A SURVEY OF THE GLOBAL CHURCH

Posted on October 31, 2014 by Eddie

A brief overview of some of the encouragements and challenges faced by the church around the world as it seeks to engage in mission.
Category: Observations

Christianity is a global phenomenon. The bible says the â€œchurch is one people, the new humankind created in Christ Jesus. It is a multinational and multicultural community that spans the globe.â€

MISSION AND GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY

Are the study of global Christianity and mission one and the same, or is this a colonial hold-over? Does mission studies include the non-western church because other areas of study fail to do so? These may be true, but the bigger question is the challenge that the global church faces in terms of mission in its contexts.

SOME INITIAL STATISTICS

Today there are 2.3 billion who profess to be Christians compared to about 1.6 billion Muslims, almost a billion Hindus and just under 0.5 billion Buddhists. Throughout the C20 the church has numbered about 1/3 of the worldâ€™s population compared to under Â¼ in 1800.

Roman Catholic: 1.2 billion, Protestants 500 million, Orthodox 280 million, Anglicans 90 million.

THE GLOBAL SHIFT TO THE SOUTH

The western church now represents only a small fraction of global Christianity.

The â€˜southernâ€™ churches are still broadly Roman Catholic and mainstream Protestant, but Pentecostalism is growing.

Southern churches tend to be found amongst the poorest people and in situations of persecution. They are more likely to be ethically and theologically conservative. They tend to have a stronger supernatural orientation.

According to Andrew Walls, it is the southern church that will lead the world church.

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Good News About the Church in Africa

Christians were 10% of the population in 1900, but are now 60%.

The most growth is in Pentecostal churches such as African Indigenous Churches (AICs). Most AICs are small, but there are some very large ones such as the Kimbaguist churches in DRC and

Cherubim and Seraphim in Nigeria.

The AICs arose in reaction to Westernized Christianity. They exhibit examples of African religious heritage. Dreams and visions are integral to them and healing is important.

Some see AICs as syncretistic, others believe them to be a faithful African expression of Christianity, while others see them as ambiguous!

Much of the fear about AICs revolves around the extent to which they have absorbed the paganism of traditional African religion. On the other hand, no cultural form of Christianity has achieved complete fidelity. Criticism should be on biblical grounds, not on Enlightenment based Western Christianity.

Gilland offers a fourfold categorization of AICs

- **Evangelical-Pentecostal**. These had a connection with Western missionary churches but broke away.
- **Indigenous-Pentecostal**. Have had some contact with Western church but are more committed to Africanisation. Charismatic leadership and illiterate use of the Bible.
- **Revelational-Indigenous**: Rooted in direct revelation given to the leader. These have more authority than the Bible.
- **Ingigenous-Syncretistic**: Pastor is a shaman/diviner and any claim to be Christian is dubious. A lot of magical use of Christian symbols.

AICs are important as they seek to lay aside Western bias and Africanize the church. Contextualisation is necessary. A faithful African expression of the Church has a lot to contribute ot the world.

Challenges facing the Sub-Saharan African Church.

- **Socio-Economic Problems**: AIDS, debt, urbanization, the brain-drain.
- **Relating the Gospel to Traditional Culture**: much of this goes back to missionaries who condemned African culture. Western theological framework is still taught in African seminaries. Africans are aware of a spiritual aspect to the world which has been supressed in the West.
- **Rapid Growth of the Church**: There is a huge need for leadership training and there are far too many denominations.
- **Ongoing Evanglization**: There are many unreached people. Mission was (and is) regarded as the role of the Western church by too many Africans.
- **Violence**: Civil wars and Christian-Islamic conflict.

ASIA

Good News About the Church in Asia

1900, 22 million Christians (2% of the population). Today 360 million (8%).

The growth is uneven and some countries still only have tiny numbers of Christians. There were 4.5M Christians in China in 1949 and probably 100M today.

South Korea is a land of superlatives: the larges Christian gathering ever held, the largest theological seminaries, the largest Pentecostal, Presbyterian and Methodist congregations, and the largest non-Western missionary sending nation.

Christianity in Indonesia is growing faster than anywhere else in the world. Many countries now sending out missionaries.

Challenges Facing the Asian Church

The biggest is the huge population of Asian and the small % of Christians. 55% of the worldâ€™s population lives in Asia and the three largest non-Christian relgions are rooted there.

32 Asian nations are less than 10% Christian and 12 less than 2%. 75% if unreached people groups are in Asia.

A biblical response to religious pluralism is needed.

Many countries have regimes that are hostile to Christianity.

There is a huge urban challenge. In south-Asia 60% of the population lives in slums with a huge range of socio-economic problems.

LATIN AMERICA

Church made up of two groups.

- **Roman Catholics**: the conquest approach of Spain and Portugal means that the faith did not always take deep root. 75% of population is Catholic but less than 15% ever attend church. Many people are leaving for Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches. But Church has been renewed since Vatican II. The rise of liberation theology was understandable in the face of poverty and injustice. Marxism also corrupted some aspects of liberation theology. However, if the gospel does not address poverty it is not being true to its calling. Base Ecclesial Communities (BECs) are lay led, informal Christian groupings who meet to study the Scripture.

They are posing a challenge to traditional expressions of Catholicism.

- **EvangÃ©licos**: refers to all Protestants living in Latin America. They compose three main groups: mainline denominations, Evangelicals and Pentecostals. There has been dramatic growth in the last 50 years with Pentecostals accounting for 80% of the growth. EvangÃ©licos represent 17% of the total population with Â¾ of those being Pentecostals. There is a significant health and wealth streak amongst Pentecostals which isnâ€™t always good. However, they are doing a great job of urban mission and political involvement.

Challenges Facing the Latin American Church

Issues of politics, poverty and the gospel are urgent in this context.

The tension between the Catholic church and Pentecostals is an issue as are divisions within Catholicism itself.

There is a need for well trained leaders.

The monumental scale of the drug-trade in some countries is a huge challenge.

Urban mission is an issue.

By 2025, 50% of the worldâ€™s Christians will be Latin or African, according to Walls, the theological and ethical thinking of the church will be dominated by these two continents; hence the need for good theological training and mentoring.

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

This is the part of the world where Christianity started, but today it is only just hanging on. Before the Muslim invasion, almost 100% of population considered itself Christian; today it is down to 5% (or 1% of world Christian population).

Distribution of Christians is uneven. Half of the Christians in the region are found in Egypt.

Half the Christians are Orthodox with the majority of the rest being Roman Catholic.

The rise of radical Islam poses huge challenges. It is unlikely that the church will grow or even maintain numbers in the near future.

THE PACIFIC

Three large cultural regions: Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. Thousands of Islands and 34 M people.

These reasons were evangelised by Protestant and Catholic missionaries and Christianity has been

widely accepted. Evangelism took place within a colonial framework that leaves some challenges today.

The challenge of the â€˜unit of salvationâ€™; is that the individual or the community is posed here as it is in other collective societies.

Places like Fiji still have strong vestiges of Christendom.

There is a big problem of nominalism and a lack of contextualisation. The church also faces significant social and economic issues tied to globalisation. Emigration to Australia and New Zealand is extensive.

EASTERN EUROPE

There are three situations that a missional church can face with relation to the state:

- The state and cultural situation favour the church along the lines of Christendom.
- The state is hostile to the faith.
- The state is indifferent to the church allowing it to flourish in the private realm.

The Church in Eastern Europe has faced all three in a century.

There has been significant growth amongst all strands of Christianity since the fall of communism. That being said, church attendance is still far lower than the numbers who call themselves Christians would lead you to expect.

Sadly, church differences have been part of the violence that has broken out in some parts of the area, especially former Yugoslavia.

THE WEST

To understand the Church in Western Europe and the European diaspora you need to understand three things:

- The Church in the West is in decline.
- Despite this, the majority of people in the West still claim to be Christian.
- The USA does not seem to be following the same trend as Europe, Oceania and Canada.

The first of these clashes with the second two. The West is the product of a long period in which two religions â€“ the Christian and Humanist faiths â€“ have interacted with each other in various ways.

The church lost ground because of: violence and conflict to which the church had no answer and refusing to accept scientific knowledge.

The church in Christendom lost the sense that there needs to be a missionary encounter with culture and as culture changed, the church was unable to respond.

This is part of my continuing series making notes onÂ Â Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History and IssuesÂ by Mike Goheen.Â If you are finding these notes helpful, a small contribution to the running costs of Kouyanet would not go amiss â€“ or you could get us a book from the list on the right.Â