

The World is Flat—Or Is It?

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We stand on the brink of a new era in global missiology.

In many respects, we are experiencing a dramatic “hinge” in the history of planet Earth.

Futurist Leonard Sweet puts it this way:

Events that have happened in the aftermath of the postmodern earthquake have generated tidal waves that have created a whole new world out there. In your lifetime and mine, a tidal wave has hit....a tsunami of change.ⁱ

As we meet in the Netherlands in the first decade of the Third Millennium, we face a sea change in Christian mission.

THE WORLD IS FLAT

In his blockbuster best-seller, Thomas Friedman says that globalization has caused us to live in a world that is a “level” or “flat” playing field. This is a major paradigm change. You have read Friedman’s research: jobs can now be outsourced anywhere; airline agents answer your 800 number calls in India; your clothing was probably made in China. Friedman postulates that “this flattening process is happening at warp speed.”ⁱⁱ

A more recent book, published in late 2006, is *Mind Set!: Re-Set Your Thinking and See the Future.*ⁱⁱⁱ In this book, author John Naisbitt says that industries are becoming global economic “domains”. For example, eBay’s revenue belongs to a worldwide technology

“domain”, not the economy of the United States. Years ago, in his book, *Megatrends*, Naisbitt correctly forecast the slippage of the USA in economic dominance. In this newest volume, he elaborates on the decline of Europe as well.

In many respects, Friedman and Naisbitt are correct. Global interconnectedness definitely characterizes the third millennium. This has tremendous importance for Christian mission. Global “togetherness” is being fed by a number of factors:

- The technological revolution.

We have only seen the tip of the iceberg. An Eastern Nazarene College student spent much of the summer of 2006 working on a Harvard University project to fabricate nanowires. These wires are 10 to 15 nanometers in diameter, which is 3,000 to 4,000 smaller than a human hair!

- Vast movements of population.

Each day, thousands of planes carry passengers between nations. For many, it is a one-way flight. These shifts have resulted in what futurist Keichi Ohmae calls “the borderless world”

- Instantaneous global communication.

In Bangladesh, Muhammad Yunus, who won the Nobel Peace Prize this year for his work, is equipping some of the rural poor with solar-powered cell phones and computers—so that they may gain income by being programmers for major corporations overseas.^{iv}

- Interdependence of nations

As global ties increase, individual nations find that they are less able to “act on their own”.

Today, societies are interlocked globally in commerce, travel, and communication.

THE SOUTHERN SHIFT

A second major paradigmatic change missiologically is the shift in the strength of the Christian church from the Western to the non-Western world, and from the northern hemisphere to the southern. Although Philip Jenkins has recently popularized this truth in *The Next Christendom*^v, this shift is not something recent. I heard Andrew Walls (now of the University of Edinburgh) say much the same thing at an American Society of Missiology meeting in the mid-1980's.

The north-south shift has become significant enough that the journal *Missiology* had "The Southern Shift" as its theme for the April, 2006 issue. Mark Laing, author of the keynote Article, "The Changing Face of Mission: Implications for the Southern Shift in Christianity" notes, "It is no exaggeration to state that the current changes in world Christianity are as significant as the Reformation or the conversion of Constantine."^{vi} Instead of the phrase "Two-Thirds World" (where two-thirds of the world's population live on two-thirds of the world's land mass), we are now using the term "majority world."

Perhaps the most important contribution that Laing has made in this article is to point out that this seismic shift is not just about demographics. Along with Jenkins and others, Laing's research indicates that the southern church is generally much more conservative and evangelical than the church in the north. Gone is the day when Americans and other Westerners considered themselves the "guardians of the faith" against the syncretistic tendencies of the church in the non-Western world. In a grand historic reversal, the non-Western church and the churches of the southern hemisphere now often provide the only ballast that keeps the Western churches from sliding into heretical theological positions.

A recent example of this concerns the Episcopal position on homosexuality: the voices that cry for orthodoxy on this issue within that communion arise mainly from the non-Western, rather than the Western church. As a result, some Episcopal parishes in the USA are linking to Anglican jurisdictions in other parts of the world, such as Nigeria.

Additionally, while the churches in the West generally are stagnant in terms of growth, majority-world churches tend to be strongly evangelistic and are exploding with growth.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN MISSION

These two paradigm shifts have tremendous implications for missiology today. The global scene, according to Saskia Sassen, “materializes in a worldwide grid of strategic places...constituting a new economic geography of centrality, one that cuts across national boundaries and across the old North-South divide.”^{vii}

What Sassen, Walls, Jenkins and Laing describe without doubt constitutes a major change in the history of the world. We indeed stand on the brink of a new era. We face major changes in the context of Christian mission and the church.

PARADIGM CHANGES IN THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE

A significant paradigm shift is occurring within the Church of the Nazarene concerning membership. If we look back forty-five years (1960), there were nearly six times as

many members of the Church of the Nazarene in the US/Canada (318,597) as there were in world areas (54,055). However, in 2005, there were 917,135 members in world areas, and 649,170 members in US/Canada. If those same trends should continue for the same length of time, forty five years from now there would be 1,322,742 members in USA/Canada, but over 15 million (15,560,755) members overseas! In other words, the church overseas would be nearly *twelve times larger than the church in USA/Canada*. If we look at the almost complete lack of growth in USA/Canada in very recent years (the number of churches has declined in each of the past four years), the numbers might even become more disparate.

Of course, extrapolations far into the future usually fail in accuracy over the long haul. However, just imagining the possibilities helps us to expand our thinking. When we hear that a Church of the Nazarene was planted every week of 2006 in the nation of Benin, or that 100 new churches were planted within a six month period last year on the Ethiopia South Central District, it should encourage us to seriously contemplate our response to this new context.

THE WORLD IS FLAT....OR IS IT?

Is the world “flat” within the church? Is there equal access, equal opportunity, equal representation?

We can hardly say that the world is “flat” in the church when most of the leaders come from Western nations.

The world is not “flat” when techniques and programs from a stagnated Western church are exported to the non-Western world.

The world is hardly “flat” when we look for spiritual nourishment and guidance to those who lead churches that are dormant.

The world is definitely not “flat” when missionaries are drawn primarily from nations where the church is ailing.

Certainly, in the church at large, and in our own beloved communion, the world is not flat yet. Could it be? Will it be?

SOME ENCOURAGING DEVELOPMENTS

There are some encouraging signs. The fact that four of six regional directors now are non-USA persons is a step in the right direction. A second step is the continuance of the various “internationalization commissions/groups” over the years by the General Assembly. A third is the very existence of this conference.

Another plus is the increasing number of missionaries from the “majority-world”. This has tremendous advantages (and challenges) for the sending churches. As was reported by a mission director in a recent article in *Christianity Today*: “There is a team working in northern India. There are a couple Koreans, a Japanese, an Ethiopian, a couple

Americans...it is very difficult for Muslims in northern India to say that Christianity is a Western religion.”^{viii}

The emergence of God-called persons from all nations is not a totally new phenomenon. Juliet Ndzimandze, born in an obscure village in Swaziland, conducted successful evangelistic campaigns not just across Africa, but also in Germany, Britain, and the USA.^{ix} Alice Khumalo was a true missionary to the Pedi in Africa; Ap Tul learned another language and crossed a cultural boundary in Papua New Guinea. But many of these stories have been obscured or were seen as atypical “droplets” of God’s grace in the global missionary task.

Today, within the Church of the Nazarene, we have “Missionary Training Centers” operating in several nations, including, among others, Argentina, Korea, Philippines, Brazil and Guatemala. The sending of missionaries from Central and South America to Europe, or vice versa, is becoming the norm rather than the exception. Wherever holiness and true spirituality prevail, God calls his surrendered people to take the good news of his peace and love to others.

WILL WESTERN NAZARENES BE WILLING TO ADAPT?

Just prior to his untimely death, David Bosch, in his book *Transforming Mission*, wrote these words: “The events that we have been experiencing at least since World War II and the consequent crisis in Christian mission are not to be understood as merely incidental

and reversible. Rather, what has unfolded is the result of a fundamental paradigm shift, not only in mission or theology, but in the experience and thinking of the whole world. In earlier ages the church has responded imaginatively to paradigm changes; we are challenged to do the same for our time and context.^x

Are we who live in the West willing to respond imaginatively? Are we willing to adapt to the new context of the Third Millennium? If 15 million Nazarenes should materialize in world areas, are we willing to have persons from other nations take *all* of the leadership roles in the Church? All of the General Superintendents, all of the headquarters personnel? Are we willing to consider moving headquarters to another country? (just think, “Kansas City” would no longer be the “whipping boy”!) Before we, like the disciples responding to Jesus’ query, “Are you able”, say an easy “Yes, we are willing”, we need to think about and consider well all of the implications of our response.

Even more importantly than the items above, are we who are from the West willing to humble ourselves in order to *listen* and *learn* from our sisters and brothers from other nations? From those world areas where revival is occurring? Where the message of holiness is being fervently proclaimed? Where all night prayer meetings are being held? Where worship services are not truncated so that “we can beat the Baptists to the restaurant”? Where strong, vital spirituality exists among God’s people? In the Church of the Nazarene, this may be our opportunity to save the life of our church by loosing our own lives.

This is a *kairos* moment for the Church in many ways. As Lesslie Newbigin has pointed out, we “...need to listen to the witness of Christians from other cultures. The great new asset that we have for our missionary task is the presence among us of communities of Christians nourished in the cultures of Asia, Africa and the West Indies.”^{xi} In the Church of the Nazarene, we need to listen to wherever the fresh winds of God’s Spirit are blowing over our world. We must understand that God really does not recognize our smallness, our local agendas, and our prejudices. He really *does* want to save the whole world, and he will use any obedient people he can find to do the job.

ARE WE WILLING TO SUBJECT OURSELVES TO LIVING IN A “FLAT WORLD”?

Will a new era be birthed at this conference that will inspire all of us from the West to be newly egalitarian in our outlook? Will we dedicate ourselves to take the position of underling, servant, and student—to be instructed and taught by earnest Christians from the majority world? Are we willing?

Paul put it this way: “ Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Phil.2:5-8)

Jesus, of course, was even more precise, because he perfectly modeled for us what our behavior should be in any century by washing his disciples' feet. The National Opinion Research Council (based at the University of Chicago), in their study of social stratification, determined that the lowest ranked occupation—lower even than working in fast food—in the USA was that of shoe shine person. Not surprisingly, that was also true of the rank of “foot washer” in ancient Mediterranean cultures. That was the lowest, most menial, task—to wash those dirty feet. After he finished, Jesus asked his disciples the same question (John 13:12-17) that I think that we should ask ourselves as we enter the new global context of the Third Millennium: “Do you understand what I have done for you?”....”Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them!

END NOTES

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- ⁱ Leonard Sweet, *SoulTsunami* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 17.
- ⁱⁱ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006), 49.
- ⁱⁱⁱ John Naisbitt, *Mind Set!: Re-set Your Thinking and See the Future* (New York: Collins, 2006).
- ^{iv} Muhammad Yunus, *Banker to the Poor* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), 227.
- ^v Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- ^{vi} Mark Laing, “The Changing Face of Mission: Implications for the Southern Shift in Christianity,” *Missiology*, April, 2006, 165.
- ^{vii} Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: The New Press, 1998), xxv.
- ^{viii} Rob Moll, “Missions Incredible”, *Christianity Today*, March, 2006, 33.
- ^{ix} See the *Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (www.dacb.org), and Charles Gailey, *The Daughter of Africa* (Kansas City: NPH, 1998). The editor of the Dictionary, Jonathan Bonk, once said to me at a meeting of the American Society of Missiology, “You Nazarenes are way ahead of everyone else in recognizing your indigenous African leaders and missionaries.”
- ^x David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1993), 4.
- ^{xi} Lesslie Newbigin, “Can the West Be Converted?”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, January, 1987.