
Periodic Paper #4

The Changing Face of Mission

Implications for the Southern Shift in Christianity

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The southern shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity has far greater implications than just numerical changes. It marks a profound change in the constitution of Christianity. With the change, world Christianity undergoes a translation from being a predominantly Western culture construct to having a myriad of diverse cultural expressions. The implications of this shift are of central importance as the Church of the 21st Century increasingly faces the dual challenge of a non-Christian West and a non-Western Christianity, and the complex relationship between the two.

It is no exaggeration to state that the current changes in world Christianity are as significant as the Reformation or the conversion of Constantine. Bühlmann stated that “The coming of the Third church [southern church] is the epoch-making event of current church history; it is therefore a sign of the times to be taken very seriously” (1977:131). It is surprising then that Western Christianity often exhibits blissful ignorance or willful negligence about these events. In this essay I wish to describe the most significant phenomenon in 20th and 21st century Christianity – the southward shift in the centre of gravity of global Christianity. This southward shift from its heartland in the West of Europe and North America to new heartlands in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific has been documented by Walbert Bühlmann (1977), statistically validated by David Barrett (1970, 2001), and explored by Philip Jenkins (2002) and Andrew F. Walls (1996, 2002).

The southward shift brings about a demographic change in the constitution of the church, but it is not just about numbers. As Christianity loses its place in the West and becomes rooted in the cultures of the South, a cultural transformation is taking place in the very nature of what constitutes Christianity. Jenkins notes that the southern churches are far more “traditional, morally conservative, evangelical, and apocalyptic than their northern counterparts.” The church of the South is characterized by such phenomena as “mysticism, Puritanism, belief in prophecy, faith healing, exorcism, and dream-visions,” features which many of the western churches have long ago exchanged for a more secular spirituality (see Jenkins 2002). In this paper I will initially follow Wall’s presentation of the southern shift because of his treatment of the implications. In the later part of the paper I seek to further explore the potential repercussions from this southward shift, which we are only now starting to realize consequences.

The Serial Spread of Christianity

Christianity in its essence is missionary. It stands unique from the other world faiths as a faith which must continually be translated into new cultures as it spreads. Another distinctive is that as Christianity spreads it does so by a process of expansion and concurrent recession; that as Christianity becomes embedded in a new heartland it dwindles, even dies, in its old heartland. This serial spread, with growth and recession, has been repeated since the birth of the church. Walls describes six sequential phases into which all of Christian history can be divided. Each phase is characterized by the translation of Christianity into a major culture so that its emergence in that particular phase exhibits unique cultural features as it is moulded by that culture. Walls’ typology of six major epochs of the church’s history is similar to that of David Bosch’s typology of mission paradigms which Bosch derived from Hans Küng (Bosch 1991:181-189). Walls describes the six phases as being:

1. The Jewish age of the first century characterized by Jewish custom, culture and world view.
2. The Hellenistic Roman age in which Christianity invented the idea of orthodoxy.



3. The Barbarian age which introduced the concept of the *Christian nation*.

4. The Western European age marked by the consciousness of the *individual*.

5. The age of colonial Europe and western recession marked by a substantial *recession* of Christianity from its western heartland, and also by the *cross-cultural transplantation* of Christianity.

6. The age of cross-cultural transmission marked by the shift to southern Christianity of Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Pacific, where Christianity has now reached its widest ever *diffusion into many cultures* (Walls 1996:16-25).

The embedding of Christianity into new cultures, the essential translation of the faith, is derived from the central historical event of our faith, the Word becoming flesh and tabernacling with us. At its core Christianity is revealed as an act of translation, Christ taking human form (Walls 1996:23). In essence then, Christianity is a vernacular faith, the most local of the global faiths, which must be earthed and rooted into the vernacular languages; drawing from the local soil its essential nutrients which allow it to constitute itself. "In each case a threatened eclipse of Christianity was averted by its cross-cultural diffusion. Crossing cultural boundaries has been the life blood of historic Christianity" (Walls 2002:32).

This serial pattern of expansion is unique to Christianity and in contrast to the nature of the spread of other world religions. "Buddhism and Islam have repeatedly crossed the cultural divide, but of Christianity we may almost say that it exists today only *because* it has crossed it" (Walls 1996:256). This contrasts with Hinduism which, whilst expanding, has remained earthed in its heartland and Islam which has progressed whilst maintaining its original base and the ongoing allegiance of most of those nations conquered in Muslim expansion. "Christian faith has fixed itself at different periods in different heartlands, waning in one as it has come to birth in another" (Walls 1996:256). The first "waning" occurred early in the life of the church. Within a few chapters in the book of Acts the centre for Christianity moves from Jerusalem to Antioch carried by unnamed men of Cyprus and Cyrene who preached to the Gentiles (Acts 11:19-21). Jerusalem withered as Antioch blossomed.

The contrast between Islam and Christianity is evident. Essentially the revelation of the Qu'ran cannot be translated from its original Arabic. The Qu'ran and associated *hadiths*, stipulating cultural codes and conduct must be adopted by the recipients of Islam in Arabic. Islam if it is *bona fide* and orthodox results in the new converts to

Islam having to adopt Islamic culture, including some essential Arabic, rather than Islam being translated into a new cultural form. Christianity for it to be true to itself, must in contrast, allow itself to be translated into the culture of its new recipients on their terms. In translation the Christian faith loses aspects of its previous cultural incarnation as it metamorphoses and evolves into a new form, whilst maintaining the core essentials which define and distinguish it as being authentic, biblical Christianity.

Southern Shift of Christianity

We shall now turn to look in more detail at the southern shift of Christianity, noting early prophets of change, and the nature of emerging southern Christianity.

We have been taken by surprise by the sudden demographic changes in Christianity in the 20th century. This is partly because the Western recession has had irregular contours rather than being continuous and steady. Recession from the Christian faith among the European peoples although beginning in the 16th century reached "notable proportions by the 18th century. During that century, however, and for much of the 19th, there was a Christian counter-attack, which halted the movement of recession in Europe and brought spectacular accessions.... The sudden quickening of recession, therefore, in the twentieth century, took observers by surprise" (Walls 1996:21).

Even during the "heyday" of Protestant mission in the latter half of the 19th century, observant missionaries were able to discern that significant changes were afoot when comparing church growth on the mission field with that of the American homeland. In 1892 in a lecture at Princeton theological Seminary entitled "Foreign Mission after a Century" James S. Dennis, an American Presbyterian missionary in Beirut, was able to observe that "the churches in Asia and Africa in 1892 were in general growing faster than those in the United States" (Dennis cited by Walls 2002:52); although he could not, at that stage, foresee the dramatic changes over the horizon. Along the way other prophetic voices have indicated this impending change: William Temple on his enthronement as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1943 remarked on the "great new fact of our time," that the church had become a global reality (Shenk 2003a:5). More recently, in 1970, David B. Barrett published an article that foresaw, "A.D. 2000: 350 Million Christians in Africa." His staggering prediction caused quite a stir, but has with hindsight proved to be accurate. It is remarkable that we have been surprised because this is the historic nature of the expansion of Christianity: serial expansion combined with recession from an existing heartland.



The renowned mission historian KS Latourette in his “concluding generalizations” to his seven volume history of the expansion of Christianity noted the tide repeatedly for, then against Christianity (See for example Latourette 1945:418-9, 426-7, 434).

Who were the agents of these dramatic changes in global Christianity? Western missionaries spearheaded the initial transformation. Another repeated feature of the serial expansion of Christianity is that often the most significant growth is initiated not from the center but from the periphery. In the 19th century this was true of foreign mission and more so of the largely unnamed nationals who spread the Gospel, the equivalent of the unnamed men (and no doubt women) of Cyrene and Cyprus. Foreign mission was important to the 19th century Western Christianity but it could never be considered as central to the life of the church. Instead it was a peripheral activity of the church, growing out of her largesse and generosity. The Juggernaut of indigenous church growth, the national converts are given scant attention in the annals of Western missionaries. With hindsight we can always see more clearly.

[I]t is evident that even during the colonial period, indigenous Christians – Bible women, evangelists, catechists, and prophets – were all along the most effective interpreters of Christianity to their own people. The explosion of non-Western Christianity was possible because Christianity was already being indigenized before the colonizers departed. (Robert 2000)

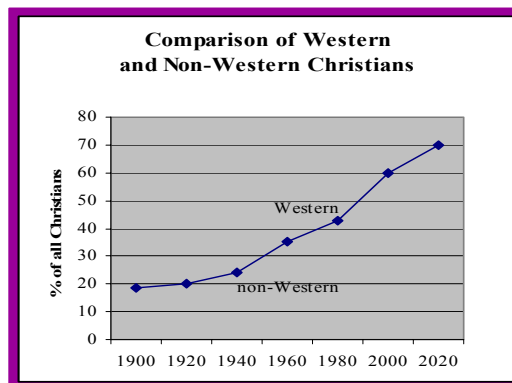
The explosive potential for growth when Christianity is adequately contextualized leads Lamin Sanneh to compare the process of the translation of Christianity to the firing of a gun: “[W]hen one translates it is like pulling the trigger of a loaded gun: the translator cannot recall the hurtling bullet. Translation thus activates a process that might supersede the original intention of the translator” (1989:53). There is no sign of this exponential growth in the South abating, nor of the northern recession of Christianity slowing; so that “now the idea of territorial Christianity, of geographically contiguous Christian states, lies irretrievably broken” (Walls 1996:258). It is humbling for the Western church to realize that so great and so rapid has the recession of Christianity been from its previous heartland that Western Europe has become “perhaps *the* prime area for identification as a mission field” (1996:258).

The territorial legacy of Christendom is now broken. The central characteristic of Christianity as it now exists in the South is that it exists in a *diffuse* form. Diffuse in being at its most culturally, ethnically, and geographically widespread than ever before; in nations where

Christians usually exist in a minority, cheek by jowl with those of other faiths, who are usually more numerous and thus have a stronger voice in the governance of their nation. In contrast to the days of Christendom and colonial Christianity, Christianity now exists predominantly as a vibrant minority faith vying for voice and identity amongst a plurality of faith communities, or as a persecuted minority faith amongst a suspicious or hostile majority faith. The means of witness also contrast with preceding colonial models. Colonial mission often brought the Gospel hand-in-hand with education and technology, with mission comprising of Christianity, commerce and civilization. Now however, southern missionaries are often poor and from the periphery, without the economic clout or governmental allegiances of colonial missionaries. “It now seems increasingly likely that the bearers of the gospel will bring no gifts with them, except the gospel itself” (Walls 1996:261).

Demographics

The change in demographics of global Christianity during the 20th century can be better understood by way of a graph:¹



This shows the concurrent growth of southern Christianity and the recession of northern Christianity. Although we cannot be adamant about the veracity of the actual numbers in the statistics, they do allow us to derive accurate ratios. In 1800 90 percent of Christians were in Europe and North America, by 1960 that proportion had shrunk to about 65 percent and by 2000 northern Christians for the first time in more than a millennium are now in the minority: approximately 40 percent of the total number of Christians (see table 1 on the following page). Now at least 60 percent of the world’s two billion Christians live in the South, and that proportion is rising.

Implications for the Southern Shift



The demographic changes affecting global Christianity have continued throughout the last century, but it is only now that we are starting to become aware of the implications of such a dramatic shift in the center of gravity of the church, which changes the very nature of Christianity. The two major challenges which face us are that of a post-Christian West and a post-Western Christianity (Walls 2002:65). In the latter part of this essay we shall explore some of the potential implications.

Theological Developments

During the 19th and early 20th century for the western missionary, theology generally remained as an accepted, immutable standard which was characterized as being timeless and universally acceptable. Historically mission validation was largely gained from the use of proof-texts, such as the Great Commission in Matthew 28. The “means” of mission was largely pragmatic, modeled on commercial venture rather than having theological foundation. This was partly the legacy we have from William Carey and his argument to model mission on trading companies in his treatise: *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (1792). That theology was deemed as having little to contribute to mission was also evident by its exclusion from discussion at the pragmatic Edinburgh 1910 Missionary conference. It was only by 1952 and the Willengen council meeting of the International Missionary Council that an adequate theological foundation for mission was begun, drawing upon the earlier work of Karl Barth, to introduce the concept (but not the term) of *Missio Dei*.

From Edinburgh 1910 “English set out on its career as the successor to Latin as the international language of theology” (Walls 2002:62); and this theology was inextricably bound up with an enlightenment world view. The Western missionary endeavor came with a superior and rationalistic orientation imbued with enlightenment philosophy which manifested several key characteristics: the subject/object dichotomy, cause/effect relationship, the fact/value dichotomy, and the victory of purpose giving rise to a triumphalistic, optimistic Western Christianity which could cure all ills and guarantee progress (Bosch 1991:342-3).

With historical hindsight we can recognize more clearly the influence of the Enlightenment. Bosch thus helps those imbued with Enlightenment concepts still inherent in Western education to extricate themselves (to a certain extent) from the straightjacket of this thinking. However, this whole exercise is largely unnecessary for people who have never come under the influence of the Enlightenment in the first place (Nussbaum 2003). There is the potential for Christian leaders of the South to re-connect with their pre-Enlightenment roots and thus harness a missionary force not

saddled by the Enlightenment, ushering in what Bosch has termed the “Emerging Ecumenical Missionary Paradigm” (Bosch 1991:368-510). It is interesting to note that the prophets relating the emergence of southern Christianity such as Barrett and Bühlmann are only given passing mention by Bosch in *Transforming Mission* (Bosch 1991:451). Yet many of the features of Bosch’s “Emerging Ecumenical Missionary Paradigm” are those which will emerge from the church rooted in the South.

Christians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America as percentage of all Christians

	1900	1960	2000
Protestant (P)	5.4	19.1	57.3
Independent (I)	2.6	3.5	74.0
Anglican (A)	3.9	9.6	48.8
Catholic (C)	26.9	40.7	65.6
Orthodox (O)	9.2	13.7	25.8
Marginal (M)	61.4	26.5	58.2
All Christians	16.7	35.6	59.4

However, at the level of theological education, Western theological influence lives on through Western resources and the Western training at doctorate level of the brightest from the South. For instance in Japan, Shenk comments that this has contributed to the “Germanic captivity” of Japanese theology, as Japanese Protestant theologians have returned home with their PhDs in say Barth, Bühlmann or Tillich and then proceeded to base their theological teaching upon German methodology and content. This has resulted in training theological thinkers to provide excellent answers to irrelevant questions, and making them blind to the pertinent questions arising from their own context. As a consequence “Japanese theology has not yet begun to address the Japanese situation effectively” (Shenk 2003b:2).³

The southern church is predominantly a church of the poor. In contrast “a developed world in which Christians become less prominent will seek to protect its position against the rest” (Walls 2002:81). We would anticipate an increased prominence being given to the theological themes of justice and economic fairness.

Missiology Methodology

Whilst teaching in Sierra Leone in the 1950s, Andrew Walls recalls his realization that those he was teaching had more in common with the second-century



church than with the contemporary western church. “I still remember the force with which the realization struck me that I ... was actually living in the second-century church. The life, worship and understanding of a community in its second century of Christian allegiance was going on all around me” (Walls 1996:xiii). As the Sierra Leonean church emerged from a pagan background and existed as a minority amongst a plurality of faiths, the theological issues of Christian self-identity and contextualization were more akin to those faced by the early church fathers than at any other time in the church’s history. In contrast the expression of Christianity evidenced in the Western church, although contemporaneous with Sierra Leonean church, was culturally far removed from it.

Walls has developed those ideas in more recent articles in the International Bulletin of Missionary Research (hereafter *IBMR* 1997, 1999, 2000), presenting Origen as the original founder of mission studies and of the theology of mission. Origen in a letter gives the example of how the spoils of Egypt are used as the source material for the construction of the tabernacle in the wilderness. That the worship of Yahweh did not emerge out of nothing but utilized what had previously been used for idolatry. As Origen “saw the need for Egyptian gold and Egyptian cloth to furnish the tabernacle in the wilderness...[so] he turned the learning of the Greek world to the worship and glorification of God” (Walls 1999:104). Walls argues that just as “the early classical Christian theology...its doctrines, creeds, and confessions was made from materials of the Greek intellectual world and by means of its methods” (Walls 1997:149) so the work of Christians today is to do the same from their milieu. To build their faith from the intellectual raw materials present in their context and in so doing to discover a rich source of inspirational; material rather than import foreign (Western) materials which are unsuitable for their situation.⁴

What is true of the new theological agenda is true of a new hermeneutic also. Indeed, African theologians may well discover and “develop aspects of the biblical material which Western theology has left undeveloped simply because Western society was culturally unable to see them” (Walls cited by Shenk 1996:54). New and fresh theological developments are now coming from southern Christianity which is at the cutting edge of Christian expansion. This contrasts with the reiteration of Western theology which has been “stymied by the historical burden of the Western theological tradition” (Shenk 2003b:1).

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With such theological gold waiting to be recovered from our forefathers, it is surprising that it has largely lain buried and unmined. In the July 2003 issue of *IBMR*, Stanley Skreslet, reporting on ten years of doctoral research in mission (albeit limited to English), notes the remarkable concentration on the last two centuries of mission history at the expense of earlier phases of church expansion. In the chronological focus on dissertations only a miserly two out of 711 are on the post-apostolic church (in the category: “to 600”). That works out at less than 0.3 percent of current dissertations being on this period – a veritable goldmine of wide-open opportunity (Skreslet 2003:100).

Church and Mission Historiography

As noted earlier Western missions have not been primarily responsible for the rapid demographic transformation of Christianity in the 20th century. “[B]ut they formed the detonator of the vast explosion that brought it about. This must make the missionary movement one of the most important developments in the entire history of Western Christianity “ (Walla 2002:65). Yet in mainstream Western education it is little studied nor understood. The energy for frontier crossing came from the periphery rather than the centre of the Western church’s powerbase. This however is not reflected in current histories. To help redress these historical black holes and document the life and work of national Christians, two major projects have been established. *The Dictionary of African Christian Biography* (dabc@omsc.org) and *The Dictionary of Indian Christian Biography* (www.dicb.org and biographies@dich.org) are seeking to redress this omission (Thomas 2003:87-89). Another major project is the forthcoming *Dictionary of South Asian Christianity* under the direction of Roger Hedlund. It will be fascinating to learn from these histories which document the cutting edge of Christianity’s inherent nature to cross cultural boundaries. In the documentation of the cross-cultural spread of Christianity there is a danger of polarizing our focus to give account of either the foreign missionaries or else the national church leadership; and in





so doing omitting the important dynamic that the one had with the other as Christianity crossed a frontier and took on a new life within the new context.

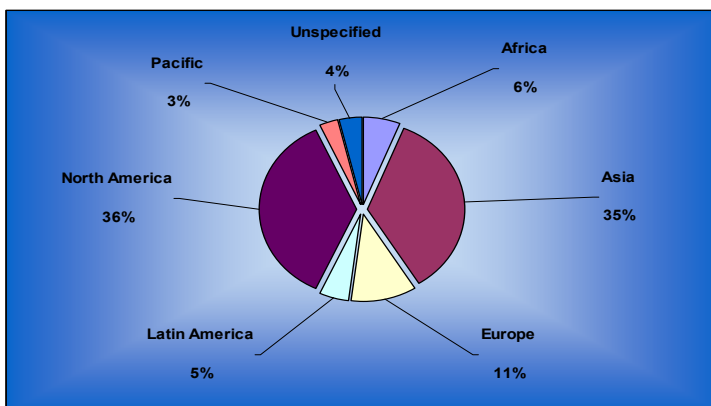
Ecclesiology

The church grows primarily by translation. As “Cultural diversity is built into the church; so is the ecumenical sharing of its diverse cultural communities” (Walls 2002:68). This inevitably leads to inherent tension within the ecclesiology of the church and the pernicious tendency to make cultural proselytes rather than true converts; demanding that converts accept Christ plus something extra from the messengers’ culture. “Of all the heresies in Christian history, it is Judaizing that has been the most persistent” (2002:68). Walls thus predicts that the “great issues of twenty-first-century Christianity are likely to be ecumenical” (2002:69). Nussbaum anticipates that this shift in the ecclesiastical centres of power is “probably the biggest change in the church since the Reformation” (2003).

Missionaries and Methods

The demographic makeup of the global church has been transformed during the 20th century and is reflected in the makeup of today’s missionary force. This is evident from the following diagram, which shows the continent of origins for the world’s current missionaries.

Origin of the World’s P, I, A Missioners⁵



Currently 47 percent of missionaries are from the traditional sending countries in North America and Europe but the majority, 49 percent, are now from the non-Western world, although many of these missionaries will be ministering cross-culturally within their own country. As recession continues in the North concurrently with growth of the church in the south, this ratio will continue to widen.

As one of every two Protestant missionaries will be

from the emerging missions of non-Western countries how will the traditional mission agencies structures of the North respond to this growing missionary taskforce? In a paper, Larry D. Pate and Lawrence E. Keyes propose three possibilities. Firstly that of benign neglect: the western mission agencies maintain their traditional model of mission, which has no place for this new taskforce, so they are ignored. But the sheer size and rate of growth of the emerging-missions movement will make benign neglect an increasingly less tenable response in years to come. The emerging mission movement is growing at a rate more than five times that of Western missions, and it promises to change the nature of the world missionary enterprise (Pate and Keyes 1986). There is the related danger too of the new emerging mission agencies of the majority world, having seen the mistakes that westerners have made, deciding to “start again”, without Western input and reject Western models and try to reinvent the wheel. Western and non-Western mission could become like ships in the night unaware that we are passing each other by. A second possible response is the internationalization of western agencies. The *modus operandi* of the mission agencies continues, as might western domination in leadership, but the agencies become more inclusive, welcoming southern missionaries if they come in accord with the existing northern model of mission. The first model is increasingly impossible, the second inadequate as it seeks to perpetuate the status quo rather than enabling mission agencies to adapt to the 21st century. Pate and Keyes, therefore, argue for a third model, that of task-oriented partnership which will consist of – besides evangelism – “researching harvest fields, organizing good strategies, building support structures, training effective missionaries” (1986). Clearly what is needed will be increasing cooperation and interconnectedness. As Paul Hiebert states “the future of missions is based in the formation of international networks rather than multinational organizations,” (Hiebert in Pate and Keyes: 1986) which will exhibit a willingness to share resources of people and intellectual property rather than to compete. It will require a great deal of humility for Western mission agencies to adopt the role of consultancy under southern leadership and for Western missionaries to recognize that they are “temporary, secondary, and advisory” (D. Fleming cited by Bosch 1991:456).

The traditional western model of a missionary was typically someone sent across the sea with full financial support from the home mission board. This model of full financial dependency has been replicated by newer sending countries such as Brazil, the Asian tiger economy of Korea, and to a lesser extent India. Few of the southern economies are able to sustain this high-octane burning



Jerusalem to Antioch and other predominantly Gentile congregations the Apostle Paul was at pains to ensure that the “poor” in Jerusalem would be helped through his collection from the Gentile churches (Laing 2002). Among Paul’s motives for fostering this interrelatedness was his vision “that the weakened church in Jerusalem could be helped by the vigorous new congregations emerging” (Ross 2003:163). We are now witnessing this long anticipated “blessed reflex” at a number of levels. Missionaries are being sent from vibrant southern churches to the North bringing renewal and revitalizing northern churches. Coming from contexts unaffected by an Enlightenment worldview, many are able to naturally connect and communicate with the post-Christian post-modern world, where in contrast, the Western church often struggles to do so. In fact there is the danger for Western Christians, that in their quest to maintain orthodoxy, they may find themselves defending the plausibility structures of the Enlightenment rather than defending Christianity, guarding a cultural form of Christian Enlightenment.

Mission agencies and structures are being renewed by southern leadership with fresh vision and theological vitality to their mission. The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization in 1974 marked the official “coming out” of dynamic non-Western evangelical voices, evidenced in the extreme statements given by C. Rene Padilla of Argentina and Samuel Escobar of Perú (Shenk 2001b:27). They and others have challenged and reshaped the Western assumptions of 20th century evangelicalism. The impact of non-Western theologians will continue through their publications and at a more local level through their input as visiting professors in western theological colleges, bringing renewal to the western seminary and thus to the church.

With the juggernaut of globalization continuing to gain speed, the potential for the church in the post-Christian West to be renewed by post-Western Christianity is greater now than at any time. This is evident through the rapid dissemination of knowledge which the Internet and e-mail allow and the global marketplace which allows or compels the northern migration of a skilled workforce. The personal encounters at home and abroad of Western Christians with southern Christians “may be the spark which ignites a renewed experience of faith for a new generation of Westerners” (Ross 2003:166).

Conclusion

The demographic changes brought by the southern shift in the heartland of Christianity from the North to the South herald not just a change in numbers but a profound change in the constitution of Christianity. The church in the

21st century faces dual challenge of a non-Christian West and a non-Western Christianity and the complex relationship between the two. We are only now awakening to the enormity of those changes. A new heartland demands new leadership and new structures. With the northern countries maintaining their financial dominion and abundant resources, the northern church is challenged to give up its domination in world church leadership and become subservient to support the new emerging agenda of mission. Only in giving up the reins may the northern church be renewed from the south.

Notes

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2. From *Operation World CD-Rom*, copyright © 2001 Patrick Johnstone. Used with permission.
3. An abridged version of this paper was published in *IBMR* 25:3, 2001.
4. A more detailed application of this method is given by Kwame Bediako, (a former PhD student of Walls) in his book *Theology and Identity*, 1992.
5. P, I, A represents missionaries from Protestant, Independent, and Anglican denominations, the figures from other groups such as the Orthodox and Roman Catholics being incomplete and so are omitted. From *Operation World CD-ROM*, copyright © 2001 Patrick Johnstone. Used with permission.

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