

Christianity at 2010: Changes Today and Challenges Tomorrow

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At the end of the twentieth century just over 33% of the world's population profess to be Christians. Contrary to the optimistic outlook one hundred years ago of a "Christian century", this percentage is actually slightly lower than it was in 1900. Some might conclude that Christians have made virtually no progress in enlisting followers in the past one hundred years. But such a point of view would miss the radical changes that have impacted the world Christian movement in the 20th century.

Changes and Trends

Southern Shift. First of all, in 1900 over 80% of all Christians were White. Most were from Europe and North America. Today that percentage is only 45%. The demographic weight of Christianity is now found in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Over the next 25 years the White portion of global Christianity is expected to continue to decline dramatically.

Renewal Movements. Second, in 1900, only a handful of Christians were involved in renewal movements. By AD 2010 over 630 million or 28% of all Christians were participants in renewal. Over the century the first wave of renewal, the Pentecostal Movement, grew into 750 denominations in 225 countries with 84 million members. Later, a second wave, the Charismatic Renewal, hit the mainline churches encompassing 6,500 denominations in 235 countries with over 204 million members. Finally, a third wave, or the rise of Neocharismatics, emphasizing a break with denominationalism, spread into over 18,800 networks in 225 countries, claiming over 350 million members. The majority of these are in Africa and Asia. Altogether these three waves of renewal mark a radical transformation of Christianity in the 20th century.

Great Commission Emphasis. Third, Christians of all major traditions have grown increasingly committed to the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. One out of three Christians in the world is active in their obedience to this Commission. The number has grown from 78 million in 1900 to over 725 million in AD 2010. As a result, hundreds of new mission agencies have been formed and thousands of new missionaries sent out. The independent churches, barely a factor in mission in 1900, are now providing a new infusion of workers as many of the more traditional sending bodies continue to decline. An almost entirely unexpected surge of workers has emerged from the non-Western world—thousands of new churches and agencies sending foreign and home missionaries.

Communication. Fourth, Christians have stepped up their evangelistic efforts particularly in line with advances in communications technology, beginning with the radio early in the century and progressing to satellite networks today. In 1900 it is estimated that Christians generated enough evangelism on earth for every person to hear the gospel six times every year. By 2010 that figure had skyrocketed to 260 times—a gospel presentation for every person on earth nearly every day all year long.

Unreached Peoples. Remarkably, these dramatic changes have not achieved a fundamental goal of Christian missions—proclaiming the good news to every people in the world. A major study by Samuel Zwemer was commissioned by the Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910 and then published the following year as *The unoccupied mission fields of Africa and Asia*. Zwemer clearly outlined the unfinished task and the opportunities the churches had for contacting the unevangelized. He even emblazoned an early version of the “10/40 Window” on the cover. This call was largely ignored. Similar clarion calls were made throughout the 20th century culminating with a global concerted effort in the 1990s with a now-popularized 10/40 Window. Nonetheless, in 2010, 1.9 billion people in several thousand ethnolinguistic peoples are still without access to a culturally-relevant church community.

This shortfall is largely the result of where missionaries went to work during the twentieth century. Nine out of ten missionaries sent out went to work among peoples already contacted with the Christian message, and in some cases, already heavily Christian. This pattern is being repeated today by the new independent missionaries, and to a large extent, by non-Western missionaries.

Resistance and Persecution. Another unanticipated trend has been the tremendous resistance non-Christians have shown to Christians and Christian missions in the 20th century. The rise of Communism early in the century provided most of this dynamic. Over 70 years not only were Christians in Communist lands under intense persecution but millions lost their lives prematurely as a result of their witness—the standard definition of Christian martyrs. With the collapse of Communism in the latter part of the century one would think that martyrdom and persecution would now be rare. Unfortunately this is not the case. Outside of the Communist world, governments that now persecute Christians are run by secularists, Muslims, Hindus, and surprisingly, other Christians. In fact, the 20th century has been the bloodiest on record, not only for all of humanity but for Christians as well. In these 100 years more Christians lost their lives as martyrs than in all the previous centuries combined.

The Arab World. Another area of interest is the struggle faced by Christians in the Arab World, now 23 countries with a population of 355 million. Today, nearly 25 million Christians can be found there although two-thirds of these are in Egypt and Sudan alone. In fact, the percentage of Christians in virtually every one of these countries has been declining through emigration over the past 25 years. The Orthodox community has been hit the hardest, creating a worldwide diaspora as far flung as North and South America, Europe, and Australia. In particular, Palestinian Christians have been on the move—their homeland was almost 9% Christian in 1990 and is less than 2% Christian today. Not surprisingly, the nations of the Arab World are more Muslim today than they were 100 years ago. At the same time, guest workers, especially from South Asia, have brought large numbers of Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists to the region for the first time. Christians hoping to evangelize the Arab World have been looking to innovative new strategies including television and radio as well as “insider movements” where Muslims remain in their communities while following Christ.

Challenges and Future Trends

The challenges that the new missions force of the 21st century face are legion. The world of AD 2000 is radically different than that of 1900. The overconfidence exhibited early in this century by secular leaders of the Enlightenment Project has been completely deflated by the collapse of Communism and a general loss of faith in science and the idea of inevitable progress. Christian theologians and mission leaders who borrowed heavily from this paradigm find themselves at a crossroads. Although some advocate an even stronger “modern” approach, many hope to use postmodern strategies—usually more decentralized and less dependent on big budgets.

Many Initiatives, Mixed Success. With that in mind, some see the ethos of 20th century mission creeping into 21st century initiatives. First is the tendency to convene big conferences with impressive slogans in which the implications of the slogans are not seriously addressed. Second, the hoped-for century of church union has become instead one of schism and lack of cooperation. If anything, hundreds of new organizations have emerged, each with their own independently-stated plans. Third, the number of missionaries available for frontier missions may be impacted by an increasing uneasiness over the efficacy of Christianity in already-disciplined peoples—Rwanda as a premier example. As a result, more mission effort is advocated among the 141 countries already 60% or more Christian—already the locus of current missionary deployment. Fourth, short-term missions is now a driving force in missions. Although this means that more Christians are exposed to mission fields, it seems to be having the effect of injecting a short-term emphasis into long-term mission efforts—ranging from church planting to business as mission. Fifth, although much has been learned in contextualization of the gospel, emerging short-term mentalities foreshadow a de-emphasis on language and culture learning—the backbone of the foreign missionary enterprise.

Partnerships and Strategy Coordinators. Nonetheless, positive developments in 20th century mission are also being appropriated in the new century. First and foremost has been the formation of two kinds of partnerships. First, we see increasing cooperation between Western and non-Western missions. Whereas there have been many false starts along the way, valuable lessons have been learned related to the use of money and the sharing of control of personnel and funds. Second, strategic partnerships between various kinds of Christian outreach organizations have been formed specifically around unreached peoples. For example, a Bible translation agency might work closely with radio broadcasters and a microenterprise endeavor. Although these partnerships are relatively few in number, they represent a major step forward in frontier missions strategy. Closely related to this is the rise of strategy coordinators. This new breed of missionary studies a specific people and lists all the possible ways they might be reached. They then choose 10 or so of the best strategies and advocate these among specialized agencies (such as media ministries).

Disciples of Jesus vs “Christians”. Perhaps the most astonishing development in frontier missions in the 20th century has been the unanticipated rise of the non-baptized believer in Christ. Akin to the fabulous growth of the Chinese house churches or African Independent churches in the latter half of the 20th century, several million Hindus,

Muslims, and Buddhists have given their primary allegiance to Jesus Christ but have chosen not to leave their cultural traditions to join Christian churches. Their growth and development as individual believers and movements is not to be taken for granted. It may depend largely on the ability of key leaders within the Christian church to study and understand the implications of these insider movements. Their role as ambassadors will be to try to anticipate how these new believers interact with Christian churches. They may also be able to unlock contextualized strategies in reaching peoples currently beyond the gospel. This is especially true since recent research suggests that 86% of all Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists do not personally know a Christian.

Towards Fulfilling the Great Commission. All of these developments underscore the fact that the missionary of the 21st century will likely have a much greater load to bear than his or her 20th-century predecessor. Faced with information overload in a networked environment, multiple agencies from multiple countries taking multiple approaches, the impact of globalization and postmodernism on seemingly remote peoples, an increased need for cultural, ethnic, and religious sensitivity, the emergence of almost-unrecognizable new forms of Christianity, and a host of other new factors, Christian workers, more than ever, will need to be well-prepared and well cared for in the 21st century. Only then will Christians around the world be able to fulfill the initial requirement of the Great Commission—the effective penetration of all peoples with the gospel message.

Note: All statistics in the text are documented in *World Christian encyclopedia: a comparative survey of churches and religions in the modern world*, 2nd edition, D.B. Barrett, G.T. Kurian, and T.M. Johnson (Oxford University Press, 2001), updated annually at www.globalchristianity.org.

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