

Welcoming the gifts of a global church

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The world is getting smaller. Distances that years ago took days and weeks to cross we now traverse in a couple of hours. Peoples, places, and cultures that in the past existed in distant lands may today be just around the corner. Here in Canada and the United States, many white, middle-class, monocultural neighborhoods have become mosaics of people of a variety of skin colors, languages, and cultures. As Paul Kroeker—who trains people in intercultural church planting—writes, “Every tribe and nation is here.”¹ Today, mostly in major urban but also in smaller nonurban centers, we witness the arrival of newcomers as a result of global migration.

Newcomers bring not only their distinctive clothing, food, and other cultural expressions but also their religion. Not all are Muslims, Buddhists, or Hindus; newcomers are also Christians from the “global” church. They exemplify what most of the Christian world looks like. Over the last few years, for example, a group of children born outside Canada has begun attending my daughters’ school. They identify themselves as Christians, but most come from countries where Christianity is not the religion of the majority.

What do we mean when we talk about the global church?

In my view, those who use the recently coined term *global church* use it to point to at least three realities. First, they recognize that the majority of people making up the Christian world come not from the West or North but from the South.² They reside outside the Western world.³ Second,

1 Paul Kroeker, *Every Tribe and Nation: Cultures and the Kingdom of God* (Winnipeg: C2C Network, [2017]), 4.

2 In the past, on the basis of mainly political differences between countries, the Global South was identified as the Third World. Then the terminology shifted to Global North and Global South, highlighting economic differences.

3 “Western world” in this context means Europe and North America. In the last few years, missiologists, historians, and theologians have documented that the center of the Christian world lies no longer in the North but in the South. To understand this shift, see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007); Gary V. Nelson, Gordon W. King, and Terry G. Smith,

to speak of a global church is to acknowledge the cultural diversity and the international and multicultural nature of the church. In theological

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terms, they recognize the catholicity of the church. In this sense, the church as a global body is composed of people from far and near, people from different social, cultural, ethnic, economic, and political backgrounds (Eph. 2:11-22; Rev. 7:9). Third, the term highlights the equality and mutuality of affluent and poor churches around the world. If churches in North America and Europe used to shape the agenda of worldwide mission,⁴ today the aim is to build egalitarian relationships in which every voice

is welcome to contribute to the conversation. The trend is toward partnership relationships between churches.

More importantly, the phrase *global church* points to more than an abstract concept created by missiologists and theologians. The global church is made up of a diverse group of people, seekers and followers of the Messiah Jesus around the world. Some of them live in the richest, safest, and most stable countries of the globe. But most of them do not enjoy a life of privilege. They live mainly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where many of them are poor and where even elementary education is a luxury. Unlike most Christians in the West, they face suffering, persecution, and misunderstanding. According to Latin American pastor and theologian Samuel Escobar, theirs is a grassroots Christianity, “marked by a culture of poverty, an oral liturgy, narrative preaching, uninhibited emotionalism, maximum participation in prayer and worship, dreams and visions, faith healing, and an intense search for community and belonging.”⁵

Today, churches in the West have unique opportunities to welcome, engage, and become a global church in their own places. With a diverse

Going Global: A Congregation's Introduction to Mission beyond Our Borders (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2011); and Patrick Johnstone, *The Future of the Global Church: History, Trends and Possibilities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011).

4 See Samuel Escobar's comments about “imperial missiology” in *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 26.

5 Escobar, *New Global Mission*, 15.

body comes a variety of gifts. In all their multiplicity, those gifts are meant to be valued and integrated in the life of the church, for they have been given by God (1 Cor. 12). Every person, of whatever background, has received “grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Eph. 4:7, NRSV). That grace is meant to be used to enrich and equip the church.

What are the gifts of a global church?

So, what are the gifts of this huge body of Jesus followers around the world? My purpose here is to highlight the gifts that the Global South provides and the potential contribution they can make to our faith communities, especially in the West. I want to clarify, however, that I am not writing from a neutral or objective position. My perspective has been shaped by a variety of life, theological, pastoral, and cross-cultural experiences. My view of the global church comes from below.

One gift of a global church is **cultural diversity**. Diversity in itself is a gift from God, given to humanity and the church. The apostle Paul affirms that we are one body with many parts and gifts (1 Cor. 12; compare Eph. 2:14–16; 4:1–13). A global church brings different skin colours, tastes, cultural expressions, languages, worldviews, and theological and life perspectives. A global church is not a monolithic, monocultural, and homogeneous entity but a diverse body consisting of a variety of members, yet united by God’s grace as embodied in the self-giving sacrifice of the Messiah on the cross (Rom. 3:21–26; Col. 1:21–22).

In our churches, cultural diversity is meant to be embraced, not resisted or ignored. Yet such diversity is missing in many North American churches. Indeed, “if you survey churches during Sunday morning worship, you will find that they are not as culturally diverse as the neighborhood they serve.”⁶ What if churches in North America lived out their faith in the way of intercultural inclusion, acceptance, and solidarity?

A second gift of a global church is **joy and spontaneity in worship**. The integration of emotions into worship is a common experience in a global church. While a regular service may have some structure, in the global church, spontaneity is seen as an appropriate way to respond to God’s presence and work. This response may take the form of singing

6 Kroeker, *Every Tribe and Nation*, 4.

aloud, shouting hallelujah, or crying. Joy is externalized in dancing, clapping, other kinds of body movements, and more.⁷

In the eyes of Christians in the West, displays of joy and spontaneity in worship are confusing and messy, especially if prophecy, dancing, visions, and charismatic experiences are not part of their tradition. But these are biases rooted in culture, sometimes in racism, often in misinformation or in a sense of superiority. Unlike most churches in North America, churches in the Global South sense and experience God as they offer themselves, soul and body, as living sacrifices to God, in joy and spontaneity (Rom. 12:1).

Christians from non-Western societies who migrate to Western countries sometimes also view their brothers and sisters in the North with suspicion. Solemnity, structure, and preparation in worship are seen not as gifts but as formalities. In this case too, judgment arises out of cultural differences, ignorance, and a sense of spiritual superiority. What if churches from Western and non-Western societies, both in North America and the Global South, made an intentional effort to get together, learn from each other's strengths, and practice mutual encouragement—for the sake of the global church?

A third gift is *passion for reaching out*. A global church is a community that engages its neighbours with the good news of the kingdom of God. It takes the “great commission” seriously (Matt. 28:18–20). It has a sense of responsibility and urgency. The sense of responsibility lies in the authority given by the Messiah Jesus to his followers to go into the world and announce the dawn of a new age (Mark 16:15; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). The sense of urgency lies generally in an apocalyptic worldview: because the world is coming to an end soon, the church must actively participate in the *missio Dei*.

In contrast, in Canada I have observed fear and reluctance about witnessing to one's faith outside the church.⁸ I understand that this at-

7 Biblical foundations for these expressions of worship are found mainly in the Psalms (30:11–12; 95:1; 98:4–6; 100:1–2; compare Eph. 5:18–20).

8 In this context, “witness” means verbally sharing with others the good news of Jesus. In Mennonite circles, I have perceived two main—usually opposite—understandings of witnessing. For some, to witness is to do acts of justice, to seek peace, and to pursue the common good. For others, it means verbal proclamation of God's story, and its focus is not so much on earthly matters as on spiritual ones and especially on directing people to heaven. I know that this characterization is an oversimplification that excludes conversation about colonization and mission. Yet it helps highlight the difference in approaches. My understanding of witness to the gospel entails both telling God's story

titude has a context. In my view, at least three factors are at work. First, many of us have seen examples of bad evangelism: random confrontation of people on the street, short-term mission trips that fail to establish relationships, unscrupulous televangelism that preys on the gullible, and obnoxious defenses of the faith on the Internet. Fear of being identified with these approaches justifies Canadian Christians in keeping their witness to themselves. And when asked for a good example of evangelism,

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few can think of one. Second, Christians have consciously or unconsciously accepted the assumption that matters of faith belong exclusively in the religious realm, so faith becomes a matter of personal preference. Finally, cultural sensitivity to others' values and views makes many Canadian Christians reluctant to share their faith. They do not want to offend or bother people with a religious outlook they might find disagreeable. Consequently, they choose to keep their faith private.

But a global church understands that its commission and authority come

from God and his word. For this reason, people in the Global South live out the missionary task with courage, love, and obedience, and sometimes at great personal cost. No matter where people are or whom are they speaking to, they reveal a passion to proclaim the good news to anyone open to hearing it. It is not surprising that Christianity is not only surviving but growing in the Global South.⁹ What if churches in North America let their partners in the Global South help them rediscover and rethink their theology and practice of witness?

Fourth, a global church offers the gift of *community*. This may not seem like a unique gift, for the possibility of building communities exists wherever human beings are. Humans are meant to be together. But be-

and doing acts of justice. To me, it is a matter not of one or the other but of both. My theological views on what is known as integral or holistic mission have been profoundly influenced by René Padilla and Samuel Escobar. A brief summary can be found by searching for the online article by C. René Padilla, "What Is Integral Mission?" *Del Camino Network for Integral Mission in Latin America*, accessed April 20, 2018.

9 See Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, especially chapter 1.

cause of economic affluence, access to digital technology, overconsumption, an excess of entertainment options, and putting a high value on personal privacy, people in the West focus on the pursuit of happiness, personal fulfilment, and feeling good about themselves. This complex mixture of economic, cultural, and psychological factors can make it difficult to build meaningful relationships and foster community.

In contrast, a global church has different experiences and understandings of what community is. Many people from Africa, Asia, and Latin America experience community by spending time together, cooking, cleaning, worshiping, serving, sharing stories, and even suffering together. When trouble comes, solidarity steps forward. Generally speaking, the focus in these cultures is on the community, not on the self.¹⁰ In the eyes of people from the West, concepts of personal belongings and private property are “underdeveloped” among such people. But in the South, property, belongings, and a broad range of goods are understood to be there for the sake of the community. I do not mean to suggest that a global church is a perfect community; we know that wherever human beings interact, there is potential for conflicts and divisions. Yet a global church has a richer sense of how important community is for spiritual as well as social well-being. What if all of us who live in Western societies made ourselves available to one another? What if we all made an effort to get away for a bit from the online world, to engage in face-to-face relationships in the offline world?

Fifth, a global church comes bearing the gift of *resilience in the face of suffering*. In my opinion, this resilience is one of the greatest contributions of a global church. Here in the West, our main problems are related to mental health, school shootings, irregular migration, politics, and various pressing international matters. Levels of anxiety and depression and the incidence of eating disorders and addictions of various sorts are growing in North America. The hardships faced by Christians in the Global South are of a different sort. They do not enjoy positions of privilege. Most are at the margins and face situations of social, political, military, religious, and racial conflict. Poverty is a given. As it was for the apostle Paul (2 Cor. 6:3–10), persecution resulting from missionary activities is a real possibility. Yet they are willing to risk their lives for the sake of the gospel (Rom. 5:1–5). They are aware of Jesus’s warnings that his disciples will

¹⁰ Those who are first-generation immigrants to Canada typically do not change this mindset.

be rejected and persecuted (John 15:18–16:4). Despite all the challenges, Jesus followers around the world find meaning, hope, strength, and joy, and they experience resilience in the Spirit of the One who invited them to be part of his great multiethnic family (Gal. 3:26; 4:7; Eph. 2:14–16; 6:10; Rev. 7:9–10).

An invitation to welcome one another

The concept of a global church may be new, yet its roots can be found in the New Testament account of the church's growth. In the beginning, Jesus's movement was mostly a Jewish movement. When his followers had spread throughout the Mediterranean world, the movement became empire wide and multiethnic.¹¹ Eventually, the movement reached Rome, but not without challenges and tensions. Those tensions have their origin in cultural and theological differences.

From the outset, the church in Rome was composed of Jewish and non-Jewish ("Gentile") followers of the Messiah. Jewish followers of the Messiah (many of them occupying positions of leadership in the church) assumed that believers in Jesus as Messiah were still obliged to keep the law of Moses. Non-Jewish followers of the Messiah were oriented to a type of faith in Jesus Christ that did not require observing Jewish law. They found Paul's understanding of the way of Jesus more appealing.

After the expulsion of the Jews from Rome by the emperor Claudius in AD 49, the churches¹² continued under non-Jewish Christian leadership. Over time, they became disconnected from the synagogue and Jewish traditions. When Nero became emperor, he let the Jews return to Rome. Some Jewish followers of Jesus returned to Rome, perhaps hoping to pick up where they had left off. But in the five years the Jewish and Gentile believers had been apart, the differences between them had widened. The challenge they now faced was how to learn to live together peaceably, despite their theological differences.¹³

11 The book of Acts presents a good picture of this transition.

12 The church in Rome was not a single body of people who gathered on a Sunday morning. Rather, it consisted of small clusters of people who gathered as followers of Jesus in various households in Rome.

13 A. Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 7. I think this explains Paul's advice toward the end of the letter, where he uses the phrase "one another" repeatedly (in 12:10, 16; 13:8; 14:13; 15:5, 7, 14; 16:16).

Under these circumstances, it is understandable that Paul's main concern in his letter to the Romans was about the unity of these assemblies. After laying out a long, complex argument, the apostle advocated for the unity of the body of Christ (Rom. 12:1–8). The climax of Paul's argument is the exhortation to “welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (15:7, NRSV).¹⁴ As New Testament scholar Gordon Zerbe observes, “everything in Romans leads, in one way or another, to this dramatic and concluding exhortation.”¹⁵

The Greek word Paul uses, *proslambanō*, conveys the idea of warm welcome and wholehearted acceptance (compare its use in Rom. 14:1, 3; Philem. 17).¹⁶ To Paul, God's action through the Messiah Jesus is the creation of a new humanity (Rom. 5–8). Paul affirms that whoever puts her trust in Jesus is incorporated into God's covenant people regardless of her cultural, social, national, and ethnic background (Rom. 3–4). All of these are gifts from God because of his radical generosity, his grace.

The church is built on the foundation of the Messiah. In his sacrifice he was an agent of peace in the world, embodying unity where divisions are commonplace. From eternity, God dreamed of building a global multiethnic community of people who would embody his love, justice, blessing, and peace in the world. That is why Jesus's disciples have been sent to the world (Matt. 5:13–16). A global church is a gift for a fragmented, self-centered, and independent humanity. A global church offers the possibility of embodying unity, while acknowledging and embracing diversity, by welcoming the gifts that followers of Jesus from every nation, tribe, and language bring to the table.

About the author

José-Luis Moraga was born and raised in Santiago. His background is Chilean Pentecostal, and he has embraced Anabaptist theology. He serves on the pastoral team at Springfield Heights Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

14 My understanding of Paul's letter to the Romans is that everything he writes about justification by faith, being in Christ, life in the Spirit, and God's faithfulness to Israel is directly related to the situation of the Roman churches described above. All the “one another” language of the letter is built on the foundation of what Paul has said in the first eleven chapters.

15 Gordon M. Zerbe, “From Retributive to Restorative Justice in Romans,” *Direction* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 43.

16 Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 480.