



# Mission from the Margins

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*Mission from the Margins*

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## INTRODUCTION

Presbyterians talk a lot about “mission.” In fact, we tend to overuse the word, identifying just about any church activity as “mission.” On the other hand, we are oddly reluctant to use the word “missionary,” even for those who are sent beyond the church’s ordinary activities to speak and live the gospel. Perhaps that is why some unfamiliar expressions have begun to creep into the church’s language. “Missiology,” “missional church” and “*missio dei*” are attempts to reclaim language and express the church’s call to move beyond itself in service to God’s new way in the world.

Philip Wickeri is among a growing number of Presbyterians helping the church to move beyond self-serving and outdated notions of mission. The Office of Theology and Worship is pleased to make available his inaugural address, delivered on the occasion of his installation as Flora Lamson Helwett Professor of Evangelism and Mission at San Francisco Theological Seminary in October, 2003. The oral nature and personal tone of the address have been retained, perhaps enabling readers to enter into a conversation with Phil about the church’s calling.

Philip Wickeri believes that we are living in a time of fundamental change in the shape and structure of world Christianity. This change creates a crisis that may be described in terms of the churches’ relationship to globalization, and its response to religious and cultural pluralism. Prof. Wickeri sets forth an understanding of “mission from the margins,” suggesting that, throughout the history of the Christian churches, the cutting edge for mission has come from movements emerging outside established Christian centers. In today’s context, these “marginal” movements include the African initiated churches, Pentecostals all over the world, and the rural churches of China.

*Mission From the Margins*, Theology and Worship Occasional Paper No. 18, suggests that our response to the *missio dei* must be reshaped in the encounter between historic churches in the North and these movements in the South. This will help all Christians to resist the forces of globalization and empire, and to respond anew to the gospel message for today. It will also support the recovery and renewal of missiology and mission studies, already underway in Presbyterian seminaries.

Philip Wickeri’s *Mission From the Margins* is not intended only for those interested in “worldwide mission.” The issues Prof. Wickeri raises are important for pastors, sessions, presbytery executives, and national church staff. What do we mean when we so easily talk about “mission”? How do we understand the fundamental changes that are altering congregational life and denominational structures? What in the world do we see, and who in the world do we listen to?

The Office of Theology and Worship hopes that *Mission From the Margins* will be used by small group and committees in presbyteries and congregations, beginning a sustained conversation about our participation in God’s mission.

Joseph D. Small  
Office of Theology and Worship

MISSION FROM THE MARGINS:  
The *Missio Dei* in the Crisis of World Christianity

Philip L. Wickeri

(Inaugural Address as Flora Lamson Helwett Professor of Evangelism and Mission, San Francisco Theological Seminary, San Anselmo USA, 6 October 2003)

*Abstract*

This paper proceeds from the premise that we are living in a time of fundamental change in the shape and structure of world Christianity. The background of this crisis is traced to the beginnings of the modern missionary movement, and it is discussed particularly as it has affected our understanding of the *missio dei* and the teaching of mission at San Francisco Theological Seminary. Today, the crisis may be described in terms of the churches' relationship to globalization, on the one hand, and to religious and cultural pluralism on the other. The contrast between a Christian vision of the *oikumene* and the neo-liberal ideology of globalization, undergirded by American empire, has shaped the crisis in all of its forms. Mission from the margins suggests that the cutting edge for mission today and throughout the history of the Christian churches comes from movements emerging outside established Christian centers – the African initiated churches, Pentecostals all over the world, the rural churches of China. The *missio dei* needs to be reshaped in the encounter of historic churches in the North with these movements in the South. This will help Christians resist the forces of globalization and empire, and to respond anew to the gospel message for today. This will also entail the recovery and renewal of missiology, mission studies and questions related to Christianity in a world of religious pluralism as these subjects relate to theological education in Europe and North America.

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It is a great pleasure and a great honor for me to stand before you this evening. When I started out on my journey in the study of religion and theology and preparation for mission and ministry, I never dreamed that I would one day be in such a place as this.

M. M. Thomas once said that the ecumenical movement was a journey among friends. I have been committed to this movement my entire life, and it has shaped my understanding of mission and evangelism. I am happy that so many friends and fellow travellers are here tonight, colleagues and students, staff and administrators, trustees and alums.

On this occasion, I would also like to mention three friends who are not here, but who are or were known to many of you. All three have a special place in my prayers as people who have guided me and prepared me for my present calling. They too were friends of one another from an earlier generation and they shared a common vision of ecumenical mission. The first was the late Richard Shaull, my theological mentor, always challenging us to look just over the horizon, always challenging the church to be true to its mission. Those of us who were privileged to be his students used to say that he

had more faith in us than we had in ourselves. The second is Margaret Flory, who sent Janice and I overseas for the first time, and as she did for so many other students, she helped create opportunities for our own callings in mission. I am happy to say that Margaret, well into her ninth decade, is in good health and still thriving. The third is K. H. Ting, who welcomed me into my work with the church in China, and ordained me as pastor and priest. K. H. is known all over the world for his leadership of the church in China and the contributions he has made to the ecumenical movement. It surprises me that in the midst of such an active life, he was able to help me and many others understand so much about theology and the mission of the church.

Finally, I want to thank my family, and particularly Janice who is here tonight. She has been an unindicted co-conspirator in much of my work. I also want to thank our daughter Elisabeth, immersed in law books even as I speak, who believes that the church would be better if we just did things, rather than spend so much time speaking about what we were going to do.

But this is a lecture, and so speak we must. I intend to cover a lot of ground, but I promise that I will be finished before I have to be yanked from the podium.

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We are living in a time of fundamental change in the shape and structure of world Christianity. For at least the past three decades, the historic (or mainline) Protestant and Roman Catholic churches of Europe and North America, have been in decline, whether this is judged in terms of numbers of adherents, institutional vitality or social and cultural influence. In Russia and other countries of central Europe, the Orthodox Church and other historic churches have been facing serious institutional challenges in their own societies, especially since the dissolution of the Soviet Union fifteen years ago. At the same time, indigenous churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America have been growing faster than ever before. In almost every part of the world, there has also been a rapid rise of Pentecostal movements, post-denominational churches and other informal networks of Christian communities. Non-white Roman Catholic and Protestant churches continue to grow in the southern hemisphere, and among ethnic minorities and new immigrants in the North. All over the world, churches are confronting challenges posed by globalization; the “clash” of rival secular and religious fundamentalisms; and an American-led “war on terrorism.”<sup>1</sup> These challenges, set alongside changing patterns of institutional renewal and decline, now define the contours of our new ecumenical situation.

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<sup>1</sup> On the clash of fundamentalisms, see Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London, Verso, 2002; on Christian responses to the war on terrorism see Ninan Koshy, *The War on Terror: Reordering the World*, New Delhi, LeftWord Books, 2003; on the structural shift in world Christianity, see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2002; on Christianity in response to globalization and religious pluralism see, *inter alia*, Philip L. Wickeri, ed. *The People of God Among All God's Peoples: Frontiers in Christian Mission*, Hong Kong, The Christian Conference of Asia and The Council for World Mission, 2000) and *Scripture, Community and Mission: Essays in Honour of D. Preman Niles*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Printing, Hong Kong, The Christian Conference of Asia and The Council for World Mission, 2003.

A variety of interpretations have been offered to describe the changes that are taking place and to discern their implications for the churches' mission. The Scottish Presbyterian historian Andrew Walls writes about the "great transformation" in the movement of the center of Christianity over the last four hundred years from North to South and from West to East.<sup>2</sup> He urges churches in Europe and North America to re-learn mission from the churches of the South. Konrad Raiser, outgoing General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, has spoken of the "paradigm shift" in the ecumenical movement. He has proposed that we need to enlarge the discussion of our common calling in a Global Christian Forum, which would include churches that are not now related to the WCC.<sup>3</sup> Robert Schreiter, the Roman Catholic missiologist at the Catholic Theological Union, prefers to emphasize the "global flows" in the emergence of a "new Catholicity." He stresses the need for continuing dialogue and reconciliation between global and local contexts in world Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Letty Russell and other feminist theologians have proposed a missiology based on "God's Mission (the *missio dei*) as a gift of welcome for all in each place," linking the concerns of communities struggling for justice all over the world.<sup>5</sup> These interpreters are all pointing us in the right direction.

Yet I believe that Felix Wilfred, a parish priest from India, and Jon Sobrino, a theologian from Latin America, may come closest to the truth when they speak of our situation as a time of "crisis in world Christianity," a crisis that represents a fundamental turning point in our understanding of the issues raised by "globalization" and religious and cultural pluralism. It is a crisis that has deep theological and ecclesiological implications, and calls us to raise fundamental questions about Christian mission.<sup>6</sup> Wilfred and Sobrino do not claim to have the answers, but they do suggest certain directions. The word "crisis" – dangerous opportunity in Chinese – has an urgency about it, which I think accurately describes the situation in which we now find ourselves. According to Felix Wilfred, our new situation necessitates redrawing the boundaries of theology and the church, something which has happened again and again in history of Christianity.<sup>7</sup> Redrawing boundaries will provoke both resistance and division in Christian communities, but it also opens up possibilities of new life and enlarged unity. In my lecture this evening, I want to explore what this might mean for embracing an ecumenical vision that can commit churches to a new understanding of mission.

The crisis in world Christianity did not begin yesterday. Its sources may be traced to the beginnings of the modern missionary movement in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The missionary movement was in its own way a movement of "globalization"

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1996) and *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva: WCC, 1991 and more recently *Toward a Culture of Life: Transforming Globalization and Violence*. Geneva, WCC, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Letty Russell, "God, Glory, Gold and Gender: A Postcolonial Look at Mission," unpublished paper presented at *Women in Mission Seminar*, Bossey, Switzerland, June 4-10, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> See Sobrino and Wilfred in a forthcoming issue of *Concilium*.

<sup>7</sup> Felix Wilfred, "Our Neighbors and Christian Mission: Deconstructing Mission without Destroying the Gospel," in Wickeri, ed., *The People of God Among All God's Peoples*, pp. 89ff.

which came face-to-face with the challenge of religious pluralism. In a seminal essay written twenty-five years ago, the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner elaborated a fundamental reinterpretation of the missionary movement in light of Vatican II and the changes taking place in world Christianity. The relationship of the church to the world outside Europe and North America, in his view, was originally that of “an export firm which exported a European religion as a commodity it did not want to change,” and sent it all over the world with a civilization it considered superior. This understanding, which even in the first decades of the twentieth century accurately described Protestant and Catholic missionary efforts alike, was, by the 1930s or 1940s, no longer widely believed, even in Europe. But since that time, the church has been groping for a new identity, still seeking its “self-actualization” as a world church expressed by local churches with plural proclamations.<sup>8</sup> We are still searching for this new identity today.

The missionary movement presented the challenge of the gospel to the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America bound up with European notions of the universality of their own understanding of the church. Churches in other parts of the world challenged this assumption, and in time, they forced Europeans and North Americans to confront the fact that our religion was a European construct which could not simply be transferred as a package to other cultures. The fact that colonialism and imperialism were the vehicles for the presentation of the gospel only deepened the sense of crisis, for both the colonized and the colonizers.<sup>9</sup> Roland Allen, the only missiologist writing in the first part of the last century who is still read today, was one of the very few who saw all this. Based upon his experience in China at the turn of the last century, he was among the very first to call for a “decolonization” of the missionary movement.<sup>10</sup> But even today, in China and in many other parts of the world, Christianity is seen to be associated with colonialism, a fact which has never really been understood by most Christians in North America.

In the modern ecumenical movement, our understanding of the crisis in world Christianity emerged in stages. Between the two world wars, the European experiences of colonial expansion, social dislocation, economic depression, and political uncertainty forced theologians to confront the impending crisis in Western civilization as a whole. They responded, appropriately enough, with a “theology of crisis,” which also came to be known as dialectical theology. For many decades, this was the mainstay of the theology taught at San Francisco Theological Seminary. Its inspiration was the thought of Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr, but a wide range of theologians shaped its development. They exerted a profound influence on ecumenical thinking about theology and mission for two generations.

Dialectical theology was certainly formative for Willis Church Lamott, the Thayer Professor of Christian Missions at San Francisco Theological Seminary in the

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Rahner, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies*, 40, 9, December, 1979, pp. 716 – 727.

<sup>9</sup> K. M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance: A Survey of the Vasco de Gama Epoch of Asian History (1498 – 1945)*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1959; Arendt T. van Leeuwen, *Christianity in World History: The Meeting of the Faiths of East and West*, New York, Scribner’s, 1964.

<sup>10</sup> See Philip L. Wickeri, “Roland Allen and the Decolonization of Christianity,” Paper Presented at the Conference, “Faithful/Fateful Encounters: Religion and Cultural Exchanges Between Asia and the West,” Beijing, 21 – 26 October, 2002.

1950s. In his inaugural address which he delivered here fifty-four years ago (almost to the day – he spoke on October 11), Lamott emphasized the shift in perspective from “foreign missions” to “world mission,” by which he meant that the churches of the West were no longer the centers of mission, if indeed they had ever been.

The day is past when men (*sic*) thought of Missions as concerned largely with the conversion of individuals from non-Christian religions in conveniently distant foreign lands. The challenge of our day lies rather in a worldwide heathenism running horizontally through all the religions, cultures and nations of the world, including our own.<sup>11</sup>

The missionary challenge was right here, not in some far-off land. This idea represented a shift in the way in which mission was conceived, at least among mainline Protestants, beginning in the late 1940s. The shift was expressed in the concept of the *missio dei*, the idea that mission is God’s mission, not ours. Willis Lamott and, I believe, all subsequent professors of mission here at this seminary (including myself), have all embraced some version of the *missio dei* idea, which slowly became the accepted way of thinking about mission in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in most other mainline denominations and in the ecumenical movement as a whole.<sup>12</sup>

*Missio dei* thinking emphasizes the radical activity of God in history, challenging liberals and conservatives, pietistic and “good works” ideas of mission. Christian mission is not an activity of the deeply-committed or the well-meaning. It is not one among many church activities. The church was seen as an instrumentality of God rather than as the originator of mission rediscovered in the colonial era. Indeed, *missio dei* became a way of criticizing the whole missionary enterprise as it was then understood in the churches. God had been working in the world all the time, and in all places, creating and redeeming, liberating and saving, whether the churches in the West realized this or not. God’s work in all cultures was seen to be part of salvation-history, challenging all human institutions, and provoking a crisis in the church and its mission. *Missio dei* called the triumphalism of the missionary movement all over the world to a prophetic judgment.

What, then, of the church? The church is missionary by its very nature, or as Emil Brunner used to say, “The church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning.” *Missio dei* implied a shift from a church-centered mission to a mission-centered church. The church is active alongside other movements which anticipate God’s reign, for the *missio dei* sees all the ways in which God is involved in the world, and not just the evangelistic mission of the church. There were different interpretations of how the church stood in relationship to other movements for humanization, but there was general agreement that *missio dei* was about the renewal of the world, not just the renewal of the church. The church came to be understood as the “church with others” not the “church for others,” and the Christian community became known through the rhythm of its

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<sup>11</sup> Willis Lamott, “From Foreign Missions to World Mission,” (Inaugural Address) October 11, 1949,

<sup>12</sup> For two recent and contrasting approaches to the continuing relevance of *missio dei* see my Abraham Malpan Memorial Lectures, “Mission as Building Communities,” forthcoming publication by the Mar Thoma Theological Seminary, Kottayam, India; and Darrell Guder, “From Mission and Theology to Missional Theology,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, XXIV,1, New Series, 2003, pp. 36 – 54.



relationship with the whole human community. In an early statement of the East Asia Christian Conference (now the Christian Conference of Asia) we read:

The rhythm of the Church's life in its total history is also the rhythm of its own nature. The Church lives not only in assembly but in dispersion. Those who hear Christ's name are not those who have been called out of the world, but are sent to the world and placed in it...The call is to every Christian individually and to the Christian community as a whole to indicate by word and example the new age that Christ has ushered in.<sup>13</sup>

*Missio dei* is always oriented towards change in the church and in the world in light of God's reign. Such changes were evident at this seminary after the retirement of Lamott, and the story of subsequent years is vividly told in the history of the seminary by Robert Coote and John Hadsell.<sup>14</sup> The fact that they tell this story in light of the changes taking place in church and society is itself an expression of *missio dei* thinking, and I say this even though the term doesn't even appear in the book.

In 1976, our Board of Trustees established the Flora Lamson Hewlett Chair of Evangelism and Mission. This new chair was based on the generosity of the Hewlett family and a great many individuals, alumni and churches. In setting up the chair, both the Board and the faculty agreed upon a statement which began: "Evangelism involves the acceptance of individuals by Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and the challenging of the 'principalities and powers' inhibiting individuals from responding to the call of Christ." They further agreed that the chair was to be related *directly* to the worldwide mission of the church and that the incumbent would be in dialogue with the religions of the world.<sup>15</sup> This is *missio dei* thinking. Three years later, Donald P. Butyn was called to be the first Flora Lamson Hewlett Professor of Evangelism and Mission. His was the first full-time appointment to such a position in any of our Presbyterian seminaries. Don's emphasis on evangelism and mission in the local church, his work in promoting the study of mission at the seminary and throughout the Presbyterian Church, and his leadership at the seminary helped to renew our commitment to mission and evangelism.

This renewal was continued in the work of Ben and Carol Weir who became co-holders of this chair in 1989. Ben and Carol brought with them thirty-two years of experience in serving the churches of the Middle East, and this shaped their approach to teaching. Their emphasis was on what was then termed "the globalization of theological education" and they stressed the need for sensitivity to context, global awareness and an understanding of mission as that which brings unity and healing to a divided and broken world.<sup>16</sup> I am honored to be standing before you to try to continue the work begun by my esteemed predecessors.

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<sup>13</sup> "The Christian Community within the Human Community," as quoted in Ninan Koshy, "Building Communities: Socio-Political and Economic Concerns," unpublished manuscript (July, 2004), p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Robert B. Coote and John Hadsell, *San Francisco Theological Seminary: The Shaping of a Western School of the Church, 1871-1998*, San Anselmo, First Presbyterian Church, 1999, especially chapters ten and eleven.

<sup>15</sup> See San Francisco Theological Seminary "News Release," June 24, 1977; and "New Era Begins..." *Chimes*, 25,1, January, 1980, pp. 2-3.

<sup>16</sup> See Carol Weir, "Visions and Strategies for the Globalization of Theological Education," *Pacific Theological Review*, 23,1-2,Fall, 1989 – Spring 1990, pp. 53 – 58; and Benjamin J. Weir, Visions and

Our world had become even more divided and broken by the time Janice and I moved to San Anselmo in 1998. The crisis in world Christianity has deepened and widened since then, especially after September 11, 2001. The Cold War had shaped the ecumenical movement from the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948 to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Since then, the pace of economic and technological change has increased dramatically, and we have entered the age of globalization. There are competing views of globalization, but neo-liberal ideology increasingly sets the terms for the movement towards a unified global market and international order, which in turn affects all politics, societies, cultures and theologies.<sup>17</sup>

*Missio dei* is directly related to the contemporary debate about globalization in our churches, and not only in the area of mission and evangelism. Our colleague Lew Mudge has made enormous contributions to the redefinition of ecumenical social thought drawing on the idea of *missio dei*.<sup>18</sup> Using the same idea, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches has raised the issue of how economic injustice and environmental degradation now pose basic issues for the integrity of the churches' witness. These are much more than ethical problems, for they are basic concerns for churches as moral communities preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Globalization poses particular challenges for the witness of churches in the United States. We are no longer living in a bipolar world, but in a world in which one country – the United States of America – presides over a global economy and an increasing number of regional and national conflicts, with various economic, political, ethnic and religious aspects. In this situation, it is no exaggeration to say that our country has emerged as a new empire, a fact that has significant implications for those of us involved in global mission and evangelism. I use the word empire not figuratively or metaphorically, but politically, economically, and militarily. In his widely discussed essay on America as an empire, Michael Ignatieff has written:

Ever since George Washington warned his countrymen against foreign entanglements, empire abroad has been seen as the republic's permanent temptation and its political nemesis. Yet what word but 'empire' describes the awesome thing that America is becoming. It is the only nation that polices the world through five global military commands, maintains more than a million men and women at arms in four continents, deploys carrier battle groups on watch in every ocean,

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Strategies for the Globalization of Theological Education," *Pacific Theological Review*, 23:1-2, Fall, 1989 – Spring 1990, pp. 59-64.

<sup>17</sup> There is a vast and growing literature on globalization. For Christian responses to globalization see *Bibliography on Globalization*. A special issue of *Theology in Context*, 11,2000. Also see Julio de Santa Ana, ed. *Sustainability and Globalization*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1998; Ian T. Douglas, ed. *God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis*, New York, Church Publishing, 2002; Ninan Koshy, ed. *The Global Thrust of Modernity*, Mumbai, Vikas Adhyayan Kendra, 2002; also Wickeri, *The People of God Among All God's Peoples: Frontiers in Christian Mission*; and also Wickeri, Janice K. Wickeri and Damayanthi M. A. Niles. *Plurality, Power and Mission: Intercontextual Theological Explorations on the Role of Religion in the New Millennium*. London, CWM, 2000. The latter two volumes contain substantial Asian reflections on the subject of globalization.

<sup>18</sup> See Lewis S. Mudge, *The Sense of a People: Toward a Church for the Human Future*, Philadelphia, Trinity Press International, 1992 and *The Church as Moral Community: Ecclesiology and Ethics in Ecumenical Debate*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1998, as well as his more recent essays.

guarantees the survival of countries from Israel to South Korea, drives the wheels of global trade and commerce and fills the hearts and minds of the entire planet with its dreams and desires.<sup>19</sup>

Historian Niall Ferguson is more blunt, comparing the United States of today with Britain in the late nineteenth century and noting the close connection between neo-liberal globalization and the recent American-led wars of conquest and occupation. “We have to call it by its real name,” writes Ferguson, “political globalization is a fancy word for imperialism, imposing our values and institutions on others.”<sup>20</sup> Clyde Prestowitz, a conservative thinker, laments that other countries now see us more as “the bully on the block” rather than the “city on the hill.”<sup>21</sup> Others have commented that the September, 2002 policy statement entitled “National Security Strategy of the United States” marks a significant turning point in our nation’s self-definition of our role in the world. My point is not to provide a political commentary on recent American foreign policy, but simply to note that a wide range of analysts, from across the political spectrum, both in the United States and overseas, are urging us to consider very carefully the vast implications of our emerging American empire.

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I am particularly concerned about the ways in which this empire is now shaping, structuring and dividing world Christianity. Some Christian thinkers have already begun to criticize the new American “theology of empire” which connects our foreign policy to a religiously inspired “mission” which we now promote all over the world.<sup>22</sup> Churches overseas with a wide range of theologies and traditions have been raising questions about our country’s role as “protector” of religious freedom. Is this an aspect of American foreign policy, or a genuine concern for the religious rights of all? They also challenge our churches to give a clear account as to how our mission initiatives stand vis-à-vis our government’s policies. The American empire thus has a direct connection with the reinterpretation of the *missio dei*. Churches involved in global mission can choose either to ride the coattails of empire or criticize the project of empire, but we cannot remain neutral. But neither can our choice be taken lightly, for it will inevitably lead to an increasing polarization of different parts of the Christian community in this country about how we should be involved in mission internationally.

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Ignatieff, “The American Empire (Get Used to It),” *The New York Times Magazine*, January 5, 2003, available online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/05/magazine/05EMPIRE.html>. Also see his follow-up essay on the same subject, “Why are we in Iraq? (And Liberia? And Afghanistan?),” *The New York Times Magazine*, September 7, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> As quoted in Ninan Koshy, “The Present Phase of Globalization,” unpublished manuscript, August 2003, p. 5; also see Niall Ferguson, *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*, New York, Basic Books, 2003.

<sup>21</sup> Clyde Prestowitz, *Rogue Nation: American Unilateralism and the Failure of Good Intentions* New York, Basic Books, 1993 as quoted in Brian Urquhart, “World Order and Mr. Bush,” *The New York Review of Books*, October 9, 2003, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> See Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003; Don Snider and Chris Hickey, “Christian Citizenship and American Empire,” *The Brandywine Review of Faith and International Affairs*, 1, 2, Fall, 2003, pp. 3-12; Jim Wallis, “Dangerous Religion: George W. Bush’s Theology of Empire,” *Sojourners*, 32,5, September – October, 2002, pp. 20 – 26; a secular analysis of the theology of empire is found in Joshua Green, “God’s Foreign Policy,” *The Washington Monthly*, November, 2001, pp. 26-33.

Our response will determine the ways in which we ask the new questions we are facing. A few months ago Kim Yong-Bock, a prominent theologian from Korea, put the question for the *missio dei* in this way: What is the future of world Christianity in light of the war in Iraq? This question has implications far beyond Iraq, because it brings together so many missiological issues. This is not a question about whether or not Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator – we all know that he was – but about whether the war in Iraq met the conditions for a Christian understanding of a just war. The war having been “won,” is the subsequent occupation of Iraq a new stage in globalization? How should Christians (including the 400,000 or more Iraqi Christians) relate to Islam, in light of the arrogance of a self-professed “Christian” power attacking the heartland of Islam? What do “democracy” and “development” mean when they are introduced by massive military might against a sovereign people? How do we address questions of religion and violence in light of our new situation? And how should we preach the gospel in such a time as this, when there are differing viewpoints in our own churches? The situation in Iraq can highlight for us the much broader crisis in world Christianity, both in terms of the ways in which churches have responded to the war as well as to the related issues of justice and peace, dialogue and prophetic witness, mission and evangelism.

The assumption on the part of an earlier generation of theologians, missiologists and church leaders was that Christianity stood shaken but erect in a world in crisis. This continues to be the viewpoint among many advocates of the *missio dei* even in light of Iraq. Behind this assumption is the unspoken confidence that the Church (with a capital C), the church reformed but always reforming, is *the* foretaste of God’s reign. The world is in crisis, but the fundamental crisis was not in Christianity itself. Up until very recently, the dominant paradigm for understanding the ecumenical movement as a whole reinforced this confidence. It is summed up in what W. A. Visser t’Hooft, the first General Secretary of the WCC, termed “Christocentric universalism.”<sup>23</sup> He meant that the church was *the* chosen instrument for the world-embracing work of Christ whose message was universal as it spread to the ends of the earth.

This theological viewpoint is no longer tenable. The universal and Christocentric understanding of mission is now being challenged by a renewed emphasis on Christian particularity set in a Trinitarian framework for ecumenical mission. Feminist theologians in particular have helped us shape a new Trinitarian understanding of mission. I believe that from such a perspective we can begin to address the new questions posed by the crisis in world Christianity. The WCC’s Commission on World Mission and Evangelism has affirmed that given our overall context, the *missio dei* needs to change its focus.

...Ecumenical missiology has already started to move away from an exclusively Christocentric basis to a trinitarian understanding of God’s mission. There is a need to deepen the meaning of such a move, in particular by insisting on the role of the Spirit in the church and in the world and to work out the consequences for mission in practice. In this new paradigm and context, reconciliation appears to be a central missiological term, describing God’s forgiveness given in Christ, the intention of God’s own action and presence in the world, and the vision of the final aim (or purpose) of the *Missio Dei*.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva, WCC, 1991, pp. 36 ff.

<sup>24</sup> Report from the CWME Planning Committee (June 20, 2002).

Similarly, a missiological consultation held a few years ago by the Christian Conference of Asia and the Council for World Mission affirmed:

Our new context calls for a reassessment of the missiological paradigms which we have used in the past. In the aftermath of World War II, the concept of *Missio Dei* helped to vindicate mission as primarily God's dealing with the world as a whole and comprising the totality of the salvific work of the Holy Spirit. The role of the churches in participating in this mission became focused on bearing witness to the reign of God, service to the poor and marginalized, and the building up of new communities of faith. We believe that *Missio Dei* retains its value as a liberative force with its emphasis on "God working in history," but that in our new situation, new theological questions have emerged which point us in new directions.<sup>25</sup>

It is these new theological questions and new directions that claim our interest. They are not emerging at what were once regarded as the "centers" of world mission (in Geneva, Rome or Constantinople; or for Protestant mission initiatives, in New York, London or Hamburg), but at the margins or boundaries of what used to be known as the Christian West. We need to situate ourselves with those on the margins of empire, and there reconsider the meaning of the *missio dei* for today. Mission from the margins is associated with peoples that have been marginalized in Christianity's expansion and by the various colonial ideologies associated with it. The popular challenges to traditional Christianity I spoke of at the beginning of this lecture are all coming from the margins.

The study of mission and missiology is on the decline at most of the historic Protestant seminaries of Europe and North America, so in a certain sense I am speaking from the margins of theological education. Most of the chairs in missiology at European theological seminaries and universities no longer exist. There are only two full-time professors of missiology at the Graduate Theological Union, Eduardo Fernandez, S.J. at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley and myself. Conservative evangelical seminaries in North America still teach courses in mission and evangelism, but their understanding of mission is quite different from the *missio dei*. In mainline Protestant seminaries, despite the continuing rhetoric about putting mission at the center of theological education, the study of mission has rarely been more than an optional subject. Those of us who teach mission generally find ourselves at the margins of theological curricula and ignored in academic discussions. Many respected theologians from Europe and North America reject mission and the study of missiology *tout court*, because of its association with colonialism and conquest. I have worked in China for more than two decades, and I am well aware of the uncertain legacy of the modern missionary movement. Yet I never stopped believing that our churches continue to be part of that history, a history that, despite all the mistakes and wrong turns, always pointed beyond itself. Part of the work that we do in the study and teaching of mission is to review that history. But missiology has a more pressing agenda as well, in enabling Christian communities to discover creative new directions that have implications for mission today.

Mission and evangelism may be on the margins of academia in the West, but in and through the *missio dei*, we can discover the power to begin all over again, from a

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<sup>25</sup> "The People of God Among All God's Peoples," in *The People of God Among All God's Peoples: Frontiers in Christian Mission*, p. 43.

different place, and in different ways. Therein lies the power of the gospel. The teaching of mission is quite prominent in most theological seminaries in the Third World, and so it is important for us to be in dialogue with them. We also need to rediscover the cutting edge that the theology of mission once had. At the last assembly of the World Council of Churches in Harare, former General Secretary Philip Potter told all who would listen that we needed to reclaim lost ground in our approach to mission in the ecumenical movement.<sup>26</sup> He is correct. This is especially important in North American theological education. Martin Kahler observed at the beginning of the last century that mission is “the mother of theology” because it challenges the existing culture.<sup>27</sup> To reclaim lost ground and challenge the culture of empire means that we must now move from the marginalization of mission in the churches of the North Atlantic to mission on and from the boundaries of our world.

An important dimension of this question is how Christians should engage in mission in religiously plural contexts, a subject of intense debate in churches on every continent.<sup>28</sup> Felix Wilfred’s call for a “redrawing of boundaries” is directly related to the relationship between churches and other religious traditions. Although I cannot fully develop in a short lecture what this means for the teaching and study of mission in North America, I believe that Felix Wilfred, Aloysius Pieris, Preman Niles and other Asian theologians concerned with mission are pointing in the right direction. Preman Niles and others have introduced an understanding of Christians as “the people of God among all God’s peoples.”<sup>29</sup> This offers us a new language and a way forward in discerning the *missio dei* in relationship to people of other religious traditions, and in enabling us to co-operate with them in furthering the reign of God over all of life.

It has become popular to speak about the importance of the “boundaries” or the “margins” (I am using the terms interchangeably) in many fields of study. In the area of interdisciplinary studies where I am situated at the Graduate Theological Union, we say that any discipline’s center is located by conversations and new ideas which emerge at the “boundaries” or “margins” of academic discourse.<sup>30</sup> Revolutionary change, as Thomas Kuhn argued more than three decades ago, comes not from the center of a discipline but at its boundaries, where existing paradigms are not held onto as strongly, where prevailing orthodoxies can be questioned, and where individuals and communities are freer to be experimental and creative.<sup>31</sup> It was Kuhn who popularized the now much used and abused term “paradigm shift” which missiologist David Bosch then used to

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<sup>26</sup> This is also reflected in his speech to the assembly, see Philip Potter, “Visions for the Future,” in Diane Kessler, ed., *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1999, pp. 273-277.

<sup>27</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1991, p. 16; Jan A. B. Jongeneel, *Philosophy, Science and Theology of Mission in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Part II: Missionary Theology*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 1995 and 1997, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> For a good summary of the recent debate about religious pluralism see the “Report of the Moderator (Aram I),” WCC Central Committee, 26 August to 2 September, 2003.

<sup>29</sup> *The People of God Among All God’s Peoples*, pp. 25 ff and passim.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Kenneth A. Bruffee, *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence and the Authority of Knowledge*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, pp. 159-163.

<sup>31</sup> See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1970.

speak of the changes which have taken place in the theology of mission over the last two thousand years. Mission from the margins is meant to indicate just such a paradigm shift in terms of the initiative and new directions for Christianity today.

In the English language, prepositions make all the difference in the world. I am speaking here about mission *from* the margins, not simply mission *at* the margins or *on* the margins, and certainly not mission *to* the margins. There are a great number of books which have been published in the last few years which speak about mission *at*, but not mission *from* the margins.<sup>32</sup> The last book written by my mentor and friend Richard Shaull scandalized many of his friends and colleagues because he dared to suggest that Pentecostalism as practiced among people at the margins of Brazilian church and society might have something to say to established churches and liberation theologians.<sup>33</sup> In his studies, he discovered that Pentecostalism brings an experience of empowerment and freedom which animates communities of the poor and oppressed and provides them with the potential for transforming unjust social structures. This is mission from the margins.

Similarly, the most dynamic sections of Christianity today are in movements emerging outside its established centers: The African Initiated Churches (or AICs), Pentecostals all over the world, the rural churches of China, new indigenous Christian communities throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America. They represent a popular Christianity, a mission from below, a mission of transformation. Their emphasis on oral tradition, lay leadership and maximized participation confront historic Protestant churches with our carefully scripted, over-clericalized approaches to church life.

I have been particularly interested in the church in China, where we have begun to see the creative interaction between popular Christianity at the grassroots and the contributions that may come from a new emphasis on “theological reconstruction” in the seminaries. Popular Christian communities in China and all over the world are beset by serious problems of leadership, education, superstition (I use the word guardedly) and often questionable interpretations of the Bible, the sacraments and Christian tradition. Those of us from the historic Protestant churches need to be in dialogue with popular Christianity, both to share our understanding of the gospel, but also to better understand and learn from the spirit which moves new Christian communities.

Mission from the margins is also the story of the early church. Mission to the Gentiles started not with the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, but with the Hellenist Christians in Antioch. Their understanding was “to the Jew first, then the Greek” (Acts 13-14), and it was the Greek or non-Jewish Christians that represented the margins. The Antioch community was the dynamic element in early Christianity, and mission transformed their self-definition into “extraordinarily assured, open, active, pneumatic,

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<sup>32</sup> See for example, Anthony J. Gittins, *Ministry at the Margins: Strategy and Spirituality for Mission*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2002; Robert Lentz and Edwina Gateley, *Christ at the Margins*, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2003; Joerg Rieger, ed., *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003; Cheryl J. Saunders, *Ministry at the Margins: The Prophetic Mission of Women, Youth and the Poor*, Intervarsity Press, 1997; Mary R. Sawyer, *The Church at the Margins: Living Christian Community*, Harrisburg, Trinity Press International, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Shaull and Waldo Cesar, *Pentecostalism and the Future of Christian Churches: Promises, Limitations and Changes*, Grand Rapids and Cambridge, Eerdmans, 2000.

city-oriented, Greek-speaking Jewish Christian heirs of Stephen.”<sup>34</sup> Paul learned about mission from what was already going on at Antioch. As my colleague Eungchun Park has argued, Paul changed his mind as he went along. His theology (like any theology of mission) was always a work in progress, but it always moved toward greater inclusivity.<sup>35</sup> Mission theology from the margins always emerges in imperfect and ambivalent forms, but it presents the gospel in ways that are receptive to empowerment by the Holy Spirit, and so, at least potentially, open to further correction and change.

Archbishop William Temple once said that the church is like a ray of light shining in the night, brilliant in the middle, but ending we know not exactly where. We now need to reverse the image, and focus not on the bright light in the middle, but on the margins, the shadows and the border areas. New communities of mission emerge on the margins which become new centers of faith for localized communities. The margins are good places from which to critique power and struggle for justice. The poor and powerless are found at the margins, or more accurately, they have been marginalized and the border areas become their natural dwelling places. They are naturally pluralistic, because there is no power to order them or to bring them into unity. This is true whether we are speaking of the margins of the church or the margins of cultures or the margins of ethnicities. The affirmation of cultural plurality within the church, therefore, is a defense of the powerless against those who stand for a pseudo-unity imposed from above.<sup>36</sup> The challenge for the historic Protestant churches is to rediscover our common Christian identity with churches at the margins.

As I have already suggested, this is also a challenge for theological education. According to Aloysius Pieris, speaking out of a South Asian context, the poor are not theologians and theologians are not poor. There is therefore the need for theologians to encounter the poor, in order to make their reflection contextual and their understanding of community relevant.<sup>37</sup> Pieris goes on to say that this encounter is by no means a one-way street, for there is a great deal that theologians and churches from established traditions have to offer in the reformation of world Christianity, for example, working with the poor in terms of advocacy; social development; capacity building; and theological education. We have tremendous resources in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), as well as at this seminary, which can be used in co-operative work with churches and theological institutions in other parts of the world. The margins are lonely and isolated places, and so we need to help create new forms of ecumenical solidarity with the marginalized.

Mission from the margins poses particular challenges for churches in North America and Europe. In our own North American context, we have not, for the most part, been willing to accept the fact that our historic middle-class Protestant churches are

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<sup>34</sup> Ben Meyer, *The Early Christians: Their World Mission and Self Discovery*, Wilmington, Michael Glazier, 1986, p. 97.

<sup>35</sup> Eung Chun Park, *Either Jew or Gentile: Paul's Unfolding Theology of Inclusivity*, Louisville, Westminster/John Knox, 2003.

<sup>36</sup> Felix Wilfred, “Religions as Agents of Hope: Challenges for the New Millenium” in *Plurality, Power and Mission: Intercontextual Theological Explorations on the Role of Religion in the New Millennium*, London, CWM, 2000, pp. 43-82.

<sup>37</sup> Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1988, pp. 39-42.



no longer mainline, despite the prophetic calls to re-engage in mission in our own contexts. This will require a re-engagement with people at the margins of our society and our churches, as many recent studies of the church in North America have suggested.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, in the words of Douglas John Hall, it will require the church to embrace disestablishment, and see our relative “powerlessness” (something which is especially evident in times of financial crisis) as a creative opportunity for change and renewal.<sup>39</sup> Finally, this will also mean a reconsideration of the privileged place of Christians, particularly white mainline Christians, in a “new religious” America where “Christian” culture no longer sets the terms.<sup>40</sup> We are far from understanding what all this entails, but we can begin to experiment with new directions in mission.

I have argued elsewhere that our churches need a *kenosis* (or self-emptying) of mission so that they can once again become part of a movement in society that shakes up institutions and calls them to renewal.<sup>41</sup> Our structures need to be more pluriform and de-centralized. The church may have a lower visibility than it now has; it may, at times, become more “hidden” in other social movements. This is part of the *missio dei*. What Lucien Richard once said of the Roman Catholic Church can now be applied more broadly: we need a *kenotic* church, a church which “is always an apophatic church (emphasizing the *via negativa*)...always offering an alternative vision, always on the road to Jerusalem.”<sup>42</sup> One Biblical image for this vision is Hebrews 13:13, “Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city which is to come.” To go outside the camp means that we can expect to encounter Christ in the faithful people whom we meet there, and begin to rediscover the meaning of *missio dei* for these times of crisis in world Christianity.

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I have painted on a large canvas with many colors and very bold strokes. This is appropriate for an inaugural lecture. Missionaries, and even those who teach mission, have never been known for the modesty of their expectations. With the wisdom of Gamliel, we can hasten, slowly, forward. Nothing we do, and nothing any of us hope, can be accomplished alone, and so the faith that sustains us and the relationships in which we stand, make all the difference in the world. I am thankful to God to be part of this theological community, and part of the continuing movement of world Christianity. I look forward to learning from all of you as we work together in the *missio dei*.

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<sup>38</sup> Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier*, New York, The Alban Institute, 1991. Mead and his colleagues develop this thesis further in subsequent studies published by the Alban Institute. Also see the website of the Hartford Theological Seminary which has up-to-date analyses of church life in the United States.

<sup>39</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity*, Harrisburg, Trinity Press International, 1995.

<sup>40</sup> See Diana Eck. *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Became the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, San Francisco, Harper, 2001.

<sup>41</sup> See my “Toward a Kenosis of Mission: Emptying and Empowerment for the Church and for the World,” in *Scripture, Community and Mission: Essays in Honor of D. Preman Niles*, , pp. 332-356.

<sup>42</sup> Lucien Richard, *Christ: The Self-Emptying of God*(New York/Mawah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 194.