipino Migration and Christian Presence. Filipino migration provides one of the strongest examples of Christian presence moving through labor networks.

Catholic and evangelical Filipino communities exist across Asia, the Gulf, Europe, and North America. Seafarers live for long periods in international crews. Nurses and caregivers form close relationships with patients and coworkers. Domestic workers live inside households.

Some Christian migrants understand their work explicitly through vocation and witness.

Others do not.

The category **missionary** should therefore not be assigned automatically.

Christian presence becomes missionary when believers intentionally bear witness and participate in disciple-making across meaningful boundaries.

African Churches in Europe. African-led churches have become highly visible in several European cities.

Their existence complicates the story of European secularization. Christianity is declining in some historic populations while being renewed or reintroduced through migration.

The phenomenon raises difficult contextual questions.

A Nigerian-founded church in London may thrive among Nigerians.

Can it also reach secular British neighbors?

A Congolese congregation in Brussels may worship with extraordinary vitality.

Can its second generation remain Christian while becoming culturally Belgian?

Diaspora churches face their own contextualization task.

They can become missionary bridges or culturally enclosed enclaves.

Neither outcome should be assumed.

Reverse Mission Reconsidered

This is why “reverse mission” remains a limited concept.

It names the striking fact that Christians from former mission fields now establish churches in former sending countries.

But mission does not automatically occur because the direction has reversed.

A Ghanaian church in Amsterdam serving almost entirely Ghanaian believers may be a healthy diaspora church without being primarily a mission to Dutch society.

Mission requires boundary crossing, not merely changed latitude.

Diaspora and Homeland. Migrants also maintain relationships with home communities through:

- remittances;
- messaging;
- social media;
- travel;
- family networks.

A new Christian in diaspora can therefore carry Christian influence home long before permanent return.

This creates both opportunity and risk.

Religious change revealed through family messaging can create conflict.

Digital conversations can be monitored.

Missionaries should not assume diaspora converts can safely become bridges to their home communities.

The convert’s own judgment should carry substantial weight.

Second Generations. Diaspora changes over generations.

Children may speak the parents' language imperfectly.

Marriage patterns broaden.

Identity becomes hybrid.

A church built around first-generation language and culture can struggle to retain the second generation.

Missionary strategy therefore needs to distinguish:

- first-generation ethnic ministry;
- second-generation discipleship;
- wider cross-cultural mission.

The same congregation may need all three.

Cities and Class

Urban mission is also shaped by class.

A megacity contains wealthy professionals, middle-class families, informal settlements, migrant laborers, students, and homeless populations.

Churches can be physically close and socially separated by income.

A professional-class evangelical congregation may possess almost no relationships with low-income migrants living nearby.

Missionary social distance therefore includes class as well as ethnicity and religion.

This is one reason the phrase “urban mission” is too broad to function as a strategy without further definition.

Megachurches and Invisible Populations. Large urban churches can create another statistical illusion.

A city may contain tens of thousands of Christians attending prominent congregations.

Missionaries then assume the city is well served.

But the churches may draw mainly from certain:

- classes;
- ethnicities;
- language groups;
- neighborhoods.

Other populations remain almost untouched.

The national-average problem becomes a city-average problem.

Mission research needs network-level curiosity even where Christianity is institutionally strong.

Digital Cities. Urban populations also inhabit digital networks that cross geography completely.

A university student may have more social contact with a gaming community across three countries than with neighbors in the same apartment building.

Religious exploration likewise occurs online.

Missionary social geography therefore increasingly includes platforms, interest groups, and digital subcultures.

This does not make physical place irrelevant.

People still live somewhere, need embodied community, and participate in institutions.

The digital layer adds another network to the map.

Migration and the People-Group Model. Migration challenges static people-group classification.

A Somali population in Somalia and Somali diaspora communities in Minneapolis, London, Stockholm, Nairobi, and Cologne share language and heritage while developing different social environments.

Second generations may speak different languages.

Intermarriage changes boundaries.

Legal and religious freedom differs.

Should all be one missionary people group?

Ethnically, perhaps.

In terms of access, clearly not.

This is why place remains essential alongside people.

The Moving Mission Field

The phrase **mission field** once suggested distant stable geography.

The contemporary missionary environment is mobile.

The people we hope to serve may move.

The missionary may move.

A church's neighborhood may transform in ten years.

A refugee crisis can create a new diaspora overnight.

A university can become one of the most religiously diverse environments in the country.

This volatility makes one-time mapping insufficient.

Mission strategy must be periodically revised.

The Ethical Priority of Agency. Finally, migrants should participate in defining mission to migrants.

Churches can easily design programs *for* diaspora communities without involving their leaders. Refugees can be discussed as fields. Migrant Christians can be treated as volunteer translators rather than theological partners.

Locally rooted leadership matters here as everywhere else.

A Syrian Christian may understand Syrian refugee communities more deeply than a German mission agency.

A Turkish-background believer may interpret family dynamics outsiders miss.

A second-generation Christian can help churches understand hybrid identity.

The missionary church should learn from the people whose movement created the new context.

The Paradox of Proximity

Cities and migration therefore produce one of the book's central paradoxes:

physical distance can collapse while social distance remains.

The migrant moves next door.

The church still may not know the migrant.

A Bible exists in the national language.

The newcomer may speak another language at home.

Religious freedom increases.

Family pressure remains.

A Christian congregation is nearby.

Its culture may feel inaccessible.

The moving mission field therefore confirms the need for a multidimensional account of gospel access.

Part III began with a warning against false precision. *Unreached* is useful because it forces attention below the level of nations and denominations. It becomes misleading when a research threshold is treated as if it were a complete description of a community. The same lesson has recurred in every chapter. A population is never reducible to one percentage. Geography, language, family, law, religious tradition, class, migration, historical memory, and local Christian presence interact. The missionary question is not merely whether Christianity exists somewhere nearby. It

is whether meaningful Christian witness can actually cross the boundaries that organize a person's social world.

The chapters have also shown that **distance has more than one form**. Some communities are geographically distant from strong Christian populations. Others live beside churches but remain relationally distant. Some have extensive Christian media but little trusted personal contact. Some can encounter Christian teaching in a national language but not in the language that carries family life, prayer, memory, or identity. Some live under legal systems that restrict public religious change. Others possess legal freedom but face powerful family, caste, ethnic, or reputational costs. Still others live in post-Christian societies where churches are numerous and information is abundant, yet Christian belief has lost plausibility or institutional credibility.

This prevents two opposite mistakes. The first is to flatten the unfinished mission into a single global count. Counts matter. They direct attention, reveal concentration, and make neglected populations visible. But a number of unreached groups cannot by itself describe the depth or type of access problem within each group. The second mistake is to react against imperfect metrics by abandoning prioritization altogether. If one community possesses many churches, multiple Bible translations, extensive Christian media, and broad relational contact while another possesses almost none of these, the difference is morally and strategically relevant. Equal dignity does not require the church to pretend that access is equally distributed.

Religious labels have proved equally limited. The phrase *Muslim world* hides Arabic and non-Arabic societies, Sunni and Shi'a histories, Sufi and reformist traditions, secularized identities, migrant contexts, and radically different political environments. *Hindu* does not explain caste, language, regional tradition, family structure, or the long history of Indian Christianity. *Buddhist*, *folk-religious*, and *unaffiliated* can each conceal practices and beliefs that do not fit a neat institutional category. *Post-Christian* identifies a historical trajectory rather than simply a low church-attendance rate. Mission begins with accurate description because people should be encountered as communities and persons rather than as examples of an abstract religious type.

Language provides one of the clearest tests of this principle. Bible translation has achieved extraordinary measurable progress, yet the presence of a translated text does not settle the question of Scripture engagement. Oral communities, sign-language communities, multilingual populations, literacy differences, revision needs, digital formats, and local ownership

all affect whether Scripture is genuinely usable. Translation can complete a particular task. It does not complete discipleship. The same distinction applies elsewhere: an evangelistic campaign can finish, a church can be planted, a missionary can hand over leadership, and a people-group classification can change, while the church's wider responsibility continues.

Cities and migration then destabilize the map itself. People once described as living in distant mission fields now form diasporas in London, Cologne, Toronto, Dubai, Seoul, Nairobi, and countless other cities. Christian migrants carry churches into new regions. Refugees and international students enter unfamiliar social networks. Second generations develop identities different from those of their parents. Yet physical proximity does not automatically become relational access. A church and a low-access community can occupy the same postal code while remaining socially invisible to one another.

The result is a more demanding but more realistic missionary geography. The unfinished mission cannot be represented adequately by one belt of latitude, one religious bloc, one list of countries, or one people-group threshold. It is better understood as a pattern of **unequal access across overlapping human worlds**. The map must remain dynamic because the worlds themselves move.

That conclusion creates the question for Part IV. If Christianity is globally distributed, Scripture is more widely available than at any previous point in history, communication technology can cross borders almost instantly, and the worldwide church possesses enormous human and institutional resources, why do severe access disparities persist? Description is no longer enough. The analysis must become causal.

The next Part therefore turns from **where the gaps are** to **why the gaps remain**: how resources are allocated, how political and social barriers operate, how cultural distance slows understanding, how institutions develop inertia, how calling and strategy interact, how short timelines distort long work, and how missionary power itself can reproduce the very distances it intends to cross.

Part **IV**

Why the Gaps Persist

Part III mapped unequal gospel access. Part IV asks a harder question: **why does that inequality persist?**

The answer cannot be that Christianity lacks people, institutions, money, technology, or geographic reach. The contemporary church is demographically global and increasingly polycentric. It contains millions of pastors and other Christian workers, large mission networks, universities, seminaries, schools, hospitals, media platforms, translation organizations, businesses, charities, and local congregations. Christian information can move across borders faster than at any previous point in history. Yet a person in one social world may still possess several realistic paths into Christian community while another person, living in the same city or using the same internet, may possess almost none.

The explanatory problem is therefore not simply scarcity. It is **distribution, friction, time, institutions, vocation, and power.**

Resources do not move automatically toward the populations with the weakest access. They move through relationships, denominational histories, donor trust, legal possibilities, existing infrastructure, language competence, and organizational capacity. Some communities are expensive to serve because governments restrict religious activity, geography is difficult, security is uncertain, or social pressure makes visible Christian identification costly. Even when legal barriers are low, cultural distance can remain high. Words require translation, but so do assumptions about family, authority, shame, guilt, honor, spirituality, community, and truth.

The church itself also has gravity. Local needs are visible. Existing ministries have advocates. Buildings require maintenance. Staff require salaries. Longstanding missionary relationships become morally significant. Programs that once served pioneer purposes become institutions with their own constituencies. None of this is necessarily corrupt. Much of it is the normal consequence of faithfulness over time. The problem is that normal institutional life tends to preserve what already exists more easily than it creates capacity for people who remain outside existing Christian networks.

Vocation adds another layer. Christians can affirm the Great Commission while remaining uncertain about what kind of personal obligation follows from it. Some wait for an extraordinary missionary call. Others treat general willingness as sufficient. Churches and agencies can either clarify this discernment or turn calling language into a mechanism of guilt and control.

Time further complicates the picture. Missionary organizations report annually; language, trust, discipleship, theological formation, and leader-

ship succession may require years or decades. Short horizons can reward visible activity before deep capacity exists. Long horizons can create the opposite danger when missionaries or institutions become permanent centers of authority rather than servants of locally rooted Christian maturity.

Finally, mission can reproduce the very distance it intends to cross. Money can distort relationships. Foreign prestige can silence local judgment. A charismatic missionary leader can become difficult to challenge. Spiritual language can make human preferences appear divine. Digital ministry can collect sensitive data faster than communities understand the risks. The question is no longer merely whether mission reaches people. It is whether missionary power is exercised in forms consistent with the gospel being proclaimed.

These mechanisms interact. A restrictive context requires more security and money. That raises the cost of long language learning. Cost increases pressure for measurable results. Short-term reporting can favor imported programs. Imported programs can weaken local ownership. Weak local ownership can prolong dependence on the very external systems whose time horizons created the problem.

Part IV therefore proceeds causally rather than geographically. Chapter 18 examines allocation. Chapter 19 asks what makes some environments genuinely hard. Chapter 20 studies cultural and linguistic distance. Chapter 21 analyzes institutional gravity. Chapter 22 reconstructs the theology of missionary calling. Chapter 23 examines mismatched time horizons. Chapter 24 turns the analysis inward and asks what happens when missionary power itself becomes part of the obstacle.

The purpose is not to explain every unfinished missionary situation through one universal theory. It is to identify recurring mechanisms that can be recognized, tested, and corrected. If Part III asked **where access is weak**, Part IV asks **what keeps weakness from correcting itself**.

The Allocation Problem

The missionary world has no central planning office. There is no global authority that surveys every population, calculates the relative strength of Christian access, ranks needs, and then assigns workers and money accordingly. Mission is carried by thousands of churches, denominations, agencies, networks, foundations, schools, businesses, and informal relationships, each with its own history, theology, constituencies, obligations, and information.

That decentralized structure has major strengths. It protects mission from one bureaucracy controlling the church's obedience. It allows innovation, diversity, local initiative, and multiple forms of sending. It also means that missionary resources do not necessarily move toward the communities with the weakest access. They move through relationships, institutions, legal opportunities, funding histories, human preferences, and inherited commitments.

This is the allocation problem.

The Statistic Everyone Remembers

Mission mobilization has often summarized the problem through a dramatic claim: roughly 97 percent of missionaries serve among already reached peoples while only 3 percent serve among the unreached. Variations of the same statistic circulate in sermons, infographics, fundraising campaigns, and missionary training.

The rhetorical effect is powerful because the number seems to turn a diffuse problem into an obvious scandal. If almost all workers serve where churches already exist while almost none serve where Christian access is weakest, the moral conclusion appears unavoidable.

The evidentiary problem is that contemporary global missionary deployment is not measured through one standardized census capable of supporting that level of precision. What counts as a missionary differs across traditions. One dataset may include foreign church planters but omit national missionaries. Another may count theological educators, administrators, relief workers, Bible translators, or tentmakers differently. A missionary may spend part of the year in one population and part in another. Large sending movements outside Western agency systems can be especially difficult to measure consistently.

Joshua Project currently publishes a narrower and better-attributed claim: it estimates that about 3 percent of missionaries serve within the 10/40 Window, the broad region containing the largest concentration of populations it classifies as unreached.¹ That estimate still points toward apparent imbalance, but it does not establish that exactly 97 percent of every kind of missionary effort serves reached peoples or that only 3 percent serves unreached peoples everywhere.

The correction should not become an excuse to dismiss the allocation problem. It should make the argument stronger. The global church can acknowledge serious imbalance without pretending that an incomplete measurement system is more precise than it is.

A Church With Enormous Resources. The scale of contemporary Christianity makes the allocation question unavoidable. The World Christian Database's 2026 model estimates approximately fourteen million national Christian workers and about 455,000 foreign missionaries. It also models roughly 2.30 billion people as lacking gospel access under its own macroevangelistic definition and estimates that only 18.9 percent of non-Christians personally know a Christian.²

These are modeled global variables, not direct headcounts of every congregation and worker. Their importance lies in scale. Christianity is not a tiny persecuted sect trying to reach the world with no institutions. It possesses millions of workers, billions of adherents under broad definitions, enormous educational systems, publishing networks, digital infrastructure, hospitals, schools, denominations, and substantial financial resources.

¹Joshua Project, "Missions Explorer," accessed August 21, 2026. Joshua Project currently estimates that approximately 3 percent of missionaries serve in the 10/40 Window; this should not be paraphrased as a standardized census showing exactly 3 percent of all missionaries serving unreached peoples.

²World Christian Database, *Status of Global Christianity 2026* (2026): modeled figures include approximately 14.0 million national Christian workers, 455,000 foreign missionaries, 2.300 billion people without gospel access under its macroevangelistic definition, and 18.9 percent of non-Christians personally knowing a Christian.

The unfinished mission therefore cannot be explained simply by saying that the church has too few resources in the abstract. The more revealing question is where those resources are embedded and what they are equipped to do.

A pastor in a large Nigerian city is a Christian worker. So is a parish priest in Brazil, a Bible translator in Papua, a Korean missionary in Central Asia, a Baptist pastor in Texas, an Orthodox priest in Egypt, a youth worker in Germany, and a theological lecturer in Kenya. Their work is not fungible. Moving one person from a mature church system into a pioneer context does not automatically produce useful missionary capacity. Language, theology, training, family, visas, local invitation, and cultural competence all matter.

Allocation is therefore not merely a headcount problem.

It is a capability problem.

Allocation Is a Portfolio Problem

Mission strategy is sometimes framed as though one global ranking could tell every church what to fund next.

That would be too simple.

Different forms of missionary work have different strategic functions. Pioneer evangelism, Bible translation, theological education, member care, media production, relief, local pastoral ministry, and organizational administration cannot be reduced to one common unit. A church that funds only frontier church planting may neglect the systems that allow frontier workers to remain healthy or local churches to mature. A church that funds only mature institutions may never develop capacity for communities where those institutions do not yet exist.

Allocation therefore resembles a portfolio problem more than a queue.

A responsible portfolio asks at least four questions.

First, **what is absent?** A population may lack Scripture, trusted Christian relationships, locally rooted congregations, trained leaders, or sustainable pastoral structures. The missing capability should shape the response.

Second, **what can this sender actually contribute well?** Need alone does not create competence. A German congregation with deep relationships in North Africa may be able to support Arabic-speaking ministry responsibly. The same congregation may have no credible basis for launching an unrelated program in rural South Asia simply because a map shows greater statistical need there.

Third, **what should be local rather than imported?** Money can sometimes move more wisely than people. Expertise can sometimes be shared without foreign control. In other cases, sustained cross-cultural presence remains necessary because no existing Christian community crosses the relevant boundary.

Fourth, **what must remain deliberately underfunded or temporary?** Not every good ministry should become permanent. A mature organization needs enough discipline to end projects, transfer ownership, or reduce its role when the original gap has changed.

This approach avoids two opposite errors.

One is pure relationalism: we fund only the people and ministries we already know.

The other is pure optimization: we treat communities as numbers and redirect resources whenever a new ranking appears.

Faithful allocation requires both covenantal relationships and periodic strategic review.

Resources Follow Relationships. Church giving is relational. Congregations support people they know. Families give to missionaries whose stories they have followed for years. Denominations maintain institutions founded by earlier generations. Mission agencies build expertise in particular countries and languages, then recruit workers into the systems already in place.

This is not irrational. Relationships create trust and accountability. A church that has supported a missionary family for fifteen years should not drop them because a new strategic map identifies another population as statistically less reached. Human commitments matter.

But relational allocation produces path dependence. Once resources become attached to a ministry, they develop constituencies. A school has teachers and graduates. A hospital has staff and patients. A theological college has property, faculty, and accreditation. A mission office has employees. A church partnership produces friendships. Each of these creates legitimate reasons to continue.

A population with almost no existing Christian presence possesses few comparable advocates. It has no alumni writing to donors, few missionaries visiting supporting churches, no mature local institution submitting grant proposals, and few Christians inside denominational committees arguing for its needs.

Low access can therefore reproduce invisibility.

The people least represented within Christian institutions are often the least capable of attracting resources through normal institutional channels.

Existing Infrastructure Attracts More Infrastructure. Mission organizations also prefer contexts in which work is administratively possible.

A country with:

- stable visas,
- international schools,
- accessible healthcare,
- mature partner churches,
- English-speaking institutions,
- airports,
- legal religious organizations,

is easier to staff than a country lacking those conditions.

Families can remain longer. Agencies can supervise workers. Donors can visit. Teams can meet openly. New candidates see understandable roles into which they can enter.

The same infrastructure that reflects previous missionary success can therefore attract additional missionary resources.

Meanwhile, the places with the weakest infrastructure may require the greatest investment merely to sustain one worker. Language training takes longer. Children's education becomes complicated. Medical evacuation may be necessary. Security costs rise. Reporting must be restricted. Visas may be uncertain. The worker-to-support ratio becomes less attractive to organizations under financial pressure.

This creates a missionary version of cumulative advantage: contexts that already possess Christian infrastructure can absorb more resources efficiently, while pioneer contexts remain comparatively expensive.

Visibility and the Donor Imagination

Donors understandably want evidence that their money accomplishes something.

Visible ministry is easier to communicate.

A school can report enrollment.

A hospital can report patients.

A church can report attendance.

A training program can report graduates.

A mass evangelistic campaign can report responses.

Pioneer mission may produce much less visible evidence for years. A worker spends two years learning a difficult language. A small group of friendships develops slowly. Security conditions prevent publication of names and photographs. A new believer may need to remain discreet. A missionary team discovers that its first strategy was culturally inappropriate and begins again.

None of this produces compelling quarterly numbers.

The donor does not necessarily demand superficial results. The reporting system may still reward them. Organizations know that stories of dramatic impact are easier to communicate than accounts of patient learning, failed hypotheses, or quiet relational presence.

This creates pressure toward ministries whose outcomes can be displayed.

The pressure becomes especially strong when agencies compete for the same donor attention.

The Finance Claims We Should Stop Repeating. The allocation debate is often intensified by viral claims about Christian money: only 1 percent of Christian giving goes to missions, only 0.1 percent goes to unreached peoples, or Christians spend 99.9 percent of their money on themselves.

Such claims typically depend on uncertain combinations of global income estimates, church spending, mission definitions, and frontier allocation assumptions. The underlying categories are rarely standardized enough to justify the precision with which the numbers circulate.

The World Christian Database's 2026 model estimates roughly \$1.081 trillion in annual giving to Christian causes, but it does not provide a transparent universal accounting system that lets us convert that figure into a precise contemporary percentage of money reaching every unreached or frontier population.³

A church should not need a dubious statistic to ask whether its budget reflects its missionary convictions.

The stronger questions are concrete:

How much does this church give beyond its immediate institution?

What kinds of work receive support?

How much is directed toward pioneer or low-access contexts?

³World Christian Database, *Status of Global Christianity 2026*: modeled annual giving to Christian causes of approximately \$1.081 trillion. The table does not justify the common viral claims that precise fractions such as 0.1 percent of all Christian giving reach unreached peoples.

How much strengthens locally rooted churches?

Who decides?

What evidence supports those decisions?

Those questions can be answered without pretending that the entire Christian economy has been audited with decimal precision.

Support Roles Complicate the Map. A missionary allocation map can also undervalue support roles.

Suppose a missionary researcher never directly plants a church but produces language data that allows several teams to work more effectively. A member-care specialist may prevent multiple experienced workers from leaving. A theological educator may prepare local pastors who then serve dozens of churches. An aviation worker may enable translators to remain in remote areas. A software engineer may maintain a Scripture distribution platform used across languages.

Should these people be counted as serving reached populations or unreached populations?

The question may be badly formed.

Their work supports a missionary system whose effects cross categories.

This does not justify bloated administrative systems. Institutions can become self-protective and consume resources primarily to sustain themselves. But the corrective to administrative excess is not to assume that only frontline evangelists count as strategic workers.

A mature allocation analysis asks which capabilities are missing from which missionary environments.

Local Workers and the Foreign-Missionary Bias

Global missionary statistics can also overemphasize foreign workers because foreign deployment is easier to conceptualize as mission.

A pastor crossing a major cultural boundary inside India may never appear in a foreign-missionary count. An African evangelist serving a neighboring ethnic population inside the same country may perform profoundly cross-cultural work without international movement. A migrant church planter may support herself through ordinary employment and never enter an agency database.

The missionary map therefore changes depending on whether the unit of analysis is passport crossing or meaningful cultural boundary crossing.

This book uses *missionary* primarily for sustained gospel ministry across meaningful cultural boundaries. That definition includes international mission but does not depend on it.

The allocation problem should consequently ask not only:

Where are foreign missionaries?

but:

Where does sustained boundary-crossing Christian capacity exist, and where is it weak?

Different Resources Have Different Mobility. The phrase *missionary resources* can hide an important distinction.

Money is comparatively mobile.

Human beings are not.

A donor can redirect part of a budget in one fiscal year. A missionary family cannot be reassigned between languages and countries like capital. A worker's effectiveness may depend on ten years of linguistic competence, friendships, legal status, professional credibility, and children's stability. Moving that worker to a statistically less-reached population can destroy more capacity than it creates.

Institutions are even less mobile. A seminary building, hospital, radio studio, or translation center is embedded in a place. Its location may reflect a century of accumulated Christian history. The right question is rarely whether such infrastructure should simply be moved. The question is whether its mature capacity can generate new outward movement.

A strong theological college in one region might train students from less-served communities.

A mature church network might second experienced leaders into pioneer settings.

A publishing ministry might add languages beyond its historic audience.

A financially strong congregation might support local workers in places where expatriate deployment is difficult.

This distinction matters because allocation rhetoric can accidentally punish success. A region with mature Christian infrastructure should not be viewed merely as a place receiving too much. Mature infrastructure can become a sending base.

The strategic failure occurs when maturity becomes self-contained.

The goal is not equal distribution of every resource everywhere. It is increasing the capacity of the global church to cross the boundaries that ordinary Christian networks do not cross by themselves.

Strategic Priority Without a Hierarchy of Human Value

Missionary prioritization creates a moral anxiety. If churches deliberately direct more pioneer resources toward communities with little Christian access, are they implying that Christians or non-Christians in already-served places matter less?

No.

Human value and strategic priority are different categories.

A pastor may spend more time with a family in acute crisis without believing the rest of the congregation has less dignity. A public-health system may direct greater resources toward a region with an outbreak without claiming the inhabitants elsewhere are less valuable.

Similarly, low-access communities can deserve particular missionary attention because ordinary Christian systems are least likely to reach them automatically.

The priority compensates for unequal access.

It does not create unequal human worth.

This distinction protects the church from two opposite mistakes. One is strategic indifference: because everyone matters equally, no ministry can ever be prioritized. The other is missionary utilitarianism: people in low-access populations become more spiritually valuable because they improve strategic metrics.

Both are wrong.

Rebalancing Without Abandonment. Deliberate reallocation is morally difficult because ministries involve people.

Suppose a church discovers that almost all of its mission budget supports long-established work in high-access contexts. The obvious strategic response may be to create more room for pioneer work. The careless response would be to terminate long-term partners abruptly in order to produce a cleaner percentage.

That would confuse strategy with accounting.

Healthy rebalancing is usually gradual.

A church can establish a target for new giving rather than immediately canceling old commitments. It can review ministries when missionaries

retire or change roles. It can ask existing partners whether part of their work is ready for local ownership. It can create a separate pioneer fund. It can invest in candidate preparation for difficult fields while continuing responsibilities already undertaken.

The same principle applies to agencies. Institutional change should be serious enough to alter future allocation but patient enough not to treat workers, local partners, or communities as disposable inputs.

This is one reason strategic priority must remain subordinate to Christian ethics.

The church should become more deliberate without becoming technocratic.

The objective is not to maximize one metric.

It is to reduce unjustifiable access disparities while honoring real relationships, local agency, and the long time required for mature Christian work.

Better Allocation Requires Better Questions

No global committee can optimize the church's resources perfectly. Nor should it try.

But churches and agencies can ask better questions.

Where are our current relationships taking us?

Which populations remain invisible to those relationships?

Are we maintaining a ministry because its purpose remains important or because the institution has become difficult to end?

Are our funding systems capable of supporting years of language learning and trust-building?

Are we counting local missionaries and churches as strategic actors rather than only foreign personnel?

Do the people most affected by our strategy participate meaningfully in deciding it?

Allocation becomes healthier when research informs relationships instead of replacing them.

The global church does not need one master plan. It does need enough self-awareness to recognize that resources do not naturally flow toward the least-accessed communities.

Even perfect allocation would not solve the next problem.

Some environments remain difficult because external barriers are genuinely severe.

The Hard Places

Missionary language often speaks about “hard places.” The phrase can identify a genuine reality. It can also romanticize difficulty, as though the most dangerous assignment were automatically the most spiritual.

The first question should therefore be more precise:

Hard for whom?

A foreign missionary may face surveillance, visa loss, imprisonment, or expulsion. A local believer may face those same pressures and then remain in the country after the missionary has left. A convert may lose family, inheritance, marriage prospects, employment, social identity, or physical safety. A Christian minority may face discriminatory law even though foreign visitors can travel freely. A missionary family may struggle mainly with isolation, education, or healthcare while local Christians confront direct social hostility.

Different kinds of hardship require different strategies. They should not be compressed into one persecution ranking.

Government Restrictions

Pew Research Center’s global work on religious restrictions distinguishes government restrictions from social hostilities. Its 2026 report, measuring conditions in 2023 across 198 countries and territories, classified fifty-eight countries as having high or very high government restrictions involving religion.¹

Government restrictions can take many forms:

¹Pew Research Center, *More Countries Had Elevated Levels of Social Hostilities Involving Religion in 2023* (June 15, 2026). The study covers 198 countries and territories and distinguishes the Government Restrictions Index from the Social Hostilities Index. Fifty-eight countries had high or very high government restrictions and fifty-five had high or

- registration requirements,
- bans on particular religious groups,
- restrictions on conversion or proselytism,
- censorship,
- surveillance,
- limitations on religious literature,
- control of clergy,
- property restrictions,
- unequal legal recognition.

These mechanisms matter because they shape what kinds of Christian activity can occur openly.

A country may permit historic Christian churches while restricting missionary activity aimed at another religious population. It may allow worship inside approved buildings while regulating public evangelism. It may distinguish between registered and unregistered congregations. It may tolerate private belief while punishing political organization.

The missionary needs to understand the actual legal environment rather than assume that “religious freedom” is either fully present or fully absent.

Social Hostility. Law is only part of the environment.

Pew’s same 2026 report classified fifty-five countries as having high or very high social hostilities involving religion in 2023, with twenty-seven countries registering elevated levels of both government restrictions and social hostilities.²

Social hostility can arise from:

- families,
- clans,
- local religious authorities,
- mobs,
- political movements,

very high social hostilities; eighty-six had elevated levels on at least one index, twenty-seven on both, and approximately 78 percent of the population covered by the study lived in countries with elevated levels on at least one index. These are country-level environment measures and should not be interpreted as equal individual exposure.

²Pew Research Center, *More Countries Had Elevated Levels of Social Hostilities Involving Religion in 2023* (June 15, 2026). The study covers 198 countries and territories and distinguishes the Government Restrictions Index from the Social Hostilities Index. Fifty-eight countries had high or very high government restrictions and fifty-five had high or very high social hostilities; eighty-six had elevated levels on at least one index, twenty-seven on both, and approximately 78 percent of the population covered by the study lived in countries with elevated levels on at least one index. These are country-level environment measures and should not be interpreted as equal individual exposure.

- employers,
- neighborhood pressure.

A state may formally permit religious change while a convert's family makes conversion almost impossible socially. Another state may regulate religion heavily while ordinary relations between religious communities remain comparatively calm.

Government pressure and social pressure therefore need separate analysis.

The distinction is strategically important because the appropriate response differs. Legal advocacy may matter in one environment. In another, careful family-level discipleship and community negotiation may be more important than national legal reform.

Restriction Is Layered, Not Binary

Global indexes are useful partly because they expose a mistake in ordinary missionary language: a country is rarely simply *open* or *closed*.

Restriction is layered.

A government may recognize historic churches but prohibit conversion from the majority religion. Another may permit evangelism but deny registration to congregations outside approved denominations. A third may have permissive national law while provincial officials harass minorities. A fourth may score highly on legal restrictions while ordinary neighbors remain comparatively tolerant.

Pew's 2026 analysis makes the layered character visible. In 2023, fifty-eight of the 198 countries and territories studied had high or very high government restrictions and fifty-five had high or very high social hostilities; accounting for overlap, eighty-six had elevated levels on at least one index and twenty-seven on both. Because several of these countries are extremely populous, roughly 78 percent of people in the study lived in a place with elevated government restrictions, social hostilities, or both.³

³Pew Research Center, *More Countries Had Elevated Levels of Social Hostilities Involving Religion in 2023* (June 15, 2026). The study covers 198 countries and territories and distinguishes the Government Restrictions Index from the Social Hostilities Index. Fifty-eight countries had high or very high government restrictions and fifty-five had high or very high social hostilities; eighty-six had elevated levels on at least one index, twenty-seven on both, and approximately 78 percent of the population covered by the study lived in countries with elevated levels on at least one index. These are country-level environment measures and should not be interpreted as equal individual exposure.

That statistic should not be read as though 78 percent of humanity experiences the same degree of religious danger. The indexes classify national environments; they do not imply that every individual is equally constrained.

The strategic implication is more careful.

Before describing a field as closed, missionaries should ask:

Closed to which activity?

Closed to which population?

Closed to foreigners or also to citizens?

Restricted by law, by social pressure, or by both?

Does pressure fall equally on established Christians and new converts?

Can churches own property, train leaders, publish material, meet in homes, or communicate digitally?

The answers determine what forms of witness are possible and which forms would expose others unnecessarily.

Christian-Specific Persecution. Open Doors' World Watch List 2026 uses a Christian-specific methodology. It reports more than 388 million Christians living under what its framework classifies as high levels of persecution or discrimination. During its reporting period it recorded 4,849 Christians killed for faith-related reasons, along with attacks on churches and displacement.⁴

These figures should remain explicitly attributed to Open Doors. They do not measure the same thing as Pew's Government Restrictions Index or Social Hostilities Index.

The difference is not merely technical. A country may impose broad religious restrictions affecting several groups. Another may permit religion generally but expose Christians in particular regions to intense hostility. A Christian-specific advocacy dataset and a comparative social-science index can therefore illuminate different dimensions of the same environment.

Missionary rhetoric becomes misleading when the results are merged into one ranking called "the hardest countries for Christians."

The responsible question is what each source actually measures.

⁴Open Doors, *World Watch List 2026: Compilation of Main Documents* (2026). Open Doors reports more than 388 million Christians experiencing high levels of persecution or discrimination under its methodology and 4,849 Christians killed for faith-related reasons during the reporting period. These are organization-specific estimates and should not be merged with Pew or USCIRF categories.

USCIRF and Policy Categories

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom provides another source type. Its 2026 recommendations, principally evaluating conditions during 2025, recommended eighteen countries for designation as Countries of Particular Concern, eleven for the Special Watch List, and seven nonstate actors as Entities of Particular Concern.⁵

USCIRF's categories are policy instruments within a particular governmental framework. They can help identify severe religious-freedom environments and legal developments. They should not be treated as a theological ranking of missionary need.

A country can be deeply important for mission without appearing on a U.S. religious-freedom list. Conversely, a severe freedom-of-religion problem can affect religious communities other than Christians and deserves concern even when it does not create a direct missionary opportunity.

Christian concern for religious freedom should not be self-interested.

A church that wants freedom to evangelize should also defend the freedom of Muslims, Hindus, atheists, and others from coercion. Religious liberty loses moral credibility when it means liberty only for one's own group.

The Convert's Cost. The language of missionary sacrifice can obscure whose sacrifice is greatest.

Consider a foreign missionary working in a restrictive country. The missionary may accept real danger. Yet if the government discovers the ministry, the likely consequence may be expulsion and a return to a passport country where churches, family networks, and economic support remain available.

The local convert cannot necessarily leave.

The local believer remains inside:

- family,
- employment,
- neighborhood,
- legal system,
- political reality.

This asymmetry should shape missionary decision-making.

⁵United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *2026 Annual Report* and "2026 Recommendations": eighteen countries recommended for CPC status, eleven for the Special Watch List, and seven nonstate actors as Entities of Particular Concern, principally assessing conditions in 2025.

A foreign worker should not take security risks on behalf of local Christians simply because the foreign worker personally feels courageous. Publication of photographs, reports, testimony videos, or names may help the missionary raise support while exposing the local believer to lasting danger.

Security ethics therefore begins with the person who bears the consequences longest.

War Is Not the Same as Persecution. Missionary stories also need to distinguish religious persecution from general insecurity.

A Christian killed in a bombing may have died because of Christian identity.

Or the bomb may have targeted everyone in the market.

A missionary may be kidnapped because of religious hostility.

Or because foreigners are valuable hostages.

Civil war, state collapse, terrorism, organized crime, and communal violence can overlap with religious persecution without being identical to it.

This distinction is morally important. Inflating ordinary conflict into Christian persecution can instrumentalize the suffering of entire societies. It can also weaken the credibility of genuine persecution reporting.

Missionaries should name danger accurately.

Visas and the Ethics of Presence

Many countries with low Christian access do not grant visas for foreign missionaries.

This has encouraged forms of professional presence sometimes described as tentmaking, business as mission, or marketplace mission. Teachers, doctors, engineers, businesspeople, researchers, students, and other professionals may live legitimately in societies where explicit missionary visas are unavailable.

The model can be entirely ethical.

The ethical line is professional integrity.

A teacher who enters a country as a teacher should genuinely teach. An engineer should do competent engineering. A business should be a real business rather than a paper structure designed mainly to secure residency.

Missionary motivation does not justify deception about one's legal occupation.

At the same time, states sometimes use visa categories to suppress legitimate religious association. Missionaries and local churches then face difficult ethical questions about privacy, disclosure, and unjust law. These questions should be handled with theological seriousness rather than simple slogans about either total transparency or strategic secrecy.

Surveillance. The digital environment has changed the meaning of security.

A missionary once worried primarily about letters, meetings, and physical documents. Today a phone can contain:

- contact networks,
- messages,
- Bible applications,
- photographs,
- location history,
- donor correspondence,
- cloud backups.

A digital ministry can reach a person across a border while simultaneously creating data that identifies that person to authorities.

The same technology that lowers informational barriers can increase surveillance risk.

This creates a missionary responsibility that older strategies did not need to consider at the same scale: data minimization.

Do we need to store this name?

Do we need to upload this testimony?

Should this conversation be linked to a real identity?

Does this platform retain metadata?

Security is not simply an operational matter for missionaries. It is part of loving the neighbor whose vulnerability may be greater than one's own.

Visibility Can Be a Liability. Many missionary systems were built around visibility.

A church building is visible.

A public baptism is visible.

A conference photograph is visible.

A conversion story placed in a newsletter is visible.

In restrictive environments, the same visibility can become a form of risk.

The tension is not simply between courage and fear. Christian witness is inherently public in some sense; faith cannot be reduced permanently

to private opinion. Yet the timing and form of public identification can carry radically different consequences for different people.

A foreign missionary may want to celebrate a new believer publicly because testimony strengthens donors and encourages prayer. The new believer may still be negotiating family relationships, employment, or legal exposure. A digitally distributed story can travel far beyond the audience imagined at the moment of consent. Facial recognition, translation, archived social media, and searchable databases make old assumptions about anonymity increasingly fragile.

The ethical priority is therefore not the missionary organization's need for a compelling story.

It is the local person's agency and safety.

This does not require secret Christianity as a permanent ideal. It requires distinguishing between *the church's duty to witness* and *an outside organization's desire to publicize another person's witness*.

In some settings, restraint is not timidity.

It is solidarity.

Family and Community Costs

Some of the hardest barriers to Christian discipleship are not created by states.

A young adult may be legally free to convert but know that conversion would sever family relationships. A woman may fear losing custody or marriage prospects. A man may lose his position in a family business. A village may interpret Christian baptism as a betrayal of the ancestors or the community.

These costs help explain why Christian information can circulate without producing visible Christian communities.

A person can privately believe for years before public identification becomes possible.

Mission strategy focused only on evangelistic communication may miss the deeper need: a community in which the convert can learn how to remain truthful, loving, and Christian inside a relational crisis.

The missionary question is therefore not simply:

How can we get the message into this place?

It is also:

What would following Christ cost here, and what kind of Christian community could sustain people through that cost?

Geography and Logistics. Hardship can also be physically ordinary.

Remote mountain populations, islands, deserts, forests, or regions with poor transportation may remain difficult to serve even where there is no persecution.

Medical care may be distant.

Communication unreliable.

Seasonal travel impossible.

Such environments can receive less missionary attention not because churches oppose them but because sustained presence is expensive and logistically demanding.

Technology helps but does not erase geography.

A satellite connection can provide teaching.

It cannot automatically provide a pastor, medical evacuation, school, or community of believers.

Hard for Missionaries, Harder for Churches. Foreign missionary organizations often think about whether workers can enter and remain.

Local churches ask a different question:

Can Christian life survive here across generations?

A foreign worker may survive through an expatriate salary, international schooling, and emergency evacuation. A local pastor cannot build a church around those systems.

This is one reason foreign presence should not become the measure of access. The deeper question is whether Christian discipleship can become locally inhabitable.

Can believers marry?

Can they raise children?

Can leaders work without foreign salaries?

Can the church worship without constant external protection?

These questions move missionary thinking from access toward durability.

Danger Is Not a Spiritual Credential

Hard-place rhetoric can create a subtle hierarchy of missionary holiness.

Workers in dangerous environments appear courageous and serious. Those serving in safer contexts appear ordinary. Candidates may begin to seek difficulty as confirmation of spiritual authenticity.

Christian theology provides no basis for making danger a virtue in itself.

Paul sometimes entered danger knowingly. He also escaped through a basket, invoked Roman citizenship, accepted protection, and changed plans.

Prudence is not cowardice.

Martyrdom is honored because faithfulness is maintained under lethal pressure, not because death is itself a missionary objective.

The missionary is called to obedience.

Sometimes obedience is dangerous.

Sometimes it involves the humility to leave.

Resilience Changes the Strategy. The final mistake in hard-place strategy is to define success mainly through the foreign worker's access.

A visa is valuable.

A foreign specialist may fill a real gap.

But the most restrictive environments make locally rooted Christian resilience especially important because expatriate presence is often fragile by definition.

A missionary strategy becomes more durable when it asks what remains after:

- the visa is canceled,
- the foreign worker is expelled,
- an international transfer stops,
- a digital platform is blocked,
- travel becomes impossible.

This shifts attention toward capacities that are harder to remove:

- local biblical knowledge,
- trusted house-level relationships,
- distributed leadership,
- Scripture in usable languages and formats,
- vocationally sustainable local ministry,
- networks of mutual care,
- theological resources that do not require constant foreign mediation.

Such resilience should not be romanticized. Local Christians can be arrested, displaced, impoverished, or killed. The point is not that local leadership makes persecution disappear. It is that a missionary model dependent on permanent foreign access is structurally weakest precisely where access is least secure.

Hard-place mission therefore needs an exit test even while workers hope to remain:

If outside access disappeared tomorrow, what Christian capacity would still exist locally?

That question reveals whether missionary presence is producing durable access or merely temporarily importing it.

Strategy for Hard Places

Hard environments therefore require differentiated responses.

Some need foreign pioneer workers.

Some need support for existing local churches.

Some need Bible translation.

Some need secure digital access.

Some need professional presence.

Some require religious-freedom advocacy.

Some should not receive highly visible foreign missionary activity because visibility would make local life harder.

No global missionary ranking can decide these questions by itself.

The church needs contextual judgment, and contextual judgment requires cultural understanding.

External barriers explain why some communities remain difficult to serve.

Even where those barriers are modest, another form of difficulty remains: the distance between what the missionary means and what another community hears.

The Distance Problem

Modern travel creates the illusion that the world is close.

A missionary can fly from Frankfurt to Nairobi in a night, from Seoul to Istanbul in half a day, or from São Paulo to Lisbon while watching films and answering email. Digital communication can cross the same distance instantly.

The human distance may remain enormous.

Language, moral intuition, social hierarchy, family obligation, historical memory, religious meaning, and power do not disappear because transportation becomes faster.

The difficulty of mission therefore cannot be measured only by kilometers.

Some of the most consequential boundaries are invisible.

Language as a Long Apprenticeship

Language learning is the most obvious form of cultural distance because its failures are audible.

A beginner missionary cannot preach, counsel, or understand ordinary conversation with the same nuance available in a native language. Progress is measurable and often painfully slow.

Foreign-service language-training estimates are sometimes used to dramatize the point. For English-speaking adults, languages such as Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese, and Korean generally require substantially more instructional time to reach professional competence than closely related European languages. The exact hour classifications were developed for diplomatic training rather than missionary life and should not be treated as universal laws.

The deeper insight is more important: **serious language competence is expensive in time.**

A missionary organization can affirm language learning rhetorically while undermining it structurally. Workers are expected to report ministry outcomes while still studying. Donors ask what they are “doing.” A capable professional feels incompetent because basic errands require help. Team members who use English together progress more slowly. Children acquire the local language faster than parents.

The temptation is to stop early.

Functional survival then masquerades as cultural competence.

Language and Authority. Language ability also affects power.

The missionary who speaks poorly depends on interpreters and local colleagues. That dependency can be healthy because it forces humility.

Yet foreign organizational authority may run in the opposite direction. The missionary who understands the culture least may still control the budget, strategy, and theological curriculum.

This combination is particularly dangerous:

low local comprehension + high institutional authority.

Mission structures should therefore ask whether decision-making power grows faster than cultural understanding.

In many pioneer contexts, it should not.

Words Carry Worlds

Translation becomes difficult even after vocabulary improves.

Christian theology depends on words such as:

- God,
- spirit,
- sin,
- grace,
- faith,
- sacrifice,
- covenant,
- salvation,
- church.

Every available local word carries existing associations.

A term for “spirit” may evoke ancestors or local spiritual beings. A word translated “sin” may emphasize shame, ritual pollution, crime, or

interpersonal wrongdoing. A word for “faith” may sound like intellectual belief, loyalty, trust, or religious membership.

No translation enters an empty semantic space.

This is why missionary communication requires conceptual learning rather than merely word replacement.

The missionary must ask not only:

What word means grace?

but:

What does this community hear when I use the word I have chosen?

Contextualization Is Not Cosmetic Translation. Cross-cultural communication fails when contextualization is treated mainly as changing illustrations.

A sermon originally written in Dallas is not contextualized for Dakar merely because the preacher replaces an American sports metaphor with a Senegalese one. The deeper assumptions may remain untouched: what counts as a person, how decisions are made, how authority is recognized, what family obligations mean, how misfortune is interpreted, what a public confession costs.

Contextualization therefore begins below vocabulary.

The missionary asks:

Which questions does this community already consider important?

Which questions am I importing because they are central in my own theological history?

Which local practices are compatible with Christian discipleship?

Which require correction?

Which appear strange to me but are morally neutral?

Which Christian practices from my home context have I mistaken for universal Christianity?

Paul Hiebert’s anthropological work helped generations of missionaries distinguish between rejecting local culture wholesale, accepting it uncritically, and engaging in what he called critical contextualization: examining cultural practices in light of Scripture together with the community rather than allowing either missionary preference or inherited custom to function as the final authority.¹

¹Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Baker Academic, 1985), especially his framework of critical contextualization; see also Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion* (Baker Books, 1999), for the importance of engaging lived religious worlds rather than only formal doctrines.

That process is slower than copying a ministry model.

It is also more likely to produce a church that belongs genuinely to the people who inhabit it.

Moral Frameworks and the Appeal of Simple Maps. Mission training has long searched for frameworks that help workers notice differences in moral experience.

One influential approach contrasts guilt/innocence, shame/honor, and fear/power cultures. The framework can perform a useful pedagogical function. A Western missionary shaped by individual legal categories may begin noticing the importance of public shame, family honor, spiritual fear, or communal identity.

Problems arise when the framework turns from heuristic into anthropology.

Statements such as:

Western cultures are guilt cultures; Asian cultures are shame cultures; African cultures are fear cultures

compress enormous populations into essentialized moral types.

Simon Cozens' review of the evidence challenged the empirical basis for treating these categories as neatly bounded cultural systems. Johannes Merz has likewise criticized the way honor/shame discourse can misuse anthropological concepts by treating cultures as fixed containers.²

The better use is diagnostic rather than classificatory.

In this situation, which dynamics of guilt, shame, honor, fear, power, obligation, or innocence are important?

Several may be operating simultaneously.

Family as a Moral World

Cross-cultural missionaries from strongly individualist settings can underestimate family identity.

A conversion testimony in one church may celebrate:

I decided for myself regardless of what anyone thought.

²Simon Cozens, "Shame Cultures, Fear Cultures, and Guilt Cultures: Reviewing the Evidence," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 42, no. 4 (2018): 326–36, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2396939318764087>; Johannes Merz, "The Culture Problem: How the Honor/Shame Issue Got the Wrong End of the Anthropological Stick," *Missiology* 48, no. 2 (2020). Darrell L. Whiteman's response to Cozens in *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 42, no. 4 (2018): 348–56, represents a constructive defense of the pedagogical value of cultural models while acknowledging complexity.

In another social world, such a story can sound less like courage and more like moral immaturity.

Family loyalty is not automatically idolatrous.

Nor is individual autonomy automatically Christian.

Missionary discipleship must therefore help believers distinguish between legitimate obligations to family and demands that contradict allegiance to Christ.

This is harder than telling converts simply to choose Jesus over family.

Jesus himself speaks of conflicts created by discipleship. The New Testament also commands honor, care, reconciliation, and responsibility within households.

Faithfulness may require resistance to family pressure while still seeking to preserve family love.

Missionaries who understand only the first half can produce unnecessary social rupture.

Religious Distance. A Christian may explain salvation to a Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or secular neighbor using words that both speakers know while inhabiting completely different theological maps.

The Muslim hearer may interpret “Son of God” through biological categories the Christian explicitly rejects.

A Hindu hearer may place Jesus within a broad divine or devotional framework unlike Christian confession.

A secular European may understand “religion” primarily as an institutional or psychological category and hear Christian truth claims through suspicion of authority.

A Buddhist hearer may not begin with a creator-God question at all.

The missionary needs enough knowledge to understand the misunderstanding without pretending to master the entire religion before speaking.

This is why respectful study of another religion is not academic luxury. It is part of accurate communication.

Historical Memory

Missionaries arrive after history.

The history may include:

- colonialism,
- war,
- migration,
- previous missionary encounters,

- religious conflict,
- political intervention.

A British missionary in India cannot make British imperial history disappear by personally rejecting colonialism. An American missionary in Iraq may be interpreted through American geopolitical power. A European Christian speaking to an Indigenous community may encounter memories of mission schools and cultural suppression. A Korean missionary may carry associations with Korean corporate expansion, nationalism, or church culture.

None of these associations fully defines the missionary.

They still affect the relationship.

Historical distance means that people may respond not only to what the missionary says but to what the missionary symbolizes.

The Body Has Meaning. Missionaries sometimes say:

I am here as a Christian, not as a representative of my country.

The intention may be sincere.

Other people still see:

- passport,
- race,
- gender,
- wealth,
- education,
- nationality.

A missionary from a wealthy country may be perceived as rich even when living modestly by expatriate standards. A white missionary may carry status in a postcolonial society that a local Christian does not. A male missionary may receive access or authority unavailable to women. An American passport may allow departure from a crisis that local colleagues cannot escape.

Missionary bodies therefore participate in power before missionaries speak.

This reality should produce neither guilt nor denial.

It should produce self-awareness.

The Missionary Learns to Be a Guest. Cross-cultural workers often enter with unusually strong initiative.

They have raised support, crossed borders, completed training, and accepted disruption. Those traits are useful. They can also create a pattern

in which the missionary is always the person who proposes, organizes, funds, teaches, and evaluates.

A guest inhabits another moral posture.

Guests ask before rearranging the house.

They notice when they do not understand.

They depend on hosts.

They learn names, rhythms, boundaries, and forms of courtesy that were not designed around them.

Mission cannot remain permanent guesthood; missionaries sometimes become long-term members of a community, and Christian truth sometimes requires disagreement with hosts. Yet the guest posture is a valuable corrective to the assumption that crossing a border grants a mandate to redesign another church or society.

This posture also changes research.

Instead of asking only, *How can we communicate our message effectively?*, the missionary asks, *What have Christians here already learned that I do not know?*

Instead of treating local believers as cultural informants for an externally designed strategy, the missionary treats them as theological participants.

The outsider still contributes real gifts.

The relationship becomes reciprocal rather than extractive.

Social Distance Inside One City

Cultural distance does not require international movement.

A wealthy urban church may be physically close to:

- migrants,
- a lower-caste community,
- refugees,
- an ethnic minority

while possessing almost no shared social life.

The congregation's members shop elsewhere, attend different schools, marry within different networks, and speak a different language at home.

A city map shows proximity.

A network map shows separation.

This explains why Christian density at national or city level can coexist with weak access among particular populations.

The missionary task may be crossing one street socially rather than one ocean geographically.

Distance Within Christianity. Missionaries also cross boundaries inside the Christian world.

An evangelical Protestant may enter a region where historic Orthodox or Catholic churches are deeply rooted. If the missionary assumes that evangelical difference equals Christian absence, the resulting relationship can reproduce unnecessary division.

Likewise, a Western missionary may treat a Majority World church as theologically immature because its worship, preaching style, or institutional structure feels unfamiliar.

Christian mission requires enough ecclesial literacy to distinguish between:

- real theological disagreement,
- denominational difference,
- cultural unfamiliarity.

This is another reason Chapter 10's wider-Christian clarification matters. Mission strategy should not erase existing churches simply because they do not fit one tradition's categories.

Learning as Missionary Work. The distance problem has a simple practical implication that missionary culture often struggles to honor:

learning is work.

Listening to local Christians is work.

Studying history is work.

Language school is work.

Being corrected is work.

A missionary who spends the first year learning rather than launching programs may be making a more serious contribution than a worker who arrives with a fully developed strategy and never understands why local people respond poorly.

The outsider should become a learner before assuming the role of teacher.

This does not mean waiting until perfect cultural understanding, which never arrives. It means allowing authority to develop alongside understanding rather than ahead of it.

Culture Changes. Culture should not be romanticized as something missionaries merely discover and preserve.

Cultures are dynamic.

Migration, technology, education, markets, politics, and generational change constantly reshape them.

An urban twenty-year-old and a rural seventy-year-old from the same ethnic population may inhabit different social worlds.

Missionaries who learned one cultural pattern twenty years earlier can become culturally outdated while assuming their longevity guarantees expertise.

Local Christians can also disagree over what authentic local culture means.

Contextualization therefore needs continuing discernment rather than one early ethnographic decision.

Contextualization Without Relativism

Fear of cultural imperialism can produce an opposite error: the idea that outsiders should never challenge local beliefs or practices.

That conclusion would make mission incoherent.

Christian witness claims that the gospel is true across cultures and therefore addresses every culture, including the missionary's own. Contextualization does not mean that local meaning determines Christian truth. It means that Christian truth must be understood and embodied within a real social world rather than delivered as a culturally unmarked package.

The missionary therefore needs two kinds of humility.

The first is **cultural humility**: my instincts are not identical with Scripture.

The second is **theological humility**: neither my host culture nor my own culture is beyond biblical judgment.

These two forms of humility prevent opposite distortions.

Without the first, missionaries export their habits as though they were divine commands.

Without the second, missionaries become unable to say that any practice should change.

The translation history of Christianity shows why both matter. As Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls argued in different ways, Christian expansion repeatedly involved translation into new languages and cultures, and that translation allowed new communities to appropriate the faith in forms not controlled by the culture from which the missionary arrived.³ Translation

³Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed. (Orbis Books, 2009); Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Orbis

decentralizes the missionary precisely because the receiving community begins reading, interpreting, teaching, singing, and arguing Christian faith within its own language.

Contextualization is therefore not a technique for making foreign Christianity more attractive.

At its best, it is part of the process by which Christianity ceases to be foreign.

Distance and the Limits of Strategy

No mission strategy removes the need for human patience.

Digital translation can accelerate communication.

AI can assist language analysis.

Intercultural training can prevent obvious mistakes.

None of these can produce trust on demand.

Trust develops through observed character over time.

The remaining missionary gaps often coincide with the boundaries where communication is least likely to yield to rapid technique.

This connects cultural distance to the institutional problem examined next.

If crossing boundaries takes years while institutions are constantly pulled toward visible, immediate, familiar needs, how does mission remain central long enough to do the work well?

Books, 1996). Both are used here for the missiological significance of vernacular translation and the repeated cultural relocation of Christianity, not for an argument that every translation decision is automatically faithful.

When Mission Becomes Peripheral

A church can affirm the Great Commission without allowing mission to shape much of its ordinary life.

The contradiction is easier to understand once we stop assuming that institutional priorities are determined entirely by stated beliefs.

Institutions develop gravity.

By **institutional gravity**, this book means the tendency of churches and organizations to devote increasing attention to needs that are visible, familiar, inherited, and internally represented, even while continuing to affirm wider missionary commitments.

The concept is not an accusation of hypocrisy. It describes an organizational tendency that appears precisely because local responsibilities are real.

Institutional Gravity Is Usually Rational

Institutional gravity rarely begins with a conscious decision to neglect the nations.

It begins with reasonable obligations.

The pastor knows the family whose marriage is collapsing.

The finance committee knows the roof must be repaired.

The denomination knows which seminary needs accreditation.

The mission agency knows which workers are already deployed and dependent on support.

Each decision can be defensible in isolation.

The problem appears cumulatively.

Visible constituencies generate requests, meetings, reports, relationships, and moral pressure. Invisible populations generate none of these automatically. Over time, an institution can become increasingly responsive to the people already connected to it while remaining sincere in its global theology.

This is why missionary peripheralization cannot be solved simply by telling churches to care more.

The issue is partly architectural.

What appears on the agenda?

Who has authority to propose new work?

Which metrics receive board attention?

When are historic commitments reviewed?

Who represents people who have no relationship with the institution yet?

Institutions drift toward what they are designed to notice.

If pioneer mission depends only on occasional enthusiasm, institutional gravity will usually win.

The Visible Need. A pastor sees the family whose marriage is collapsing.

The congregation knows the teenager who stopped attending church.

The roof leaks.

Children's ministry lacks volunteers.

An elderly member needs care.

A local food bank asks for help.

These are not distractions from Christian mission. They are ordinary forms of pastoral and neighborly responsibility.

A population ten thousand kilometers away does not appear in the church office with an appointment.

Its absence is silent.

This creates an asymmetry. Local needs generate their own visibility. Distant or socially disconnected populations require deliberate representation.

If no one teaches about them, prays for them, researches them, or maintains relationships with missionaries and local churches serving them, they can disappear from institutional imagination without anyone consciously deciding that they do not matter.

Mission as a Specialist Department

Modern churches solve complexity through specialization.

Children's ministry has leaders.

Worship has leaders.

Finance has a committee.

Mission has a mission committee.

Specialization can improve competence. The danger is psychological outsourcing.

Once one group "does missions," the rest of the church can assume global mission belongs to specialists in the same way sound engineering belongs to the technical team.

The mission committee organizes an annual conference, maintains missionary support, and sends updates. The wider congregation remains largely untouched in:

- prayer,
- vocational imagination,
- theology,
- hospitality,
- giving.

The program survives.

The church's missionary identity weakens.

Mission then becomes one department among several rather than a dimension of the church's life.

Local and Global Is a False Opposition. Mission advocates sometimes respond by attacking local ministry.

They compare money spent on buildings, staff, or youth programs with small amounts sent to pioneer mission and conclude that churches care primarily about themselves.

The critique can identify genuine excess.

It can also create a false choice.

Local discipleship is not the enemy of global mission. Churches need pastors, children's ministry, theological teaching, mercy ministries, administration, and physical spaces. A church that neglects local formation may become less capable of sending healthy missionaries, not more.

The better question is integration:

Does local ministry form Christians whose imagination includes the nations?

Does global mission strengthen rather than bypass the local church?

Can a congregation care deeply for its neighborhood while deliberately attending to populations beyond its ordinary relationships?

The New Testament does not force a choice between Jerusalem and the ends of the earth.

Budget Inertia

Institutional gravity becomes especially visible in budgets.

A church begins supporting a missionary couple.

Years pass.

The couple moves from pioneer evangelism into administration. Their children grow. The mission field develops. Local churches become stronger. The original strategic need changes.

Should support continue?

Perhaps.

Relationships matter, and administrative work may remain strategically important.

But if every historic commitment becomes permanent, the budget slowly fills with inherited obligations. New opportunities can enter only when old ministries end, which they rarely do.

The same problem affects mission agencies.

Property, schools, offices, training centers, and staffing structures create recurring costs. Institutions founded to serve mission can eventually consume significant resources simply to maintain themselves.

Again, this is not automatically waste. Durable institutions can serve generations.

The question is whether continuation has become the default rather than an evaluated decision.

Opportunity Costs Are Hidden. Budgets show what an institution funds.

They rarely show what the same money cannot fund elsewhere.

A church adds one staff position.

A mission agency maintains one legacy property.

A denomination subsidizes one recurring conference.

Each may be worthwhile. The opportunity cost remains invisible because the alternative ministry never exists.

This matters particularly for pioneer work because new fields often have no existing constituency able to make the counterfactual visible. No one can introduce the candidate who was never trained, the translation

project that was never started, or the local partner who was never discovered.

Strategic review therefore requires imagination about non-events.

What could become possible if five percent of new spending were reserved for low-access contexts?

What new candidates might emerge if a church budgeted for two years of language learning rather than expecting immediate ministry productivity?

What local ministries could gain agency if a foreign institution transferred decision rights rather than only increasing grants?

Opportunity-cost thinking does not imply that existing ministries are wasteful.

It forces institutions to compare continuation against plausible alternatives instead of comparing continuation against nothing.

Relationship Inertia. Christian giving is relational, and rightly so.

Yet relationships can make strategic review emotionally difficult.

A church may know the missionary personally but know almost nothing about the community the missionary serves. Supporting the person becomes easier than evaluating the mission.

If circumstances change, honest questions can feel disloyal:

Is this role still needed?

Has local leadership developed?

Would a different form of partnership now be healthier?

Could resources be redirected without abandoning friendship?

Healthy sending churches need relationships strong enough to survive those questions.

Missionary support should not require permanent institutional sameness.

The Career Script

Institutional gravity also operates through ordinary assumptions about adult life.

A Christian student hears detailed advice about:

- education,
- career,
- internships,
- home ownership,
- marriage,

- retirement.

Missionary vocation appears only if an unusual experience interrupts the normal script.

This creates a subtle theological asymmetry.

The person considering engineering asks:

Am I gifted? Is this wise? What opportunities exist?

The person considering pioneer mission may feel required to answer:

Did God give me an extraordinary supernatural call?

The result can be that ordinary secular professions are treated as default while cross-cultural mission requires exceptional proof.

Chapter 22 will examine whether that requirement is biblically justified.

Formation Shapes Imagination. Christians normally desire vocations they can imagine.

A child who knows doctors understands what doctors do. A university student with Christian professors can imagine academic vocation. A church that regularly knows missionaries, hears from Majority World Christians, prays for peoples, and discusses global mission creates a different imaginative environment from a church where mission appears once a year.

Mobilization therefore begins long before recruitment.

A missionary sermon cannot instantly compensate for years in which the church's discipleship implied that normal Christian adulthood is domestically bounded.

This does not mean children should be pressured toward missionary careers.

It means missionary vocation should be intelligible as one normal form of Christian obedience among several.

Leadership Pipelines Reproduce the Existing Map. Institutions allocate not only money but imagination.

A young Christian usually considers vocations that appear in the surrounding network.

The church has pastors, worship leaders, teachers, counselors, administrators, and business professionals. Those roles have mentors, internships, job descriptions, training routes, and recognizable success stories.

Pioneer mission may have none of these.

The result is predictable. A student who could become a strong cross-cultural worker sees a clear path into law, medicine, academia, engineering, or local church ministry and a vague path into missionary service that begins with “pray about whether you are called.”

This is not merely a recruitment problem.

It is a pipeline problem.

Healthy sending churches make missionary formation concrete without pressuring every member toward the same vocation. They can provide:

- exposure to experienced missionaries,
- serious intercultural training,
- language-learning opportunities,
- internships under accountable teams,
- theological education,
- financial guidance,
- mentoring for spouses and families,
- realistic discussion of failure and transition.

Once those structures exist, missionary vocation becomes a discernible possibility rather than an exceptional leap out of normal Christian life.

The church still sends only some.

But all can see what faithful sending actually requires.

Organizational Success Can Become Its Own Goal

Mission agencies experience another form of gravity: institutional survival.

An organization has employees.

Employees have families.

Donors expect activity.

Leaders want continuity.

A successful program develops a brand.

These pressures make it difficult to say:

Our role here is almost complete.

Completion can feel like organizational failure because reducing programs means reducing budget and staff.

This is one reason Chapter 25 will propose a deliberately countercultural missionary question:

What would need to become true for the missionary's present role to become unnecessary?

An institution capable of answering that question is less likely to confuse its own permanence with the mission's success.

Majority World Churches Have Gravity Too. Institutional gravity is not a Western problem.

A rapidly growing African denomination can become preoccupied with its own buildings and leadership structures.

A Korean megachurch can invest heavily in familiar overseas relationships while overlooking migrant or minority populations nearby.

A Latin American mission network can reproduce denominational rivalries and donor incentives.

The point is organizational, not geographic.

Every institution develops constituencies.

Every church sees some needs more easily than others.

Polycentric mission multiplies missionary agency; it does not abolish institutional self-interest.

What Surveys Can and Cannot Tell Us. Some contemporary Christian surveys suggest uncertainty about missionary responsibility. Barna's U.S. research, for example, has documented differences among American Christians and pastors regarding whether the Great Commission is understood as a mandate for all Christians or a particular calling for some.¹

Such findings are useful only when kept inside their actual scope.

They do not tell us what Christians everywhere believe.

They do reveal a theological tension that appears in many evangelical settings: churches may simultaneously affirm that mission is central to Christianity and speak as though mission belongs mainly to people who receive an extraordinary call.

The next chapter addresses that tension directly.

¹Barna Group, "Pastors See Missions as a Mandate, But Christians Aren't So Sure" (April 20, 2022), based on 2021 U.S. surveys of 2,000 self-identified Christian adults and 507 Protestant senior pastors. Barna reported that 85 percent of pastors described missions as a mandate for all Christians, while among Christians the more common response was that missions is a calling for some (51 percent) rather than a mandate for all (25 percent). These findings are useful for illustrating one U.S. evangelical tension and should not be generalized as a global Christian survey.

Rebuilding a Congregation's Missionary Imagination

Mission becomes central not when a church adds more missionary slogans but when global responsibility is integrated into ordinary discipleship.

Children hear about Christians from many cultures without learning to imagine them mainly as recipients of Western help.

Young adults encounter missionary vocation before career decisions have hardened.

Prayer includes named churches and peoples rather than generic requests for "the mission field."

Preaching treats Acts, the prophets, the Gospels, and the epistles as part of one biblical world rather than reserving mission for an annual theme.

Migrants and international students are received as neighbors and potential co-laborers, not only as outreach targets.

Returning missionaries are allowed to describe ambiguity, failure, culture shock, and change rather than performing only inspirational stories.

Financial reports explain why patient language learning can be a legitimate ministry expense.

These practices matter because imagination precedes allocation.

A church will rarely make long, costly commitments to people it has never learned to see.

The objective is not to make every Christian preoccupied with one strategic map. It is to form congregations in which concern beyond the immediate social horizon is normal enough that pioneer responsibility does not disappear whenever local pressure rises.

Institutional gravity never vanishes.

Missionary formation gives the church counterweights.

Counteracting Institutional Gravity

Gravity is not defeated once.

It is counteracted repeatedly.

Churches can build practices that keep less-visible missionary responsibilities present:

- regular biblical teaching on God's concern for the nations,
- intercession that includes specific peoples and churches,
- relationships with missionaries and Majority World Christians,
- periodic review of inherited mission commitments,
- candidate formation,

- hospitality toward migrants,
- external research that challenges local blind spots.

The practices should not make mission feel like permanent crisis.

A healthy missionary church does not need every worship service to become a mobilization event.

It needs a normal Christian life broad enough to include people beyond the congregation's immediate horizon.

Institutional gravity helps explain why mission becomes peripheral without anyone intending it.

But another question remains.

Even where Christians care deeply about mission, many are unsure whether they themselves should go.

The Calling Question

“Are you called?”

The question has shaped missionary biographies, recruitment events, interviews, and private Christian decisions for generations.

It can perform a healthy function. Cross-cultural mission is demanding. A church should not send someone merely because the person feels adventurous or guilty after an emotional conference.

But *calling* can also become so mysterious that willing, mature Christians wait indefinitely for an experience Scripture never promises every missionary will receive.

The theological difficulty is that several different kinds of calling are often compressed into one word.

A clearer account distinguishes three levels.

Calling to Christ

The fundamental Christian calling is the call to Christ himself.

The New Testament speaks repeatedly of Christians as people who are called:

- into fellowship with Christ,
- into holiness,
- into one body,
- into God’s kingdom.

This call is universal among Christians.

Before a person asks whether God is calling him to Pakistan, church planting, or Bible translation, the more basic question is whether he is learning to follow Christ in ordinary life.

Missionary vocation should grow from discipleship rather than substitute for it.

A candidate who cannot:

- receive correction,
- serve a local church,
- keep commitments,
- reconcile conflict,
- practice sexual integrity,
- steward money,

will not become mature simply by entering a more dramatic setting.

The missionary is first a disciple.

Particular Vocation. Christians do not possess identical vocations.

Paul's image of the body makes diversity integral to the church rather than a concession to weakness. Different gifts and roles serve the same body.

Some Christians become pastors.

Some become artisans, scholars, parents, engineers, physicians, farmers, teachers, or administrators.

Some enter sustained cross-cultural gospel ministry.

This book uses *missionary* primarily for that latter vocation rather than saying every Christian is a missionary.

The distinction preserves two truths simultaneously:

Every Christian participates in Christ's mission.

Not every Christian occupies the same missionary role.

Particular Assignment

Even a genuine missionary vocation leaves many questions unanswered.

Which people?

Which country?

Which language?

Which role?

Which team?

For how long?

A person can be well suited to missionary work and poorly suited to one particular assignment.

A skilled theological educator may not be the best pioneer church planter.

A person able to thrive in a multilingual city may struggle in an isolated rural context.

A family with a child needing specialist medical support may be unable to serve responsibly in a region without adequate care.

Assignment therefore requires contextual discernment rather than merely general willingness.

The Special-Call Model. One evangelical tradition emphasizes an extraordinary personal missionary call.

The pattern is familiar from missionary biographies:

A verse becomes overwhelming.

A sermon creates conviction.

A dream or vision directs attention toward a people.

An unusual providential event confirms the decision.

Scripture certainly includes extraordinary divine guidance.

Paul receives visions. Prophets speak. The Spirit directs and restrains missionary movement in Acts. Christians should not construct a theology in which such guidance is impossible merely because it cannot be standardized.

The problem arises when extraordinary guidance becomes a universal prerequisite.

Scripture does not teach that every missionary must receive the same kind of subjective experience before going.

A person can become trapped in endless waiting:

I am willing, but God has not given me a sign.

The special-call model then unintentionally makes inaction the default that requires no discernment while action requires supernatural certification.

The Wisdom-and-Discernment Model

A second approach treats missionary vocation more like other Christian decisions.

The person asks:

What does Scripture command the church?

What gifts has God given me?

What desires persist?

What do mature Christians who know me observe?

What needs and opportunities exist?

What circumstances has providence opened or closed?

The final decision emerges through wisdom rather than one extraordinary signal.

This model has considerable biblical strength because much Christian decision-making in the New Testament appears ordinary rather than spectacular.

Its danger is becoming merely career planning.

Missionary vocation is not simply a compatibility matrix between personality and labor-market need. It involves availability to Christ, sacrifice, church discernment, and concern for people beyond one's natural networks.

Wisdom must remain Christian wisdom.

The Command-and-Availability Model. A third missionary tradition begins with the Great Commission itself.

Christ has already commanded the church to make disciples among all nations.

Why should a Christian require another command before considering participation?

The provocative version asks:

Why stay unless God calls you to stay?

This approach can expose the unexamined assumption that ordinary professional life in one's home society requires no calling while missionary service does.

It can also become coercive.

The New Testament does not teach that every Christian should become a pioneer missionary unless prevented by God. The body needs different gifts and roles. Churches need pastors. Children need parents. Societies need Christians in ordinary professions.

Missionary mobilization should not manufacture guilt by treating geographical distance as a hierarchy of obedience.

Scripture Rarely Gives a Decision Algorithm

The search for calling often becomes a search for certainty.

Christians want a method that will identify one correct location, agency, spouse, profession, or ministry role and eliminate the possibility of a mistaken decision.

The New Testament rarely offers that kind of algorithm.

Acts contains extraordinary guidance: visions, prophetic speech, the Spirit's restraint, dramatic providence. It also contains ordinary planning, disagreement, travel decisions, team selection, strategic preference, and adaptation after circumstances change. Paul can speak of divine constraint and also of personal ambition. A church can pray and send while missionaries still make practical judgments about where to go next.

This pattern matters because it changes the purpose of discernment.

The objective is not to achieve omniscience about the future.

It is to make a faithful decision with the light actually given.

A mature Christian may choose between two legitimate missionary assignments without being able to prove that one was secretly the only permissible option. Providence can guide through the decision rather than only before it.

This reduces the spiritual anxiety that can paralyze willing candidates.

It also reduces manipulative certainty.

Leaders should be cautious about saying, "God told me what you must do," when Scripture itself often leaves faithful servants making real judgments under uncertainty.

A Better Synthesis. The three approaches preserve genuine insights.

Extraordinary guidance can occur.

Wisdom and church discernment are normal.

The Great Commission creates real responsibility rather than optional interest.

A balanced formulation is therefore possible:

The church possesses a universal missionary responsibility, while particular cross-cultural vocation should be discerned through Scripture, character, desire, gifting, church recognition, wisdom, providence, opportunity, and willingness—with room for extraordinary divine guidance without requiring it as the universal norm.

This moves the discussion from one question—"Did I receive a call?"—to a richer process of discernment.

Desire Is Not Suspicious. Some Christians distrust desire because they assume God's will will probably be the thing they least want to do.

That is not a sound theology of vocation.

Desire can be selfish.

It can also be one of the means through which vocation becomes visible.

Paul expresses ambition to preach where Christ is not known. The desire is not treated as inherently suspect because it is desire.

A Christian who consistently longs to learn Arabic, lives well cross-culturally, is affirmed by the church, and possesses appropriate gifts need not wait until the desire is contradicted by a dramatic sign.

Neither should desire alone control the decision.

Calling is discerned in community because we misunderstand ourselves easily.

Calling and Competence

Willingness is essential.

It is not enough.

Missionary history contains people whose courage exceeded their preparation. Zeal can carry a worker across a border. It cannot by itself create language aptitude, emotional stability, theological judgment, professional competence, or the ability to live peaceably on a team.

Competence should therefore be understood as part of vocation rather than as a secular obstacle to spiritual obedience.

The church asks not only:

Is this person willing to go?

but:

What kind of cross-cultural work is this person capable of doing responsibly?

Competence is task-specific.

A gifted evangelist may be a poor administrator.

A strong scholar may be unsuited to crisis-heavy pioneer work.

A physician may contribute through specialist training without becoming a church planter.

A businessperson may create legitimate professional presence while needing local partners for theological ministry.

Weakness does not automatically disqualify a candidate; every missionary has weaknesses. The question is whether the team and role are structured realistically around them.

This protects both the missionary and the receiving community from a theology in which sincerity excuses preventable incompetence.

Church Recognition. Acts 13 remains especially important.

Barnabas and Saul are set apart within a worshipping church. The Spirit's guidance and communal recognition appear together.

Healthy missionary sending therefore requires churches that know candidates before commissioning them.

The church should be able to answer questions an agency application cannot discover quickly:

How does this person respond when nobody notices service?

How does she handle disagreement?

Does he exaggerate spiritual stories?

Is she teachable?

Does the candidate already share faith and disciple others?

Mission agencies can evaluate professional and field-specific suitability.

They should not become substitutes for ecclesial knowledge of character.

The Church Has a Duty Not to Send

Sending is sometimes treated as the courageous decision and restraint as lack of faith.

A responsible church must sometimes say no.

A candidate may possess unresolved patterns of dishonesty, sexual misconduct, uncontrolled anger, financial irresponsibility, untreated addiction, or chronic refusal of correction. Cross-cultural distance will not sanctify those patterns. It may make them harder to detect.

A candidate may also be spiritually mature but unsuited to a particular context.

The family may have health needs the field cannot reasonably support.

The person may lack the language-learning capacity required for the role.

A marriage may already be under severe strain.

A worker may be trying to escape an ordinary life problem by giving it missionary significance.

The church's refusal need not mean:

You are not valuable.

It can mean:

We do not believe this assignment is wise now.

This is one reason genuine church recognition matters. Commissioning is not a ceremony that follows a private call automatically. It is an ecclesial act of judgment and responsibility.

A church that sends someone shares moral responsibility for the decision.

Calling and Singleness, Marriage, and Family. Vocation becomes especially complex when more than one person bears the consequences.

A married Christian cannot simply declare:

God called me; therefore God called my spouse.

The spouse is a moral agent before God rather than an accessory to another person's missionary identity.

Couples need genuine shared discernment.

Children complicate the matter further. Parents make many legitimate decisions for children, including where to live. Yet missionary rhetoric can use "calling" to silence reasonable questions about:

- education,
- health,
- safety,
- repeated loss.

A vocation that affects a family should be discerned with attention to the family's actual flourishing, not merely the candidate's sense of spiritual heroism.

Calling Can Be Revised

Missionary culture sometimes treats calling as irrevocable in a way Scripture does not require.

A worker enters one country convinced God led the decision.

Years later:

- health changes,
- political conditions shift,
- children need care,
- the ministry changes,
- another role becomes more strategic.

Has leaving become disobedience?

Not necessarily.

Providence changes.

Vocational assignments can change.

A missionary may remain called to cross-cultural ministry while changing region or role. Another may return permanently and serve the church differently.

Faithfulness is not immobility.

When Calling Language Becomes Dangerous. The most serious misuse occurs when leaders invoke calling to preserve organizational control.

A worker reports abuse or dysfunction.

The response is:

God called you here. Do not abandon your post.

Spiritual language then makes an institutional preference appear divine.

Calling should never be used to trap people inside:

- abusive leadership,
- unsafe situations,
- roles for which they are no longer suited.

God's authority is not an agency's property.

This point becomes important in Chapter 24's discussion of spiritual power.

Ordinary Obedience Before Extraordinary Guidance. The strongest preparation for missionary discernment is rarely another conference.

It is ordinary Christian faithfulness.

Does the person pray when no decision is pending?

Serve when the task is unimpressive?

Share faith before receiving a missionary title?

Build friendships across difference where they already live?

Give generously?

Learn patiently?

Receive authority without becoming passive?

Exercise initiative without becoming unaccountable?

Missionary calling becomes clearer when it emerges from an established pattern of discipleship.

This also protects vocation from fantasy.

A candidate may imagine that a distant culture will awaken courage, discipline, or evangelistic passion that is absent at home. Sometimes a new environment does expose new gifts. More often, existing patterns travel with the missionary.

The person who avoids conflict at home will still face conflict abroad.

The person who cannot submit to ordinary church leadership may struggle on a missionary team.

The person who is fascinated by cultures but uninterested in actual neighbors may be attracted to travel more than mission.

Extraordinary guidance, when it comes, does not make ordinary formation unnecessary.

It gives direction to a life already learning obedience.

From Calling to Preparation

A healthier doctrine of calling does not necessarily produce more missionaries immediately.

It produces better questions.

Am I mature?

Am I willing?

What gifts do others recognize?

Which needs fit those gifts?

What responsibilities already belong to me?

What does my church discern?

These questions can lead a Christian either to go or to stay.

Both decisions can be obedient.

For those who go, however, vocational clarity solves only one problem.

Mission remains a long work conducted by institutions often structured around short horizons.

The Problem of Short Horizons

Missionary institutions often operate on shorter timescales than language, trust, discipleship, leadership, and church maturity require.

The mismatch is structural.

Budgets are annual.

Projects run for two or three years.

Leadership terms end.

Grants require reports.

Short-term teams arrive and leave.

Human formation follows a different clock.

That difference helps explain why serious missionary effort can produce shallow outcomes even without bad motives.

The First Language Plateau

New missionaries frequently underestimate how long language learning will remain central.

The first year can produce dramatic progress. Everyday tasks become manageable. The worker can tell a testimony, order food, travel independently, and participate in basic conversation.

Then the curve changes.

The difference between conversational competence and the language required for pastoral work is enormous.

Can the missionary understand indirect disagreement?

Can she hear sarcasm?

Can he counsel a marriage without missing social implications?

Can the worker discuss theological abstraction naturally?

Can she understand a sermon delivered quickly by a local pastor rather than carefully simplified language-school speech?

Those capacities take years.

A mission organization can move a worker into visible ministry before the language is ready, especially when donors expect activity.

The ministry may then remain permanently dependent on translators or simplified communication.

Trust Has No Curriculum. Trust develops even less predictably.

A missionary can finish a language course.

No one can graduate from trust after twelve months.

A community watches:

Does this person stay?

Does she keep confidences?

Does he disappear when political pressure increases?

Does the missionary listen after disagreement?

Does money change the relationship?

Previous missionary turnover can make the process slower. A local Christian who has invested deeply in several foreign friendships only to watch workers leave may become reluctant to invest again.

Trust therefore accumulates not only from present behavior but against remembered absence.

Conversion Is a Beginning

Mission reports understandably celebrate conversions.

The event matters enormously.

The difficulty begins after it.

A new Christian needs to interpret faith within ordinary life.

What happens to family ceremonies?

Can the believer attend a religious wedding?

How should ancestral rites be handled?

What happens when a spouse remains Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or unaffiliated?

How does a business owner respond to corruption expected by the market?

How should a believer interpret illness and spiritual fear?

These questions may not emerge during evangelistic instruction.

They emerge through years of discipleship.

Missionary systems optimized for initial response can therefore report dramatic growth before anyone knows whether Christian identity will survive ordinary social pressure.

Leadership Formation Is Slower Still. The transition from new believer to trusted church leader is one of mission's most consequential time horizons.

Two opposite pressures create danger.

The first is **premature transfer**. Missionaries committed to local leadership identify gifted recent converts and give substantial authority quickly. The intention is admirable. Character has not yet been observed across enough seasons.

The second is **permanent delay**. Foreign missionaries repeatedly find reasons local leaders are not ready. Since the missionaries possess more theological education and organizational experience, the standard of readiness keeps moving.

Healthy leadership development requires both patience and intention. Potential leaders need opportunities to:

- teach,
- fail,
- receive correction,
- manage conflict,
- handle money,
- shepherd people.

The missionary must tolerate local decisions that are different from the missionary's preferences without tolerating serious theological or ethical failure.

That discernment takes time.

ReMAP and the Retention Question

Missionary longevity depends partly on organizational quality.

The ReMAP II study, published in 2007 in *Worth Keeping*, examined missionary retention through data from roughly six hundred agencies across twenty-two countries and nearly forty thousand missionaries.¹

¹Rob Hay et al., eds., *Worth Keeping: Global Perspectives on Best Practice in Missionary Retention* (William Carey Publishing, 2007), reporting the ReMAP II research involving approximately six hundred agencies in twenty-two countries and nearly forty thousand missionaries. The study is historically important but should not be represented as a current 2026 global attrition rate.

Its scale makes it important.

Its date matters just as much.

It cannot supply a current 2026 global missionary attrition rate. Missionary sending has changed, Majority World agencies have expanded, and organizational practices have evolved.

The study's enduring contribution is causal: preventable attrition is influenced by preparation, leadership, relationships, organizational culture, and care rather than being reducible to individual spiritual weakness.

Missionaries do not simply fail organizations.

Organizations can fail missionaries.

Retention Is Not Always the Goal. Missionary retention statistics can create their own distortion.

If an organization defines success as keeping every worker on the field, it may pressure unhealthy workers to remain or treat transitions as failure.

Some attrition is preventable and harmful.

Some departures are wise.

A worker may discover the role is a poor fit.

A family crisis may require return.

A local church may no longer need the missionary's role.

Another field may require the worker more.

Retention should therefore be evaluated in relation to:

- calling,
- health,
- task,
- local need,

rather than maximizing duration for its own sake.

Short-Term Mission as a Tool. Short-term mission magnifies the time problem because the format is intentionally brief.

The modern short-term trip can expose participants to global Christianity, encourage long-term missionaries, strengthen partnerships, provide specialized professional service, or help churches discern longer commitments.

Problems arise when a two-week instrument is assigned a ten-year objective.

A short-term visitor cannot normally:

- learn a difficult language,
- understand a community deeply,
- develop mature leaders,

- establish trusted pastoral relationships.

Recent missiological research continues to document both contributions and problems, including the perspective of host communities.²

The strongest general principle is modest:

short-term mission should serve long-term, host-defined relationships rather than become an independent event whose meaning is determined mainly by the visiting team.

Who Benefits From the Trip?

A church sometimes evaluates a short-term trip primarily through what participants learned.

Students became grateful.

Members developed missionary passion.

A future long-term worker discovered vocation.

These are legitimate outcomes.

They are not sufficient if the trip imposed significant cost or disruption on the host church.

A sending church should be willing to ask:

Would our partners still want this trip if our members gained nothing personally?

If the answer is no, the activity may be primarily a discipleship program for the sending church conducted inside another community.

That does not automatically make it wrong.

It should be named honestly and designed so that hosts are not instrumentalized.

Project Time Versus Church Time. Donor-funded projects often require defined start and end dates.

This is useful for accountability.

Church formation does not fit easily inside the model.

A project can fund three years of leadership training.

²See Simone Mulieri Twibell, "Contributions, Challenges, and Emerging Patterns of Short-Term Missions," *Missiology* 48, no. 4 (2020): 344–59; David Barr, host-perspective research in Uganda, *Missiology* 47, no. 4 (2019): 372–94; and Sue M. Holdsworth, "Short-Term Mission Trips: A Luxury the World Can No Longer Afford?," *Missiology* (first published online January 19, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00918296251410530>. Together these illustrate both potential benefits and persistent ethical and strategic concerns; Holdsworth specifically argues for much stricter criteria in light of cost and uncertain benefit.

The church may require twenty years to develop mature theological institutions.

A translation grant can finance one stage of a language program.

Scripture engagement may continue for generations.

Mission organizations therefore need to distinguish **project completion** from **mission outcome**.

A project can succeed while the deeper process remains unfinished.

The Donor's Need for Evidence

Financial accountability is necessary.

The problem is choosing evidence that fits the timescale.

Language learning should not be evaluated primarily by baptisms in year one.

A pioneer relationship ministry should not be evaluated by church attendance before enough trust exists.

Leadership development should not be judged only by how many people completed a course.

Mission organizations need intermediate indicators appropriate to the phase of work:

- language proficiency,
- relational network depth,
- local participation in decisions,
- theological comprehension,
- leadership responsibility.

These indicators are less dramatic.

They are often more honest.

Member Care as Time Infrastructure. Long mission requires systems capable of sustaining human beings over time.

Member care includes more than crisis counseling. It involves preparation, relationships, rest, transition support, family care, and re-entry.

Missionaries experience predictable forms of loss:

- leaving home,
- language incompetence,
- friendship turnover,
- cultural fatigue,
- children's transitions.

None necessarily indicates pathology.

Ignoring them can turn ordinary strain into avoidable breakdown.

Chapter 28 will develop member care constructively. Here it belongs as a causal explanation: institutions that invest heavily in deployment but weakly in long-term care may repeatedly lose experienced workers just as those workers become genuinely useful.

The Cost of Constant Turnover

Turnover is especially expensive in high-distance fields.

Suppose a missionary needs three years to become linguistically capable and another several years to build deep relational trust.

If workers leave after four or five years, the organization repeatedly finances the most expensive learning phase without benefiting from mature competence.

Local partners also pay relational cost.

A church may prefer one imperfect worker who remains teachable for fifteen years over a sequence of highly trained workers who each stay three.

Longevity itself is not virtue.

In certain tasks, continuity is strategically valuable.

Experience Is a Mission Asset. Mission organizations sometimes treat workers as interchangeable units because job descriptions can be standardized.

Experience is not standardized.

A worker who has spent ten years in one language has accumulated knowledge that rarely appears fully in reports:

- which phrases sound natural,
- which leaders can be trusted,
- which conflicts are historical rather than personal,
- how local officials actually behave,
- what children hear at school,
- which theological terms create confusion,
- when silence means disagreement,
- when a public invitation creates embarrassment.

Much of this is tacit knowledge.

It cannot be transferred quickly through orientation documents.

This makes experienced missionaries, local colleagues, and long-term partnerships unusually valuable. Their significance is not merely that they have survived longer. It is that time has converted repeated exposure into judgment.

Organizations that lose experienced people repeatedly lose this invisible capital.

The same principle applies to locally rooted leaders even more strongly. When an expatriate worker leaves, a local pastor may preserve decades of relational memory. A mature mission strategy therefore asks not merely how to retain expatriates but how to retain and distribute contextual knowledge across the whole local and missionary network.

When Long Becomes Too Long

The corrective should not become romanticism about career missionaries who never leave.

A missionary can stay so long that identity, authority, and organizational control become inseparable from the person.

Local leaders remain assistants because the foreign missionary has become indispensable.

Long-term mission is healthiest when its duration serves local maturity rather than permanent missionary centrality.

This returns us to the question introduced earlier:

What would need to become true for this role to change or end?

Transitions Are Part of Mission. Long-term thinking includes leaving well.

Missionary transitions are often treated as administrative events at the edge of “real ministry.” In reality, departure can strengthen or damage years of work.

A rushed exit may leave:

- local leaders uncertain about authority,
- finances without clear ownership,
- sensitive data in foreign systems,
- friendships without explanation,
- children and families carrying unresolved grief,
- a replacement worker inheriting relationships without context.

A healthy transition therefore requires more than handing over passwords.

The missionary should clarify roles, transfer decision rights, document institutional knowledge, communicate honestly with local partners, and create space for grief. When possible, successors should be introduced relationally rather than merely appointed organizationally.

The same principle applies when the goal is genuine local handoff. Transfer is not complete because a local leader receives a title while the foreign organization retains money, property, donor communication, and veto power.

A long horizon asks whether authority has actually moved.

Leaving can be one of the missionary's most important acts of service.

A Long-Horizon Scorecard

Short horizons persist partly because organizations measure what is easy to count.

A long-horizon strategy needs indicators that make slow progress visible without pretending to measure spiritual outcomes mechanically.

Different phases require different evidence.

During early pioneer work, useful indicators may include:

- language proficiency,
- breadth and depth of local relationships,
- understanding of religious and social context,
- security practices shaped with local input.

During emerging discipleship, indicators may include:

- ability of new believers to interpret Christian faith within family and work,
- use of Scripture without constant missionary mediation,
- durability of relationships under pressure,
- participation in community decisions.

During leadership formation, the questions change again:

- Who teaches?
- Who handles conflict?
- Who controls money?
- Who can correct the missionary?
- Can local leaders train others?
- Does the ministry continue when expatriates are absent?

These are not guarantees of church maturity.

They are more truthful than demanding the same visible outcome from every stage.

The principle is simple:

measure the work appropriate to the season.

Organizations still need numbers.

They also need narratives, qualitative judgment, and local evaluation capable of showing whether apparent growth represents increasing Christian capacity or merely increasing missionary activity.

Matching Horizon to Task

Missionary work needs different clocks.

A surgeon serving a six-week specialist training program may contribute enormously.

A consultant can solve a technical problem in months.

A pioneer language-and-church-planting role may require a decade or more.

A theological institution may need intergenerational partnership.

The principle is not:

longer is better.

It is:

the time horizon should match the task.

This sounds obvious.

Institutional incentives often push in the opposite direction.

Short horizons help explain shallow outcomes.

But time alone cannot guarantee health. A mission organization can remain for decades and still create dependency, abuse, or foreign control.

That is the final diagnostic problem.

When Mission Goes Wrong

Missionary history contains extraordinary sacrifice, translation, service, friendship, and church formation.

It also contains failure.

That failure should not surprise Christian theology. Missionaries are sinners. Churches are fallible. Institutions develop interests. Spiritual language can amplify ordinary human power.

The central problem can be stated simply:

mission becomes dangerous when power operates without sufficient accountability and local agency.

Power itself is not evil. Leadership requires authority. Money can serve. Expertise matters. The question is whether power is named, bounded, shared appropriately, and answerable to those who bear its consequences.

Power Exists Before It Is Abused

Missionary ethics becomes shallow when power is discussed only after obvious abuse occurs.

Power exists in ordinary relationships.

The person who can approve a salary has power.

The person who controls access to international donors has power.

The person who speaks the donor's language has power.

The person whose passport permits evacuation has power.

The person whose theological credentials determine who is considered "trained" has power.

The person whose newsletter tells the story to thousands of supporters has power.

None of these facts proves wrongdoing.

They identify the conditions in which responsibility increases.

Christian leaders sometimes respond to power analysis by insisting that they do not *feel* powerful. That is insufficient. Power is partly structural. A missionary may live modestly, feel culturally incompetent, and sincerely love local colleagues while still controlling the grant that pays their salaries.

Naming power is therefore not an accusation.

It is the beginning of accountability.

The practical question is:

Which decisions can I make that others affected by those decisions cannot realistically contest?

Where the answer is “many,” governance needs deliberate counterweights.

Cultural Power. The missionary often arrives with recognized expertise.

The worker may possess:

- theological education,
- professional credentials,
- mission training,
- international networks.

Local Christians possess forms of expertise the missionary lacks:

- language,
- family networks,
- religious memory,
- political knowledge,
- social reputation.

Missionary systems can value the first set more highly because formal institutions recognize them more easily.

The foreign missionary becomes “the expert.”

Local Christians become “the context.”

This division is artificial.

A seminary degree does not make someone expert in another community’s social world. Local knowledge does not automatically make someone a sound theologian. Mission requires both, and healthy partnerships should organize authority accordingly.

Financial Power

Money is one of mission's greatest gifts and greatest distortions.

Foreign money can:

- translate Scripture,
- support pastors under persecution,
- build schools,
- train leaders,
- fund relief,
- sustain research.

It can also reshape local institutions around donor priorities.

The person controlling salaries can influence leadership without issuing direct commands. A local pastor who disagrees with a foreign partner may technically possess authority while knowing disagreement could end the funding on which staff depend.

The relationship can look equal in meetings while remaining structurally unequal.

This is why Chapter 27 will insist that money be treated as a contribution rather than automatic decision-making authority.

Dependency: A Word That Can Hide Power. Missionaries frequently warn against financial dependency.

The concern is legitimate when ministries are built around costs local communities cannot sustain and foreign funding prevents local responsibility from developing.

But the term can carry paternalistic assumptions.

Every church depends on networks.

Western churches depend on:

- historic wealth,
- denominational systems,
- seminaries,
- publishers,
- tax structures,
- donors.

Interdependence is normal Christian life.

The better question is whether a financial arrangement:

- weakens local agency,
- places decisive authority far from consequences,

- creates structures that collapse if one donor leaves.

The objective is not isolated self-sufficiency.

It is healthy interdependence.

Spiritual Power. Mission adds another layer of authority because leaders speak about God.

A supervisor can say:

This is agency policy.

A spiritual leader can say:

God wants this.

The second statement is far harder to challenge.

Calling language can become particularly powerful. A worker considering departure hears:

God called you here.

A local Christian questions a missionary leader and is told the resistance reflects spiritual immaturity.

A candidate feels pressured to accept a role because leaders say they have discerned God's will.

Spiritual authority becomes abusive when divine claims insulate human decisions from examination.

What the 2026 Abuse Research Can Tell Us

A 2026 qualitative study in *Pastoral Psychology* examined precursors to spiritual abuse in Christian mission organizations using grounded-theory methodology. The researchers identified recurring themes including the idealization of missions or missionaries, strong personal values surrounding calling, unrealistic expectations placed on leaders, and hierarchical power dynamics.¹

The study is valuable precisely when its limits are respected.

¹Jamie Klemashevich, Karen Roudkovski, Helen Runyan, Ashley Jamison, and Robert Olson, "Precursors to Spiritual Abuse in Christian Mission Organizations," *Pastoral Psychology* (published online March 2026), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-026-01313-y>. The grounded-theory study identifies four recurring precursor categories—idealization of missionaries and mission work, personal values around calling, unrealistic expectations, and hierarchical power dynamics. It is qualitative research and should not be used to infer global prevalence.

It does not tell us the global prevalence of spiritual abuse in mission organizations.

It identifies patterns through qualitative research.

Those patterns are plausible enough to warrant institutional attention without being converted into claims such as:

most mission agencies are abusive.

Responsible criticism requires the same methodological integrity demanded of mission statistics elsewhere in this book.

Charisma and the Heroic Missionary. Mission cultures can idealize exceptional leaders.

The missionary endured danger.

Founded a movement.

Raised millions.

Speaks several languages.

Stories of sacrifice inspire legitimate gratitude.

They can also make accountability feel disloyal.

An organization built around a founder may find it difficult to distinguish:

criticizing the leader

from:

attacking the mission.

The problem is intensified when donors know the charismatic leader better than local staff do. Local complaints can appear to threaten the story donors were taught to trust.

Healthy mission structures should become more accountable as influence increases, not less.

Institutional Self-Protection. Organizations possess a natural incentive to protect reputation.

A serious abuse allegation can threaten:

- donors,
- staff morale,
- legal liability,
- access to a country,
- partnerships.

This makes denial tempting even for organizations committed to Christian truth.

A theology of repentance should produce the opposite instinct.

Christian institutions proclaim that confession and repentance are possible because grace is real.

An agency that cannot admit institutional failure contradicts its own gospel at the organizational level.

Repentance may require:

- independent investigation,
- removal of leaders,
- public acknowledgment,
- compensation or restoration where possible,
- policy change,
- long-term accountability.

Protecting the mission's reputation cannot become more important than protecting people harmed inside the mission.

Safeguarding

Missionary environments can contain unusual safeguarding risks.

Workers may operate in places with:

- weak legal systems,
- vulnerable refugees,
- residential schools,
- children's ministries,
- unequal expatriate/local power.

Religious trust can make people less likely to suspect misconduct by missionaries.

Organizations therefore need robust safeguarding procedures independent of assumptions about a worker's spiritual maturity.

A strong testimony is not a background check.

A sense of calling is not a safeguarding system.

Prayer is not a substitute for reporting structures.

Christian character and professional protection should reinforce one another.

Cross-Cultural Complaint Systems. Safeguarding policies can exist on paper while remaining unusable in practice.

A local employee may technically be allowed to report a missionary supervisor but know that the complaint will be translated by the supervisor's colleague, evaluated by headquarters abroad, and communicated to donors through the same leadership network.

A missionary child may know that reporting misconduct could threaten the family's ministry, housing, or visa.

A national church worker may come from a culture where directly accusing an elder or senior leader carries severe social cost.

A reporting system designed only around formal permission therefore misses the real barrier.

Usable complaint systems need multiple channels.

At least one channel should bypass the direct chain of command.

Reporting should be possible in languages people actually use under stress.

Whistleblowers need protection from retaliation.

Serious allegations should not be investigated solely by people whose reputation, funding, or relationships depend on the accused leader.

Local legal obligations must be understood, but internal processes should not become excuses for avoiding legitimate civil authorities where reporting is required or appropriate.

Cross-cultural accountability is difficult precisely because norms of hierarchy, shame, privacy, and institutional loyalty differ.

That complexity strengthens the case for independent channels.

It does not weaken it.

Storytelling as Power

Missionary fundraising depends heavily on stories.

A convert's testimony can inspire prayer and generosity.

It can also expose the person whose story is being told.

Who owns the testimony?

Did the person understand that it would be shared globally?

Could relatives identify the convert?

Does the story simplify a complex community into a dramatic before-and-after narrative?

The organization's need for donor communication does not create automatic rights over another person's story.

This is especially serious in persecuted or high-surveillance environments.

Consent should be informed, contextual, and revisable where possible.

Data Is Missionary Power. Digital ministry adds another asset missionaries can control: data.

Organizations may possess:

- contact lists,
- language recordings,
- testimony archives,
- translation corpora,
- discipleship records,
- location data.

In the age of artificial intelligence, local-language datasets acquire new technical and commercial value.

The missionary question therefore includes data ownership.

Who can reuse a community's recordings?

Can data be transferred to an AI provider?

Who understands the privacy implications?

A local church should not lose control of sensitive religious data simply because an international organization supplied the technology used to collect it.

Local Leadership Is Not Magic

Mission critique sometimes assumes that replacing foreigners with local leaders solves the power problem.

It does not.

A locally rooted pastor can be:

- authoritarian,
- financially corrupt,
- sexually abusive,
- ethnically exclusionary.

Locality provides contextual legitimacy and reduces certain forms of foreign domination.

It does not remove sin.

The alternative to foreign paternalism is therefore not unaccountable local control.

It is locally rooted leadership inside systems of theological, ethical, and institutional accountability.

This is why Part V repeatedly pairs *local* with *globally connected*.

The wider church can provide:

- peer relationships,
- expertise,
- correction,
- support.

Healthy interdependence is stronger than either foreign control or romantic local isolation.

When Missionary Money Distorts Conversion. Financial inequality can also distort the meaning of religious response.

If becoming Christian provides access to:

- jobs,
- education,
- aid,
- migration networks,

a new believer may face suspicion that conversion is economically motivated.

Sometimes the accusation is unfair.

Sometimes mission systems unintentionally create the incentive.

Christian service should therefore be structured so that help is not conditional upon religious response.

The gospel invitation must remain distinct from economic leverage.

This is particularly important in humanitarian crises.

A refugee receiving food should never need to wonder whether faith is the hidden price.

Mission and Coercion. Christian mission is inherently persuasive. It asks people to believe claims the missionary regards as true and important.

Persuasion is not coercion.

Coercion occurs when power over another person's material, legal, or social situation is used to obtain religious compliance.

The boundary can become blurred when missionaries occupy roles as:

- employers,
- teachers,
- doctors,

- aid providers.

Ethical mission maintains the freedom to say no.

The patient receives care.

The employee keeps employment.

The student receives fair grading.

Religious conversation should occur in relationships where refusal does not threaten basic goods controlled by the missionary.

Accountability Across Cultures. Accountability itself must be contextualized.

A Western agency may impose procedures designed around Western law and corporate governance without understanding local structures.

A local church may rely so heavily on relational hierarchy that complaints against elders become nearly impossible.

Neither system is automatically sufficient.

Healthy mission needs multiple channels of accountability:

- local,
- organizational,
- ecclesial,
- professional,
- legal where appropriate.

The goal is not maximum bureaucracy.

It is preventing any one person or institution from becoming the sole judge of its own behavior.

The Accountability Triangle

A healthy missionary structure should rarely be accountable in only one direction.

Three forms of accountability need to intersect.

The first is **local accountability**. People who live with the consequences of ministry should possess real voice. Local church leaders, employees, partners, and communities often see effects that distant boards cannot see.

The second is **sending accountability**. Churches and agencies that commission workers must supervise doctrine, character, finances, safeguarding, and organizational conduct. Sending should create responsibility rather than merely prestige.

The third is **external or professional accountability**. Some matters require expertise beyond either local relationships or missionary leadership: financial audits, safeguarding investigations, clinical supervision, legal advice, data protection, or independent review.

Each side corrects a weakness in the others.

Local systems can become captured by hierarchy or faction.

Sending organizations can protect their reputation.

External professionals can misunderstand context.

No one mechanism is sufficient.

The objective is not to create an impossible bureaucracy around every missionary decision. It is to ensure that serious power cannot become self-validating.

A leader should never be the final judge of an allegation against himself.

An organization should never be the only interpreter of harm caused by its own program.

A donor should never be the only constituency whose satisfaction determines whether ministry continues.

The Missionary's Willingness to Lose Control. The deepest power test arrives when local Christians choose differently from the missionary.

Perhaps they select another worship style.

Choose a slower growth strategy.

Reject a foreign program.

Allocate money differently.

The missionary must distinguish between decisions that violate Christian fidelity and decisions that merely violate missionary preference.

This is difficult because long service creates emotional ownership.

The missionary has sacrificed.

Raised funds.

Built relationships.

Sacrifice can quietly become entitlement:

After everything I gave, I should have influence.

Christian mission answers differently.

Service does not purchase control.

Exit, Handoff, and Institutional Mortality

Power is revealed most clearly by whether an institution can imagine its own reduced importance.

Mission organizations often speak about local ownership while retaining decisive assets:

- property titles,
- bank accounts,
- donor relationships,
- curriculum control,
- brand identity,
- senior appointments.

The local organization receives operational responsibility while strategic control remains elsewhere.

A genuine handoff asks harder questions.

Who can change the program?

Who appoints leaders?

Who can say no to the foreign partner?

Who owns the data and intellectual property?

Who communicates with donors?

Who has authority to close the ministry?

In some cases continued international partnership is desirable. Local ownership does not require isolation. But partnership becomes credible only when the local party can disagree without risking institutional extinction.

Missionary institutions should therefore cultivate what might be called **organizational mortality**: the capacity to complete a role, merge it, transfer it, or end it without interpreting institutional survival as a theological necessity.

The gospel does not require every mission agency to exist forever.

Sometimes the most faithful evidence of missionary success is that the original missionary structure is no longer central.

Repentance as Missionary Strength. A self-critical mission theology can sound pessimistic.

It should produce the opposite effect.

If missionary failure must be denied to preserve confidence in mission, the project is fragile.

Christian mission rests on Christ, not missionary innocence.

The church can acknowledge:

- colonial entanglement,
- racism,
- abuse,
- paternalism,
- financial distortion

without concluding that witness across cultures is illegitimate.

Repentance clarifies mission.

It removes false defenses and makes healthier practice possible.

The Constructive Turn

Part IV began by asking why unequal gospel access persists.

The answer is now clearer.

Resources cluster around existing relationships and institutions. External barriers make some contexts genuinely difficult. Cultural distance slows understanding. Churches are pulled toward visible and familiar needs. Vocational theology can either mobilize or inhibit potential workers. Institutional timelines can be shorter than discipleship. Missionary power can undermine local ownership.

These mechanisms interact.

They also point toward corresponding responses.

If resources cluster, mission needs deliberate pioneer priority and partnership.

If contexts are difficult, local leadership and legitimate alternative pathways matter.

If cultural distance is large, language and contextual learning matter.

If institutions become inward, mission must be formed into ordinary church life.

If calling is confused, discernment must improve.

If timelines are short, formation and care must support long obedience.

If power is distorted, authority and accountability must change.

Part V therefore does not begin by demanding more missionary activity.

That would risk reproducing every mechanism this Part has identified.

More workers without better allocation can reinforce existing concentration.

More courage without contextual judgment can expose local Christians.

More communication without cultural learning can multiply misunderstanding.

More mobilization without discernment can send unprepared people.

More projects without long horizons can create activity without mature churches.

More money without accountable local agency can deepen dependency and power imbalance.

The constructive question is different:

What kind of missionary practice turns access into durable, locally rooted Christian capacity without making the missionary institution itself the permanent center?

Part V begins there. It asks what missionary access should finally produce and what faithful mission requires now.

Part **V**

What Faithful Mission Requires Now

Part IV ended with a warning. Missionary activity can be energetic, sacrificial, well funded, technologically sophisticated, and still reproduce the very inequalities it intends to overcome. Workers can cluster where Christian institutions are already strong. Difficult environments can punish simplistic strategies. Cultural distance can make sincere communication unintelligible. Sending structures can become inward-looking. Calling language can confuse discernment. Short horizons can reward visible activity over durable formation. Money and spiritual authority can weaken the agency of the people mission claims to serve.

The constructive task must therefore begin with a different question from *How can the church do more mission?*

It is:

What kind of missionary practice turns access into durable, locally rooted Christian life without making the missionary, donor, technology, or sending organization the permanent center?

That question changes the horizon of strategy. If the goal is only exposure, then distribution becomes the dominant problem: more media, more workers, more events, more translations, more contacts. If the goal is disciple-making communities able to worship, teach Scripture, care for one another, form leaders, embody Christian holiness, and bear witness across generations, then mission must be judged by what remains when the initiating outsider becomes less central.

This Part develops six constructive movements.

Chapter 25 argues that the **local church is the normal missionary horizon**. Mission agencies, specialist ministries, digital platforms, schools, relief organizations, and expatriate workers can make indispensable contributions, but none should quietly replace the durable Christian community toward which disciple-making points.

Chapter 26 addresses **contextualization**. A gospel that cannot be understood inside the hearer's language and social world has not yet been communicated adequately. Yet contextualization is not permission to reshape Christian truth until it becomes indistinguishable from surrounding belief. The task is faithful translation, local theological judgment, and embodied discipleship.

Chapter 27 turns to **local ownership and global partnership**. The question is not whether foreigners disappear but whether authority, responsibility, knowledge, money, and decision-making are organized so that local Christians are genuine agents rather than permanent implementers of outside plans. At the same time, local ownership must not

become isolation. Christianity is one body, and healthy mission is interdependent.

Chapter 28 examines **missionary formation and member care**. Long-term cross-cultural service requires more than sincerity and a plane ticket. Character, theology, language aptitude, cultural humility, team competence, safeguarding, family preparation, financial integrity, resilience, and accountable care all matter. Sustainable mission is formed before deployment and supported through the whole missionary life cycle.

Chapter 29 considers **new legitimate pathways**. Migration, ordinary work, business, study, professional service, digital communication, media, and remote collaboration have changed where relationships can form. These pathways can expand access where a classic foreign-missionary model is impossible or unwise. They become distortions, however, when platforms replace people, employment becomes a cover for deception, or digital reach is confused with discipleship.

Chapter 30 returns responsibility to the **whole church**. Not every Christian should become a cross-cultural missionary, but every church belongs to a missionary people. Some go. Some send. Some host. Some translate, teach, give, research, build, advocate, pray, create, employ, or welcome. The chapter then gathers the book's empirical argument into a Gospel Access Framework and returns to the question embedded in the title: what can actually be finished, what remains permanently dynamic, and what faithful obedience requires without pretending to schedule the end of history.

Recent global evangelical statements have increasingly returned to the local church, contextual faithfulness, collaboration, digital discipleship, and whole-life participation. The 2024 Seoul Statement, for example, describes the local church as integral to the formation of mature disciples, calls ministry leaders and missionaries to remain accountable to local churches, and calls churches to engage digital technologies for disciple-making rather than only promotion or content distribution.² The World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission likewise describes contemporary mission as requiring locally rooted, contextually relevant communities alongside mutual global collaboration.³

²Lausanne Movement, *The Seoul Statement* (2024), especially sections III and V on the local church, disciple-making, ministry accountability, and digital discipleship, <https://lausanne.org/statement/the-seoul-statement>.

³World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission, "GC23 Review," and current Mission Commission statements emphasizing locally centered, contextually relevant mission and mutual global collaboration, accessed August 22, 2026, <https://weamc.global/gc23/gc23review/>.

These documents are not final authorities for Christian mission. Scripture is. They are useful because they show that the constructive questions developed here are not eccentric concerns at the edge of missiology. They now sit near the center of serious global missionary reflection.

The final Part therefore moves from diagnosis to practice.

The measure is not whether every problem can be solved.

It is whether missionary obedience increasingly looks like the gospel it proclaims.

The Local Church as the Missionary Horizon

What would need to become true for the missionary's present role to become unnecessary?

The question sounds almost hostile to missionary organizations. It is not.

It is a way of recovering the difference between **missionary faithfulness** and **missionary permanence**.

A Bible translator may spend decades helping a community receive Scripture. A theological educator may train several generations of leaders. A pioneer team may remain through years in which public response is small. A specialist ministry may continue indefinitely because the service remains needed. Nothing in this chapter assumes that short presence is more faithful than long presence.

The issue is different.

If an outside worker or institution becomes structurally indispensable to ordinary Christian life, the mission has produced a fragile center of gravity. The question is not whether the outsider is loved, respected, or useful. It is whether the community's worship, teaching, pastoral care, leadership, finances, discipline, witness, and theological reflection can continue without permanent outside control.

From Contact to Community

Missionary strategy often begins with contact.

Someone hears the gospel.

Someone reads Scripture.

Someone asks questions.

Someone believes.

Those moments matter enormously. Yet the New Testament normally carries the story further.

In Acts, proclamation repeatedly produces gathered communities. Believers are baptized. They receive teaching. They share life. Leaders emerge. Paul and his coworkers revisit churches, appoint elders, write letters, send delegates, correct error, and eventually entrust responsibility to others.

The missionary pattern is therefore not simply:

message → response.

It is closer to:

witness → response → discipleship → community → leadership → continuing witness.

The sequence is not mechanically identical in every context. It identifies the direction of maturity.

A digital seeker who reads the Gospel of John at night may be at the beginning of a real missionary story.

A baptized believer who has no Christian community, no trusted teacher, no way to worship safely, and no path toward mature fellowship remains in a precarious position.

Missionary access becomes durable when Christian life can become social.

Why the Church Matters. The church is not merely an efficient distribution network for religious information.

It is the community in which Christian claims become embodied.

The church gathers for worship.

It hears Scripture.

It baptizes.

It receives the Lord's Supper.

It prays.

It disciplines.

It reconciles.

It cares for the vulnerable.

It teaches children and adults.

It recognizes leaders.

It bears witness publicly and privately.

It receives correction from other churches.

It sends.

This is why the 2024 Seoul Statement places unusual emphasis on ecclesiology after decades in which evangelical mission discussions often

concentrated more heavily on evangelistic expansion. It argues that mature disciple-making and the maturity of local churches belong together and describes local churches as the concrete communities in which the gospel forms a people.¹

That emphasis corrects two opposite mistakes.

The first is **churchless evangelism**, in which conversion decisions become the primary success metric while the community required for long-term discipleship is treated as secondary.

The second is **church preservation without mission**, in which congregations become inward institutions whose energy is spent maintaining themselves.

The missionary church must be both gathered and sent.

What Counts as a Locally Rooted Church?

The phrase *local church* can sound simpler than reality.

A congregation may be geographically local while culturally foreign.

It may use the national language but remain socially tied to another ethnic group.

It may have local pastors but depend on outside donors for salaries, buildings, curriculum, and strategic decisions.

It may be legally registered yet inaccessible to a convert from another community.

It may be a house fellowship precisely because public registration is dangerous.

Locally rooted therefore means more than a domestic address.

A locally rooted church is a Christian community whose ordinary life can be genuinely inhabited by people from the social world it serves. Its language, relationships, leadership, rhythms, costs, patterns of hospitality, and public presence make Christian discipleship possible without requiring permanent adoption of an outsider's social identity.

This does not mean the church becomes a mirror of the surrounding culture.

Christianity always creates forms of difference.

A church may challenge local patterns of caste, patriarchy, corruption, ancestor ritual, nationalism, sexuality, violence, or consumerism. Its very existence can create a new social identity that crosses older boundaries.

¹Lausanne Movement, *The Seoul Statement* (2024), especially sections III and V on the local church, disciple-making, ministry accountability, and digital discipleship, <https://lausanne.org/statement/the-seoul-statement>.

Local rootedness therefore means **belonging without captivity**.

The church belongs in the culture sufficiently to be intelligible.

It belongs to Christ sufficiently to challenge the culture.

The Old Three-Self Formula. Nineteenth-century Protestant mission theory developed a famous ideal: churches should become **self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating**.

The formulation associated especially with Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson was a major advance over paternalistic assumptions that foreign missionaries should remain permanent governors of younger churches.²

Its enduring insight is important.

A church should not require indefinite foreign administration in order to be a church.

Yet the formula also needs qualification.

No church is truly self-supporting in an absolute sense.

A congregation in London depends upon legal systems, educational institutions, historic denominational capital, publishers, trained leaders, inherited property, and wider Christian networks. A congregation in Nairobi may receive theological books from the United States and send missionaries to Europe. A church in Seoul may support a seminary in Central Asia while receiving theological insight from African and Latin American partners.

Christian interdependence is normal.

The problem is not dependence itself.

It is **asymmetrical dependence that relocates decisive authority away from the people who bear the consequences**.

This is why later missiology has often expanded the older formula. The WEA Mission Commission has emphasized the local, multi-church connection, contextually relevant leadership, and the continuing importance of outsiders without returning to outsider control.³

²On the nineteenth-century “three-self” principles, see Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson in historical mission scholarship; for later critical development see mission histories by Dana L. Robert and Andrew F. Walls and contemporary discussions of indigenous and polycentric mission.

³World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission, “GC23 Review,” and current Mission Commission statements emphasizing locally centered, contextually relevant mission and mutual global collaboration, accessed August 22, 2026, <https://weamc.global/gc23/gc23review/>.

From Self-Propagation to Sending Capacity

One additional mark deserves emphasis.

A mature local church does not merely reproduce itself internally.

It can participate in mission beyond itself.

This may begin very modestly.

A small congregation prays for a neighboring community.

A bilingual believer helps translate Christian material.

A church sends one member to assist a nearby people group.

A migrant congregation reaches people in both its host country and ancestral homeland.

A regional network trains workers for another country.

The transition from receiving mission to participating in mission is one of the clearest signs that missionary identity has become local rather than imported.

This does not mean a church must become numerically large before it sends.

The church at Antioch in Acts sends from within its own leadership while remaining a relatively young center in the Christian story.

Sending is not a graduation ceremony in which a church becomes superior to those still receiving help.

It is participation in the same missionary movement.

When a Public Church Is Impossible. The local-church horizon must not be confused with one visible institutional form.

In some environments, a legally registered congregation with a public building, published leadership list, bank account, and weekly open service is possible and healthy. In others, the same structure would expose believers to surveillance, family retaliation, employment loss, or arrest. A missionary strategy that treats the most visible form of church as the only mature form can therefore confuse one political environment with ecclesial faithfulness.

Locally rooted Christian community may take less public forms:

- households gathering around Scripture and prayer;
- small networks of trusted believers;
- dispersed congregations meeting in several locations;
- migrant or bilingual fellowships;
- churches whose public identity is deliberately limited for security;
- digital contact that supports, but does not replace, embodied relationships.

The criterion is not architectural visibility. It is whether believers can increasingly carry the ordinary responsibilities of Christian life: worship, teaching, baptism and the Lord's Supper where possible, mutual care, discipline, leadership, witness, and the formation of future disciples. Current global mission reflection similarly emphasizes locally centered and contextually relevant Christian communities rather than treating imported institutional forms as the universal norm.⁴

This distinction also guards against a second error. Security language can become an excuse for permanent missionary control. A foreign team may say that local believers are too vulnerable to lead, handle resources, or make strategy, even when those believers understand the risks far better than outsiders. Restricted settings require prudence, not paternalism.

The local church as missionary horizon is therefore a theological and social reality before it is a building, legal entity, or denominational office. Its form must be faithful enough to be recognizably Christian and local enough to survive inside the world its members actually inhabit.

The Missionary's Changing Role

If local Christian capacity grows, the missionary role should be capable of changing.

In early stages, the outsider may perform many tasks:

- evangelism;
- language development;
- teaching;
- organizational design;
- fundraising;
- leadership;
- international advocacy.

Over time, faithful development should redistribute some of these functions.

Local believers increasingly teach.

Local leaders make decisions.

Local churches shape worship.

⁴World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission, "GC23 Review," and current Mission Commission statements emphasizing locally centered, contextually relevant mission and mutual global collaboration, accessed August 22, 2026, <https://weamc.global/gc23/gc23review/>.

Local theologians interpret difficult cultural questions.

Local networks raise resources.

The missionary may become a trainer, specialist, bridge-builder, researcher, advocate, or peer.

Sometimes the missionary remains for years in this changed role.

Sometimes the missionary moves to another community.

Sometimes the original agency closes its program.

The point is not withdrawal as an ideology.

It is **role flexibility as evidence that the mission exists for the church rather than the church for the mission organization.**

Organizational Mortality. Mission agencies should be capable of dying.

That sentence needs care.

Long-lived institutions can preserve expertise, provide accountability, fund difficult work, train missionaries, and coordinate across borders. There is no virtue in destroying a healthy institution simply because it is old.

But no mission agency is promised permanence in Scripture.

An organization may complete its assignment.

Another institution may become better positioned to continue it.

Local churches may assume the work.

A project may merge.

A field office may close.

A property may transfer.

Mission organizations therefore need a theology of **organizational mortality.**

Without it, institutional survival can become an invisible metric of success. Every ministry must grow because shrinking feels like failure. Every office must remain open because closure appears to dishonor sacrifice. Every donor stream must continue because employees depend upon it.

A healthier question is:

If this ministry succeeds deeply, what might we eventually stop doing?

That question creates space for completion.

When Church Planting Language Misleads. The phrase *church planting* can also hide complexity.

A church is not planted like a prefabricated object shipped from one country and installed in another.

Missionaries can initiate communities, teach Scripture, gather believers, and help establish structures. But churches become rooted through the life of the believers themselves.

They form marriages and friendships.

They bury their dead.

They raise children.

They survive conflict.

They develop songs and prayers.

They learn how to handle money.

They decide how to relate to neighbors.

They discover which inherited practices can continue and which must change.

They experience leadership success and leadership failure.

This is why church maturity is generational work.

A congregation can be founded in a month.

A church tradition cannot.

Church Health Is Not a Percentage

The constructive horizon also cannot be reduced to a numerical threshold.

A people group does not become spiritually secure because evangelical affiliation reaches 2 percent.

A church may be numerically significant and institutionally weak.

It may lack trained leaders.

It may be concentrated in one subcommunity.

It may be dependent on foreign salaries.

It may reproduce harmful theology.

It may have no missionary capacity beyond itself.

Conversely, a small minority church may be unusually resilient, locally led, biblically mature, and relationally connected.

The better questions are qualitative as well as quantitative:

Can believers gather?

Can they understand Scripture?

Can they develop leaders?

Can Christian family and community life continue across generations?

Can the church correct itself?

Can it survive if foreign workers leave?

Can it bear witness beyond its current membership?

No global database can answer these completely.

Missionary strategy should still ask them.

The Horizon Is Capacity, Not Control

The deepest corrective is simple.

Mission should aim not at permanent missionary control but at **durable Christian capacity**.

Capacity is broader than independence.

A church may remain connected financially, educationally, and relationally with partners around the world. What matters is that it is not merely the local branch office of somebody else's Christian project.

The local church should increasingly possess the theological, relational, organizational, and missionary capacity to follow Christ within its own world and to contribute to the wider body of Christ.

This is why missionary success can create a paradox.

The missionary becomes less central.

The gospel becomes more rooted.

The organization becomes less visible.

The church becomes more capable.

The next question is how Christian faith takes intelligible form inside that local world without becoming captive to it.

That is the problem of contextualization.

Contextualization: Faithful Gospel, Local Form

Every missionary contextualizes.

The only question is whether it is done consciously and faithfully.

The missionary who insists, “I simply preach the Bible without culture,” is already using a language, vocabulary, tone, social role, meeting format, assumptions about time, expectations about leadership, and inherited theological categories. None arrived from heaven without cultural form.

Christian faith crosses cultures through translation.

That is one of its greatest strengths.

It is also one of mission’s permanent risks.

The gospel can be translated badly.

A missionary can confuse personal culture with biblical command. A local church can preserve a cultural practice that contradicts Christian discipleship. A theological term can be formally accurate while communicating the wrong meaning. A method designed to reduce foreignness can become so adaptive that Christian identity becomes ambiguous.

Contextualization therefore requires two loyalties at once:

faithfulness to the gospel and intelligibility within the context.

Remove either and mission fails.

Translation Is More Than Language

Language translation provides the clearest analogy.

A translator cannot preserve the Hebrew or Greek words and call the task complete. Meaning must move into another language.

Yet a translator is not free to produce any message the audience finds appealing.

Faithful translation is constrained by the source and attentive to the receptor language.

Contextualization operates similarly at a wider level.

Christian teaching enters systems of:

- family;
- authority;
- honor and shame;
- law;
- ritual;
- economic life;
- gender expectations;
- religious memory;
- ethnicity;
- political identity;
- technology.

The missionary must ask not only, “What words communicate this doctrine?” but “What does following Christ mean here?”

That question belongs eventually to the local church, not to the outsider alone.

Scripture Is Read From Somewhere. The 2024 Seoul Statement explicitly rejects the fiction of culture-free interpretation. It affirms the importance of historical, literary, and canonical context for reading Scripture while also recognizing that every contemporary reader approaches Scripture from a cultural location. It therefore calls local churches to read faithfully in their own contexts while remaining connected to the wider communion of the church.¹

This produces a double movement.

Local Christians possess insight outsiders lack.

They understand jokes, fears, family obligations, political memories, class codes, and linguistic connotations without needing them explained.

The wider church possesses resources the local community may lack.

Historic creeds, biblical scholarship, other Christian traditions, and brothers and sisters from different cultures can reveal blind spots.

¹Lausanne Movement, *The Seoul Statement* (2024), especially sections 20–24 on faithful biblical interpretation across historical, canonical, and local cultural contexts, <https://lausanne.org/statement/the-seoul-statement>.

Contextual theology is therefore strongest when it is both **local and catholic**—rooted in place and connected to the wider body of Christ.

The Missionary's Cultural Package

Missionaries often export more than they realize.

A church plant may inherit:

- the sending church's music;
- the missionary's preferred preaching length;
- Western meeting procedure;
- Korean hierarchy;
- Brazilian worship style;
- denominational vocabulary;
- American small-group models;
- imported children's curricula;
- foreign architecture;
- donor expectations about reporting.

None is automatically wrong.

The problem begins when these forms acquire theological status simply because the missionary introduced them first.

A young church can spend years distinguishing Christianity from the missionary's habits.

This is especially damaging when cultural forms carry social meaning.

A style of dress may signal wealth.

A meeting time may exclude workers.

A building may communicate foreign money.

A leadership title may evoke authoritarian political structures.

A worship genre may mark the church as belonging to another ethnic community.

Contextualization asks which forms serve the gospel and which forms obscure it.

Local Culture Is Not Innocent. The opposite error romanticizes local culture.

Christian mission does not assume that every indigenous pattern should be preserved because it is indigenous.

Every culture contains beauty and sin.

So does every missionary culture.

Local patterns may include hospitality, communal responsibility, reverence for elders, artistic depth, and strong family solidarity.

They may also include caste exclusion, ethnic hatred, domestic abuse, corruption, exploitative patronage, revenge, or religious practices incompatible with Christian worship.

The task is not to replace one culture with another.

It is to allow Scripture to judge both.

Contextualization therefore requires what might be called **two-way suspicion**.

The missionary asks:

Which assumptions am I importing without biblical warrant?

The local church asks:

Which assumptions in our own world must be transformed by allegiance to Christ?

The gospel stands over both.

Critical Contextualization

Paul Hiebert's influential language of **critical contextualization** remains useful because it refuses both rejection and uncritical acceptance of local culture.²

The process can be summarized conceptually:

First, understand the practice as local people understand it.

Second, study Scripture and Christian teaching relevant to the issue.

Third, allow the believing community to evaluate the practice.

Fourth, develop a contextual Christian response.

The sequence matters.

Missionaries have often reversed it by deciding the answer before understanding the question.

A funeral practice looks "pagan," so it is prohibited.

A local believer then loses the only socially recognized way to honor parents and becomes identified not merely as Christian but as disloyal to family.

Sometimes prohibition remains necessary.

²Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 3 (1987): 104–12; see also Hiebert's wider anthropological work on mission and worldview.

But the church should know what the practice means before deciding how Christian disciples can respond.

Family and Conversion. Family is one of the hardest contextual fields because Christian conversion is rarely interpreted as an individual intellectual event.

In many communities, changing religion changes social belonging.

A convert may be understood to reject ancestors, family honor, marriage networks, national identity, or inherited obligations.

A missionary who frames conversion only as personal choice may underestimate the cost drastically.

Contextual discipleship must therefore address questions such as:

Can a believer participate in family rituals without worshiping another deity?

How should a Christian honor deceased ancestors?

What happens when parents arrange marriage?

How should believers handle food offered in religious settings?

What does baptism communicate socially?

Can a convert remain within existing kinship networks?

The New Testament itself contains analogous tensions around food, circumcision, household allegiance, idolatry, and participation in pagan social life.

Contextualization is not an optional specialist concern.

It is ordinary discipleship at cultural depth.

Muslim-Background Contexts

Debates around Muslim-background believers expose the difficulty sharply.

Some missionary approaches have encouraged believers to retain substantial elements of Muslim social identity, terminology, or communal practice in order to reduce unnecessary cultural rupture. Critics fear that such strategies can blur Christian identity, baptism, ecclesial belonging, or essential theological differences.

No global answer can adjudicate every local practice.

Several tests remain necessary:

Does the practice communicate allegiance to Christ clearly over time?

How do local Muslims interpret it?

How do local Christians interpret it?

Can children raised in the community understand what the church believes?

Does the practice strengthen or weaken durable Christian community?

Does it preserve access at the cost of theological ambiguity?

Does rejection of the practice reflect Scripture or missionary discomfort?

These are not solved by labels such as *insider* or *extractionist* alone.

They require long, local theological judgment.

Caste and Contextualization. South Asia creates a different test.

A church may proclaim that all are one in Christ while reproducing caste boundaries in marriage, leadership, seating, burial grounds, or social networks.

Should missionaries create caste-specific congregations because social homogeneity may make initial access easier?

Or does such a structure entrench precisely the hierarchy the gospel should challenge?

The answer requires distinguishing between **missional accommodation to social reality** and **ecclesial legitimation of social inequality**.

A church may begin among one caste because relationships travel through existing networks.

Maturity should still move toward a Christian community capable of embodying reconciliation rather than baptizing inherited exclusion.

Contextualization is not successful merely because a church feels culturally familiar.

It must also become biblically faithful.

Secular Contexts Need Contextualization Too

Western societies sometimes discuss contextualization as something missionaries do overseas.

That is a category error.

A secular German university, a South Korean technology company, a French suburb, and an American professional class are all cultures.

Christian language can become unintelligible within them.

Words such as *sin*, *salvation*, *authority*, *repentance*, *kingdom*, or even *God* carry assumptions listeners may not share.

The answer is not to remove difficult Christian claims.

It is to explain them.

A post-Christian context may require more historical reconstruction, greater attention to institutional scandal, stronger intellectual engagement, and clearer distinction between Christianity and political identity.

Contextualization is not simplification.

Often it requires more explanation.

Globalization Creates Hybrid Contexts. Classic missiology sometimes imagined two cultures: missionary culture and host culture.

Contemporary identities are often more hybrid.

A young professional in Nairobi may speak English at work, another language at home, consume Korean entertainment, follow American social media, attend a Pentecostal church, and participate in an extended-family system shaped by regional tradition.

A Turkish student in Berlin may be simultaneously German, Turkish, Muslim-background, secular, digitally global, and embedded in a transnational family network.

Contextualization cannot freeze culture into an ethnographic museum.

Lausanne's contemporary missional work notes that globalization, migration, and technology accelerate cultural change and require contextualization to address the world people inhabit now rather than an idealized traditional past.³

This makes local Christians even more important.

They are not merely informants about a static culture.

They are participants negotiating cultural change from inside.

Local Theology. A mature church should eventually ask theological questions in its own voice.

What does Christian teaching say about land in a community shaped by displacement?

How should the church address ancestor obligations?

What does forgiveness mean after ethnic violence?

How should believers think about caste?

What does Christian discipleship require inside a surveillance state?

How should AI, migration, or consumer culture be interpreted biblically?

Imported theology can provide profound resources.

It cannot anticipate every question.

³Lausanne Movement, "Understanding Global Change and Cultural Shifts in the Religiously Pluralistic Context," Theological Foundation Paper associated with the *State of the Great Commission* project, accessed August 22, 2026, <https://lausanne.org/missional-paper/understanding-global-change-and-cultural-shifts-in-the-religiously-pluralistic-context>.

Local theology is not a lower-level adaptation of “real theology” produced elsewhere.

It is the church thinking faithfully from within its own world.

The wider church then benefits from it.

African theology can expose Western individualism.

Asian theology can sharpen Christian reflection on family and community.

Latin American theology can challenge economic blindness.

Middle Eastern Christians can teach churches elsewhere about minority existence and ancient Christian-Muslim relations.

Contextualization becomes reciprocal.

Who Gets to Decide?

This question leads directly into power.

The missionary may have theological education, foreign funding, organizational authority, and access to publishers.

Local Christians may possess deeper contextual understanding but less formal status.

Who decides what counts as faithful contextualization?

The answer cannot be “the foreign expert.”

Neither can it be “whoever is local.”

Healthy discernment requires Scripture, mature local believers, accountable leadership, theological expertise, and connection to the wider church.

The missionary’s role should increasingly become facilitative rather than monopolistic.

Ask better questions.

Provide biblical resources.

Introduce global Christian perspectives.

Learn the language deeply enough to understand the discussion.

Accept correction.

Allow local believers to reach conclusions the missionary would not have invented.

This is difficult because contextualization transfers interpretive agency.

That is precisely why it matters.

Faithful Contextualization Has Limits. Missionary anxiety about syncretism is not imaginary.

Christian communities can combine beliefs in ways that contradict the gospel.

Churches can baptize nationalism.

Prosperity teaching can merge Christian vocabulary with consumer aspiration.

Ancestor practices can become worship.

Political ideology can function as sacred identity.

Modern individualism can hollow out ecclesial life.

Every context produces syncretistic temptations.

The safeguard is not foreignness.

Foreign churches have their own syncretisms.

The safeguard is sustained biblical formation, theological accountability, the discipline of the local church, and learning across the global body of Christ.

The goal is not a culturally pure church.

No such church exists.

It is a church continually reformed by the gospel within its real culture.

Contextualization as Missionary Humility

At its best, contextualization is an act of love.

It refuses to make the hearer perform unnecessary cultural migration before hearing Christ clearly.

It also refuses to flatter the hearer by pretending the gospel requires no change.

The missionary says, in effect:

I will work to understand your world well enough that you can encounter Christian truth rather than merely my foreignness.

And the local church says:

We will follow Christ here, in this language and this society, without assuming that everything inherited from either our culture or the missionary's culture is sacred.

That is a demanding balance.

It is also one of Christianity's oldest missionary strengths.

The gospel has crossed languages for two thousand years because it can take local form without belonging exclusively to any one civilization.

The next constructive problem is institutional.

If Christian faith can become genuinely local, who should own the structures through which that local Christian life is organized?

Local Ownership and Global Partnership

Missionary partnership often sounds healthier than it is.

Two organizations sign an agreement.

Leaders pray together.

Photographs display diversity.

The word *partner* appears throughout fundraising material.

Yet one side may still control the money, agenda, property, hiring, reporting system, theological curriculum, international travel, and relationship with donors.

The relationship is described as partnership.

Its structure is closer to subcontracting.

The constructive question is therefore not whether mission uses the vocabulary of partnership.

It is:

Who possesses meaningful agency when interests differ?

That question reveals ownership.

Local Ownership Is More Than Local Staffing

A ministry can be staffed almost entirely by national workers while remaining externally owned.

Foreign partners may still decide:

- which programs receive funding;
- which leaders are appointed;
- which outcomes are measured;

- which theological materials are used;
- which buildings are purchased;
- which stories are told to donors;
- which risks are acceptable;
- when the ministry changes or closes.

Local workers then carry responsibility without corresponding authority.

This arrangement can be efficient in the short term. Outsiders may possess administrative experience, established donors, and international networks. The local team may genuinely appreciate the resources.

But if the structure never changes, it trains dependence into the institution itself.

Local ownership means that people rooted in the context possess increasing authority over the Christian work whose consequences they live with.

That includes the ability to disagree.

If a “partner” cannot say no without losing the ministry, the relationship is not fully mutual.

Ownership Has Several Dimensions. Ownership should be examined across more than one axis.

Spiritual ownership asks who is responsible for the church’s worship, teaching, discipline, and pastoral life.

Strategic ownership asks who defines priorities and decides what success means.

Financial ownership asks who raises, receives, allocates, and accounts for resources.

Institutional ownership asks who appoints leaders, controls property, and holds legal authority.

Knowledge ownership asks who controls research, data, translation resources, media, curricula, and intellectual property.

Narrative ownership asks who tells the story of the ministry to the wider world.

A project can appear local in one domain and remain foreign-controlled in another.

This is why transferring a job title is easier than transferring authority.

Money Creates Gravity

The organization that controls money does not need to issue explicit commands in order to shape decisions.

Funding creates gravity.

Suppose a local church believes the greatest need is slow pastoral formation, but a foreign donor funds visible evangelistic campaigns.

The church may adapt its ministry toward what can be funded.

Suppose a local seminary believes it should reduce enrollment and deepen faculty development, but international supporters celebrate student numbers.

Growth becomes financially safer than depth.

Suppose a mission partner pays the salaries of several pastors.

A theological disagreement now carries economic consequences.

None of this requires malicious donors.

Power can operate through incentives long before anyone abuses it consciously.

The solution is not to stop international giving.

Money can enable extraordinary good.

The solution is to design financial relationships that increase rather than reduce local agency.

Contribution Is Not Automatic Control. A basic principle should govern global Christian funding:

financial contribution does not automatically create moral entitlement to control.

Donors do need accountability.

Churches should know whether money is used honestly.

Foundations need reporting.

Mission agencies must protect funds from corruption.

Yet accountability and control are not identical.

A donor can require transparent accounting without deciding every ministry priority.

A sending church can ask serious questions without assuming its preferences override local judgment.

A global partner can fund training while allowing local leaders to design the institution.

The shift is from **patronage** toward **stewardship between accountable partners**.

This requires donors to accept outcomes they did not design.

That is harder than giving money.

The Dependency Debate

Missionary literature has long worried about dependency.

The concern is real.

Foreign funds can create churches whose operating costs are impossible to sustain locally. External salaries can make pastoral ministry economically attractive in ways that distort vocation. Imported institutions can collapse when donors withdraw.

But dependency language can become selective.

Wealthy churches also depend on systems they did not create.

They inherit buildings.

They benefit from tax structures.

They use seminaries funded by previous generations.

They purchase theological resources produced elsewhere.

They rely on denominational networks and charitable foundations.

No church is independent.

The more useful concept is **healthy interdependence**.

Does the relationship diversify rather than concentrate power?

Does it strengthen local capacity?

Can the ministry survive disagreement with one donor?

Are costs appropriate to the context?

Does giving unlock local generosity rather than replace it?

Can local leaders reshape the program?

Dependency becomes unhealthy when outside support systematically prevents those answers from moving toward greater local agency.

Local Generosity Matters. An emphasis on local ownership should also recover local giving.

Poorer churches are not spiritually disqualified from generosity.

A congregation may not fund an international missionary salary at Western levels.

It may still provide food, housing, transport, hospitality, prayer, local fundraising, volunteer labor, or partial salary support.

These contributions matter because participation changes identity.

A church that only receives mission can internalize the idea that mission belongs to wealthy Christians elsewhere.

A church that gives something—however small—learns that it is an agent.

This is one reason contemporary global mission networks have begun revisiting resource mobilization from “everywhere to everywhere.” Lausanne’s post-2024 conversations on mission funding explicitly identify one-way flows from wealthy regions as a source of dependency and power imbalance and call for broader Christian participation in resourcing mission.¹

The aim should not be romantic self-financing.

It is shared responsibility.

The Outsider Still Has a Role

Correcting paternalism can produce an opposite mistake: assuming outsiders should become silent, invisible, or irrelevant.

That is not partnership either.

Outsiders can bring genuine gifts:

- theological education;
- technical expertise;
- money;
- access to global networks;
- experience from other contexts;
- advocacy;
- linguistic knowledge;
- research;
- fresh questions.

The problem is not that outsiders contribute.

The problem is when contribution becomes control by default.

The WEA Mission Commission’s recent global conversations capture this tension well: mission should place local believers at the center of activity in their contexts while still recognizing the important roles outsiders can play within mutual global collaboration.²

The healthiest outsider posture may often be **co-learner**.

A co-learner can still teach.

¹Lausanne Movement, “From Everywhere to Everywhere,” resource-mobilisation gathering emerging from Fourth Lausanne Congress conversations, March 6, 2025, <https://lausanne.org/gathering/from-everywhere-to-everywhere>.

²World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission, “GC23 Review,” recommendations on positioning local believers at the center of mission activity while valuing outsider contribution and mutual collaboration, accessed August 22, 2026, <https://weamc.global/gc23/gc23review/>.

A co-learner can still disagree.

A co-learner simply refuses to assume that foreign experience grants total interpretive authority.

Global Partnership Protects Against Local Isolation. Local ownership must not become local isolation.

Christianity is translocal by nature.

Paul's churches exchange workers, letters, money, teaching, and encouragement. The Jerusalem collection joins churches across regions. Apostolic letters circulate beyond one congregation. The New Testament never imagines each church inventing Christianity independently.

Global partnership provides several protections.

It can expose local corruption.

It can provide theological correction.

It can connect minority churches to a wider body during persecution.

It can share specialist knowledge.

It can help churches respond to crises too large for local resources.

It can prevent nationalism from becoming ecclesiology.

A church that says, "We are local, therefore outsiders have nothing to teach us," can become as arrogant as the missionary who says, "We are global experts, therefore locals should follow us."

Christian mutuality rejects both.

Partnership in a Polycentric Church. The contemporary church has no single missionary center.

This creates new possibilities and new power problems.

An African church partners with a Korean agency in the Middle East.

A Brazilian network supports workers in Europe.

A Filipino congregation sends professionals to the Gulf.

A Middle Eastern believer trains churches in North America about Muslim-Christian relationships.

A European foundation funds an Asian translation project led by local scholars.

This is more complex than "West sends, rest receives."

It is also morally safer only if structures change with the geography.

A Korean agency can be paternalistic.

A Nigerian megachurch can export its culture aggressively.

A wealthy Brazilian network can dominate poorer partners.

The WEA Mission Commission's 2026 reflections explicitly warn against replacing an old West-versus-rest hierarchy with new Majority-World-versus-Minority-World silos and instead call for mutuality, shared own-

ership, and deeper conversations about who gets to shape direction and decisions.³

Polycentricity describes where actors are located.

Mutuality describes how they relate.

The second does not automatically follow from the first.

Knowledge Is a Mission Resource

Money is not the only unevenly distributed resource.

Knowledge carries power too.

Mission organizations collect:

- people-group data;
- language surveys;
- church maps;
- security assessments;
- demographic research;
- conversion testimonies;
- audio recordings;
- translation corpora;
- discipleship materials.

Who owns this information?

In the digital age the question becomes urgent.

A community's language data may be stored on servers it does not control.

Sensitive religious information may be collected by international organizations.

Local researchers may gather data while foreign institutions publish the conclusions.

Mission research should therefore adopt principles of data minimization, informed consent, security, appropriate local access, and shared intellectual ownership.

The people being mapped are not merely data points in somebody else's strategy.

³World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission, "Reimagining African Initiatives: MANI 2026" and "WEAGA Overview," 2026, emphasizing mutuality, shared ownership, Majority/Minority World collaboration, and attention to power and decision-making, <https://weamc.global/mani2026/> and <https://weamc.global/2025-weaga/weaga-overview/>.

Narrative Power. Mission partnerships are also shaped by storytelling. The donor-facing story often needs a protagonist. The missionary becomes the obvious one. A newsletter says:

We planted three churches.

What actually happened may be that local believers took most relational risk, opened homes, translated conversations, disciplined converts, handled family conflict, and remained after the missionary moved.

Narrative distortion then reinforces institutional power.

Donors believe the foreign organization caused the outcome.

The organization receives more money.

Local agency becomes less visible.

Ethical mission communication should tell the truth about causation.

Sometimes that requires reducing the missionary's narrative centrality.

It may also require not publicizing local believers at all when security is at stake.

The right to tell a story is not automatically created by funding the ministry.

Partnership Needs Conflict Capacity

Real partnership eventually produces disagreement.

The foreign donor wants one program.

The local church wants another.

A missionary believes a cultural practice is unwise.

Local leaders disagree.

A national partner questions the use of money.

The agency fears reputational damage.

If the relationship can survive only while everyone agrees, it was never strong.

Partnership needs conflict capacity:

- clear governance;
- transparent financial agreements;
- documented decision rights;
- complaint mechanisms;
- periodic review;
- shared theological commitments;

- processes for ending partnership without coercion.

Christian unity does not mean avoiding conflict.

Acts 15 is a global church partnership meeting precisely because disagreement requires discernment.

Handoff Must Be Designed Early. Organizations often discuss handoff only when a missionary is preparing to leave.

By then it may be too late.

If the missionary has controlled the donor relationship for fifteen years, local leaders cannot inherit trust instantly.

If all files are stored in the agency's system, data ownership cannot be transferred casually.

If one expatriate signs every legal document, institutional authority has never been distributed.

Handoff should therefore be designed from the beginning.

Who will learn this role?

Who can access the bank account?

Who understands the donor relationships?

Who can teach the curriculum?

Who owns the property?

What happens if the missionary is suddenly expelled?

What decisions can already be made locally?

These questions are not pessimistic.

They are resilience planning.

The Test of Mutuality

A practical test of partnership is to reverse the direction of learning.

Can the sending church receive correction from the receiving church?

Can a missionary's theology be challenged by local believers?

Can an African partner teach a European board something it did not know?

Can a wealthy organization change policy because a poorer partner explains that the policy is harmful?

Can a local church decline money?

Can a foreign partner accept a locally designed strategy it would not have chosen?

If influence flows only one direction, partnership remains incomplete.

Mutuality does not erase differences in expertise or responsibility.

It makes those differences accountable to relationship.

From Ownership to Partnership

Local ownership and global partnership are sometimes presented as alternatives.

They should reinforce one another.

Local ownership protects against external domination.

Global partnership protects against isolation, parochialism, and lack of resources.

The constructive ideal is:

locally rooted authority + globally connected interdependence.

This is not easy.

It requires wealthier Christians to share resources without purchasing control.

It requires local leaders to exercise agency without romanticizing independence.

It requires missionaries to become less central without becoming indifferent.

It requires institutions to value outcomes they do not own.

That is a more demanding missionary model than either paternalism or withdrawal.

It is also much closer to the reality of a global body in which no region owns the mission of God.

The next chapter turns from structures to people.

Missionary systems capable of mutual partnership require missionaries who have been formed for humility, endurance, accountability, and long obedience.

Missionary Formation and Member Care

Missionary recruitment asks:

Who is willing to go?

Missionary formation asks a harder question:

Who can be prepared to serve faithfully, safely, humbly, and sustainably in this particular work?

The distinction matters.

Urgent need can tempt churches to lower the threshold for sending. A person expresses zeal. A field needs workers. An agency provides orientation. Support is raised. The candidate leaves.

Sometimes the result is fruitful.

Sometimes preventable weaknesses become expensive once magnified by cultural stress, language incompetence, isolation, team conflict, family pressure, power, and unrealistic expectations.

Missionary preparation should not eliminate risk.

Cross-cultural obedience will remain costly and unpredictable.

It should eliminate avoidable negligence.

Calling Is Not Competence

A sincere sense of missionary calling does not prove missionary readiness.

Someone can be deeply convinced God is leading them toward cross-cultural mission and still need years of preparation.

The church already understands this in other vocations.

A person who feels called to surgery still studies medicine.

A person who feels called to pastoral ministry still requires character testing and theological formation.

Mission should not become the one Christian vocation in which sincerity substitutes for competence.

Readiness includes several domains:

- Christian character;
- biblical and theological maturity;
- church accountability;
- relational health;
- intercultural learning capacity;
- language aptitude and discipline;
- team competence;
- safeguarding awareness;
- financial integrity;
- resilience;
- role-specific skill.

No candidate excels equally in all of them.

The point is serious discernment.

Character Before Platform. Missionary gifting can hide character weakness.

A charismatic communicator raises support easily.

A decisive leader starts projects quickly.

A gifted teacher attracts students.

These strengths can become dangerous when joined to narcissism, sexual misconduct, financial dishonesty, inability to receive correction, or spiritual manipulation.

Part IV examined how mission organizations can idealize missionaries and use calling language in ways that protect unhealthy authority.

Formation should therefore include the capacity to be ordinary.

Can the candidate serve without being admired?

Can they receive correction from people with less formal education?

Can they apologize?

Can they obey team decisions they did not prefer?

Can they handle anonymity?

Can they live without constant evidence of visible impact?

Missionaries are not Christian heroes deployed to rescue passive populations.

They are disciples sent to serve.

The Sending Church's Responsibility

A mission agency can assess, train, deploy, and supervise.

It cannot replace the sending church entirely.

The 2024 Seoul Statement calls missionaries and ministry leaders to remain in vital fellowship with and accountability to local churches and urges mission ministries to structure authority and oversight in ways consistent with healthy ecclesial accountability.¹

This matters before deployment.

Has the candidate actually served faithfully in a local church?

Do mature Christians know the person's character over time?

Has the candidate handled conflict?

Do leaders see evidence of teaching ability, humility, perseverance, and love?

A person who cannot live accountably among Christians who share their culture is unlikely to become healthier when moved across the world.

The local church knows things an application form cannot.

Agency and Church Should Not Outsource Each Other. Confusion occurs when church and agency assume the other is responsible.

The church says:

The professionals at the agency will prepare them.

The agency says:

Their church already knows their character.

Gaps appear between the two.

Healthy sending requires explicit division of responsibility.

The church may own long-term pastoral relationship, theological affirmation, and community support.

The agency may own field-specific training, risk systems, supervision, security, and specialist member care.

The field team may own daily operational accountability.

The receiving church may hold insight into local fit and behavior outsiders cannot see.

The missionary remains responsible for personal honesty and help-seeking.

¹Lausanne Movement, *The Seoul Statement* (2024), especially section 76 on local-church accountability for ministry leaders, missionaries, and ministry partners, <https://lausanne.org/statement/the-seoul-statement>.

Member care is strongest when responsibility is distributed but not ambiguous.

What Member Care Actually Means. Member care is sometimes reduced to counseling when something goes wrong.

That is too narrow.

The Global Member Care Network defines member care as the ongoing preparation, equipping, and empowering of missionaries for effective and sustainable life, ministry, and work, extending across spiritual, emotional, relational, physical, and economic well-being throughout the missionary life cycle.²

The definition is useful because it makes care developmental rather than merely remedial.

Member care begins before crisis.

It includes:

- candidate preparation;
- expectation setting;
- mentoring;
- team culture;
- spiritual formation;
- health support;
- financial planning;
- family care;
- children's education;
- rest;
- debriefing;
- transition;
- re-entry;
- retirement.

A missionary is a whole person before being a ministry role.

²Global Member Care Network, "Definitions: What Is Member Care?," accessed August 22, 2026, defining member care as ongoing preparation, equipping, and empowering across the missionary life cycle, <https://globalmembercare.com/definitions/>.

Language Learning Is Formation

Language study is often treated as a technical prerequisite.

It is also spiritual and relational formation.

For months or years, a competent adult becomes incompetent.

The missionary cannot express humor.

Cannot follow rapid conversation.

Makes childlike mistakes.

Depends on local people for ordinary tasks.

This can expose pride quickly.

A worker who approaches language as humiliation to endure may never become relationally rooted.

A worker who approaches it as disciplined love learns something deeper:

These people should not always have to cross the linguistic distance to meet me.

Language learning says that the other person's world is worth entering.

Mission organizations should therefore budget time for serious acquisition rather than praising workers who abandon study prematurely for visible ministry.

Cultural Humility Can Be Trained. No orientation course removes ethnocentrism.

Training can still make it visible.

Candidates can learn to distinguish:

- observation from interpretation;
- difference from moral failure;
- local expertise from stereotypes;
- cultural discomfort from theological conviction;
- high-context from low-context communication;
- individualistic from communal decision-making;
- direct from indirect conflict patterns.

More importantly, they can practice curiosity.

Instead of asking:

Why do these people always do this?

Ask:

What makes this behavior reasonable inside their social world?

Understanding does not require approval.
It improves judgment.

Team Life Is Missionary Work

Missionary teams can spend enormous energy on one another.

That is not necessarily a distraction from mission.

A dysfunctional team can destroy witness, consume leadership attention, and drive workers out.

Candidates should therefore be formed for:

- conflict resolution;
- clear expectations;
- feedback;
- boundaries;
- decision-making;
- cross-cultural team differences;
- singleness and family dynamics;
- authority structures;
- handling unequal workloads.

Teams also need permission to name incompatibility.

Not every disagreement is sin.

Not every team configuration should continue indefinitely.

Christian unity does not require pretending personalities and working styles never matter.

Marriage, Singleness, and Family. Missionary systems have often centered the married couple as the assumed worker unit.

That can marginalize single missionaries even though singles have made extraordinary contributions throughout mission history.

Singles may possess mobility and relational availability married workers do not.

They can also experience profound loneliness, exclusion from family-centered team culture, and weak long-term support.

Married missionaries face different pressures.

One spouse may thrive while the other struggles.

Children may love the host culture or deeply resent repeated transition.

Education options shape field decisions.

Marital conflict can intensify when every source of familiarity disappears at once.

Healthy formation does not romanticize either singleness or family life. It prepares people for the actual demands of their situation.

Missionary Children Are Not Strategy Variables

Children should not be treated as proof of parental sacrifice.

Neither should their needs automatically invalidate missionary calling. They are members of the family with real developmental interests.

Mission organizations should take seriously:

- schooling;
- language;
- friendship continuity;
- identity;
- healthcare;
- transition;
- re-entry;
- safety;
- the child's own voice.

A teenager who has lived in four countries may not experience “home” the way a sending church expects.

Re-entry can therefore be more culturally disorienting than departure.

Member care needs to include the whole family system rather than assuming children simply adapt.

Financial Formation. Missionaries should understand money before they control ministry resources.

They need competence in:

- personal budgeting;
- fundraising ethics;
- reporting;
- local salary effects;
- gifts;
- emergency funds;
- retirement;
- taxes where relevant;
- avoiding financial dependency relationships.

Money also affects identity.

A missionary may live modestly by standards of the sending country while appearing wealthy locally.

The missionary may employ domestic help and suddenly occupy a social class position never experienced at home.

Financial formation should therefore include power awareness, not only bookkeeping.

Security Without Paranoia. Some mission contexts require security discipline.

Workers may need to protect:

- names;
- addresses;
- local believers;
- digital communications;
- travel patterns;
- photographs;
- church locations;
- research data.

Security can become obsessive.

A team may treat every local person as a potential threat.

That posture makes relational mission impossible.

The objective is not maximum secrecy.

It is **proportionate protection of real risks**.

Workers should understand threat models, digital hygiene, consent, and the difference between protecting vulnerable people and protecting institutional reputation.

Safeguarding Must Precede Crisis. Mission organizations work across jurisdictions, cultures, and power differences.

That makes safeguarding difficult and essential.

Policies should address:

- sexual misconduct;
- child protection;
- spiritual abuse;
- harassment;
- financial exploitation;
- retaliation;
- whistleblowing;
- independent reporting.

Training should make clear that missionary calling does not place a person above ordinary accountability.

Part IV cited emerging 2026 research on precursors to spiritual abuse in mission organizations. The constructive response is not simply better crisis management. It is organizational culture in which idealization, unrealistic expectations, coercive calling language, and inaccessible leadership are challenged before abuse becomes normalized.

Rest Is Not Desertion

Missionary cultures can reward exhaustion.

The worker who never stops appears sacrificial.

The worker who takes leave can feel guilty because the need is endless.

This logic is spiritually unsustainable.

No missionary can meet the scale of human need.

Rest acknowledges creaturely limits.

That can include weekly rhythms, annual leave, sabbatical, retreat, or temporary reduction of responsibility.

Rest should not become luxury insulated from local realities.

Neither should local suffering become an argument that missionaries must destroy their own health.

A worker who remains for fifteen years with sustainable rhythms may contribute more than one who burns out spectacularly in three.

Retention Is Not the Goal. Member care should not become a system for keeping every missionary on the field at all costs.

Some workers should leave.

A role is wrong.

A marriage is in crisis.

Health changes.

Children need another environment.

The local church no longer needs the missionary.

The worker has become harmful.

Another vocation becomes wiser.

Departure is not automatically failure.

The goal is faithful stewardship of people and mission.

Historic ReMAP research remains useful for understanding missionary attrition, but its older global rates should not be treated as current

2026 statistics. Its enduring lesson is that preventable organizational and relational factors can contribute significantly to missionary departure.³

Modern member care should therefore ask not only, “How do we retain workers?” but:

How do we help workers serve faithfully for the duration appropriate to their calling, health, family, and task?

Re-Entry Is Part of Sending

Missionary care does not end at the airport home.

Re-entry can involve:

- loss of role;
- loss of community;
- financial uncertainty;
- reverse culture shock;
- grief;
- difficulty explaining experience;
- children entering unfamiliar school systems;
- spiritual confusion after intense ministry.

A sending church that celebrates departure but ignores return has only half a sending theology.

Former missionaries also hold valuable knowledge.

They can mentor candidates, inform strategy, teach languages, support diaspora ministry, advise boards, and contribute to mission research.

Re-entry should therefore be reintegration, not disappearance.

Formation for Reduced Centrality. The deepest missionary formation may be learning not to be needed.

A worker must be capable of giving away responsibility.

Training others who become better than the trainer.

Watching a local pastor preach differently.

Allowing a ministry to change after handoff.

Losing public recognition.

Receiving correction from a younger leader.

Leaving a role that once provided identity.

³Rob Hay et al., eds., *Worth Keeping: Global Perspectives on Best Practice in Missionary Retention* (William Carey Publishing, 2007), ReMAP II; use as historical comparative research rather than a current 2026 attrition census.

This is spiritually difficult because mission can become the missionary's selfhood.

The gospel provides another identity.

The missionary is a disciple before being a missionary.

A child of God before being an organizational asset.

A member of Christ's body before being a ministry brand.

That identity makes handoff possible.

The Sustainable Missionary Is Not the Safe Missionary

Sustainability should not be confused with comfort.

Faithful missionaries may suffer.

They may face imprisonment, illness, grief, rejection, danger, or early death.

Christian mission cannot guarantee safety.

The New Testament does not.

Member care is not a technique for removing the cost of obedience.

It is stewardship that refuses to add unnecessary harm through negligence, poor preparation, abusive leadership, or unrealistic systems.

The church should not promise missionaries an easy life.

It should promise that they will not be treated as disposable tools.

Mission needs workers who can remain, learn, repent, endure, hand over authority, and sometimes leave wisely.

Those workers are formed through churches, teams, agencies, mentors, families, and the ordinary means of Christian discipleship long before strategic deployment.

Yet even well-formed missionaries cannot enter every context through the same route.

The next chapter examines how migration, work, digital life, education, and professional presence have expanded the legitimate pathways through which Christian witness can travel.

New Pathways Into the Missionary World

The classic modern missionary image is easy to recognize.

A Christian leaves a sending country, joins a mission agency, receives a missionary visa or religious-worker status, relocates to another country, learns the language, and begins evangelistic or church-planting work.

That pathway remains legitimate and important where it is possible.

It is no longer the only significant pathway through which cross-cultural Christian witness moves.

Migration, international education, global labor markets, remote communication, professional mobility, tourism, digital media, business networks, refugee movement, and transnational families have rearranged the missionary landscape.

The result is not the disappearance of the missionary.

It is the multiplication of **missionary pathways**.

That multiplication creates opportunity.

It also creates ethical questions.

A route into a country is not automatically a missionary strategy. A job should not become a lie. A refugee should not become a ministry target before becoming a neighbor. A social-media follower should not be counted as a disciple. A digital conversation should not expose a seeker to surveillance. A business should produce real value rather than exist as a financial disguise for religious activity.

The governing principle is therefore:

Use every legitimate pathway that creates truthful, relational, and locally responsible access—but do not confuse access with mature mission.

Migration Changes Both Ends of Mission

People move in both directions across the missionary map.

A population once geographically distant may appear in the neighborhood of a sending church.

A Christian from a historically receiving country may migrate into a secularized society and become a missionary presence there.

A diaspora believer may maintain relationships across several countries simultaneously.

The *State of the Great Commission* project treats diaspora mission as a major feature of contemporary global Christianity, emphasizing that mission increasingly occurs among and through people on the move rather than only through geographically fixed sending and receiving categories.¹

This is especially important because migration can change several access domains at once.

A refugee from a restrictive country may gain greater informational access after migration.

Religious freedom may increase.

Christians may become easier to meet.

Yet family pressure, language barriers, economic vulnerability, and distrust can remain.

Physical relocation does not automatically produce meaningful access.

Hospitality as Missionary Practice. Diaspora mission often begins with something less dramatic than a campaign.

Hospitality.

A student is invited into a Christian home.

A refugee receives practical help without religious conditions.

A new immigrant learns how to navigate bureaucracy.

A family receives language assistance.

Friendship forms before a theological conversation.

Hospitality matters because migration is frequently a period of relational disruption. Existing social networks weaken. New identities are negotiated. Practical dependence increases.

That vulnerability creates missionary opportunity and ethical danger simultaneously.

Christian hospitality must not make help conditional on spiritual response.

¹Lausanne Movement, *State of the Great Commission* (2024), section on diaspora missions and the movement of mission “from everywhere to everywhere,” <https://lausanne.org/report>; see also the report PDF’s “Diaspora Missions” discussion.

The guest should never need to wonder whether food, translation, friendship, or legal assistance is a disguised transaction requiring interest in Christianity.

Witness becomes credible precisely when love remains love even if conversion never occurs.

Diaspora Christians as Missionary Agents

Diaspora populations should not be viewed only as people to be reached.

Many are already Christians.

African, Asian, Latin American, Middle Eastern, and Eastern European Christians now inhabit global cities far from ancestral homes. Migrant congregations have sometimes become missionary actors within societies that once sent missionaries elsewhere.

This can produce forms of witness unavailable to older institutions.

A Nigerian Christian in London may possess networks across Africa and Europe.

A Persian-speaking believer in Germany can communicate across diaspora and homeland relationships.

A Filipino worker in the Gulf may encounter people from several Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds in ordinary work life.

The missionary significance is not simply ethnic matching.

Diaspora Christians often understand migration, minority status, multilingual life, and transnational family pressures from experience.

The church should therefore ask not only:

How do we minister to migrants?

but:

How do we recognize, equip, and learn from the missionary agency already present among them?

The Workplace as a Missionary Environment. Most Christians spend far more time in workplaces than in church buildings.

Work therefore creates ordinary relational access on a scale formal church programs cannot reproduce.

Colleagues observe:

- competence;
- honesty;

- ambition;
- conflict;
- generosity;
- speech;
- treatment of subordinates;
- response to failure.

Christian witness at work cannot be reduced to verbal evangelism during lunch breaks.

It includes the integrity of the work itself.

The 2024 Lausanne Congress and subsequent resources placed significant emphasis on workplace mission, including business, tentmaking, professional life, education, and other sectors as arenas in which Christians participate in the Great Commission.²

This emphasis corrects a sacred-secular division in which “mission” belongs only to professional religious workers.

Yet whole-life mission also needs restraint.

An employee should not neglect contracted work in order to conduct unofficial ministry.

A manager should not use economic authority to pressure employees religiously.

Professional trust should not become a covert conversion technique.

Faithful workplace witness combines excellent work, ethical conduct, genuine relationships, and appropriate openness about Christian faith.

Tentmaking and Professional Presence

The apostle Paul’s work with his hands has long inspired the language of **tentmaking**: missionaries supporting themselves through ordinary professions while participating in gospel ministry.

Modern professional presence can be especially important where governments do not issue missionary visas.

Teachers, physicians, engineers, academics, software developers, nurses, businesspeople, and other professionals may possess legitimate reasons to live and work in places inaccessible to conventional missionary structures.

The word *legitimate* is essential.

²Lausanne Movement, “Workplace & Global Mission” resources from the Fourth Lausanne Congress and subsequent workplace-mission materials, accessed August 22, 2026, <https://congress.lausanne.org/prepare/workplace-global-mission/>.

A Christian should not claim to be a teacher while treating teaching as an annoying cover for “real ministry.”

If a worker enters under an employment contract, the worker owes honest professional service.

This principle protects Christian integrity and local people from being used as props in missionary strategy.

Professional presence works best when vocation and witness are integrated rather than deceptive.

The physician serves patients because medicine matters.

The teacher teaches because education matters.

The engineer builds because the work serves real human good.

Within those truthful relationships Christian witness may become possible.

Business as Mission. Business can provide another pathway.

A genuine enterprise can create:

- employment;
- economic value;
- long-term presence;
- relationships;
- local investment;
- opportunities for ethical leadership.

But “business as mission” is vulnerable to misuse when the business exists primarily to secure visas or donor legitimacy while producing little real value.

A fake or intentionally unsustainable business damages witness.

Employees become instruments.

Local competitors face unfair subsidized competition.

Authorities are misled.

The missionary organization may absorb repeated losses donors do not understand.

A Christian business in mission should therefore be a **real business with real accountability**.

Profit is not the only measure of value, but commercial claims should be truthful.

Where a business cannot function without permanent charitable subsidy, it should be described honestly as a subsidized social or ministry enterprise rather than pretending otherwise.

International Students

Universities are among the most globally connected institutions in the world.

International students may live for several years outside their home society during a formative period of adulthood.

They encounter new ideas, relationships, freedoms, and pressures.

Christian student ministry can therefore create meaningful access.

The ethical requirements resemble diaspora ministry:

- friendship rather than targeting;
- hospitality without conditions;
- respect for academic responsibilities;
- cultural humility;
- connection to healthy churches;
- awareness of security for students returning to restrictive contexts.

Students should not be treated as cheap access points to their home countries.

They are people first.

Some may later become important Christian leaders or bridge-builders.

That outcome should emerge from genuine discipleship rather than strategic instrumentalization.

Digital Space Is Real Space—but Not the Same Space. Digital mission has generated exaggerated claims in both directions.

One side treats online communication as superficial and unreal.

The other treats enormous reach metrics as evidence that geography has almost ceased to matter.

Both are wrong.

Digital relationships are real.

People form friendships, identities, communities, political movements, romantic relationships, and intellectual commitments online.

Christian witness therefore cannot ignore digital life.

At the same time, digital space does not remove embodiment.

A person still needs food, safety, family relationships, physical community, baptism, pastoral care, and often face-to-face support.

The 2025 Lausanne Global Voices survey illustrates the present missionary consensus and uncertainty. Ninety-five percent of participating global Christian leaders identified digital space as part of the mission field and the same share called for increased investment, while respondents expressed

considerably less confidence that current Christian digital presence produces authentic representation or effective discipleship.³

The finding should be interpreted within the survey's actual population of global Christian leaders, not as a census of all Christians.

Its significance is conceptual:

the opportunity is widely recognized; the discipleship model remains less mature.

The Digital Mission Ladder

Digital mission becomes clearer when treated as a ladder rather than one activity.

1. Discovery

A person encounters Christian content.

Search, video, podcast, social media, online Scripture, advertising, or recommendation creates first exposure.

This is informational access.

2. Exploration

The person reads more, asks questions, compares sources, or follows a series.

Anonymity may reduce social risk.

3. Conversation

One-way content becomes relational interaction.

The seeker can ask questions and receive responses adapted to actual concerns.

4. Trust

Repeated interaction creates confidence that the Christian contact is a real person who listens rather than a conversion script.

³Lausanne Movement, *Global Voices Report — October 2025*, reporting that 95 percent of participating global leaders identified digital space as part of the mission field and 95 percent called for increased investment while expressing uncertainty about current digital discipleship effectiveness, <https://lausanne.org/research/global-voices/october-2025>.

5. Discipleship

The conversation becomes sustained engagement with Scripture, prayer, Christian belief, and obedience.

6. Community

The person connects, where safely possible, with other believers—online, offline, or through a hybrid network.

7. Church

Christian life becomes accountable and communal: worship, baptism, teaching, pastoral care, leadership, and continuing witness.

Not every seeker moves through every stage.

The ladder prevents one common error: counting stage one as though it were stage seven.

Ten million video views can be strategically meaningful.

They are not ten million disciples.

Digital Mission in Restricted Contexts. Digital tools can dramatically expand informational access where public Christian activity is restricted.

A person may privately read Scripture, watch teaching, or message a Christian outside the country.

This can be life-changing.

It can also be dangerous.

Search history, contact metadata, cloud backups, platform moderation, compromised devices, or careless screenshots can reveal interest in Christianity.

Mission organizations working digitally in high-risk contexts should therefore minimize data collection and avoid assuming that common consumer platforms are safe simply because they are convenient.

The principle is straightforward:

Do not collect identifying information merely because technology makes collection easy.

Security should be designed around the risk to the seeker, not only the convenience of the ministry.

AI Expands Capacity and Risk

Artificial intelligence changes digital mission further.

AI can assist with:

- translation drafts;
- content adaptation;
- transcription;
- summarization;
- multilingual search;
- moderation;
- research;
- educational support.

It can also produce hallucinations, theological errors, culturally inappropriate advice, false confidence, privacy problems, and synthetic relationships that look more human than they are.

AI should therefore remain an instrument rather than a spiritual authority.

A seeker asking whether to reveal Christian interest to a hostile family does not need an unaccountable model improvising high-risk pastoral advice.

Sensitive decisions require knowledgeable human judgment.

Digital scale increases the need for human handoff, not the excuse to remove it.

Media and Broadcasting. Radio, satellite television, podcasts, and streaming media remain important because they can cross boundaries without requiring immediate physical presence.

Their strength is reach.

Their weakness is relational thinness.

Broadcasting is often strongest as one layer within a wider strategy.

A program introduces Christian ideas.

A secure contact channel allows questions.

Local or diaspora believers provide conversation.

Discipleship resources follow.

Where safe, connection to Christian community becomes possible.

Media then serves the ladder rather than pretending to be the whole mission.

Short-Term Specialists. Not every valuable missionary role requires long-term relocation.

Specialists may contribute through:

- medical training;
- translation checking;
- cybersecurity;
- trauma care;
- theological intensives;
- engineering;
- disaster response;
- legal support;
- financial auditing;
- educational consulting.

The key is role-task fit.

A six-week specialist should not be evaluated as a failed church planter.

A two-week team should not promise community transformation.

Short-term expertise becomes healthy when it strengthens long-term local capacity rather than displacing it.

The host should define whether the service is actually useful.

Regional and Near-Culture Mission

Global mission does not always require crossing continents.

Some of the strongest missionary pathways cross shorter cultural distances.

A church may engage a neighboring language group.

A regional worker may share broader cultural assumptions with the community while still crossing meaningful ethnic or religious boundaries.

A national Christian may possess easier legal access than a foreigner.

Near-culture mission can reduce language and social distance.

It can also contain internal hierarchies. Urban majorities may treat rural minorities paternalistically. Dominant ethnic Christians may reproduce national prejudice.

Nearness helps.

It does not abolish the need for humility.

Creative Access Without Deception. Mission agencies have often used the phrase *creative access* for roles that allow presence in restrictive countries.

The idea is legitimate.

The ethical line should be clear.

A Christian may accept a lawful role that creates relationships and live openly as a person of faith within the constraints of the context.

A Christian should not build missionary strategy around systematic lying about the work actually performed.

Some contexts will still require discretion about religious activity for the safety of local believers.

Discretion is not identical to deception.

The question is whether the worker's public role is real and responsibly fulfilled.

Christian mission should not depend on a theology in which evangelistic intention excuses dishonesty.

Pathways Must Converge Toward Community

The chapter can now return to its central warning.

New pathways expand access.

They do not redefine the missionary horizon.

A workplace relationship can introduce Christianity.

A diaspora friendship can create trust.

A digital platform can deliver Scripture.

A professional role can sustain long-term presence.

A business can create genuine community connection.

A student ministry can accompany people through questions.

These are powerful beginnings.

The deeper question remains:

Can Christian life become locally sustainable?

Can disciples gather?

Can leaders emerge?

Can Scripture be understood?

Can the church endure when the original pathway disappears?

The missionary world has more doors than previous generations possessed.

Faithful mission still needs somewhere for those doors to lead.

That destination is not the missionary organization.

It is mature Christian discipleship in community.

The final chapter therefore returns to the people responsible for carrying these pathways together: not a missionary elite, but the whole church.

The Whole Church and the Unfinished Mission

Who is responsible for the unfinished mission?

The wrong answer is:

missionaries.

Missionaries carry distinctive responsibility because they cross boundaries intentionally and often devote their vocation to gospel access where it is weak.

But missionaries do not own the Great Commission.

The church does.

This does not mean every Christian must become a foreign missionary.

It means the missionary vocation of the church cannot be outsourced to a small professional class while the rest of Christian life remains strategically unrelated to the nations.

The body has many members.

Mission requires many forms of participation.

The Whole Church Does Not Mean Identical Roles

Christian mobilization sometimes uses universal language carelessly.

Everyone is a missionary.

Everyone should go.

Everyone should evangelize in the same way.

These slogans can obscure genuine differences in gifting and calling.

Paul's body imagery in 1 Corinthians 12 depends on difference.

Some teach.

Some lead.

Some give.

Some serve.

The New Testament contains itinerant apostles and locally rooted elders, traveling coworkers and household hosts, financial supporters and teachers, public evangelists and ordinary believers whose lives spread the gospel through migration and relationship.

The whole church participates precisely because not everyone performs the same function.

A faithful missionary ecclesiology therefore says two things at once:

not every Christian is a cross-cultural missionary; every Christian belongs to a missionary people.

Going. Some Christians should go.

The access disparities documented in this book do not disappear through better language alone.

There remain communities with little locally rooted Christian witness. Someone must sometimes cross a boundary.

That boundary may be:

- geographic;
- linguistic;
- ethnic;
- religious;
- class-based;
- digital;
- professional;
- social.

Going should be taken seriously enough to require discernment and preparation.

Churches should not manipulate members into missionary service.

They should make missionary vocation imaginable, honorable, and concrete.

Young Christians should know that long-term cross-cultural service is one legitimate way to use a life.

Sending

Those who go require senders.

Sending includes money.

It also includes:

- prayer;
- theological accountability;
- friendship;
- pastoral care;
- logistical support;
- communication;
- care for parents and children;
- re-entry support;
- willingness to ask difficult questions.

A church that wires money but has no meaningful relationship with its missionaries is funding rather than sending.

A church that loves missionaries personally but never evaluates the work may provide relationship without stewardship.

Healthy sending combines both.

Praying. Prayer is not the missionary activity mentioned when nothing more practical is available.

Christian mission is theological before strategic.

Prayer acknowledges that conversion, endurance, wisdom, protection, repentance, and church maturity cannot be manufactured.

Prayer also forms missionary imagination.

A church that regularly prays by name for peoples, cities, missionaries, persecuted Christians, Bible translation, migrant communities, and local churches learns to see beyond its immediate horizon.

Prayer should be informed enough to avoid abstraction.

“God bless the missionaries” is sincere.

“Give wisdom to these local leaders as they decide whether to move gatherings after renewed surveillance” forms a different kind of attention.

Mission research can therefore serve prayer rather than replace it.

Giving

Global mission requires material resources.

Money funds language study, travel, translation, member care, research, media, theological education, relief, and countless ordinary costs.

Giving becomes unhealthy when donors assume control, demand inflated impact stories, or fund projects whose local costs cannot be sustained.

The answer is not less generosity.

It is wiser generosity.

Christians can learn to ask:

Does this ministry strengthen local agency?

Are the claims measurable and honest?

Is the strategy appropriate to the context?

Does the organization protect vulnerable people?

Can the work change or finish?

Is the donor supporting a relationship or purchasing a preferred outcome?

Good giving is missionary discipleship.

Welcoming. Migration has brought the nations into ordinary neighborhoods.

Churches that pray for distant people groups while remaining socially closed to migrants nearby have separated global mission from local obedience.

Welcoming can include:

- friendship;
- meals;
- language practice;
- practical support;
- international student hospitality;
- refugee assistance;
- partnership with migrant churches;
- cross-cultural worship and learning.

The aim is not to treat every migrant as a missionary project.

It is to become the kind of Christian community in which cross-cultural relationship is normal.

Some of the people welcomed will teach the host church more about global Christianity than the host church teaches them.

Working

The whole church spends most of its life outside formal church programs.

Engineers, nurses, teachers, shopkeepers, civil servants, researchers, drivers, programmers, artists, managers, farmers, and business owners inhabit relational worlds inaccessible to pastors and missionaries.

Workplace participation in mission should therefore be integrated into discipleship.

The 2024 Seoul Statement emphasizes that the Spirit distributes ministry gifts across the church and that Christians honor Christ in workplaces, homes, schools, and communities, while Lausanne's workplace initiatives have pressed the same conviction into explicit Great Commission practice.¹

A workplace Christian does not need to imitate a pulpit preacher at work.

Faithful presence can include:

- excellent work;
- truthfulness;
- justice;
- care for colleagues;
- moral courage;
- hospitality;
- appropriate verbal witness;
- mentoring;
- ethical use of authority.

The workplace becomes missionary not because every meeting turns into evangelism, but because Christian disciples inhabit it as Christians.

Creating, Translating, Researching, and Building. Mission also needs specialists whose work may never look like traditional evangelism.

A linguist analyzes a language.

A developer builds a secure communication tool.

A designer creates literacy materials.

A statistician audits mission data.

A lawyer helps a church navigate registration.

A psychologist improves safeguarding and member care.

¹Lausanne Movement, *The Seoul Statement* (2024), especially sections 40, 72–76 and related calls to whole-life discipleship, local-church maturity, and ministry accountability, <https://lausanne.org/statement/the-seoul-statement>; see also Lausanne workplace-mission resources from the Fourth Congress.

A historian corrects a missionary myth.

A translator makes theology accessible.

A cybersecurity professional protects vulnerable contacts.

A musician helps local believers develop worship in their own forms.

These activities can increase gospel access indirectly but substantially.

The whole church participates when professional competence is offered without pretending every skill is identical to proclamation. Contemporary mission research increasingly treats workplaces, diaspora networks, digital environments, specialist vocations, and cross-border collaboration as overlapping missionary pathways rather than marginal additions to one traditional deployment model.²

The Local Church as the Integrator

Mission can fragment into specialist silos.

Bible translation organizations focus on language.

Relief ministries focus on humanitarian need.

Digital ministries focus on media.

Agencies focus on deployment.

Seminaries focus on theological education.

Research organizations focus on data.

Each can be excellent.

The local church provides an integrating horizon because disciples eventually need a community in which these partial contributions become Christian life.

Scripture belongs in worship and teaching.

Relief belongs within love of neighbor.

Digital contact should move toward accountable relationship.

Missionaries should remain connected to churches.

Theology should form actual communities.

Research should inform prayer and decision-making.

The local church is not capable of performing every specialist function itself.

It is the community for whose maturation those functions should ultimately serve. Contemporary global evangelical mission frameworks likewise describe mission not merely as message distribution but as gospel

²Lausanne Movement, *State of the Great Commission* (2024) and the 2025 *Global Voices Report* for contemporary global mission discussion of digital life, collaboration, workplaces, diaspora, disciple-making churches, and emerging missionary pathways.

communication that contributes to replicating, maturing communities of believers in contextually meaningful forms.³

Agencies Remain Valuable. Returning responsibility to the church does not require abolishing mission agencies.

Specialized organizations exist because churches often cannot individually maintain:

- security systems;
- translation expertise;
- aviation;
- regional research;
- candidate assessment;
- international payroll;
- member care networks;
- complex legal compliance;
- high-risk field supervision.

Agencies can serve the church by concentrating expertise.

The danger begins when the specialist institution becomes functionally detached from ecclesial accountability or measures success mainly through its own growth.

A healthy agency asks:

How does our expertise help churches obey more faithfully?

How does this ministry strengthen local Christian capacity?

What should remain specialist?

What should eventually become locally owned?

The Gospel Access Framework

The book can now make explicit the framework used implicitly throughout Parts III and IV.

No single percentage captures meaningful gospel access.

A more honest analysis uses four domains.

³World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission, current mission framing: communicating the gospel where it is not known and establishing replicating communities of maturing believers in contextually relevant ways, accessed August 22, 2026, <https://weamc.global/who-we-are/our-heart/>.

1. Informational Access

Can a person realistically encounter an intelligible account of Christian belief?

This includes:

- Scripture;
- Christian media;
- teaching;
- public knowledge;
- digital availability;
- opportunities to ask questions.

Informational access can be high even where churches are weak.

It can also be distorted by censorship, misinformation, low literacy, or overwhelming caricature.

2. Linguistic Access

Can Christian Scripture and witness be understood in a language the person actually uses deeply?

A national language may provide partial access while the home language remains underserved.

Written material may exist where oral resources are more useful.

A spoken-language translation does not automatically serve a Deaf community.

Linguistic access is therefore more than the existence of one Bible edition.

3. Relational Access

Does the person know Christians with whom meaningful conversation is realistically possible?

This is often the invisible dimension.

A city can contain many churches while social networks remain segregated by caste, ethnicity, class, language, age, or migration status.

Relational access asks whether Christianity can be encountered through trusted human relationships rather than merely abstract information.

4. Ecclesial Access

Can a person realistically enter and remain within a Christian community capable of worship, discipleship, pastoral care, teaching, and belonging?

A church may exist geographically nearby yet remain socially inaccessible.

A private convert may possess excellent information but no safe community.

A migrant may understand Christianity but lack a congregation in a usable language.

Ecclesial access therefore asks whether Christian faith can become durable social life.

Why the Framework Has No Master Score. The temptation is to assign each domain a number and calculate one Gospel Access Index.

This book deliberately refuses to do so.

The domains are not easily commensurable.

How many online sermons equal one trusted Christian friend?

How should a complete Bible be weighted against the absence of a church?

How much does legal danger reduce otherwise strong informational access?

A single score would create a false precision similar to the problem criticized in simplistic unreached metrics.

The framework is diagnostic, not computational.

It helps ask better questions.

Access Profiles

Consider several hypothetical profiles.

Profile A — High Information, Low Church

A person can read Scripture online, watch Christian teaching, and speak privately with believers abroad.

No safe local church exists.

Informational access is high.

Linguistic access may be high.

Relational access is moderate.

Ecclesial access is low.

The strategic priority is not another million content impressions.

It is safe, durable Christian community.

Profile B — Churches Nearby, Social Distance High

A migrant neighborhood sits near several congregations.

The churches worship in another language and have almost no relationships with the neighborhood.

Ecclesial presence exists geographically.

Meaningful relational and linguistic access remain low.

The strategic need may be hospitality, language, cross-cultural relationship, and church adaptation rather than pioneer entry from another country.

Profile C — High Access, Low Plausibility

A secular European can investigate Christianity easily, buy several Bible translations, meet Christians, and attend churches.

All four access domains are relatively strong.

The challenge is not basic availability.

It may be credibility, discipleship, institutional trust, intellectual plausibility, or social imagination.

This is genuine mission.

It is not the same missionary problem as Profile A.

Profile D — Strong Church, Weak Minority-Language Access

A country contains a large Christian population and mature institutions.

One minority language lacks Scripture and churches.

National data suggests high Christian access.

The four-domain profile reveals a local frontier hidden within a Christian-majority environment.

This is why mission maps must remain granular.

Access Is Dynamic. Every profile can change.

A new translation improves linguistic access.

Migration improves relational access.

Persecution reduces ecclesial access.

A church-planting movement increases local community.

Secularization changes credibility.

War displaces populations.

Technology expands information.

A government blocks platforms.

Mission research must therefore be time-stamped.

No final world map exists before the end of history.

From Access to Maturity

Access is not the final missionary outcome.

It is the condition that makes meaningful encounter more possible.

The horizon remains mature disciples and churches.

A community can move through stages:

little access → first witness → relationships → discipleship → local church → mature leadership → reproducing and sending capacity.

Real life does not follow the sequence neatly.

The model still identifies an important direction:

mission seeks not merely to make Christianity visible but to see Christian life become locally sustainable and capable of further witness.

This returns the framework to Chapter 25.

The church is a better horizon than the missionary.

What Can Be Finished? The book can now answer the completion question more precisely.

Christians can finish many things.

A Bible translation can be completed.

A language survey can finish.

A pioneer assignment can reach its objective.

A church can gain local leadership.

A training program can hand over responsibility.

A mission agency can close a field office.

A people group can move from almost no meaningful Christian access to substantial local Christian capacity.

A missionary role can end.

A project should sometimes stop.

Mission organizations should celebrate these completions.

Permanent incompleteness is not a virtue.

What Cannot Be Declared Finished by a Dashboard? No database can certify that a human population no longer needs Christian witness.

Generations change.

Churches weaken.

Languages shift.

Migration changes communities.

Children grow up who have not heard what their parents heard.

Christian-majority societies secularize.

Missionary movements become institutionalized.

New minorities appear.

The Great Commission is therefore not completed by crossing every row off a contemporary people-group list.

Neither is it made meaningless by the fact that the task is dynamic.

The church can reduce real access inequalities without claiming to control the eschaton.

The Unfinished Mission Revisited

The governing definition introduced earlier can now be restated with the constructive argument attached.

Earlier, this book defined the unfinished mission as the continuing condition in which Christ's commission remains active while meaningful access to Christian witness, Scripture, discipleship, and locally rooted Christian community remains profoundly unequal. That definition still governs the conclusion; the intervening chapters have supplied its historical, empirical, and practical content.

Faithful mission therefore seeks to reduce that inequality in ways that produce durable Christian capacity.

It does so through:

- truthful proclamation;
- Scripture;
- contextual understanding;
- relationship;
- local churches;
- local ownership;
- global partnership;
- well-formed missionaries;
- legitimate pathways;
- whole-church participation;
- accountable power;
- patient endurance.

No one strategy can substitute for the whole.

Urgency Without Manipulation. The unfinished mission is urgent.

People live and die.

Opportunities close.

Languages disappear.

Churches need workers.

Yet urgency must not justify:

- inflated statistics;
- coercive fundraising;
- careless sending;
- deceptive access;
- shallow contextualization;
- abuse of local leaders;
- unsafe data practices;
- institutional self-protection.

A missionary method that contradicts Christian truth cannot be defended by missionary urgency.

Means matter because mission represents Christ.

Hope Without Triumph

The global history traced in Part II gives reason for hope.

Christianity has crossed extraordinary cultural distances.

It has survived the collapse of empires.

It has taken root in languages missionaries did not know existed.

Former receiving churches have become sending churches.

Scripture access has expanded dramatically.

New missionary centers continue to emerge.

But Christian history also resists triumphalism.

Ancient churches have disappeared from regions where they once flourished.

Missionary institutions have caused harm.

Churches have compromised with power.

Growth has sometimes produced shallow discipleship.

The church's confidence therefore cannot rest in historical momentum.

It rests in Christ.

Faithful Until the End

The Great Commission ends not with a metric but with a promise of presence.

The church goes because Christ has authority.

It makes disciples because he commanded it.

It teaches obedience because the gospel forms life, not merely opinion.

It crosses boundaries because the nations belong within the scope of his kingdom.

It builds churches because discipleship requires community.

It gives away power because Christ is the head of the church.

It perseveres because missionary fruit often takes longer than institutions prefer.

It remains humble because the Spirit is not controlled by strategy.

It can finish assignments because the mission does not depend on the permanence of one missionary.

And it continues because the commission remains active until the end of the age.

The unfinished mission is therefore neither a fundraising slogan nor a countdown.

It is a call to see the world truthfully and obey Christ faithfully where access remains unequal.

Some will cross oceans.

Some will cross streets.

Some will learn languages.

Some will translate.

Some will build churches.

Some will strengthen churches already there.

Some will send.

Some will welcome.

Some will give.

Some will research.

Some will create tools.

Some will teach.

Some will remain for decades.

Some will complete a task and leave.

The center is not the missionary.

The center is Christ.

The goal is not the expansion of missionary institutions.

The goal is faithful witness, mature disciples, locally rooted churches, and worship among the peoples God has made.

Until then, the church goes.

Conclusion: Faithful Until the End

The missionary question is easy to make either too small or too large.

It becomes too small when mission is reduced to a program: a department in a church, a line in a budget, a trip on a calendar, a set of statistics, or the specialist vocation of people who cross national borders. It becomes too large when every form of Christian goodness is called mission until the word no longer distinguishes the church's particular responsibility to bear witness to Christ, make disciples, form churches, and cross boundaries where that witness is weak.

This book has argued for a narrower center and a wider responsibility. The center is the gospel of Jesus Christ and the communities of disciples gathered around him. The responsibility is global because the Lord of the church is Lord of the nations, because the commission is not bounded by one civilization, and because meaningful access to Christian witness remains profoundly unequal.

Part I began with theology rather than strategy. Mission did not originate with William Carey, the modern missionary movement, a twentieth-century congress, or an evangelical research database. It belongs first to the biblical story of the God who creates, calls, sends, redeems, gathers, and promises the worship of the nations. That theological beginning matters because strategy is always subordinate. The church may measure, prioritize, organize, send, translate, and innovate. It may not turn its models into revelation or its institutions into the kingdom of God.

Part II then complicated the geography. Christianity did not move in a single line from Jerusalem to Europe and from Europe to the rest of the world. African and Asian Christian histories are ancient. Translation repeatedly decentralized Christian authority. Indigenous believers carried the faith beyond the reach of foreign missionaries. The modern missionary movement achieved extraordinary things while remaining entangled with

empire, race, money, and cultural power. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries then produced a genuinely polycentric church in which Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, Europe, North America, and diasporas all contain both sending and receiving contexts.

That history made the question in Part III unavoidable. A global religion can still have unequal reach. National Christian percentages, religious labels, and one-dimensional people-group classifications each reveal something; none captures the whole missionary reality. The distinction that emerged across the chapters was access: informational access to credible Christian explanation, linguistic access in forms people can understand deeply, relational access to trustworthy Christians, and ecclesial access to a locally inhabitable Christian community. Legal restriction, social cost, migration, caste, class, religious memory, urban segregation, secularization, and technology can strengthen or weaken each domain in different combinations.

Part IV asked why the inequalities persist even when the global church has enormous numbers of people, institutions, skills, and resources. No single explanation survived scrutiny. Some gaps persist because contexts are genuinely dangerous. Some persist because language and culture take years to learn. Some persist because money, workers, and attention follow existing relationships. Some persist because churches and organizations develop institutional gravity. Some persist because calling is framed in ways that make missionary vocation unusually difficult to imagine. Some persist because short funding horizons reward visible activity before durable trust can form. And some persist because missionary power itself can damage the communities it intends to serve.

The constructive answer in Part V was therefore not “send more” in isolation. More workers can be valuable. More money can be valuable. More technology can be valuable. None is automatically missionary progress.

The stronger horizon is locally rooted Christian capacity: disciples and churches able increasingly to worship, teach Scripture, care for one another, form leaders, bear witness, make decisions, steward resources, correct error, survive disruption, and eventually send beyond themselves without permanent dependence on outside control. That horizon changes the missionary’s definition of success. A faithful missionary may become less central over time. A successful organization may close a program. A donor may surrender decision rights. A local church may refuse an outside proposal. A receiving church may become a sending church. Completion of a particular assignment can be evidence of maturity rather than abandonment.

This does not erase the need for outsiders. The argument against domination is not an argument for isolation. Christian history is full of gifts that crossed boundaries: Scripture translations, theological insights, people, money, institutions, professional expertise, advocacy, hospitality, and friendship. Polycentric mission should increase these exchanges. The moral question is whether partnership allows all parties to possess meaningful agency, whether the people most affected can contest decisions, and whether contribution is confused with ownership.

The same restraint applies to technology. Digital media can create first contact where physical access is dangerous. Artificial intelligence can accelerate research, translation support, communication, and administration. Migration can place previously distant communities beside churches. Professional work can create legitimate presence where a conventional missionary role is impossible. These are real openings. But discovery is not discipleship, a message thread is not automatically a trusted relationship, and an online audience is not a church. New pathways are valuable when they converge toward truthful witness, embodied relationship where possible, accountable discipleship, and durable Christian community.

The unfinished mission therefore cannot be represented by one remaining number. It is not identical to a count of people groups below a threshold, the number of countries without Christian majorities, or an estimate of how many people have never encountered Christian information. Those measures may serve limited strategic purposes. None can tell the church that history is nearly completed.

Nor does this conclusion dissolve urgency. Unequal access concerns real people, not abstractions. Some live and die with almost no realistic pathway into Christian relationships or Scripture they can understand deeply. Some believers inhabit communities where public Christian life carries enormous cost. Some languages still lack Scripture work. Some churches have strength but little connection to neighboring populations. Some sending systems possess resources that could be deployed more faithfully.

Urgency, however, is different from panic. Panic exaggerates numbers, bypasses formation, treats people as targets, confuses speed with fruitfulness, and makes institutions afraid to admit failure. Christian urgency can be patient because God is not threatened by the time required for language, trust, repentance, discipleship, and local leadership. It can also be costly because patience is not passivity.

The practical questions are therefore demanding but finite. Where is meaningful access weakest? What kind of access is missing? What barriers

create the gap? Who already follows Christ there? What do locally rooted believers understand that outsiders do not? What contribution is actually needed? What time horizon fits the task? What safeguards are necessary? Who controls the money and the story? What would maturity look like? What would need to become true for the present missionary role to change, diminish, or end?

A church that learns to ask those questions will still make mistakes. Mission strategy cannot eliminate human fallibility. It can become more truthful, more accountable, more patient, and more willing to learn.

The final hope of Christian mission is not a perfect strategy. It is not a complete database. It is not the expansion of a denomination, a nation, or a mission agency. Christian hope rests in Christ, whose authority grounds the commission and whose promised presence prevents the commission from becoming a project of anxious human control.

Until the end, then, the church's task is not to manufacture the kingdom but to bear faithful witness to the King: to go where witness is weak, send wisely, translate carefully, welcome strangers, form disciples, strengthen churches, share power, repent when mission harms, and receive gifts from the global body of Christ.

The mission remains unfinished.

Faithfulness need not be.

Methodological Note: Statistics, Categories, and Source Freeze

This book combines biblical theology, mission history, contemporary demographic research, religious-freedom reporting, people-group databases, Scripture-access statistics, and missiological scholarship. Those sources answer different questions and should not be merged as though they describe one variable.

Religious-demography estimates describe affiliation under a source's stated methodology. Pew Research Center's 2025 global reconstruction, for example, estimates the religious composition of 2020 using censuses, surveys, registers, and related sources. World Christian Database uses a different modeled system and broader Christian categories. Their totals are therefore not interchangeable.

People-group databases are strategic research systems. Joshua Project and PeopleGroups.org use related but nonidentical definitions, counting systems, thresholds, and engagement categories. A people-group total is not a census of naturally bounded human units. Counts can change because populations change, because research improves, or because the classification system changes.

Gospel-access language in this book is analytical rather than a claim to direct measurement of individual spiritual opportunity. Informational, linguistic, relational, and ecclesial access are distinct dimensions, modified by factors such as legal freedom, social cost, geography, class, caste, migration, and digital surveillance. The book intentionally does not combine them into a single numerical score.

Persecution and religious-restriction sources also use different objects of measurement. Pew's Government Restrictions Index and Social Hostilities Index describe country-level restrictions involving religion gen-

erally. USCIRF makes policy recommendations under U.S. statutory categories. Open Doors' World Watch List measures pressure and violence experienced by Christians under its own methodology. These sources can illuminate the same environment without being equivalent datasets.

Scripture-access statistics are dynamic. Wycliffe Global Alliance and ProgressBible distinguish languages with at least some Scripture, languages with work in progress, and languages where work still needs to begin. Availability does not by itself measure comprehension, use, engagement, or ecclesial maturity.

The final volatile-data source freeze for this edition is **22 August 2026**. Historical arguments do not depend on that date, but live counts and policy lists should be rechecked before any later edition or reprint. Rounded figures are preferred where methodological uncertainty is larger than the apparent precision of the underlying number.

The governing editorial rule is simple: **a statistic may direct attention, but it must not pretend to know more than its source can measure.**

Glossary

Contextualization. The process of communicating and embodying Christian faith in forms intelligible within a particular cultural and social world while remaining accountable to Scripture and Christian confession.

Diaspora mission. Christian witness and church life shaped by the movement of peoples across borders or regions, including mission by, among, and through migrant communities.

Ecclesial access. Realistic access to a Christian community a person could meaningfully enter, not merely the existence of a church somewhere in the same country or city.

Evangelical. In this book, a broad Protestant Christian category centered on the authority of Scripture, the gospel of Christ, conversion, and active witness. Statistical sources may operationalize the term differently.

Frontier people / frontier unreached people group. A missionary-research category for populations with extremely low evangelical presence or little evidence of an indigenous gospel movement. Exact thresholds depend on the database used.

Gospel access. The realistic opportunity to encounter and understand credible Christian witness. This book analyzes four domains: informational, linguistic, relational, and ecclesial access.

Informational access. Availability of credible and sufficiently comprehensible information about Christian belief, Scripture, and practice.

Linguistic access. Availability of Christian witness and Scripture in languages and forms a community can understand deeply, including oral and sign-language contexts where relevant.

Local ownership. Meaningful local authority over priorities, decisions, resources, leadership, institutions, and public representation; not merely the employment of local staff inside externally controlled systems.

Locally rooted church. A Christian community embedded sufficiently in its social and linguistic environment to sustain ordinary Christian life and increasingly carry witness, leadership, discipleship, and decision-making without permanent outsider control.

Mission. The participation of God's people in God's redemptive purpose, centrally through witness to Christ that makes disciples, crosses boundaries, and forms communities of faith. The term is used more narrowly than a synonym for every good Christian activity.

Missio Dei. "Mission of God." A missiological concept emphasizing that mission originates in God's action and purpose rather than in the institutional expansion of the church.

People group. A human research category used by mission organizations to identify populations among whom barriers of language, culture, ethnicity, religion, caste, geography, or social acceptance may hinder the flow of the gospel. It is an analytical tool, not a claim that humanity consists of perfectly fixed units.

Polycentric mission. Mission arising from multiple geographic, ecclesial, and cultural centers rather than from one dominant sending region.

Relational access. Meaningful access to trustworthy Christians with whom questions, faith, and life can be explored through actual relationships.

Sending church. A local church that discerns, prepares, commissions, supports, pastors, and remains accountable with workers it sends, rather than functioning only as a source of funding.

Unengaged unreached people group (UUPG). A database category for an unreached population in which no active church-planting engagement or workers are reported under the source's operational definition.

Unreached people group (UPG). A strategic category for a population judged to lack sufficient locally rooted Christian presence to sustain broad evangelization without outside assistance. Thresholds and counting methods vary by organization.

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