

“Witnessing to Christ Today”: Mission and Unity in the “Long View” from 1910 to the 21st Century

“After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Revelation 7:9-10)

Since the early days of the persecuted church, this powerful Revelation vision has anchored Christian hope amid suffering and struggle. It carries prophetic significance for united Christian witness, as it points to the day when the followers of Jesus--called out from every nation, tribe, people, and linguistic group--together praise God. It promises that those washed in the blood of the Lamb will hunger and thirst no more, and “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Rev. 7:16-17).

This text grounds us in the history of God’s mission. Over two hundred years ago, the first African seminarians in England became followers of Jesus. Against the powers and principalities of the African slave trade, then at the height of its brutality and global reach, they prepared to return to Sierra Leone as witnesses to the Gospel. At their baptismal service in 1805, the Reverend John Venn, a founder of the Church Missionary Society, charged them to herald the day “when Africa shall embrace the Truth of Christ.” Venn described the vision of assembled believers from the ends of the earth, united in love with no racial or national divisions among them: “Glorious day! Whose heart does not burn with the sacred prospect? who does not, amid the desolation of war, the tumult

and destruction, the feuds and jealousies, which agitate the Earth—who does not cry,
How long, O Lord, how long?”¹

In 2010, the biblical promises take on renewed meaning for united Christian witness. During the lifetimes of the people gathered in this room, Christianity has undergone one of the biggest changes in its two thousand year history. It is now a multi-cultural faith, with believers drawn from every inhabited continent. Today we rejoice in God’s global mission as we gather to celebrate this moment in history! Yet as we look at our interconnected world today, we still cry with the psalmist and John Venn, “How long, O Lord, how long?” For in God’s timing, our work on earth has not finished. “Witnessing to Christ today” means *both* inviting others to join us in following Jesus, *and* discerning the ways in which our promised unity challenges those things that enslave God’s people in the twenty-first century.

Participants in the World Missionary Conference a century ago evangelized the world in their own generation. We who are alive in 2010 bear witness to our own generation. It is our turn to point to the biblical vision of believers called from all nations, in praise of the living God, who speaks to us through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Looking backward reminds us that continuity with the Edinburgh conference a century ago does not lie narrowly in the particular accomplishments or structures to which it gave birth. To take the “long view” requires that we acknowledge that both Edinburgh 1910 and Edinburgh 2010 derive their shared meaning from the certainty that the past and the future belong to God. The history of world mission is located along the road from Jesus’

¹ John Venn, quoted in Max Warren, ed., *To Apply the Gospel: Selections from the Writings of Henry Venn* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 57-59. John Venn was a leader of the Clapham Sect, the evangelical antislavery group that both led the fight to outlaw slavery in the British Empire, and founded the Church

resurrection to the glorious day when pain and suffering are gone, and the new heaven and earth appear. Because we live within this larger narrative, witnesses to Christ are first and foremost ambassadors of hope: Today we witness to the Good News of what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will do through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Within this “long view,” let me explore two turning points in twentieth century mission history, both of which light the pathway of our shared journey toward God’s shalom. These moments show that the biblical promises draw us forward and make united witness to Christ both *possible* and *necessary*.

I. *World Missionary Conference 1910*

A century ago, over twelve hundred delegates from Protestant missionary societies came by ship and train to Edinburgh. For ten days, their leaders discussed the key issues facing world missions in the twentieth century. For two years prior to the event, conference organizers had corresponded with missionaries and informants around the world to produce eight commission reports.

The vast majority of delegates were European and North American men. Two hundred were women, an estimated nineteen were Asians, one African, and none were Latin Americans.² They *gathered* under the assumption that missions operated in the

Missionary Society. His son Henry Venn was Secretary of the CMS from 1841, and enabled the consecration of the first African bishop in the Church of England, Samuel Ajayi Crowther.

² On the ethnic composition of the conference, see Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 91-107. After the publication of Stanley’s book, I discovered the name of an “Anglo-Indian,” Miss Grace Stephens, as a delegate from the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The addition of Stephens brings the number of Asian delegates to nineteen or twenty. On Stephens, see Dana L. Robert, “Faith, Hope, Love in Action: United Methodist Women in Mission Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” unpublished address delivered April 29, 2010, at the Mission Forward event, UMW Assembly, St. Louis, Missouri.

context of western colonialism. But they *departed* with a prophetic glimpse of Christianity as a worldwide fellowship! In other words, the conference itself awakened them to the reality that discussions of mission policy could not be separated from the deeper meaning of the church as a worldwide community united before God. The depth of this discovery was expressed by the chairman John R. Mott, in his closing remarks: “Gathered together from different nations and races and communions, have we not come to realize our oneness in Christ? . . . It is not His will that the influences set forth by Him shall cease this night. Rather shall they course out through us to the very ends of the earth. . . . Our best days are ahead of us because we have a larger Christ, even one who requires, as we have learned increasingly these days, all of us, and all nations, and races, and communions through which adequately to express His excellences, and to communicate His power to our generation.”³

Mott’s words show that conference delegates recognized that the Christ to whom they witnessed was “larger” than that of western dominance and sectarian divisions. They cemented this global vision through united prayer and fellowship. It also broke into their consciousness through the presence of the Asian delegates at the conference, notably that of young V. S. Azariah, co-founder of the first Indian missionary society. Azariah gave a powerful speech calling for equality and friendship between missionaries and Indian Christians. Not only was cross-racial friendship practically necessary, but it was a spiritual imperative for faithful witness. He said, “The exceeding riches of the glory of Christ can be fully realized not by the Englishman, the American, and the Continental alone, nor by the Japanese, the Chinese, and the Indians by themselves—but by all

³ John R. Mott, in World Missionary Conference 1910, *The History and Records of the Conference together with Addresses Delivered at the Evening Meetings* (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson,

working together, worshipping together, and learning together the Perfect Image of our Lord and Christ.”⁴

The youngest delegate to the conference, Cheng Jingyi, pastor of an independent church in Beijing, made a strong impression on the conference when he declared that in Chinese terms, the universal church was a family. “The Church of Christ is universal, not only irrespective of denominations, but also irrespective of nationalities—‘All one in Christ Jesus.’”⁵ Cheng urged that as a full member of a universal family, Chinese Christianity should be united and become independent of foreign denominations. He appealed to the conference to take concrete action toward uniting the church in China: “Let us go, with our Divine Master, up on the top of the Mount of Olives, and there we will obtain a wider, broader, and larger view of the needs of the Church and the world.”⁶

The courage behind Azariah, Cheng, and Mott’s statements lay in their eschatological hope. Obviously in human terms they could not achieve the Revelation vision. Colonialism and racism continued unabated. World War I broke out soon afterward. But they lived in courageous certainty of the “long view” that God’s love would ultimately prevail. Thus they refused to separate Christian mission from concrete work for unity among believers of different nations, ethnicities, denominations, and social classes.⁷ The commitments of Azariah, Cheng, and Mott cohered around their

& Ferrier; New York, Chicago, and Toronto: Fleming H Revell, 1910), 347-348.

⁴ Azariah in *ibid.*, 315. See also Cheng Jingyi’s vision of a unified Church of Christ in China. See Stanley, *World Missionary Conference*, 107-111.

⁵ World Missionary Conference 1910, *Report of Commission VIII, Co-Operation and the Promotion of Unity* (Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson, & Ferrier; New York, Chicago, and Toronto: Fleming H Revell, 1910), 197. Stanley points out that “All one in Christ Jesus” was the motto of the Keswick movement.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ None of these three leaders at Edinburgh 1910 could easily be slotted into a stereotype of evangelism versus social justice, or mainline versus evangelical. Their grounding in a bigger vision resisted such compartmentalization. After the conference ended, Azariah continued his evangelism among the

realization that despite human brokenness, the followers of Christ do in fact constitute a worldwide fellowship.

From the vantage point of a century later, we see that the World Missionary Conference stood on the cusp of the great demographic shift we celebrate today. The growth of Christianity in Asia, Africa, and Latin America during the twentieth century no doubt would have delighted the delegates. After all, they were missionaries who had given their lives to make it possible.

What the delegates to the 1910 World Missionary Conference did not foresee was the elimination of entire communities of ancient Christians in the Near East, nor the destruction of Orthodoxy under the Soviet Union, nor the decline of Christianity in the European heartland. Neither could they envision the radicality of the indigenization that they called for, nor its often brutal suppression by colonial authorities. Even as the conference was meeting in Edinburgh, Liberian prophet William Wade Harris was in prison receiving a call from God to evangelize throughout West Africa. This great missionary would convert an estimated 100,000 people before being re-arrested by the French in 1914. In Congo, African-American missionary William Sheppard had just been tried for libel, for exposing the atrocities perpetuated by Belgian companies against rubber gatherers.⁸ In the Philippines, the first ordained Protestant minister Nicolas

lower castes, supported the interracial partnerships that characterized the YMCA, and eventually was consecrated the first Indian bishop in the still colonial Church of England. Cheng returned to China and founded an interdenominational home mission movement to work in tribal China, and the China for Christ movement. He lived to see his plans come to fruition as the first moderator of the Church of Christ in China in 1927. After the conference, Mott traveled throughout Asia organizing interdenominational and interracial mission councils. In each country, he met and mentored young national Christian leaders. Mott's assumption that missions required active work for unity was reflected in his longterm leadership both of the world's largest parachurch agency, the YMCA; and of organizations that led to the World Council of Churches.

⁸ E.g. for cutting off the hands of people who did not gather enough rubber, including those of children.

Zamora had just broken away from the Methodist mission, thereby founding one of at least 25 independent Filipino churches organized by the 1930s. The growing Korean Christianity praised in conference reports would soon be suppressed by Japanese annexation two months later. In 1910 while denominational mission leaders met in Edinburgh, freelance faith missionaries were spreading the new Pentecostal movement from San Francisco and India into Chile, Norway, Sweden, South Africa, China, Russia, Germany, Australia, and elsewhere.⁹

Today when we identify the historical legacy of the World Missionary Conference of 1910, we must include the unintended consequences of what the delegates could only then see through a glass darkly. (I Cor 13:12) The importance of grounding our work today in the Revelation vision of united witness to Christ is not only because we live in the certainty of Christian hope, but because we also know that the shape, timing, and achievement of God's reign are beyond human control. Just as witness and unity are inseparable in God's timing, so are Christian hope and humility. "How long, O Lord, how long?"

II. *Whole Church, Whole Gospel, Whole World 1963*

⁹ While Brian Stanley's book is a superb introduction to the Edinburgh conference, much historical work remains to be done on its impact. For example, Darrell Whiteman has pointed out that the founding of the Kennedy School of Missions and training in missionary anthropology came from the conference. Another area ripe for investigation is the spread of conference ideals in Africa. Malawian Baptist John Chilembwe, for example, was one of the informants for the conference reports. Did the ideals of equality that came from the conference inspire him in his revolt against colonial authority a few years later? Another unresearched area is the way in which women's missionary societies immediately publicized the findings of the conference in women's mission magazines and then launched initiatives of their own. Women delegates commented that men did the talking, but that they "acted." Following the conference, the women's missionary societies of North America adopted a plan by conference delegate Clementina Butler to launch the Committee on Christian Literature for Women and Children in Mission Lands, in response to the problem of youth formation discussed at Edinburgh 1910.

Now let us fast forward a half century to another decisive moment in the inseparability of mission and unity. Here I quote the conclusion of the final Message from the groundbreaking WCC mission conference in 1963, “Witness in Six Continents”:

We therefore affirm that this missionary movement now involves Christians in all six continents and in all lands. It must be the common witness of the whole Church, bringing the whole Gospel to the whole world.¹⁰

This statement, in a nutshell, reflected fifty years of missiological developments set into motion by Edinburgh 1910. In retrospect, we see that it marked the symbolic beginning of a postcolonial framework for the liberation of mission from captivity to western Christendom, and growth into mutuality.¹¹ The articulation of a united world community—as opposed to western-dominated Christianity-- emerged from struggles for Christian solidarity under the horrific conditions of the Second World War. In 1948, both the founding of the World Council of Churches and the passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights resulted from hard work by Christians to frame a global Christian ethic suitable to an interconnected world.¹²

¹⁰ Ronald K Orchard, ed., *Witness in Six Continents. Records of the Meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches held in Mexico City December 8th to 19th, 1963* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1964), 175. The phrase “whole Church bringing the whole gospel to the whole world” appears to have been written by J.C. Hoekendijk into the Rolle Declaration of the WCC in 1951, to define united ecumenical mission. “We would especially draw attention to the recent confusion in the use of the word ‘ecumenical.’ It is important to insist that this word, which comes from the Greek word for the whole inhabited earth, is properly used to describe everything that relates to the whole task of the whole church to bring the Gospel to the whole world. It therefore covers equally the missionary movement and the movement towards unity, and must not be used to describe the latter in contradistinction to the former. We believe that a real service will be rendered to true thinking on these subjects in the Churches if we so use this word that it covers both Unity and Mission in the context of the whole world.” *Minutes and Reports of the Fourth Meeting of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, Rolle (Switzerland), August 4-11, 1951* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1951), 65. Keith Bridston attributes the phrase to Hoekendijk. See Keith R. Bridston, compiler, *Shock and Renewal: The Christian Mission Enters a New Era* (New York: Friendship Press, 1955), 10.

¹¹ At the time, ecumenical leaders stated this as the end of the “missionary era” and the beginning of the “ecumenical era.”

¹² See John Nurser, *For All Peoples and All Nations: Christian Churches and Human Rights* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005).

Then during the 1950s and 1960s, nationalist movements gave birth to independent nations in Asia and Africa. Churches in postcolonial contexts threw off western control.¹³ Independence added urgency to the conviction that mission was a task of the “whole church,” and not just the West. By the time delegates met in Mexico City in 1963, mission leaders hoped that a new egalitarian era of the “whole church” was dawning.¹⁴ This first conference after the merger of the International Missionary Council into the World Council of Churches was also the first mission meeting in which the Orthodox participated fully. The simultaneous gathering of Roman Catholic bishops for the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) held out the possibility of even deeper missional unity in the future.

The idea of “witness to six continents,” therefore, was a breakthrough in mission identity appropriate to a post-Christendom, post-geographic, global context. Henceforth missions should be multi-directional. They must include concern for God’s work in the world and the eventual coming of God’s reign.¹⁵ The “whole gospel” begins with the message of reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ. As the Mexico City report stated, “The Christian mission is the proclamation of this message to the whole world: be ye reconciled to God.”¹⁶

¹³ African and Asian Christians often repudiated western denominations through founding independent churches, or through regional church mergers, as in the creation of the Church of South India in 1947. During the 1950s and 1960s, eastern church leaders often preferred to focus on regional ecumenical associations such as the East Asia Christian Conference, while western church leaders preferred to work through international denominational groups such as the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, World Methodist Council, Lutheran World Federation, etc. D.T. Niles claimed this difference was an example of western denominations attempting to retain control of resources during the devolution process.

¹⁴ See, e.g. Bridston, *Shock and Renewal*; Lesslie Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today* (London: International Missionary Council, 1958).

¹⁵ “The Christian message to men is not only concerned with individuals but also with the Kingdom of God as the destiny of mankind as a whole.” *Witness in Six Continents*, 154.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 144. The report explored the ideas of mission as witness to persons of other faiths, witness in secular contexts (including the centrality of laity in mission), the witness of local congregations (including changing forms of church life), and witness across new mission “frontiers” of the contemporary era.

And what of the Revelation vision of believers called from all “tribes and peoples and languages” united in praise to Christ? British mission leader Ronald Orchard wrote the clearest exposition of how the challenging transitions of the early 1960s related to the eschatological “long view” in his perceptive book, *Missions in a Time of Testing*. To Orchard, the clearest expression of a postcolonial mission from and to all six continents was *doxology*—mission as praise of the risen Christ. Orchard wrote, “Seen in the perspective of the ‘last hour’, the Mission of Christ is the establishment of the centre of the new humanity to which come God’s people from the ends of the earth to worship. These are not two processes, but one: the sending is also the gathering. The one stresses the aspect of witness among people, the other God’s use of that witness in the fulfillment of His purpose to gather his people into Christ. . . . Mission is nothing else than this—to speak, to act, to live so as to ‘cause God’s glory to be praised’”.¹⁷

Orchard’s helpful analysis reveals the deeper flow underneath the many problems, policies, and plans hatched by mid twentieth-century mission leaders. If “common witness” means “the whole Church bringing the whole Gospel to the whole world,” then mission unfolds from the nature of the church itself, as a worldwide community both gathered and sent by God. Witness to Christ is rooted in the *missio Dei*,

Because of its deepened commitment to visible unity, represented both by the merger of the IMC into the WCC and the participation of the Orthodox, the conference also invoked the centralizing goal of sacramental unity as the ultimate witness to “the final consummation of God’s kingdom. *Witness in Six Continents*, 165-166. Thus despite the postcolonial mission theory implicit in the report, there was an inward ecclesial focus that symbolized a backtracking from evangelization.

¹⁷ Ronald K Orchard, *Missions in a Time of Testing : Thought and Practice in Contemporary Missions* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 195-198. Note that Orchard wrote his book before the 1963 conference, and he also edited the conference proceedings. I have changed Orchard’s quotation to reflect more gender inclusive language.

God's purpose for the world. The Message from the 1963 conference concluded, "God's purpose still stands: to sum up all things in Christ."¹⁸

Orchard's image of the mutuality of sending and gathering suggests that the process of unity in mission is like breathing. The church gathers in worship, inhaling the Holy Spirit. We gain strength from our gathering and centering of purpose, and then exhale in praise of the God who loves all creation. Emil Brunner famously stated that "the church exists by mission as fire exists by burning." Orthodox theologians like Ion Bria call mission "the liturgy after the liturgy." I would add that mission is the church breathing: we inhale in worship and exhale in witness.¹⁹

III. *Mission in 2010*

Now I come to the third and final section of my remarks. What has happened in the relationship between mission and unity that brings us to this place today? 1910 expressed hope for the church as worldwide fellowship.²⁰ 1963 deepened that reality by shifting the meaning of mission to multicultural, multidirectional, mutual "witness in all six continents." Now here we are in 2010—another generation of living and breathing witnesses to Jesus Christ!²¹ How shall we live out the relationship between mission and unity for our generation?

Despite the high promises of 1963, fighting over mission mandates characterized the mid 1960s into the 1980s. Christendom mission was dying, and a new era of mutuality struggled to be born. In my opinion, however, 1989 marked a symbolic turning

¹⁸ *Witness in Six Continents*, . 175.

¹⁹ I mention the image of mission as breathing in my study book for the United Methodist Church, Dana L. Robert, *Joy to the World!: Christian Mission in the Age of Global Christianity* (Women's Division, GBGM, United Methodist Church, 2010).

²⁰ Of course Roman Catholicism already had a strong sense of itself as worldwide fellowship. But for divided Protestants, 1910 was a turning point in this direction.

²¹ As we Methodists might sing with Charles Wesley, "And are we yet alive, and see each other's face?"

point in the shared reappropriation of the Revelation vision of the church as a worldwide community of believers, united in common witness. People took their faith into the public square in Eastern Europe and Russia, and the Berlin Wall came down. Stated one communist leader, "We were prepared for everything, but not for candles and prayers."²² With students at Tiananmen Square, the cross appeared in public procession for the first time in many decades in China. The repression of dissent there led to new openness to the gospel among young people in what is now one of the fastest growing churches in the world. Lamin Sanneh's groundbreaking book *Translating the Message* appeared. Authored by an African convert to Christianity, this book single handedly broadened the discourse on mission from colonial lament toward appreciation of the cultural diversity unleashed by Bible translation.²³ Conviction about the mutual necessity of both evangelization and social justice gained momentum at mission conferences sponsored in 1989 by the WCC in San Antonio, and the Lausanne Movement in Manila. Theological convergence increased with the papal encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* appearing the following year.

The events of 1989 opened the window to a fresh relationship between witness and unity. Recognition that Christian faith thrives in multiple cultural expressions has been gradually dawning since the 1990s.²⁴ A century ago, Elizabeth Northup, one of the missionary women who attended Edinburgh 1910, wrote of what she learned from the

²² Quoted in Thomas Kemper, "God is coming toward us," Address to Board of Directors General Board of Global Ministries The United Methodist Church, Stamford, Connecticut, April 13, 2010. http://gbgm-umc.org/global_news/full_article.cfm?articleid=5724. Accessed April 24, 2010.

²³ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989).

²⁴ To put these changes into the context of one lifetime, when I was born in 1956, the "average" Christian was a European. By the time I die, the "average" Christian will be an African or a Latin American. When I received my doctorate from Yale in 1984, my dream to teach what I called "comparative Christianity" was

conference, ““Until the whole world can come together and interpret Christ, we shall never know him in his fullness.”²⁵ This necessity for all cultures to contribute to the fullness of Christ is also how historian Andrew Walls describes the theological necessity of our contemporary situation. Referencing Ephesians 4:13, Walls writes, “The very height of Christ’s full stature is reached only by the coming together of the different cultural entities into the body of Christ. Only ‘together,’ not on our own, can we reach his full stature.”²⁶

And so we stand at a moment in history when multiple cultural streams of Christianity are renewing the Revelation vision. We honor our continuity with those who came before us in 1910 and 1963. Yet the urgent realities of 2010 must also guide how we witness to Christ today, and shape our dreams and hopes.

How does our context of 2010 differ from that of the twentieth century? For one thing, common witness has imbedded within it far more plurality than was recognized fifty years ago. Cultural, ecclesial, theological, and organizational diversity is greater than what could be imagined in 1963. Ours is no cookie cutter faith, and since the 1970s the “fourth self” of self-theologizing has been increasingly affirmed as intrinsic to Christian mission.²⁷ Seen in historical perspective, the multiplicity of 2010 celebrations (and critiques) around the world should be affirmed as signs of hope and opportunities for

completely obscure and unusual. Now the recent proliferation of scholarship in the field of “world Christianity” is so large I cannot keep up with it!

²⁵ Elizabeth C. Northup, “Impressions of the World Missionary Conference—June 14 to 23,” *Woman’s Missionary Friend*, August 1910, 274.

²⁶ Andrew F Walls, “The Ephesian Moment,” *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, Orbis, 2002), 77.

²⁷ E.g. in 1972, Taiwanese theologian Shoki Coe coined the term “contextualization,” and the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia adopted the Critical Asian Principle. On self-theologizing from different ecclesial perspectives, see Catholic Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), and Protestant evangelicals William Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, eds., *Global Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008).

new forms of mission that must engage each other. The essence of worldwide Christian community is being reimagined as a more inclusive and broader “global conversation” than was possible in the past.²⁸ At the same time, the greater plurality of the world church today means that our united witness becomes urgent for the integrity of the gospel message.

Secondly, the sorry state of the planet is shaping how we interpret the idea of “the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world.” This phrase from 1963 is the theme of the Lausanne Congress in October, and the leadership of that movement is arguing that the “whole world” includes stewardship of the earth as God’s creation.²⁹ Focus by multiple 2010 partners on environmental mission, including the Edinburgh 2010 study process, contrasts sharply with the dominion theology present at the 1963 conference in Mexico City. Speaking personally, as a native of southern Louisiana and the grandchild of Gulf Coast fishermen, I am grieving the destruction of my homeland from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and now the massive oil spill inundating the marshes. We must work for the “repair” or the “salvation” of God’s creation when we conceptualize mission in the 21st century.

Thirdly, the reality of globalization carries multiple implications for the meaning of mission. Today’s macro context of globalization has parallels to the macro contexts of colonialism in 1910, and secular modernization/nationalism in 1963. Globalization stimulates migration as mission, the spread of world religions and the reinterpretation of local religions beyond their traditional borders, high levels of interdependent exploitation

²⁸ The term “global conversation” is being used by the Lausanne Movement for its 2010 theological process.

between wealth and poverty, and the proliferation of new forms of mission such as international non-governmental organizations (INGO's) and short-term mission trips. Globalization forces us to conceptualize missions beyond the boundaries of the nation state, and both to strategize and critique new forms.

Fourthly, the context of 2010 gives new meaning and urgency to the church's tasks of world evangelization and forming disciples. A century ago the participants at Edinburgh 1910 complained that only one-third of the world was Christian. Today we rejoice that one-third of the world are followers of Christ. What does this change in attitude mean for our commitment to sharing the Good News with all peoples? We must not allow difficult theological, socio-cultural, and political issues, or disagreements over theologies of religion, to discourage us from sharing God's love and salvation through Jesus Christ with all the world.

And finally, as did English and West African and German missionaries against the slave trade two hundred years ago, we must proceed in assurance that despite all odds, our united witness across multiple human boundaries makes a difference in the world.³⁰ As witnesses to Jesus Christ today, and led by the Holy Spirit, to take the "long view" means that we act on the promises that there will be no more hunger or thirst, that springs of living water will flow, and that God will wipe away the tears in the eyes of the world he loves. Even as we ask "How long, O Lord, how long?," united in praise, we confidently embrace God's mission.

Dana L. Robert

²⁹ See statement by Lausanne theology director Christopher Wright, "Whole Gospel, Whole Church, Whole World." <http://www.christianitytoday.com/globalconversation/october2009/index.html?start=1>. Accessed April 15, 2010.

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³⁰ Note that the first missionaries to West Africa sent by the CMS were German nationals, who met the African students in England prior to embarking for West Africa.